

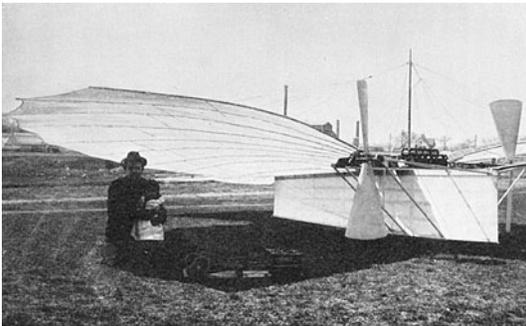
## *Jane's* Stumbles Over an Old Airplane

By Lou Chmiel and Nick Engler

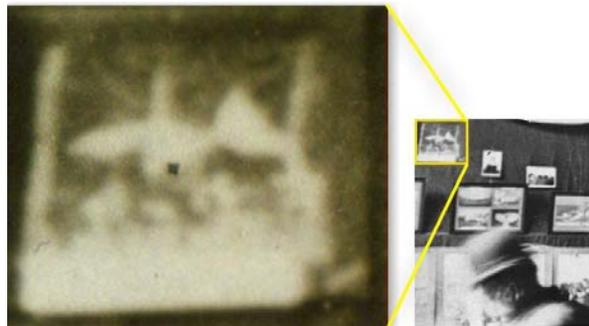
It's a sad day when a lighthouse publication, a beacon of its industry, shoots itself in the foot with its own hubris. Publishing has enough pitfalls without its leadership taking a controversial and poorly researched stand on an almost meaningless tussle. Such was the case when editor Paul Jackson of *Jane's All the World's Aircraft* endorsed a long-standing and oft-dismissed claim that Gustave Whitehead flew a powered airplane before the Wright brothers.

It's noteworthy that the Wright brothers themselves never claimed to be the first to get a powered aircraft off the ground. Wilbur Wright credited others in speeches; his and Orville's claim was in developing the first *practical* airplane. That nuance was lost on the popular press who credited them as the "first to fly" and drummed it into our collective psyche. So that psyche was piqued in 1935 when the rediscovery of an old article in a Connecticut newspaper raised the question of whether Whitehead, a German immigrant living in Bridgeport, had flown two years before the Wrights. The story was investigated by Harvard scholars and dismissed for lack of evidence. This happened again in 1945, 1948, 1953 and every few years right up to the present whenever something new turned up relevant to the story.

Most recently John Brown, an Australian living in Germany, claimed to have found photographic evidence of a Whitehead airplane in flight. A photograph taken of an aeronautical exhibition in New York City in 1906 shows a wall of images. Brown blew this up 3200% and claimed that the blurry shapes in one of the photos within the photo was Whitehead's "No. 21" airplane twenty feet above the ground on August 14, 1901. This apparently was enough to convince Jackson. In a rambling foreword in this year's edition of *Jane's*, he declares the old *Bridgeport Herald* story to be true and Whitehead vindicated at long last.



Gustave Whitehead and his No. 21 in 1901.



Enlarged photo within photo of 1906 exhibition.

Jackson spends much of his foreword telling the story of Gustave Whitehead and his *No. 21*, closely following the same presentation that Brown makes on his web site. There is no indication that Jackson employed the considerable resources of *Jane's* to check Brown's research. This is unfortunate, because the story as Brown tells it has errors, omissions and what seem to be deliberate fabrications.

For example, in trying to prove that the Wright brothers came to Bridgeport to spy on Whitehead, Brown writes,

“Circumstantial factors appear to support their visit. The Wrights had a good friend in Bridgeport. He was the submarine inventor, Simon Lake, with whom they discussed their glider and their patent options before their claimed 1903 flight.”

To support this claim, he quotes the Simon Lake web site:

“The inventors first met when the Wright brothers submitted their airplane designs to Simon Lake for his review before making their famous Kitty Hawk flight.”

A digital search of [http://www.simonlake.com/html/simon\\_lake\\_who\\_.html](http://www.simonlake.com/html/simon_lake_who_.html) (Brown’s citation) shows the quote does not exist. The closest you can come is this:

“His (Simon Lake’s) company’s European agent was Mr. Hart Over (a typo -- actually Hart O. Berg) who was associated with Mr. Charles R. Flint of New York. Mr. Flint had become interested in the Wright Brothers’ flying machine and had an opportunity to secure the European rights to the Wright inventions, the plans and specifications of which were submitted to Mr. Lake for his opinion by Mr. Berg, as to whether he (Lake) considered them practical or not. This was before the Wrights had made their first public flight. Mr. Lake advised Berg to go into it, which he did, and the Wrights then, after making their first public flight in America, came to France and Mr. Berg sold their rights to that country.”

The flights referred to were in 1908. The Wrights did not know Flint or Berg until 1907 and there is no record that they ever met Lake. To say that the Wrights and Lake were good friends in 1901 and offer this as evidence that they visited Bridgeport is misleading. When you add in the made-up quote, it’s almost certainly *intentionally* misleading.

In addition to fabrication, Brown also misrepresents. He quotes an exchange of letters between Wilbur Wright and Octave Chanute in 1901, asserting that Chanute recommended a Whitehead engine to the Wrights. Chanute, an engineer who had also conducted flying experiments, mentioned to Wilbur that “a Mr. Whitehead has invented a light weight motor...” and claimed that it would weigh 30 pounds, including enough gasoline for two hours. Wilbur’s response was tongue-in-cheek, noting that the gasoline itself would take up much of the weight allotment. In an age when fractional horsepower combustion engines commonly weighed 200 pounds or more, Whitehead’s specs seemed outrageous. Note that when the Wrights set out to procure an engine in December of 1902, Wilbur wrote to ten manufacturers. Whitehead was not among them.

More telling than fabrications or misrepresentations are Brown’s omissions. Brown provides over a dozen affidavits from people who remember Whitehead flying thirty years or more in the past, but omits the testimony of the only eyewitness named in the *Bridgeport Herald* story ever to be interviewed. In a statement taken on April 2, 1937, James Dickie says,

“I believe the entire story in the *Herald* was imaginary, and grew out of the comments of Whitehead in discussing what he hoped to get from his plane. I was

not present and did not witness any airplane flight on August 14, 1901. I do not remember or recall ever hearing of a flight with this particular plane or any other that Whitehead ever built."

Dickie had worked with Whitehead and was alleged to be one of his flight crew in the 1901 newspaper article.

This seems to be more than an oversight when you consider that Brown focuses squarely on August 14, 1901. He mentions other events from Whitehead's life but does not elaborate unless it supports his premise. If you examine Whitehead's entire aviation career, he purports to have flown multiple times between 1893 and 1904. In fact, he begins his career by claiming a gliding flight in South America traveling 4-1/2 miles. If true, this feat wouldn't be duplicated for almost thirty years. In 1899, he tells an exciting tale about flying a steam-powered aircraft with a fireman stoking the boiler. And in 1902, he describes flights in his *No. 22*, including a 7-mile flight from Bridgeport out over the Charles Sound and back. After each of these sensational assertions, there are documented failures of flying machines he builds for hire. From this a pattern emerges. Whitehead claims success; his boasts garner him contracts; but he is unable to deliver on his promises. Then the cycle repeats.

Finally, there is the photo within the photo. The blown-up blobs look more like a Rorschach test than an airplane and Brown's analysis of them is long and confusing. His conclusion depends on a series of assumptions, any of one of which could be easily challenged. But even if this image shows an airplane in flight, Brown offers no proof of when the photo within the photo was taken. All we know for certain is that it was made some time before the 1906 exhibition in which it appears. One of Whitehead's few successes was the flight of a glider in 1904.

Jackson echoes Brown's errors and omissions, adding a few of his own. For example, the *Bridgeport Herald* story clearly describes the first flight of the *No. 21* as being unmanned. Whitehead fills the cockpit with sandbags, the aircraft takes off and lands safely, and then Whitehead gives it a go. But Jackson attributes the flight of the sand bags to a mysterious *No. 20*, flown two months in advance of the manned flight and revealed in his foreword for the first time. Just how carefully has Jackson read Brown's material?

It's too soon to tell whether Paul Jackson's editorial will do permanent damage to *Jane's* reputation. But it certainly gives one pause. *Jane's* annuals are a detailed survey of the state of the flying art. Fred Jane and his successors spent over a century distinguishing themselves for the depth and accuracy of their reporting. Governments and businesses rely on their publications to learn which way the wind is blowing in the aircraft industry. But if *Jane's* editor can't see through John Brown's transparent advocacy, you have to wonder what else he is missing.

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