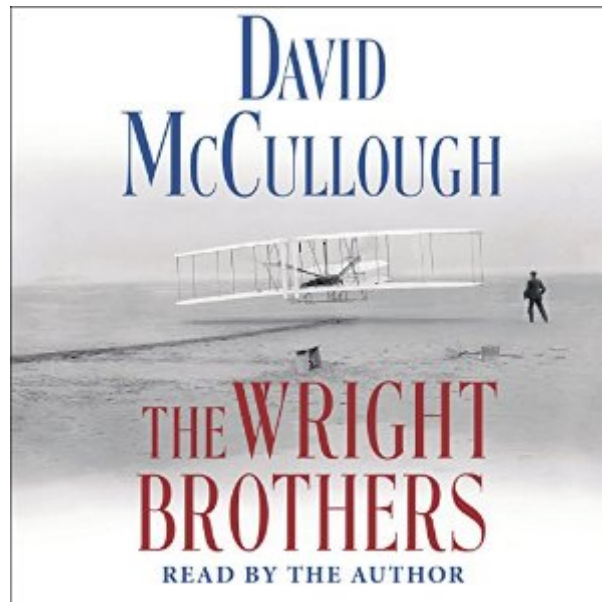


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# The Wright Brothers



## Synopsis

Two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize David McCullough tells the dramatic story behind the story about the courageous brothers who taught the world how to fly: Wilbur and Orville Wright. On December 17, 1903, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Wilbur and Orville Wright's Wright Flyer became the first powered, heavier-than-air machine to achieve controlled, sustained flight with a pilot aboard. The Age of Flight had begun. How did they do it? And why? David McCullough tells the extraordinary and truly American story of the two brothers who changed the world. Sons of an itinerant preacher and a mother who died young, Wilbur and Orville Wright grew up on a small sidestreet in Dayton, Ohio, in a house that lacked indoor plumbing and electricity but was filled with books and a love of learning. The brothers ran a bicycle shop that allowed them to earn enough money to pursue their mission in life: flight. In the 1890s flying was beginning to advance beyond the glider stage, but there were major technical challenges the Wrights were determined to solve. They traveled to North Carolina's remote Outer Banks to test their plane because there they found three indispensable conditions: constant winds, soft surfaces for landings, and privacy. Flying was exceedingly dangerous; the Wrights risked their lives every time they flew in the years that followed. Orville nearly died in a crash in 1908 but was nursed back to health by his sister, Katharine - an unsung and important part of the brothers' success and of McCullough's book. Despite their achievement the Wrights could not convince the US government to take an interest in their plane until after they demonstrated its success in France, where the government instantly understood the importance of their achievement. Now, in this revelatory book, master historian David McCullough draws on nearly 1,000 letters of family correspondence plus diaries, notebooks, and family scrapbooks in the Library of Congress to tell the full story of the Wright brothers and their heroic achievement.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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.

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: "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.

THE WRIGHT BROTHERS is an easy to read, exciting story about the men (and the woman!) at the forefront of aviation. David McCullough weaves a fun tale exploring the competition to accomplish the first flight. It's a story of hardship, dedication, and scientific research by mechanics without even a college education. Wilbur and Orville Wright accomplished for about \$1000 what the director of the Smithsonian museum had just crashed into the Potomac River for \$70,000. Perhaps the most notable feature of this book is the detail and research evident. As an example of the author's persistent research, the author is now credited with solving the infamous "hockey stick incident." There has long been a mystery about the villain who smacked Wilbur in the face with a hockey stick. The author finally resolves this mystery, finding a diary entry pointing to the actual villain. It turns out that the culprit was a ne'r-do well named Oliver Crook Haugh. In fact, Haugh was later executed for murdering his own family. The significance of the hockey stick incident is this: It caused depression so severe that Wilbur remained mostly home-ridden. As a result, he became a voracious reader; more importantly, Wilbur and Orville become closer, ultimately teaming them as business partners together. Of course, this meant a printing press business, followed by a bike shop, followed by airplane inventors/mechanics. The author explains the rejection of the brothers by the American government, while France wholeheartedly embraced and encouraged the men. American officials expressed no interest (at first, that is.) Even when a prominent senator encouraged the government to investigate, nothing happened. McCullough emphasizes the mechanical skill and research of the two.

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