



The Wright Brothers, by David McCullough
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, September 2016

In his biography, *The Wright Brothers*, acclaimed historian David McCullough recounts the iconic story of Wilbur and Orville and their historic 1903 flight near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Truly, their accomplishment represents American exceptionalism at its best.

McCullough's focus on the Wright family, beyond our school-hood knowledge of the Wright brothers, is a fascinating aspect of the book. "If I were giving a young man advice as to how he might succeed in life," Wilbur once noted, "I would say to him, pick out a good father and mother, and begin life in Ohio."

Wilbur and Orville were the third and fourth sons respectively of Bishop Milton and Susan Wright of Dayton, Ohio. A love of learning was instilled in all their children; books on many subjects were read and discussed as a family. Years later, in response to a comment that the brothers were an example of how far Americans with no special advantages could advance in the world, Orville countered, "The greatest thing in our favor was growing up in a family where there was always much encouragement to intellectual curiosity."

Early on, Wilbur's genius was apparent, as was Orville's mechanical ability. The two oldest brothers, Reuchlin and Lorin, married young and started their own families. Athletically and academically gifted, Wilbur was the family star, destined to attend Yale. However, in a twist of fate, Wilbur's college dreams were ended when, during an ice hockey game on a frozen Dayton lake, a neighborhood bully threw a stick at Wilbur's face, knocking out his front teeth. For three years, Wilbur became a homebound recluse, turning inward. Wilbur tenderly cared for their mother during her final illness. The remaining family unit—Bishop Wright, Wilbur, Orville, and their younger sister Katharine—formed a close bond.

Katharine was the only Wright sibling to attend college. An Oberlin graduate and Latin teacher, Katharine became her brothers' staunchest supporter. From the

Wright brothers' early inventive years through their world-wide acclaim, Katharine was always by their side. And although Wilbur and Orville remained life-long bachelors, a successful woman was behind them, after all.