

Skylark: The Life Lies and Inventions of Harry Atwood

Howard Mansfield

University Press of New England (March 1999)

Unknown \$26.00 (264pp)

978-0-87451-891-7

Skylark is the story of a time—the time when men first took to the sky after the Wright Brothers showed that it was, indeed, a possibility. And Skylark is the story of a man—named Harry Nelson Atwood who came into his own during those early, heady days when aviation was so new there were not even words made up yet to describe the experience.

Mansfield has put together an extraordinary biography, the first ever of Atwood. He is seen as a complicated man who received a hero's welcome and a medal from President Taft when he landed an airplane on the White House lawn on July 14, 1911 and counted among his acquaintances senators, governors and Amelia Earhart. Yet Atwood died a virtual unknown fifty-six years later to the day, a genius/inventor perennially-hounded by creditors and estranged from five of his six children.

Mansfield intertwines the past with the present, the professional with the personal, as he alternates chapters and subject matter. In the introduction, we meet Atwood's daughter, Katrina, now nearly eighty, as she re-enters the house she last lived in at the age of twenty, reminiscing about life with her father. This is an approach that works well, since Atwood left a difficult trail of his life.

As Mansfield writes: "The flying stories of that fantastic era collapsed into one tale. It was so long ago. Some of his stories had a longer life than some of the people he had known. Some were true, some false, but by now it was as seamless as a one-piece Duply Airmobile. Truth and lie were bonded tightly to form a new material, the fable of Harry Atwood's life."

Mansfield, the author of two previous books, gives a personal perspective of the nation's obsession with flight shortly after the turn of the century and focuses it on one extraordinary individual.

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (March / April 1999)

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