

THE WRIGHT BROTHERS ON POSTAGE STAMPS

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When the Wright brothers flew for the first time, on December 17, 1903, they might as well have dropped the news down a hole. The New York Herald, the only newspaper to run the story, did so a few days later, on the sports page, just below a gripping account of a close game won by the Hackensack high-school football team. The New York Times, with reckless abandon, reported the event five years later, in 1908.

The indifference of the press reflected the interest of the public, which was casual. The <sup>various</sup> men we regard as the heroic pioneers of <sup>aviation</sup> ~~flight~~ were looked upon <sup>by their contemporaries as</sup> ~~as~~ sportive loons, wasting their lives and savings on the impossible dream of human flight.

In spite of the newspapers, the word finally leaked out that the brothers from Ohio had actually accomplished that dream, and when it did <sup>few people</sup> ~~no one~~ believed it. <sup>The Wrights</sup> ~~They~~ were called liars, bluffers, and practical jokers.

With such a beginning, no one would expect an early postal recognition of the triumph. And yet ~~it came with~~ —given the period— very little delay. *recognition of sorts came with*

In 1912, the U.S. Post Office began to issue its only set of parcel post stamps. They bore pictures of the several ways in which the mails were carried from here to there, and on the

20-cent value we can see a late model of the Wright Flyer, as *the* ~~they~~ <sup>brothers</sup> called ~~it~~ <sup>their baby,</sup> with wheels attached to the famous skids. It is airborne and, considering the terrain, rather too close to the treetops, but it is a clean, accurate depiction of the craft, worthy of its inventors, and also of its primacy --for it is the world's first officially-issued postage stamp to show an aircraft of any kind. (Sc.#08)

The caption, however, is a piece of bombast. It reads: "Aeroplane Carrying Mail," ~~but~~ <sup>though</sup> the Post Office would not deal in airmail for another six years.

The date on which this stamp was issued happened to be December 16, 1912, just one day ~~was~~ away from the exact anniversary of the first flight. The coincidence reveals that the Department did not have the ~~Wrights~~ Wrights in mind when they put out the stamp with their plane on it. It also tells us how off-hand things were in those days before first-day covers, special cachets, and the like.

More than fifteen years were to go by before the government would consciously call attention to the fact that the airplane had been invented by Americans. This was to happen in 1928, with the large-format 2-cent value commemorating the International Civil Aeronautics Conferance (Sc.#649) which has a neat profile view of the historic craft.

Europeans, meanwhile, had brought out a large number of fugitive labels with portraits of the Wright Flyer (it had been a sensation when Wilbur took it to France in 1908) and it is featured on a Jamaican Red Cross quasi-postal of the war years.



But the first appearance of the Flyer on a <sup>full-pledged postage</sup> foreign stamp was a comedy of multiple errors that came out in 1930, as one of a series of Spanish <sup>adhesives</sup> ~~stamps honoring~~ recalling an odd lot of flights of varying importance. The stamp in question, Sc.#C50, was actually meant to honor the Franco-Brazillian pioneer flyer Santos-Dumont whose portrait appears in an oval frame at the right hand side. The rest of the vignette is a panorama of the harbor at Rio de Janeiro, and above it all soars an airplane never piloted by the man in the oval (who liked to design his own aircraft), namely the Flyer. Don't think the inclusion <sup>of this anomalous machine</sup> is meant to divide ~~the~~ the glory between the Brazillian and the Americans. <sup>It is simply a mistake.</sup> The Latin countries have never admitted that the Wrights were first. For them, the earliest flight was made by Santos-Dumont, in 1906, and this conviction is asserted in the caption of this very stamp, which reads: "Primer Vuelo Mecanico 1906." The <sup>view</sup> ~~inclusion~~ of the harbor <sup>of Rio was put in</sup> ~~is meant to~~ soften the ~~unpalatable~~ unpalatable fact that Santos-Dumont left Brazil as a youth and did all his experiments in Paris. Just for the record, the Wrights never flew over Rio either.

The next country ~~and stamp~~ to commemorate the Wrights' achievement was Latvia which, in 1932, brought out a handsome <sup>semi-postal</sup> bicolor set of five airmail stamps picturing important moments in the early history of flight. The fourth in the series, Sc.#CB12, shows the Flyer <sup>rising</sup> above a wood, and is correctly dated 1903. This set was for many years listed only with a caution, but now has full catalogue recognition.

In 1943, the Island of Lundy remembered the fortieth year of



the Kitty Hawk flight with an overprint on some of its local airposts, but the next UPU-member to doff its hat was the Principality of Liechtenstein which, in 1948, followed the Latvians with a series ~~of stamps~~ dedicated to the major events in the early days of flying, as seen from a middle-European perspective. There are ten of them this time, and the Wright stamp, Sc.#C32, gives us Wilbur in a wing-collar and cap, with his airplane squeezed in between the back of his head and the border. It is a handsome stamp in a handsome and sought-after set.

The following year, the United States issued ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> first stamp to show <sup>both</sup> the inventors, ~~themselves~~. It is Sc.#C45, and it marked the 46th anniversary of the first flight, which is not what you'd call a round figure. The reason for this lopsided remembrance is that the stamp actually commemorates the gift to the U.S., by Great Britain, of the last remaining Flyer of original construction. It is now in the Smithsonian ☺ This stamp is remarkable in that it includes a description of the actual accomplishment which is also a compact yet complete definition of true heavier-than-air flight. It reads: "First free controlled and sustained powered flight by man." This is precisely what the other claimants to primacy (and they are several) did not achieve, and it is on this <sup>rigorous</sup> ~~very precise~~ basis that the Wrights have received the credit that is their due.

The Fiftieth Anniversary <sup>(of the first flight)</sup> made it necessary to top <sup>number C45</sup> ~~this stamp~~ <sup>issue,</sup> with another <sup>issue,</sup> not long after, in 1953. Though an important date, it is a rather cheesy design. Its Scott # is C47.