While emphasized in the introduction, Mellor’s abhorrence with the homogenization that he sees in the sport is not leaned on very much in the body. Neither is any other central theme. Instead, *American Rock* reads like a compendium of essays on the American climbing life in its many facets, leaving readers to form their own conclusions.

The book begins with a quick history of climbing in the U.S. and then moves into a section on climbing media and current trends in the sport. Chapter two is a geology lesson, and it is not until chapter three on page 65 that the book gets into a groove. There, Mellor starts an eight-chapter tour of more than 40 climbing areas from the Shawangunks to Joshua Tree. A wrap-up chapter, “Cherishing the Resources,” talks about current threats and issues in American climbing (e.g. the Wilderness Act of 1964, raptor nesting closures).

This bits-and-pieces style produces a book that at times feels disjointed and superficial. With only 300 pages to tackle a monumental subject, *American Rock* is not an encyclopedia on climbing in the U.S., but instead serves as an introduction to its constellation of areas, people, and subcultures.

But it is this same tell-all style that makes the book an overall success. There are a few holes here: almost no coverage of Montana, and minimal attention to Devil’s Tower; Mellor may disappoint flatlands climbers like myself by not giving any ink to Midwestern areas such as Devil’s Lake. These quibbles aside, the book is thorough, well written, and a first-of-its-kind. It will no doubt expand the consciousness of newbies and serve as a great refresher course for climbing veterans.


Reuben Ellis’ goal is both an admirable and daunting one: “to understand the world we live in,” as Ellis paraphrases Edward Said, “we should seek out connections between culture and empire, geography and literature.” Ellis explores the interlocking themes of mountaineering, the motivations of those who climb, and the language that they use to describe it. According to the author, climbing cannot be done—or read—in isolation. It must be placed in its appropriate geographical, historical, literary, and political contexts. Thus, mountaineering in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and its literature can only be understood in the context of that time. And, since British and American climbers belonged to nations that were busily expanding their dominions over peoples in the developing world, so, too, were climbers, in a sense, imperialists. Under the guise of scientific exploration, foreign investment, and nationalism, American and British alpinists climbed. Hence, these climbers were not motivated solely by a spiritual need to be in the mountains or a desire for sport. Rather, at the turn of the last century climbers were carrying the banner of their ascendant nations in the “vertical margins” of their respective empires: British climbers in East Africa and the Himalaya, American climbers in that American “sphere of influence,” Latin America. However, Ellis tells this interesting, albeit complex, story in a way that likely will alienate the average reader of mountaineering...
literature. Make no mistake about it, Vertical Margins is, in the best and worst senses, an academic book.

Ellis begins his book by looking at the “blank spaces on the map,” when mountains became sites of scientific exploration. Prior to the late 19th century, mountains were seen as places of romance or spirituality, where you might go to test or find faith and mountains and mountaineers were represented in literature as such. In the late 1800s, however, mountains—and the conquest of them—must be seen through the language of empire. No longer were mountains simply depicted in word (and, soon, film) as places of spirituality. Instead, they were places to be investigated scientifically and had significance in the context of the spreading economic, military, and political power of Britain and America.

The second chapter examines the life and climbs of Sir Halford Mackinder, the author of a significant theory of political geography, but also the first man to reach the 17,000-foot peak of Mt. Kenya. As someone who had recently traveled to Kenya in order to follow in Mackinder’s footsteps, I can say that I learned precious little new about it. That is because Ellis is more concerned with how “Mackinder’s narrative [of his climb] engages a broad range of issues revolving around individual ambitions within evolving academic institutions, British colonial politics in East Africa, and racial and cultural difference.” You get the picture.

The most interesting chapter was his analysis of Annie Peck Smith’s 1911 mountaineering classic, *A Search for the Apex of America*. A feminist and academic, as well as one of the most prominent climbers of her generation, Smith’s book discusses her first ascent of 22,200-foot Huascaran and other exploits in the Peruvian and Bolivian Andes. Ellis, though, focuses upon her mountaineering exploits as they relate to gender dynamics and American foreign investment in the aftermath of the “Roosevelt Corollary,” in which (basically) the United States claimed the right to invade any nation in the Western Hemisphere in order to protect its own economic interests.

The final chapter shifts from the writings of climbers to one of the first documentary filmmakers of the alpine world, John Baptist Noel, and his 1927 film, *Through Tibet to Everest*. Again, Ellis’ objective is not to rehash the familiar literature of Everest, but to explore “the evolving documentary film movement, and perhaps Western technology in general, [as it] interacted with the British imperial posture in central Asia in the closing days of the Raj.” One of the more interesting aspects of this chapter concerns the super-nationalism of the interwar years, in which people went to suicidal lengths (literally) in order to bag peaks in the names of their respective empires.

Throughout the book, Ellis displays an impressive knowledge of a wide variety of subjects—not simply mountaineering and its literature but also the history of Britain and the United States domestically and internationally. I—a professional academic historian—learned a great deal from reading this book, but I doubt that most of my climbing buddies would have the interest or discipline to slog through it. Ellis makes no attempt to reach a popular audience. As a sidenote, the “dedicatory preface” is a thoroughly enjoyable and well-written short work that hints at Ellis’ command of not just academic prose but also intelligent and humorous literary non-fiction.

*Peter Cole*