



Race the Atlantic Wind

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Oisín McGann

Teaching Guide

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RATIONALE & THEMES

The purpose of this guide is to help the reader understand the themes of the text, to explore the writer's techniques, to develop empathy skills and to encourage enquiring minds – all through a range of reading, writing, talking and listening activities, which pupils can complete either individually or in groups.

Key themes include:

- Friendship
- Courage
- Adventure
- War
- Women's rights

SUMMARY

Set in the immediate aftermath of World War One, this book tells the story of the aviators Alcock and Brown as they prepare to make their extraordinary journey across the Atlantic. Told through multi-narratives, our main protagonist is an Irish girl called Maggie McRory, who lives in Newfoundland with her uncle Patrick and his wife Gretchen. Maggie is obsessed with adventure and aviation, so she can hardly believe her luck when the tiny island of Newfoundland becomes the epicentre of the world of flight. The story tracks the efforts of Alcock and Brown (and the other aviation teams) as they prepare to attempt to fly across the Atlantic despite many setbacks – aided in parts by the support of a young Irish girl who just can't keep away from the excitement.

APPROACH

This is a very enjoyable and entertaining read. Although the plot refers to a number of difficult and challenging historical events, it is an engaging read with many opportunities for discussion. This guide has divided the story into four sections, and the activities offer suggestions on developing the themes.

Section 1

The Aftermath of the War (Pages 8–45)

SUMMARY

In his introduction, Oisín McGann gives a brief outline of the context of the story, and explains how his Dad's passion for flight inspired him to write the book.

We first meet Lieutenant Alcock in the middle of a battle in the air, trying desperately to land his plane safely without loss of life. Later, we meet Brown, who is also suffering from the effects of the war. Having met the two male protagonists, the narrative moves across the Atlantic and we are introduced to Maggie McRory, a young Irish girl living with her family in Newfoundland, whose life is about to change completely. Her uncle returns from the War, and she discovers her town is about to become the centre of the aviation world.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read page 9)** McGann explains that the flight by Alcock and Brown was "overshadowed" by Lindbergh's solo flight. Do you think a solo feat is more impressive than one done by two people or a group? Consider why a team effort can be more difficult than working on your own – what extra factors do you have to take into consideration when working with others to finish a project successfully?
- (Read pages 18–20)** As the aeroplane fails, the men prepare for impact. What can we tell about the airmen by their reactions? How do you think the men are behaving under pressure? How does McGann make this section dramatic?

- (Read page 23)** The airmen are caught by the enemy side. However, the Turkish soldiers do not kill them, instead taking them as prisoners. Why do you think there are rules in war about conduct? What rules would you impose to make sure that people do not turn into monsters?
- (Read page 35)** Maggie is excited to see her uncle again, but Finch warns her that the war "changes" men. Is this a surprise? Why do you think this? How do you think her uncle might have changed based on what we've seen from Alcock and Brown's dreams? What advice would you give Maggie?
- (Read page 36)** We are told that during the war some people turned against Gretchen because she was German. Why do you think the local people did this? Do you think this is right? Why is it important for communities to try to stick together in difficult times?
- (Read page 41)** Patrick describes the arrival of the aviators as "an invasion". Why do you think Patrick wants them to stay away from Newfoundland? Do you agree with him? Do you think it's important for people to have somewhere to retreat to when they want some quiet time? Why?

ACTIVITIES

1. Personal passions

On page 8, McGann says he first learned of Alcock and Brown from his father. Have your parents passed on any of their passions? Is there anything they are passionate about? What is it? Create a short presentation explaining their passion, including why, to the rest of the class. First create a questionnaire, including questions like: When did they first become interested? What is it? Why is it so important to them?

2. Space race

On page 12, McGann explains that the reason for the race across the Atlantic was because “People needed hope for a better future” after the horrors of the First World War and the tragedy of the Spanish flu. After the Second World War, a similar race began: The Space Race. In small groups, create a presentation on the other big ‘race’ of the 20th century: The Space Race. Your presentation should include:

Some basic information on who was involved and the timeline of events.

Images of the posters and propaganda produced by the countries involved.

Answers to the questions:

Do you think it happened because people needed a distraction?

How popular did the race become?

Why do you think some people became so obsessed with it?

Can you think of any other similar ‘races’?

Anything else you think is relevant or interesting.

3. Physical tension

Re-read the first paragraph of Chapter One on page 14. Examine the language. What can we guess about Alcock’s state of mind based on the way his bodily reactions are described? How does our body display our emotions? Using quotes from the text to support your ideas, write a couple of paragraphs on how McGann creates tension through his description of Alcock’s physical reaction.

Extension task: Research how our bodies react to emotion. What five physical reactions can we expect if we are feeling: Happy; Melancholy; Excited; Angry?

4. SOS drama

On page 22, we find out that the airmen waited after firing off their flares. Why do you think they did this? Do you think this was a sensible decision? In small groups, create a script for the conversation you think they might have had where they agreed to delay swimming for the shore. Be prepared to perform your piece to the rest of the class.

5. Maggie McRory

We meet Maggie on pages 31–34. What are your initial impressions of her? Write an extended piece on your reaction to her as a character, using quotes from the text to support your ideas.

6. Uncle Patrick’s diary

We first meet Patrick on page 38. Our impressions of him so far have been based on some of Maggie’s memories. What sort of a man are we expecting to meet? Imagine you are Patrick. You are about to return home to your wife and niece. What are you thinking? What are your thoughts and fears? Write a diary entry.

Section 2 Preparing to Fly (Pages 46–131)

SUMMARY

This section opens with the Vickers Vimy team (Alcock and Brown) testing their plane in England. However, they are behind the trend, as many of the other teams in the ‘race’ are already in Newfoundland – much to the excitement of the inhabitants of St John’s (and Maggie in particular).

Patrick is finding it difficult to adjust to civilian life, as he seems trapped in his own angry thoughts and memories of the war. Newfoundland is filled with anticipation as some of the teams are preparing to fly. However, Alcock and Brown are still stuck in England waiting to leave.

In Newfoundland, Maggie has made a new friend, as well as driving a few hard bargains and showing off her business skills.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read page 58)** Maggie is amazed to hear that Harry Hawker is a test pilot, which means he has to test potentially unsafe aircraft. What sort of person do you think it takes to be a test pilot or test driver?
- **(Read page 72)** When Patrick breaks down in tears, Maggie wonders, “What was wrong with him?” What do you think is wrong? What advice would you give her and her family?
- **(Read page 75)** The description of London’s streets echoes what Patrick said about planes being weapons of destruction. Are you surprised to know that war sped up inventions? Why is this? Do you think they should have stopped developing the aeroplane in order to preserve life?
- **(Read page 75)** Jack is described as having “always been removed from the destruction he’d caused”. Pilots fought from a distance, killing people from afar. Do you think this is unethical? What do you think about drone strikes? Why?

- **(Read page 76)** Why do you think so many veterans ended up as beggars? Does the State have a responsibility for these men? Do you think we should be doing more for homelessness?
- **(Read page 84)** The aviators are very anxious to get started. What do you think it must be like for them? Have you ever been really nervous/excited about something? What did it feel like?
- **(Read page 100)** We see Freddie Raynham laughing. What sort of man do you think he was before the war? How has he changed? Do you think he’ll ever be the same?
- **(Read page 114)** Teddy shows off his mascot. Why do you think we have mascots? Do you believe that they bring luck? Why? If you had a mascot, what would it be? Why?

ACTIVITIES

1. Glossary

Re-read pages 46–49. There are a lot of technical terms in the descriptions of the aircraft. Create a glossary to explain the different technical terms. Create a fact sheet for each of the different flying teams. You will be adding to this as the novel progresses, so leave room for extra information as you find it.

2. Read all about it!

Re-read pages 57–61. Imagine you are the reporter Joey Smallwood. Write up your interview with Hawker and Grieve for a magazine, giving descriptions of your impressions of the men and their responses to your questions. Make sure you add in some extra questions of your own that aren’t in the book!

3. Hotseating Maggie

On pages 66–67, we learn about Maggie’s backstory and how she has run away from Ireland. What sort of girl is she? In small groups, create some questions you’d like to ask her, and consider how she might reply. Then dramatise a hotseating scenario, with someone answering the questions as if they were Maggie.

4. Inequality

On pages 85–90, we meet Captain Hobbes. How is he disrespectful towards Maggie and Kate Sulley? Write a response, using quotes from the text. What do you think of their response to him? Explain your opinion.

5. Language analysis

On page 108, Jack describes how “the constant stress of flying in combat wore holes in you the way cloth thinned and tore over time”. What do you think of description? Why is it so effective? Write a short response.

Extension task: Read the poem ‘Mental Cases’ by Wilfred Owen. What is Owen’s message about the effects of war? Choose your favourite two images and explain why they are so effective. www.poemhunter.com/poem/mental-cases

Section 3 Let the Race Begin! (Pages 132–234)

SUMMARY

Alcock and Brown begin making their way across the ocean on the cruise liner *Mauretania*. Back in Newfoundland, Maggie gets to know the American sailors, whose plan suffers an unfortunate setback.

Alcock and Brown finally get to Newfoundland, but their plane is still stranded on the other side of the Atlantic. The weather hasn’t improved, so they join the rest of the aviators in St John’s, where they finally meet Maggie. The people of Newfoundland are treated to the sight of a blimp, but a storm brings chaos. Maggie has an accident that stops her explorations.

Freddie Raynham and Harry Hawker set off, with disastrous results. Maggie makes a deal with Alcock and Brown while they wait for news of the other teams.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read page 135)** What do you think of Teddy’s prediction that “Someday, flying over this ocean will be a routine matter.” What do you think we might be doing in the future – something that seems impossible now, but may become easy over time?
- **(Read page 142–143)** Maggie comments that “Trepassey was a wild place, slowly being tamed and tainted by mankind.” Do you think we’ve made too much of an impact on nature? What do you think of the school strike protests? What can we do to become more environmentally aware?
- **(Read page 143)** Maggie feels like she might understand Patrick’s fears about the way the world is changing. Do you agree with Patrick that we need to protect what we have from newcomers

or do you agree with Maggie that we should seize opportunities to learn about different worlds? Why? Explain in your groups.

- **(Read pages 181–182)** Why do you think the locals aren’t given any information about the airship, even though they are waiting around just to see it? What are your impressions of Finch, who gives “one of the earth anchors a kick, looking unimpressed”? Does his reaction surprise you? Have you ever seen something that completely blew your mind? What happened?
- **(Read pages 190–191)** Why do you think the airmen are so kind to one another? Do you think this is the case with all sportspeople away from the cameras? Do you think it should be? Why?
- **(Read page 204)** Patrick is calm in the face of chaos. Has this changed your impressions of him? Why? Do you think he will recover? How do you think the crash will affect the airmen? Why?
- **(Read page 208)** Everyone is anxiously waiting to hear news about Harry Hawker and his team. What do you think they are feeling? Do you think they might be secretly pleased? Why? How do you think they’ll feel if they hear that they have been successful?
- **(Read page 223)** Maggie remembers Teddy’s words, “Aeroplanes are reshaping the world.” What else has reshaped the world? Discuss with your group. Are the things you’ve identified 100% positive in their effects?

ACTIVITIES

1. US Navy plane disappears

How do you think the other aviators feel about the US Navy entering the race? Do they think it’s fair that they have a whole country’s financial backing and all those resources? Imagine you are the reporter Joey Smallwood and write up an article exploring how the aviators feel about their rival – and how they feel when they find out on page 150 that the NC-4 has disappeared.

2. Local dialect

On page 159, Jack uses the word “mardy”. What does that mean? Are there any words that are only used in your local area? Choose your ten favourite, and write your own ‘local dictionary’.

3. Kate Sulley

On page 165, Maggie admits to Kate that she wants “to be an explorer!” Has she chosen the right person to reveal this to? What are your impressions of Kate Sulley? Do you think she is a good role model for Maggie? Write a character analysis, using at least four quotes to explain your ideas. Remember that this book is set a century ago, when women were treated differently. Kate Sulley would have been quite a remarkable woman for her time! Make sure you read until page 169 before beginning your response.

4. Meeting Maggie McRory

On page 174, Fax Morgan warns Jack and Teddy about Maggie and her questions. What do you think will happen when they meet for the first time? In small groups, develop a piece of drama that shows what happens.

5. Blimp

Everything goes wrong with the blimp when the storm picks up. Imagine you are at the scene. In small groups, create a piece for the local news, explaining what happened, and the after effects. Include interviews with those involved.

6. Lieutenant Brown

What sort of man is Lieutenant Arthur Whitten Brown? Write an extended character analysis based on his actions in this section, using quotes from the text. Alternatively, you could draw him, labelling it with strong adjectives to describe his personality, supported by quotes from the text.

7. Motivational speeches

Jack gives an inspirational speech on page 227. Why is it so effective? Can you recognise any persuasive devices? Imagine you are one of the aviators. Write a similar speech to encourage your peers in a similar style, remembering to use persuasive language.

Section 4 The Voyage! (Pages 234–272)

SUMMARY

The Vimy is finally airworthy, but it looks as though they will be overtaken by the other teams. Thanks to an observation by Maggie, they are able to make some adjustments before they take off to cross the Atlantic. After they leave, Maggie gets an amazing opportunity, thanks to her uncle Patrick.

After facing a lot of obstacles, Alcock and Brown land in Ireland, the first people to fly non-stop across the Atlantic. The book ends with some sad news.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read page 240)** What do you think of the supplies they bring with them? What would you include in a ration box if you were flying across the Atlantic for the first time? Explain your answer to the others in your group.
- **(Read page 246)** Freddie Raynham offers Maggie the chance to fly. “Maggie, my girl, would you care to come flying with me?” Wow! What do you think she is feeling in that moment? Does this change our views on Patrick?
- **(Read page 265)** How do you think Alcock and Brown feel about their Vickers Vimy being ruined? Why do you think they feel so attached? What do you think they should do with the plane?
- **(Read page 269)** What do you think of Teddy’s advice to “dwell on Jack’s life, rather than his death”? Do you think this is an important message? Why? “Fly, Maggie. Explore. Seize life, and shake everything you can out of it.” Do you think she will? Why? What would you like to do in life? Why do you think the book finished on the letter rather than just with Alcock and Brown arriving in Ireland?

ACTIVITIES

1. Let me fly

Maggie is desperate to join Alcock and Brown. Do you think they should have taken her? What reasons did they give? How could she persuade them? Write a goodbye speech that Maggie might have given, drawing together everything you know about her personality.

2. The feeling of flight

What do you think of the description of the plane taking off on page 247? Have you ever been in a plane? Write a description of the feeling as the wheels leave the ground, giving as much detail as possible so that someone who has never flown can really imagine what it’s like.

3. Log report

Re-read pages 248–261. How many obstacles did Alcock and Brown overcome? Create a log report of their journey. If you’d prefer, you could imagine they were able to ‘live-tweet’ the journey, and write a series of at least 8 tweets that outline what is happening and how they feel.

4. A flying machine

To the “one boy out on the street” on page 262, they must have seemed as strange as spacemen, flying above his village. Write up an interview with the boy: What did you see? What did you think it was? How did it feel?

Extra Activities

Top Trumps

There are a lot of different teams in the race. Create a Top Trump card for each one, and decide on the different categories that they will be judged on. You might think about the personality of the crew, the weight of the plane, how reliable it seems to be, etc.