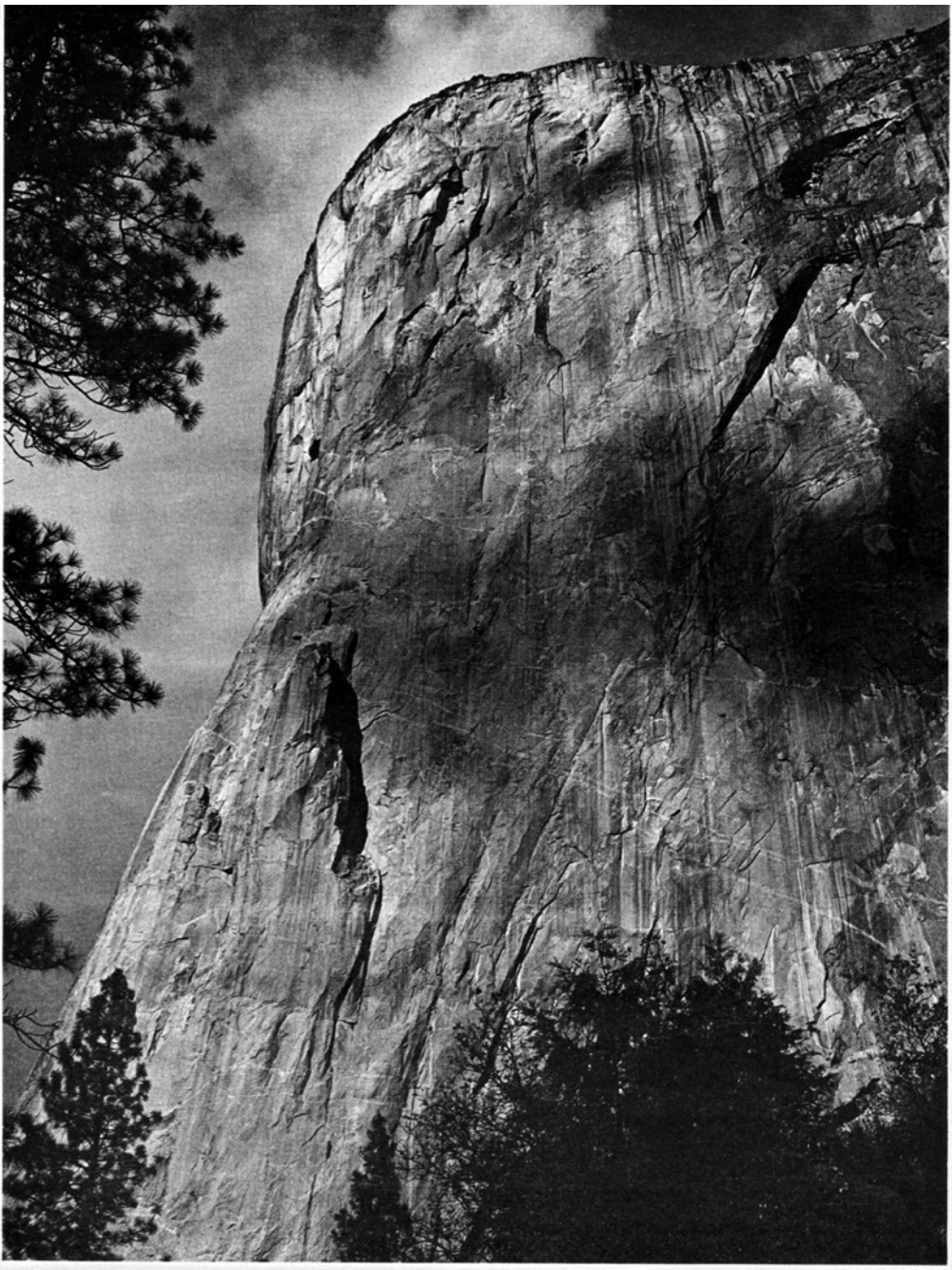


Can you spot the climbers?

Warren Harding and Dean Caldwell are the red and yellow specks precisely in the center of this picture of El Capitan, directly to the right of the top of the rock outcropping known as "El Cap Tower." The route of Harding's first successful ascent of El Capitan in 1958 led up this outcropping. His present route is up what Harding calls "the Wall of the Early Morning Light," a sheer face which veteran mountaineers regard as one of the toughest rock climbs in the world. Nonclimbers can reach the summit by hiking a long back trail.

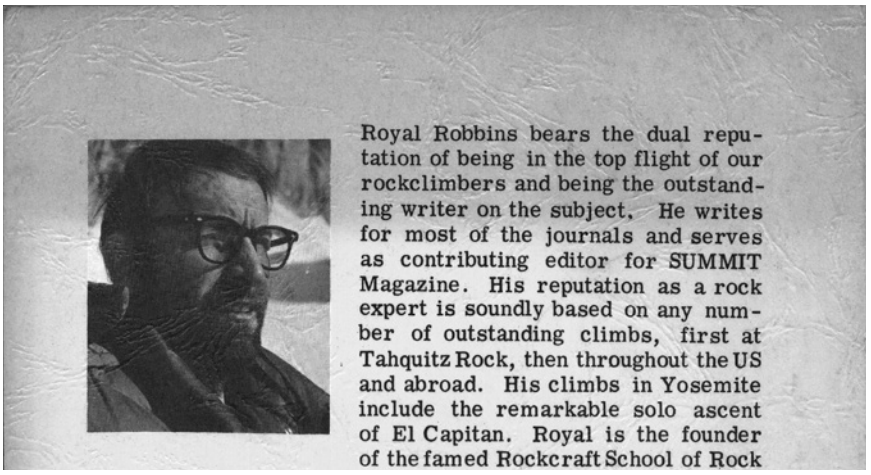
The story of two mythical feats of rock climbing retold here was first encountered by the author in another retelling—an audio recording of Jon Krakauer's book on climbing, *Eiger Dreams* (read by Krakauer in his charismatic, unhurried meter). A veteran climber himself, Krakauer's take gets straight to the heart of the matter: the guts, the balls, and the sharp tongues. What follows is a more bookish account. An inspection of the present author's hands has confirmed that they are indeed more accustomed to handling paper than rock.

The opening paragraph is borrowed from Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Representative Men* (1850).

Cover image: page from *Life* (November 20, 1970).

Nature will be reported. All things are engaged in writing their history. The planet, the pebble, goes attended by its shadow. The rolling rock leaves its scratches on the mountain; the river its channel in the soil; the animal its bones in the stratum; the fern and leaf their modest epitaph in the coal. The falling drop makes its sculpture in the sand or the stone. Not a foot steps into the snow or along the ground, but prints, in characters more or less lasting, a map of its march. Every act of the man inscribes itself in the memories of his fellows and in his own manners and face. The air is full of sounds; the sky, of tokens; the ground is all memoranda and signatures, and every object covered over with hints which speak to the intelligent. In nature, this self-registration is incessant, and the narrative is the print of the seal.

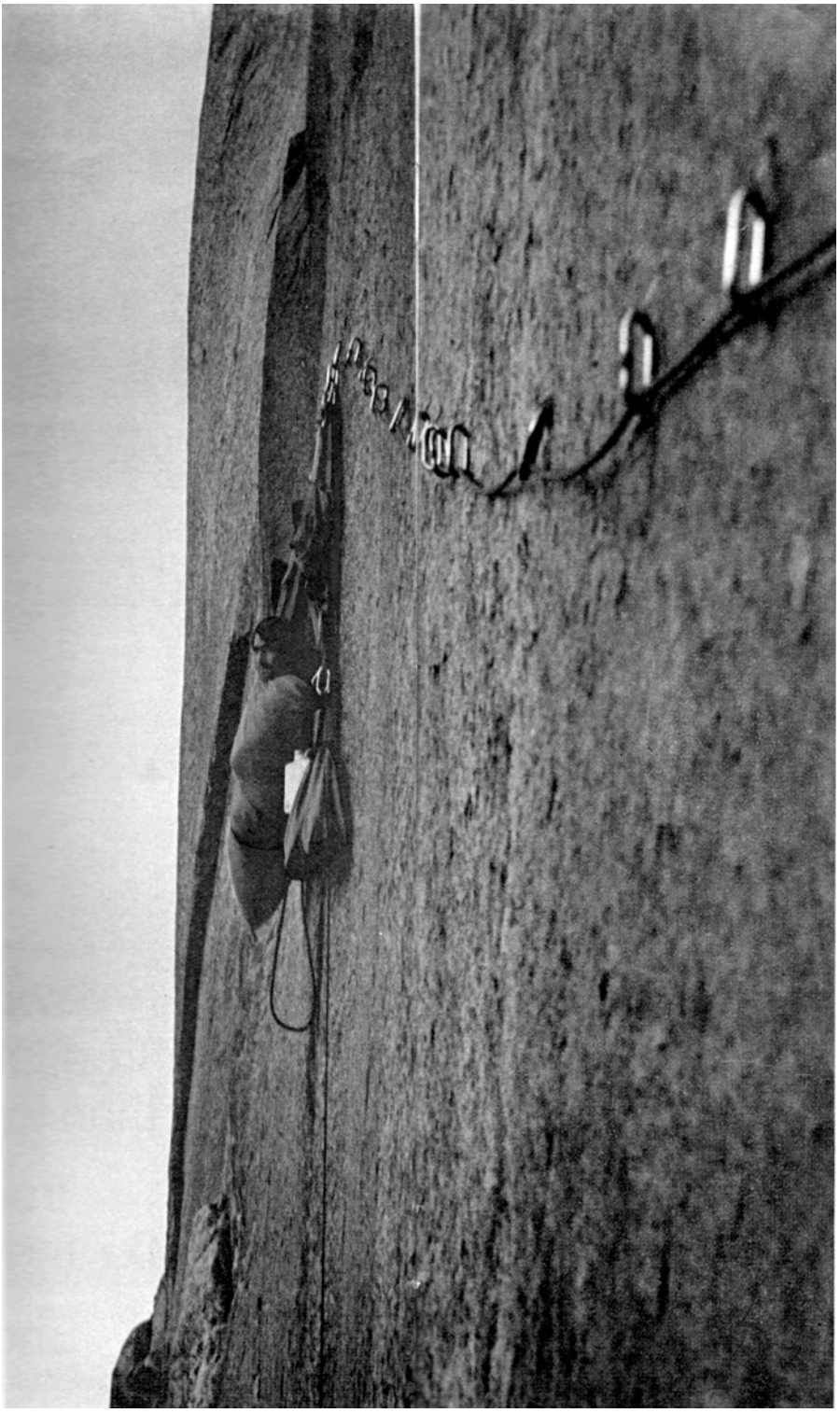
Books with yellow printed covers tend to fade in the sunlight. The effects are not uniform—I have yellow books turned pale blue, pale green and blotchy off-white. The discoloring of my copy of the rock climbing manual *Basic Rockcraft* by Royal Robbins is subtle. It is a small format, slim volume, its cover printed black, green and yellow, with an overall plastic laminate textured like rock and tacky to touch. On the front is a photograph of an athletic climber whom I take to be Robbins. He is poised beneath an imposing overhang on a sheer face of rock, around his waist an array of equipment: ropes tied in specialist knots, crudely shaped metal devices. *Basic Rockcraft* was published in 1971. I acquired my first edition paperback only recently. A band of the solid yellow printing along the top of the back cover has faded to a stony beige.



The November 20, 1970 edition of *Life* magazine has a three-page feature on "one of the toughest rock climbs in the world." Two climbers, Warren Harding and Dean Caldwell, had made the first ascent of the formidable "Wall of the Early Morning Light" on El Capitan, the granite monolith that dominates Yosemite National Park in California. The scale of the climb is difficult to convey. A photograph of the rock face almost fills a page of the magazine, with the caption: "Can you spot the climbers?" They barely register — their bright red and yellow sacks of gear just a few halftoned specks of colored ink in an expanse of grey.

Life called it a "gruelling endurance test" — 28 days on the wall, more than twice what the climbers had prepared for. Part-way up they were stalled by a storm, during which Harding refused a helicopter rescue from the National Park Service. This incident made national news, and a crowd of reporters finally greeted the pair at the summit. CBS News footage shows the moment Harding stumbles over the cliff. "My God!" he exclaims as he sees the crowd, his haggard demeanor visibly lifted by the thrill. Climbers in Yosemite were not used to the attention.

A photograph taken by Caldwell during the climb is reproduced across a double page opening of *Life*. Harding is suspended perilously in a nylon sack, attached to the rock by a single fixing. I imagine *Life* readers disturbed by the image. How could this vast wall, marked only by the slightest depressions and protrusions possibly be climbed? Behind Harding a column of blue sky represents the 2,000 feet of void below.



The photograph evidently disturbed Royal Robbins, a highly accomplished, highly opinionated figure among Yosemite climbers. Why? Tracking forth from Harding's position is visible a row of "expansion bolts" drilled into the surface of the rock to fix the ropes the two men are ascending. Robbins wrote an editorial titled "The El Capitan Climb" for the December issue of *Summit*, a climbing journal of which he was a contributing editor. His writing maintains a superficially admiring tone, remarking on Harding and Caldwell's success in attracting mainstream publicity for their climb, and on the audacity of their route:

In forging this route, Harding and Caldwell followed a concept which in American climbing is highly innovative. This is the Comici concept, the idea that the finest line would go up where a drop of water would fall down.

But a tension looms. Harding and Caldwell's direct route was made possible by dependence on tools and hardware — known as "aid-climbing." The subtext suggests Robbins found this a poor substitute for "adventure" and "style," words he uses purposefully in *Basic Rockcraft*. And when Robbins writes "forging," the word is, I'm sure, meant with irony. He notes the "unprecedented" 300 steel bolts placed — and left — in the face of El Capitan, and concludes that "this climb may not have been done exactly to our taste."

In January 1971, Robbins himself led a second ascent of the "Wall of the Early Morning Light" with the subversive intention of removing the bolts from Harding's route as he climbed. An issue of *Mountain* magazine documents this climb, including a detailed interview with Robbins. In a photographic portrait printed with the text, he looks assured, casually seated in a lounge chair, can of beer in hand. In his eyes a hint of menace reflects the intensity in the transcript:

I'm not totally against bolts: I've used enough of them myself. I'm just against anything that encourages pure technology. I deplore the idle drilling of holes in rock just to get up, and the way this is justified as part of the climb. Placing bolts should be a conscious outrage that you unwillingly accept because it is necessary. I think it's important to stress that bolting is raping: you want to avoid it wherever you can. (...) We started up with the intention of eradicating the entire route, because we thought it invalid.

After the diplomatic *Summit* editorial, this is a jolt. In fact, the dispute on the "Wall of the Early Morning Light" was the final exchange in a 15-year contest between Harding and Robbins. Historians of Yosemite climbing call it the "golden age." During these years, a new spirit of ambition apparently pervaded the climbing community. My collection of aging magazines attests with numerous photographs of earnest-looking climbers making equipment inventories, training on pull-up beams, and hunched like conspirators around the campfires, plotting new routes. These were not exactly professional athletes — more like dedicated outsiders, living a frugal existence, some residing permanently in the park. Harding and Robbins led the way in making first ascents on Yosemite's defining routes, and in the process became icons for their irreconcilable philosophies of climbing. I picture their likenesses carved into the walls of El Capitan and Half Dome, like an adversarial Mount Rushmore. (Indeed, Harding's mother named him after the 29th U.S. President.)

This golden age was sagely observed by a cartoonist, Sheridan Anderson, whose work appeared regularly in climbing magazines and books. A compilation, *The Climbing Cartoons of Sheridan Anderson*, was published in a small edition in 1989, but is now scarce. To access it, I have to settle for low resolution scans found at an online climbing forum. Sheridan — as he signed his work — foiled his admiration for the existential dimension of climbing by satirizing the mundane: boredom, petty disputes, and campsite humor. Among his drawings are telling caricatures of Harding and Robbins.

Harding lurches over a bottle of wine, "vintage last Friday." (He was a heavy drinker, and saw no reason to abstain during climbs.) Harding's nickname was "Batso" — a reference to the sleeping pouch he invented for hanging on walls during climbs — and Sheridan gives him devilishly pointed ears and fangs. Virtuous Robbins stands on a tree stump in Camp Four, the social center of Yosemite climbing. Clipboard in hand, whistle around his neck, finger wagging, he lectures an eager group of dumb, pumped-up climbers. His stature is short and squat, more like a stereotypical "little old lady" than the real Robbins, tall and lean.

As far as I can tell, these two drawings were not originally published together, but now they appear as mirror images, reflecting how each man likely saw the other. It is entirely believable that a drunken Harding might have slurred that Robbins was nagging and moralizing — demanding that climbers obey his tiresome rule-making. And Robbins may well have thought Harding was diabolical, disrespectful, and that sleeping in a bat-pouch bolted to the rock was a crude way to get up a mountain.

The climbing boom in Yosemite was generating dissent. What kind of hardware is acceptable? How much is too much? Who decides? The 1972 Chouinard Equipment catalog is revealing in this regard. It's a curious artefact — a climbing hardware catalog with a 16th-century Chinese landscape painting reproduced full-page on an art-paper cover. *Landscape in the Spirit of the Verses of Tu Fu* by Wen Jia is a dream-like scene. A mountain range rises suddenly out of a wooded landscape, waves curling at its base. The painting is serene, the mountain's loosely-drawn contours rise to its peak in soft ink washes of turquoise and ochre.

Chouinard Equipment was founded by Yvon Chouinard, a distinguished Yosemite climber, who, as part of a group including Robbins, made the first ascent of the "North America Wall" on El Capitan in 1964. In the late 1950s Chouinard had taught himself to blacksmith, making hard steel pitons and selling them directly to climbers from the back of his van. Later, he set up the The Great Pacific Iron Works to mass produce climbing hardware. Chouinard's pitons were strong enough to be prised out from the rock and re-used, making possible the multi-day expeditions that the longest routes in Yosemite required. These removable pitons also appealed to the environmental concerns being expressed by Robbins and others. The catalog's introduction provides some insight into the subtleties of this aid-climbing dispute:

The 1960s marked an awakening in American climbing characterized by a vast increase in climbing activity, closely paralleled by a corresponding improvement in technique and equipment. Significant climbing advances have resulted. On the other hand, this combination is producing a serious problem — deterioration of the climbing environment. The deterioration is twofold, involving the physical aspect of the mountains and the moral integrity of the climbers.

Alongside listings for "bugaboos," "bong bongs," "jumars," "sky hooks," and other specialist ironmongery (bolts conspicuoulsy absent), the catalog contains a pointed essay — commissioned especially — titled *The Whole Natural Art of Protection* by Doug Robinson. He writes:

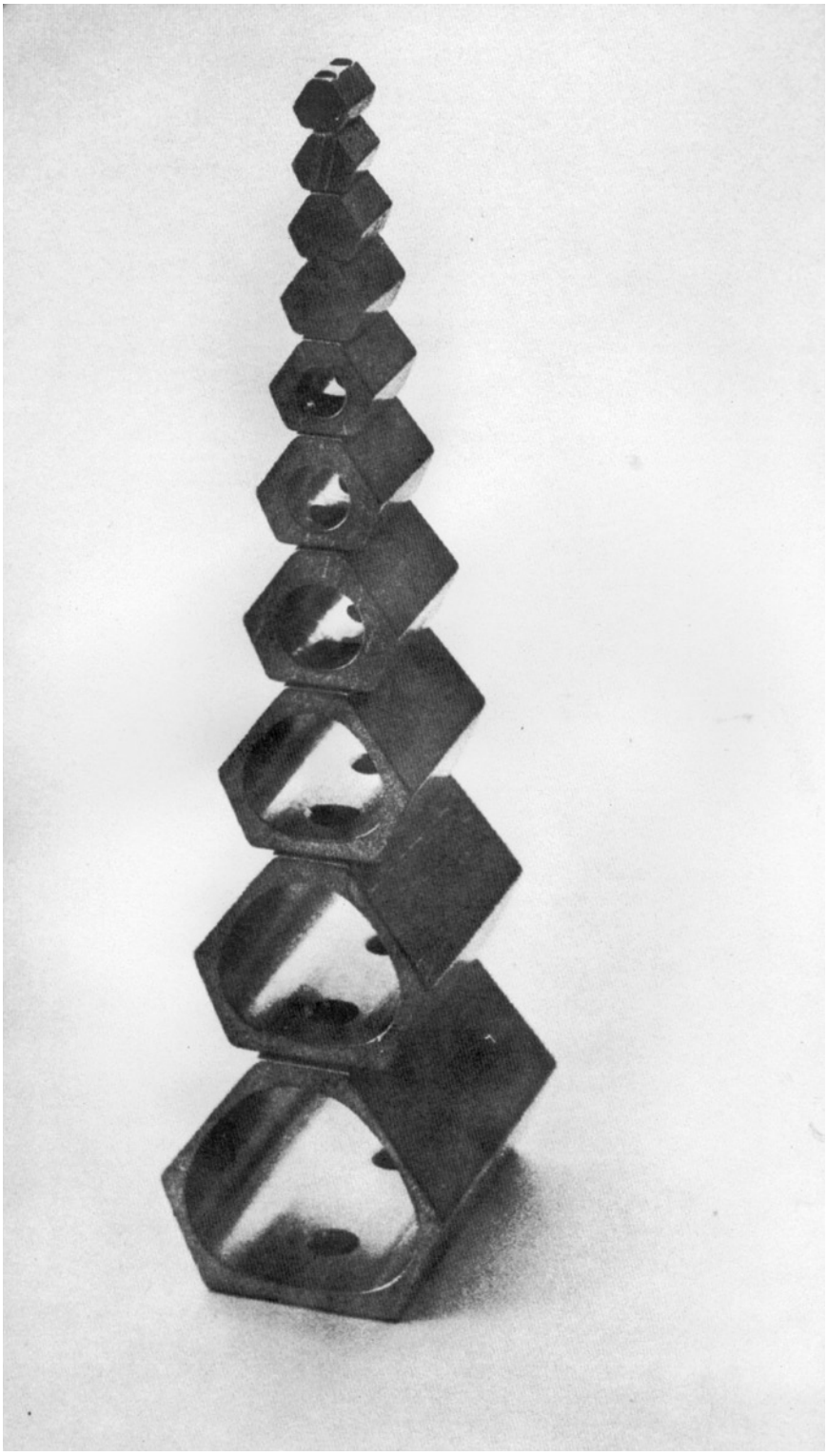
There is a word for it, and the word is clean. Climbing with only nuts and runners for protection is clean climbing. Clean because the rock is left unaltered by the passing climber. Clean because nothing is hammered into the rock and then hammered back out, leaving the rock scarred and the next climber's experience less natural. Clean because the climber's protection leaves little track of his ascension. Clean is climbing the rock without changing it; a step closer to organic climbing for the natural man.

There is an obvious irony here, and Chouinard was sensitive to it. Despite having catalyzed the growth of climbing in Yosemite with his innovative equipment, Chouinard responded craftily to objections that large amounts of his hardware were being permanently embedded in the walls.

The 1972 catalog offers a whole range of products designed to be removed from the rock by the climber as he proceeds. A full-page photograph shows the newest introduction: ten "Chouinard Hexentrics" arranged in increments by size to form a peak, like a steel cairn. The design of these asymmetrical hexagonal nuts is significant because it represents a step backward in performance. Bolts enabled the climber to plot his route irrespective of the characteristics of the rock — what Robbins called "pure technology" in Harding and Caldwell's climb — allowing less skilled climbers to ascend difficult routes. Pitons could only be placed in an existing crack, but hammering them into the crack was still destructive. Climbing with nuts required constant attention to the structure of the rock, demanding more of the climber, and accordingly leaving behind the least trace.

The cover of the March 1973 edition of *Summit* suggests that Chouinard's change of direction was good business. A cartoon by Sheridan has a giant grinning nut in boxing gloves and climbing boots, standing victorious over a floored piton. An arena of snow-covered mountains looks on approvingly, with smiling faces and expressions of relief.

Clashing personalities and disagreements over the protection of the landscape only partially explain the division between Harding and Robbins. Harding branded his own climbing as "farcical" and seemingly regarded the sport with little pretense. Robbins, by contrast, was channeling the environmental sensibilities of the 19th-century romantics, naming John Muir and Ralph Waldo Emerson among his formative influences.



But, vital as the preservation of Yosemite was for him, his was an explicitly *aesthetic* proposition, an exemplary union of climbing and writing.

Besides the instructive prose of *Basic Rockcraft*—and its follow-up *Advanced Rockcraft*, published in 1973—Robbins wrote personal accounts of his notable climbs. These narrative, anecdotal texts foreground the sensory experience of climbing. This, from 1971, describes a new route on Half Dome:

It was hot. We had battled our way up through the dust and scrub oak to be shriveled like ants in a reflector oven. The bottom of the northwest face of Half Dome is stark and severe. No tree grows there. The shattered talus shrieks silently of the violence that occurs when the mountain sheds its skin. (...) In the moonlit darkness it was strange to be standing with a pounding heart thinking how little it would take to be plummeting through soft space toward the sharp rocks below. Strange yet familiar, battling along the thin edge, fighting in the darkness.

Prolific publishing in a cluster of small circulation periodicals such as *Summit*, *Mountain*, and *Mugelnoos*—and occasionally in more widely distributed titles such as *American Alpine Journal*—gave Robbins's voice presence and canonized his achievements. With his irritated reaction to *Life*'s coverage of Warren Harding in mind, I'd guess that many of Robbins's now-celebrated first ascents were witnessed at their summits by very few people apart from the climbers. Climbing had no regulating institution to arbitrate the sport. The authenticity and particulars of a climb were proven by the record on the wall, and equally, by its (self-) reporting. As I read him, I realize that the idealized "clean" climb—leaving no trace—was not quite what Robbins sought. The record of the climb was part of the point. He described this sense of mark-making artfully in *Basic Rockcraft*:

Those making first ascents will be conscious of everything they are doing because it will all be part of their creation. They will not just be getting from bottom to top, but will in effect be writing a score. That piton they are thinking of placing will not be trivial, but will be of enormous importance. Like a single word in a poem, it can affect the entire composition.

Without marks, no "score" is legible. Bolts, pitons, nuts, and the limbs of a climber alter the surface of the rock, however minimally. Even the persistent use of powdered chalk to absorb moisture from hand holds leaves its residue visible on the rock. Robbins considered and crafted the traces left by his first ascents like sculpture, and stylized their reporting deliberately in prose.

The self-regulation of the climbing community had another function. To judge the qualities of a climb, another climber may follow its score. In this way a second ascent *critiques* a first ascent. By repetition, it reflects on a climber's sense of movement and traversal, their reading of the rock, their use of aid, their economy of effort. Consistent with his habit of getting up Warren Harding's nose, Robbins made an infamous second ascent of a route on the "Nose" of El Capitan — that had taken Harding over a year to rehearse — in a week, and cleaner, using a fraction of the first ascent's aid. This brings me back to the "Wall of the Early Morning Light."

Robbins set out to chop the bolts from Harding's route in January 1971. After using each bolt, he slid a chisel under the head of the bolt and struck it off with the hammer. The route remained visible, but not climbable. More like vandalizing than eradicating. Until, something extraordinary happened. At a certain point in the climb, Robbins and his climbing partner got into difficulty. They were held up in a section of technical climbing, progressing slower than expected, even retreating for a time. Robbins reflected:

That night I lay awake in my hammock thinking about it, and I finally decided that I no longer felt right about destroying the route. (...) So the right thing at that point seemed to be to stop the bolt chopping and just concentrate on climbing the route. (...) For the most part the climbing was of high caliber, and I didn't expect that. There was one good lead after another; both Caldwell and Harding must have been climbing at a really inspired level. And that, of course, complicated the whole thing enormously — how could one continue to judge it so simply? (...) The main point now is that the thing should be explained, not that somebody should be made to appear right or wrong. It's a contest between attitudes and ways of doing things. We acted on theory, and it seems clear now that we should have been better not doing it that way.

Aborting the bolt-chopping showed an admirable humility, but the resulting anachronism on the "Wall of the Early Morning Light" must have troubled Robbins. What did the remains of this climb speak of? Error of judgement? Loss of conviction? How did he reconcile either with his aesthetics?

Basic Rockcraft was published in 1971. The colophon doesn't state in which month, but since the second ascent of "Wall of the Early Morning Light" was done in January of that year, it's likely that the book appeared after the climb. In a section titled "Preservation," Robbins establishes a "First Ascent Principle":

The primary ethical consideration involves leaving a route unchanged so others may enjoy, as nearly as possible, the creation of those who made the first ascent.

The contradictory, compromising events on the "Wall of the Early Morning Light" marked the end of the golden age. Both Robbins and Harding withdrew from climbing major new routes in Yosemite. As I look at the printed matter on my table, page markers and notes charting the narrative arc of my enquiry, I am drawn to this final, messy episode. It seems to me the most human of Robbins's acts on the wall. I'm no climber, but I can at least relate to that moment of hesitation that one might feel when, faced with a difficult problem during a climb, one might find oneself asking, "What would Royal do?"

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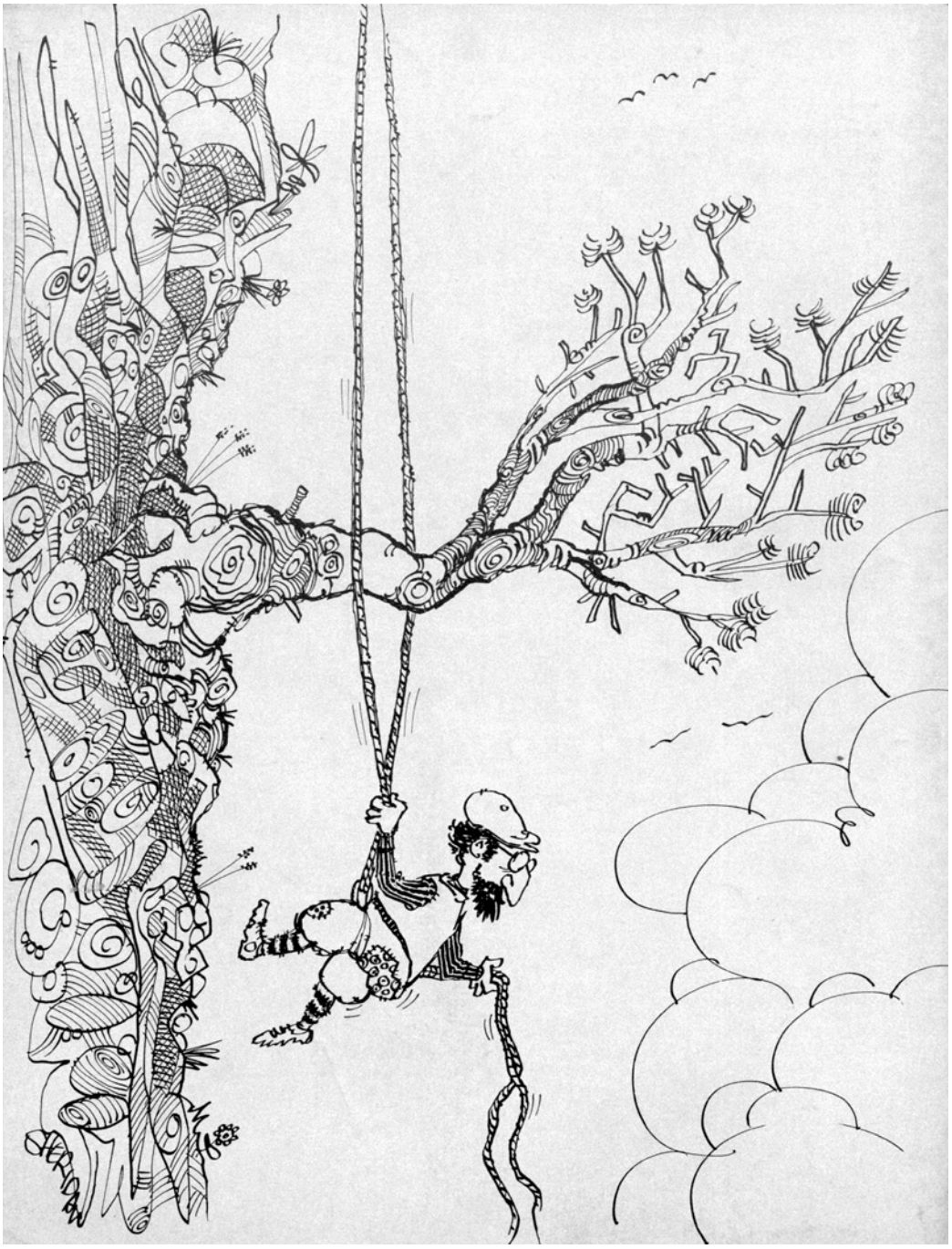

Cartoon of Royal Robbins by Sheridan Anderson, from *Summit* magazine (December 1968)