

*Climbing in the Adirondacks.* Don Mellor. Lake Placid Climbing School—Sundog Ski and Sports, Lake Placid, 1983. 178 pages, black and white photographs.

*Touch the Sky: The Needles in the Black Hills of South Dakota.* Paul Piana. The American Alpine Club, New York, 1983. 304 pages, 48 black and white photographs, separate maps. \$13.50.

There was a time when the mountains were complicated, and a guidebook made matters a bit easier by telling you how to get to the top. Those times are long past. The mountains, in the harsh glare of modern knowledge, equipment, and technique, appear less formidable than they used to, and climbers are increasingly preoccupied with the problem of how to make things harder for themselves. In rock climbing, the whole point is to make things hard for yourself, although not at the price of success. Thus there is a paradoxical interplay of ends and means, and guidebook writers are obliged to appease gods, demons, and muses whose demands are often in conflict.

The guidebook writer's primary task is still to describe routes, and these descriptions must be accurate enough to keep you from getting lost. On the other hand, they must not be too detailed, else the fragile secrets of the crux may be revealed, obscenely exposing the climb to the unworthy. In addition to telling you where to go, but not what to do, a route description is expected to include at least one, and perhaps several grades. Individual move grades, overall commitment grades, protection grades and esthetic grades are the most common measures. All this information gives the modern climber excellent insurance against an unexpected encounter with an offensive moderate pitch, while allowing him to advance upon his prey with all the trepidation of a big-game hunter armed with heat-seeking missiles. However, variations in grading still plague the climbing world, and the guidebook writer must answer for his numbers. If the difficulty of the climbs is undergraded, the cliffs will ring with outraged wails of wounded pride. If the difficulty of the climbs is overgraded, the rocks will hiss with smug proclamations of superiority. (The sting of outrage being considerably less than the stigma of inferiority, we can expect errors to be on the side of undergrading.)

Protection grades are, of course, a much more recent development. The author's ability to tell us anything is hindered by the swelling tide of technology, from micro knick-knacks to multicammed behemoths. As a result, the number of cavities in rock that cannot be wedged, spanned, cammed, or jammed is fast approaching zero, and the formerly barren stage of many an unprotected pitch now supports a vast glittering troupe of dancing carabiners. Still, most climbers do not object to finding better protection than they expected, and the protection grades give them some idea about the worst that can happen. (Of course, even on a well protected climb, if you forget to push your energy-absorbing double-

overhead cam flare snare all the way to the crux, you're out of luck and will have to lead the pitch.)

Finally, there are the esthetic grades. These already run the gamut from a simple list of recommended climbs to multiple-star approval systems. Visiting climbers are always glad to have this kind of information, because the feverish search for new lines often produces a substantial number of repulsive concoctions, and only rarely can these be detected by their names. (The Shawangunks, with such routes as *Smegma Gardens* and *Rubble Without a Cause*, is the only area I know of that has even begun to indulge in truth-in-packaging.) Even so, the esthetic grades are so subjective that we may end up learning more about the author's quirky preferences than about the qualities of the climbs. Whatever we do learn will be by trial and error, because most authors do not attempt to explain the criteria a climb must meet in order to achieve recommended status.

Route descriptions and grades are no longer a guidebook's only *raison d'être*. The author is supposed to chronicle the history of the area, and dispense proper credit for the various "firsts" that may occur on a given climb. In the guidebook, climbers' feats are catalogued and enshrined, priority is established, and reputations are made, confirmed, or, perhaps, diminished. By defining what constitutes a new route, a free ascent, and acceptable style, the author becomes the arbiter of achievement and sets the tone for the evaluation of the past and the aspirations of the future.

The main reason for publishing a new guidebook may well be to record accomplishments. Another reason is more frequently cited: the preservation of the area. There is a certain paradox here, because the guidebook is likely to attract "foreign elements" who will trample the vegetation, clog the climbs, and litter the rock with pins and bolts. Somehow, in light of the achievements to be recorded, this never seems to be too high a price to pay, but the author, in his introduction, is obliged to wrestle with the spectre of wilderness destroyed and somehow detect a silver lining. Hence we are likely to read that the real purpose of the guidebook is to protect the area from atrocities by promulgating conservation-oriented local climbing traditions. The sincerity of this piety is best judged by noting the author's treatment of already existing outrages.

The two guidebooks under consideration in this review are about areas that are geographically and geologically distinct. *Climbing in the Adirondacks*, by Don Mellor, describes rock climbs on more than thirty distinct cliffs in eight upstate New York regions, and ice climbs in sixteen different locations. *Touch the Sky*, by Paul Piana, describes rock climbs on nearly 500 pinnacles in more than fourteen regions of the Needles in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Adirondack climbing is typical Eastern granitic cliff climbing on an igneous rock that has not been scoured by glacial action and so has more small holds and flakes than the usual Western granite climbs. Needles climbing is very steep nubbin climbing, primarily on pinnacles of modest height but small circumference, and is summit-oriented.

In spite of these differences, the Needles and the Adirondacks share some similarities in the way climbing has evolved. Both areas saw fifth-class climbing activities in the 1930's, and yet the pace of development has been less intense than in other, more popular regions. Today, both these areas remain outside the mainstream of climbing activity in this country. The relatively slow pace of development and the small number of individuals responsible for most of the advances have allowed both areas to maintain a sense of history and tradition that the popular areas have lost. The main distinguishing ingredient in the history of both areas is the bold, adventurous lead, performed without a lot of equipment, in the face of obviously high but unknown difficulties. In the Adirondacks, John Turner's climbs on Pok-O-Moonshine were masterpieces of daring coolness. In the Needles, John Gill and Pete Cleveland did climbs that required the utmost in physical and mental control. These pioneering climbs were characterized by the necessity of advancing deep into unknown territory and coping, with very little margin for error, with whatever one found there. They represent the highest expression of climbing competence and maintained mythical proportions for many years. These ascents are of a different genre from the multiple-fall siege attacks of recent years, and they have absolutely nothing in common with climbs that have been previewed and then preprotected with bolts placed while on rappel.

The fact that both the Needles and the Adirondacks have a tradition of purity which has not yet been forgotten allows the guidebook writer to take a solid stand against the degradation of the sport in his area. Paul Piana generally attempts to decry shoddy practices, no doubt because he knows that the entire content of Needles climbing could be destroyed by route sculptors dangling from the top with their drills at the ready. Don Mellor makes an eloquent plea for conservation-oriented practices that leave minimal impact on the rock, but then condones bolting on rappel and even recommends it as the safest approach to bolting. This attitude can only encourage climbing sociopaths to desecrate the temples of the past and rob the future of its potential achievements. Mellor, however, is sanguine about the impact of the hordes of the future on his beloved Adirondacks. I wish I could share his optimism, but I have already witnessed some crimes against nature in the Needles, where Mount Rushmore stands as a reminder of man's propensity to build monuments to himself at the expense of nature. In the climbing world, the guidebook author is an essential cog in the monument-building process and owes it to nature to exercise his editorial powers to deny mountain carvers the recognition they seek.

Let me now devote some attention to the particular features of each of these guides. *Climbing in the Adirondacks* is a concise, no-frills compilation of route descriptions. Each rock route gets a length and commitment grade (from I to IV), a decimal grade of free-climbing difficulty (with plus and minus appended to form further subdivisions), an aid rating, a protection rating (there are three grades), and possibly a check to indicate it is recommended by the author. I

found the free-climbing grades in the 5.9 to 5.11 range to be robust, about one-third of a grade lower than my estimates. (These are my 1983 estimates. Sixteen years ago, Jim McCarthy and I naively undergraded *Psychosis* at Pok-O-Moonshine and so may have contributed to the present severity of the ratings.) I had some trouble distinguishing between the “satisfactory” and “excellent” protection ratings, but the recommended climbs seem to me to be deserving. (However, Mellor admits that he lowers his standards for some cliffs so that Pok-O-Moonshine doesn’t collect all the recommendations). The routes are numbered consecutively, and the cliff photographs have most of the routes drawn in and identified by their number. This system is annoying to use, since one has to page back and forth to find out what route one is viewing. The route names and grades should be included in a margin or on a caption page adjacent to the photograph. Ice climbs are graded in the New England Ice system, and some are recommended. There are no photographs to help in locating them, but of course with ice this is less of a problem than it would be with rock.

The attractive climbing photographs and the cliff pictures are all poorly reproduced. There is no index or list of climbs by difficulty. Tucked away in the back of the book, where you are unlikely to notice it until you look for the index, is an interesting history of Adirondack climbing. There is an indestructible plastic cover with screw and post binding, making it possible to add supplements (or delete unwanted sections). All in all, this is a serviceable, up-to-date account of Adirondack climbing. It’s bland, being neither idiosyncratic, nor anecdotal, nor witty, but this is in keeping with the current trend of guidebooks, in which concise, unembellished delivery of information is the dominant esthetic.

*Touch the Sky* is a very different sort of guidebook. Some of the differences are mandated by the special problems presented by the topography of the Needles: one is confronted with a veritable forest of pinnacles, seamed with gullies, chimneys, and cul-de-sacs. Finding a particular climb can be a major problem—and a major source of amusement. Once the pinnacle has been found, the route often needs little description. Thus, the information core of the guidebook is the collection of hand-drawn topographic maps that come with the book. These maps are an expanded version of a set made by Herb and Jan Conn for their original mimeographed guide. The Conn’s expertise in surveying was essential in producing these maps, and no comprehensive guide to the Needles could exist without the Conn’s legacy.

The Conns left another legacy: a whimsical attitude towards climbing that has persisted, even in the face of the seriousness of some of the climbs. Names like *Connspire*, *The Battle of the Wounded Knee*, *The Point* and *Beside the Point* exemplify the Conn’s playfulness.

Bob Kamps, an incorrigible fashioner of excruciating puns, took over where the Conns left off and established new lows in humor while ushering in new highs in climbing standards. His guidebook, which is incorporated nearly verbatim into Piana’s guide, set a tone which encouraged the pursuit of hard climbs

in an atmosphere of high silliness. Consequently, the Needles were spared the cosmic acid-rock pretentiousness of the route naming trends of the seventies. Piana tries to carry on the noble traditions of inspired nonsense in the current guide, but his sophomoric, frat-house humor springs from different sources. Of course, the climbing population in the Needles has changed, and Piana probably represents the brave new world, whose effluvia already contains such route names as "Never Mind All That Technique Shit, Mongo's Back in Town". Even if high silliness has given way to low silliness, Piana's willingness to be more than merely telegraphic indicates that not all guidebooks have lost their vital signs.

As for the details of grading, each climb receives a decimal grade for free-climbing difficulty, with plus and minus to indicate variations within the grade. There are no protection or esthetic ratings, although there is a small table of recommended climbs in the introduction. Opinions about many of the ratings will vary; the rock in the Needles does not favor precision of grading, and the psychological problems of some climbs overshadow the technical difficulty of the moves. This is one guidebook that really could use a consistent approach to characterizing protection. Piana's comments about runouts or thin moves high up are not always enough to yield a sensible idea about what one will face, so be prepared for adventure.

If *Climbing in the Adirondacks* is a bit lean, *Touch the Sky* is rather flabby. It has a friendly, family-album air about it. The large number of photographs include gags, shots of local notables in repose, and a miserable collection of climbing pictures. The reproduction is slightly better than the Adirondack guide, but there is no need to see most of these pictures more clearly. There's a chatty climbing history with chapters and anecdotes written by various participants. There is even an index. The friendly, informal aura of the climbing scene comes through, and yet Piana manages to set a consistent tone of restraint with respect to destructive climbing practices. Those who are very serious about climbing will resent the excess verbiage they must wade through in order to unearth the "way rads". Those who are serious about not being serious about climbing may wish for a more adult entertainment. All will agree that Piana's guidebook is unusual in an era when most authors try to make themselves and their fellow climbers invisible, preferring a stark set of directions and a battery of statistics to any distracting human content.

RICHARD J. GOLDSTONE

*Utah Mountaineering Guide, (and the best canyon hikes)*. Michael R. Kelsey. Kelsey Publishing Co. Springville, Utah, 1983.

Utah is a state rich in its variety of natural wonders, both in mountains and desert. When you top out on a ridge or swing around a canyon bend, be ready for another sight that will just knock the socks off you. Michael Kelsey clearly enjoys the popular as well as the seldom seen areas of his native state. His