

Untitled

JEREMY NOEL-TOD & ROBERT MACFARLANE

When I was an undergraduate at Oxford, a friend was billeted at the top of the tall college gatehouse. The stairs to her room were so many that, in case of fire, a long rope, bolted to the wall and ending in a noose, was thoughtfully provided for descent to the street below. With no intercom at ground level, a social call became a real test of friendship. But why did I take the stairs when I could have been shining up the stonework?

For some reason, the culture of night climbing never spread to Oxford. It seems to have begun in Cambridge at the start of the twentieth century, which saw the first published descriptions of the 'Alpine Sports' to be had on the slopes and peaks of old colleges. It has lived on to the present day, partly through student legend – one night climber from the 1970s spoke to me of the feeling that a challenge had been inherited – and partly through two samizdat handbooks: *The Night Climbers of Cambridge* (1937) by 'Whipplesnaith', and *Cambridge Nightclimbers* by 'Hederatus' (1970).

Below, the author and climber Robert Macfarlane describes Hederatus' power to excite and incite. Whipplesnaith, however, remains the literary classic of night climbing, with his ability to take you up on the roofs in a few elegant sentences: 'The sun is setting. Enthusiasts will now make a tour of some of the interesting climbs

'Whipplesnaith', *The Night Climbers of Cambridge* (1937)
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'Hederatus', *Cambridge Nightclimbers* (1970), is out of print.

of Cambridge, we hope in fact as well as by the fireside. There is no moon, the sky is cloudy and the barometer is high. It will be a fine night.'

Seven decades on, Whipplesnaith's sentences continue to issue their challenge to the young. A few months after an excellent reprint of the book in 2007, which restores several evocative lost photographs, the Dean of Trinity circulated an email in response to 'renewed reports about roof climbing' in the college, reminding 'Junior Members' of the hazard to 'life, limb and fabric'.

Even for those with no head for heights, however, the remarkable effect of reading this book is to start the eye spidering in sympathy. Walk through any British city centre, and one cannot help but notice overhangs, lost bricks and ledges bristling with anti-pigeon spikes. In Cambridge, college lodges or gatehouses reveal themselves as scaleable little castles, from their cluttered entrances up to crenellations and flagpole. Grander architectural prospects, meanwhile, suddenly seem to converge on the decorative or functional interruption that offers a leg-up. As a guide to the buildings of England, *The Night Climbers of Cambridge* leaves Pevsner literally standing.

The deeper sympathy that night-climbing excites is moral. From the University's point of view, roof-climbers need to be sent down before they fall down. But, as Whipplesnaith writes, 'no one would have it otherwise . . . this official disapproval is the sap which gives roof-climbing its sweetness'. Back in the 1930s, college porters locked their gates at ten o'clock, and the proctors of the University still patrolled the streets after hours. Yet if the relatively simple art of 'climbing in' had given you a taste for night sports – a suited man is shown here stepping gingerly down through rows of revolving spikes – Cambridge was unofficially a starlit playground.

As well as having sympathizers in the Senior Common Room ('if you tactfully broach the subject with your supervisor, he may be able to help you considerably'), the night climbers seem to have been tacitly admired by the city's police. One photograph shows a drain-piper

halfway up, intent on writing his name on the University Officers Training Corps sign, with a long-coated bobby looking on from below. ‘There was nothing dramatic in the photograph,’ writes Whipplesnaith coolly, ‘he obligingly posed for us’. Then there is ‘the incident on the roof of Marks and Spencers’ in the middle of town, from which one climber was led away in handcuffs. Fortunately, at the station he met ‘several old friends, including P.C. —, and thereafter tension relaxed’.

Such encounters bespeak a certain gentlemanly ease at operating above the law (the later generation of adventurers described by ‘Hederatus’ even planned to be rescued from the authorities by private helicopter). The real charm of the night climbers, however, is their otherworldliness. It is the climber’s ideal to leave ‘no trace where he has been’. What he does at night is to weave intangible anarchy around the sacred space of the college lawn. Admittedly, the rule is sometimes bent, as in the case of the autographed Training Corps sign, or the stunt of leaving an umbrella on top of King’s College Chapel (the college gets a crack-shot undergraduate to shoot it down – only to see it replaced by a Union Jack, on which the patriotic young sniper will not fire). But in general childish impulses are checked: ‘crying “boo” at people is not consistent with good climbing’, and although the occasional stone knob may break off in the hand like biscuit, vandalism is neither safe nor intended.

What spurs Whipplesnaith’s outlaws on to greater heights is a kind of artistic pride. They were only up on the roof of Marks and Spencers because one of the book’s collaborators ‘was concerned at the lack of pinnacles in our photographs’, and a good one was to be had on the adjacent Lloyd’s Bank: ‘What the lay reader wanted, he said, was not drain-pipes and chimneys, but bodies crawling over pinnacles like bumble-bees on a foxglove.’

The flash photography of the book is often forgivably shaky in focus and exposure, but always elegantly posed. Moreover, for all Whipplesnaith’s characterization of the night climbers as those who

prefer ‘to live their own epics to reading those of others’, he himself is a nimble literary man. Every chapter comes with its own facetious epigraph (‘He hath enclosed my ways with hewn stone’, Lamentations, iii. 9; ‘Come, thick night/And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell’, *Macbeth*) while the poised levity of his prose is a model of undergraduate humour (‘No climber’s intestine has ever yet been found dangling from these spikes’).

The young whippersnapper behind ‘Whipplesnaith’ has recently been revealed as Noel H. Symington, a climber who features in several photographs. Introducing the 70th-anniversary reprint, Symington’s son confirmed that his father was also the man who burned his fingers by descending on a rope from King’s College Chapel. According to the conclusion of this episode, ‘the delinquent now collects butterflies’ – a nice touch of the camp that, in the final chapters, fends off the real world from the romance of night climbing.

On the face of it, conquering colleges with one’s bare hands would seem a rather manly sort of pastime. In the 1930s, we are told, night-climbers went on to be mountaineers and polar explorers, as well as dons and lepidopterists. But it can also be read as a bravado attempt to extend the state of boyhood. The only girls in the book are the screamers whose room is accidentally entered during the escape from Marks and Spencers; ‘Dorothy’, who loans a skirt for a drag-climb on the walls of Newnham; and ‘Amelia’, a shop dummy bought to be hauled on to the roof of King’s Lodge. Unless they were being very modest, Whipplesnaith and Co. do not appear to have used their talents to meet Cambridge’s imprisoned maidens.

Instead, the love interest of *The Night Climbers of Cambridge* is King’s College Chapel, the subject of a pair of penultimate chapters. ‘It is possible’, Whipplesnaith writes, in Wordsworthian rapture, ‘to grow to love the chapel, seeing it reflected in every face, hearing the singing of its pinnacles in every storm of wind, thinking of it many times during the day and dreaming of it by night, having only to cast

back to it to return to a higher world of thought and feeling.’ These chapters are also the high point of his narrative, a complicated farce of lightning conductors, criminal locksmiths, tennis balls, sweep’s rods and steeplejacks.

History and Mortality get shadowy cameos here too. A young man named Charles who planned to climb the chapel, and also to enlist against the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, mysteriously dies of ‘an untimely bump of the head’. His memory is honoured by friends who hang a ‘Save Ethiopia’ flag from the roof. Whipplesnaith reports the incident but reserves comment – as also in the case of the man who, in 1936, ‘affixed a swastika to the pinnacle’. These are things that his light touch cannot tackle.

In the final chapter of *Night Climbers*, however, facetiousness becomes heartfelt philosophy, as Whipplesnaith bids farewell to his youth:

There is a kind of fear which is very close akin to love, and this is the fear which the climber enjoys. It is, to use a contradictory term, a brave fear . . . We may ask ourselves whether the good effects resulting from climbing are permanent. From the pinnacle of our premature old age, we think we can say they are.

This seems to have been Symington’s retirement from literature too, having left his lone, ‘necky’ classic fixed on the Cambridge skyline.

JEREMY NOEL-TOD comes from a long line of armchair nightclimbers: his great-uncle read Whipplesnaith at St John’s, and his father read Hederatus at Trinity.

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One winter afternoon, browsing in a second-hand bookshop, I found a book called *Cambridge Nightclimbers*, by ‘Hederatus’. (*Hedera* is the Latin for ivy, probably the world’s most talented climber). Inside the cover was a red ink stamp: ‘Cambridgeshire

Libraries: WITHDRAWN FROM STOCK’ it declared, intriguingly. I flicked through the book. It was part-memoir, part-guidebook, written under a pseudonym in 1970 by a student who had spent his years at the university scaling the city’s buildings – sacred and profane – and evading the porters.

‘Buildering’, he and his friends called their sport, and they were very good at it indeed. The Fitzwilliam Museum had fallen to them, as had King’s College Porter’s Lodge (‘It is essential to climb the clock-face up the right-hand side . . .’) and even, most impressively, the twin towers of King’s College Chapel (‘Tradition, height, beauty, severity all combine to make it the goal of everyone’s ambition . . .’). The lady who sold me the book said it had been withdrawn from circulation in libraries because it was a danger to public health.

Each night the following week I dressed in black, eased on my climbing slippers and went out alone, or with my friend Simon, pulling myself up by Gothic bosses, lodging my toes in spandrels, clutching at trefoils – each one of whose upper curves fitted the palm of a hand exactly – and shaking masonry grit from my hair when I got home. My dreams filled with mullions, porticos, pale marble cornices, and a particular carved and painted red rose on the gatehouse of St John’s College, which had a space for each finger-tip between its furled stone petals. I was more than usually thankful for the Gothic tradition in architecture, and stayed away from anything Georgian.

After five days of low-altitude clambering, I decided to attempt Cambridge’s foremost Catholic church. Its spire rose like a sooted space-rocket over central Cambridge, outstanding even in that city of towers. I had no intention of risking myself on the spire, but thought that there might be sport to be had among the flying buttresses on its south side, and that it might give me a view over the city.

That night I heaved and hauled my way up the side of the church, keeping to the shadows cast by the buttresses. It was an ungainly, brutal display of climbing. I jammed my feet into unreceptive niches, startled a slumbering pair of pigeons, pressed my fingers into a moist

sill of birdshit, and finally – thankfully – embraced a gargoyle which stared amazed back at me, its lemur-eyes ringed with shadow and a pair of odd little wings poking up like feathered shoulder-blades from its back.

It was no good, I reflected when I got back that night. Buildings weren't mountains – I needed the real thing. A fortnight later, I was in the Northern Corries of the Cairngorms.

ROBERT MACFARLANE is the author of *Mountains of the Mind* and *The Wild Places*. He no longer climbs buildings, except by the stairs.