
ROYAL ROBBINS

Three Early Influences

In April 2004 Royal Robbins took up an invitation from Terry Gifford to speak at the International Festival of Mountain Literature, Bretton Hall, about his favourite American climbing authors. Restricting himself to those writing prior to 1960, he assembled an impressive pack that included Charles Houston, Bob Bates, Allen Steck and Brad Washburn. His top three, however, were as follows, in reverse order.

James Ramsey Ullman is not known for a string of first ascents, nor for the difficulty of the climbs he made. He was, primarily, not a climber but a writer. He earned his bread with *words*. He wrote fiction and non-fiction about other subjects as well as climbing, but, in my opinion, his one book that stands out, like Everest above the lesser peaks of his other works, is his story of mountaineering titled *High Conquest*.

While discussing this book with Nick Clinch, I was surprised and delighted to hear him describe it as 'the Bible of our generation'. I had never talked to anyone else who had read it. It hadn't been recommended to me. I came across it by chance in the Los Angeles Public Library when, as a 15-year old, I was casually looking for mountaineering titles. It changed my life. This book, published in 1943, in the middle of the Second World War, attempts, in Ullman's words, 'to offer a word of suggestion and encouragement to the reader who would follow the Mountain Way himself'. The 'Mountain Way'! What an idea. I was ready for that way and *High Conquest* was just the kick in the pants to get me off and running. After reading this book I was convinced that the 'Mountain Way' was the way for me. Ullman paints a picture of mountaineering as a glorious enterprise, a calling worthy of one's best endeavours. It was something I could believe in, partly because it didn't claim to be socially useful. Through climbing one could grow toward one's potential. Climbing would help one get there.

The book is superbly well written, pulling one into the narrative and holding one there. The captions on the illustrations suggest the romance of mountaineering as Ullman saw it: 'The Last Citadel' (the Mustagh Tower), 'That Awful Mountain' (The Matterhorn), 'White Death' (an avalanche), and (my favourite) 'Hard Rock – Thin Air – A Rope' (a climber in extremis). It's a persuasive history by a gifted, professional writer. At the end of the book Ullman sums up his message:

For it is the ultimate wisdom of the mountains that a man is never more a man than when he is striving for what is beyond his grasp and that there is no conquest worth the winning save that over his own weakness and ignorance and fear.

‘Have we vanquished an enemy?’ asked Mallory. And there was only one answer:

‘None but ourselves.’

It is not the summit that matters, but the fight for the summit; not the victory, but the game itself.’

‘The game itself.’ I was a sucker for heroic prose like that. More than any other American climbing writer, James Ramsey Ullman captured in words the magnetic pull of mountains on those with mountaineers’ blood in their veins.

That brings me to my penultimate climbing writer, **Clarence King**, whose lone book about climbing, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*, made such exciting reading and so strongly influenced me as a young climber. Clarence King was a geologist who travelled and worked under some of the great names in California geology such as Whitney and Brewer. King roamed the Sierra about the same time as John Muir, that is, the 1860s, though there is no record of their ever having met. King was an extraordinarily gifted writer, approaching in skill the likes of Mark Twain and Brete Harte, who, like King, also wrote about life in the Sierra foothills.

Although the title suggests the book is all about mountaineering, and although climbing forms the core and centrepiece, *Mountaineering* is at least as much devoted to travel, geology, and character sketches as to thrilling ascents. Nevertheless, the key chapters in the book are ‘The Ascent of Mt. Tyndall’ and ‘The Descent of Mt. Tyndall’.

King asks his chief, Brewer, for permission to attempt, with his friend, Richard Cotter, to reach what they believe to be the highest point in California:

It was a trying moment for Brewer...he felt a certain fatherly responsibility over our youth, a natural desire that we should not deposit our triturated remains in some undiscoverable hole among the feldspathic granites.

Brewer, overcome by a desire for scientific knowledge, decides to risk the lives of his lieutenants and grants permission. There follows a fascinating description of a cross-country journey to reach the mountain, crossing gorges, climbing over difficult terrain, bivouacking on the chilly heights:

A sudden chill enveloped us. Stars in a moment crowded through the dark heaven, flashing with a frosty splendour. The snow congealed, the brooks ceased to flow, and, under the powerful sudden leverage of frost, immense blocks were dislodged all along the mountain summits and came thundering down the slopes, booming upon the ice, dashing wildly upon rocks.

The next day finds them encountering more hair-raising adventures, including lassoing spikes and climbing the rope hand over hand. Two days of adventures brought them to the base of their mountain, which they climbed, with great difficulty, the third day, naming it Mt Tyndall, and realising, as they could see higher peaks to the south, that they were not on top of California's highest point. King describes vistas of cold, dark, inhuman hardness, summed up in his words: 'Looking from this summit with all desire to see everything, the one overmastering feeling is desolation, desolation!' How different this point of view is from that of John Muir, who, in such a place, would see light and beauty, and hear God's voice.

On the descent they need to climb up at one point. Cotter goes first over difficult terrain and calls King to come ahead and 'don't be afraid to bear your weight'. King climbs up but distains using the rope, insisting upon getting up on his own power. When he reaches his friend he finds Cotter on a sloping shelf with no anchor. If King had pulled on the rope or fallen they both would have perished. The climbing was so 'on the edge' that Cotter avoided saying so for fear that King might stiffen up and climb less freely. Of this act, King writes: 'In all my experience of mountaineering I have never known an act of such real, profound courage as this of Cotter's.'

This 'edge of one's seat' description of climbing Mt Tyndall, and the noble sentiments expressed, strongly affected me as a young climber and I held Clarence King in the highest regard until I climbed Mt Williamson and could look across at Mt Tyndall and see it was much less fearsome than King's writings had led me to believe. I came to the reluctant conclusion that he must have exaggerated. And so it is that we must ascribe to King the fault of hyperbole, and deduct a few points from his stature as an American mountaineering author.

Still, as a writer, *qua* writer, King is superb, particularly when it comes to capturing the comic aspects of man or beast. Travelling through the Sierra forest, King comments upon the mule he is riding:

My Buckskin was incorrigibly bad. To begin with, his anatomy was desultory and incoherent, the maximum of physical effort bringing about a slow, shambling gait quite unendurable. He was further cursed with a brain wanting the elements of logic, as evinced by such *non sequiturs* as shying insanely at wisps of hay, and stampeding beyond control when I

tried to tie him to a load of grain. My sole amusement with Buckskin grew out of a psychological peculiarity of his, namely, the unusual slowness with which waves of sensation were propelled inward toward the brain from remote parts of his periphery. A dig of the spurs administered in the flank passed unnoticed for a period of time varying from twelve to thirteen seconds, till the protoplasm of the brain received the percussive wave, then, with a suddenness which I never wholly got over, he would dash into a trot, nearly tripping himself up with his own astonishment.

In a chapter titled 'The Newtys of Pike', King describes a family who have left Pike, a town somewhere in the Midwest, to seek a better living in California. He meets them in the Sierra foothills:

The mother...rocked jerkily to and fro, removing at intervals a clay pipe from her mouth in order to pucker her thin lips to one side, and spit with precision upon a certain spot in the fire, which she seemed resolved to prevent from attaining beyond a certain faint glow. I saw too that (the daughter) ...was watching with subtle solicitude that fated spot in the fire...which slowly went into blackness before the well-directed fire of her mother's saliva.

King displays a strong appreciation of the good things of life, especially after coming through a Sierra storm:

In anticipation of our return the party had gotten up a capital supper, to which we first administered justice, then punishment, and finally annihilation. Brief starvation and a healthy combat for life with the elements lent a marvellous zest to the appetite.

And now we come to my numero uno, the last man standing, so to speak, among my early American mountaineering authors. It is hard to know where to begin with **John Muir**, so vast is his output. There is so much that could be said about 'John o' the mountains', and so much that has been said, that I need to confine my remarks to, not Muir the climber, as such, but Muir through a *climbing perspective*. I suppose a logical starting point is to acknowledge that he is known not primarily as a climber but rather as a conservationist, or even a *prophet* of conservation. We might more accurately say, a prophet of *preservation*. For, in his heart of hearts, Muir wanted not merely to keep resources from being wasted; he wanted to preserve them in their natural state. And this, frankly, has been Muir's great contribution to America's climbing mores – the idea of leaving the mountains, including the rock upon which we climb, as much as possible in their natural condition. Thus Americans, particularly in the western states, early came to see fixed

pitons as not desirable, as interfering with the natural experience of finding the rock as the first ascensionists did. We were just following in Muir's footsteps.

Muir's 'mountaineering' often took the form of ranging over the mountains, rather than climbing specific peaks, and was usually in the service of science – glaciology, geology, mapping the wilderness. Muir certainly had the true climber's instinct to climb for its own sake, and once, viewing a panorama of Sierra peaks, effused: 'Hope I may climb them all.' Still, he rarely did a climb without using it to further his scientific investigations, once spending a life-risking night in a storm on Mount Shasta because scientific measurements caused him to linger longer than prudence counselled.

Nature was very much a religious experience for Muir. He had little sympathy with and patience for the Christian religion as it was practiced in his day, and observed, upon reaching the top of Cathedral Peak, that it was the first time he had been to church in California. Still, he often invoked God and the words of Christ in his writings, even while finding fault with the idea of man 'having dominion' over the rest of the creatures of God. He saw this religious 'splitting up' of man and nature as, well, unnatural. Muir always saw things as part of a whole. He was a great synthesizer.

Muir led a grandly adventurous life. In fact, his was a life of adventure. There was recently published in America a book titled *22 Adventures of John Muir*. Of the 22 adventures, only five or six could properly be called 'climbing stories'. Of these, three stand out: his ascent of Mount Ritter, the night out on Shasta, and a rescue of a friend on an Alaskan peak. Most climbers consider the description of his solo first ascent of Mount Ritter to be his most memorable climbing writing, especially the section where he describes a close call spread-eagled in the middle of a steep face high on the mountain. The writing sings with the ring of truth. Anyone who has done a little climbing says, 'Yes, I recognise that moment. I've been there!'

Muir describes his first ascent, alone, of Cathedral Peak with off-hand nonchalance. Leaving the north side of Tuolumne Meadows at daybreak, he attained the summit by noon 'after loitering along the way' to study trees, flowers, rocks, chipmunks and squirrels. He gives us a detailed description of the peak, but no comment about climbing it. His reticence about any climbing difficulty is remarkable. Even today a rope is recommended for this ascent. He did it ropeless in hiking boots, probably with hobnails, hardly the best footwear for gripping the hard granite of this 'temple of marvellous architecture'.

But Muir's greatest legacy to climbers was the intensity and eloquence with which he captured not just the climbing experience in particular but the mountain experience in general. He showed us, in word and deed, how to view the mountains, how to climb them, and how to care for them. He was like an Old Testament prophet. Receiving the word directly from God through the trees and rocks, the waterfalls and animals, he had little patience with those who didn't share his religion. Like many modern

environmentalists, he, at times at least, viewed humans as blights upon the landscape, referring to them as ‘the moiling, squirming, fog-breathing public’, ‘Babylonish mobs’, and ‘rough vertical animals...who occur in and on these mountains like sticks of condensed filth’. Muir saw the wholeness of things, especially of nature, and was in arms against anything that threatened to split that wholeness asunder.

Muir made an early ascent of Half Dome, ‘a month or two after’ the Scotsman George Anderson had gained the summit by drilling holes, leaving a fixed line. Muir climbed the Dome on November 10, 1875, right after a snowstorm. The snow on top apparently kept Muir, who was a keen observer of glacial phenomena, from noting the lack of glacier polish on top of the Dome. He was under the impression that ice rivers had overridden Half Dome, as they had many of the other Yosemite domes. Muir was mostly right in his original interpretations of how glaciers formed Yosemite. Except for snow that day he might have realized and corrected this minor error.

Well, this is what it has come to, after so many throes and convulsions – my pick of Muir as the top American climbing writer. John Muir was a mountaineer – wide-ranging, peripatetic, climber of many summits, of different types of mountains; gifted and eloquent chronicler of his ascents, no exaggerator, telling it like it was; a writer and prophet, who by his pen and voice and actions spoke to us climbers about how to think about the mountains and how to treat them; and, finally, an author whose output far exceeds that of any other American mountaineer. For all these reasons we have no choice but to accept John Muir as the number one American climbing writer.

There is one final thing we haven’t mentioned – his quotability. His sayings alone are enough to give him first place. His most famous and most often repeated quote is one with which many are familiar:

Go to the mountains and get their glad tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their freshness into you, and the storms their energy; while cares drop off you as autumn leaves.

Here are some others:

‘All the world was before me and every day was a holiday.’

‘But where do you want to go?’ asked the man. ‘To any place that is wild,’ I replied.

‘Canyons 2,000 to 5,000 feet deep, in which once flowed majestic glaciers, and in which now flow and sing the bright, rejoicing rivers.’

Speaking of climbing to get a better view:

'One must labour for beauty as for bread, here as elsewhere.'

'A climb of about 1,400 feet from the valley has to be made. There is no trail, but to anyone fond of climbing this will make the ascent all the more delightful.'

'My first view of the High Sierra, first view looking down into Yosemite, the death song of Yosemite Creek, and its flight over the vast cliff, each one of these is of itself enough for a great life-long landscape fortune — a most memorable of days.'

'Who wouldn't be a mountaineer! Up here all the world's prizes seem nothing.'

'I wish I could live, like these junipers, on sunshine and snow, and stand beside them on the shore of Lake Tenaya for a thousand years. How much I should see, and how delightful it would be!'

Speaking of clouds building in the late afternoon sun:

'I watched the growth of these red-lands of the sky as eagerly as if new mountain ranges were being built.'

'I came at length to the brow of that massive cliff that stands between Indian Canyon and Yosemite Falls [Muir is referring here to Yosemite Point], and here the far-famed valley came suddenly into view... the noble walls – sculptured into endless variety of domes and gables, spires and battlements – all atremble with the thunder tones of the falling water. The level bottom seemed to be dressed like a garden – sunny meadows here and there, and groves of pine and oak; the river of Mercy sweeping in majesty through the midst of them and flashing back the sunbeams.'

But, in the end, in the final analysis, Muir's words can be summed up in the one injunction with which we started these quotes, and I will leave you with that:

'Go to the mountains and get their glad tidings!'