

# Gold Rush is known 'round the world, historian says

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By [Dan Davidson](#) on March 12, 2014 at 3:41 pm



Photo by Dan Davidson

SPREADING HIS KNOWLEDGE – Ken Coates, seen during his recent address in Dawson City, is Canada Research Chair in Regional Innovation at the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, and director of the International Centre of Northern Governance and Development at the University of Saskatchewan. In 2013, Coates was named as the Macdonald-Laurier Institute's Senior Fellow in Aboriginal and Northern Canadian Issues.

DAWSON CITY – If you were trying to build a case for the Klondike region to be declared a World Heritage Site, you could hardly find a more enthusiastic booster than historian Ken Coates.

The educator, who was raised in Whitehorse, made that very clear during his talk at Myth and Medium 2014 conference in late February. While his lecture had the rather long-winded, academic-sounding title *Precious Lands: Territory, Resources and Values in the Klondike River Valley*, there was nothing stuffy about the presentation itself.

Coates first visited Dawson in 1965, and has been fascinated with its history and that of the Yukon ever since.

The Klondike, he told his audience, is unique for two reasons.

First, one must acknowledge the long history of the native people who have lived here for thousands of years. Secondly, however, one must recognize the impact of the Gold Rush. “We can’t get away from that,” Coates said.

“We can pretend the Gold Rush isn’t a dominant theme, but it really is. The Gold Rush is really probably the only event in Canadian history that’s known around the world.

“Interestingly, the only place where it’s not really known as a Canadian event is in the United States, because they claim it as theirs, which is why Sgt.

Preston on the Mounted is there in Disneyland, right in the middle of it.”

In his world travels, Coates has run into a number of gold mining centres where the promotional banners have read, “(This country’s) Klondike”, and that says a lot.

“In the United States, they still think of the word ‘Klondike’ as an ice cream bar, but in the rest of the world, where they’re literate – oh, I shouldn’t say that. In these places, the word ‘Klondike’ didn’t need an explanation. (In New Zealand and South Africa) they didn’t have to add ‘famous place where they found gold and dug it out of the ground.’

“All they had to say was the word ‘Klondike.’”

His brother, who is a historian living in the United Kingdom, found dozens of places named Klondike and Bonanza there when he did a search just for fun. Coates said he made the mistake of downloading the recent Discovery Channel mini-series *Klondike*, only to discover that the peaceful history of the Yukon had been transmogrified into the American frontier myth before his eyes and had become *Deadwood North*.

In the serious portion of his talk, Coates outlined a number of key points about the Tr’ondëk/Klondike experience, breaking each one into three parts: the event itself, the values it displayed, and the threads that spin out from it.

“The real transcendent importance, the powerful story about the Klondike,” he began, “is not just about what happened here, but what it tells us about the broader world.

“What is happening in Dawson City is actually a marvelous way of telling the story of humanity, not just the people who came here, but of the broader forces that shape big parts of the human condition.”

Aboriginal occupation is the first event, a story of human adaptation to the environment. The values are reflected in the way this adaptation took place, how people managed to thrive in a place most would find inhospitable.

The threads speak to the fact that this same type of process has taken place in different settings all over the world. European exploration started here well before the Gold Rush, a process that was frightening for both the explorers and those being explored.

Out of this drive to both expand and satisfy curiosity came a key development, which was the establishment of the boundary between British North America and Russian North America. This would eventually lead to the boundaries we know today.

The Europeans brought to North America the value of human domination over the land. It’s not a value unique to their culture, he said. You find it in Japan, China and other cultural milieus, but it was fairly new

here, where the ethos had been to work with what the land provided. Europeans had technology that could overcome most obstacles and they tended to do just that.

The search for gold did not begin in the Klondike. It is a global story, Coates said, one that continues right down to the present day.

It is a trail we can follow down through history, a human phenomenon, and a very North American one. It's the pursuit of wealth, of fame, of opportunity.

The Klondike Rush occurred at a time when it seemed like the last frontier had already been closed off, and at a time of a great North American economic depression. It captured the imagination of the world.

"This was a truly global phenomenon, and this thread is what gives the Klondike its greatest mystique," he said.

The imposition of Canadian law is another process, and one that plays a major role in the history of this region.

"The fact that the Northwest Mounted Police were already here when gold was discovered was very very important," Coates said, wondering how the degree of American influence might have increased without them.

"The value here is one of sovereignty, of national governments demonstrating their ownership and control over territory."

Again, this process was going on all over the world at that time.

The stampede led to cultural encounters between aboriginal people and newcomers.

"In very few places on the planet does it happen as fast and on such a large scale," Coates said. "A couple of hundred local First Nations people and several tens of thousands of outsiders pouring in and imposing themselves on the people in this area very very quickly."

The new arrivals, as they did in places around the world, assumed they were the superior people with the absolute right to displace those who were here already and marginalize them in their own land.

Following the Rush there is the inevitable decline of the boomtown, though Coates noted that "Dawson City is one of the most resilient places" in this regard.

There follows the development of the Klondike legend, magnified, popularized and distorted by the tales of Jack London, the verses of Robert Service and even the narrative history of Pierre Berton, not to mention the reimagining that has taken place in the movies, on radio and on television.

In more recent times, there has been the development of a tourism industry, somewhat based on reality and somewhat on the mythology.

And even more recently there has been the revival of First Nations

culture that is producing the sort of events at which Coates had come to speak.

Concluding his talk, Coates put forth a sort of manifesto.

"I think we need to use the history of this area as a means of teaching about reconciliation, and teaching about partnership.

"This is a precious land, as aboriginal people, clearly your land. As newcomers, you're hopefully welcome as neighbours and friends into this territory. You know it but not enough people do.

"Only a single story has really leaked out from the Klondike. Only a single story has leaked out from the Yukon and that is about the Klondike Gold Rush. We have allowed outsiders to tell the story, I think, too long.

"You are telling the story differently with your lives. You tell the story differently with the cultural centre. You tell the story differently with the kind of wonderful celebration you are having this week, in this particular event of Myth and Medium. And you find new ways of telling stories to different people in different audiences.

"It is magnificent that you are telling these stories to each other as aboriginal and non-aboriginal people. Please do it and please find a way to share these stories with the rest of the world."