Book Reviews

EDITED BY THOMAS H. JUKES

Direttissima, by Peter Gilman and Dougal Haston. New York: Harper & Row, 1966. 174 pages, 40 pages of photographs. Price $5.95.

The Eiger Direct assault has been described by Christian Bonington in the 1967 *American Alpine Journal.* I will assume the reader has read this excellent account, and eschew a recapitulation of the ascent, dwelling rather upon the worth of Gilman's book and discussing some peripheral questions raised by the nature of the climb and of the climbers.

Direttissima would never sell nor long survive on its merits as mountaineering literature. It warrants our attention because it is an account of the details of an important event in modern mountaineering: the successful ascent of a direct route up the north face of the grimmest mountain in the Alps: the Eiger. An ugly name — "Eiger" — it doesn't trip off the tongue like "Mont Blanc", or "The Jungfrau."

But to return to the point — the book is poorly written. A sentence on the dust jacket of *Direttissima* reads, "The climb that made the world hold its breath"; it is a pity that the same cannot be said of the book. Peter Gilman, the principal author, is a journalist, which perhaps accounts for *Direttissima* containing so many faults of daily newspapers; namely: inaccuracy, factual errors, carelessness with words, trivia, and superficiality. And that is the essential weakness of the book: it rarely rises above the level of mediocre journalism.

Gilman compounds these journalistic vices with a wishy-washiness which enervates the prose and leaves it anemic. For example, "He (Kor) complained that one climber had said that a sunrise creeping up the face toward a bivouac site had been better than Mozart." What climber? What face? The culprit was I, the face was El Capitan, and the sun was *not* creeping toward the "bivouac site", which happens to have been on Sentinel Rock. These details are unimportant in themselves, but their absence robs this passage of credibility. There are many like it. Such vagueness and inaccuracy create in the reader a persistent skepticism regarding what is said in the book.

Except that, as the climbers near the summit, burning their bridges behind them, Dougal Haston intermittently assumes the narrative and paints vivid pictures of the final struggle: a battle for life amid a wilderness of rock, ice, and cold — finishing in a blizzard of ferocious violence.

Haston writes well and there is never any doubt he is telling it as it was. He makes clear that these men of the Eiger Direct are hard. One is, however, slightly put off by how hard. Haston's honest narration reveals an emotional control (necessary for survival) which is astonishing and a little disquieting. He wants this control; he is proud of it; he has conquered himself. Harlin revealed this same preoccupation in his writings. This control is probably what most, if not all, climbers are after, at least in a vague way. Reading of Dougal's attainment of this ideal, I thought, "It seems almost monstrous."

Bonington's photographs will win no prizes, nor even make "Picture of the Month" in *Alpinismus.* But the Eigerwand in a bad winter is a poor setting for showing off one's photographic talents. It is to Bonington's credit that the coverage was as nearly complete as it was. I do not think we can fault him for not getting flawless pictures in that environment. But his portraits are good. Haston looks quite the tiger he is, while Whillans is very much Whillans: stoical, tough, unruffleable. But the ones of Harlin, the force behind the English-speaking team, are especially apt. One picture shows Harlin and Haston standing in the snow after just descending the face. The wall looms in the background. Is it just chance that Harlin is in the center of the picture, with the direct line (his line) of the Eiger rising straight above his head, while Dougal is off to the side, and lower? Or was it perhaps the sensitive intuition of the photographer who saw whose show it really was and caught it that way? Or was it that Harlin had a genius for publicity? Was it that he had an extraordinary sixth sense for seeing himself as the camera saw him, and instinctively placed himself to best advantage? Another picture in the book has Kor, Haston and Harlin standing behind an exhibit of their gear, the north face again in the background. It's a curious picture, for Harlin looks like a supremely confident Greek athlete who has somehow become associated with two scruffy, disreputable hoodlums from the back streets of London. While Harlin did have an outstanding physique, Kor and Haston are not runts. Yet Harlin dominates the scene. Why? Perhaps because the other two are not concerned with projecting images. Harlin is. So he (doubtless subconsciously) strikes a heroic pose, just as he has chosen the clothes which will show him off to best effect, perhaps subconsciously. Not that Harlin was being false in projecting a heroic image of himself. He certainly had the makings of a hero. And he would have risked his life ten times over if he could have done it in a grand and heroic way. What is fascinating is not the truth or falsity of the projection, but the mechanism. It is as if he went through life seeing himself through the camera's eye. He was all in all a very com-

plex character, very strong, but with some startling weaknesses. He had the strength to sit on a mountain in an electrical storm and show no fear, but he was incapable of laughing at himself. He was a man of exceptional personal force — ruthless, but loved by his friends.

A lot of silliness (in addition to this review) has been written and said about this climb. For example, Michael Vaucher's remark about the climbers being "heartless" because they did not descend when Harlin was killed. This seems presumptuously holier than thou. What does he know about their hearts? Others have been just as quick to rush to judgment, and most of the verdicts have been negative. Particularly singled out for criticism have been the open publicity-seeking (to defray expenses, we are told), and the use of fixed ropes. Well, nowadays even Walter Bonatti, who climbs with impeccable style, capitalizes on his climbing accomplishments by publicizing them as much as he can. And the use of fixed lines was unquestionably necessary in this particular winter. The following anecdote is pertinent: A few months after the ascent, Don Whillans attended a gathering in Italy of some of the world's outstanding mountaineers. The moral questions of the Eiger Direct were hot issues then, with most opinions against the Eiger-wanderers. Asked to speak on the problems of ethics in mountaineering, Whillans spoke to the effect that they should be purely a personal matter. The individual must make his own decisions about what is right and wrong for himself. Let him not trouble himself with the actions of others. After this declamation he received a standing ovation. Good counsel, but I fear the best we can hope for is a diminution in the levels of invidious comparison and disparagement of the achievements of others. After all, climbers are just as imperfect as human beings.

ROYAL ROBBINS

Mt. McKinley: The Pioneer Climbs, by Terris Moore. College, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, 1967. Distributed by University of Washington Press. 202 pages, many photographs, 8 maps. Price $6.95.

Mount McKinley is superlative in several respects; for its beauty; for its proximity to the Arctic Circle; for its great height above its surroundings; for being the highest mountain in a National Park; for the amazing claim of the first ascent by Frederick Cook; and for the nature of the first ascent of the North Peak by the Sourdough Party. Terris Moore's book brings together the history of the early climbs in an absorbing and richly-documented story. The book is of much significance to the American Alpine Club; for the refuting of Cook's claim is intimately interwoven