



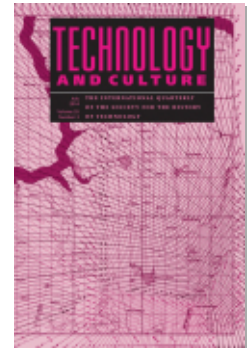
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Airship Design, Development, and Disaster by John Swinfield (review)

Tom D. Crouch

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influenced the development of electrical technologies. It properly acknowledges that increasingly sophisticated knowledge of electrical science played a role in the creation of these devices. Yet, by highlighting the struggles between casually trained inventors and formally educated and socially esteemed specialists, the book emphasizes that much more goes into technological innovation than previous scientific achievements.

RICHARD HIRSH

A professor of history and science and technology studies at Virginia Tech, Richard F. Hirsh writes and speaks extensively about the history and management of the electric utility system.

Airship Design, Development, and Disaster.

By John Swinfield. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012.
Pp. 352. \$45.95.

John Swinfield has given us a good book with a misleading title. Readers might assume that this volume is an overview history of the airship, from Henri Giffard's first minimally successful craft of 1852 through the modern enthusiast's dream of reviving the golden age of the great rigid airships. Instead, the author covers the early history of the airship in France and Germany in three pages, devotes just twenty-one of his 352 pages to all U.S. blimps and semi-rigid and rigid airships, and rushes through the story of the *Graf Zeppelin* and *Hindenburg* in ten pages.

What Swinfield does provide is a solid and very readable history of the rise and fall of the British airship. He opens with an account of the early history of the subject, 1906–13, from the pioneering efforts of Ernest Thompson Willows and the American expatriate Samuel Cowdery (aka Samuel Cody) to the Admiralty's first venture into the field of rigid airships, *Mayfly*, or "Won't fly," as Winston Churchill famously quipped, a craft which broke in two as it was being taken out of its hangar for its first flight (p. 36).

If the round-trip transatlantic flight of R-34 in 1919 seemed to herald the coming of an age in which British rigid airships would establish passenger air routes across the oceans of the world, the loss of the R-38, which broke up over the Humber two years later, underscored the dangers of airship operations. At a time when the airplane was still unable to carry large numbers of passengers or heavy payloads over long distances, however, the airship offered the only immediate hope for establishing transatlantic air routes, or of binding the far-flung corners of the empire by air.

The author provides a detailed account of the evolution of what would become known as the Imperial Airship Scheme, from a gleam in the eye of Commander Sir Charles Dennistoun Burney to the destruction of R-101 in a crash on a French hillside in 1930. It is a tangled tale in which, he notes, "Ambition outstripped capability" and "Wretched politics played its part"

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VOL. 55

(p. 245). The initial plan was for the Airship Guarantee Company, a government-subsidized division of Vickers, to operate a transoceanic civil airline using airships. When a Labor government replaced the Tories in 1923, the new air minister, Lord Thomson, proposed an alternative Imperial Airship Scheme, in which the Vickers operation would develop and operate R-100, while the Air Ministry would direct the design, construction, and operation of the R-101. Newspapers and the public focused on what was now described as a race between a “capitalist” airship and its “socialist” rival.

Swinfield presents a colorful cast of characters. There is the legendary George Herbert Scott, who piloted the R-34 on its double Atlantic crossing, and maintained a heroic image in spite of his reputation as a drinker. Sir William Sefton Brancker, the director of Civil Aviation, could bring any party to life by swallowing his monocle; he carried a pocketful of spares. The brilliant engineer Barnes Wallis, who led the development of R-100, “never allowed diplomacy to inhibit his opinion” (p. 196). His able assistant, engineer/novelist Neville Norway Shute, provided a colorful, if opinionated, account of the dual effort in his autobiographical book *Slide Rule* (1954). Lord Thomson, Scott, and Brancker were among the forty-seven who lost their lives in the crash of R-101, an event that cast a pall over the successful Atlantic crossing of Wallis and Shute’s R-100, and brought the era of the British rigid airship to an end.

This volume will not replace Robin Higham’s classic, *The British Rigid Airship, 1908–1931* (1961), but it is a highly readable re-telling that draws on new interviews and previously unpublished personal correspondence. The book deserves a place on the shelves of both the airship enthusiast and the serious student of the subject. It is fully annotated and well-illustrated, and offers a useful bibliography of works on British airship history.

TOM D. CROUCH

Tom D. Crouch is senior curator, Aeronautics, with the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum and the author of more than fifteen books on the history of flight technology.

Flickering Light: A History of Neon.

By Christoph Ribbat, trans. Anthony Mathews. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. Pp. 208. \$30.

A quarter-century ago I realized that there was no good scholarly study of neon lighting. Christoph Ribbat’s *Flickering Light: A History of Neon* begins to fill this gap, but a small-format book of 168 well-illustrated pages cannot be a definitive study. Ribbat is professor of American studies at the University of Paderborn and this work is a translation of *Flackernde Moderne: Die Geschichte des Neonlichts* (Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011). He provides good examples from Germany, Britain, and France, although the