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HANGDOG DAYS: CONFLICT, CHANGE, AND THE RACE FOR 5.14

BY JEFF SMOOT

HANGDOG DAYS: CONFLICT, CHANGE, AND THE RACE FOR 5.14. Jeff Smoot. Mountaineers Books, 2019. Paperback, 320 pages, \$21.95.

One of the enduring phenomena in American climbing history has been clashes between the old guard and the new. While not entirely absent in European countries, I think it's safe to say the most influential and dramatic episode of bolt chopping happened on El Capitan on the Warren Harding route known as the Wall of the Early Morning Light. This episode in 1971 would have a huge impact on the future of American climbing in ways its perpetrators could not have entirely foreseen. In their quest for an ethically pure climbing style, Royal Robbins and other Yosemite locals had failed to reckon with the impact of another giant in American climbing, John Gill, who was redefining climbing away from following protectable features on big walls and toward exploration of physical difficulties untethered to natural protection. Robbins and his Yosemite followers were caught in a vision of climbing that ultimately was antithetical to Gill's vision and indeed hostile to the future of climbing as it was shaping up elsewhere in the world. This situation is where Jeff Smoot's book *Hangdog Days* essentially places its reader.

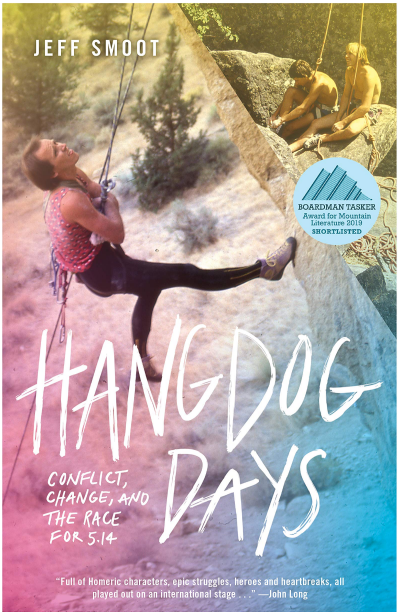
Hangdog Days explores the conflicts and controversies surrounding changes in climbing practice in the early 80s into the mid-1990s. Now that sport climbing on preplaced bolts has become the dominant mode for most roped climbers, it's almost impossible to comprehend that there were numerous incidents of route chopping, physical attacks on climbers, and of course countless words exchanged as each side argued its side. Even now, some members of the old guard rail against the sea change that overtook climbing in this era, but few contemporary climbers will understand the source of their angst. Reading this book will help them understand what it took to get climbing to the place we see it now.

Jeff Smoot has personal insight into two key players from this period: Todd Skinner of Pinedale, Wyoming, and Alan Watts from Madras, Oregon. They adopted the Gill vision of climbing from the boulders to bigger cliffs. Both were from relatively obscure locations and were pushed, in a sense, to make the most of those places by using tactics that other climbers viewed as suspect. However, much as Gill had explored off-the-map boulders for years and made some of them iconic locales, these efforts would also bear significant fruit. Most readers of this review will be very familiar with Todd Skinner (who sadly died in a rappelling accident in 2006), as Skinner was a very outgoing personality and one of the country's earliest professional climbers. Alan Watts never sought or gained that status but in his time was among the very best climbers in the world. It's nice to see him given ample space in this account, as he proved very influential in creating Smith Rocks as a world-class climbing area and legitimizing hard sport climbing in America and even around the world.

The account of Skinner really stands out in this book, and at times the narrative feels like a welding of climbing history and quasi-biographical memoir as Smoot vividly evokes the personalities and recreates the conversations of the major players of the day. History is full of irony, as any reader of it will know, and this is well illustrated when Alan Watts proposes near the end of the book that "the sport climbers didn't win. The trad climbers didn't win. Instead climbing won." I think this is a valid take on the outcome, as the hardest "trad climbs" today are done by people with deep sport climbing backgrounds. It's unfortunate that this took so long and consumed so many in fruitless controversies.

– PETER BEAL

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