



Welcome to our October book, Historians!

Our next meeting of The Historians is Tuesday, October 8 at 6:30 to discuss David McCullough's *The Wright Brothers* published in 2015. David McCullough is one of our best-known American historians and may be more responsible than anyone else for making popular history popular again with contemporary readers. Of all of his books, why select *The Wright Brothers*? It is a very American story of invention and ingenuity, of persistence despite setbacks. And of all the great inventions of humankind, is there any

more mythic invention than the machine that gave humans the ability to fly? While most Americans know who the Wright brothers are and can even tell you that they first flew at Kitty Hawk, McCullough tells us the behind the scenes story of the brothers and their planes to give us a deeper understanding of what happened on that remarkable windy day in 1903 in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

Even with all of the books for young people written about the Wright Brothers, we knew comparatively little about them personally because the emphasis is always on what they did and not on them. Why so little interest in who they were? Writing in *The New York Times* in her review of the book, Janet Maslin speculates that it was because "the Wrights' asceticism and single-mindedness sound so uncomplicatedly heroic." And this is borne out in McCullough's description of their persistence despite setbacks and ridicule. Even after they flew and documented what they had done with patents and photographs, it is the French government who expresses interest in the new invention. The U. S. government, far from being supportive, accuses them of fabricating the information.

Once the world recognized what they had done, perhaps the most astonishing aspect of the young men's characters was the way that fame did not change them. Meetings with kings and billionaires, laudatory articles in magazines and newspapers, and spectacular parades in their own hometown of Dayton, Ohio failed to pull them away from what always interested them the most—their work. Endlessly inventive, they strove for perfection and used the practical. Perhaps most astonishing, everything they did, they did with their own money, earned from the proceeds of their bicycle shop.

McCullough is careful to give credit to the people whose support made it possible for the Wright brothers to do what they did. As you read, think about how people like their sister Katherine, their father Bishop Wright, Charlie Taylor, and others in Kitty Hawk and beyond helped the brothers, and most importantly believed in them when so many did not. What did each of these people contribute? Is it true to say, without taking anything away from what the brothers accomplished, that it takes a village to raise an airplane? If so, why?

Is there something peculiarly American about the Wright brothers and the invention of the airplane? Certainly, Europeans of the time thought so, despite the early work done in the field of aviation by the French. If it is peculiarly American, why and how? And can we duplicate this type of effort today? Or were the times just right for this kind of invention without money or government backing? What can we learn from that? Speaking of learning things, what did you learn about this time in history that you did not know? What astonished you? What will remain with you? And how did McCullough capture your interest and keep it?

As you can see, there will be lots to talk about as we meet on Tuesday, October 8 at 6:30 to celebrate triumph in the skies by these daring young men in their flying machine. Join us!

Donna McBride