

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anne Millbrooke. *Aviation History*. Englewood, Col.: Jeppesen Sanderson, 1999. x + 622 pp. \$68.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88487-235-1.

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Facts and Context, with a Passion

Anne Millbrooke's comprehensive *Aviation History* is stylistically different from many other book-length historical reviews of flight, and refreshingly so. Rather than begin with the usual breezy generalizations about men yearning since the dawn of time to imitate the birds, Dr. Millbrooke chooses to commence with a simple, declarative statement of fact and context: "Aviation began in the provincial French town of Annonay, where the brothers Etienne and Joseph Montgolfier lived. The year was 1783." (pp. 1-6) The rest of the book is written in a similarly crisp style. The cumulative result is an informative, intelligently structured, and highly readable overview of the science, technology, and art of flight. The book is valuable as both a textbook and a ready reference source for novices and experts alike.

The structure of the large single-volume book facilitates "a well-rounded review of the significant events, people, places, and technologies in aviation as it progressed through history" (p. vi) by distilling information into ever-more precise pieces without losing sight of broader contexts. Readers can navigate easily throughout the book, whether proceeding in a linear fashion, hunting for specific facts, or browsing randomly.

The book is divided into ten chapters by chronological or thematic period—Early Aviation, 1783-1914; Wright Brothers, 1896-1914; Early Flight, 1904-1914; World War I, 1914-1919; Peacetime Aviation, 1919-1927; Golden Age, 1927-1939; World War II, 1939-1945; Cold War, 1945-1958; Space Age Aviation, 1959- 1989; and Modern Aerospace, 1990-. Each of these chapters is further di-

vided into four topically-oriented sections. Each section features narrative text set off with numerous small side-bars that highlight relevant historical events, personalities, and quotations. Historic photographs, graphic illustrations, tables, maps, and drawings are used extensively and to good effect. Each chapter begins with a chronology of important events—both aviation-related and not—and ends with a more detailed timeline, a bibliography, and study questions. Key concepts and terms are highlighted throughout the narrative text. Appendices include lists of aviation and space "firsts" and a facsimile reproduction of the Wright Brothers' 1906 patent for their "flying machine."

Dr. Millbrooke is an authority on the history of flight. A historian of science and technology who has published widely on a variety of aviation-related subjects, she earned her M.A. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. For many years she directed the now-defunct United Technologies Archive and Historical Resource Center, where she oversaw the historical records of Pratt & Whitney Aircraft, Sikorsky, and Hamilton Standard, among other firms. She has been a Research Collaborator at the National Air and Space Museum, a Smithsonian Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution, and a Mellon Fellow at the American Philosophical Society. She has held history professorships in Connecticut, Montana, and Alaska. As a certified pilot, Dr. Millbrooke has the advantage of supplementing her scholarship with personal experience. I had the good fortune to study under Dr. Millbrooke as an undergraduate, where I came to appreciate firsthand

her passion for precision and clarity in historical research and writing.

The focus of *Aviation History* is not simply, or even primarily, on aircraft and their uses in war and peace; the book profiles contemporaneous developments in other areas such as aerial navigation, airway systems, ground facilities, aerial photography, aviation law, and international regulations. Many of these topics have been treated separately and in greater detail by other authors—many of whom are referenced in the bibliographies—but one of this book’s significant accomplishments is its placement of them in relation to each other chronologically and causally. Geographically, the book’s scope is global; significant aerial activities in all parts of the world are thoroughly explored.

While the book covers much that is familiar, or at least of nodding acquaintance, to scholars of aviation history, Dr. Millbrooke occasionally surprises readers with hints at stories yet to be told in more detail. For example, how many people recognize the work of the Spruce Production Division of the U.S. Army Signal Corps during World War I which, in an organizational feat that foreshadows federal control of production in the second World War, imposed control on the logging industry in the Pacific Northwest and shipped 120 million board-feet of wood overseas for airplane production? (pp. 4-42)

As is often the case when large amounts of data are compiled from a wide variety of sources, some errors of fact have sneaked by the author and editors of *Aviation History*. Aviation enthusiasts will no doubt descend upon these like World War II dive bombers on an unsuspecting target, but the errors are comparatively few and far between, and in any case they do not undermine the book’s considerable contribution to the literature. Future editions of the book should benefit from the knowledgeable assistance of readers of all backgrounds in pointing out these errors.

The history of technology is as much about our growing understanding of how things work as it is about the things themselves. Flight, like other technological pursuits, has borrowed a great deal from many scientific and technical disciplines, and has contributed knowledge in turn to other fields of study. *Aviation History* does not explore how advances in fields such as chemistry, fluid dynamics, structural engineering, and metallurgy contributed to progress in the design, construction, and safe operation of aircraft. With the exception of a review of the development of jet engine technology (pp. 9-39, pp. 9-40), description of the principles behind mechanical and aerostatic flight—and the development of our understanding of them—is lacking. Obviously, the line had to be drawn somewhere regarding what could be included in this already comprehensive review. Nevertheless, without at least some emphasis on aviation’s close relationships to the rest of science and technology, readers are in danger of coming away from the book with an artificial conception of aviation as an dissociated and isolated activity.

The publisher has termed the book a “Manual” and emphasized pilots as the primary audience. This is not surprising, as Jeppesen Sanderson is one of the oldest and most respected pilot services firms in the country. However, *Aviation History* has much to offer a wider audience, despite its textbook price. *Aviation History* is an essential work of reference that deserves a place alongside other classic and reliable books as *Jane’s Encyclopedia of Aviation*, Mackworth-Praed’s *Aviation: The Pioneer Years*, and Gibbs-Smith’s *The Aeroplane: an Historical Survey of Its Origins and Development* on the bookshelves of pilots, scholars, students, and enthusiasts of all things aviation.

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