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Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering

By Maurice Isserman

Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering. Maurice Isserman. Norton, 2016. Hardcover, 426 pages, \$28.95.

Given climbers' obsession with meticulously chronicling ascents from 8,000 to 8 meters, it is odd to see how little actual history has been written on climbing in North America in recent decades. Local narratives such as *Yankee Rock and Ice* or *Climb!* are important contributions, but they hardly synopsise the extraordinary developments that have occurred in climbing since its inception in this country in the later 19th century. The "classic" remains Chris Jones' *Climbing in North America*, which was published over 40 years ago, at a time of dramatic transformation of the sport. Jones' account was vividly written and accessible, retelling stories that, if perhaps too good to be true, were apparently too good not to be told. But was the book an actual history?

Even by the standards of 1976, the Jones book was a throwback to an idea of history as the account of the deeds of great men, mostly white, impressing their character upon a land ripe for conquest. Jones tended to avoid more sophisticated accounts of historical change rooted in theoretical contexts. A nod to changes in the post-WW II American economy or the counterculture movement of the 1960s or environmentalism, perhaps, but no deeper reading of the complex forces that shaped the sport over a period marked by extraordinary historical change.

Maurice Isserman, professor of history at Hamilton College and coauthor of *Fallen Giants*, a history of Himalayan climbing, has published a volume titled *Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering*, which is clearly intended to pick up to some degree where Jones left off. (At least methodologically—one of the odd commonalities of Isserman's book with that of its predecessor is that both authors omit any deep study of climbing after roughly 1970.) An interesting paradox found in comparing the two books is that the first is a history of climbing without much actual history, while the second could be considered a history of climbing without much actual climbing, taking, as it does, well over 100 pages to get to the point where we see genuine climbing discussed as opposed to hiking or scrambling.

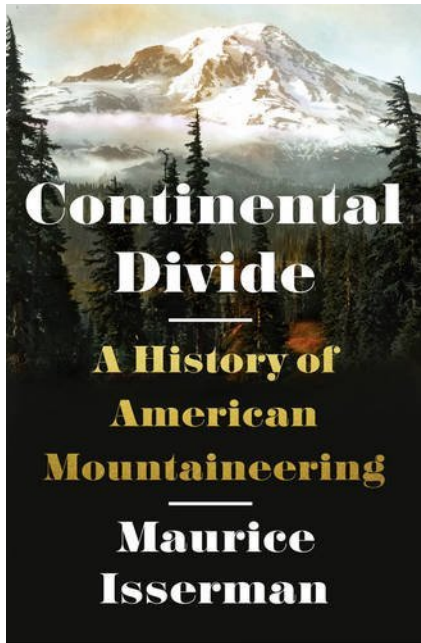
The book's primary strengths start to show as Isserman discusses institutions such as the American Alpine Club and East Coast university outing clubs. It's in these contexts that the ideologies of modern climbing took form in this country, and Isserman's archival research is by far the most original and compelling portion of the book. Particularly interesting is a discussion of anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination from very well-known figures in climbing, such as Robert Underhill. This makes an uncanny parallel with similar efforts in Austria and Germany to exclude Jews from associations such as the German Alpine Club.

In a sense, a historian of climbing has two distinct tasks. The first, which is relatively straightforward, is to narrate the events and personalities of climbing, while the second, anything but straightforward, is to answer the perennial question, "Why climb?" not merely in relation to individuals but to entire generations of individuals. We tell ourselves that climbing is a profoundly individualistic pursuit, but a good historian recognizes that many external factors affect our actions as climbers, including political ideologies such as nationalism, economic systems such as capitalism, and emergent technologies that enable access to climbing areas and climbing itself. Climbers are conflicted in exploring the implications of these seemingly abstract, impersonal, and anonymous forces, but a

serious appraisal of the sport requires this effort, now more than ever. Isserman's book is a welcome step in that direction.

– Peter Beal

Images



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