

IT'S BIZARRE BECAUSE NOW, in our age of information, when any fact, datum or titbit is literally at our fingertips, and the price for being deemed wrong grows mightier by the day; when any idle curiosity or bagatelle can be satisfied in an instant, invariably leading to further idle curiosities and bagatelles, taking you deeper into the goldmine of a seemingly limitless supply; when it's more or less understandable that, for most of us, there really is no excuse for not knowing anything, it's all there, all you have to do is look it up; now, in an age when the sweep of history is laid out before us, notwithstanding all the caveats, hesitations and conflicting perspectives, of those who know about the airborne exploits of the Great Harry Houdini—illusionist, self-promoter, dispeller of frauds and inveterate daredevil—more people seem to know that the Master of Mystery *didn't* actually get the record for the first controlled flight of a powered aircraft in Australia than know who in fact *did*. The suggestion that the Handcuff King had been beaten to the punch came as a surprise to me, but the more I looked into the matter, the more I found that the record held by the master escapologist had become disputed, qualified and sometimes even dismissed outright, given all the fuss over aviation at the dawn of human flight, records being attempted and broken, new heights being reached, both literally and metaphorically—really, the world at the time was so taken by all things aircraft-related that many newspapers had sections headed 'Flight' to discuss all manner of global air events; who went up where and in what, which awards were on offer and with what prize money—indeed, there was so much wonder surrounding aviation, and people were so awestruck at seeing their fellow humans take to the skies, and the hype was so intense, that

it is conceivable that official records do not quite match the events as they really transpired; which is why there is some conjecture from certain quarters surrounding Houdini's attempt to soar over Australian soil, the curious upshot being that while it might be common knowledge that the great mystifier held the record (or holds it still, depending on who you ask) the very fact that it is disputed seems to be the fact worth knowing, maybe because it implies greater familiarity with the subject, which in turn suggests that the more valuable fact regarding Houdini's flight on 18 March 1910 at Diggers Rest in Victoria, just north of Melbourne, coincidentally near the present-day Tullamarine Airport, isn't what something *is* but rather what something *isn't*. "That's the spot," people say, "that's the very paddock where Harry Houdini—born Erik Weisz, of course, in Hungary in 1874, one of seven children, the youngest of whom, Carrie, was left almost completely blind following a childhood accident, though both the accident and whatever came of her (some say she lived her life as a ghostwriter) is an even deeper mystery than the aura surrounding her elder brother with the mesmerising eyes—that's the precise location, look it up, that's where Harry Houdini, born Erik Weisz in landlocked Hungary in 1874 only to travel to America four years later, with his family, including Carrie, and who, five years after that, at the age of nine, giving his first public performance as a trapeze artist, crowned himself 'The Prince of the Air'—how fitting that moniker would become some twenty-seven years further on when he arrived at Diggers Rest, north of Melbourne, near today's Tullamarine, where if you go up there now you can pinpoint the selfsame paddock in which Harry Houdini (there's a memorial; two, actually), who also went by Erik Weisz, Ehrich Weiss and Harry Weiss, not to mention Prince of the Air—why not King of the Air we'll never know—if you hop on a train or a bus or rent a car, you can zero in on the coordinates where the Great Houdini—all the way from Europe via America via Eur-

ope where, incidentally, he picked up the French-made aircraft, a Voisin biplane, which he'd flown in Hamburg before sailing off, plane in cargo, for the Great Southern Land aboard the P&O liner *SS Malwa*, his wife Bess was by now drinking heavily and out of reach, while at thirty-six the great mystifier and *demystifier* (he maintained it was all just trickery and sleight of hand, not magic at all) was starting to feel that vaudeville had had its day, and that maybe he himself, the Great H.H., had also had his day, with perpetually sore wrists from escaping handcuffs, aching shoulders from daily dislocations when shrugging off the straightjacket, a ruined lower back that would only get worse as the years went by, and a tender *derrière* from having an infected boil lanced barely a month prior; which is to say that as he stood on the blustery deck, hands in pockets, gazing out over the endless silver sea—with Bess sleeping it off in their cabin—his mind was turning more and more to thoughts of death: his own, yes, but also the death of vaudeville, the extinction of a craft he'd spent his life honing, the silencing of the crowds, and the end of wonders—which was strange in itself because he would have been the first to admit that death had been, from the very beginning, his constant companion, one he'd actively courted and flirted with, for it was the threat of his imminent demise that kept *derrières* on seats—but now aboard the *Malwa*, the wind making his receding hair seem possessed, he was contemplating the end of all that, the death of death, the threat of choking, drowning, suffocating suddenly humdrum, faced with the dark maws of a yawning audience, he might have even considered flinging himself seaward if it were not for these fantastic new flying machines that promised to give a lift to his stalling career, his stalling life. Germany had been a practice run, and while he skimmed beneath those monochrome Teutonic skies, he imagined himself soaring over the sun-soaked paddock and disinterested livestock half-an-hour north of Melbourne, picturing the khaki scrub blurred

by speed and the black dots of skyward-gazing spectators, the throng of enthusiasts cheering him on—he could hear them cheering, just like they’d done in theatres from Boston to Belfast—the men waving their bowler hats up at him or else at God, who could tell the difference?—why not God of the Air we’ll never know—because that’s what it would have felt like being up there, a god, a pioneer!, when the rest of the world had been discovered, when every continent, country and capital city had been canvassed and coined, when there was practically not a blade of grass that had not bent under an explorer’s boot, here he was, the Great Harry Houdini, Prince of the Air, up among clouds, the final frontier, another death-defying feat (you always had to stay one ahead of your rivals), a new and untapped way to die, a sudden shot in the arm for the listless Handcuff King and his expectant audience; surely he must have felt like a god among children with the power of lightning in his veins, he could imagine it up above Hamburg, could see it on the insides of his eyelids, and you can too, if you go there to the veritable, the *verifiable*, dot on the map, north of Melbourne, that waypoint of waypoints, and *look up* and exclaim that right there, that’s the very spot where Houdini—though he often went by other names; I prefer Erik Weisz with that particular and peculiar and very Hungarian ‘z,’ as did his beloved mother Cecília—where, at last, Houdini did *not* become the first man to conduct a controlled flight over Australian soil.” It’s bizarre because, in this day and age, in which everything is available to us, every fact, datum and tidbit, and there’s no excuse for not knowing anything, it’s all there for you, you don’t even have to spell it correctly, in fact you don’t have to spell it at all, you can just mutter a question into the æther and the æther itself will answer, which is perhaps the greatest trick in the history of magic, speak to the air and the air speaks back—ask not now who are the Gods of the Air!—shout into the darkness and the darkness shouts back, because that’s all we really want, isn’t it,

to be able to commune with the unseen, the intangible, the incorporeal and seemingly *not there*, to have those to whom you're calling out call back, for them to be ready with answers to all of your questions; in this day and age all the facts just hang there ripe for the plucking, you barely even have to reach out, and yet it's positively bizarre that the fact that Houdini was *not* the pioneer of the Aussie skies takes precedence over the other and related fact, the fact implied by the insertion of that devilish word "not," that he was beaten to the punch by someone else—and yet, strangely, it is this first fact that holds more weight than the second, than the one *vis à vis*, regarding, pertaining to who exactly *did* achieve this feat. Apparently it's more crucial to hang on to that miniscule but very weighty "not," that spanner in the works, that devil's trident of three letters, one, two, three, N O T: apparently it's better to know an enigmatic negation of a thing that never was, or that maybe was, or that was depending upon who you believed, or who paid the most money—ah, money—because you might also know that Erik Weisz, Ehrich Weiss, Harry Weiss, Harry Houdini was brought out to Australia *at enormous expense* by another Harry, one Harry Rickards, born Henry Benjamin Leete in England in 1843 before he left for Australia in 1871 to become a famous comedian, baritone and maestro of the stage who at one point owned and managed nearly every significant theatre, playhouse and opera hall in Australia, and was known as perhaps the most significant promoter, manager and proprietor in the world, the likes of which had never been seen, and who lured a host of distinguished performers from all over the globe to stages all over the Great Southern Land, not the least of whom was Houdini, Weiss, Weisz, who commanded a princely "Of the Skies" sum so exorbitant that Harry Rickards, Henry Benjamin, even noted it on the theatrical posters he printed to announce the series of flights Houdini would make in Sydney five weeks after his record-setting (depending who you asked) feat at Diggers Rest:

AVIATION WEEK

AT

ROSEHILL RACECOURSE

MR. HARRY RICKARDS

At Enormous Expense Has Arranged with The

GREAT

HOUDINI

(The First Successful Aviator in Australia)

TO GIVE A SERIES OF PUBLIC FLIGHTS ON HIS VOISIN BI-PLANE

COMMENCING

MONDAY, APRIL 25

HOUDINI WILL

POSITIVELY FLY

BETWEEN THE HOURS OF 10 & 12 A.M.

Weather conditions after these hours being uncertain.

Flights between hours of 12 and 5 p.m. will be achieved, weather permitting

ADMISSION TO THE GROUND & GRAND STAND:

ONE SHILLING ONLY

And so the cost of getting the Hungarian-American to Australia became one of Harry Rickards' selling points, a trick still played by promoters and publicists the world over when they pay through the nose for something just so they can say they paid through the nose for it, because if someone knows you've paid through the nose, if they get the whiff of something big in the offing, you'll immediately pique their interest, which, with all the incredible noise buzzing around in everyone's ears these days, is usually a fool's errand, because how often does it occur that when one mouths into the void the void mouths back?, never!, not in my bitter experience anyway, but the ever-astute Harry, Henry, comedian and baritone and vaudeville promoter extraordinaire, knew the true value of the phrase "At Enormous Expense," which he put right at the top of his publicity material so that everyone knew the gravity of the situation, so that everyone got a sniff of the bigtime, this Harry Houdini was indeed an important visitor (as if they didn't already know, but "At Enormous Expense" no doubt sweetened the deal), in hope of setting tongues wagging, which undoubtedly had the desired effect—old Henry Benjamin knew how to gee-up a crowd—because nowadays it is indeed much more valuable, in an age when knowledge is not power so much as a license to speak, in fact it's not really even knowledge, to know that Harry Houdini, Erik Weisz, was not, did not, could not and now is not, than it is to know who in fact was, did, could and is. Because what matters, what carries the most caché—an invaluable commodity acquired often at enormous expense—is not what Harry Houdini did or did not do; is not that he was first, second, third or fourth; nor is it even *what* he was attempting to do—because isn't it true that many failures are indeed just as famous as successes, as it is in this case—nor is it even the fact of his defying gravity, because by the time he did it gravity had been defied already in every important corner of the world—indeed, he'd just done it himself in Hamburg (albeit to varying

degrees of success, one of which included a significant crash)—but what really matters is the fact, and it is a fact, as verifiable as any other, that it was Harry Houdini, Erik Weisz, Ehrich Weiss, Harry Weiss, who did or did not do it. “Did you know,” we can now say, “that on 18 March 1910, Harry Houdini, the man with the mesmerising eyes, the Hungarian-American who on arriving Stateside dropped the ‘z’ from his native surname—all the better to fit in or stand out—came all the way to Australia, at enormous expense to Harry Rickards, born Henry Benjamin Leete in Stratford, London, who, upon his death a year later in 1911, was survived by his second wife, Kattie, Kate, Roscow, Rickards, Leete, the Australian trapeze artist and theatre actor who also, in her younger years, performed as Katie Angel and was described as “the most beautiful trapeze performer in the world” as well as “the greatest wonder of the age!”—and is it any wonder, for high-flying acts never fail to strike awe into the audience’s collective heart, their silver and white suits reflecting the searchlight as they soar overhead in defiance of gravity, in defiance of death and affirmation of life, arms outstretched, muscles taut, and if you look closely, if you have eagle vision, you’ll see the blissful smile and sleepy eyes of the performer in a trance-like state as they enter the world of flight, as they cross a threshold and become, even if just for a second, superhuman, mystical, otherworldly; as they open a door to this other world so that we might poke our heads in and catch a glimpse of what lies beyond, a flash of the unbelievable, a flicker of the unimaginable, a flame of the seemingly unknowable lighting up the darkness, which is enough to throw open the door in one’s own heart; I should know, it happened to me some dozen or so years ago when I first saw the woman who would become my wife, Alison, in a silver and red trapeze suit, flying through the air a dozen or so metres above me, cutting across the blue, red and yellow backdrop of the bigtop, colours swirling by, a kaleidoscopic image, and with the wisdom of

second sight I knew that I would spend the rest of my life with her, that she would join my family's circus and we'd travel the world together and never be apart, living, working and playing together: a moment of clairvoyance that has proven both true and not true. No doubt it was a similar feeling to the one that came over the inveterate baritone, promotor and vaudeville proprietor Henry, Harry, Leete, Rickards when he first laid eyes on his Katie Angel wheeling, drifting and skyrocketing like a firework above him—yes, Kate Rickards, who would in 1921, long after the death of her husband, herself die of heatstroke while sailing back to Australia from England, in fact while crossing the Red Sea, and be given a sea burial, not before, of course, having mothered four children, three of whom had predeceased her, though the sole survivor, her daughter Madge Adelaide, only outlived her by some seven years, and had also been a singer and comedic actor in her youth, no doubt toeing the family line and indeed marrying another actor, a certain Frank Harwood (real name Joseph Gibbs) with whom she had a son, Harry Frank Broadbent, born Harry Frank Gibbs, who in turn duly changed his name when his mother divorced Joseph and married one John Allen Broadbent—although after the remarriage Madge Adelaide's son now preferred the handle Jim Broadbent—and who would also go on to become an aircraft pilot of some repute, entering countless air races and attempting to break many records, not the least of which was the England-to-Australia record—which he did, landing in Darwin after five days, four hours, twenty-one minutes—only to be lost at sea, like his dear old mum, like so many sons and mothers, wives and daughters, some thirty-six years after Madge, on 29 September 1958, when he disappeared in his aircraft, a Martin PBM Mariner, somewhere over the Atlantic approximately one hundred and fifty miles southwest of Lisbon, Portugal, along with his co-pilot, Thomas Rowell, four crew and thirty passengers—this poor Harry Gibbs, Jim Broadbent, was doubtless named after

his pioneering grandfather Harry Rickards, Henry Benjamin Leete, who *at enormous expense* (£200 per week: the most any artist had been paid in Australia) brought another Harry, Houdini, Weiss, Weisz, to Australia in 1910 with the purpose of conducting the first ever controlled flight in Australian airspace, over an airfield, or rather a paddock (there were no airfields in those days—nobody knew what an airfield was!), a patch of dirt known as the old Plumpton paddock, at Diggers Rest, north of Melbourne, curiously close to today's Tullamarine Airport—must be something in the air out there—only for Houdini to be beaten to the punch and thus *not* become the first man to conduct a controlled flight in Australian airspace.” Which is to say that it's more important, ie. carries more caché and is therefore a fact worth knowing, and not only knowing but repeating whenever and wherever one can, to know who, at the end of the day, it was that, at enormous expense to one Harry, Henry, Rickards, Leete, in fact did *not* conduct the first controlled flight in Australian airspace at Diggers Rest—which, incidentally, was founded along the road to the goldfields of Bendigo as a spot where the gold diggers could, you guessed it, rest—than it is to know who indeed *was* the first person to achieve this remarkable and hotly contested—though it was barely a contest, for Harry Rickards, who knew how to gee-up a crowd, had made sure that his publicity material spoke loud enough to put all other comers in the shade—feat. It's bizarre that the attempt, for it can never be labelled anything other than an attempt, because although Houdini did indeed, at 8.00am on that Friday morning in March, after a couple of initial attempts—attempts at *the* attempt—were thwarted by unfavourable winds, manage at last to achieve lift-off and forward thrust, thus circling round the paddock for something close to a minute and, for the moment, clinching the trophy ahead of rival aviator and competitor Ralph Coningsby Banks, who'd been trying to beat the escapologist to the punch, having camped out at Diggers