

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

the evolving alpine adventures that books are more often made of. His most arresting climbs have been solo efforts that place a burden on Barber's own powers of narration. And at the center is Barber himself: can he be as interesting as his accomplishments? The preface to *On Edge* terms him a "fascinating character"; the book unfortunately fails to substantiate this claim.

The coolly competitive, businesslike Henry Barber is a familiar figure. But according to this book he also has "a deep-seated fascination with animals and all that is animated and irrational," "seeks solace" in relations with women and, in his own words, thinks "a lot" about dying. He simultaneously craves and resents attention, a complexity embodied in a scary moment during a solo on a Welsh sea cliff. Performing for a film, he is nearly shocked off the face when the cameraman, a "foreign presence," makes a sudden movement. Such complications of character are little explored; we can only guess at their depth. David Roberts' preface acknowledges that some readers will find Chip Lee "too close, too uncritical" for accuracy. The problem is that he is indeed too uncritical, despite serious efforts not to be, yet finally not close (or penetrating) enough to illuminate Barber's nature, which emerges as opaque rather than mysterious.

Lee provides some lively characterizations, such as Dresden's Bernd Arnold and the late British wildman, Al Harris. Henry Barber is one of the less vivid people in the book. Whether because of reticence—Lee's or Barber's own?—or literary misjudgment, a number of areas of interest are merely touched upon. Barber's conservative upbringing, reflected in attitudes that troubled many a climbing partner, is not analyzed. His failure to climb with his "hero," Royal Robbins, is attributed in part to "personality differences," but we are given no hint of their nature. In the Shawangunks, a reckless hiker takes a fatal fall. Barber, in whose arms the man dies, calls the episode "very sobering, something to think about." But, Lee adds, "the implications were never pursued."

To his credit, Lee addresses the 1978 Kilimanjaro issue directly. While *The Breach* was apparently published too late for his consideration, he does quote from Rob Taylor's earlier article in *Climbing*, which embodies many of the charges elaborated in that book. Lee establishes his most nearly critical stance in the Kilimanjaro chapter, his longest and last. Some light is thrown on such questions as the reasons for the length of Taylor's fall, Barber's lack of participation at the end of the rescue, his choice of route off the mountain and failure to remain in Africa long enough to visit Taylor in the hospital. Both participants have allowed that Barber was "caught unaware" by the accident, yet Barber's remarks here give a contrary impression as well: "I was concerned about him. . . . After he got his first screw in, I just stopped taking pictures. I knew something was wrong." Taylor's larger assault was upon Barber's whole character, which he portrayed as shallow and harsh. Barber's own words at times only intensify that view: immediately after the accident "I just smiled at him and said something like, 'Just like everything else on this trip, isn't it?' What could I say? He was in incredible pain and was apologizing to me. I just

told him to stop his sniveling or I'd leave him there." Barber's great resourcefulness during the difficult descent is manifest, but not all readers will be persuaded by his ascription of his "seeming lack of compassion" to a "defense mechanism to deal with what was happening."

The narrative has an obstructed energy. Block quotations, mostly from Barber, appear frequently, not always well integrated with Lee's text. More editing would have eliminated irritating repetitions. The volume provides a publisher's preface and a glossary for the lay reader, a nonpublisher's preface describing how the account came to be written and a prologue that seems designed to humanize the book's subject. Many photographs are interspersed; they range from the murky to the striking.

Although afflicted with many shortcomings, *On Edge* recounts some stunning achievements from Yosemite to England, Dresden, Australia and Turkestan. I failed David Roberts' sweaty-palms test ("I doubt that there is a climber in the world who can read some of the episodes in Chip's book . . . without having to pause to wipe his sweating palms on his trousers."), but other hands may respond more readily. The book is of importance for those who follow the frontiers of hard climbing. It establishes or confirms Barber's significance in several areas: his insistence on good style, ability to lead on sight climbs that had stymied locals, and his extraordinary solo ascents.

STEVEN JERVIS

*50 Years of Alpinism*. Riccardo Cassin. Diadem Books Ltd., London and The Mountaineers, Seattle, 1982. 207 pages, black and white photographs, diagrams, maps. \$17.50.

Riccardo Cassin has written a masterpiece of an autobiography—possibly the most important mountaineering book to be published in the last twenty-five years! It's all here—a scintillating record of a half century of high-standard Alpine endeavor: his first climbs in the Grigna, the Dolomites, the north face of the Cima Ovest, the north face of the Piz Badile, the Walker Spur of the Grandes Jorasses, the Cassin Ridge of McKinley, Jirishanca, Gasherbrum IV and Lhotse. Perhaps the world's best climbs done by one its best climbers. What more could one ask for?

But Cassin does deliver more. Recorded in these pages are tales usually ignored by his predecessors—tales of the roles of patriotism and nationalism within the framework of mountaineering. The joy expressed at making the first "Italian" ascent of a Dolomite north wall was clearly a source of great satisfaction to the young Cassin. It was also a significant step in overcoming the territorial constraints of a twentieth century Europe about to go to war. Neglected by most authors as taboo subjects, nationalistic feelings are discussed quite openly by Cassin—to his great credit. It may prove very surprising to the modern climbing generation to discover how profound these feelings actually