

New Review from Adrian Bonenberger: Brian Castner's "Stampede": Disaster and Gold Fever in the Klondike"



My earliest exposure to the literature of 19th century Alaska came in the form of Jack London's *Call of the Wild*. An adventure to match the dreams of idealistic youth, *Call of the Wild* carried me away, and may have been my first book-length encounter with anthropomorphism. Its characterization of good and evil—of right and wrong, justice, and injustice—has stayed with me to this day.

Even before reading London's works, though, I've a deeper memory—one of Charlie Chaplin's "The Gold Rush," an ostensibly humorous look at the Klondike rush. The film, a smash at the time, came out in 1925, nearly thirty years after the rush to

Yukon (in 2021 terms, that would be analogous to someone releasing a movie today about The Gulf War, or perhaps the early Clinton years). Each summer during an annual community bbq, my parents would screen it on an old projector, using actual cylinders of film. We kids would watch the line of prospectors crawling up the mountain in the movie's beginning, what looked like an endless snake in the snow, simultaneously huge, and also tiny when presented against the backdrop of looming snow-filled mountains—a serious prologue to Chaplin's *The Tramp's* later absurd and treacherous wanderings. Chaplin's choice to begin the comedy on such a realistic and somber note is telling; he can't resist the urge to remind viewers of the vast human suffering that exists as a foundation for his tale.

This is all background on why and how I was prepared to rip through Brian Castner's [*Stampede: Gold Fever and Disaster in the Klondike*](#). I grew up on myths, and anyone else who spent some part of their childhood fantasizing about or watching movies about The Wild West will love *Stampede*, too. For readers who enjoyed the HBO series *Deadwood* and watched *Unforgiven* more than once (by choice), and of course anyone who's read Jack London's *White Fang*, *The Sea-Wolf*, and *Call of the Wild* will have difficulty closing the book's cover once opened, and, as I did, find themselves making excuses to their spouse about lunch and chores, and carrying it around the house flipping pages, while stumbling over various impediments.

The book follows people who were integral to discovering and sensationalizing the gold that sparked the stampede for which it's named, as well as profiting from it. Its characters include many prominent figures, including a young Jack London. Of particular interest is the way in which Castner disentangles myth and legend from fact, aligning historical misconceptions that were spread far and wide at a time when it was difficult to correct a narrative once it appeared in a newspaper. In reading *Stampede*, one has the feeling that one

is reading as close to the final word on what happened, and how it happened, in the voices of the people who lived the events.

There are so many surprising and extraordinary details woven into the narrative, hardly a page goes by without some new and unexpected turn. London's story was particularly gripping; in addition to being interesting on account of his later writing career, London seems to have been a capable outdoorsman. He survives a winter along with some other comrades, and, before that, helps pilot improvised boats through a section of rapids. One gets a sense that London is able to write so capably about high stakes survival against the odds because he was skillful enough to recognize what success took—and how fickle a thing fortune was, how narrow the line between disaster and wealth. Reading *Stampede*, one understands how London could have come by this understanding as a young adult, and how that influenced his writing.

Readers may also appreciate that Castner—no slouch when it comes to trekking himself—hiked the trail many took from Skagway to the site of the strike. His experience and memory of the terrain helps animate the book, bringing it to life with accounts of the physical landscape.

Stampede doesn't shy away from the uglier parts of history, either. In many ways, the most important and interesting element of *Stampede* is the way it highlights how exploitation of First Nations people was integral to the first strike's discovery. Widespread racism and hostility toward First Nations people occurred during the rush, and afterwards, in their erasure from a narrative that focused on the luck and ingenuity of white prospectors—when the success enjoyed by American and Canadian prospectors depended on First Nations labor and resources. Take away either group, and there is no “Stampede” at all.

Another detail that may interest American audiences is the

presence of Donald Trump's grandfather—a Bavarian immigrant named Fredrich Trump, who made his first fortune running a restaurant and brothel (and thereby provided seed money for the Trump family real estate business). For all the gold that was pulled out of the Klondike, and the fortunes made therefrom, far more was made by catering to the appetites of the people flowing into the area. Unscrupulous purveyors of less-than-fine merchandise gladly equipped countless doomed missions with substandard inventory, or took their money in exchange for creature comforts. Some merchants ran a scheme by which they sold equipment to groups that seemed unlikely to succeed, then had agents waiting further down the trail to buy the equipment back at a fraction of the cost once the gullible rubes had a taste of the trail and found it not to their liking.

Those groups of prospectors who turned around, and who paid for their avarice or foolhardy curiosity with their health and thousands or tens of thousands of dollars in today's terms, were the lucky ones. The unlucky or unwise fell victim to the various hazards one could encounter on the 400-mile long trail to the strikes: banditry, disease, avalanche, freezing temperatures, starvation, wild animals, falls, and drowning, to name some of them. Castner captures this exhilarating story in all of its tragic scope—both from the well-known American perspective, and that of a lesser-known and failed Canadian attempt to reach the site of the strike overland.

At the end of Chaplin's "The Gold Rush," The Tramp and his partner are on a ship sailing back to the mainland US. They've become "multi-millionaires" from having struck it rich largely through luck, having stumbled upon a "mountain of gold," according to the movie—an apocryphal cultural memory of how wealth was built. A more accurate ending would have them heading back with a small pile—some tens or hundreds of thousands wrested out of the earth, if they were among a handful of hardworking groups who got to the strikes early.

Either that, or they'd have made their money through less legitimate means. In either case, the odds were against them holding onto the money in any meaningful way. The Trumps invested in cheap NYC real estate, eventually the fortune that Donald Trump inherited. Another family of prospectors, a husband-and-wife couple, turned their fortune into more and greater mining operations, dominating a sector of the oil industry in California, a business that was recently sold for over \$4 billion. And the man Castner and history ultimately conclude was responsible for striking "gold" in 1896—a First Nations man nicknamed "Skookum Jim"—spent some of his fortune on easy living, but also willed upon his death that the remainder be placed in a substantial trust dedicated to the welfare of his people—a trust that [endures to this day](#).

Different visions for what wealth can accomplish—corporate organization, personal wealth and celebrity, the elevation of a community—reflecting the personalities and priorities of the people who made their fortunes in the Klondike.

The timing couldn't be better for *Stampede*, as modern-day prospectors spend tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars on data processors to "mine" bitcoin hoping to satisfy what amounts to an atavistic urge for something the modern world, the civilized world, cannot provide. As with the original Klondike gold rush, the people who are truly striking it rich are those who are building and selling the hardware—building and maintaining the servers and exchanges—creating the framework by which individuals can gamble in a system that almost guarantees they'll fail or lose. As much as anything else, *Stampede* is a cautionary tale—well-researched history books always are. Maybe that's why there's so few of them, and even fewer written with the skill and power of a page-turner. I greatly enjoyed reading this book, and ended up coming away smarter and wiser for it. If you're thinking about investing in cryptocurrency, remember all those people who trudged up the Chilkoot and never came back, and [buy this book](#) instead.

It's cheaper, and will be of more use to you!