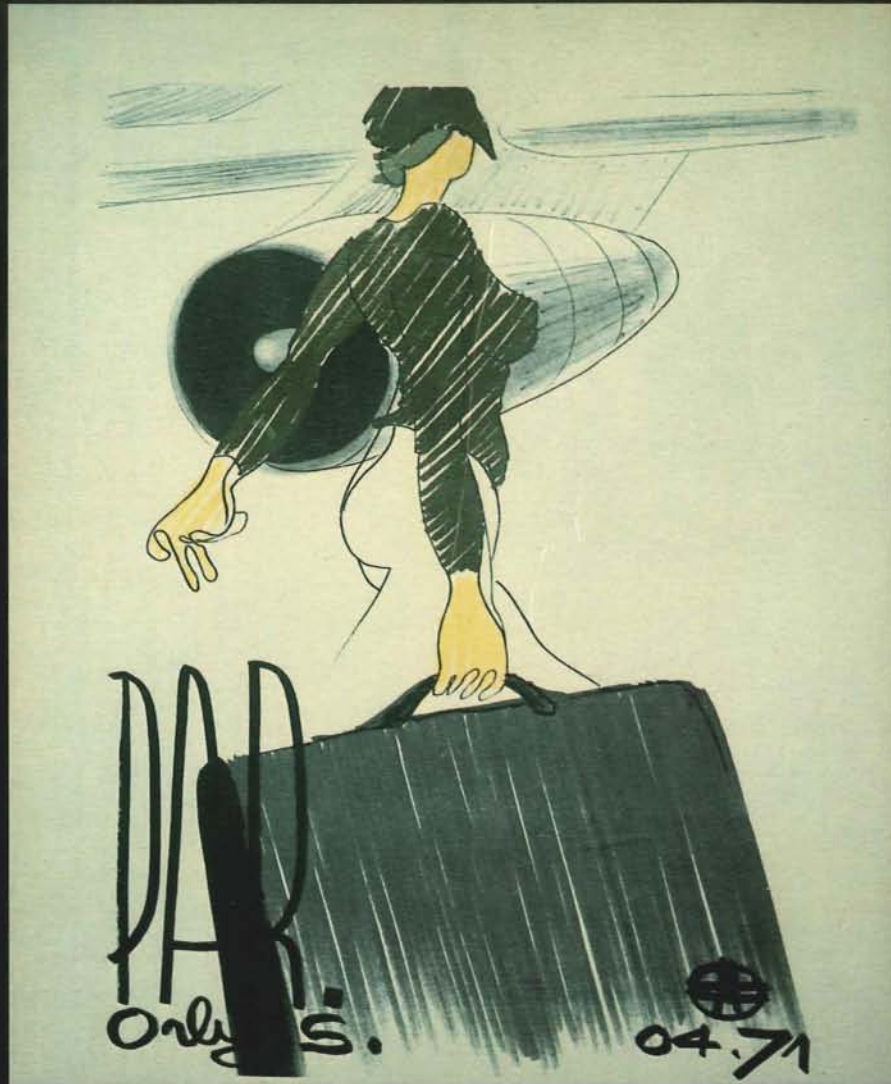


Kenneth Hudson and Julian Pettifer



DIAMONDS IN THE SKY

A Social History of Air Travel

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Published by
The Bodley Head Ltd
9 Bow Street
London WC2E 7AL

and the
British Broadcasting Corporation
35 Marylebone High Street
London W1M 4AA

First published 1979

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Hudson, Kenneth

Diamonds in the sky.

1. Air travel – History
2. Air travel – Social aspects

I. Title II. Pettifer, Julian

III. British Broadcasting Corporation

387.7'42'0904 HE9787

ISBN 0-370-30162-5

ISBN 0-563-17749-7 (British Broadcasting Corporation)

Printed in England by Jolly & Barber Ltd, Rugby

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Preface

This book is primarily about passengers, not aeroplanes. There are many technical experts in the field of aviation history, and the present authors make no claim to be among them, although we are grateful for the existence of their scholarly writings on the finer points of designing, making and operating aircraft.

We are, in fact, something of an oddity among aviation historians, people whose experience of airlines and aeroplanes has been entirely as passengers. Nearly all books about the history of flying have been written either by pilots or by people who have what can best be described as a train spotter's interest in aeroplanes, a connoisseur's passion for the technical minutiae. We ourselves have never even dreamt of flying an aeroplane, we have never worked for an airline in any capacity whatever and our technical awareness of aeroplanes could be described, somewhat flatteringly perhaps, as informed general knowledge. But, on the other side of the scales, we can place with some pride the fact that we are both very experienced air travellers. We have been at it for many years and in many countries and we know what it is really like, as distinct from what the publicity people tell us it is like. We have flown Concorde, we have savoured the pleasures of First Class, and we have spent thousands of tedious, cramped hours in Economy. We have taken off from and landed at big airports and little airports, we have prepared several times for crash landings but, fortunately, never yet had one. We have learnt to defend ourselves, so far as one can, against the manifold inconveniences of going by air, we have marvelled many a time at the astonishing and terrifying shrinking of distances that the aeroplane makes possible. We have come to understand, by looking out of aeroplane windows, what the world's geography is all about. Millions of people must have had exactly the same experiences as we have, and in this book we are simply trying to act as their spokesmen and, as historians and observers, to show them where they come in. We have tried, in words and pictures, to make the point as strongly as we can that the history of aviation is not only or chiefly about aeroplanes. It concerns people, too, the

people who, in their many different jobs, have made the airlines work and the people who, for sixty years, have taken their courage in both hands and decided to fly. In the pages which follow, what the reader will find amounts to a social history of aviation, an account of the ways in which flying has ministered to human needs, whims and follies.

Every attempt has been made to present a fair and balanced picture and, despite the very uneven nature of the evidence, to look at the world as a whole. The story is not one of unqualified admiration. Progress in aviation has been patchy and, although remarkable things have been accomplished, a great deal of improvement is still possible. The most reliable, comfortable and safe methods of travel so far invented by man have been the train and the engine-driven ship. The aeroplane, although probably superior to the motor car, is still a long way behind both of them. All it has to offer – although this is a great deal – is speed. Its accommodation is cramped, its operations are easily disrupted by bad weather, especially fog, and airports become steadily more tedious and uncomfortable every year.

Passengers have to put up with massive and exhausting delays at both ends of their flights, their baggage is damaged, lost and looted with a frequency that yesterday's travellers by boat and train could never have imagined, and they are required to walk very long distances before they actually reach their aircraft. To go by air today, it is as well to be young and strong.

This book has a great deal to say about achievements but, always remembering that our main allegiance is to the travelling public and not to the airlines or the manufacturers, we have pulled no punches in showing the stages by which what started as an adventure and status symbol for the privileged few has become a trial of fortitude and patience for millions.

And, weaving its way remorselessly through all the hazards, comes the steady stream of ever faster and bigger aeroplanes, making sure that each year eight per cent more people will fly. Before the Second World War, there was virtually no consumers' movement among air travellers. The feeling was always, or nearly always, that the company was doing its best and that it was a good best. Those days are long past. With air travel, as with many other things, more has certainly meant worse, and the natives are beginning to get restless.

Diamonds in the Sky is very much a co-operative effort. The authors have pooled their philosophy, knowledge and experience, in the confident belief that the result is a better and more comprehensive book than either would have been capable of writing separately.

Its publication coincides with the first transmission of the BBC's television series, also called *Diamonds in the Sky*, which is presented by Julian Pettifer and for which Kenneth Hudson has given historical advice. The close link between the book and the television programmes has made it possible to make use of the considerable body of BBC material which has accumulated during the course of research and production.