

OF KLONDIKE GOLD AND SILK TRAINS

Article for *Mystery Readers Journal*, 2008

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Writing historical mysteries is a dream come true for me. I've always wanted to write, and I've always loved history. When I write, I don't outline, or think out a plot in advance. I usually have no idea how a book is going to end. I start with a character, a setting and a what if. And I usually end up with a mystery.

For *The Silk Train Murder*, the first book in the John Lansdowne Granville series, I'd been toying with the idea of a book set in British Columbia in the 1800's, because I'm fascinated by the concept of the western frontier. I was intrigued by the romantic appeal of "the wilderness" for an increasingly industrialized and crowded society, and by the remittance men – younger sons of the English gentry who didn't fit in and were paid a monthly 'remittance' to stay far, far away. I'd also read quite a bit about the various gold rushes, especially the Fraser River gold rush of 1858 and the Klondike rush of 1896-1899. (I blame Robert Service, whose *The Spell of the Yukon* - "I wanted the gold, and I sought it/ I scabbled and mucked like a slave..." - I committed to memory at an impressionable age.)

A reference to the silk trains on the radio one day caught my attention, and I did some research into them. I learned that the costly material, insured by the day, was rushed from west coast ports to New York in specially designed trains, which became the target of every crook across the continent. These silk trains consisted only an engine, caboose and six or seven specially lined railcars holding silk. When the silk trains were coming through, every other train on the tracks was shunted to one side, as competition was fierce between the Canadian

and US rail lines for the lucrative trade. The Silks were also the target of every crook along the way. As one of my characters ended up explaining it “Six of those cars full of silk fetch nearly three-quarters of a million dollars. How’s that for motive?”

So I had a jumble of intriguing historical bits, but no real setting, no what if, and no character. Then as I was journaling one day, John Lansdowne Granville showed up on the page, announcing that he was the fourth son of an English Baron, but no remittance man. He’d been a Klondiker, joining that mad rush for gold in 1897, and had washed up in Vancouver in 1899, hungry and broke. He still wasn’t accepting money from home, he’d make his own way, thank you very much.

It was perfect. In 1899 Vancouver had only existed for 13 years, and while it had electric lights, streetcars and telephones, the sidewalks were made of board and the city was still surrounded by forest. What is now pricey Yaletown was then mudflats and a notorious red light district on the edge of Chinatown.

The city of Vancouver came into existence because of the Canadian Pacific Railway; what had been a small mill-town with a couple of bars and not much else became the western terminus and the link to the Orient. By 1899, the CPR had three sleek steam liners, the *Empresses of India, of China and of Japan*, carrying passengers, silk, tea and other cargo into the Port of Vancouver each month. The silk was then loaded onto the silk trains for the mad dash to New York.

The Klondike Gold Rush had brought an influx of wealth to Vancouver as hopeful gold seekers sought provisions and passage north. The area along the waterfront thronged with bars and merchants catering to the would-be gold miners. Population growth and a real estate boom drew still more people to the young city. The cultural influences of the day were a mix of British, Canadian and American, reflecting the local demographic. Vancouverites were as proud of

their new Opera House as they were of the 1,000 acre Stanley Park, dedicated in 1889.

In 1899, Vancouver had its own police force, with a Chief and six constables. Unfortunately, half the force was under investigation for corruption that year, including accusations of accepting bribes to turn a blind eye to the activities of the “ladies” on Dupont Street. By the following year, several of the force, including the Chief, were forced to resign. And the one-armed jailor? – he was often as drunk as some of his charges. The judiciary system, appointed from Victoria, already the provincial capital, was far more upright.

So when Granville and his friend and fellow gold-hunter Sam Scott find gangster Clive Jackson's body on the wharf one snowy morning, Scott is quickly arrested for murder. Neither the police nor Scott himself seem to have any interest in clearing Scott's name, and in 1899 Vancouver, they hung murderers. Granville is determined to clear his friend, and his hunt for the real killer takes him to the seedy side of the city; to burlesque halls, gambling joints and down along Dupont Street -- two blocks of brothels and opium dens along the reeking mudflats.

Along the way, Granville finds allies in Emily Turner, the emancipated daughter of a very Victorian father, and Trent Davis, a young, would-be silk train robber, who is determined to go straight. The trail to find Jackson's killer leads him to glamorous fan dancers, crime bosses, an enemy from the Klondike, a former Oxford schoolmate, an ambitious young reporter and a pair of Dupont street prostitutes. Along the way, Granville must sort out silk trains, smuggling rings, opium dealers, houses of ill repute, power struggles, blackmail and betrayal in time to trap a killer and save his friend.

The Silk Train Murder is the first book in the John Lansdowne Granville (and Emily Turner) series, and I've just completed the first draft of book two.

I've been having a wonderful time researching lost gold mines, the local First Nations tribes as they were in 1900. In The Silk Train Murder, the only real life figure I used was the one armed jailor, because I couldn't resist. In the sequel, however, there are several real personalities that seem to need to be included. We'll see what happens during the rewrite...

Visit Sharon at her website at www.sharonrowse.com; read Chapter One of The Silk Train Murder and learn more about the historical research for this series.