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In Their Own Words: Forgotten Women Pilots of Early Aviation

Fred Erisman

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IN THEIR OWN
Words

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IN THEIR OWN

*Forgotten Women
Pilots of Early Aviation*

Words

Fred Erisman

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For
Patt and Wendy
Keeper of the flame; Inheritor of the torch



The women who defined the Golden Age of Aviation in the United States:
Amelia Earhart, Ruth Nichols, and Louise Thaden (l-r) in 1933. COURTESY OF
SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM (NASM 89-21979)

Once in the air a machine will go as well with a woman at the steering wheel, as with a man. Machinery knows no sex.

— RUTH LAW, 1916

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Acknowledgments

A FRINGE BENEFIT OF an academic career is the privilege of working with and alongside a host of intelligent, creative, independently minded individuals. A singular number of these are women. In my own case, they include (among numerous others) Carrie Hintz, Karen Nelson Hoyle, Deidre Johnson, and Anne Scott MacLeod in the field of children's literature; Melody Graulich, Nancy Tystad Koupal, Ann Romines, and Ann Ronald in that of Western literature; Dorothy Cochrane, Valerie Neal, and Margaret Weitekamp from the National Air and Space Museum; and colleagues from Texas Christian University, Judy Alter, Theresa Stroud Gaul, Linda K. Hughes, Karen Steele, and Judy Suther. Two others belong in this company, as well: my wife, Patricia L. Erisman, and our daughter, Wendy Erisman. I have learned a great deal from all of these women, with perhaps the greatest lesson being the realization that intelligence, wit, creativity, and competence are not created by—or limited to—any specific combination of X and Y chromosomes.

I have had other moments of good fortune as well. When Howard Carter broke through the final wall and first peered into Tutankhamen's tomb, he's said to have gasped, "Wonderful things!" His awe is understandable, but it pales alongside mine when I first experienced the resources of the National Air and Space Museum and the Library of Congress. Both are extraordinary sites. At NASM, the aeronautical "wonderful things" on display were only the surface of a much greater wealth of material. My year there as the Charles A. Lindbergh Chair of Aerospace History was for me the equivalent of Howard Carter's excavations. With access to the NASM research library, the NASM Archives, and the assets of the other Smithsonian museums, I was able to explore primary sources from the popular and aviation journalism of the times as well as technical and trade sources virtually unobtainable elsewhere.

This is where I discovered the riches of women's aviation in the United States. Amelia Earhart I knew of, of course, and Jackie Cochran I recalled from her days of setting records in military jets. But there was more—much more. I was able to roam about in the Blanche Stuart Scott Collection and the Louise McPhetridge Thaden archive, hearing the authentic voices of both women. At the Library of Congress, the Marjorie Claire Stinson Papers enriched my understanding of Marjorie's life while giving additional insights into sister Katherine Stinson's life and career. Here, as well, access to the primary sources of newspapers and magazines helped me to flesh out the milieu of the women fliers and their times.

The staff at NASM was no less a resource than its research and archival holdings. I received particular help and encouragement from Dominick A. Pisano, now curator emeritus, and curators John Anderson, Dorothy Cochrane, and Russell Lee. Curator Dik Daso, no longer with NASM, also offered advice and guidance. I am grateful to them all, friends as well as colleagues.

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Fred Erisman
Fort Worth, Texas
September 2020

Introduction: The Aviation Age Takes Shape

IN A REVIEW OF Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Listen! The Wind* (1938), *New Yorker* critic Clifton Fadiman quipped that "so far the experience of flight has produced many books and little literature."¹ His charge may well be valid, but he misses a larger, crucial point. For every Anne Lindbergh or Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, for every Ernest Gann or Richard Bach, there have been dozens of less gifted individuals pouring out their thoughts and feelings about flight. They have been, without exception, pilots, and they have been, without exception, enthusiastic about the flying experience. They frequently wrote for the aviation press, but they also wrote for the general public, striving to convey the excitement, liberation, and even exaltation they found in the exercise of flight. Here is where one finds the contribution that Fadiman so readily casts aside.

Most of the pilots who wrote of their lives in aviation were not concerned with artistry. They were amateur or journeyman authors, less interested in shaping and polishing their phrases than they were in celebrating a topic about which they were passionate. They were impelled by their experiences to argue the case for aviation, awakening the American public to the progressive possibilities of the enterprise and talking of ways in which it might go on to shape their worlds (and those of the future) for the better. A notable number of these writers were women.

Despite Amelia Earhart's de facto standing as the personification of American women in aviation during the 1930s, she was but one member of the era's closely knit community of women pilots. Many of these women, well-known in the profession and widely publicized in the press of the time, have been studied individually, but they are largely overlooked in popular histories of the decade. Still more crucial is that Earhart and her contemporaries were only the most recent of a long line of women

pilots whose lives and activities extended back to the earliest days of aviation. Many of these women, including Earhart, wrote of the complementary qualities of aviation and women's causes, recording their activities throughout the emergence and maturing of America's air age.

They wrote of their times and their experiences, and over forty-plus years of technological evolution they evinced a singular consistency of experience. Aviation, they discovered, was an experience that spoke to them as *women*, and offered at least the possibility of greater opportunity and equality for their gender. Their writings form a long, sustained text that documents the maturing of the airplane and aviation *and* sheds considerable light upon the complex relationship between capable, ambitious women and the larger American society. That text is the focus of this book.

One segment of the American aviation world is omitted here—the African American flying community. From Bessie Coleman in the years after World War I through Willa Brown in the 1930s, the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II, and astronauts Guy Bluford, Mae Jemison, and Jeanette J. Epps in the 1990s and after, there has been a significant African American presence in aviation. Until recently, however, that presence was obscured by social convention and prejudice. Racial segregation in the United States prior to the 1960s extended to writings by and about African American fliers, creating a widespread national ignorance of their presence and contributions.²

A case in point is that of Bessie Coleman (1892–1926), the first African American woman to earn a pilot's license. Unable to find a flying school in the United States that would admit her, she went to France and won her license in ten months. She returned to the United States in 1921, planning to take part in air shows and other flight exhibitions.³ She flew actively until her death in 1926, yet her work was reported almost exclusively by the African American press, including the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Newspaper indexes for the period between 1921 and 1927 indicate that she was mentioned twice in the *New York Tribune*, once in the *New York Times*, and not at all in other national journals ranging from the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *Boston Globe* to the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Moreover, apart from interviews in the African American press, she left behind no significant written materials.

Despite the limitations she faced, Coleman saw herself as speaking out for women as much as her activist white contemporaries, *and* for African American women and African American women in aviation as well. Talking with a reporter for the *Chicago Defender* shortly after her return from France, she observed that she took up flying “because I knew we had no aviators, neither men nor women, and I knew the Race needed to be represented along this most important line, so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviating and to encourage flying among men *and women* of the Race who are so far behind.” There was, however, more to her determination than just

race and gender pride. Like her contemporaries, she saw flying as distinctively elevating and liberating: "I shall never be satisfied until we have men of the Race who can fly. Do you know *you have never lived until you have flown?*"⁴ The enterprise of flight offered much that was denied her by the larger society, but her significance must be assessed by means other than her writings.

Women, be they White or Black, have been a part of the American aeronautical scene almost from its beginnings. From the earliest days of aviation through the onset of the 1940s, women fliers were actively engaged in advancing the aeronautical experience. Lilian Todd won public recognition in 1909 for her aircraft designs and her efforts to educate the public about aviation. Bessica Raiche, a practicing physician, joined with her husband in designing and building aircraft and in 1910 was formally recognized as the first American woman to make a solo flight. Blanche Stuart Scott, known as the first woman to make a transcontinental trip in an automobile (1910), flew first, but authorities generally agree that her takeoff was inadvertent, whereas Raiche's was planned and deliberate. Scott did, however, fly briefly with the Curtiss Exhibition Company and in 1912 proclaimed, "Automobiles are back numbers; it's a biplane I want now." None of the three won a flying license or wrote of her achievements, but all stand as female pioneers in the history of American aviation.⁵

These women and others notwithstanding, men dominated the field at the beginning and continued to dominate it throughout the succeeding decades. The Wright Brothers first flew in 1903, then dropped into temporary obscurity. But public interest continued to grow. By 1909 mechanical flight had already begun to take on a mystical aura: "A prayer for 'the wings of the dove' has anticipated the aeroplane by many centuries," one reporter wrote. "Actual testimony as to the long-coveted sensation is now for the first time available, and we have the assurance that our hopes are fully realized." Even as late as 1910, however, there was widespread skepticism about the reality of flight. As Orville Wright himself at one point observed, "Flight was generally looked upon as an impossibility . . . , and scarcely anyone believed in it until he had actually seen it with his own eyes."⁶ Manufacturers, promoters, and local boosters, however, soon recognized the publicity value of the "flying machine," and the formal meets came into being.

The nation's first public—and publicized—aviation meet, the First in America Aviation Meet (the "Dominguez Meet"), took place 10–20 January 1910 at Dominguez Field outside Los Angeles, California, and set the pattern. The Wrights were noteworthy for their absence, and Glenn Curtiss, who had gained fame in 1909 by winning the Gordon Bennett Aviation Cup at the first international air meet, held in Rheims, France, was arguably the most prominent of the domestic participants. Curtiss and Charles F. Willard flew Curtiss-built machines, Louis Paulhan from France operated a Blériot monoplane, and Roy Knabenshue and Lincoln Beachey from the United

States (who would soon graduate to heavier-than-aircraft) flew dirigibles. *Outing Magazine* captured the spirit of the occasion in an article published three months afterward, noting that “the American public . . . was hungry to put to ocular proof the much-discussed flying machines.” What they saw, the article continued, was an “exhibit of man’s ingenuity and his ability to cleave the atmosphere unscathed.”⁷ It was a remarkable introduction for the American public.

The nation’s second major air meet, the Harvard-Boston Aero Meet, held 3–13 September 1910, was the first substantial presentation to be held in the East and was acclaimed by *Scientific American* as “the most important [meeting] thus far held in the United States.” Much of its prominence came from the presence of several notable European aviators in addition to American participants. Pilots from France and Austria expressed interest, while entrants from England included the experimenters Cecil Grahame-White and A. V. Roe. A display advertisement in the *New York Times*, touting “the World’s Most Famous Bird-Men,” listed Curtiss, Wright, Willard, Johnstone, Grahame-White, and Roe among a list of “Kings of the Air”⁸

Their importance notwithstanding, the Dominguez and Harvard meets paled in comparison with the Belmont International Aviation Tournament (the “Belmont Meet”), held 22–30 October 1910. This competition was sponsored by the Aero Club of America, a national organization established in 1905 for the promotion and advancement of aviation, and was planned from the outset as an international competition. Events conformed to rules laid down by the *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* (FAI), the multinational organization overseeing early flight, opening the door to the establishing of official world records. One event, the race for the Gordon Bennett International Cup, an annual competition since 1906, held particular international appeal; ever since Glenn Curtiss won the event in Rheims, France, in 1909, beating French favorite Louis Blériot, patriotic sentiment to keep the Bennett Cup in the United States had run high.⁹

The Belmont Meet offered competitors prizes and profit shares estimated to total \$200,000, and individual cash awards were lavish.¹⁰ Daily events rewarded speed, altitude, distance, and endurance, and a special prize of \$10,000 was reserved for the flier who made the fastest circuit from the field to the Statue of Liberty and back. Seven fliers, including Alfred Leblanc and Edmond Audemars, represented France; for the most part they flew Blériot monoplanes, although Audemars at times flew in a tiny Demoiselle sport craft designed by the Brazilian-born Alberto Santos-Dumont. Three pilots represented the United Kingdom: Cecil Grahame-White, flying a French-designed Farman biplane, and two compatriots. American entrants included Walter Brookins and Arch Hoxsey, flying Wright machines; John Moisant, in a Blériot monoplane; and Eugene Ely and C. F. Willard, in Curtiss biplanes. Glenn Curtiss himself gave demonstration flights, as did Wilbur and Orville Wright, but none of the three competed

actively. The meet garnered national coverage and achieved what *Aircraft* magazine called “a lasting place in American aeronautic history.”¹¹

Professional exhibition teams reinforced the aviation excitement engendered by the meets. The Wright and Curtiss organizations, sensing a profitable opportunity offering other opportunities for “ocular proof,” quickly moved to show off their machines. The Wright Exhibition Company, launched in June 1910, included Walter Brookins, Roy Knabenshue, Arch Hoxsey, and Ralph Johnstone. The Curtiss Exhibition Company, making its debut in September 1910, numbered Lincoln Beachey, Augustus Post, Eugene Ely, Charles K. Hamilton, and Charles F. Willard among its pilots. The third team, the Moisant International Aviators, was organized by John Moisant, who won prominence with his flight from Paris to London in August 1910. Featuring Charles K. Hamilton and French star Roland Garros, the group began shows in November 1910 and subsequently added two female members, John Moisant’s sister, Matilde, and journalist Harriet Quimby. For the next two years all three teams crisscrossed the country, introducing community after community to the wonders of flight.¹²

Not until 1927, however, did flight capture the wholehearted attention of the American people. Another male, Charles A. Lindbergh, was the agent. Until 1927 aviation activities had for the most part been limited to visionaries, enthusiasts, and a few risk-taking entrepreneurs. Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight in May 1927 electrified the public and launched a new perception of aviators in general. Lindbergh’s relative youth (he was twenty-five), his modesty in the face of publicity, his Midwestern origins, and the genuine achievement of his flight made him the “face” of American aviation. Overnight he became the archetypal “All-American Hero,” and in the burst of national pride that followed his flight the public suddenly and passionately embraced the ongoing marvels of aviation technology, the first stirrings of commercial aviation, and the mystical, liberating appeal of the airplane—elements that offered the possibility of a new and revolutionary world.¹³

Lindbergh fueled these feelings in two series of essays on aviation published in the *New York Times* in 1928–1929 and syndicated nationally. In them he made clear his intention to proselyte for aviation, saying, “Please regard me as a medium for having concentrated attention upon the subject of transatlantic flying in particular and aviation in general.” He concluded by reaffirming his faith in the prominence of American aviation, stating, “I am convinced that aviation will soon take its place among the big activities of the United States.”¹⁴ For the American public he was *the* face and voice of national aviation.

For all the prominence that men enjoyed in the years before and after Lindbergh’s flight, women were also a vigorous part of aviation, adding their faces and voices as parts of the aviation community. Harriet Quimby was the first American woman to win a pilot’s license (1911) and the first woman to fly the English Channel (1912). She

became an instant celebrity, using her position as a feature writer for *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* to offer a dozen or more essays recording her flight training and her flying career throughout 1911–1912. In a move that set a model for subsequent women writers on aviation, she also pointedly expressed her convictions about the appropriateness of aviation as an undertaking for women.

Several women pilots made notable contributions as fliers in the World War I era. They also spoke out for women's greater engagement in military and commercial flying. Ruth Law made a name for herself as a record-setting pilot and operator of her own traveling air show and wrote widely to make her case for women's place in the air. Her articles in *Outlook*, *Air Travel*, and *Flying* supported the war effort and argued for an expanded women's role in the conduct of World War I. The air show favorites Katherine and Marjorie Stinson published articles in *Aerial Age Weekly*, *Aero Digest*, and *Liberty Magazine*. Both won commissions as United States Air Mail pilots (although neither flew as a scheduled professional); Katherine gained national prominence making publicity flights for Liberty Loans and the Red Cross while Marjorie trained male pilots for the Royal Canadian Flying Corps.¹⁵

The women who followed these pioneers in the years after Lindbergh's flight were as diverse a group as their predecessors. The Kansas-born Earhart, who came to fame in 1928 when she flew the Atlantic as a passenger, was a dropout from Columbia University and the daughter of a middle-ranking railroad official. Ruth Nichols was a New Yorker, a Wellesley graduate, and the debutante daughter of a member of New York society's "400." Louise Thaden, a native of a small Arkansas town, attended the University of Arkansas for three years, then took a sales position with the J. H. Turner Coal Company of Wichita, Kansas. Anne Morrow, a Smith graduate anticipating a sheltered and cosseted life as aesthete and writer, had her world turned upside down when she married Charles Lindbergh and joined him in flying endeavors. These individuals had only three things in common: they were women, they flew, and they wrote of aviation.

With the exception of Anne Morrow Lindbergh and, possibly, Earhart, these women were not artists. Their writing was pragmatic and practical; sales to magazines and newspapers helped to fund their flying endeavors and the exposure helped to publicize them to potential backers. Aware of the power of print and as comfortable with a typewriter as they were with their aircraft, they did not limit themselves to topics aeronautical. They turned to print to speak of matters that moved them deeply—aviation, of course, but women's place in and contribution to daily American life as well. In their writings they spoke as articulately and as explicitly for women's causes as they did for aviation, capitalizing on their distinctiveness as pilots to speak out for the future of women.

Earhart wrote three books and was a frequent contributor to *Cosmopolitan* and other general-interest periodicals. Ruth Nichols, holder of records for altitude, speed, and distance, contributed to *Ladies' Home Journal* and *American Magazine*, became

women's editor of the *Sportsman Pilot*, a journal for affluent enthusiasts, and published an autobiography, *Wings for Life* (1957). Louise Thaden, winner of the first National Women's Air Derby (the "Powder Puff Derby" of 1929), holder of a record for in-flight refueling, and the first woman to win the Bendix Trophy (1936), contributed to *Aero Digest*, *Sportsman Pilot*, *Western Flying*, and similar publications, and briefly served as women's editor for the widely circulated *Popular Aviation*. Her autobiography, *High, Wide, and Frightened*, appeared in 1938.

The linking of women's concerns and aviation in print reached its most "literary" statement in the years leading up to World War II, as Anne Morrow Lindbergh brought an artist's eye to the adventure of flight. Her first books, *North to the Orient* (1935) and *Listen! The Wind* (1938), grew out of her experiences during global survey flights her husband, Charles, made to explore possible commercial routes. These flights took the Lindberghs to China and Japan via a Great Circle route (1931) and on a circum-Atlantic flight in 1933 via Greenland, Portugal, Africa, and Brazil.

Though accepting a secondary role in her books (she served as radio operator and navigator on the flights rather than as a pilot), Anne Lindbergh had legitimate flying credentials, earning a conventional pilot's license and becoming the first American woman to win a glider pilot's license. The only one of the women flier/writers not professionally engaged in aviation, she embraced the undertaking as a medium to illuminate an ongoing process of self-discovery, writing of how her awakening was stimulated and enhanced by aviation as an enterprise and flying as a metaphor.

The prevailing spirit among women fliers and potential fliers in the post-Lindbergh period is evident in a brief series of articles by Margery Brown, a recreational flier who had been, she said, "inspired by Lindbergh's Atlantic flight" to learn to fly.¹⁶ Her articles in *Popular Aviation*, *Pictorial Review*, and other periodicals between 1929 and mid-1930 were overtly directed toward the benefits of flying to women—concise statements of how the discipline, self-reliance, and decisiveness deriving from the aviation experience would bolster women's self-esteem and confirm their capabilities beyond the stereotypical. In these articles she expressed and reinforced themes common to all of the women pilots' writings, whatever their era, addressing her works to the individual woman who might want to fly.

Brown's "Woman's Influence on Aviation" (1929), appearing in *Popular Aviation*, a magazine for recreational pilots and flying enthusiasts, contended that "the time is coming when women pilots will be nearly as common as women automobile drivers are, now." When they took to the air, she continued, women would find "spontaneity and joyousness" that would free them from "the same old unprofitable, egocentric ideas, emotions and desires that many of them cherish on the ground." She addressed male prejudice toward women fliers in "What Men Flyers Think of Women Pilots" (1929), again writing in *Popular Aviation*, arguing that men's attitudes were of little

consequence compared with the benefits to women of flight: “If you are thinking that flying will develop character . . . ; will give you an increasingly wider outlook; discipline you, and destroy vanity and pride . . . , why—FLY!” She developed this theme in “The Moral Aspect of Aviation” (1929), listing personal benefits that flying would carry for women, including “self-control, discipline, attentiveness, alertness and persistence.”¹⁷

The most expansive statement of her views, however, came in “Flying Is Changing Women” (1930) in the *Pictorial Review*, one of the principal women’s magazines of the time. There she proclaimed that “women are seeking freedom. Freedom in the skies!” For her, she continued, “flying is a symbol of freedom,” and “every woman who overcomes a limitation has gained a measure of freedom, not alone for herself, but for her sex. A victory for one woman is a victory for all.” The experience of flying will open a door to “a new dimension” that awakens participants to “hitherto unrealized beauty, not only of the earth and sky, but of the spirit.”¹⁸ Through flight, women may well attain a degree of personal liberation hitherto unavailable to them.

Women will gain more than freedom from flight. Airplanes and the act of flying, Brown says, “will bring about an amazing change in the relations which have existed in the past between men and women.” This will be possible because airplanes and the act of flying “suggest human thought breaking away from a limited and sordid basis; rising into an atmosphere of greater purity and freedom. . . . [O]ne senses a mystical meaning beyond . . . the mechanical triumph.” In that atmosphere, Brown concludes, women will be freed from “the so-called inherent feminine weaknesses: emotionalism, instability, indecision, and dependence on the male sex.” Indeed, she continues, “a woman who can find fulfilment in the skies will never again need to live her life in some man’s spare moments.”¹⁹ She, like Earhart and her contemporaries, saw flight as a way of breaking gender barriers and stimulating profound personal and social change.

Each of the women pilots considered here, like Brown, was a product of her time. Each responded by speaking to issues surrounding the developing technology and applications of aviation of the time and her encounter with the enterprise. Each demonstrated her capability by flying one or another of the most advanced aircraft available—the Blériot Model XI, the Lockheed Vega and Electra, the Beechcraft C17 Staggerwing, and others. Each spoke of the importance to the larger American society of national “air-mindedness,” a theme reaching its apex during the so-called Golden Age of American Aviation, when flight held an almost religious appeal for the American public.²⁰

Each spoke, finally, of the part that women might—and should—play both in advancing aviation and in extending women’s roles in contemporary American society. None, save Lindbergh in her later years, overtly identified herself as a suffragist or feminist or allied herself with the activist factions of the women’s movement. Nevertheless, they regularly and consistently used aviation to address matters pertaining to women’s role

and potential in American life. They chose to go their own ways, embracing women's causes as they had embraced aviation—out of an interest in a new, promising, and exciting field of endeavor. They were not artists, but their story is a fresh and revealing record of American society's evolving attitude toward women and its embracing of a new technology during the first decades of the twentieth century.