

Cambridge night climbing history

This is the transcript of a talk given by Richard Williams to the Cambridge Society of Victoria at the Kelvin Club, Melbourne, on Wednesday 21st October 2009. The text has been updated by the author. The latest version can be found at www.cambridgesociety.org.au. It has recently been published by Oleander Press, Cambridge, as the introduction to their omnibus edition of The Roof-Climber's Guide to Trinity. Their website is www.oleanderpress.com.

Part I, Introduction

Welcome everybody to my talk, which will give a brief summary of the history of night climbing in Cambridge, with particular reference to Trinity, where most of it happened.

For those of you who don't know about night climbing, I should explain that it's a rather esoteric sport, in which people climb up the walls of buildings, and explore the rooftops. It's done at night, to avoid detection. It's very much like cat burglary, but without the robberies!

It only comes to the public eye when some strange object is left on the top of a roof or a spire, for the world to see.

These days, the most popular piece of rooftop litter would be the Santa hat. But in my day, without doubt, it would have been the chamber pot, which was rather coyly described in the old guides to night climbing as a "domestic utensil". They would be hard to find today. You would only ever see them in the antique shops. The young people would have no idea what they are.

Other examples of rooftop litter have been a Belisha beacon, a bicycle, a bucket and mop, a gown and mortarboard, a policeman's helmet, a shop dummy, a toilet seat, and a wheelbarrow. In particular, I liked the bowler hat on the head of a statue, with the conventional furled umbrella in its hand. And of course, an assorted variety of ladies' underwear!

There is an old story about two umbrellas that were mounted overnight on the pinnacles of the Trinity Chapel. This was in 1932. The Master knew a crack rifleman, so he summoned him to shoot the umbrellas down. The marksman promptly obliged, but during the night, the missing umbrellas were replaced by a pair of Union Jacks. The Master summoned the crack shot once again, but this time he refused. "Sir," he said, "I couldn't possibly fire at our national flag!"

The sceptre in the hand of the statue of Henry VIII, on Trinity's Great Gate, has been replaced many times by a chair leg, and at least once by a bicycle pump. The college authorities dutifully kept on supplying a new sceptre, until in the end they gave up, and left a chair leg in the royal hand. As far as I know, it remains there to this day.

Of course, there have been many occasions when people have used the buildings to make political statements: for example (regrettably) a swastika in 1936, and various banners, such as

“Save Ethiopia” or “Ban the Bomb”, which were often strung between the pinnacles of King’s Chapel.

Sometimes, the rooftop litter is on a grand scale. Night climbers once managed to get a light-four boat up onto a college roof. But the prize for the most ambitious piece of rooftop litter must go to a group of engineers in 1958, who left an Austin 7 on the roof of the Senate House.

I hasten to assure you that the people I climbed with were not publicity seekers. On the contrary, we climbed surreptitiously, taking great care to avoid detection and media attention, and we never left rooftop litter behind. Our nocturnal activities were strictly forbidden by the college authorities, and therefore we operated like a secret society, the brotherhood of the night.

You may well ask me “Why did you do it?”. I can give many reasons: the sheer enjoyment of climbing the roofs and spires, spiced by the extra thrill of unlawful adventure; the happy companionship of my fellow conspirators; the satisfaction from reaching the lofty goals that we had set; and the sublime beauty of the college buildings from the rooftops by moonlight.

The pioneer of night climbing in Cambridge was Geoffrey Winthrop Young, who published the first edition of *The Roof-Climber’s Guide to Trinity* in 1900. Subsequent climbers followed literally in his footsteps. We owe him an enormous debt of gratitude. He started it all.

The second edition was published in 1930, and I had the honour of writing the third edition in 1960.

I have brought with me copies of all three editions of the Trinity guide, plus a copy of the guide to St John’s, plus a copy of a book called *Night Climbers of Cambridge*, which was first published in 1937 under the pseudonym of “Whipplesnaith”. I shall pass these books round at the end of my talk, together with some other night climbing memorabilia.

You will see that all the guidebooks have appropriate quotations sprinkled throughout the text. This convention was started by the First Guide, Winthrop Young, and all the later writers followed suit. For example, on the cover of my book, I used a quotation from the Second Guide, a beautiful biblical verse from Joshua, chapter 2, verse 5:

And it came to pass, about the time of the shutting of the gate, when it was dark, that the men went out: whither the men went, I wot not.

The First Guide set another precedent which was maintained by the subsequent writers. This was to publish the guides anonymously. In earlier days, the secrecy was essential, because of the prohibition of night climbing. But with the passage of time, the need for anonymity has slowly evaporated. I need to emphasise this point. I shall mention many names in my talk, because I want to give full credit to the pioneers. They were heroic. They deserve our homage. I look back on their exploits with admiration and humility.

Almost all the pioneers were male. There is a huge gender imbalance in the context of night climbing. In those days, Cambridge wasn’t co-ed, and the women were cloistered in their all-female colleges. The typical female undergraduate of the 1950s would never have wanted to

venture out on the roofs at night. Whipplesnaith's book does show a Newnham lady climbing up a building; regrettably, I understand she was actually a man in drag, wearing a borrowed skirt!

I only know four female names in the context of night climbing. Amelia was the shop dummy that I mentioned earlier. Angela was the illustrator of the third edition of the Trinity Guide. Dorothy was the girl who lent the skirt for the Whipplesnaith photograph. The fourth name is Jo, short for Josephine, the only woman I know of who actually climbed the roofs. She went out with us once or twice. I'll tell you more about Jo later on.

To complete my introduction, I'd like to apologise in advance for any errors and omissions in my talk. I'm sure there will be many. I'd also like to quote some words by Whipplesnaith. He said:

And while mountaineers are counted by the tens of thousands, roof-climbers could scarcely be mustered by the dozen. Like characters from Buchan crossing a Scottish moor on a stormy night, they are silent and solitary, mysterious and unknown except to their own circle, preferring to live their own epics to reading those of others.

Part II, History

The 18th century

Geoffrey Winthrop Young said that wall and roof climbing was “of enormous antiquity, possessing extensive history and a literature which includes the greatest prose and verse writers of all ages”. But he said this tongue-in-cheek. In fact, he wrote in his personal notes that “after long research, I could find no authentic evidence of climbing on the College roofs”. He searched hard for historical records of Cambridge night climbing in the past, and the earliest he found was for Byron in about 1806.

However, I have found two earlier references, from the 18th century.

The first is from St John's, where a certain Peter Gunning has immortalised himself with a penknife on a lead slab with the following inscription: *Petrus Gunning Eliensis, Huius Coll: Alumnus Feb: 19th 1734*. The location is known to the climbing fraternity as Gunning's Balcony. The translation is as follows: “Peter Gunning of Ely, student of this college, Feb 19th 1734”. He was a cousin of another Peter Gunning, the Bishop of Ely and former Master of St John's. I don't think the Bishop would have approved of his cousin's rooftop activities!

The second reference came to me from Lord Adrian, the very distinguished former Master of Trinity, who was kind enough to send me a handwritten note of thanks after my book came out. He said “I suspect that there were some routes in the 18th century. At all events the top pane of the big staircase window at the back of the Lodge has various initials and dates scratched with a diamond on the outside”.

The 19th century

In his personal notes, Geoffrey Winthrop Young identified three roof climbers from the 19th century. He said they all “got there by breaking in to the turret stairs to the roof”. Here are the names, in chronological order:

- **Lord Byron** (1788-1824), who was of course a legend at Trinity. He went up to the roof of the Wren Library to decorate the four statues on the eastern balustrade. He is also reputed to have made the first ascent of the Great Court Fountain, which is a difficult climb. That was in 1806. I understand that Byron often bathed nude in the Fountain, which in those days was the only place in Cambridge where he could take a bath!
- **Edward Bowen** (1836-1901), who became a schoolmaster at Harrow, and taught there for many years. He wrote the Harrow school song “Forty Years On”. Young referred to him as “the great Harrow master”, and said that he used to climb on the Chapel roof.
- **Dr Roger Wakefield** (1865-1958), who also used to climb on the Chapel roof. He was the father of Wavell, Ted and Cuthbert, and I will mention those names again in a few minutes.

I know of no other early climbing exploits in Trinity, so I now want to take you forward to the time of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee, 1887, the 50th anniversary of her accession to the throne. The British Empire was at its height, and although many lived in Dickensian poverty, the rich Englishmen had incredible wealth.

In the closing years of the 19th century, without the slightest premonition of the disasters that lay ahead, they enjoyed an extremely privileged lifestyle. This was the era when mountain climbing in the Swiss Alps first became popular. These Englishmen would set out in their tweed jackets and knickerbockers, and they would climb the mountains with no equipment other than their walking-sticks. Then they began to get serious, and the sport of mountaineering was born. Publishers started to print mountaineering guides to the Swiss Alps for the benefit of this new wave of tourism. The tourists included a young man named Geoffrey Winthrop Young.

His family lifestyle was indeed privileged. The Youngs were descended by marriage from the Baring merchant banking dynasty. They lived in a splendid 18th-century country mansion, Formosa Place, beside the Thames in Berkshire. They also had a town house near Sloane Square.

Winthrop Young’s father was Sir George Young, the third baronet, who was also a mountaineer, as was his mother, Alice. His elder brother, George, became the fourth baronet, and a diplomat and Ottoman scholar. His younger brother, Edward Hilton, went up to Trinity, became President of the Union, took a first in Natural Science, then later became Lord Kennet of the Dene.

Winthrop Young was born in 1876, and went up to Trinity in 1895 to read Classics. As well as pioneering the Cambridge night climbing tradition, he also led and inspired a new and glorious era in British mountaineering, in partnership with George Mallory. Sadly, this era was short-lived. It ended with the tragic loss of many great British climbers in the First World War.

The decade from 1900 to 1909

With his friends, Geoffrey Winthrop Young began climbing the roofs of Trinity at night, during term time, to give themselves practice for the Alps during the vacations. His night climbing took place from 1895 to 1902. As I said earlier, he published the first edition of *The Roof-Climber's Guide to Trinity* in 1900.

His second book was a slim volume entitled *Wall and Roof Climbing*. It was published in Eton in 1905. I was surprised to learn that Young was the author, because he was a master at Eton at the time. I now have a copy. I was relieved to discover that it wasn't a guide to the Eton roofs; the gamekeeper hadn't written a guide to poaching! In fact, it was a very scholarly work, lavishly embellished with erudite quotations by writers from many different countries and periods.

He was a man of many talents, as educator, linguist, mountaineer, pacifist, poet, and writer.

- As an educator, Young was a master at Eton from 1900 to 1905, then a schools inspector until 1913. From 1932 to 1941, he was a Reader in comparative education at London University. But he is probably best remembered in this context because of his friendship with Kurt Hahn. Their co-operation inspired the foundation of Gordonstoun, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award programme, and the Outward Bound movement.
- As a linguist, Young was fluent in several European languages. He studied at the universities of Jena (in Germany) and Geneva, and spent much time in Paris and Berlin. He worked for the Rockefeller Foundation in Germany and was a key figure in an American-funded attempt to avert the Second World War by trying to influence German opinion against the Nazis.
- As a mountaineer, Young is said to have been the greatest English Alpine climber of all time. He has a most impressive record of first ascents and difficult ascents in Wales and in the Alps. His regular climbing partner was George Mallory, who perished on Everest in 1924 with Andrew ("Sandy") Irvine. That may have been the first ascent of Everest; we will never know. I have already mentioned that Young and Mallory inspired a glorious new era in British mountaineering. That was a major part of his great legacy. He lost a leg in 1917, but that didn't prevent him from resuming his climbing career after the war, and he succeeded in climbing several alpine peaks on a specially-designed metal leg (Monte Rosa, the Matterhorn and the Wellenkuppe, in 1927 and 1928).
- As a pacifist, Young became a war correspondent at the outbreak of the First World War, but soon resigned to join the Friends' Ambulance Unit in Ypres. He served in Belgium, France and Italy, and was decorated for bravery several times. He was hit by an Austrian shell, lost his leg above the knee, but walked sixteen miles in two days to avoid being captured by the Austrians. He was awarded the Order of Leopold for "exceptional courage and resource". Tragically, Young's brother Edward also lost a limb in the First World War – his arm was blown off at Zeebrugge.
- As a poet, Young twice won the Chancellor's Medal for English Verse, and published three books of poetry, plus a book of collected verses.

- As a writer, he published several books which are still regarded as classics of mountaineering literature. Pre-eminent among them is his book *Mountain Craft*, 300 pages of climbing instructions, published in 1920.

He was obviously a most remarkable man.

I received a letter from him in 1958. He had dictated it to his wife, Eleanor, known as Len. In this letter, he said “The original Guide was a May Week joke, a parody of the style of the Swiss mountaineering guides, and intended only to amuse”. He died soon afterwards, at the age of 82.

Here are the names of some early climbers, with Young’s personal notes.

- **Cyril Clague.** *Climbed with me in the Alps, Wales etc. Put his knee out playing chess! A good athlete and swimmer. Became later HM Inspector with my help. When I first took Clague up the Hall (the 3rd ascent) he tied his hanky to the pilaster on top – tearing off the corner with his name. St John Parry, our tutor, had specimens of all hankies in college brought, identified Clague’s, and was so pleased at being able to spring his detective cleverness on us, that he forgot even to gate us!*
- **Horace de Vere Cole.** *The practical joker and athlete, who also climbed with me. He was the first to climb the Great Gate. Hartley climbed it on the street side after the war for the first time.*
- **F Dobson.** *Became Professor of Greek at Bristol University. A big powerful fellow, fond of me, and a useful ‘second’.*
- **W W Greg.** *Later the famous Elizabethan scholar and writer. A keen climber when young.*
- **Felix M Levi.** *Brilliant mathematician, killed by an earthquake in Himalaya [sic].*
- **A M (Sandy) Mackay.** *Scholar of Trinity College. Became a judge, and Lord Mackay. He also played tennis for Scotland, etc., and climbed in the Alps with me in early years. Broke his leg with me in Aran.*
- **George Macaulay Trevelyan.** *Later the Master of the College.*
- **Felix Wedgwood.** *Odd adventurous fellow. Later in S. America. Wrote one good novel. Married Longstaff’s sister; died in war. Brother of Colonel Josh W. and Sir Ralph W. Insisted, when I took him up the Library, on carrying four green paper parasols for the four statues. Fonder of me than I of him I think, as he had a red-haired man’s temper!*
- **Christopher Wordsworth.** *My close friend, who died in India.*
- **E Hilton Young.** *My brother, afterwards Lord Kennet of the Dene.*

The decade from 1910 to 1919

The decade from 1910 to 1919 was overshadowed by the horrors of the First World War. The only knowledge that I have of night climbing activity in Cambridge during these years is gleaned from the lead slab on the roof behind King Edward's Tower in Great Court. A certain "G.F.D. Trin. Choir, 1910-1914" has followed Gunning's earlier example, by immortalising himself with a penknife. The slab has become known among the climbing fraternity as the Chorister's Table.

The decade from 1920 to 1929

In 1921, *The Roof-Climber's Guide to St John's* was published, with acknowledgments to the first Trinity Guide, under the pseudonym "A. Climber". Geoffrey Winthrop Young was very pleased with it, because it closely copied his own style. He has revealed who the authors were. This is what he said:

The St John's Roof Guide was produced in imitation of the first edition, by a post-war group consisting largely of Johnsian Blues. Hartley (thrice stroke of the VIII), Oliver Grag (who'd been under me in Italy), Darlington (another doctor), etc. They invited me to attend a solemn meet and showed me the climbs and told me they'd copied the Trinity Guide's style as close as might be.

No further editions of the St John's Guide have ever been published.

In 1922, an article appeared in the *Journal of the Oxford and Cambridge Mountaineering Club* about night climbing at Oxford. This was the only reference to night climbing at Oxford that I had ever seen. I had always thought it was very strange that it had never taken off at "the other place". But I recently received an email from Alan Wedgwood who went to Worcester College, Oxford, in the 1950s. He said "Although we did some roof climbing at Oxford, the stone was more brittle than the Cambridge stone, and climbing more illegal due to damage". It would also have been more dangerous! Alan climbed with Shane Williams and Mike Gravina. They used to do a few climbs at Cambridge after annual mountaineering club dinners. Alan said that these post-prandial climbs were "limited, due to alcohol intake".

Night climbing in Cambridge was very active in the 1920s, both at St John's and at Trinity. Some of the climbers at this time were Bobby Chew, Bunny Fuchs, John Hurst, Jack Longland, Peter Scott, G L Trevelyan, Laurence Wager, R C Wakefield, Ivan Waller, Gino Watkins, C T Wedgwood, John Wedgwood, Aidan Wigram and E G Wright. Most of them went to Trinity.

But before I go any further, I'd like to comment on something very strange about the names that I have just given you. As you may have noticed, most of these names begin with W, in fact 8 out of 14. I am a statistician, so this intrigued me. I used the Melbourne residential telephone directory to find that the names beginning with W occupied 89 pages out of 1728, which is a percentage of about 5%. I worked out the probability of getting 8 or more in a sample of 14, and

the answer is less than one chance in ten million. I find that very weird, especially since I am a W myself!

Now let me comment on these 14 men. They all had a great deal in common: a love of adventure, the open air, the Outward Bound movement, wild country, and mountaineering. No wonder they all went night climbing. They were all really amazing men, as I am sure you will agree when I tell you something about each one in turn.

- **Bobby Chew** became headmaster at Gordonstoun. One of his pupils was Prince Charles.
- **Bunny Fuchs** became Sir Vivian Fuchs, the polar explorer. After expeditions to Greenland (1929) and several to East Africa (1930-37), he led the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic expedition in 1957/58, and completed the first overland crossing of Antarctica. He died in Cambridge in 1999, aged 91.
- **John Hurst** wrote the second Trinity Guide. He was one of the sons of Sir Cecil Hurst, a legal adviser to the Foreign Office. He later consummated his obvious zeal for higher things by becoming ordained as an Anglican priest. He was the Rector of the West Meon parish in rural Hampshire for over 50 years until his death in 2003. During those years, he wrote a second guidebook, this time to Corhampton Church, Hampshire.
- **Jack Longland**, later Sir John Longland, was one of Geoffrey Winthrop Young's climbing protégés. He achieved distinction as an educator (he was an English lecturer at Durham University), as a mountain climber (he was a hero of the 1933 Everest expedition when he saved eight Sherpas from death in a storm) and as a broadcaster (he was the chairman of the BBC radio panel-game *My Word* from 1957 to 1977).
- **Peter Scott**, later Sir Peter Scott, was the son of the famous explorer Captain Robert Scott of the Antarctic. He went on to become very well known in his own right as an eminent naturalist, and also as a painter, Olympic yachtsman, gunboat commander, and television personality. He illustrated the second Trinity Guide. His mother, Kathleen, was a highly-regarded sculptor, as well as being a society beauty. In 1922, after Captain Scott's death, Kathleen remarried, this time to Geoffrey Winthrop Young's younger brother Edward. These names keep cropping up!
- **G L Trevelyan**, later Sir George Trevelyan the fourth baronet, taught at Gordonstoun and became a spiritual leader of the New Age movement. When he went up to Trinity, he succeeded his father as Master of the famous Trevelyan Man Hunt, which took place annually in the Lake District. He held that position for 42 years. This gives yet another connection to Geoffrey Winthrop Young, who was a great friend of G L Trevelyan's uncle, George Macauley Trevelyan, the renowned historian, Master of Trinity 1940-51, whom I mentioned earlier. The Man Hunt was founded by these two men in 1898, when they were both 22.
- **Lawrence Wager**, known as Bill, became an Arctic explorer, like Fuchs. He was also a member of the 1933 Everest expedition, with Longland.

- **Cuthbert Wakefield** was known as “Jumbo”, because of his size. His father was Dr Roger Wakefield, whom I mentioned earlier. Roger had three sons. The eldest was William Wavell Wakefield (WWW), who became Sir William, then Lord Wakefield of Kendal. He was an excellent all-round sportsman (rugby, cricket, squash, swimming, running, skiing), and became a legendary English rugby captain. The middle son was Ted, later Sir Edward, baronet, and like WWW, a Conservative MP. Cuthbert was the youngest of the three. He climbed with Geoffrey Winthrop Young, toured South America in 1927 with the British Lions rugby team, and then became an explorer (Greenland in 1929 with Fuchs, and the Lake Rudolf Rift Valley expedition in 1934, again with Fuchs). He had a distinguished career as a surveyor in Sudan. Roger and Cuthbert provide an example of father-and-son night climbers.
- **Ivan Waller** was a climber all his life. He climbed in Britain and Europe with Bobby Chew and Jack Longland and Gino Watkins and many others. He became a director of “Outward Bound”, and climbed his last mountain at the age of 85.
- **Gino Watkins** became an inspirational explorer and mountaineer. Like Fuchs, Wager and Wakefield, he explored the Arctic. But sadly, I have to tell you that he died at the very early age of 25. He drowned in Greenland when hunting seals in a kayak. So many triumphs in his young life, and then the ultimate tragedy.
- **Tom and John Wedgwood** were cousins, and members of the well-known china and pottery family. Tom’s father, Frank, was the eldest of four brothers. I have already mentioned the other three. They were Sir Ralph (who was knighted in 1924, and made a baronet in 1942), then Colonel Josh (John’s grandfather, Josiah IV, later Lord Wedgwood, having been made a baron by Churchill), and finally Felix (who was an author and mountaineer, and a climbing contemporary of Geoffrey Winthrop Young; Felix died heroically in the Somme in the First World War). So the Wedgwood family has contributed at least three generations of Cambridge night climbers: Felix, Tom and John. I have also previously mentioned Tom’s son, Alan, who climbed at Oxford. Tom and Alan provide another example of father-and-son night climbers.
- **Aidan Wigram** died tragically in 1941 in an air crash, on service with the RNVR.
- **Edmund Wright** became a distinguished barrister, and a bencher at Lincoln’s Inn. In 1938, his wife Hannah became the first female member of the Bar Council. Alan Wedgwood has sent me a photo of Edmund Wright climbing the Trinity Bridge (the idea was to cross the river on the outside of the bridge, up and down the arches) with Alan’s father Tom on lookout duty for dons.

Let me now return to night climbing in the 1920s.

Scott’s autobiography says that the first recorded rooftop circuit of Trinity’s Great Court was made in November 1927, by Scott with Longland, Wager and Watkins. However, the second edition of the Trinity Guide contains an erratum which says that the Great Gate was first conquered in 1905, not in 1927. That would have been by Horace de Vere Cole, as reported by Geoffrey Winthrop Young. This makes me believe that the first rooftop circuit of Great Court

was made in 1905. Also, my own records say that the successful team in 1927 was Scott, Longland and Trevelyan, rather than Scott, Longland, Wager and Watkins.

My records also show that

- In March 1928, Longland, Scott, Wager and Wakefield made the first ascent of Castor Corner from the Hole
- In February 1929, Hurst and Wright made the first circuit of the Wren Library
- In May 1929, Tom Wedgwood and Wright made the first ascent of the Gateway Column

This was indeed the Golden Age of night climbing in Cambridge. The *Cambridge Review* in April and May 1924 had five consecutive articles on “Alpine Sports in Cambridge”. The author used the pseudonym “Messrs Robinson and Jones”. The same author under the pseudonym “Nocturne” wrote an article entitled “A Novel Climb in Cambridge” about the first ascent of the St John’s Chapel Tower. This was published in the *Rucksack Club Journal* in 1926. Ivan Waller climbed the Chapel Tower in 1925, so he was probably a member of the successful team.

The decade from 1930 to 1939

The second edition of *The Roof-Climber’s Guide to Trinity* was published in 1930. The author was John Hurst, and the illustrator was Peter Scott. I have already mentioned them both.

Regrettably, the second edition was not well received by Geoffrey Winthrop Young. In fact, he was quite scathing in his comments about it. I prefer not to repeat those comments here: it would be unkind for me to do so.

My records show that

- In May 1930, the first ascent of Oriel Corner was made by M S Gordon and John Hurst
- In 1931, the first ascent of 1834 Corner was made by G A Millikan

I now turn to the year 1937. This was marked by the publication of the book that I have already mentioned, called *The Night Climbers of Cambridge*. It soon became the night-climbers’ bible. It was written under the pseudonym “Whipplesnaith” by a very interesting man named Noel Symington. His family owned the two biggest factories in Market Harborough, in Leicestershire. One made Symington’s Soups. The other made corsets and bodices, then parachutes in the war.

In 1937, Symington had recently graduated from King’s. He decided to publish his book, but he wanted to include a number of flashlight photographs. He had adequate funds, so he recruited an army of climbers and photographers to help him: 24 men in all. Among the principals were four climbing colleagues: Nares Craig and Wilfrid Noyce from Trinity, Alec Crichton from King’s, and Colin O’Hara Murray from Pembroke.

Here are some details of these four men.

- **Nares Craig** is the man standing on top of the St John's New Tower (usually called the "Wedding Cake") in the frontispiece of Symington's book. He was rusticated together with O'Hara Murray for trying to hoist an unflattering effigy of George VI up to the top of King's Chapel. The incident took place in May 1937, when the coronation was imminent. Craig was a communist, and this was his way of "mocking the whole pantomime of royalty". Craig became a radical architect. I believe he is still alive and well, now in his 90s, living in a retirement home in Muswell Hill, London.
- **Alec Crichton** served in the Irish Guards during the Second World War, then returned to Dublin and became the chairman of John Jameson, the whiskey distillers.
- **Wilfrid Noyce** became a very accomplished mountaineer, writer and teacher. Once again, there is a connection to Geoffrey Winthrop Young, because Noyce (like Longland) was one of Young's protégés. Noyce was a key member of John Hunt's historic 1953 expedition when Hillary and Tenzing conquered Everest. Sir Edmund Hillary regarded Noyce as the most competent British climber that he had met. Noyce died tragically in 1962 when he fell 4,000 feet down the slopes of Mt Garmo in Central Asia.
- **Colin O'Hara Murray** married Alec Crichton's sister Sheila. He served in the Royal Ulster Rifles during the war, and won an MC. He then joined the Malay Police, and sadly became one of the first officers to be killed in the Malayan Emergency.

Symington and Craig were both injured while night climbing, in separate incidents. Symington suffered severe rope-burns to his hands one night during an over-hasty descent from King's College Chapel, and his left hand never fully recovered. Craig gashed his forearms rather badly when a piece of masonry was dislodged by a climber above, and fell on him. Injuries to night climbers, and damage to buildings, are extremely rare, and these are the only instances that I have ever heard of.

I have a letter from Symington, dated October 1958, when he was a farmer living in Market Harborough. He said "You may have heard my name once or twice recently, on the Midlands television, in connection with banned Fascist meetings. I am trying to form a Fascist party, but for the moment it is very uphill work."

Symington published two more books: one presented his case for Fascism, and the other was a strange mixture of philosophy and poetry. He died in 1970 at the age of 56.

The decade from 1940 to 1949

In 1941, inspired by the Whipplesnaith book, a couple of Winchester schoolboys wrote *The Night Climbers of Winchester*. This was a hand-covered notebook, containing descriptions and

photographs. The authors were Peter Sankey and Freeman Dyson. The photographer was George Hervey (Coll 1937-42), and a climbing colleague was Brown (Coll 1935-41).

Sankey and Dyson both went up to Cambridge together, the former to Magdalene, and the latter to Trinity. They went night climbing together several times in 1941, and did some of the climbs described in Whipplesnaith's book, including the Gateway Column climb at the Wren Library, the New Tower at St John's, the Senate House and a few others. Here are some details.

- **Peter Sankey** died heroically at Arnhem in 1944.
- **Freeman Dyson** went on to become one of the 20th century's pre-eminent theoretical physicists. He read mathematics at Trinity in 1941-43, and then joined RAF Bomber Command where he worked in operational research at the Command HQ, which was hidden in a forest near High Wycombe. He returned to Trinity in 1946 as a Junior Fellow. Then in 1947, he went to Cornell University as a Fellow and studied QED (quantum electrodynamics). His colleagues were Bethe, Feynman and Schwinger, who were all legendary pioneers in this field. He was appointed Professor of Physics at Cornell in 1951, but left in 1953 for a position at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he has been ever since. He is renowned for his work in quantum field theory, solid-state physics and nuclear engineering.

I have a recent email from Dyson in which he said "So far as I know, nobody else except Sankey and me were night-climbing while I was up at Cambridge. At that time, in the middle of the war, there were few students, and the life of the university was at a low ebb. Of course, we had a big advantage because the town was blacked out and nobody on the ground could see us."

In fact, I know of at least one other night climber in the 1940s, Maurice Lessof of King's, who accidentally broke King Henry's sceptre while climbing on the Great Gate one night in 1942. The next day, he and a Trinity friend, E M M Besterman (matric. 1941) painted a chair leg gold. Lessof replaced the broken sceptre that night.

The decade from 1950 to 1959

This was the decade when I was at Trinity. I went up in 1955. My regular climbing companions were Mike Sandford and Brian Young, who were with me at Trinity, and Julian Williams, from Clare. Sandy Robinson, also from Trinity, climbed with us once or twice, as did Jo Scarr, from Girton. I mentioned Jo Scarr in my introduction, as the only female night climber that I know of.

I can also give you the names of some other men, unknown to me and my companions, who also climbed the roofs in the 1950s. The Trinity men were R S Money-Kyrle (matric. 1945), D P S Heath (1950), J B G Cairns (1955), P J Sykes (1958), and R Hall (1958). Two others were Mark Boxer of King's and Nigel Peacock of St John's. I have found most of these names from the recent lively correspondence in the *Trinity Annual Records* (2006 to 2008) about the Great Gate and the royal sceptre.

Five of these seven men were our contemporaries. The fact that we didn't know any of them makes one realise that there could have been armies of night climbers at the time, all operating independently in small bands, with each band unaware of the others. That's part of the night climber syndrome. I am reminded of the words of Whipplesnaith, which I quoted earlier: "they are silent and solitary, mysterious and unknown except to their own circle".

I must tell you how I first met Julian Williams. It was quite remarkable. One fine night, I had climbed on my own to the roof of the Wren Library, and I was standing against a chimneystack, admiring the ethereal beauty of the Backs by moonlight. Then I heard a faint scuffling noise. I looked round, but the roof was deserted. I heard the sound again. It seemed to be very close. I moved my head slightly so that I could peer round the side of the chimney, and I was astonished to see another pair of eyes peering round from the other side!

We introduced ourselves. It turned out that Julian was a fellow Welshman, and he shared my surname, and he lived near my home town, Llandudno, in North Wales. We had much in common; we were kindred spirits.

Now I want to tell you more about Jo Scarr. She was an exceptional woman in many ways. Let me give you her background.

- **Jo Scarr** read Classics at Girton, and went on to have two outstanding careers, first as a climber, and then as an archaeologist. She has published a number of highly-regarded books on both subjects. Jo first became famous in her early 20s, with her climbing partner Barbara Spark, as a world-class Himalayan mountaineer. She emigrated to Canberra, married an Australian, and became Josephine Flood. She took a PhD in archaeology at the Australian National University, and became a lecturer there. She then achieved further fame through her extensive work with the Australian Heritage Commission in the discovery, documentation and conservation of significant indigenous sites.

You will agree that Jo Scarr was indeed an exceptional woman.

We recently exchanged emails. Jo told me that she has returned to the UK and now lives in Snowdonia with her second husband, Nigel Peacock, whom I have just mentioned.

Nigel was also a distinguished climber. He went to the USA to start Outward Bound there. He recently had a letter about night climbing published in the Daily Telegraph, with a photo. The letter described his daylight ascent of the Wedding Cake at St John's, when he was an undergraduate there. He made this ascent at the invitation of the Dean, to remove a chamber pot and a couple of bras that had mysteriously appeared there overnight.

Nigel and Jo were very close in the 1950s. They used to climb together, in and out of Girton and St John's and elsewhere. Here is the story of their lives: boy meets girl, boy goes west to America, girl goes east to Nepal and Australia, then boy meets girl again, decades later, and they get married and live happily ever after! How's that for a very romantic story!

We have some old mountaineers here today, who will be interested to know that Nigel and Jo live near the home in Snowdonia of Barbara Spark and her husband Don Roscoe. Barbara was Jo's

Himalayan climbing partner. Don was one of England's finest rock climbers in his day, and a mate of the legendary Joe Brown.

At the north-east corner of the Snowdonia National Park, there are three locations in a triangle, only about 12 kilometres from each other. My home town is at one corner of the triangle. Julian's home town is at a second corner. The third corner is the little village where Jo and Nigel Peacock now live. That's another strange coincidence!

Now I'd like to offer you some more of my personal reminiscences.

It was very natural for me to get involved with the Cambridge roof climbing fraternity, because I had been climbing roofs throughout my school years. I climbed my first roof when I was only eight years old. This was in 1943. I was playing soccer one summer evening, with my brother John and some friends, in the playground of the local primary school. Unfortunately, I accidentally kicked the ball on to the school roof. That was a disaster, because it was the only ball we had. So I decided to retrieve it.

The school porch had a strong old Victorian drainpipe running up to the roof, and of course the Victorians built everything to last for centuries. It wasn't hard to climb up the drainpipe, and then there was a tricky bit where I had to reach out to get over the cornice, but I managed that successfully, and I was rewarded by a sight which I shall always remember. A true treasure trove, a cornucopia of balls, just lying there in the gutters and on the roof of the porch, waiting to be found! I quickly discovered that most of them were unusable, they had rotted, but I must have found 15 or 20 balls in good condition, including the one that I had just kicked up there. I wriggled along the roof, retrieving balls and tossing them down to my jubilant friends below.

So that's how it all started!

I soon met some kindred spirits at Trinity, and during my three years there, I went night climbing on many occasions. Sometimes I went alone, but usually I went with friends. We never used ropes or any other climbing aids: we preferred the freedom of climbing without any equipment. Modern climbers would call it "free soloing". We followed the routes developed by the pioneers, and we developed some new routes of our own. We did the rooftop circuits of all the courts, and we usually had coffee or beer together afterwards. It was all great fun and often very exciting. We enjoyed it all enormously.

Here are some of the highlights of our climbing exploits, although I am rather embarrassed to reveal my own involvement in these climbs.

- In March 1958, the first ascent of Castor Corner from the ground, by Julian Williams of Clare, and myself.
- Also in March 1958, the first ascent of the Devil's Tower from the ground, again by Julian Williams and myself.

- In May 1958, the first ascent of the Great Hall from the ground, by J L Robinson, R M Sandford and myself.
- Also in May 1958, the first ascent of the Angel's Tower, by Brian Young and myself.
- In November 1959, I went back to Trinity and made the first circuit of Angel Court. This was a new set of buildings. In the note that I received from Lord Adrian, he said he was delighted to see that Angel Court was already in my guidebook.

Let me interpose a little anecdote at this point. There is a corner of Great Court which is known to the climbing fraternity as "Sandy's Drop", and I am going to tell you how it acquired its name.

I have mentioned a man named Sandy Robinson, who climbed with us occasionally. On a memorable Bump Supper night, Sandy had been celebrating the success of his boat in the Lent races. He was staggering back to his room late at night in Great Court with one of his friends, when he heard noises on the roof. He looked up and saw four of us on the parapet next to the Chapel.

"I'm going to join you!" he cried. And suiting action to the words, he immediately started climbing up a drainpipe. But disaster struck. He was only halfway up when he shouted despairingly "I'm not going to make it!" And then I think he just lost his strength and let go. The stillness was broken by a loud crash as he fell to the ground in the shrubbery. We were all horrified, although we later found out that no damage was done.

A light went on in a first-floor room, a window opened, and a head emerged, wearing a red and white nightcap. It was one of the dons.

"What was that noise?" he asked.

The friend below was very quick-witted. "That was only Robinson falling out of bed, sir!" came the reply.

"But it sounded like a very heavy fall!" said the don.

"Yes sir, that's because Robinson is a very heavy sleeper, sir!" said the quick-witted friend below.

"Oh, I see", replied the don, apparently quite satisfied with this explanation. The head wearing the nightcap withdrew, the window closed, the light went out, and stillness returned to the night.

The decade from 1960 to 1969

Let me now resume the historical narrative.

In my final year, which was 1958, we had often discussed the fact that the first edition of the Trinity Guide had been published in 1900 and the second edition in 1930, so it seemed appropriate that we should maintain the 30-year cycle, and bring out the third edition in 1960. I was elected to be the author, and I managed to complete the manuscript in early 1960.

I had a girlfriend at the time named Angela Machale and she was a very talented artist, so I got her to do all the illustrations, except for the cover illustration. That was drawn by another talented artist, Timothy Birdsall, one of my Cambridge friends, who sadly died a few years ago. I found a publisher in Cambridge, and the book came out on schedule in 1960.

Because of Whipplesnaith's book, everybody used the term "Night Climber" rather than "Roof-Climber". The first two editions had been called *The Roof-Climber's Guide to Trinity*, but we all regarded that as old-fashioned, so my book came out as *The Night Climber's Guide to Trinity, 3rd edition, 1960*.

A few months later, in 1961, I was at a party in London and I met someone who was up at Cambridge at about the same time as me. I was introduced to him by a man named Keith Evans, who was my best friend at Cambridge. Sadly, he died quite recently. Keith read Law at Downing and became a very successful barrister and author, so you won't be surprised to hear that his style was rather flamboyant.

"Richard's claim to fame is that he wrote *The Night Climber's Guide to Trinity!*" Keith announced loudly, in his best courtroom voice.

"Oh really, that's most interesting, I have a copy myself!" came the reply.

"But that's absolutely amazing!" said Keith, with a wicked smile. "I assume it's a SIGNED copy?" He could have been delivering the key question in his cross-examination. Everybody within earshot had turned round to listen.

"No, I'm afraid it isn't, I bought it over the counter in a bookshop!" said my new friend.

"Don't apologise!" said Keith, very theatrically. "You should be congratulated! You are very fortunate! You have got one of the RARE ones!"

The years from 1970 to 1999

We now move forward to 1970. This was the year of publication of another book on night climbing in Cambridge, written under the pseudonym of Hederatus, which is Latin for "adorned with ivy". This book was called *Cambridge Night Climbing*. Then in 1977, a book by F A Reeve was published, entitled *Varsity Rags and Hoaxes*, which contained a short section on night climbing.

Unfortunately, I have no further information about these two publications. In fact, I know very little about Cambridge night climbing during the latter part of the 20th century. We had emigrated from the UK to Australia in 1968, and I was out of touch. But my impression is that

night climbing was at a low ebb throughout this period. The college authorities became antagonistic towards night climbing. Penalties became severe. Obstacles and barriers were installed on the college buildings to thwart potential climbing. The public authorities also became hostile; the book by Hederatus was withdrawn from the public libraries in Cambridge, on the grounds that it was a threat to public health and safety!

I made enquiries at Trinity to see if anybody was going to maintain the 30-year cycle by bringing out a fourth edition of the Trinity Guide in 1990, but I drew a blank. Nobody knew any night climbers.

The decade from 2000 to 2009

Now another fast forward, this time to 2007, when I visited Trinity on a trip to the UK, with my wife, Jan, who is here today by my side.

We were walking round the old college and came to the Wren Library, one of Sir Christopher's masterpieces. I decided to demonstrate to Jan how we used to reach the roof of the library from the ground. I started to show her the chimneying technique for getting up between the pillar and the wall.

This greatly alarmed a couple of Trinity security men, who came hurrying over to find out what I was doing. When I explained that I used to be a night climber, their faces lit up. "You are just the man we need!" they said. "Have you got a minute to come to the Great Hall with us? There is something we would like to show you!"

Of course, we went with them to the Great Hall, and they showed us the problem that they thought I could fix. High up, sitting on one of the roof beams in the vast ceiling of the hall, they pointed out a little yellow plastic duck! They wanted me to get it down! You won't be surprised to hear that I declined their invitation! I later discovered that the duck is named "Mallard", and it had become a Trinity undergraduate tradition to move her secretly from one rafter to another.

I am now almost at the end of my historical review, and I come to the present, 2009. This will give quite a dramatic climax to my talk.

A couple of weeks ago, our Honorary Secretary, Jerry Platt, announced on the society's web site that I was going to be talking today on the subject of night climbing in Cambridge. Shortly afterwards, I received an email from a very excited publisher in Cambridge, Jon Gifford, of Oleander Press. Apparently he had been trying to find me for years, and had finally succeeded when his regular internet search for references to Cambridge night climbing had found Jerry's announcement.

Jon explained to me that in recent years, the night climbers of Cambridge have become cult heroes. This is because of the huge growth of interest in extreme sports: the BASE jumpers, the builderers, the free climbers, the free runners, the traceurs, and the urban climbers. Jon said that most climbers are amazed that there were guys climbing roofs over 70 years ago, with no ropes, and often no shoes!

Jon gave me references to recent articles about Cambridge night climbing, not just from England but from all over the world, both in the major newspapers and also in the specialist climbing magazines, particularly from Holland and Germany.

All the old books had been out of print since the 1950s. Mine was the last. Jon reprinted Whipplesnaith's book 20 months ago and has already sold 5,000 copies in hardback. He has been able to contact the families of the First and Second Trinity Guides and the St John's Guide, and they have all given him permission to reprint. He was just so delighted to make contact with me, and to get my approval to republish my book.

It is all quite amazing. It never occurred to me that one day I might become a Cult Hero!

That gives me some compensation for feelings of inadequacy that my only claim to fame at Cambridge was to have written the third Trinity Guide. I never succeeded in emulating the intellectual feats of some of my illustrious predecessors. I never won a Nobel Prize! But I can't complain. Becoming a Cult Hero is really quite a nice thing to have happened to me!

Of course, I'm only joking. I can't take this at all seriously. We weren't heroes. We just happened to follow in the footsteps of the pioneers. They were the real heroes. Now that I have told you something about their exploits, I'm sure you will agree.

Part III, Conclusion

In conclusion, I have another surprise for you. I can reveal that at the age of 75, I do still climb roofs occasionally! But it's only when I remove the leaves from the gutters of my garage!

I want to finish by telling you about the Night Climbers' Anthem. I have already mentioned that I found a number of good quotations for my book, to add to those used by the First and Second Guides. One of them in particular was highly appropriate. It came from a poem called *The Ladder of St Augustine*, by Henry Longfellow, the American poet. Well, the rhythm or metre happens to fit a tune which became the party anthem of the British Labour Party, the Red Flag. So we used Longfellow's words to the tune of the Red Flag, followed by a second verse of our own, and that became the Night Climbers' Anthem.

Would you like me to sing it for you? OK, it goes something like this:

*The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they while their companions slept
Were toiling upwards through the night.*

*"Excelsior" shall be our cry,
We'll never stop, we'll never tire,
Until at last we see on high*

A chamber pot on every spire!

Many thanks to you all for your attendance here today!

Epilogue

Shortly after my talk, I received the following letter, dated 22nd October 2009, from the President of the Cambridge Society of Australia (Victoria):

Dear Richard

It is not often that one has the honour to address a Cult Figure, but I am seizing this opportunity in thanking you formally on behalf of the Society for providing us with such great entertainment at Wednesday's luncheon.

The size of the turnout for the luncheon and your exposé on the Night Climbers speaks for itself; we were lured by the prospect of gleaning hidden insights into this clandestine activity. We were not disappointed: how else would we be able to examine the different routes to the roof of the Wren Library; how else would we have come to know of the plastic duck nested high in the rafters of Trinity Great Hall; how else would we hear first hand of the thrills of those nocturnal expeditions to impossible places; and above all, how else would we have heard a magnificent rendering of the Night Climber's Anthem?

Those of us present to enjoy your talk would all have been taken back to earlier times in life when we defied the Rules and enjoyed evading the Authorities in seeking out the hidden pleasures of life: thank you so much for the insights, reminiscences and the sheer fun of your address.

Yours very sincerely,

Peter Adams (President)