

America's Airports: Airfield Development, 1918–1947. By Janet R. Daly Bednarek. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001. viii + 226 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, photographs. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 1-585-44130-9.

Reviewed by Peter Bakewell

Historians of aviation or related topics have paid little attention to airports, according to Janet R. Daly Bednarek in her account of airfield development. The simplest reason for this omission may be that airports are essentially large, flat places on which airplanes take off and land, and hence they offer little of the drama (human, technological, and military, for instance) that characterizes much of the history of flight. Nonetheless, without airports airplanes could not perform their current central role in the economic and social life of this country and many others. In addition, large modern airports have immense local and regional weight as centers of employment, trade, and industry. The story of how they came to be where they are in their present form is proper grist for the historian's mill.

Bednarek lays out what could be called the childhood and adolescence of U.S. airports, from the end of the First World War until just after the Second. All but a few of the major airports that now exist were in place by 1947, the book's ending date, though they did not reach their maturity until the 1960s and 1970s. The central, organizing question is why cities and towns, rather than states or the federal government, took on the tasks of building almost all the country's airports and running them (as they still do). Bednarek offers various answers. Two seem particularly cogent. First, it was only with the advent of jet airliners in the 1960s (and particularly with the arrival of wide-bodied jets around 1970) that passenger transport became a mass affair. Second, in the period covered here, airports were rarely profitable. Before World War II, therefore, states and the federal government felt little popular pressure to go into the airport business and soon realized that doing so would mean cost rather than income. Hence they limited themselves largely to a regulatory role.

Why, then, did municipalities so enthusiastically take up the construction of airfields from the 1920s onward? In considering this question, Bednarek of necessity turns to the broader history of flight in the United States during the 1920s, the first decade in which Americans began to become "air minded." That process started with barnstorming, which featured itinerant pilots in leftover World War I planes giving flying displays and rides. During the same period, the U.S. Postal service began to try out carrying mail by air. By the mid-twenties, after many accidents and uncertainties, it was clear that aircraft could move letters on long routes more quickly than

trains, if not yet as reliably. Thus, the commercial potential of aviation in the United States first became obvious with air mail. At the same time larger, multiengined, more dependable aircraft were built that were capable of carrying a few passengers along with the revenue-producing mail. Then, in May 1927, came the event that catapulted aviation into the popular consciousness of the country: Charles Lindbergh's non-stop New York to Paris flight. This feat raised to a new level what Joseph J. Korn has called "the winged gospel" (1983), the extraordinary concatenation of beliefs in the U.S. in the power of aviation to improve the social and moral fabric of the country. All these elements—entertainment, commerce, and a diffuse sense of betterment—fed into the enthusiasm for airports shown by city leaders, both public and private, across the country in the second half of the 1920s. A progressive municipality had no choice but to welcome airplanes and to join in the local "boosterism" for the aviation phenomenon. For many years, boosterism was the force driving the construction of local airports, despite largely negative financial returns. It was soon clear that a flat, firm, dry field was not enough to draw aviation activity. Runways (preferably paved), lights, hangars, fueling equipment, and passenger buildings were needed as well. The onset of the Depression in 1929 exacerbated the problems entailed in constructing these projects, as did the federal government's imposition of technical requirements. Under the New Deal, relatively abundant federal money became available for the first time to airports through programs like the Works Progress Administration. Although these funds were allocated for the purpose of stimulating employment, and were not to be used for buying materials, they helped with maintenance and upgrading. In the mid-thirties, the number of people traveling by air began to rise, as the introduction of new aircraft (particularly the Douglas DC-3) gave airlines the novel possibility of running profitable passenger services. Only the better off, however, could afford the fares. Most people were concerned with having roads available for their cars. The federal government consequently continued to leave the airport business to municipalities. Airports in fact received their greatest injection of federal spending during World War II, when a large number of them (especially in the South and on the two coasts) were taken over by the military, which expanded and improved them. After the war, many of these fields reverted to civilian use.

The book's narrative is enriched by case histories, many of them (such as the account of the competition over airports between Newark and New York City during the thirties) entertaining. The story would have benefited, however, from the addition of statistical material, including graphs, showing the direction and pace of change for selected years, as well as the number of airports, their location, primary uses, number of passengers, amount of cargo handled, aggregate financial condition, and so on. Some of these data would undoubtedly be hard—perhaps impossible—to find and slow to collect, but a few key charts and tables would have

added clarity to the narrative, which in places becomes blurred by the abundance of examples. Nonetheless, *America's Airports* is a welcome and pioneering work.

Peter Bakewell is Edmund and Louise Kahn Professor of History at Southern Methodist University. He is best known for his work on silver mining in colonial Spanish America. His most recent book is A History of Latin America: Empires and Sequels, 1450–1930 (1997). An enlarged edition of this work will appear in 2003. His current interest is, however, in the pioneers of flight in France at the start of the twentieth century.