
Art & Photography



'A Hilly Landscape with a Winding Road', John Robert Cozens, undated,
brush drawing in grey wash, 48cm x 61.7 cm. (*British Museum*)

JOHN CLEARE

In the Light of Yosemite

The Climbing Life and Art of Glen Denny

On every foothold and ledge along the way Glen Denny was making photographs that are so much more than action.

John Long

Glen Denny was the foremost chronicler of the Golden Age of Yosemite climbing: the 1960s and 1970s. There were other excellent photographers and many other notable writers, but Denny, one of the leading pioneering climbers himself, was both. His outstanding images place him among the doyens of American climbing photography.

Born in Modesto in California's Central Valley in 1939, he was schooled in the outdoors by his father, a high-school teacher, who would take him on backpack fishing trips in the Sierra that Glen would document with his camera. Later, having absconded from an organised scout hike in the mountains, he set off to attempt Mount Humphreys, a rocky peak of almost 14,000ft in the High Sierra but wisely retreated when faced with exposed, technical scrambling. Intrigued by the challenge of surmounting steep rock, he determined to learn to climb properly.

Reading every climbing book he could find, he soon learned that Yosemite was the place where it actually happened and so, aged just 19, and to his parents' dismay, he dropped out of college and set out in his old car to find and investigate the Valley.

Below El Capitan he found the road blocked by stationary cars and crowds of tourists gazing up at the stupendous cliff. Borrowing binoculars he picked out two tiny figures high on the wall. It was 1958 and Warren Harding and his rope-mates were making the first ascent of the Nose.

It was the most inspiring thing I had ever seen. Instantly I realized I'd come to the right place. I didn't know how they were doing it but I was going to find out.

Supporting himself with a kitchen job at Yosemite Lodge, he mail-ordered some basic climbing equipment and with a workmate, a guidebook and a how-to-do-it manual he started on easy routes, progressing to Class 4 scrambles, 'where a rope is used only because a fall would be fatal.' He'd heard that the real climbers hung out at Camp Four, so one spring day he wandered down to locate the place. Warren Harding was in residence, they got chatting and Harding offered to teach him to climb. And Denny never looked back.



Robbins leads the zebra section on the second day of the first ascent of *Tis-sa-ack* (VI 5.9, A4), a 2,000ft (600m) line on the north-west face of Half Dome in October 1969. The climb, with Don Peterson, took eight days. A powerful, graphic image in a situation where a long focus lens was essential. Long lenses flatten perspective, an effect used creatively here where a wall of blank rock – of vertical texture– is split by a great black feature down which the eye travels to stop at the lonely figure working his way slowly upwards, still with a long way to go. Little man, big mountain indeed: always a good formula. (All images Glen Denny/courtesy of Peggy Denny)

Meanwhile he continued to record his doings, supplementing his notebooks with snaps with his camera but he became frustrated in his attempts to capture in words the essence of the climbs, the climbers themselves and the life they led. It was only when confronted by published climbing photographs of Tom Frost and others that he realised his camera might well be a better means of record and self-expression than his pen. It was.

Climbing was the most important thing in my life and I didn't want the experience to disappear. It seemed too special ... I could show what it was like and not have to explain it.

He took his camera on every climbing trip: a slim, folding, Kodak Retina 2A with a good, fixed 50mm lens: a fairly simple, robust but decent quality



North America Wall (VI, 5.8, A5). Tom Frost leads the third pitch during an early unsuccessful attempt. The key to this classic image is its symmetry. The rope meanwhile leads down into the camera, a useful ploy that integrates the viewer with the climb, a process accentuated by the leader, who is seen calling down with a comment.

camera but with no built-in light meter. Practice makes perfect, and in the fairly consistent lighting conditions both on climbs and in the shadowed woods of Camp Four, Denny's exposure calculations were obviously pretty successful.

... so a camera strap was added to the cluster of slings around my shoulders and under my arm a small folding camera as handy as my hammer: when the image appeared it had to be captured right now before it disappeared.

He was learning that 'the moment' was important, it could often be anticipated, but should it happen, it would happen fast.

Before long he was aware of the historical importance of the scene of which he was now part: the late 1950s and the ensuing decade encompassed the first generation of American big-wall climbing, what in retrospect we now know as the Golden Age of Yosemite. Conscientiously Glen Denny now set about recording it.

He was soon repeating many of the most challenging routes in the Valley, often climbing with Harding or other leading Yosemite names such as Chuck Pratt, Layton Kor, Gary Colliver, Tom Frost and Royal Robbins, and making first ascents, not only in Yosemite but before long elsewhere in the Sierra and up in the North Cascades of Washington State but always carrying and using his camera. Experimenting with his lenses and his subjects

and learning fast, he nevertheless considered that it was a couple of years before his climbing images had any real merit.

Down at ground level he made portraits of the denizens of Camp Four and recorded their doings, their careful preparations for the big climbs, along with the scruffy tent and basha-dotted clearing among the pines where they hung out, often to the chagrin of uptight park rangers. He shot on Kodak Plus-X film, and in poor light on the faster Tri-X film which, if working by firelight or at night, he might push a couple of stops. Until 1965 his film was processed in the local camera shop where 3in x 5in prints were run off from his negatives and larger prints developed as necessary. Some of his pictures were published in the local press and it became obvious he had an eye: a strong sense of composition and the ability to exploit what he saw on film.

Now captivated by photography, Denny pored over the landscapes of Ansel Adams and the work of such celebrated photographers as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Edward Weston. He was especially stimulated by images, published in art-book form, from the celebrated 1955 'Family of Man' exhibition curated by Edward Steichen at New York's Museum of Modern Art, arguably the most famous photographic exhibition ever hung (and an inspiration for many other young photographers, including the present writer). Many of these images feature action of people in a landscape, which of course is the essence of so many great climbing pictures.

Taking photography really seriously entailed using more versatile equipment. Promoted to barman at the Ahwahnee Hotel where generous tipping was the norm, he was soon able to equip himself with a Nikon F single lens reflex camera and four lenses: a 35mm widish-angle, a 50mm standard lens, a longish 105mm and a 200mm telephoto, as well as, at last, a light meter. The 200mm lens Denny reserved for landscapes and long, tripod shots of 'climbers as small specks on big walls'.

It is no coincidence that I too selected the same combination of lenses for my own work, not just for rock climbing but also for my general business



Warren Harding on the final 'horrendous' roof pitch of The Rostrum *North Face* (IV, 5.8, A3). Eye-catching in any gallery, this image is purely graphic, a powerful, stark and at first puzzling design, until one realises that gravity doesn't lie. Perspective is non-existent and in this instance irrelevant.



The agony of the big-wall game. Shadows and shapes form another story-telling image at the final stance on the *Wall of the Early Morning Light* (850m, VI, 5.8, A4). The way that Harding's gnarled, hard-driven hand, complete with tattered finger-tip plasters, rests on his gear after 27 continuous days on the wall says much about the man, while the jumble of karabinres, pegs and tapes suggests that the climb has not been easy going, but it's done: a complex yet sympathetic image.

assignments, but I added, and frequently used, a 28mm true wide-angle lens, a lovely perspective but one Denny eschewed for its slight distortion, an effect I utilised carefully on our so much smaller Welsh crags to good effect. (I was always aware that

the coverage of a 50mm standard lens is rather less than the coverage of a human glance and was not what my eye saw.)

Denny eventually decided he must pursue a proper career and in 1965, biting the bullet, he enrolled at San Francisco State University to study photography and film. Yet whenever possible he continued with his alternative climbing career. He was now able to handle all his own darkroom work and his striking images were being widely published, for Yosemite climbing now attracted worldwide interest. That same year he was invited to join editors Allen Steck and Steve Roper as picture editor of the first four issues of the new annual *Ascent*, that beautiful publication, sponsored by the Sierra Club, which was for many years a Californian icon for discerning English-speaking mountaineers and remains a collector's item.

Although colour photography had by now come of age, Denny always preferred to use black and white for his serious work. Like Ansel Adams, the landscape photographer he most admired, he considered the monochrome medium, like painting a translation of the actual, to be the true creative art form of photography. With his fine eye for shape, Denny used the harsh light, the strong shadows, the textured rock and the bizarre geometrics of crack, flake and roof to construct his images. A genius of the moment, his figures reflect the exhilaration, the camaraderie and the ordeals of living in a vertical world, often for days at a time. He emerged from college with a master's degree in photography, cinematography and fine arts.

Back in Yosemite, Denny's peers considered him an excellent rock technician and an innovative aid climber. Indeed, for big-wall climbs he invented a twin jumars-and-leg-pumping technique for easier sack hauling. By 1970 he



Back at Camp Four Yvon Chouinard organises his hardware before a big climb. This arresting composition once again tells a story. Essentially the picture is split into two contrasting images, each dominated by an eye-catching – yet vaguely similar – rounded shape: the lower half with its powerful circle of pitons, the upper half by the crouching figure, an unusual combination of form and texture.

had been involved in no less than 18 first ascents in the Valley itself, most iconic perhaps being *Dihedral Wall* on El Capitan climbed with Ed Cooper and Jim Baldwin in 1962. The following year he made the third ascent of the Nose itself with Layton Kor and Steve Roper. Of that climb he wrote:

How strange it felt after the climb. Walking and not having to hold on to anything. Sleeping on the ground – you couldn't fall off. All the water you could want – just turn on the faucet.

Not one for fame, he eschewed the commercialism and publicity that attended some of the more spectacular Yosemite ascents, falling out with several erstwhile companions who would brief reporters and TV channels before attempting a major new line.

Not surprisingly there were epic moments. The following excerpt, taken, with permission, from Denny's essay 'Quicksilver' in his book *Yosemite in the Sixties*, details an early attempt on North America Wall with Royal Robbins.

My climbing partners got used to annoying new phrases like 'Hold it!' or 'I'm changing film', or even the dreaded 'Could you do that again?' I didn't say that to Royal while he was leading the third pitch of North America Wall. He had placed a long line of marginal pitons, and the situation was tense. But the light on the rock was beautiful. He had been on his last peg for quite a while. It seemed solid so I raised the camera. Suddenly he got bigger in the viewfinder and the belay line started zinging out as if I'd hooked a marlin. I dropped the camera and grabbed the rope with both hands. It hurt like hell, but there was nothing to do but grab harder. After what seemed a long time, things stopped moving.

I looked up. Royal was a lot closer now. He looked down and said 'Nice catch'. The gradual arrest had pulled out only a few pins; I didn't tell him why it had been so dynamic. The rope burns made my palms look like raw salmon fillets.



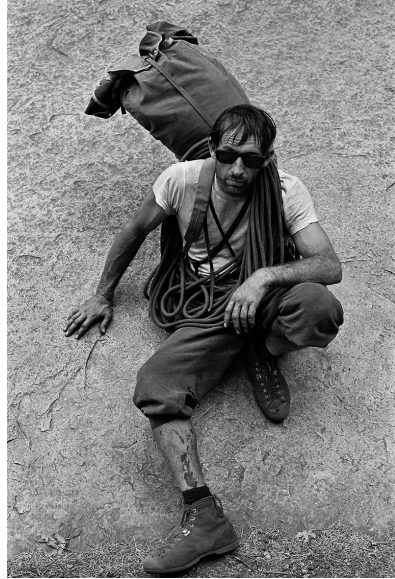
Camp Four c1968. A casual scene at the very informal camp ground between the foot of Three Bothers and Yosemite Point where climbers hung out in the 1960s and 1970s. The arrangement of the figures in several planes gives an almost three-dimensional feel. To employees of the Curry Company, the franchisee operating the Yosemite Valley, climbers were initially 'parasitic wretches who deserved to live in squalor' until, with the advent of a climbing school concession in the early 1970s, climbers were tolerated as local colour.

Denny's pioneering climbing in the Valley itself continued for another decade, but he was not only a rock aficionado. In the Canadian Rockies with George Whitmore he climbed Mount Robson and other major peaks and in 1964 with Gary Colliver he made the first ascent of Jirishanca Norte (6015m), in Peru's Cordillera Huayhuash. Six years later with Jeff Dozier he made both the first ascent and a film on Koh-i-Marchech in the Hindu Kush.

For some years he worked as a freelance photographer and film maker but admitted, when looking back later that he 'didn't enjoy using his visual skills on commercial assignments photographing junk.' Then for a spell he taught photography while continuing to climb seriously in the Valley and elsewhere, though no longer on the big walls. At one stage Denny enjoyed a spell working in the Napa valley 'producing higher quality wine than the stuff we drank at Camp 4.' And in 1982 he settled down, married Peggy and took a post at the Stanford University library.

Eventually he tried writing again, utilising his notebooks at last, but this time with more success. His first book, *Yosemite in the Sixties*, was published in 2007. It contained many of his favourite pictures, won several awards and was followed in 2016 by *Valley Walls: a Memoir of Climbing and Living in Yosemite*. His major films are *El Capitan*, which took 10 years and was finally completed in 1978, and *Nyala* (1966) featuring a solo ascent of Cathedral Peak in Yosemite's high country.

With the advent of digital photography he had all his negatives professionally scanned and delighted in the quality, tonal range and sharpness of the exhibition prints that digital methods produce. Denny lectured widely in the US, Japan, Europe and here in Britain both at the AC and the Kendal Film Festival, leaving this rather apposite tip for aspiring climbing photographers. 'It's not easy,' he warned, 'to do two full-time jobs at the same time. When you're on a [climb], the more you get involved with a shot, the more you need to check that you're still tied in.' Indeed. Travelling in Britain he especially enjoyed the architecture and tranquillity of English cathedrals and a pint of ale in a local hostelry. He still enjoyed the mountains and continued to make long solo hikes in the Sierra until the last month of his life. Glen Denny died in 2022. John Long, like no one else perhaps, understood what Denny had achieved.



Robbins rests during his descent from Half Dome summit after his eight-day ascent of *Tis-sa-ack*. Shot from an unusual and telling angle, this portrait accentuates the tired limbs, the exhaustion and also the anti-climax of an incredible achievement by an athlete in his prime.

Of all those who have recounted the Golden Age of Yosemite climbing, none captured its soul more faithfully and more aesthetically than Glen Denny ... While Denny's first ascents are venerated among climbers, his artwork tends to move everyone who's exposed to it.

- The author and editor thank Peggy Denny for her help in publishing this article.