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The Flight of the Titan: The Story of the R34

George Rosie

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In the early hours of Thursday, July 10, 1919 hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers rushed out onto the streets and rooftops and gaped up into the sky as a great silver ship, hundreds of feet long, rolled slowly across the city. Restaurants, hotels, theatres and bars emptied as people took to the street to gaze upwards. The ship seemed to hover over the New York Times building in 42nd street before turning its bow to the east and heading off towards the Atlantic. New Yorkers had never seen anything like it. They were left to wonder as the thrum of the engines died away. But it was no alien visitation. The huge silver craft, bearing a lion rampant across its bow, was the Scottish-built airship R34 manned by a 30-strong crew of World War I veterans (and a stowaway cat). A few days earlier the R34 had made the first-ever east-west flight across the Atlantic against powerful head winds and electrical storms. The flight of the R34 was one of the great feats of British aviation and it has been shamefully forgotten - but there is a wealth of information out there. Some of it is in the diary kept by General Edward Maitland, which was later published, other material comes from the flight reports of the airship's officers, crew diaries, press interviews, and technical information buried in the National Archives in Kew and in the records of the royal Aeronautical Society and the New York Times. Weaving all of this together, George Rosie paints a vivid picture of the great feats of early 19th Century aviation and one of which Scotland should be immensely proud.

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