

The Big People

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This is an excellent way to plunge into history and vicariously experience the thrilling ride that was the Klondike gold rush.

In July of 1897, the steamship *Portland* arrived in Seattle bearing more than a ton of gold and sixty-eight miners fresh from the newly discovered Klondike goldfield. The news raced through a financially depressed continent. Overnight, thousands of would-be miners “stampeded” for the goldfields, many of them utterly unprepared for the arduous trek or for the realities of survival once they reached the remote Yukon wilderness.

The Big People is a fast-paced but thoroughly researched fictional portrait of this legendary, larger-than-life moment in history. The protagonists of the story, Elmer and his uncle Henry, are among the “stampeters” who hear the news of the gold strike and race to the Yukon in the hope of finding something better than their previous lives. Along the way, they encounter dozens of extraordinary men and women whose exploits have since become the stuff of legend.

The author, an outdoorsman who resides in the Yukon, knows his subject thoroughly. The descriptions of ordinary life on the frontier, as well as the hair-raising dangers faced on the Chilkoot Pass and the rampaging rapids of the Yukon River, have a level of intimacy and detail that bring to life the taste of the simple “bannock” bread that the prospectors fried on their campfires, the feeling of clinging for dear life to a crudely constructed boat plunging down a frigid river, and the sensation of slogging through the mud of a raw mining camp.

This is outdoor adventure very much in the tradition of early twentieth-century writers like James Oliver Curwood and Henry Bedford-Jones, the so-called “king of the pulps.” It also shares some of their literary limitations. The protagonists are characterized mostly by strength, steadfastness, and good moral character, and the plot features a number of amazing coincidences. Elmer and Henry have an astonishing propensity to be in exactly the right place at exactly the right time to meet legendary characters and witness famous (or infamous) events.

And yet the force of the narrative sweeps all such quibbles aside, bolstered by the fact that, as the author describes in an extended epilogue, most of the flamboyant heroes and scoundrels that Elmer and Henry meet in their turbulent journey were very real, and the historically documented exploits of these “stampeters” were no less incredible than anything described in the novel. The epilogue carefully notes where Elmer and Henry’s story has diverged from historical fact. With these caveats, *The Big People* could almost be taken as a historical primer for those interested in visiting the area and reliving its glory days. It is, for any reader, an excellent way to plunge into history and vicariously experience the thrilling ride that was the Klondike gold rush.

BRADLEY A. SCOTT (April 22, 2015)

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