



Wings of Madness: Alberto Santos-Dumont and the Invention of Flight

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On the eve of the centennial of the Wright brothers' historic flights at Kitty Hawk, a new generation will learn about the other man who was once hailed worldwide as the conqueror of the air--Alberto Santos-Dumont. Because the Wright brothers worked in secrecy, word of their first flights had not reached Europe when Santos-Dumont took to the skies in 1906. The dashing, impeccably dressed inventor entertained Paris with his airborne antics--barhopping in a little dirigible that he tied to lampposts, circling above crowds around the Eiffel Tower, and crashing into rooftops. A man celebrated, even pursued by the press in Paris, London, and New York, Santos-Dumont dined regularly with the Cartiers, the Rothschilds, and the Roosevelts. But beneath his lively public exterior, Santos-Dumont was a frenzied genius tortured by the weight of his own creation. *Wings of Madness* chronicles the science and history of early aviation and offers a fascinating glimpse into the mind of an extraordinary and tormented man, vividly depicting the sights and sounds of turn-of-the-century Paris. It is a book that will do for aviation what *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers* did for mathematics.

Wings of Madness: Alberto Santos-Dumont and the Invention of Flight Details

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From Reader Review Wings of Madness: Alberto Santos-Dumont and the Invention of Flight for online ebook

Wayne says

Amazing Story of an adventurous man who at one point rode his Hot Air Ballons into town and hitched them to the lamposts outside the Cafe's and Resturants of Paris as if they were horses in the Old American West. But more as a progenitor of modern aviation he (among others) changed the world by his pioneering efforts in mans lifting himself into the clouds and travelling across the sky for ever increasing amounts of time. His tragic demise after all that was/is a sad ending to/of the life a remarkable man.

Ben says

Alberto Santos-Dumont was born in Brazil, but he had all the whimsy, passion, and creative genius of the great fellow Frenchmen like Verne, Magritte, and Satie. And if there were any justice in the world, he would be credited equally alongside the Wright Brothers for the invention of human-powered flight. If you can't read this book in a Parisian cafe or a hot air balloon, take it along as reading material for your next flight.

Patricia Johnson says

An interesting book about the beginnings of manned flight beginning with ballooning to the first heavier than air aeroplane. It follows the successful flights of Alberto Santo-Dumont born in Brazil but developing his aircraft and flying his inventions in France. In competition with the Wright brothers it is said that he is the "first man to develop an airplane and to fly over the roof tops of Paris."

Curtiss says

Describe's the developement of the lighter than air dirigible as a means of personal transport by the renowned aviator, the Brazilian coffee magnate, Alberto Santos-Dumont.

Albero Santos-Dumont became a passionate enthusiast for manned flight aboard hot air balloons, where he helped establish the early tradition of celebrating a flight with a bottle of champagne. Before turning the helium-filled balloons, Santos-Dumont persuaded a balloon manufacturer to build a custom hot-air machine to his own specifications, capable of being folded into his valise following a remote landing.

He later cruised the skies of Fin de Siecle Paris in a series of elegant dirigible helium-filled balloons, powered by a gasoline motor of his own design. Many evenings he would arrive at Maxime's for a midnight diner and tie up his "aerostat" by the front door. Maxime's still has a relief carving of Santos-Dumont's profile on the wall over his favorite table.

Santos-Dumont found flying his dirigible's to be so taxing that he found it hard to use his pocket watch while airborne, and so he had his friend Cartier design the world's first wristwatch to enable him to check the time while his hands were otherwise engaged.

He later designed what many French aviation enthusiasts believe was the first powered heavier than air machine capable of carrying a man, predating the Wright flyer, although his tail-first 14-bis was really only capable of sustained 'hops'. But later his petite "Damoiselle" (Dragonfly) was the first popular mass production airplane, purchased in the hundreds, despite being tailored to Santos Dumont's diminutive stature.

Alberto Santos-Dumont was and is revered in his native Brazil as a national hero for his pioneering achievements in aviation. After his suicide, in depression over the military use to which aviation had been put to during and after the First World War, Alberto Santos-Dumont's heart was sealed in a case, and is on display at Brazil's main Air Force training facility as a shrine to all of Brazil's future aviators.

I recorded this book in 50-minute episodes for Golden Hours, my local radio service for blind and reading-impaired listeners.

melydia says

The title is somewhat misleading: this book covers Santos-Dumont's early experiments with powered balloons and airplanes, but skips from 1906 to 1932, the years where he supposedly went mad with guilt and grief for the use of his inventions in World War I. That said, the rest of the book is really interesting. I'd never heard of Santos-Dumont, not even his sort-of rivalry with the Wright Brothers. He was an eccentric character, as one might expect of an inventor in such a dangerous arena. I wish more had been known about his personal life and feelings, but the descriptions of his work in aviation were fascinating. Definitely recommended if you're interested in the early years of man's quest for flight.

Sally Grey says

I found this book and the subject matter appealed to me. It was an OK biography of an interesting person.

Gregory Williams says

Alberto Santos-Dumont is one of the most fascinating historical figures I've had the pleasure to study. In 1901, Santos-Dumont flew a powered dirigible around the Eiffel Tower in Paris to win the Deutsch Prize, and become the most famous aeronaut in the world. He shunned patents and believed his designs and flying itself belonged to humanity. He saw a world where to allow humans to fly meant they would better understand each other and no longer feel a need to have conflicts. In the early 1900s, he could be seen all over Paris flying one of his unique designs, the diminutive Baladeuse dirigible, which he piloted around Paris, hitching it to buildings like someone might for a horse, for the purpose of attending a dinner party.

Truly a Renaissance man, Santos-Dumont is a national hero to his homeland of Brazil, where he is revered, and his heart is encased in a display in a museum in Brazil's National Air and Space Museum. Highly recommend reading about him, and learning about this fascinating figure in early aeronautics.

Rafael Belenos says

Li esse livro assim que foi lançado, em 2004. Devorei em dois dias de tão fascinado que fiquei com a história pessoal de um dos brasileiros mais icônicos já nascidos. Decidi reler com calma, todos esses anos depois, só para lembrar o quão fantástico é o trabalho do Paul Hoffman em escavar cada detalhe escondido, cada curiosidade sobre a vida de Santos=Dumont (leia o livro para entender o sinal de igual no sobrenome) e situar cada acontecimento com os fatos da época (parei praticamente ao final de cada capítulo para perder alguns minutos no Google procurando fotos e textos com mais detalhes de cada relato apontado no livro). Não é só um amontoado de fatos reunidos numa linha temporal, é um trabalho jornalístico de primeira qualidade, justo, sem ufanismo e que merece ser apreciado com calma.

Jeffrey Bloomfield says

This is a trick question in two parts:

- 1) who were responsible for the first successful heavier than air flight; when and where did it occur; and who flew the airplane?
- 2) who was widely recognized in 1906 in Europe as the first man who performed a heavier than air flight, and was also recognized for earlier, different aviation achievements.?

Answers:

- 1) Wilbur and Orville Wright, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, in December 1903, and Orville flew the plane.
- 2) Europeans knew only of Alberto Santos-Dumont, a Brazilian expatriate living in Paris from the 1890s onward, who flew by his own design a series of elegantly designed cigar shaped dirigibles in Paris, and then in 1906 designed the first successfully flown heavier than air 14-Bis plane, that was the first known airplane that was piloted by a man who was not seated or lying down but standing! Like the Kitty Hawk flyer it made a relatively short flight, but while the 1903 flight was photographed the 1906 flight was witnessed by hundreds of witnesses. Wilbur Wright was in Europe at the time trying to interest various governments in his plane, but the general public had not seen it in the air. By 1909 Wright had flown it around the continent, and was now seen as the actual inventor of the first successful airplane, but Santos-Dumont was (and still is) recognized as the first of the European rivals of the Wrights to likewise succeed.

Santos-Dumont remains a fascinating aviation pioneer, for his airships and airplanes, and his lifestyle. His father owned one of the largest coffee plantations in Brazil, and in 1890 gave a small fortune to Alberto and told him to go to Paris and become a man. Interesting encouragement that. Sexually Alberto was either latently Gay or was one of those individuals who really is not interested in sex. But he did go to Paris, and soon was a well known boulevardier. Indeed his specially designed floppy fedora hat, and his well tailored clothes were copied by many others in France, and a specially designed watch made by Cartier's for him (which is still sold) was the prototype of the modern wrist watch.

The watch was a by-product of his interests. As a boy his favorite writer was Jules Verne, and he especially liked the latter's novels about ballooning ("Five Weeks in a Balloon"), and space travel ("From the Earth to the Moon"), and the issue of human flight by balloon or airplane/helicopter ("Robur the Conqueror"/"The Clipper of the Clouds"). When he was in Paris he read up everything about ballooning, and the newly developed dirigibles of Henri Girard and David Schwartz (the latter's patents were later bought up by Count Ferdinand Zeppelin). After his self-education was completed, Alberto began constructing the series of balloons that ran on petrol motors over Paris from 1897 to 1901. Later he wrote of his experiences in a small

book "My Airships". He eventually would win a major aviation prize by flying a figure eight route between his starting point and the Eiffel Tower. But he was trying to popularize such flying. He went up with friends and picnic baskets, anchor to a tree or post, and have his meal with his guest. Later he also would use the balloon to travel to Maxim's and other night spots. Because he had to keep an eye on where his balloons were travelling, Alberto cut down on rudimentary activities, such as pulling a pocket watch out of his pocket to see the time, while timing the motion of the balloon. Hence his decision to attach the watch to a band on his wrist!

Alberto changed over to heavier than air flights when he read of the experiments of not only the Wrights, but of Ader, Maxim, Lilienthal, Langley, Pilcher, Hargraves, and Chanute. He saw that airplanes were coming, and using his own workshop created the 14-Bis and later the Demoselle. Both crafts turned out to be successes. But the latter was to prove his last achievement: Santos-Dumont was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and though it was working slowly it was affecting how his hands responded to serious work in his workshop. He still might have offered his considerable gifts to the French air force, but in 1915 he was humiliated when some officious ass had him arrested as a suspicious alien living in France. Even though he was cleared and got an official apology, he felt humiliated by his second home-land. He left France forever.

Paul Hoffman wrote this fascinating biography of this brilliant man who had health and emotional problems due to unforeseen results from his inventions that bothered him. Dying in 1932 under tragic circumstances, Santos-Dumont was mourned around the globe for his seriously important and impressive contributions to aviation in it's heyday. Today he is recalled by aviation enthusiasts, and by his fellow Brazillians, who turned his home in Petropolis into a national museum, and feel he was one of their greatest national heros. The Hoffman book is a great place to start in rediscovering this amazing man and what he did achieve.

Paul Miller says

A very novel life becomes a nice tapestry on which to cover life in Paris ~1900, the state of the world at that time, as well as the history of flight. I found it much more entertaining than McCullough's treatment of Paris. A Brazilian aristocrat (a funky one at that) pioneers 'lighter than air' travel while the Wright Brothers go for 'heavier than air' (airplanes). Guess who won? A nice find.

A.L. DeLeon says

Nothing like picking up a book because the title sounded intriguing and then being pleasantly surprised by what it had to teach you. The history of flight that I thought I knew had missing pieces I never knew existed until this biography. It takes a bit to absorb the details, but ultimately worth the time to read if you are interested in historical accounts that were important during their time and yet have become relatively unknown among most people.

Smuda says

Amazing detail and present-tense physicality make this a great meta-travel read. The descriptions of Paris as having phonebooths (circa 1900) that for a coin would allow one to listen to political meetings, plays or the Opera are as amazing of those describing the gold plated syringes of the posh drug dens. The description of

Santos-Dumont's heroic efforts seem simple as though made for Hollywood yet down to earth enough.

Igor says

Já pelas outras avaliações percebe-se que o livro é muito bom. O interessante é que precisou vir um norte-americano, da terra dos Wright brothers, pra escrever a biografia mais interessante e sensata de Santos de Dumont.

Pontos positivos:

- 1) Bem escrito. A leitura flui e não dá vontade de parar;
- 2) Muito bem contextualizado. Explica o que acontecia em Paris, EUA, Brasil e Europa na época. Sem esse entendimento, é vazia qualquer tentativa minimamente razoável de entender quem era e o que fez nosso 'herói';
- 3) Retrata um Santos Dumont humano, com muitos acertos, erros e 'fantasmas'. Passei a admirá-lo, e principalmente compreendê-lo, ainda mais;
- 4) Feitos paralelos de outros aviadores da época dele. Houve na verdade muitos 'pais' da aviação.

Juro que tentei não entrar em discussões polêmicas, mas não resisti:

- 1) O livro 'Santos Dumont - Domador do Espaço', de Cláudio de Cápua, que faz uma homenagem ao invés de uma biografia, contesta e reclama de Paul Hoffman sobre suas insinuações de que o aviador seria homossexual. Bem, uma boa biografia deve abordar as questões pessoais também - até para a total compreensão do personagem. E se foi ou não homossexual não reduz sua importância e feitos. Mas entendo o porquê da resistência de militares e aviadores de aceitarem essa (possível) verdade; e
- 2) O livro "Guia Politicamente Incorreto Da História Do Brasil", de Leandro Narloch, faz uma série de ataques pessoais ao aviador que sempre me pareceram equivocados. Ao Asas da Loucura, penso que ele não deveria ter atacado o aviador, que na verdade era produto da sua época e do local onde vivia, no caso Paris. Até posso concordar com o Leandro Narloch que o aviador poderia ter tentado criar uma empresa pra potencializar seu legado, e que poderia ser menos preocupado com demonstrações e exibicionismos. Mas fazia parte da Paris da época e personalidade do aviador. Agora, penso que a maior lição que esse livro, juntamente com o que o Leandro Narloch colocou no livro dele, é a forma diferente que o brasileiro deveria ver Santos Dumont. Ao invés de vê-lo como uma figura quase mítica (ao estilo dos Gregos de 2.500 anos atrás), poderiam inspirar-se no seu estilo de vida e valores, como trabalho duro, persistência, criatividade, honestidade, valorização da cultura e educação.

Por último, acho que Santos Dumont deixou legados diversos para o mundo e para os brasileiros. O 'mundo' da época, aviadores, engenheiros, 'realezas', políticos e empresários souberam, na sua maioria, reconhecer e seguir seu exemplo. O aviador foi um dos grandes 'pais' da aviação nesse sentido.

Já aos brasileiros, discordando do que aprendi na escola e nos livros com homenagens, seu maior legado foi sua personalidade e caráter - e não o 14-bis. O maior legado para sua terra foram sua honra, honestidade, persistência, engenhosidade, independência (a herança ajudou aqui), cultura e humildade. Nesse sentido, após mais de 100 anos dos famosos voos que colocaram seu nome na história, ainda estamos olhando para o céu (com orgulho) ao invés de olharmos a nossa volta e começarmos a colocar em prática o que o fez ser realmente tão grandioso. E que nos faria ser uma grande nação.

Annette says

I'm shocked and appalled that I'd never heard of Alberto Santos-Dumont before reading this book--picked up on a lark from the dollar cart at the Harvard bookstore as a cheap in-flight read. I've rarely read a richer, more enticing portrayal of fin de siècle Paris (or world, for that matter), and Hoffman paints the flying-circus world of Santos-Dumont in brilliant colors.

Gerry says

Despite The Times stating, 'When the names of those who have occupied outstanding positions in the world have been forgotten, there will be a name which will remain in our memory, that of Santos-Dumont' and Louis Bleriot saying, 'For us aviators your name is a banner. You are our pathfinder', I am sorry to admit that before I discovered this book I did know the name of Alberto Santos-Dumont. That omission (which says more about me than of Santo-Dumont's fame) is soon rectified with a read of Paul Hoffman's entertaining biography.

Born in Brazil, where he was always a national icon, he spent much of his time in Paris, where he made his name and regularly flew round the Eiffel Tower, Monte Carlo, America and briefly in London, where he hastily departed having found that the balloon that he had shipped over had been slashed beyond immediate repair. On that issue it was suggested that he had done it himself to save having to perform in the city but he always vehemently denied that.

He began with balloons, moved on to powered dirigibles and graduated to aeroplanes. His productions were all numbered from 1 to 20, with no number 8 as he felt it an unlucky number. Some also had names, No. 14 'Bird of Prey' and No. 20 'Demoiselle', some crashed some brought him more fame than others, some won him prizes but none of them, arguably, brought him the fame that he craved.

He always felt that he had outshone the Wright Brothers, who were making their own aviation history back in the United States, but he was never as highly regarded as were they. Unfair? Perhaps, because it was possible that he flew publicly before the Wright brothers did and one soldier, stationed at the air force base where Santos-Dumont's heart is preserved in a museum devoted to him, remarked to the author, 'Tell me, why do people in your country insist that the Wright brothers flew first? Nobody saw them on that damn beach. Without witnesses anyone can claim anything. All of Paris watched Santos fly. Why has the world forgotten him?'

Well, that was how it all panned out and the diminutive Santos-Dumont went into a deep depression in later life, particularly when he realised that something that he had helped to develop could be used as a weapon of mass destruction. And on that subject, how wrong could Orville Wright have been when he said, 'The aeroplane has made war so terrible that I do not believe any country will again care to start a war.'

Santos-Dumont, a dandy throughout his early life, was in later life a much-troubled man and in 1932 he knotted together two of his splendid red ties that he had worn in his heyday in Paris and hanged himself. However, Paul Hoffman has once again brought him to life, and to the attention of this particular reader, who I hesitate to repeat, had never heard of him!

