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A NEWS FROM THE MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY OF MILAN

## FATHER&SONS

### THE MERITS OF THE WRIGHT BROTHERS <sup>1</sup>

*Men will never fly, because flight is the privilege of angels*

*Rev. Milton Wright*

*(father of the Wright brothers)*

At the Museum of Science and Technology in Milan, in a board with spinners and propellers, you can read some aphorisms by famous thinkers and scientists, including the one reported here.

The curator for the exhibition had a brilliant idea: he pointed out the merits of the Wright brothers. Intrigued, I looked it up on Wikipedia. And here is what I found: «Attempts to fly powered airplanes had been made, albeit with almost always disastrous results, some years before their historic venture accomplished on December 17<sup>th</sup> 1903. Brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright were able to take off on the beach of *Kitty Hawk*, North Carolina - keeping their airplane, the *Flyer I*, in the air for those twelve seconds that would change the history of flight.<sup>2</sup> [emphasis mine]

The Wrights owned a bicycle factory, and since 1896 they had been fascinated by the experiments of those scholars who tried to apply a scientific approach to their attempts to fly means heavier than air (...). During that single morning of December 17<sup>th</sup> the *Flyer I* flew four times: Orville and Wilbur took turns at the controls. In the first two flights, the airplane, piloted by Orville, flew for about twelve seconds at a height of about three meters and a speed of 7.5 km/h. Shortly after that, Wilbur was able to have a flight time of 59 seconds on a distance of 266 meters».<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Published on IML NEWS, weekly magazine of the *Institute of Forensic Medicine* of Milan, Year I, n. 43, October 26<sup>th</sup> 2010.

<sup>2</sup> It was the first self-propelled aircraft launched using a catapult to be entirely made and the first one that was able to take off.

<sup>3</sup> The *Flyer I* has been kept from 1948 at the *National Air and Space Museum* of the *Smithsonian Institution* in Washington D.C. The label says: «The original Wright brothers aeroplane. The world's first power-driven heavier-than-air machine in which man made free, controlled, and sustained flight, invented and built by Wilbur and Orville Wright, flown by them at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina December 17, 1903. By original scientific research the Wright brothers discovered the principles of human flight as inventors, builders, and flyers they further developed the aeroplane, taught man to fly, and opened the era of aviation.»

So far we have the mere news, which had not appeared immediately in the newspapers of the time, remaining unknown for some time.

Now the heart of the matter in the light of the citation stated.

That first powered flight must be ascribed to the relationship of the Wright brothers with their father. Methodist pastor and bishop, he was an intellectual: he had in fact two great collections of books, the first one consisting exclusively of theology books, while the second one included many different genres. His son Orville wrote: «We were lucky enough to grow up in a home environment where there was always much encouragement to children to pursue intellectual interests; to investigate whatever aroused their curiosity». Probably Reverend Wright himself had the aspiration to fly: his warning about the flight, «reserved for angels» makes me think that he found himself coming to terms with his theological education. His would be a case of psychological inhibition reinforced and legitimized by his Protestant education. I do not know what happened at the Ford's house; the first car with that brand that was also built in 1903. Many other family-run factories wrote the history of capitalism in Europe and overseas, remembering the beautiful essay by Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-1905).

Certainly the Wright brothers did not stop at the identification with the father figure, and they didn't even linger to question it. They simply took a different route, taking up and thus fulfilling their father's ambition.

And the airplane was invented.

We fly thanks to their enterprise, directed toward the success of what Freud, unique in the history of modernity, a few years later called «paternal complex». The Wrights were really *Father and Sons*, but with a very different meaning compared to the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, and the opposite to that of the homonymous and legendary song by Cat Stevens (1970), so loved by many including myself, who were fifteen years old at the time.

If it were not for December 17<sup>th</sup> 1903, there would be no Lindberg with his *Spirit of Saint Louis*, no *Air Force One*, no *Top Gun*, no *Frecce Tricolori*, no *Canadair*, or the famous low cost *Ryanair*, used now by millions of people all over the world.

The Wrights must have thought: *ce n'est qu'un début*.

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