



No Ordinary Being: W. Starling Burgess (1878-1947), a Biography

Llewellyn Howland III

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The long-awaited, fully illustrated biography of an authentic American polymath.

Few twentieth-century Americans lived a more creative, event-filled, and often conflicted life than the Boston-born aviation pioneer and yacht designer W. Starling Burgess. Orphaned at twelve, Burgess received his first patent at nineteen, left Harvard, and, following the suicide of the first of his five wives, published a book of poetry at twenty-four. Among his children was the celebrated author-artist Tasha Tudor.

After launching his career as a yacht designer, Burgess built the first airplane to fly the skies of New England (in 1910) and was selected as the sole manufacturer of aircraft under the Wright Brothers' patents. He received the prestigious Collier Trophy "for the greatest progress in aviation." His company was a primary supplier of both civilian and military aircraft before the main factory in Marblehead burned to the ground in 1918.

After World War I, Burgess returned to his first love, yacht design, drafting the lines for three successive Gloucester fishing schooners to compete against Canadian entries for the International Fishermen's Trophy and in 1924 introduced the staysail rig on the all-but-unbeatable schooner yacht *Advance*. He later designed the three acclaimed America's Cup-winners: the J-Class sloops *Enterprise* (1930), *Rainbow* (1934), and *Ranger* (1937). In 1933, he collaborated with R. Buckminster Fuller to design and create the revolutionary Dymaxion automobile.

Although an occasional morphine user (Burgess was successfully treated for chronic ulcers on the eve of World War II), he enjoyed some of his most productive years as a naval architect and inventor doing top secret anti-submarine work for the Navy and Air Force. Burgess was a personality of enormous charm, physical courage, and energy. He was also, as his son lamented, "a child who will not face hard facts, but will hide from them and will love the person who shields him from them." The tension between his personal and professional life had consequences both disturbing and tragic-and provides answers to questions, and insight into events, that cover the entire span of the twentieth century. Here, at last, is a book that covers the entire fascinating career of a genuine native polymath.

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