



## AAC Publications

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### **Emilio Comici: Angel of the Dolomites**

By David Smart

**EMILIO COMICI: ANGEL OF THE DOLOMITES. David Smart. Rocky Mountain Books, 2020. Hardcover, 248 pages, \$32.**

David Smart's new biography of Emilio Comici (1901–1940) draws on a variety of sources to paint a nuanced picture of Comici, a man of genius and flaws who had an oversized but underappreciated—particularly to English-speaking readers—impact on climbing. I knew nothing about Comici when I started reading. I just had the vague sense that his name was as important as other famous Italian climbers of the 20th century, like Bonatti or Maestri. By the end of the book, I'd come to appreciate Comici's impact on so many aspects of the sport. He was the inspiration behind the first artificial wall built to teach climbing, the precursor to modern gyms. He also filmed the first rock climbing documentary, a concept from which I've benefited greatly.

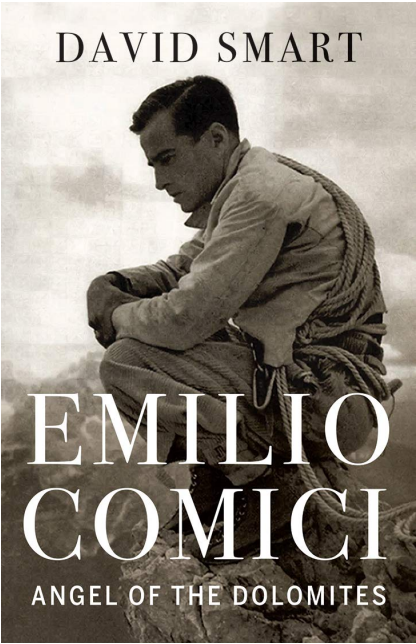
Comici made over 200 first ascents, including the north face of Cima Grande in the Dolomites, one of the "six classic north faces of the Alps," in 1933. Four years later, he soloed the 1,500-foot route in three and half hours. But his biggest contribution to climbing is probably the idea of the *direttissima*: choosing an aesthetic line straight up a face instead of searching for weaknesses. As Smart describes, "By denying modern climbers the option of wandering the mountain for easy rock, the *direttissima* reconfigured the ethic of adventure for 20th-century climbers and elevated route-finding from a skill to an ideal."

The writing flows along quite nicely, and the book almost felt like it ended prematurely, but I suppose that's the result of Comici's untimely death, at age 39, when a frayed rope broke on easy ground. I couldn't help but wonder if the climbing community would better recognize his name if he had lived longer.

Much of the book made me think of the closing song from the musical *Hamilton*; I kept imagining Comici, who was so concerned about greatness and about how other climbers viewed him, singing the lines: "Let me tell you what I wish I'd known/When I was young and dreamed of glory/You have no control/Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" I think Comici would be pleased with David Smart for telling his story so well. [Editor's Note: This book was winner of the Banff Mountain Book Award for Climbing Literature in 2020.]

— Alex Honnold

Images



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