

# TOO BIG TO FILM

## WHY ARE SO FEW CANADIAN-MADE HISTORY PROGRAMS ON TV?

BY CHARLOTTE GRAY

**I**n the distance, four clumps of tiny figures struggled upward in different directions through thick snow, then crouched down and started digging. I stood one kilometre away, on the opposite side of a vast snowy bowl, straining to see what they were doing. Above the figures, the rocky upper slopes of Alberta's Fortress Mountain, near Kananaskis, loomed out of the cloud; the summit was hidden. Close to me, three camera crews — each member wearing an avalanche transponder and a thick down coat — waited. And waited. And waited.

Instructions from the director crackled out of walkie-talkies. The icy wind made my eyes water. Having focused and buried small GoPros — light, durable video cameras — in protective containers, the distant figures finally made their way down to the base of the slope and roared out of danger on snowmobiles.

The countdown began: "Five, four, three ...." When it ended, the silence was briefly overpowering. I stared up at the peak opposite. And then, as a black cloud billowed upwards, tons of snow cascaded down the rock face, and, with a roar, buried the slope and valley below. Although safely removed



Actor Richard Madden as goldseeker Bill Haskell on the set of *Klondike*.



from the avalanche, we found ourselves in a swirling snowstorm.

My 2010 book on the 1890s Klondike gold rush, *Gold Diggers*, is being adapted for television, and Scott Free productions invited me to visit the set in April 2013. The series, entitled *Klondike*, will be shown on the U.S. Discovery Channel in early 2014. A cluster of well-known actors, including Sam Shepard, Richard Madden, and Tim Roth, are playing the Klondikers I wrote about. In my book, I interwove real-life stories drawn from original memoirs, letters, and diaries;

scriptwriter Paul Scheuring has reshaped the material, injecting some fictional elements but sticking close to the authentic details of Klondike madness.

During the rush, more than fifty thousand people went north to flee the economic depression that swept through North America in the 1890s. Hoping to strike it rich, they made a nightmare journey up the inhospitable north Pacific Coast, over the savage St. Elias Mountains, and across the icy wastelands of the Yukon. Most returned empty-handed but never forgot the experience.



**I'VE OFTEN WONDERED WHY CANADIANS GET SO LITTLE TELEVISED HISTORY. OF COURSE, MONEY IS A LARGE PART OF THE ISSUE. THE NATIONAL BROADCASTER'S BUDGET HAS BEEN SQUEEZED RELENTLESSLY FOR YEARS.**

On the production set, I was watching the recreation of a grisly event: an avalanche that in April 1898 swept down the Chilkoot Pass in the Yukon, burying scores of Klondikers in up to fifteen metres of snow and killing sixty of them. One hundred and fifteen years later, the avalanche footage captured by the three camera crews and four buried cameras would be superimposed on footage shot the previous day in exactly the same area.

The earlier shot had brought to life an image that sends shivers down my spine: the thin, dark diagonal line of men bent double under heavy backpacks in Eric Hegg's primal panorama of the great gold rush. Hegg's photograph conveys all the sweaty hope and despair of prospectors, gamblers, and dreamers as they struggle over the Chilkoot Pass towards the goldfields. But television audiences require action. So, as fifty extras toiled up the faux Chilkoot Pass, the director gave them the cue to turn, scream, and start running and tumbling down the mountain. When the two scenes shot several hours apart are blended together, the results should be horrifying.

I've often wondered why Canadians get so little televised history. Of course money is a large part of the issue: The national broadcaster's budget has been squeezed relentlessly for years, and private broadcasters squee to buy programs cheaply from elsewhere rather than produce homegrown documentaries or dramas. This six-hour *Klondike* miniseries will cost \$25 million — far beyond Canadian budgets.

But is there a deeper problem? Are our creators defeated by the immensity of our landscape? Calgary writer Chris Turner spent three months in Berton House, the Dawson City writers residence run by the Writers Trust of Canada. He describes the Yukon as "lethally unforgiving ... the weather is trying to kill you, the landscape intends to evict you." It can render all of us tiny figures in a snowy waste. Pierre Berton himself is one of the few Canadian authors who attempted to pin that brash, epic landscape onto paper.

In Britain, historian David Starkey draws on a parade of colourful monarchs for his television documentaries, in which cameras linger on barren Yorkshire moors or sweep along rocky Cornish shores. Meanwhile, in the United States, Ken Burns enthalls PBS audiences with documentaries on subjects as varied as jazz, baseball, Prohibition, or the 1930s dust bowl. Burns tells epic stories through a combination of archival photography and footage of panoramic scenery.

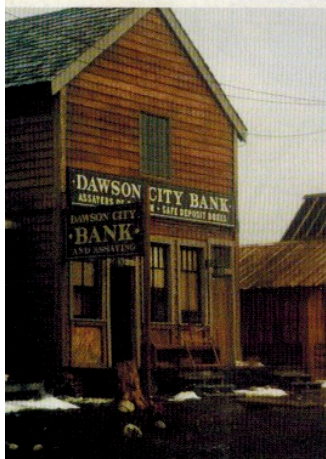
By contrast, it is now thirteen years since Mark Starow-

icz's acclaimed series *Canada, A People's History* was shown. Since then historical pickings have been slim in Canada. Yes, we have seen the dramatic recreation of our first prime minister's constitutional struggles in *John A: The Birth of A Country* as well as period drama series such as *Murdoch Mysteries*. But these programs are usually shot on claustrophobically small sets with small casts. The War of 1812 triggered some half-hearted Canadian coverage recently, though PBS did a far better, more ambitious documentary on the subject.

I think this is about more than money. I think we are afraid of our history because it is so hard to contain. Dramas in our past and present (Quebec nationalism, First Nations rage, Islamist threats) remain too raw, too controversial. And so much of our history is driven by the forbidding vastness of our geography — lakes stretching as far as the eye can see, endless prairie under a lofty blue dome, mountain ranges rolling towards the horizon, and rivers so ferocious that you step backwards, intimidated by the powerful roar. Our land is literally larger than life, or at least larger than the lives of the different peoples who have settled and lived here.

No wonder Canadian novelists tend to stick to smaller canvases: family sagas, domestic dramas, urban detective stories. Or else they abandon the windswept magnificence altogether and set their fiction on the remembered landscapes of their childhoods in other countries.

If novelists duck the challenge, how much harder must it be for filmmakers, for whom an avalanche in the Rockies is not simply a literary device but a costly operation requiring skilled mountain guides, camera operators, dynamite — and a really good insurance policy. ☘



CHARLOTTE GRAY

Above: Part of the set from the American television series *Klondike*.

Right: Canadian author Charlotte Gray on the set of *Klondike* in April 2013.

To view a 1957 Canadian film about the Klondike, go to [CanadasHistory.ca/KlondikeFilm](http://CanadasHistory.ca/KlondikeFilm)



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