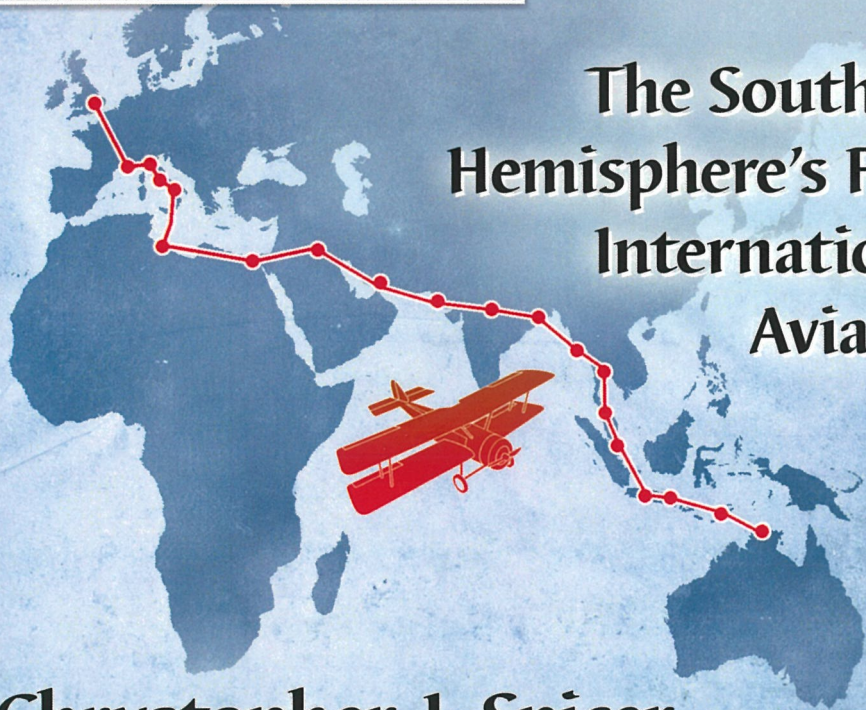




# **The Flying Adventures of Jessie Keith “Chubbie” Miller**

**The Southern  
Hemisphere’s First  
International  
Aviatrix**



**Chrystopher J. Spicer**

**P**ioneer aviatrix Jessie “Chubbie” Miller made a significant contribution to aviation history. The first woman to fly from England to her native Australia (as co-pilot with her close friend Captain Bill Lancaster), she was also the first woman to fly more than 8000 miles, to cross the equator in the air and to traverse the Australian continent north to south.

Moving to America, Miller was a popular member of a group of female aviators that included Amelia Earhart, Bobby Trout, Pancho Barnes and Louise Thaden. As a competitor in international air races and a charter member of the first organization for women flyers, the Ninety-Nines, she quickly became famous. Her career was interrupted by her involvement in Lancaster’s sensational Miami trial for the murder of her lover, Haden Clarke, and by Lancaster’s disappearance a few years later while flying across the Sahara desert.

**Chrystopher J. Spicer** has written extensively about Australian and American film and history. He teaches writing and communication at James Cook University in Queensland, Australia.

Front cover: *inset* Jessie Miller in her flying gear after her arrival in Australia in 1928 from England (courtesy The Cobbs Auctioneers); *background* world map (© 2017 iStock) showing path of Miller’s flight from England to Australia



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The Flying Adventures of  
Jessie Keith "Chubbie" Miller

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# The Flying Adventures of Jessie Keith “Chubbie” Miller

*The Southern Hemisphere's  
First International Aviatrix*

CHRYSTOPHER J. SPICER



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For Marcella,  
Who beat the odds,

For Miranda,  
Who always knew how to fly,

And for Max, Slugger and Princess Buttercup  
Who reached the second star on the right before us.



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“Below the earth has shed its darkness. There is the silver of countless lakes and streams. The greatest things to be seen, the ancients wrote, are sun, stars, water, and clouds. Here among them, of what is one thinking? ... of flying itself, the imperishability of it, the brilliance.”

—James Salter, *Burning the Days* (1997)

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# Preface

Before Amelia Earhart, there was pioneer Australian aviatrix Jessie Keith Miller. Before her, no woman had ever traveled so far in the air or even crossed the equator above the planet's surface when Jessie became the first woman to fly from England to Australia, landing in Darwin on March 19, 1928, as co-pilot with William "Bill" Lancaster in an Avro Avian biplane. Earhart's transatlantic flight in June that year of some 2,250 miles as just a passenger on board the large Fokker trimotor *Friendship* pales into insignificance alongside Jessie Miller's journey of over 14,000 miles in the tiny open-cockpit *Red Rose*, over half the distance of a global circumnavigation, with only one other person. Not until May 1930 would English aviatrix Amy Johnson be the first woman to fly that route solo, and not until 1934 would another Australian aviatrix, Freda Thompson, fly it alone. Jessie was only the third Australian woman to be granted a pilot's license, the first of whom was Australian nurse Hilda McMaugh in England in November 1919, followed by Millicent Maud Bryant in Australia in March 1927. Bryant, along with Evelyn Follett, had actually attempted to join the newly formed Australian Aero Club in 1926 in order to train, but the committee didn't accept women as student pilots. Before Bryant's career was tragically cut short by her death in the *Greycliff* ferry disaster in Sydney Harbor, she took part in the first women's air race in Australia, the Ladies Oaks Race, held in October 1927, over a distance of eight miles across Sydney. The following year, the Oaks Race and the associated air pageant attracted a crowd of 100,000 people because one of the features of that day's events was the landing of Jessie Miller and Bill Lancaster in Sydney on their way south from Darwin.

I first became interested in Jessie Miller's story many years ago when, while researching another project in the American state of Ohio, I heard a story about an Australian woman whose biplane had landed in a farmer's field outside of the small Ohio town of Xenia during a race in 1929. At that time, I could find nothing about any Australian woman flying a plane in America, which made me even more determined to discover the identity of

this mystery Southern Hemisphere aviatrix. Eventually, it wasn't Jessie Miller the pilot whom I found but Mrs. Keith Miller the witness in a sensational murder trial, and that discovery led me to Ralph Barker and his book about Jessie's flying partner, *Verdict on a Lost Flyer*. Fortunately, I managed to make contact with Ralph shortly before he passed away and he was able to share with me some of his information that inspired me to search further. However, *Verdict* is focused on Lancaster and leaves Jessie essentially in the background, where she's remained ever since, yet Jessie's career as a record-breaking pioneer pilot actually rapidly eclipsed that of the careless and accident-prone Lancaster. Jessie became a significant female pioneer pilot in both American and Australian aviation history, whereas Lancaster is really only remembered today because of two major personal calamities: his trial for the shooting death of Jessie's fiancé, and his subsequent disappearance and death in the middle of the Sahara Desert.

Despite Jessie Keith Miller's significance to aviation history, the story of this remarkable Australian woman who became the first international aerial ambassador for her country remained virtually unknown in her own country until I revived it as a chapter in my book *Great Australian World Firsts*. As so often happens, though, the more I searched the more I found, far more than could be squeezed into a single book chapter. Jessie had always been interested in writing and had always wanted to tell her own story, yet publishers have been only interested in the more sensational events surrounding Lancaster. So, although she made at least two attempts at books about her flying career, no major published work is known to have eventuated, and despite frequent mentions of diaries, journals and log books having been written by both Miller and Lancaster, the original volumes have never been located. Only Jessie's notes, interview transcripts and articles have survived and the versions of Lancaster's diaries published in newspapers. Educated in the arts, Jessie Miller began traveling and writing while married to an experienced journalist, and she continued to write and be published in American, Australian and English newspapers and magazines throughout her flying career, so even though a book on her life has not been published until now, she did leave behind quite an extensive autobiographical record to which I refer when using the terms "recollected" or "remembered" or from which I have drawn dialogue or mention her thoughts. Along with the interview that Ralph Barker conducted with her only a few years before she died, these long-forgotten accounts are now the only chance to hear Jessie's voice telling her story, and so I've relied on them extensively here as primary sources to give Jessie a chance to express her opinion and point of view. Like many women pilots of her era, Jessie found that much of her life became public news and, in fact, to a certain extent that was quite deliberate. Flying cost money, and to raise that money an aviator had to draw attention to their flying in order

to attract sponsors and funding. Even Amelia Earhart, married to the wealthy George Putnam, still had to sign deals with Lucky Strike cigarettes and market her own line of clothing and luggage to fund her career. So, much of Jessie's flying career was covered extensively by newspapers in the U.S., Australia and England, although not always accurately, and so given the lack of letters and diaries I have used these accounts as well so that Jessie's story can be understood in the context of her time and so that as much of Jessie's story as possible can be told from her point of view, that of an independent career woman who chose her own path through the world.

For Jessie Miller, one record was never enough, and she continued to break records throughout her flying career. She was the first woman across the Mediterranean in the air, the first woman to travel by air through the Near East and Middle East to the Far East, then through what is now Indonesia to be the first woman across the Timor Sea by air. She was then the first woman by air across the Australian continent from north to south and the first woman to pilot an airplane across Bass Strait to Tasmania. She was the first female pilot to fly solo from the east coast of the U.S. to Cuba, the first female pilot from the Southern Hemisphere to fly competitively in the U.S. and to compete in national air races there, the first woman to be granted a commercial pilot's license in Canada, and in 1930 she became the second official female holder of the American transcontinental flight speed record in both directions and the first woman to hold that record as a result of unaccompanied solo flight. A personal friend of other pioneer female pilots such as Amelia Earhart, Amy Johnson and Nancy Bird Walton, of aircraft designers and engine builders alike, Jessie Keith Miller was known and respected for many years as Australia and the Southern Hemisphere's first international aviatrix.

One of the probable reasons her memory has faded from Australian history is that Jessie last visited Australia in 1928 and then never returned, although she certainly intended to. Most of her association with aviation was in America, where she is still honored as one of the charter members of the first female aviators' organization, the Ninety-Nines, and as one of the select group of female aviation pioneers who competed in the first American national air race for women, the 1929 Women's National Air Derby, or the "Powder Puff Derby," as it became colloquially known.

However, one of the other possible reasons for Jessie's omission from Australia's early aviation history records was her involvement in one of the great sensational murder trials of the 1930s, during which Jessie and her married pilot colleague, Bill Lancaster, had to admit they had an affair during their England to Australia flight. Nevertheless, despite Bill continuing to profess his love for Jessie, he would not divorce his wife and so Jessie eventually fell in love with her younger, dark and handsome biographer, Haden Clarke.

Unfortunately, as was revealed later, he couldn't sort out his romantic affairs, either, but it seemed at the time that he was able to marry her. Consequently, the prosecution claimed, a jealous Bill murdered his rival. Or consequently, the defense claimed, a depressed Haden Clarke took his own life because he'd lost hope. Jessie had to choose a side. Although Jessie was undoubtedly an independent woman who made her own choices about her life, both American and Australian society of that period still clung to conservative moral codes, and it was obvious that Jessie was invited by the United States Department of Labor to leave America after the trial for infringing those codes. A young country such as Australia, self-conscious and sensitive of its international public image, would have been embarrassed to be associated with a woman mixed up in such a public moral scandal, so Jessie was quietly air-brushed from early Australian aviation history.

Almost certainly one other reason Jessie faded from memory was that her aviation career did not survive World War II, although she was an early advocate of defense forces employing women as transport pilots. By the time the war was over, Jessie had married another well-known pilot and retired from public life. She was, after all, a woman from a conservative family background who had endured a traumatic, life-changing experience during which her inner and intimate self had been exposed to public gaze for question and comment. Now, growing older and having come close to losing her life on a number of occasions, Jessie took the opportunity to trade adventure for a quieter and probably longer life. Only the unexpected discoveries concerning Lancaster not long before her death would bring Jessie momentarily out of that retirement.

Yet in only a few years, pioneer aviatrix Jessie Keith Miller made a major contribution to Australian and American aviation history, for which she is still honored as a founding member of the Ninety-Nines and in the Women in Aviation Pioneer Hall of Fame. She still awaits recognition in her own country. In blazing the trail for women aviators from England to Australia, she became an early symbol of what women could accomplish. Many future women pilots read about her adventures in newspapers and followed her journeys on maps pinned to their walls, saying to themselves, "If Jessie can do that, then so can I."

After so long, this is her story. Jessie Keith Miller was a pilot once...