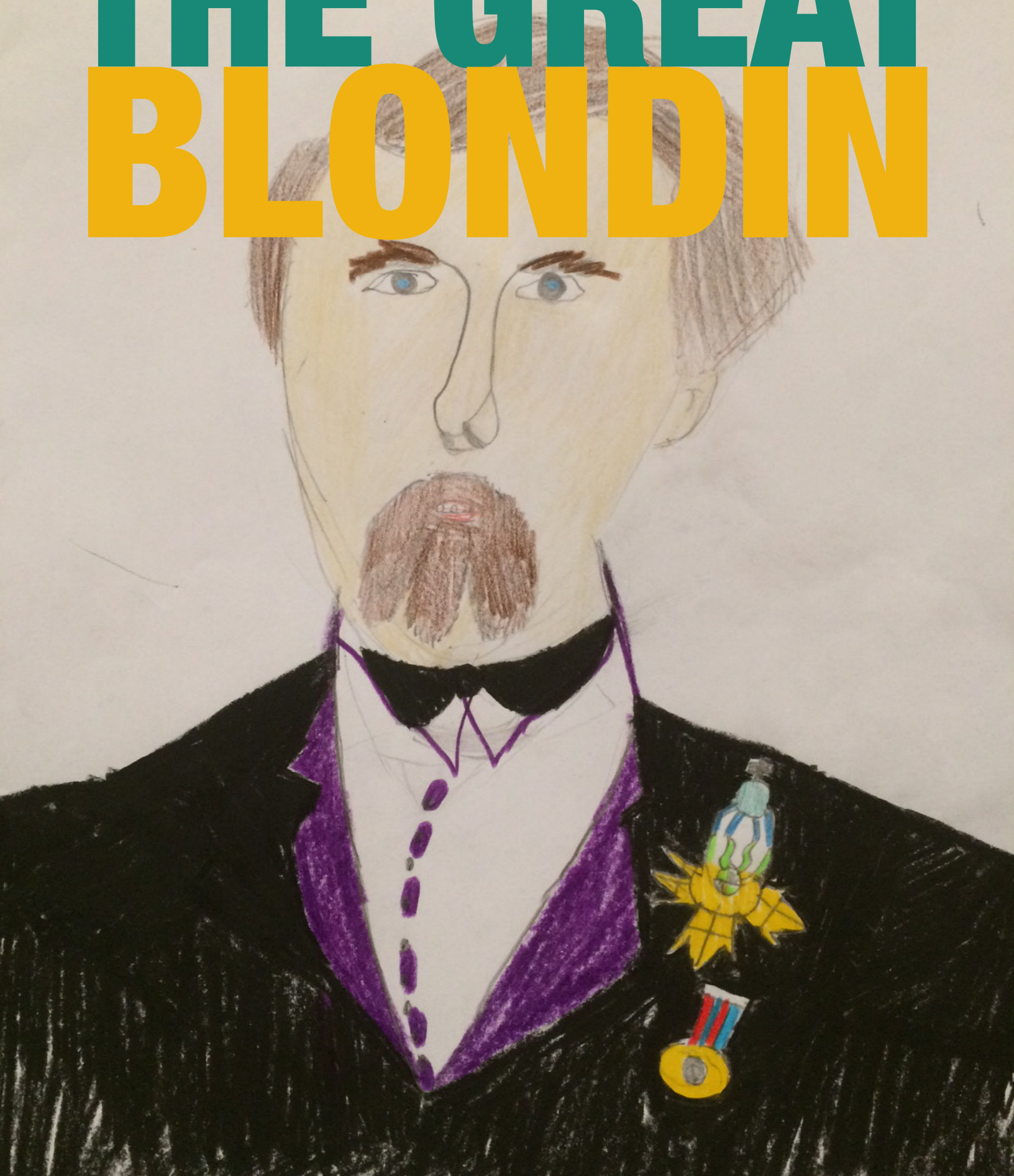


THE GREAT BLONDIN



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Introduction

1

Queen Victoria, who died in 1901, is famous for uttering the words “We are not amused.” Whether she said this or not, she was actually quite fond of being entertained and had a good sense of humour.

Popular entertainment in Victorian times included visiting the theatre, attending music concerts, championing sports such as rowing and horse racing and of course going to the circus.

Victorian circus thrilled its audience with equestrian displays, clowns, jugglers, musicians and acrobats.

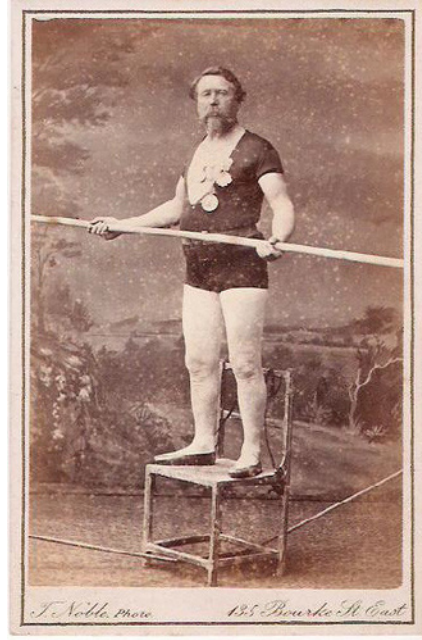
The subject of this project chose instead to perform his acrobatics independently – keeping his audience to himself and not even selling tickets! All he needed was a small crowd, fine weather conditions and a rope. May I present The Great Blondin!?!



Typical Victorian circus performers

Our Man

2



Charles Blondin was a French tightrope walker and acrobat. He was born Jean François Gravelet on the 28th of February, 1824. Despite a life led performing perilous feat after perilous feat he lived to the grand old age of 72, a matter of days before his 73rd birthday in 1897. This fearless and peerless Victorian was born in Pas-de-Calais, France but lived out his last years up the road from us in Northfields. When I noticed, while walking my dog, a park and several streets named after him I decided to find out all about him. Prepare to be amazed!

The Early Years

3



The Boy Wonder

On the 28th February 1824 at St Omer, Pas-de-Calais, France a star was born. He was named Jean Francois Gravelet but became known as Charles Blondin – but more about that later. As a boy Jean Francois was an adventurous and imaginative child. He loved the outside world and was interested in nature. The lad was fearless and courageous – he would climb trees and balance on walls – never missing an opportunity to test his early skills. He practised these activities from the moment he learnt to walk. It was plain to see that he had a gift and the determination to become an impressive stunt man.

When he was just five years of age he was awarded a place at the ‘Ecole de Gymnase’ in Lyon. To everyone’s amazement he was astonishingly good and, after only twenty four weeks’ acrobatic training, made his first major appearance as ‘The Boy Wonder’. His supreme skill and his showmanship, in combination with his talent for performing his tricks in unusual ways, made him an act that soon everyone looked forward to. Word soon spread about this child prodigy and as he grew so did his reputation as an exciting daredevil. As his audience expanded his act evolved into a thrilling and incredible exhibition.

‘The Boy Wonder’ became known as ‘Chevalier Blondin’, ‘The Great Blondin’ and ‘Charles Blondin’ – possibly because of his mop of blonde hair. Meanwhile, in his private life, he and his wife-to-be had a son called Aime Leopold. Jean Francois married Aime’s mother Marie but he was soon to leave them behind in France when he went to America in 1855, aged 31. Nobody knows what was to become of his little family – a new, exciting life awaited him in America.

America

4



The Great Blondin

Charles Blondin went to the United States Of America in 1855. He was given a job by a man called William Niblo to appear with the 'Ravel Troupe' in New York City, and later on was invited to become part owner of the circus.

He is undoubtedly most famous for his feat of crossing the Niagara Falls on a tightrope. He actually did it 17 times! Each time more daring and horrifying than the last. To accomplish this the rope had to be 1,100 feet long, 3.25 inches in diameter and 160 feet above the water. This he achieved for the first time on the 30th June 1859 – dressed

in spangly pink tights. He wore light leather shoes with soft soles and carried a pole made of ash that was 26 feet long and weighed almost 50 pounds. About 25,000 people arrived by train and steamer to spread along the banks on the American and the Canadian sides to get the best view.

Niagara Falls



Come One Come All

SEE
The Incomparable

BLONDIN

CROSS THE PERILOUS GORGE

AT
Niagara Falls

Pushing
A WHEELBARROW

The Master Funambulist
Will Amaze All
With His Airborne Antics
And Death-Defying Courage

July 16, 1859
at 5:00 p.m.

Admission.....25 Cents

Niagara

5

Half way across he sat down, threw down a line and waited for a bottle of wine to be hoisted up. He drank from the bottle, stood up and continued to walk. After he passed the sagging



middle section he ran the rest of the way. He arrived on the Canadian bank and rested for 20 minutes while the crowds recovered from the spectacle. Then he strapped a Daguerreotype camera to his back and started back towards the American side. He stopped after about 200 feet to set up the



camera and take a photograph of the crowd on the American side before continuing on to his original starting point. The whole back

Blondin and Colcord

and forth walk took 23 minutes in total. Once he had crossed the simplest way he repeated the stunt – each time with a twist; blindfolded, in a sack, trundling a wheelbarrow, on stilts and even once carrying a man (his manager Harry Colcord) on his back. He also once sat down in the middle and cooked and ate an omelette and on another occasion stood on a chair, balanced precariously with only one chair leg on the rope!



Coming To Britain

7

While living in the USA Blondin married his second wife Charlotte Lawrence and they had three children; Adele, Edward and Isis.

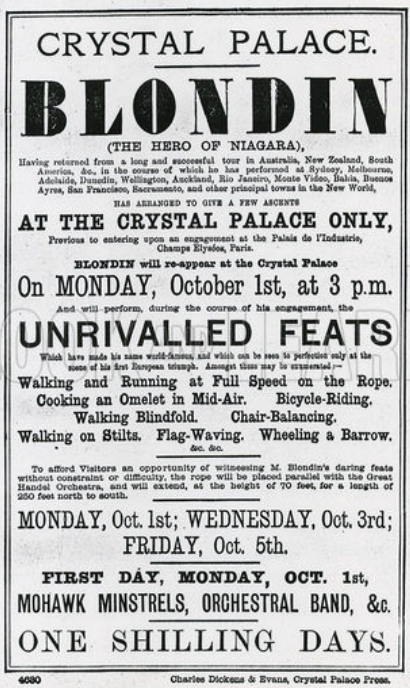
In 1861 Blondin came to London to appear at the Crystal Palace. He turned somersaults on stilts on a rope stretched across the inside of the palace 70 feet

from the ground. This is 20 metres.

He went on to perform in Scotland and in Ireland though during one display in Dublin disaster struck. He was walking a tightrope stretched between a scaffold structure in the Botanical Gardens and the rope broke. Blondin was not hurt but two men that were working on the scaffolding fell to their death.

Blondin made himself scarce and though the event organiser said that he would never allow such a display to take place again somehow Blondin returned the following year and repeated the exhibition but this time at twice the height!

In September 1873 Blondin crossed Edgbaston Reservoir in Birmingham. In 1992 a statue was built to mark this feat.



Statue in Birmingham

Image	Title / subject	Location and coordinates	Date	Artist / designer	Type	Material
	Charles Blondin	Ladywood Middleway 52.4766°N 1.9251°W	1993	Paul Richardson	statue	Steel

My Neighbour

8

The Great Blondin carried on performing until he was in his 50s and sometimes took a part in a pantomime. His very last performance was in Belfast in 1896 when he was 71 though I don't think he was walking the tightrope. By this time he had two more children with his second wife but she died in 1888. He married again for the 3rd time and he and Katherine lived in their house in Northfields, Ealing. The house was called Niagara House. Unfortunately the house isn't there anymore but our hero is well remembered because there is a Niagara Avenue and a Blondin Avenue – both leading to a park that is called Blondin Park. This is the park where I walk my dog Larry and balance on the climbing frame.



Blondin Avenue, W5





An Inspiration

11



Lincoln and his load

Charles Blondin was so famous that he became a symbol for courageousness and achievement of the seemingly impossible. During the weeks leading up to the Presidential election in 1864, Abraham Lincoln

compared himself to this daredevil of a man on the tightrope, with all America's valuables in a wheelbarrow he was pushing along carefully before him. A political cartoon was published in 'Harper's Weekly' on the first of September 1864, illustrating Lincoln balancing on the tightrope, pushing a wheelbarrow and carrying two men on his back – Navy Secretary, Gideon Welles and War Secretary, Edwin Stanton – while in the audience we see John Bull, Napoleon III, Jefferson Davis and Generals Grant, Lee and Sherman, among others, looking on.

FUNAMBULIST

12

noun

A tightrope walker

The ancient Greeks had four different words for ropewalkers: The Oribat dances on the rope. The Neurobat sets his rope at great heights.

The Schoenobat flies down the rope.

The Acrobat does acrobatics on the rope.

In 260BC Censor Messala did away with these distinctions, uniting them in a single word:

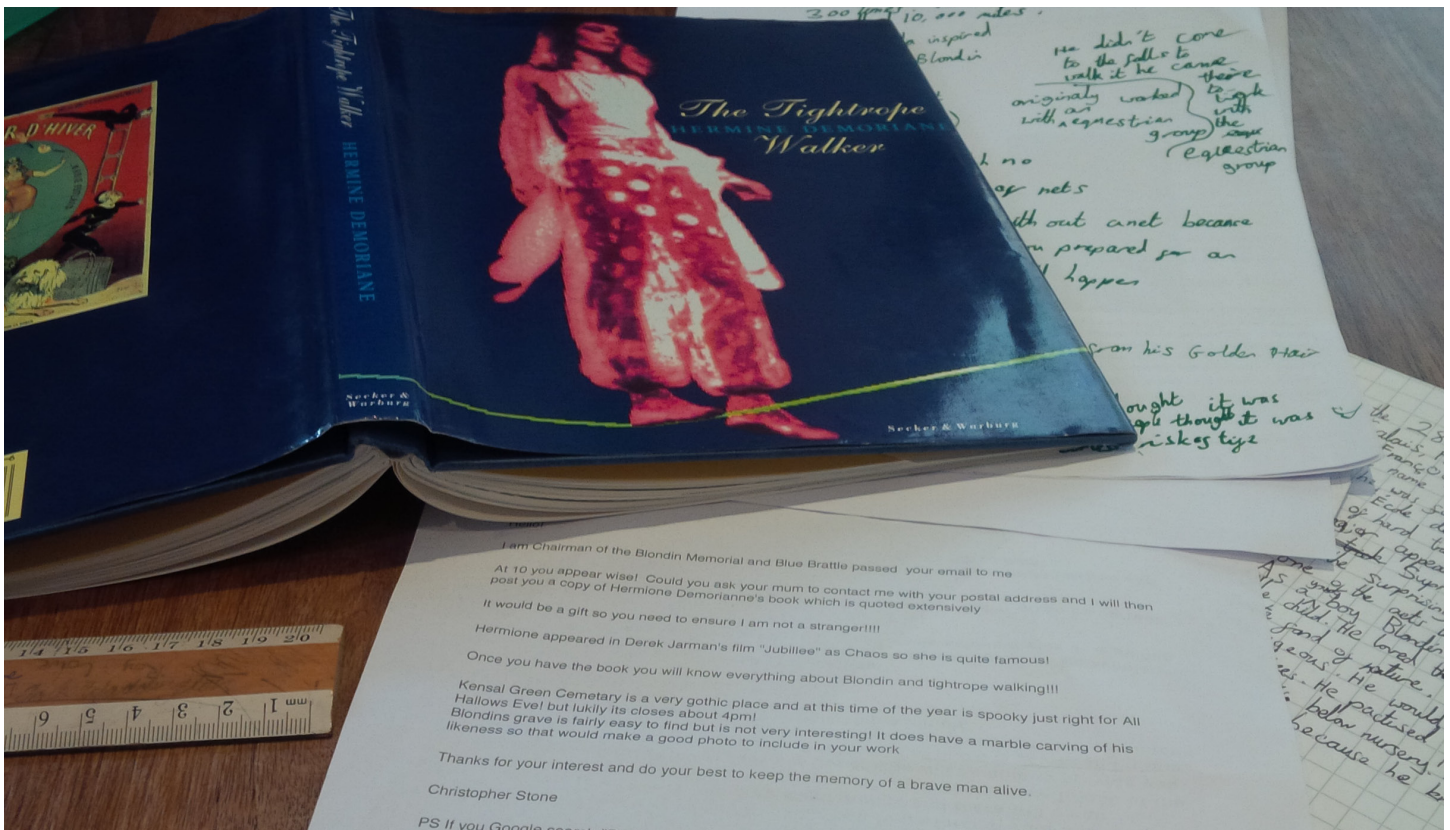
'funambulus' from *funis* – a rope, and *ambulare* – to walk.



Blondin Memorial Trust

13

I heard on the radio a man speaking about none other than The Blondin Memorial Trust and seeing that I was doing Blondin as my project, my mum got in touch with the founder and told him that I was researching him for school. The man – Christopher Stone – replied to my mum's text and said he would send a book about tightrope-walking to me, which had some information about Blondin. The book is called 'The Tightrope Walker' by Hermine Demoriane. It's got lots of fascinating pictures of people doing daredevil stunt acts and moves. Mr Stone also told me some other interesting facts about The Great Blondin and one of them is that he's buried in Kensal Green Cemetery so I'm going to see if I can find it!



Philippe Petit

14

Last year Mum, Dad and I sat down to watch Philippe Petit's film 'Man On Wire'. I found it nail-biting as he bravely walked across the tightrope which was branched across The Twin Towers in New York City. He was born 13 August 1949. He, as you may of guessed, is a French tightrope walker. The project took him years to plan. He worked with a very select group of skilled people who helped him plan the crossing and keep this illegal feat



secret for it was vital that it stayed under wraps.

I loved the film because, although it was a documentary, every minute was tense and frightening. Sometimes a true story, told dramatically,

can be more thrilling than fiction.

Philippe Petit was, no doubt a fan of Blondin's and my imagination was captured by both of them. They must be similar men and in their own way supreme showmen and each truly heroic.

Other disciples of Blondin's include Nik Wallenda and Annie Taylor who tried to cross the tightrope in a barrel.

The Walk

15

Tightrope walking is in the news again! Recently a film has been released called 'The Walk'. I was lucky enough to see the film in my half-term. It is about the tightrope walker, Philippe Petit, who I have talked about already in this project. His film 'Man On Wire' is a documentary about his crossing of the void between the ill-fated Twin Towers in New York and so is 'The Walk'. The actual cameraman in the documentary ran away because he was scared of being caught by the police so they made a new film with actors. With the help of computer graphics and sophisticated 21st century special effects, the public can now see and feel the extent of Petit's achievement.

[We attached reviews of the film here](#)

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16

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YouTube – From the talk: ‘How Can I have Faith?’ (Alpha Australia)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9H-yrfmqmGc>

BBC Radio 4 Extra

Blondin Memorial Trust

The Smithsonian.com

The Victoria & Albert Museum

‘The Tightrope Walker’ Hermine Demorlane

The End



