



MCCULLOUGH SHOWS WRIGHT BROTHERS' SUCCESS WAS FAMILY AFFAIR

News / Personalities



Perhaps the most striking thing about the **Wright brothers**, who changed the world when they took to the skies on a bleak winter day in 1903 on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, is the familial support and devotion that enabled them to pursue wholeheartedly what sounded to most people back then like a delusional fantasy.

David McCullough's carefully crafted account, *The Wright Brothers*, lays out the brilliant, but eccentric duo's rise from a bicycle shop in Dayton, Ohio to the world's stage as founders of flight. And standing in the wings most of that time was Orville and Wilbur's younger sister, Katharine, who played a supporting role as their confidant and full-time 'social secretary' when the Wright brothers became famous.

[Katharine, the graduate](#)

She handled their correspondence, their engagement bookings and their finances. She also flew as an eager passenger in the amazing flying contraption her brothers designed and built. Her steadfast support allowed the brothers to focus solely on their design and engineering projects.

She, like others in the Wright family, recognized the sheer genius of her brothers, crediting their mother to a large degree for supporting their earliest ambitions.

"She recognized something unusual in Will and Orv, though she loved us all," Katharine wrote about their mother, Susan Koerner Wright, as recounted in *The Wright Brothers*. "She never would

destroy one thing the boys were trying to make. Any little thing they left around in her way she picked up and put on a shelf in the kitchen.”

In his book, McCullough describes the petite Katharine as “bright, personable, highly opinionated, the only college graduate in the family”. After graduation she taught high school Latin, but soon resigned to work full time for her brothers.

The brothers were always nattily dressed, in starched shirts and suits, perhaps to convey an image of gravitas. Their father, Milton, was a bishop for the United Brethren in Christ church who instilled a strong work ethic in them and encouraged them to read from his sizable book collection at their Dayton, Ohio home.

“Hard work was a conviction and they were at their best and happiest working together on their own projects at the same waist high bench, wearing shop aprons to protect their suits and ties,” McCullough writes. “Not only did they have no yearning for the limelight, they did their best to avoid it. And with the onset of fame, both remained notably modest.”

Wright 2

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Katharine thrived in the limelight, basking in the reflection of attention paid the Wright brothers as they traveled Europe demonstrating their aircraft and accepting the accolades of royalty and high society.

In a letter to her father from Europe, Katharine wrote that she was the only woman ever invited to dinner at the Aero-Club de France. “You ought to see it. Me – sitting up there as big as you...talking French as lively as anyone! It was a performance, I can tell you,” McCullough quotes from Katharine’s correspondence.

When the Wrights returned from Europe, they were to be honored at a lunch at the Cosmos Club in Washington. In order for Katharine to attend, the club had to waive its requirement of men only.

“The less Orville had to say, the more Katherine talks and with great affect. She had become a celebrity in her own right,” McCullough wrote, adding, “Reporters delighted in her extroverted, totally unaffected American manner.”

The author does not paint Katherine as a subservient woman but rather a strong leader who took

control of social settings where her brothers were most uncomfortable.

She was also supporter of the suffragettes and their fight for the vote, and clearly staked her ground as an independent woman. But when Katharine finally married at 58 years old, it caused almost an irreparable rift with her remaining brother, Orville. Only when she was on her deathbed did the two reconcile.

Neither Wilbur nor Orville ever married. Wilbur died at the age of 45 after a bout with typhoid fever. Orville outlived his brother by 36 years when he suffered a heart attack at 77. But during that time, the world changed dramatically. "He lived to see aviation transformed by jet propulsion, the introduction of the rocket, the breaking of the sound barrier in 1947," McCullough writes.

When Orville passed, he was buried alongside his mother, father, Wilbur and Katharine in Dayton.

McCullough is a master storyteller as well as an astute historian. His book details the Wrights' early efforts, their success and failures as well as colorful accounts that include many of the early pioneers of aviation – Octave Chanute, Samuel Langley, Glenn Curtiss and others. It also provides an intimate view of the incredible American family that produced Orville and Wilbur.

On July 20, 1969, another son of southwestern Ohio, remembered the Wright brothers when he stepped out to walk on the moon. Neil Armstrong carried with him a small swatch of the muslin that covered a wing on their 1903 Wright Flyer.

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