

# MINING THE RUSH:

## *Recent Publications Relating to the Klondike Gold Rush*

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THE RECENT CENTENNIAL celebrations of the Klondike gold rush have sparked a virtual renaissance of writing about the North. Publishers and authors alike have profited from the record number of visitors to Alaska and the Yukon in recent years. Scholars have much to celebrate as well, since the recent outpouring of literature has made available a wealth of new sources.

The general interest in Northern subjects has always made for a strong book market, but the centennial of the Klondike in 1998 provided a nice focus for the field. Not surprisingly, a number of publishers have jumped at the opportunity to take advantage of the situation, and the University of Alaska Press in Fairbanks is one of those. Its most recent brochure, for example, lists eleven titles relating to the Klondike.

Three of these are the published memoirs of Northern men and women who lived, worked, and travelled in the Yukon and Alaska between 1898 and 1900. The most recent of these is *The Alaska-Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins*. Elizabeth Robins was an American actress and literary figure who, in 1900, set out for the Klondike looking for her two brothers. The editors of the diary claim that this is "the most engaging, witty, and readable" diary documenting life in Alaska and the Yukon at the turn of the century

(1). While the editors' claim is debatable, there is no question that Robins manages to capture the very essence of the Northern mining frontier in her journal. Her detailed diary, which she kept between April and November 1900, became the raw data for her numerous short stories, articles, and two novels (*The Magnetic North* [1904] and *Come and Find Me* [1908]).

Robins' diary is remarkably similar to the published diaries and memoirs of other upper-class women who made the long trek north at the turn of the century. She travels in relative comfort, regularly drops the names of the dignitaries and officials she encounters, and is generally pampered and celebrated wherever she goes. She wants for few material things and is not required to labour for her keep, thus she is wonderfully free to comment on her fellow travellers and other contemporaries, something she frequently does with wit and humour. For scholars looking for evidence of continuity between North American mining rushes, there is plenty of evidence here of miners, professionals, and business entrepreneurs trying to make a success in Nome after doing likewise in the Yukon, Colorado, and California. Historians looking for meaningful commentary on the conditions of women's lives and work in this period, however, would do far

better to consult the published diary of Anna DeGraf, entitled *Pioneering on the Yukon* (1992), which details working women, their joys and their difficulties, in Fortymile, Dawson, and other Northern communities during the same period. Still, Robins' diary is an interesting account of a woman's brief foray north, nicely introduced and interspersed with a few archival photographs and a smattering of Robins' own Kodak prints.

Perhaps more representative of Klondike memoirs is the University of Alaska's timely reprint of William Haskell's *Two Years in the Klondike Gold-Fields. 1896-1898* (1997). First published in 1898, this book is a fascinating and highly readable account of everything from the journey inward to the characters of the streets and bar-rooms of Dawson. Haskell is a witty and humorous commentator, yet, unlike Robins, he manages to convey a great deal of the gritty, frustrating, and exciting nuts and bolts of daily Klondike life as experienced by its principals.

In a similar vein, the Washington State University Press provides us with the diary of William Shape, entitled *Faith of Fools: A Journal of the Klondike Gold Rush*. Packaged as a coffee-table book, it is the diary of a very average working gold miner. As historian Frank Norris notes in his foreword, William Shape was "in many ways indistinguishable from the rest of the Klondike tide" (xii). The work begins with a photograph of a page from the diary itself (something that would have greatly enhanced the Robins' journal), and this is followed by a steady interspersing of Sharpe's photographs along with his daily entries. Like Robins and hundreds more Klondike diarists, Shape's account is brief. He begins with the journey to the goldfields in the late summer of

1897 and ends with the journey home just a year later. In between, however, he provides an eyewitness account of some of the most celebrated events of the gold rush and intimate details of the lesser-known Klondike route – the Chilkat Trail. Written for and preserved by his family, the publication of William Shape's diary is both timely and important. The design, content, and introductions combine to make this brief diary a very valuable contribution to the fields of Klondike history and Northern travel exploration.

A somewhat similar book in both format and content is the posthumously published *Trail to the Klondike*, which was written and compiled by Pacific Northwest broadcaster Don McCune. *Trail to the Klondike*, like *Faith of Fools*, takes the form of a coffee-table book, richly illustrated by the most famous of the Klondike's professional photographers, E.A. (Eric) Hegg, and interspersed with smaller photographs of McCune's 1969 journey over the Trail of '98. The text of *Trail to the Klondike* is the narrative of that 1969 trip, with added extracts from the diary of Fanny Ostrander. Ostrander journeyed over the Chilkoot Trail in 1987 with her husband. Using Ostrander as his guide, McCune and his crew retraced the steps of the Klondikers, experiencing for themselves the thrills, the blisters, the bracing winds, and the relentless mosquitoes. Yet Ostrander is overshadowed here. She is literally a ghost lurking in the past, prevented from coming fully into the light of day. The publisher provides several useful appendices to the work: biographies of McCune and Eric Hegg, and a brief overview of the Chilkoot Trail. The value of the work for historians, however, is diminished by the absence of biographical material on Fanny Ostrander

and the absence of an appendix containing her unabridged diary.

Related to the published diaries and documents of Northern travellers and gold stamperers are the dozens of photograph albums that now fill the Northern section of bookstores. Three of the most recent titles were produced by Graham Wilson and Wolf Creek Books in Whitehorse, Yukon. *Southeast Alaska: Early Photographs of the Great Land*; *The Klondike Gold Rush: Photographs from 1896-1899*; and *Paddlewheelers of Alaska and the Yukon* all appeal to the popular book market as small, inexpensive mementos of a trip up the Alaska Highway or through the Yukon en route to a cruise ship waiting in Skagway. Still, these slim volumes offer a wealth of information from which scholars might benefit. The small collections of photographs are treasure troves highlighting some of the excellent photographic documents housed in research libraries in the Yukon, Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington State. While intended as souvenirs, I welcome the little books as sets of documents ready for analysis.

There are, of course, also a growing number of monographs on Northern

life and culture, and Lael Morgan's *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush* is one of these. This detailed study examines numerous women who worked in the sex trade and entertainment industry in the Klondike, Nome, southern Alaska, and Fairbanks between 1890 and 1920. Morgan points out the complexity of these women's experiences and the multi-dimensional nature of their lives. She documents this with painstaking care and detail in an engaging and readable style. Morgan's work is rich in detail, proliferating in numerous, lengthy quotations from old-timers and their descendants, from the period newspapers, and from the testimony of some of the women themselves.

Scholars, then, have much to celebrate as the centennial celebrations of the Klondike gold rush draw to a close. Publishers are taking a renewed interest in publishing primary documents and photographic collections, which means documents held in private hands for generations are now coming to light. These hold great promise for historians interested in retelling the old story and finding new, meaningful stories yet untold.

#### BOOKS REVIEWED

Haskell, William. *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields, 1896-1898*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1997. 578 pp. Illus., maps. \$29.50 paper.

McCune, Don. *Trail to the Klondike*. Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1997. 114 pp. Illus., maps. US\$19.95 paper.

Moessner, Victoria Joan, and Joanne Gates, eds. *The Alaska-Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins*. 1900. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1999. 390 pp. Illus., maps. US\$22.95 paper.

Morgan, Lael. *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush*. Fairbanks and Seattle/Vancouver: Epicenter/Whitecap, 1998. 352 pp. \$16.95 paper.

- Sharpe, William. *Faith of Fools: A Journal of the Klondike Gold Rush*. Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1998. 95 pp. Illus., maps. \$37.95 paper.
- Wilson, Graham. *The Klondike Gold Rush: Photographs from 1896-1899*. Whitehorse: Wolf Creek, 1997. 112 pp. Illus. \$12.95 paper.
- Wilson, Graham. *Paddlewheelers of Alaska and the Yukon*. Whitehorse: Wolf Creek, 1999. 112 pp. Illus. \$12.95 paper.
- Wilson, Graham. *Southeast Alaska: Early Photographs of the Great Land*. Whitehorse: Wolf Creek, 1999. 128 pp. Illus., map. \$16.95 paper.