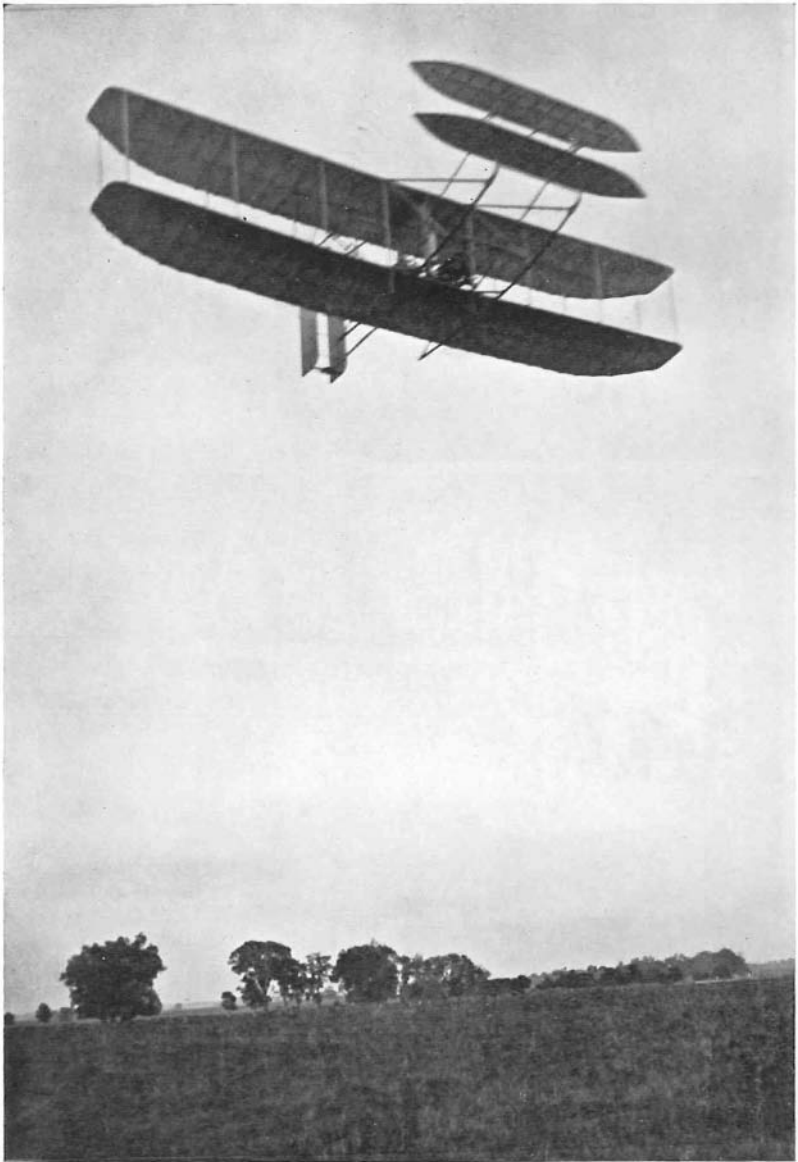


The World's First Aeroplane Flights

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1 The Wright *Flyer III* of 1905, which was the world's first practical powered aeroplane. This machine was flown by Wilbur and Orville Wright at the Huffman Prairie, near Dayton: during over 40 flights, it was repeatedly banked, turned, and circled, and twice exceeded half an hour in flight duration.

Introduction : What is a Flight ?

In the history of flying one is often faced with claims for this, that, or the other "first", regardless of whether the achievement in question has any true historical significance. Whatever tributes can be paid to certain experimenters on the score of ingenuity, persistence, or personal courage, it is essential to decide whether their contributions were important historically, and to what degree. In the history of aviation there are generally two basic questions which are posed; who was the first to fly? and who was the first to make powered flights? Both questions are unanswerable without further definition, and the answers to them may easily become frivolous unless mature and realistic standards are established. What, for example, is to fly? Webster's dictionary defines it as "to move in or pass through the air with wings", "to move through the air", or "to float, wave or soar in the air". So, to jump off the ground, fall from a height, or be precipitated through the air, would each in some measure fit the definitions. But no one would seriously consider such activities to be flying in the aeronautical sense, where at least some degree of sustentation is always implied, even with diminishing height, as in a glider's downward passage in still air, or its level or climbing flight when soaring. But then the question might arise as to how steep a glide could be, and still qualify as flying, and so on. Even a parachute, falling in still air, can be manipulated to travel somewhat obliquely, and thus might be claimed as a flying machine; so might a billowing sheet held above the head, or a voluminous dress, if one happened to fall from a height with such fabrics attached. Incidentally, the best name for the parachute—but not for other machines—is an "aeronautical device", in that it is designed to do a specific job in the aeronautical field.

As the so-called "tower-jumpers" of history, in their efforts to fly, equipped themselves with every variety of stiff, pliant, or limp surface—sometimes strengthened by ribs or other stiffeners—and as they either flapped or held themselves rigid, there is happily no telling who was the first to deflect himself from the vertical sufficiently to earn the title of first "flier" or "glider" in history, in this primitive sense. It is also more than possible that some of the "tower-jumpers", and the "near-gliders", made "glides" of considerable distances, though they were generally lucky to survive.

When it comes to the historical assessment both of true gliding and power-flying, it is difficult to deal in definitions; nevertheless, it is easy in practice to determine who were the significant pioneers. The first proper manned gliding flight was made by Cayley's machine of 1853, but as the man on board was not piloting it, and as the controls were locked, it does not rank as a piloted glider. So, despite Le Bris' brave efforts in 1857, the first piloted and controlled gliders were Lilienthal's machines of 1891-96, Pilcher's of 1895-99, and Chanute's biplane glider of 1896; but it should be noted that, although "piloted and controlled" they were controllable only to a very limited degree, all by body movements.

It is, however, powered flying that captures most interest, and the question as to who made the first powered flights has always engaged public interest, and been the subject of much controversy. It is powered fixed-wing flying that

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