

# '...his flying was a poem'

## Miles Jeffrey Game Day, 1896-1918

by Ian Burns

For as long as armies have marched there have been war poets. Songs for the march; songs for the barracks; verses satirical, ribald or nonsensical. The Great War was no different. What made the war poets of that conflict so memorable was the extensive publishing of their work, both poetry and songs, which made it available to a wider public than the barrack room and mess.

The majority of the poets had their lines formed by experiences in the trenches. Far fewer came from the naval and air services. Miles Jeffrey Game Day, Jeffrey or Jeff within the family, was both naval officer and aviator. He served with the fleet in the North Sea aboard a seaplane carrier and aircraft equipped cruiser before transferring to a scout squadron at Dunkirk. He had had a number of poems published during the war, in *The Spectator* and the literary *Cornhill Magazine*. Following his death his papers and notebooks were edited, together with an affectionate memoir, published in 1919 as a slim volume, *Poems and Rhymes*. His poetry did not display the stark horror or disillusion of the trench poets. Mostly they were filled with lightness, wry humour - he greatly admired W.S. Gilbert - and reflected his love of flying, home and countryside. It is probable that many were not intended for publication and, had he lived, might not have seen the light of day, which would have been a great loss as they capture the magic and exhilaration of flight.

### ON THE WINGS OF THE MORNING

*A sudden roar, a mighty rushing sound,  
a jolt or two, a smoothly sliding rise,  
a jumbled blur of disappearing ground,  
and then all sense of motion slowly dies.  
Quiet and calm, the earth slips past below,  
as underneath a bridge still waters flow.  
My turning wing inclines toward the ground;  
the ground itself glides up with graceful swing  
and at the plane's far tip twirls slowly round,  
then drops from sight again beneath the wing  
to slip away serenely as before,  
a cubist-patterned carpet on the floor.  
Hills gently sink and valleys gently fill.  
The flattened fields grow infinitely small;  
slowly they pass beneath and slower still  
until they hardly seem to move at all.  
Then suddenly they disappear from sight,  
hidden by fleeting wisps of faded white.  
The wing-tips, faint and dripping, dimly show,  
blurred by the wreaths of mist that intervene.  
Weird, half-seen shadows flicker to and fro  
across the pallid fog-bank's blinding screen.  
At last the choking mists release their hold,  
and all the world is silver, blue and gold.  
The air is clear, more clear than sparkling wine;  
compared with this, wine is a turgid brew.  
The far horizon makes a clean-cut line  
between the silver and the depthless blue.  
Out of the snow-white level reared on high  
glittering hills surge up to meet the sky.  
Outside the wind screen's shelter gales may race:  
but in the seat a cool and gentle breeze  
blows steadily upon my face*



Freshly minted Flight Sub-Lieutenant Miles Jeffrey Game Day in a studio portrait. :Sheila Day

*as I sit motionless and at my ease,  
contented just to loiter in the sun  
and gaze around me till the day is done.  
And so I sit, half sleeping, half awake,  
dreaming a happy dream of golden days,  
until at last, with a reluctant shake,  
I rouse myself, and with a lingering gaze  
at all the splendour of the shining plain  
make ready to come down to earth again.  
The engine stops: a pleasant silence reigns -  
silence, not broken, but intensified  
by the soft, sleepy wires' insistent strains,  
that rise and fall, as with a sweeping glide  
I slither down the well-oiled sides of space  
towards a lower, less enchanted place.  
The Clouds draw nearer, changing as they come.  
Now, like a flash, fog grips me by the throat.  
Down goes the nose: at once the wires' low hum  
begins to rise in volume and in note,  
till as I hurtle from the choking cloud  
it swells into a scream, high pitched and loud.  
The scattered hues and shades of green and  
brown  
fashion themselves into the land I know,  
turning and twisting, as I spiral down  
towards the landing ground; till, skimming low,  
I glide with slackening speed across the ground,  
and come to rest with lightly grating sound.<sup>1</sup>*