

LESTER DURAND GARDNER

Honorary F.I.A.S., *Honorary Fellow*

(August 7 1876 - November 23 1956)

AT THE END of June 1939 Lester Gardner returned to New York from a visit to Europe and wrote a long personal letter to his many friends in America and other countries, telling them what he had been doing.

"I went to Europe," he said in this letter, "primarily to attend the Wilbur Wright Memorial Lecture and to see the beautiful new building of the Royal Aeronautical Society. This oldest of aeronautical societies has a new home which is so luxurious that it is breath-taking in both size and beauty."

Lester Gardner was not satisfied until the Institute of the Aeronautical Sciences, which he had founded and served so well, had its own beautiful new building for its headquarters in New York.

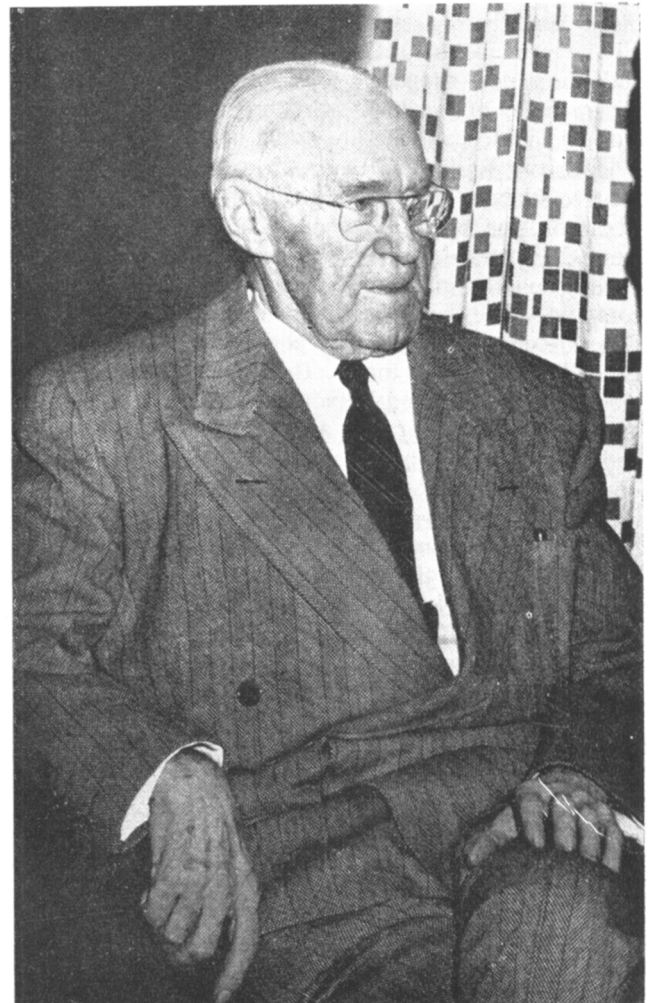
New York was his native city, where he was born, from which all his aeronautical activities originated, and where he died. For over forty years of his long, full, and interesting life, aviation was his only love.

He was trained at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in engineering administration, and in administrative law at Columbia University. From 1901, for some years, he served on a number of American newspapers and magazines in Chicago and New York, an experience which was to prove of great value to him in later years.

Lester Gardner had a flair for publishing and publicity and in 1916 he founded *Aviation and Aeronautical Engineering*, with encouragement from three American aeronautical pioneers who were to become world famous, J. C. Hunsaker, Glenn Martin, and Grover Loening. All three were to play leading rôles in Lester Gardner's aviation projects in later years. Lester soon made a success of his new venture, a paper which still exists under the title *Aviation Weekly*. In 1928 he sold his interests in this and other papers, so that he could be free to devote himself to the larger problem of putting aircraft routes on the map of the world.

He had long been convinced, after seeing the Wright Brothers at the International Flying Meeting at Belmont Park, New York, in 1910, that world transport would be air transport, and he was determined to give all his energies to encouraging others to share in his belief.

In the early twenties it was difficult to persuade many aircraft manufacturers, let alone the man in the street, of the *tremendous* future the air held. It was confidently asserted by some that half a dozen firms could manufacture all the passenger aeroplanes likely to be required in the world for years ahead. The man in



Photograph by Technology Review, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

A photograph of Lester Gardner taken for his 80th Birthday, reproduced from the *Aeronautical Engineering Review* of the Institute of the Aeronautical Sciences, August 1956.

the street was more interested in the development of a cheap motor car, for that was something he could own and drive himself from door to door.

Lester Gardner grew up with American aviation and with those who became its leaders, so that he got to know every one who mattered in it. He made friends with them, sold them his ideas for putting aviation on the map, persuaded them to let him help, and cajoled them, in their prosperous years, to give money to help the Society he founded.

The year 1926 gave Lester Gardner an opportunity which he seized with both hands, to travel over the airlines of Europe. On his return from the trip in July, he came to London and the Society of British Aircraft Constructors gave him a lunch "to celebrate Lester Gardner's extraordinary airworthy feat." Among those present to meet him were many of the leading pioneers in British aviation.

"As one who has always been deeply interested in the development of aviation," he said at the lunch, "I thought it was up to me when I took a holiday in Europe to see for myself how aviation had developed there. In 53 flying days I have visited 27 countries and all the principal capitals in Europe, Northern Africa and Iraq, and I suppose I must have seen some million square miles of territory. On three consecutive nights I dined in Moscow, Berlin, and London respectively."

Moscow, Berlin, Northern Africa, Iraq! The names seem to strike a familiar chord thirty years after! Lord Thomson, the newly-appointed Chairman of the Royal Aero Club, added to the historic names by saying, when introducing the guest of honour, "We have much in common. We have both flown to Baghdad by the Desert Route, and we have both been to Bucharest." Lord Thomson, like many others present, had already met Lester in New York and had felt the impact of his outlook. Lester Gardner added, "My average speed had been about 90 m.p.h. and the flying time was 230 hours. I estimate that if I had travelled in the old fashioned way I would have had to spend some 900 hours in trains alone." Of the time saved by flying he afterwards coined the memorable phrase, "There is no way to travel as leisurely as by air."

For some 5,000 miles of his trip Lester took his wife Margaret, to whom, indeed, he owed the constant and tireless encouragement and help which enabled him to live twenty-five hours a day. Charles Grey wrote in *The Aeroplane*, as they were returning to New York, "One wishes them on behalf of the whole of the British Aeronautical community a safe journey and many years continuation of the good work which they have both done for International Aviation."

The following year Lester Gardner was back again in Europe to attend the Fourth International Congress on Civil Aviation, as an official American delegate appointed by the President, an appointment renewed for the Fifth Congress held in Washington in 1928. It was in the July of that year that I wrote to him and J. C. Hunsaker and sent them details of the work and objects of the Aeronautical Society, and its organisation. Both were anxious to see a similar society formed in the United States. Lester was then President of the Aeronautical Chamber of Commerce of America, and in a position to influence many who might help to found such a Society.

But the time was not ripe.

In 1929 Lester Gardner again came to Europe, this time as guest speaker at the International Advertising Convention held in Berlin and as American delegate to the Aero Exhibition at Olympia. That year he was elected an Associate Fellow of the Society and took away a dozen or so forms so he could get other

Americans to join. Before he left England he took the opportunity to go to Hull and give a talk on the importance of Hull as an international airport of the future, on the route from the United States to northern Europe, urging the town to take the necessary steps as quickly as possible. An opportunity appears to have been missed.

In 1930, while I was on a visit to New York, Lester Gardner took the opportunity of calling a number of the American members of the Society together, and others in the industry, so that I could give them a first-hand account of the work of the Society. Just over twenty years later Lester sent to me a draft of the first chapter of the history of the Institute of the Aeronautical Sciences. The draft had been prepared by him and J. C. Hunsaker, two of the founders. I quote briefly,

"It was obvious that when an independent aeronautical society should be organized in the United States, the Royal Aeronautical Society could provide a general pattern of organization and operation. . . ." The draft of this preliminary chapter ended, ". . . the Institute was incorporated on a five cent standard form and by payment of the incorporating fee of \$40. The expense of \$40.05 was the total for the legal or other expenses of all the preliminaries to the first meeting of the incorporators on October 17, 1932."

Paul Johnston, the present Director of the flourishing Institute, on the occasion of Lester's 80th birthday in August 1956, paid him a moving tribute in the *Aeronautical Engineering Review*.

"We of the Institute owe much to Lester Gardner. He was the spark plug for that group of aviation people (including Hunsaker, Warner, Osborn, Loening, Wright, Doolittle, Aldrin, de Flores, and many others) who foresaw the need for a scientific and technical society for the aeronautical engineering profession and then undertook to do something about it. . . . In 1932 this was no easy task. . . . The country was in the throes of the most crippling economic depression of all time. . . . The number of shirt fronts he drenched with his tears, the number of desks he pounded to splinters, the number of doorbells he rang in those days he alone can tell. . . . He breathed life into the organization and pumped the essential plasma, dollar by dollar, into its veins to tide over a precarious infancy. For our very existence he must be given full marks."

In 1936, Lester Gardner flew from Lakehurst to Germany in the airship Hindenberg, and then by aeroplane to Moscow, setting up the quickest time from the United States to Russia. On his way back to the United States he was given the unusual, and indeed rare honour, of being the guest of the Royal Aero Club, the Society of British Aircraft Constructors and the Royal Aeronautical Society at dinner. He had then spent a month in Europe, attending the Lilienthal Gesellschaft, in Berlin; paying visits to Gottingen, Dessau, Milan, Rome, Guidonia, Cologne and Paris.

Lester was much moved by this dinner, arranged, by the way, on the initiative of Richard Fairey, and was especially pleased that one of the guests was F. W. Lanchester, who had made a special effort to come to London to pay honour to Lester.

Lester Gardner made a practice of writing letters following his major air trips, descriptive, historic, and fascinating. A set of these letters would prove of very high value to future aeronautical historians and it is hoped that a complete set has been preserved.

In 1939, he flew to Rome to attend the first World Congress of the Aeronautical Press, before attending the Wilbur Wright Memorial Lecture given by his friend George Lewis. From Rome he made a number of flying trips. I quote a brief passage from his 5,000-word letter.

"The flight from Rome to Athens has everything. Roman countryside, with its intense cultivation; many, many small cities with their beautiful cathedrals and graceful contours. . . . Soon the bleak hills of Albania could be seen on the left. Ahead was the Island of Corfu, which was to be our first Greek landfall. We were flying at 8,000 feet and within the next hour were to have an emotional experience that must come to anyone who sees for the first time in a very few minutes the home of Ulysses—that Mouse Island which is his vessel turned to stone—Mt. Parnassus with Thermopylae and Delphi at its base—the Bay of Arta where the battle of Actium was fought—Corinth and its canal; and before you can realise it you have flown in a few short hours from Rome to the centre of Grecian culture and history and are gliding to a landing at the Tatoi airport."

Earlier in the year he had been one of the passengers during the first week of flying over Trans-Canada Airlines from Montreal to Vancouver. He flew through the night and wrote, "The sky was so clear that we had a spectacular showing of the mysterious Northern Lights. The sky was literally dancing with them. I was fascinated watching them form one shape and then gradually change to another. The phenomenon was all around us and we passed an hour or two following the ever changing cloudlike masses forming and disintegrating like so much smoke in a fitful breeze."

Lester Gardner was flying in the days when one could get more out of the scenery below than is usual nowadays. Every one of his descriptive letters is full of details of interest.

"I have fortunately been privileged to fly over the Pyramids of Egypt, and by that I do not mean just those of Cheops," he wrote in another letter. "One afternoon on a flight from Aboukir near Alexandria, I flew over the Sahara and counted from my cockpit seat fourteen pyramids and the panorama included the Sphinx for good measure. A week later I flew over the ruins of Nineveh in the morning and in the afternoon flew over Babylon two hundred and fifty miles away. . . . I have seen the Coliseum and Forum of Rome from an Italian dirigible. I have also flown over the mysterious pre-historic Stonehenge in England."

He flew on all the routes over the Rockies and the Alps; over the jungles of Yucatan and the mysterious city of the Mayas; over Mexico, Cuba, Miami, and most parts of the United States visible from the air!

One more quotation from his letters. This was written about Croydon after his landing there from Europe in 1939.

"I recall the early days when it was small and did not have its present traffic nor traffic building which

has served so many air travellers for the last ten years. We used to consider it a great achievement. Now it is a comparatively small air terminal having been out-classed by many more recent aerodromes. But the field was filled with familiar types. Douglas transports shining brightly in the sun were standing beside the great Handley-Page 'built in head winds' which are famous for their ten-year record of ferrying forty passengers a trip from London to Paris and back without an accident—and for making money for Imperial Airways. The good old Junkers 52 and the more recent English, French and German types were sunning themselves ready to wend their airways to all parts of the world."

At one time Lester was called The Flying Ambassador. Everywhere he went he made friends and introduced people to one another so they could make friends of each other and join the great Lester Legion of Friendship. He was a particularly close friend of so many in Great Britain, for which he always had a deep affection, for he was of British descent. He even managed to raise a fund in England to benefit the Institute! I remember how he persuaded Richard Fairey in 1939 to give him credit through the Aeronautical Society for £200, so that he could buy books for the Institute's library in New York!

Few people who have experienced Lester Gardner as an exhaustive, genial, imperative and generous host, will ever forget their experience. My own first one was in June 1930, in New York. I had telephoned to him at eight o'clock in the morning to tell him I had arrived. It was a fatal thing to do. He replied at once that he would be along in twenty minutes for breakfast with me, and would tell me the skedule he had arranged. I went to bed that midnight, after every minute of the day Lester had legislated for behind me—exhausted. The next morning he gave me the thrill of my life, the opportunity to watch Commander Byrd, fresh back from his Polar exploration, in the unbelievable ticker tape Parade which only New York can put on. I had been found a seat in the Mayor's stand



Major Lester D. Gardner presenting the Musick Memorial Trophy to Mr. (now Sir) Arthur Gouge in 1939.

and it was then I learnt that there were no doors Lester could not manage to open.

They were the days of Prohibition, and with three mysterious knocks at the end of an underground passage, whispered words through a grill, I found myself drinking an illegal bottle of British beer on a stool sitting between Lester and a New York cop complete with revolver and a glass of something which looked suspiciously like whisky! One does not forget these things, any more than I have ever forgotten a flight Lester arranged for me in a Sikorsky amphibian on the following day over New York. I was told by the pilot we could always glide down to the Hudson in case of trouble, so there was nothing to worry about though we were flying only a hundred feet above the Woolworth building. I could see nothing but jagged looking skyscrapers; certainly no river! Lester never let one go back to England without long lingering memories of people one had met, places one had been to, and things one had done.

Lester himself had a vivid and unexpected memory. I remember when George Lewis came over and gave the Wilbur Wright Lecture he wanted to go to the National Physical Laboratory at Teddington, and I took him there with Lester. We left there an hour earlier than we expected and Lester suggested we should go and look at Hampton Court. I had to explain I had not yet seen it. From that moment Lester took Lewis and myself in hand, became the professional guide, and told us what we were going to see and where we would see it when we arrived. He had made one previous visit to Hampton Court and had remembered! Of course, George Lewis was delighted! I think I had the last word, nevertheless, when I took them the following day to visit a friend of mine in Sussex who owned a house old enough to have a minstrel gallery

and, at the bottom of the great garden, an old Roman well, still in use.

The two looked silently down the well for some minutes while their host casually talked about anything but the well, and Lester suddenly, solemnly, said, "Fifteen hundred years before Columbus, George."

Space will be given some day, I hope, to a full story of this great American. This is a brief record of what he was as I knew him. The Society awarded him its Honorary Fellowship in 1942, the fourth American to receive it. The first three were the Wright Brothers and J. C. Hunsaker. He was terribly proud of the honour. In 1947, he received the coveted Daniel Guggenheim medal "for outstanding achievement in advancing aeronautics, particularly for his conception and organization of the Institute of the Aeronautical Sciences."

This is not intended to be any more than a brief memoir of a man who did so much for Anglo-American friendship in the thirty years I knew him, who always held out the helping hand, who disagreed and wanted his own way, but gave you yours because he liked so much to give pleasure.

Like many others of his friends I wrote to him on his 80th birthday. He sent me two letters in reply. One had been typed, for, as he explained, he had over four hundred to answer "and you can see that it would put too much of a strain on your new octogenarian friend." The other was short, in very shaky handwriting, and was signed "As ever, but feebler, Lester."

His first letter was headed: "I love everything that's old; old friends, old times, old manners, old books, old wine."

That was Lester Durand Gardner.

J. LAURENCE PRITCHARD.