

The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush. By Kathryn Morse. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003. xvii + 290 pp. Photographs, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-295-98329-9.

Reviewed by Joseph Cullon

Gold seekers paused near the summit of Chilkoot Pass, an overland trail leading to the tributaries of the Yukon River, their backs bent from the weight of their packs, their skin chapped from the arctic wind, and their bodies exhausted from the long ascent. At this point, the mountains threw up yet another challenge—a mile-long, almost perpendicular sheet of ice. Prospectors climbed it single file, sometimes on their hands and knees. More surprisingly, they paid a toll to endure this ordeal. In all the photographs of the Chilkoot Pass ascent and in the public memory that they spawned, this detail is obscured. Still, the fact remains that entrepreneurs carved steps into the ice and charged prospectors a toll to climb their “golden staircase.” They found it easier to separate the hopeful from their money than to dig gold for themselves. In *The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush*, Kathryn Morse rescues the account of this toll plaza in the arctic wilderness and a host of other illuminating stories from obscurity. With vivid prose, telling examples, and keen insight, Morse illuminates how nature and culture interacted in the rapid commodification and industrialization of this distant outpost. Exploring the paths that prospectors followed, the gold they dug, and the food that fueled them, Morse also sets a new standard for integrating environmental and social history.

Morse develops a two-part argument in alternating chapters on “nature” and “culture.” In developing the first thesis, she draws attention to the way in which promoters and miners alike worked to “naturalize” social relations. Most provocatively, she asks, “Where did gold’s value come from?” In the 1890s, promoters of the gold standard for the nation’s money supply wanted everyone to believe that gold was, by its nature, the most valuable metal. Gold’s purity, malleability, resistance to tarnish or rust, and rich luster aided their arguments, but Morse’s attention to political rhetoric demonstrates convincingly that the metal’s value was not inherent but culturally constructed by these “Goldbugs.” Also, prospectors weren’t propelled by “human nature”

to the Klondike, as many argued at the time. Their decisions to abandon life in the contiguous United States were shaped by “cultural ideas about hard work, production, nature, virtue, chance, luck, and wages” (p. 193). Drawing with discernment upon a range of sources, from political tracts on the money supply to the first-hand chronicles of prospectors, Morse vividly recounts how social relations of power were often purposefully described as relations of nature.

On the flip side, Morse addresses how late-nineteenth-century economic culture emphasized the industrial origins of commodities at the expense of their roots in nature. She convincingly demonstrates that these natural “connections . . . may not always be easy to see, but in everything . . . they are inescapable” (p. 192). She reconnects gold to its natural contexts by exploring the physical labor of prospectors and their “disassembly” of the landscape. From their journeys to the Yukon watershed to their seasonal routines in the gold fields, miners came to know nature through work. They thawed the earth with fires in the winter and harnessed scarce water in spring to process gold-bearing gravel. Although they developed deep local knowledge from intimate experiences with the region’s resources, they remained part of an industrial society. Railroads, trams, and steamboats rapidly brought this once distant outpost the provisions of industrial life. The imported food upon which miners depended connected them to distant environments. All that could be commodified had a price assigned it, even the steps on a remote mountain pass. This process of abstraction ultimately obscured the very real attachments to nature that prospectors experienced as they took the mountainsides apart in pursuit in of gold.

Morse limits her focus to the gold-rush years, 1896 to 1900, and to prospectors hailing from the lower forty-eight states. Thus, while hydraulic mining was substituted for placer mining soon after 1900 and produced far greater environmental degradation, Morse does not address its impact either on nature or on labor. Further, prospectors rushed to Canada from all parts of the world during the gold rush. This was both a Canadian and a transnational story. Morse, however, emphasizes the American dimensions of the rush. Seattle figures more prominently in her narrative than Canadian cities of similar size and import. Citing these omissions is not to criticize Morse, for her accomplishment more than compensates for these limitations.

While Morse relies heavily upon interpretative strategies pioneered by environmental historians Richard White and William Cronon, she also pushes the field in new directions. In *Organic Machine* (1995), White first emphasized the way people know nature through work, but Morse further develops the idea by attending to the most intimate details of prospectors' journeys and labor. In *Nature's Metropolis* (1991), Cronon powerfully articulated the connections between abstract commodities and the natures that produce them, but Morse extends his insight by placing equal emphasis on consumption. She argues that "all acts of production are unequivocally linked to myriad acts of consumption; all acts of consumption are further connection to other acts of production, and thus to other natures" (p. 192). Whereas environmental history has frequently been criticized for ignoring social relations and privileging abstract forces of production, Morse bridges the gap. Prospectors emerge in these pages as real people who shaped their lives and environments as much as both were shaped for them by industrial capitalism. With great effectiveness, Morse draws the connections between social and environmental history, convincingly demonstrating that each subfield is enriched by the other.

Joseph Cullon is assistant professor of history at Dartmouth College. He is at work on his first book, which is about shipwrights and economic culture in colonial New England. He is the Andrew W. Mellon Post-Dissertation Fellow at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, for the academic year 2005–06.