

Airplanes: The Life Story of a Technology
A Book Review

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Since the first successful powered flight documented in 1903, airplane technology has advanced exponentially. In just over one hundred years, the airplane has progressed from a wood and cloth, single pilot contraption to the sophisticated, advanced piece of machinery we recognize today. Although the technology started as a novelty, it has evolved into what most consider a staple of everyday life. Jeremy R. Kinney documents the evolution of the airplane from its original conception to present day in his book *Airplanes: The Life Story of a Technology*. The book introduces the technological, economic, political and cultural importance of the airplane in an international context with an emphasis on the United States.

Kinney's examination of the development of the airplane starts with the early conception and devices of flight and extends through modern day military, commercial, and general use. As is mentioned in the book's preface, the majority of the book correlates the developments of the airplane to 20th century history. In the beginning of the book, the author shows how the purpose and intent of the airplane started as a point of curiosity but quickly evolved into a military technology. As he relates the advancements of the airplane to the context of the period, the reader is able to see the causes and effects of the airplane's development. This approach provides many helpful points of reference used to understand the development of the airplane and the effects each of these developments had on the economics, politics, and culture of the time.

This book, while applicable to those who have an interest in airplanes, would be particularly beneficial for readers who are studying aviation at the collegiate level because it provides a compilation of information that links numerous events in the life of the airplane. At the collegiate level, aviation history courses or introduction to aviation courses would be appropriate forums for use of this text.

The life of the airplane is documented in a chronological manner starting in 1000 B.C. with the mention of kites taking to the air in China and ending with how the airplane is used today. The first chapter of the book highlights milestones of the 19th century including the development of the glider, the failure of ornithopters and the multitude of research produced by early aviation enthusiasts. The remaining seven chapters of the book focus on the advancements of the airplane in the 20th

century. Significant focus is devoted to the initial development of powered, controlled, heavier-than-air flight. The author thoroughly covers the Wright Brother's efforts, but only briefly touches on other inventors. As the book progresses, he narrows his focus to concentrate on the development of the airplane in the United States. He still references other countries' participation in the evolution of the airplane; however, the purpose of the references is purely contextual.

His approach to analyzing the evolution of the airplane shifts as well. In contrast to the first half of the book, the second half of the book focuses on the maturity of the airplane, only briefly mentioning the engineers. This half of the book is devoted to examining the effects the world wars had on the airplane's evolution. Starting with World War I, Kinney effectively documents the advancement of airplane technology, highlighting how war became a platform for aviation. The book explained how the identity of the airplane was redefined in the years following the wars due to its new circumstances.

After examining how the wars influenced the development and usage of the airplane, Kinney detailed the transition of aircraft design from aircraft used for military purposes to aircraft used for commercial transportation of cargo and people. The book draws attention to some of the key milestones including the development of jet aircraft and the expansion of passenger service.

Kinney also provides related information concerning the regulation of the new industry. Although not directly relating to the development of the airplane, his inclusion of historical context helps the reader to understand subsequent developments in the life of the airplane. Lastly, he discusses the expansion of private and general usage of the airplane. The end of the war left a niche for personal aircraft usage that fueled the success of companies such as Beechcraft and Cessna as well as numerous others.

Kinney's experience as Curator in the Aeronautics Division at the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution as well as his position serving as the Centennial of Flight lecturer at the University of Maryland give him a distinct advantage in writing about the history of the airplane. Despite the excessive amount of information available to Kinney, he managed to keep the book informative yet succinct. He includes enough information about the history of the period to establish the context of the airplane's development without detracting from the book's purpose. Kinney's writing style is intelligent, appropriate, and free of engineering jargon. Anyone could pick up this book and read it without having to resort to the dictionary. The book as a whole is visually pleasing and very user friendly.

Style is the primary factor in evaluating the book's effectiveness due to its informative rather than argumentative nature. In that regard, there are not many noticeable weaknesses. The book's strongest points were related to how the author presents the subject. His informative, succinct, easy to understand style conveys the necessary information without sidetracking the reader with irrelevant details. Although the book does not include a great deal of detail concerning specific aircraft, it offers basic information on a sampling of aircraft that is indicative of the period in question. If a reader's intent is to understand the context of the development of the airplane, this book provides many advantages.

I would recommend this book to anyone interested in understanding the airplane, especially emphasizing its benefits to beginning collegiate aviation students. This book educates students about the life of the airplane as well as its economic, political and cultural effects on the world. This well-rounded understanding of how the airplane was developed will not only help students in their introductory courses, but will also be useful in their more advanced courses. The straightforward writing style helps provide a logical, easy to follow overview of the development of the airplane and shows how the airplane fits into and affects the context of the 20th century. If the reader's intent is to get a general understanding of the airplane's development, *Airplanes: The Life Story of a Technology*, it is a very worthwhile read.