

## Klondike: TV Review

10:00 AM PST 1/16/2014 by Tim Goodman

### The Bottom Line

Discovery goes all in for its first scripted drama effort, which delivers bold, cinematic on-location action.

**Air date** Jan. 20, 9 p.m., Discovery

### Discovery's gold rush drama stars **Richard Madden, Tim Roth, Abbie Cornish and Sam Shepard.**

Discovery's first scripted miniseries doesn't take any baby steps. The cable channel went all in from the get-go with *Klondike*, about the gold rush and the lives swept up and sometimes away in its course. *Klondike* is from executive producer **Ridley Scott** and sports a star-studded line-up. Over the course of six hours it delivers bold, cinematic on-location action, announces itself with sweeping, dramatic dialogue (admittedly, not for everyone) and scatters excellent acting across the small screen.

our editor recommends



[Discovery Won't Produce 'Klondike' Sequel»](#)



['Klondike' Cast Invade 'Gold Rush' Preshow 'Dirt' \(Exclusive\)»](#)



[Discovery's 'Klondike' Sneak Peek »](#)

So, yeah, that's pretty much how you want to make an entrance into the scripted world.

Based on the book *Gold Diggers: Striking It Rich In the Klondike* by **Charlotte Gray**, the miniseries tracks the lives of people who, like typical Americans, wanted to strike it rich, wanted

freedom to move around and do as they wish, and wanted something they could call their own. Set in 1897 with the gold rush on but not yet played out (it lasted a mere four years), *Klondike* centers on New Yorker Bill Haskell (**Richard Madden**, recently killed on *Game of Thrones*) who along with best friend Byron Epstein (**Augustus Prew**) put their college degrees behind them, fearing a desk life of boredom and regret, and imagined greater. They've been saving money -- not much -- but they've got a head full of dreams and once they get a whiff of a miner who struck it rich, they start a misguided adventure to Canada's Yukon Territory with the lure of gold on their minds.

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Superbly directed by **Simon Cellan Jones** (*Generation Kill*, *Treme*), who packs in sweeping, awe-inspiring images of nature with the up-close ugliness of dank, mud-packed streets, *Klondike* stands out instantly with its large canvas. Jones and his crew filmed real avalanches, icy river scenes, snow storms, gunfights in dense forests -- all of which contrasted grandly alongside the day-to-day drudgery of the camps. Jones manages to make these six hours feel cold and wet as you follow Haskell and the denizens of the Yukon through their often bleak pursuit of the all-consuming gold nugget. Turn up your heater before watching.

Written by **Paul Scheuring** (*Prison Break*, *A Man Apart*), *Klondike* expands Gray's world from the book (which had many real life people in it) to get at a seemingly simple concept -- greed. But interwoven in the strike-it-rich mentality was how people lost themselves in the pursuit. Many were literally lost in the cold environs and others killed by the ruthless nature of other dream seekers toiling next to them in hardship.

We know now that relatively few actually managed to get rich on the gold. Many never left the Klondike even if they did pull nuggets from the ground -- either there was no fortune to haul home, they lost it as quickly as they found it or it was taken from them. The lawless nature (the Canadian Mounties eventually settled in) plays out in Haskell's life numerous ways. If you're not worried about losing your claim from another greedy, desperate digger, then there were always Indians or the elements to fell you.

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*Klondike* is centered in Dawson City. It depicts how Haskell and Epstein realize there's no rulebook on striking it rich, nor any wrong (much less tried-and-true) way of going about it. So they gleefully spend almost the last of their money on supplies to get going. Barely is a stone turned over before their destinies are forged and fates met in different ways for each man.

In Dawson, Haskell and Epstein meet the characters that shape the story. There is, of course, Jack London (**Johnny Simmons**), hanging around to ultimately tell many of the Yukon stories. Soapy Smith (**Ian Hart**), the first huckster (of many) that they encounter trying to fleece the easy newbie targets. Early on Haskell seems smitten by Sabine (**Conor Leslie**), until he finds out she's a courtesan, as the series likes to say. Instead, Haskell ends up being linked more strongly with Belinda Mulrooney (**Abbie Cornish**), a strong-willed entrepreneur who realizes that Klondike offers her more opportunity than anything in the States. She plays at being tough (she's definitely

a successful, cutthroat businesswoman), but she can't out-evil The Count (**Tim Roth**), who's battling her for real-estate domination and muscle in the town. Those who seem destined to get caught somewhere in the middle are those who are inherently good, like Father Judge (**Sam Shepard**), the priest looking to establish a church; or Joe Meeker (**Tim Blake Nelson**), a relative of Belinda who's a little slow but helpful with Haskell and his claim.

Everybody in *Klondike* gives a strong performance, particularly Madden, who is likely to leap to leading-man status after this. His work here is exceptional. Another standout is Roth, who reminds you yet again how effortlessly he can transform a role.

### [STORY: Discovery Won't Produce 'Klondike' Sequel](#)

Jones' directing work here is one of the primary drivers of the series as well. Even if the hardships in *Klondike* hint at certain implied fates, the story nevertheless does a fine job of propelling the two-hour blocks and it absorbs you in the story of the rush to (possible) riches. One element, however, that could turn off some finicky viewers is that there are three different voice-over elements telling the story. And there's a penchant for dark and foreboding soliloquies about the toll greed/gold in particular and Klondike in general takes on those who find their way there. The shortest of which is still a perfect example of what you'll hear: "This place kills."

There is a lot of telling, to be sure, but there's also enough effective showing in the six hours to make you forget the platitudes about life in the wild and the danger and madness of risking it all. A less beautiful portrait that was poorly acted may have spotlighted the writing style more negatively, but *Klondike* never feels too laden by the style. Even the swearing, which seems so modern in its construct, is hard to call out because the now-legendary *Deadwood* did much the same thing (and probably for the same reason - rough and lawless men were cutting edge in their ability to inelegantly compound the language into crude forms).

No, there's not much to nitpick in *Klondike*. It's a seriously impressive leap into the scripted world by Discovery and is worthy of exploration.

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