

**★ Gold Diggers: Striking It Rich
in the Klondike**

Charlotte Gray; \$34.99 cloth 978-0-00200-857-0, 416 pp., 6 x 9, HarperCollins Canada, Sept. Reviewed from bound galleys

Charlotte Gray, best-selling author of 2006's *Reluctant Genius: The Passionate Life and Inventive Mind of Alexander Graham Bell*, has the ability to make Canadian history spring from the page and come to life. It is a wonderful gift, and her latest book is thoroughly engaging.

Gold Diggers tells the story of six people – including writer Jack London, a renowned Mountie, and a Jesuit priest – who participated in the Klondike gold rush of the late 1890s. Gray masterfully employs a prodigious amount of primary materials to dramatize the gold fever that gripped prospectors, and the unbelievably difficult conditions of life in the far north: the brutally hard work of hauling supplies across an unforgiving landscape; the struggle for survival in the killing cold of winter; the mud, floods, and swarms of mosquitoes that descend in summer. Apart from the challenges presented by the terrain and the weather, the men and women who ventured to the Yukon had to cope with near-starvation (and the very real threat of scurvy), isolation, and the possibility of never striking the big one.

Yukon's Dawson City lies at the heart of the narrative, and Gray recounts its growth from a small tent settlement to a Wild West frontier town, complete with numerous bars and brothels and its own kind of rough justice. Until, that is, the famous Mountie Sam Steele came to town and attempted to clean things up. Before Steele's arrival, the Jesuit Father William Judge – who is still regarded as "The Saint of Dawson" – selflessly tended to the people, convincing those with money to build a small church and hospital.

As for London, whose experiences in the Yukon formed the basis for many of his stories, it's a miracle he survived the scurvy that afflicted so many of the adventurers, and which Gray describes in excruciating detail. Gray also points out a potent irony: if the white prospectors had had any respect for the Hän people who lived in the area, they would have learned from them ways of avoiding the affliction. But racism and a feeling of white superiority meant the Hän were not merely ignored but also mistreated and forced off their land.

Gray writes in a lively and accessible manner, and eloquently provides readers with an almost tangible connection to the past. – *Candace Fertile, who teaches English at Camosun College in Victoria.*
