

# The Klondike Gold Rush in International Perspective

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In the nineteenth century, two Scots left Dumferline to seek riches in North America. Andrew Carnegie headed for the United States and made his fortune in steel. James Dodds left for the Klondike in 1898, and his letters back to his parents do not suggest that he made a great success. "This is a very strange country," he wrote from Dawson City, "from the surface down . . ." <sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, for a brief time in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Klondike was synonymous with wealth, opportunity and freedom. It was hardly surprising that would-be gold miners from Scotland to New Zealand and from across North America would decamp from the routines of everyday life and head for the gold fields in the Yukon.

One hundred years after the news of major gold strikes in the Klondike region reached the outside world, it is time to take stock of the continuing allure of this, the last of the great gold rushes. New perspectives have developed, and old ones have been revisited in the attempt to assess the broader context in which this major event took shape. This interest springs from continued curiosity about this profoundly important event and from growing interest in the impact of the gold rush on the Yukon Territory. The passage of time has created distance from the events, without diminishing public fascination in the remarkable stampede into the far northwest of North America.

In May 1997, the Centre of Canadian Studies at the University of Edinburgh, the oldest such centre in the United Kingdom, devoted its annual conference to the theme of the Klondike. <sup>2</sup> Delegates came from Canada, the United States, New Zealand, France and the United Kingdom to take part in the conference. Private scholars and representatives of institutions of higher education attended the conference, demonstrating the considerable breadth of interest in the Klondike Gold Rush. Over the course of the three days, various aspects were explored, reflecting the interdisciplinary orientation of Canadian Studies in the United Kingdom.

One of the highlights of the conference was the presentation by *Quern*, a Scottish musical group headed by Wallace Lockhart from Linlithgow.

*Quern* presented their rendition of Robert Service's life, set to music, a reprisal of a performance given at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 1996. By situating Service's work in the context of the British dance hall tradition, they cast a fascinating perspective on the musical culture that influenced Service's verse and rhythms.

In the more conventional venues of such academic conferences, discussion focussed on the lessons to be learned from the Klondike experience. For many decades, historians wrote of the Klondike primarily in terms of the unique characters, the unusual events, and the sense of adventure that pervaded the entire enterprise. Only rarely did they stand back from the event and seek to understand its broader significance or to search for evidence of the continuing influence of the Klondike on northern society. Pierre Berton's magisterial *Klondike*, a book that captured the spirit of the stampede and that helped revive interest in the event, remains the most comprehensive account of the gold rush phenomenon. Those gathered in Edinburgh did not seek to diminish Berton's contribution, but rather endeavoured to provide new insights, to ask new questions, and to seek original answers. In their work, three main strands emerged from the papers presented: the Klondike in international perspective, the Klondike in literature, and new perspectives on the Klondike.

The Klondike, though it took place in the Yukon and within Canada, always belonged to a larger constituency. As such, it seems vital to place the Gold Rush within a broader, international context. As men and women flocked to the gold fields from all over the world, so did news and perspectives on the gold rush spread back to all corners. Some of the gold-seekers were continuing lifelong quests for the mother lode begun in other gold rush districts, and some would follow the Yukon River to a later and smaller strike at Nome, Alaska, after failing in the Klondike. Others, who prospered in the field, took their money back to their homelands, carrying with them countless tales of adventure, hardship and foolhardiness that would entertain audiences for years. Most people, of course, merely watched the developments from afar, through newspapers or the occasional letters home. And so, embellished by travellers and journalists, the Klondike legend and mythology were created.

Among those who struck it rich in the Klondike—and there were more than a few in an era where fast money was hard to find—writers attracted great attention at the time. The writers, with greater degrees of attention to the truth, popularized the Klondike and gave the world a wonderful set of poems, stories and novels. Most prominently, Robert Service and Jack London set tales in the Klondike, which have been received with great

enthusiasm ever since. Some writers, like Marie Jouvassay Fotheringham, portrayed northern perspectives, while others merely used the Klondike as a location for their narratives, more a symbol of adventure or danger than an actual geographical location. Like many gold-seekers, authors experienced varying degrees of success London found enduring fame, and used his Klondike writings to create a market for his dramatic and compelling prose. Robert Service became one of the best-known poets of his or any other time. Most writers settled for less lofty accomplishments, and published a stream of stories in newspapers that had an insatiable appetite for news from the far northwest.

There is a tendency for literary images, in particular, those proposed by Service and London, to overwhelm other perspectives on the Klondike. It is important, therefore, for every generation to re-examine the history of the period, and to consider the impact that these stories have had on our understanding of the North and of the Klondike. A number of the papers provided such insights, demonstrating the centrality of Aboriginal peoples to the broader history of the North and roles of women, relatively neglected until recently, in the gold rush. The typical image of the line of gold-seekers climbing over the Chilkoot Pass remains one of the most famous and instantly recognizable photographs in history. But as new collections of Klondike photos come available, the social and cultural complexity of the Gold Rush becomes more evident. It is important, clearly, to look at newly discovered photographs and to consider again the messages and ideas portrayed by the familiar images. Similarly, it is useful to recognise that through the Gold Rush did not, as a large-scale, individualistic adventure last long beyond 1898, the search for gold persists today, as sites are worked over for the second or third time for the remaining specks of precious metal. The essays presented herein seek to remind readers of the complexity and durability of the Klondike experience.

New perspectives and the discovery of unrecognised connections compel us to revisit the history of the Klondike Gold Rush. One aspect of this Gold Rush was the recognition among participants that they were involved in a grand adventure as they sought their fortunes in the creek beds of the Yukon. Numerous private journals and newspaper accounts exist of the trip up to the Klondike and the experiences of gold miners in the field. Each diary contributes a fresh look at the individual experience of this adventure. In 1898, Lawrence Leigh Ardern of Ashton-under-Lyne sailed from Liverpool for the Klondike, carefully keeping an account of his personal adventure. Thanks to his great-nephew, Richard Ardern of the University of the Highland and Islands, it is possible to publish this account

for the first time. The individual quest that accompanied the, apparently contradictory, requirement of acting in common with one's fellows is one of the main themes of this diary. Ever a practical man involved in this most impractical of vocations, Ardern carefully recorded the costs and hardships of surviving on the gold frontier. Lawrence Ardern remained in the Klondike, only returning home to Britain once before his death in 1950.

The Klondike Conference in Edinburgh, and hence this collection of essays, revealed another crucial development in our understanding of the Gold Rush. For decades, writing on the Klondike focussed on the often heroic, sometimes bizarre, and always compelling actions of the male stampedeers. This was a story about men—prospectors, criminals, police officers, government officials, businessmen, and the like. It was also a story about the Gold Rush migrants, the farmer from Manitoba, the labourer from Glasgow. This account, interesting and fascinating though it was, left out big portions of the picture. Where were the women (save for the occasional big-hearted prostitute or the missionary wife)? Where were the First Nations, upon whose homeland the Klondike Gold Rush took place? What happened to the Yukon and the local population after the Gold Rush subsided? And how did the legacy of the Klondike stampede affect the long-term development of the Yukon Territory? These and a variety of related questions have generally received little attention. First Nations people, women and long-term non-Aboriginal residents of the Yukon have not figured prominently in Klondike mythology and contemporary tourist promotions. By addressing, albeit only in part, these aspects of the Gold Rush experience, this collection of essays seeks to contribute to the greater understanding of this vital event in the history of the North.

The Edinburgh conference on the Klondike Gold Rush was a delightful event. The meeting included writers from the Yukon Territory, who reflected both on the history of the event and its contemporary significance. Their presence provided a degree of proximity and immediacy to the academic discussions that enlivened the debates and enriched the experience. Similarly, scholars from Canada, Britain, New Zealand, France and the United States brought new and original perspectives to bear on questions relating to the Klondike stampede. The variety and diversity of opinions and insights raised new and challenging questions about the nature and international impact of the Gold Rush.

The process of transferring the proceedings of a vibrant, multi-faceted, interdisciplinary and international meeting into a printed text inevitably results in the loss of some of the richness and complexity of the experience. At the same time, a volume such as this provides a greater opportunity to

reflect on the assembled evidence, examine the nuances of interpretation, and to reflect on the significance of these ideas for the general understanding of northern history and life. The goal of the conference was to add to our collective understanding of the Klondike Gold Rush and to encourage greater international debate about this pivotal event. The same motivations lie behind this volume. If the articles assembled here encourage readers to consider more intently the meaning of the "Last Great Gold Rush," then the volume will have met its major objective.

#### Endnotes

1. National Library of Scotland, Acc. 6665, James Dodds Papers, James Dodds to parents, no date.
2. The Centre of Canadian Studies receives a grant from the Foundation for Canadian Studies in the United Kingdom and from Standard Life plc that allows it to host the annual conference.

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