

BEYOND THE SKY

The passions of Millicent Bryant, aviator

The 'lost' life of Australia's first woman pilot

Before the glamorous flyers of the 1930s like Amelia Earhart, 'Chubby' Miller and Nancy Bird Walton, another woman opened the way to the skies—and were it not for a tragic twist of fate, her name might now be just as familiar. This was Millicent Bryant, whose extraordinary life is told for the first time in an innovative new biographical work published in November by Melbourne Books.

This book opens up one of the earliest chapters of Australian aviation and provides a new and personal perspective on those times. In 1920s Australia flight was still new, dangerous and glamorous—and the aviators were all men. That was until a petite 49-year-old mother of three made her first solo flight, igniting a passion that led her to become the first woman in Australia and the Commonwealth outside Britain to gain a pilot's licence.

While newspapers all over the country followed her flying progress keenly, Millicent Bryant had other pursuits beyond the sky that were also unusual for a woman at that time: she was a small-scale property developer, an early motorist, a businesswoman, golfer, politically-engaged citizen, student of Japanese and even a would-be writer who was making notes for a novel.

But this potential and further exploits in the air were dashed when Millicent stepped onto the doomed ferry *Greycliffe* on a mild November afternoon in 1927. Thirty minutes later, she and some 40 others were dead after the ferry was cut in half by a mail steamer in Sydney's worst peacetime maritime disaster. Her story faded until it was almost lost.

Some ninety years later, the rediscovery of Millicent's letters and other writings have enabled her life to be fully told for the first time. Drawing Millicent's own voice from these sources and going beyond the

by James Vicars



pioneering flights, this innovative biographical work vividly recreates the life of a woman who engaged with the dynamic growth of early 20th century Australia but also challenged the social, political and marital conventions about what women could and couldn't do.

About the author

A great-grandson of Millicent Bryant, James Vicars began writing professionally as a journalist and creatively as a poet and short story writer. He now works as an editor, teacher, researcher and writing mentor, especially to school and university students.

He was awarded a Fellowship of Australian Writers National Literary Award—Community Writers' Award (joint winner) in 2002 for poetry and has been the recipient of two Varuna fellowships, the most recent of which was to begin the present manuscript.