

Introduction

“**D**uring the past year,” wrote James Thurber and E. B. White in 1929, “two factors in our civilization have been greatly overemphasized. One is aviation, the other is sex. Looked at calmly, neither diversion is entitled to the space it has been accorded. Both have been deliberately promoted.”¹

Thurber and White wrote with tongues in cheek, but they had a point. Aviation, whether deliberately promoted or not, attracted more public attention in 1928–29 than ever before. Charles Lindbergh, who in May, 1927, had become the first pilot to fly solo across the Atlantic, was at the height of his fame. Enthusiastic crowds had greeted him at every stop of his postflight tour of the United States; his image decorated every imaginable kind of object; and *We*, his book about the flight, was a bestseller. Amelia Earhart, a Kansas-born Boston teacher, had become in June, 1928, the first woman to fly across the Atlantic as a passenger. Small planes designed for private flying, built by companies like Stinson and Travel Air, began to enter the market in large numbers during 1928–29. The number of passengers carried by U.S. airlines in 1929 was triple that for 1928, catapulting the United States from third to first place among nations with scheduled airline service. Western Airlines hired the first cabin stewards for its Los Angeles to San Francisco flights in 1928, and in 1929 Transcontinental Air Transport began to offer coast-to-coast passenger service using carefully coordinated planes (by day) and trains (by night).²

Americans interested in flight did not, however, have to content themselves with reality: flying stories saturated the popular culture of 1928–29. *Wings*, an epic silent film about World War I fighter pilots, took Best Picture honors at the first-ever Academy Awards in May, 1929. Howard Hughes, after seeing *Wings* several times, had begun filming his own aerial epic, *Hell's Angels*, in the skies over southern California. Meanwhile, “air-minded” filmgoers could content themselves (in 1928 alone) with cheaply made features like *Air Mail Pilot*, *Air Legion*, *Air Circus*, and *Won in the Clouds*.³ Bookstores featured Dorothy L. Sayers’s new mystery novel *Clouds of Witness* and Nevil Shute’s espionage thriller *The Mysterious Aviator*, both of which had aviation themes.⁴ Young readers could choose from the aerial adventures of series characters like Rex Lee, Andy Lane, or Ted Scott, or (if allowed) they could turn to pulp-fiction magazines like *Air Adventures*, *Air Trails*, and the futuristic *Air Wonder Stories*.⁵

Public interest in aviation had been growing steadily for two decades before the peak that Thurber and White commented on in 1929. It fluctuated but remained strong in the seven decades afterward, and it remains strong today. This book is a history of that interest: an exploration of the ways in which people who were not aviators looked at, lived with, and thought about aviation.

Technology, we are told, makes us human. The depth of our ability to devise new tools and improve old ones sets us apart from other animals. Technology also, however, makes us more than human, more than the fragile, weaponless, hairless creatures that evolution produced. We improve old tools and invent new ones in order to do things well that—with existing tools, natural or artificial—we would do badly, inefficiently, or not at all. Toolmaking success has meant, since the days of *Homo erectus*, evolutionary success for humans and their ancestors. Transformed by our tools, we can outrun the antelope, out-dig the badger, and out-muscle the elephant. We can fly higher than any bird, dive deeper than any whale, and—as we have learned at great monetary and social cost—manipulate the Earth’s surface to suit our needs.⁶ Small wonder, then, that we are fascinated by our tools. Small wonder too that they figure prominently in the stories we tell to instruct, inform, and entertain one another.

Some technologies captivate because they confer extraordinary powers.⁷ Dams hold the waters of great rivers in check and dispense them at our command for drinking, irrigation, driving mill wheels,

or turning turbines. Antibiotic drugs vanquish, in a matter of days, infections that once brought weeks of pain and often death. Telephones enable any pair of users, no matter how distant, to converse as easily as if they were in the same room. Personal computers can, with the right software, make any teenager's desk into a music studio, any kitchen table into a small printing shop, and any office into a typesetting room. "Buy this product," we are told a thousand or more times a day, "and you too can do the things that the people in this advertisement are doing." Buy this kitchen knife, and you can cut tomatoes or two-by-fours with equal ease. Buy this wrench, and you can easily turn every kind of nut or bolt ever manufactured. Buy this drug (after asking your doctor if it is "right for you"), and your chronic medical condition will be cured or controlled. These ads persist because, presumably, they work—because for every problem there is a group of people ready to leap at the prospect of a technological "fix."

Other technologies captivate because they give access to otherwise inaccessible places. Remotely operated robot explorers show us the wreckage of the *Titanic* and the surfaces of distant planets. Television daily makes millions of viewers virtual witnesses of events and performances on Earth that they could not have seen in person. Computers act (for most users) as a portal to the dream worlds of games and the ever-expanding realms of the Internet. Much of the imaginary hardware in science fiction stories—spaceships, time machines, and interdimensional gateways—exists to take the characters "where no one has gone before." Car manufacturers, selling vehicles that both they and their customers know will be used for commuting and in-town errands, favor advertisements set in a land of spectacular scenery and challenging, wide-open roads. Buy the car, they imply, and you too can enter this world.

Still others captivate because they stand for ideas that are themselves appealing. Medieval and Renaissance visitors to the great cathedrals of Europe responded to them as embodiments, in stone, wood, lead, and glass, of God's majesty and the church's power. The thousands of electric light bulbs that illuminated the buildings of the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 were an affirmation of the city's rebirth after the catastrophic fire of 1888. The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 marked not only the end of the largest civil engineering project in history but also the emergence of the United States as a world power with interests in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. On a more prosaic level, the telephone has become not just

a communication device but also a symbol for the *idea* of communicating, of “reaching out and touching” a distant loved one. Cars are not just a means of traveling but also a symbol of the *possibility* of traveling at will—any time, for any reason, anywhere that a road leads.⁸

Aircraft captivate for all three reasons. They bestow the powers of gods on mere mortals. They give unfettered access to the Earth’s surface, to the skies above, and to the vacuum beyond. They symbolize the wonders and the horrors of the modern age, the settlement of old frontiers, and the opening of new ones, the greatness of nations and of individuals.

The gods fly, so do the angels, and so do a host of lesser magical creatures, from fairies to dragons to Pegasus, the winged horse of Greek mythology. Ordinary, mortal humans (according to a centuries-old literary traditions) fly only with magical aid. Perseus flies off to his meeting with Medusa using winged sandals borrowed from the god Hermes. Ebenezer Scrooge takes flight, in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, when the Ghost of Christmas Past takes his hand. Wendy, John, and Michael Darling begin their journey to Neverland with the help of ageless Peter Pan and his fairy companion, Tinkerbell.⁹ Aircraft democratize the magic. They bring the power of flight to anyone with the price of a ticket, the address of an airfield, and the name of a pilot, things much easier to come by in the modern world than a visit from a god, ghost, or fairy. Aircraft also offer other god-like possibilities. Once aloft, pilots and passengers alike can take in a town at a glance, a county in a moment, or an entire state in an hour or two. People left behind on the ground shrink into insignificance, and even the most impressive cities seem toylike when seen from altitude. Suitably armed, the occupants of an aircraft can strike at enemies, their property, or their territory at will. There is little difference (to the victim at least) between aerial bombs and the thunderbolts of Zeus, Odin, or Jehovah.

Humans are a mobile species, and even in the settled societies that arose with the invention of farming, travel is part of our cultural life. For the better part of a million years, however, travel was circumscribed by natural barriers. Crossing deserts, ice fields, mountain ranges, or oceans was possible, but it was also difficult, time consuming, and dangerous. Few people made such treks even once, and most of them did it *only* once. The British colonists who crossed the Appalachians into the Ohio River Valley in the 1750s or the Amer-

icans who followed the Oregon Trail to the Pacific in the 1840s engaged in life-defining migrations, not routine travel.¹⁰ Steamships and railways by the 1840s began to ease the difficulty of crossing natural barriers, but as early as the 1920s, aircraft had begun to obliterate it. The Atlantic and Pacific, the Alps and the Rockies, the North and South Poles, and the Sahara and Arabian Deserts had all been crossed by air before 1930. Within a decade, scheduled intercontinental air service would reach every inhabited continent. Within a generation, jet airliners would make six-hour flights across North America and the North Atlantic routine. Aircraft also overthrew, by the end of the 1930s, the tyranny of time and distance that had isolated Western inhabitants of remote continental interiors. North and East Africa, the Amazon Basin, and the Alaskan and Australian bush thus became functionally, if not physically, closer to the centers of “civilization.”¹¹ Within a generation, helicopters created the possibility of on-demand air service to still-more-remote areas. Western travelers contemplating a journey now no longer ask “How far can I go?” but “Where do I want to go?”

Powerful, world-changing technologies need not *look* impressive. The antibiotic drugs that transformed twentieth-century medicine are unremarkable tablets, capsules, and liquids. Aside from a few striking machines made by Apple and Dell, most personal computers are bland gray boxes. But the technologies that most intrigue us, those that we most often put on display to symbolize some larger idea, are those that not only do impressive things but also *look* impressive as they do them. Aircraft, mostly for practical engineering reasons, routinely display exactly those qualities that the modern world finds impressive in a machine. Most have, at least since the early 1930s, a sleek and streamlined shape that suggests speed and power even at rest. Most have large, clearly visible engines that reinforce the impression of speed and power. Most are impressively loud in operation, and many are literally deafening. Most are large enough to dwarf a human observer, even when both are standing on the ground—an experience that, with the decline of passenger railways and heavy industry, is less familiar to Americans now than fifty years ago. Finally, all airplanes, though not all aircraft, share a distinctive shape unlike that of any other machine. Many of our tools are variations on the rectangular box, but only airplanes have wings.

“Any sufficiently advanced technology,” wrote engineer and science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, “is indistinguishable from

magic.”¹² We know, because we have seen them evolve, that aircraft are “just” advanced technology. We know, at a basic level at least, how they work. We know that like all machines they require routine maintenance and that, even so, they suffer occasional breakdowns. We can, at the beginning and end of our flight, not only see but also speak to the “man behind the curtain,” whose pulling of levers and pushing of buttons makes the machine take flight. Still, for all our knowledge, it is difficult to watch an aircraft leave the ground without a suspicion that some kind of magic is afoot. That intellectual tension shaped the public’s perception of aircraft even before the Wright brothers made their first controlled, powered flight in 1903. A century later, it shows no signs of waning. We know that aircraft are “just” technology, but the stories we tell about them are laced with suggestions that they are something more.

This is a small book about a big subject, intended as an introduction to a variety of topics rather than an in-depth study of any of them. It depends (like all such books) on selective exclusion, compression, and rearrangement. Three limits in particular, responsible for the book’s intellectual “shape,” deserve special notice here.

First, aircraft have meant different (sometimes radically different) things in different times, places, and contexts. Britons, nursing the still-raw memories of wartime German bombing, looked at the steadily increasing ranges and payloads of 1920s aircraft and worried about what the next war might bring. Australians of the same era, surveying their nation’s sparse road and rail networks, looked at the same performance figures and saw a way to link isolated backcountry villages to coastal cities. Americans of the 1950s saw the long-range nuclear-armed bombers of the Strategic Air Command both as abstract symbols of national power and as the particular weapons that would, in the event of nuclear war, bring an end to life as they knew it. Those same Americans, however, also celebrated the unprecedented comfort, speed, and range of destinations offered by a new generation of airliners. Some seriously considered acquiring their own small, private airplane. Others dreamed of winged rockets that would offer airliner-style service to Earth orbit. The many, varied, and intertwined ways in which people have responded to aircraft make for a complex story, one impossible to tell while maintaining both clarity and strict chronological order. Forced to choose, I have taken liberties with chronology in the interest of preserving clarity.

Second, again in the interests of clarity, I have written as if “the public” was a single, homogeneous entity. The public is, of course, nothing of the sort; it can be divided by gender, race, class, occupation, religion, national origin, region of birth or residence, and many other factors. I have glossed over those differences not in order to deny their significance, but in order to stay true to the book’s stated purpose: a brief overview of how aviation has appeared in mainstream popular culture. The public discussed here is, therefore, more white, more male, more educated, and more prosperous than the population of the industrialized world (or even the United States) as a whole.

Finally, this book touches on perceptions of aircraft as they have been expressed in a half-dozen nations and many forms of popular culture. It is not, however, intended as a *definitive* study of those perceptions in any nation, time period, or cultural form—not even those (the United States, popular fiction, and film) that are covered in comparatively greater depth. Definitive studies of the cultural history of aviation in selected places, times, and media *do* exist, and (as the notes reflect) I am indebted to them. The bibliographic essay that concludes the book is intended as a guide, for those seeking more depth, to the comparatively scattered places where that depth exists.