Voytek Kurtyka is one of a rare breed of climbers for whom the route rather than the summit was key. His visionary approach centred on small teams of like-minded individuals using alpine rather than expeditionary styles. Kurtyka preferred the term ‘unleashed’ rather than ‘alpine’ as it freed him from the ties of sledge tactics. He resisted awards and public appearances, maintaining that while climbing can produce physical and mental wellbeing and wisdom, accolades can lead to vanity. He exemplified this with his unwillingness to accept the Piolet D’Or Lifetime Achievement Award. But after refusing it for three years in a row, he was told that he would be awarded the prize in the spring of 2016 whether he was there to accept it or not. It is a measure of the respect earned by McDonald that Kurtyka agreed to her writing his biography and framing it with the award and his reluctant acceptance.

Kurtyka partnered with many prominent climbers during his career, foremost among whom was Alex MacIntyre. One Day As A Tiger: Alex MacIntyre and the Birth of Light and Fast Alpinism by John Porter (Vertebrate Publishing, 2014) captures the essence of MacIntyre’s life and the style of small-group, informal high altitude climbing that he and Kurtyka embraced in the 1970s. Sadly, MacIntyre died in the Himalayas at the young age of 28 after being struck by falling rock on Annapurna. The first half of Art of Freedom has several stories about MacIntyre and it was fascinating to read the differing perspectives of him as portrayed by Porter and Kurtyka.

Kurtyka also partnered with Sandy Allan, Doug Scott and other top British climbers, and made several unsuccessful attempts with them on the Mazeno Ridge on Nanga Parbat. This was eventually achieved by Sandy Allan and Rick Allen, earning them a Piolet d’Or in 2013. Sandy Allan’s In Some Lost Place: The first ascent of Nanga Parbat’s Mazeno Ridge (Vertebrate Publishing, 2015) describes this epic adventure. There are interesting parallels between that January 2013 climb and Kurtyka’s and Robert Schauer’s 1985 traverse of Gasherbrum IV in that both teams spent several days descending from high altitude without water to drink and with attendant hallucinations.

Throughout his long climbing career, Kurtyka developed an innate sense of danger that he took careful heed of, turning back from climbs that he had worked hard to put in place even as his companions continued on. This led him to part ways with a number of partners over the years who had seemed willing to ignore warning signs as they pushed on to force successful outcomes.

In Art of Freedom, Bernadette McDonald succeeds in getting inside the complex character of Voytek Kurtyka in a book that slowly takes hold of the reader and makes it hard to put down. I agree with Steve House’s assessment, repro-
duced on the cover, that this is “an absolute gem of a book.” The book is beautifully illustrated and well edited (above the norm), and deservedly won three major awards in 2017: The Banff Mountain Book Award for Mountain Literature, the Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature, and the History/Biography Award from the National Outdoor Book Awards.

Art of Freedom: The Life and Climbs of Voytek Kurtyka by Bernadette McDonald; Rocky Mountain Books, 2017; ISBN 9781771602129; 8 x 9 inches; 328 pages; hardcover; $32.00.

Field Notes for the Alpine Tundra
By Elena Johnson
Reviewed by Bill Perry,
Island Mountain Ramblers

In July and August 2008, Elena Johnson was the writer in residence at an ecology research station in the Yukon Territories’ Ruby Range. She accompanied a team of University of Alberta biologists conducting research for the Klune Alpine Ecosystem Project. The result of this unusual residency is a collection of poignant and memorable poems, interspersed with charts, lists, diagrams and drawings. The first poem sets the scene:

“... Curtains of mosses, curtains of rain.
On the ridgetop,
A sheep’s horn—
a hook that parts the clouds.”

This book is part of a very small genre: poetry mixed with research field work—but a familiar mix for anyone who has dabbled in both of these. Then add the fact that this work takes place in the wilderness, above treeline, in terrain very familiar to the alpine hiker and mountaineer. In that way, it reminds me of Dick Culbert’s Coast Mountain Trilogy—poems written, at least in part, while he was a member of a boundary survey crew.

Elena Johnson brings the scene to life by describing the simple routines of camp life. “A cluster of tents / on the creek beds of June ... From inside the cook tent always rain or not-rain.” And yet “the afternoon could be a vestibule of sun or snow.” At night, “The wind keen the ropes / that tie shelters to stones.”

The people—the members of the research crew—appear as interlopers, an ephemeral presence on the vast landscape. “Three small figures hike slowly upstream ... they seem to move noiselessly ... the creek lils over the stone.” Finally, they “hunch / at day’s end, over a kitchen table / that is a series of planks.”

Other main players in the drama are time, the weather and the land. “The mist slows. / Up on the western ridgetop / a slight whisper of motion / like the sssshhhh / of breeze through treetops / in this place where there are no trees.” She tries to keep track of the days: “I scratch lines on a rock ... I count suppers ...” and realizes that “The weather can’t be counted. The moss, the mist, the hours.”

I think that anyone who has worked outdoors in fields such as geology or biology, and has a flair for the artistic, will relate to this book. Sometimes I look back at that part of my own life as a collection of forestry field notes with poetry or song lyrics scribbled on the back of the odd survey card.

This small book doesn’t take long to read, but the images may last quite a while, as “Each landscape leaves its mark — / a scratch on the heart, faint / as a pole-scar on talus.”

Field Notes for the Alpine Tundra by Elena Johnson; Gaspereau Press Limited, Printers and Publishers, 2015; ISBN 9781554471454; 8 x 5 inches; 44 pages; paperback; $17.95.

A Century of Antics, Epics, & Escapades: The Varsity Outdoor Club 1917-2017
Published by the UBC Varsity Outdoor Club
Review by Ron Dart, ACC-Vancouver Section

Those who have studied at the University of British Columbia (at undergraduate or graduate levels) and who have had some interest in mountaineering (at whatever level) will have joined and done a variety of trips and treks (of various levels of challenge and competence) with the Varsity Outdoor Club, one of the oldest mountaineering clubs on the west coast (the Alpine Club of Canada and British Columbia Mountaineering Clubs yet older). The 100th anniversary tale of the Varsity Outdoor Club from 1917–2017 is aptly, graphically and generously told and recounted in the finely packaged and printed A Century of Antics, Epics, & Escapades: The Varsity Outdoor Club 1917-2017.