

Aviation Pioneers' Correspondence as Sources for Social and Cultural History: Reflection and Methodology on the Wright Brothers' Letters (1900-1908)

Les correspondances des pionniers de l'aviation comme outils de l'histoire sociale et culturelle. Réflexion et méthodologie sur les correspondances des frères Wright (1900 à 1908)

Andréa Seignier

Traduction de Cynthia Johnson

🔗 <http://interfas.univ-tlse2.fr/nacelles/124>

Référence électronique

Andréa Seignier, « Aviation Pioneers' Correspondence as Sources for Social and Cultural History: Reflection and Methodology on the Wright Brothers' Letters (1900-1908) », *Nacelles* [En ligne], 1 | 2016, mis en ligne le 01 octobre 2016, consulté le 16 mai 2023. URL : <http://interfas.univ-tlse2.fr/nacelles/124>

Aviation Pioneers' Correspondence as Sources for Social and Cultural History: Reflection and Methodology on the Wright Brothers' Letters (1900-1908)

Les correspondances des pionniers de l'aviation comme outils de l'histoire sociale et culturelle. Réflexion et méthodologie sur les correspondances des frères Wright (1900 à 1908)

Andréa Seignier

Traduction de Cynthia Johnson

PLAN

Social and Cultural History: Concepts of Socio-history and Micro-history
Correspondence as a source for social and cultural history
Epistolary Practices of the Wright Brothers (1900 to 1910)
Letters to the father: identity markers and structure
Wilbur Wright, Octave Chanute and Ferdinand Ferber: An Epistolary Triangle
The Wright brothers and the French: the Letter and the Media Frenzy
Conclusion

TEXTE

- 1 As the first inventors of the airplane, the Wright brothers¹ are still considered legendary figures in the history of aeronautics. These aviation pioneers left a rich legacy of correspondence with family members, friends and other aviation pioneers. In reading them, we come to understand the phases of the extraordinary lives of these two American inventors and their flying machine, and we are transported into their innermost thoughts.
- 2 This article focuses on the interest in and the uses of private sources, especially correspondence, for social and cultural history. I will discuss the extent to which they are essential in the study of social networks, and how they meet the methodological needs of a history of the individual. The example of the Wright brothers' correspondence will be used to examine the importance of the people they wrote to

and the role they played in the lives of the two inventors. Finally we will try to understand, through their letters, their perception of the aeronautical world at the dawn of the twentieth century and their status within that environment.

Social and Cultural History: Concepts of Socio-history and Micro-history

- 3 In the 1980s, historians of the modern era sought to expand the objectives of social history and enrich its methods and tools. Traditional social history, as conceived by Ernest Labrousse,² was focused on studying social groups, their relationships and their social hierarchy.³ Yet it provoked new debates among historians. This traditional history would then evolve into multidisciplinary research, in which the tools and methods of sociology and anthropology complemented the historian's toolbox. At the European level, this new social history turned to new concepts such as sociohistory, represented by Gérard Noiriel, and microhistory. These new historiographical trends tried to break out of the boundaries of traditional social history.⁴ Researchers sought to study the evolution of the individual within his/her social group and as in response to events that group experienced.
- 4 Gerard Noiriel stated that "today invisible threads connect millions of people who do not know each other." Sociohistory enables us to "study these forms of interdependence and show how they affect face-to-face relationships."⁵ Microhistory, whose principles were first developed in Germany and Italy, has also generated new fields of study. *Alltagsgeschichte*⁶ and *Microstoria* focus on a limited scope, choosing a particular environment and examining small social entities or single individuals under a microscope."⁷ Carlo Ginzburg mentioned the need to focus on the marginal to understand the general. He explains that certain details may bring "valuable information about key social processes."⁸ Jacques Revel also defended the micro-analytical method, explaining that it enabled us to understand "the flow of social logic."⁹ Ultimately, these historians are part of current dynamics that argue that cultural and social phenomena should be

analyzed from the bottom up, "from the cellar to the attic," as Michel Vovelle said in the title of one of his works.¹⁰

- 5 Within these historiographical trends, cultural history found its new objectives: expand the studies of social groups and thus show that they interact independently with the rest of society. "So, at the same time, it studies what forges the 'link' between the group members, and what separates them from others who do not belong."¹¹
- 6 To do this, historians must search for information and ground their reflections in so-called sensitive sources: private papers. They indeed contain significant information that can shed light on the history of individuals and to contribute new forms of thinking about the mentalities of the past. In the history of aviation and its actors, the letters of aviation pioneers are therefore essential documents, enabling the historian to analyze the workings of the relationships among these pioneers at the dawn of the twentieth century. They bring to light behaviours and thought patterns that are difficult to discern solely through the pioneers' biographies, which are sometimes focused on recounting the legend and extraordinary story.

Correspondence as a source for social and cultural history

- 7 "All letters and correspondence have the power to intrigue us, to pique curiosity; to embarrass as much as to grip or to captivate because they are the bearers of mystery and the implicit."¹²
- 8 Epistolary sources are fascinating because they are both sensitive and rebellious. They offer rich information about daily life, social relations, and the changes in them throughout the exchange of letters. They are now considered as essential tools for a history "of sensibilities" to understand the mechanisms of representations and sociocultural ideologies of the past.
- 9 They offer new avenues for a history of the individual by integrating the testimony of those who can no longer speak. They are in a certain way "the mirror of the soul",¹³ as Brigitte Diaz tells us. Letters offer the letter writer a vast field of expression in which isolation and solitude generate fluid thought without constraints. Gustave Lanson

speaks of the "only human documents"¹⁴ we have for analyzing the daily lives of historical actors. But is this mode of expression really free from all constraints? Is a letter writer really free to speak as she would like?

- 10 "Their vision is restricted by their own categories of perception, by the interactive play between correspondents, by the position they occupy on the social chessboard."¹⁵ When using with these sources, historians must remain impartial towards these actors from the past. They may be moved for a moment reading these documents, but should not forget that these texts are intended to transmit information that is controlled by its creator. Correspondence thus offers an incredible opportunity to understand how social actors perceive themselves in their social networks and what place they accord to their correspondents. These sources also help us to understand the writer's interpretation of events, the way they see themselves or want to be seen, as well as the image of themselves that it is built through epistolary exchanges. Scholars can observe the progressive construction of an affective, or hostile, relationship network and the way those relationships change over time. When studying social networks, the comparison of these documents allows us to understand what the actors thought of each other and the place they granted each person in their network: "... the comparison beyond single individuals enables us to identify practices common to a variety of social groups ..." ¹⁶
- 11 Correspondence that continues over time allows for a deeper study of social relationships. The long-term offers historians the necessary tool to measure fluctuations and hierarchy in social relations within a group. We can determine the importance of an influence on multiple recipients and understand the events that emerge as a resource or as a hindrance to the letter writer.
- 12 Furthermore, correspondence provides personal information, which should complement biographies by bringing greater nuances and contrasts to the character of the person in the biography and his/her way of thinking. Letters also serve to highlight inconsistencies and incorrect interpretations, when they are used in addition to an iconographic study. Private writings can also be compared to literary publications by the same author. The letter and the book are very differ-

ent outlets and should be studied together to distinguish any potential manipulation of the writer's discourse.

- 13 A particularly significant example can be seen when comparing and contrasting an iconographic, literary and an epistolary source. In the course of 1907, Henry Farman, great cyclist and aviation pioneer, ordered an airplane from Gabriel Voisin, one of the first airplane manufacturers in France. An image of this time shows the two men posing in front of their plane, smiling. If we examined only this commercial partnership, rather encouraging at the time, and the images, their relationship may seem to have been cordial. In addition, when Gabriel Voisin published his book *Mes 10 000 cerfs volants* [My 10,000 kites], the words he writes about Farman always seem friendly: "In 1907, Henry Farman knew absolutely nothing about aviation, but he was, however, skilful, athletic and able to skilfully operate a combustion engine...For forty years, it was believed that Henry Farman was the engineer of the 1907-1908 machine."¹⁷ Yet in the letters Voisin wrote to his friend Charles Dollfus, Voisin mentions much more direct and harsh memories of Henry Farman: "I'll tell you nothing new by saying that H. Farman was a plagiarist and an ass. He had never even seen an airplane. We, Charles Voisin and I, taught him how to pilot his plane..."¹⁸
- 14 Clearly, comparing these three sources shows that personal writings can contradict public information conveyed by a photo and a book. It goes without saying that in the context of publishing his book, Gabriel Voisin could not make such statements about Farman, while in his private writings he could speak without barriers or fear of judgement.
- 15 Returning to the 'rebel character' of the private papers mentioned above, in this brief presentation of the uses of written correspondence, the limits imposed on the historian are evident. The letter is subject to the author's bad faith and manipulation of discourse. The writer's ability to control information greatly limits the accuracy that can be attributed to the information therein. Yet, when letter writers are writing almost every day and when it concerns a friendly relationship, they severely limit their conscious manipulations to make way for relative spontaneity in a consenting relationship. However, another characteristic of the letter writer needs to be considered when using correspondence: that of his/her status within a social

network, and in society. Of course, if the letter writer studied was a remarkable individual, such as a famous politician, an artist, or a high-profile personality, the historian must be on guard: the extraordinary letter writer takes into account the idea that information connected with him/her will be preserved. The example of George Clemenceau, who produced correspondence for about seventy years, reveals this important point. The fact that we now have his correspondence is because his status as a statesman, who became a legend during World War I, sparked within his correspondents the sense that his life, seen in these letters, would be preserved.

"Often heirs make themselves the architects of family memory, and are busy assembling and organizing pieces into a beautiful building that convinces others about of the success of their ancestors. Yet conversely, destruction or hiding sources, sometimes by these same architects, end up removing certain evidence deemed insignificant or embarrassing."¹⁹

- 16 For the Wright brothers, it is important to remember how their correspondence has come down to us. It was under the impetus of the Wright family that their biographer Fred Kelly (1882-1959) obtained the right to publish the letters written by Orville and Wilbur to each other and to their families, as well as those written to Octave Chanute (1832-1910), an American engineer and aviation pioneer. Kelly's publication focuses primarily on the careful construction of the path of the two inventors from 1900, date at which they come in contact with Chanute, and ends with the death of Orville Wright, who had done his best to maintain business dealings as well as the memory of their aeronautical achievements. Fred Kelly spoke about this publication in a statement to the American magazine *The Atlantic*: "I think that they are the most important unpublished letters now available anywhere in the world. They deal with a subject that has brought a greater effect on the world than anything since the discovery of America."²⁰
- 17 Obviously, the publication of letters of the Wrights was a memorial work and the construction of a symbol of the history of aviation. Aware of the technical impact of the invention of the airplane at the dawn of the twentieth century, the Wright family members sought a way to make the memory around the two inventors last a little longer,

as if their deaths might to carry away the memory of their exploits with them.

- 18 Present research, however, must break away from this almost hagiographic approach to focus on a more pragmatic study of the Wright brothers. Their correspondence will thus enable us to understand their position in the aviation social network at the time, as well as to measure the exchange of scientific information with their correspondents. These letters also reveal something about the emotional needs of both men, as well as their expectations towards their correspondents.

Epistolary Practices of the Wright Brothers (1900 to 1910)

- 19 The Wright brothers exchanged their first letters with important members of their family: their father, Bishop and their sister, Katherine. Later, when the two Americans began their aviation experiments, they sought contact with American scientists who were recognized in the field. After a first request for information from the Smithsonian Institute, a scientific body prepared to archive studies in aviation, the Wright brothers took the initiative to write to Octave Chanute. The latter was, at this time, an influential player in aviation. To this first association, they added a relationship with the engineer and pioneer Samuel Langley (1834-1906), who was already in contact with Chanute and who naturally joined this scientific association. Once this first American scientific cell was created, the Wrights would develop through it another much more diverse cell extending to Europe. They come in contact with German experimenters, the Lilienthal brothers and later, again thanks to Chanute, with the French Captain Ferdinand Ferber. This growth of scientific relations really took shape thanks to Chanute, who had many contacts in Europe. Finally, wishing to market their flying machine as a weapon of war, the Wright brothers would move much higher in the social sphere by developing contacts with members of the US and foreign military institutions.
- 20 This brief review of the relational structures of the Wright brothers allows us to determine the time and identity mechanisms for insertion into a social network. An individual will first correspond with

his/her family unit before gradually opening out concentrically to individuals who are increasingly unknown. One moves from the smallest to the largest and from the known to the unknown. Epistolary practice thus served as an essential tool at that time for building relationships from the known to the unknown. The social dynamics and relationships that emanated from these cells did not act the same way on the individual: the family unit provided an identity marker and an expression of intimacy, while the professional cell offered an exchange of resources between scientists and social recognition through an institution or an influential group. By counting the number of letters exchanged between the two cells, we can determine the expectations of the Wright brothers depending on their activities or travels.

Graph. 1.

Epistolary exchanges among the Wright brothers, their families, and Octave Chanute from the different letters published in the book written by Fred Kelly, *Miracle at Kitty Hawk*.

Credits: Author

- 22 Fred Kelly's publication does not identify the complete relationship from the Wright brothers. Yet we can note that the epistolary rhythms varied depending on the years as well as the interlocutors. In the relationship between Wilbur Wright and Octave Chanute (blue curve), between initial contact in 1900 and until 1902 was a phase in which the two men communicated regularly, but then spaced letters out over time. There was a slight decrease in 1903, contrasting with a rise in family relationships (green curves and burgundy), which is explained by the distance of the brothers, who were in Kitty Hawk, in the state of Ohio (USA) for their tests for five months. Later, between 1905 and 1907 was the culmination of the epistolary relationship between Wilbur Wright and Chanute. During this period, the two brothers completed their invention and conducted a successful trial at the end of 1905. This demonstrates Chanute's importance in advancing their aviation project. The need to communicate with the engineer can probably be explained by his position within their network, as well as by Wilbur Wright's need for his advice. Between 1900 and 1910, there are 93 letters by Wilbur addressed to Chanute, while the latter sent him only 18 letters although the figures do not exactly

reflect the exchanged letters. Finally, the last peaks correspond to Wilbur Wright's arrival in France, in June 1908, resulting in many epistolary exchanges with his family (his letters to Orville are not included in this count but they also represent a large part of Wilbur's exchanges during this period), but also by a clear drop in correspondence with Chanute. Starting from the trip to France, we can observe a gradual distancing of this major correspondent. Orville also developed a strong correspondence relationship with his family during his visit to Washington and to Europe in 1908.

- 23 This graph reveals two important things: the first is the recurrent need of both brothers to communicate and keep a direct relationship with their father and sister while the brothers were on the move, sometimes for quite a long time; the second shows the fluctuations of exchanges between Chanute and Wilbur Wright, which show that Chanute was not an indispensable interlocutor over the medium term. Indeed, he seems to have been solicited during an important period of making their invention, but once it was unveiled, Chanute seems to have lost any scientific attraction for the Wright brothers.

Letters to the father: identity markers and structure

- 24 Throughout their correspondence, the Wright brothers kept in fairly constant contact with their family. When temporarily leaving the city of Dayton, Ohio for their tests or travel abroad, Wilbur and Orville regularly wrote to their father, their sister, and, above all, they were sending letters to each other.
- 25 As we have seen, the correspondence between the Wright brothers and families took precedence over the others, depending on the circumstances. Sons of a pastor, the Wright brothers grew up in a family environment that was stable and conducive to personal development. From childhood, the brothers spent a lot of time together and forged strong links between them. Their sister, Katherine, was also a member of the family to whom they were strongly bound. Finally, their father, Bishop Wright, seemed very involved in the education of its children, and his status as the patriarch seems to have played a large role in his relationship with his sons.²¹

- 26 In letters written to his father, Wilbur often justified his professional orientations. Thus, he explains that he would rather be a teacher rather than a shopkeeper because of the intellectual effort involved and honourable lifestyle.²² Later, it was to his father that he explained that human flight was possible and that his growing interest in this project could perhaps lead him to fortune:

"It is my belief that flight is possible and, while I am taking up the investigation for pleasure rather than profit, I think there is a slight possibility of achieving fame and fortune from it. I can reach a point much in advance of any previous workers in this field even if complete success is not attained just at present. At any rate, I shall have an outing of several weeks and see a part of the world I have never before visited."²³

- 27 In this letter, we see aspects of Wilbur's personality that will continually be found in his letters until 1908. The man appears rather confident, ambitious, and perhaps even arrogant towards the precursors of aviation. Already in 1900, he claimed to have quickly solved the balance and motor problems of flying machines.²⁴ This rather ambitious nature is expressed mainly in the private letters at first. Indeed, Wilbur does not show himself to be as proud in his letters to Chanute during the first years of their correspondence. It was only much later, once their experiment was successful, that Wilbur expresses his ambition in his other letters.
- 28 The father of the Wright brothers showed a real interest in his sons and their aviation experiments, but also showed himself to be rather concerned about the risks they ran. Several times, Wilbur had to reassure his father about their experiments at Kitty Hawk in autumn: "The new machine is also much more controllable than any heretofore built so the danger is correspondingly reduced. We are being very careful and will avoid accident of serious nature if possible."²⁵ Later, when Wilbur was shipping his machine to France in the hope of proving his technological progress, Bishop Wright expresses real moral support for his son, by elevating him to a rank heretofore unequalled in the scientific world: "Your death or even becoming a cripple or an invalid, would seriously affect the progress of aeronautical science. Soon, others can do the flying, but you have a field for truth and science that no one else can fill."²⁶ In his personal diary,

Bishop Wright wrote that his eldest son had "an unfailing intellect, imperturbable temper."²⁷

- 29 In most of the letters exchanged between them, the paternal influence seems very important in fuelling the son's ambition in his new experiments. Bishop Wright transmitted beliefs and expectations to his children that probably played a large role in building their identity. Above all, he believed in their aviation experiments, which allowed the Wright brothers to be free from any social pressure from the scepticism surrounding aeronautical testing at that time. Thus, we can already grasp the conditions under which the Wright brothers embarked on this adventure. However, additional letters of the Wright brothers, those addressed to persons outside their families, highlight other characteristics of the two brothers. Thanks to Octave Chanute, the Wright brothers come into contact with other pioneers. From 1902, they corresponded with Ferdinand Ferber (1862-1909), a military man and French aviation enthusiast who wanted to learn more about the Americans' tests. Between the brothers, Chanute and Ferber what might be called an epistolary triangle was established, in which the three groups exchanged various resources, and spoke and acted according to circumstances.

Wilbur Wright, Octave Chanute and Ferdinand Ferber: An Epistolary Triangle

"I have a letter from Capt. Ferber of Nice France, who has made some glides himself on a Lilienthal machine. He says that he is in a state of admiration of your performances and wishes me to convey his felicitations."²⁸

- 30 Ferber writes first to Octave Chanute before starting his correspondence with Wright brothers. His inclusion in a relationship with the Americans shows something about their position in the aviation world at the time. The French captain showed admiration for the Wrights' experiments and was very interested in their research. He mentioned all the experiments he had been able to do and was not miserly in sharing information. However, the Wrights proved to be

more distant and especially more secretive in the disclosure of their research. However, they agreed to establish contact with Ferber and even offered to make him a machine in the winter of 1903 in order to train him in handling the *Flyer*.²⁹ Yet, this project fell into oblivion and other exchanges brought the Wrights and Ferber closer.

- 31 Reading Wilbur's letters to Chanute shows that Ferber gave them important information about the impact of their experiments in France. It should be recalled here that the Wrights carefully kept their tests and their results secret, and had been regarded with doubt for some years: "The last sentence of Capt. Ferber's letter is a pretty broad hint that in France the Americans are not believed..."³⁰ These discussions began to challenge the Wrights and rub against their pride. Ferber therefore reported what the French were saying, which was scepticism towards them. The Wrights then acted particularly hostile and critical towards the French experimenters, as seen in their letters to Chanute: "We regard all such imitations with great amusement and satisfaction. They present the best possible proof of the low state of the art in France at this time..."³¹

- 32 Yet it was with the French military that the Wrights would try to market their flyer. Ferber, taking advantage of his military position, became an intermediary in negotiations. These agreements were conducted with the utmost secrecy, and Ferber increasingly lost the major role he had given himself. Thus, he began to assert himself as a competitor of the Wrights:

"Tell me the price you have asked for your flyer. Only, I should tell you that, considering the progress that I have made since June, the government is no longer willing to pay as high a figure as in February 1904, or even in May 1905, the dates of my last two letters."³²

- 33 Tensions begin to be felt and the breaking point of relations between the Wrights and Ferber occurred at the beginning of 1906, first when Ferber published a letter from the Wrights in the newspaper *L'Aérophile*, and then, when negotiations with the French government failed. "We regard the publication by Capt. Ferber of our private letter to him of November 4th as simply outrageous...while striking out all embarrassing references to his "bluff", and making other changes in the letter."³³

34 This letter referred to European tensions and difficult relations with Germany and Austria-Hungary in the early twentieth century. The Wrights had seen in this context an opportunity to sell their equipment as engine of war. But the brothers considered this inappropriate publication as an offense, firstly because it was a private letter that apparently had been modified by Ferber, and secondly, because it divulged information that the Wrights had been careful not to disclose to the press. Here, we see the influence that letters could have, but it also offered an opportunity to undermine its writer. Wilbur Wright considered Ferber responsible for the failure of their negotiations: "[Ferber] became infected by ambition and was largely responsible for the failure of the final negotiations in March 1906. Since then, he has done everything he could to stop us from doing business here."³⁴

35 In his diary, Wilbur reveals his deep resentment towards Ferber. It seems that these words remained private, because there is no reference to them in his letters. However, as surprising as it may seem, Ferber continued to publicly show his admiration of Wilbur Wright. "Just think that without this man, I would be nothing...without him, my experiments would not have happened..."³⁵ Yet just a few years after he made this statement, Ferber reflected on the negotiations between the Wrights and France in a book written shortly before his death:

"They would have done better therefore to accept the 600,000 francs free from commission offered by the government. The whole story is worth telling. It will inform those interested in the history of inventions and serve as a lesson to those who believe too easily that it is enough to have made a discovery of genius for the public to notice."³⁶

36 Clearly, the time for expressing admiration was over. Ferber created this work in order to collect all his knowledge and experience about human flight and he, apparently, felt the need to remind others of the Wrights' impudence in believing that their genius would dazzle the entire world. As described in Figure 1, relational fluctuations in this epistolary triangle inform us about mechanisms of controversy. First, Chanute kept positive relationships with his two interlocutors, including when Ferber and Wright had a falling out. Chanute probably

played a fairly neutral role in the tensions mentioned above. Yet, he was often very realistic with the Wrights, regularly making them aware that they were not the only ones to achieve satisfactory results in the field of human flight. Chanute was aware of French progress and always showed his support for Ferber by continuing his correspondence with him. Second, Ferber's arrival in the Wrights' circle enabled him to introduce some French competition into the very closed universe of the Americans. This latent competition certainly caused some annoyance in the Wrights, who expressed criticism against the French. In the end, these individuals expressed sentiments of varying degrees of explicitness depending on the media through which they spoke. Wilbur did not make the same remarks about Ferber in his letters to Chanute and in his diary, and in the same way, Ferber adapted his remarks according to whether he addressed the press or in his book.

- 37 We can also assume that the relationship between Wrights and Chanute enabled the brothers' experiments to receive a credible response in the aviation world. Chanute helped keep the Wrights in a reality they denied and from which they seemed to want to protect themselves.

Figure 1:

- 38 [Image non convertible] Triangle of epistolary relations 1902-1906
Credits: Author

The Wright brothers and the French: the Letter and the Media Frenzy

- 39 Some events caused sometimes surprising reactions in the Wright brothers, as revealed by their correspondence. The first was the creation in France of the Deutsch Archdeacon Prize in 1905 in order to reward the first aviator who would manage to achieve a closed 1 km circuit. Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe (1846-1919) and Ernest Archdeacon (1863-1950), two important French patrons and aviation and

motorsport enthusiasts, financed this prize in the hope of promoting aviation. They also sought to encourage competitive sport in which they hope to attract the Wright brothers. Since 1905, the brothers had accumulated exploits and during the winter, managed to achieve an extraordinary performance by flying a distance of 38 km.

"That the French experiments in gliding were not altogether satisfactory was inferred from a rather amusing letter which we received from Mr. Archdeacon a short time ago...They are evidently learning that the first steps in aviation are much more difficult than the beginnings of dirigible ballooning...They have much to learn. ³⁷"

40 Apparently, according to Wilbur, Archdeacon made contact with him and sent alarming reports about aeronautical trials in France. However, the latter actually showed himself to be very publicly involved with the French experimenters, which he expressed very clearly by financing the Deutsch-Archdeacon prize, and also by speaking with the press. Moreover, in a speech published in the newspaper *L'Aérophile*, Archdeacon directly attacked the Wright brothers: "I also take the liberty of reminding you that there is, in France, a modest prize of 500,000 francs, named the Deutsch-Archdeacon prize. Certainly it would not tire you too much to make a short trip to France, just to pick up this 'small prize.'" ³⁸

41 Obviously, he showed a competitive and strong attitude towards the Wrights. In the course of their correspondence, the American brothers clearly displayed their contempt of the French experiments, which they deemed too far behind in aeronautical advances. They also did not seem to appreciate Archdeacon's attitude fiercely defending the French experiments: "We do not believe there is one chance in a hundred that any one will have a machine of the least practical usefulness within five years." ³⁹ They also wrote, "it seems almost ridiculous that the French have never made any success at gliding in all these years." ⁴⁰ And finally, the devastating judgement: "In the matter of wind their experiments will not compare at all with ours." ⁴¹

42 All these letters written to Chanute enable us to measure the mood of Wrights during this period when tempers were flaring around the French sports announcements. Moreover, Chanute's responses reveal

his role in all this agitation. He tempered spirits and kept in mind that the French were true competitors not to be taken lightly: "... but are you not too cock-sure that yours is the only secret worth knowing and that others may not hit upon a solution in less than 'many time five years ?'"⁴² A few days later, he wrote, "I suppose you realize that Esnault Pelterie, Ferber, Blériot and Voisin, Barlatier and Blanc... are also experimenting with dynamic flying machines."⁴³

43 Chanute continued to show them his support, but he kept his eyes open towards other experimenters could catch up very quickly to the Wrights. Moreover, in January 1908, the Wrights faced a new event that would cause them to react strongly. On 8 January 1908, Henry Farman accomplished a real aeronautical achievement by winning the Deutsch-Archdeacon Prize after completing a 1 km flight on a closed course. This performance was remarkably publicized and relayed by all the newspapers of the time. As Wilbur writes, "The troubles of the French experimenters made us much more trouble than their successes by throwing more and more doubt on the practicability of any aeroplane. If Farman should be killed by a fall, it would injure us to the extent of thousands of dollars, we believe."⁴⁴

44 Once again, correspondence enables us to measure the impact of an event in the life of the Wright brothers and the differences in perception of aviation practice. They describe the French experiments as a hindrance to their business affairs, because they displayed a precarious picture of aviation innovation. Farman's exploit, seen through the letters of Wrights, allows us to understand the differences in the motivations of the two groups. The Wright brothers were confident about their machine and were determined to sell it as a mature innovation. The French, meanwhile, were still in the dynamics of feats of flying and sought performance in the sporting experience. The Wright brothers were resistant to the idea of exposing their achievements in the press, while the French had a more thorough knowledge of the advantages of the sports press. This media exposure of Farman's performance occurred along with renewed confidence, about which Archdeacon would again be the spokesperson: "It is not now that we could admit that these foreigners, called the Wright brothers, will end up being able one day, here or elsewhere, to show us that they have truly surpassed us."⁴⁵

- 45 For Archdeacon, the Wrights no longer had the monopoly on aviation technology. They had had the opportunity to prove to the world that they could fly their aircraft over several kilometres, but they could no longer deny the official performance of Farman, which marked a watershed in the history of aviation. These events surely pushed the Wright brothers to take the step to go to France to make their experiments official. In June 1908, Wilbur took premises in the city of Le Mans, supported by a local industrialist, Léon Bollée. He then embarked on official flights in order to promote the capabilities of his aircraft and make it marketable.⁴⁶ It was during this period that Wilbur abandoned his correspondence with Chanute and privileged corresponding with his brother and father who had remained in the United States.
- 46 In this correspondence, we see how Wilbur experienced this intense period in which he found himself much in demand by the press and by the French pioneers. He had to put aside the pride seen in his letters and face the people he had criticized for years. Surprising as it sounds, the letters he wrote to his brother were sometimes filled with good impressions about certain pioneers. Wilbur was pleasantly surprised by the generosity shown by the French: "Bleriot called the other morning and offered us his shop at Neuilly and his shed at Issy if we wished to use them. A more friendly spirit is being manifested on all sides."⁴⁷ A few weeks later, he wrote, "The people of Le Mans are exceedingly friendly and proud of the fame it is giving their town."⁴⁸
- 47 It is clear that the meeting the actors in person counteracted the prejudices that some aviators had of others. It was the end of illusions and speaking through intermediaries. Now the men met, exchanged, admired each other, and felt a mutual respect hitherto nonexistent.
- 48 Thus, the Wright brothers' letters enable us to understand how they experienced French aviation events, as well as the change of opinion when Wilbur met the French pioneers. While he maintained a certain complacency towards the other aviators, he was charmed by the attentions he had received on his arrival in France. As he was quite reluctant to express himself through the press, there are few public documents in which Wilbur spoke freely. The letters written to his brother during this time shed light on his personality and feelings.

They are therefore essential for understanding the importance of the Wrights in the world of aviation, and for measuring the impact of meetings in person between actors who had previously only spoken through intermediaries and indirectly.

Conclusion

- 49 It is necessary to live with the pilot, or indeed with the whole crew, to be able to appreciate the feats and courage of these men, even though we may regret their imprudence or disapprove of their obstinacy. If we could do so, we would appreciate even more these pioneers, who had the right balance between reason, which alone can dominate, and audacity, without which many achievements would have been impossible, and this regardless of their success or failure. We must eventually turn to personal correspondence to gauge their feelings.⁴⁹
- 50 As André Turcat suggests, the feat of human flight must be experienced through closer contact with the men involved and their personal correspondence, which provides opportunities to better understand the sense of these daring men of genius who were the pioneers of aviation. Following this study, several uses have been identified for correspondence in social and cultural research on aviation actors. Through the example of the Wrights, we have seen that the epistolary practices followed fairly straightforward social mechanics. Initially, letters focused on the close relations of the letter writer, to then extend towards increasingly unknown individuals. Correspondence allows us to measure the resources exchanged as well as the impact of certain events on the lives of the letter writer. By comparing these documents to other sources, such as books, diaries and newspaper articles, it is clear that communication practices varied with the intention that the person wanted to express. For the Wright brothers, the press and publications were not appropriate channels because of their desire to preserve their secret tests. This attitude contrasts with that of the French such as Ferber and Archdeacon, who made their experiments official through the press and aviation associations. For the Wrights, their letters help us to understand their position within this social group that they had refused to enter before 1908.

Driven by pride and genius, they felt animosity towards other aviation actors, and only their correspondence reveals this.

- 51 Thus, epistolary sources offer new avenues for studying the actors in aviation, revealing the striking personalities of these geniuses of the twentieth century. Far from the perfect and legendary images projected in the biographies of aviation enthusiasts, personal writings allow us to access a more human dimension in which we find ordinary men, who are sometimes carried by the energy of their inventions, and sometimes stained by vanity. Going through the letters of the Wrights reveals aspects of the personalities of the men behind the documents. Wilbur Wright was the most active letter writer of the two, revealing facets of his personality that qualify his genius. Yet, what we must remember about correspondence is that it introduces into research the imperfections of men and women and truths that are sometimes embarrassing, but essential for social and cultural history.

NOTES

- 1 Wilbur Wright (16 April 1867 – 30 May 1912) and Orville Wright (19 August 1871 – 30 January 1948).
- 2 Ernest Labrousse (1895-1988), French historian specialised in economic and social history.
- 3 M. Huum, 'Histoire culturelle et histoire sociale', *Saeculum* 61/II, 2010, 15.
- 4 C. Charle, 'Histoire sociale, histoire globale ?', *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, n°23, July-September 1989, 125.
- 5 "... des fils invisibles relient aujourd'hui des millions de personnes qui ne se connaissent pas [...] étudier ces formes d'interdépendance et de montrer comment elles affectent les relations de face à face. " In G. Noiriel, *Introduction à la socio histoire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), 4.
- 6 Everyday history.
- 7 C. Lipp, 'Histoire sociale et *Alltagsgeschichte*', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 106-107, March 1995, 66.
- 8 D. Chabaud Rychter, V. Descoutures, A. M. Devreux, E. Varikas, *Sous les sciences sociales, les genres* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), 183.

- 9 J. Revel, *Jeux d'échelles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 13.
- 10 M. Vovelle, *De la cave au grenier* (Québec: Serge Fleury Éditions, 1980).
- 11 Huum, *Op. Cit.* 18.
- 12 C. Dauphin, 'Les correspondances comme objet historique, un travail sur les limites', *Sociétés et représentations*, 2002/1, n°13, 45.
- 13 B. Diaz, *L'Epistolaire ou la pensée nomade* (Paris: PUF, 2002).
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Dauphin, *Op. Cit.* 47.
- 16 Dauphin, *Op. Cit.* 45.
- 17 G. Voisin, *Mes 10 000 cerfs volants* (Nîmes: Éditions du Palmier, 2011), 173.
- 18 'Letter from Gabriel Voisin to Charles Dollfus, 27th January 1964', (Le Bourget: Gabriel Voisin collection, Archives du musée de l'air et de l'Espace).
- 19 Dauphin, *Op. Cit.* 45.
- 20 F. Kelly, 'Miracle at Kitty Hawk : unpublished letters of Wright brothers (Part 1)', 1 May 1950, *The Atlantic* [online journal] <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1950/05/miracle-at-kitty-hawk-unpublished-letters-of-the-wright-brothers-part-i/306537/> [consulted 13th November 2014].
- 21 F. Kelly, *The Wright brothers* (New York: Dover publication Inc, 1943), 15.
- 22 'Wilbur Wright to Bishop Wright, 12th September 1894', in F. Kelly, *Miracle at Hawk: the letters of Orville and Wilbur Wright* (New York: Da Capo Press Inc, 2002), 9.
- 23 'Wilbur Wright to Bishop Wright, 3rd September 1900', *Ibid.*, 27.
- 24 'Wilbur Wright to Bishop Wright, 23th September 1900', *Ibid.*, 30.
- 25 'Wilbur Wright to Bishop Wright, 2nd October 1902', *Ibid.*, 79.
- 26 'Bishop Wright to Wilbur Wright, 2nd August 1908', *Ibid.*, 288.
- 27 'Bishop Wright, excerpt from his diary', *Op. Cit.* 388.
- 28 'Octave Chanute to Wilbur Wright, 13 February 1902', *Ibid.*, 61-62.
- 29 'Wilbur Wright to Octave Chanute, 29th March 1903', *Ibid.*, 88.
- 30 'Wilbur Wright to Octave Chanute, 6th May 1905', *Ibid.* 140.
- 31 'Wilbur to Octave Chanute, 6th May 1905', *Ibid.*, 140.
- 32 'Ferdinand Ferber to Wilbur Wright, 21st October 1905', *Ibid.*, 130- 131.

- 33 'Wilbur Wright to Octave Chanute, 31st January 1906', *Ibid.*, 170.
- 34 'Wilbur Wright excerpt from his diary', in C. Carlier, *les frères Wright et la France, la saga des premiers vols* (Paris: Economica, 2008), 208. The passages of the Wright brothers in Carlier's book seem to be based on unpublished archival sources which were unavailable at the time of writing. Thus, these citations have been translated back into English by the translator and may differ slightly from the exact wording used by the brothers.
- 35 'Ferdinand Ferber to George Besançon, June 1907, *L'Aérophile*', *Ibid.*, 207.208.
- 36 'Ferdinand Ferber, excerpt from *L'Aviation, ses débuts, son développement*', *Ibid.*, 215.
- 37 'Wilbur Wright to Octave Chanute, 12th April 1905', in Kelly, *Miracle at Kitty Hawk*, *Op. Cit.* 137-138.
- 38 'Ernest Archdeacon, speech published in the newspaper *L'Aéronaute*', in Carlier, *Op. Cit.* 136.
- 39 'Wilbur Wright to Octave Chanute, 10th October 1906', in Kelly, *Op. Cit.* 181.
- 40 'Wilbur Wright to Octave Chanute, 18th November 1906', *Ibid.*, 190.
- 41 'Orville Wright to Octave Chanute, 8th June 1907', *Ibid.*, 213.
- 42 'Octave Chanute to Wilbur Wright, 15th October 1906', in Kelly, *Op. Cit.* 182.
- 43 'Octave Chanute to Wilbur Wright, 1st november 1906', in Carlier, *Op. Cit.* 197.
- 44 'Wilbur Wright to Octave Chanute, 27th January 1908', in Kelly, *Op. Cit.* 251.
- 45 'Ernest Archdeacon, excerpt from *L'Aérophile*, 1st February 1908', in Carlier, *Op. Cit.* 219.
- 46 For more information about the arrival of Wilbur Wright in France, see H. Guyomard and J. L. Ribemon, *Wilbur Wright, l'homme oiseau hôte de l'Aéro Club de la Sarthe* (Mulsanne: ITF, 2008).
- 47 'Wilbur to Orville Wright, 14th June 1908', in Kelly, *Op. Cit.* 271.
- 48 'Wilbur to his father, Bishop Wright, 15th August 1908', *Ibid.*, 294.
- 49 André Turcat, preface to Bernard Thouanel, *100 ans d'aviation* (Paris: Michel Lafon, MAE, 2003), 7.

RÉSUMÉS

English

This article is a presentation about interests and practices with private archive for social and cultural history. This kind of documents opens new perspectives for historical methodology as well as new paths for investigation in the field of personal history. Here we try to understand their usefulness and importance in the study of social networks in the beginning of the 20th century. Through the letters of the Wright brothers, who were the first to fly in Ohio in 1905, we can explain their function in the aeronautic network before 1914, as well as we can understand the position of this network among other aviation pioneers.

Français

Dans cet article, nous porterons une réflexion sur les intérêts et les usages des sources privées, et plus particulièrement des correspondances pour l'histoire sociale et culturelle. Nous chercherons à comprendre dans quelle mesure elles s'imposent comme un outil indispensable à l'étude des réseaux sociaux, et de quelle façon elles répondent aux besoins méthodologiques de l'histoire de l'individu. À travers l'exemple des correspondances des frères Wright, nous reviendrons sur l'importance de leurs interlocuteurs et le rôle qu'ils ont pu jouer dans la vie des deux inventeurs. Enfin, nous chercherons à comprendre, grâce à leurs lettres, leur perception du monde aéronautique à l'aube du XX^e siècle et leur statut au sein de ce milieu.

INDEX

Mots-clés

Pionniers, Aviation, Correspondance, Histoire sociale, Histoire culturelle, France, États-Unis d'Amérique.

Keywords

Pioneers, Aviation, Correspondence, Social history, Cultural history, France, USA.

AUTEUR

Andréa Seignier

Phd student Laboratoire Framespa UMR 5136. Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès andrea.seignier@wanadoo.fr

TRADUCTEUR

Cynthia Johnson