The implicit premise behind Ken Wilson’s hefty new anthology is that the journal article is the true genre of mountain writing. The premise seems to this reader unarguable; climbing journals are our “little magazines,” and it is in the pages of Climbing or the Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal that we communicate most comfortably with our colleagues, untempted by the grandiose posturings of public autobiography or by the slogging solemnities of the book-length expedition narrative. It ought to follow, then, that an anthology of journal articles could produce the best possible likeness of our art, even though it must repel the lay reader through arcane allusion, jargon, and in-joke. At least two previous books demonstrated this proposition: Tom Patey’s matchless One Man’s Mountains and Galen Rowell’s fine The Vertical World of Yosemite.

Unfortunately, The Games Climbers Play is not in their class. Its cardinal defect is a sprawling incoherence. Wilson makes a stab at an editorial statement: he intends to concentrate on writing from the last twenty years, and to present, in friendly reaction against Michael Ward’s The Mountaineer’s Companion, a “more youthful, more anarchic” view of the climbing world. Revealing that the “ideological base” for his own
editorship of Mountain after 1968 derived from Lito Tejada-Flores' widely-praised essay analyzing climbing scenes, Wilson, in appropriating Tejada-Flores' title, indicates that he means to structure his own anthology around the "games" the American climber had identified. But such a structure ends up looking superficial: Wilson offers separate sections for rock-climbing articles and expedition accounts, yet each heading turns out to be a catch-all. The coherence of Rowell's book lay in the simple discovery that a collection of journal memoirs, most of them from the Sierra Club Bulletin, could adumbrate a history of climbing in Yosemite. The coherence of Patey's book derived from the integrity of the man himself, and from the fact that he happened to be a splendid writer. In The Games Climbers Play there are few essays one cannot read with pleasure; and for American readers the selections from the smaller British journals will offer many welcome finds. But the collection as a whole remains both intimidatingly thick and yet limited in variety.

The limitation stems from a kind of provinciality. By rough count, among the 125 anthologized items, 92 are the products of British climbers, 28 of Americans. There is a snippet from the Chinese book about Everest, a single Canadian entry, two pieces by Messner and one by Bernard Amy. Yet Wilson nowhere acknowledges restricting his view of the current climbing world to English-speaking alpinists. An anthology that properly represented the rich Continental climbing literature would have been a great service to American and British readers, most of whom are unfamiliar with the foreign-language journals. One of Mountain's great strengths over the years has been its definitive coverage of international climbing, culled from a gang of foreign correspondents. It is a pity that Wilson chose not to approach his own anthology in a comparably international spirit.

The provincial bias is not confined to language. 37 of the entries appeared first in Mountain, as compared to one apiece from the Alpine Journal and the American Alpine Journal. Granted, this kind of lopsided selecting will tend to emphasize the nontraditional currents of climbing. But what Games really gives us is mainly the kind of writing Wilson himself likes, and that taste disproportionately emphasizes the ironic-absurd vein perfected by Patey and Ian McNaught Davis (who appears as the author of no fewer than eight of Wilson's selections). Absent almost entirely from this mammoth anthology are examples of other threads in recent mountain writing: the cold intensity of John Harlin, for instance, or the lyrical restraint of Wilfrid Noyce, or the argumentative originality of Rowell himself. A good anthologist has, above all other credentials, catholicity of taste. Ken Wilson has unfortunately turned a fine idea into a disappointing book by consulting too uncritically his own palate.

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