



Klondike Gold: An Interactive History. Hyperborean Productions.

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Klondike Gold on CD

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the discovery of gold at Rabbit Creek (renamed Bonanza Creek) in the Yukon, as well as one hundred years of storytelling about the events of 1896 and the “Klondike gold rush” that followed. There are many reasons for the continuing popularity of the Klondike Gold Rush, including the drama of its story of potential wealth, of reward for the few and loss and hardship for the many. There is the appeal of the image of the “North” as Canada’s (and North America’s) last frontier, with its exotic inhabitants and harsh land, and which often figures as a backdrop for masculine heroics. And there is a wealth of material which documents and interprets the history of the Klondike gold rush and its aftermath, from the pens of journalists, missionaries, police and the gold-seekers themselves, from the cameras of participants and professional photographers, and from the oral traditions of the Yukon’s First Nations. Many have mined this documentary heritage to prepare scholarly and popular accounts, and film and television productions also abound, from the innovative National Film Board documentary of 1957, *City of Gold* (narrated by Pierre Berton and directed by Wolf Koenig and Colin Low) to a current production by the Discovery Channel (it was conducting photographic research in the Yukon Archives during a visit I took this past spring). With the growth of multimedia, we can now add CD-ROMs to this list. *Klondike Gold: An Interactive History* is an ambitious and largely successful attempt to translate the stories of the gold rush to this medium. Originally created for a kiosk to accompany an exhibition at the Dawson City Museum (and now at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature in Winnipeg until January 26,

1997), the producers greatly expanded the material into this stand-alone CD-ROM. In the course of this review I intend to provide a sense of the presentation and the type of material covered in *Klondike Gold*, which I think accounts for its success. But I would also like to ask, in the context of this still emerging medium, in which little Canadian content exists, what promise it holds out in terms of the future of the presentation of Canadian history in this new format. How does *Klondike Gold* engage its audience, and what might we learn from its attempt to present and interpret the past? *Klondike Gold* begins with a brief opening voice-over narration setting out the importance of the gold rush as historical “event” (“In 1896, the discovery of gold on Bonanza Creek triggered one of the great adventures of modern history”) and promising an authentic “journey” into the past (“through the eyes and words of the people who lived it”), accompanied by a montage of photo-images. The user is then presented with the introductory screen, an engaging entry point into the production. Designed as a gold pan, the five main sections of this CD-ROM appear as flashing gold nuggets; passing your mouse over them opens up a graphic (or “thumbnail” image) in a small window with an accompanying title. One section, the “Mining Process,” allows the user to see inside the technology of placer mining, providing both an animated cross-section of a dredge and accompanying short movies illustrating various components of the dredging operations. “The Cremation of Sam McGee” provides an illuminating glimpse of Klondike cultural history, and a sample of the way the Klondike was popularized and mythologized. The main feature is a fascinating 1941 reading of the famous poem by its author, Robert Service, accompanied

by the poem's text and colourful illustrations, especially commissioned, by Yukon artist Chris Caldwell. The curious can also choose to listen to a young Pierre Berton interviewing Service in 1957, a year before his death, and follow up with several articles on Service and the writing of "The Cremation of Sam McGee." With three of the five "nuggets," which encompass the CD's "historical" material, a series of black and white historical photographs flashes by in the little window, encouraging the user to venture further into one of the topics: "Into the North: The Stories of the Klondike before the Rush," "The Gold Rush: The Story of the Stampede to the Klondike," and "After the Boom: The Stories of Dawson City after the Rush." Clicking on one of these sections opens up another level of choices presented as titles and small photographs (sub-titles within the chapters as it were), and choosing one of these sections then opens up another window, where a series of further sub-categories is presented as clickable images. Selecting "The Gold Rush," for example, presents the user with seven possible choices, including "The Klondike Discovery of 1896," "Poets and Parlour Ladies," and "On the Creeks." Click on the picture in which you are interested, and it appears in the centre of the screen; as you pass your mouse over the image "hotspots" appear. These are sections of the picture which appear highlighted when the cursor moves over them; click on one of these hotspots and a photograph, sound clip, or in a few cases, a "movie" appears. Accompanying each photograph is a series of "hypertext essays," conventional short articles on topics related to the visual images, with links which allow you to click on a highlighted word and jump to an article with further or related information. In other words, packed into all these levels and sub-levels is a wealth of information on the history of the Klondike gold rush, presented as images, sounds and written text. Archival photographs, in particular, are used to draw in the viewer and provide a visual sense of the past. Going beyond the presentation of the photographs as still images, they are presented as "movies" through the use of cinematic techniques, in the same vein as the highly popular Ken Burns-style television documentaries. Fades in and out, pans, and zooms, often accompanied by a musical background or soundscape, provide a vivid montage effect, giving an added power to what are already evocative pictures of the Klondike gold rush. Add to this the professionally produced sound items, mostly readings from diaries, letters, newspaper reports and other eye-witness accounts, and this production does deliver its promise of giving the user a vivid and compelling journey into the Yukon's past, and one that remains connected to the lives of the peo-

ple who experienced the events associated with the Gold Rush. Throughout this presentation the producers attempt to allow for a multitude of experience to be reflected. In this regard, Yukon First Nations are not merely a sidelight to the story of resource extraction in the interests of southern capital. Considerable space is devoted to the role of Aboriginal people in trade and transportation networks both before and during the gold rush, in the discovery of gold, and in examining the impacts of the gold rush on their economy and social lives. Some of this material is presented through voice-over narrations and written captions for the visual material. Native oral traditions are also represented, in the form of recordings, including an account by one of the eye-witnesses of the discovery of gold, Patsy Henderson, and a Skookum Jim Mason tale by famed Tagish-Tlingit story-teller Angela Sidney (whose stories appear in print in a number of publications, including Julie Cruikshank's *Life Lived Like a Story* [University of British Columbia Press, 1990]). Other subjects highlighted include the role of the Northwest Mounted Police, missionaries and fur traders before and during the gold rush, and the growth of Yukon society as a result of the demographic changes associated with an event that saw the population of Dawson City peak at over 30,000 and then go into a rapid decline. The accompanying "hypertext" articles incorporate the interests and findings of academic research, however, there are rarely references or suggestions for further readings given. As well, there is a lack of a searchable index to enable the user to look up articles on specific topics or people mentioned, or search for images or sound clips. In fact, the lack of a search function may prove frustrating to some users. I spent several sessions trying to locate the elusive bit of archival film mentioned on the packaging, finally coming across the brief Edison Company's motion picture of the Yukon and White Pass Railway. Yet, to its credit, Klondike Gold does not set out to be an encyclopedic reference work. Rather, it is akin to a well researched and sumptuously produced coffee table book, presenting a series of "essays" in words, pictures and sounds. Its main strength is its ability to evoke a feeling of past times and places through this rich use of sound and image. What Klondike Gold does particularly well, then, is to make history come alive, presenting an aspect of the past as a rich sensory experience. Here is the drama of Canadian history come to life, in a format appealing to a popular audience, and which does not merely sensationalize to catch the user's attention, nor shy away from presenting, at times, the conflicts which the gold rush precipitated. That this is achieved is aided by several factors, including the recog-

nition factor of its topic and the mass of visual source material to draw from. While paintings might work for illustrating an event of an earlier time period, the photograph contains a certain power to conjure up people and times long past. Klondike Gold recognizes this haunting quality of the photograph, allowing and furthering its work of connecting the present with the past. <p> As a cultural historian, however, I felt frustrated by the fact that the over 600 photographs are all unattributed, except for a general listing of photographic archives in the "Credits" section. Here, I think, is a missed opportunity to explore the representation of Klondike gold rush history. Instead of making invisible the production of the visual images which make up this CD-ROM, a section on gold rush photography could highlight the variety of ways in which this historical event was captured on film. In the Dawson City Museum's travelling exhibit version of Klondike Gold, one display case features a variety of cameras, drawing attention to the camera as standard gear in the Klondike outfit and to the growth of professional photographers who marketed their views to both stamperders and those outside the Yukon. As Jim Burant noted (at a presentation of the Association of Canadian Archivists/Rupert's Land Colloquium in Whitehorse this past June), despite the multitude of gold rush images, certain photographs of the Klondike are continually recirculated—such as those of dance-hall girls—which tend to reinforce popular notions of the Yukon that do not do justice to the range of images which survive. On the other hand, what kinds of subjects were never captured by the camera's eye? Drawing attention to the selectivity inherent in Klondike photographs, and thus to the images contained in this CD-ROM, might detract from the claims of "authenticity" boldly proclaimed in the production's opening moments. Yet to tackle such a question head-on would serve to further the depth and complexity of

Klondike Gold's presentation. <p> Finally, does all this make for an "interactive" history? If by interaction we mean making choices about the order in which we view (and read and listen to) the material in Klondike Gold, then how does this differ from the way we "read" certain kinds of books? If you were to pick up an illustrated history of the Klondike Gold Rush, would you read it cover to cover? Would you flip until an image caught your eye, then read the caption, and then perhaps check the index (if it was a well organized illustrated history) to follow up on the subject at hand? In other words, is the ability to move back and forth between subjects, and between text and images, an invention of multimedia? Clearly not; what is unique, at this stage in its development, is the ability to add sound and moving images, and substitute the loading and display of computer files for the flipping of pages. What Klondike Gold does is to make this exploration of northern Canadian history an interesting and enjoyable process, as it offers the user an intriguing range of choices within an attractive and professionally designed interface. <p> <cite>Klondike Gold: An Interactive History</cite> is a beautifully illustrated, well thought out history of the Klondike Gold Rush, its precedents, impact and aftermath on both the Native and non-Native peoples of the Yukon. It takes advantage of the capabilities of digitization to present a myriad of images, sounds and articles about its topic. At the same time, it reproduces a familiar and conventional approach to history-telling: narratives about a series of topics, often using a biographical focus to bring its story to life. This is not a criticism per se, but merely a reminder that multimedia productions are not as "new" as some might claim, owing much to long traditions of story-telling, and employing many of the same narrative techniques and conventions that historians also use in their written attempts to reconstruct and interpret the past. <p>

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