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Royal Robbins: The American Climber

By David Smart

ROYAL ROBBINS: THE AMERICAN CLIMBER By David Smart. Foreword by John Long.
(Mountaineers Books, 2023.) Paperback, 256 pages, \$22.95.

David Smart has done it again. His succession of biographies began with a memoir, followed by thorough treatments of Paul Preuss and Emilio Comici. Now, with *Royal Robbins: The American Climber*, Smart demonstrates a mastery of the form.

Most of us know about Robbins: his Golden Age first ascents, eponymous clothing company, his practical and philosophical Rockcraft how-to books, his clean climbing environmental ethos, and his sometimes contentious definition of what constitutes fair play. Thanks to Smart, we not only get to know more of all that, but we also get a picture of the human behind the legend.

Smart describes how, in the late 1940s, Robbins—a 12-year-old latchkey kid in Los Angeles—was sent to juvenile hall for burglary. More than simple thrill-seeking, it was part of a bumpy road to climbing, as he needed money for a YMCA summer camp. His crimes led Robbins to the Boy Scouts and, as Smart recounts, “Royal wrote that scouting (which led to rock climbing) kept him ‘from drowning in a sea of anarchy and aimlessness.’”

The next era of Robbins’ life is more familiar. A few short years after taking up climbing, Robbins would establish historic landmarks like Open Book at Tahquitz Rock—his first free ascent in 1952 was then perhaps the most difficult (5.9) multi-pitch route in the country. In 1957, with Jerry Gallwas and Mike Sherrick, he climbed the Northwest Face of Half Dome. This was the first Grade VI climb in America. What followed was a steady stream of significant routes in Yosemite, the western U.S., and elsewhere that continued into the 1970s. (Smart lists 160 “Notable First Ascents” at the book’s end.)

Robbins’ first continuous ascent of The Nose on El Capitan, with Joe Fitschen, Tom Frost, and Chuck Pratt in 1960, one-upped the siege style used by Warren Harding, et al, on the first ascent. A year later, on the first ascent of the Salathé Wall, he minimized the use of fixed rope, partnered again with Frost and Pratt. In 1963, Robbins, along with Layton Kor, Jim McCarthy, and Dick McCracken, made the first ascent of the southeast face of Probus in Canada’s Northwest Territories. This leap into the unknown ushered in a new era of remote big-wall climbing.

As Robbins’s style evolved, it influenced the direction of American—and to some extent global—climbing. The routes he authored were evidence of what could be done. Along with articles, lectures, books, and—in the case of *The Wall of Early Morning Light*—his actions, Robbins pointed out how things should be done. Smart observes, “I write from the partisan point of view that Royal’s choices and beliefs were significant because his climbs were significant. It’s a perspective I believe he would share.”

To Robbins, style was not merely a set of rules to which one must adhere, but also meaningful principles that extended beyond personal climbing style. His adaptation and popularization of clean climbing is but one example of how one’s choices could influence the wider world. Free climbing, limiting the use of bolts, and minimizing the application of fixed ropes were all gestures towards

maintaining the uncertainty that is necessary for adventure.

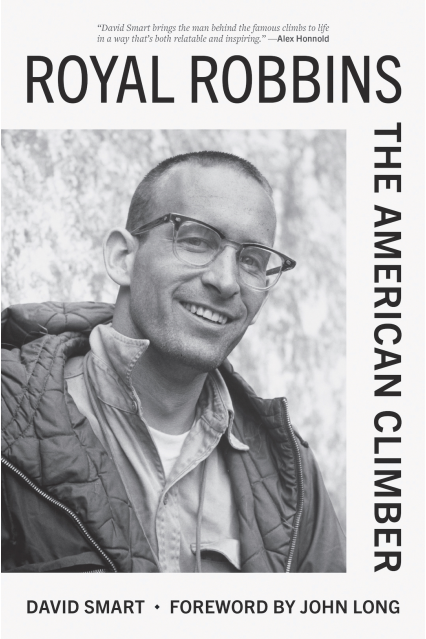
Smart allows Robbins to tell much of his own story through quotes and passages from personal letters, articles, books, and unpublished material. He fills in gaps left by Robbins' unfinished autobiography—Robbins completed only three of a prospective seven volumes before passing away—and by Pat Ament's 1992 biography of his friend and climbing partner.

Throughout *The American Climber*, Smart portrays the complexities of a man pulled between middle-class values and the freedom offered by the vertical world. He weaves this interior drama with Robbins' progression from a juvenile delinquent to master climber, to a father and devoted husband, a world-class kayaker, and founder of the outdoor company that still bears his name. Throughout much of his life, Robbins was known as focused, outwardly dour, and almost machine-like in performance and persona. Smart reveals something of the inner human without resorting to caricature: "Some of the Royal's acquaintances described him as a man worthy of Hadley Richardson's description of Hemingway with 'so many sides to him, he defies geometry.'"

What's perhaps most engaging about *The American Climber* are the small vignettes: the partnerships that succeeded and disappointed; the complex romantic entanglements set against the sexual and countercultural revolution of the '60s; the squabbles and petty egos unleashed in an era in which pioneering ascents were readily available to the bold. Fascinating characters in Robbins's life emerge in finer detail in *The American Climber*, including his wife, Liz—a pioneer in both climbing and business—Yvon Chouinard, Doug Tompkins, Tom Frost, Warren Harding, and others. Read it for yourself. It's destined to be a classic.

—Pete Takeda

Images



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