

# Letter to the Editor— Climbing Ethics

THOMAS HIGGINS

IN THE 1982 ISSUE of the *American Alpine Journal*, Bruce Morris wrote a historical and interpretive article on face climbing in Yosemite and Tuolumne Meadows. As a contributor to the face climbing tradition of these areas, particularly Tuolumne, I suggest Bruce Morris has done a very poor job of telling the story.

First, he has omitted much of the relevance in the history of routes and the ethical traditions of the areas. Second, in addition to these omissions, there are confusing discussions about the experience of face climbing and rationales for climbing styles, all suggesting the author either doesn't believe what he is saying or isn't clear what he is saying or both. Finally, and most disturbing in the pages of the *Journal*, the author sets out very unconvincing, if not preposterous, arguments in support of certain climbing styles clearly aimed at murdering the impossible.

Let's begin with the omissions in the article, some factual, some interpretive. If I had to name my favorite face climb in Tuolumne, it would be *Pièce de Résistance*. It is a long, direct line on the largest dome in the area, Fairview. It entails progressively harder face-climbing (some say 5.11, some 5.12) and crack-climbing, and follows a spectacular arch in the middle of the wide-open west face. Bob Kamps and I worked on the route several times in the early 1970s, always turning back at a blank headwall about midway up. We had no desire to aid the headwall. Our climbing styles (mine was learned from his) were founded on the belief one should leave the impossible for another time or for other climbers who might someday free-climb it. In 1974, Vern Clevenger and Bob Harrington did the headwall only and then retreated. They placed several bolts, at least one of which was used for aid. Later, Vern Clevenger and I returned, free-climbed the headwall and finished the route. I named the route as I did since I felt it was my finale in Tuolumne. I also wrote an article about it for the Sierra Club publication, *Ascent*. In part, the article was a tribute to Bob Kamps as my mentor, to our friendship and to our many attempts together on the route.

Bruce Morris tells us *Pièce de Résistance* is "one of Vern Clevenger's best routes." We are told, "Where Higgins and Kamps had met defeat, Clevenger and Harrington eventually prevailed." I don't routinely call routes "mine," nor do I think *Pièce de Résistance* is Clevenger's route. I suspect Vern Clevenger doesn't feel the route is "his" either. But the main point and serious omission

relates to who did the first ascent. Vern Clevenger and Bob Harrington did not do the first ascent of *Pièce de Résistance*. Tom Higgins and Clevenger did.

Obviously, Bruce Morris has made another omission about *Pièce de Résistance*, this one interpretive. For years, when the route repelled attempts, it underscored the climbing style of the 1970s: if aid bolts were necessary, turn back. Leave it for later. For others. Or, for never. Morris has chosen to ignore the significance of Resistance, as well as the entire ethical tradition behind its development.

When the article moves from discussion of specific routes to a discussion of style, the omissions about traditional style are even more apparent. Again, writing about Tuolumne, "Here, at the present moment, and for many years past, aesthetic considerations have displaced most questions of style . . . the goal has remained . . . a line of technical difficulty at almost any price." Shouldn't readers be told about the many aesthetic routes done when and where it mattered how they were done? For at least a decade in Tuolumne, fabulous routes were created without aid, previewing, preprotection or what Morris calls "selective cheating." Readers should know not only a different and earlier style once existed, but what routes represent the style, who did them, and why the style once prevailed. Morris also might have mentioned some of the younger generation who even today create aesthetic routes without "selective cheating."

Aside from omissions, Bruce Morris has given us lots of confusing discussions. For example, this statement makes no sense to me: "If good drill stances are passed up simply to make a route more committing, the crux moves, no matter how frightening, are never as hard as they might be if better protected." Following this logic, the lesser and lesser protection we use, the easier and easier crux moves become. Does anyone really subscribe to this logic? I have done several of the Yosemite face climbs Morris refers to as having "economical protection," such as *Quicksilver*. They seemed challenging to me just because the protection is sparse. More protection would make them easier, not harder. In England, poor protection even gets reflected in higher, not lower, ratings. Who really experiences the inverted reactions Morris claims can be found on the routes he names?

Here is another confusion, again relying on a kind of inverted perspective of things. *Handjive* is a route on Lumbert Dome in Tuolumne. It was done by placing bolts on rappel, preprotected, as they say. When it was first done, it was an oddity in Tuolumne and I chopped the bolts hoping to nip a trend in the bud. I even lectured the first-ascent party about violating a long-standing tradition against such climbing styles. Bruce Morris tells us the bolts were replaced after I chopped them, again on rappel. Why? Not as a slap back at a self-righteous Tom Higgins, but as a "fitting memorial" to Tim Harrison of the first-ascent team, who was so "popular" and "self-reliant." Have I been on Pluto for the last few years or is there a very sorry irony here? Even if you feel preprotection is an acceptable form of selective cheating, do you use it to create a memorial to a self-reliant climber? Would all the self-reliant climbers wishing a memorial climb protected on rappel please step forward?

The same confusion is compounded elsewhere in the article. Morris tells us Vern Clevenger battled his way up *Golden Bars* with "persistence" and

"grim determination," but "... no one will ever know whether he drilled all the bolts strictly on the lead." Why will no one know? If standing on bolts or putting them in on rappel creates fitting memorials, why won't we ever know how *Golden Bars* was done? Perhaps Bruce has stumbled upon the essential issue without knowing it—climbers "selectively cheating" have a very hard time justifying their actions, and they know it. They are reluctant to reveal the style of their ascent, even while loudly defending their styles in articles and discussions.

Finally Morris has given no credence whatsoever to "selective cheating," even while setting out to do so. He quotes Claud Fiddler, a "notorious local," who apparently supports such actions as placing bolts on rappel, rehearsing moves, previewing possible routes, and drilling aid bolt ladders to allow free-climbing. Asks Claud, "How can a route be worthwhile unless 'questionable methods' were employed on its first ascent?" Morris then goes on, "After all, can temporal ethics ever be successfully reconciled with a mandate to extend contemporary standards beyond the merely human? Like *Pantanjali's Yogasutra*, the moves on a difficult face-climb should outline the mystical steps toward achieving a deathless super-consciousness." Who among the ascribers to new climbing styles understands—never mind believes—such rubbish? There are hundreds of *worthwhile* routes done without questionable methods! And who is *mandating* an extension of contemporary standards? Or, who has the gall to say they are reaching toward a *deathless superconsciousness* beyond the *merely human* in climbing when they stand on bolts to place others? Or when they rappel down to check out the difficulty of a possible new route? Or place bolts on rappel for later protection in free climbing? One can usefully discuss the appropriateness of these climbing styles based on how they affect other climbers ascribing to different styles. But it is laughable to defend the style on the basis of their abilities to transform us into gods. What is this stuff doing in the pages of the *Journal*?

Nowhere in the article has Bruce Morris explained or defended the climbing styles he discusses. Perhaps such a defense is possible, though I have yet to see it. I'm not alone in wondering how cheating selectively, as Morris says Clevenger has done, can be justified to form an "artistically satisfying whole." I'm unconvinced Cantwell has created a better climb in the *Hall of Mirrors* by placing an aid bolt ladder up the "line of strength" and then free-climbing it, rather than climbing a ramp to the right without a ladder. I still ask why Ray Jardine feels justified in "sculpting" holds on El Cap, if in fact he did so, to make an area of rock go free. Nothing in the article convinces the reader that these methods either make good routes, or are justifiable no matter what the resulting route. Who wants to climb aid ladders free? Or climb on sculptings? Or on gymnastic problems next to a more natural path of holds? And who so completely can disassociate ends from means as to ignore how holds were made or bolts placed, and climb like a dullard, unaware or uncaring of who first did a route, how and why?

In sum, omissions, confusions and unconvincing or preposterous assertions abound in "Methods & Madness." I hope readers are treated to better fare in the future.