

Steck and *Ascent* [for the *Alpine Journal* 2023]

How did they do it, Steck and Roper? How did they get such stunningly original writing out of the climbing community with such regularity in their Sierra Club mountaineering journal *Ascent*? When I asked this question of Allen Steck and Steve Roper over the last lunch I had with them in the tiny kitchen of Steck's shingled house on the hill in Berkeley, Steck gave me an eloquent answer. He disappeared and then produced a wine bottle boasting a label that declared, 'INCUBUS HILLS California Barefoot Burgandy'. Beside the words was a Gustave Doré image of three climbers falling to their deaths on the Matterhorn. Yes, being Californians they had their own *Ascent* wine label for their daily lunch editorial meetings in Steck's kitchen. They could say no more in answer to my question and seemed as mystified as I was. Certainly for fourteen issues over twenty-five years they worked hard at editing the work they received and certainly the wine helped lubricate the spirit of fun and wit that characterised their conversations together in that kitchen, at the crag and round the campfire. They were a double act that spurred each other on to ironic invention. Steck was slow and laconic, Roper jumpy with fast-talking nervous energy. Roper was much younger ('Look at that old man climb!', he once said to me at Joshua Tree, where Steck, leading, had forgotten to tie the laces of one shoe. 'El Vago', they called him after he forgot his sleeping bag on a previous early season trip to Joshua Tree.) Roper was shy and reluctant to appear at gatherings. It was Steck who came to speak at the International Festival of Mountaineering Literature at Bretton Hall in 1993. (Jim Curran convinced Steck that it was a religious observance to climb every Sunday, whatever the weather, so that we got pictures of the old Californian Silver Fox brushing snow off the holds whilst climbing at Froggatt.) The 'Slim Fox', as he had originally called himself, had become the 'Silver Fox' when I knew him. He called me 'Fat Badger'. Fair enough. Roper's reply to my recent conciliatory email was, 'As expected. He was 96.' Fair enough.

So I've come to the rather obvious conclusion that the success of *Ascent* ('Ahead of its time', as John Porter put it to me recently) was built on its success. When they published originality, more originality would follow. They set a challenge to writers by what they published: who could be more imaginatively outrageous than what had gone before? When Ken Wilson was looking for the most interesting climbing writing around as he edited *The Games Climbers Play* (1978) he took his title from an article published in the very first issue of *Ascent* in 1967. With his first two articles Ken set his stall out before beginning the anthology proper. So it is significant that the second article also came from *Ascent*. Ed Drummond's 'Mirror Mirror' (1973) was typical of what Steck and Roper sought for *Ascent* and it was probably the only place at the time where such outrageously imaginative writing could have been published in the climbing press. Of course, the wine label bore the title of an article by Drummond, his 'rather bland title'

having been replaced by one plucked from the opening sentence by the editors. Ed Drummond was encouraged and supported by Steck and Roper at a personal as well as literary level. 'In 1967 we weren't thinking of nurturing writers', wrote the editors in *The Best of Ascent* (1993), still published by the loyal Sierra Club Books. But, along with Drummond, they gave early breaks to some of the giants of the field: Jeff Long, David Roberts and Galen Rowell. 'We simply wanted to publish dramatic pictures and soulful articles', they said. But from the beginning they knew that they wanted to publish, again ahead of their time, what they called 'photo essays'. When new magazines arrived in the 1980s, *Ascent* switched its focus to climbing fiction, taking a risk, 'quirky' as ever, the editors admit.

*The Games Climbers Play* contains seven *Ascent* essays from writers including Tom Higgins, Chuck Pratt, Chris Jones, Royal Robbins and Yvon Chouinard - pioneering climbers who might not have first thought of themselves as writers of pieces worthy of anthologising. Literary nurturing had taken place. In his autobiography, *A Mountaineer's Life* (2017), Steck has a chapter on *Ascent* in which he characterises the first issue as demonstrating 'our desire for innovation and whimsy'. He admits that one of the long gaps between issues was due to himself and Roper researching and writing *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America* (1979), later referred to in an *Ascent* article titled 'Fifty Crowded Classics'. But he also claims, quite rightly, to have influenced later publications and *Alpinist* is a good example. David Roberts has paid tribute to the 'care and craft' of Steck and Roper at Steck's kitchen table. Now there will be no more kitchen meetings with the Silver Fox and, in Steck's immortal words, 'putting empty wine bottles to rest'.

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