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In *Eugene Ely: Pioneer of Naval Aviation*, author John H. Zobel offers an engaging view of America’s first airplanes, the men who flew them, the business behind their publicity, and the US Navy’s adoption of the technology. At the center of the story is one of the first civilian pilots. The modest young Iowan Eugene B. Ely became renowned for his aerial exploits as he crossed the country setting firsts in primitive aircraft. He came to international notoriety for his successful shipboard launch and landing of an airplane, proving that the naval aviation concept was possible. Through a biography of Ely’s life, the author provides an enlightening view of America’s technological breakthroughs in ground and air transportation.

Zobel draws a straight line in tracing the evolution of transportation with rapid development of new technologies. In addition to the locomotive, the quick arrival of the bicycle, motorcycle, and automobile compressed space and time for humans. The crowning achievement of the transportation revolution was the advent of powered flight. Eugene Ely was born at the start of a head-spinning acceleration in technological development. The author argues Ely’s achievements in a short time are interlinked with rapid transformations in transportation and those responsible for them. His rise to fame began with automobiles. Chasing the allure of a fast-developing industry, he relocated from Iowa to San Francisco in 1905 and founded his own private chauffeur business, catering to the rich and famous. Manufacturers and dealers propelled early motorsports by holding track races, endurance runs, and hill climbs to boost sales. Ely’s reputation and impressive skills netted him a paid position as a competitive driver, and competitive events earned him publicity as a daring racer.

Similarly, public exhibitions of early aircraft were an advertising opportunity for newspaper publishers. Offering large cash prizes for significant aviation firsts, they hoped to tie their papers to
the young technology, in the process boosting readership and advertising numbers. The handful of airplane builders in America, such as Glenn Curtiss, saw the prize money as a way to subsidize the refinement of their nascent designs. Ely was one of the first to become a professional aviator, ranging across the nation to compete for cash. He first took to the air in a privately-owned Curtiss without any instruction. Within a week he and two others purchased the aircraft and began to join competitions and to stage their own exhibition flights, assisted by rapacious promoters. Aviators pushed the known boundaries of what was possible with their aircraft. Enthusiastic crowds flocked to witness manned flight, most for the first time. In 1910, Curtiss hired Ely as an official member of his flying team, a position which came with cutting-edge machinery and direct access to Curtiss as the chief designer.

Ely's accomplishments made him a pioneer in civilian aviation, but perhaps his most notable impact was as a naval aviation pioneer. Curtiss's vision for airplanes as aerial bombers generated debate over the potential for an emerging threat to naval vessels. Could an airplane launch from the deck of a ship at sea? By 1910, a newspaper-sponsored experiment to answer the question led to the US Navy becoming involved. The Curtiss Company, with Ely as test pilot, accepted the navy's offer to take part. Off the coast of Norfolk, with only one year of flying experience under his belt, Ely launched from the light cruiser USS Birmingham, resulting in the first successful flight from a vessel. The natural second half of the experiment took place two months later when Ely landed on the armored cruiser USS Pennsylvania in San Francisco Bay.

The flights showed the practicality and utility of naval aviation. They also generated government interest in aircraft for military purposes. It was not an immediate revolution, as the author points out, but the start of a long evolution that eventually led to aircraft carriers. Ely's flights also made him an international celebrity, attention which the modest Midwesterner was not equipped to handle. He immediately returned to exhibition flying and attracted demand as Curtiss's best-known aviator. Any enjoyment he took from his fame was short-lived, as Ely was killed in an airplane crash months later at only twenty-five years old. Although no longer a household name, Ely's celebrity today in aviation communities has not diminished.

This work is narrative-driven, but the thoroughness of the research contextualizes a great deal that might otherwise have been lost. Zobel ably makes connections between technology, people, forces, concepts, and ideas that guided the development of early aviation. Through Ely's history, we see the influence of the press and their pursuit of revenue, the public's appetite for the carnival-like atmosphere of aviation exhibitions, and the compulsions of those who delivered the spectacle and regularly redefined the cutting edge. There is also an excellent elucidation of the battle between American aviation pioneers and how they measured success in a cottage industry run by the visionaries who designed, built, and flew some of the first powered aircraft.

Zobel's book not only honors Ely, but it is also a fitting tribute to the author himself. An adventurer in the same vein, Zobel passed away while mountain climbing before he could complete the project. His wife, LaVerne Woods, assumed the work of winnowing down an expansive manuscript that focused on the revolution in transportation. At the heart of the story was Ely. With the help of family, Woods edited the manuscript to present the life of the aviation pioneer. She has done a superb job. Placing such a character in the center of the transportation revolution gives this work greater utility than a straightforward biography. The deeply researched book relies heavily on contemporary newspaper reporting, which at times was twisted into fanciful fabrications. The narrative cuts through the sensationalism to set
facts straight and uncover finer nuances. That attention to detail makes Ely a dynamic character, despite his reserved temperament. Students of transportation technology and aviation in general, as well as casual readers, will find much of value here.

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