



Preston Watson: The Pioneer Flying Achievements of

Alastair W. Blair, Alistair Smith

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At the turn of the nineteenth century, what was to become the aviation industry was the preserve of a few enthusiastic amateurs whose ambition to be the first to fly like the birds bordered on obsession. The Wright brothers in America, Otto Lillienthal, Percy Pilcher and others had brought matters to the cusp of success. Preston Watson was born in Dundee in 1881 and from an early age showed an innovative interest in developing a flying machine that could take off and land under its own power. While records are incomplete, many believe that Watson beat the Wright brothers into the air by a margin of months in 1903. His wood and wire machine was hoisted by ropes and weights into a tree and catapulted, with the engine running. He flew 100-140 yards before landing. His subsequent two machines aimed to improve this performance. He is credited with inventing the joystick – the idea is still in use in every aircraft today. Whoever was the first to fly is not the object of this book but to record the hitherto unsung efforts of this son of Dundee whose short life – he died at the age of thirty-four – had a marked influence on the history of aviation.

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