All That Glitters: *City of Gold* Revisited

by John C. Tibbetts

> "I must therefore submit to this law: I cannot penetrate,
> cannot reach into the Photograph. I can only sweep it with
> my glance, like a smooth surface."
> —Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*
>
> "We live amidst surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate
> well on them."
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience"

History's fingerprints are all over *City of Gold*.

The classic l957 documentary chronicles the roaring Stampede Days of the Klondike Gold Rush, the summer of l898 when more than 40,000 fortune seekers from all over the world blew in to Dawson City, the capitol of Yukon Territory. These hardy souls had survived the hike up the icy slopes of the Chilkoot Pass, the 500-mile trip down river from Lake Bennett, and months of backbreaking toil in the gold fields of Bonanza Creek. Even though few had found their El Dorado, all of them—for reasons of their own—gathered in Dawson to celebrate throughout the endless daylight hours. . .

In the almost forty years since its release by the National Film Board of Canada, *City of Gold* has received more honors and been seen by more people than any other short documentary film ever made. [1] Its pioneering use of still photographs became the model for NBC's "Project Twenty" television series in the early l960s and for countless later series for A&E, the Discovery Channel, and other cable outlets. [2] Recently, Ken Burns, in an interview with this author, confirmed that *City of Gold* has been a seminal influence on his own work. [3]

Yet, there's something mysterious about its very familiarity. Its marvelous still photographs seem to have been shaped less by the hands of individuals than by the anonymous agencies of time. As *City of Gold* has gone out into the world—the prints passing through divers hands, clattering through countless projectors in schools and church basements, suffering the sea changes of video transfers and numerous language translations—it has lost its own specific identity and passed into the common currency of folk art. It's the history book with the cover page torn out—everybody knows it but no one remembers who wrote it.

City of Gold was the direct result of a second Yukon discovery, a find almost as significant as the original l896 gold strike. In l949, while exploring the interior of a Dawson sod-roof house under demolition, a local jeweller named George Murdoch found a collection of several hundred 8xl0 glass-plate negatives documenting Dawson's Gold Rush days. From them he made prints which he sold to tourists. Six years later Colin Low, a young filmmaker in charge of the Animation Department of the National Film Board of Canada, saw them in the Canadian National Archives in Ottawa. Excited by their extraordinary visual quality, Low and his colleague, cinematographer Wolf Koenig, began pondering how they could use them in a documentary film about Dawson.

Many of these images were the work of one man, Eric Hegg, a Wisconsin photographer who had followed the sourdoughs up the Chilkoot Pass in '97. That Hegg's precious glass plates survived at all is a miracle. In those days, after glass negatives had served their purpose, it wasn't uncommon for them to be sold to gardeners to be used as window panes in greenhouses.

It was a death sentence. Sunlight, which once had given birth to the images, gradually burned them away with the passing of the years. (The Hegg Collection is currently housed at the University of Washington.)

"Hegg must have been a special man," says Low. "He may not have been an artist, but given the body of his work we saw, we know that he was a professional and had good equipment. He worked with the new dry-plate technology, which wasn't as clumsy as the old wet-plate process and which was more portable and light sensitive. He was an entrepreneur and he sold the pictures to the locals." [4]

The idea of basing a motion picture almost entirely on still photographs was a novelty at the time. [5] The Film Board was reluctant at first to pursue the project. "They asked us why we wanted to use old, dead photographs like that. We had to prove our vision to them. Wolf and I went to the Director of Production of the Film Board and told him we wanted to go to Dawson City to research the story and shoot some live-action footage to use with the photos. It was an inconceivable distance from Ottawa in those days—a couple of days by air—and expensive. When we arrived, in 1954, we found a rather active ghost town that had gone from 40,000 people in 1898 to a rather sleepy place of about four or five hundred. There were still some people there since the Gold Rush, and they told us a lot of spectacular stories."

In order to insure the best picture quality, Low and Koenig (who were given co-directing credit on *City of Gold*) made 11x14 blow-up diapositives (transparencies) directly from the original glass negatives. The low-contrast images were like fine-grain positives which had such unusual clarity that the filmmakers could isolate tiny portions of the picture field without losing resolution. "They were incredibly detailed," explains Low. "The more tests we shot, the more things in the pictures we saw."

City of Gold's celebrated camera movements over the picture surfaces were not—to the surprise of many viewers—achieved by manual manipulations. Low decided at the outset that the hand-held camera could not rival the degree of precision and control afforded by the animation stand. These techniques—called "graphics" at the NFB—had been developed during Low's work with Norman McLaren. "From the very beginning, in 1945, when I joined McLaren, he was animating the camera across still images, frame by frame—working out zooms, pans, accelerations, decelerations, curves, exponential movements, etc." Low became head of the Animation Department in 1950. He brought in a mathematician, Brian Salt, and a young technical whiz named Roman Kroitor to refine the animation process. Kroitor had already directed one of the Film Board's most famous documentaries, Paul Tomkowicz, Street Railway Switchman (1953). It was Kroitor who assisted Low in devising a mechanism by which camera movements could be mechanically calculated and plotted to simulate the inertia and momentum of hand motions.

Although, ensemble fashion, everyone worked on the production process and the basic storyline, Low claims it was also Kroitor who devised the idea of sequencing the still photographs of Dawson's past into a progression of "scenes," beginning with the Chilkoot Pass and continuing through the boat armada on Lake Laberge, the arrival at the goldfields, and finally the celebration in Dawson City. Everyone had agreed, at the outset, that the Low/Koenig live-action footage would bracket the stills sequence.

After the entire project had been shot and edited, Pierre Berton, a young Canadian broadcaster and editor of Maclean's Magazine, was called in to work with the Film Board's Stanley Jackson, a veteran scriptwriter, to develop a spoken commentary. "After the boys shot some footage in Dawson City," says Berton, "they found I was from Dawson and, indeed, was working on the story of the Klondike [The Klondike Fever, 1958] at the

time. . . . I went down to Montreal one weekend and we discovered we all had a meeting of minds. Our attitude towards the Klondike experience—that it was, in fact, the experience of life, man's search for himself as much as man's for gold—was held by all of us. . . ." [6]

The evocative music score—still a classic of its kind—was by composer Eldon Rathburn, one of three composers working full time at the Film Board. Rathburn had already worked with Low on Age of the Beaver (l952) and Corral (l954).

Apparently no one at the NFB regarded *City of Gold* at first as anything more than a modest endeavor, just a 23-minute movie that was one among five or six other projects going on simultaneously at the time. No one got rich in the process, either. Everyone, except Berton, was working under contract for the NFB, and he received only a flat $300.

Even the film's first American release occurred under less than noteworthy circumstances. l40 prints were released by Columbia on a bill with Brigitte Bardot's first film, *And God Created Woman.*

City of Gold begins with Berton's simple words, "This was my home town, and my father's town before me." The burnished music of a cello and clarinet murmurs an elegy. Dawson City is drowning in the undertow of the past. Like the locomotives and steamboats left behind from the Stampede days, the town has run aground. Old men sit framed in cafe windows, high houses rear up out of the drifting grasses, an iron bedstead snoozes in the weeds, a rusty padlock strangles a ruined gate. The churchyard tombstones rest on the bedrock of utter stillness. "History will never see its like again," intones Berton as the tinkling, honky-tonk piano music quavers and dies. Silence.

All movement has ebbed away, leaving only the residue of still photographs.

Then, exotic musical chords stroke the scene like a magician's transforming wand. "The winter of l897, beyond mountains

2,000 miles north from civilization, the cry was 'Gold!'" Suddenly the camera pans vertically down a mountain range (a photograph or a moving image?) and a quick dissolve plants us firmly on the slopes of the Chilkoot Pass.

Paradoxically, we feel a release. There is life before death. The Past is Heaven after all. Banjo music quickens and the camera spirals down to a dark line of figures etched against the dazzling snows. "This scene, above all others, remained in my father's mind to his dying day," says Berton. A single file of men extends upward in a steep diagonal across the white frame. The photograph is as stark, razor-sharp, and abstract as a Franz Kline painting.

We don't genuflect before these still images of the past, like Francois Truffaut honoring the chapel of photographs in The Green Room. There is no reverence here. Rather, like a claim jumper chasing a paystreak, the camera violates their borders and contests their ownership. "We never showed the edges of the photographs," recalls Tom Daly, who edited *City of Gold*, "so the illusion that the world went on in all directions beyond the camera frame was maintained at all times." [7] The moving eye prowls across the picture surfaces, seizes a chunk of terrain, stakes out a claim, and sifts through the details: A solitary dog carrying a candle through the darkness of a tunnel, a daintily dressed lady of Paradise Alley brandishing a little hatchet, the blurred arm of a bartender pouring a drink, Buffalo Bill doffing his hat at the head of a parade, a single bar of gold, radiant against the gloom.

Ultimately, we don't possess the images so much as they possess us. The grim-faced mounties and the insolent saloon dandies fix us in unwavering stares, pinning us to the map of history. It is the eye that establishes the horizon, wrote Emerson, and we are its vanishing point. [8] "They're looking at you, to see what you're like," says Tom Daly. "And of course you're looking at them, too, to see what they're like." [9]

The dominating image—a crowd of

3

American and Canadian celebrants packing the Dawson streets and lining the rooftops on Dominion Day/The Fourth of July—is rife with ambiguity and contradiction. The holiday was both Canadian and American. Dawson was an American town on Canadian soil. Moreover, few among the crowd had struck it rich. "What were they celebrating, really?" wonders Berton, hymnlike music welling up from a duet of trumpet and tuba. "More than Independence Day, I think, more than Dominion Day. . . . Only a few got any gold and very few of these were able to hang on to it." The camera, like Omar's moving finger, moves on, picking out individual faces from the crowd, their wistful expressions presenting a contrast to the prevailing hilarity. A solitary figure looks to the right, his head stiffly turned away from his companions, his gaze directed elsewhere. "It's hard to believe," continues Berton, "but after coming all this way, many of them never bothered to look for gold at all. It was as if somehow they had already found what they were seeking."

Despite the cues of music and text that function like captions to guide our "reading" of the images, faces like these ultimately are enigmas, glyphs of a language—a "strange elation"—we can't decipher. Like the aptly named Evaporated Kid, one of the more colorful denizens of long-ago Dawson, the message vanishes before we can get a second look.

"We felt that this one photograph conveyed all the contradictions of the whole Dawson City experience," says Low. "It was the 'theme' we were looking for to tie the whole thing together. Very few people got anything out of it—except that they had made this incredible journey. Some turned right around and came back. It's a metaphor for the human experience, of looking for an El Dorado—and, sometimes, not finding it!"

It is difficult to mark the exact moment when *City of Gold* delivers us back, blinking, to the present. The still images of the Dominion Day/Independence Day sequence are followed by static shots of an abandoned Dawson—a discarded pile of pickaxes, an oil lamp, an old shoe, dusty pictures in an empty house (Queen Victoria, a full-length nude, and a Rosa Bonheur painting of three plunging white horses). . . But, no, somebody's pulled a fast one on us. Dawson is moving again. Dust motes dance across a window. Shadows waver along the walls. For the first time, we hear sounds—the bark of a dog, the cries of kids playing baseball, the throaty chuckles of passing trucks. Dawson is up and running. An old man turns and brandishes a hand saw toward an offending smoke-belching truck. A gallant, but futile gesture.

The sequence stands as a metaphor for what was to come.

As a direct result of the popularity of *City of Gold*, the citizens of Dawson City stopped burying their past and began reconstructing it. A massive restoration project was launched during the next two decades. Today, the entire town looks like the Hegg photographs come to life. Fittingly, during the reconstruction one day in 1978, when spades and picks once again attacked the permafrost, workmen digging in a vacant lot behind Diamond Tooth Gertie's gambling hall unearthed a cache of more than five hundred "lost" nitrate films, including movies by Melies, Harold Lloyd, Allan Dwan, and Maurice Tourneur. It was the third great Dawson strike. Because the area had been the last stop in a chain of distribution points of motion pictures, the films (like the sourdoughs of yore) had stayed on. [10]

In a way, *City of Gold* brought them back to life, too.

And what of those good companions, Colin Low, Tom Daly, Roman Kroitor, Wolf Koenig, Eldon Rathburn, and Pierre Berton? They've all been too busy to look back. Koenig retired from the Film Board last August and is currently building a house. Daly is still active in Montreal as a writer and composer. Rathburn recently scored Low's 1992 film, Momentum, and the 3-D Imax film, The Last Buffalo (1990) (currently

playing to capacity crowds at the Sony-Imax theater near Lincoln Center). The Last Buffalo, by the way, was produced by Roman Kroitor and directed by Colin Low's son, Stephen. Berton, now the historian-laureate of Canada, lives in Ontario and continues his writing. And Colin Low, who resides in Montreal, has never stopped making movies. For the last twenty years he has been preoccupied with three-dimensional processes. He made the first Imax 3-D film, Transitions, for the Vancouver Expo '86. It contains a scene where a locomotive seems to move magically off the screen and into the audience. The Lumiere Brothers would have been proud. [10]

By the way, Low has never returned to Dawson to see the newly restored *City of Gold*.

He's already seen the real thing.

—John C. Tibbetts

Endnotes

[1] A listing of the more than 22 prizes and nominations *City of Gold* earned in the first two years of its release includes: First Prize in Documentary Short Features, l0th International Film Festival, Cannes; First Prize, General Interest Category, 2nd International Irish Film Festival, Cork, Ireland; Oscar nomination for Best Short Subject, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Hollywood; Best Documentary nomination, British Film Academy Awards, London; Award of Merit, Non-Theatrical Category, l0th Annual Canadian Film Awards, Toronto; First Prize, Documentary Category, International Exhibition of Electronics Nuclear Energy Radio and Television, Rome; "Film of the Year," l0th Annual Canadian Film Awards; Gold Medal, Trento Film Festival, Trento, Italy; First Prize, First Spanish American and Philippines Film Festival, Bilbao, Spain; and Blue Ribbon Award, History and Biography Category, American Film Festival, New York.

There has been astonishingly little written of consequence about *City of Gold* in either popular or academic/specialty publications. A contemporary account (and a generous picture spread) is in "Fine Old Shots of High Old Time," Life, Vol. 44 (l9 May l958), pp. 94-99. One of the few extended accounts to be found in a history of the documentary film is in Eric Barnouw, Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film (New York: Oxford University Press, l993), pp. 200-0l. (Note: Mr. Barnouw erroneously spells Eric Hegg's name "A.E. Haig.")

[2] Colin Low reports that he was brought to New York as a consultant to Donald B. Hyatt's Project Twenty series (Colin Low interview with the author, 27 August l994). For details about the impact of *City of Gold*'s so-called "stills in motion" techniques on Project Twenty, particularly the productions "Meet Mr. Lincoln" (l959), "Mark Twain's America" (l960), and "The Real West" (l961), see William A. Bluem, Documentary in American Television (New York: Hastings House, l965), l57-59; and Peter C. Rollins, "Nightmare in Red," in John O'Connor, American Television: Interpreting the Video Past (New York: Frederick Ungar, l983), pp. l34-58..

[3] Ken Burns interviews with the author, Kansas City, MO, 3-4 August l994.

[4] Colin Low telephone interview with the author, 27 August l994. All quotations from Mr. Low are from this interview.

[5] Christian Metz, Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema (New York: Oxford University Press, l974), p. 220.

[6] Pierre Berton letter to Prof. Richard Dyer MacCann, 3 February l978. Contrary to Berton's assertion that he was brought in before all the filming and editing was finished, Tom Daly asserts that "the film was already fine cut (about 2l minutes) when we first called Pierre to come and see it. . . . Pierre did not actually have any part in the picture editing." Moreover, Daly recalls that Berton was "relatively inexperienced with film" at the time and accepted Stanley Jackson's suggested revisions, "re-adapting the new lines to his own words and style." (Tom Daly letter to Prof. Richard Dyer MacCann, 28 February l978.)

[7] Tom Daly, "The Still Photo in Cinema," Pot Pourri (National Film Board Newsletter), Summer l977, p. 3.

[8] "It is the eye which makes the horizon." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in Emerson's Essays, First and Second Series (New York: Gramercy Books, l993), p. 235.

[9] Tom Daly, "The Still Photo in Cinema," p. 4.

[10] For a full account of the Yukon find, see Sam Kula, "There's Film in Them Thar Hills!" American Film, Vol. IV, No. 8 (July-August l979), pp. 2-5.

[11] For an account of Transitions, see Ray Hartley, "Imaging Expo 86," Cinema Canada, July-August l986, pp. l4-l6, l8. Other information concerning Low's work with Imax and 3-D can be found in Colin Low, "Large Screen 3-D: Aesthetic and Technical Considerations," SMPTE Journal, January l984, pp. l4-l7; Colin Low, "Notes on Shooting Urgence/Emergency," Perforations, Vol. 8, No. 2 (l988), pp. 5-6, 8; and "Interview with Colin Low, Tony Ianzelo, and Ernie McNabb," Perforations, Vol. ll, No. 2 (l992), pp. 34-36.

Sep 25, 2013 - Explore scullyandscully's board "All That Glitters is Gold", followed by 3227 people on Pinterest. See more ideas about All that glitters, Paris opera house and Opera garnier paris.Â *Rococo Revisited - Detail of the wall paneling in The â€œBreakfast Detail of the wall paneling in a palace in Vienna, Austria. Sofiaz Choice.