

Was New Zealander first in flying
machine?
Wright brothers' title contested
'Mad' Pearse may have flown earlier

BILL TAYLOR
STAFF REPORTER

The kiwi, national symbol of New Zealand, is a bird that cannot fly.

How ironic that a New Zealander — a Kiwi — may have been first to solve
the riddle of flight.

A sensitive, artistic man who refused to walk the path his parents set him on.
A man forced to retreat behind
high hedges by neighbours who feared he was beholden to the devil.

A prophet still without total honour in his own country.

The Wright Brothers? Orville-and-Wilbur-Come-Lately, say the people who
believe Richard Pearse flew
several times as the brothers worked on their Flyer in their Ohio bicycle shop.

Whatever the truth, 2003 sees one of the last and greatest of the great
centenaries, the 100th anniversary of
powered flight.

There are photographs and exact data to prove that Orville Wright made a 12-
second, 36.6-metre flight at Kill
Devil Hills, North Carolina, Dec. 17, 1903.

There's nothing but a handful of informally collected eyewitness accounts to
confirm Pearse's first flight. Few
people outside New Zealand have heard of the reclusive farmer and self-
taught engineer from the remote
community of Waitohi on the South Island. He was born there in 1877 and
died of a heart attack in
Christchurch in 1953. He'd been confined to a psychiatric hospital for two
years, suffering from paranoia.

He was forgotten even in his homeland until the remains of his third and last
aircraft were found in a
Christchurch garage some years after his death.

Researchers believe that on or about March 31, 1903, "Mad Pearse," also
known as "Bamboo Dick" for his

building material of choice, flew for about 140 metres before his plane crashed into the gorse hedge surrounding the farm that he never wanted and always neglected. He'd let the hedge grow almost four metres high and seven metres wide to keep out a skeptical world.

"Even now, not everyone here shares the admiration for him," says his great-nephew Jeff, on the phone from the house where Pearse was born and raised. "New Zealand is still a young country and it's a ... funny country. They tend to doubt themselves. People are as keen to disbelieve as to believe."

The family house is now on Pearse Rd., "but don't read too much into that. The Crombies live on Crombie Rd. Still, there is a Richard Pearse Drive and a Richard Pearse Airport."

Pearse was featured on New Zealand's millennium postage stamps with such pioneers as Sir Edmund Hillary, first to climb Everest, and Ernest Rutherford, first to split the atom.

Enthusiasts hope to fly a replica of Pearse's plane near the original site March 31. Wind-tunnel tests suggest it'll be like piloting a modern ultralight.

He never claimed to have truly beaten the Wright brothers, saying he hadn't met his own exacting standards for "proper ... sustained and controlled flight." His descents were too erratic and his plane, he wrote to the Christchurch Star in 1928, wasn't fast enough to steer effectively. "I had successful navigation within my grasp ... but I decided to give up the struggle as it was useless to try to compete against the men who had factories at their backs."

"At no point did Richard have an agenda to be the first to fly," says Jeff. "But he had this extraordinary vision of what flight could be. He wanted to fly to Temuka, 15 kilometres away."

Pearse's machine was in some ways more advanced than the first Wright Flyer. It had "tricycle" landing gear with a nose wheel, at least 20 years ahead of its time; wheels rather than skids; one wing rather than two; and ailerons for steering similar to those used in modern aircraft. The Wright brothers used "wing warping," twisting

the wing to change the flow of air over it. The engine in Pearse's plane was considerably lighter than the Wrights' engine.

"There wasn't a single car in the district, no internal combustion, so he had to figure it out for himself," says Jeff.

"He had to think of a propeller that would work. There was nothing to copy. He had to do a lot of experimentation and all on his own. He had no training or education, except for the local school."

The final proof of his achievement remains tantalisingly elusive. Pearse injured his collarbone crashing into the hedge. The hospital records were destroyed in a fire. Someone took a photo of his aircraft in the hedge. It was lost in a flood.

Dr. Peter Jakab, a curator at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C., doesn't deny that Pearse got off the ground. "But what he flew was essentially a powered glider flying into a ravine. So it wasn't a true powered flight. He's just one of many pre-Wright claimants."

Geoff Rodliffe, author of a biography of Pearse, says the evidence points to five flights between March and July 10, 1903.

"Enough people, up to 18 or 20 at a time, saw him airborne to put it, I believe, beyond doubt that he flew several times that year," says Rodliffe from his home in Auckland.

"Few people wrote down what they saw. But I've talked to a number of people who saw him fly. I knew two of his younger sisters quite well.

"Pearse was totally driven. His life could have been very different. He was chased by a girl for several years. She wanted to marry him and have lots of children. But he wouldn't. Finally there was a tearful scene and ... he was on his own after that."

Jeff Pearse's father, 86, is named after his uncle. "He remembers visiting Richard in Christchurch, remembers him as a guy full of scientific knowledge, talking in engineering terms, talking about planes."

Pearse, who once built a bamboo-framed bicycle, also used bamboo for his aircraft frame. Other materials and engine parts were salvaged junk, including tobacco tins.

"He'd order his bamboo from Auckland and then cycle to Temuka and bring it back over his shoulder on his bike," says Jeff.

As a boy, Pearse devised a mechanical needle-threader for his mother and a "zoetrope" for his sisters that flicked still pictures to produce moving images.

He never wanted to be a farmer. But his parents, who had nine children — enough for a family orchestra in which Richard played the cello — couldn't afford engineering school. On his 21st birthday, his father gave him 40 hectares to farm. He stayed with agriculture for 13 years, plodding behind a horse-drawn plough with his head buried in a science magazine.

During early ground tests, Pearse was seen steering his plane with horse-reins. If his fields were too wet he used the road by his farm. This is where he supposedly took off on his first flight.

One account says he wheeled the plane down to the crossroads by the school and, as a small crowd gathered, tried to start the engine.

It was late afternoon when the aircraft lurched into the air. It veered to the left but kept climbing before crashing into the hedge.

Witnesses have said later flights took off from a small hill. Some reportedly were as short as 15 metres, others up to 400 metres with Pearse landing on a partly dried-up river bed. Engine parts and a propeller have been found there.

One of Pearse's neighbours, Arthur Tozer, was crossing the river in a wagon when Pearse reportedly made his third flight, spooking Tozer and his horses by roaring low over their heads.

"He never got the mix right for sustained controlled flight over a distance," says Jeff. "There's absolutely no doubt that he was airborne for some distance. But the degree of control ... some people who saw him fly said

he circled the paddock twice, others that he simply kept veering off to one side."

Parts of the plane, including the undercarriage, are on display in Auckland's Museum of Transport and Technology. A replica of the plane was built in the 1970s and exhibited at Expo 86 in Vancouver.

Pearse built a bigger aircraft around 1907 but it's believed to have been too difficult to control to ever have left the ground.

Pearse worked on his third and final aircraft, also on display in the technology museum, between 1928 and 1947. It was designed for vertical take-off and landing. He envisioned it as "the private plane for the millions," bringing aviation to anyone who could afford a car. It never got off the ground.

The gorse hedges in Waitohi are gone, says Jeff, and none of the farm buildings remain.

"This house is pretty much the same. But where he flew, there's nothing any more to see."