

By Ian Shields, UK Defence Forum Research Associate
James Hamilton-Paterson is a self-confessed aircraft fan, with vivid memories of the heady days of the immediate post-World War II era, the dawn of the jet age, and the feeling of optimism in the United Kingdom with the accession of HM Queen Elizabeth II: the period of the "New Elizabethans". Britain was turning out world leading, or at least potentially world-leading aircraft: fighters, bombers and passenger aircraft. Yet within a decade Britain's aircraft industry had effectively imploded: why? The author seeks to chart not only the rapid decline of this once proud and great industry, but to explain the causes. This he does in a fairly short book that is an easy read and is well-presented; anyone with memories of the time or a wish to learn how we went from a major to a very minor player in the world aviation market has much to learn from this book.
That said, the book is written in a style that will definitely not be to everyone's tastes. From the outset the book's tone is that of the enthusiast who retains an almost boy-like love of all things flying, but especially for the early British jets and in particular the fighters. The Introduction recounts a tale of seeing a Vulcan B Mk2 undertaking a low-level flying training exercise (which dates the incident to the late 1960s or early 1970s?) and being awe-struck by the sight (a reaction not, according to the text, shared by his companion in the car). And this sets the tone for the entire book. While the wonder, pride and excitement has its place, I found it wearisome after the first few chapters. Moreover, while the criticisms of both the various governments and of the protective, inward-looking habits of the aircraft manufacturing companies are entirely justified the tone employed is that of a disgruntled citizen (the "outraged of Tunbridge Wells" writer to The Times letter page approach) which again detracts from the book's message. This is a shame, as there is a fair amount of good material in the book, but its constant harping, lack of balance, and absence of real objectivity, detract markedly. My other criticism is that the book would benefit from considerably more illustrations.
This book has some points that commend it: the sheer enthusiasm of James Hamilton-Paterson shines through, and his research is reasonably comprehensive. In a "Vulcan 607" (whose author, Rowland White, offers enthusiastic support on the dust-cover), Jeremy Clarkson sort of way, the book is good and will appeal to those who enjoy that sort of approach. But as an objective and factual history it falls short and left this reviewer wishing for a better product, much as the book's author wishes that the British aircraft industry was still in its heyday.
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