

Less well known is that it was Robbins who triggered the clean-climbing revolution in this country. After a trip to the U.K., Robbins returned home imbued with the ethos of using natural features and chocks to protect rock climbs. Chouinard and Frost immediately understood the implications, applied their design and production genius to improving the chocks available from the U.K., and commissioned Doug Robinson's seminal essay, "The Whole Art of Natural Protection," in the Chouinard Equipment catalog. This was followed by John Standard, on the East Coast, publishing his brilliant newsletter, "The Eastern Trade." The revolution swept on, but it was Robbins who triggered it.

Thus an autobiography by Robbins is a must read for anyone interested in the modern history of American climbing. It helps that it is so well done and consistently engaging.

As a device, Robbins recounts his 1963 solo of Warren Harding's amazing route on the Leaning Tower in Yosemite. His clear descriptions of the technical aspects of the climb are accessible to the non-climber, but are gripping enough to satisfy the most experienced among us. Alone on the wall for days, Robbins looks back on his hardscrabble youth, growing up in post-WWII Los Angeles. Always supported by his long-suffering mother but without a steady father figure, he recounts his youthful adventures, and misadventures, with an uncompromising eye and an amazing memory for detail. His discovery of climbing and his calling gives us a window for understanding his resolute character.

This is the first of a seven-volume undertaking. I look forward to the rest with great anticipation.

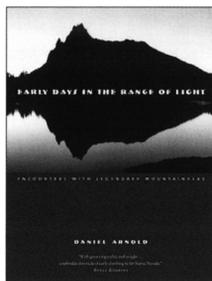
JIM MCCARTHY

*Early Days In the Range of Light: Encounters With Legendary Mountaineers.* DANIEL ARNOLD. COUNTERPOINT, 2009. 432 PAGES. HARDCOVER. \$29.95.

When it comes to mountaineering literature, California's Sierra Nevada is perhaps the most storied of North American ranges. Not that other mountains lack narratives, but the Sierra seems to have attracted more than its share of gifted chroniclers, among them Clarence King, John Muir, and Francis Farquhar. Now add to this illustrious company the name of Daniel Arnold.

An accomplished climber as well as scholar, Arnold immersed himself for ten years in the history of Sierra mountaineering, reading all the classic texts, from William Brewer's *Up and Down California in 1860-64* to Norman Clyde's essays, as well as the old climbing accounts published in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*. From this veritable massif of alpine material, Arnold identified "the most adventurous climbs made by the most headstrong climbers," then spent four summers re-doing the routes himself, following in the paths of "the climbing ancestors."

Not only did he follow the exact routes of these predecessors, he did it on their terms, leaving at home modern climbing gear and opting instead for vintage equipment. Or no equipment at all. When John Muir made the first ascent of Mt. Ritter in October 1872, he walked 25 miles across rugged high country to reach the peak. Afterward, he walked back the way he came. He wore light clothes and carried only a tin cup, a notebook, and a bundle of bread. Arnold, in retracing Muir's route, did the same, right down to the bundle of bread. At one



point he reflects upon his efforts to meet the old-time mountaineers on their own ground, confessing, “In all honesty, my possessions were disconcertingly light—each easy step forward reminded me that I carried nothing to defend myself against the darkness and the cold.”

The book presents 15 narrative accounts, “the most difficult and notable routes along with the stories of the men who climbed them.” In each case Arnold deftly weaves his own story in with that of his subject. At times the writing is so seamless, the reader is almost charmed into believing that Arnold has dissolved the barrier of years and has joined the climbing ancestors on their historic climbs, “shamelessly eavesdropping on their hundred-year-old conversations.” But more importantly, he treats each climber he writes about with a profound sympathy, which has the effect of shifting the reader’s attention away from the technicalities of mountaineering to the complications of the human heart. Instead of rehashing the all-too-familiar myth of the hero-mountaineer, Arnold leads the reader toward those inexpressible privacies that abound in the souls of those who would climb mountains.

The most poignant character in this regard is the legendary Norman Clyde. Before he gave his heart to the Sierra, Clyde was married to a woman named Winnie Bolster, who died tragically young from tuberculosis only a few years after they married—“before he had the chance to do much more than feel the potential of their future, but apparently she remained with him all his life.” Her spirit, it would seem, was his constant companion, unseen by the others who occasionally climbed with him, yet attending him to the end of his long days. A sad and moving story of love lost, to be sure, but Arnold also sees in Norman Clyde a cautionary tale for any creative spirit. When he wasn’t out and about in the mountains, Clyde was holed up in his cabin, grinding away at his writing, struggling to get into words exactly how the Sierra made him feel. It was a lifelong labor, and he never really found the audience for his work that he hoped for. When he died in 1972 at the age of 87, he left behind reams of unpublished manuscripts. As Arnold sums it up, “To me, the strongest warning against Clyde’s path is the simple fact that Clyde himself, who seems to have been better equipped than anyone to handle solitude and the unrelenting pressure of raw beauty, struggled so hard to find his place in the borderland between the mountains and civilization—and only surrendered to the peaks after exhausting the possibilities in between.”

One comes away from this book with the uncanny sense that rare is the high Sierra peak that is not haunted. As Arnold so eloquently expresses it, “The mountains have a way of propagating human echoes.”

JOHN P. O’GRADY

*The Stonemasters: California Rock Climbers In the Seventies.*  
DEAN FIDELMAN, JOHN LONG, AND OTHERS. T. ADLER BOOKS/  
STONEMASTER PRESS, 2009. MANY PHOTOGRAPHS. 196 PAGES.  
HARDCOVER. \$60.00.

“We made this book square, like a block of granite,” said Dean Fidelman, the photographer. That’s how much he and John Long, the writer, wanted it to reflect the experience of being a Stonemaster. It’s exciting how well their big volume succeeds, by diving deep into the legend to locate the sparks that set a few high school kids so on fire

