
The idea of someone who can climb levels harder than anyone else, which is what I had always heard about Gill, is completely intriguing. So when Master of Rock came out I was delighted and couldn't wait to read it. Unfortunately the book was for me no better, and perhaps even worse, than the ten or more other climbing biographies I had read. It is different from many biographies in that it isn't merely a chronological account of a climber's life, with route description followed by route description. The different format helps, but it doesn't save the book.

In the first section of the book Ament hears a climbing partner of his telling about Gill. In the second, Ament is climbing with Royal Robbins and decides he has to meet Gill. In the next three short sections the author and Gill climb together. These are somewhat interesting sections because they show how important Gill has been for some climbers and also because they contain some nice scenes of relaxed, pleasant afternoons bouldering in the sun. On the other hand they contain so much about the author that I got impatient to hear more about Gill.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is the middle section, in which a number of climbers write about Gill. The best is an amusing anecdote in which Kevin Bein uses Gill's reputation to "sandbag" Steve Wunsch.

The last half of the book is a tape-recorded conversation that Ament has with Gill. In it Gill gives the impression of being very courteous and modest, and also of being very controlled. There seem to be no hesitations or exclamations in the interview. Gill seems to speak always in complete, well-thought-out sentences. It is almost like hearing a lecture. He tells Ament where he went to school and what areas he climbed at. He talks about getting into gymnastics and some about training, but somehow we don't get any sense of passion or even of real excitement.

The only two dramatic events that Gill and Ament talk about are Gill's ascent of the Thimble, and Gill's being 90 feet out on a lead during a windstorm. They are very interesting, but both are dealt with so briefly and rationally that the reader scarcely has time to get involved.

We don't find out about any deep relationships. We don't see the source of inspiration in Gill's life. We don't see any crises or any really decisive moments. There also seem to be no great issues to involve the reader. Issues are discussed that relate to bouldering, but they are talked about in such a dry, intellectual way that the reader begins to yawn.

The book is filled with photographs—well over 200 of them. All black-and-white, mostly snapshot-sized, they are particularly interesting when one is familiar with the climb. But when one isn't, they start to blur together. Partly, I think, this is a problem of photographing boulder
problems. The climber could be standing on thin 5.8 footholds or on B-3 footholds and the reader couldn't tell the difference from a picture.

I was delighted, as I've said, to see the book come out. I think John Gill is such a unique and important figure in climbing in the United States that, despite its shortcomings, the book is well worth looking at.

ED WARD


Classic Rock is a large-format book which chronicles fifty-five British rock climbs, none more difficult than Hard Severe (approximately F6), written in the same manner as Ken Wilson's earlier book Hard Rock.

Classic Rock is characterized by Wilson's well-known thorough approach, precision of detail, and professionalism throughout. Each climb is given from three to six pages which in each case include a photograph of the cliff, a topo giving pitches and named features, action photos of each climb, a written account (each account by a different writer), and tabulated information on locations, campsites and bunkhouses, map references, weather, and literature sources.

The most noteworthy attribute of Classic Rock is that it lends a little glamor to the easy and mid-range climbs—a long-overdue seal of legitimacy to help compensate for years of inferiority feelings on the parts of those who have never been able to manage the harder routes. These are wonderful climbs. Grand climbs. Climbs that beginners and experts alike can savor. Wilson has chosen well and one cannot quibble with his selection.

Though certainly functional, the book does not have the zing of its predecessor Hard Rock. This stems from inherent limitations in the quality of both photographs and prose. Photographs of easier climbs are unavoidably less graphic than of steeper and harder routes. Typically there is neither the verticality nor the architecture of line. A particular weakness is that Wilson devotes a full-page photo to each cliff. This is less than useful as the book is too big to carry to the base where eyeball comparison might serve a purpose, and, fairly uniformly, the cliff photographs are undistinguished. In contrast, the quality of the eight color plates is very good, some of the sharpest and most vivid color reproduction that this reviewer has seen in a climbing publication.

Variable, with a tendency towards the ordinary, best describes the prose, which all too frequently degenerates into extended guidebook description. In his preface, Wilson refers to the Hard Rock "formula" and it is this characteristic which is Classic Rock's undoing, for indeed it is a formula book. With a compulsiveness that will delight the methodical, each climb is given precisely the same treatment. With repetition comes