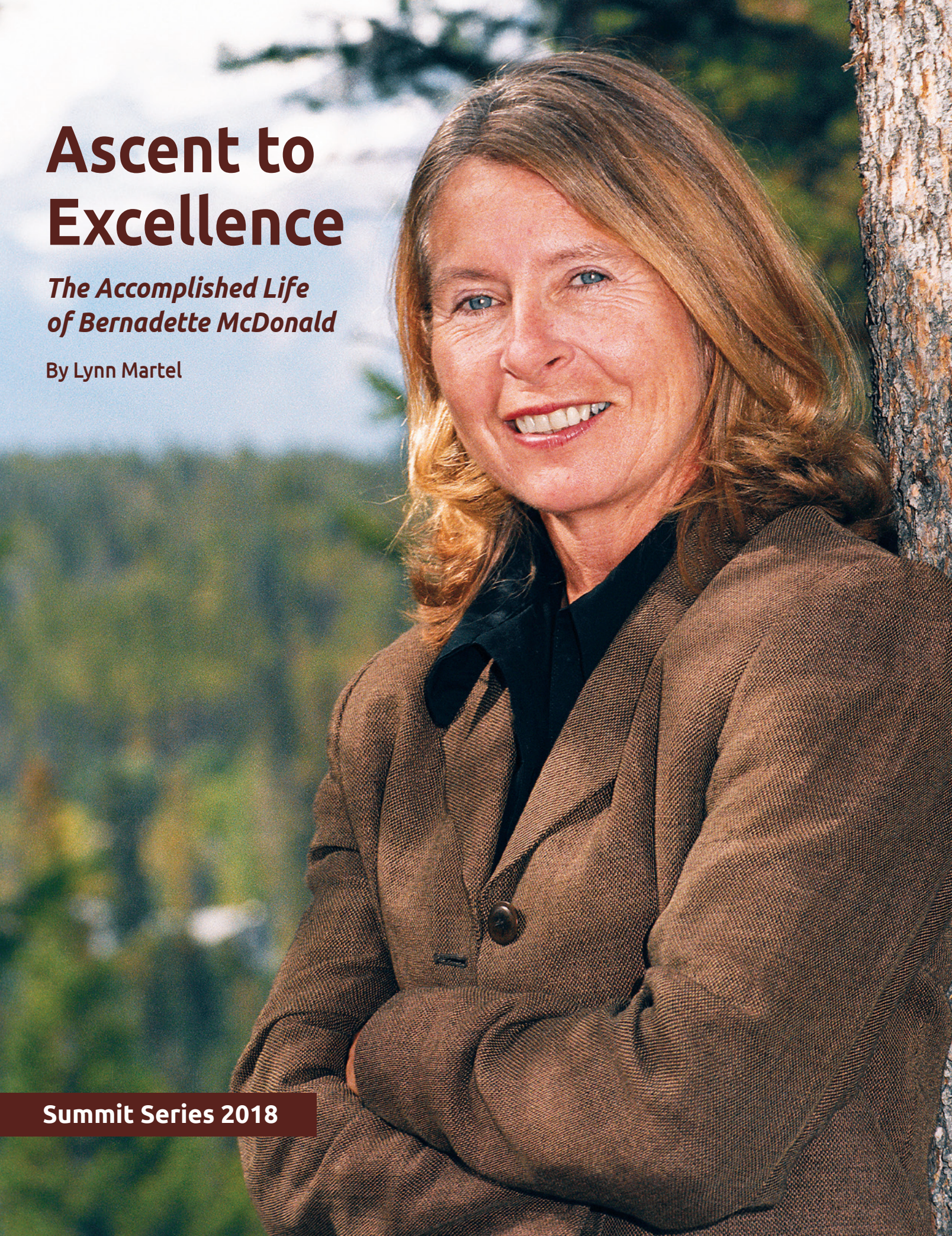


# Ascent to Excellence

*The Accomplished Life  
of Bernadette McDonald*

By Lynn Martel

Summit Series 2018







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Bernadette McDonald*



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Cover photo: Bernadette co-founded Mountain Culture at the Banff Centre, a department committed to the environment and culture of mountain places. She served as vice president from 1997 to 2006. Photo: Banff Centre, circa 1998

Title page: Bernadette smiles despite her cramping hand while signing copies of her multi-award-winning Freedom Climbers in Sheffield, England. Photo: John Coefield, 2012

Back cover: Bernadette and Alan look forward to – eventually – sipping the fruits of their vineyard labour. Photo: McDonald collection

All photos are from the McDonald collection unless otherwise noted.



# Bernadette McDonald and the “beautiful circle”

Over the past fifteen years or so, I've lost count how many times I've interviewed Bernadette McDonald for articles I was writing – about the Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival, about the worthy recipients of the Summit of Excellence Award, about the numerous books she's written, and about awards she's earned – the number of which now rival how many times I've interviewed her. So, it's more than an understatement to say that I was honoured when she asked that I write this Summit Series biography of her when she was selected as Patron of the 2108 Mountain Guides Ball. A little nervous comes to mind too.

Working with her on this project however, has been a smooth affair, and an absolute pleasure. Bernadette has been organized, considerate and professional as I knew she would be. But what I didn't count on as we sat down for her to answer my questions (a role reversal for her) was how skilled a storyteller she is. And how funny!

But, of course, it makes perfect sense.

As director of the Banff Mountain Film Festival for nineteen years, she led the team who decided which climbers, photographers, filmmakers, writers and adventurers would share their stories with live audiences at the Banff Centre every autumn. And for the twelve years since she retired from that position to pursue a highly successful writing career (again, understatement) she's proved repeatedly that she recognizes a good story begging to be told. Like her early career as a concert pianist, and all her endeavours since, she's demonstrated how focus and commitment lead to polished and exceptional performances, and publications.



Bernadette climbs at her “home” crag at Skaha Bluffs near Penticton, British Columbia. Photo: Rupert Wedgewood, 2017

And we, the audience and readers, are the winners.

And that's the thing. When her parents gave so much of their time, energy and money for her to follow her passion playing piano, it was, she said, “the least” she could do to play as well as she possibly could.

When she was awarded the position of Banff Mountain Film Festival Director, she embraced the task by working hard to make it the best possible mountain festival it could be. Today audiences the world over benefit from her dedication and effort to share great mountain stories, all coordinated by a team based in Canada's Rocky Mountains.

And with her books, English readers (and those reading her books translated into several other languages) have the pleasure of learning about exceptional members of the international mountain community whose stories would likely have gone untold – or inaccessible to them – otherwise.

Through the Banff Mountain Film Festival and its world tour, through the creation of associated mountain filmmaking, writing and photography workshops, and through her books, Bernadette McDonald's work is the gift that keeps on giving to the mountain community, in Canada and around the world.

I hope you enjoy reading about this remarkable woman as much as I did writing about her.

— Lynn Martel,  
Canmore, Alberta





Bernadette is happy in her dad's strong arms. Clearly, she already enjoys being up as high as possible. Photo: Erna Kelly, 1953, Kelly farm, Saskatchewan

## Quick study

**I**t may sound like a cliché, but Bernadette Kelly really did begin her education in a one-room country school. And, like her fellow classmates from Grades 1 thru 3, she was a farm kid. Unlike them she was the only kid in her grade.

Bernadette's parents grew up near each other, each family running their own farm. Her father, Lester's family was from Ireland; her mother, Erna's from Germany. Born in Biggar Saskatchewan, on November 14, 1951, Bernadette's world included aunts and uncles and plenty of cousins too. She even attended the same country school her father had.

Its slogan, New York is Big But This is Biggar,

was coined in jest by some off-duty survey employees in 1909 shortly after both Canadian Pacific and Grand Trunk Pacific railroads lay their tracks through the district. Despite the slogan being more formally adopted with affection in later years, Biggar wasn't, and still isn't, big. When she was growing up the population was about 2,000, but the Kelly family didn't even live in town, they lived on a farm that had belonged to Lester's family. Being the only student in her class allowed her the benefit of listening in (how could she not?) on the lessons being taught to the two Grade 2 students. As a result, Bernadette progressed directly from Grade 1 to Grade 3. From the beginning, she liked to do things quickly.

Halfway through Grade 3, the family – which included her brother, Kenneth, born in 1957, (Rod was born in 1963) moved to another farm closer to town on land that had belonged to her mother's family. Several farms were combined to create one larger farm of three sections (three square miles for



Bernadette makes her best attempt at learning to ride a bike with her mom. The lessons never took, something Bernadette blames on her mom's insistence she wear frilly dresses and lace-trimmed hats. Photo: Lester Kelly, 1953, Kelly farm, Saskatchewan



the city folk). Growing grains, feeding the chickens, gathering hay, accompanying her brothers on the tractor to pick stones from the fields, everything from plucking weeds to painting granaries all equalled just one thing – work.

“It was work. Grunt work!” Bernadette recalled decades later. “And the garden. Oh my gosh! The garden was huge. The garden never ended. Picking things, weeding things, harvesting things. It was a lot of work, all the time. I always welcomed the end of summer, it meant I could go back to school.”

The new school, however, was quite different, as Bernadette shared her classroom with some twenty-nine other students. The new scenario was just a little bit shocking. As she would throughout her life however, Bernadette adapted. She thrived. She was younger than her classmates and physically smaller, and she loved school. She loved the smell of paper, she loved new pencils.

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“I loved learning. I loved my teachers.” Then with a pause, she added, “I wasn’t fussy about recess.”

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That, she attributes partly to her mother’s penchant for insisting she dress like a little doll, all the time. While the other kids wore overalls and jeans, Bernadette wore puffy little dresses with lace trim and crinolines supporting her flouncy skirts. When recess time came around, she was reluctant to soil her dress.

“Skipping rope was at the very limit. And there was a swing. I felt quite comfortable on the swing. I was in control.”

When it came to her studies, she found it much easier to be in control. Her favourite subjects were math and English. Her grades were quite good, but then she did try hard.

But her favourite of all was piano.

Despite enjoying the view from high up on the hay truck, Bernadette is not happy to be wearing another pesky, frilly dress. Photo: Erna Kelly, 1954, Kelly Farm, Saskatchewan





## Learning the scales



A teenage Bernadette shows very mature focus as she rehearses for a recital. Photo: McDonald collection, circa 1967

Like many homes of that era, instead of televisions most of her relatives had pianos in their living rooms. One of her cousins played particularly well, and Bernadette listened and watched intently. Around the age of seven she convinced her parents to enroll her in lessons. For her first lessons she was fortunate to find herself at the bench with the minister's wife, Barbel Otto, a "fabulous" pianist from Germany who played at the level of a concert pianist. Barbel and the minister had recently moved to the community, so she agreed to take Bernadette on as a student. It wasn't long before she advanced to Mrs. McKenzie, the best teacher in town.

"She was a very good teacher. Everybody wanted

her because her lessons were very structured, and her students did well in competitions. I was lucky to get her."

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**Bernadette took to the keyboard with enthusiasm.**

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To be able to play piano, and better still, to play well, was a coveted ability. While many of her relatives could tinkle the keys, no-one in her



immediate family did. She loved the creativity involved with playing, and the feeling of accomplishment that grew as she developed her ability to create music.

Lessons however, required a large commitment on the part of her parents, not only financially, but also in terms of time and effort as they drove her to the lessons. At times the lessons were twice a week, but in the weeks leading up to an exam or a festival the schedule would ramp up, sometimes to daily. She played in competitions in Biggar, and festivals happened frequently in Saskatoon, an hour's drive away. Travelling to play in a competitive arena was terrifically exciting.

As her playing skills improved, she participated in larger competitions, rising through the ranks all the way to provincial finals. Performing well, she ended up being awarded several scholarships, which over time offset the costs of her lessons.

By the time she was ready for high school, music dominated Bernadette's life. For her next steps in education, she chose to attend Lutheran Collegiate Bible Institute, a boarding school located in Outlook, a ninety-minute drive from Biggar. The school was religious, and music-oriented, which suited her very well, since her entire family was active in their church where Bernadette contributed by playing for the choir, playing organ for Sunday services and any other occasion where music was required. The boarding school boasted not one, but two choirs, one of which was a touring choir, which presented Bernadette with exciting opportunities to travel around the province.

"It was a good choir."

Another element of the school which she found particularly helpful was that since music was a priority, any time she had a spare she was free to practice piano in one of the school's studios. Nurturing her time-management skills – which would become highly tuned and exceptionally valuable in her future – Bernadette made sure to get her piano practice hours in during the school day. By then she was practicing two to three hours a day, a schedule that would have been challenging to maintain after school hours.

Attending boarding school away from home was certainly a lonely experience at first, she admitted, but one that taught her to adjust. It also

taught her to develop a sense of responsibility and self-reliance. During these years she was enrolled in music lessons in Saskatoon, which involved taking a day off from school every two weeks and boarding a bus by herself for the one-hour ride. Her lessons were intense, covering music history, theory, harmony and piano, each taught by a different teacher.

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**"It was just fabulous. If you were serious about music, it was a great place to be."**

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Then she'd ride the bus back to her school in Outlook and carry on with her classes there. Looking back, she's a bit baffled that at the age of just fifteen she was navigating Saskatoon's city streets totally on her own.

"Can you imagine, being a fifteen-year-old, getting on a bus and going to a city – and I wasn't a city girl – completely unaware of stuff, going from one place to another, sometimes walking, sometimes taking the city buses, and always having a little bit of extra time to fill? When I think about it now, if I had a daughter, there's no way!"

While she's certain her parents weren't aware of all that was involved in those trips, she does acknowledge that they had great faith and trust in her abilities and her good judgement. Despite her youth, Bernadette was focussed, responsible and motivated. Aiming for mastery, perfection, she was never a "good-enough-er."

"I think I felt responsible to my family for giving methose great opportunities," she reflected. "It was my idea to go to boarding school, to take all those lessons. The least I could do was the best I could do. Anything less would have been letting them down."





Bernadette, right, and her university dormitory roommate, Patricia, look cool while learning to ski at Crystal Mountain, Washington. Photo: McDonald collection, 1968

## On to bigger solos

When Bernadette was in Grade 12, Lester and Erna sold the farm and moved to Vernon, British Columbia. Nearing graduation, Bernadette decided she would attend Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. It was, naturally, an excellent university for studying music. They had a choir, and she particularly enjoyed singing in choirs. Better still, it was a touring choir. She was focussed on performing contemporary classical chamber music, and at that school she'd have the advantage of working with an excellent teacher who would help in that pursuit.

There was a glitch, however. Bernadette was just sixteen. Despite that, she wasn't only ready to attend university, she wanted to do so across an international border. This situation raised something of a brouhaha and left her parents in the position of having to sign papers accepting all responsibility for her safety while at school, where she would live in residence on campus, and absolving the university from any liability. For all the effort it drew from them, Erna and Lester could not have helped feeling immense pride to see their daughter excelling in her studies and performing at

such a high level in her educational ambitions. And despite the geographical separation, Bernadette always maintained a close relationship with her parents.

University, though, demanded a lot more from her than her past studies.

"It was really a big deal for me. University – it was work. It was overwhelming at first. But you adjust. Complete immersion into studies."

She rose to the task, simultaneously completing a music degree and an English degree. The English degree, she described, was more like relaxation. Reading a book and writing a paper on the book felt rather calming in comparison to her intense music studies. At the end of the term she would buy enough books to fill two large shopping bags and bring them back to her parents' home in the Okanagan.

"We had a little cabin on the lake. That was my summer reading."

Summertime wasn't all leisure however, as she worked as a restaurant server. And, while at university, she taught private piano students on Saturdays. All her hard work paid off, as it helped her parents with her expenses through school – private university in another country – the cost of which, despite being "reasonable" at that time, was still considerably expensive.

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**"I can't imagine what it would cost today. It was a huge commitment on my parents' part. I'm so grateful. And I graduated without any debt. What a gift that was."**

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Armed with her two degrees, after four years in Tacoma, Bernadette headed off to grad school, intent on earning her master's at the University of Western Ontario in London. It was a good school for music, but moreover, she chose it because of the financial support they provided her through grants



and scholarships. Of course, there was a very good piano instructor from Hungary she wanted to study with. Her program included teaching first-year music theory classes part-time, and working as her piano instructor's assistant. While her education and living expenses were covered by the university, in exchange she worked for little pay. Ultimately, things didn't go quite as planned.

Having earned two full degrees in just four years, she fully intended to complete her masters in one school year. At the time of enrollment, the university suggested that would not be possible because not all the courses she needed were being offered. For her masters she needed a history of music theory class. Being optimistic, she brushed it off and figured by the end of her first term there would be a conversation and it would all work out the way she planned.

"I was used to doing things kind of quickly."

But as her second term rolled around, the university didn't budge, so she left school one course short of her masters. But her decision was not only based on her studies.

"I wasn't keen on returning for another year to take just one course. Besides, I had fallen in love."

## Romantic interlude

They met ski touring in Rogers Pass, in British Columbia's Glacier National Park.

She had taken ski lessons at Washington's Crystal Mountain while at university, and during the holidays when she visited her family back home in Vernon, she would ski at Silver Star. She took the winter off between graduating from university and embarking on her masters' program.

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### "I was a ski bum, basically."

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Alan McDonald was working at Rogers Pass as an avalanche technician.

"He was very good looking, quiet and kind. We actually didn't have much in common at first, but it seemed like there was potential. When he agreed to listen to classical music recordings on our first 'date', I knew my hunch was correct."

Their romance blossomed and by the time she



Bernadette performs Stockhausen's Kontakte with percussionist David Robbins at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. Photo: McDonald collection, 1971





Big Red, a 1992 model, is the current generation of the Volkswagen van Bernadette and Alan drove to the Yukon in the summer of 1974 – and still their favourite home away from home. Photo McDonald collection

decided not to finish grad school, they were already “quite close.”

When she returned to western Canada, Bernadette took a part-time position at Okanagan College in Vernon, teaching music history and theory, as well as private students. Alan continued to work in Rogers Pass.

Among the best ways to really get to know a person is to travel together. Alan aimed high and suggested they spend most of the 1974 summer canoeing in the Yukon and northern British Columbia. Despite the minor detail that she’d never been in a canoe before, Bernadette was onboard for the adventure.

First, she thought she’d better learn some basic canoeing skills, so they headed to her parents’ cottage on Okanagan Lake, and Alan coached her. It was a crash course – she was, after all, accustomed to doing things rather quickly – amidst the reeds and the loons. Then she and Alan loaded up his Volkswagen van and drove to Teslin, Yukon via the remote, and in those days, unpaved Stewart Cassiar Highway, suffering two flats in a single day on the adventure. In Teslin they packed their canoe full of food and camping gear, put into the water and began paddling across Teslin Lake. They carried on down

the Teslin River to where it joined the Yukon River and continued all the way to Dawson City. At the end of three or four weeks, they shipped the canoe back south to Whitehorse on a truck, picked up their van in Teslin and drove to Atlin in northern British Columbia. They relaunched the canoe and spent ten days paddling south to the far end of Atlin Lake and returning to the village of Atlin.

“It was a beautiful trip. Fabulous fishing, gorgeous scenery, some scary winds, an amorous moose. It was really good.”

During those years, for two summers Bernadette worked in Yoho National Park – the 1973 season as campground attendant at Kicking Horse Campground, while Alan worked as foreman of the Yoho trail crew; and 1975 at the Lake O’Hara Campground. That, she declared, was a plum job, where as campground attendant and trail information person she was required to hike the trails – yes, hike – until later in the afternoon when she walked around the campground to collect campers’ fees. Alan took that summer off and stayed with Bernadette in the storied little warden cabin on the shore of jewel-toned Lake O’Hara, so they could spend a lot of time together.



“It was an unbelievable job. I think it’s probably my very best job.”

It was that summer when she and Alan began rockclimbing and mountaineering. He learned how to pound in pitons, and she, how to pound them out. They woke long before sunrise to climb the Lake O’Hara favourites, including Mounts Huber, Victoria, Lefroy and Odaray. In later summers they climbed the bigger peaks – Hungabee and Biddle, both of them “really big” days.

Those summers were heavenly, she said.

“Lake O’Hara feels like my home.”

## Crossing the threshold

**M**ay 8, 1976 was a hot day in Vernon. Stifling hot.

Dressed in long sleeves and a high collar, Bernadette felt the heat, and four decades later the memory remained vivid.

Nevertheless, their wedding, which took place at Vernon’s Japanese Garden, was absolutely lovely. They’d both wanted to be married outside, in a natural setting. Long sleeves in May had seemed a practical choice. And it was a very cute dress.

For their honeymoon, the newlyweds spent a few days camping on British Columbia’s Sunshine Coast. But first, they broke up their drive in Bernadette’s little Fiat 124 Spider sports car by stopping in Vancouver for a night to attend the ballet.

“Poor Alan. I think he might have said, ‘wow, what did I get myself into?’”

Alan survived the performance and after a delightful week they headed back to the Rockies for Alan’s summer job as Park Ranger at Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park. Erna, however, was less than impressed with the accommodation her new son-in-law was providing for her daughter.

“It’s really nice that you’re married now, but you’re moving into a ... tent? Your first home together is a tent?”

“But Mom, it’s a wall tent. It has a floor!”

For the next few years, the couple focussed on Alan’s career path as he rose through the ranks to become a national park warden. He’d studied wildland recreation and progressed from trail crew foreman to avalanche technician to park warden. Following Assiniboine, Alan worked at Elk Island National Park in northern Alberta, east of Edmonton, where they lived for a summer. His next



posting was Jasper National Park.

For three summers, Bernadette and Alan lived in the backcountry for weeks at a stretch. Alan’s job as a warden involved patrolling on horseback up and down valleys, over passes and along riverbanks deep in the wilderness of Jasper. In those days, it was not unusual for a backcountry warden’s wife to head out on patrol with him.

It was, she declared, like living in a different century. They would leave town with four horses – two saddle horses, and two laden with groceries and supplies to last them seventeen days. Then they’d ride back to town for four days to take long hot showers, wash some laundry, connect with a few friends over a pint or two, and shop for groceries. Then they’d load up the horses and set off on their next seventeen days.

“That was probably the biggest adventure of my life, up to that point, living in the backcountry.”

Patrolling some of the Canadian Rockies’ most remote trails taught Bernadette how important it was to be organized, not only in terms of the food items they chose to bring along, but also in how they packed the saddle boxes so rattling sounds didn’t cause the horses to “freak out.” She learned to live a simpler existence, one without phones (even before cell phones, landlines, too, could ring

Bernadette and Alan were married at the Japanese Gardens in Polson Park, Vernon, British Columbia on May 8, 1976. Photo: McDonald collection





Bernadette travelled with Helene Tremblay, a colleague from the Columbia Icefield Centre, for her first trip to India in 1986, where she dutifully assumed the tourist role to the heights of her ability. Photo: McDonald collection

annoyingly often or at inopportune times) or other taken-for-granted modern luxuries and conveniences. She also learned plenty from the trail horses (so different from farm horses), a whole lot about Jasper National Park, and about exploring backcountry wilderness and following game trails. And she learned many saddlebags' worth about and from the old outfitters whose lives were intertwined with the Rockies's creeks and peaks.

For the most part, their trips unfolded smoothly without any mentionable mishaps.

"We had the odd restless horse in the summer, we certainly had long days in winter when we were breaking trail on the South Boundary – really long days – but I never got charged by a bear, never got charged by anything." With a shrug she added, "luck and timing."

Those weeks together on the trail were times of solitude and deep companionship shared by the young couple. Only occasionally would they see another warden or even rarer, any hikers. It was hard work, she insisted, hauling water and firewood in to rustic warden cabins to keep themselves warm and cook dinner. And she loved every minute of it.

"I loved it. I learned about a lifestyle. At the time it just seemed like a really neat adventure, but in retrospect, I think it was a gift to be able to live like that, in a simpler way. I feel lucky to have been able to do that."

## Mile 45

Before long, Alan was posted to work with Jasper's public safety specialists stationed at Sunwapta Warden Station on the Icefields Parkway about seventy kilometres south of Jasper town site. Mile 45, as they called the handful of houses that comprise the "station" was a small but vibrant community of outdoor-loving national park employees. While Alan's work involved rescuing stranded climbers, fighting wildfires and attending highway accidents, Bernadette worked at the Columbia Icefield Centre as an information attendant. Their co-workers were active in the outdoors, and on their days off Bernadette, Alan and their colleagues – many of whom remained close friends for years afterward – embarked on backcountry adventures. During the summer months they hiked, scrambled, climbed to glacial summits and backpacked fabled long-distance trails. In the winter, they would ski virtually from the door of their home, setting off in one of several directions on a backcountry tour.

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*"With everyone being active, we all encouraged each other. We planned all kinds of trips. It was an amazing time to live there."*

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As soon as the tourist traffic dwindled at the end of the summer and the snow began to pile up at higher elevations, around Thanksgiving the Columbia Icefield Centre closed for the season. That's when they'd embark on a ten-day fall horse trip on the South Boundary Trail. The winter trips were the really tough ones – the North and South Boundary trips, skiing up onto the Columbia Icefield, or the Winston Churchill Traverse from Diadem Peak onto the Gee Glacier, dropping down to the Chaba River and out via Sunwapta Falls. Multi-day glacier ski tours – some as long as ten days – means carrying a big heavy pack laden with a bulky winter-weight sleeping bag, harness, prussiks and carabiners, food, extra clothing, extra thick sleeping pad and a section of a four-season tent. For a petite woman such as Bernadette, that weight constitutes a proportionally greater burden.



“I’m glad I did those tours when I did. Those are big days, and it took me a long time to learn – I almost didn’t learn it – you have to carry weight according to what you weigh. For some reason, I didn’t always figure that out.”

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Necessity, she added, is a good teacher for learning what you can live without, how to pare your gear down.

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Thankfully, time and popularity of outdoor adventure sports has led to the development of backpacks and other gear that properly fits smaller, particularly female, bodies. Still, her knees are now paying the price of those long days.

Fortunately, as with their backcountry patrols, Bernadette, Alan and their friends never suffered any serious mishaps. She never fell in a crevasse, was never buried in an avalanche. Routefinding however, caused occasional challenges, such as the time she and some friends were skiing across the Columbia Icefield at 10,000 feet in a white-out, aiming for Mount Columbia. Skiing by compass in near zero visibility with Bernadette in the middle of the rope, they were aiming for a dip in the icefield known as the Trench.

“The person up front said, ‘I think it’s getting a little steep, it’s dropping off.’ I had been up there before, and I said OK, we have to stop. It’s not supposed to get steep, it’s supposed to get flat! So, we back-tracked and we found the Trench. The next day it cleared off and we saw where we’d been. We were just about to head off down toward the north, toward the steep Columbia Glacier.”

On another trip, while hiking down from a climb in the Woolley Diadem Valley in the unwieldy double plastic mountaineering boots of the era, Bernadette became separated from her companions. Hiking downhill, she negotiated a small V-shaped ravine between a slope of moraine rubble and a small creek with her head down to keep an eye on the unsteady footing.

“I looked up and there was a grizzly bear



Bernadette shows her handy side peeling logs for a cabin she and Alan built in the woods southwest of Jasper. Photo: Alan McDonald, 1986, Albreda, British Columbia

Bernadette, centre, shares the summit of Mount Columbia, at 3,747 metres the Canadian Rockies’ second-highest peak, with Jasper colleagues Monica Schaeffer and Jasper park warden Greg Horne. Photo: McDonald collection, circa 1984







Bernadette and Alan patrol the Jasper National Park backcountry on horseback with their dog, Tracer. Photo: McDonald collection, circa 1982

Bernadette and Alan savour a relaxing paddle on a lazy summer day with their dog, Tracer. Photo: McDonald collection, circa 1985



standing up, looking at me. He must have woofed. I did exactly the wrong thing. I ran! I scrambled up the side of this moraine, in my double plastic boots. I can't believe I managed to do that. But there was so much gravel coming down I probably scared the poor grizzly. I dropped down the other side, kept running and never looked back."

Apparently, neither did the grizzly, and by the time she caught up with her companions it was long gone and did not reappear.

During those years, Bernadette and Alan enjoyed the company of a Chesapeake retriever they named Tracer. She was fond of tagging along on their mountain adventures – and accompanied them on many, winter and summer – and would jump up and down at the sight of them preparing to head out the door. A big dog weighing seventy pounds, once on a canoe trip she shifted her weight and all three of them were tossed into the water.

Tracer would become especially excited when they prepared for a ski tour, and Wilcox Pass was one of her favourites.

"When we took off our skins and started skiing down, she would throw her body down on her back on her wavy, wiry fur, head first. And she'd wiggle her bum so she would actually do little turns all the way down the slope. I think she enjoyed those days as much as I did."



## Have grand piano, will travel

Throughout the years Bernadette continued teaching music, and she always found enough students to keep her going. Teaching piano turned out to be a remarkably portable skill, as she found eager students wherever she went.

Of course, one essential element to making this possible was her “very nice” grand piano. Key to the operation was the willingness on the parts of Alan and her father (not to mention brute strength) to move the piano every time Alan was reposted.

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“My poor dad, and Alan, put together a package to move the damned thing. I have this vision of the piano on its side, of course, because its legs are off, carefully wrapped in quilts and furniture moving straps.

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“We still have the heavy-duty dolly. We would roll it up onto the back of the truck, then snug it down on both sides so that when we went around the corners it wouldn’t fall. Honestly, they did this eleven times.”

Teaching piano lessons however, was Bernadette’s profession, and her main source of income. In the six years they lived at the Sunwapta Warden Station they lived in three different houses. First, they were in a little portable panabode, where they somehow found the space to install the grand piano. Then they moved into a log cabin, and finally, a house. Where Bernadette went, the grand piano went.

While they were stationed at Sunwapta, Bernadette and a violinist who worked with her at the Columbia Icefield Centre performed two recitals each summer. Their performances were quite the occasion, and friends and fellow Park employees wouldn’t miss them. In fact, their performances were sufficiently highbrow – in a

remote-log-cabin-neighbourhood-kind-of-way-to attract none other than Jon Whyte, the writer, poet and respected descendent of the famed Rockies family (of the Whyte Museum) who would make the three-hour drive from Banff.

“He just loved the whole concept. There would be the concert, then it would be a pot luck dinner. It was kind of unusual at a warden station.”

But then, backcountry performances were not new to her; she had played at Lake O’Hara Lodge too, as a featured musician on the lodge’s Saturday night entertainment roster. These opportunities were as appreciated by Bernadette as they were by the audiences.

“If you’re serious about music, you can’t take a summer off without practicing. I loved that part of Lake O’Hara.” She paused, then said, “well, I loved every part of Lake O’Hara.”





## A future for Bernadette



Bernadette enjoys a social moment at her first Banff Mountain Film Festival as director with her invited speaker, US climber and photographer Galen Rowell, and her boss, director of the Banff Centre School of Management, Peter Greene. Photo: McDonald collection, 1988

While they were living in the boonies of the Banff-Jasper highway, in 1979 Bernadette applied for a position at the Banff Centre for the winter cycle, similar to a university semester. Naturally, the position involved studying and performing music. It was a contemporary music program which had her performing with another pianist, a wind player and two percussionists. The commute was long, three hours to Banff one-way, and the drive could be especially sketchy in winter. But she was keen. And sometimes Alan would drive down to Banff to stay with her.

"I was so happy to be immersed in performance again, in an academic setting, and with access to many composers whose music I admired."

After a couple of years at the Banff Centre, she applied for the coordinator position in the Academy of Singing. When she got the job, Alan requested a transfer to Banff National Park. Now that his warden career was well underway, it was Bernadette's turn to build her career. Alan was granted a posting in Lake Louise.

"It was pretty clear there was a future for me at the Banff Centre."

And how there was!

Now that she was working at the Centre full-time, she began volunteering for the Banff Mountain Film Festival. At that time the festival, which had begun as a one-day event in 1976 under the enthusiastic efforts of Chic Scott, John Amatt and Evelyn Moorehouse, was managed by Amatt, who hired Denise Lemaster as its director. It had expanded to a two-day event several years prior, and Bernadette became increasingly interested not only from a spectator's perspective, but also in the behind-the-scenes operation. Through volunteering she became knowledgeable about the event and its organization. Years later, when people asked her – and they frequently did – how they might get a job with the Banff Mountain Film Festival, her reply was always the same.

"Think about volunteering. Honestly. Then you can see which job really interests you."

As a volunteer, Bernadette served as jury coordinator. Somehow – as these things happen – she found herself being persuaded into finding a



sponsor for the jury. She kept learning about the inner workings of the festival along the way, and when Amatt decided to launch a second outdoor adventure film festival in the growing British Columbia ski town of Whistler, he hired her to coordinate that festival. A couple of years later, when management of the Banff festival returned to the Banff Centre, a call was put out for a new director. Having already been coordinating the Whistler festival, as well as working at the Banff Centre in a couple of capacities, Bernadette felt she might be sufficiently qualified to at least apply.

She passed the audition.

"I couldn't believe it! I was surprised in a very good way. It was like a dream job."

And it was.

Her first year as director was the 1988 Banff Mountain Film Festival. Over the course of the weekend – the festival began Friday night and ran Saturday and Sunday – audiences viewed some forty-four films submitted from nine countries.

Her initial plans were basic.

"My first goal with the festival was not to screw it up. It was the thirteenth year and it was already a good festival. I didn't want to mess it up."

Was it nerve wracking?

"Oh ya!"

Her Friday night keynote speaker was well-known American climber and adventure photojournalist Galen Rowell. Bernadette was especially pleased that he presented as a great photographer first, climber second. In her early years Bernadette's small team was comprised of two people: Christine Thel would start working in the summer to sell tickets; and Woody MacPhail was in charge of all things technical. Bernadette shared her office with Thel and as the festival dates drew nearer volunteers and technical crew members would enlarge the crew. Thel and MacPhail – who continues to work with the festival as a producer – would become the longest serving members of Bernadette's team.

"I'm still close to both of them."

Chris Bonington and Bernadette share conversation at the jury dinner at the 1989 Banff Mountain Film Festival. His first of several visits to the festival, Bonington would later become part of the international advisory committee for the Centre for Mountain Culture.  
Photo: McDonald collection





## Taking the show on tour



Bernadette and colleague, Deb Smythe discuss the merits of a mountain film (no doubt) at Mountain Film festival in Telluride, Colorado.  
Photo: McDonald collection

In the early years, and as the festival date approached Bernadette would have nightmares, real nightmares in which the theatre was barely half full. But it was never that.

Slowly, with her team, she began growing the event. Environmentally themed films were included in the line-up alongside the adventure films, adding depth to the programming. She and MacPhail engaged in long conversations about the future of the festival, brainstorming about how they might develop a strategy for enticing sponsors to help finance its growth. They imagined what a sponsorship arrangement might look like, which different categories might be defined – clothing here, footwear there...

“When you have that kind of commitment from your colleagues, and you have mutual respect, the energy kind of builds on itself in an explosive way. The energy – it’s exponential.”

Bernadette’s first big decision was to make a concerted effort to build the festival tour. The festival had toured before in a casual way, usually organized by one of The Alpine Club of Canada’s regional sections. At first there were just three cities on the tour – Calgary, Toronto and Ottawa.

At that stage, one unavoidable step toward growing it meant making cold calls. Progress was slow. She researched independent outdoor retailers in various cities and towns across North America who

might be interested in hosting a showing.

“It was hard.” Mimicking holding a phone to her ear, she demonstrated.

“Hello, I’m from the Banff Mountain Film Festival, and we...”

“Who? Where?”

“The Banff Mountain Film Festival. We show mountain and adventure films submitted from all over the world...”

“Can you send me some information?”

“Happily! Happily!”

And Bernadette would stuff envelopes full of brochures and send them off in the mail. Very often, the result was silence. Occasionally people would say yes. One of the early stops was Spokane, Washington, hosted by Mountain Gear. Progress was slow. Growing the tour, however, was important to her, personally as well as professionally. Having been involved in the festival in several different capacities, Bernadette had developed a very clear view of how much effort was involved in making the event happen every year. Her pragmatic, efficient and focussed self stepped forward.

“I thought, this is stupid. Why do people work for ten months to do something that is over and done with in three days? And only the few hundred people who come to Banff get to see it? Let’s amortize this work in such a way that lots and lots of people can see these films. And generate some revenue in the process.”

The reward for taking the festival on tour was three-fold. It benefitted the filmmakers to have more people view their work, as well as financially. It benefitted the companies that sponsored the festival. And it benefitted the Banff festival as it became increasingly well-known, increasing ticket sales and sponsorship partners, and allowing the festival to grow in length and scope. It was a win-win-win.

The physical task of taking the films on the road – in those days reels were contained in giant metal canisters the size of large pizzas – was often an adventure of its own. And through the early years, Bernadette was the one travelling with the films and standing on stage to introduce them.

On one such occasion, she showed the films in Chicoutimi, Quebec. Scheduled to catch a flight to Quebec City, the next tour destination, in the morning, she was keen to get to the airport early.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll take you to the airport,” the



Chicoutimi organizer offered.

"It's OK, I can take a cab," Bernadette replied.

"No, no, no, I'll take you to the airport."

He arrived at the hotel quite late, and they sped off to the airport.

"Oh, you have to run, the plane is ready to leave," exclaimed the gate attendant.

Bernadette ran across the tarmac lugging her bag of sixteen-millimetre film cannisters and lumbered – as gracefully as possible – up the staircase that dropped from the side door of the plane.

"The bag weighed almost as much as I did!"

She handed the attendant her boarding pass.

"Oh, not this plane, you want that plane over there! This plane is going to Montreal."

Bernadette ran back down the stairs lugging her bag of films and sprinted across the tarmac. Her plane was already moving! She waved her arms frantically, the pilot stopped the plane, dropped down the stairs, and she stumbled up them, the huge bag knocking her on the legs.

She's called her own cabs ever since.

Attending her first Outdoor Retailer show in Salt Lake City, Utah, was especially intimidating. "Beyond frightening." It's North America's largest outdoor industry tradeshow, and everybody is there. Thankfully, she did have an in; Mike Mortimer, owner of Calgary's popular Hostel Shop, prominent mountain personality and years later, Alpine Club of Canada president, took her under his influential wing and began introducing her to people. He knew a lot of people.

By the early 1990s Bernadette had taken a marketing-based sponsorship program, conveniently offered at the Banff Centre. The instructor was very encouraging.

"You have an unbelievable product," he told her. "You have such a targeted product. Your job is to learn which companies want to get in front of those people." For the most part, the answer was obvious—outdoor adventuresport equipment and clothing.

But there were other beneficial partnerships. Canadian Airlines was looking to shift their market to a younger, more active demographic. Acquiring an airline as a sponsor was an enormous coup, since its currency was seats on the planes that would deliver the speakers to Banff – or at least to Calgary's airport. Close enough. Sponsorship agreements were carefully planned and the benefits



meticulously outlined. What sort of programming would the festival offer? Would there be more hard-core adventure films, or more environmentally-focussed ones?

Out of this strategic planning Radical Reels was born. Conceived as a "fun evening" of action films, Radical Reels has since solidly established itself as the younger crowd's special night. Local middle- and high-school students scream their lungs out in a jammed packed theatre on a Tuesday – a school night, even. Some even let their parents tag along. From a marketing perspective, it's a perfect arrangement. The kids become hooked on the Banff Mountain Film Festival as teens and even pre-teens, and many are hooked for life. Better still, more than a few of them are inspired to embark on their own adventures, with some returning to share their films at the Banff festival.

As the festival grew, additional staff was hired as each job became larger than what could reasonably be handled by one person. Symbiotically, the additional staff members helped the tour grow too. Cold calls were no longer necessary, thank goodness! Now people called Banff, begging to host the festival. Sponsors wanted to sign on. This provided for the hiring of more staff.

"It was a massive amount of work. But we had more people involved and it became easier to run."

Bernadette "tidies up" the empty champagne bottles after an enjoyable afternoon at the Henley Boat Races – rowing matches between Oxford and Cambridge universities. She and cohorts Shannon O'Donoghue and Julie Summers adhered to the strict dress code – nothing above the knee, no cleavage and a hat. Photo: Shannon O'Donoghue, 2011





The Banff Centre for Mountain Culture was Bernadette's "baby" for a number of years, and the dream team made it all happen. Back from l. to r., Leslie Taylor, Patsy Murphy, Katherine Archer, Seana Strain; Front from l. to r., Anne Ryall, Laurie Harvey, Deb Smythe, Shannon O'Donoghue, Bernadette McDonald, Christine Thel. Missing from the line-up at that time was Producer, Woody MacPhail. He was probably fixing a projector! Photo: Donald Lee

## A book festival launches

As the film festival matured, it was impossible for Bernadette and her team to ignore the other key way of sharing mountain stories – books. Explorers, including mountaineers, have long written about their exploits and as a result a lot of great adventures have been recorded on the page. The Banff film festival had long invited guests who were writers in addition to being adventurers or filmmakers. Bernadette was also aware of mountain book festivals in Britain and France.

By then she valued the input of an advisory committee, which included among its ranks Hans Gmoser, founder of Canadian Mountain Holidays, the world first helicopter skiing company, co-founder of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides and all-around mountain champion. So, she invited him to lunch. At that time the film festival was growing steadily, and a sponsorship base had been built. The organization was healthy.

"I think we should grow the festival to add a literature component," she suggested to Gmoser. "What do you think?"

"Well, what would it look like?"

"We would have speakers, we would have readings, we would have seminars..."

"What do you think it would cost?"

"Well, I'm not sure, but I think... it would probably cost about this much if we were careful about making sure that the people who came for the book festival would also do double duty as jury members..."

"I think it's a good idea. How about if I sponsored it for the first three years?"

Wow! As he did so many times in his life, Gmoser shared the wealth and success he had grown with his business. Canadian Mountain Holidays went on to support the Banff Mountain Book Festival for many years.

The first Banff Mountain Book Festival in 1994 was run by Karen Barkley, a dancer with a long connection to the Banff Centre. After four years, Shannon O'Donoghue took on the job in 1998.

Over the course of three decades, the Banff Mountain Book Festival has established itself as the premier gathering in North America for the small and lovingly committed tribe of mountain writers who contribute to climbing, skiing and outdoor adventure magazines, and write books on topics near and dear to theirs and every other mountain lover's heart. Pico Iyer, David Roberts, Angie Abdou, Jon Krakauer, Wade Davis and Majka Burhardt comprise a small yet brilliant sampling



of the authors who have inspired and enthralled audiences with their written words.

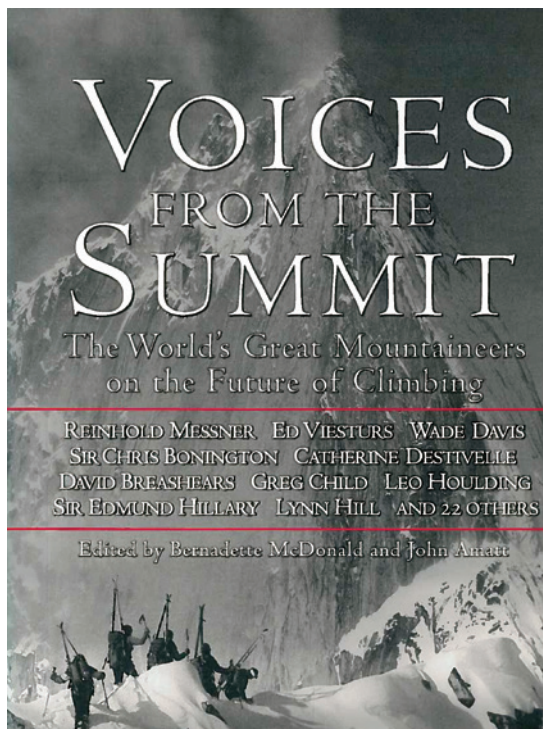
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With the book festival, like the aspects of the film festival, an idea was born, one person took the reins and as the number of details and scope of the workload grew, a process was designed so another person could be hired and the money to pay that person acquired.

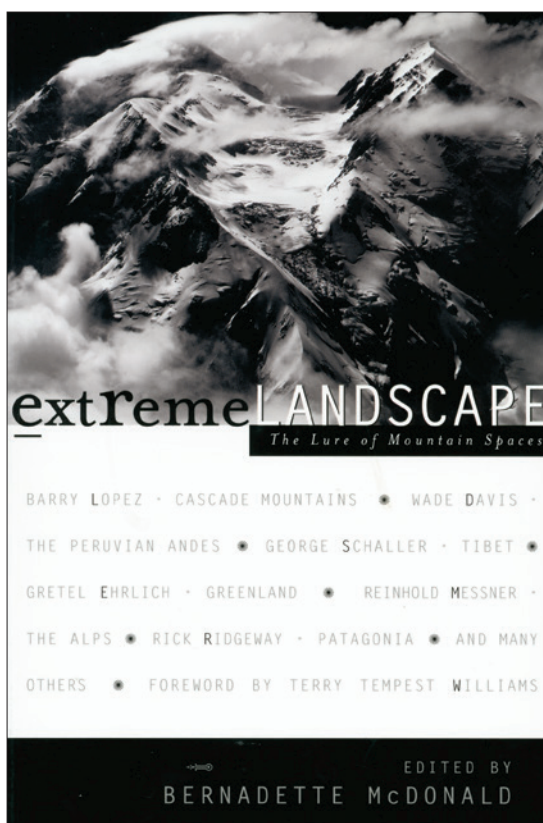
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In recognition of the team efforts involved, Bernadette adopted the practice of thanking her "Dream Team" publicly on the Eric Harvie Theatre stage every year on Banff festival opening night. Today, the Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival is capably run by fourteen to fifteen full-time staff, and three to five part-time people who are brought on in the months and weeks leading up to the event. The efforts and energy of some 120-plus volunteers are essential to making the event, which now runs for nine days in multiple venues on the Banff Centre campus.

In addition to her role as director of the Banff Mountain Film Festival, from 1997 to 2006 Bernadette also served as Vice President of Mountain Culture, a division of the Banff Centre. As the mountain festivals grew, additional mountain programming took shape including environmental conferences and mountain culture summits. At one point, Bernadette proposed a Centre for Mountain Culture to then President, Graeme McDonald. He agreed, pending the necessary ground work: market research, strategic plans, business plans. The Banff Centre for Mountain Culture was launched in 1997 when President McDonald announced it on opening night of the festival.



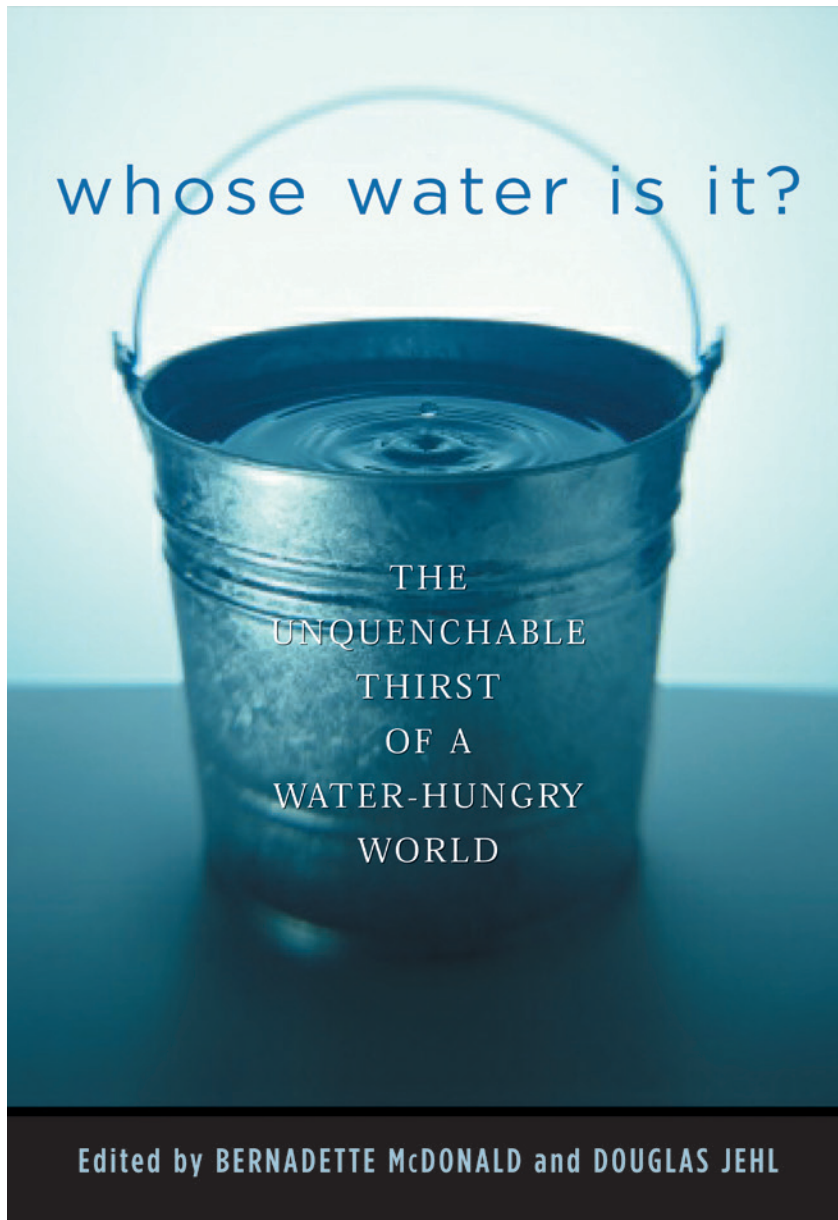
*Voices from the Summit* was published in 2000 by National Geographic in celebration of the first 25 years of the Banff Mountain Film Festival. Bernadette partnered with John Amatt to edit 32 essays by the world's top mountaineers; the publication was subsequently translated into several languages.



Hosted in 2002, the second Banff Summit focussed on extreme landscapes, and the book published by National Geographic Books was a collection of essays edited by Bernadette, this time solo.



## A beautiful circle



The third Banff Summit took place in 2003, this time focussed on water. For the book of essays published on the topic Bernadette teamed up with Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Douglas Jehl to edit the collection.

Anyone who has ever sat back in one of the Banff Centre's theatres to watch some of the exciting, thought-provoking, heart-wrenching, visually stunning or hilariously entertaining films the Banff festival shares with audiences year after year has likely walked away at least a little bit inspired to plan an adventure of their own or maybe make their own mountain-themed film. Over the decades, many films have inspired the next generation of climbers and paddlers and ski explorers to embark on their own adventures, and for filmmakers to

share stories of those expeditions.

Like the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child, and the same is true to nurture the art of fine adventure and wilderness-oriented storytelling. To do just that, the Banff Centre for Mountain Culture created workshops to help photographers, filmmakers and writers develop and nurture their craft – the Adventure Filmmakers Workshop, the Mountain Photography Residency and the Mountain and Wilderness Writing Residency. In turn, many of the programs' participants have returned to the festival to showcase their images, their films or present their books.

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### It's all part of what Bernadette calls "a beautiful circle."

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From the outside, some might see the Banff festival as a somewhat bulky machine, she suggests. If you look closer at the parts, however, there's a deeper purpose. A great majority of the tour locations are connected to a local partner, and the hosting partner is often a not-for-profit group, such as (and not infrequently) the region's Alpine Club of Canada section. A portion of the money raised from the screenings then benefits that organization. When the films are viewed, the filmmakers earn money for their hard work – which helps them make their next film – and the sponsors are happy to have their products exposed to their target audience.

Twelve years after retiring from the Banff Mountain Film Festival, Bernadette expressed honest joy at learning that the local cross-country ski club in hers and Alan's part-time home of Penticton, British Columbia was to host the festival for the first time with the proceeds going towards maintaining their day lodge and trail grooming equipment. This year the tour will share 1,100 screenings in forty-five countries on all seven continents.

When asked what the most stressful part of the job had been, Bernadette didn't hesitate.

"Financial stability. Keeping it all afloat. Everyone needs to get paid. There are good years and bad years, and that is the job of the person at the top."

And, it's the gift that keeps on giving. She can't count how many times while travelling, while



sipping tea – or wine – in an alpine hut or on a trail or at a crag, someone would notice the Banff Mountain Film Festival t-shirt she was wearing. One such memorable experience happened when she and Alan were climbing a multi-pitch route in South Africa. Bernadette was tied into the anchor at a ledge, belaying Alan as he led the next pitch.

A woman climbed up to her and asked, “Can I share the stance?”

“Of course,” replied Bernadette.

“Oh, we do Banff in Cape Town,” the woman said, nodding toward Bernadette’s t-shirt while reciting the titles and scenes of films she had enjoyed over the years.

“Bernadette, are you paying attention?” Alan called down.

“And how do you know the festival?” asked the woman.

“Well, we’re from Banff, I’m actually the director of the festival.”

“Aieeeee! Nowaaaayyy! Honey!” she called down to her husband. “You’ll never believe who’s up here!!!!”

“Is everything all right down there?” Alan called out.

“She just about fainted,” Bernadette recalled, grinning. “That was a fun one.”



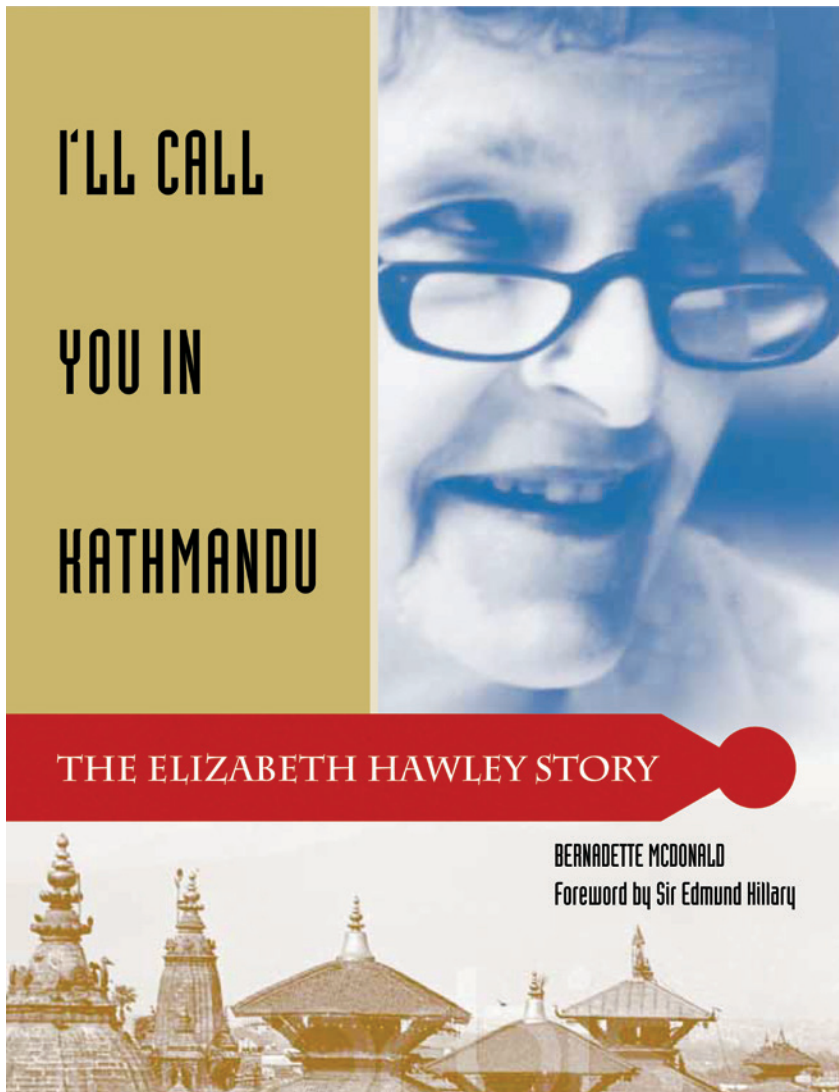
Bernadette founded Mountain Culture at the Banff Centre, a department committed to the environment and culture of mountain places. She served as vice president from 1997 to 2006. Photo: Banff Centre, circa 1998

Bernadette and Alan peruse maps with Himalayan mountaineer and author Harish Kapadia in Ladakh to determine their strategy if/when the horses didn't arrive. They didn't. Photo: McDonald collection, circa 2008





## The next chapter



The original edition of Bernadette's first biography, on Himalayan chronicler Elizabeth Hawley, was titled *I'll Call you in Kathmandu* and published by The Mountaineers Books in 2005. It was re-released by Rocky Mountain Books in 2012 as *Keeper of the Mountains*.

The idea was to create some kind of legacy in recognition of all the hard work and dedication that had gone into making the festival happen year after year. The year 2000 would mark the 25th anniversary of the Banff festival, and the team decided to invite a number of the world's most accomplished, admired and respected climbers and mountaineers to Banff. Thirty-two accepted the invitation.

For some (OK, yes, this writer) who attended that year, remembering listening to Sir Edmund Hillary and Yvon Chouinard speak, or seeing an aged yet spry Anderl Heckmair of the Eiger North Face 1938 first ascent team, or spotting Lynn Hill walking the halls of the Banff Centre during the Banff Mountain Summit still brings goosebumps.

It was a huge event.

Naturally, Bernadette and her team had decided from the beginning there was no sense in putting a ton of work into an event that would be over without a trace in a matter of days. There would be a book. Better yet, National Geographic, then a major festival sponsor, offered to publish the book, a collection of essays on various topics related to climbing, conservation and mountain culture written by the Summit's all-star line-up. The collection would be edited by Bernadette and John Amatt.

Voices From the Summit: The World's Great Mountaineers on the Future of Climbing is a keeper. For Bernadette, the project served as a terrific learning experience that opened her eyes to all the hard work and diligence that goes into writing, editing and publishing a book. Part of her task included writing a section on some of the Banff festival history. Her first experience at creating something tangible struck a chord.

Not long afterward, she found herself at the Outdoor Retailer show in conversation with several people from Seattle based Mountaineers Books, which had been an early and enthusiastic sponsor of the Banff Mountain Book Festival. Somehow, they touched upon the subject of Elizabeth Hawley, who had spent the last half-century in Kathmandu diligently documenting every notable Himalayan climb, usually through famously thorough interviews with the climbers.

"Her life must be really interesting, and nobody knows anything about her because she's always writing about everybody else," Bernadette commented. "Wouldn't it be interesting if..."

"Would you like to write her biography?" asked Helen Cherullo, publisher with The Mountaineers.

"Uh, you mean for a book?"

"Well, yes, if you could get her to cooperate with you, we would publish that."

"Really? Well, OK. Let me ask her."

Through her role with the festival, Bernadette had come to know Elizabeth Hawley, communicating frequently about information in her reports. And, "for some strange reason" Hawley agreed to the project.

Prior to flying to Kathmandu where she would interview Hawley in her home over a period of ten days, Bernadette gathered insight about how to approach her assignment. Whatever you do, she was instructed, know your stuff. If you don't,



she will write you off. And bring her a present. She likes presents.

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Bernadette studied. And she went shopping for chocolate – Bernard Callebaut chocolate – as well as a rather large bottle of single malt Scotch.

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As part of her meticulous preparation, Bernadette wrote out hundreds of questions. Knowing that Hawley was a “factual” kind of person, Bernadette felt totally confident she would answer any fact-based questions without hesitation. Bernadette colour-coded those questions green. She asked those questions first, and Hawley was forthcoming with all the answers.

Then she moved on to ask the questions she had colour-coded yellow – those that required an opinion. Hawley was less cooperative, replying somewhat guardedly.

Knowing that Hawley was famously – notoriously, even – private, in the final days of her interview Bernadette prepared to enter the dragon’s lair armed with the questions she had marked as red. By that time, she felt they were getting along quite well, becoming friendly, joking even. Bernadette felt Hawley respected her tactic as, one after the other, she delivered the tough questions. Steeling herself, Bernadette hit the big, triple red question.

“I asked her about her relationship with Edmund Hillary.”

Hawley’s face tightened, and then broke into laughter. “You conniving vixen, you! You’ve been waiting all this time to ask me that question!”

Hawley’s answer is near the end of the biography.

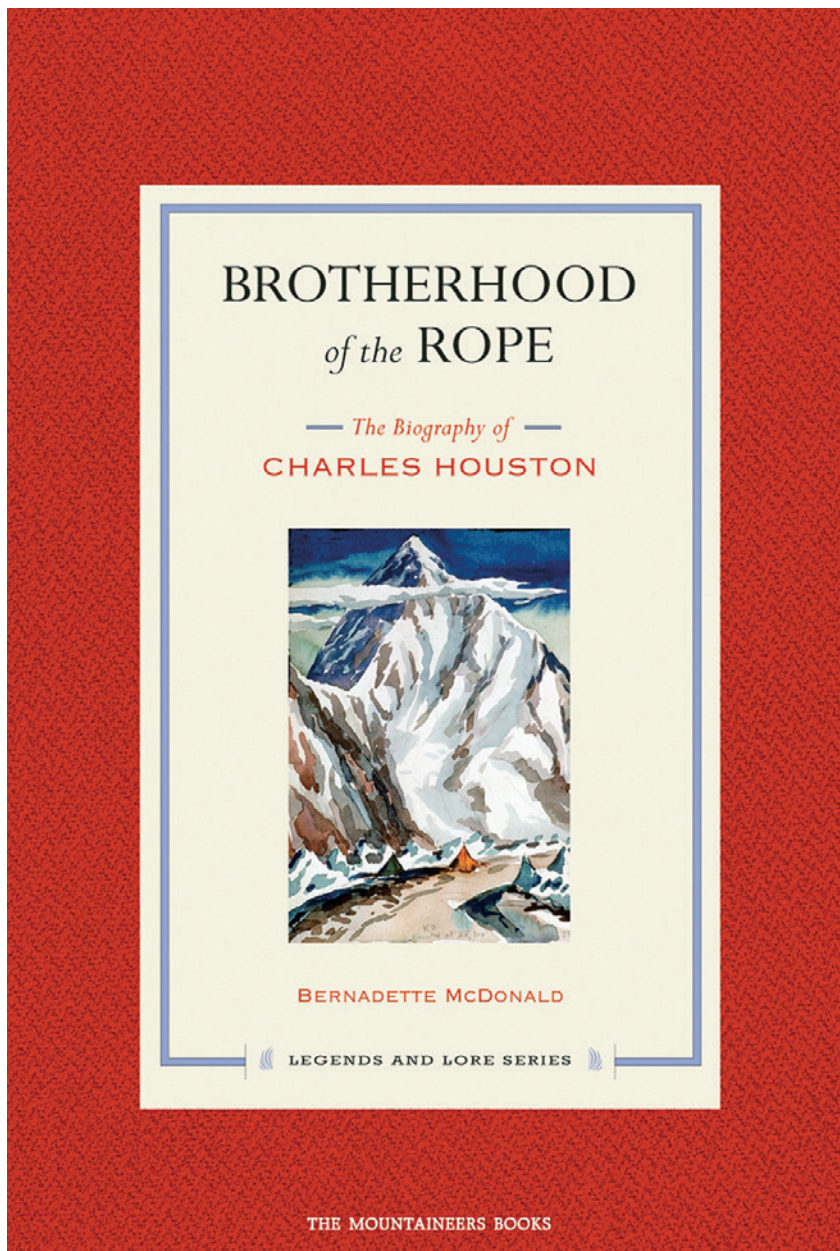
Top: Bernadette stands with Elizabeth Hawley in front of Elizabeth’s Kathmandu apartment and her famous blue Beetle. McDonald Collection

Bottom: Bernadette and Alan made a second trip to climb in Kalymnos, Greece in 2003, where the limestone proved even better than their first sampling. They were joined by Marc Ledwidge, former Banff National Park public safety specialist. Photo: Marc Ledwidge





## Somebody needed to do it



*Brotherhood of the Rope*, Bernadette's biography of American climber and high-altitude medicine specialist, Charles Houston, was published by The Mountaineers Books in 2007.

Writing a book is no easy task. It demands spending day after day, month after month, sometimes years reading other books, doing research, taking notes, recording interviews – including travelling to record them in person – transcribing those recordings, communicating by phone, email, Skype, writing, rewriting, organizing photographs, writing captions and myriad other tasks. It's a big job. And always with a deadline.

Bernadette, of course, already had a job.

Fortunately, the Banff festival granted her a leave of absence to write. By the time she finished *I'll Call You in Kathmandu: The Elizabeth Hawley Story* and it was released in 2005, she decided the entire enterprise had been "a lot of fun."

Before long, she was working on her second biography. She had known Charlie Houston for sometime, since he'd appeared at the Banff festival as a guest.

"A wonderful man," he was also in his nineties and in the later years of a remarkable life of ground breaking climbs and high-altitude medical research. Bernadette had long been encouraging him to write a memoir, because through their conversations she had developed a sense that he possessed some wonderful reflections on life, on teamwork and on friendship. Finally, he said to her, "I don't want to do it. Why don't you write it? I'll cooperate with you fully."

*Brotherhood of the Rope* was published in 2007, again by The Mountaineers Books. Getting the book written, however, was an exhausting affair. She was still running the Banff festival and after a full day at her office she would stay up until the wee hours, typing at home. Before she had time to blink, though, she was committed to writing her next book, which coincidentally began in a similar fashion to Houston's biography.

The Slovenian alpine powerhouse Tomaž Humar was a guest of the 2001 Banff Mountain Film Festival where he delighted attendees with his infectious laugh, explosive energy and hand-crushing/shoulder-pumping handshake. Naturally, Bernadette became acquainted with him and even climbed with him in Croatia and Slovenia.

"He was such a natural storyteller," she recalled with obvious fondness. "I would say Tomaž, you are funny, funny! You've had incredible adventures."

He certainly had. By 2000 he had established himself among the world's boldest alpinists with





his solo climb of Annapurna's north face French Route in 1995, several new routes including Ama Dablam's northwest face and the west face of Nuptse West – his partner died on descent – and a solo ascent of Dhaulagiri's south face in 1999. His exuberant personality, unconventional climbing decisions tempered by a fierce need for privacy made him something of a lightning rod for attention – both positive and critical. Then there was a spectacularly serious fall while building his home that left him dealing with serious fractures and months of rehab.

"That story alone," Bernadette declared, "was almost like a book. I kept saying, 'you have to write this stuff down.' And he kept saying 'no, no no, I don't want to do that.'"

Then in 2005, while attempting to climb Nanga Parbat's Rupal Face solo he became trapped by avalanches and melting snow around 6,200 metres. The ensuing rescue by Pakistani helicopter pilots Lieutenant Colonel Rashid Ulah Baig and Major Khalid Amir Rana was the stuff of a Hollywood blockbuster. Media interest intensified to fever pitch.

By that time, Bernadette and Humar had become good friends. He trusted her. The media repeatedly contacted her in hopes of being connected with him. She did not betray him and blocked them. Back home in eastern Europe, he took his

son rock climbing in Croatia in effort to escape the onslaught of attention and made it clear to Bernadette that he did not want to talk to any media about what had transpired on Nanga Parbat. She was honest with him.

"You know what, now, Tomaž, you have to write about what happened. It's time for you to write that book."

"Alright."

"Take the time you need to get over this and spend time with your family." In just a few days he replied to her.

"I'm not interested in doing this, but I hear what you're saying. Would you do it?"

"I don't know. I can try. Let me see if I can find someone to publish it." There was no point in writing the book unless someone was keen to publish it. Coincidentally – or more likely serendipitously – she was in the UK at the Kendal Mountain Festival enjoying a conversation with award-winning British author Andy Cave when she mentioned she had an incredible opportunity on her doorstep but was unsure how to proceed.

"Talk to Tony Whittome," Cave suggested. Whittome was Cave's publisher at UK Random House. Cave even went the extra mile and approached Whittome for her.

Tomaž Humar was published in 2008. The meticulously researched and brilliantly detailed

Charlie Houston's favorite film was *Scent of a Woman*, which features an aging blind man with a fondness for fast cars. As Houston's own blindness progressed, Bernadette couldn't resist arriving with a red Mustang convertible to transport Charlie to the launch of *Brotherhood of the Rope*. Like in the film, Charlie insisted on getting behind the wheel. Unlike the film, Bernadette insisted on keeping the keys in her pocket. Photo: McDonald collection, 2007, Golden, Colorado





Tomaž Humar was a great story teller, as is clear from this photo, taken high on a ridge in Slovenia's Julian Alps. Photo: Maja Roš, 2008

Nanga Parbat helicopter rescue chapters alone should be on every adventure lover's reading list. Bruce-Willis-eat-your-heart-out material.

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## During the writing of the book however, Bernadette hit overload.

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She and Alan had begun planning the next phase of their lives and had purchased a piece of land on the Naramata bench overlooking Okanagan Lake. They'd set up a small trailer where they lived for part of the summer while she continued to work at the Banff Centre and, for a time, was also working on the Houston and Humar books all at once. It wasn't good. Worse, their tiny trailer home had no wifi and she was on deadline with two manuscripts.

"I remember driving into town [Penticton] to go to various coffee shops and the info centre to poach wifi so I could send photos and drafts back and

forth to the various publishers. It was awful."

Her transition from her Banff Centre career, where she had an office, a secretary and a team, to her one-woman show as a writer certainly tested her well-honed time-management skills. It was decision time. It was a year or so earlier than planned, but in 2006 she made the difficult decision to retire from the Banff Centre. It was bittersweet: the sadness of leaving her team and a wonderfully challenging job balanced by the excitement of a new writing career. The hardest part was saying good bye to her colleagues. O'Donoghue stepped up as film festival director.

Interestingly, the two books remained connected; in the autumn of 2009, Houston died in September, Humar in November. At ninety-six, Houston's passing surprised no-one. Sadly, although Humar was just forty, in some ways his didn't either. But for Bernadette, it was an emotional experience.

The initial phone call came during the week of her birthday from a mutual friend who asked if she might have any contacts to help organize a rescue. Humar was trapped again, this time at about 7,200 metres on Nepal's Langtang Lirung during another solo climb. She offered what help she could, but in the end Humar's luck ran out and the Swiss



helicopter pilots effected a recovery, not a rescue. During the course of writing his biography, when Bernadette had broached the topic of his potential for an early death, he exploded.

“The relationship was quite volatile. He was someone who, when I asked a difficult question, didn’t hold back. That was one time that he really let me have it, saying that he had full intentions of becoming a grandfather one day. It wasn’t easy working with Tomaž, but it was worth it. I think he was, ultimately, a good soul, and that counts for a lot.”

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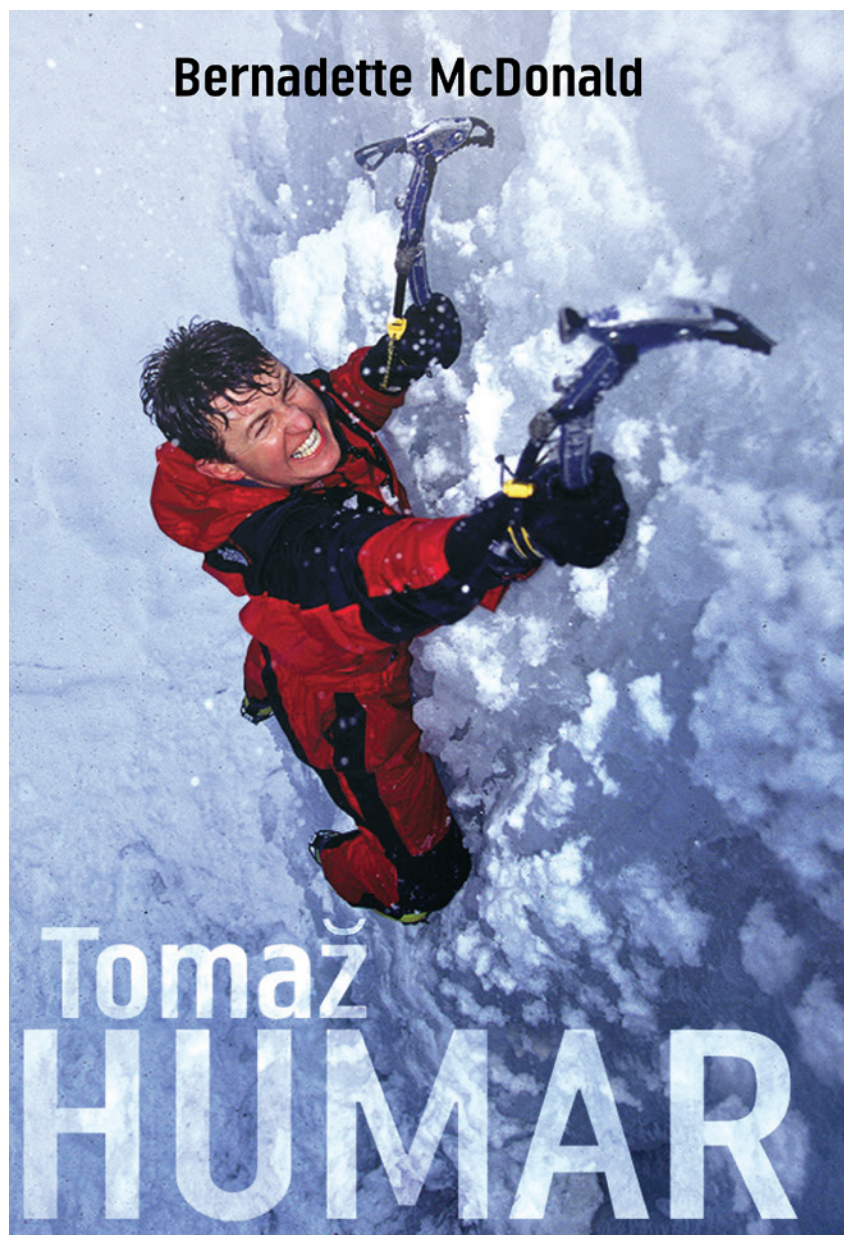
Taking the challenges in stride, without a break Bernadette soon launched into her next project.

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She’d left the Banff Centre to pursue a writing career and felt she should take the opportunities as they came along. Inspiring Creativity was a Banff Centre publication celebrating the institution’s 75th anniversary, in which she wove together an eclectic collection of essays, short stories, poetry, photography, art works, set designs, musical scores and interviews with some of the Centre’s accomplished performers.

The book was one of several that showcase her broad scope and depth of interests. Previously, published in 2002 in association with the Banff Centre, she had also edited *Extreme Landscape: The Lure of Mountain Spaces*, a collection of essays by eighteen authors, including Barry Lopez, George Schaller and Gretel Ehrlich in celebration of the United Nations’ designated International Year of Mountains. The following year she had co-edited *Whose Water Is It? The Unquenchable Thirst of a Water-Hungry World*, another collection of essays that examine the global water supply crisis from different perspectives.

Following her departure from the Banff Centre, she also wrote, in partnership with her Naramata neighbour, artist and musician Karolina Born-Tschümperlin, *Okanagan Slow Road*. Published in 2014, the lively coffee-table book expresses her passions for good food, fine wine, artwork and the



region she first experienced as a teenager visiting her parents on Christmas break with a delightfully knowledgeable tour of local farmers’ markets, bakeries, orchards and world class wineries paired with rock climbing, canoeing, cycling and bird-watching, all set to a backdrop of the valley’s four distinct ecosystems.

“That was my attempt to connect with a different kind of community, and an attempt to get to know this valley as well. And I did.”

Bernadette’s biography of Slovenian climber, Tomaž Humar, was published by Random House, England in 2009.



## Alan McDonald



When he was eighteen, Alan McDonald left his hometown of Ottawa for the Canadian Rockies. Banff was known as Canada's ski mecca, and he spent two years as a ski bum. He worked as a bellhop at the Banff Springs Hotel and skied the North American chair at Norquay, then his second winter as cook's helper and pot washer at Sunshine Village, living in staff accommodation and skiing every day.

Pierre Lemire (at the beginning of his long and respected mountain guiding career), took Alan on his first backcountry ski tour, on the Wapta Icefield. Then and there Alan decided he'd like to be a park warden. He enrolled in the wildland recreation program at Selkirk College in Castleguard, British Columbia, and worked four winters as an avalanche technician in Rogers Pass.

"We would live up at Mount Fidelity for four or five days, going out in storms and in the middle of the night to take measurements and record readings."

At season's end the staff hosted a party up at the cabin, and their wives and friends would ride up on the snow cat. That's where a beautiful young woman with a face tanned from skiing all winter showed up.

"There was this beautiful girl, her face was brown as a berry and she had these blue eyes. She was a dream come true! I think I fell in love that night." Nothing happened at that meeting, but the following summer when Alan was living the hippie life in Field, Bernadette was working at the Kicking Horse campground. There was a small laundry there, and Alan rode his bike with a backpack full of dirty clothes out there often.

"I rode my bike out there a lot!"

They began dating and bonded over their shared love of the mountains.

"We were kindred spirits. She was up for anything."

Alan's first rock climb was with fellow Field resident, Pierre Lemire, on a route Pierre had put up on Mount Field, Rainbow Route. It scared the bejesus out of him.

"But I was hooked."

With their trusty Freedom of the Hills, Alan and Bernadette learned to climb together, an activity they still enjoy sharing. Some twenty-five years ago they began climbing at Penticton's Skaha Bluffs, still a favourite for both. No longer alpine climbing, just a few summers ago they climbed the demanding 13-pitch 5.8 bolted route Achilles Spire on the Rockies' Mount Andromache, putting in a twelve-hour day.

"Pretty good for a couple of senior citizens," Alan joked.

Looking back, Alan loved his career choice.

He learned to ride horses – fast – while herding bison in Elk Island park, but he couldn't wait to be back in the mountains.

"Elk Island is a long ways from the mountains."

Being stationed at Sunwapta was perfect.

"I just loved the whole range of duties. We did bear management, highway response, backcountry patrol on horseback, avalanche control on Parker Ridge, ski touring trips and climbs on Columbia and other peaks in the Columbia Icefield area. People knocking on your door in the middle of the night. It was pretty full-on!"

While living in a location with only a hand-crank phone connecting them to the warden dispatcher in Jasper required a certain mind-set, having Bernadette come along on his patrol trips was terrific.

"Sunwapta was almost the highlight of our warden life. In those days, wives could come along. Bernadette came with me on skis, on horseback, on skidoos. She was tough. She can break trail with the best of them, she always takes her turn. And we did a lot of slogging."

When it came time to retire, Alan knew he'd need a project. They knew Naramata was a beautiful place, and the vineyard is working out perfectly for them both. They'd spent lots of time in the Mediterranean – not just rock climbing but enjoying the lifestyle, the food, the wine and being able to go into the garden and pick fresh vegetables for dinner.

"Naramata is a place where we could recreate that – without moving to Italy," Bernadette said.

For his part, Alan is proud and happy to see Bernadette enjoying her success, including her frequent travels.

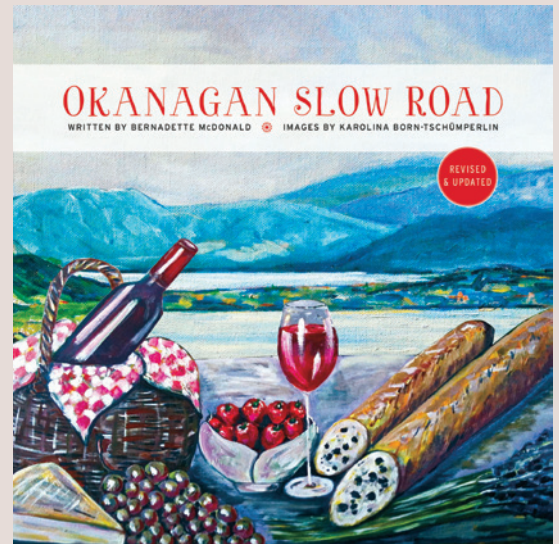
"We're best friends. We do a lot together, but not everything. It's important to have your freedom. But when she travels, she's never gone long."

And while he insists growing grapes is his perfect retirement project, he's pretty sure Bernadette's found hers too.

"There's no half measures with Bernadette, everything she does, she does in extremes. She's definitely never retired. I think her life has gotten busier."



## Retirement – sort of



Above: Bernadette collaborated with artist Karolina Born to create *Okanagan Slow Road*, celebrating a slow food/ slow travel approach to the Okanagan Valley, published by TouchWood Editions in 2014. An updated edition has since been published.

Left: Bernadette climbs at her “home” crag at Skaha Bluffs near Penticton, British Columbia. Photo: Rupert Wedgewood, 2017

Below left: Bernadette and Alan’s Artemesia Vineyard in Naramata, British Columbia is their labour of love (and great flavour). Photo: John Niddrie, 2011

Below: Bernadette tends to some young vines at hers and Alan’s vineyard in the South Okanagan Valley. Photo: Alan McDonald, 2008





## It all began with a party

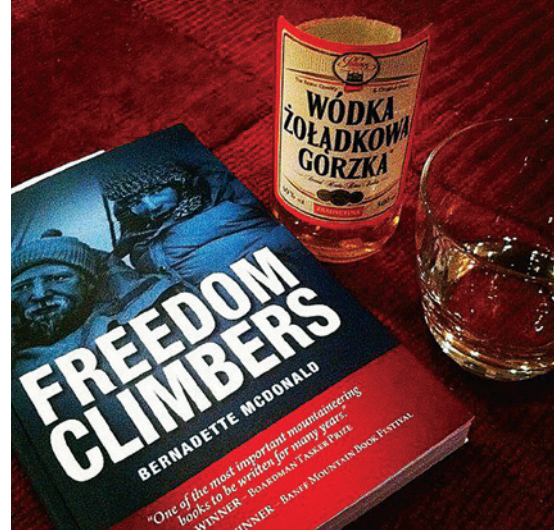


Bernadette smiles despite her cramping hand while signing copies of her multi-award-winning *Freedom Climbers* in Sheffield, England.  
Photo: John Coefield, 2012

Through a series of circumstances, Bernadette was helping organize a climbers' film festival in Katowice, a city of 300,000 in Poland's industrial heartland. At the festival's wrap party, she found herself meeting the stars of Poland's climbing community. It was the who's who, not only of Polish climbing, but of Himalayan climbing – Krzysztof Wielicki, Andrzej Zawada, Artur Hajzer, plus widows of Jerzy Kukuczka and others.

"It really was an amazing gathering."

The names roll off her tongue as easily as reciting the attendees of a backyard barbecue. At the party, she listened to the stories. Not just about climbing, but painting the towers, smuggling to fund their expeditions. Incredible stories. At the time, she imagined they would make terrific material for an in-depth magazine article. She wasn't thinking of herself as the appropriate writer, only that the topic



*Freedom Climbers*, the story of Polish Himalayan climbing, was published in Canada by Rocky Mountain Books in 2011, and in many other countries, including in the UK with this cover by Vertebrates Publishing.

would be interesting for some writer to explore. Over the following years and subsequent trips to Poland, she came to know the Polish climbers better, and eventually began to see herself as the writer to record those fantastic stories.

Finding a publisher, she soon realized, would be a challenge. Each one she mentioned her idea to would respond with, "Oh ya! Ooooh... great. Ahhhhh, hmmm...nobody's really interested in Poland..."

For a time, she even had an agent, climbing writer David Roberts' "really good agent", who is, in fact, from Eastern Europe.

"He said the same thing to me. It's a great story, but I don't think I can sell this."

Then one day she was having coffee with Don Gorman of Rocky Mountain Books, a decidedly Canadian publisher of Canadian mountain-focused books, sharing a conversation about marketing, what books sell, and how those decisions are made.

"If you could write any book, right now, if you could pick any topic, what would it be?" he queried.

"Oh, that's easy," she replied. And she told him about the Polish climbers' stories begging to be written – and published.

"I'll publish it."

"You?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Are you sure? It's about Polish climbers... It's not about anything that RMB is interested in..."

"I'd love to publish it."

With such a huge idea, so many characters and so much material, Bernadette recognized she could use some help organizing the structure of the book. Maybe more than a little. So, she applied for the Mountain and Wilderness Writing program – a program she had started years before, offered every fall at the Banff Centre for three



weeks of intensive work. She was accepted.

While most writers who take the course arrive with a project well underway, Bernadette was accepted on her outline, so she was madly writing for the weeks leading up to the start, and madly writing, from scratch, all through the program. While she only worked on about four chapters while she was there, the process became ingrained in her head so when she went home to work on her own, the writing progressed smoothly.

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Her biggest challenge in terms of the subject matter was how to connect the climbs and the climber to the political events and influences of the era. It was complicated.

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“It was very interesting, but also a pretty tricky thing to do. But I knew that was how the story had to be told. It was also a challenge because the written history of the country and the oral history, depending on who was telling it, are all so nuanced.”

That element would be even more pronounced, and more delicate when the book was translated into Polish and published in Poland for Polish readers.

“When it came out in Poland, I was nervous all over again. People who had been generous with me with all their information and their support, well it’s all fine and dandy, but now it was the entire mountain community that I was facing. They were really surprised that a foreign person would tackle their history. But they knew there likely wasn’t anybody in Poland who could do that with any semblance of objectivity.”

By nature, mountaineering books can very easily be simplistic. *Freedom Climbers*, and her book that followed in its wake, *Alpine Warriors*, which tells the story of Slovenian climbing from the 1970s thru the 1900s, are anything but. The books are



Above: Bonnie Hamilton joins Bernadette atop the Goloritze spire in Sardinia. Alan and Marc Ledwidge were there too, but the summit wouldn't fit four. Photo: McDonald collection, 2005



Left: Bernadette savours a ski tour on a blazingly beautiful day in Kananaskis Country, Alberta. Photo: Alan McDonald, 2010

deep, layered, colourful and engaging. Bernadette’s careful study and relating of the countries’ turbulent political climates make those books so much more worthwhile on multiple levels.

The Slovenian story, she added, was even trickier to write because their connection to the Yugoslav wars of the mid-1990s is so much more recent, more immediate. Writing the book was more complicated than the Polish story on a structural level too.

“Of course, you never know this when you start.”

With *Freedom Climbers*, the structure eventually formed around three central characters – Wanda Rutkiewicz, Jerzy Kukuczka and Voytek Kurtyka – whose narratives carried throughout the book. Happily, for Bernadette and Rocky Mountain



Books, it was awarded the Grand Prize at the 2011 Banff Mountain Book Festival – one of numerous awards it earned.

With *Alpine Warriors* however, none of the main characters evolved in such a way that the book could focus on them. The Slovenian climbing community was fractured and volatile, rife with infighting and jealousies. Patriotism did not bond them as it did for the Poles. While working on *Alpine Warriors*, Bernadette expressed her conundrum to Toronto author and editor Marni Jackson, who, with UK publisher and editor Tony Whittome, has run the Mountain and Wilderness Writing program since its inception in 2002, Jackson pointed out that she did have a main character – Nejc Zaplotnik.

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The author of a beautifully written book on his connection with climbing as a spiritual and physical part of his life, Nejc Zaplotnik was the one member of the Slovenian climbing community who was revered by everybody.

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“And it’s so true. They had all read his book multiple times; they all had copies of his book. He was their soul mate, their spiritual mentor. His writing is so beautiful, but I didn’t know how beautiful it was until I had it translated into English. I quoted extensively from it and he became my main character, even though he was dead.”

Released in 2015, *Alpine Warriors* won Bernadette the Banff Mountain Book Festival Award for Mountaineering History.

## Awards

- 2018 – named a Fellow of the Explorers Club
- 2017 – Jon Whyte Award for Mountain Literature, Banff Mountain Book Festival for Art of Freedom
- 2017 – Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature for Art of Freedom
- 2017 – National Outdoor Book Award for Biography for Art of Freedom
- 2015 – Mountain History Award, Banff Mountain Book Festival for *Alpine Warriors*
- 2014 – Città di Verbania prize for Italian edition of *Freedom Climbers*
- 2014 – Grand Prix from le Salon international du livre de montagne de Passy for French edition of *Freedom Climbers*
- 2013 – Himalayan Club Kekoo Naoroji Award for Mountain Literature for *Freedom Climbers*
- 2012 – American Alpine Club Award for Mountain Literature for *Freedom Climbers*
- 2011 – Named to Canada Who’s Who
- 2011 – Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature for *Freedom Climbers*
- 2011 – Grand Prize, Banff Mountain Book Festival for *Freedom Climbers*
- 2010 – Leggi Montagna prize for Mountain Writing for Italian edition of Tomaž Humar
- 2010 – ITAS prize for Mountain Writing for Italian edition of Tomaž Humar
- 2010 – Honorary Member, Himalayan Club
- 2009 – Alberta Order of Excellence, Alberta’s highest honour
- 2009 – Kekoo Naoroji Award for Mountain Literature, awarded by the Himalayan Club for Tomaž Humar
- 2008 – Kekoo Naoroji Award for Mountain Literature, awarded by the Himalayan Club for Brotherhood of the Rope
- 2007 – Summit of Excellence Award
- 2006 – King Albert Award for international leadership in the field of mountain culture and environment (co-awarded with colleague, Leslie Taylor)
- 2002 – Queen’s Golden Jubilee Medal
- 2001 – United Nations appointment as the official Canadian representative and speaker at the opening of International Year of Mountains at UN headquarters in New York
- 1960 – 1973 – numerous music scholarships and prizes





Above: In 2009, Bernadette was awarded Alberta's highest honour, the Alberta Order of Excellence. This official photo was taken at the awards ceremony in Edmonton.  
 Photo: McDonald collection



Left: In 2006, Bernadette, along with her colleague, Leslie Taylor (not in photo), was awarded the King Albert Award for international leadership in the field of mountain culture at a ceremony in St. Moritz, Switzerland.  
 Photo: McDonald collection

Below: In 2007, one year after retiring from her position as Vice President, Banff Centre for Mountain Culture, Bernadette was given the Summit of Excellence of Award in Banff. Her proud family came out from British Columbia to celebrate with her. Flanking Bernadette are her brothers, Rod and Kenneth, with her parents Erna and Lester, seated. Photo: Alan McDonald





## Crescendo



More than 600 people turned out in Warsaw for the Polish launch of *Art of Freedom* – and for a glimpse of the elusive Voytek. Photo: McDonald collection, 2018

Naturally, Bernadette soon found herself writing another book that needed to be written, about another subject who didn't want to write about himself.

The enigmatic Voytek Kurtyka was a leading light of Poland's golden age of climbing, whose visionary "night naked" climbs continue to astound and inspire. Famously reclusive, he's long shunned interviews or attention. He was not interested in writing an autobiography. Coming to know Bernadette over the years though, he agreed to let her tackle the job.

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"It was a wonderful surprise that he agreed to cooperate with me. When I realized I could do it, there was no question that if I had anything else on my plate, it was pushed to the back burner. I had to write it before he changed his mind!"

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Voytek Kurtyka regales Bernadette with (no doubt) yet another hilarious story at La Grave, France, where he was about to receive the lifetime Piolet d'Or award. This was just months before the release of *Art of Freedom*. Photo: Piot Drżoż, 2017

Working with Voytek was "pretty great."

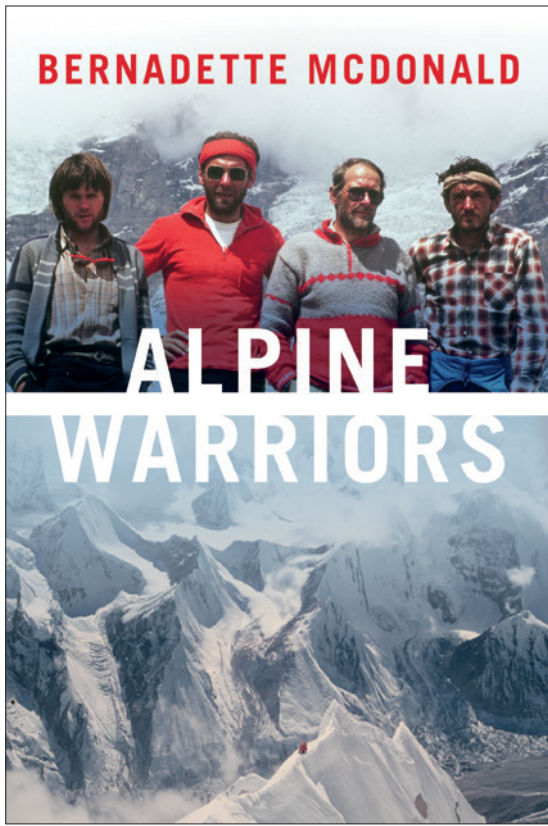
He provided access to his journals and photos, he dug it all up. They spent hours discussing his climbs, his motivation, his spiritual and religious beliefs, his partnerships, his community, commercialism. It was intense. She'd work with him in Poland for seven to ten days at a time, then she'd return home to Banff or Naramata, sit at her keyboard and work with her notes. Then the next time she was in Poland for whatever reason – as a jury member for a mountain film or book festival – he'd set aside more time.

And he told her outrageous stories. Sometimes, though, as she listened intently, the details and the character traits wouldn't quite add up. She realized he was pulling her leg!

"Stop wasting time! I'm only here for two more days! We just wasted an hour for you to tell me that stupid story!"

Fully realizing this project involved complicated subject matter and a complicated main character, Bernadette applied again to the Mountain and Wilderness Writing program, and again, was accepted. This time she was quite far along in the writing process (tenth draft), and essentially sought to polish her manuscript. Just like playing piano or rock climbing, practice, practice, practice leads to excellence. *Art of Freedom: The Life and Times of Voytek Kurtyka*, published by Rocky Mountain Books in 2017, earned Bernadette the trifecta of





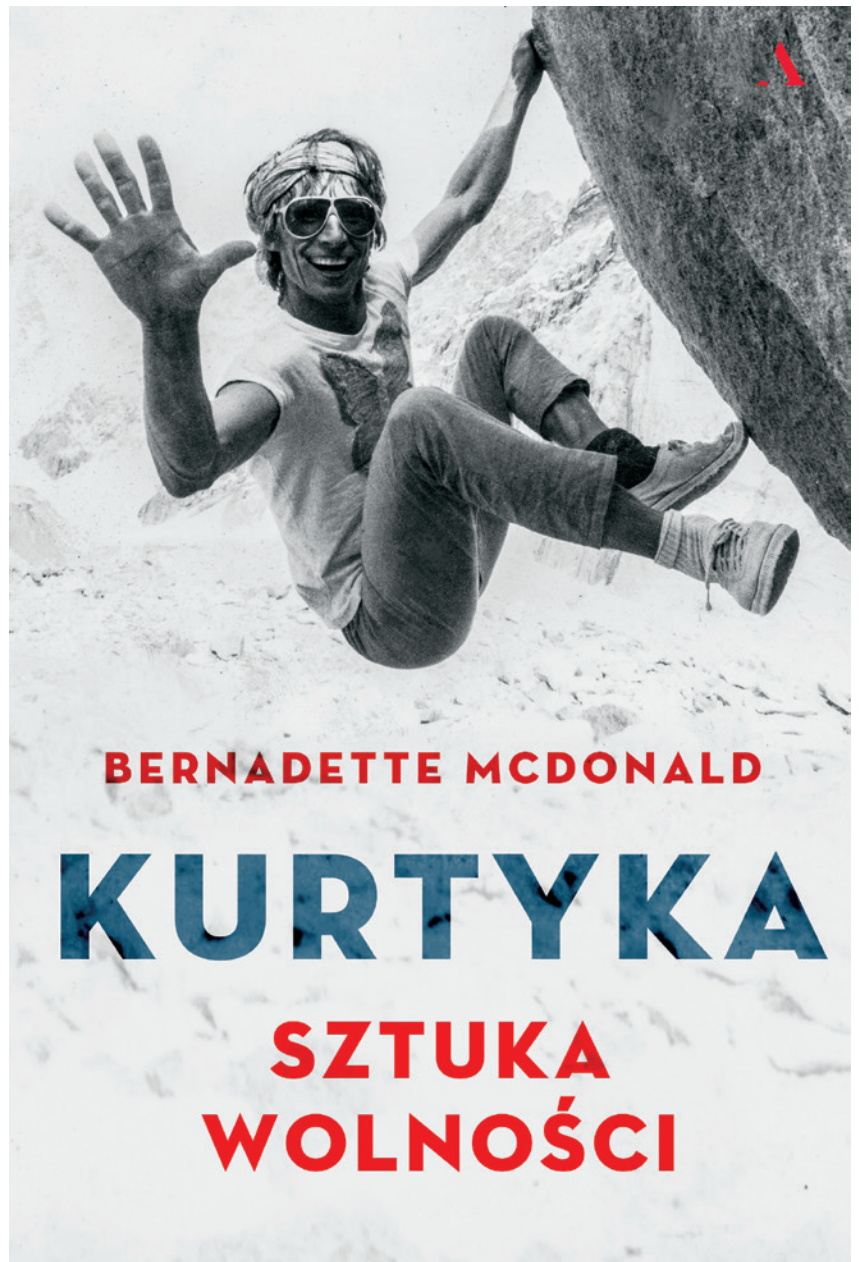
*Alpine Warriors*, the story of Slovenian Himalayan climbing, was published by Rocky Mountain Books, and eventually published in ten languages.

outdoor writing awards – the Banff Mountain Book Festival Award for Mountain Literature, the National Outdoor Book Award and the UK’s prestigious Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature.

Then for an encore, the Polish publisher, Agora, hosted a big launch, transforming the entire main floor of their building into a presentation space, complete with lights, camera and make-up artist. It soon filled with hundreds of fans, eager to catch a glimpse of the reclusive Kurtyka. Live-streamed around the world, the Polish diaspora tuned in. Afterward as she toured with the book in North America she met plenty of readers who had watched the launch.

From volunteer to festival director to editor to author and presenter at the Banff Mountain Book Festival – as well as live interviewer for featured Banff film festival guests – Bernadette now embodied her own beautiful circle, her contributions to the mountain community spanning decades, generations and continents.

By summer 2017, with her manuscript off at the publisher where the designer worked her magic,



Bernadette had time for a little – and much needed and earned – break. Her work was done.

“That summer felt like a holiday,” she said with a laugh. “I climbed more last summer than I had in ages. It was just great.”

It was shorted lived though, as the 2018 summer was jammed with events, including three trips to Poland, two in just two months.

Not one to rest on her laurels, Bernadette had also begun work on her next project.

“Is it a book?” I asked.

“Well, yes... I’m doing research. That’s all I’m going to say.”

First published in Canada by Rocky Mountain Books, this is the Polish cover of *Art of Freedom*, Bernadette’s biography of Polish alpinist, Voytek Kurtyka.



From accomplished concert pianist to intrepid backcountry adventurer to world-respected mountain film festival director to award winning author (many times over), Bernadette McDonald has led a life marked by hard work, dedication, careful attention to detail and well-earned accolades.

She also knows how to have fun.

An astute interviewer and polished storyteller, Bernadette recognizes which adventurers and mountain personalities will engage audiences and keep them spellbound, whether it's from their seats during film showings and live presentations at the Banff Mountain Film Festival or while turning through the pages of one of her exceptionally well-crafted books.



From her earliest piano lessons to running the Banff festival for nineteen years to writing biographies of remarkable people who trusted her to tell their stories, Bernadette McDonald has continually strived to reach her own peak not for her own benefit, but for the pleasure of mountain enthusiasts around the world.

These remarkable and admirable attributes are perfect examples of why she deserves this latest honour, being named Patron of the 2018 Mountain Guides Ball.

For further information regarding the Summit Series of mountaineering biographies, please contact the National Office of The Alpine Club of Canada.  
[www.alpineclubofcanada.ca](http://www.alpineclubofcanada.ca)



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