

W E Johns And Biggles : The Reality and The Legend

By Philip L Scowcroft

William Earl Johns (1893-1968), a children's writer and journalist, whose hobbies were shooting and fishing, was born in Hertfordshire. When the Great War broke out, he joined up in the Norfolk Yeomanry and served with it at Gallipoli and later with the Machine Gun Corps at Salonika. He transferred to the RFC in 1917, was commissioned as a pilot and joined 55 Squadron, flying DH4s. He was shot down, wounded and taken prisoner in September 1918. He was tried and condemned to death for indiscriminate bombing of civilians (rather like the pot calling the kettle black for the Germans to do that). He was reprieved because of the likelihood of an armistice; there was still time for him to attempt escape from his prisoner of war camp before 11 November 1918.

Johns remained in the RAF post-war and was promoted Flying Officer in 1920, being demobilised in 1927 after flying in RAF displays. He became an aviation illustrator, in 1932 he became founder editor of the monthly periodical Popular Flying which introduced the fictional airman Biggles, first in a collection "The Camels Are Coming" (doubtless after the iconic fighter the Sopwith Camel).

By the date of his death, Johns had written 102 books involving Biggles showing his hero as a freelance airman, then as a RAF Second War Squadron Leader, fighting in the Battle of Britain in Spitfire Parade (to be historically accurate the title should be "Hurricane Parade" as there were two Hurricanes to every Spitfire in the Battle) and post-war as Sgt Bigglesworth CID of Scotland Yard. He also wrote for Modern Boy, Pearson's Magazine and My Garden. He was credited with 169 titles adding to the 102 Biggles books, 11 about his WAAF heroine Flight Officer Worrallson (Worral) and ten featuring "Gimlet" King of the Commandos and others, ten "Scifi", eleven adult thrillers and eight non-fiction titles among others. His books were translated into 14 languages plus Braille, were serialised in newspapers and magazines in Britain, Australia and Europe, broadcast on radio in Britain, Australia and South Africa, televised by Granada and issued in strip cartoon form and on cassette recordings. He was said to be the most popular children's writer of his time after Enid Blyton.

The present writer was an avid reader of Biggles in the 1940s and Johns' other series heroes we have mentioned. I remember the first I read was Biggles Fails to Return (he did, of course); other titles were Biggles Air Commodore, set in the Far East, Biggles Defies The Swastika, Biggles Delivers the Goods, Biggles Defends The Desert and Biggles Flies East,

Biggles Flies South, Biggles Flies West and Biggles Flies North, set respectively in Palestine in the Great War, Africa, the West Indies and the Arctic. Biggles was and indeed is a legend.

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