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“Rock for Climbing” – An Argument for Antiquity

Posted on **October 15, 2011** by **Tyler**

I recently traveled back to my home state of Maine to visit family. While roaming around my old stomping grounds, I inevitably found myself wading through the small booths and dusty stalls of antique malls. For some reason, all the big antique malls in Maine are in converted chicken barns, which, combined with the musty smell of antiques, creates a unique and surprisingly pleasant aroma.

It has been a hobby of mine for some time now to acquire old outdoor guides and reference books. If you’ve never read an old climbing guide or ski manual, you really should crack one open. I’ve found the old reference guides are often full of perspectives lost to modern author. Sometimes these prove insightful (discussions of Gore-Tex from the 1970s are enlightening, probably because it was relatively new and still untested) while other times they are just hilariously outdated. Guidebooks are valuable as well, there are many old roads or trails that more recent guides have neglected. Sometimes you can find some overgrown, but unfrequented, paths that are a departure from the norm.

My most recent acquisition is an unassuming description of assorted rock climbs written by C. Douglas Milner in 1950, titled “Rock for Climbing.” Initially what drew me to the book were the beautiful black and white photographs (97 in all) displayed throughout. Some are just landscape style prints, while others show climbers making their way up impressive faces by employing, what we would today consider to be, questionable safety precautions.

I was pleasantly surprised to also discover the beautiful and insightful writing of the author. Milner describes several techniques and technologies that were cutting edge for the time. His eloquent prose can be almost poetic. Yet, there are several passages that are only fully comprehensible when the reader understands Milner is writing in post-war England. He is often very critical of Italian and German climbers and the practices they pioneered.

Below are a few quotes from “Rock for Climbing” arranged categorically, interspersed with some choice pictures I have scanned (sorry their quality isn’t better). All rights belong to the author, C. Douglas Milner, and Chapman & Hall LTD.

On Rock Climbing in General:

[Rock climbing] is a good game played slowly, concerned more with contemplative quiet, and withdrawal from crowds, than the applause of the arena. the victory, if the successful end of a climb can be so called, is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but to the skilful and level-headed. The joy in victory is not that of the isolated first man in a competition, but a pleasure shared with those who made it possible ... our comrades on the rope, with whom we can enjoy that close knit yet easy friendship which unites all men who have faced and overcome dangers by combined effort and mutual trust. (p5-6)

The high mountains, or even the high crags, can hardly fail to impress upon men who move among them their own minuteness; and the solitude and utter silence that surrounds them is rich and strange. Yet it is for each man to live with his thoughts, and the best guarantee of their genuineness is to keep them behind the veil of a decent reticence. (p8)

[...]climbing is “not real life and it is not religion” but it is most certainly among the things that give grace and quality to life. It may be a reaction from civilisation, but is often a complement of it... the contrast gives the quality. it may be good exercise, but is no better than mountain walking, and can often be worse. yet like most things that call for mental or physical effort, it leads by devious paths to contentment. (p9)

Check out the direct belay!



The Gangway, Gimmer - England

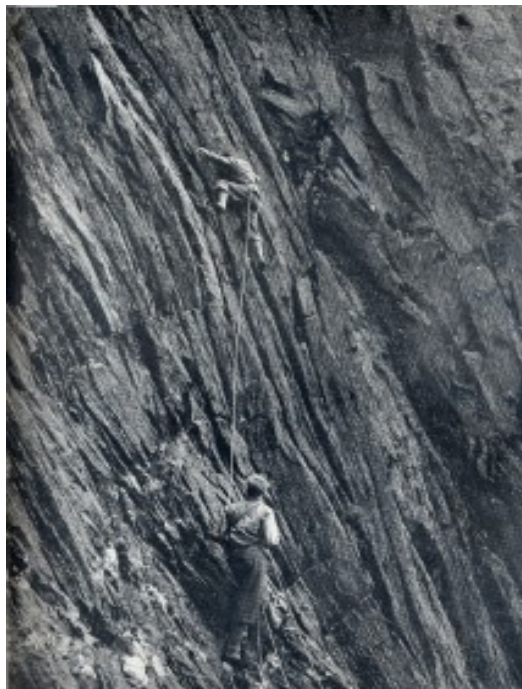
Note the protection.
(click to view full size)



The Terrace Wall, Tryfan - North Wales

Nationalistic Overtones:

In this pursuit [of danger for its own sake,] there have certainly been many brilliant achievements, disguised as something else, and many untimely deaths. The Germans have a genius for it, and the Italians too. Many examples of this type of work were seen in the years between the wars, the cult aggravated by ideas of nationalism and strivings in the mountains for superiority over other countries. In England and France a fundamental strain of commonsense insists on the need for a limited proportion of danger, and climbers as a whole have kept themselves to the principle of Ecclesiastes, "Better a living dog than a dead lion." (p8)



Lliwed, The Red Wall Finish to Avalanche - North Wales



A Helsby Climb - England

On Pitons:

Of pitons there has been much controversy over many years. There are probably very few hard climbs in the Alps where pitons are not to be found in small numbers. They are chiefly used either as safeguards (belays) or as points of attachment for abseils. Within reason there is little objection to such fittings [...] The Piton has been little used, and is generally condemned, for British climbs. (p15)



The Wall of the Third Sella Tower - Italy



A Traverse from the Adang Kamin - Italy

On the Subject of Rope:

Coming down rock on the rope, either hand over hand or by the abseil, is only objected to by extreme purists. It is a common place of alpine descents, and though frowned on in Britain, would certainly be excused on exploratory work or when a sudden rainstorm attacks a rubber shod party. Otherwise climbing descent is thought proper. (p12)

Discussion and trial among climbers, in the light of the proved limitations of the direct belay, led to the adoption in the present century of a "cushioned" or indirect belay, by which the rope was taken round the waist or shoulder of the climber managing the rope, who in turn was, where possible, hitched to a rock spike or a piton. The convenient shoulder belay with the rope running over one shoulder, across the back, and under the arm nearest to the man climbing, has proved its worth many times over [...] at the cost to the second sometimes of a broken collar bone, or at the least, badly burned hands [...] Recent research with nylon rope now favours the waist belay in safeguarding the leader, but for bringing up a party, the shoulder method is likely to retain some usefulness in many positions where it is quick, convenient and safe. (p13)

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