

## Just Whose Conspiracy Is This?

Those who insist that Gustave Whitehead flew before the Wright brothers often point to an agreement between the Wright Estate and the Smithsonian Institution as evidence of a conspiracy to deny Whitehead the recognition he deserves. This agreement, made in 1948, defines how the original 1903 Wright Flyer is to be displayed. One of its provisions says that should the Smithsonian “publish or permit to be displayed a statement or label in connection with or in respect of any aircraft model or design of earlier date than the Wright Aeroplane of 1903, claiming in effect that such aircraft was capable of carrying a man under its own power in controlled flight,” then the Wright Estate may reclaim the Flyer.

This agreement was the result of a long-running dispute between Orville Wright and the Smithsonian. The Smithsonian had issued a report in 1914 that the Langley Aerodrome, an aircraft designed by the former Secretary of that institution, was the first airplane “capable” of flight despite two failed attempts. The Smithsonian finally retracted and apologized for the report in 1943 – 39 years later – and the agreement was to keep them from backtracking. It had nothing to do with Gustave Whitehead.

However, it is true that the threatened loss of a national treasure is a disincentive for the Smithsonian to publish that someone flew successfully before the Wrights. Tom Crouch, Director of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, has said as much in the articles he has written and the lectures he has given. But it is not an impediment. The Wright/Smithsonian agreement creates no barrier that prevents the Smithsonian or any other institution or individual from exploring this possibility. This is not the case for agreements concerning Gustave Whitehead’s papers and effects.

In a recent article, *Five Agreements*, historian Carroll Gray describes the custodians of Gustave Whitehead’s personal papers as they were transferred from the Whitehead family to author Stella Randolph to William O’Dwyer and the Connecticut Aeronautical Historical Society, and finally to the Fairfield Historical Society. Every time the papers changed hands, the rules governing access to them became more restrictive. “No use, study, reproduction, publication, or transfer of any of the Whitehead memorabilia or files will be made by any group, groups, person or persons having the apparent intent of discrediting Whitehead or his work,” reads the first paragraph in the agreement between Randolph and O’Dwyer. Successive agreements have similar clauses. The last agreement, between O’Dwyer and Fairfield Historical Society, adds a massive user fee requiring “that an author receiving profits from a publication using these materials pay a royalty of 60%” to O’Dwyer and the FHS.

These restrictions on the Gustave Whitehead archives have two effects that govern the type of people who may see these resources. The first is obvious. Because the material may not be used to disprove the aeronautical

accomplishments Whitehead claimed, only those who believe these claims may have access to the material. The second is less obvious, but more insidious. To use this information, you must give up more than half of your earnings. This massive royalty effectively removes any incentive that a professional historian might have for seeking Whitehead's side of the story. Only true believers with sufficient commitment to donate their time and money will be allowed to see the relics. In a word, zealots. Consequently, any reports generated from these resources come from people with the least inclination to be objective.

The technique by which we reconstruct the past – historiographics – puts great emphasis on primary sources, specifically the correspondence, diaries, reports, and other papers written by the historic figure who is being studied. In the case of the Wright brothers, these primary sources are located at several institutions, the Library of Congress, the Franklin Institute, Wright State University, the Dayton Public Library and others. In no case is their access restricted; they are available to the general public. There are no fees; many have been posted on the Internet, making them available worldwide free of charge.

The primary sources for the Gustave Whitehead story, however, are severely restricted. Not even their whereabouts is generally known. Even if you find the files and are permitted to see them, they are ridiculously expensive to use. Scholars are left with only secondary sources – conflicting newspaper articles and affidavits – to try to resurrect Whitehead's aeronautical career. In view of this, for Whitehead supporters to accuse the Wright Estate and Smithsonian of a conspiracy to suppress the truth is the very definition of hypocrisy.

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