

McFarland

A Leap from the Clouds

The Balloon-Parachute Act and the Daredevil Heritage of Aviation

In the late nineteenth century, circus aerialists collaborated with show balloonists to perform death-defying stunts, initially by suspending themselves from trapeze bars beneath a balloon, later by jumping from the balloons using fabric parachutes. By the 1890s, these performances became a worldwide craze, remaining in rural fairs and fetes for decades. Many of the original balloon-parachute pioneers went on to play key roles in the creation of airships, test flying the first gliders and airplanes. Based on extensive historical research, this unusual account explores how a nineteenth-century daredevil act united with the desire to achieve human flight. These performers' contributions did not come without a price: dozens, if not hundreds, of people died in horrifying events witnessed by thousands of spectators. This book chronicles the act that had no practical purpose other than entertainment, which eventually evolved into the development of the free-fall parachute pack—a key aviation need—and the foundation of a new activity known as skydiving.

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