

“SLUMACH’S GOLD” PANS OUT

BY GORDON J. STEWART

Slumach’s Gold: In Search of a Legend by Rick Antonson, Mary Trainer, and Brian Antonson. Heritage House, 144 pages, paperback.

How can a person with even a modicum of curiosity and imagination not be stimulated by the legend of Slumach and his Lost Creek gold mine? Reading *Slumach’s Gold*, an enthralling account of gold nuggets “the size of walnuts” lying on the ground, like so many errant golf balls hit into the deep rough and awaiting discovery, one cannot help but feel the urge to strap on the ol’ backpack and head out in search of treasure. Succeed where so many others have failed. Find fame and fortune. Solve a B.C. mystery that has fascinated people for over a century.

But wait: there’s a curse on this treasure. Thirty or more people may have died trying to find it. The mountainous territory around Pitt Lake, where the mine is supposedly located, is extremely rugged and dangerous, prone to sudden shifts of weather, humbling in its vastness, disorienting and exhausting in its topography.

Hmm . . . so remain in the comfy chair by the fire and revel in fantasy? Or get out there, *carpe diem* and all that, and pursue this unlikely dream?

Slumach’s Gold: In Search of a Legend sure stirs up emotions, and that’s a true compliment to authors Mary Trainer, an SFU alumna, and former SFU students and brothers Rick and Brian Antonson. Their work is indeed a gem of a book about B.C. history, and very much worth a read.

The authors critically analyze all of the elements of the story that constitute this legend. And they are careful to point out that legend is the operative word. We know that Slumach lived, and that he was hanged for murder in New Westminster in 1891. That’s the facts. Beyond that, conjecture and hyperbole rule. And questions outnumber verifiable answers. Did Slumach really toss gold nuggets around freely in the bars and sporting houses of 1880s New Westminster? Did the other characters attendant to his legend — the half-Irish, half-Chinese Molly Tynan who escorted Slumach to the wilderness, never to be seen again; the Alaskan miner known only as “Jackson”; Constable Grainger; and many more colourful inhabitants of early British Columbia — actually exist? Why, despite many attempts, has no one located the Lost Creek mine?

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Or have they been searching in the wrong area all along? Does a mother lode exist near Sheridan Hill? Or up Spindle Canyon? Or on the east side of Harrison Lake?

Don't let the ambiguities inherent in this tale deter you from a most enjoyable read. For what would a legend be if not for exaggeration, conflicting recollections, and wild speculation? The fact that Slumach's legend endures more than 115 years after his death speaks volumes about how intriguingly it has been woven into the fabric of early pioneer life in southern British Columbia. Set within the historical context of grand visions for a huge, untamed territory on the edge of the continent, and full of enough plausibility to keep the legend alive and thriving, even today it is not yet ready to be banished to the realm of the fraud or the imposter. Such is the allure of gold. Such is the power of the imagination.

So sit back, lose yourself in this tale, and just maybe dust off your hiking boots.