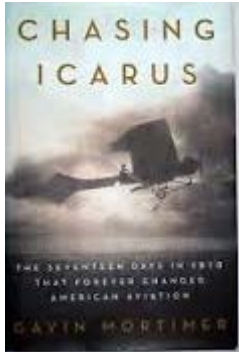


**Book Review – Chasing Icarus – The seventeen days in 1910 that forever changed American aviation**  
by Gavin Mortimer

Review by Chris Hope, Master CFI



Aviation aficionados tend to gravitate toward certain phases of aviation history – The Wright Brothers, and aviation's birth; the era of the barnstormers just after World War I; World War II; the dawn of the jet age. But before any of these eras could begin, there had to be an era when men said, "Look at what the Wright brothers did. I could do that as well, and even better."

In the ten years or so after Orville and Wilbur's first flight at Kitty Hawk, many from all over the world were trying to make their own name in aviation. Some were pilots, and some were designers, and some were both. And not only were airplanes the rage - balloons and dirigibles were in the public eye as well. Indeed, there were many who thought that the future of aviation would be captured not by a heavier-than-air craft, but by the dirigible. Look how much one of those could carry. And of course, not only were there a small group of pilots and designers caught up in the craze, the American public (and, for that matter, the world public) was gaga over this entire aviation thing.

In "Chasing Icarus", Gavin Mortimer has chosen to focus on three major aviation events that coincided during the last half of October, 1910 – In St. Louis, attention focused on the International Balloon Cup. In New York at the Belmont Racetrack, the International Aviation Cup was on everyone's mind. And at an Atlantic City, there was to be another attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean by dirigible. No wonder the newspapers were full of aviation news.

It is hard for us to imagine today, immersed in the normality of airline travel, what the world of aviation looked like to the public in 1910. First of all, for the vast majority of Americans, there was no "look" of aviation. Very few people had actually seen an aircraft at all, let alone an airplane in flight. The only contact most people had with aviation was through the newspaper. Secondly, the pilots of airplanes, balloons and dirigibles were themselves still feeling their way through this new world.

What equipment did one need for long flights, whether by balloon or dirigible (no one yet thought of an airplane capable of spanning any distance.) What happened with an increase in altitude? What were these "air holes" that seemed to cause an aircraft to fall from the sky? All of these unknowns were just being explored in 1910.

Walter Wellman had been ridiculed in the press often, for his pronouncements of the capabilities of the dirigible. And now, as he waited for favorable conditions to launch his 228-foot *America*, the pundits were no less supportive. But launch he did, with his crew of three, in the cabin of the airship with the lifeboat attached below, and his “equilibrator” slung below that.

Simultaneously, the International Balloon Cup competition is getting underway in St. Louis. The guess is that the prevailing winds will carry the craft northeasterly, but no one was sure whether they would get as far as the Great Lakes. And if they got that far, would they be able to cross the water? And if so, what lay beyond? Only the Canadian wilderness.

And then there was the airplane competition. Probably the closest thing we can imagine today would be a combination of the Reno Air Races, with its low level turns around the pylons, and the Cleveland Air Races of the 1920s and ‘30s, with the emphasis on straight-line speed. And then throw in an altitude competition as well.

Gavin Mortimer weaves a fascinating story, taken (literally) from the newspapers of the day. He allows the newspapers to describe the search for Alan Hawley, and Augustus Post, as they alternatively feared lost to the elements of the Canadian wilds, and deemed able to overcome every adversity. He digs through newspapers for the personalities of the airplane pilots – the suave Claude Grahame-White, the Englishman who loved the ladies as much as his plane; the volatile Count Jaques de Lesseps of France, and America’s favorite, John Moissant. It is a story of bravery, foolishness, politics, and discovery. That is, a story that is a lot like today. An enjoyable book.

*Chris loves to read, write, and fly, but not necessarily in that order*

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