

Harry Ferguson

On 9 August 1910 assiduous readers of the *News Letter* may have encountered the following brief story (reproduced here in full) in their morning newspaper:

‘Yesterday evening Mr Harry Ferguson flew a distance of almost three miles over the Newcastle foreshore, in the presence of a large number of people. He rose near Dundrum Bar, and flew at heights varying from 50 to 100 feet, and alighted safely on a strip of sand near Blackrock. The crowds along the beach cheered lustily as the aviator passed. Mr Ferguson has now fulfilled his contract with the Sports Committee, and is to be congratulated on his very successful flight.’

The *News Letter* accorded the story no great prominence. Nor indeed did any of the Belfast newspapers. There were number of reasons for this. First, newspapers of the time were preoccupied with the protracted political and constitutional crisis precipitated by the House of Lords’ rejection of Lloyd George’s budget on 30 November 1909. This event inaugurated a series of political crises which merged into each other and produced the third Home Rule crisis in the years immediately before the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914. Secondly, there was a plethora of aviation-related stories at the time. For example, the *News Letter* of 10 August 1910 also carried accounts of broadly similar events which had taken place at venues as diverse and varied as Lanark, Cardiff, Paris and Blackpool. Finally, few people at the time would have discerned the significance of the event. Most people would have dismissed early areoplanes as mildly amusing mechanical toys. After all, they looked as insubstantial as a child’s kite.

The report in the *Northern Whig*, which was virtually identical to that in the *News Letter*, provided the interesting additional detail that Ferguson had won the £100 prize offered by the Newcastle Sports Committee. The prize was for the first powered flight of two miles along the strand, hence the reference to the Sports Committee in the *News Letter* account.

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Henry George (Harry) Ferguson was born on his family’s farm at Growell, between Hillsborough and Dromore in County Down, on 4 November 1884.

In 1902 Harry started work as an apprentice in his brother Joe’s car and cycle repair business in Belfast. He quickly developed a passion for motorbikes and aviation. In religious and socio-economic terms Harry had a background very similar to that of Wilbur and Orville Wright who had made

the first powered flight in a heavier-than-air-craft across a coastal sand dune near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on 17 December 1903. Harry took a very keen interest in their exploits. He attended several air meetings and exhibitions, making visits to France in 1907 and 1908, and was inspired to design and build his own monoplane.

On 31 December 1909 Harry made the first recorded flight on this island. A Belfast reporter described the scene at Old Park, Hillsborough:

‘The roar of the eight cylinders was like the sound of a Gatling gun in action. The machine was set against the wind, and all force being developed the splendid pull of the new propeller swept the big aeroplane along as Mr Ferguson advanced the lever. Presently, at the movement of the pedal, the aeroplane rose into the air at a height from nine to twelve feet, amidst the heavy cheers of the onlookers. The poise of the machine was perfect and Mr Ferguson made a splendid flight of 130 yards.’

The flight described in the *News Letter* of 9 August 1910 was the first flight of significant distance on this island. A granite memorial on the North Promenade in Newcastle commemorates Ferguson’s pioneering flight. A full-scale replica of the Ferguson monoplane may be seen at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra. Strictly speaking, this exhibit is rather more than replica because it incorporates some original parts of Harry’s plane, not least the seat.

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Early flying was an extremely dangerous business. For example, in 1908 Orville Wright’s plane crashed, injuring him and killing his passenger. Five days before Louis Blériot’s first flight across the English Channel (from the Sangatte cliffs near Calais to Dover Castle) on 25 July 1909 an attempt by Herbert Latham had ended when he had ditched in the sea. At one stage Harry was referred to as ‘the mad mechanic’. It has been observed, perhaps anecdotally rather than with absolute accuracy, that Harry spent more time crashing than he actually did flying. On one occasion a gust of wind caused his aircraft to somersault, the result being that both Harry and the engine fell out.

Harry’s safety was a matter of serious concern to Joe Ferguson, so much so that the two brothers rowed and parted company. Joe could not see why Harry should risk his life. After several close shaves, Harry gave up flying at the request of Maureen Watson, a Dromore girl whom he had married in 1913.

In 1911 Harry opened his own car business in May Street, Belfast, later moving to Donegall Square East. A firm Unionist, he was strong opponent of Home Rule and a supporter of the Ulster Volunteer Force in the years before the Great War. Thereafter, Harry's mind turned to selling tractors and improving their design. It is with the development of the modern agricultural tractor that his name is most closely linked.

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The first woman to fly in Ireland was Lilian Bland (1877-1972) of Carnmoney. The granddaughter of a Dean of Belfast, Lilian was an unconventional young woman who wore trousers, smoked cigarettes and tinkered with car engines. Her interest in flying was apparently stimulated by Louis Blériot's cross-Channel flight. Like Ferguson, she was prompted to design, build and fly her own bi-plane, the 'Mayfly', which she flew in Lord O'Neill's Deerpark between Antrim and Randalstown in 1910. She called her plane 'Mayfly' because, as she explained, 'It may fly or it may not.'