

the vertical world's seductive dance with risk, danger, and even death as an affirmation of life itself. The allure of this world is best captured in the chapter where he "meets the Phantom Lord" as he steps from a cliff for his first Osman-supervised "jump":

In a mutation so swift as to be imperceptible, as if externally compelled, I pass irreversibly through Osman's moment of choice. In the attenuated heartbeats that fall between the moment of commitment and the moment of execution, the pooling fear distills, climaxes, and transmutes. The resistance of the will cracks and dissolves. My body, suddenly unbound, becomes weightless, soars in its position on the rock. My back straightens, my head instinctually rises to the sky. A deep, luxurious passivity imbues my limbs. The oxygen is rich, heavy. I have gained no deeper confidence in the equipment. I have in no way lost the visceral suspicion that I may soon lie mangled on the rocks below. I have simply been relieved of my command.

What seems to weigh down the otherwise elegantly told stories of both Osman and Todhunter is the inordinate amount of attention given by the author to the mechanics of climbing, ice climbing, and jumping, as well as the almost sycophantic references to who's who in the climbing world. Perhaps these details may be of interest to the general audience, or to a very enthusiastic beginner climber, but for most climbers, such excessive information seems wholly unnecessary. It also seems at odds with the Dan Osman minimalist philosophy the author wants to convey. For example, Todhunter recounts Osman's idea of a good top rope—one sling and a carabiner:

For Osman, it appears, an anchor is either adequate or inadequate. This seems to be an issue of aesthetics rather than bravado. . . . In pursuit of mastery in any enterprise, one strives to attain or express a condition just so, and chasms of mediocrity—too much and not enough—yawn on either side. By this reasoning. . . superfluous gear on a top-rope anchor is not a harmless, sensible backup, but as regrettable—to borrow from another trad—as an overwritten phrase.

Aside from overwriting background information that is, like Osman's theory on anchor systems, superfluous to the story, Todhunter is an accomplished writer whose prose is lovely and compelling, if a bit self-conscious at times. But then, it is self-conscious terrain he has chosen to explore: throughout the strands of Osman's life that he's selected to showcase, the author has tied in the more compelling stories of his own evolving relationship with risk and danger. A climber and adventurer himself, Todhunter finds, in the two years that he is spectator to Osman's life, that the addition to his own life of a wife and child, seriously alters both his ability and his desire to take such risks. *Fall of the Phantom Lord*, told through Todhunter's keen and honest perceptions about his own experience, gives the book its soul—which is a far leap from anything popular culture has embraced about the vertical world.

AMY IRVINE

Souvenirs from High Places, A History of Mountain Photography. Joe Bensen. Mountaineers Books: Seattle. 151 color and black-and-white photos. 144 pages. \$35.00.

Souvenirs from High Places: A History of Mountain Photography is a pleasing collection and celebration of photography from the world's mountains, yet it ultimately raises tough

questions. I was delighted to see familiar classics, like the Bisson work from the Mt. Blanc region in the late 1800s, Byron Harmon's wanderings in the Canadian Rockies and the extraordinary archive produced by four generations of the Tairraz family. Bradford Washburn's sensuous Doldenhorn East Ridge is here, in an exquisite frame exposed as Washburn was flying toward the mountain, about to make his more familiar images of the ridge. We see Vittorio Sella, too, though considering the author's kudos for him as "the greatest mountain photographer of all time," he is under-represented.

The real pleasure of this volume is in the surprises and arcana. Who cannot be seduced by the early 19th century etchings? Or by the German Alpine Club's quaint hand-colored post-cards from the early 1900s? My favorite of all is a remarkable 1967 image by Czech photographer Vilem Heckel. With all the formal richness of a classic modernist photograph by Edward Weston or Arnold Newman, Heckel gives an intimate sense of a climber's fatigue on a broiling snow slog in Pakistan.

Once Heckel's show-stopper grabbed me, I realized how much this book was missing images that reached a similarly high level of artistry. Re-reading the author's introduction and musing on the title, it became clear that the book tries to cover too much terrain, that encompassing both "souvenir" and "history" leaves the book diluted and uneven. The book proposes to cover "... the highest state of the pictorial climbing art . . . [.] however, this is also the story of photographs taken over the years by the many thousands of ordinary citizen climbers" In the context of climbing photography, a souvenir is typically either a hero shot or a relatively casual snapshot of a person or place, like those seen here of a bivy hut on the Brouillard Pillar or a portrait of Reinhold Messner.

However much we may admire a place or person, the pictures themselves usually remain aesthetically inconsequential. On the other hand, "history" connotes a survey that intends to track creative change through time. In this vein, the book delivers fantastically artful images like Heckel's and Washburn's. But combining masterpieces with banal snapshots seems peculiar at best. This anthology would be much improved by focusing on one intention or the other: stay with snapshots and come up with a wry, wacky family album of the climbing fraternity, or focus entirely on the great art shots.

All of which raise a key question: how often has mountaineering photography actually entered the realm of fine art? This point could be argued ad nauseam by everyone from museum curators to the most museum-adverse climber. Since I have the remarkable privilege of writing this review and the opportunity to answer my own question, my response is: not terribly often. Most mountain photography, even by devoted, accomplished, and, in some cases, famous photographers, is fundamentally little more than hero shots or the by-product of being in the right place at the right time. It is usually not the result of the individual vision or soul. Photographers who can take us beyond passive description and into active visual creation, as Heckel and Washburn have, are exceedingly few and far between. The overall standard of climbing imagery has risen far in the past decade or so (witness the high quality of magazine covers and gallery displays in the climbing literature), yet too many images remain formulaic.

Those who take their photography seriously owe their art, their mountains, and their society much more. Transcendent images are floating around somewhere out in the ether, waiting to be born. I don't pretend to know how to bring them into this world, but I do know that their discovery will only be possible if we ask tougher questions of our art than most of us are currently asking. Like climbing 5.19, doing the impossible will result from someone pushing beyond the inherited forms and predictable ideas—and it will, no doubt, someday be done.