



**Other books by Andrew Cottingham**

Mr. Winderbilt & The Modern Conveyance

# **WINDERBILT** OVER FLOODSVILLE

A story for grown-up boys and girls of all ages

ANDREW COTTINGHAM

Winderbilt Over Floodsville  
(revised edition - 'The Second Wind')  
© 2009 Andrew Cottingham  
First edition originally published 2006

Design and illustrations by Simon Russell at Boing

Made at Trans-Genre-Express Workshops  
for Bang Bang Chicken  
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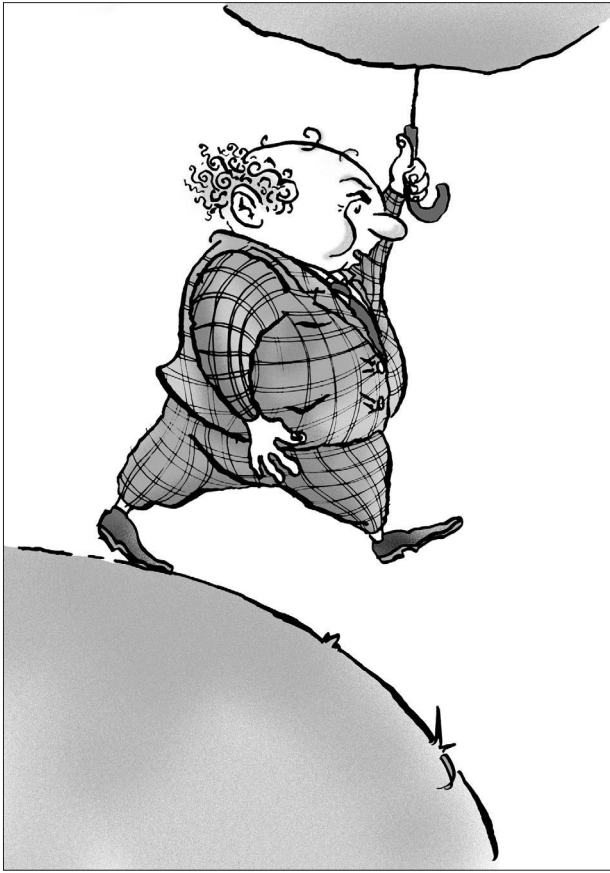
Winderbilt Over Floodsville  
ISBN-13: 978-0-906628-09-3  
Published by CheckPoint Press, Ireland



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**For Blaise and Nina**



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## CHAPTER ONE

### **The Library**

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Over here an eerie light spreads creeping fingers, picking out nosy crocuses. It melts onto the sleeping hedge in cold yellow candles. Just there, turned earth and shivering slabs of crazy path scissor the garden into crazy halves.

Here, the bowl of milk moon curdles in a blue-ink sky. The silent wind blows quivering voices out of nervy leaves; an owl sends a telegram through the darkness from a tree across the path which calls itself a road. And in the garden of Mr. Winderbilt the candles of light, all of a sudden, all at once, flicker.

Mr. Winderbilt peers through the buttercup stripes of his curtained window. He hangs there a moment, staring quizzically out at the blurred shapes of the night, plump nose seeming to twitch in expectation of the sharp air. On the backlit stage formed by the window frame and bordered by the curtains, Mr. Winderbilt's bald head with its tussocks of grey around the sides looks very much like an overgrown egg in a decorative cup, except for the dark but bright eyes which shine mischievously from beneath caterpillar eyebrows. The egg performs a couple of brief bows and then disappears behind the curtains.

Time hangs from the tree like a hoary chestnut nugget, about to drop. The sky pauses for a moment, ponders the possibility of raining, changes its mind and continues its inevitable dark slide across the earth.

Mr. Winderbilt's front door, with its knobbly glass surface through which only the bloated outline of objects can be seen, clicks open. He steps out, squat and wide, hurriedly wrestled-into coat filling the doorway, a black bundle beneath one arm. He bends down on the path by the grass and newly dug earth. The black bundle suddenly slithers away and then trots briskly

back to the doorway. It sniffs at two empty bottles which stand by the rugged doormat and then pads back indoors.

Mr. Winderbilt lets forth a deep and weighty mutter which is perhaps a curse or an oath, and which disappears inside his overcoat, "Here, puss, puss, puss..."

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In the High Street of Floodsville the shops, one by one, gradually flickered alive to the many calls of, 'Good Morning' and, 'How are you today, P.C. Offgrass?'

Each shop lit up its tightly packed internal organs swollen full of food and bottles and clothing and little boxes of tools and soaps and tins and matches and bright purple foil-wrapped sweets.

Birds hit the sky like shot pellets. There was a church stuck to the side of one of the nearer hills and the birds perching on the needle of the steeple chirped not hymns but airy fairground noises.

Cloistered in his thickly curtained purple and gold room, Reverend Pew responded by letting loose an outrageously righteous roar of a snore which pricked up the fleshy ears of his old hound, Jacob, who had slept soundly all night in his flea-ridden woollen den beneath the bell tower. The clock on the top of the bell tower stretched out its long wooden arms in slow yawning ticks.

Fourteen minutes past nine. Mr. Winderbilt had overslept his routine waking time by two long slumberous hours. He winced into his prickly dressing gown and prodded feet at loose-fitting slippers.

Mrs. Knead, the baker's wife, chuckled along the High Street, swaying from side to side on short plump legs, bags laden with dough ingredients in the firm grasp of each hand. She grinned a sweet tooth grin at everyone she passed and she wobbled her way into the baker's shop, struggling to get both heaving bags through the narrow doorway.

"Ah, mornin' 'tis. Bright an' brilliant an' brisk," she strained.

Horace Theobald Winderbilt, known to all simply as Mr. Winderbilt, walked into the village, as he had many a morning for as long as anyone could remember. The road wound into the village like the string of a fighting conker tossed carelessly onto the ground. Indeed, Floodsville was very much of a rounded shape, cut in two by the High Street and tucked neatly into a bend of the Big River which flowed by year in, year out.

The baker peered out of the tiny panes of his window, awaiting the first customers of the day. The fresh yeasty smell of warming bread rose up and out into the street, exiting far less stressfully than it had arrived. The odour wafted gently into the tobacconist's shop and mixed with the deep moist smell of tobacco stuffed into soon-to-be-rusting tins. Old Tom Catarrh, wizened dealer of shag, cigarettes, cigars, cigarette holders, pipes, lighters and matches stumped around on his anciently thin pipecleaner legs, serving the occasional customer, while constantly working his gums in a long, slow chewing motion. Major Morris stalked stiffly into the shop and ordered five packets of *Olde Hack*. Mr. Winderbilt breathed in deeply, and surveyed the world.

Mr. Winderbilt disliked dogs, especially the tiny, barky sort and he crossed the street deliberately to avoid Frank Stamp, the postman, who took his little terrier, Scamp, everywhere with him on his rounds because he yapped so fiercely at all the other dogs that they quite forgot to bother young Frank himself.

Some would suggest that Mr. Winderbilt crossed the street to avoid people also, but that perhaps would be not quite fair. He was, after all, a naturally very shy person and a naturally very frowny person. Mr. Winderbilt wore a permanent set of creases across his forehead, which rode heavily on his brow, pushing it down over his eyes. This gave the general effect of a slightly angry and irritable stare, even when Mr. Winderbilt was neither angry nor irritable at all.

“Oh dear, oh dear, I ache somethin' terrible,” complained Mrs. Pullet, the farmer's wife, to Mr. Knead, the baker, “This leg will be the death of me yet, it will, it will.”

Mr. Knead tut-tutted sympathetically as he wrapped crusty white loaves and still-warm rolls into thin white wrapping paper. His moustache twitched nervily when he talked and its dark shade peppered with white convinced his customers that he sampled his own floury produce in a rather careless manner. He stuffed the bread into a large parcel and handed it over the counter.

“I don’t know why we ever took over that extra land las’ autumn,” muttered Mrs. Pullet, as she bundled the parcel into her bag, “It’s just a worry, just a worry..”

Mrs. Pullet had a habit of repeating everything that she said, in a sing-song voice that was dulled only by the fact that the largest part of her conversation consisted of some form of complaint, which led to a certain feeling amongst some that once, let alone twice, was more than enough.

At this point, Mr. Winderbilt entered the baker’s shop, putting an abrupt end to Mrs. Pullet’s free-flowing observations on the varying degrees of energy and industry possessed by members of the local farming community. Mrs. Pullet hurriedly bid one-and-all a good day and departed with her parcels.

Mr. Winderbilt invariably visited the baker’s shop first, and Mr. Knead presented him with his early morning crusty bloomer.

Mr. Winderbilt left wordlessly in the general direction of the grocer’s shop. He fancied that Paul Legume, vendor of groceries, fruits and vegetables had given him a strong look of disapproval when it came to a judgment of his ripest but firmest marrow, through a test of much prodding and squeezing. Mr. Winderbilt had come to expect disapproval from most people, and yet it still produced in him a feeling of gloom and loneliness which it took several minutes, a couple of enthusiastic frowns and a brisk walk to rid himself of.

By the time he reached his destination of the library, plump spots of rain had begun to spatter the pavement with dark-eyed pupils. The occasional drop plopped and broke heavily on his bald top.

The sky immediately above was a grizzly grey, a thick patch against a blue background. Mr. Winderbilt kept his umbrella beneath his arm, as he was now at the entrance to the small but well-stocked library. The building was stained with the running green of ivy, which clung to its every cling-able surface.

The library looked something like a greenhouse which had been taken over by repossessing plant life, through which could be seen the brief oasis of glass and the odd growth of red brick.

Mr. Winderbilt loved books. He read almost anything he could find, from trade journals on beekeeping to huge volumes on the courtship rituals of native tribes on far-off South Sea Islands. In the summer, he would lie back in his garden chair and pore over texts through morning to mid afternoon. In the winter, he would huddle in his huge old armchair, so worn that its insides sprouted out, and read by the light of the fire and a candle until the late hours, his old radio set buzzing in the background long after he had fallen asleep. And so it was that Mr. Winderbilt paid almost weekly visits to the library and its librarian and part time schoolmistress, Miss McBinding. Miss McBinding was one of the few people with whom Mr. Winderbilt exchanged more than a couple of words of almost polite greeting.

On this particular morning the young lady in question was taking stock of the general Non-Fiction section, A-M, on the top-most shelf of the central bookcase.

“Och, Mr. Winderbilt, it’s good t’be seeing yoo, tuh be sure. I’ll be wi’ yoo in a wee moment.”

Miss McBinding was a woman of northern-most extraction.

Mr. Winderbilt strained his neck in order to gain a full-handed grasp on the situation before him in the little library. He thereupon grasped the ladder on which the librarian was perched, most precariously it seemed, in a helpful gesture.

“Mr. Winderbilt, careful there, I’m quite safe, I tell you. Steady noo...”

The effect of suddenly letting loose his grip on the ladder, which seemed to Mr. Winderbilt a perfectly natural reaction, received a rather different response from that intended on the part of Miss McBinding, who was herself of a slightly nervous temperament. The ladder began to wobble most dangerously and the librarian, in a fit of panic, made a hasty grab at the top shelf, her hand coming away with a copy of *Aerodynamics and the Art of Perfect Flight*.

The ladder then made several hopeful gestures in the general direction of the next set of shelves, finally despairing and settling upon a well-curved motion toward the ground. Books scattered everywhere and Miss McBinding slid down directly upon the usefully rounded form of Mr. Winderbilt. That gentleman staggered back several paces, before recovering from the sudden increase of weight upon him, at which point his legs gave way and he and the librarian and part time teacher landed in a somewhat convoluted manner amid the Children's Books section.

"Och, Mr. Winderbilt, you gave me such a shock. Lucky for yoo that I'm just a wee lassie."

Mr. Winderbilt collected himself slowly, like loose change returning to a pocket. "I'm m-most sorry, Miss McBinding. A most unfortunate incident all round. Perhaps I can be an assist," Mr. Winderbilt guided Miss McBinding to the nearest chair and directed her gently down onto it. He then went in specific search of two mugs of hot tea, leaving the librarian to piece together her jumbled wits and plaits.

Outside, the wind began to blow deeply into the ferns and fronds about the library. All across Floodsville collars were tightened high up around necks, umbrellas were grasped more firmly and steps were quickened. Trees swayed great broccoli heads back and forth; gusts shot through the innards of hedges and ripples rippled swiftly across the Big River.

Just outside the church on the hill, a plank of fencing cracked with a brittle shock of sound. Old Jacob barked viciously and Caesar, the young tabby, shot up the inside of the church steeple.

In the library at the other end of the village, MissMcBinding sipped tea under the concerned gaze of her sole customer.

“I don’t know how it happened, I’m sure,” stammered Mr. Winderbilt, “I really feel sh-shocking about the whole affair.”

“It’s quite alright, Mr. Winderbilt, an’ no harm done. Now, if you’ll just choose yuir books, I’ll see to you shortly.”

Mr. Winderbilt went glumly off in search of *Crocuses and some Recent Developments*, a not especially thumbed-worn book he had wished to re-read since his disastrously poor crop of the previous year. When he finally departed the library, with some weighty literature tucked snugly in his bag, a further section of the sky had darkened to a dangerous shade.

Wind dragged the air this way and that. Mr. Winderbilt huddled himself up against the elements and headed homewards, shuddering now and again. He followed a direct trail through the village, meeting very few people, and was stopped by no one. The patch of dark grey above drifted across the sky, and one could almost imagine that it was following Mr. Winderbilt home, if one was given to such odd imaginings.

The thick atmosphere covered the land like a quilt on a bed. Shrieks and yells pierced through it from the school yard, “Look out, you naan-head!”

“Give me my brace back, William!”

“Watch it! Old Goldfish bowl-Face is coming!”

Children played in the yard, leap-frogging and hopscotching, skipping and jumping. Marbles clicked like skeletons’ teeth. Balls, as is their wont, bounced high and low. Mr. Winderbilt gritted his own molars as he struggled up the hill with a literal load tugging at his side. As he neared the furrowed brow of the incline, something teased at the corner of his eye. He looked up from his staggering and carrying and squinted at the distance. An object was playing in the air. It was red and white and swooped and nodded in all directions, an angry tail wriggling beneath it. Mr. Winderbilt

resumed his upward onslaught, finally reaching the top of the hill, chest heaving like a beached halibut, his face the violent red of the kite which bobbed and danced in the air above the old church.

Five children, three boys and two girls, stood and ran and scurried madly beneath the kite which the eldest boy held by a tight and tugging string. As he puffed nearer, Mr. Winderbilt recognised the youngsters as the Spring Kids, of Autumn Lane, a summer retreat type of spot on the other side of the Big River.

The daft red and white kite twitched in the sky and then swooped heavily towards the ground. The boy now attached to the other end of the kite, young Ben Spring, raced off, his legs a mad whirl across the road, and the kite shot upwards behind him. Mr. Winderbilt was about to shout out some exclamation of warning when it became obvious that it would be all-too late.

The kite sped on even after Ben Spring had stopped suddenly at the mossy grounds of the church. The stick frame cracked sharply against the steeple. String and tail wrapped themselves passionately around the old spire, clinging as if with some hereditary life force. The kite was most definitely tangled.

The Spring kids gathered beneath the church, moans of disappointment and some recriminations rising from their ranks, “Ben, you mouldy old loon...”

“It wasn’t me. It was the wind...”

The string of the kite was jerked back and forth and tugged this way and that. But it was no use. Suggestions were made, and ideas bounced up and down, as to the possibility of retrieving the now tired-looking object hanging from the steeple. One of the girls began to suggest the daring and quite sacrilegious measure of knocking on Reverend Pew’s door, when the other silenced her with a sharp, “**Sssh!**”

Noiselessness reigned. Then, out of the quiet, could be heard, quite clearly, a pitiful mewling sound, and then another.



“Look!” exclaimed Tommy Spring, prodding the air with a grubby finger. All the Spring kids gazed up as one. The perky head of the clergyman’s tabby emerged through a slit near the steeple’s peak. Ben Spring gulped noisily, “It’s stuck.”

They all pondered the meaning of this development for several moments. And then someone noticed Mr. Winderbilt standing, quite innocently, at the edge of the field. The Spring Kids paused for communal thought, “It’s Windy Wonderbolt,” one muttered.

Moments later a bob-haired, smudge-nosed group gathered around a bemused Mr. Winderbilt. It took several minutes to persuade, cajole and tug the elderly grown-up over to the site in the grassy graveyard where the two prongs of the forked dilemma were stuck up the steeple of the church on the hill at the edge of the village.

The sullen sky was motionless. Rain hung in the clouds like milk in the udder of a cow, waiting patiently to be milked.

Mr. Winderbilt raised a moistened little finger into the air. He thought for a moment. Wind whistled tunelessly in the nearby trees and bushes. The Spring Kids became impatient, but Mr. Winderbilt silenced them with a gesture. He whipped up his umbrella with a sword stroke motion which at the same time opened out the black cane construction. Its full umbrella shape burst wide like an outraged mouth. The wind rose somewhere from the distance with a whooshing, gushing sound.

A wave of awe and admiration, and not a little fear, swept through the Spring Kids, accompanied by much *ooh*-ing and *aah*-ing. Mr. Winderbilt’s feet had lifted gently but surely from the ground and, hanging tightly on to the gnarled handle of the big black umbrella, his large form lifted slowly up into the air. He then began floating and wobbling towards the church steeple. And there he hung, Horace Theobald Winderbilt, swinging from an umbrella in the spring wind, one hand raised.

Mr. Winderbilt drifted drunkenly from side to side for seconds, as if he was a broken pendulum. He then dipped down towards the

spire, made a swift grab into the gap below the steeple and came away with a mewling, meowing tabby kitten-almost-cat which dug its claws deeply into his jacket sleeve, overcome with fright. Mr. Winderbilt wafted slowly to the ground. All around him the youngsters exploded with delight and wonderment, “Cor ! Show us how you did it...”

“It’s his umbrella, stupid,” exclaimed the older and wiser voice of Tommy Spring.

“Nah, it’s them sick powers that Mucky Binding was telling us about.”

“*Psychic...*”

“How’d you do it, then..?”

“But my kite’s still stuck up there...”

The rescued kitten shot off into the bushes to lick the wounds which had scarred his pride.

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Red-faced and huffing, Mr. Winderbilt disappeared swiftly over the horizon. He equally quickly resumed his land-bound self, as he neared some outlying village houses. “...k-kin’.. k-kites and k-kittens and k-kids...” he puffed, “Blink-k-kin’ hills.” Though he could not say exactly why, Mr. Winderbilt felt quite irritable at, and with, himself.

High above Floodsville, and beyond the far green and purple hills, the sun pedalled over the horizon, its spokes sprayed out over the landscape, dallying over the slopes and sloping over the dales.

It had taken Mr. Winderbilt quite a while longer than usual to walk home after his exertions, and by the time he reached the green gate of his cottage the edges of his strength were extremely frayed. He almost fell indoors and collapsed into his old armchair. He thereupon entered into a very loud and heavy nap, but immediately after he began his first spluttery snore, which set the

tiny hairs of his armchair aquiver, a small incident occurred which may be of some note.

The ancient black cat, which had lived with Mr. Winderbilt for more years than he was capable of recalling, and which for some reason was referred to, if at all, as Persephone slinked around the door, sat directly in front of Mr. Winderbilt and grinned a very knowing and strangely appreciative grin. She then decided to follow the noisy and careless example of her companion and carer, tucked herself into a neat black ball, and drifted briskly off to sleep.

Both snored undisturbed for quite some time.

