

GOLD RUSH WRITING

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THE LITERATURE OF THE KLONDIKE

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN seriously to study the available literature dealing with the Klondike gold rush in all its ramifications, I was struck by two things: first, the astonishing number of books — well over a hundred — that had already been written on the subject (not to mention several hundred magazine articles); and, secondly, the dearth of books viewing the phenomenon as a whole.

This should not have been surprising. The great stampede, especially in its latter stages, was one of the best-covered news events of the nineteenth century, coming as it did in the first fine careless rapture of a popular and personal journalism that had just been dubbed “yellow”. There must have been several score of newspapermen in Dawson City at the height of the gold rush. The *New York Times*, naturally, had a man there and so did all the papers in New York, Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco and Seattle. The *Globe* of Toronto had a girl reporter on the scene and so did the *Times* of London. (She later became a Lady.) The *Manchester Guardian* had a correspondent who was to emerge as one of the great tycoons of Klondike gold mining. (He had been a don at Oxford.) Hearst’s shrill *New York Journal* sent a platoon of five men to the Klondike, including the aging Poet of the Sierras, Joaquin Miller. All the leading magazines, such as *Harper’s*, *Scribners*, *The Century* and so on, had their own men on the spot. Many of these later committed their experiences to hard covers.

The Klondike was to make some literary reputations. Jack London, who was in Dawson City only briefly but who certainly took a leading role in the rush (he piloted boats on the Whitehorse Rapids in 1897),

made his name several years later with a *Saturday Evening Post* serial titled *Call of the Wild*. Rex Beach was also part of the stampede, though he never actually reached the Klondike. He wrote about Nome, Alaska, but is thought of as a "Klondike" novelist. Robert Service, who did not go near the Klondike until ten years after the rush and who wrote his first book before he actually got there, extracted more gold from the region than 99 per cent. of those who made the trek in '98.

Yet none of these people saw the Klondike whole. I do not wonder, since this would have been a physical impossibility in the days before the airplane. The stampede sprawled over an area as large as India and half as big again; the stampeders, one hundred thousand strong, were scattered over a wilderness region a million and a half square miles in size. It was like a war, with a dozen campaigns going on simultaneously. And thus, in the hundred-odd books that deal directly with this glittering moment in history there was (until I wrote *Klondike*) only one that attempted to assess the full phenomenon. This was Kathryn Winslow's *Big Pan-Out*¹, and even it did not try to detail several of the minor campaigns.

If I were to recommend only two eye-witness books about the gold rush I should have no hesitation in naming William Haskell's *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaska Goldfields*² and Teppan Adney's *The Klondike Stampede of 1897-98*³, which meet the tests of readability and authenticity.

The first is by a miner who was on the ground before George Washington Carmack's famous strike changed the face of the North. It is written with clarity and perception. Adney's book, written by the correspondent for *Harper's Illustrated Weekly*, takes up where Haskell leaves off. Adney, a quite remarkable figure not only in the Klondike but also, later, in his adopted New Brunswick, was one of the first reporters to reach the goldfields after the news of the strike reached the outside world. Any reporter who covered the stampede had to be more than a mere casual observer; he became part of the rush itself. To reach Dawson Adney had to trundle his ton of supplies over the passes, construct a bateau on Lake Bennett, shoot Miles Canyon and the Whitehorse Rapids, and navigate 400 miles of unknown river. On arrival he had to build himself a log cabin. He writes of the stampede, therefore, not as an onlooker but as a participant. He took his own photographs, made his own sketches and interviewed many of the original sourdoughs. As a result, his is one of the

few authentic accounts we have of the Klondike Odyssey in its first phase. Adney did not publish his book until 1899; by this time the literary marketplace was glutted with volumes about the stampede, many of them hastily contrived. The public appetite was sated — indeed the very word “Klondike” had taken on a certain tarnish — and so the book was poorly received. It has since come into its own.

There are a few other books that stand apart from the run-of-the-mine reminiscences. Near the peak stands William Ogilvie's *Early Days on the Yukon*⁴, in whose pages we sense the instincts of a born raconteur at odds with the tight-lipped traditions of the civil servant. Ogilvie was a government surveyor who witnessed many of the memorable events of 1896. He was one of the few men on the spot who realized that history had been made that August evening on Rabbit Creek (shortly to be re-named “Bonanza”). He took affidavits from the four participants in the ironic drama of discovery: from Robert Henderson, the proud and touchy prospector, from Carmack the squaw-man, from Skookum Jim and Tagish Charley, the Indians. He questioned them separately and together, not once but twice, with an interval between to see if the stories had changed. As a result we have a clear picture of what occurred. In addition we have Adney's research plus an interview that Henderson gave to Mrs. William Campbell Loudon of the *Alaska-Yukon Magazine* (Summer, 1908), together with Carmack's own memories, posthumously published in a pamphlet by his widow⁵. This is a florid account, highly colored, for Carmack was a romantic and a poseur. For all that, it bears the stamp of the man who was there. It was Carmack, after all, who found the gold and his description of his own emotions on that memorable day, which was to change the lives of one hundred thousand men, cannot be duplicated.

There are three other books that might be described as coming straight from the horses' mouths. Colonel Samuel Benton Steele's autobiography⁶ contains a thick section on the stampede, and as Steele was the Mountie who ran the stampede on the Canadian side, keeping the casualty rate surprisingly low, it is of more than casual interest. Arthur Treadwell Walden's *A Dogpuncher in the Yukon*⁷ is a fascinating story told (with a ghostwriter's help, I suspect) by the most mobile man on the scene. Walden was in the country before, during, and after the stampede, and his mail beat took him from Circle City, Alaska, to Dyea on the seacoast, a distance of more than one thousand miles. There are exaggerations in

his story, but then a dog driver ought to be forgiven an exaggeration or two. The third book of quality is Frederick Palmer's *In the Yukon*⁸, a general account of the stampede with a particularly good picture of Dawson in the summer of 1898 by a special correspondent of *Scribner's*.

THE REMAINDER of the scores of books on the subject fall into three general categories. There are, first, what I call the "curiosities". There are, second, the biographies of the great figures of the stampede — the saints, villains, heroes, rogues and comic personalities who put flesh on the Klondike saga. There are, third, the personal accounts of several dozen men and women who survived the great trek north and in later years were persuaded to set down their memories on paper.

Among the curiosities you will find some dozen or so books rushed into print a few months after the first news of the strike burst upon the world. These were published in the fall of 1897, or early in 1898. They are rather like scrap books, filled with warmed-over newspaper accounts of those who have struck it rich, crammed with geographical background, peppered with anecdotes, full of advice for would-be gold seekers. They are studded with inaccuracies, fabrications, exaggerations and enthusiasms. Reading them today, one basks briefly in the reflected glow of a period when almost everybody believed the streets of Dawson to be paved with gold, and men talked of nuggets big as hen's eggs strewn about the Klondike valley waiting to be picked up.

The most entertaining of these volumes, from a curiosity-seeker's point of view, are *The Chicago Record's Book for Gold Seekers*⁹ and Charles S. Bramble's *Klondike: A Manual for Goldseekers*¹⁰. The most accurate is A. E. Ironmonger Sola's *Klondyke: Truth and Facts of the New Eldorado*¹¹.

Mrs. Iola Beebe's little book *The True Life Story of Swiftwater Bill Gates*¹² is a curiosity of a different kind. How much of it is strictly true one cannot tell, but as Mrs. Beebe was Swiftwater's mother-in-law for a year or so, we must accept her eyewitness accounts of her erstwhile son-in-law's adventures, both marital and financial. It makes lively reading. Mrs. Beebe is often horrified at the carryings-on of her teen-age daugh-

ter's strange husband but she is never horrified enough to ignore his blandishments or to beware his perpetual requests for money. Reading between the lines, one cannot escape the conclusion that Mrs. Beebe, like so many other women, was herself in love with the engaging Swiftwater Bill.

Louella Day's *The Tragedy of the Klondike*¹³ is remarkable only in one sense — that it should have been published at all. Miss Day was a lady doctor who visited the goldfields and labored under the firm conviction that the Canadian authorities, under the personal direction of Clifford Sifton, were attempting to poison her to death. She sets out this odd thesis in this very odd book.

I find C. H. Hamlin's *Old Times in the Yukon*¹⁴ curiously engaging, perhaps because he so obviously wrote it under his own steam without aid from the ubiquitous ghost writer who has clouded so many Klondike memoirs with the murky varnish of professionalism. This is a pre-Klondike book about Fortymile, the strange gold town that existed on the banks of the Yukon long before Dawson City. A similar book of scattered anecdotes, many of them quite amusing, is W. S. Dill's *The Long Day*¹⁵. These, too, are footnotes to the main tale, but interesting ones.

But the cream of the curiosa is Mary E. Hitchcock's *Two Women in the Klondike*¹⁶. Mrs. Hitchcock was the widow of a U.S. admiral; her companion, Miss Edith Van Buren, was the niece of a former president. They were wealthy tourists who each year struck out for foreign climes: Bath, Shanghai, Paris. In 1898 they chose Dawson City; they felt, vaguely, that it was the place to go. The fact that they were the only bona fide tourists in the Klondike that summer bothered them not at all; they carried on as they might at Biarritz, and when they returned they wrote a book about it. The writer peruses it with a growing sense of frustration and awe: frustration because of the author's nineteenth century habit of disguising names with initials (Big Alex McDonald, the King of the Klondike, is simply M- - - - - in this book); awe, because of the bizarre circumstances of their visit. While others lugged beans, bacon and axes into Dawson the ladies arrived with a variety of luggage which contained two Great Danes, an ice cream freezer, a parrot and several canaries, two cages full of pigeons, a gramophone, a music box, a zither, a coal oil stove, a portable bowling alley, a motion picture projector (newly invented), a mandolin, several air mattresses, the largest marquee tent ever

pitched on the banks of the Yukon and several hundred pounds of rare foods, ranging from *paté de foie gras* to mock turtle soup. Their tale, besides being amusing, is quite useful to Klondike researchers.

THE BIOGRAPHIES of Klondike personalities are many. Joseph Whiteside Boyle¹⁷ and Arthur Newton Christian Treadgold¹⁸, the two great Klondike dredging tycoons, each had a book to himself. Bishop Bompas, the pioneer Church of England prelate¹⁹, and his wife²⁰, both have had their stories told. So has Father Judge, the Roman Catholic "Saint of Dawson"²¹ and Jefferson Randolph "Soapy" Smith, the devil of Skagway²². (The Skagway section in the latter's biography is, in my opinion, incomplete and not too accurate). The personal stories of the brothers Mizner have twice been chronicled by third parties²³ while Addison Mizner (he later became architect of the great Florida land boom) has written his own account of their trek over the Chilkoot²⁴. Tex Rickard's biography has appeared²⁵ and so has Klondike Mike Mahoney's²⁶. Capt. William Moore, discoverer of the White Pass and founder of Skagway, has had his biographer²⁷ and so has Eugene Allen, the colorful editor and publisher of the famous *Klondyke Nugget*²⁸. There are several biographies of Jack London²⁹, though none devotes much space to his Klondike period, perhaps because it was such a short segment in a crowded life. Rex Beach has written his autobiography³⁰ and it contains a good account of his days on the Yukon river.

Several of the giant figures of the stampede, alas, have not had their stories committed to hard covers, and it is doubtful now that this will happen. There ought to have been a book on Robert Henderson, the original explorer of the Klondike watershed, and another, certainly, on Big Alex McDonald, the richest man in Dawson. Belinda Mulroney, the famous Klondike inn-keeper, deserves a book to herself and so does Clarence Berry, one of the few Eldorado millionaires to hang on to his gold. These familiar faces, and many others (Nellie the Pig, Diamond Tooth Gertie, One-Eyed Riley, the Oregon Mayor, Silent Sam Bonni-field, Nigger Jim Dougherty, Gussie Lamore, the Otaley Sisters, Big-

Hearted Tom Chisholm, to name a few) all stride through the pages of the various personal accounts which have contributed to the folk lore of the period.

Space does not allow me to detail all the bona fide personal accounts here, though each holds its own fascination for the Klondike buff. The most harrowing of all is the grisly tale set down by Arthur Arnold Dietz³¹ — the story of the few men who survived the foolhardy attempt to reach the goldfields by crossing the Malaspina — the largest piedmont glacier in North America. Another harrowing saga, lightened by periods of high comedy, is Walter Russell Curtin's *Yukon Voyage*³², which tells the story of the famous steamboat *Yukoner* and the only mutiny on the Yukon river. Thomas Weidemann's *Cheechako Into Sourdough*, is the third Odyssey in this trilogy of hardship; it tells the almost unbelievable tale of the ill-fated *Eliza Anderson* expedition to the Yukon by way of Bering Sea.

Oddly enough, the great stampede, for all its literary by-products, produced no really great work of fiction. It is true that Jack London's *Call of the Wild*³³ is a classic of sorts. I read it as a boy, while still in Dawson, and was thrilled by it; yet it seems curiously naive and sentimental today. Certainly Robert Service's reputation does not rest on his one novel of the Klondike, *The Trail of Ninety-Eight*³⁴; it's hard to believe now that his publishers tried to make him water it down because they thought it was too "raw".

Most Klondike fiction has been of the potboiler type and the most interesting stories seem to me to be those based on fact. The best tales in Jack London's *Smoke Bellew* collection³⁵ are simply true anecdotes masquerading under the guise of fiction. The most interesting novel I know from this period is W. H. P. Jarvis's *The Great Gold Rush*³⁶ which gives the details of a plot to overthrow the Yukon government and form a "Republic of the Midnight Sun". It, too, is based on an actual though little-known incident and its hero is simply a thinly disguised portrayal of the great Sam Steele.

It does not really surprise me that there should be such a paucity of good fiction about the Klondike, for here, if ever, was a classic case where the truth was far stranger. The facts themselves are gaudy enough for the wildest melodrama or the most compelling Odyssey. It is foolish to try to improve upon them, and he who attempts it does so at his peril.

NOTES

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- ² HASKELL, WILLIAM B. *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaska Goldfields*. Hartford Publishing Co., Hartford, Conn., 1898.
- ³ ADNEY, TAPPAN. *The Klondike Stampede of 1897-98*. Harper & Brothers, New York, 1900.
- ⁴ OGLIVIE, WILLIAM. *Early Days on the Yukon and the Story of its Gold Finds*. John Lane Company, New York, 1913.
- ⁵ CARMACK, G. W. *My Experiences in the Yukon*, privately printed by Marguerite Carmack, 1933.
- ⁶ STEELE, COL. S. B. *Forty Years in Canada*. McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart, Toronto, 1918.
- ⁷ WALDEN, ARTHUR T. *A Dogpuncher on the Yukon*. Louis Carrier & Co., Montreal, 1928.
- ⁸ PALMER, FREDERICK. *In the Klondyke*. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1899.
- ⁹ CHICAGO RECORD. *Klondike, the Chicago Record's Book for Goldseekers*. Colonial Publishing Company, Philadelphia, 1897.
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- ¹¹ SOLA, A. E. I. *Klondyke: Truth and Facts of the New Eldorado*. The Mining and Geographical Institute, London, 1897.
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- ¹³ DAY, LOUELLA. *The Tragedy of the Klondike*, privately printed, New York, 1906.
- ¹⁴ HAMLIN, C. H. *Old Times in the Yukon*. Wetzel Publishing Co. Inc., Los Angeles, 1928.
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- ²⁸ BANKSON, RUSSELL A. *The Klondike Nugget*. The Caxton Printers Ltd., Caldwell, Idaho, 1935.
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