er forced numerous retreats. Several leaders fell when their protection popped, though they were stopped unhurt.

Yates is very good at describing the airy feel of the climb, as well as the messy details of cooking and portaledging—and the moves: “The handholds were enormous, but having got used to aid climbing, relying completely on my own body seemed strangely unfamiliar. The weight of equipment made me feel cumbersome and strength quickly drained from my arms. Realising that I could not hang on for long, I lunged to the left, and in a series of rapid ape-like movements, swung across the flake...”

Yates prefaches his account with an apology for perhaps being too frank and critical. He need not have worried. Except for a little irritability and forgetfulness, the climbers are portrayed as remarkably polite and thoughtful under the stressful circumstances. His own moments of frustration and rage seem pretty mild. I’m not asking for personality clashes, enlivening though they can be, but for more vivid characterization.

Even so challenging a route as this one is not ordinarily worth an entire book. No high peaks here, no first ascents, no accidents or rescues. Another participant described the whole thing with clarity and wit in a few pages of the 1993 AAJ. But Yates’s Introduction promises more than fixed ropes and spectacular granite: “For me, the Patagonian expedition was a turning point, marking a very sudden shift in my attitudes to many things and the start of a new phase of my life.” This phase is treated only in a brief epilogue (and mentioned on the dust jacket). Yates, it seems, after years of hard climbing (including a winter attempt at Nanga Parbat), has settled down. The transition is anticipated by a number of introspective passages in the last third of the book. He realizes that “I did care not only for myself, but also for those around me. Drifting along in a world of my own was no longer enough. I needed to try harder to do things better, for myself as well as for others.” This perfectly believable declaration sounds like a pallid New Year’s resolution or an excerpt from a pop psychology text. It is not grounded in enough personal detail to carry weight. Only in his acknowledgments does he mention a woman who helped him “through a difficult patch in [his] life.” How did she help? What patch was this? The Simpson episode? The few pages about it here do little more than assert that: “My decision [to cut the rope] had been right.” It is hard to write a revealing account while remaining as reticent as Yates is in this book.

Although Against the Wall misses its largest ambitions, it is an engrossing account of a major climb. Its eight pages of color photos make the reader wish for more (the best of all is on the cover). It surely will persuade a lot of climbers to hurry down to Patagonia.

STEVEN JERVIS


During the past decade, I have read and reviewed many inferior books about mountaineering. I have been bored with 8000-meter-peak quests and grown contemptuous of padded, egocentric autobiographies. I have scorned an attempt by an amateur to delve into the “personal insights” of climbers. A recent encyclopedia was, in my view, not worth the trees sacrificed. My half-dozen negative reviews in this journal since 1989 have burdened me with angst and despair (shared, I hope, by six cringing authors). Someone must review such books, but why me? Am I to be a hatchet man forever?

Reading Bruce Barcott’s book on Mount Rainier, I felt a surge of pleasure and optimism, as if gazing upon a fine new cliff for the first time. Barcott is not only a master of the lan-
guage but a man who has done his homework: this is not a book spewed out in a few months. And, as a pleasant sidelight, it has been copy edited and designed by true professionals, and I applaud Sasquatch. How gratifying to have, along with Mountaineers Books, a second competent mountain publisher as the millennium turns.

Barcott, Seattle raised, has been mesmerized by Rainier since his teens. He isn’t a climber, or a botanist, or a glaciologist, but he quickly realized that the mountain is more than a summit, a wildflower paradise, or a mound of earth containing 25 icefields. A grand eminence like Rainier is the sum of all these things and much, much more. Barcott went to the mountain, waited, listened, and learned.

The book is composed of a series of essays bound by an admittedly thin thread: Barcott the non-climber realizes he must attempt to reach the apex of the monster volcano some day. But this is a commitment he’d better think about for a while, absorbing everything he can about the peak before he clicks crampons to boots. So he hikes, fleeing during deluges; he observes marmots and tourists; he talks with climbers, guides, rangers, naturalists, volcanologists, historians. What a unique way to approach a peak! What a contrast to those who race up the 50 state high points!

Had Barcott been a mediocre writer, short on curiosity, this would have been a dull book. For instance, an entire chapter about the controversy of renaming the mountain Tacoma, in the early part of the century, might not make for compelling reading. But Barcott eloquently manages to convey the boosterism of the city of Tacoma, the economic issues involved, and the craziness of congressional wranglings. It’s amusing and instructive to learn of this strange, archaic tale.

Other chapters deal with the meaning of Scott Fischer’s life and death, the secret lives of marmots, climbing accidents then and now, modern climbing writing, and the airplane crash of December 1946, when, during the next summer, mountaineers Dee Molenaar and Bruce Meyer, along with many others, worked for days to excavate corpses from the ice—only to entomb all 32 later into the glacier at 12,000 feet. An even more sobering chapter describes the potential for a mudflow disaster when the volcano next rumbles, an event undoubtedly to happen during the next 100 years.

Barcott’s honesty and perceptiveness are refreshing. In one of my favorite passages, he writes:

I’d begun my Rainier explorations with a passing interest in the summit. Now I found myself caught between a curiosity urging me to explore the upper mountain and a conscience deeply opposed to the macho ethos of climbing. Having read through thousands of pages of mountain carnage and witnessed the grief brought on by Fischer’s death, climbing a mountain could no longer be written off as an innocent lark. Too many questionable motives underlay the whole culture of mountain climbing. Too many people died pursuing goals that were unworthy of their deaths. I didn’t want to become one of them.

(I should point out that the hideous dangling modifier in the third sentence is one of the very few grammatical mistakes in this otherwise well-edited book.)

While some readers of this journal may consider the above excerpt a cowardly view of our fabulous, risky sport, I find it provocative and worthy of discussion. Let us hope Barcott will write another mountain book, though I have a hunch he will move in another direction. Our loss, if this is true.

Steve Roper