

**Review: The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the
Klondike Gold Rush**

By Kathryn Morse

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Kathryn Morse. *The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003. 290 pp. ISBN 0-295-98329-9 (cloth). US\$29.95. Alkaline paper.

The Nature of Gold! What a great title for a book. It makes one want to pick up the book and at least browse it. But the title is the lure. This book can bite like the gold bug. I found myself visualizing the passes and the rivers that these hardy and brave people took to get to the gold fields and then the areas they had to work to find the gold. In fact, I found this book more interesting than many fictional accounts of the Yukon gold rush.

Kathryn Morse, an assistant professor of history at Middlebury College in Vermont, tells the story through contemporary newspaper accounts and advertisements, and diaries and letters of the miners and others who experienced the challenges of reaching, working in, and surviving the harsh environment of the gold fields. Morse shows why the miners left their homes in the industrial world to gain their freedom from its constraints, and how they found themselves recreating the same situations in their world of gold mining. It is a story about the environment and how the miners, seeing it only in terms of their own needs, destroyed and changed the ecosystem as they mined for the gold.

Morse tells the story of not just the miners, but of the historical, economic, and political times in which they lived and why conditions were right for so many people to leave their homes and travel to such a remote area. It is also a story of the inter-relationships that one doesn't normally contemplate: what is connected to opening a can of pork and beans on the Chilkoot Pass or buying a railroad ticket to Seattle. It also shows how the farmer, the factory worker, the grocer, and the outfitter all are tied to the environment and the culture of gold, and how each can affect the overall economy.

Included in this well-researched book are endnotes for each chapter and a selected bibliography. Morse also includes a section of impressive photographs as well as cartoons and maps which provide insight into the text.

This book will appeal to scholars of the western environment and 19th

century industrialization. Further, it will be appreciated by anyone interested in the last big gold rush of the west. I would highly recommend it as an excellent addition to academic and large public libraries.

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