

The End of the Mountains

CHRISTOPHER A. G. JONES

LIVING in a large city I accept overcrowding as part of the grim price of today, but recently overcrowding has begun to annoy me where one would least expect it: in the mountains. For me the quality of the mountain experience is deteriorating as the quantity of climbers increases. This is nothing new, for our large and affluent population decreases the availability of beaches, clean air, unspoiled country and tranquility, to name a few. But, somehow, one had a naive faith that this would never happen in the relatively inhospitable mountains.

Some years ago surfers were a small group of enthusiasts, surfing a common bond and an escape from the oppressive sterility of Los Angeles. Now it is hard to see the ocean for the surfboards, and a number of former surfers have told me that it simply is not worth the effort anymore. What surfing meant to them has long since gone.

Downhill skiing is similarly becoming absurd, as more and more people crowd into ski areas that cannot expand fast enough to fulfill the promise of their own overpromotion. When skiing this year I have been struck by the way we tolerate long lift lines and crowded slopes — weekend skiing is a slow torture. Now the ski promoters are arming to invade the National Parks and game refuges, notably at Mineral King, in their unending expansion: and no end is in sight.

Both surfing and skiing have changed from the activity of a dedicated few to become mass recreation for millions. The reason, as with most successful business ventures, is highly sophisticated marketing and promotion. Some activities can absorb huge followings, they can take place almost anywhere, but others are totally dependent on a finite number of locations.

Raft float trips through the Grand Canyon have become a victim of their own success, so that instead of being able to enjoy the experience with a few one has to share it with a crowd. Here massive promotion was not needed. There is only one Grand Canyon.

The Mont Blanc area has probably the finest mountaineering in Europe, and is so heavily used that to have a classic route to oneself, let alone a mountain, is almost unknown. For example, while climbing the Route Major on Mont Blanc last summer we had three parties ahead of us, and

other ropes on all the adjacent routes. The Walker Spur of the Grandes Jorasses, one of the great alpine climbs, had a reported dozen parties on it at the same time, sharing stances and frustrations. We had a number of discussions on the future of alpinism in Europe, and many agreed that Europe was played out; the future was in the great ranges. The number of worthwhile new climbs in the Alps are insignificant. Yet how many mountaineers have the time or money to make expeditions to Nepal or Alaska — what they need now, and in the future, is an authentic mountain experience within a reasonable distance.

The United Kingdom, it seems to me, is also suffering from too many climbers, for the available mountains are clearly defined, and becoming rapidly worked out. Climbing during the early sixties I remember how remote and wild North Wales and the Lake District were. Here a real sense of solitude and adventure was possible, Clogwyn du'r Arddu the epitome of all the mysteries that made us climb. Our first visits to the black cliff were life in the raw — we were alone and insignificant, the cliff's legends a mental barrier, its difficulties overwhelming. It was our crag. How many young climbers today have Cloggy to themselves?

When I first climbed in the Avon Gorge the Main Wall cliffs had had very few ascents. If there was a party on Main Wall one invariably knew them, and the ascent was the event of the week. The unknown was the key factor, the feeling of entering a new dimension. Today there are commonly three or four parties on Main Wall at the same time. The technical demands of the rock are the same, but is the total experience? While it may be true that there is unclimbed rock in remote parts of Scotland this may be of no consequence to the Londoner. Overcrowded during the week, he is now hemmed in at the weekend. And what of the future? From a recent Mountain Rescue Committee conference we learn "outdoor training centres can now be numbered in hundreds — in Snowdonia they seem to be going up in rows like terrace houses."

Powerful external forces are at work promoting the mountains as a battlefield, as a panacea of man's ills, with such heavily loaded phrases as "character building," "leadership" and "self-reliance." Indeed Dr. Kurt Hahn, founder of the Outward Bound, said "In peace we have still to discover the moral equivalent of war." A frightening credo from which to launch a crusade of building men.

In an article in the 1970 *Alpine Journal*, "Margins of Safety," Harold Drasdo remarks on the effect of the mass media in exaggerating the sensational in mountaineering. He goes on to say "We ought to moderate our language, begging the Character Builders not to use the word 'courage' in talking to young people about climbing; this word is best

saved for situations which have not been entered for fun, and in a climbing context 'persistence' might be more appropriate." My concern is that mountaineering is being deliberately promoted for aims other than the activity itself; namely to "make a man" out of you, and by the media as if it were an auto race.

In North America we are some way from these conditions, yet they are coming. Both the Shawangunks and Yosemite attract more climbers every year. In all the mountains of the world there is only one El Capitan, and when it too is a commonplace what is left? Will it be a mere technical exercise to tomorrow's climbers? Traditionally apolitical and unregimented the very number of mountaineers have forced us to be regulated in the Tetons, where camping is soon to be replaced by the formality of hut accommodation. Even the Bugaboos have been desecrated by the Alpine Club of Canada, who chopped down trees and replaced them with outrageous fiberglass igloos; all under the pressure of numbers and progress.

This is just the beginning, for the United States has a vast industry almost unknown elsewhere — recreation. With a large and affluent population some amazing fads have been launched. The snowmobile shatters the winter quiet, ranging at will over untracked wilderness, and the dune buggy is turning the Southern California desert into a 16,000,000-acre garbage dump. Skiing, power boats, surfing, water skiing, trailbikes — why not rock climbing? Play up the daring, excitement and sex-appeal and it could take off. Climbing involves travel, accommodation and a vast array of expensive gadgetry and clothing. Already in Yosemite the concessionaire is marketing climbing. "Climb Yosemite" posters are all over California (and all over the East for all I know), while they sell rock climbing just like horse treks and picture postcards. To them it is a business like any other.

Today's climbers in North America are, in general, what I would classify as inner directed — they have consciously chosen their minority activity for personal reasons. Tomorrow's may well be outer directed, influenced by advertising and external forces to try the new thing. We can be sure that the real nature of climbing will not be stressed: the attention to detail, the hard work, fatigue, cold and determination. Rather it will be the superficial, another kick in the endless pursuit of fun.

Probably unconsciously many of today's climbers, including myself regrettably, are sowing the seeds for this congested future. Writing in popular magazines, film making, lecturing — aren't we pushing climbing and often playing up the heroic and flashy, giving a false picture of mountaineering? As Chuck Pratt remarked, when reviewing an instruction

book "Climbing, contrary to Mr. Rossit's contention, is not something that everyone can, or should, do immediately."

I am not trying to deny mountaineering to those whose inclinations would lead them to it, but the experience of Europe, and the potential for aggressively selling it here, suggest that more is not better. My feeling is that those drawn into skiing by the advertisers derive less value from the skiing and more from the trappings, which may well be the promoters' aim. For this the genuine skiers have virtually sacrificed their sport, while the shame is that the externals could just as well take place anywhere.

In countless ways we are learning that continual growth, the American Dream, is turning against us. California's campsites are so crowded that Governor Reagan has announced a state-wide computer reservation system, and ironically enough this is defined as progress. To mountaineers this is the antithesis of progress, it is another freedom lost. Too late we discover that growth is like a cancer, our great cities strangling to death, our cars destroying the air, our pesticides destroying life, our very numbers the greatest crisis mankind faces. All a result of the blind acceptance of growth.

Should not we, as climbers, take a hard look at where we are going, and where the promoters could push us? What are the implications in ten years, in fifty? Will our children have unknown mountains nearby, or will they all be minutely detailed?

By all means let us climb, and introduce others to climbing, but beware the wholesale character builders, sensation seeking media and promoters who would turn mountaineering into another vast business. Man's hand lies heavy on the land, his capacity to over exploit and destroy is phenomenal. Are we the instruments of our own destruction?