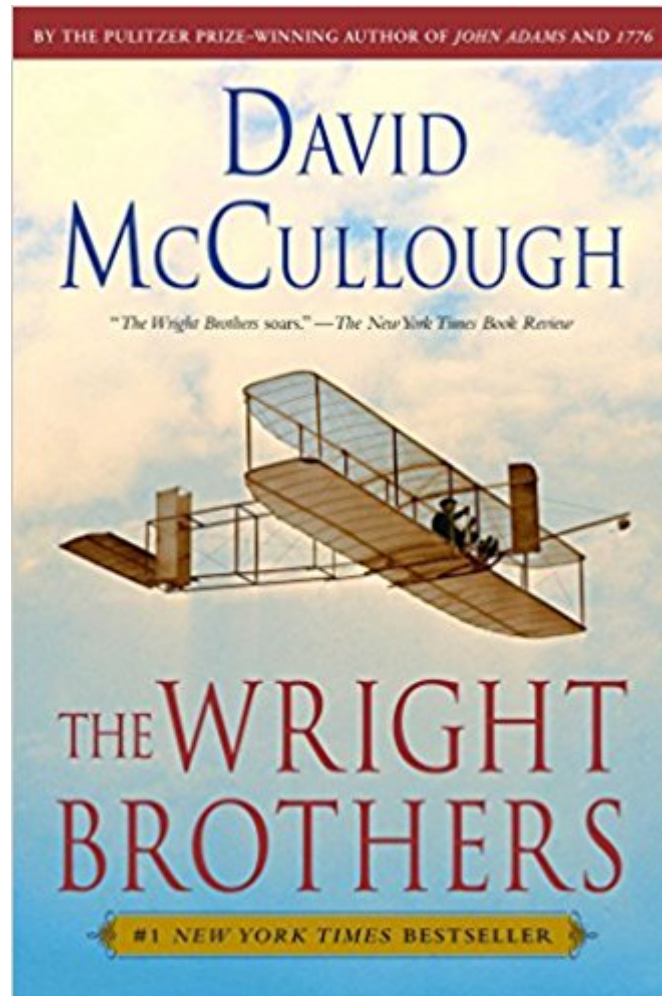




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# The Wright Brothers



## Synopsis

The #1 New York Times bestseller from David McCullough, two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize—the dramatic story-behind-the-story about the courageous brothers who taught the world how to fly—Wilbur and Orville Wright. On a winter day in 1903, in the Outer Banks of North Carolina, two brothers—bicycle mechanics from Dayton, Ohio—changed history. But it would take the world some time to believe that the age of flight had begun, with the first powered machine carrying a pilot. Orville and Wilbur Wright were men of exceptional courage and determination, and of far-ranging intellectual interests and ceaseless curiosity. When they worked together, no problem seemed to be insurmountable. Wilbur was unquestionably a genius. Orville had such mechanical ingenuity as few had ever seen. That they had no more than a public high school education and little money never stopped them in their mission to take to the air. Nothing did, not even the self-evident reality that every time they took off, they risked being killed. In this “enjoyable, fast-paced tale” (The Economist), master historian David McCullough “shows as never before how two Ohio boys from a remarkable family taught the world to fly” (The Washington Post) and “captures the marvel of what the Wrights accomplished” (The Wall Street Journal). He draws on the extensive Wright family papers to profile not only the brothers but their sister, Katharine, without whom things might well have gone differently for them. Essential reading, this is “a story of timeless importance, told with uncommon empathy and fluency” about what might be the most astonishing feat mankind has ever accomplished—The Wright Brothers soars” (The New York Times Book Review).

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

An Best Book of May 2015: Most people recognize the famous black-and-white photo of the Wright brothers on a winter day in 1903, in a remote spot called Kitty Hawk, when they secured their place in history as the first to fly a motor-powered airplane. That brilliant moment is the cornerstone of the new masterful book by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough, who brings his deft touch with language and his eye for humanizing details to the unusually close relationship between a pair of brothers from Dayton, Ohio, who changed aviation history. Bicycle shop owners by day, Wilbur and Orville taught themselves flight theory through correspondence with the Smithsonian and other experts. But the brothers soon realized that theory was no match for practical testing, and they repeatedly risked life and limb in pursuit of their goal—including when Orville fractured a leg and four ribs in a 75-foot plunge to the ground. McCullough's narration of ventures such as this—their famous first flight at Kitty Hawk; the flight in Le Mans, France that propelled the brothers to international fame; the protracted patent battles back at home; and the early death of elder brother Wilbur—will immerse readers in the lives of the Wright family. Like other great biographies before it, *The Wright Brothers* tells the story about the individuals behind the great moments in history, while never sacrificing beauty in language and reverence in tone.   
Manfred Collado --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

“A story of timeless importance, told with uncommon empathy and fluency. . . . A story, well told, about what might be the most astonishing feat mankind has ever accomplished. . . . The Wright Brothers soars.” (Daniel Okrent *The New York Times Book Review*) “David McCullough has etched a brisk, admiring portrait of the modest, hardworking Ohioans who designed an airplane in their bicycle shop and solved the mystery of flight on the sands of Kitty Hawk, N.C. He captures the marvel of what the Wrights accomplished and, just as important, the wonder felt by their contemporaries. . . . Mr. McCullough is in his element writing about seemingly ordinary folk steeped in the cardinal American virtues—self-reliance and can-do resourcefulness.” (Roger Lowenstein *The Wall Street Journal*) “[McCullough] takes the Wrights’ story aloft. . . . Concise, exciting, and fact-packed. . . . Mr. McCullough presents all this with dignified panache, and with detail so granular you may wonder how it was all collected.” (Janet Maslin *The New York Times*) “McCullough’s magical account of [the Wright Brothers’] early

adventures – enhanced by volumes of family correspondence, written records, and his own deep understanding of the country and the era – shows as never before how two Ohio boys from a remarkable family taught the world to fly." (Reeve Lindbergh *The Washington Post*) – "David McCullough's *The Wright Brothers* is a story about two brothers and one incredible moment in American history. But it's also a story that resonates with anyone who believes deeply in the power of technology to change lives and the resistance some have to new innovations." (Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google) "An outstanding saga of the lives of two men who left such a giant footprint on our modern age." (Booklist (starred review)) – "[An] enjoyable, fast-paced tale. . . . A fun, fast ride." (The Economist) "[A] fluently rendered, skillfully focused study. . . . An educational and inspiring biography of seminal American innovators." (Kirkus Reviews) "McCullough's usual warm, evocative prose makes for an absorbing narrative; he conveys both the drama of the birth of flight and the homespun genius of America's golden age of innovation." (Publishers Weekly)

David McCullough is one of the preeminent American historians of our times, the deft biographer of John Adams and Harry Truman, and in this book he brings his wonderful historical exposition and storytelling skills to the lives of the Wright brothers. So much is known about these men that they have been turned into legends. Legends they were but they were also human, and this is the quality that McCullough is best at showcasing in these pages. The book is a quick and fun read. If I have some minor reservations they are only in the lack of technical detail which could have informed descriptions of some of the Wrights' experiments and the slightly hagiographical tint that McCullough is known to bring to his subjects. I would also have appreciated some more insights into attempts that other people around the world were making in enabling powered flight. Nevertheless, this is after all a popular work, and popular history seldom gets better than under McCullough's pen. The book shines in three aspects. Firstly McCullough who is quite certainly one of the best storytellers among all historians does a great job of giving us the details of the Wrights' upbringing and family. He drives home the importance of the Wrights' emphasis on simplicity, intellectual hunger and plain diligence, hard work and determination. The Wright brothers' father who was a Bishop filled the house with books and learning and never held back their intellectual curiosity. This led to an interest in tinkering in the best sense of the tradition, first with bicycles and then with airplanes. The Wrights' sister Katharine also played an integral part in their lives; they were very close to her and McCullough's account is filled with copious examples of the affectionate, sometimes scolding, always encouraging letters that the siblings wrote to each other. The Wrights'

upbringing drives home the importance of family and emotional stability. Secondly, McCullough also brings us the riveting details of their experiments with powered flight. He takes us from their selection of Kill Devil Hills in the Outer Banks of North Carolina as a flight venue through their struggles, both with the weather conditions and with the machinery. He tells us how the brothers were inspired by Otto Lillienthal, a brilliant German glider pilot who crashed to his death and by Octave Chanute and Samuel Langley. Chanute was a first-rate engineer who encouraged their efforts while Samuel Langley headed aviation efforts at the Smithsonian and was a rival. The Wrights' difficult life on the sand dunes - with "demon mosquitoes", 100 degree weather and wind storms - is described vividly. First they experimented with the glider, then consequentially with motors. Their successful and historic flight on December 17, 1903 was a testament to their sheer grit, bon homie and technical brilliance. A new age had dawned. Lastly, McCullough does a fine job describing how the Wrights rose to world fame after their flight. The oddest part of the story concerns how they almost did not make it because institutions in their own country did not seem to care enough. They found a willing and enthusiastic customer in the French, perhaps the French had already embraced the spirit of aviation through their pioneering efforts in ballooning (in this context, Richard Holmes's book on the topic is definitely worth a read). Wilbur traveled to France, secured funding from individuals and the government and made experimental flights that were greeted with ecstatic acclaim. It was only when his star rose in France that America took him seriously. After that it was easier for him and Orville to secure army contracts and test more advanced designs. Throughout their efforts to get funding, improve their designs and tell the world what they had done, their own determined personalities and the support of their sister and family kept them going. While Wilbur died at the age of forty-five from typhoid fever, Orville lived until after World War 2 to witness the evolution of his revolutionary invention in all its glory and horror. McCullough's account of the Wright brothers, as warm and fast-paced as it is, was most interesting to me for the lessons it holds for the future. The brothers were world-class amateurs, not professors at Ivy League universities or researchers in giant corporations. A similar attitude was demonstrated by the amateurs who built Silicon Valley, and that's also an attitude that's key to American innovation. The duo's relentless emphasis on trial and error - displayed to an almost fanatical extent by their compatriot Thomas Edison - is also an immortal lesson. But perhaps what the Wright brothers' story exemplifies the most is the importance of simple traits like devotion to family, hard work, intense intellectual curiosity and most importantly, the frontier, can-do attitude that has defined the American dream since its inception. It's not an easy ideal to hold on to, and as we move into the 21st century, we should always remember Wilbur and Orville who lived that ideal better than almost anyone else. David

McCullough tells us how they did it.

McCullough has written a serious and riveting review of the lives of Wilbur and Orville. His writing style is concise, thorough, and unpretentious. I was able to read it easily and enjoyably and learned many things about the Wright family that I didn't know. The book was thus valuable to me.

**FAMILY** McCullough makes it clear that the Wilbur and Orville were a product of their family environment. Their father was the major influence. Milton Wright was a minister and finally a bishop in the United Brethren Church in Christ. McCullough writes "He was an unyielding abstainer, which was rare on the frontier, a man of rectitude and purpose all of which could have served as a description of Milton himself and Wilbur and Orville as well. His strict values molded and focused the views of the three younger Wrights (Katherine, Wilbur, and Orville). In addition to his strictness, he was a true classical liberal in his beliefs in the scientific method and equal rights for all people, no matter their race or gender. For example, Milton wrote to his sons when they were in Paris trying to get support for their flying machine: "Sons Be men of the highest types personally, mentally, morally, and spiritually. Be clean, temperate, sober minded, and great souled. As grown, experienced, and highly successful inventors, they responded: "Father All the wine I have tasted since leaving home would not fill a single wine glass. I am sure that Orville and myself will do nothing that will disgrace the training we received from you and Mother. McCullough writes "Years later, a friend told Orville that he and his brother would always stand as an example of how far Americans with no special advantages could advance in the world. "But it isn't true," Orville responded emphatically, "to say we had no special advantages . . . the greatest thing in our favor was growing up in a family where there was always much encouragement to intellectual curiosity."

**BUSINESS** McCullough records Wilbur's thoughts on being in business in a letter to his brother Lorin in 1894: "In business it is the aggressive man, who continually has his eye on his own interest, who succeeds. There is nothing reprehensible in an aggressive disposition, so long as it is not carried to excess, for such men make the world and its affairs move. . . I entirely agree that the boys of the Wright family are all lacking in determination and push. That is the very reason that none of us have been or will be more than ordinary businessmen. We ought not to have been businessmen. In 1911, Wilbur

wrote: “When we think what we might have accomplished if we had been able to devote this time [fighting patent infringement suits] to experiments, we feel very sad, but it is always easier to deal with things than with men, and no one can direct his life entirely as he would choose.” The Wrights never built, or even tried to build, an industrial empire as Ford or Edison or their Dayton neighbors John and Frank Patterson (National Cash Register) had done. The Wrights were intellectual men and women. ENGINEERING McCullough’s book is quite light on technical discussions. But the Wrights’ unique approach to technology development is the essence of who they were and why they were such successful engineers when others better funded, better educated, and better connected failed. For example, McCullough ignored the following examples. Wilbur and Orville were superb engineers, though neither went beyond high school. They found by trial and error that the existing data held by the science of aeronautics was flawed even though its principles were generally correct. They zeroed in on weight, power, control, lift, and the propeller as the main technologies that had to be solved. What is so astounding is not just that they solved these technical problems and reduced them to practice, but that they did it in record time. In a matter of three years, they invented or reinvented virtually the whole field of aeronautics. For example, the wind tunnel had been invented thirty years before, but Wilbur and Orville developed it into a precise quantitative instrument. With it, they developed not just the wing configurations, but coupled with the understanding that a propeller is simply a wing on a rotating shaft, they rewrote the rules of propeller design and optimized its efficiency dramatically. These two men had an insight into, and a reverence for, quantitative empirical data that was unique in aeronautical engineering at that time. McCullough shows how that reverence for truth (data) grew out of their family standards. But there was more to it than the principles of a strict Protestant upbringing. It also has to do with time and place. The late 1800s and early 1900s was a period of great minds applying the rules of The Enlightenment and the experience of science to practical problems. The place was an industrial axis, which was anchored by Dayton and Detroit and included Flint, Toledo, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and many other cities in the Midwest. This is where Edison, Ford, Dow, Firestone, the Patterson Brothers, and the Wright Brothers lived and created their technologies. There was a culture of boundless innovation and an infrastructure that included materials and support equipment that fostered great invention. It was similar in many ways to Silicon Valley today. REINFORCE THE NARRATIVE Another area that could be strengthened in the book is its niche. There has been so much written about the Wrights that each new book needs to distinguish itself in some way with a different point of view, a new set of facts, or a fresh interpretation of old facts. For example, McCullough writes “In early 1889, while still in high school, Orville

started his own print shop in the carriage shed behind the house, and apparently with no objections from the Bishop. Interested in printing for some while, Orville had worked for two summers as an apprentice at a local print shop. He designed and built his own press using a discarded tombstone, a buggy spring, and scrap metal. That last sentence about building his own printing press defines so much about Orville and his simple pragmatism. To reinforce that point requires some expansion of that event or similar other defining events in the lives of Wilbur and Orville. I wanted to read more about Orville's compulsive act of invention, but it wasn't there. The 81 photos McCullough includes in his book are treasures. Many of them are familiar, but so many are new looks at the Wrights. I wish there were greatly expanded captions below each photo, for each one is a story in itself. One source of knowledge about the Wrights' approach to aeronautics is the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton. It is normally overshadowed by the more popular Air and Space Museum in Washington, but the exhibits at the Air Force Museum walk you through the Wrights' engineering exploits with a degree of detail and insight I have found nowhere else.

Well, I have read nearly every one of David McCullough's books and was definitely looking forward to this one when it came out. I was expecting a large and comprehensive treatise like "John Adams" or "Harry Truman". What about "A Path Between the Seas"? (Now there's a lengthy complete read.) But, "The Wright Brothers" was a disappointment. I can honestly say I learned nothing new. Several years ago I read Harry Combs' "Kill Devil Hill" and was enthralled. Maybe David McCullough is getting too old to do all the research, but why bother, if that's all you got. By the way, check the reference section in the back of the book and you'll see "Kill Devil Hill" quoted numerous times. I suppose if you've never read anything before on the Wright Brothers, you'll enjoy an introduction to their lives and work, so I'll still give it 3 stars.

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