

Now I felt the exhilaration: The North is different, especially in summer. The hills pulsate with irrepressible light, wildlife regards us as intruders, the silence is intense ... I never felt entirely safe. — *Charlotte Gray*

Into the wilderness

BY CHARLOTTE GRAY
in Dawson City

I wanted to see it with my own eyes.

For the past three years, I have been living vicariously the 1890s Yukon Gold Rush — the subject of my next book. I've read dozens of memoirs by survivors of this collective Get Rich Quick madness, and through them, become captivated with the men and women, thousands of them, who came stampeding into the Far North towards the Klondike goldfields.

Like me, most of those people had no idea what the terrain was like, no backwoods skills, and only the haziest notion of how to pan for gold. They all lusted after "colour," as they called the yellow stuff, but other motives played their role — a yearning for adventure on the "last frontier," a need to escape desperate unemployment, a hunger for literary inspiration.

It was inspiration too that drove me North.

It is an historian's lot to spend time surrounded by those long dead; as a writer of popular history, I want to make their stories come alive.

There was Bill Haskell, an early miner, who described the impact of subsisting for eight months on bread, beans and bacon: steak replaced sex in his dreams, and "the awakening is very painful." Despite the hardships, he would later sum up his journey in his memoirs: "What a picture! Snow peaks and their shining glaciers!" Entrepreneur Belinda Mulroney, a tough young Irish-American who went north to "mine the miners," found a widespread contempt for women. "My backbone stiffened then and there," she recalled, and insisted on being addressed as "Miss Mulroney." Jack London, the macho Californian who would become the most successful writer of his day, left with acute scurvy after less than a year; he described the Yukon winter as like "living inside a refrigerator."

But what was it actually like for them? I wondered. What was it like to be one of those crazy stampedeers?

Most of them had slogged northwards for thousands of miles, through blizzards, across ice, over mountains. They left San Francisco, Seattle or Vancouver in dangerously over-loaded vessels, sailed north up the Pacific Coast to land near either Dyea or Skagway, and then faced a towering mountain range — the St. Elias Mountains. For those who survived the killer inclines of either the Chilkoot Pass or the White Pass, almost a thousand kilometres of wilderness lay ahead — five lakes icebound seven months of the year, and then (once the spring thaw arrived) a terrifying series of rapids in the Upper Yukon River.

It took weeks to reach their destination: Dawson City — a boomtown on a bog that exploded from about thirty inhabitants in 1896, when gold was first discovered in the Klondike, to close to 30,000 at the peak of the Gold Rush in 1898.

One hundred and ten years after the Gold Rush, I was far more comfortable than my predecessors in modern-day Dawson, now with a permanent population of 1,300 residents and 1,500 dogs. I arrived by scheduled airline, Air North, purchased fresh vegetables in the Dawson General Store, and viewed the rocky horrors of the Chilkoot Pass from the comfort of a small, private plane. I also avoided the river's notorious white water that took so many lives back then.

Even from above, my stomach lurched as we swooped down a gradient so dizzy that, in 1898, those who climbed it in single file did not dare lift their eyes from the man in front. If they looked up, they would be paralyzed by the challenge ahead. If they looked down, they might topple

Author Charlotte Gray follows in the footsteps of 'those crazy stampedeers'



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Thousands of men and women stampeded into the Far North in the 1890s in search of riches.



NATIONAL POST



Charlotte Gray travelled to Dawson City, Yukon, to get a sense of what it was like for those stampedeers during the gold rush — the subject of her next book.

off the path and tumble down the cliff.

But I knew that research from 5,000 feet was cheating.

So when friends, Maureen Abbott and Gord MacRae, offered a trip on their river raft along the stretch of the Yukon River that flows past Dawson City, I grabbed at the offer. I remembered too late that, twenty years ago, I declared that sleeping on the ground was for suckers. However, enthusiasm for getting right both the facts and the sensations of a previous era got the better of me. I signed on.

The trip was four days, three nights, during which we covered about 250 kilometres. The river was wide, shallow, and carried so much sediment that, if you put your ear close to water level, it hissed like air escaping from a

tire. It looked benign until you realized that the branch bobbing in the distance was actually an entire 50-foot spruce tree, torn from the bank by the strong current that was constantly carving out new channels and treacherous gravel bars. Once we watched a stand of trees topple into the water, as the ground gave way. Massive log pile-ups littered the riverbanks. The water is so cold that, had anybody fallen in, it would have been instant hypothermia.

The days were long (the sun set after midnight, and there was always some light in the sky) and the scenery vast. The sun beat down and the cloud formations were extraordinary. Gravelly pockets of land at water level were covered in alder shoots cropped to waist-height by moose

during the long gloomy winters. Sheer cliffs glowed yellow in the sunshine or deep purple in the evening shadow. Clumps of dark, impenetrable spruce or slender white birches dotted the hillsides. There were purple and blue harebells, purple fireweed, deep blue vetch, and endless wild roses in full bloom.

As we rowed along in the current, I began to see the fascination of the North. Ever since I emigrated from England, I have been struck by the number of Canadians, from Pierre Trudeau to Marshall McLuhan, Glenn Gould to Liz Hay, who go misty-eyed at the thought of the North — the immense and almost impenetrable wilderness that stretches from the 60th parallel to the North Pole. I had never understood it before:

How could it be better than the Cabot Trail, or the Rockies, or Georgian Bay, or any number of other incredible Canadian landscapes?

But now I felt the exhilaration: The North is different, especially in summer. The hills pulsate with irrepressible light, wildlife regards us as intruders, the silence is intense. The gravel beaches where we pitched our tents were pitted with moose prints and bear scat. I never felt entirely safe.

Those early stampedeers were equally awed by this landscape. They heard the howls of wolves at night and anxiously exchanged rumours of bear attacks. Anxious for human companionship in the echoing wilderness, they banded together in campsites with strangers. They shared supplies (bread, beans and bacon again) with fellow stampedeers who had lost partners or supplies in the rushing current. For me, the moose or bear by the water's edge was a fascinating wildlife sighting. For the hungry stampedeers, armed with unreliable shotguns, it was a chance to vary their diet. "Stopped to take a hunt and try and get some game," recorded one of Jack London's companions in 1897, "but Jim only shot a Wild Cat."

Unlike our predecessors, we didn't have to sleep on wet spruce boughs or squat over unreliable campfires while creating meals. Our dinners were high end (coq au vin, chocolate cake) and our supplies plentiful. Our large orange raft had two seats and two storage compartments.

Unlike our predecessors, we didn't have to sleep on wet spruce boughs

By the end of the fourth day, I was flagging at the oars as we drove ourselves to reach Dawson before midnight. One of my companions shouted, "I can see the Dome!" The Midnight Dome is the big hill above Dawson. Next, we saw the Moosehide Slide, a big white scar on the Dome's flank — the landmark that all those sweaty, exhausted stampedeers yearned to see in the late 1890s. It meant their epic journey was almost over.

Just before we beached, we passed the mouth of the Klondike River where the inky clear Klondike flows into the silty brown Yukon, the line between their waters as sharp as between oil and water. In the 1890s, many of the newcomers must have felt gold within their grasp; they could almost see nuggets glinting below them at the bottom of the translucent Klondike as they were swept towards Dawson's wharves. Soon they would spill out of their vessels into Dawson's saloons, with roulette wheels and can-can dancers busy 24 hours a day.

I had no illusions about the Klondike's gold-speckled pebbles: I'd had my lesson in panning and knew the Klondike glitter was iron pyrites. But I could see that the very existence of a town called Dawson in the midst of that vast, remote and overpowering landscape was a miracle of human stamina and a testimony to the power of gold. But I gave Diamond Tooth Gertie's Casino a pass, and headed for a hot shower and a soft bed.

■ Charlotte Gray is the author, most recently, of *Reluctant Genius: The Passionate Life and Inventive Mind of Alexander Graham Bell*, and a short biography of Nellie McClung. She spent three months in Dawson City, as writer in residence at Berton House, generously sponsored by Dawson Public Library and the Writers Trust of Canada.