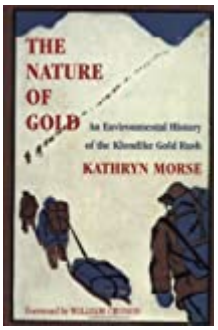
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kathryn Morse. *The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003. xviii + 290 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98329-5.

Reviewed by Timothy Rawson (Alaska Pacific University)

Published on H-Environment (April, 2005)

The Arctic Trails Have Their Secret Tales

Readers familiar with that Bard of the North, Robert Service, will recognize the title as the third line of "The Cremation of Sam McGee." The most familiar arctic trail is, of course, that leading from tidewater at the head of Lynn Canal, over the Chilkoot and White passes to the Yukon River, and thence to Dawson and the richest placer gold deposits ever discovered. Kathryn Morse is fully aware that the pictures and stories of the Klondike gold rush are so well known as to have become iconic. Furthermore, there is already plenty of literature about it, in firsthand accounts, monographs, and popular retellings. Yet in reworking an already mined topic, Morse finds that an environmental perspective yields secret tales hitherto undiscovered.

Morse seeks to complicate our current understanding of this event by questioning the motives, expectations, practices, and infrastructure carried north by the gold seekers. This book does not cover the pre-1897 situation in the North, nor elaborate on mining developments subsequent to the great rush; rather, it stays focused on the rush itself, 1898-99, and distills the experience of those tens of thousands of hopeful people into an analysis of the intersections of nature and culture. This analysis is a progeny of Richard White's concepts of connections between nature and human labor, and William Cronon's commodification of nature, applied to the Klondike rush. Because of its remoteness and environmental challenges, rapidly bringing the weight of acquisitive capitalism to the Klondike proved to be a process fraught with ambiguities.

Seven chapters, bracketed by an introduction and a conclusion, take the reader from the fiscal policy debates of the Gilded Age, along the land and marine routes, north to the mining claims themselves, with attention to the merchants and Natives who enabled the adventure. In addition to descriptions of steamboat travel, supply packing, thawing permafrost, and sluicing gravels, we get insistent questions on consequences near and far, from local environmental damage to New York condensed milk production. Each chapter has the word nature or culture, or both, in its title, and Morse deftly shifts her emphasis between them. Rather than this event being a heroic episode in the oldest contest, Man versus Nature, Morse highlights negative outcomes and links them

to culture to show why these were unremarked at the time, yet also how the values we associate with gold, and resources in general, have undergone change.

Clear maps appear at appropriate intervals throughout. The many reproductions of political cartoons and advertisements for consumer products add visual interest, along with a collection of photographs. Morse uses a wide array of primary sources from archives in Yukon, Alaska, and Washington, buttressed by an ample bibliography.

Morse's skill is in the varied and interesting ways she takes the straightforward and reveals hidden complexities. Her discussion on the consumption and production of travel in chapter 2, for instance, and what those had to do with the alienation from or intimacy with nature, illuminates the task of the journey. That miners engaged in "the work of disassembly" of nature, upon arrival, in order to find gold, is obvious (p. 91); of greater interest is the subsequent discussion of the ways in which the fickleness of mining frustrated the argonauts' expectations of work followed by reward (pp. 125-130). Also useful is the extended theme of people leaving an industrializing world in a Turnerian-type reversion to a preindustrial world, with its rewards and travails, and the imperatives that brought boilers, rails, and machines as quickly as possible.

Whereas other narratives of the gold rush amplify the people involved and their connections to one another (man to man as competitors in a race, men to women, sourdoughs to cheechakos, owners to laborers), Morse focuses on the connections to people to nature. These connections are "forged" not less than two dozen times in the text, as if they were workers in a smithy: "Through the labor of mining, gold seekers forged new connections to nature, but they forged those connections within the powerful context of their culture" (p. 137). She periodically recognizes, amidst all these connections to nature and within the blurred lines between production and consumption, that all this analysis would have bewildered the gold rushers: "In the end, to the miners, it was all just work" (p. 14); "gold mining made sense" (p. 39); "it was simply another meal" (p. 142).

Morse concludes with a fine contemporary example of the shifting values we ascribe to gold and its extraction, in the Montana debate over cyanide-leaching mining and particularly a proposed development on the Big Blackfoot River. The human nature of gold, unlike gold's chemical stability, is ultimately protean.

The Klondike gold rush continues to generate producers and consumers. Every summer they appear in Skagway, Whitehorse, and Dawson, travelers from countries near and far clutching their copies of *Klondike* (1972), Pierre Berton's masterful narrative. *The Nature of Gold* will not displace that popular history, but for scholars and serious students of the North, Morse's book provides a stimulating collection of questions and perspectives.

Citation: Timothy Rawson. Review of Morse, Kathryn, *The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. April, 2005.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10409