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ANTICIPATING LINDBERGH'S FAMOUS FLIGHT:
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Gilbert Seldes

Transatlantic

Gilbert Seldes (1893–1970) is best remembered for his groundbreaking book *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924), which argues for the superiority of popular art forms over those favored by the elite: “the circus can be and often is more artistic than the Metropolitan Opera.” In his long career, he distinguished himself as a writer, playwright, filmmaker, and television producer, and in 1958 as founding dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. Here, in a 1927 *New Republic* column on the eve of Lindbergh’s nonstop solo flight from New York to Paris, Seldes registers the typical intellectual’s distaste for the excess, ugliness, and sordidness of America in the 1920s, qualities he associated mostly with the rival Bellanca crew and its backers. Those men, like Lindbergh, were trying to claim the Orteig Prize of \$25,000, first offered by a New York hotelkeeper in 1919. Seldes saw in Lindbergh, even before his triumphant flight, redeeming qualities—the flyer’s straightforward and unselfish character along with his seeming embodiment of pioneering American virtues—that would earn him a worshipful reception by the public.

Nerves and a little nastiness have crept into the arrangements for the transatlantic flight; there have been quarrels between pilots and backers, an ignoble sharing of prize money before it has been won, disagreements about the route to be taken; the radio equipment, which in one plane is a factor of safety, is in another only a means to make money from a news syndicate; there seems to have been some question whether, in case of death, the wives of the fliers should be cared for by the backers.

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It would be pitiful if this were all we had to show against the recklessness and the courage of Nungesser and Coli. Fortunately it is not. Almost all the difficulties are connected with the Bellanca plane; the Fokker America stands out as a triumph of massive engineering, lacking romance, but satisfactory in all respects; and last week there appeared from the West, in two gigantic strides from San Diego to Curtiss Field, a wild unknown who restored to transatlantic flying the daredevil spirit and the elation of a Hawker. Without this man, Lindbergh, the prospect would be dreary; it would be hard to take great satisfaction out of success, and failure would only be depressing, not tragic. Lindbergh, as the crowds see him, through the newspapers or tinkering with his machine, is the true adventurer, unsentimental and solitary, a Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett of the air. He flies alone, and his Ryan plane is so built that he cannot see directly, but has to use a periscope. For twenty-four hours or more he expects to face the instruments in the cockpit, and he is quite sure that he will keep awake. When reporters asked him whether he would take coffee along, he replied that he didn't like coffee. His mother came to see him, but did not stay for the take-off, as she had other affairs in hand. The crowd, knowing that Lindbergh has made four forced descents in a parachute, crushes round him to touch him "for luck" — their luck rather than his.

It is quite possible that the triple-engined America, with a crew of three and a supremely accurate equipment, has the best chance of the three planes. It is, at the same time, the plane most fully prepared for accident, with two rafts, radio, signal flares, rations — some of which may have to be discarded if the plane refuses to rise. Whatever is available of the science of aeronautics has been used; and for that reason the success of the America will be more important, in its bearing on future flying, than the success of a lone ranger like Lindbergh. The Atlantic has been crossed before; what remains now is to make the terms of the crossing clear. The efforts of Commander Byrd will lack all the elements of the spectacular, but if he succeeds we shall know much more than we know now; and we shall be able to guess, with some accuracy, how and when transatlantic flying will become a regular and practicable thing.

It is, therefore, a little silly to root like a schoolboy for Lindbergh. The mechanism of flying, like any other mechanism, has to perfect itself, and the delicate instruments, the monster engines, are far more typical of the machine age than any bravado. Lindbergh has the human touch, the faculty of touching the imagination; but the rough-rider is outmoded, and we are all mechanics now.

To reach the flying fields on Long Island you pass through one of the dreariest reaches of American scenery. The vast railroad sidings which serve manufacturers of disinfectants and motor accessories are not beautiful, but they lack the dullness, the almost deliberate ugliness, which follow them in street after street of dull-colored, characterless bungalows. The success of a development seems to be measured by the number of identical houses it can show, and here the two- and three-story bungalows proceed for blocks, looking like barracks or bath-houses. The sameness, if they had any charm, would be bad enough, but this is a tasteless monotony; the houses have not been built, but produced; not imagined, not constructed, but run up. You pass them and suddenly the air becomes alive with planes. Your heart leaps up.

There is nothing pretty about the flying fields; the ground is torn, the grass untrimmed. But the shapely planes rest lightly upon it, and their gaily colored bodies have grace and seem always alive. They all seem incredibly fragile, and the mechanics, tuning them up, step gingerly on the slight footholds which have been reinforced to bear weight. As you stand, fascinated, there is a whirr behind your shoulder and a great plane swoops down at an angle over your head, and taxis gently to a standstill. The Bellanca, with a preliminary roar of her engine, without fuss or bother, takes off; a moment later, with as little preparation as starting a motor car, a news-reel plane follows; the grass blows backward as the planes start their run, you look elsewhere for a moment, and the two planes are specks in the distance. One turns and the sun catches a varnished facet of the wing, which flames like a window in the setting sun.

It is all extremely matter-of-fact, the combination of a given number of items of mechanical skill gives flight as a result. But flight itself

remains inexpressibly thrilling, and every movement of the planes is full of grace. Until the moment of rising, it seems impossible that a plane should leave the ground, yet when it does rise, nothing seems more natural than its movement through the air. Even on the long, rather dull trip across the English Channel you feel that equivocal sense of strangeness and rightness in the aeroplane, the sensation that you are not yet prepared to fly, but find it natural to be flying. The plane takes hold of your imagination; I have never seen one rise without wishing I were part of it.

No matter how precisely you reduce it to powers and resisted strains, to adjustments and mechanics, the aeroplane remains a thing created, because it was imagined first, then brought into being. At Curtiss Field there are half a dozen orange-colored planes, all exactly alike, and all beautiful, more beautiful than the unique America. These planes are used for passenger flights; they are the commerce of the field, not its romance. Yet there is no ugliness, no monotony, no grasping. They represent one of the ideals toward which commercialism and industry and mechanical progress can move; they are a triumph of applied science and a triumph of the human spirit at the same time.

Watching them, you can forget mean streets and mean bickerings. Here is something better than machinery and better than man. Your eyes turn again to Lindbergh, the man who seems to pilot his plane as a rider his horse, identifying himself with its movements, in a sort of good-humored ecstasy. Hardness and ease, delicacy and superb control are in the combination. It is natural to long for his success, since you would share in it, with everything you have that is creative and aspiring.

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