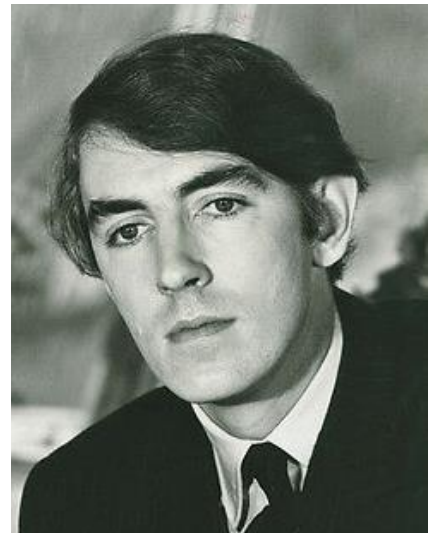


Let me tell you today about someone who has a fair claim to be regarded as the funniest man who has ever lived. I am talking about PETER COOK.

Peter Cook actually went to my College - Pembroke! - in 1957. It's said that he got in partly because in support of his application, he submitted this sketch, about a one legged man wanting to audition for the role of TARZAN (have you heard of Tarzan? - he's someone who was brought up in the jungle by animals and now spends all his time in the jungle like a wild animal, swinging from tree to tree). He later acted out the sketch with DUDLEY MOORE, who formed a double act with Peter Cook for most of his life:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQV3RyVDR84>



If that's right, Peter Cook was incredibly funny, even as a teenager. At university, he performed in loads of comedy sketches as part of the CAMBRIDGE FOOTLIGHTS CLUB, and in 1960 was put together with DUDLEY MOORE, JONATHAN MILLER, and ALAN BENNETT to act in a comedy stage show called BEYOND THE FRINGE. Of the four, Peter Cook was by far the funniest. Dudley Moore was a brilliant piano player who could have performed as professional concert pianist. Jonathan Miller was training to be a doctor and would go on to be a distinguished theatre and opera director. Alan Bennett went on to become a writer of films and TV series. Together, they caused a sensation. Not only were they incredibly funny, but they were doing things that had never really been seen on stage before - in particular, impersonating the Prime Minister (and making him out to be a doddering old fool), and making fun of the British war efforts in World War II. Here is a very famous sketch from 'Beyond the Fringe', where the British Air Force is asking a pilot to sacrifice himself to boost everyone's morale:



<https://youtu.be/Y5YW4qKOAVM?t=5>

'Beyond the Fringe' was a hit on the London West End, and went to Broadway in New York, where PRESIDENT JOHN F KENNEDY (a pretty funny guy himself, who came to a very sad end) attended a performance. Peter Cook returned to the UK, at the age of only 25, hugely famous and with everyone wondering what would he do next? What he did was team up with Dudley Moore, and make a TV series called 'NOT ONLY...BUT ALSO' - that is, not only Dudley Moore, but also Peter Cook. Together they made some brilliant comedy sketches, with Peter Cook trying his best to make Dudley Moore crack up in the middle of a sketch. Look at these two sketches in particular:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wejNjdPndLI>

At 8.48, you see Peter Cook looking at Dudley Moore thinking 'I've got him - he's going to

crack up now', which Dudley Moore does, stuffing a sandwich in his face to try and conceal the fact that he's laughing:



This is the second sketch:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilmOHfnIpFI>

At 3.38, Dudley Moore starts cracking up, and has to drink a pint of beer to cover up.

Peter Cook and Dudley Moore would work together on other projects during the 1970s, but Dudley Moore started to make a career for himself as a Hollywood film star in the 1980s, and that wasn't something Peter Cook could really do. Instead, he focussed on the satirical magazine *PRIVATE EYE*, which he owned, and appeared on various TV shows. But perhaps because he didn't get enough satisfaction out of that, he started drinking a lot, and his health suffered. But before he died at the age of only 58, he had one last flourish, appearing on a talk show not as one guest - but as all four guests, in different disguises. When he died in 1995, he was universally recognised as being the godfather of modern British comedy - everything that happened in British comedy after 1960 owed a huge amount to Peter Cook.

