Big Wall Climbing: Breakthroughs on the Free-Climbing Frontier. Paul Piana. Sierra Club Books: San Francisco, 1997. Hard cover, profuse color photography. 190 pages. $35.

In large part, the history of modern world rock climbing is a response to the history of modern American rock climbing. Prior to about 1940, Americans had taken the Europeans' lead in how to climb. At that time, the vast majority of rock gear was imported from Germany and France, and the means of using it was oftentimes passed on by ex-pat Europeans who had taken their love of climbing to their adopted homeland and enlisted Americans to follow them up their peak. The Euros had long since worked out the basics: how to secure the rope to the cliff by way of anchors; how to protect the leader via pitons and belay; how to free climb and how to aid climb (though the line between the two were oftentimes blurred). All of these techniques were readily espoused by the Americans.

The Americans more or less followed the European model right up to the day Chuck Wilts took a crack at free climbing the previously aided *Piton Pooper*. Chuck succeeded, and the idea of a first free ascent became fact. Slowly, American climbers followed his lead. While there were exceptions, the vast majority of leading American climbers put a high premium on free climbing; first free ascents and the creation of new free routes that would previously have been aid climbed became the norm. The thinking was: If I can free climb it, I will. Otherwise, I'll aid it.

American and world rock climbing entered another phase when people set to work on the great walls in Yosemite. While the Yosemite pioneers valued free climbing, the big walls were so intimidating that simply getting up them remained the first ambition.

By 1968, modern big-wall techniques were established and their utility proven on what then were the greatest pure rock climbs in the world—routes such as the *Nose, Salathé,* and *North America Walls* on El Cap, the South Face of Mt. Watkins, The Northwest Face and Direct Routes on Half Dome, and many more.

About half a dozen years earlier, the second coming of Chuck Wilts arrived in the person of Frank Sacherer, widely considered the Father of American free climbing. Starting on a small scale, Sacherer set out to free climb the existing aid routes. Finding immediate success, Sacherer spread his wings, and by the time he'd left the Valley in 1968, he'd made spectacular free ascents of such climbs as the East Face and Direct North Buttress of Middle Cathedral, the *Lost Arrow Chimney*, the Southwest Face of Half Dome, and many others. Sacherer did not introduce a new level of difficulty—Chuck Pratt, Royal Robbins, Bob Kamps and several others were also free climbing at a very high level. What Sacherer introduced was the revolutionary concept that scale was not a limiting factor. To Frank Sacherer, the bigger, the better. It was a philosophy readily embraced by the next generation of free climbers who arrived in the Valley around 1971.

The next quantum jump in free climbing came in 1975 with the first free ascent of Washington Column's East Face (*Astroman*) and the Chouinard/Herbert route on Sentinel's North Face. These ascents bred the belief that anything short of a blank wall could be free climbed.

By 1980, another generation of free-climbers, their techniques enhanced by the demands of modern sport climbing, set to expand the horizons first broached by Chuck Wilts, 40 years earlier, expanded by Frank Sacherer in the 1960s, and pushed to new heights by the leading free climbers of the 1970s. Two of the most talented of this new wave were Todd Skinner and Paul Piana, whose partnership pushed free climbing difficulty to a scale no less grand than that attained by the Yosemite pioneers.

Big Walls: Breakthroughs on the Free-Climbing Frontier, penned by Piana, is a celebra-

tion of his and Skinner's free ascents of four spectacular big walls: El Cap's *Salathé Wall*, the Southwest Face of Proboscis in the Northwest Territories, the North Face of Mt. Hooker in the Wind River Range and the Direct North Face of Half Dome. Ironically, all four walls were originally pioneered by Royal Robbins in the 1960s, and were then seminal climbs at the top of the scale of both difficulty and beauty. Piana's opinion that the freeing of these four routes make them the most important wall climbs in North America is a claim supported neither by history nor by the climbs themselves. Free climbing big walls had been established for more than a decade when the duo made its dramatic first free ascent of the *Salathé,* which is questionably the finest free-wall climb in the world, but historically represents raising the ante of an already established phenomenon rather than inventing a new mode.

But the gargantuan claims aside, *Big Walls* is a thrilling effort—a lavish coffee-table book bursting with shocking color photos and spirited writing. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the outer envelope of what free climbers have yet accomplished, and to those who aspire to reach similar heights someday.

JOHN LONG

A History Of Mountain Climbing. Roger Frison-Roche and Sylvain Jouty. Flammarion: Paris and New York, 1996. Hardback, large format, numerous color plates and photographs. 236 pages. $65.

A history of mountaineering, lavishly illustrated, in a coffee-table format. No mean feat! The book gets off to a good start: the initial chapters are superb and justify the high-altitude price tag. Alpinism was born in the Alps, primarily in the Chamonix/Zermatt environs, so the French authors speak with considerable artistry on the highly contested first ascents of Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn. But following their nationalistic chronicling of European alpinism (including British, German, Austrian, but most enthusiastically, French) in the book's first half, they should have stopped while ahead. Once they launch into the book's second half and "Other Mountain Ranges," factual mistakes multiply like mushrooms after a rain. Ascents in the American "lower 48," the Canadian Rockies, and Alaska are conveniently described alongside exploits in the Caucasus, Andes, Africa, and New Zealand.

Chapter titles like "The French to the Fore" make it obvious this book was written for the French market. Yes, climbers are naturally competitive—with the mountains and each other—but as an historical constant, the theme of nationalism is stated ad nauseam. There is, however, excellent historical trivia: the precursor of the ice axe, a small hatchet, was called a pioulette, hence the term piolet. Grand Jorasse was the nickname of a chamois hunter and early guide on Mont Blanc named Lombard. Jacque Balmat's sick baby actually died the same day that he and Dr. Paccard reached the Mont Blanc summit (August 8, 1786), and Balmat hurriedly descended to be with his wife.

Numerous misspellings and factual errors interrupted my reading. Samples: Miriam (NOT Myriam) Underhill. Mick (NOT Mike) Burke. Hans C Christian Doseth (NOT Donseth) and Finn Daehli (NOT Doehli); and NOT ALL four Norwegians died on the descent after the first ascent of Great Trango (only the two with misspelled names died!). Likewise, Rand Herron was killed in a fall down the Second Pyramid at Giza, NOT down the Great Pyramid. Plus Heinrich Harrer "subsequently spent the next seven extraordinary years climbing in Tibet." No kidding? And Todd Skinner did have a partner on the first free ascent of the *Salathé Wall*: his name is Paul Piana.