

John Harlin dies on the Eiger Direct, the author is so casual he could be talking about total strangers.

The book is organized into ten chapters, each opening with an overview of its subject. The balance of the chapter reexamines the identical information by means of extended captions and detailed accounts of particular climbs. This format results in redundant material and confusing transitions. For instance, after a climb of Mont Blanc, with the weather still perfect, "there was only one climb to go for—the Eiger North Wall!" We turn the page, eager to hear about the dreaded Ogre . . . and instead wade through pages about the Chamonix aiguilles. Seventeen pages later we arrive at the Eigerwand.

Bonington's prose is adequate, though it is often bland and cumbersome. His thoughts can wander like a route through an icefall, causing readers to lose their way. An example: "The Mount Everest Foundation underwrote the cost of it, we were to be accompanied by a film crew, Don Whillans designed the box tents, successors to the Patagonian prefabricated hut, and also a waist harness, from which all subsequent harnesses have been developed." A sentence like this could go on forever, obviating the need for periods.

Bonington's life story is by definition exciting, unique. Yet he has trouble luring the reader into his special world. Hesitant to delve into the nuances and complexities of climbing, he instead tells us the "standard" thoughts. It's rough above 7000 meters. The mountains are soulful and yet unforgiving. Death is part of the game. Does the author spout these cliché from conviction, or because he's been advised that's the way to write about mountaineering?

I dream of perfection, I suppose. Few mountaineers write well, and we have come to accept lackluster prose as a trade-off for a well-illustrated adventure yarn. Not everyone can write like David Roberts, but why can't he at least have a few writers hot on his tail? Bonington, I regret to say, is not even in the race. But he surely takes pretty pictures!

STEVE ROPER

*Ascent: The Mountaineering Experience in Word and Image.* Edited by Allen Steck and Steve Roper. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1989. 205 pages, illustrations. \$19.95.

In the inaugural issue of *Ascent*, Royal Robbins characterized the periodical as "a delightful and tasteful mélange of mountaineering; an eclectic potpourri of adventure, polemics, cartoons, photographs, poetry, humor and information, all strung together with a few central threads: California mountaineering, significant mountaineering successes and belles-lettres of alpinism." From its inception in 1967 through 1976, *Ascent* was, in effect, an annual mountaineering magazine. A shifting band of editors, which included Dave Dornan, Chuck Pratt, David Roberts, Lito Tejada-Flores, Jim Stuart, Joe Fitschen, Edgar Boyles and Glen Denny, worked with *Ascent's* mainstays Allen Steck and Steve Roper to produce a product that focused on first hand accounts of significant moun-

taineering ascents. The early editions were fleshed out by mountaineering notes, book reviews, interviews, essays and a few fictional pieces. In short, it was much the same format that we now see in our bi-monthly climbing magazines, although with an undeniable flair.

After publication of the combined 1975-1976 issue, *Ascent* underwent a rather dramatic change. Steck and Roper, who by this time shouldered the editorial burden alone, came to realize that they could no longer compete with the climbing periodicals for topical climbing accounts. They began publishing every four years and shifted their focus from articles on the here-and-now to articles of "more lasting interest, favoring literature over journalism, a sometimes elusive distinction"—a distinction, that while elusive, Steck and Roper have mastered.

*Ascent* has become the only periodical which exists solely for the expression of mountaineering literature. Who else would have published what is probably the finest piece of climbing fiction ever written, David Roberts' 66 page novella, "Like Water and Like Wind" which appeared in the 1980 issue? The 1980 and 1984 issues of *Ascent* became full-blown anthologies of book length, combining essays, fiction and non-fictional accounts, all of which explored the mountaineering experience. In addition to leading all mountaineering publications in the pursuit of literature, *Ascent* set the standard for visual beauty with its black and white photos, illustrations and color essays.

The 1989 issue of *Ascent*, which for reasons unexplained came out a year late, would by general standards be considered visually attractive. When compared to *Ascent's* recent issues, however, it is disappointing. The contrived graphics and undistinctive photo of the cover are a marked contrast from the stunning photos which have graced the two past issues. The only photo essay is of excellent quality but of a subject—Mount Everest and environs—which we have seen time and time again. Tad Welch's illustrations are nice, but the reader yearns for the diversity and profusion of images that have accompanied past issues.

While the images in this issue of *Ascent* are disappointing, the words live up to Steck and Roper's past standards. The 1989 issue contains seventeen stories together with seven poems. As is perhaps unavoidable, there is a range in the quality of pieces, but there is plenty here to recommend. I will spare you what few criticisms I have and point out some of the best.

Among the six fictional pieces, two which stand out are "The Collector" by Anne Saavy and "For The Record" by Steven Jervis. In "The Collector", a World War I veteran returns to find life as he has known it shattered. Turning to the mountains for consolation, he begins pursuing a game of collecting firsts so extreme that no one else would have climbed them. He is stung by the disbelief of his rivals and plots his revenge by beginning to secretly collect dozens of difficult first ascents, taking extensive photos and writing out detailed route descriptions. His prize collection of solo triumphs is officially sealed and dated by a notary. His revenge is jeopardized, however, when he dies and his voluminous record discarded as trash.

In "For The Record", two former friends vie to convince the editor of the National Alpine Club's accident reports, through their correspondence, of the veracity of their competing versions of a climb which ended in tragedy. Their bitter recriminations and conflicting accounts are certain to strike a deep chord with anyone who has experienced tragedy in the mountains.

In "Karass and Granfallons" by Alison Osius and "The Best of Times, The Worst of Times" by Joe Kelsey, the authors explore the bonds of climbing friendship. "Karass and Granfallons" centers around a far-flung, cash-short group of friends that jokingly calls itself the Fourth Avenue Alpine Club after a bar in Anchorage's seediest district.

In "The Best of Times, The Worst of Times", a group of friends, most of them admittedly long past their prime, use a May trip to Joshua Tree to push their personal limits as they prowl the crags by day and recount climbing experiences—both past and present—around the fireside by night.

A common theme in climbing literature has always been personal tragedy and loss. This issue of *Ascent* is no exception. One-half of the articles have tragedy as a theme. Perhaps the most compelling is Gary Ruggera's "The Eyes of Buddha" in which he races to save a friend dying of altitude sickness and then confronts the terrible reality of his friend's death and his own grief. You won't find route descriptions, ratings or ego-charged narratives in this story or, for that matter, any of the others. What you will find is a perceptive, heart rending tale of a mountaineering experience.

While the latest issue of *Ascent* may not be as slick or glossy as its recent predecessors, it remains the best thing going when it comes to pure mountaineering literature.

ROBERT F. ROSEBROUGH

*Mountain Journeys*. Edited by James P. Vermeulen. The Overlook Press, Woodstock, New York, 1989. 248 pages, \$19.95.

James P. Vermeulen has compiled an anthology of mainstream first-person climbing stories. He has reasonably organized the selections into a kind of up-and-back structure: "Because It was There," about the tug of mountains on the imagination; "Up, Down and Toward," dealing with expedition planning and preparation; "Trials and Tragedies;" "Summits;" and, lastly, "Back into the World."

A sampling of the writers he has chosen includes Galen Rowell, Gaston Rebuffat, Nicholas Clinch, Tom Patey, Elizabeth Knowlton, Art Davidson, Robert Bates, Robert Craig, Dave Roberts, Julie Tullis, Rick Ridgeway, Maurice Herzog, Tenzing Norgay. The more offbeat choices are John Muir and Joe McGinniss. Before each, the editor includes a brief, competent comment on the careers and writing of each climber.

In his preface Mr. Vermeulen writes, "Not surprisingly, the question most often asked about mountaineers is: Why?" The same question can be asked