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PAUL PREUSS: LORD OF THE ABYSS

BY DAVID SMART

PAUL PREUSS: LORD OF THE ABYSS. David Smart. Rocky Mountain Books (Canada), 2019. Hardcover, 247 pages, CAN \$32.

In 2014, as Alex Honnold and I were working on his memoir, *Alone on the Wall*, I laid a little trap for him. "So, Alex," I said earnestly, "I'm sure Paul Preuss is one of your heroes."

I got the blank look I expected. "Who?"

"Alex! Preuss invented free soloing!" To tell the truth, I knew only the bare outlines of the meteoric career of Paul Preuss, who died in 1913 at the age of 27 on an unwitnessed fall from the daunting north ridge of the Mandlkogel. Somewhere along the way I had come across the scenario of Preuss's demise that David

Smart calls "the knife theory." In *Alone on the Wall*, instead of giving me a blank look, Alex ruefully empathized with the Austrian prodigy's final moments. "I can just picture it," he wrote. "Preuss stops for a lunch break. He takes out his knife, maybe to cut an apple or a hunk of cheese. The knife slips out of his hand, so he lunges forward to grab it, forgetting for the instant where he is. Goes off the edge, tries to grab something, and misses. Talk about the worst four seconds of his life!"

Even today, outside of Austria and perhaps Germany, Paul Preuss remains little known and less understood. We can hope that David Smart's deeply insightful biography (the first in English, though Reinhold Messner has written two lives of Preuss in German) may rectify that neglect. Smart's command of the primary sources, including Preuss' startling polemic "Künstliche Hilfsmittel auf Hochtouren" ("Artificial Aids on Alpine Routes")—reminiscent of nothing so much as Messner's own "The Murder of the Impossible"—allows him to paint a nuanced portrait of a man who was half mad genius, half insecure striver. As a Jew, Preuss was excluded from many Austrian and German climbing clubs and circles (he would convert to Protestant Christianity at 22, though for spiritual and aesthetic rather than political reasons.) For all his competitiveness, he so enjoyed roping up with women (including Anna Freud, Sigmund's daughter) that he felt the need to write two articles explaining this apparent aberration to his misogynistic peers.

In his short life as a climber, Preuss dazzled his contemporaries. Tita Piazz, his only equal in the Dolomites, hailed him as "the most fantastic knight of the mountains of all times and all nations." Hans Dülfer called Preuss "the complete master." Later climbers, including Emilio Comici, Giusto Gervasutti, and Willo Welzenbach, were in awe of the climber that Gervasutti saluted as "unsurpassed and unsurpassable."

Preuss' soloing ethic makes even Alex Honnold's style look half-hearted. To Preuss' way of thinking, not only was the use of pitons an abomination, but relying on the rope to rappel, except in an emergency, was arrant cheating. "If you cannot climb down," Preuss declared, "you should not climb up." Yet the romantic image of a soloist confronting the most dangerous walls in the Alps only "by fair means" is undercut by Smart's shrewd analysis of the nakedly ambitious youth whose drive "was fueled by a relentless need to prove himself."

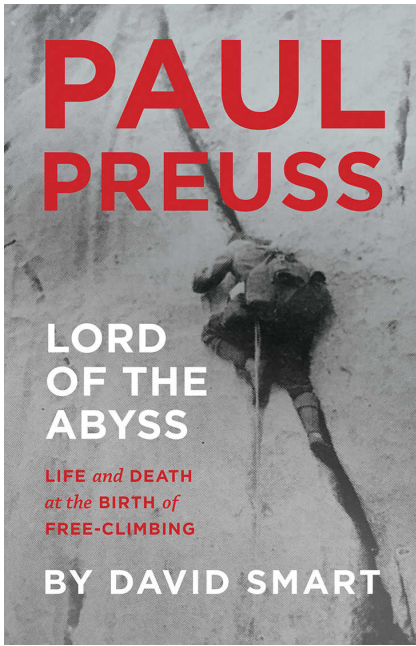
It came as a complete surprise to me that in his mid-20s Preuss made his living by writing articles and giving lectures for which he was handsomely paid. According to one source, Preuss delivered no

fewer than 100 talks during the last three years of his life.

If we come away from Smart's evocation of Paul Preuss puzzled by the man's contradictions and confused about his legacy—is Alex Honnold really the perfectionist heir of Preuss' radical vision or something else entirely?—we must stand in admiration of one of the finest biographies of a climber ever written.

– DAVID ROBERTS

Images



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