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‘Sadly Forgotten’? Newspaper coverage of the first men to fly the Atlantic non-stop, Alcock and Brown.

On Saturday, June 14, 1919, a Vickers Vimy, a converted First World War bomber powered by two Rolls-Royce Eagle VIII engines, took off from St John’s, Newfoundland. In it were two Mancunians, Captain John Alcock and Lieutenant Arthur Whitten Brown, who 16 and a half hours later touched down beside the Marconi wireless station in Derrygimla bog near Clifden, Galway.¹ They had become the first people to fly the Atlantic non-stop. It was a feat that lifted a Britain recovering from the disasters of 1914-18 War and the Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918-19 and, according to Lynch, brought the greatest outpouring of joy since Armistice Day.² Not only to the nation, to the world. Lynch asserted that the achievement touched society in general: ‘The fliers had made a giant step out of the shadow of war and pestilence to reassert man’s potential.’³ For a short time Alcock and Brown were among the most famous men on the planet. Their feat dominated the national and international media, they were knighted within a week and thousands waited at stations to catch glimpses of them on their train journey from Ireland to London. Brown had to rescue Alcock from a crowd of autograph hunters at Chester and the mayors of Chester, Crewe and Rugby greeted them like victorious generals. Lynch wrote:

Hitherto unknown to the general public, Alcock and Brown’s names were emblazoned on news-stands from Dublin to London, Paris, and New York. Their success against overwhelming odds had touched all strata of society. The fliers had become instant heroes, harbingers of change and a brighter future for the millions, who were weary of the plagues of war and flu, and the endless post-Armistice recriminations.⁴

¹ Brown was born in Glasgow, but moved to Manchester as a baby.

² Lynch, *Yesterday*.

³ *Ibid*, 21-2.

⁴ *Ibid*, 229.

Yet, a century on from their historic flight, they are relatively neglected figures in aeronautical history. Alcock and Brown have blue plaques on their Manchester homes, a statue at the entrance to Heathrow Airport⁵ and an unassuming sculpture in their honour at Manchester Airport, but that was moved to a corridor between the terminals and the airport's rail station in 2008 and relatives of Alcock complained that it is 'tucked away in a corner'.⁶ In June 2019 the *Daily Mail* bemoaned the lack of celebrations in the UK to mark the centenary of Alcock and Brown's flight. Noting there were celebrations in Canada and Ireland, a news feature read: 'The anniversary passed with little notice in Britain.' In the article Tony Alcock, nephew of John, was quoted as saying it was 'disappointing' that more was not done. 'We have been trying, but we can't get people interested,' he said.⁷ On the same day a letter to the *Guardian* asked: 'How much was there in your paper about this truly groundbreaking, world-changing and historic flight?' The writer provided the answer: 'Nothing.'⁸ In contrast, the American Charles Lindbergh, who became the first man to fly the Atlantic solo (albeit with a closed cockpit, a luxury that was denied Alcock and Brown), is internationally renowned, and has several airports, numerous schools, roads and a mountain range in Greenland named after him. Len Deighton, the author and historian, wrote of Alcock and Brown: 'The story of this historic flight has been shamefully neglected',⁹ while Bryson noted: 'Their flight was one of the most daring in history, but is sadly forgotten now. It was not particularly well noted at the time either.'¹⁰

⁵ The statue was moved to Clifden for eight weeks in 2019 to mark the centenary of the flight.

⁶ Qureshi, Air hero 'forgotten', *Manchester Evening News*.

<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/air-hero-forgotten-966454>

⁷ Stickings, Centenary of Alcock and Brown's Atlantic trip which won them £10,000 *Daily Mail* prize is celebrated with special flights in Canada and Ireland... but there is no fanfare for the magnificent men in their flying machines in the UK. *Mail Online*. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7146799/Alcock-Browns-historic-flight-attracts-little-fanfare-Britain.html>

⁸ Wiczowski, Remember the first transatlantic flight, *Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/16/remember-the-first-transatlantic-flight>

⁹ Lynch, *Yesterday*, 9.

¹⁰ Bryson, *One Summer*, 15

This article examines British newspapers and the role they play in placing events in history. There is a lacuna in the research about Alcock and Brown generally, but the gap in the literature is at its greatest regarding newspapers. This is a strange omission because the press was the main form of communication to the masses in June 1919 and brought the attention of the transatlantic flight to the public. What the press wrote about had significant implications on contemporary memory and any events of greater magnitude that threatened that coverage caused a news deficit. The study will look at three newspapers – two national and one regional, analysing their content through the lens of news values, a key difference between national and regional titles at a time when local newspapers were emphasising the ‘localness’ of their product - in an attempt to explain why Alcock and Brown have such a relatively low historical profile. Was their feat overtaken by events that moved them down the news agenda or were there other, economic, imperatives? For example, Lord Northcliffe had offered a £10,000 prize to the first non-stop flyers across the Atlantic and, as he was the owner of a newspaper empire that included the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*, there might have been commercial incentives for rivals to neglect Alcock and Brown.

Method

This study will be both quantitative and qualitative. It will look at three newspapers with different owners, political allegiances and target audiences: the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *Manchester Guardian*. The *Daily Mail*, as noted above, was owned by Northcliffe and would be expected to provide most coverage, if only to justify the £10,000 prize. In 1919 it was the highest selling national newspaper in Britain with *T. B. Browne's Advertiser's ABC* recording a daily circulation on 1.533 million in 1921, which meant it sold nearly a million more copies than the *Daily Express* (579,000) owned by Lord

Beaverbrook.¹¹ The politics of both newspapers reflected the maverick, and often unpredictable, views of their proprietors, but Northcliffe was ‘detested’ by most politicians,¹² while Beaverbrook was a Unionist MP until his elevation to the peerage in 1916, but he ‘rarely conformed to party policy’.¹³ The *Mail* was billed as the ‘the busy man’s daily journal’,¹⁴ while the *Express* appealed to the masses moving from the country and the Victorian slums into suburban areas surrounding cities, though essentially, as Chisholm and Davie pointed out, Beaverbrook produced a newspaper ‘that would interest him’.¹⁵ Both the *Mail* and *Express* were Conservative-supporting newspapers and, to ensure the findings were not affected by their political allegiance, the quantitative research is triangulated by comparing their coverage to that of the *Daily Herald*, a left leaning newspaper that was edited in 1919 by George Lansbury, a future leader of the Labour Party. The *Manchester Guardian*, launched in 1821 to appeal to readers who were ‘amongst the classes to whom, more especially, advertisements are generally addressed’,¹⁶ had a circulation of around 40,000 that was based round its home city, but had a far greater influence nationally. Lord Camrose described it as ‘one of the famous papers of the world’ and ‘the widest distribution of any provincial daily’,¹⁷ and its editor, C. P. Scott, a former Liberal MP, had close relations with the Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who led the Government coalition of Conservatives and Liberals, in 1919. The *Guardian* served Lancashire and also the home city of the two fliers and would be expected to report the event more thoroughly than other regional newspapers because proximity – readers’ identification with people in the news – was and is a key driver in selling a story to a target audience.

¹¹ Curran, Smith and Wingate, *Impacts and Influences*.

¹² Taylor, *Great Outsiders*, 196.

¹³ Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, xiv.

¹⁴ Engel, *Tickle the Public*, 60.

¹⁵ Chisholm and Davie, *Beaverbrook; A Life*, 212

¹⁶ Ayerst, *Guardian*, 23.

¹⁷ Viscount Camrose, *British Newspapers*, 116.

The time scale of the study was Monday, June 16, 1919, the first day the news of the successful flight could be published, to Thursday, July 31, 1919, a period of more than six weeks to allow the newspapers full reflection on the story and to include Brown's marriage to Marguerite Kathleen Kennedy on July 29. This amounted to 40 editions of each newspaper. Harcup and O'Neill included follow-up – reports about subjects already in the news - as an important factor in news values and the repetition of the Alcock and Brown story would have had an impact on their place in public memory.¹⁸ Quantitatively, a search of electronic newspaper files was conducted using 'Alcock' and 'Whitten' (Brown was too common a word) as the terms and these parameters produced 75 results in the *Daily Mail*, seven of which were advertisements (Vickers and Rolls-Royce emphasising their part in the feat, or the fliers endorsing products such as razors) and 16 were photographs. The *Daily Express* registered 33 results, seven of which were advertisements, and the *Manchester Guardian*, excluding the tables of content, had 44 mentions of Alcock and Brown (five adverts). The search terms identified reports in which the two airmen featured, but, to broaden the search, the words 'transatlantic' and 'Atlantic' were included, which inflated the figures: the *Mail* rose to 183, the *Express* to 64 and the *Manchester Guardian* 198. None of these extra reports referred to Alcock and Brown's flight, many featured the crossing of the Atlantic by the airship R34, and, in the *Guardian's* case, the figure increased substantially because of daily market reports on the price of cotton, important in the mill towns of north west of England. The numbers do underline, however, the interest in transatlantic flight.

The qualitative research will study the same editions to see whether the news agenda played a part in the coverage of Alcock and Brown. What is printed in newspapers needs to be judged against what else was in the news that day; where and how reports appear in the newspaper; and what other lines of inquiry were ignored or under-exploited. Harcup and

¹⁸ Harcup and O'Neill, *What is News?*, 261-280,

O'Neill were underlining news-values orthodoxy when they listed magnitude – 'Stories that are perceived as sufficiently significant either in the numbers of people involved or in potential impact' – among their list of criteria for publication.¹⁹ Bigger, more important, events command the main news pages with a diminishing effect on other issues competing for space, so did stories elsewhere eclipse the achievements of the two Mancunians? Journalism, according to Richardson,²⁰ is inescapably connected to the social, political and cultural context in which it is written, and consideration is given to the impetus cinema and newsreels gave to celebrity culture in the early part of the Twentieth Century. In addition, a Canadian perspective is provided with an interview with an aeronautical expert in Newfoundland, who campaigned to mark the centenary at the take-off site in St John's.

'A box-kite with a motor'

It is a measure of the feat of Alcock and Brown that there was no repeat of their non-stop Atlantic flight until Lindbergh flew from Long Island, New York, to Paris eight years later. It was an achievement that was highly anticipated, however, and this expectancy owed much to Northcliffe's enthusiasm for air travel. Wallace wrote that 'almost alone among the leading figures of Britain, Lord Northcliffe had the foresight and vision to see where the development of the aeroplane would lead',²¹ and as early as 1906, less than three years after the Wright brothers first took to the air, the *Daily Mail* was offering £10,000 for the first flight from London to Manchester (Our offer to aeronauts. *Daily Mail*, November 17, 1906, 4). According to Wallace, this offer was regarded sceptically by the public who regarded it as a publicity stunt, but by 1910 the mood had altered and thousands were waiting in Manchester to see the winner of the prize, Frenchman Louis Paulhan, land. In April 1913 the

¹⁹ Ibid, 261.

²⁰ Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers*.

²¹ Wallace, *Flight of Alcock and Brown*, 23.

Daily Mail offered another £10,000 to the first person to cross the Atlantic non-stop in less than 72 hours and repeated the offer in 1918 (£10,000 prize. *Daily Mail*, July 17, 1918, 3).

A young apprentice engineer called John William Alcock had been among the crowd watching Paulhan's successful landing in Barcroft Fields, Manchester, and, having spent the last year of the First World War as a prisoner of war in Turkey, was eager to contest the race to earn the *Daily Mail's* prize. A pilot, he resigned his RAF commission in March 1919 and his enthusiasm impressed Vickers when he approached the Brooklands-based engineering and aviation firm in Surrey about tackling the Atlantic crossing. 'Although he was only 26, the man who so boldly contacted Vickers had experience and confidence beyond his years... he already had 4,500 flying hours to his credit.'²² Coincidentally, because they had never met despite their shared interests and their living only three miles apart, Brown, 33, who had also been a prisoner of war after being shot down over Germany, approached Vickers seeking a post soon afterwards and his knowledge of long distance navigation convinced them to employ him as Alcock's navigator.

It was not a straightforward flight. There were several other attempts for the transatlantic prize being prepared when Alcock and Brown arrived in Newfoundland in late May and it was in some haste that the Vickers and Rolls-Royce engineers assembled the plane. They took off at 16.13 GMT on June 14 and soon afterwards their generator failed depriving them of radio, their intercom and the ability to heat their flying suits. Then thick fog and snow made staying on course difficult – at one stage they were so disorientated they emerged from the fog to find themselves just 10 feet from the water²³ - but, navigating only by a sextant and fleeting glimpses of the stars, they arrived over Ireland within 20 miles of their intended destination. Seeing what he thought was a green field, Alcock brought the

²² Ibid, 46.

²³ Villiers-Tuthill, *Ditched in Derrygimla*, 45.

Vimy down in a bog that forced the plane to stop suddenly and buried the propellers into the sodden ground at a 45 degree angle. Unhurt, they touched down at 08.40 GMT, 16 hours and 27 minutes after taking off, but their official time of 15 hours 57 minutes was determined from the time they were over the sea. 'Perhaps never have flyers braved greater perils in a less substantial craft,' Bryson wrote. 'The Vickers Vimy was little more than a box-kite with a motor.'²⁴

From Alcock and Brown, the two men were propelled into instant fame. Wallace wrote: 'Alcock and Brown had become headline heroes. The press, fully alive to the fascination of Atlantic flying for the public, gave them a generous treatment of ballyhoo and publicity.'²⁵ In addition to the £10,000 prize from the *Daily Mail*, they were awarded £1,000 for being the first Britons to fly the Atlantic from a Mr Lawrence Phillips and another 2,000 guineas from the State Express Cigarette Company. The *Mail* cheque was presented by Winston Churchill, the Secretary of State for War and the Air, at the Savoy Hotel in London on June 20, and the following day they were awarded a knighthood by George V at Windsor Castle. Finally, there was a reception in the home town of Manchester before the two men, neither of whom were natural extroverts, returned to their 'normal' lives.

For a few weeks they impatiently endured their roles as public figures. The visit to Windsor Castle was followed by a seemingly-endless series of fetes, garden parties and public appearances. By the end of July they were finished with the limelight.²⁶

They did not get the peace to reflect calmly on what they had done. Within six months Alcock was killed in a flying accident in France and Brown, a shy man at the best of times, became more reserved and withdrawn. 'Brown was severely affected by Alcock's death,'

²⁴ Bryson, *One Summer*, 15.

²⁵ Wallace, *Flight of Alcock and Brown*, 285.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 306.

Lynch wrote. ‘The shock permanently affected the battle-scarred Vimy navigator.’²⁷ Brown died in his sleep on October 4, 1948, from an accidental overdose of barbiturates, aged 62.

The Newspapers

Given that the *Daily Mail* had offered the £10,000 prize, the newspaper would have expected prime access to the story, but that was confused by timing and geography. By starting their flight on Saturday, Alcock and Brown ensured that news of their take-off was covered extensively by Sunday newspapers. The *Observer*, for example, had three stories on page 11 of their June 15 edition, including a profile of Alcock under the headline ‘The man and machine: pilot who was captured by the Turks’. Also landing by the Marconi wireless station, in 1919 one of the most connected places on the planet, ensured that news of the achievement was broadcast to the world within hours if not minutes of the airmen climbing out of the damaged Vickers Vimy. The *Mail*, which did not publish on Sundays,²⁸ had been denied its scoop, but it gave full coverage to the story nevertheless on June 16, with 13 reports on three of the 10 pages of the broadsheet newspaper and four photographs in a back page exclusively comprising pictures. To remind readers that this was a *Mail*-influenced feat, a report headlined ‘The *Daily Mail* £10,000 won’ appeared on page 4, and this message was underlined on the facing, and main news, page where the principal headline was ‘How I won it’ (*Daily Mail*, June 16, 1919, 5). Possibly the most intriguing element of the coverage was a photograph on page 6 of the Marconigram which had arrived in London at 10.51am on June 15 reading: ‘To: Daily Mail Ldn. Vickers Vimy aeroplane landed Clifden 8.40 g m t from St John’s. Alcock’ (punctuation inserted for clarity).

The following day there were eight reports spread over three pages including what today would be called a colour piece from a reporter on the train with the airmen, an

²⁷ Lynch, *Yesterday*, 268.

²⁸ The *Mail on Sunday* was launched in 1982.

exclusive denied other newspapers. ‘Is it true that you flew part of the way upside down?’ a lady asked. ‘You must allow even an airman a bit of metaphor,’ Brown replied. ‘What I meant was that as we could see neither sky nor ocean we might have been any end up.’ The correspondent reported that students broke into the carriage in Dublin and ‘kidnapped’ Alcock and Brown, taking them shoulder high to Trinity College until the provost intervened and allowed them to continue their trip to the Royal Irish Automobile Club (Train scenes. *Daily Mail*, June 17, 1919, 6).

There were also eight reports in the June 18 edition that marked Alcock and Brown’s arrival in London, including a report from the ‘Special Correspondent on the Train’, who noted the new appearance in the carriage of the latter’s fiancé at Rugby, describing Miss Kennedy as ‘a pretty, tall, slim girl with engaging dimples in her cheeks’ (Airman and bride-to-be. *Daily Mail*, June 18, 1919, 5). But the coverage tailed off rapidly (Table 1) and, having had 44 references in the first three days, there were only 31 more over the study period. Indeed, but for R34 airship, which completed the first East-West crossing of the Atlantic in early July after a flight of 108 hours that inevitably drew comparisons with the two airmen (R34 arrives unaided. *Daily Mail*, July 7, 1919, 5), and Brown’s wedding at the end of the same month the coverage could have ended even more abruptly. The only clue in the coverage as to why the airmen might have wished to avoid the limelight came on June 18 when Brown was described as ‘looking a trifle uneasy’ when he was confronted by a ‘human maelstrom’ at Euston Station (Ten deep crowds. *Daily Mail*, June 18, 1919).

Table 1: References to Alcock and Brown in the *Daily Mail* 16/06/1919 - 31/07/1919

Other newspapers would not have the access to Alcock and Brown that Northcliffe’s £10,000 had bought and this would have acted as a deterrent for greater coverage, including the *Daily Express*, which was a commercial rival of the *Daily Mail* and with a similar target

audience. This was reflected in the reduced number of references (Table 2), although the *Express* was not sparing in the width of its coverage on June 16, 1919. The *Daily Express* was an exception in 1919 in having news on the front page and it led the newspaper with the story headlined 'Direct flight across the Atlantic', one of 11 reports that mentioned the two airmen. No reference was made to the *Daily Mail*'s £10,000 prize, but a story was credited to the rival newspaper that included quotes from the pilot (Alcock. *Daily Express*, June 16, 1919, 1) that read: 'People did not know who we were when we landed and thought we were scouts looking for Alcock.'

Probably because the *Daily Mail* had greater access and the transatlantic flight might be considered to be a 'Mail story', Alcock and Brown moved swiftly down the *Express*'s news agenda to the extent that they were absent from the front page the following day. Inside, a small comment piece speculated presciently on the ephemeral nature of fame (Atlantic heroes, *Daily Express*, June 17, 1919, 4). 'I wonder if in a year or two we shall regard as heroes the men who have crossed the Atlantic by ship?' it asked, noting that less than a century previously 'the first railway passengers had been cheered on their perilous way'. There was also an indication of news priorities at the *Express* in that the main editorial on the same page focussed on the Peace Conference in Versailles. This despite a less than enticing headline 'No change'. Alcock and Brown made only sporadic appearances in the *Express* thereafter until reports of their knighthood appeared on a week after their flight, and the coverage of the R34's return trip from Long Island to Norfolk was printed on July 14. Even Brown's wedding was ignored, but the lack of reports did not limit the language. 'These new knights are very like the old,' one editorial stated. 'The firmament is their round table and the stars their quest' (True knights. *Daily Express*, June 21, 1919, 5). No mention of the £10,000 prize appeared in the *Express*'s reporting, but court proceedings in a libel action against the *Daily Mail* brought by a former assistant provost marshal was given prominence (APM who

lost his post. *Daily Express*, June 26, 1919, 6) and the award of damages to the plaintive two days later was also reported (£650 for ex-APM. *Daily Express*, June 28, 1919, 6).

Table 2: References to Alcock and Brown in the *Daily Express* 16/06/1919 - 31/07/1919

The *Manchester Guardian* was also in direct competition with the *Daily Mail* as Northcliffe had launched a northern edition of the latter on 3 February 1900 in Gorton, three miles south-east of the city centre.²⁹ The Mancunian roots of the airmen would have superseded any commercial rivalry, however, and this was reflected in the number of references over the study period (Table 3). The *Guardian* referenced Alcock and Brown 44 times during the study period which was 33 per cent more coverage than that of the *Daily Express* and, while its reports, in terms of numbers, were considerably fewer than the *Mail's*, they tended to be longer. For example, the *Guardian* had only four reports on June 16, 1919, but that number is misleading because the first comprised virtually the whole of the main news page of a 12-page newspaper and included much of the information the *Daily Mail* included in several reports. The story comprised around 25 per cent of the news and comment of the *Guardian's* edition that day (sport and business pages not included). The newspaper's lead story emphasised the different target audience and the local angle of the story with the headline 'Manchester men first to fly Atlantic direct'.

Table 3: References to Alcock and Brown in the *Manchester Guardian* 16/06/1919 - 31/07/1919

Like the *Daily Express*, the *Guardian* also published a statement by Alcock that began: 'We have had a terrible journey. The wonder is we are here at all' (Alcock. A terrible flight. *Manchester Guardian*, June 16, 1919). There was also an attempt to claim the airmen by disparaging, and othering, national newspapers' reaction to a failed attempt to fly the

²⁹ Waterhouse, *Other Fleet Street*, 16.

Atlantic by another pilot Harry Hawker that had presaged Alcock and Brown's achievement (see below). An editorial read:

Everyone, and particularly everyone in this city, will congratulate them most warmly on their daring, skill and vitality. They may not find themselves the objects of such semi-hysterical excesses of emotion that marred the congratulations of London to Mr Hawker on his escape. They certainly will not in the North, where the national temperament keeps more of its old stability (The direct Atlantic flight. *Manchester Guardian*. June 16, 1919, 6).

A month later there was a headline that underlined the city's ownership of the new national heroes: 'Our airmen' (*Manchester Guardian*. July 17, 1919, 6).

There were three reports in the *Manchester Guardian* on June 17, but, like the *Mail* and the *Express*, the coverage of Alcock and Brown tailed away quickly even if references appeared on more days. Much of the *Guardian's* coverage centred on a strong local angle, the civic reception in Manchester for the two airmen, which took place on July 17 more than a month after the flight. The report noted that Alcock said only a few words of thanks, perhaps an indication that the pilot, who had been the more loquacious in the first celebrations, was tiring of the attention, and it was Brown who spoke at 'more length'. He quoted Kipling 'After me cometh a builder; tell him I, too, have built' and the reports added: 'He spoke of those pioneers who had made his achievements possible... and said he hoped this latest enterprise would help forward the "builders" of the future' (The transatlantic flight. *Manchester Guardian*, July 18, 1919, 4).

The *Express* and *Mail* were middle-market newspapers chasing a similar audience and the *Guardian* had local reasons for pursuing the Alcock and Brown story. The *Daily Herald*, an 'uncommercialized Labour paper'³⁰ whose daily circulation was counted at 211,000 in 1921³¹, had a different, more working class, readership, but its coverage mirrored that of its

³⁰ Curran, Smith and Wingate, *Impacts and Influences*, 33.

³¹ *Ibid*, 29.

right-wing rivals. It had 17 references to Alcock and Brown, 14 articles and three photographs, in the study period, a figure that rose to 70 when the ‘transatlantic’ and ‘Atlantic’ were added to the parameters. Like the three principal newspapers in the study, the majority of the reporting about Alcock and Brown appeared in the immediate aftermath of the flight and the airmen were mentioned on only three occasions after June 21. The evidence suggests that political allegiance did not influence the amount of coverage devoted by newspapers to the two airmen.

‘Flimsy and grudging’

The rapid fall in the press attention devoted to Alcock and Brown is marked and contrasts with other celebrities of the time. For example, the search term Hawker yielded 137 references in the *Daily Mail* for the time period May 20, 1919, and June 10, 1919. This was for the Australian pilot who, with navigator Royal Navy officer Kenneth Mackenzie Grieve, attempted to fly the Atlantic a month before Alcock and Brown. The attempt failed and the story would have had greater poignancy as the airmen were feared dead in the Atlantic for several days before news of their rescue emerged, but even so the difference is disproportionate. This was for what was essentially the same story and the study period was half that used for Alcock and Brown. The disparity between the reporting of the unsuccessful attempt by Hawker and Grieve and the success of Alcock and Brown was dwarfed, however, compared to eight years later when Lindbergh flew the Atlantic solo in 1927. He touched down in Paris to a ‘hysterically, enthusiastic reception’³² and was the ‘most admired man in the world.’³³ Mosley wrote:

He seemed almost too good to be true. Not only had he proved himself an incomparable flier and insuperably brave, but he was young, handsome, polite and, it seemed, instinctively modest.³⁴

³² Mosley, *Lindbergh*, 116.

³³ *Ibid*, 112.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 115.

Bryson wrote that a ‘kind of mania’ gripped the United States, adding:

The *New York Times* gave Lindbergh’s flight the whole of the first four pages of the paper even though there was little more to say than he made it. In the first four days after the flight American newspapers ran an estimated 250,000 stories, totalling 36 million words.³⁵

There had been plans to make a film about Alcock and Brown in the 1950s, with talk of Kenneth More playing Alcock and Denholm Elliott as Brown, but the interest in Lindbergh was so great that these plans were shelved and Warner Brothers instead released a biopic about the American starring James Stewart.³⁶

As has been seen, the coverage of Alcock and Brown in British newspapers fell considerably short of the American acclaim for Lindbergh and the reasons for this were varied. The fact that Northcliffe’s £10,000 prize gave the *Daily Mail* privileged access to the airmen did not encourage greater reporting because rivals such as the *Daily Express* would have been reluctant to give publicity to what might have been considered the ‘*Mail*’s story’. This contrasted with the coverage of a ‘*Mail* failure’ Hawker, and the *Express* printed reports about him for 11 successive days from May 20, 1919, while it managed only three successive days for Alcock and Brown. The *Manchester Guardian* also gave greater coverage to Hawker than to Alcock and Brown (71 reports to 35 over a comparable period) despite the latter being Mancunians, which underlines the chilling effect of the *Daily Mail*’s prize at a time when newspapers were competing vigorously for readers at national and local level. The *Guardian* did mention the *Mail* and the £10,000 on four occasions.

Commercial imperatives may have played a part in the extent of the coverage of Alcock and Brown’s flight, but that does not explain the *Daily Mail*’s relative reluctance to publicise the achievement. This is a surprise until the newspaper’s reporting of Hawker’s flight is taken into account. Engel said that the *Mail* gave ‘massive coverage’ to his attempt

³⁵ Bryson, *One Summer*, 115.

³⁶ Wilder, *Spirit of St Louis*.

and, when it was revealed that the pilot and Grieve had been rescued by a Danish boat, the airmen were greeted with ‘national *Mail*-orchestrated rejoicing’.³⁷ A month later, when Alcock and Brown succeeded they did so without a radio, and arrived on a Sunday meaning that the *Mail* could not give a running account. As a result, Engel stated: ‘The publicity was rather flimsy and grudging.’³⁸ He added that this had further repercussions eight years later: ‘When Charles Lindbergh made the first *solo* [the writer’s italics] Atlantic flight in 1927 it was widely assumed he was making more of a breakthrough than he actually was’.³⁹ This was partly due to the massive increase in accessibility to pictures afforded to ‘celebrities’ in the 1920s thanks to cinemas and newsreel. Picture houses existed in the UK 1919 to broadcast Alcock and Brown’s feat more widely, but as Richards noted: ‘The great age of cinema building began in the 1920s’.⁴⁰ This change in access to news was enumerated by Mowat: ‘There were 2,000 cinemas in operation in 1921, 3,000 by 1926 and 4,967 by 1938.’⁴¹ *The Social Survey of Merseyside* reported in 1934: ‘30 years have seen its rise from little more than a scientific toy in a sideshow at fairs to one of the most influential social institutions of the country.’⁴² Lindbergh became a household name in the UK because many occupants of those households had seen him walk and talk on the big screen. Alcock and Brown’s profile never received the equivalent promotion.

Another element that affected the length of Alcock and Brown’s coverage was the events with which they were competing. Galtung and Ruge identified threshold – the greater the size of an event is the more likely it is to appear in the media – and a story can disappear down the news agenda quickly if bigger news happens elsewhere.⁴³ On the day that Alcock

³⁷ Engel, *Tickle the Public*, 101.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Richards, *Age of the Dream Palace*, 19.

⁴¹ Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars*, 523.

⁴² Jones, *Social Survey of Merseyside*, 279.

⁴³ Galtung and Ruge, ‘Structure of Foreign News’.

and Brown were receiving their knighthoods, June 21, 1919, the German fleet, which had been moved to Scapa Flow in the Orkneys at the end of the First World War, was scuttled by its sailors, who refused to see the ships divided between the victorious Allied powers. This, for Britons brought up on the exploits of Nelson and who spent a decade before the war demanding more dreadnoughts⁴⁴, this was a story of intense import and the newspapers reflected this interest. Two days later, the first time that the *Daily Mail* could report events in Scapa Flow, a naval eye-witness described the scuttling of the battleships and battle-cruisers as ‘one of the greatest dramas in world history’ (Hun fleet scuttled. *Daily Mail*, June 23, 1919, 5). If the scuttling of the German fleet affected the coverage of Alcock and Brown, however, there was an even bigger news story a week later, the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919. This was the culmination of an event that J. L. Hammond, a social historian who had been appointed by the *Guardian* to cover the peace conference, described as “fascinating in its gigantic unreality”. He asked a question resonating in millions of British homes: “If the Peace Conference were to collapse, what would happen?” (Neither war nor peace, *Manchester Guardian*, April 10, 1919, 7). Macmillan wrote: ‘The world has seen nothing quite like it and never will again,’⁴⁵ and the coverage in the press reflected its importance to readers, many of whom had investments in the story in the shape of lost sons, fathers or brothers. Using the parameters ‘Versailles’ and ‘German’ between June 28 and July 31 1919 brought up 284 results, including 231 news stories, seven editorials and 18 features. This was for the *Daily Mail* alone. The *Manchester Guardian* was even more expansive, printing 403 articles, 25 editorials and 20 readers’ letters. The exploits of Alcock and Brown were buried in an avalanche of international news.

⁴⁴ The popular demand was “We want eight, and we won’t wait” (Brooks, *Dreadnought Gunnery*, 2005, 2).

⁴⁵ Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, 1.

Conclusion

Alcock and Brown's achievement was profound. Deighton wrote: 'It marked the moment when British aviation might have led the world',⁴⁶ but like the UK's pre-eminence in the air, the fame of the two Mancunians was short-lived. This article has shown that mostly this was because of events beyond their control; there are times when achievement is overwhelmed by events elsewhere. Dean Baquet, the executive editor of the *New York Times*, said in 2017 'Great stories trump everything else'⁴⁷ and what applied in the Twenty-first Century also held true a hundred years earlier. Gans listed importance – 'impact (e.g. on numbers of people); past or future significance'⁴⁸ – as an important fact in constructing news agendas and very few stories would have remained at the forefront of minds when first the Germans scuttled their fleet at Scapa Flow and then signed the terms of their First World War surrender in Versailles. These events happened within two weeks of Alcock and Brown touching down in Ireland.

The death of Alcock, whose plane crashed in Normandy *en route* to an aeronautical exhibition in Paris on December 18, 1919, while being a significant news story in its own right, also deprived future editions of the exploits and views of the more extrovert of the two airmen. Had he lived, the name Alcock would have been seen in print more often and the exploits of himself and his aeronautical partner would have been recalled more regularly, although even that can be taken for granted because neither had a personality that welcomed attention. Alcock was the more outgoing, but a friend described him as 'only happy and at ease when flying or talking "shop" with mechanics and pilots'⁴⁹ and he was described in an obituary in the *Daily Express* on December 20, 1919, as 'modest' and 'shy'. Brown was even more averse to publicity, his fellow pupils at Manchester Central High School describing him as a 'thoughtful

⁴⁶ Lynch, *Yesterday*, 9.

⁴⁷ Garbus, *Reporting Trump's First Year*.

⁴⁸ Gans, *Deciding What's News*, 78-9.

⁴⁹ Lynch, *Yesterday*, 46.

and exceptionally studious youth',⁵⁰ and, while reports in the newspapers in the study frequently referred to his reticence to engage with the press or admirers, he became more withdrawn after the death of his friend. He got a job with Metropolitan Vickers, which took him to Swansea, and he largely opted out of public life. His obituary in the *Daily Mail* on October 5, 1948, described him as 'one of aviation's "Forgotten Men"', quoting him as saying: 'I am now a businessman pure and simple. I merely want to be known for what I am now – an engineer.'

As this article has shown, the *Daily Mail's* involvement almost certainly proved counterproductive and, as newspapers were the principal purveyors of news in 1919, any reluctance to promote what was seen as a rival's story would also have impacted on Alcock and Brown's status in the news agenda. The initial coverage in the *Daily Express* and the *Manchester Guardian* quickly dwindled, and, while the *Mail* gave Alcock and Brown the most coverage, it failed to give them the space it had devoted to Hawker. Author and journalist Gary Hebbard, who lives in St John's, Newfoundland, and whose father and grandfather visited Alcock and Brown while they were assembling their plane on the shores of Quidi Vidi Lake, also felt that national identity played a part in the relative neglect of the two airmen. He said:

There were at least two American newspaper reporters present in St. John's in 1919, but, of course, they were covering what was then a competition among several flyers vying for the honour. The fact it was won by a couple of Brits was probably something of a disappointment to them.⁵¹

Finally, and most crucially, Alcock and Brown's place in the public's pantheon of notables was affected profoundly by a different perception of heroism in Britain, shaped by the First World War. Contrasting the reception offered by the public to the deaths of Robert Falcon Scott in the Antarctic pre-war and George Mallory on Everest in 1924, Jones wrote that the 'glory of sacrifice did not burn quite as brightly as in 1913'.⁵² He added:

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 52.

⁵¹ Personal interview via email, December 14, 2017.

⁵² Jones, *Last Great Quest*, 272.

The experience of modern warfare, the scale and anonymity of mechanized slaughter, the legacy of mutilation and disfigurement, the immobility of trench fighting, the absurdity of a subterranean existence where men starved and rats feasted, rendered such traditional heroic narratives more problematic than they had been before 1914.⁵³

Alcock and Brown had been prisoners of war, their plane was a converted bomber and they were too closely associated with the horrors of a war that had ended only six months earlier. The renown that should have been theirs passed instead to an American who eight healing years later piloted the *Spirit of St Louis* from New York to Paris, a solo flight that lasted 33 hours. Although Charles Lindbergh acknowledged the debt he owed to the British airmen by saying ‘Alcock and Brown showed me the way’ (*National Geographic*, 2013), their feat was overwhelmed by the news frenzy, reinforced by the cinema, that followed him in 1927. Hebbard, who is attempting to have a statue erected in Newfoundland, to commemorate the Alcock and Brown flight, said: ‘Many people credit Charles Lindbergh with the first Atlantic crossing by plane. He became such a hero in America and much of the rest of the world that his fame erased all previous flight milestones.’

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⁵³ Jones, Last Great Quest, 270.

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