



The Bishop's Boys: A Life of Wilbur and Orville Wright

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Brilliant, self-trained engineers, the Wright brothers had a unique blend of native talent, character, and family experience that perfectly suited them to the task of invention but left them ill-prepared to face a world of skeptics, rivals, and officials. Using a treasure trove of Wright family correspondence and diaries, Tom Crouch skillfully weaves the story of the airplane's invention into the drama of a unique and unforgettable family. He shows us exactly how and why these two obscure bachelors from Dayton, Ohio, were able to succeed where so many better-trained, better-financed rivals had failed.

The Bishop's Boys: A Life of Wilbur and Orville Wright Details

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From Reader Review *The Bishop's Boys: A Life of Wilbur and Orville Wright* for online ebook

Neil Rogers says

This is a fantastic biography of the Wright brothers - containing a nice blend of family, culture, aeronautical engineering & history. The first 150 pages are a bit slow, but provide a comprehensive understanding of the Wright family dynamics and, perhaps, motivation for the way the Wright brothers handled their immense success. In spite of it being a long book, I highly recommend it.

Jared Gillins says

An excellent, well rounded overview of the Wright brothers' lives. Crouch gives a very detailed history of their family and home life, which gives great insight into the motivations of the two men that brought us powered, heavier-than-air flight. I was especially impressed at how detailed Crouch got in the engineering and experimentation details of the invention of the airplane. I have no engineering background and haven't learned anything from a science class since high school, but I was able to keep up and understood everything that Crouch explained. The only thing that kept me from giving this book five stars was the section on the contract and patent battles. After the excitement of the invention process and the first flight, this section really dragged--right up until the Wrights formed their own exhibition team with crack pilots.

Craig says

"The Bishop's Boys" is a meticulously researched and well-written biography of the lives of Wilbur and Orville Wright, the inventors of the world's first heavier-than-air, self-propelled aircraft to fly. Known as the Wright Flyer, it was successfully flown for the first time on December 17, 1903 at Kitty Hawk, NC. Though the Wright brothers developed the aircraft in their hometown of Dayton, Ohio, they chose Kitty Hawk as a place to test the aircraft because of its flat sandy (soft) soil, relative obscurity and the constant, steady winds of from 13 to 30 mph, which were ideal for providing the optimal lift for testing. The Wright brothers were mechanically minded (they supported themselves through the manufacture and repair of bicycles). However, they were first and foremost "inventors". Though they later became businessmen, that was not their forte. They perhaps did not maximize pecuniary gain from their patents as they might have had they applied more effort and savy to commercial exploitation of their invention.

The Wright brothers succeeded where numerous others (on both sides of the Atlantic) had failed because of their ability to identify and solve problems. Of Wilbur and Orville, the author Tom Crouch writes: "[They] had no special training in science or engineering. While both were well educated, neither had completed the formal coursework required for his high school diploma. Before the summer of 1899, they seemed the most ordinary of men. That was part of their fascination. They were the quintessential Americans, whose success seemed compounded of hard work, perseverance, and common sense, with a liberal dollop of Yankee ingenuity - raised to the level of genius."

As Wilbur's interest in flying was developing, he wrote to the Smithsonian Institute to request available information. His request was almost dismissed and had that occurred he might have given his notion up.

However, correspondence ensued resulting in some pamphlets being sent to him touching on the history of aviation thought. That was all he needed. The author writes: "Wilbur spent three months . . . sifting through the chaff of aeronautical history and theory to arrive at a far more accurate understanding of the state of the art than [the aviation notables of the day] who had spend decades in the field and written books on the subject. How did he do it?" The author answers his question: "Wilbur was a man who established a goal with care, then never lost sight of it. He was the perfect engineer-isolating a basic problem, defining it in the most precise terms, and identifying the missing bits of information that would enable him to solve it. Other students of the subject lost themselves in a welter of confusing detail; they were lured into extraneous, if fascinating, blind alleys that led away from the basic problem. Not Wilbur. He had the capacity to recognize and the dogged determination required to cut straight to the heart of any matter . . . Wilbur went to the books in search of answers to the most fundamental issues. What did one have to know to fly? What portions of the flying machine problem were well in hand? What problems remained to be solved? he emerged from his reading with the answers to those questions. Incredible as it may seem, no other major experimenter had taken such a reasonable approach to the work of his predecessors." Wilbur summarized is findings: "The difficulties which obstruct the pathway to success in flying machine construction are of three general classes." Such a machine would require wings that would lift it into the air; a power plant to move it forward with sufficient speed so that the air flowing over the wings would generate that life; and a means of controlling the machine in the air. The airplane was the first vehicle what would require control in three axes of motion. There axes can best be understood as three imaginary lines around which a machine in the air is free to rotate: Pitch (a horizontal line running from wingtimp to wingtip); roll (a horizontal line running through the center of the craft from nose to tail); and yaw (a vertical line running directly through the center of the craft). Wilbur (principally), but together with Orville, tackled this daunting task and engineered the first craft ever flown which solved each question.

Concerning Wilbur's writing to the Smithsonian, the author states (perhaps an understatement), "It was the most important exchange of correspondence in the history of the Smithsonian. The receipt of those pamphlets set in motion a chain of events that would culminate in the invention of the airplane."

When one considers the numerous discoveries and inventions man has achieved through the centuries, many are startling and breathtaking. Few, however, become so revolutionary that they stand apart and alone. The printing press comes to mind - also the airplane. Since thinking man first looked up into the heavens and saw birds in flight, he has been mesmerized by the notion of overcoming the earth's gravity and soaring through the air under his own power. In 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright made that fantasy a reality and changed the world. And it happened in America.

A great read.

Douglas Grant says

This is one of the best biographies I have read. Although it tells the story of Orville and Wilbur Wright and the invention of controlled flight, it is as much about their father, their sister, their rivals and the people who were a part of both the invention and the personal turmoil that surrounded it. Dr. Crouch manages to bring the inventing of the airplane away from the wood and fabric and wires to make it a human accomplishment with all of the glory and struggle that surrounds all endeavors.

Sarah says

This book was recommended to us by the curator of the Wright Museum in Dayton, Ohio. It is a thorough history of the Wright family and the science and politics of developing the first airplane. Although it was long, it was a fascinating read that covered both the scientific aspects of developing a flying machine as well as the personal quirkiness of two highly driven and creative men.

Pierre Lauzon says

Billed as "the definitive biography of the Wright Brothers," I would have to agree. The book is a very readable history of the Wright Brothers and their influence on the development of world aviation.

The book discusses the scientific and deliberate methods used by the Wright Brothers to conquer the challenge of controlled, powered flight. Their inventions of lateral flight controls, propeller design, and a workable autopilot would make them noteworthy even if they had not been inventors of the airplane. The book also details the patent fights and other not so noble actions of the brothers, who stagnated after their invention.

The author, Tom Crouch, is a prolific and excellent aviation historian and this book is certainly recommended for aviation historians and historians in general.

Rod Van Meter says

A finely honed biography of the brothers. They are most decidedly modern and dispassionately analytical in their laboratory work, making important advances in airfoil and propeller design and making careful use of a wind tunnel, leading up to their most important contributions in three-axis airplane control. But they are most decidedly nineteenth century archetypes in their business and personal interactions with other researchers. They are the quintessential American garage tinker/inventors.

The contrast is stark with Octave Chanute, who failed to win the same kind of lasting fame the boys did, but arguably had a far more modern view of research and development. His actions read much like a modern research "rainmaker", always trying to connect people and get them to share data, work and credit.

The book is a good read, well written and researched. Now I want to go read more about Chanute, Lilienthal and Langley.

KennyO says

The Bishop's Boys holds a place of distinction in my collection of biographies and it's unquestionably the best of the Wright Brothers biographies I've read through the years. Author Crouch has the credentials and the resources to back what he writes. There's a lot about their father here and it illuminates their characters significantly. You learn, too, that there's much more to these men than the bicycle shop and the flying machine, most of which is given short shrift or even elbowed aside in other works. The single unaddressed

(or under-addressed) controversy is that of Gustav Whitehead's supporters' claim that he preceded the Wrights in powered flight. I don't give much weight to the importance of that argument since this is a biography.

It's exceptionally well done and I recommend it with no hesitation.

John says

This is a truly amazing biography of an even more amazing subject. I should have read this one years ago, but I am glad that I finally did. The Wrights are fascinating characters and their discovery of how to control powered flight is so much fun to read about. Having just recently vacationed on the Outer Banks, my curiosity was piqued and I had to read more.

Regina says

The Bishop's Boys covers all the bases in the story of the Wright Brothers. It brought to life the excitement of the times when human flight was new. And there was plenty of technical and family background information to round out the story. Reading this book was a great way to enhance the experience my kids and I had of visiting Kill Devil Hills and the Wright Memorial last August.

Tom says

This was a good summary of the lives and times of the Wright brothers. It was a little bit like reading a textbook at times and also spent more time than necessary on others that were very superficially related to them by also doing flight experiments at the same time. Overall, well worth the time to read.

Joy says

For those people interested in the history of the Wright Brothers, this book is a must read. I've read several books about the Wright brothers this summer and I consider this a very thorough book in providing insight into not only the events leading up to flight and what happened afterwards, but also a very good look into the lives of the family members. You find out WAY more about the Wright's and their familial background than you ever will in your standard biography. Who knew that the Wright's father was a domineering bishop of an obscure Christian denomination, and that his lifelong violent battles within his group had a powerful effect on the invention of human powered flight. For many years, the Wright's story was doubted, and it became Orville's quest to at least set the historical record straight. The Smithsonian has the original Wright 1903 flyer on display ONLY because they finally conceded that the Wright Brothers were indeed the inventors of the airplane, (which they had been holding out on in favor of their colleague Langley for years.)

Very good book. Very comprehensive and fairly definitive. A very well rounded and complete biography.

Studebhawk says

For the Boys

This story is an excellent read by Tim Crouch. It's obvious from the very beginning that the author thoroughly researched the source materials on the Wright brothers. What drew my attention was the masterful amount of detail he was able to discover on the place and time of the discovery of manned flight. The author's coverage of all of the work done by the contemporaries of the Wright brothers both here and abroad serves the reader well in adding an extra amount of detail to the story. The complicated family dynamic between the brothers and the father, the depth of the relationship with the sister all added another level of interest to the story. My only complaint with author was the amount of detail on the family dynamic and especially all of the detail on the father. At times this story got bogged down and got lost in the weeds. There were times I had to skip whole passages to keep up with the story flow on the accomplishments of the brothers. The first three chapters of the book could use some good well placed editing. An accomplished editor would have tightened up the manuscript without diminishing the story that we have here or the accomplishment of the author.

Katie says

This was an impulse buy after seeing the exhibit at the Smithsonian, and it didn't disappoint. While it started out slow, it really captured the excitement during the Wright brothers' exploratory and inventive days. The author did an excellent job of grounding their achievements in a through explanation of their personalities and upbringings as well as in the global scale of the growing science of aviation.

Ryan Whitehurst says

I liked the book. If anything, I am disappointed with Wilbur and Orville. I have to wonder what more they may have accomplished if they weren't spending their time defending patents and getting paid. However, I think the same could be said of most of us, myself included.
