



Falling Upwards: How We Took to the Air

Richard Holmes

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****Kirkus Best Books of the Year (2013)****

****Time Magazine 10 Top Nonfiction Books of 2013****

****The New Republic Best Books of 2013****

In this heart-lifting chronicle, Richard Holmes, author of the best-selling *The Age of Wonder*, follows the pioneer generation of balloon aeronauts, the daring and enigmatic men and women who risked their lives to take to the air (or fall into the sky). Why they did it, what their contemporaries thought of them, and how their flights revealed the secrets of our planet is a compelling adventure that only Holmes could tell.

His accounts of the early Anglo-French balloon rivalries, the crazy firework flights of the beautiful Sophie Blanchard, the long-distance voyages of the American entrepreneur John Wise and French photographer Felix Nadar are dramatic and exhilarating. Holmes documents as well the balloons used to observe the horrors of modern battle during the Civil War (including a flight taken by George Armstrong Custer); the legendary tale of at least sixty-seven manned balloons that escaped from Paris (the first successful civilian airlift in history) during the Prussian siege of 1870-71; the high-altitude exploits of James Glaisher (who rose) seven miles above the earth without oxygen, helping to establish the new science of meteorology); and how Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, and Jules Verne felt the imaginative impact of flight and allowed it to soar in their work.

A seamless fusion of history, art, science, biography, and the metaphysics of flights, *Falling Upwards* explores the interplay between technology and imagination. And through the strange allure of these great balloonists, it offers a masterly portrait of human endeavor, recklessness, and vision.

(With 24 pages of color illustrations, and black-and-white illustrations throughout.)

Falling Upwards: How We Took to the Air Details

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Author : Richard Holmes

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Graychin says

Jorge Luis Borges once said that “reading is a form of happiness.” For days after reading Richard Holmes’s *Falling Upwards* I walked around with a lighter step and a vague sense of altitude, as if I’d just received a gift or made a discovery that was bound to smooth out all the rough patches of my life, if only I could remember and make use of it. I kept asking myself: What was it that I was so pleased and excited about? No, I hadn’t unexpectedly received a large sum of money, nor had I found the universal key to a life of perpetual delight. I had merely – *merely!* – read a good book.

Falling Upwards is a history of manned ballooning from the Montgolfier brothers in 1783 to the Wright brothers in 1903. It’s chock full of wonderful stories and miniature biographies. There’s Charles Greene’s Dantean night flight above industrial Liege. There’s balloon performer Sophie Blanchard in her white dress aboard a silver gondola illumined in fireworks. There’s Thaddeus Lowe’s creation of a balloon corps during the American Civil War. There’s James Glaisher’s and Henry Coxwell’s near death of asphyxiation – for science – at 7 miles above the English midlands. There’s the daring balloon post out of Paris during the Prussian siege of the city in 1870-71. There’s Salomon Andree’s doomed attempt to reach the north pole by balloon just before the invention of airplanes. There’s more too, all of it wonderful.

Richard Holmes’s prior book, *The Age of Wonder* was among the two or three best things I read in 2012. In that title, which plumbed the relationship between Romanticism and the second, post-Newtonian scientific revolution, he also spent a little time on the early balloonists. Here, however, we get so much more, and it’s all delivered with such skill and love that the only possible response in a reader is gratitude. Solidly penned and lushly illustrated, *Falling Upwards* is light-as-air but deeply satisfying and one of the best books I’ve had the happiness to read in 2013.

Patrick Santana says

Here's a case of a book where the 'literary merit' of the work takes a back seat to the sheer interest of the subject matter. Yes, Holmes writes well. But the pleasure of this book goes beyond the style of the writing (which is, by the way, very good). From the first anecdotes to the (tragic) closing chapter of these balloonists and aeronauts, this book was a wonderful experience.

Paula says

This was presented in 5, 13-minute segments. I rated it only 3 stars based entirely on the subject matter, which is interesting, but not something I'd be inclined to pick up and read about. But the stories of the history of this sport (science?) are amazing. I can't imagine what drove these men to embark on what surely they knew was likely to be their death simply out of curiosity or the unlikely chance of making a discovery. (People must have been very bored back then. Kidding, not kidding.) But people did do that sort of thing once upon a time. And thank goodness for that, because where would we be without them? Long live the

Melanie Hilliard says

Did I miss my calling as a Victorian balloonist. Clearly, the answer is yes. Oh and I learned about this, true story: after I fly a balloon to the North Pole, I'm going to whip out my circa 1897 camera & die like it ain't no thang <http://tinyurl.com/pt8jaan>

B. Rule says

I've always felt there's something almost subconsciously fascinating and terrifying about the symbolism of a hot-air balloon. Holmes clearly feels the same and has written a book about the human yearning for discovery through the story of 18th and 19th century ballooning. Like Holmes' "The Age of Wonder", the book is largely structured as a series of biographical vignettes and accounts of famous events through the lens of his chosen topic. I found that approach greatly sharpened in this book (and I really liked The Age of Wonder), as you get a deeply incisive but also narrowly focused view into the attitudes that shaped a period of explosive scientific and humanistic growth through a seemingly insignificant fringe technology. Many of the anecdotes Holmes recounts are funny, some are uplifting (ha), some are tragic, and the account of the polar expedition that closes the book is a truly harrowing account of existential horror. Good god, is it haunting. Anyone who is interested in the history of science and technology, Georgian and Victorian society and entertainments, women's contributions to science and spectacle, adventure stories, or feeling a vertiginous sense of tiny, striving man (and woman) in the face of the unimaginable vastness of nature, this book is for you. Many people have laughed when I told them I was reading a history of ballooning, but this book is about much, much more.

Brian Willis says

I'm pretty certain I will never float into the air in the basket of a hot air balloon. But this book, which I absolutely loved and devoured with ardor, is the next best thing.

Holmes, in his trademark prose that makes for compelling reading, tells the long century of the pioneering of human flight under the balance of hot air or hydrogen within a balloon. We forget that flight didn't begin with Kitty Hawk; human flight truly began with the Montgolfier hot air balloon launched in London in the late 1700s and truly ended from the primary method of achieving exploratory flight in 1897. There are triumphs of daring and harrowing tales of foolhardiness that ends in vivid tragedy (in fact, the stories of air tragedy will certainly stick with you as cousins of the Hindenberg and the Titanic). Handsomely and amply illustrated throughout the book, you will not find it easy to stop reading. You may stay up all night as many of the aeronauts did in their balloons. But if you want to discern the early nature of aeronautics, this book is a the place to start, and worthy continuations of issues explored here are David McCullough's book on The Wright Brothers (as well as his book The Greater Journey if you like the chapter on the 1870 siege of Paris though it doesn't cover flight) as well as Tom Wolfe's The Right Stuff. The pioneers of balloons were just as innovative as the Wrights or NASA, except they weren't in a metal bucket but a wicker basket. One of my new all time favorite books.

Dr_Savage says

Coming to this book with high expectations, it initially disappointed me - the first few chapters seemed to float too close to the ground, weighed down by some leaden puns and sagging anecdotes which left me feeling ... well, deflated. But it pays to persevere. Holmes only really gets into his element in the chapters on military and scientific ballooning, which fully reveal the significance for human self-understanding of "falling upwards" that is the book's real subject. (Those expecting a standard history of ballooning should look elsewhere. This is a metaphorological study masked as a collective biography of nineteenth-century ballomaniacs, not a comprehensive survey.) It is fascinating to watch Holmes chart the process by which the balloon fell from being a lofty emblem of human freedom (Shelley, Hugo) to an instrument of colonial domination (Verne) and, ultimately, a plaything of the idle rich. The sections on Nadar, the French photographer, author and shamelessly flamboyant self-promoter who got the balloon postal service off the ground during the siege of Paris by the Prussians, are particularly rewarding. By the final chapter, which retells the tragic story of S.A. Andree's quixotic attempt to conquer the North Pole by balloon, the book had me wholly under its spell. Highly recommended.

Jassel says

Very interesting book, which goes into great detail into the great illusion of men and their enchantment of flight.... I found it very intriguing, mainly because I as well have a fascination with people who devout themselves to perilous, but nonetheless quixotic adventures.

Jojo says

A very pleasant wander through the history of ballooning and the surrounding norms of the times

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the Week:

In this heartlifting book, the Romantic biographer Richard Holmes floats across the world following the pioneer generation of balloon aeronauts, from the first heroic experiments of the 1780s to the tragic attempt to fly a balloon to the North Pole in the 1890s.

In a compelling adventure story, dramatic sequences include an unscheduled early flight over the North Sea, the crazy firework flights of beautiful Sophie Blanchard and the heart-stopping escape of two families from East Germany.

Early balloons also played a role in warfare - with the legendary tale of sixty balloons that escaped Paris during the Prussian siege of 1870, and a memorable flight by General Custer in the American Civil War.

These are stories where scientific genius combines with extraordinary courage and the power of an

imagination that dares to claim the airy kingdom for itself.

Episode 1 (of 5):

Every balloon tells a story, and more often than not it is one of courage in the face of great perils.

Two determined balloonists take to the skies to raise money for charity. Over two hundred years separate them, but both find themselves sailing out over the sea with nothing but danger ahead.

Read by Rory Kinnear

Abridged and produced by Jill Waters

A Waters Company production for BBC Radio 4.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01s...>

Chris says

Actually abandoned it... no particular reason...

Jaylia3 says

I lost myself reading *The Age of Wonder*, the previous book by Richard Holmes, becoming completely caught up in its enticing panorama of the Romantic Age of Europe, when there were still far flung parts of the globe to explore, most of the chemical elements awaited discovery, and poets and scientists looked to each other for inspiration, so I started *Falling Upwards* with great anticipation and it largely lived up to my expectations.

Like the previous book, *Falling Upwards* has a mix of art and scientific discovery, and is full of fascinating, colorful characters, but here they are all involved in the science, circus-like demonstrations, or military uses of ballooning. It spends most of its pages on the dangerous but exciting early stages of ballooning from around 1780 through the early 1900's, though there are some stories about more recent balloon exploits, like a risky escape over the Berlin Wall. It's not a conventional history but in a clever and effective move the book uses ballooning to explore evolving attitudes, technologies, culture, and beliefs. The idea of flight thrilled people, ballooning gave us our first mind-expanding vision of the world as seen from on high, and *Falling Upwards* successfully captures the excitement and joy of discovery.

For me one of the most interesting episodes described is the use of balloons to try to break the punishing 1870-71 siege of Paris when Bismarck set out to cut that city off from the world and let Parisians starve. The book's only negatives from my perspective are that it has a little too many details about the science of ballooning, and a few too many characters to keep track of, but the enthusiasm of Holmes is infectious and the book is a wonderful read.

S. K. Pentecost says

Falling Upwards by Richard Holmes is a book about the golden age of aviation, written with the love of a hobbyist. It is a book that trips anecdotally through the early history of lighter than air craft. Other authors have referred to the age of lighter than air flight as the cul de sac of aviation; but to men like Holmes and yours truly, it is a cul de sac we might give our eye teeth to live on.

Focusing almost exclusively on unpowered balloons, Holmes's writing vividly recreates scenes of early aeronauts succeeding spectacularly, mostly on luck and fearlessness, and failing spectacularly when the luck ran out. He writes about an age when scientists were likely to be poets, and men and women routinely conquered fear of crushing injury or death in the name of showmanship and/or patriotism.

As a steampunk fan, this is not the first non fiction work about balloons I've listened to or read. Still, Holmes was able to work in several things I'd never read before, even including facts about my own nation's civil war. He finishes up with the story of S.A. Andree's attempt to reach the north pole. Despite the fact that I only recently finished, I hung on this different angled retelling's every word.

A warning though: Holmes is able to throw such a romantic light upon the pioneers of ballooning, that you may be left with a desire to emulate the early aeronauts he writes about. Like me-- I can't shake the hope that I can combine modern aviation knowledge with 19th century daring do, to one day cobble together the world's most dangerous sailing ship in the hypothetical man-shed of my retirement years. I'm serious. I already have the mustache wax.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Ints says

Pirms gadiem asto?iem izlas?ju š? autora gr?matu The Age of Wonder, kas diezgan padzi?in?ti izp?t?ja k?du britu zin?tnes laikposmu, sasienot kop? Heršela, Banksa un Dievija dz?vesst?stus vien? liel?k? zin?tnes st?st?. Autors sp?j pasniegt skat?jumu uz tehnolo?iju att?st?bas procesu visnota? savdab?g? veid?, vi?am tas nav vien?ršs faktu un atkl?jumu uzskait?jums, tas ir process, kur otraj? pl?n? notiekošais nav mazsvar?g?ks par priekšpl?nu.

Gaisa baloni un lidojumi ar tiem nemaz nav tik sena par?d?ba, ja skat?mies uz cilv?ces v?sturi kopum?. Pirmie bija ar karstu gaisu pild?ti baloni, kuri it k? esot lidojuši jau virs Dienvidamerikas jau pirms Mongolf?ra, ta?u to popularit?te bija atkar?ga no daudziem faktoriem. Kara?a labv?l?bas, tehnolo?ijas att?st?bas un sabiedr?bas uzman?bas. Krist uz augšu bieži vien beidz?s ar krišanu lej?, neveiksm?gs lidojums, kurš sagad?šan?s d?? beidz?s kaps?t? var?ja tikt uzskat?ts par sliktu z?mi, kas p?rvilka aeronautikai treknu str?pu uz daudziem gadiem.

Gr?matas autors ikdien? nodarbojas ar biogr?fiju rakst?šanu, un š?s gr?matas izp?t? vi?š ir pamat?gi iedzi?in?jies agro aeronautu biogr?fij?s, kas sav? zi?? padara šo gr?matu unik?lu. Man? bibliot?k? ir p?ris gaisa baloniem velt?tas gr?matas, ta?u sal?dzinot ar šo, es t?s var?tu ierindot sausu tehnolo?iju v?stures

aprakstu grāmatās. Tur aeronauti ir tikai vārdi un lidojuma skaits, bez nekāda ieskata viņu personīgās ambīcijas un ietekmes, kuru tie atstājuši cilvēku prātus.

Baloni lielkoties sākās kļūdzīgas izklaides pasākums, agrīnie balonisti mēģināja laisties gaisā un šaut raķetes, lai ielūkosmotu cilvēkus svātkos. Pasākums nebija no lūtajiem, un arī risks bija visai augsts. Ne reizi vien veiksmīgs uzņēmums nositās piezemējoties degošā balonā. Brīdī, kad balonos sāka lietot deķerādi gāzēs, pakdam neuzmanīgam skatītājam, kas pēkšņi pieķēra generatora, ar visām no tā izrietošām sekām.

Šeit savukārt var uzzināt, kur Žils Verns smēlies idejas savam gaisa balona stāstam, par to kļūda Edgars Alans Po savulaik radījis viltus gaisa balonu, kura Atlantijas šērsojumu “dzīvajā” drukāja kāda avīze (fake news!). Par slaveno Parīzes aplenkumu, kur gaisa baloni nodarbojās ar pasta piegādi un kontaktu ar ārpusauli, par to, kā tas ietekmēja literātu prātus. Par aeronautiem, kuriem ambīcijas bija vairāk par veselo saprātu.

Jau tai laikā cilvēki bija kļūdzīgi traki uz rekordiem, Gleišers mēģināja pārspēt augstuma rekordu, lai noskaidrotu cik augstu cilvēks var uzlaisties un kādi ir laika apstākļi atmosfēras augstākajos slāņos. Un nemaz nerunāsim par Andrē lidojumu uz Ziemeļpolu, kur leņķība, entuziasms un neprasme izmest pareizo balasta daudzumu padarīja šo ekspedīciju par traģisku pasākumu.

Gramatai lieku 10 no 10 ballēm, ja interesē ne tikai tehnoloģijas, bet arī laikmets, tad silti iesaku izlasīt. Autors raksta aizraujoši un interesanti. Nevajag sacerēties uz mūsdienu gaisa balonu sasniegumu aprakstiem, tie gan ir pieminēti, taču tikai garšmeļot.
