

# Chance encounter

*Toby Chance (Geography; 1979) who is based in South Africa, visited Fitzwilliam in November 2008 while in the UK to launch his book on lighthouses. Optima took the opportunity to hear more about his life since graduation.*



The class of '79 Fitz matriculation photo hangs in my study and whenever I glance at it I realise my three years at Cambridge were probably the most formative of my life. I found religion and promptly lost a girlfriend, discovered Tory politics then declined a prospective Parliamentary candidacy, and had my public school-educated assumptions about class turned upside down among Fitz's heterogeneous community.

Fitz then, as now, has a reputation for turning out top class geographers, which was not surprising as we had two

was Fitz's own debating club but its early demise showed the student body's interest in sport, drinking and other pursuits trumped our attempts to elevate politics as a worthwhile social activity!

After graduating I spent six weeks in South Africa, returned via the overland route in 1984 and have lived here ever since. One of the most dramatic things to happen on the political front during my Cambridge years was the Gang of Four breakaway from Labour. In South Africa a similar thing is now happening with the formation of an ANC splinter party, the Congress of the People, which aims to strengthen the centre ground and repel the threat from the extreme left. In my work, which involves organising business events and community festivals in South African townships, I grapple with the consequences of the wasted apartheid years which politicians here are trying

hard to confront, though solutions are elusive.

I was recently in England to launch my book on lighthouses. The book traces the story of how my great-great-grandfather, who graduated from Trinity in 1838, and the family firm restored Britain's leadership in lighthouse optics and then supplied over 2400 lighthouses to 80 countries around the world. As any geographer would agree, a map is worth a thousand words.

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future stars of the University geography department guiding us – Bob Bennett and Richard Smith. As a geographer, the highlight for me was the “field trip” to the Algarve in the 1981 Easter vac – not just for the sun but for cementing friendships.

My main extra-curricular interest was politics, both at the Union and as a member (and Chairman) of the Cambridge Tory Reform Group. I enjoyed mixing with the stream of cabinet ministers for whom participation in a Cambridge Union debate was seen as vital to their career prospects. One of my TRG guests was Edward Goldsmith, a leading Green Party advocate, whose warnings about man's destruction of the environment were laughed at (though not by us geographers, of course!). Plus ça change.

The Somerset Society, formed by Peter Hippen (1979), me and a few others,

**Lighthouses: the race to illuminate the world**  
 Toby Chance and Peter Williams  
 New Holland Publishers 2008

