

The Klondike Gold Rush as Seen Through the British Press

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Improved communications during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries meant that news travelled faster between countries and so entered the columns of newspapers, magazines and weeklies more quickly. As a result, news of the Klondike Gold Rush hit the headlines of newspapers far more quickly than had the California Gold. The unfolding of events in the Klondike was followed avidly across the western world and particularly in Britain. The technology of telegraphic communications speeded the movement of news but it also meant that papers could reach out and find other stories of interest and so, gradually, the Klondike had to compete with other stories for space.

While news travelled much faster in 1897 than in 1848, it has to be remembered that information still had to get to where it could be transmitted by telegraph and/or ship to the papers. Thus, delays occurred with news of the Klondike due both to the harsh winter conditions and the desire by early prospectors to keep the "matter to themselves." It was not until the middle of July 1897 that the first of the gold-rich miners already working and prospecting in the Yukon reached the west coast ports by steamer. *The Seattle Post Intelligencer* had a description of a "ton of gold" that actually started off the stampede to the North. The effect on the depressed economy locally was immediate, as hoarded funds were freed to finance thousands of ambitious gold-seekers, who started north that late summer, autumn and winter. The seekers with adequate funds and those with the right timing went all the way by water, while most of the rest struggled over the Chilkoot, onto the Yukon River and then on to Dawson by makeshift rafts and boats.

Some struck it rich; others did not. One economic historian has suggested that the total costs of people getting to the Klondike more-or-less equalled the amount of gold actually "mined." Gold continued to be worked commercially until 1966 when the Yukon Consolidated Gold Corporation closed its last dredge and the gold mining era of the region ended. Some

Klondike images are well established in our minds—such as the pictures of prospectors making their laborious way up over the Chilkoot Pass in a never-ending line (*Illustrated London News*, 21 May 1898), the establishment of Dawson City and sternwheelers on the Yukon River.

This essay explores the type of information that the British reader might glean about the Klondike from the papers. One might ask how many gold seekers would scan the papers in order to get information or would they depend on “instinct,” “or knowing someone.” This is an unanswerable question but be that as it may, what were the types of information available? This study, reflecting my on-going interest in newspaper portrayals of Canada in particular and North America in general,¹ draws its illustrations from a sample of papers and magazines for the period June 1897 to December 1898. The coverage is necessarily selective in the choice of papers used and the *Times* is little used, although it did contain quite a number of entries in the early period under consideration. It was decided, however, to look in more detail at some of the regional papers. It can be cogently argued that it would be from these papers that many fortune seekers would have gathered their knowledge.

It was interesting to note, for example, that while the *Sheffield Weekly Times* provided a rich source of material on the prairies, a few years later it said little on gold in the Yukon in the eighteen-month period I examined. On the other hand, the *Illustrated London News* found plenty of possibilities for pictures from the Klondike area. One soon formed the impression that there was far more emphasis upon practicalities, problems and facts—as far as they were known—and less on trying to persuade people to go and seek their fortunes than had been the case with the impressions given about the North American grasslands. In this limited review, I found no evidence of “Boomer”-type literature though some reference to boomers.

The newspaper material is examined here under several heads, starting with weather.

Weather

A vivid impression that comes through from both pictures and the written word is that of emphasis upon snow, ice and cold. *The Pall Mall Gazette*, in a piece from an Ontario correspondent headed “The Truth about Canada: Investment in Canadian Goldfields” stated “Gold mining on an iceberg is not an attractive proposition at any time.” It could be argued that the writer had an axe to grind as he went on to state “For there are other Canadian Goldfields” and suggested that “The Klondyke will serve its purpose if it merely acts as an advertisement for Canada’s mineral wealth and if its riches

merely draw attention to the vast and splendid goldfields of Kootenay and NW Ontario."² Later references included "Return to Klondyke: Varied experiences in the Icy North."³ A number of papers commented on the eight months winter.⁴ This point was emphasised by a photograph in the *Illustrated London News* 26 March 1898 of a Yukon River sternwheeler with a caption saying it had been iced-in all the winter.

A young missionary, who left Manchester for the Yukon initially to work with the Native peoples and had been directed instead to minister to the developing mining communities, wrote in a letter to the *Manchester City News* 19 March 1898, headed "Klondike: A Missionary in the Yukon Gold Country; Warning to Intending Immigrants," that the country was very large and very inhospitable, the mosquitoes and flies were a great pestilence and the winters were very cold—down to 60 degrees below. Being more specific, *The Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser* carried a report entitled "Winter in Klondike," which quoted climatic statistics:

Between 1st December 1895 and 1st Feb. 1896 temperatures had fallen below freezing every day and 28 days at least 40 below, and 14 were 50 below and 9 were 60 below.

The column went on to say that snow fell one day in seven between October and May and that June to September 1896 saw 29 days when the temperature was 70+ and it was 80+ on three days.⁵

A number of descriptions combined indications of the weather with reference to the way of obtaining gold. These included the *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph* with a piece entitled "Gold Mining on the Klondyke: All About the New Eldorado." This was really a repeat of an article that had appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine* by T. C. Down, in which he described the technique of digging holes in the gravel, then lighting fires in the gravel to thaw it so it could be dug out. Fires were then relit, more gravel thawed and the process repeated. The material was then piled on the surface where it froze again but thawed out in spring when it would be washed and sorted in the summer.⁶

Some papers had detailed articles referring to the geological and mining engineering conditions involved. Examples of such material were found in *The Times* and the *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph*, which carried a two-column article, "The Yukon Goldfields." This was largely a quotation from an article by Brenton Symes M. I. C. E. in *The Mining Journal*, which made a number of interesting points. Though concentrating on the engineering and geological aspects of the region it also carried practical information about routes and distances, and went on to make the point that the way in which the gold was deposited meant that often discoveries could be as easily

made by the tenderfoot as by the experienced miner.⁷

At this time, a number of newspapers contained general references to gold mining in North America, in the goldfields of the Kootenay area,⁸ gold mining in Colorado,⁹ and the new Gold Rush in B. C. *The Sheffield Telegraph* also talked about the gold-bearing alluvial deposits of the Yukon River basin as well as showing a rather ineffective map of the route from UK to Halifax or Montreal by steamer, to Vancouver by rail, and then to the North by sea and land. This was a particularly lyrical page-long article discussing the Black Hills and Colorado as well as stating

There seems no reason to doubt that in the newly discovered Klondyke goldfields we are face to face with one of those unexpected happenings which, at least thrice already within the present century, have suffered to change the character and direction of the development of a continent. In a few years time (says a writer in the *Daily Mail*) the country that is now ice and snow will be transformed by the magical influence of gold.¹⁰

The same year and a few weeks later, the *Manchester City News* carried a letter to the editor from N. Schou of Vancouver, "The Yukon Gold Country; A Word of Warning," who stated that the prospects

in general are, for and by the "average man," as greatly exaggerated as the hardships and dangers of that northern land of climatic extremes, and except in respect of gold—in barren unproductiveness, are by the same means underestimated.¹¹

He goes on to warn against western "boomers," saying that few would make fortunes, but most would not and many would perish and that only gamblers and card sharps do well. Schou also suggested that the best route after March 1898 would be the CPR to Vancouver, then by CPR steamer and a combination of stage, railroad and river boats to Dawson City, and estimated that the journey would take 14 days. He also referred to prices, weather and mosquitoes and ended by commenting that for every one who went to the area and stayed four out of five would return rapidly

The *Pall Mall Gazette* published a piece entitled "The Prospects at Klondyke: 'A Fortune or a Grave.'" It started by stating that no such gold rush had been known in the USA since 1849 and continued "Hundreds and thousand of miners and adventurers are flocking to the newly discovered diggings to tempt fortune. . ." and added a sombre note that

there are already alleged to be 800 graves of unfortunate ones at the digging. The new goldfields are very different from those that have been worked in the past, on account of the difficulty of reaching them and the hard labour required to work them. The great trouble is the scarcity of provisions. . . .¹²

It went on to state that at present the miner was dependent on what he had

taken with him, and continued by saying that it would be foolhardy to go with less than a year's supply of provisions. In that writer's view perhaps 10% would be successful and 90% would fail.

Comments on the Journey

A number of references were found to the various possible routes and their advantages or disadvantages. There was an all-land, all-Canadian route possible via northwest Alberta and British Columbia but, in the main, the routes suggested involved a sea passage from Seattle or Vancouver and, depending on time of year and size of purse, either to St. Michaels and then by sternwheeler up the Yukon to Dawson or to Dyea, Skagway or the other ports on the west coast, and then by trail, sledge, canoe, or makeshift raft to the Yukon River and then on to what became Dawson City. As early as September 1897 papers carried references to the possibility of railway connections being constructed. For example, there was a suggestion in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 2nd September that a scheme was being put forward to the Dominion government to build a railway northwest from Edmonton and possibly also one from Kamloops to Teslin Lake. In October 1897, Sir William Van Horne said that the CPR would make Vancouver the starting point for first-class steamers to the Stikine River where there would be flat-boat connections to Telegraph Creek and also that the CPR were contemplating building a railway from there to Teslin Lake.¹³

A more feasible route was referred to in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 27 January 1898. It quoted a statement by William Mackenzie of Mackenzie and Mann, Railway Contractors, that he had signed an agreement with the Canadian Government to build a 150-mile railway from Glenora 140 miles from the mouth of the Stikine River to Teslin Lake, so that passengers could be carried to the Klondike from the ocean in five to six days.

Another feature of journey information was to encourage travel via Vancouver, not Seattle. Evidently a lot of people erroneously thought the goldfields were in Alaska, whereas, in fact, they were in the Yukon; indeed, some of the American press reports gave this impression. People from England who were contemplating going to the Yukon in the spring were asked to bear in mind that it was as easy to go from Vancouver as from any US city and, by so doing, they would be helping "the colony of Canada," and, incidentally, saving themselves customs fees.

On 19 March 1898, the *Manchester City News* commented on a previously published letter of John Powell and said that it made much sense except in suggesting outfitting from Seattle. This, George Fox of Victoria indicated, would be expensive as outfits not purchased in Canada were

assessed a 30% duty, assiduously collected by Canadian customs. The earlier letter, from George Davies, a former Manchester resident, had been published in the same paper a few weeks earlier. Entitled "The Rush for Gold: Routes to Klondyke; Openings in Cariboo," it talked about steamers on the Yukon and said journey could be unpredictable because water height varied and there were many shifting sandbars. He stated that the cost of river boat passage from St Michaels to Dawson City in 1897 was \$500 or £100 but that "the large number of steamship companies lately organised, and now catering and competing for freight and passengers by this route should reduce the rates of passage to a minimum."¹⁴

Warnings About the Cost of Provisions

The *Pall Mall Gazette* of 4 August 1897 has already been quoted and the same article also referred to the problems of obtaining provisions saying that currently the miner was dependent on what he took with him and that it was foolhardy to go with less than a year's supply of provisions. It went on to give some indication of prices and included the following items: flour \$12-20 per 100lbs., beef \$1-3 per lb., bacon 80 cents per lb., eggs \$3 per dozen, tea \$3 per lb., and tobacco \$2 per lb. "So a miner's little stock of money will soon be exhausted." The article also argued it was stupid to start then (August) for the Klondike as there was little chance of arriving at the goldfields before spring as the navigation season was nearly over.

John Powell, a former Manchester resident then living in Mount Murray, warned would-be gold-seekers that the costs of outfitting would be at least £400 for a year's supplies plus transport (a figure upon which many commentators agreed). He ended by saying that "if you have the means and are in good health and remember that only a few out of the thousands will succeed. . . then OK."¹⁵

Talk of Starvation

It is hoped that the careful newspaper reader would have been left in no doubt about the problems which faced would-be gold-seekers. Numerous references were made to the lack of food supplies and fears of starvation though gradually efforts were made to dispel some of the worst fears and Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior, and others moved swiftly to announce that, if necessary, the government would get supplies in. How, was not said!

On 11 November 1897, the *Pall Mall Gazette* published an article under the title "Klondyke Gold Diggings: The Outlook in Dawson Colony; Fuel

a Legal Tender in Skagway." This referred to a 32-day trip over the Dawson Trail by H. A. Stewart and two colleagues who had spent five years in the Yukon. Stewart stated, "This is the simple fact; there was starvation in sight when I left Dawson City (14 Sept)." They had waited three weeks in Dawson City to buy enough food for the winter but had failed and so he and his companions put together enough just for the journey and left. He said that only two-thirds of the food needed for the eight-month winter had reached Dawson City but emphasised that there was gold there. Part of the problem was logistical, as stocks of flour and wheat were waiting at St Michaels on the Bering Sea but they had to be moved 2000 miles (3218 km) to Dawson City on the Yukon River. A further problem was that two freight companies had devoted much space not to provisions but to wine, whiskey, and even billiard balls, and when they had difficulties with shallow water they jettisoned—guess what!—the food, and kept the wine, whiskey and billiard balls. The crew was nearly lynched upon their arrival at Dawson City!

One result of all this was that while thousands were trying to get to Dawson City, equally thousands were leaving because of the food shortage. Newcomers were not welcomed either, as they put strain on the food supplies. The only ones welcomed were those who brought plenty with them. An indication of the desperation of some men is illustrated by a story in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 22 October 1897, "On the Klondyke Trail: A Lynching and What Led to It." This was a tale of a man who stole food from others in his group, who were making their way to the goldfields, and their own summary rough justice.

The same issue reported that no food ships had reached Dawson City after August because of low water but said some food was available 300 miles from Dawson City, and that at Fort Yukon there were 400 tons of supplies, while Fort Hamlin had 1000 tons and St Michaels had "piles."

Further warnings about the plight of some men appeared in the Torquay newspapers under the title "Klondike As It Is." This was largely a quotation from a letter from Andrew Warren Bunkes, an ex-collector of customs, who, having caught the gold fever and started for the Klondike, wrote to his wife from Skagway an account of his experiences. He commented that

There are now no less than 3000 men here with a total of 15 horses between them. The men are the most forlorn lot of creatures I have ever cast eyes on, and the horses are the poorest I ever saw. Half of them have given up any hope of reaching the diggings, while the remainder do little else but curse the day they started and cry out about their miseries and distress. At Dyea there are said to be nearly as many in the same woeful condition. God knows what will become of them all! Of the crowd who headed this way only those having horses in good condition can ever hope to get through, and for these it will be

a tough contract. As far as I can learn, of nearly all who started and tried to make the journey many have returned footsore, disheartened and broken down."¹⁷

But Not All Gloom

A *Daily Mail* account of early September 1897¹⁸ refers to a 13 August report stating that steamers were now returning to Vancouver from Dyea and Skagway having landed thousands of fortune seekers. At both places it mentioned canvas cities had sprung up. A few months later, the *Pall Mall Gazette* referred to four men having arrived in Vancouver by steamer on 26 March who stated that, when the navigation season opened on the Yukon River, there were about 20 tons of Klondike gold waiting to be shipped. They also commented that, around Dawson City, the area was black with smoke from fires where miners were thawing the ground for digging.¹⁹

A number of papers in 1898 referred on one hand to gold shipments and on the other, inevitably, to more people going out to the gold fields. The *Daily News* correspondence at Victoria wrote under the date 18 January:

Not less than one million dollars in gold dust and nuggets and nineteen Dawsonite males and one female Dawsonite arrived in Victoria 17 January by steamer from Skagway. The rush to the gold region is well under way, every vessel for the north is crowded to its utmost capacity, and Vancouver, Victoria and the CPR are prepared for the biggest rush in the history of Canada.²⁰

Another reference in this South Devon newspaper, entitled "Making for the Klondike," reads

How many people will be in the Klondike before the summer is over it would be hazardous to guess, but the following figures have an unquestionable content at the present time. From S Africa 300 miners are expected, and about as many from Australia, with advices received in San Fran showing that at least 50,000 will go from our shores. The preparations go on apace for conveying this multitude by turning into passenger ships nearly all the boats engaged in the coal carrying trade of the Pacific in the neighbourhood of Frisco. The Pacific Coast Steamship Company alone will, it is expected, carry about 10,000 people from that city in the course of this month.²¹

Way of Making a Fortune

Inevitably, not all who made money made it from gold. Indeed, probably more made a living from servicing the miners than actually mining. Such stories were frequently referred to in the newspapers and the following are some illustrations.

The woman who landed in Victoria from the Skagway steamer on 17 January 1898 had gone north to make her fortune in a dance hall, and she

did, and returned south to marry.²² Some women established businesses like restaurants and dress-making. The *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph* on 14 August 1897 carried a half-column article entitled "How to Profit by Klondyke: Hints for the English Capitalist." It suggested that few would succeed in getting wealth directly from gold and argued for the establishment of stores and hotels along the route and in the Dawson area. The article suggested the development of collieries in the Dawson area as coal was in great demand for both heating for people and for melting the ground for winter mining. The following week another article, while referring to the fact that a steamer had reached Seattle with nearly half a ton of gold belonging to half a dozen miners on board, went on to suggest that it would be mainly provision merchants, or similar, who would gain from the resultant work and that few miners would make much, if any, money and most would not cover their costs. *The Pall Mall Gazette*, under the heading "The Gold from Klondike: Luck of a Newsboy," related the story of a Chicago newsboy who bought up some papers, went out to the Klondike and sold them at \$1.00 each. With the money he gambled at faro tables and made \$1000. He then wisely and promptly returned to Chicago a more wealthy person.²⁴ Another further example of enterprise was provided by

Two new women have started for Klondike from Boston on bicycles and expect to enlist 1000 female recruits in crossing the continent. Hope to reach the goldfields in the spring and open a big hotel for wheelmen.²⁵

No report could be found about how they fared.

While there are many references to the problems of scaling the Pass—one lady, at least, did it "in style." The *Manchester City News* carried an article, headed "How a Woman Crossed the Chilcot Pass," in which the woman explained how she was wound up the pass by winch on a steel wire in a 2 foot by 2 foot by 3 foot (0.61m by 0.61m by 0.91m) box used for carrying supplies. She said it saved between one-and-a-half to two days but she did not enjoy the ride!²⁶ Such cable tramways were indeed erected to move freight up the Chilkoot Pass and saved many days on the journey inland.

The foregoing examples give some idea of the sort of information available. Readers would be made aware of the possibilities of finding gold and the likelihood of not doing so. They would find out about alternative routes of entry in a very general way and by means of stories, correspondents' reports, news items and letters they would get word pictures that were enhanced by photographs, drawings and sketches made from photographs. This meant that the reader would gain images of cold, mosquitoes, snow and whiteness. Or was it, perhaps, blackness? Some reports described the area around Dawson City as being black with smoke

and ash from the numerous fires burning to thaw the gravel.²⁷

For those not wishing to venture afield there was the possibility of investment in companies that planned to develop the area such as the Klondike Goldfields Ltd., offer to the public of 200,000 shares at £1 each out of a share capital of £350,000.²⁸ Many readers would hopefully have been left with the warning that "The great Yukon country is no place for the 'tenderfoot'. Strong men with means enough to outfit for a year or two will be successful." ... "At any time no man should start for the mines with less than 1000 dollars." It also warned against poor men "leaving their homes without the means to reach the mines."²⁹ The last word could perhaps be given to a Mr. F. A. Stevens who had spent twelve years in the Klondike region and, while in London, was asked for his comments. He is reported in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 21 March 1898 as saying that if people were young, fit, had enthusiasm and determination, were prepared to rough it and take their chances and were well prepared then they should go out to the Klondike and have a go. He warned against buying equipment in the United Kingdom as it would be useless, but advocated purchasing all equipment and at least one year's supplies when reaching Canada.

As 1898 progressed, coverage of the Klondike gold rush in newspapers had to compete with other alternative perhaps more "newsworthy" items for many readers. These included the war in Sudan, problems of the North West frontier, the Dreyfus Affair in France, increasing problems in South Africa, and the Prince of Wales' broken knee cap, plus strikes in South Wales coalfields provided sufficient other news to push the Klondike out. Nevertheless, the coverage in newspapers, magazines and journals gave readers a significant amount of information which they could use to base their views and decisions about the Klondike upon. This essay has only drawn upon a small selection of press sources and the writer acknowledges that a range of other material existed such as that to be found in the long piece by T. C. Down in the *Fortnightly Review*³⁰ and also two issues of a newspapers published in London and dedicated to the area, *The Klondyke Review*.³¹ In spite of these limitations, the foregoing essay does indicate how the British reader saw the Klondike during this eighteen-month period.

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Endnotes

1. "Constructing the British View of the Great Plains." In *Images of the Plains*, ed. by B. Blouet and M. Lawson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1974: 139-143; and "The Printed Word as Vehicle for the Encouragement of Emigration." *London Journal of Canadian Studies*. Vol. 8 (1992): 70-82.
2. *Pall Mall Gazette*. 22 September 1897: 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 9 October 1897: 5.
4. *Ibid.*, 11 November 1897.
5. *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*. 3 June 1898: 2.
6. *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph*. 12 March 1897: 12.
7. *Ibid.*, 9 October 1897: 6.
8. *Ibid.*, 10 July 1897.
9. *Ibid.*, 31 July 1897.
10. *Ibid.*, 7 August 1897: 7.
11. *Manchester City News*. 18 December 1897: 6.
12. *Pall Mall Gazette*. 4 August 1897: 7.
13. *Ibid.*, 7.
14. *Manchester City News*. 22 January 1898: 5.
15. *Ibid.* The *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph* 9 April 1898 also carried a warning.
16. *Pall Mall Gazette*. 1 October 1897: 7, carried a heading, "Miners Starving at Klondyke: Limitless Wealth of No Avail."
17. *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*. 3 September 1897: 7.
18. Reported in *ibid.*, 24 September 1897.
19. *Pall Mall Gazette*. 30 August 1897: 7.
20. *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*. 1 December 1898: 7, "Arrivals from Klondike: 5cwt of Gold."
21. *Ibid.*, 18 March 1898: 7.
22. *Ibid.*, 11 February 1899.
23. *Pall Mall Gazette*. 30 August 1897.
24. *Ibid.*, 12 August 1898: 8.
25. *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*. 24 September 1897: 3.
26. Referred to in *Pall Mall Gazette*. 25 November 1897: 3.
27. *Ibid.*, 13 April 1898: 8, "Direct from Klondike: The City of Darkness."
28. *Ibid.*, 19 April 1898: 5.
29. *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*. 24 September 1897: 3.
30. *The Fortnightly Review*, part 64, 1898: 745-755.
31. *The Klondike Review: A Journal of Authentic Information on the Yukon Valley Gold Fields* Only two issues, December 1897.