

“Seventy-five pence a day for dangerous work. They enjoyed it. The pay was high by Nepalese standards. The price of an average Mercedes would make a villager in Nepal an extremely rich man, comfortable for the rest of his days.” There is much food for thought in this perceptive observation. If Ang Dorje did not actually want to *sell* his Mercedes, he could drive it down from Namche to the Dudh Kosi and take a swim. Or take Faux’s comments on the apparently endless stream of women who make the trip to St. Magdalena in the Villnöss in the South Tyrol where Messner lives. “From women,” he notes, although how, one wonders, does he know, “the reaction was usually an inquisitive stare. Was there something darkly attractive about a man who lived constantly in the shadow of such danger, who thought perceptively about the motives for his adventures and wrote about them with great frankness?” This weighty question is, needless to say, never answered by Faux and the reader is left, in a manner of speaking, hanging to a vertical wall of suspense by his merest pitons. In fact, the real trouble with Faux’s book is that, after reading it, one does not have the feeling that one knows much more about Messner than before, especially if one has read Messner. While, for my taste, Messner may carry on a little too much about “the Death Zone” and the like, at least he writes with simplicity and clarity about both his life and his feelings about the mountains. There is no indication from Faux’s book that he spoke to any of the other people, such as Messner’s family or his former wife, Uschi, or Peter Habeler, with whom, it seems, Messner will no longer climb, who have played an important part in his life. All one has by way of external comment are some singularly vapid observations by Messner’s current girl friend, one Nena Holguin, such as “Sometimes I feel so squelched by this man, but then I know that is what I want anyway—a strong man, a single separate identity.” Who cares what *she* wants. Let her write her own book. It is to read about Messner that we are going to pay our \$22.50—yes, \$22.50—for a 180-page book with mediocre black-and-white pictures. Alas, Faux seems incapable of telling us anything about Messner that is not obvious. When I finished his book, apart from a great sense of relief that I did not actually have to buy it, I was reminded of a review that one of the New York food critics gave of a pretentious and over-priced French restaurant in Princeton. The critic wrote, “Princeton has long needed a truly first-rate restaurant. It still does.” Someday, someone may write a decent biography of Messner but this ain’t it.

JEREMY BERNSTEIN

Total Alpinism. René Desmaison. Granada, London, 1982. 202 pages, black and white photographs. £12.50.

Total Alpinism is certainly a book to read. It is like sitting down with one’s best pal and listening to him tell about his latest wild climb. This book is a combined translation of *La Montagne à Mains Nues* and *342 Heures dans les Grandes Jorasses* which René wrote at the peak of his climbing career in the early

seventies, when he was around forty. This account of dramatic alpine climbing over twenty years, the unglossed version of a climber who realized early on in life that he was not a literary genius or a profound philosopher but an exceptional climber of the highest degree, mercifully spares us self-indulgent, weird ideas about why he and the rest of us climb.

The first section of the book describes his early new routes and exploits: the Direct on Olan, the first winter ascent of the Dru's West Face, the direct of the Cima Ovest, the first ascent of Jannu, the Walker in winter, the first ascent and first winter ascent of the Frêne Pillar and the first ascent of the Shroud. Of special interest to me is his account of the 1966 rescue on the West Face of the Dru where René gives his version of a most controversial affair that starred his friend Gary Hemming.

The last section of the book deals with his tragic first attempt on the Walker Direct in winter and his eventual success. For those unfamiliar with the story, here are the highlights: René and Serge Gousseault, a younger (23) but accomplished climber, went up on a new route on the Walker Spur in the winter. After seven days of climbing, Serge froze his fingers and started to slow down, unable to retrieve a lot of the gear as well as dropping some. Then they had to spend the next two days battling for a few feet in a blizzard. Two hundred feet from the top, and hanging from slings after the ninth bivouac, Serge was unable to move. With no more food, in miserable weather, and still hanging from the slings, Serge managed to endure two more bivouacs but finally died. As a rescue was being organized by Simone, his wife, René waited through four more bivouacs (losing his sleeping bag in the second to last) before finally being rescued and hospitalized. He concluded with his description of his successful ascent the following winter, eloquently letting go his feelings at the top. "We had won. I had won, but what had I won? Glory? Material success? If glory, it would not last; if material success, it was too dearly bought. I could have had both so much more easily, so much less hazardously elsewhere. And yet it is for such moments of triumph and success that the mountains exact their toll. Logic asks why, but the question is meaningless. Only the passion and agony are real. . . ."

After reading *Total Alpinism*, one is left with the feeling that Desmaison made climbing his life simply because he liked to climb—not as obvious a statement as it seems. I put it down thinking "Wow! I would have loved to have climbed with this guy." And that's unusual.

JOHN BOUCHARD

On Edge: The Life & Climbs of Henry Barber. Chip Lee, with David Roberts and Kenneth Andrasko. Appalachian Mountain Club, Boston, 1982. 291 pages, black and white photographs. \$14.95.

At age 28, Henry Barber makes a problematic subject for the biographer. Many of his achievements are difficult to dramatize: short rock problems rather than