

Book Review – Amazing Women (part 1)

Review by Chris Hope, Master CFI

Do you remember when the flying bug hit you? Did it hit you hard enough that you wanted to give up a successful career to become a professional pilot? Did it hard enough that you were willing to travel to a distant country, learn a new language, and then walk nine miles each way to flight school? Books about two remarkable women this month. Although their lives overlapped in time, there is no indication that they ever knew each other.

Bessie Coleman was born in 1892, the daughter of George and Susan Coleman. Her mother was the daughter of a slave, and her father was a Choctaw Indian. She spent her early years, picking cotton in the fields surrounding Atlanta Texas, and then moved to Chicago as soon as she was old enough to do so.

Half a world away, in British East Africa (now Kenya) Beryl Markham was born in 1902. Her upbringing was at the other end of the social scale. Born in England, at an early age her parents divorced, and her father moved to East Africa to indulge his passion, raising race horses. Beryl was the only white child in her world, and she grew up a tomboy and racehorse trainer.

But when the flying bug hit each of these women, it hit hard. Bessie Coleman attained her International Pilot's License in 1921 in France, and was the first black woman to do

so. Beryl Markham turned her back on a successful horse training career, and became the first person to fly the Atlantic Ocean from east to west.

Beryl's autobiography "**West with the Night**" is a masterpiece of prose. Her descriptions of East Africa, her tracking wild game, her relationship with her horses, are lyrical. For example, she describes her flight training:

"We began at the first hour of the morning. We began when the sky was clean and ready for the sun and you could see your breath and smell traces of the night. We began every morning at that same hour, using what we were pleased to call the Nairobi Aerodrome, climbing away from it with derisive clamor while the burghers of the town twitched in their beds and dreamed perhaps of all unpleasant things that drone – of wings and stings and corridors in Bedlam."

Beryl wrote of her life while on board a ship returning from Australia to South Africa. She had received acclaim as a race horse trainer, she had been a renowned commercial pilot in Africa at a time when that in itself was a rare accomplishment for a man, and she had been the first person to fly from England to Canada. If there is any shortcoming to this life's accounting, it is that she wrote it when she was not yet 40 years old, and she had another full

life ahead. But fortunately, when you finish this book and ask for the rest of the story, there is place to turn. In 1986, shortly before Beryl Markham's death, she was "discovered" by writer Mary Lovell. Mary had the opportunity to meet with her, to reminisce with her about her experiences, and to write "**Straight on to Morning**." And in that accounting we learn of Beryl's relationships with Ernest Hemingway, poet / flyer Antoine de

Sainte-Exupery and pilot Tom Black, as well as her later life in Hollywood, her marriages, and her return to horses.

And Bessie Coleman? What was her part in this world of flying in 1920's and '30's? Doris Rich, in **Queen Bess – Daredevil Aviator** describes Bessie's affect on women and black aviators . And that discussion will wait until next month.

What's on your book shelf?

*Chris loves to read, write, and fly, but not necessarily in that order
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