
Reviews

No Easy Way

Mick Fowler

Vertebrate Publishing, 2018, pp272, £24

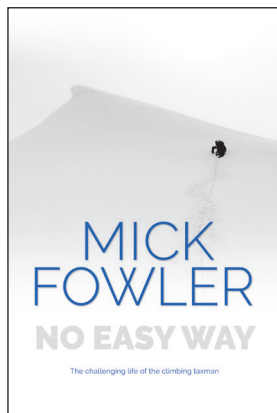
Mick Fowler's mountaineering accomplishments are bordering on phenomenal. Over the past four decades, he has become one of the most important and influential alpinists in the world. Now into his sixties, he still plans at least one trip to the greater ranges each year. *No Easy Way* covers 11 of these climbs in the past two decades. Almost all are successful, including three Piolets d'Or winners, but he adds a few brilliant failures and exciting near-misses just to prove that getting to the top is not quite everything.

The title, however, covers much more than mere climbing. This partial autobiography also reveals new aspects of Fowler's life: his work as a senior taxman for Her Majesty's Government, his time as president of the Alpine Club, his passion for fell running and, most poignantly, his recent battles with cancer. The conclusion of the first chapter, 'The Competing Priorities of Life', succinctly sums up what this book is about:

... the ups and downs of and stresses and strains of fitting the little understood urges of a greater-range mountaineer into the well understood challenges of being a family man with a fulltime job.

Fowler saying that the challenges of being a family man with a fulltime job are 'well understood' reveals something more than overconfidence or complacency. Fowler is not trying to simplify the challenges: he is just making an important distinction. It's not that the problems are understood, it's that he understands there are problems. I also worked for a number of years in government and understand the need to get on with the job in the manner that civil servants generally adopt: enabling the policies and laws created by politicians who hope they meet the 'understood' needs of the majority and thereby ensure they get voted in next time. In the chaos of our current world, I for one find it hard to understand how rapid changes in climate and technology and just about everything else will affect my family. Perhaps only a level headed and stoic civil servant could describe family challenges as 'well understood'.

There are many gleeful moments in this book where Fowler revels in beating the bureaucrats at their own games, getting around obstacles thrown up by foreign permit policies and pointing out the nonsense of perverse policies whereby governments make a hash of things. No more need be said



on that subject, except that Mick is a wolf in pinstripe.

The great fun reading *No Easy Way*, and indeed Mick's earlier books, comes from the regular waves of raucous, witty and unique humour. Mick loves to make light of serious moments, especially those where one might expect restraint and decorum. Sometimes the humour reveals his appreciation of the absurdity of both extreme climbing and day-to-day occurrences where the entrance of confident and single-minded climbers changes the whole dynamics of a situation. For example, when Mick with Paul Ramsden climb the crag beneath Nottingham Castle to be caught by a night watchman who becomes increasingly irate and frustrated trying to get the police to arrest the pair. Or when he and Victor Saunders have it out in a boxing match at a rough south London pub known for violent altercations and settlements of differences in the ring. 'Get 'em off and bring on the strippers' come the cries when the audience realise they aren't going to seriously hurt each other.

In one of the more understated chapters, Mick takes on the old guard of the Alpine Club. He wins the first-ever contested presidency in the Club's history. This adds to the stress as he gets on with the job of reforming the Club, a task he stacks precariously on top of the job he is already doing at the tax office. He soon discovers he can't leave the Club to the evenings but must deal with urgent Club business during working hours.

Acquiring a smartphone helped in that. But civil service cutbacks meant I no longer had my nice private office with high-back chair and curved mahogany desk. Instead I was ensconced in the corner of an open-plan office visible to all. I felt uncomfortable spending too much time tapping away ... some must have noticed that I spent a lot of time in the toilet.

Whether it's the day-to-day or extreme alpinism, Fowler uses his sense of fun to great effect. Humour is the perfect tool to explore some of the consequences of those 'little understood urges of the greater range mountaineer.' The climbing adventures are full of slapstick moments: putting an ice axe through the climbing rope on a first pitch; thinking that the red end of a compass must be pointing south because of its colour, since it's hotter in the south; extricating himself from fraught upside-down moments in the dark mayhem of stormy bivouacs; insisting a climbing partner's cup is continuously filled with bitter Tibetan tea knowing how much that partner will gag trying to satisfy the etiquette of local hospitality; being seen behind a bush by a young girl rubbing Vaseline onto his privates before a fell race.

'Daddy look, there's that man again.'

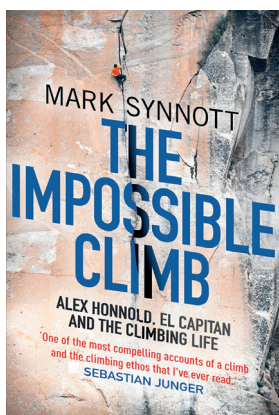
You get the idea. Mick has great fun 'taking the mick' out of his partners and himself. The book sparkles with these moments.

Fowler is a connoisseur of bivouacs, describing especially comfortable and unlikely tent platforms with the same calm resignation as horrendous spindrift-plagued one-cheek perches, knowing that tomorrow will eventually come and with it a new set of challenges. Mealtimes are also often examined in some detail:

... a glorious evening had developed by the time we sat down to brew up and tuck into our evening meal of Chinese baby powder and fruit flavoured sausages. This was one of two menu options, the other being noodles with a flavouring sachet. These were not the meals we had meant to choose, but having decided to buy of food in the shops of Lhasa in order to avoid excess baggage costs, our Chinese and Tibetan had been exposed as woefully inadequate knowing exactly what we were buying. On the bright side, both menu options were very light. And they were sufficiently unappetising for us to frequently fail to finish our meals, so the food was lasting longer than expected.

This is just one of many culinary observations. And although the big and little moments of those ‘little understood urges’ are described in an apparently casual style, Fowler can also describe perfectly well his depth of feeling for and enjoyment of mountaineering. Pure adventure he defines as a state of uncertainty, but when things come good, which they do for Fowler with impressive regularity, there’s a kind of authentic simplicity to his joy. He may at times appear to dismiss risk casually, but his approach to the hardest mountaineering projects are famously well researched and expertly executed. As I write Mick and Victor are planning a new route in Sikkim in the post-monsoon season this year. (Victor is currently on K2.) Mick is working to get fit again after another cancer scare, which was thankfully a false alarm. In a fitting final chapter, he deals with his cancer diagnosis at the very end of a frightening tale out walking his dog. Perhaps I have already given too much away, so I will end by saying that this is an exceptionally fine and entertaining book. For Fowler action and perspective are everything, regardless of whether a situation is little or well understood.

John Porter



The Impossible Climb

Alex Honnold, El Capitan and the Climbing Life
Mark Synnott

Allen & Unwin, 2019, pp403, £20

There is an incident in *The Impossible Climb*, recorded by its author, Mark Synnott, which appears to represent all that is reprehensible about the interaction of super-extreme climbing with sponsorship and the media. In June 1999, after several days on the 3,000ft headwall on the west summit of Great Trango, Synnott’s teammate Alex Lowe discovered the battery of his laptop computer was drained of power.

The laptop was important to their enterprise: it enabled them to write reports on their progress that were to be distributed by their sponsors. The team, comprising Synnott, Lowe and Jared Ogden, had backing to the tune of \$12,000 from outdoor brand North Face. An NBC film crew was making a documentary of their ascent with additional fund-

ing from Quokka, a social-media start-up with \$80m of venture capital and 300 employees. Quokka and its backers saw a lucrative future in sponsoring adventure activities such as theirs: others included round-the-world sailing and grand prix motorcycling. It too had a team at base camp, pumping out the climbers' dispatches, sometimes editing them in a way that magnified disagreements among the team. The climbers were also equipped with radios so they could conduct live interviews, of varying degrees of inanity, with stations in the US.

Synnott was wearying of the demands of the media circus, whose costs had reached \$50,000. He therefore felt immensely relieved that he would not have to write any more dispatches, which, he relates, embodied everything he had come to hate about Quokka. But Lowe would not be diverted from the media call and insisted on abseiling down to base camp to have the laptop repaired. He returned two days later and the dispatches resumed.

The story at least has a happy ending, of sorts. The three climbers reached the summit, doing so in sync with four Russians on a parallel route. As for Quokka, on the very same day it made a public share offering, which flopped. The company closed down a year or so later and the 300 jobs were lost, along with the investors' \$80m. Lowe, it must be added, died in an avalanche on Shishapangma in October 1999, part of another North Face adventure being filmed for a NBC documentary.

At this point I cannot resist comparing the methods used to convey news of the climb with those I employed during the British Cerro Torre Expedition of 1967-8, when Messrs Haston, Burke, Boysen and Crew were attempting the first authentic ascent. *The Sunday Times*, for whom I was covering the climb, had put up a princely £1500 for the team. After writing my reports in long hand, I walked for six hours to the roadhead where we had parked a pick-up truck. I drove 200 miles across the pampas to the coastal town of Santa Cruz, where I transcribed my report on to a telegram form for transmitting to the paper. I then visited the tiny Santa Cruz airstrip to dispatch our rolls of black-and-white film to London. The round trip took me three days, and several weeks would pass before I learned whether my dispatch and photos had been published.

The point of this old-timer's tale is not hard to grasp: things have moved on since those epic days, and the step change in communications and media sponsorship is matched by the extraordinary levels of technique and audacity at which today's climbers perform. Synnott's book culminates in the astonishing solo ascent by Alex Honnold of *Freerider* on El Capitan in June 2017, accomplished in just 3h 56m. It can thus be seen as the book of the film *Free Solo*, which was the talking point of the AC's London dinner in February 2019, as it had been released a few weeks before.

The *Freerider* ascent occupies just 12 pages near the end of the book, which is also an exposition of the backstory and development of modern extreme climbing. It had a dissident counterculture not so far from the notorious pillaging Chamonix Brits, with groups such as the Stonemasters and the Stone Monkeys pushing standards while leading what Synnott

terms 'rebellious feral lives'. Synnott becomes a character in the story as he relates his own accession to this world, graduating to the status of a professional once he has joined the North Face roster. Synnott presents the 1999 Trango episode as a nadir in the drive to fashion a living out of climbing, and the book debates the ethics and pitfalls involved in attempting to do so.

Seen from this side of the Atlantic, there is something unsettling about the way such extraordinary exploits become business ventures. Synnott was present on the day in January 2015 when Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson completed their 19-day free ascent of El Cap's *Dawn Wall*. He noted an ABC camerawoman wearing shiny fashionista combat boots, the spraying of champagne like a motor-racing grand prix ceremony, and the public relations minder from Patagonia – Caldwell's sponsors – who shoed away an unauthorised reporter from *Men's Journal*, telling him that Caldwell was 'off limits'. Synnott recalls the pre-internet era when climbers on expeditions 'unplugged' from the outside world. By 2015, sponsored climbers were expected to report their exploits almost hour by hour; their contracts would stipulate how and when they should post, which hashtags they should use, and even creative guidelines to follow. 'It was a rare soul who avoided getting sucked into the vortex.'

It is not until page 144 of the book that the ostensible hero of the story makes his entrance. Synnott's first face-to-face meeting with Honnold takes place at a hotel in Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia in April 2009, when Honnold, then 23, arrives at his door wearing only boxer shorts and Synnott is captivated by his 'deer-in-the-headlights' eyes. Synnott offers him a drink but Honnold says he does not consume alcohol or caffeine, though adding: 'Actually, I do have one vice – fornication.'

This was yet another arranged commercial relationship: Synnott wanted to climb the north face of Kinabalu that rises from the notorious Low's Gully, scene of a British army debacle in 1994, and had been teamed with Honnold by Conrad Anker, then acting as a recruiting sergeant for North Face. Honnold had burst on to the climbing firmament in 2007 with his free solo ascents of two 5.11c routes in Yosemite. Following the Kinabalu ascent, the book weaves multiple paths between their respective careers, and Synnott addresses some of the questions prompted by Honnold's astonishing achievements and ambitions. Does he know fear? This is tested through a scan of his amygdala, a key arousal area in the brain, which proves resolutely normal. Is he a sociopath and/or does he have Asperger's? Here, Honnold concedes he is probably 'somewhere on the autism spectrum'. Honnold is clearly a driven man, but he appears casual in his attitude to celebrity. He is not obsessed with its rewards and donates one third of all his earnings to his own foundation, which funds sustainability projects around the world. He has spent most of his climbing career living in a van.

In the book, as in the film, we catch glimpses of Sanni McCandless, described as his girlfriend, and in several toe-curling encounters we discern that her passion for him is not matched in any way that he is able to express. Honnold appears to find as much fulfilment in the partnership he strikes

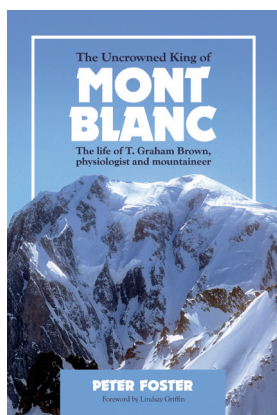
with Tommy Caldwell, with whom he made the five-day Fitzroy traverse in 2014, followed by several further spectacular ascents including the El Cap Nose in a record 1h 58m in June 2018.

We reach the denouement of the story on page 378, Honnold's *Freerider* attempt. As in the film, it is all over so quickly, which was in the nature of the ascent. What is more, at least half of the description reports the tension among the camera crew and the watchers on the ground, including Synnott. Notably, Honnold had refused to allow camera operators to dangle alongside him on the key pitches, so they strung remote control cameras beside him instead. Even so, we share their relief as Honnold pulls over the final block.

Synnott has pitched his story at a readership beyond the climbing community and his account will be mostly accessible to lay readers. There are however terms and usages that will be new to some AC members: dialled, douchey, sketched, beta, spraying, whose meanings may have to be guessed at. As other reviewers have noted, there is some disturbingly chauvinist language used to refer to women, which is not excused by Honnold's own admission on this score. The chronology can be hard to follow because Synnott is sparing with his dates, and there is no index.

Despite these misgivings, the book is highly readable, intimate and revelatory, on a level with Tommy Caldwell's superb *The Push* in admitting us to this elite world, its culture, attitudes and language. Honnold, we learn, is not the gauche outsider portrayed in his first meeting with Synnott. Nor, for all his extraordinary achievements, is he some alien being. Synnott presents us with someone determined to fulfil his dreams and aspirations, an inspirational figure with whom all can empathise.

Peter Gillman



The Uncrowned King of Mont Blanc

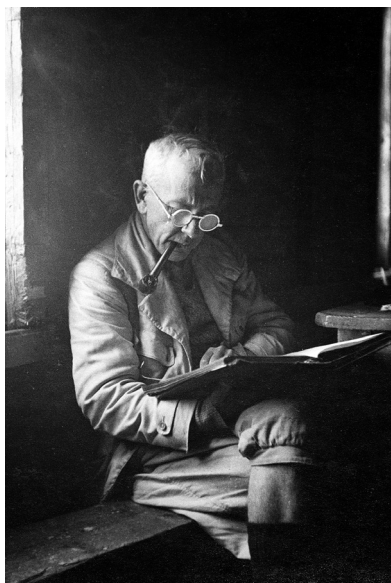
The Life of T Graham Brown, Physiologist and Mountaineer

Peter Foster

Bâton Wicks, 2019, pp205, £14.95

Thomas Graham Brown was a first-class hater, one of the Alpine Club's best, an obdurate Scot happily dedicated to rootling out fresh truffles of gossip to deepen the flavours of his various enmities. The chief object of his loathing was Frank Smythe but, as this excellent, sympathetic but never exculpatory biography makes clear there were others jostling for his attention, most notably Geoffrey Winthrop Young.

Graham Brown was also the most successful British alpinist of the interwar years; his season in 1933 must rank among the finest of all, despite the fact he was then 51 years old and had only developed his passion for alpinism in his forties. On top of all that he was a successful research scientist whose



Above: Graham Brown at the Promontoire hut towards the end of his remarkable 1933 season at the age of 51. (*Alpine Club Photo Library*)

Left: Alexander Graven nearing the top of the Pear Buttress in 1933, an immense achievement for the era, the third of Thomas Graham Brown's triptych on the Brenva face. (*Thomas Graham Brown/National Library of Scotland*)

early career was marked by the same intensity and care that he brought to his alpinism. As his friend of 40 years, the lawyer Edwin Herbert, later Lord Tangle, put it: 'His was one of the most complex personalities I have ever known.' Given Herbert's record of public service, I fancy he'd known a fair few of those.

Graham Brown was born in Edinburgh in March 1882, making him four years older than George Mallory, an Edwardian whose best-before date extended deep into the 1930s. His father was a lecturer in neurology who brought up his sons with the sort of bourgeois rectitude that prized position and reputation, determined they should give a good account of themselves. After a wobbly start, Graham Brown knuckled down, graduating in medicine from Edinburgh University, perfecting his German in Strasbourg and gravitating towards a career as a research neurophysiologist in the Liverpool laboratory of his father's great friend, the much-loved future Nobel laureate Charles Sherrington. (Sherrington shared the Nobel with Edgar Adrian, an honorary member of the Club who wrote Graham Brown's obituary for

the Royal Society, of which, like Sherrington, he was president.) Allowed to pursue his own direction, Graham Brown conducted experiments in the neural control of movement and had the war not intervened, it's possible he would have stuck to that groove and enjoyed a distinguished scientific career, despite a tendency to write boring papers. In fact, Graham Brown did return to this work in the late 1930s with some ghoulish-looking experiments of decerebrate cats – look it up – on treadmills. This work would inspire the Swedish neuroscientist Anders Lundberg, who revolutionised our understanding of how the brain and spinal column work together. At the outbreak of the First World War, Graham Brown was 32 and at the height of his powers; he worked on the misery of shell shock and was posted to a military hospital in Salonika. Between 1909 and 1920 he produced a huge number of papers, and in a festschrift for Sherrington's 90th birthday wrote how, 'This laboratory life was a continuing adventure with always widening horizons.'

So what happened? How did this bright start, which saw him made a fellow of the Royal Society in 1927, veer off into a life of adventure? Because once he'd pocketed the initials FRS, the fecund research withered on the vine. By then his father, always so hard to please, was dead and Graham Brown was living alone in the Royal Hotel in Cardiff, the professor of physiology at University College, Cardiff's and embroiled in a long-running and bitter scrap over the status of its medical school, a fight for which Graham Brown proved superbly adapted, with his eye for the pedantic and his immense stamina for disputation. Many years later Tom Longstaff would tell him, in a letter following Graham Brown's ill-considered appointment as editor of the *Alpine Journal*: 'you are pathologically sensitive to the exact truth. Speaking – or writing – the exact truth just breeds SWARMS of enemies.' I sympathise, but Graham Brown often struggled to tell the difference between *the* truth and *his* truth.

The scientific and professional parts of Graham Brown's life are dealt with in the first part of Peter Foster's biography, understandably because they are both difficult and quite dry, especially given the juice that comes later, for a mountaineering crowd. But I think he might have structured it differently. I had many questions at the end about Graham Brown's motivation. As the retired Winchester schoolmaster Graham Irving put it, in a private review of Graham Brown's book *Brenva*: 'His meticulousness over times and measurements is almost exasperating and induces the idea that his climbing is the serious business of life, not its refreshment.' Always the scientist, applying the rigour of the laboratory to human affairs, especially something as inconsequential and light as alpinism, made me wonder if the disappointments of Graham Brown's professional life might have been kept a little more in the foreground.

Wholly absent is any reference to Graham Brown's private life. This seems to me the book's only serious omission. No mention is made of sweethearts or indeed the lack of them. From Foster's immense and careful rummage through Graham Brown's papers, a few hints emerge: he seems very much

a man's man, tweedy and reeking of pipe tobacco. (In fact, this is a very male book although in a marvellously bitchy way. *Mean Girls* has nothing on 1930s British alpinism.) I can wholly understand why he despised Smythe, who was prone to bouts of insecure petulance and really should have picked his enemies more carefully; but I wondered about Geoffrey Winthrop Young, whom Graham Brown marked down on first acquaintance as a 'poseur'. Is that code for some kind of sexual disapproval? I have no idea, but I'd rather hope such questions were asked. Perhaps Graham Brown was too absorbed in his own life to let anyone else in, but if so, we should be told.

Foster is superb in conjuring the events and atmosphere of Alpine climbing in the late 1920s and 1930s. He doesn't just capture Graham Brown's career, from its late and average inception in the mid 1920s to his fateful first encounter with Frank Smythe in 1927, introduced by his friend Edwin Herbert. Almost 20 years his junior, Smythe was almost anti-matter as far as Graham Brown was concerned, a self-aggrandising romantic who wouldn't hesitate to massage the facts for a better story. They shared two climbs together on the Brenva face, both remarkable, both of them demanding courage and stamina. Smythe's casual misrepresentation of Graham Brown's role on *Route Major* was the start of a bitter and divisive feud that glowered over the Alpine Club for twenty years and only ended with Smythe's premature death in 1949. At which point, as it happened, Graham Brown was serving his choppy stint as *Alpine Journal* editor and had to be adroitly steered away from Smythe's obituary.

Graham Brown's great year was 1933, not coincidentally the year of Smythe on Everest. In the space of a fortnight he climbed Mont Blanc six times, three of the routes new, including the formidable *Via della Pera*, the Pear Route, the final panel in Graham Brown's magnificent triptych of works on the deadly canvas of the Brenva face. The Italian name is important: the French equivalent, *Route de la Poire*, had a double meaning and could be construed as the 'route of the bloody fool'. Graham Brown rarely stopped thinking about how others would regard him. Lindsay Griffin's foreword is a useful reminder of just how impressive this route remains, and its reputation among Europe's finest alpinists. Foster discusses the role of his guides Alexander Graven and Alfred Aufdenblatten in all this: to what extent could these be considered to Graham Brown's routes? He was not technically gifted but had immense drive and strength, and vision too, although I suspect he rather overestimated his talent there. It was very much a 19th century relationship of amateur and guide, the logical conclusion of what was possible in that kind of arrangement. But I would very much like to have sat down with Graven and Aufdenblatten to ask them what they thought of their 'Herr', because Graham Brown made it plain what he thought of them, detailing their shortcomings in his diary, reflecting that perhaps he was asking too much of 'a mere peasant' and accusing Aufdenblatten of cowardice. Contempt was never far away.

After the Pear, Graham Brown was at the Leschaux hut below the north face of the Grandes Jorasses looking up at the Walker spur, a focus for

what was the seismic reordering of alpinism away from the guided pattern to partnerships of equals: equally gifted and motivated, sharing the decision making. How else could alpinism progress? On a previous visit to the Leschaux he had made sketches in his notebook of possible lines up the spur, but that's as far as his interest went. The future was not his. Instead he went to the Dauphiné and traversed the Meije, Les Écrins and the Ailfroide and put up a new route on the north face of Les Bans. Strutt, not prone to flattery, called Graham Brown's achievement 'miraculous'. By the end of that season he had literally worn out his gear, not just his clothes, but his crampons too, so often sharpened that the points were too short. In almost eight weeks in the Alps, Graham Brown had five days off, three because of bad weather and two as he travelled between regions. None of the illustrious band on Everest that summer could match his Alpine record.

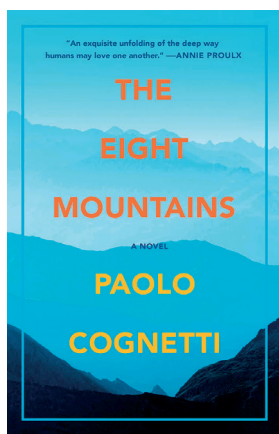
That begs the question why Graham Brown was not on Everest himself, although the obvious answer is that by then you couldn't have Smythe and Graham Brown in the same room let alone on the same mountain. And anyway, as Foster's portrait makes clear, after 1933 Graham Brown was never really as strong again, despite the first ascent of Foraker in 1934. (The portrayal of his relationship with Charlie Houston, which led to this expedition, is one of this book's great gems.) Graham Brown was not an ideal expedition climber, surprisingly brittle in mood and often sour in a team, indifferent to the needs of others and always determined to get the credit he felt was his due. Bill Tilman kicked himself for sending Graham Brown the proofs of his Nanda Devi book, since it brought down an avalanche of minor corrections aimed at making the Scot look better. 'I have told him,' Tilman wrote to Noel Odell, 'it doesn't accord with his views on being impersonal. They only apply to others apparently.' It's extraordinary how two men, superficially so similar, could be so profoundly different.

Graham Brown stuck at it after an indifferent performance on Nanda Devi, going to Masherbrum on an expedition conceived and organised by James Waller and his fellow army officer Jock Harrison, the latter's close friend Jimmy Roberts and the brilliant rock climber Robin Hodgkin, poised between Oxford and his teaching career. This expedition, which left Hodgkin's hands and feet in ruins, deserves and gets Foster's full attention; it is painful to watch the affection and respect the younger climbers have for Graham Brown curdle as he shows himself to be selfish and deluded about his own performance. Harrison told him to his face 'that from the beginning he had not done a stroke towards helping the expedition along since he joined it and that he was a selfish old man who had no thought beyond his own personal comfort and success.' Anyone who thinks poor behaviour at high altitude is a modern phenomenon needs to read this chapter, although the dignity of Hodgkin, Harrison and the others is a welcome counterweight. Predictably, Graham Brown had a peaceful retirement, beloved by the young climbers of Edinburgh University whose company he sought.

Peter Foster deserves great credit for his cool and reasonable view of Graham Brown. His background as a consultant gives him a valuable

extra perspective but it's his judgment as a writer that is most commendable. There were things I disagreed with: he's too harsh I think on Tom Blakeney, but small matter. Thanks to this fascinating study, alongside Tony Smythe's underrated memoir of his father, we now have a much fuller picture of a rich and romantic period of British mountaineering history and one of its most fascinating characters. As for Graham Brown: 'It was a great pity,' Blakeney wrote of his editorship, 'as Graham Brown had great gifts had he chosen to use them well.' That might stand for rather more.

Ed Douglas



The Eight Mountains

Paolo Cognetti

Harvill Secker, 2018, pp 272, £12.99

For Pietro, the narrator of this lyrical novel, a particular blend of smells defines the mountains: the aroma of the stable, hay, curdled milk, damp earth and wood-smoke. Worldwide it is the smell of the dairies and settlements where pine and juniper give way to summer pasture, threshold to heights of rock and snow.

That same olfactory essence pervades Paolo Cognetti's story of two Italian boys from contrasting backgrounds who meet in a secluded valley somewhere south of Monte Rosa and whose lives remain

entwined thereafter. It has melancholic wistfulness that clearly appeals to Italian readers: *The Eight Mountains* spent a full year in the Italian bestseller lists and won the country's Premio Strega as well the French Prix Médicis Étranger. It has been translated into 37 languages, this English version by Simon Carnell and Erica Segre. Carnell is a poet, a sensibility ever present in this captivating book.

Despite its title, *Eight Mountains* is not a climbing novel. Eight mountains are not as such climbed; they are drawn in the dust by a Nepali porter, each mountain at the outer end of a spoke in the wheel of a mandala. At its centre is the tremendously high Sumeru, the heart of the universe. 'Who has learned the most,' the chicken carrier asks Pietro, 'the one who has been to all eight mountains, or the one who has reached the summit of Sumeru?'

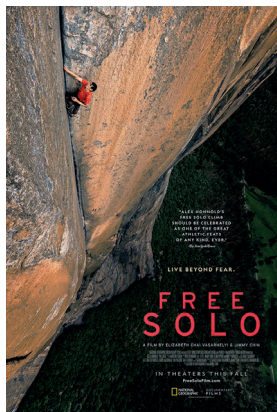
Pietro smiles but offers no direct answer. Neither he nor the porter (nor Cognetti) explains that Sumeru (aka Meru) is the meeting place of the gods and above is the pure realm of the Buddha-fields. But Pietro thinks he has understood the meaning. And if I have, it is that while Pietro, the city child turned freelance filmmaker, leads a wandering life, it is his friend Bruno who remains constant to the *alpeggio* and its guardian mountain, the Grenon, at the centre of his world.

To what extent is Pietro's life a reflection on Cognetti's own, divided between Milan and his cabin at 2,000 metres in the Italian Alps? Milan is

the city to which Pietro's parents migrate from the countryside, and the Alps their retreat for long family holidays. *Eight Mountains'* place in those bestseller lists may owe something to the fact that this drift to the city and nostalgia for a rural past is a familiar narrative for many Italians.

Set over some four decades, the book is a coming of age story. It is also an elegy for a way of life on the high pastures; one of hard toil and scant economic reward, yet somehow honest and in harmony with nature and the elements. *Eight Mountains* cannot help but put one in mind of abandoned cattle sheds passed on hikes above the treeline and of mountain hamlets with farms converted to swish holiday homes. Yet still in such places a whiff of hay and wood-smoke lingers, just as it does over Cognetti's smouldering tale.

Stephen Goodwin



Free Solo

Directed by Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin
National Geographic, 2018, 100 minutes

Dawn Wall

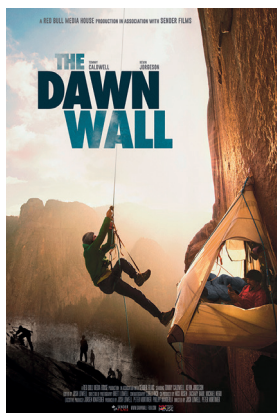
Directed by Peter Mortimer and Josh Lowell
Sender Films, 2017, 100 minutes

I'm gripped. My palms are sweaty and I'm squirming in my seat: it's the UK premiere of *Free Solo* and I've never seen climbing footage this impressive before. I had watched *Dawn Wall* a couple of months earlier, also on the big screen, and on first watch, before I'd seen anything of *Free Solo*, had been blown away. Now I fear nothing will be as good as *Free Solo*. Not since the opening of *Mission Impossible 2* have I seen climbing footage so cool, and this could actually be a problem: it looks so impressive you have to wonder how many ill-prepared people will consider giving it a go.

Warren Harding took 47 days to climb El Cap in 1958, using fixed ropes and pitons up the whole of the route, and it's truly inspiring to see how much things have changed. But really, this isn't so much a climbing film as the character study of a very intense person: Alex Honnold. It's about someone who takes such huge risks and the people that love him. It's a staggering film, beautiful but also often visceral to the point where I felt concern, despite knowing

how it ends. I *know* I signed up for a questions and answers session with Honnold after the screening. But will he make it off the wall?

Honnold is shown with Tommy Caldwell, of *Dawn Wall* fame, preparing for his solo climb. (The filmmakers chose to leave out footage of training



climbs Honnold did with women. These happened, as Honnold makes clear in the Q&A and he expressed displeasure at this.) Otherwise he's solo in everything, eating out of a pan with a spatula seems to capture this perfectly. When my wife is away and left to my own devices, I eat the same way: one pan, one spoon, one cup, one glass. On the other hand, I climb to be with people, seeking adventure and exploring our natural environment with others. I prefer to limit my chances of dying wherever I can. The sheer number of chances Honnold has to die is unfathomable to me, which is why the film works: we still think something could happen, as we watch the close ups of his perfect footwork on penny-sized footholds, even though we know the ending.

Dawn Wall is as unlikely a story as *Free Solo*, really. The suspense is provided by the struggles of Kevin Jorgeson, a boulderer with no big wall and little trad experience either, who finds himself on the project after years of reconnaissance and practice by Caldwell, who needed a partner. (He had also lost a finger along the way, the index finger of his left hand, severed in an accident with a table saw.) Really, all the odds were against them. Caldwell makes it through the hardest pitch first, days before Jorgeson, and decides to suspend his ascent to wait for his partner, even as the media look on, expecting him to continue and complete the project he'd pursued for so many years. For me this was the film that captures the climbing spirit I know and love, and not the ethos displayed in *Free Solo*. It's the pursuit of adventure and finding one's limits and confronting failure time and again that I appreciate climbing for. Above all, it's about the friendships built whilst climbing. The cameras capture Caldwell, who's maybe not the best communicator, struggling to explain this to Jorgeson, that he doesn't want to go ahead without him.

For me, the most difficult part of *Free Solo* wasn't the nerve-racking climbing but more Honnold's sometimes troubling relationships with those close to him, especially girlfriend Sanni McCandless, and his hyper-masculine approach to life; he frequently compares himself to a warrior or samurai. *Free Solo* often celebrates the 'ardent glory' of war. 'It's about being a warrior. It doesn't matter about the cause necessarily. You face your fear because your path depends on it. That is the goddamn warrior spirit.'

At times, this bubbles over into misogyny, even toxicity. Sanni is perfect for the filmmakers as she appears at the right time to add drama to what otherwise would be *just* a climbing film, and they portray her in a stereotypically cinematic female role: the lover who inserts herself into the 'great man's' life and restricts his achievements, potentially stopping him from achieving his goals. When Ueli Steck's death is announced Sanni responds with appropriate tears and thinks about Ueli's parter. Honnold asks, 'Well, what did she expect?'

The filmmakers offer several of these less than flattering, almost callous moments. Honnold is in the kitchen, saying how he's been waiting for watermelon. Sanni appears, slices some and says, 'It must be nice to have a human slave.' Honnold agrees. There are unnecessary scenes explaining

Sanni's beginner-climber mistakes, and Honnold's statement that he would 'hardly characterise Sanni as a climber,' that convey a belittling disrespect. The message is that to push boundaries, this is how the male athlete/adventurer needs to be – and the women in their lives need to be silenced. Honnold says he 'will always choose climbing over a lady' and the film justifies this prioritisation of his pursuit over those that love and care for him. When things go wrong, Sanni is to blame, for being too clingy. Throughout *Free Solo*, Honnold shows outdated gender roles, leaving Sanni to be 'cute, small in the van' and livening 'the place up', making 'life better in every way', simply there for his pleasure and enjoyment. We're asked to believe that this is the behaviour of an incredibly dedicated athlete. Tommy Caldwell, also a dedicated athlete, tell us that 'a romantic relationship is detrimental to that armour. You can't have both at the same time.' But there are countless athletes, including himself, that do.

I think we're supposed to ask ourselves whether Honnold is right to do these things, but ultimately he achieves his goal and the film celebrates this, as we all do. The film's view is clear: Honnold achieves his impossible goal and his behaviour is consequently justified. But there were ideas I would like to have explored further in *Free Solo*, such as Honnold's MRI brain scan. 'It's not that you don't experience fear,' says the doctor. 'It's just that in your case it takes a lot more to trigger excitement.' Has climbing made him this way through thousands of hours of exposure? Or was his brain always like this, and he's therefore perfectly adapted to take such huge risks?

Free Solo is sufficiently detailed in its description of the technical aspects of climbing and runs through the route's main features: the 'Monster Off-width', 'Enduro Corner', and the 'Boulder Problem' which is very much the crux of the climb, ending with a move known as the karate kick. Yet *Dawn Wall* is much more of a climbing film, for climbing people. We see the intricacies of climbing: storms lashing the wall, portaledge, climbers cooking and relieving themselves, cutting off rough skin with razor blades, and taping up. The climbing footage again is stunning: perhaps not of the same quality and crispness as *Free Solo*, but it includes the desperation of hard lead climbing, swooping falls and the struggle for the blankest section of El Capitan, the Wall of Early Morning Light, looming 3,000ft above the Valley.

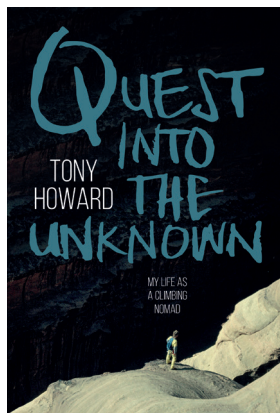
Free Solo is a film that celebrates perfection, admires emotionally inarticulate men, and pursuing goals beyond reason. But for me, one of the beautiful things about climbing is the experience of failure, something that *Dawn Wall* very much celebrates, failing over and over again on a route until you get it right and then not proceeding until you can achieve it with the people that helped make it possible.

'This sucks,' Honnold exclaims near the end of his first abortive attempt. 'I don't want to be here. I'm over it.' Honnold talks to Peter Croft after retreating. 'I failed,' he says.

'Good for you,' Croft replies, before adding: 'You never have to go for it.' This is perfectly put. Climbing is ultimately useless, but it's often sublime,

adventurous, and life affirming. Of the two films, *Dawn Wall* captures this the most. *Free Solo* is, in its own 'bro' language, very cool, but it is not a film to follow as an example.

Nigel Buckley



Quest into the Unknown

My Life as a Climbing Nomad

Tony Howard

Vertebrate Publishing, 2018, pp422, £14.95

Is this an autobiography or a diary? It seems to be a bit of both from this respected climber, explorer, adventurer and sometime entrepreneur. Were they publicised, the activities of Tony Howard would put to shame many of the high-profile, so-called adventurers who strut the media these days, but to the mountain community he will already be known for the first ascent of the Troll Wall, Troll climbing equipment and the opening up of Wadi Rum.

There is an awful lot of this book. Though not a slow reader, it has taken me over four weeks to digest the 68 chapters. Admittedly, each occupies only four or five pages, a convenient length for bedtime reading. Split into two parts, the first, comprising 38 chapters, is a fairly organised narrative and to my mind the most interesting. The second I found alluring if confusing, with subjects not necessarily sequential in time or location. Nevertheless the author writes evocatively throughout both parts, conjuring up mood and atmosphere, the sounds and smells of the souk and the frustration of the all too frequent police check-post, while it is evident that he must possess either a prodigious memory or has for years kept a meticulous daily diary, or both.

The author starts at the very beginning: 'The day I was born was a momentous day.' It was indeed, for it was during the evacuation from Dunkirk in May 1940. Having lived through those times myself I was fascinated to read of his wartime and immediate post-war childhood among the western valleys of the Peak District, his discovery of the moors and crags, his early climbing and the birth of the Rimmon Climbing Club. Although as a southerner my own formative years and entry into the mountain world came from a different angle, I can identify with much of it, while I know, or I'm acquainted with, so many of the characters involved, as will be those older AC members.

All climbers have some degree of wanderlust, although until recent times it was most usually restrained by the need to earn a 'proper living'. Where Tony Howard was different was that back in 1958, aged 18, he did something about it. He walked out of school, signed up on a Norwegian whaler and went off hunting the leviathan of the Southern Ocean, thus financing his initial ventures in Norway and his exploration of Romsdal's huge rock walls. Between visits he worked as a deckhand on Icelandic trawlers.

He married a Norwegian girl and in the aftermath of the epic first ascent of the Troll Wall, together with a couple of his Rimmon rope-mates, founded the innovative Troll equipment firm, initially very much a garden shed enterprise centred on the webbing gear they had developed for the climb.

The story continues with trips to anywhere where steep rock might be found or an adventure encountered, especially if the necessary finance could be earned, for instance by labouring throughout the winter at an opencast mine in the Yukon. The lure of putting up a route on a fresh or hitherto unknown crag rather overtook the more disciplined business of entrepreneurship but apart from a foray to Greenland and an epic canoe journey across the Yukon-Alaska marches, Howard veered towards sunnier climes. There were crag-searching visits to Morocco, Algeria, the Sudan and Iran, typically in decrepit vehicles of some kind, often accompanied by his daughter Tannith and Di Taylor, an old friend, a fine climber and eventually his second wife. There were many adventures but all too often red tape, strop-py policemen or the wrong permit got in the way. But essentially part one is about going climbing.

Many of us have been intrigued by the remote mountains of the Sahel, the Hoggar for instance, the Tibesti and the Simien. Here Tony Howard comes into his own, for apart from reconnoitring in Thailand, India's Deccan escarpment and Madagascar, part two is exclusively Middle Eastern. But by now middle age is catching up, the Norwegian marriage has long since failed and it seems that the journey, the exploration, is its own reward, leaving so many promising crags to be 'returned to later with climbing gear.' Armed with a business card for his adventure travel consultancy NOMAD (New Opportunities for Mountaineering, Adventure and Desert Sports), a ploy which sometimes cuts the ice with suspicious officials, the author visits Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Mali, Oman, Palestine and Jordan, ostensibly to look for crags and high places, but also delighting in the mere fact of travelling.

In Jordan over Christmas 1983, attracted by the landscapes in David Lean's film *Lawrence of Arabia*, he and Di visited Wadi Rum, and as both rock climbers and mountaineers explored its imposing cliffs, canyons and mountainous mesas. They befriended the local Bedouin, ibex hunters and born climbers themselves, and become persona very much grata to the Jordanian authorities and even Queen Noor. On dozens of subsequent visits they explored virtually the whole of Jordan's extensive wilderness areas, enthused local people to climb and trek and planted the seeds of Jordan not only as a rock-climbing venue but also as an international trekking destination. The culmination of their efforts over more than 30 years was the opening in 2017 of the Jordan Trail, a nine-section, 400-mile trekking route from Um Qais in the far north to Aqaba on the Red Sea, via such evocative places as the crusader castle at Karak, the Dead Sea, Petra, 'a rose-red city, half as old as time', and Wadi Rum.

The detail in part two is so intense that I found it easy to lose track of exactly what was happening, where, when and with whom, while the narrative cries out for small-scale maps to supplement 113 excellently reproduced

photographs, most of them in colour. An index would make the book useful. Nevertheless I have to admit that I'm smitten. Were I 10 years younger, I'd be off to Jordan myself as soon as I could pack a rucksack. What a tempting wilderness for a spot of rugged recreation.

John Cleare

Horizon

Barry Lopez

The Bodley Head, 2019, pp 586. £25

As Barry Lopez sets off from Bull Pass to hike west along the crest of Antarctica's Olympus range he falls prey to a fancy that is a commonplace in mountaineering literature: the idea that one is the first human to tread this particular piece of ground, or, in the climbing version, the first to lay a hand on this expanse of rock.

Since leaving the banks of the Onyx river he had not seen anything like a human footprint. And to the far side of Bull Pass is forbidden territory: the Mc-

Kelvey valley, one of several dry valleys closed to human entry to preserve them in a completely undisturbed state. He was intoxicated with the sense of the great space about him and that seductive notion of being the first human in that place.

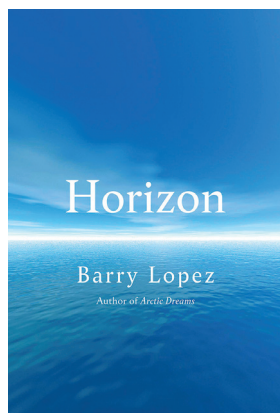
But for Lopez the reverie does not last. Along the ridge he comes upon a camera case and picks it up: the upper half of a black Nikon 35mm SLR case. The climber in such circumstances would, I suspect, have felt cheated of a first ascent. Lopez, however sees it as a deserved chastisement:

I was privately mortified by the fact that I had entertained the illusion that I might be the first to walk this ridgeline. To what degree had this adolescent daydream of mine taken me away from what was actually here?

Two fundamental aspects of Barry Lopez are present in that second sentence: his deep humility, and a meticulous attention to detail of his surroundings. Landscape for Lopez is the great teacher and he does not want to miss a single lesson. He desires to be 'fully present' in whatever place, and in *Horizon*, whether it be the coast of Oregon, Ellesmere Island, the western Lake Turkana uplands, Botany Bay or the central Transantarctic mountains, this intensity of study and thought is manifest.

Let's be clear, Lopez is no climber and there is no mountaineering in this marvellous book. It warrants inclusion among the *Alpine Journal* reviews because, in the words of essayist and poet Mark Tredinnick, 'the wild breathes in the words of Barry Lopez.' And the wild, or what passes for it, is where Lopez' world and that of exploratory mountaineering intersect.

Lopez is best known for his 1986 masterpiece, *Arctic Dreams*. It won the



US National Book Award and gained him a reputation as a kind of sage, steeped in wilderness and native wisdom. He would reject any such notion, just as he rejects the labels 'nature writer' or 'environmentalist'. He accepts only the description 'writer': a writer who travels. And how! Reading *Horizon*, there's no escaping the irony that for someone who is deeply concerned about the trashing of the natural world and effects of climate change, Lopez must have one of the biggest personal carbon footprints on the planet. Polar regions have drawn him repeatedly, but so too has Africa, Australia and the Galápagos.

Offsetting the writer's carbon account are the stories he has brought back. But this is no mere collection of traveller's tales. His approach is one of deep engagement; it's as if he brings together the discipline of an archaeologist, ethnographer, naturalist and geologist, then searches for the spiritual in his findings. Lopez believes the physical land to be sentient and responsive, as informed by its own memory as it is by the weather.

Lopez is now in his mid seventies and *Horizon* is as close as he's likely to come to an autobiography. It is an absorbing reflection on his decades of travel and research: the overall tone is elegiac; he is much concerned with how to live a just life and speculates at length on the fate of modern man. All people, every culture, every country, now face the same problematic future, he says. It is necessary to reconsider human destiny, and in doing so leave behind adolescent dreams of material wealth and the quest for greater economic or military power. And to do so requires 'resituating man in an ecological reality.'

These strictures arise as Lopez relates assisting in a search for hominid fossils in northern Kenya. The time span in these passages is humbling: the first group of primates clearly ancestral to *Homo sapiens*, the gracile australopithecines, appear in the fossil record of the early Pliocene, four to five million years ago. Paleoanthropologists have identified a succession of descendants: in effect our close relatives. Yet only we, *H sapiens*, survive. Why? And for how long?

The alarming situation here for humanity is that H sapiens, though it has asserted itself as the dominant species on Earth, is at the same time the potential victim of its domination over virtually all Earth's ecosystems. If H sapiens were to become extinct, the event would simply be regarded as evolution continuing to unfold, a biological future for life but not one that any longer included humanity.

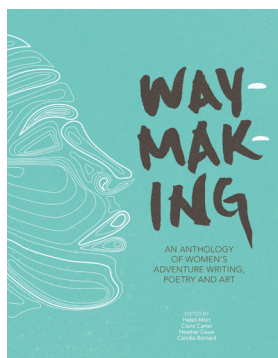
You get a sense here of what makes *Horizon* such a deeply thoughtful and challenging book. Its more than 500 pages contain writing of lyrical beauty but also much sadness and suppressed anger, particularly over the disintegration of indigenous societies and the loss thereby of other ways of understanding the world. Of the three tribes of Feugians, unable to cope with a colonizer's culture, each, writes Lopez, 'eventually became another torn prayer flag, snapping in the wind over burned ground.'

Even today one wonders how much of that ‘colonizer’s culture’ mountaineers carry with them in their interactions with expedition crews and hill villagers. Lopez is honest to a fault and wonders whether in his own travels he hasn’t unconsciously behaved in some way ‘like a grave robber’ and given unintended offence: perhaps at an Afghan dinner table or in an Inuit village on Baffin Island. That he hasn’t exploited them, seduced them with intoxicants or pressed them with religion, isn’t the point.

Often the transgression is no more than that the white guest does not see himself as a guest, but as an emissary. ‘Even if he sees himself as only a well-intentioned visitor, he’s prone to believe that, in the long run, he knows what’s best, whether it’s how to sharpen a knife, how to run a bodega, or how to worship the Divine.’

And if that’s not sobering thought enough, Lopez drives home the consequence of that ‘superior culture’ mind-set in three short words: ‘It kills people.’

Stephen Goodwin



Waymaking

An Anthology of Women's Adventure Writing, Poetry and Art

Edited by Helen Mort, Claire Carter, Heather Dawe and Camilla Barnard

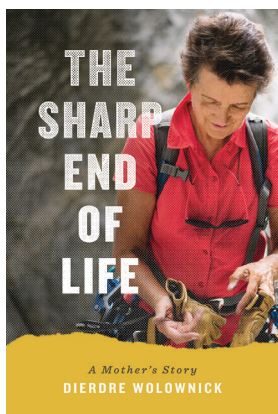
Vertebrate Publishing, 2018, pp277, £17.99

The Sharp End of Life

A Mother's Story

Deidre Wolownick

Mountaineers Books, 2018, pp253 pages, \$24.95



A good deal of mountain writing is concerned with the epic, a word heavily freighted with extremes, both physical and mental. For many climbers, privation seems to be an inevitable part of the experience, even a badge of honour. Ego, the ever-present ‘I’, is the force that drives adventure; success ensures this brittle inner voice is temporarily quietened, before it all starts again. Sometimes mountain writing dips into the language of combat: laying siege to peaks until they are conquered. There is often the sense of a battle to be fought, that man is pitched against mountain and mountain against man. The mountain is a monster that spits out the ammunition of stone fall or avalanche. This perspective often seems an exclusively

male preserve, although I appreciate the debate is more nuanced than that.

Waymaking, a compilation of 57 pieces of women’s adventure writing, poetry and art, is the first of its kind and it seeks to present a variety of

outdoor experiences which move beyond the insistence of conquest and, in part, towards what Nan Shepherd so memorably described as being 'with the mountain as one visits a friend, with no intention but to be with him.' There is no covert feminist agenda here, instead an opportunity for female adventurers of all kinds to describe their relationships with the landscapes they explore in a variety of ways. The pieces were selected from those which the editors received after an open call for submissions and this volume is intended as the forerunner of future publications.

There are four thematic areas: Vicinity; Heart and Soul; Water; and Union. Each contains a mix of art, poetry and prose. The common themes that emerge are that women adventurers do not feel obliged to conform to stereotypes or to underplay their achievements. Rather, they feel free to simply exist in outdoor environments, sometimes entirely uncoupled from the pre-occupations of self and sometimes finding self through the opportunity to detach from the day-to-day litany of tasks and urgencies that beset us all. There is exploration of environmental themes and of family responsibilities, too, and Bernadette McDonald's short story 'Snow' poignantly details the latter as she recalls time spent in the mountains with her father, both before and after his death.

Maria Coffey's autobiographical offering about her fear and sadness at leaving tiny Protection Island on which she and her husband had lived for 20 years beautifully evokes the elements of land and sea. She is inconsolable at the thought of leaving but is advised by a friend to collect beach stones and attach each one to a special moment within the landscape, thus acknowledging her 'deep connection to the ocean and the earth'. This act of gratitude releases her from the burden of sadness and allows her to move on to future adventures with an unfettered heart.

This anthology is a rich experience for readers, rich with variety, rich with insight and rich with inspiration. There is no lack of wild adventure and risk within its pages, but what is absent is the desire to attempt to subdue a landscape, to bend it to one's will, to force it to allow passage. Instead, there are voices to tell us of a different way of considering the interaction between self and landscape. To return to Shepherd: 'On the mountain I am beyond desire. It is not ecstasy ... I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am.'

Deidre Wolownick spent a good deal of her life without that immersive sense of self. Her childhood was a dawning realisation that to cause no problems for her parents was the only way to gain their approval. Interactive dialogue did not occur and all decisions about the family were made solely by her parents. Guidance took the form of criticism. Without ever being consulted, a clear life plan was laid out for her: life at home until she married and had children. Little wonder, then, that she escaped to what seemed like an idyllic lifestyle, teaching in California in order to be with the man who had promised to show her a life of adventure.

Her parents had taught her to live by a 'devastating absence of connection' and when, after a year of marriage, her husband began to criticise and, later, to completely withdraw from her she determined to work even

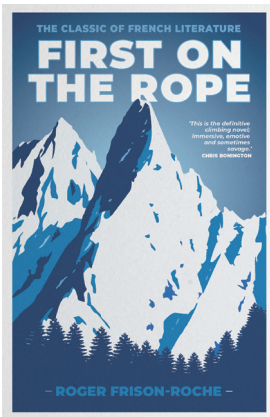
harder at a relationship, which, it later became clear to her, was conducted with a man on the autistic spectrum. When the marriage finally ended she was left with close relationships with her son Alex Honnold and her daughter Stasia, both gifted exponents of extreme sports. It was a desire to better understand what they did and why they did it that led her to take up marathon running and climbing.

It was her gradual immersion in climbing which brought her to 'the human sublime': garnered both as a result of the intimate friendships which she had never known elsewhere and the sheer physical, adventurous endeavour of being on beautiful rock. Joy is everywhere in her descriptions of her climbing achievements but it is tempered always by the travails of taking up the sport in her later years. She set her personal bar high, culminating in an ascent of El Cap, visiting the face before her climb to 'touch it, make friends with it,' to make real a 'legend' which otherwise she knew she would inordinately fear.

Determination is woven through every facet of her narrative and her self-deprecating descriptions of her body and initial lack of fitness serve to point up the level of her commitment. Yet this is not just an account of a woman climbing her way out of unhappiness by setting herself new challenges to push her body where she thought it could never go. This is a story of finding freedom from emotional confines, refusing to simply endure whatever life brings-and, perhaps most importantly of all, finding a sense of self.

Her son captures the essence of her story best: it is 'a testament to the transformative power of outdoor adventure.'

Val Johnson



First on the Rope

Roger Frison-Roche

Vertebrate Publishing, 2019, pp256, £8.99

Originally published in 1941, when its author was living in Algiers, this is one of a few climbing novels to have retained a wide readership, having sold over three million copies. Frison-Roche was born in 1906 to parents with Savoyard roots living in Paris where they owned several bars. During the First World War, Frison-Roche visited the family's hometown of Beaufort and developed a passion for the mountains. Leaving school at 14, he worked first for Thomas Cook and then settled in Chamonix. In 1930 he

became the first man not born in the valley to become a member of the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix, the oldest guides' company in the world, formed in 1821, whose members over the years have included some of the best known names in mountaineering history: Payot, Croz, Charlet, Simond, Lachenal, Terray, Rébuffat.

Besides his mountain exploits, Frison-Roche had always wanted be a

writer and after publication of some of his stories about being an Alpine guide, became a successful journalist. By the late 1930s he was working in Algeria as a reporter for *La Dépêche*, then an editor. Whilst working in Algeria he made several exploratory trips to the Hoggar mountains. In 1942, following France's 1940 armistice, he was captured at Kairouan in Tunisia by the Germans while reporting on the Allied war effort, transferred to Naples under the control of the Gestapo and condemned to death. Transferred to France, his new commandant was the owner of a hotel in Partenkirchen where Frison-Roche had stayed before the war. The officer arranged papers for his release, and Frison-Roche returned to Chamonix, until Germans replaced the Italian garrison, whereupon he joined the resistance.

Climbing-themed novels are rarely successful, either because they don't sell, or else their stories are less 'true' than real life ones found in books like *Touching the Void*, *The Bond* or *Into Thin Air*. Yet some climbers do tackle this difficult art form, from Wilf Noyce and Dougal Haston to the writing team of Lucy Rees and Al Harris. Five novels have so far won the Boardman Tasker Prize: *Climbers* by M J Harrison, *Mer de Glace* by Alison Fell, *The Ascent* by Jeff Long, *Hazard's Way* by Roger Hubank and *The Fall* by Simon Mawer, of which, for me, *Climbers* is the most outstanding. Although it requires concentration to follow the novel's complex story, it is a well-observed tale of how climbers become obsessed by their lives 'on the rocks', ignoring life's other responsibilities.

There are all sorts of climbing novel genres: science fiction, horror, thrillers and so forth. Two made it onto the big screen as blockbuster adventure movies: *The White Tower* by James Ramsey Ullman and *The Eiger Sanction* by 'Trevenian', the pseudonym of Rodney Whitaker. The former was published in 1945 and is full of racial stereotypes; the latter was written as a satire on James Bond, appearing in 1972 and Whitaker felt the point of the book had been lost in Clint Eastwood's movie of 1975, describing it as vapid. Modern readers would likely struggle with the portrayal of women in both books, but both do explore how wilderness often provides a test of human character.

A book that stands on its own, first published in 1956 after the ascent of Everest and rarely out of print since, is the *The Ascent of Rum Doodle*. Its author Bill Bowman was a Yorkshireman and not a Himalayan mountaineer, but that didn't stop him writing a brilliant satire of expedition climbing. It became so familiar that a bar in Kathmandu is named 'The Rum Doodle', as is a mountain in Antarctica, courtesy of an Australian expedition there in 1959. There are Rum Doodle sleeping bags and it was even recommended in *The Guardian* as part of a list of 1,000 novels everyone must read.

Frison-Roche's novel *First on the Rope* is a much more straightforward story, set in Chamonix and the Mont Blanc range in the 1920s and 1930s, a truly golden period in which to be climbing there. It tells the life of the Servettaz family: the father Jean is a longstanding, well known guide, his son Pierre wishes to follow his father's profession but is being dissuaded from this by his family. In recent winters Jean has been working hard to

turn the family's home into a pension, taking in paying guests and working towards something bigger that Pierre will manage.

The novel's action moves swiftly on, and with his knowledge of a mountain guide's life, Frison-Roche draws a compelling and accurate picture of the tragedy that now besets the Servettaz family and its ramifications. As Jean is guiding an American climber down from the summit of Les Drus, he is struck dead by lightning. His porter, in modern parlance *accompagnateur*, George, manages in the teeth of a storm to shepherd the client safely down but suffers severe frostbite in doing so. A team of guides assemble at the Charpoua hut to retrieve Jean's body but to no avail and they retreat. Pierre and his uncle Joseph Ravant, a senior guide, join a second attempt to reach Jean's body. Refusing to turn round despite the route being totally out of condition, Pierre ignores the advice of his seniors and pushes into the lead. He takes a huge fall and badly fractures his skull, with Pierre now the object of a full-scale rescue by his father's friends and guides, who act decisively to save his life but abandoning their attempts to reach Jean's body.

The novel moves on six months. The guides have retrieved Jean's body but Pierre has been both physically and mentally damaged by his accident, and now suffers from vertigo. George the porter is in a nursing home in Geneva having lost all his toes and is learning to walk again in specially constructed short boots, as would happen to Louis Lachenal after Anna-purna in 1950. As spring approaches, Pierre takes off by himself up an easy climb on the Brevent. He has a torrid time, suffering from vertigo and nearly falling to his death, and this makes him begin to accept that he will never be able to climb freely again.

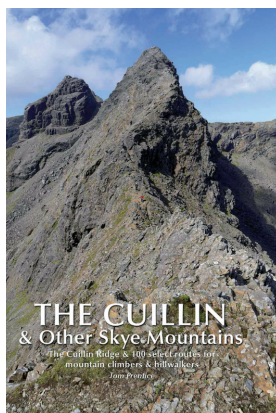
There is of course a love interest, an understanding young lady who tries to do her best to comfort him, but he sinks into a black despair spending his days and evenings drinking and keeping low company in Chamonix's less well-known drinking dens. There's a welcome interlude when friends and families meet up to move cattle out and up onto the high Alps to graze for the summer: a time of feasting, singing and a competition between the fighting cows of the area.

George returns from Geneva and he and Pierre meet with friends to celebrate his recovery. He surprises them all by announcing he intends to become a guide despite his injuries, and eventually persuades Pierre to accompany him on some easy outcrop climbs and short routes. Slowly Pierre's vertigo becomes less severe, and they plan a major, secret comeback climb: the north face of the Verte. Leaving separately and meeting up on the Grands Montets, they bivouac near the foot of the route, and early next morning set out. The crossing of the bergschrund almost turns them round but once on the face they find they can cut steps and climb ice as well as before. Pierre tunnels through the cornice at the head of the face and they then spend another night out on the descent before arriving at a refuge early in the morning. Much to the surprise of Pierre's uncle Joseph, who having reached the age of 60 years has retired from the guides' rota and is now in his new profession of hut warden.

So in the end all is happy ever after. Pierre has recovered his health and will shortly marry, and George has shown he can manage major climbs once more. Both can now begin their training to become Chamonix guides. So *First on the Rope* is not a novel to search within for the meaning of life, but it stands the test of time and its descriptions of life in the Chamonix valley in the 1930s, so different from the modern scene, is obviously so true, as are the descriptions of the routes and mountains. It is an easy read but worthwhile. I first read the book in 1950 as a 14-year-old and later met its translator Janet Adam Smith; as someone who tried to read it in French I must say she made an outstanding job of it.

I cannot finish without mentioning *Mount Analogue*, published in 1952, 11 years after *First on the Rope* in 1952. Written by the poet and surrealist René Daumal, *Mount Analogue* is unlike any other mountaineering book ever published. At only 106 pages it is unfinished, but tells of assembling a team to find and climb a hidden peak that reaches inexorably towards heaven. The film *The Holy Mountain* by Jodorowsky is based on the story. Harold Drasdo sent me his copy urging me to read it and think on its meaning. You don't need to do this with Frison-Roche, but 20 climbers could read Daumal and all come up with a different opinion of its meaning; I read it as an allegory of man's search for himself. So I recommend you to read *First on the Rope* whilst journeying to the mountains, and in your bivouac or tent in the Himalaya study *Mount Analogue* to try to find the meaning of it all.

Dennis Gray



The Cuillin & Other Skye Mountains

The Cuillin Ridge & 100 Select Routes for Mountain Climbers and Hillwalkers

Tom Prentice

Mica, 2019, pp288, £25

For climbers and mountaineers, the Isle of Skye is one of the most sought after destinations in the British Isles. Opportunities for adventure amongst the mountains, sea cliffs and sea stacks abound, but there is no question that the Cuillin peaks are the main attraction. In summer, the traverse of the Cuillin Ridge is one of the most celebrated mountaineering undertakings in the country, and in winter it is a world-class outing.

So it's no surprise that *The Cuillin and Other Skye Mountains*, a new large A5 format guidebook by Tom Prentice, initially focuses on how to succeed on this great challenge. Tom does this by outlining the intricacies of the ridge with a detailed summit-by-summit description illustrated with 23 photo diagrams. There is no doubt, this is the most detailed description of the Cuillin Ridge ever published, and will be a boon for summer visitors intent on traversing the ridge, or making reconnaissance trips prior to a successful traverse, whether it be for summer or winter.

Tom has devoted four pages to ridge planning and tactics. He acknowledges that one-day traverses are frequent, but suggests that for many climbers, a two-day traverse with prior knowledge from previous visits is the surest recipe for success. On-sight traverses of the Ridge in summer are still rare, and likewise, few winter traverses of the ridge occur without prior knowledge in summer.

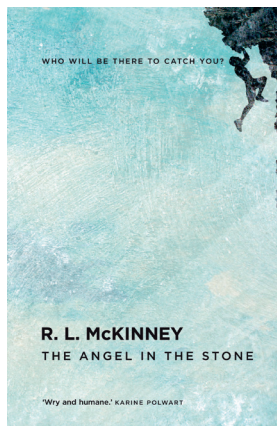
It would be a mistake to think this book is just about traversing the Cuillin Ridge however. Tom Prentice goes on to describe ascents and rounds of peaks throughout Skye, such as the Trotternish Ridge and the mountains of Kylerhea on the east side of the island, as well as the Cuillin. Many of the itineraries are well known, such as Pinnacle Ridge on Gillean or the round of Coire Lagan, but others are less frequented such as the north ridge of Sgurr na h-Uamha at the northern end of the range. As Tom notes: 'Some guidebooks suggest Sgurr na h-Uamha as a potential consolation prize after failing on Sgurr nan Gillean's south-east ridge. Be warned: anyone expecting an "easier day out" will get a very nasty shock.' He goes on to recommend the route should only be attempted in dry condition and many will require the security of a rope.

This first hand detailed experience underpins the quality of information in the book. Tom has spent successive summers on Skye checking all the routes, and taking hundreds of photographs. The result is a beautiful production, which is almost certainly the most detailed illustrated guidebook ever published for the Skye mountains. But in many ways it is the balance of routes included in the book from sub-2,000ft Marilyn's to major mountaineering undertakings that sets *The Cuillin and Other Skye Mountains* apart. Whatever the weather, this book presents a choice of rewarding options that will make the long trip to the Hebrides worthwhile. Hillwalkers, scramblers, climbers and winter mountaineers intent on visiting Skye will find it both an invaluable reference and a source of endless inspiration.

Simon Richardson

Ed Douglas writes: Tom Prentice, for so long publisher for the Scottish Mountaineering Club, has been producing some useful guidebooks under his Mica imprint in recent years, most notably the hugely popular *Chasing the Ephemeral*, by Simon Richardson. This book looks as though it will be as welcome, since it's also born from long and deep experience. Prentice has the useful skill of inhabiting multiple perspectives – alpinist, rock climber, hill-walker – in offering advice, particularly when it comes to the Cuillin Ridge. I finally did this last year, the ridge being the only thing on my wife's climbing to-do list, without ever having been on the northern section, and can see immediately that I would have benefitted from the excellent photodiagrams explaining the most awkward sections of route finding. I'm thinking particularly here of the descent, going south to north, from Bidein Druim nan Ramh's west peak, whose complexity provoked a scale of marital discord that might well have ended in the divorce courts had I not finally worked it out. Photographing these useful diagrams on a phone makes sense, since

the book is too heavy to carry. Prentice offers sound advice on tactics and equipment: my own choice was to catch the boat from Elgol and accept the consequent two-day traverse with a delightful bivvy at around halfway. I've no doubt that when I go back, for the Dubhs Ridge say, I'll be taking this excellent book with me. If you have any love for Skye, you need this guide.



The Angel in the Stone

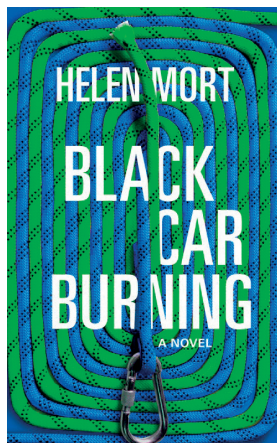
R L McKinney

Sandstone Press, 2019, pp298, £8.99

Black Car Burning

Helen Mort

Chatto & Windus, 2019, pp324, £12.99



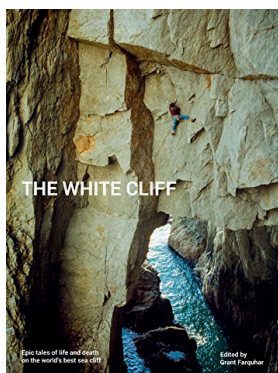
These two novels represent the two poles of climbing fiction. The first is an absorbing novel in which Scottish climbing is in the background of relationship tensions and the second is totally immersed in the Sheffield climbing scene and foregrounds named climbs, although entangled relationship tensions are very much its subject. Each is very readable of its kind, but the two novels also represent two poles of fictional risk-taking. Although R L McKinney looks backward and forwards in time and place in *The Angel in the Stone*, readers always knows where they are, whilst Helen Mort leads her reader into some rather steep moves: crags speak and sex can be complex in *Black Car Burning*.

Calum is a musician whose mother in her Fort William flat does not realise that she has Alzheimer's. He is estranged from his wife and teenage daughter and has sought a quiet life on the west coast where he consoles himself with kayak trips and a noncommittal relationship with a neighbouring sculptor whose studio is in Glasgow. Calum had introduced his younger brother, Finn, to climbing as a distraction from his drug use and manic moods. Finn proves to

be very good, although he puts his survival on desperate routes down to the protection of an angel in the rock itself. Calum's mother blames him for the death of Finn when Calum was belaying him and the narrative gradually creeps closer to revealing what really happened. Halfway through the book Calum's daughter arrives at his house and Calum cannot avoid the questions about his past any more. Because Calum's conversations with his mother have been so patient, understanding and witty, the reader is willing him to find a reconciliation with both his troubled daughter and his own past. R L McKinney handles this with great sympathy and narrative economy to suggest that actually each of them knows more than they fully understand.

The open secret of Helen Mort's novel is the Hillsborough football disaster. The first page of her novel is actually Hillsborough speaking – 'I can speak, though, if you know how to listen' – watching a climber in his van, parking and not buying a sandwich, on the way to Wharnccliffe Crag, which he thinks 'always felt like a closed room.' So the first pages challenge and engage the reader with strangely moving detail and the unexpected familiar. The 'He' turns out to be a former policeman who is haunted and obsessed by the continuing enquiries and inquests. Because everyone in Sheffield is, apparently, a climber, he is in contact with the three women, Alexa, Caron and Leigh, whose relationships, of varying degrees of intimacy, are at the centre of this novel. The publisher suggests that this novel asks, 'How do we trust one another?' but my feeling was that it asks, 'How do we care for one another?' given the tensions of what Andrew McMillan calls the 'trauma, lust and loss' underlying those relationships. The title refers to the name of a hard route targeted by Caron, belayed by her new love Leigh, unbeknown to Caron's partner Alexa until Caron ends up in hospital from a fall at Ladybower Quarry. Ladybower Quarry? Mort certainly knows her crags and this is a contributing factor to the sense of caring generated by this lyrical and hard-nosed novel.

Terry Gifford



The White Cliff

Epic Tales of Life and Death on the World's Best Sea Cliff

Edited by Grant Farquhar

Foreword by Stevie Haston

Atlantis Publishing, 2018, 390pp, £35

This is a monster of a book, hard to get to grips with and initially off-putting: in fact, just like Craig Gogarth, the fabled sea cliff it describes. But as aficionados of Gogarth, and anyone else revelling in the world of hard 'out there' trad climbing, knows, detailed inspection and first-hand experience reap

rewards. I should say from the start that my Gogarth experience was some time ago and far from comprehensive, but I've been there enough times to know the fear and respect it engenders: and, if you stick at it, the rewards. Like many others, I've also been spat off or had an epic when mind and body were not enough. Johnny Dawes captures this astutely in a quotation from an early *On The Edge* magazine used as a frontispiece: 'The Gogarth "look" must not disappear. In the Padarn, say 10 times a year, you'd see a certain expression – The Look – a manic, almost evil but so very human picture paint a person's face: Gogarth.'

To say this book is comprehensive is an understatement. It is chock-full of most of the writing on Gogarth and includes an amazing archive of photographs. It is certainly a labour of love for which we must be in debt to Grant Farquhar. He started the project when having a long lay-off from climbing,

inspired by Ken Wilson's books. As one of climbers pioneering hard routes on Gogarth in the 1980s, he is well qualified for the job. Crucially, he has drawn in most of the major names across all the decades to provide the definitive account of the cliff, drawing from hundreds of articles, book excerpts but also commissioned writing. It's no mean feat.

It is however frustrating at times. Right from the off, editing issues jump out: Stevie Haston's foreword is spelled 'forward', although perhaps that's just an in-joke from one of the climbing scene's more terrible *enfants terribles*? There's also some kind of weird house style with the use of italics, usefully used to denote subsidiary authorship within the essays, but not in any consistent way. In the acknowledgement he admits that without Smiler Cuthbertson's advice and proofreading, it might have been more sexist and coarser although some will still wince at *Viz*-style references to 'jugs' and 'healthy bouncers': not so hilarious with the benefit of hindsight.

Part way through reading it, I realised two bigger questions had to be asked about the book. Being predominantly a compilation of already published material, albeit from a hugely scattered and arcane set of sources, was it greater than the sum of its parts? And, was there a better way of editing and structuring the book? In my humble opinion, the answers are definitely yes and probably no, or at least, I couldn't see how else to do it. Maybe the final question is would many other people have taken on the task? Again probably not: I, for one, am very glad Farquhar and many others stuck with the project. The passion behind it clearly shows.

Once I got into it, I found I couldn't stop reading. The main pioneers of the 1960s and 1970s were my climbing heroes, the stuff of legends with their hard climbing and hard socialising. Some I knew through the anarchic Liverpool-based Vagabond Mountaineering Club. Some of the stories are well known – Rouse and Minks' epic first ascent of Positron, for example – but I was surprised by how many key early ascents had been done by folk I knew. For mere mortals, like me, the black and white iconography created by John Cleare, Leo Dickinson and Ken Wilson was spellbinding at the time and happily remains so, much of it reproduced throughout the book to great effect. Later colour images are no less impressive.

The book covers the cliff area by area and each section is treated historically, from old to new. Often the text spins away from Gogarth *per se* as it follows the main characters and their other achievements. This 'kitchen sink' approach may infuriate some but generally it makes sense of the myriad contributors to Gogarth's climbing history. In reality it's the history of the modern, bold UK trad ethic with many of its finest exponents also being alpine and super-alpine pioneers: Brown, Boysen, Rouse, Stevie Haston, Fowler and Bullock, to name only a few.

Should you read this book? If you're interested in UK rock climbing in the past five decades, then yes, you should. There's some beautiful writing that goes to the heart of what makes all climbers, from boulderers to alpinists, tick. But it's possibly better for dipping into than reading cover to cover.

Andy Tickle