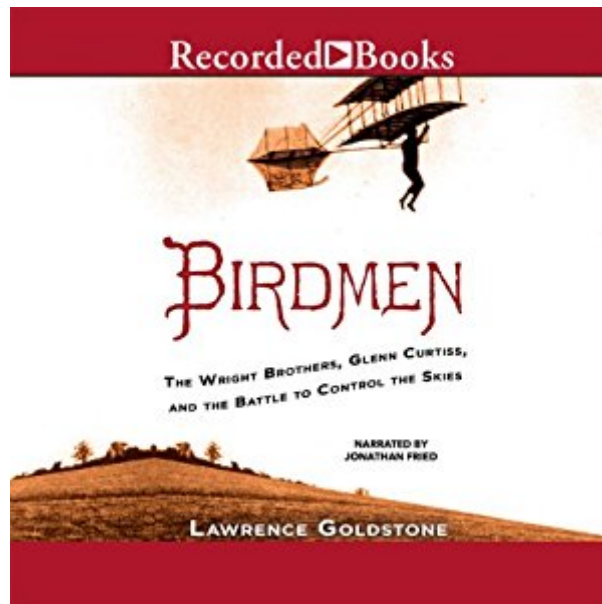


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# Birdmen: The Wright Brothers, Glenn Curtiss, And The Battle To Control The Skies



## Synopsis

Wilbur and Orville Wright are two of the greatest innovators in history, and together they solved the centuries-old riddle of powered, heavier-than-air flight. Glenn Hammond Curtiss was the most talented machinist of his day; he first became the fastest man alive when he perfected the motorcycle, then turned his eyes toward the skies to become the fastest man aloft. But between the Wrights and Curtiss bloomed a poisonous rivalry and a patent war so powerful that it shaped aviation in its early years and drove one of the three men to his grave. *Birdmen* is at once a thrilling ride through flight's wild early years and a surprising look at the battle that defined an era of American innovation. Lawrence Goldstone is the author or co-author of 14 books of fiction and nonfiction, most recently *LEFTY: An American Odyssey*. His work has been profiled in *The New York Times*, *The Toronto Star*, *Salon*, and *Slate*, among others. He lives on Long Island with his wife and daughter.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Wright brother's flight at Kitty Hawk was a monumental triumph. Wilbur's (and Orville's) genius at solving the problem that had stumped so many others for so long was truly remarkable.

Unfortunately, it was also the beginning of his legal battles as he sought to patent and monopolize the invention with a broad "pioneering patent" that would have required licensing fees of all those who soared on his coattails. And even though Glenn Curtiss soon improved upon the methods of control (developing many of the improvements that are still in use today), he became an especially hated rival and target of the Wright's attacks. And the legal storm that erupted cast a constant

shadow over the aeronautical industry when the public's thirst for air shows and events was at its highest, making stars of the daredevils in the barnstorming circuit (really, most of them just wanted to see crashes). And it is widely felt that his focus on protecting his patents that caused his early death. This is an interesting chronicle of the early years of aviation, from Kitty Hawk through the first World War. The Wrights and Curtiss are profiled, along with many other prominent but largely forgotten individuals: visionaries who put their faith in balloons such as Thomas Baldwin; scoundrels like Augustus Herring, who mostly made their fortune by deception; and daredevils such as Lincoln Beachy, who thrilled audiences with his death-defying stunts (as well as his own death) are included in this wide-reaching history. While it's an interesting chronicle, I felt it suffered from a too-wide reach of history. Curtiss never became more than a cardboard figure in the history for me, despite his amazingly prominent role in nearly everything.

Birdmen by Lawrence Goldstone gives us a detailed history of the Wright Brothers and the early days of human flight. And I mean very detailed. In fact, probably for many readers, too much detail. Keeping track of all the characters described can distract from the story. But for me, having read different histories of that era, that level of detail was fine. Lawrence Goldstone focuses on the "battle to control the skies" that was fought between the Wright Brothers and Glenn Curtiss. After the Wright Brothers flew their historic plane on Kitty Hawk, they went into stealth mode to try to sell their technology, relying on their landmark patent to give them a monopoly on flight. The problem was that as the Wright Brothers shifted their focus from flight to the patent fight, their unimproved technology became dated and their lawsuits hampered their competitors like Glenn Curtiss from making improvements as well. The upshot was that the United States got left behind in the aviation industry. In fact, when airplanes took to the skies over the battlefields of World War I, the airplanes were made by Germany, France and Great Britain. None were of American design and none, with a minor exception, were of American manufacture. The blame for that shameful showing lies, it seems, squarely on Wilbur Wright's shoulders, whose overwrought overwork in the patent wars cost him his life (according to his sister Katherine). In telling that basic story, though, Lawrence Goldstone gives the stage to many other characters as well. That's where the book has its weaknesses. The story line jumps around a lot. Indeed, at one point in the story, Wilbur Wright dies, but then a few pages later we are back hearing about when he was alive. People come in and out of the story at odd moments.

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