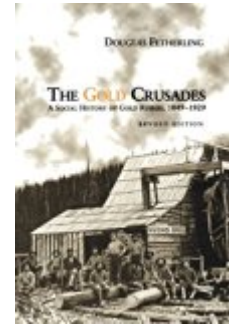


# H-Net Reviews

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Douglas Fetherling. *The Gold Crusades: A Social History of Gold Rushes, 1849-1929*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. 222 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-8046-2.

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## Crusading for Canada

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This work endeavors to put gold rushes into an international context by stressing the commonalities that make them—like the crusades—part of a single discontinuous event. Studies that consider rushes merely in a national context, it argues, miss or contort their real social meaning. For, according to Fetherling, all gold rushes share certain characteristics. Even though the presence of gold at a certain site may be known, before a rush can occur certain conditions have to be met. There has to be an expansive capitalistic economy, there has to be a frontier, and there has to be enough technology to spread the word of discovery, but not enough to make the mines accessible to everyone. The frontier adds remoteness and the possibility for adventure; historically, he says, gold rushers, like crusaders, were rootless men, more interested in the journey than the destination, ultimately not concerned with the practical opportunities to find gold. Gold rushes, in sum, were part of the experience of the British empire, a product of Manchester liberalism and industrialization. Self-deluded argonauts, while fleeing this society to pursue an impossible Arcadia, were inescapably bound to its values, its technology, and its authority. The international context, then, is British—there is no room in this model for non-English-speaking, pre-industrial peoples who do not accept classic liberalism. The national context Fetherling regards as misleading is American. Even though the rush of forty-nine came first, its products—greed, fraud, racism, a violent vigilantism—were precisely what later, more British, gold rushes had to overcome.

A basic starting point for this study is the fact that in the nineteenth-century United States, gold belonged to whoever found it; in the British possessions, all precious metals belonged to the crown. In America, miners, at least briefly, set up their own local governments. In the Empire, government officials sold licenses giving the right to dig gold, and governments gave prizes to men discovering valuable new deposits. Authority came first. If obedience failed to follow—as in Australia, where miners rebelled against the licensing system—the fault lay with inept colonial officials, anti-liberal English Chartists, and trouble-making Americans. (Wherever Americans went, sins against order, not to mention morality and good taste, were sure to follow.) In South Africa, Fetherling claims, the oppression and oligarchy that dominated the mines could be traced to the Boer influence. Actually, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa failed to live up completely to Fetherling's British Empire model; Canada best exemplified it. And in the Klondike, where he most starkly contrasts an "enobling" British colonial paternalism with a "leveling" American "corn pone" democracy, a particularly Canadian moral superiority reinforced British-style institutions. While he is vague on just what constituted these "distinctly Canadian values" (pp. 62, 125), Fetherling is clear on one point. America represents a degraded British society; Canada an improved one. American argonauts might have been startled to learn that the ability to move freely and the desire to better oneself were products of British liberalism; English and Spanish-speaking Americans had been seeking gold and greener pastures long before Manchester blighted the surrounding coun-

tryside. American scholars also would be surprised to learn that escapist, antisocial beliefs dominated American gold rushes; J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In* (1981), and Malcolm J. Rohrbaugh, *Days of Gold* (1997), demonstrate that American gold rushers maintained the closest links possible with home; often dreamed of self-improvement in practical, limited, traditional terms; and feared social disruption both in the mines and back home. Comparative studies of American and British colonial attitudes toward gold and those who sought it can be very valuable; David Goodman, *Gold Seeking: Victoria and California in the 1850s* (1994) brilliantly analyzes differing cultural attitudes in the two countries, especially toward

the moral impact of gold-driven wealth and social fluidity. But Douglas Fetherling has not delved very deeply into gold rush society or its historiography; he operates at the level of stereotype and spectacular events and characters. He has written on gold in Victoria and California without reference to Geoffrey Serle or Rodman Paul. The book is very well written, and, where the argument does not overwhelm all else, it contains interesting narratives. But as a synthetic history of gold rushes, it fails. The reader learns more about Fetherling's particular brand of British Canadian nationalism than about why people stampeded for gold.

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