

Jean Batten

Biography

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Jean Batten was New Zealand's greatest aviator, celebrated around the world for her heroic solo flights during the 1930s. Following her success she moved in and out of public view before dying in obscurity in Majorca, Spain, in 1982.

Jane Gardner Batten was born on 15 September 1909 in Rotorua. She soon became known as Jean. In 1913 she moved to Auckland with her parents and two older brothers. In 1917 her father, Frederick, a dentist, volunteered to join the New Zealand Expeditionary Force and was sent to the Western Front. The loss of his earnings caused financial hardship for the family; during this period Batten moved from Melmerley Ladies School in Parnell to a state school. Following Frederick's return in 1919, Batten's parents quarrelled and around 1920 they separated. Her mother, Ellen, initially took her to live in Howick, where she attended a local convent school. They returned to the city in 1922 and Batten's father paid for her to board at Ladies College in Remuera.

Batten's ambition to learn to fly developed in the late 1920s as the first flights of 'an era of hugely publicised long-distance record-breaking flights' began. Her mother, with whom she maintained a close

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relationship throughout her life, encouraged this new ambition. In 1929 she took Batten on a holiday to Sydney and arranged for her to fly with Australian aviator Charles Kingsford Smith.

A year later Batten sailed to England with her mother, and began to learn to fly at the London Aeroplane Club. By December she had gained her 'A' licence and had her eye on breaking the women's record for a flight from England to Australia. To fund her commercial pilot's licence, and obtain the commercial sponsorship she would need to break the record, Batten borrowed money from a young New Zealand pilot, Fred Truman, who wanted to marry her. After completing her 'B' licence in December 1932 she had nothing more to do with him. Raising money by taking advantage of her relationships with men was a theme that continued throughout her flying career.

The mid 1930s were the heyday of Batten's flying career. After two failed attempts to fly from England to Australia in 1933 she successfully completed a return journey in May 1934. Although the route had been flown in one direction or the other more than 30 times, Batten's gender and her beauty captured huge media attention. In keeping with the direction of her 'patron saint', oil magnate Lord Wakefield (of Castrol Oil), she carefully kept herself in front of the public eye, embarking on extensive tours of Australia and New Zealand. During both tours Batten was accompanied by a mascot, a black kitten she had named Buddy.

Her attention-grabbing flights continued. In November 1935 she became the first woman to fly herself across the South Atlantic. In October 1936 she went one step further and made the first ever direct flight from England to New Zealand. But she was physically and mentally exhausted by the journey. Her tour of New Zealand was eventually called off in Christchurch and she spent much of November resting at Franz Josef Glacier at the government's expense. In February 1937 she returned to Australia. A few months later she completed her last long distance flight, from Australia to England.

For the rest of her life Batten moved in and out of public view. Despite rumoured love affairs she never married, continuing to live and travel with her mother until the latter's death on the island of Tenerife, Spain, in 1966.

Batten re-emerged in public life three years later, and then embarked upon a decade of world travel with her apartment in Tenerife as a base. She decided to leave the island in early 1982 and, after travelling and staying with her publisher and his wife in England, flew to Majorca where she intended to buy an apartment.

In a letter dated 8 November 1982 Batten advised her publisher of her new address. This was the last anyone heard from her. Her whereabouts remained unknown until September 1987, when it was revealed that she had died in Majorca on 22 November 1982. She had been bitten by a dog, and after refusing treatment had died needlessly from a pulmonary abscess. On 22 January 1983 she was buried in a paupers' mass grave.

By Imelda Bargas

Further information

- Jean Batten (Dictionary of New Zealand Biography)

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