

THE **R** HISTORY GROUP
7

W E JOHNS
1893 – 1968



Best known as the author of the 'Biggles' books William Earle Johns was a prolific editor and writer with a wide range of interests but is a difficult personality to assess. There are many contradictions which leave only a feeling of ambiguity.

His first marriage deteriorated quickly, but perhaps understandably. His wife would not divorce him so he lived with Doris Leigh unmarried but wanted the fact hidden as he felt it would prejudice his position as a children's writer. Nevertheless, they lived

a very happy, devoted life together for many years. It did mean that he never acknowledged his son publicly, but there seems to have been a good relationship between them and he always financially supported his wife, with her continual health problems, and his son. He could be cruel towards people, held trenchant views which would brook no opposition, but at the same time formed friendships and partnerships with people of those opposing views. He exaggerated his own experiences and invented others, which are shown by official papers, and make it difficult to know when to accept comments attributed to him. On the other hand he had friends who seem to have regarded this as part of his personality and would refer to the habit jokingly. He awarded himself the rank of Captain.

He was born on the 5th February 1893 at Mole Wood Road, Bengeo, a suburb of Hertford, to Richard Eastman Johns, a tailor, and Elizabeth Johns, nee Elizabeth Earl, whose father was a master butcher. Johns, having been given his mother's maiden name as his second, added the "e" later in life. The family had originated in Devonshire and may have had connections with a William Johns who was an adjutant in the Cornish Militia and died in 1834. He had a son, Richard, a major in the Royal Marines, who died at Stoneham, Devonshire in 1851 and wrote some books on naval and military battles and some volumes of poetry. This may mean that W E Johns was correct when he told the editor of the 'Boys' Own Paper' that he had traced his family back to soldiers who had served in the Peninsular War.

He had a younger brother, Russell Ernest, born on the 24th October 1895. His childhood was a happy one and he remained close to his family.

He and his brother attended the local school, then went to Hertford Grammar School in 1905 and 1907 respectively.

The present day Grammar School is a different building – that which the Johns boys attended was the Richard Hale School, an all-boys school founded on the 16th April 1617. Richard Hale was an affluent merchant, eldest son of Thomas Hale of Codicote, who founded the school 'for the instruction of children in the Latin tongue and other literature in the town of Hertford'. The school was in use until 1930 and still stands near All Saints Church.

There is a haunting sadness about schoolboy antics of the time. In many cases the schools had a cadet corps. Some of the boys may have taken it seriously but probably Johns' view that it was merely a 'silly game' was more general. What was also sadly true was his comment later in life that 'None could guess that within a few years most of them would be doing these things in grim earnest on the war-stricken fields of Flanders; or that before the First World War was over nearly a third of them were to die on that same battlefield...'

It is suggested, in the absence of an autobiography that 'Biggles at School' is based on Johns' own experiences.

Johns wanted to go into the army, but when he left school in 1907 his father arranged for him to become articled for four years to a county municipal surveyor.

At school he had proved to be a crack shot. Now two other skills developed – he had music and art lessons and proved to be proficient at both, to the point, regarding the piano, of improving his pocket money by playing for the silent films at the local cinema.

When he had completed his apprenticeship he was appointed sanitary inspector in Swaffam and it was there he met his future wife. He was in a concert and three girls were in the audience and he was introduced to them later after a church service. They were the vicar's daughters and Johns and the eldest, Maude Penelope, began 'walking out together'. She was eleven years older than him.

Johns was still studying to become a qualified surveyor but was dissatisfied and on the 4th October 1913 he joined the Territorial Army and became Private No. 74451 in the King's Own Royal Regiment (Norfolk Yeomanry), a regiment raised in 1901 at the express wish of Edward VII. Then war was declared and as with so many others Johns' life changed completely.

The regiment was mobilised on the 4th August 1914 as a cavalry regiment and Johns was to spend three years fighting in Turkey with the Yeomanry and then Greece with the Machine Gun Corps. His experiences in the trenches had the same appalling traumatic effect it had on so many others, best expressed, perhaps, in his strident outspokenness about rearmament in the 1930s, when he felt that our vulnerability would increase not lessen the likelihood of another war.

Johns and Maude decided to get married on 6th October 1914, the Regiment meanwhile remaining on home defences, but then in September 1915 it embarked on the SS Olympic for Gallipoli, just as Maude found she was pregnant.

The horror of the Gallipoli Campaign is well known and it was followed, inevitably, by an Enquiry. Reading the reports of the Dardanelles Campaign Commission can still cause anger to rise until it threatens blood pressure. In one sense it is like reading the script of a 'Yes Minister' episode. Pure Sir Humphrey. The amount of words used by witnesses to hide that they are saying 'Yes' or 'No', whichever may be the truth, demonstrates the inventive range of the English vocabulary. You could become lost in the wonder of it all. The anger comes from the realisation that it is bruised egos that are being protected, but the lack of planning, the mistakes, the stupidity, medical facilities that it was thought Florence Nightingale had eradicated forever, wounded men left on the beaches and so on had cost 250,000 Allied lives, and the maiming, physically or mentally, of many more.

Johns' Regiment formed part of the 54th East Anglian Division which suffered considerably from disease. It was finally evacuated from the Suvla Bay beachhead on the 20th December, among the last to leave, and arrived in Alexandria on Christmas Day to become part of the Suez Defences. It was here that Johns learned that Maude had given birth to a son, William Earl Carmichael Johns, on the 18th March 1916.

In July 1916 Johns left the Yeomanry, having become a machine gunner, and in September received his formal attachment to the Machine Gun Corps as a lance corporal.

At the start of the War the military had not realised the significance of the machine gun and the Machine Gun Corps was not formed until October 1915. Johns returned to England for further training before being sent to Salonika, a campaign that was always considered a 'side show', except by those who fought in it. It was here that Johns contracted malaria, one of the 63,396 men to do so, out of a strength of 100,000, and it was while he was in hospital that he decided to transfer to the Royal Flying Corps. 'It seemed to me' he said, 'that there was no point in dying standing in squalor if one could do so sitting down in clean air'. On 25th September 1917 he was discharged on appointment to a commission as 2nd Lieutenant on the General List of the Royal Flying Corps, as gazetted on 23rd October.

The Royal Flying Corps was the military air arm, initially responsible for artillery co-operation and photographic reconnaissance, later expanding to strafing and bombing. In 1918 it amalgamated with the Royal Naval Air Service and became the RAF.

On 26th October 1917 Johns arrived at No. 1 School of Aeronautics at Reading, eventually going to the school's aerodrome at Coley Park, where he trained in a Maurice Farman Shorthorn to become a bomber pilot, receiving his 'wings' at the end of the year. In January 1918 he received his first posting to No. 25 Flying Training School at Thetford which meant he could spend time with his family. He became a flying instructor based at Narborough.

When the RAF was formed Johns was confirmed as a 2nd lieutenant and posted to No. 2 School of Air Fighting at Marske-on-Sea in Yorkshire. Both this site and that at Coley are no more – Coley is now a housing estate and Marske became an RAF administrative base, then an ICI Depot and then a housing estate.

In July 1918 he was posted to France and joined No. 55 (Day) Bombing Squadron which had originally been formed at Castle Bromwich, Warwickshire in April 1916. It was at first a training unit but then mobilised for active service and was the first squadron to be equipped with De Havilland DH4 heavy Bombers. During the time Johns spent with the squadron he only had an operational total of 6 hours flying before he was shot down – and during that time continued unabated the rise of the number of aircraft he crashed, for various reasons and not all his own fault.

On 15th September 1918 after a party in a hotel in Nancy Johns found himself stranded when a fellow officer who had offered him a lift back to base failed to turn up and he was due to fly in the morning. He managed to cadge a lift in an American ambulance but they got lost and found themselves at a remote country house. Writing of this later Johns refers to the old lady who answers the door as an 'old crone', looking like a Notre Dame gargoyle. It is an example of the more unpleasant side of him. She tells him her husband was killed in 1870 – 'If she had said he was killed at the Battle of Hastings I would have believed her' he wrote. He was being offered hospitality. One would expect common politeness and sympathy. However, there was also a young girl present with the 'face of an angel'. He intended to go back but the following day he crashed and became a POW. The girl became the basis of a character in 'The Camels are Coming'.

Johns convinced himself he had been shot down by a pilot named Ernst Udet, a German air ace who was part of the Jagdstaffel commanded by von Richthofen, the 'Red Baron'. This even formed part of Johns' obituary in the Times, but Udet was on a month's leave at the time so there is a mystery about what happened – he may even have crashed once more. Tragically though, his observer was killed. Johns also stated that after interrogation he was subjected to a 'court martial' and threatened with being shot as a spy but German records show nothing of this, although that may not mean anything. It is just an example of the difficulty of being certain of some statements.

Having been sent to a POW camp Johns made several escape attempts finally succeeding at the end of October, only to be recaptured again. But here also he gives contradictory accounts. It was soon the end of the war and on the 30th November the prisoners were driven to Strasbourg for debriefing and he embarked at Calais for Dover on 23rd December, causing a sensation when he arrived home because he had been reported as 'missing, presumed killed'. There was a family celebration and then the problem of adjusting to civilian life once more. He stayed in the RAF, becoming a flying instructor at Cranwell which was then the 59 Wing's headquarters. This lasted until 11th April 1919 when the Wing was disbanded and he was transferred to the Unemployment List. This increased the tensions which were developing in the marriage due to illness and age differences, plus the changes the War had brought about in Johns himself.

In November 1920 he was reinstated for a three year Short Service Commission and promoted to the new RAF rank of Flying Officer. He joined the Inspectorate of Recruiting in Covent Garden and the family moved to a flat at Lancaster Gate, a mid-19th century development in the Bayswater district of west central London.

Not only did the work give him an insight into economic realities it was also, subconsciously, giving him material for the books he would write in the future. One of the saddest things was finding how many men who only a short time ago were risking their lives could now not find employment and were living like tramps. Men in these circumstances were to be the heroes of his early adult books.

Thomas Edward Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) was one of the recruits Johns turned away. The papers were false. Pressure from above resulted in Lawrence being accepted and there is one version of what happened in his book 'The Mint', and another version which Johns gives. In view of the degree of Lawrence's involvement with the Secret Service it is difficult to assess just what was going on behind the scenes.

Johns makes two comments about his own activities during this period – one, that he flew in a Hendon Air Display, which would have been unusual according to the RAF Records Department. Although there is evidence to show he was on the organising committee in 1927 there is none that he actually took part. In the same way he stated that in 1924 he was posted to operational duties in Iraq and India. Again, RAF records do not confirm this although Johns' recollections seem to be detailed and clear.

In 1923 his three-year commission was extended for a further four years and he was sent to open an RAF Recruiting Depot in Birmingham. He spent over a year there and

met and fell in love with Doris Leigh. His marriage had ended when he had rejoined the RAF and his wife and son had moved back to the Vicarage at Little Dunham. Johns had moved into a hotel in Edgbaston, next door to the Leigh home. In 1924 he was posted to Newcastle and set up home with Doris in Whitley Bay. His next posting was to Ruislip, where Doris ran a guest house at Gerrards Cross, then he was moved to Headquarters Air Defence (Great Britain) and it was then that he started on the paintings, and, in particular, the articles, which would eventually lead to a staggering output and bring him fame. His time in the RAF was coming to an end, but he had discovered another way of earning a living – the 1927 Air Display for which he was invited to serve on the committee was a fitting end. He relinquished his commission on the 15th October, retiring as a Flying Officer, and he and Doris moved to Lingfield, first to a house by the pond, although it is uncertain which one, and then moving into the Thatched Cottage.

Luck was with him. There was great public awareness of and excitement in aviation. It was the year Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic, Britain won the Schneider Trophy and airships were being developed. Johns set up his studio and also encouraged Doris' 18 year old brother Howard, who had had no formal teaching but showed great promise as an artist. He was to become a well-known aviation artist and illustrated many of Johns' books and magazines.

Johns had also developed an interest in gardening and a little of the Alpine garden he created still exists. This time in Lingfield seems to have been a particularly happy one with Doris, and with her family living in the smaller cottage, with the garden, pets and Johns' developing new career as artist and writer. He was established with the Illustrated London News and wrote articles on aviation for *The Graphic*. New markets were opening up and he submitted articles for the *Modern Boy*, a weekly magazine launched by the Amalgamated Press in February 1928, costing 2p.

After a holiday in Africa with Doris he came back with so many ideas for illustrating front covers of magazines, submitting aviation articles and editing *The Modern Boys' Book of Aircraft*. Among the contributors to this book was a young writer, Christopher St John Sprigg, whose thrillers, written under the pseudonym of Christopher Caudwell, were becoming increasingly popular, and here we see another of Johns' contradictions because he was staunchly anti-Communism, but Caudwell was a confirmed communist. Perhaps Johns recognised it for the philosophical form it was rather than political. Caudwell joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in Poplar. He was born into a Catholic family in Putney and educated at the Benedictine Ealing Priory School. When he was 15 he had to leave school when his father lost his job as literary editor of the Daily Express. This may well have been Caudwell's road to communism and from that time his poetry and philosophy all sprung from his new outlook. It also led to his early death. He went to fight in the Spanish Civil War and was killed in December, at the age of 30, whilst driving an ambulance on the first day of the battle of the Jarama Valley. Johns was very upset when hearing of his death.

Johns was still increasing his output. He contributed two articles to *Wings: a Book of Flying Adventures* which was published by John Hamilton, a company established in 1925. He also illustrated many of their titles.

He then tried his luck as an author and wrote his first book *Mossyface*, its hero being based on the RAF officers who had presented themselves at the Recruiting Office. The book was published in 1932.

Now he seemed overwhelmed by ideas. He contributed articles weekly to *Modern Boy*, and wrote a book with Harry Schofield, a member of the winning 1927 British Schneider Trophy team, *The Pictorial Flying Course*. All the illustrations were done by Johns. He designed book covers for John Hamilton, although he found that Howard Leigh was now overtaking him as an illustrator, so increasingly Johns turned his attention to writing. In 1932 John Hamilton launched a new magazine *Popular Flying*, with Johns as editor and from the first issue the demand was heavy and the magazine remained highly successful. He may have had little journalistic experience but he had a natural flair, in his editorial he was not only informative but prepared to be outspoken and controversial, particularly politically, and engendered criticism and even government pressure. The magazine, however, established itself within two months as the most popular aviation publication, both here and in America. From the first issue Johns used Howard Leigh, now 22, as illustrator for the front cover.

The quality of the literary standards, controversial content and so on marked Johns' editorship. He even commissioned an article from Hermann Goring, a member of Baron von Richthofen's 'Flying Circus', an ace, having shot down 22 aircraft. This article carried the rider 'The publication of this article does not necessarily mean that we agree with Captain Goring's present political activities; we are concerned only with his career as an airman'.

Significantly, Johns contributed a series of his own stories – about a teenage Royal Flying Corps pilot named James Bigglesworth. The first story, *The White Fokker* by William Earle appeared in *Popular Flying* (Vol 1, No. 1) in April 1932. This and further short stories were published by John Hamilton, as a book *The Camels are Coming*, in August 1932.

This was the beginning of a series that would make W E Johns famous and there has always been speculation about who was the basis for the character. One nominee is Air Commodore C G Wigglesworth CB, AFC (1893-1961), who served in the RNAS and the RAF. A painting done by Johns depicting Biggles looks a little like Doris' brother Howard. Another suggestion is Cyril Nelson 'Kit' Lowe, MC, DFC (1891-1983), English Rugby Union player. Johns also said in an interview 'He is a little of me.' In the foreword of *The Camels are Coming*, written in Lingfield, Johns writes Biggles is 'a fictitious character yet he could have been found in any mess during those great days of 1917 and 1918 when air combat had become the order of the day and air duelling was a fine art'. In a later book he writes that Biggles is 'Not entirely a fictitious character. True he did not exist but the exploits with which he has been credited have nearly all been built on a foundation of truth, although, needless to say, they were not all the efforts of a single individual.' However, Sir Peter Masefield, a great-nephew of the Poet Laureate John Masefield, speaking at the W E Johns Centenary Luncheon at the Royal Air Force Club on 6th February, 1993 said that he had discussed the question with Johns on several occasions and although Johns said the character was a 'compendium' the 'first ingredient' was Arthur Wellesley Bigsworth who had gone to sea with the Royal Navy in 1901 at the age of 16. In 1912

he was one of the first ten officers to train in what would become the Royal Naval Air Service. In 1915 he became the first pilot to damage a Zeppelin and to sink a submarine from the air, for which he received DSO and bar. Johns used both the Zeppelin and submarine incident in two of his Biggles books.

Johns had met Bigsworth in 1922 when he was in the Air Ministry Recruiting Office. Bigsworth was a Wing Commander at the time, subsequently becoming a Group Captain and then in 1935 a Director of Equipment at the Air Ministry.

Johns' and Masfield's friendship lasted 40 years. Masfield became one of the leading figures in Britain's post-war aviation industry, playing an important role in British European Airways and the development of the Britannia aircraft. From 1965 to 1971 he was Chairman of the British Ports Authority. He was knighted in 1972.

Despite a very full life, editing, writing, broadcasting, travelling and gardening, Johns was also politically active. The international situation was a cause of great concern despite which the Government not only wanted to reduce money to the RAF but was even talking of disbanding it. In May 1931 Johns wrote a trenchant article about the Government's air policy entitled 'Disarmament Dementia and Economy'. He was not the only one concerned. A speech was given in the House Commons by Lieutenant Colonel Moore-Brabazon, whom Johns quoted, in which he said 'The enemy of the air force is not across the Channel, it is in Whitehall'. To comments that it was ardently felt that the aeroplane should never have been invented Brabazon replied that those who had made flying possible did not dream they were creating a weapon of destruction but something that would be of great value.

John Moore-Brabazon, GBE, MC (1884-1964) was a London- born aviation pioneer and Conservative MP for Chatham, later being elevated to the House of Lords as Baron Brabazon of Tara. In 1943 he chaired the Brabazon Committee planning the postwar development of the British air industry and was involved in the production of the Bristol Brabazon which first flew on 4th September 1949, the largest aeroplane built in Britain.

By 1935 facts and figures were appearing in the Press regarding the growth of the Luftwaffe and Johns was publishing more critical articles. Despite these sales of *Popular Flying* still increased.

In 1935 the magazine was sold to C. Arthur Pearson, associate company of George Newnes Ltd.

Johns' son, Jack, now 19, submitted articles, first as W Carmichael Earle and J Carmichael Earle. When writing for *Modern Boy* he referred to Johns as his 'uncle'.

Under the new owners Johns still continued to urge for rearmament. He also introduced a new magazine *My Garden*, branching off into an entirely new venture.

By 1937 the Lingfield cottage had become too small to accommodate all the visitors and they moved to Colley Chase, Reigate Hill. The new house was built throughout the year, with Johns taking part in the construction.

On the 2nd April George Newnes Ltd. launched a sister paper to Popular Flying – just called *Flying*, 3d, published on Fridays, and Johns was asked to be editor, but eventually his controversial stance resulted in him being called to the House of Commons, and being dismissed as editor of the magazines, which were taken over by Oliver Stewart.

The start of the 2nd World War proved the dire prophecies of so many people, including Johns, were correct and he found himself back in favour politically. He hoped to get back to flying but he was now 46 and the Air Ministry appointed him lecturer to the Air Defence Corps which became the Air Training Corps in 1941. He also wrote a column in *The Boys' Own Paper* entitled 'Skyways, Jottings from My Log-Book', devoted to ATC activities and then did the same regarding the WAAF in the 'Girls' Own Paper'. He also joined the ARP at Reigate Heath. Then the Air Ministry realised that Biggles had become an established boys' hero and a valuable recruiting aid for the RAF and asked Johns to do something similar for the WAAF. This resulted in the creation of Worralls. The Army then made a request and the Gimlet series resulted. There seems to be a little irony here, in view of the attitude towards Johns prior to the War.

On 3rd October 1939 Johns' son married Sabena Hammond, a nurse who had been looking after his mother. The wedding was in Norwich. Neither Johns nor his wife attended. Their first grandchild, Perdita, was born on the 19th September, 1940 and a second, Faith, on the 15th June 1943. But in 1942 Howard Leigh died, aged 32. He had been suffering from a malignant cancer. He is buried in Lingfield churchyard.

In September 1944 Johns and Doris moved to Pitchroy Lodge, Grantown-on-Spey, which he rented from the local laird. They spent nine happy years there, moving back down to a Queen Anne mansion – Park House, Hampton Court. A year later Johns' son died. He had been a diabetic for many years and after the war had developed tuberculosis. He had spent two years in a sanatorium in Davos in Switzerland and after returning home had worked on the East Grinstead Courier. Then it was found he also had multiple sclerosis. He died on March 1954, aged 38, and is buried in Dormansland churchyard. Johns' wife also died on the 1st April 1961 but he and Doris decided they could not marry without a scandal.

The post war years brought new prosperity for other countries were now free to publish his books. Norway and Italy sought translation rights and copies were also published in Spain, Chile and Portugal. This was followed by Holland, then the Far East – only in America were the books not popular being considered 'too British'. Against this they became, amazingly, very popular in Germany. Biggles stories were also broadcast on the BBC Home Service Children's Hour, but it was in Australia that Biggles on radio became an institution. In the 1960s Granada Television started a series featuring Biggles. Johns then tried branching out into science fiction and westerns but these were not successful.

In the 1960s Johns found himself, like Enid Blyton and other writers, accused of racism, what was to become termed as 'not politically correct', elitism and all the other 'isms', with his books being removed from library shelves etc. Thankfully this

nonsense is abating but the rather nasty aspect of this is that it was only after his death that the attacks on Johns increased. Anyone can find anything they want to find in another's work, just to prove their point, if they are determined to find it.

One interesting local sidelight is that Johns, Doris and a friend, John Templar, ran a company in Constitutional Buildings, East Grinstead, called the *Aviation and General Fine Art Company*. This is shown in Kelly's Directory of 1927 and the East Grinstead Directory of 1932, both at the East Grinstead Museum. The company appears to have sold aviation Christmas cards, postcards and calendars to RAF Stations.

John Templar was the name under which John B Townend wrote his 'Air Police' novels of the 1930s, and also contributed to Johns' *Popular Flying*. He left the RAF in 1927.

Coming back to the doubts surrounding whether Johns' served in India, Peter Masfield stated categorically that he did not, saying quite cheerfully that it was another case of Johns' 'gilding the lily'. On the other hand Templar certainly did from 1923 to 1926 taking part in operations on the North West Frontier with the Bristol Fighter Squadron No. 5, Perhaps Johns' got all his detailed knowledge from him.

The last years of Johns' life were spent writing about four books a year, appearing on television and speaking on radio. He died suddenly on the 21st June 1968. Doris died of cancer on the 26th September 1969.

© Mavis Priestley
May 2008

Sources

National Archives, Kew
Pamela Erskine, Thatched Cottage, Lingfield
By Jove, Biggles – The Life of Captain W E Johns
by Peter Berresford Ellis and Jennifer Schofield
Michael Leppard
East Grinstead Museum
Twickenham Museum
RAF Museum, Hendon
Reading Tourist Office
Hertford Tourist Office
Museum of Aviation, Berkshire
The London Gazette