



To Conquer the Air : The Wright Brothers and the Great Race for Flight

James Tobin

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"For some years I have been afflicted with the belief that flight is possible to man. My disease has increased in severity and I feel that it will soon cost me an increased amount of money if not my life." So wrote a quiet young Ohioan in 1900, one in an ancient line of men who had wanted to fly -- men who wanted it passionately, fecklessly, hopelessly. But now, at the turn of the twentieth century, Wilbur Wright and a scattered handful of other adventurers conceived a conviction that the dream lay at last within reach, and in a headlong race across ten years and two continents, they competed to conquer the air. James Tobin, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in biography, has at last given this inspiring story its definitive telling. For years Wright and his younger brother, Orville, experimented in utter obscurity, supported only by their exceptional family. Meanwhile, the world watched as the imperious Samuel Langley, armed with a rich contract from the U.S. War Department and all the resources of the Smithsonian Institution, sought to scale up his unmanned models to create the first manned flying machine. But while Langley became obsessed with flight as a problem of power, the Wrights grappled with it as a problem of balance. Thus their machines took two very different paths -- his toward oblivion, theirs toward the heavens. As Tobin relates, the Wrights' 1903 triumph at Kitty Hawk, however hallowed in American lore, was ill-reported and disbelieved. So, while the two brothers struggled to transform their delicate contraption into a practical airplane, others moved to overtake them as the leading pioneers of flight. In France, rivals scoffed at the Wrightseven as they rushed to imitate them. At home, the great inventor Alexander Graham Bell seized the fallen banner of his friend Langley and thrust it into the hands of a circle of young daredevils, urging them to get into the air. From this group emerged the motorcyclist Glenn Curtiss, fastest man in the world, whose aerial challenge to Wilbur Wright culminated in an unforgettable showdown over New York harbor. "To Conquer the Air" is a hero's tale of overcoming obstacles within and without that plumbs the depths of creativity and character. With a historian's accuracy and a novelist's eye, Tobin has captured the interplay of remarkable personalities at an extraordinary moment in our history. In the centennial year of human flight, "To Conquer the Air" is itself a heroic achievement.

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