Book Reviews


Gertrud Pfister, professor of sports history at Berlin's Free University, is internationally known for her detailed and methodologically sophisticated studies of women's sports in Germany and for her ability to present the results of her research to nonacademic as well as to academic audiences. In Fliegen-Ihr Leben: Die ersten Pilotinnen (Flying-their Life: the First Female Pilots), Pfister extends her scope to tell the stories of balloonists and airplane pilots not only from Germany but also from France, the British Commonwealth, and the United States. The book, well-illustrated by black-and-white reproductions of popular art and by dozens of well-chosen photographs, includes primary documents (many translated from English into German) as well as Pfister's own narration of the adventures of the intrepid women who defied convention and took to the skies. Pfister warns in her introduction that we should not romanticize these women: "The indubitable achievements of the first female pilots should not ... tempt us to glorify them or uncritically to honor them as heroines" (11). True to her word, Pfister notes the recklessness and the arrogance that seem to have been endemic among the first pilots, male as well as female, but no reader can doubt the author's admiration for their courage and for their obdurate determination to overcome natural, material, and cultural obstacles. Although German scholars are notorious for their abstruseness and verbosity, Pfister's writes as if the story of these women were a tale of high adventure—which it is.

The first chapters are devoted to nineteenth-century women such as Sophie Blanchard and "Carlotta" (Mary Myers), who ascended to the heavens in hot-air balloons, and Kathe Paulus, who sprang from balloons and floated to the ground by parachute. The next group of chapters narrates the exploits of the women who flew the primitive airplanes of the early twentieth century. The first female pilot seems to have been a Frenchwoman, a self-proclaimed baroness, Raymonde Delaroche, who acquired her pilot's license on March 8, 1910, slightly more than a year earlier than Germany's Melli Beese and America's Harriet Quimby. All three of these Pilotinnen sacrificed their lives to their passion. Quimby, the first woman to fly the English Channel (April 16, 1912), died a scant two months later when her plane went down in Boston Harbor. Delaroche, flying as a passenger, lost her life in 1919. Beese, who married a Frenchman, suffered political persecution during World War I and never regained her place of leadership in German aviation. After a series of disappointments, she committed suicide in 1925.

Thanks to aeronautical progress, the female flyers of the Twenties and Thirties had-on the average-longer careers. They also provided more in the way of autobiographical material, which Pfister uses quite effectively. The
most famous of the women who flew ente deux guerres was unquestionably Amelia Earhart, remembered today for her solo flight across the Atlantic in 1932 and for her mysterious disappearance over the South Pacific during her 1937 attempt to circumnavigate the globe. Her adventures, however, were no more exciting than those of a number of other women—such as Amy Johnson and Beryl Markham—who are much less known. On a flight from England to Australia, in 1930, Johnson surmounted one difficulty after another. She lost her bearings in the clouds while flying through the mountains of eastern Turkey. She was caught in a sandstorm near Bagdad. She made an emergency landing on the athletic fields of Bangkok's polytechnic institute (whose teachers and students helped her repair her plane). She made another emergency landing between Surabaya and Darwin, coming down on "soft earth between bushes and trees" (110). Her plane was immediately surrounded by a troop of natives, "howling and crying" and brandishing clubs and spears. Fortunately, they proved quite friendly, and Johnson was soon on her way again. Beryl Markham is another whose exploits can still impress a modern reader. Reared in British East Africa, Markham played with native children, whose languages she learned. As a young adult, she became expert with the bow and arrow and with the Massai spear. She "drank animals' blood and fermented milk with the Nandi warriors, prayed with them for luck on the chase, and accompanied them on their hunting expeditions . . ." (210). After a number of years spent raising horses, she met Denys Finch Hatton, the former lover of her friend Karen Blixon, author of Out of Africa. Hatton taught her to love literature, music, and-airplanes. After his death in 1931, she acquired a commercial license and flew numerous dangerous missions in support of safaris. Among her subsequent achievements was a twenty-one-hour nonstop flight from England to Nova Scotia (September 4, 1936). After divorcing her third husband, she returned to Kenya to become a successful racehorse breeder. Earhart, Johnson, and Markham are but three of the many women whose extraordinary stories are told in their own words as well as in Pfister's.

Although Pfister has chosen in this book to narrate rather than to analyze and interpret, she does highlight some interesting patterns. Despite their diverse origins and different nationalities, almost all of the female pilots were avidly involved before they took to the skies-in sports, in the arts, or in some other unconventional career (one of which was journalism). Unconventional, these women had to persevere in the face of discrimination, and unconventional they were. Marie Marvingt, for instance, a French pilot in the years just before World War I, swam and cycled competitively, skied, skated, and climbed mountains. In 1900, she won a national title as a sharpshooter. She also played golf, which must have seemed rather tame.

Although Fligen-Ihr Leben is by no means a political polemic, Pfister makes no effort to hide her views on the topic of women's rights. "Amelia Earhart's wish for equality;" writes Pfister with obvious approval, "was as strong as her desire to fly, and she was conscious of the fact that her successes as a pilot could support the emancipation of women because she was a model for most of the girls and women of her time. She showed with her wings that women can achieve as much as men can" (196-97).