

VOLUME 4

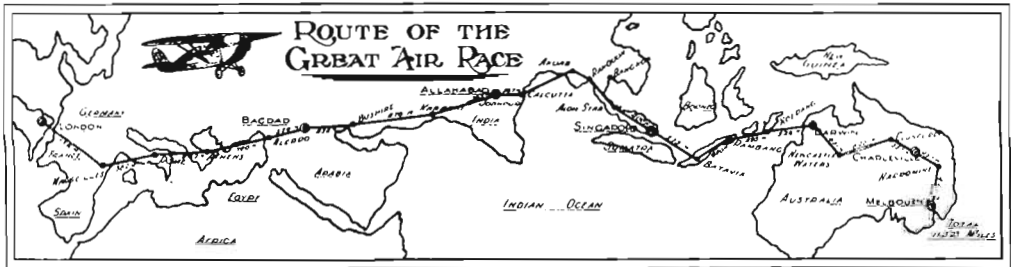


JOURNAL OF THE
NUMISMATIC ASSOCIATION
OF AUSTRALIA.

<http://naa-online.com/>

THE MACROBERTSON (VICTORIAN) CENTENARY AIR RACE

BY RAY JEWELL



Map of the Centenary Air Race Route.

To fully understand the Great Air Race it is necessary to try to regain the feeling of Melbourne in the 1930's, the spirit of Macpherson Robertson, the international rivalry of the time, the enthusiasm of the pioneer airmen, the thrust of the budding aeronautical firms, the dedication of the officials and the excitement of the millions of people who combined to make this one of the greatest sporting events ever staged.

In the late 19th century "Marvellous Melbourne" had been a happy city. The first settlers had arrived in Victoria in 1834 and a period of steady agricultural and commercial growth had ensued. The discovery of gold disrupted this pattern. The sudden wealth, population explosion and business boom catapulted Melbourne into a world ranking city in the shortest possible time. Then came the end of the land boom, falling commodity prices, depression, war and another depression which combined to turn Melbourne into a serious, sombre and ultra conservative city as the State Centenary approached.

The form of the Centenary celebrations was itself a subject of debate. With a large percentage of the workforce unemployed it was not thought proper that extravagant expenditure should be undertaken, but it was also necessary that a fixture be planned to help the general morale.

A Festival Committee was established in 1932 and a number of exciting and admirable events were planned. The list of sporting events, gatherings, exhibitions, etc., were all commendable. Many suggestions were put forward, debated and rejected.

The then Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Sir Harold Gengoult-Smith wanted something on a grander scale and privately canvassed an international air race. Such a project required not only vision but financial backing on a huge scale for the time and for this he approached Sir Macpherson Robertson. A man of vision and faith Robertson saw the opportunities of the race and promised wholehearted support.

Macpherson Robertson was born in Ballarat in 1860 of Scottish parents, one of a family of five.

His father was a dreamer who followed rainbows, from Ballarat to Rockhampton and then to Fiji. While he journeyed to Fiji the family returned to Scotland and lived close to the poverty line for five years.

During his stay in Scotland the young Mac Robertson worked in a confectionery factory. This was a period that left a lasting impression on the lad.

The Robertson family returned to Australia on the maiden voyage of the Loch Ard a vessel that was later wrecked on the Victorian coast.

When the family settled in the inner Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy, Mac Robertson joined the Victorian Confectionery Company on a five year apprenticeship.

In 1880 he decided to go into business for himself and commenced making confectionery in the bathroom of the family's small home.

The story of his struggle, his courage and his faith is magnificent and his biography is wonderful reading. (In 1934 his factory employed 2,528 people).

A great nationalist he encouraged and financed the Douglas Mawson British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research expedition in 1929 and indeed MacRobertson Land in the Antarctic was named in his honour.

He also financed the MacRobertson Round Australia Expedition in 1928.

In 1929 he was created a Knight Bachelor.

His Centenary gift to Victoria of £100,000, was to pay for MacRobertson Girls High School, the Grange Road Bridge, the Herbarium, the Fountain by the Shrine and the Air Race.

That this gift also attracted £42,000 in gift tax which was levied by the Commonwealth and paid by Robertson and was never given any publicity.

Within three months an Air Race Committee representing Government, Aviation, Centenary Authorities and finance had been established.

The route to be followed was decided upon – very similar to that followed by Jim Mollison on his record-breaking flight in 1931.

The task of obtaining the co-operation of the countries across which the aircraft would have to pass (sixteen in all), the waiving of customs and health regulations, the acceptance of different national aviation certificates of safety, the starting point, handicapping and a myriad of other details had to be worked out. Could it be done?

To readers in 1988 the organization of such a race may appear simple. But this was 1934. The race was to cover the 12,000 miles from England to Australia, over jungles, mountain ranges, deserts and oceans, there were few airfields and the only radio (still in its infancy) was a morse code system, and importantly, there was no direction finding equipment.

Today air travel is taken for granted but the pioneers were adventurous men and women. The first England/Australia flight by Ross and Keith Smith in 1919 took 27 days and 20 hours.

By 1930 the journey (in either direction) had been successfully completed by Ray Parer and McIntosh (1920), Alan Cobham (1926), Bert Hinkler (1928), Kingsford Smith and Ulm (1929), Francis Chichester (1929), Parker and Kay (1930), Amy Johnson (1930), F. R. Mathews (1930), Pickthorne and Cabot (1930),

Hill (1930), Kingsford Smith (1930), Gordon (1930). Kingsford Smith now held the record which had reduced to thirteen days.

In 1931 eleven attempts were made on the recorded and it was broken by C. W. A. Scott (both directions), Alan Butler and James Mollison. During 1932 five more completed attempts were made and C. W. A. Scott regained the England-Australia record he had lost to Batten. In 1933 eleven more attempts were made on the record, Kingsford Smith breaking the England-Australia recorded only to lose it later to C. T. P. Ulm. In 1934 Jean Butler completed the flight and C. J. (Jimmy) Melrose captured the Australian-England record, flying solo in a Puss Moth in eight days and nine hours. Melrose was twenty-one and had flown to England to compete in the proposed race. The English-Australian recorded was held by Ulm and was just under seven days.

In April 1933 the Race Committee approached the Royal Aero Club in London.

Original thoughts and ideas were taking shape. Sir Macpherson Robertson's charge at the first meeting of the Air Race Committee – 'You have been convened to make arrangements for an International Air Race from London to Melbourne in connection with the Centenary Celebrations. Make it the greatest race yet conducted in the world, make as few conditions as possible consistent with reducing risks to the minimum. Give attention to Australia's geographical isolation, and in this connection direct your thoughts towards the possibility of reducing this handicap consistent with safety.'

It was decided that the race should commence on Saturday 20th October 1934, that a speed and handicap race should be run jointly but a competitor could only win a prize in one race, that compulsory control points be Baghdad, Calcutta, Singapore, Darwin and Charleville but between these points entrants could select their own routes and that the finishing line should be across an East/West line on Flemington Racecourse between two pylons.

In July 1933 the prize money was lodged in a Melbourne Bank and Condition (2) read as follows:

- (2) Speed Race –
 First Prize £10,000
 and a gold cup, valued at
 not less than £500
 Second Prize £1,500
 Third Prize £500
 Handicap Race –
 First Prize £2,000
 Second Prize £1,000

The pilot of any aircraft, entered in either or both of the above races, which completes the course within sixteen calendar days will receive a gold medallion.

Time was working against the organizers. By the time the complicated handicap formula had been agreed upon, the conditions and rules finalised it was 2nd October, 1933.

The gold cup, valued at £650 was finished and requests for it to be placed on display in cities throughout the world poured in. Race fever was in the air. The optional checking points were to be Marseilles, Rome, Athens, Aleppo, Bushire, Jask, Karachi, Jodhpur, Calcutta, Rangoon, Bangkok, Alor Setar, Batavia, Rambang, Koepang, Newcastle Waters, Cloncurry and Narromine.



The Donor of the Air Race Prizes, Sir Macpherson Robertson.

Not unnaturally the bickering, claims of discrimination, counter claims, doubts of safety and differences between national organisations now commenced to surface. To detail these and the negotiations needed to settle them is a story in itself. Suffice to say the organisers were able to see it through although at times with extreme difficulty.

The search intensified for suitable entries from Britain and Australia but the only large British manufacturer to decide on a new design was de Haviland.

The months that followed and the storms that grew between nations and individuals only added to the interest. Governments made representations, Departments could not move fast enough, and difficulty mounted on difficulty. But the world wide race fever mounted.

On 23rd July, 1934, entries were finalised and a full listing published. Summarized into nationalities they were:

Algeria	1
Australia	5
Denmark	1
Eire	1
France	6
Germany	1
Holland	5
India	1
Italy	2
New Guinea	1
New Zealand	4
Portugal	1
United Kingdom	16
United States	18

Of the 63 entries it was thought that perhaps 20 to 30 would not start.

The Australian entries, who were all entered in Speed and Handicap races, except Melrose who entered Handicap only, were:

- No. 16 Mrs. Melrose, D. H. Moth, Gipsy, Pilot C. J. Melrose
 No. 28 Sir Charles Kingsford Smith, Lockheed Altair, Pratt and Whitney, Pilots, Sir Charles Kingsford Smith, P. G. Taylor
 No. 36 H. C. Miller, Lockheed Vega, Pratt and Whitney, Pilots, H. C. Miller, J. Woods
 No. 43 Air Race Australia Entry Ltd., Monoplane, Cirrus Hermes, Mark IV, Pilot, D. Saville
 No. 64 H. W. G. Penny, Cord Vultee, Wright Cyclone F.2., Pilot, H. W. G. Penny

The New Guinea entry, also of interest to Australian readers was:

No. 35 New Guinea Centenary Flight Syndicate, Fairy Fox, Fairy Felix D.12, Pilots Ray Parer, G. E. Mensworth.

But exactly where was the start to be? Condition (6) stated in part –

‘The races would start in England at a given signal, from several aerodromes as near as possible equidistant from Baghdad’

After long debate and frustration the Royal Aero Club agreed on ‘Mildenhall’ a new and uncompleted R.A.F. airfield some 70 miles from London. The Air Ministry was approached and permission to use the field was given on 5th September, 1934.

As the race approached the entries gradually dwindled. The great disappointments of entrants losing sponsors, or damaged aircraft, of failed deadlines and unavailable pilots seemed to be without end. But all this only served to fuel public interest and the continuing news of entrants vied with the ongoing problems of the Race Committee for coverage throughout the world.

To Australians the controversy and ultimate withdrawal of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith was an enormous pre-race blow. Kingsford Smith had gone to America and purchased a Lockheed Altair and this aircraft was shipped to Sydney arriving in mid July. Department wrangling, lack of communications, aircraft damage, lack of time, all combined to force his withdrawal.

Some commentators of the time have suggested that Kingsford Smith’s unchallenged position in Australian affections wavered and declined from this time. Certainly his fortunes had peaked before the Great Race.

Space prohibits a full account of all the drama that preceded the race but comment must be made that only one company prepared an aircraft solely for the purpose of winning the event. This was to be the de Havilland Comet, a new twin engined racing monoplane basically manufactured from wood. By early 1934 three Comets had been ordered – eventually to be flown by Scott and Black, the Mollisons and Cathcart-Jones and Waller.

The problems at Mildenhall are also a story in themselves. The crews were quartered in temporary dormitories, there were few facilities

and no comforts. But the competitors were not there for comfort.

Lord Nuffields Airspeed Envoy piloted by G. E. Lowdell was damaged on the way to Mildenhall so that 21 starters were prepared to start on 20th October.

Grouped nationally they were:

Australia	3
Denmark	1
Eire	1
Holland	2
New Zealand	3
United Kingdom	8
United States	3

The Irish entry, Colonel Fitzmaurice in a Ballanca withdrew on the night before the race leaving twenty starters.

The world newspapers had called it ‘Mildenhall Madness’ and so it seemed. Tens of thousands of people flocking over ploughed fields to watch aircraft depart at 6 a.m. on a winter’s morning. The starting point was visited by George V and Queen Mary as well as the Prince of Wales. Race fever had taken over, not only in England but throughout the world.

The Lord Mayor of London, Sir Alfred Bower waved the first aircraft away and minutes later the Mollisons (Jimmy Mollison and Amy Johnson) were airborne in their Comet.

There were twenty starters and there were twenty stories. The courage and endurance of the men and women involved as well as the incredible skill and ability was amazing. The world watched and listened as history unfolded.

The world interest was intense and enormous crowds greeted all the aircraft at their



The Dutch in Java.

various stops. Never before or since has an event received such concentrated newspaper coverage throughout the world. Sir Macpherson Robertson could be well satisfied. The attention of the world was on Melbourne.

Along the way records fell and excitement rose. Stories of tragedy and disappointment were intermingled with the ongoing news of the changing leaders. Gradually the field spread out, there were thousands of miles between the leading aircraft and the stragglers.

In the lead Scott and Black were now a few hours ahead of Parmentier and Moll and the race was in the balance. They limped into Darwin on one engine at 3 a.m. local time to be met by an enormous crowd. The time, a remarkable 2 days 4 hours and 38 minutes. They had clipped 4½ days off the existing record held by C. P. T. Ulm.



C.W.A. Scott and T. Campbell Black.

As the planes raced across Australia the lead was only 8 hours and any mishap could seal the fate of either team.

The KLM Douglas DC2 ran into a rainstorm which necessitated a forced landing at Albury. Again a story that has been told and retold of the hundreds of Albury residents who turned out in their cars to make an illuminated runway on the Albury racecourse. The heavy Douglas bogged and again willing townspeople stepped in to pull it clear. What wonderful stories of co-operation.

In the meantime Scott and Black had reached Melbourne at 5.35 a.m. and had only to stay awake long enough to fly through the pylons at Flemington Racecourse at a height not exceeding 200 feet and then on to Laverton. The race was won.

The Centenary Air Race did show the world that Australia was only days away and it achieved all that Macpherson Robertson had hoped. It made him a household name around the world. It undoubtedly benefitted the firms of de Havilland, Douglas and Boeing. It enabled de Havilland to develop the Comet which in just a few years was to become the Mosquito, the famous R.A.F. fighter-bomber of World War II. The race established the reputation of KLM as a world ranking airline, a position it holds until this day. KLM had entered a commercial aircraft which had carried a payload and had failed by only hours to beat a racing plane. It also served notice to existing airlines that improved performance was required and this notice was heeded throughout the aviation industry.



J. J. Moll and K. D. Parmentier

The grand ambition had also been realised. A single event had focussed world attention on Melbourne and had proved a wonderful stimulus to flagging spirits who had just been through a terrible depression.



The Victory Procession in Melbourne.

Results

The aircraft to finish the race within the sixteen calendar days allowed were:

SPEED RACE

Place	Pilots	Machine	Prize	Arrival Time Melbourne
1.	Scott & Campbell Black	DH Comet	£10,000	Oct. 23, 5.35 a.m.
2.	Parmentier & Moll	Douglas DC2	+	Oct. 24, 12.52 a.m.
3.	Turner & Pangborn	Boeing 24TD	£1,500	Oct. 24, 3.36 a.m.
4.	Cathard-Jones & Waller	DH Comet	£500	Oct. 25, 4.45 a.m.
5.	Hewett & Kay	DH Dragon Rapide	-	Nov. 3, 1.33 a.m.

HANDICAP RACE

1.	Scott & Campbell Black	DH Comet	#	Oct. 23, 5.35 a.m.
2.	Parmentier & Moll	Douglas DC2	£2,000*	Oct. 24, 12.52 a.m.
3.	Melrose	DH Pusmoth	£1,000	Oct. 30, 2.00 a.m.
4.	Stodart & Stodart	Airspeed Courier	-	Oct. 30, 12.55 a.m.
5.	McGregor & Walker	Miles Hawk	-	Oct. 27, 9.50 p.m.
6.	Hewett & Kay	DH Dragon Rapide	-	Nov. 3, 1.33 a.m.
7.	Hansen & Jensen	Desoutter Mark II	-	Oct. 31, 11.33 p.m.

+ Relinquished for 1st Handicap Prize

Relinquished for 1st Speed Prize

* Handicap adjusted for dropping payload at Albury

Other aircraft to finish the course were:

Brook	Miles Falcon, Gipsy Major	Nov. 20
Davies & Hill	Fairy IIIf, Napier Lion	Nov. 24
Parer & Hemsworth	Fairfox, Fairy Felix D12	Feb. 13

Aircraft which departed Mildenhall and failed to complete the course were:

Starting Number	Pilots	Machine
6.	Asjes and Geyesdorfer	Panderjager S4 Aircraft damaged on landing at Allahabad, Oct. 21, 3.55 p.m.
30.	Cochran & Smith	Granville Monoplane Withdrew Bucharest, trailing edge flap, Oct. 20, 4.23 p.m.
33.	Wright & Polando	Lambert Monocoupe Withdrew Calcutta, engine trouble, Oct. 30
36.	Woods & Bennett	Lockheed Vega Aircraft damaged on landing at Aleppo, Oct. 21, 8.05 a.m.
47.	Shaw	Klemm Eagle Aircraft damaged on landing at Bushire, Oct. 23, 12.45 a.m.
58.	Stack & Turner	Airspeed Viceroy AS8 Withdrew Athens, after earlier forced landing, Oct. 22, 1.45 p.m.
62.	Gilman & Baines	Fairy Fox Crashed to their deaths near Foggia, Oct. 22, 3.55 a.m.
63.	Mr. and Mrs. J. Mollison (Amy Johnson)	DH Comet Withdrew Allahabad, engine trouble & forced landing, Oct. 22, 5.25 a.m.



The DH Puss Moth flown by C. J. Melrose.

Of course the numismatic connection in the Great Air Race is to be found in the Conditions of the Race – Clause 2 – which states that a gold medal will be awarded to the pilot of any aircraft that completes the course within 16 days.

The value of the medal is stated to be £ 12.

This medal has been elusive to Australian collectors and of course one only needs to read the results to realise why.

The gold medal was ordered through Hardy Brothers, Jewellers and this firm placed the order with Stokes and Sons of Melbourne. Because of the ever-changing number of entrants, starters and eventual finishers, the actual order could not be placed until the very last minute.

At this time (1934) Stokes kept an exact day book of all goods produced at their factory and the number of gold medals delivered in three batches, totalled 29.

Some conjecture must arise as to their distribution but it is known that the medals were presented each day as the planes landed, whereas the cheques were presented at a separate ceremony.

If the pilot *and* co-pilot of each aircraft received a medal (and this would have been quite typical of Mac Robertson) then 17 medals are accounted for.

It is also recorded that H. L. Brook, a soloist, who finished on 20th November was enter-

tained privately by Sir Macpherson and again the possibility of a medal is real. This possibility again applies to Davies and Hill as they and Brook were all British entrants and the sponsor was a whole-hearted supporter of the Empire.

What is recorded is that medals were given to Ray Parer and Godfrey Hemsworth who limped in four months after the race had started. Stokes records show that an additional gold medal was ordered at this time.

It is a reasonable assumption, knowing that all medals had been given by 20th February, that all of the above five pilots did receive medals. This would make a total of 22.

Another medal adorned the front of the handsome gold trophy won by Scott and Black. Total 23 medals.

One can only guess at the fate of the other medals. There were so many people who contributed so much that it is reasonable to think that some of the medals would have found their way to V.I.P.'s who had helped with the planning of the race.

But the majority of gold medals returned home with the pilots. To Britain, Denmark, Netherlands, New Guinea, New Zealand leaving only one in Australian hands.

This was the medal won by C. J. (Jimmy) Melrose, the quiet unassuming young Australian who had flown solo in his Puss Moth and had taken second prize in the Handicap Race.



Jimmy Melrose.

This young hero was to meet a sad death on 5th July 1936 when on a charter flight to Darwin. After taking off in bad weather his plane exploded over Melton, Victoria.

It is interesting to note that the Coronation Medal (1937) could not be awarded posthumously but an award was made to Mrs. Melrose – mother of James Melrose, Airman.

The gold medal illustrated is that awarded to Jimmy Melrose – the only Australian entry to finish in the prescribed time.

The medal has the original pale blue ribbon and a gold bar on which is written ‘MacRobertson’.

Gold 34mm. Stamped 18ct.
 Maker, Stokes and Son
 Weight of medal 24.41g
 Number struck 29.

There exist replicas of the official medals which are gilded copper. These are also quite rare and some mystery surrounds their origin.

It has been said that these replicas were given to the ground staff who looked after all the aircraft that finished. A small group of men, and if this is correct it would explain the rarity.

That all existing specimens have a Melbourne origin helps to add weight to this theory.

It is absolutely certain that the gilded medals were not struck by Stokes. The firm’s records until the end of the 1936 financial year were meticulous and recorded every item produced in the factory. These records, still intact, make no mention of the medals nor are they mentioned in the official reports of the events sponsored by MacRobertson.

A close examination of the gilded copper medals leads to the thought that all are cast. An exact comparison with the gold medal is difficult as it has a sand blasted finish.

Certainly the ‘MacRobertson’ bar of the gold medal has Stokes name impressed on it while the bar of the gilded medal does not have this imprint.

It is known that the greatest collection of Air Race memorabilia was assembled by Rex Allison and is now in the National Museum, Canberra. This collection was amassed from the time of the Race and it contains a gilded copper medal.



The Gold Medal.

It is not possible to give an explanation for the gilded copper medals at this time. Rather we are left with unanswered questions –

Why were they made?
Where were they made?
For whom were they made?

This account of the Great Race is so fleeting that it offers the writer little satisfaction. If your interest has been spurred to read further, Arthur Swinson's history published in 1968 is recommended.

Perhaps the feeling of dissatisfaction arises from the knowledge that the great characters who played the major roles in making the race happen have not been mentioned.

But the story as told here is utterly incomplete when the participants are considered. These were wonderful characters, great people, whose like will not be seen again. A glance at the Bibliography that follows will show that there was much, much more to this great event that can be told here.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The Great Air Race*, Arthur Swinson (Cassell, 1968).
The Aviators, William Joy (Angus and Robertson, 1958)
Cooper's Creek, Alan Moorehead (Hamish Hamilton, 1963).
Flying Matilda, Norman Ellison (Angus & Robertson, 1958)
The Restless Sky, Air Vice-Marshal C. E. Kay (Harrap, 1964)
Sky Fever, Sir Geoffrey de Havilland (Hamish Hamilton, 1961)
Making It Happen; the Rise of Sir Macpherson Robertson, G. Taylor (Melbourne, 1934).
The History of Australian Aviation, Stanley Brogden (Melbourne, 1960).
Fifty Years Fly Past, Geoffrey Dorman (Forbes Robertson, 1951).
Caesar of the Skies, Beau Shiel and Colin Simpson (Cassell, 1937).
D.H.: An Outline of De Havilland History, C. M. Sharp (Faber, 1960).
Slide Rule, Nevil Shute (Heinemann, 1954).
The Story of British Light Aeroplane, T. Boughton (Murray, 1963).
The Millionth Chance, James Leasor (Hamish Hamilton, 1957).
My Flying Life, Sir Charles Kingsford Smith (Melrose, 1937).
Florence Desmond, by Herself, Florence Desmond (Harrap, 1953).
Introducing Victoria, G. W. Leeper (ed.) (CUP, 1956).
Winged Victory, Elizabeth Grey (Constable, 1966).
The Stars at Noon, Jacqueline Cochran (Hale, 1955).
Wij in de Melbourne-Race, P. J. Mijksenaar (Amsterdam, 1935).
Fellowship of the Air, B. J. Hurren (Iliffe, 1951).
The History of Queensland, M. J. Fox (ed.) (CUP, 1956).
Scott's Book, C. W. A. Scott (Hodder, 1934).
Mosquito, C. M. Sharp and M. J. F. Bowyer (Faber, 1967).
Lans der Hoge Weg, J. J. Moll (Amsterdam, 1959).
In Drie Dagen Naar Australië, K. D. Parmentier (Amsterdam, 1935).
The MacRobertson Centenary Gestures, The Government of Victoria (Melbourne, 1934).

Grateful thanks are extended to Gary Larsen for the opportunity to borrow many of the above books from his Library.