



On the Set: Discovery Goes for Gold With Klondike

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Winter is coming...to the set of [Klondike](#). The crew of Discovery's first-ever scripted show cranks up the snow machine as stars [Richard Madden](#) and [Sam Shepard](#) button up their wool coats and two buses unload dozens of extras dressed in heavy 19th-century garb. The only problem? It's actually a beautiful May day on the Calgary set, with temperatures hovering in the high 80s. When the director yells "Action!" the actors do their best to re-create the subzero temperatures of the Yukon tundra - until the snow machine unexpectedly shuts down mid-scene. "What the f--- happened to the snow?" exclaims Shepard as he looks to the sky, prompting laughs from his costars.

"We've been through everything: snow, rain, sunshine - and that's all just in one day!" Madden says between takes. "It's always sunny when it's supposed to be snowing."

But unpredictable weather conditions are integral to the Klondike tale. Based on the book *Gold Diggers* by [Charlotte Gray](#) and produced by [Ridley Scott](#), the six-hour miniseries (which airs over three consecutive nights) tells the true tale of Dawson City during the 1897 gold rush and the characters who inhabited the lawless town. "A lot of people had no idea what they were dealing with," says executive

producer [Dolores Gavin](#). "They came up in their elegant finery and all their jewelry, thinking how easy it would be to find gold, but they were living in this fantasy world."

The project itself is a big step into uncharted territory for the network. *Klondike* was developed before the success of History's [Hatfields & McCoys](#) and [The Bible](#), and the subject was specifically chosen because of how heavily its core mining story relates to the Discovery brand - this is, after all, the same channel that airs [Yukon Men](#) and [Gold Rush](#). "It's incumbent on all of us that in this competitive landscape we find new ways of telling stories," says Gavin, who is also a Discovery executive vice president. "The themes we talk about all the time at Discovery are man versus nature, man versus man and man versus self. Our first thought was, 'Is there a fresh take on the gold space?'"

It turns out there is, and the cable network set out to ensure that the project was as realistic and accurate as possible. Using historical records and photographs, set designers painstakingly re-created Dawson City, right down to the depth of the mud in the streets. Tree stumps were hauled in as a finishing touch because, notes Gavin, "[Boomtowns] went up so fast, they didn't have a chance to uproot them." For the premiere's opening moments, the producers even received permission from the Alberta government to trigger a real avalanche - using more than 200 pounds of explosives - on Fortress Mountain in the [Canadian Rockies](#). "The Canadians were so helpful," Gavin says. "They said to us, 'We can get you nine dynamite things,' so we said, 'Yeah, we'll take that!'"

At the center of the story is [Bill Haskell](#) ([Game of Thrones](#) vet Madden), a young Vermont native who sets out to the Yukon to strike it rich. "Haskell is a man who's very much alone," Madden says. "His ambition to go and make something of his own resonates with all young men."

Madden, who insisted on performing his own stunts, reveals that the brutal conditions brought him dangerously close to death due to hypothermic reactions during a river-rapids sequence and sheer exhaustion from mountaineering. Bill spends the majority of the miniseries' first hour trekking through Alaska's Chilkoot Pass to get to Dawson City, which for the actor entailed a vertical climb up the frigid Canadian Rockies at 8,000 feet - and a date with the aforementioned avalanche. "It was the most demanding physical thing I've ever had to do in my life, without question," says Madden, who lost 12 pounds over the course of filming. "*Game of Thrones* was hard to shoot because of the relentless horseback riding in heavy armor - there's mud up to your knees. But that was a walk in the park compared to half of this stuff!"

Once Bill arrives in Dawson, he is introduced to some key residents, including Father Judge (Shepard), the conniving Count ([Tim Roth](#)), future *Call of the Wild* author [Jack London](#) ([Johnny Simmons](#)) and beautiful businesswoman Belinda ([Abbie Cornish](#)). "She was essentially in a man's world," Cornish says of Belinda, who, like almost all the characters, is based on a real person. "She owned a shop, a restaurant, a lumber mill - so many things in that time that not a lot of women did."

Expect to see sparks between Belinda and Bill, but a mysterious murder that rocks the town will test their fledgling relationship. "It's been a while since she's opened her heart," Cornish notes. "He does sweep her off her feet, but she's driven by other things, so that conflict ultimately makes a lot of decisions for her."

The decision to do more scripted fare will be easy for Discovery if *Klondike* strikes ratings gold. Just don't count on Madden - who was a big fan of *Yukon Men* and *Gold Rush* before he landed this part - to pick up a pan anytime soon. "I think I'll leave it to the experts," he says. "It's a thoroughly difficult world. I see the amount of effort those men put in, so I'll stick to acting for now."

Klondike premieres Monday, Jan. 20 at 9/8c on Discovery.