

# NEW APPROACHES TO THE KONDIKE GOLD RUSH

## *A Review Essay*

BY MYRA RUTHERDALE

### *Gold Diggers of the Klondike: Prostitution in Dawson City, Yukon*

Bay Ryley

Winnipeg: J. Gordon Shillingford, 1997. 108 pp. Illus., maps. \$19.95 paper.

### *Women of the Klondike*

Frances Backhouse

Vancouver: Whitecap, 1995. 211 pp. Illus., maps. \$16.95 paper.

### *Gamblers and Dreamers:*

#### *Women, Men and Community in the Klondike*

Charlene Porsild

Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998. 250 pp. Illus., maps. \$19.95 paper.

**H**ISTORICAL LITERATURE, both popular and academic, is an integral part of memorializing the past. These three books, each in its own way, contribute to the creation of a collective memory of the Klondike gold rush, whose hundredth anniversary was marked in the summer of 1998. We are introduced to a fascinating and adventurous array of characters who often risked life savings and an arduous northern voyage in the hopes of striking it rich. Unlike many studies of the Klondike,

these works offer a more balanced approach by incorporating gender. Yet significant differences in intent are obvious. Ryley and Backhouse have written accounts well suited for a general audience, whereas Porsild offers a more analytical study of community formation in Dawson. However, each adds to our understanding of the dilemmas and anxieties conveyed during this historical moment in Yukon history.

In *Gold Diggers of the Klondike*, a brief, essay-like text, Bay Ryley chron-

icles the anxieties provoked by prostitution in Dawson. Based largely on court records, newspaper accounts, and government documents Ryley sees Dawson as a local site where sexuality was scrutinized, normative images of masculinity and femininity challenged, and struggles over notions of respectability, space, and place won and lost. Ryley shows that Dawson's newcomers were, initially, willing to tolerate prostitution as an inevitable part of gold-rush society. She goes on to examine how anxieties emerged as local leaders struggled to create more permanent institutions (like schools and churches). Reformist zeal in other parts of English Canada, Ryley notes, prompted interior minister Clifford Sifton to insist on the suppression of dance halls, or, as he called them, "bar-rooms with women of ill-repute in attendance" (59).

According to Ryley, Sifton and the Women's Christian Temperance Union failed to acknowledge the extent to which prostitution was an economic issue as well as a moral one. Here we see how Dawson served as a microcosm of the sexual double standard. Women were forced, for instance, to present themselves for medical examinations every two weeks, in compliance with the Contagious Diseases Act. Each time they had to pay a hefty five dollars per exam to the civic coffer. As the *Klondike Nugget* reported, the income was "a handsome one and the commission profitable" (53). The North-West Mounted Police also gained from the fines accrued through routine roundups. Ryley makes clear that male customers and pimps were infrequently charged or slandered in the reformist discourses, which increased in intensity as Dawsonites drew "moral boundaries" around their town.

Ryley also suggests that by 1903, as new families settled and the gold rush

ended, the contest for conventionality and respectability was over. Unfortunately, her short book offers little in terms of a theoretical discussion on popular perceptions of respectability; instead, one of the ironies skilfully underscored is that in present-day Dawson the tourist industry basks in the glory of historical characters like Klondike Kate and Diamond-Tooth Gertie, characters whom respectable Dawsonites may have shunned 100 years ago. Apparently a new double standard is played out every summer.

The voices in Ryley's study, mediated through court records, express women's determination to protect themselves against unjust or false charges. Whereas Ryley's focus is entirely on prostitution, Backhouse's aim is to reconstruct a much wider portrait of women's experiences in the Klondike. Here we have a more colourful set of narratives. By combining diaries and letters with newspaper sources, Backhouse unearths society women and debutantes, Salvation Army lasses, theosophists, missionaries, school teachers, seamstresses and entrepreneurs, Harvard University graduates, doctors and nurses, journalists and tourists, as well as prostitutes. Backhouse considers their full range, and she does so in terms of the broader social dimensions of ethnicities, classes, races, and religions that confronted one another in the Klondike.

While Backhouse has done a good job of casting light on many women unknown to most historians, she sometimes records their lives without much reflection on feminist concerns and without questioning prior assumptions. For instance, she states that "one of the greatest breakthroughs for working women in the late Victorian era was their entry into the offices of government and business" (140). The feminization of clerical work might be

recast as less than a breakthrough than a step towards a system of gendered labour exploitation. Or, in commenting on the wife of the Anglican bishop of the Yukon, she says of Sadie Stringer that, "in addition to her social obligations, Sadie actively supported her husband's work and kept the home fires burning during his many trips to visit the territory's far flung mission" (124). She travelled less than he, but hardly stayed home for her husband's needs alone. She became a missionary in her own right, despite the fact that she was not compensated as such by her own church.

These details aside, what Backhouse does well is to display the wide range of women's roles in the Klondike. In so doing, she places the public/private dichotomy in serious doubt, at least for the first phase of Klondike life. Yet, while gendered boundaries often shifted, ideas about women's innate femininity and need for protection, as well as men's masculinity, remained part of the gold seeker's baggage. Backhouse nicely juxtaposes notions of propriety with the mundane realities of life in boomtown Dawson. At times women relied on traditional sentiments of femininity. Backhouse offers a good example in Ethel Berry, who seemed prepared for hardships but ended up being somewhat pampered by her male travelling companions – at least that is how she portrayed herself: "I had only to hold my hands and play lady" (40). We see this device again through another woman, in search of grocery items, who said that she could beg shopkeepers "and arouse their sympathy because [she was] a woman" (48). In truth, and Backhouse makes this plain, most women were just as strategic and hardy as their travelmates and, occasionally, more so. Not all men, we are reminded, had the

vigour and pluck needed to rough it in the North.

Women may have challenged gendered stereotypes, but their bold adventures were not always welcome. Backhouse notes that often unmarried or divorced women passed as widows and identified themselves as "Mrs." to gain respectability (78). And, while women's earnings might be crucial in securing adequate family incomes in Dawson and on the creeks, their essential monetary gains were often overlooked or downplayed. In her lively discussion of "daring women" Backhouse gives due emphasis to the social constraints they faced.

Similarly, Charlene Porsild confirms that, while gendered boundaries were challenged and defended, Dawson did not offer unconstrained spaces within which to operate or advance. Yes, there were daring women like Texas Bill, a packer on the Chilkoot Pass, who remained "undaunted by Victorian notions of womanhood," but for the most part the new settlers in Dawson attempted to emulate the customs and norms held by other Victorians (61).

In enticingly entitled chapters on Aboriginal peoples, gold miners, prostitutes and the underworld, social work and religion, and professionals and family life, Porsild challenges dated, but still popular, assumptions about community formation in Dawson. She questions the notion that Dawson operated as a democratic mining frontier. While anyone from an old-timer to a newcomer could strike it rich on the creeks, not just anyone could belong to the "Nucleus of 400," a group, if not a compact, of like-minded families who socialized and formed the inner circle of the professional elite. Her use of family papers is perceptive. Members marked their status by hiring Japanese or African-American house-

keepers, ordering the latest fashions from catalogues, and holding exclusive parties. The majority of families were outside of this circle and were ostracized by their occupations, races, ethnicities, or religions. Especially marginalized were prostitutes, dance-hall women, and Aboriginals.

Porsild disputes the popular image that American gold rushers constituted the majority of the population; instead, she finds a cosmopolitan atmosphere, with many French- and English-Canadians as well as British newcomers. The balance, of about 20 per cent, came from the rest of the world. Porsild's close reading of the census material helps correct any false assumption that Dawson consisted of "a gang of unruly Americans tamed by Mounties in red serge" (18). She also tackles the myth that Dawsonites were transient. In 1901, 65 per cent of its residents had lived there for three years. This should be tempered by the fact that the Yukon's population dropped from 40,000 in 1898 at the height of the rush to 27,000 in 1901, suggesting a significant amount of transiency throughout the territory. But, for the core of families who stayed behind, community building became the focus. Newcomers appropriated the landscape in order to maintain their ordinary pre-existing practices in the transplanted institutions of churches, hospitals, schools, shops, and offices.

Their efforts were far from benign. Sensitive to how the rush affected the Aboriginal cultures of the area, Porsild portrays the encounter as one that left the Han without resources and territory as well as subject to disease and racism. Part of Dawson was the site of the Han's summer village, but once the miners arrived thirty Han families were relocated to a reserve three miles downriver. The Moosehide reserve con-

sisted of 160 acres, the same amount of land (an irony Porsild reveals) that was given to individual homesteader families in the west. We are not told how the Han were removed or if they went willingly. Unlike the Han, members of the Tagish, Tlingit, Gwich'in, and Southern Tutchone participated in the gold rush as guides, boat builders, packers, and, in some cases, miners. They also provided essential provisions.

While Porsild expands our understanding of the impact of the gold-mining society on the Yukon's first peoples, she leaves several questions unanswered. She readily admits that more work must be done on mixed marriages. I suspect that there was more interaction between Dawsonites and Aboriginals than Porsild allows. Bishop Stringer, for one, frequently had Aboriginal visitors at his home. Government sources and census data are not entirely reliable when assessing population shifts, labour participation, or the long-term impact of the rush on Aboriginal populations. Aboriginal oral histories would be useful here.

Just as heightened views of respectability and propriety were juxtaposed with prostitution and dance halls, so too can we position individual claims of longevity and membership in the Yukon Order of the Pioneers. Nothing marked masculinity in Dawson more than being a sourdough or old-timer in the community. Male pioneers were publicly recognized and respected for the number of years they had stayed. Women were not included in this club, nor were Aboriginals recognized for their efforts in helping the so-called pioneers survive the trip across the Chilkoot and their first Yukon winters.

Porsild's work is a welcome addition to histories of frontier community formation, like those by Paul Voicey and Jeremy Mouat. For me Porsild's treat-

ment of those often ignored in studies like this – women, Aboriginals, and ethnic minorities – places this work well above most other resettlement studies. Another feature, which will surely please Northerners, is Porsild's personal connection to the North through her grandparents. Her reflection on their experiences lends this book further authenticity.

In different but useful ways, all three books provide new approaches to the history of the Klondike gold rush and its aftermath. Given the more recent commodification of the Klondike, its seasonal rituals, and its social memories, these works will push us towards a more critical and grounded reevaluation of what happened there a century ago.