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Book Review: Aviation History Lite

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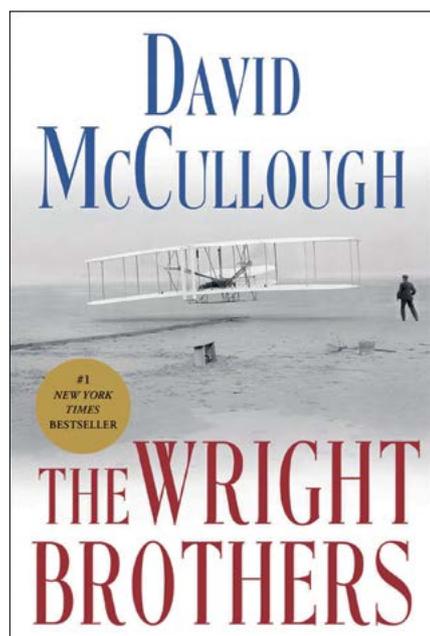
BOOK REVIEWS

Aviation History Lite

Michael Farley

David McCullough, *The Wright Brothers*
(New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

David and Goliath, Bonnie and Clyde, Orville and Wilbur. The classic stories and moral lessons attached to these pairs of historical characters are all so well known to us that their very mention evokes deeper messages. We all know these stories as much (or more) for what they symbolize than we do for their details. And so, one might ask: why write a book about any of these pairs? Do we really need to know anything more about them? Pulitzer Prize-winning and beloved author David McCullough tackles the last of these three pairs in his most recent, voluminous (368-page) effort. It is my belief that he wrote *The Wright Brothers* as both a primer biography and a screen play. The prose is superb and, though their story has already been told by many others, there are actually some new tidbits of research in McCullough's work that were previously unknown. For those of us who have never read about the Wright Brothers



and want to know about their social lives, family happenings, and the places that they went to, this is the book for you. Those who are searching for deeper insight as to the engineering, science, and methods of construction of their flying machines, there are plenty of other, more suitable books.

The opening paragraph (and perhaps what will become the opening scene of the screen play) reads as follows: “In as strong a photograph as any taken of the brothers together, they sit side by side on the back porch steps of the Wright family home on a small side street on the west end of Dayton, Ohio. The year was 1909, the peak of their

fame. Wilbur was forty-two, Orville thirty-eight. Wilbur, with a long poker face, looks off to one side, as though his mind were on other things, which most likely it was. He is lean, gaunt, long of nose and chin, clean-shaven, and bald. He wears a plain dark suit and high-laced shoes, much in the manner of their preacher father” (5).

Much later in the book, a passage describes the first flight of their father (Milton Wright, a United Brethren in Christ church bishop): “They took off, soaring over Huffman Prairie at about 350 feet for a good six minutes, during which the Bishop’s only words were, “Higher Orville, higher!” (253). Here it is tempting to imagine oneself a Hollywood screenwriter, closing the film with this dialogue and morphing the Wrights’ airplane into a modern Boeing that disappears into the sunset as the credits start to roll. (On second thought, that’s really too hokey, and probably why Hollywood is not knocking at my door).

Among these two passages are mostly snippets that relate the interesting happenings in the brothers’ lives, but ones that are largely unrelated to their great technological accomplishments. McCullough dedicates 18 lines to the exploits of them almost catching a mouse and only six lines to describing the “hip cradle” that was ultimately one of the single most important discoveries of their combined career. Each of these snippets would make great scenes in the movie, which will undoubtedly be visually fantastic and feature dozens of compelling characters. There will even be a French-born villain with a cool name (Octave Chanute) who tries to take credit for the brothers’ work, but is thwarted in the end.

McCullough’s limited treatment of the technical details involved is illustrated perhaps most clearly by his treatment of a 1907 letter from Wilbur, writing from Washington, DC, to Orville, who was in France. In the letter, Wilbur warns his younger brother not to socialize

too much, both because it would tire him and, perhaps, reveal to others their airplane secrets. “Do not let people talk to you all day and night. It will wear you out, before you are ready for real business. Courtesy has limits. If necessary appoint some hour in the daytime and refuse absolutely to receive visitors even for a minute at other times. Do not receive anyone after 8 o’clock at night” (174). McCullough adds: “Then after some technical discussion about the rudder, he wrote again. ‘I can only tell you to be extraordinarily cautious.’” Here would have been an ideal place for the author to expand upon the Wrights’ “technical discussions.” We can only surmise that McCullough does not want to bore his readers with the details. That’s too bad. For me, the reference to the

technicalities of the rudder was compelling enough to prompt me to look up and read the rest of the letter in the Wilbur and Orville Wright Papers in the Library of Congress. In the end, I think McCullough and his editors may have underestimated the numbers of us “Wright Geeks” out here who are fascinated by the technical details of the history of flight.

The Wright Brothers is a good, light and enjoyable summer read, regardless of one’s level of technical knowledge about aviation. For readers who would like a more technical and complete explanation of how the brothers came to invent the first controllable and sustainable flying machine as well as a recounting of the other parts of their lives, *The Bishop’s Boys* by Tom

D. Crouch (W.W. Norton, 2003) is the book you want. Be warned, however: Crouch’s book is *much* longer and takes considerably more time to digest. One is not better than the other; they each serve their own specific purpose. But only one of them is likely to inspire a Hollywood movie.



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In Pursuit of an Ice Pact

Robert Hellström

Jorge Daniel Taillant, *Glaciers: The Politics of Ice* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

In *Glaciers: the Politics of Ice*, Argentine author Jorge Daniel Taillant unravels the complex interplay between environmental protection, political will, and the unimaginable influence of big mining companies in the ice-capped Andes Mountains of South America. Looking through scientific lenses, his book traces the work of respected activists promoting environmental laws to protect vital water resources. Taillant identifies “cryoactivism” as a central theme behind Argentine Environmental Secretary Romina Picolotti’s relentless goal to enact the world’s first national glacier protection law. Her opponents, the provincial political leaders who support the mining

industry, have mounted swift and deliberate attacks to derail Picolotti’s train. Peter Munk, president of Barrick Gold, the world’s largest gold mining

corporation, whose eyes are set on prospecting in the Andes, is clearly Picolotti’s most powerful and politically manipulative adversary. Taillant’s

close attention to detail is supported by copious references to interviews, facts, and helpful Internet links that actively engage the reader. No matter how you read Taillant’s latest detective work on mining operations, his attention to scientific and legal evidence, and his suspenseful unraveling of covert relations between mining and politics will inspire you to read on.

Taillant opens his story with an overview that assures his audience that this is neither a scientific textbook nor a dreary account of conservationist efforts to push an environmental agenda. It is, rather, “a social, cultural, and political introspection into our cryosphere (the world of ice) that brings critical complex and rather obscure scientific information about ice and glaciers into perspective for our nonscientific lives” (xxi). Chapter 1 introduces the major players, namely Picolotti, Barrick, money-hungry gold prospectors, federal government officials and Argentina’s provincial government leaders. The author illustrates the impact of the mining corporations, describing their cutting of roads