

Dominions Diary. The Letters of E.J. Harding 1913-1916. Edited by Stephen Constantine. Ryburn Archive Editions, Ryburn, Halifax, 1992. 336 pp. UK price: £28.

BEFORE the First World War, colonial politicians expressed loyalty to the imperial connection, but they avoided formal commitment. On the concept of preferential tariffs, the British were themselves divided. The Imperial Conference of 1911 rejected the Imperial Council suggested by Sir Joseph Ward. But it did accept the idea of a Royal Commission that would investigate the trade and natural resources of the dominions. This got under way in 1913 with visits to Australia and New Zealand, followed by one to South Africa early the following year. The visit to Newfoundland and Canada was interrupted by the outbreak of war. It was thought important enough to renew before the war ended. Indeed the empire became more important in the war, and the Commission was to advocate an Imperial Development Board. Nothing came of it post-war. The dominions became still more independent. The man who had been secretary to the Commission, E.J. Harding, was to be deeply involved in the negotiations that led to the definition of dominion status in 1926 and the Statute of Westminster of 1931.

This volume is made up of the letters Harding wrote to members of his family in England while on tour, well introduced and almost too elaborately footnoted by Stephen Constantine. The publishers describe the volume as one of the Ryburn Archive Editions, and it is well printed and bound and illustrated by reproductions of contemporary postcards. The object of the enterprise is not, however, clear. It is not quite a coffee table book. Nor, however, does it add greatly to our understanding of the empire: given what the scholar could glean from it, he or she might prefer a less elaborate presentation. But let us hope the Ryburn series continues in some form. For there must be other diaries and letters, in the Royal Commonwealth Society or elsewhere, that deserve to appear in print.

These letters are enjoyable. The author is sprightly and candid: prepared to laugh at his contemporary R.E. Stubbs as Governor of Ceylon, suggesting that Lord Liverpool 'looks absolutely brainless', finding the wife of the Queensland premier 'an aggressive and really dreadful woman'. He is not insensitive. Indeed he thought the Maori children who dived for pennies at Rotorua evidence of 'sad demoralisation', but he was stunned by the haka he saw. In some ways Harding's world seems remote: New Zealand, he finds, is short of domestic servants. In others his world is closer to ours than one might at first imagine. 'Johannesburg beggars description . . . There are houses of all kinds from the hovel to the palace'. New Zealand, one witness told the Commission, was 'on the verge of bankruptcy from over borrowing'. The newspapers denied it, but Harding suspected there was 'really a good deal of truth' in the statement. In any case, this reader warms to a correspondent who, not far out of Colombo, wonders how the London premiere of Vaughan Williams's *A Sea Symphony* will be going.

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Coningham: A Biography of Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham. By Vincent Orange. Methuen, London, 1990. 292 pp., plates, maps. NZ price: \$39.95.

VINCENT ORANGE has succeeded in rescuing from obscurity an airman whose command was crucial to the Allied Desert Campaign of 1942-43 and the liberation of Western Europe in 1944-45. Air Marshal Sir Arthur 'Mary' Coningham was responsible for

establishing the practice, and later doctrine, of tactical air support to ground forces.

Coningham was proud of his New Zealand associations, though in truth they were rather tenuous. He was born in Brisbane, the family fleeing from Australia to New Zealand in 1901 to escape scandal. Subsequently, Arthur passed through Wellington College without qualifications or intellectual pretensions. After farm work he enlisted for the First World War, serving in Samoa and then in the Middle East from whence he was invalided home. He left for England at his own expense in 1916, joined the Royal Flying Corps, served on the Western Front, acquired the nickname 'Mary' and never returned to New Zealand. For the early part of Coningham's life Orange offers little analysis. He pays much attention to an Australian court case in which Coningham's parents figured as crooks and swindlers. But this sordid background might have been relegated to a footnote for all the impact it appears to have had on Arthur's own life.

Indeed perhaps there is too little material about the nature of the man for a rounded biography. We do learn that Coningham was a Sybarite, who enjoyed lavish entertaining and a snazzy life-style, facilitated by his marriage to the wealthy widow of a property dealer. But Coningham's motivations and beliefs about religion, politics, war and life remain a mystery. Perhaps he did not have a belief system. Sporting pursuits interested him more than ideas. Apart from some official records, there are no Coningham papers listed in the bibliography. Moreover, Coningham left no memoir, dying in 1948 on an aircraft which disappeared in the so-called 'Bermuda triangle'.

In spite of these obstacles, Orange has assiduously plundered the papers of Coningham's contemporaries to produce a career biography. This part of the book is well-balanced and analytical. It shows that Coningham was an excellent commander, who kept a cool head during a crisis. By attending to good Army-Air relations, also, Coningham effectively ended the long-running dispute over control of air power and ensured independence of command. He was no enthusiast for heavy bombing over the battlefield and generally resisted Montgomery's demands for towns and villages in Normandy to be destroyed. As Coningham argued, it made no military sense and killed civilians. Ironically, Coningham had bombed defenceless tribes from the air during the RAF's inglorious operations to control Iraq in 1922-23.

Orange adds a new dimension to the quarrels in the Anglo-American high command. Coningham benefited from the support of Air Marshal Tedder and generally concurred with the views of the American leaders. Coningham initially regarded Montgomery as a great soldier, only to become increasingly disillusioned. Orange shows that the general's failure to understand what air support could and could not do, as well as his abysmal performance in France and northern Europe, led to a rift which Montgomery tried to solve in his usual malicious fashion by having Coningham removed. Relations with Churchill are not discussed at length, though there were incidents which probably caused trouble between them. In December 1943, Coningham had been complacent about German air power in southern Italy. The undefended harbour at Bari was attacked by German aircraft. An Allied ship carrying mustard gas was hit, and Churchill, not known for avoiding the deaths of others to save political embarrassment, ordered a cover-up with the result that hundreds of Allied casualties went untreated.

It would have been interesting to know whether Coningham studied Germany's use of tactical air support. In general, however, the book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the evolution of air power during the Second World War.

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