



## AAC Publications

---

### **Alpine Warriors**

By Bernadette McDonald

**Alpine Warriors. Bernadette McDonald. Rocky Mountain Books, 2015. 335 pages. Hardcover, \$30.**

Any follower of modern climbing in the Himalaya will know of the exploits—bold, inspirational, occasionally shameful—of Slovenian climbers. The names Štremfelj, Česen, Humar, and Prezelj have filled magazines and Internet reports for decades. But it's likely only the cognoscenti will recognize and understand the importance of the earlier Slovenian greats: climbers like Stane Belak, Viki Grošelj, Aleš Kunaver, and Marjan Manfreda. In the 1970s, these and other climbers in the former Yugoslavia were at the forefront of Himalayan climbing, with first ascents like the south face of Makalu and the direct west ridge of Everest. In *Alpine Warriors*, Bernadette McDonald tells the full story of these climbs, the men and women behind them, and the country that shaped these climbers—a country riven by war and privation, but also one unified by a mountain, Triglav, which every citizen aspires to climb.

Of all the climbers in the years before Slovenia won independence in a 10-day war in 1991, one man had outsized influence: Nejc Zaplotnik, who died in an avalanche on Manaslu in 1983, at age 31. Zaplotnik not only was a key figure in several great Himalayan climbs, he also wrote a slim book in 1981 that profoundly influenced Slovenian climbers and remains a strong seller in the country to this day. *Pot*, meaning “the Path” or “the Way,” is a philosophical work on life and climbing, and when McDonald discovered how much Slovenian climbers treasured the book, she arranged to have it translated to English. *Alpine Warriors* is peppered with quotes from Zaplotnik's work, as here, reflecting on his dull day job in a bank:

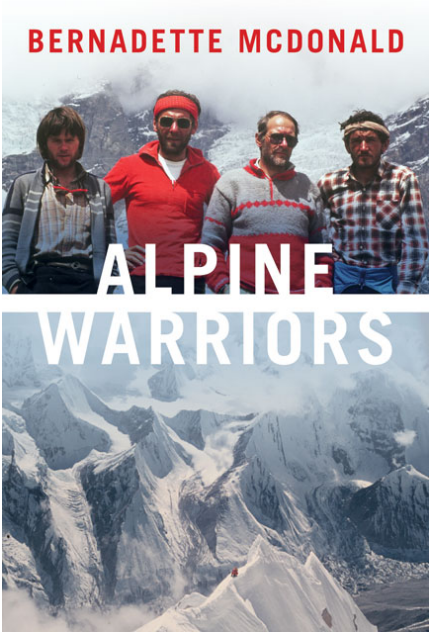
Day after day I sit at the window in a smoky office. Darkness falls quietly on the bustling city streets, only the mountains still glow scarlet. Their blinding light falls directly onto my miserable window.... My coworkers are beautifully adjusted to me, so perfectly that they never even notice me. How I would like to share with them at least some of the yearnings and hopes and blue horizons within me.

McDonald's tale does not end with the 1970s and '80s climbs on the 8,000-meter giants, but extends into other arenas with influential climbs like Janez Jeglič and Silvo Karo's testpieces on Bhagirathi III and Cerro Torre, and Marko Prezelj's wide-ranging first ascents. Modern Slovenian climbing also has been colored by scandals (Tomo Česen) and antics (Tomaž Humar) that McDonald covers thoroughly and objectively. (She previously wrote a biography of Humar, published in 2008.)

In its unveiling of lives and climbs previously hidden by the curtain of politics and language, *Alpine Warriors* serves like a sequel to McDonald's much-lauded previous book, *Freedom Climbers* (2011), which covered Polish climbers before and after the fall of communism. Both books perform an essential service, ensuring that the stories of those bold and deadly years on the greatest Himalayan faces are preserved, while the survivors are still around to tell them. With its colorful characters and the fascinating thread of *Pot* running throughout, plus a lighter, more agile touch in her writing, *Alpine Warriors* is McDonald's best book yet. Now, who will tackle the great untold story of Soviet and Russian climbing?

– Dougald MacDonald

Images



## Article Details

Author	Dougald MacDonald
Publication	AAJ
Volume	58
Issue	90
Page	371
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Book reviews