

## Cambridge Climbing

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IN 1657 one Joshua Poole, M.A., of Clare Hall, Cambridge, published his *English Parnassus: Or a Help to English Poesie*, which included "an ample treasury of *phrases*, and elegant expressions" properly applicable to certain likely words. Between *Morpheus*, who has half a page, and *Mountebank* (nearly a page), we find this listing:

*Mountain. v. Hills. High.*

The rocky ribs of earth. Earths warts. Blisters. A century and a half passed before rather more expansive utterance on the subject, by other Cantabs, began to compensate. Wordsworth of John's, Coleridge of Jesus and Byron of Trinity showed some appreciation, for example; and so, later still (and perhaps more significantly, in a climber's eyes), did Leslie Stephen of Trinity Hall. It remained, however, for their successors in the University to complete the repudiation of Poole, by founding in 1885 the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club.

Be it said that the founders had other objects in view: to foster the spirit of mountaineering in Cambridge, by arranging lectures; and to provide opportunities for members to get acquainted and form parties for climbing during the vacations. The spirit quickly caught on. Membership, originally confined to Trinity College, was thrown open to the entire University. More and more climbs were done, by undergraduates and graduates. Between the turn of the century and 1914 the group was active which included Geoffrey Winthrop Young and George Mallory and their friends. The war interrupted activities: no meetings were held, and (I learned from *Oxford and Cambridge Mountaineering 1921*) the minute books were lost. In 1919 the Club revived. Since then more than one member has been to Everest. Indeed Dr. Raymond Greene, an ex-president of the Oxford Club, tells how in 1933 he found that he was outnumbered by six to one. Others of the Club have had good times together in the nearer hills of Britain and in the Alps. *Cambridge Mountaineering 1940* announces that now in this Second War, despite the restrictions on travel and the turnover in member-

ship brought about by acceleration in the courses of study, the C.U.M.C. is determined to carry on.

With neither an expedition nor a first ascent to report, I can do nothing here but recall something of the good times I had while I was up at Trinity in 1937-38, and tell a bit about the Club to which I owed many of them. First, let me give an account of the membership. There are four categories: Senior Members, Resident Associate Members, Non-Resident Associate Members, Ordinary Members. Of the first, in recent years, there have been about nine, including Geoffrey Young, N. E. Odell and C. A. Elliott. (I wonder whether this last gentleman has ever recalled how an inquisitive trio at the Bétemps Hut in 1936, not then knowing his identity but enjoying the conversation, drew from him the admission that he was . . . well, as a matter of fact . . . Headmaster of Eton.) Of Resident Associate Members there have been about 26, including Professors Adrian and Clapham. In the third group have been some 37, including such recent luminaries as J. L. Longland, L. R. Wager and E. H. L. Wigram. The Ordinary Members have naturally constituted the largest category: about 80, representing almost all the Cambridge colleges. From their number are chosen each year's officers, who are assisted by a committee of two older advisers.

It has been the custom to hold about fifteen meetings in Cambridge annually. About a third of these may be classed as informal: gatherings in the rooms of members for the discussion of vacation plans or for the showing of members' movies. The formal meetings, held in the more spacious quarters of dons or in combination rooms, have been marked by lectures. On the list of speakers we find such names as C. G. Bruce, T. G. Longstaff, Geoffrey Young, N. E. Odell, I. A. Richards (and Mrs. Richards, too), Marco Pallis, Spencer Chapman, Jack Longland. Not infrequently the lecture has a title like "Some Everyday Climbs" (E. H. L. Wigram) or "Guideless Climbing for the Plain Man" (A. M. Greenwood).

*Cambridge Mountaineering* appears every two years or so, to chronicle the activities of the Club. C. W. F. Noyce, who edited the journal of 1938, summed up its purpose: "It is simply a record of days pleasant and unpleasant, put together largely for the amusement of the writers' own fellows. . . . We should be both flattered and surprised if it interested any but those immediately concerned with Cambridge." For other reading matter members may turn to the Wherry Library, housed in the Scott Polar Research Institute.

Choice though not very extensive, the collection is frequently used. I should mention also, as administered in Cambridge, the Donald Robertson Fund. Donald Robertson died after a fall on Glyder Fach in 1910. The fund was established by friends who were fond, as he was, of staying at the Gorphwysfa, Pen-y-Pass. The committee considers applications from undergraduates wishing to travel in the Long Vacation and, one suspects, has often granted aid to members of C.U.M.C.

Of climbing activities in Cambridge itself Roof Climbing is the best known. Officially the C. U. M. C. has nothing to do with it. Nevertheless it must come under our consideration. The sport has evolved from earlier mastering of a situation which all Cambridge undergraduates have known. Unless they have late leaves, they must be in their colleges (or "digs") by midnight. If they are delayed and arrive to find the gates tight shut, they have either to find another way in or to suffer the consequences of missing a night. Finding another way in may have consequences, too; but it is obviously the sporting thing to try. Knowledge of the best routes into a particular college is easily come by. One hears discussion of them at lunch parties, by dons and undergraduates alike. There used to be a ludicrously simple . . . but that is an unnecessary detail.

Usually the delayed reveller must creep and intrude and climb into the fold by means of ledges and drainpipes and railings. College porters and rows of revolving spikes are among the principal hazards. In some quarters conditions have been eased by special arrangement. For example, it is understood that the occupant of a useful room in King's must always leave a window unlocked. The Master of Caius undertakes (according to reports) to keep a way through his garden open, provided everyone will avoid the crumbling Gate of Honour, which would obviously "go."

I must protest that I cannot write about roof climbing from first-hand experience. In Trinity I sometimes whiled away an odd moment by balancing around the ledge at the base of the Freshmen's Pillar, under the Wren Library in Neville's Court. But that ledge is only a few inches from the pavement—merely a place for practicing technique. Real night climbers devote themselves rather to making the circuit of the Great Court of Trinity by the roofs, or to ascending the outside of King's College Chapel. Conquest of the chapel is the highest ambition of most: ground to roof, roof to pinnacle. That entails 160 ft. of effort. To his completion of the

arduous course one Kingsman is said to have attributed his election as a Fellow. His story, with many others, is recorded by "Whipplesnaith" in *The Night Climbers of Cambridge* (1937), which should occupy a place on the adept's shelf beside two classics by Geoffrey Young, anonymously published: *The Roof-Climber's Guide to Trinity* (1901) and *Wall and Roof Climbing* (1905).

Occasionally one sees notices posted like the following one:

TWO PERSONS *in statu pupillari*, having been found climbing King's College Chapel, have been rusticated by their Colleges.

G. H. A. WILSON,  
Vice-Chancellor.

10 June 1937

Punishment for anyone apprehended is sure. The night climber faces the risk as frankly as the authorities acknowledge the existence of the night climber. A message from the powers of one college ran something like this: "Roof Climbing is strictly forbidden. However, anyone who finds himself above the corner of X Court is requested not to disturb the maids whose rooms are there." Obvious moral: don't get caught! I can think of only one undergraduate exempt from it. His father and grandfather had been sent down from Cambridge before him. Nothing was more important to him than maintenance of the family tradition. Alas, when he succeeded in being trapped on the roofs, he was subjected to cruel disgrace. The subtle and knowing authorities saw to it that he was *not* sent down.

It is best for me, as an outsider, simply to suggest the lines that an argument about roof climbing might follow. The roof climber could begin by pointing out the antiquity of his pastime. See the Biblical passages cited in *Wall and Roof Climbing*: 2 Kings 6.26, for example, or 2 Samuel 11.2. Or look at Tamburlaine's speech by the death-bed of Zenocrate, in Marlowe's play:

Now walk the angels on the walles of heauen. . . .

*Orthodox Member of the C.U.M.C.*: But after all some of your favorite climbing grounds in Cambridge are getting old, too. Professor Pigou says the stone-work on the chapel isn't safe.

*R.C.*: The Pigou Argument again! "Whipplesnaith" dismisses it as poppycock. Besides we make a point of never breaking anything.

*O.M.*: What about the money King's has had to spend, fixing unsightly prongs to keep you off the pinnacles and removing the

souvenirs you leave? In 1937 the deans wrote to *The Cambridge Review* to say that “the climb on Coronation morning compelled the expenditure of no less than £351.” If Wordsworth were alive now, he might tax *you* with vain expense, even if he still let off the royal saint.

R.C.: I wasn't there. Lamentable, no doubt, but I shouldn't say vain. We're most appreciative. Have you heard Geoffrey Young's "Song of the Brotherhood suitable for Club Dinners"?

Sing we, brothers, in resonant chorus,  
Paeans of praise to the ultimate goal,  
Rolling its composite mountains before us,  
Guide to the hand, yet support to the sole!  
Heart-discloser! Brain-shelter of proof!  
Brothers, hail to the region of Roof!

O.M.: I hardly think Geoffrey Young and the other early “perpetrators” would have incurred that bill.

R.C.: He's right in suggesting good companionship, though.

O.M.: Some of the best people, too. Granted. But isn't your good companionship with them likely to be interrupted?

R.C.: Sharing the risk of discovery merely draws us closer. All the more fun.<sup>1</sup>

O.M.: In the dark, with porters around? I'd rather confront *gendarmes*—the rocky sort—and in daylight.

R.C.: We have wonderful exercise. Exquisitely delicate, some pitches are.

O.M.: Irrelevant, so far as I'm concerned. Gymnastics. The angels are artificial and preposterous.

R.C.: Would you say that about the buildings as a whole? Listen to part of a description of the ascent of the Hall of Trinity, in *The Roof-Climber's Guide*: “A few moments can well be spared for the view, and few could be insensible to its charms. The distant towers of the Great, New and Nevile's Courts, looming against the dark sky, lit by the flickering lights far below; the gradations of light and shadow, marked by an occasional moving black speck, seemingly from another world; the sheer wall descending into darkness at his side, the almost invisible barrier that the battlements from which he started seem to make to his terminating in the Court

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<sup>1</sup> An ex-President, now in the R. A. F., reports that Night Climbers were active in the early weeks of the blackout—until suspicious wardens began to shoot at them.

if his arm slips, all contribute to making this esteemed, deservedly, the finest viewpoint in the college alps."

*O.M.*: Geoffrey Young wrote *On High Hills* and *Mountain Craft*, too. Roof climbing looks to me like a poor substitute, for anyone who can't evaluate both it and mountaineering proper from experience. You've been quoting. Let me read from a review of *The Night Climbers* in *Cambridge Mountaineering 1938*: "We may hope, then, for the roof-climbers. Because they have love of high places, though most do not climb hills, it may be they will discover that mountains dangle a yet greater lure."

*R.C.*: Nice of him, I'm sure.

*O.M.*: Wait. It goes on: "It would be vanity on the part of the mountaineer to boast himself greater

than they  
Who on the fragments of yon shattered dome  
Have stamped the sign of power.

Let him only reckon that while many have turned from roofs to hills, none that we know have done the reverse."

*R.C.*: You can't turn to hills here, in term time. The Gogs are all we have. John Buchan was right about Cambridge, even after you allow for an Oxonian bias: "Over what she calls her hills one is apt to walk without noticing them."

*O.M.*: You can't stay in Cambridge out of term.

*R.C.*: And in Wales or the Alps you can't find anything to match the delightful situation here. G. A. M. suggests that it's like a tolerant democracy at work. We'll take no notice so long as you don't force us to, sort of thing.

*O. M.*: I should have thought that democracy depended somewhat on people voluntarily keeping certain bounds.

*R.C.*: We do, we *do*. We avoid breaking up the buildings, and we don't frighten the maids. Whom do we bother, unless the porters? They probably enjoy a little excitement, anyhow. Harm ourselves? Rather not. In his last chapter "Whipplesnaith" tells something about the self-discipline involved, and the salutary knowledge of accomplishment in the face of danger and difficulty.

*O.M.*: If you *must* confuse a symbol of struggle with the real thing, I do think you might choose a better symbol.

*R.C.*: Well, roof climbing always represents a good sporting venture, whatever you say.

*O.M.*: There. That's the hardest of your arguments to answer. But the review I mentioned points out "that the spirit of the game, with flashlight photography and attendant publicity, has lost what its first 'perpetrators' prized most, the freedom

To wander in the shadow of the night. . . ."

*R. C.*: Just the same, I like it.

*O.M.*: I prefer. . . .

And so on until midnight, when *R.C.* fishes out his black sneakers and departs for the Fourth Court Climb, with *The Roof-Climber's Guide* in his pocket, while *O.M.* saunters home to reread a chapter of *On High Hills*, wishing for the end of term.

During vacations the C. U. M. C. has regularly held meets and particularly urged first- and second-year men to attend. Scotland and North Wales afford the favorite locations within the Isles: Glenbrittle and Helyg. The former attracted various numbers in the summers of 1934 and 1935 and at Easter in 1937. The hardy few who camped out probably would not have done so if Mrs. Chisholm had not been at the post office, to offer warm shelter at times. Helyg, the Climbers' Club cottage on the road between Capel Curig and Bethesda, was the scene of gatherings at Christmas time from 1935 through 1939. Glencoe and the Lakes have also received some attention. The principal meets, in the Long Vacation, used to be held abroad: 1934, Stubai and Ötztal; 1935, Grindelwald; 1936, Norway; 1937, Arolla; 1938, Les Evettes and Lognan; 1939, Arolla. The Club has fostered guideless climbing, depending on experienced members for leadership; but it has never considered the tradition binding. Members who have attended—usually six to a dozen at a meet in the Alps—appear to have been interested more in enjoying themselves than in peak-bagging or sensational new routes. They have been known to admit discomfort in soft snow and in storms—and even, once or twice, to regard with favor the idea of temporary return to the level of the *pâtisserie* or the *Bierstube*.

About my own sadly limited experience of C. U. M. C. meets I have already written briefly.<sup>2</sup> It was at Helyg, just before Christmas in 1937. The meet lasted for a fortnight. About six members capable of leading stayed the whole time. A dozen others stayed a week and then gave way to a dozen more. Persistent blizzards

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<sup>2</sup> "Rocks and Fells," *A. A. J.* (1939), iii, 299.

kept us off some of the more difficult routes (not to mention the "severes"), but could not smother our enjoyment: closer acquaintance with Tryfan, looming near, and the Glyders; scrambles on the Helyg Boulder and into the loft of the cottage, direct; toast made on an upturned electric heater and buried under marmalade; the President's report of the old man who was always looking for his "sheeps"; the grisly prognostications offered to the chap who had to be pried out of a frozen rope. . . .

Tryfan is a special favorite. In 1781, having looked across from the Glyders, Pennant described it aptly as "a pyramidal form, naked and very rugged." At the end of the same century, speaking from experience, Bingley declared that no one could ascend it without using his hands. The ridge, which runs roughly north and south, has four peaks, divided by gullies; and the east (main) face has four fine buttresses, which the climber may reach from the Heather Terrace, part way up and slanting downward to the north. At the foot of the north ridge lies a separate buttress, the Milestone. Blocks and slabs, chimneys and corners, not much exposed (except on the Terrace Wall), give one days of pleasant climbing. "A cheerful mountain," says the *Climbers' Club Guide*, "mainly in the sun, and a good place for talking." So far as the C. U. M. C. is concerned, I can do no better than quote a tribute by E. C. Allberry of Trinity.<sup>3</sup>

#### Ballade of Unchanging Affection

As term drags on I'm feeling far from gay,  
 There's nothing for a chap to climb on here:  
 The chalk at Cherryhinton comes away  
 —Sad End to Undergraduate's Career—;  
 King's Chapel really is a bit severe,  
 Excessive heights give me a bad *migraine*;  
 (Professor Piccard, keep your stratosphere),  
 I'm off to climb on Tryfan once again.

I've been insolvent since a year last May,  
 The tariff for the Grépon is too dear;  
 To get to Capel Curig takes a day,  
 The trip to Everest takes half a year.  
 And though it makes me jealous when I hear  
 Of Martin Conway's chickens and champagne,  
 I have no Gurkhas for my grub and gear,  
 I'm off to climb on Tryfan once again.

<sup>3</sup> *Cambridge Mountaineering 1936.*

Paul wants me to go out to Dauphiné.  
 Alasdair's Munro bag is in arrear ;  
 He's off to Skye, and sends a card to say  
 I shall be welcome. Will I come? No fear!  
 The Grooved Arête is standing grey and clear,  
 And there's the Milestone Buttress, should it rain ;  
 Helyg is waiting. May I raise a cheer?  
 I'm off to climb on Tryfan once again.

*Envoi*

Farewell, Prince! Pardon if I seem to sneer,  
 Seeing you go up Snowdon in a train  
 To buy your postcards, and drink bottled beer.  
 I'm off to climb on Tryfan once again.

I can add little more. Most of our climbs are familiar to the climbing fraternity. If one were to attempt an account of any such, he would have—as Donald Robertson suggested in "Alpine Humor"—to be either concise or funny. Certainly the greater climbs by members are too well known to need mention. Perhaps I should follow up the first paragraph and list writings from which a reader may derive an impression of any peculiarly Cantabrigian attitudes toward the hills; but I somehow think of the attitudes as belonging not to Cambridge so much as to a number of individuals who, sharing affection for the hills, happen to have been additionally blessed as fellow-Cantabs. Attitudes are obviously difficult to isolate, anyhow. Those of us who agree that "a day well spent in the Alps is like some great symphony" may yet be guilty of would-be jokes in *Cambridge Mountaineering*.

In some cases the name of one of those individual fellow-Cantabs can start a line of reminiscence longer and more particular than any suggested merely by "C. U. M. C." or "Helyg." J. A. B. G. is an example. He was an officer of the Club while I was up and, incidentally, a member of Clare College—Joshua Poole's own. We first met when Spencer Chapman told the Club about Chomolhari, and subsequently we were both at Helyg and put in some time trying to conquer the first pitch of the Wall Climb. But John fits also into memories of The Gang's frequent lunches together in Cambridge and the Sunday walks over the Fens. Unfortunate name, suggestive only of wet, damp, moist, unpleasant monotony; and the country is admittedly flat. Nevertheless, having been in the hills, all of us, we could talk of them—and plan. We could also discuss

Harley Street or Downing Street, or quote "Kubla Khan," or sing "Green Grow," or look at parish churches, or recline on the lawn outside the Duke of Wellington, with ale and pickled onions for lunch. John was present when Andrew miscalculated the strength of a branch and fell from tree to muddy stream beneath, and when—with a rope from above—we climbed in the chalkpits at Cherryhinton. And John was at Geoffrey Young's Easter party at Pen-y-Pass. Lliwedd, Tryfan again, and a day on Craig Cwm Silin. There, for a while, voices bellowed songs in chorus, until the whole cliff seemed to be echoing. Evenings in the smoking-room at the Gorphwysfa. . . . And then our Westdale Wanderers' camp in June: indefatigable John on Gable, Pillar, Scawfell, in all kinds of weather . . . . intent over the fire, cooking . . . . puffing a pipe and talking about a trip to Italy, to look at pictures.

Or Ashley, who was President of the Club a couple of years before I went to Cambridge. He and Charles seem to have turned up on a number of enjoyable occasions. We first met one evening in August, 1936, when Bob Bates and I were at the Dom Hut. The next day's weather was memorably poor: a nasty, greenery-yallery sort of sunrise. From the Dom Bob and I caught a glimpse of Ashley and Charles on the Nadelgrat, before things were quite blotted out.

It was not until Christmas Day, 1937, that I saw them again. After a good run down from the Rotmoosjoch, Fred Osborn and I stomped into the Schönwieshütte, above Obergurgl, hoping to thaw out. Ahead of us, already thawing, were Ashley and Charles. With them and their *confrères* we joined forces for the rest of our stay. Fred and Charles were far and away the best skiers. The Everester of the group—and this was a comfort—was known, *quâ* skier, as Captain Crump. In the evening at the Gurgl he soberly presided.

One evening we challenged one another, uncouth hearties that we were, to go and dance with the exotic hothouse blossom whom we had labelled Public Enemy Number One. She should have mixed up in espionage and intrigue, a Hedy Lamarr taking over Lynn Fontanne's rôle in another *Idiot's Delight*; but she turned out to be a model for Jaeger. Ashley was reluctant; but then, during a Paul Jones (we descended *en masse* on the dance-floor whenever there was one), he fetched up, just for a moment, with her as his partner. That sidelong smile of triumph!

And Ashley was our imperturbable spokesman when a Frenchman fluttered over to ask us about a German who had carelessly schussed into a crack in the Rotmoosgletscher. Apparently it was known that we were such daredevils as to go up there without guides. The culminating question (quiver of morbid excitement): "Was he one of *your* party?" Ashley (drawing himself up as impressively as a seated man possibly can): "Our party NEVER falls into crevasses."

Their party left eventually for the Silvretta; Fred and I, for Hoch Sölden. A few months later, I looked round a rocky corner on Lliwedd. There were Ashley and Charles. . . .

Very pleasant, the C. U. M. C. Members enjoy the hills.