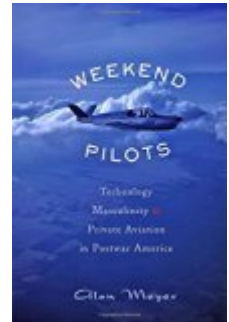


Alan Meyer. *Weekend Pilots: Technology, Masculinity, and Private Aviation in Postwar America.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. 328 pp. \$44.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-1858-2.



Reviewed by Emily Gibson

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Commissioned by Sean Seyer

Alan Meyer's *Weekend Pilots* serves as a crucial guide to private aviation's intimidating world of insider references, technical jargon, and showmanship for both the uninitiated and aviation aficionado. A bottom-up, cultural analysis of the history of post-WWII aviation, *Weekend Pilots* fills a gap in existing history of aviation literature that largely chronicles the political, commercial, and military dimensions of flight during the period. Meyer's careful socio-historical analysis of the private aviation community from 1945 to 1985 also offers a new vantage point from which to explore the history of masculinity in postwar America, making it an important contribution to gender history.

Weekend Pilots argues that postwar private pilots created and maintained a culture and community that "demonstrated and celebrated ideals and behaviors traditionally associated with masculinity in America," and that this culture shaped the evolution of private aviation during the period (p. 7). Through the performance of their masculine identities, Meyer argues that private pilots

shaped "all aspects of training and acculturation of aspiring aviators" in addition to the "very technology and complexity of the aircraft that were available for private pilots to fly" (p. 7). At the core of Meyer's analysis of this masculine culture is a careful attention to issues of access, specifically how such a culture defined women and non-white men as antithetical to its aims. Beyond shaping who figured as the ideal pilot, Meyer argues that this masculine culture also rejected technologies aimed at simplifying or automating the process of flying—as he demonstrates with the failure of the Cessna Skymaster to reach widespread acceptance among pilots.

Weekend Pilots is organized topically, with chapters exploring themes such as pilot identity, the link between masculinity and technological skill, and social aspects of the world of private flying as it played out in local airports and at various flying organization meetings. Chapters 1 and 2 explain the ways that WWII and military flight training established flying as a largely masculine endeavor. Chapters 3 and 4 explore the delicate

balance between skill and safety as pilots sought to emphasize their masculine identity and prowess as pilots. Chapters 5 and 6 dive into the social world of pilots as it existed in airports across the country as well as pilot organizations. The majority of Meyer's study rests on rhetorical analysis to demonstrate the ways in which postwar pilots created and maintained a masculine culture—making use of pilot accounts published in memoirs, organizational correspondence, and aviation magazines. Meyer also examines cartoons, images, and advertisements, which enriches his analysis and engages the reader. In addition to an almost sociological study of how participants and outsiders constructed and described the culture of private aviation, Meyer points to the importance of structural issues that contributed to the encouragement of men's participation in aviation. For example, Meyer highlights the impact of WWII military flight training as well as programs such as the GI Bill, which funded a generation of men's flight training, a cost that many women were unable to bear during the period.

Meyer's analysis of private aviation's masculine culture shines brightest in discussions of pilot training requirements and social interactions at airports and in club meetings. Discussions positioning the culture of masculinity as a causal factor in the acceptance or dismissal of various technological innovations in postwar private flying, however, seem a bit more uncertain. The discussion in chapter 4, "Taming the Taildragger," provides one such example. In explaining the persistence of some pilots' preferences for tail-dragging landing gear over tricycle landing gear, Meyer points to a group of pilots who linked their masculine, highly skilled reputations as pilots to their ability to land this comparatively difficult style of plane. Meyer points to this association as a reason for the persistence and popularity of taildragger aircraft. The reader, however, is left wondering what other factors might encourage a pilot to choose to fly a taildragger—beyond demonstrating skill and male prowess. With a higher sitting

propeller allowing for greater ground clearance (created by the aircraft leaning back on its tail wheel), taildragger aircraft are known for being able to accommodate off-runway landings. In this case, practicality seems to be just as important, or even more important, than masculine prestige in choosing to fly a particular aircraft.

In summary, Alan Meyer's *Weekend Pilots* makes for an enjoyable and engaging read. Meyer's clear explanations of technical concepts makes this book impressively instructive and accessible to nonpilots—a feature that is sure to make it relevant not only to aviation enthusiasts, but anyone interested in understanding the historical developments of gender, expertise, and technology in America.

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