

it were in the right place at the right time to scoop what the circumstances gifted them and get credit for doing it. *Fail Falling* also shows a few heroic men and women grasping their moment and blowing through the limits that restrain the rest of us. Robbins is such a hero.

*Fail Falling* shares a remarkable story. Robbins' early days run on the jet fuel of enthusiasm, and these pages reveal a unique spirit to his life that can possess and inspire the willing reader.

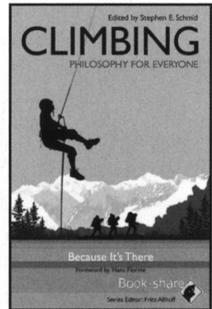
JEFF MCCARTHY

***Climbing—Philosophy for Everyone: Because It's There.* Stephen E. Schmid, ed. Foreword by Hans Florine. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 256 pages. Paperback. \$19.95**

Eric Shipton once said “climbing is a form of philosophy,” or something like that. His philosophy was a woolly mix of Emersonian transcendentalism and nature worship—pretty much what most of us subscribe to. But you'll not find any of it in this collection of 17 essays by contemporary professional philosophers—nor by the writer-climbers mimicking their style. In his introduction editor Stephen E. Schmid, a devotee of Ayn Rand, whose Objectivism is hardly everyone's idea of philosophy, declares that his goal is to pose “intriguing questions that make philosophy interesting and exceptionally so when applied to the activity of climbing.” But most of the questions raised cover familiar ground: the justification of risk, the pursuit of virtue or character, and thumb-sucking on ethics. This may have been no bad thing had the philosophical perspective yielded originality. But there is too little of that. I felt as if I'd landed in the same old climbers' bar, thrashing the same old conversations about reasons *why?*, the same natter on bolting, trad vs sport, only this time with guys with a compulsion to stick Wittgenstein, Hegel, John Stuart Mill, Locke, Aristotle into their shop talk. I give Schmid high marks for intellectual audacity. His attempt to shoehorn the ideas of great philosophers into a sporting activity that requires no self-knowledge—the lack of which may improve performance (action at its purest)—is riskier than climbing the Eiger wearing flipflops.

The few creditable pieces in this collection make their point without belaboring ties to the philosopher pantheon. “From Route Finding to Redpointing: Climbing Culture as a Gift Economy,” by Debora Halbert, is a fine discussion of the value created by new routes and how they are unique objects—never mind that gift economy is an old idea in anthropology and not philosophy. Another piece I liked looked at the climber's access to his or her inner mental states and the unreliability of remembered impressions. Stephen M. Downes in “Are You Experienced?” references psychological experiments that illuminate how we are not as we seem to ourselves. “Consider another familiar predicament: you reach the anchors of a route and while clipping in declare ‘That felt easy.’ Everyone watching, including your nervous belayer, witnessed a desperate by-the-skin-of-your-teeth, wobbler of an ascent. Were you experiencing what it feels like for a climb to feel easy?” He warns us to be aware of the unreliability of our impressions and to get feedback from others and, further, that “failure to remember can easily be understood as a failure to access an inner state.” This trait, he surmises, explains the wide prevalence of inaccurate reporting of first ascents and of post-accident narratives.

In “Why Climb?” analytic philosopher Joe Fitschen explores evolutionary explanations of



the question that never dies. He warns against a teleological approach, i.e., that climbing serves a purpose, fits a grand design, and by his whimsical approach to the material, he cautions us not to take the climbing-philosophy connection too seriously. In “Jokers on the Mountain: In Defense of Gratuitous Risk,” Heidi Howkins Lockwood does a good job making distinctions between ineliminable types of risk and elective risk-taking in climbing. Society puts climbers in the position of justifying risk as if it were their primary pursuit, when in fact risk is not an end in itself.

The essay that is most genuinely philosophical and yet bears down with immense authority on a vital climbing issue is William Ramsey’s “Hold Manufacturing: Why You May Be Wrong About What’s Right.” This is a tour de force of the modern analytic methods applied to a problem in practical ethics: lucid, candid, reasoned with a fine razor. Here is the gist of the matter: “The reason hold manufacturing still occurs in the preparation of many routes despite its widespread condemnation is because the condemnation itself is not properly justified.” He then goes through arguments pro and con with careful and consistent reasoning and, half a dozen pages later, winds up with an analysis that suggests that at least in some circumstances, which he explores in detail, manufacturing can be philosophically defensible.

I was surprised that there is no mention of the one philosopher of note who was also a magnificent climber, Arne Naess, and of the omission of Nietzsche, a big influence (for good and bad) on the climbing zeitgeist of the 20th century (case in point: überman Dougal Haston). Nor of later philosophies that speak to climbing: e.g., the limit or edge philosophy of men like Jaspers and Heidegger, Bataille, and Foucault. Instead, the chief authorities, who get mentioned every sixth page, are not philosophers at all, but Tejada-Flores and his “Games Climbers Play” and Frost and Chouinard, with their famous 1974 testament on clean climbing. So Lito, Tom, Yvon, how do you feel about being caught in this kind of company? Proud? Embarrassed? Indifferent?

JOHN THACKRAY

***Ron Fawcett Rock Athlete.* Ron Fawcett, with Ed Douglas. Vertebrate Publishing, 2010. 256 pages. Color photographs. Hardcover. £20.00.**

Strawberries, Lord of the Flies, The Cad. These routes are synonymous with bold standard-pushing and with Ron Fawcett in the 1970s and early 80s. In this autobiography, Fawcett depicts his beginnings as a cad making the first ascent of England’s Mulatto Wall to his years working in the entertainment industry. Along the way, Fawcett pioneered the life of a professional climber.

“I just wanted to find the edge I’d felt that I’d lost,” Fawcett writes in the opening chapter, “A Century of Extremes.” Fawcett planned to climb 100 extreme routes in a day. After a lifetime on the rock, his lost edge was still sharp somewhere inside him, and his ability remained strong through an epically long day, as he ascended 3,957 feet and traveled 12 miles on foot between crags. “For almost twenty years I’d spent every waking moment either climbing or thinking about it.... I’d given pretty much everything I had to the sport. What did I have left?” He lived and breathed climbing, an obsession that comes with its costs. His lifestyle contributed to breaking his marriage. When his wife moved away from the outdoors, toward dinner parties, theater, “situations that were not my natural habitat,” Fawcett couldn’t move with her. “She

