

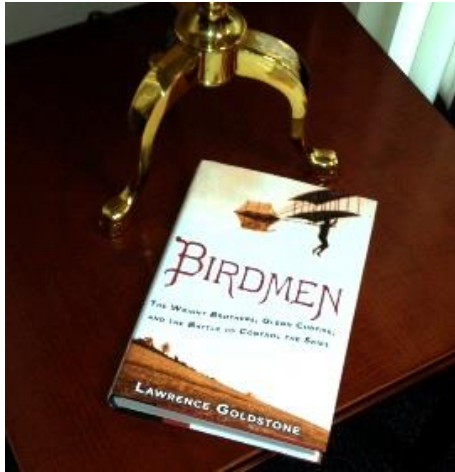
Birdmen

The Wright Brothers, Glenn Curtiss, and the battle to control the skies

By Lawrence Goldstone

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Goldstone is author or co-author of 14 books of fiction and non-fiction. He won the New American Writing Award, New York Times notable mystery. He was profiled in The New York Times, Toronto Star, Salon, and Slate.



Birdmen is a non-fiction book that will capture the imagination of anyone interested in aviation history. Lots of books have been written about the Wright Brothers and their quest to master controlled, powered flight but few reveal the detail and background stories as Mr. Goldstone. While many would-be aviators were trying to build a “flying machine” through trial and error, Wilbur and Orville were true, albeit self-taught, scientists and spent most of their time in research and testing using various devices that they invented...including the first wind tunnel used to test lift on wing surfaces. They kept meticulous notes and each experiment was built on the results of the previous one. But once their goal of controlled, powered flight had been achieved, the Wrights focused their time

toward protecting their patents from “scoundrels” who were “stealing” their ideas...most notably...Glenn Curtiss. Indeed it became an obsession and before his death, even Wilbur himself questioned what they could have accomplished had they not been spending so much of their time with paperwork and litigation.

Meanwhile, Curtiss and the rest of the aviation world raced past them with new and daring aircraft designs. Of the 759 aircraft that were built in 1911, only 200 were manufactured by legitimate aircraft manufactures. Aviation “exhibitions” attracted sold out crowds and pilots of all skill levels were trying to “out-fly” the others by inventing new and more dangerous maneuvers with names like - the Corkscrew Twist, the Death Curve, Dip of Death, etc.

Knowing what we know today, it's hard to imagine what it would be like to take an aircraft up to 5000 feet, put it into a Corkscrew Twist (spin), then try various procedures to try to recover from the maneuver knowing that if you failed you would crash to your death. Many deaths were caused by the pilot simply being thrown from the aircraft for various reasons. (No seat belts!). From the first aircraft fatality in September of 1908 when Orville crashed with passenger Thomas Selfridge through the time of Wilbur's death in May of 1912, there was an aviation fatality every 10 days.

The work is extremely well researched and offers a detailed insight into the “behind the scenes” lives and accomplishments of not only the Wright brothers but the other players who wrote aviation's history.