part one

George Edward Boulter (1864–1917)
In the worldwide depression of the 1890s, the discovery of gold in the Yukon’s Klondike hit like a bombshell. Word reached England via Canada as soon as it reached the United States, if not sooner. Thousands of people from all over the world set out for the gold fields in 1897–98. Many had only the vaguest idea of where the Klondike was; relatively few ever reached it. Even fewer found gold in any quantity, and fewer still managed to keep what they did find.

George must have been among the first to head north, for we know he definitely reached Alaska sometime in March 1898. In his “Declaration of Intention” to become an American citizen, dated September 5, 1908, at Juneau, he stated that he had emigrated to the United States from Liverpool, England, on the vessel Labrador and had arrived at the port of Ketchikan, Alaska, in March 1898, although he did not know the exact date. He also stated that his last foreign residence had been Liverpool (where he had arrived from London to await passage across the Atlantic) and that he currently resided at Eagle, Alaska. He listed his present occupation as teacher. He was then thirty-three years old, with a fair complexion, grey hair, and brown eyes.

From England to Dawson

Shipping records show that the Labrador departed Liverpool on February 24, 1898, and arrived at Halifax, Nova Scotia, on March 4, 1898. During the iced-in months, ships that normally docked in Québec were diverted to either Halifax or Portland, Maine. Canadian searches of passenger lists for the Labrador around this time show only one entry that could apply to George: “Geo. Boulton, age 30, arrived Halifax, March 4, 1898, destination Vancouver.” Early passenger lists and immigration records have been found to be extremely inaccurate, but in spite of the error in the name and the four-year discrepancy in age we are satisfied that this entry refers to George. From Halifax he would easily have reached Montréal, taken the Canadian Pacific Railway to Vancouver, and made his way north to Ketchikan, arriving there before the end of March. The Klondike trail nearest Ketchikan began at Wrangell but it was seldom used and notoriously difficult—over 1,200 miles with long portages, up the Stikine River to the Dease and Pelly rivers. It was more practical to continue to Skagway. As the White Pass & Yukon Route Railroad line from Skagway to Whitehorse was not opened until 1900, George’s choice of routes from there to Dawson, in the Canadian Yukon, was limited to the Chilkoot or White Pass trails. During the winter of 1897–98, the White Pass was closed because of heavy snow, so the Chilkoot Trail remained his only route from Skagway. At whatever date in late March or early April George started up the Chilkoot Pass, he was lucky to miss the massive avalanche that killed seventy men on its steep slopes in early April 1898.

There were other routes to the Klondike but none feasible from Ketchikan. Two existed via steamer from Seattle, one to Valdez, a long way north and difficult to reach from Ketchikan, which crossed the treacherous crevasse fields of the Valdez
George Edward Boulter (1864–1917)

Glacier to the Klutina River and Copper River Valley. The other was the “rich man’s route” from Seattle to St. Michael by sea and then up the Yukon River, but it was 4,000 expensive miles, taking six weeks or longer to travel, and, more important, the Yukon was closed to navigation until mid-June. If a prospector had the $250 fee, he could use the Dalton Trail from the head of the Lynn Canal to Fort Selkirk on the Pelly River and on to the Yukon. If not, he could take the “poor man’s route” entirely overland from British Columbia, up the Ashcroft River valley and a thousand miles to the Stikine River, through the forests to Atlin, Lake Bennett, and the headwaters of the Yukon River—a long, gruelling slog. And then there was the preposterously long Edmonton Trail, from central Alberta north to the Peace and Athabasca rivers, across Great Slave Lake, and on to the MacKenzie and Porcupine rivers down to Fort Yukon, which was still many miles northwest of the Klondike. This journey could take as long as two years.

The SS Labrador, the ship on which George Boulter sailed from Liverpool to Halifax in 1898, on his way to Alaska. Built for the Dominion Line of Liverpool in 1891, the Labrador was 401 feet long, with three decks, and weighed 4,737 tons. It provided accommodation for one hundred first-class passengers, fifty second-class, and one thousand in steerage. Collection of George E. Boulter II.

The 33-mile Chilkoot Trail to Lake Lindeman was the shortest and most widely used route to Dawson. Though only slightly less difficult than others, it was at one time crowded with many thousand men and women. To cross the Chilkoot Pass with a thousand pounds of supplies—the roughly one year’s provisions required by the Canadian government—prospectors had to make ten to twenty trips up its steep incline, although those with ready cash could pay Aboriginal guides to carry their goods. From the head of the Lynn Canal at Skagway, a nine-mile trek up the inlet ended at Dyea, where the trail began. It climbed 3,500 feet in the sixteen miles to the summit on the Canadian border before descending to Lake Lindeman, where prospectors built barges, scows, and longboats to carry them across Lake Bennett and then north via Lake Laberge and the headwaters of the Yukon River to Dawson and the surrounding Klondike gold fields.

We know George was in Dawson in 1901 from the Dawson City, Yukon Territory and Alaska Business Directory and Gazetteer, which lists George E. Boulter as “Designer, Dawson, 1901–02.” Except for this scrap of information, the years between 1898 and
1904 remain a blank, although it seems he did stake a mining claim. We can only infer from his future career that his claim failed to pan out.

The first actual news we have of George comes from his nephew Stanley Ibbotson, in letters sent from Dawson in 1904 and 1905 to his sister Olive in London:

Dawson, October 21, 1904

Dear Olive:

I have now been in this place a month and I can't say that my liking for the town improves on longer acquaintance. It is just as I described it at first—a terribly dead and alive hole—shut in to the north by mountains and now to the south by the frozen Yukon River. Thus we are practically prisoners for about seven months, for very few people care to leave here by the overland coach route during the winter. The only place in the town which one can enjoy is the library, and as for any park or common place outside the town such as the majority of cities are blessed with, they are conspicuous by their absence. Sixth-rate concerts are held here in a shanty dignified by the name of "The Auditorium" about once in a month of Sundays.

George and I share a cabin with an old man, Captain La Coste. As for the other inhabitants of the town, a more mixed lot of men could not be found anywhere, I suppose. Here you find university men working side by side with a sometime road sweeper. Swede and Dane, Frenchman, German, Jap, Russian, American and English—all are represented here, and each man is as good as another. It is nothing out of the way for a fellow here to be clean broke, for what man here has not been in that position one day and the owner of thousands on the next, only to be broke again on the succeeding day, most likely through drink. A strong man here has no difficulty in getting good work, and thus, if a fellow wakes up after some drunken bout, or if through any other reason a man finds himself broke, he just goes to work again and gathers another small fortune together.

The female portion of the population had perhaps better not be spoken about. Girls from the dance hall and stage form the majority, but of course there are several excellent women—ladies—the wives of respected men here, who have elected to live with their husbands up in these wilds. I have been introduced to many of these, and already George and I have spent two or three nice evenings in their homes.

We sadly lack a piano. George hopes to be the pianist in the two musicals which are to be produced here about Christmas time, and of course a lot of practice is necessary. However, if our ground [mining claim] should turn out good, we will be able to get one—a benefit I shall greatly appreciate also. […]

Your affectionate brother, Stanley.
My Dear Olive:

We are now fairly in the Klondike winter, and the temperature yesterday was 62 degrees of frost, but fine, dry, bright weather. So cold is it that in the open air one’s handkerchief will freeze up in one’s pocket and the breath freezes on one’s face—so much so that men with moustaches who have been walking for some time become invested with icicles two or three inches long which hang from their hirsute adornment and make them look most funny. Fur caps with ear flaps are quite necessary now, and many of these caps also have a band which buttons across the nose. Consequently, very little of the face is visible and it is most difficult to recognize persons. The huge mitts and big felt boots also tend to make one look peculiar.

There has been a serious jamb in the ice on the river this year. When the river starts freezing up, drift ice—which grown larger and larger in size every day—goes floating down and finally becomes blocked at some turn of the river, and so the river freezes over—usually. This year, however, it has been different. The river became frozen over and then started to move again, so that at some narrow turn in the river lower down, where the drift ice had stuck fast, a jamb occurred, for the newly drifting ice had to go somewhere, and so it mounted upon the firmly set drift ice, and so nearly stopped the flow of the river—with the consequence that the water rose very high above the jamb and flooded the wood yards on the banks, washing away hundreds of tons of valuable fire wood. Much of this has been recovered, but of course, being now waterlogged, it won’t be of much use for fire wood this season. This is not the most serious thing which has been caused by the jamb, however. Several valuable steamers which were anchored in their winter quarters have been almost totally wrecked by the moving ice—the damage being tens of thousands of dollars.

The skating rink is now open, and a fine rink it is. I have not been there yet—indeed, I find I have quite forgotten how to skate. I tried on a clear stretch of the river one day this week and made a miserable hash of it. However, I shall improve with practice. I am pleased to say that this cold weather agrees with me, and I fairly enjoy being out in it, so well does it make one feel. Then too, I can breathe so much more freely and without the constant coughing which was so noticeable in the warmer, damper weather we had when I first arrived.

Your affectionate brother, Stanley.
My Dear Olive:

I feel I must not delay writing to you any longer. What you must think of me already, I don’t know, for I believe I have three letters of yours unanswered, but believe me, dear, I would have written earlier had I not been so queer and in the hospital for so long. Just now though I am honestly feeling worlds better and much stronger, and I am writing this letter as I sit in my chair in my little corner at the back of the hospital having a sunbath.

And a really fine sunbath it is, too—such a bath as one would get very rarely in England—if you can believe such an apparently wild statement. But how often, even during the English summer, do you get the sun shining in an absolutely cloudless sky—and so hotly that at about noon it is uncomfortable to sit out in it? Well, that is the sort of weather we have been having lately—and this is the Klondike spring. What a summer here must be like I leave to your imagination, but I am told that the most beautiful wild flowers simply cover the slopes of the hills as soon as the snow has gone, and that wild gooseberries, raspberries, red and white currants, blackberries, blueberries and cranberries are to be seen and gathered in the wildest profusion. Just fancy that, for a country which in England is thought to be a land of ice and snow!

But the Klondike is not known to any except those who have been here—hence the woeful mistake the English people make in talking about that country. Fresh lettuces, radishes and spring onions grown here have been on sale for a fortnight now, but of course they have been forced by the gardeners in their hothouses. During the summer, potatoes, cabbages, turnips, carrots, onions and celery and beet-roots grow splendidly. You see, in summer, the sun is shining for about 23 hours out of the 24—so the various plants get no time to sleep during the nights as they would in other countries.

My favourite sorts of garden flowers and ferns flourish luxuriantly in the open air, while roses of all kinds can of course be grown in hothouses. At Easter time it seems to be a kind of custom here for gentlemen to present ladies of their acquaintance with a rose—either a cut flower or one growing in a pot. What do you think the prices are for these? One dollar for the cut flower and two and a half dollars for the pot flower. That is all!

With regard to English people’s ideas of this country, Dad says in one of his letters that our log cabins are much as he expected them to be—judging from the full length photo of George which has a cabin for a background. The only point about which he was doubtful was whether we had glass windows. Since Dawson became a town of any size at all, I believe glass windows have been used. But in the earlier days miners, in building cabins, used a number of equal sized bottles with the necks knocked off for windows—standing them up side by side and fixing them firmly in position with wooden lathes and filling up the open spaces.
with mud. Many of these old cabins are yet to be seen out on the creeks, and indeed miners, if they know they are only going to work in a certain district for a short while, just put up a rough temporary cabin and still use the old bottles for windows. Sheet glass is very expensive here I believe.

Then, as regards our winter water supply—Dad wonders how it is we get any at all during the very cold weather—George buys his water from the owner of a spring which is running all through the winter. Why it doesn’t freeze up like everything else, I don’t know, and there are several similar springs scattered over the country. The owners bring the water round in big iron water carts, which in the severest weather have fires lit beneath them. Thus do we get our water. The extreme cold seems to act very strangely on water in this country. I wonder how it is that in the coldest weather, water is actually lying around on the surfaces of the different glaciers scattered about the country, and also how it is that on very cold days vapour can rise from the surfaces of the frozen river, even when the sun is shining. Such is the case in this remarkable country.

I don’t know whether I ever told you about the Indians here. There are few of them in town—they have their own village called “Moosehide” about five miles lower down the river. I have been there twice in the dog sleigh. The village is a most strange collection of cabins, huts, tents and wigwams erected on top of the high bank of the river. Chief Isaac is their “boss” under British rule, and he has his name painted over his cabin door. He dresses in English style and is fairly well versed in our language, but the people for the most part are in native attire. And very picturesque this is, too, for both men and women are passionately fond of bright colours. Both the village and its inhabitants, however, seem to be very dirty. They live by fishing, hunting, wood cutting, and by making baskets and curios of the products of their country which they come into town to sell. Indian women carry their babies (called “papooses”) on their backs—a method of procedure which doesn’t seem to hurt the kiddies a bit, for they laugh and toss and crow in that position just the same as if they were in the mothers’ arms.

I have just been in to dinner. Shall I tell you what I had? Cream tomato soup was the order of the day, but as anything with this canned cream in it upsets me, I had a cup of Bovril instead. Boiled mutton, carrots and potatoes, a tinned peach and a glass of milk. A fine dinner, after which I feel very comfortable and inclined to go to sleep in this hot sun.

Now my dear Olive, I think I must conclude. Please write again soon, and with very much love from George and myself to all of you, I remain your affectionate brother,

Stanley.
On April 15, 1905, the day after he wrote this letter, Stanley died in Dawson’s Good Samaritan Hospital, of acute tuberculosis. He was twenty years old. Following his death, George left Dawson to accept the position as the first schoolteacher at the newly built St. John’s Episcopal Mission at Eagle Village, in Alaska, a hundred miles northwest of Dawson and just eleven miles west of the Canadian border.

Government and Mission Teacher at Eagle, 1905–8

In 1905, about 150 Alaska Natives lived at Eagle Village, and roughly thirty children attended the Episcopal mission school housed in St. John’s chapel. Three miles downriver from the village was Eagle City, incorporated in 1901. A trading post existed there by 1880, and settlers and prospectors began arriving after the Fortymile gold strike of 1886. The town soon grew into an important centre of transportation and commerce. Fort Egbert, built in 1899, became the US Army headquarters for the Alaska Interior, as well as the US customs port of entry from Dawson, and was the first station on the telegraph line through British Columbia to Dawson and Alaska. The line, built by the US Army Signal Corps for the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System, reached Eagle in 1900 and, by 1903, had been extended to St. Michael, Valdez, and Nome.

In 1900, Congress enacted the Alaska Civil Code, and Eagle was chosen as the seat of Alaska’s Third Judicial District. James Wickersham was appointed as judge for the district, which at the time covered the Interior as well as south-central Alaska. The appointment came without federal funding. Eagle had no school, court house, or public building, no wagon road or marked trail, until Wickersham levied and collected license fees to begin a program of construction. Prior to his arrival, Eagle had its own approach to justice. Communally elected settlers, miners, and traders held court, murderers were hanged, and lesser miscreants were dispatched “downriver” to any place other than Eagle. Wickersham’s first court sessions at Eagle were overwhelmed with cases involving alcohol smuggling, prostitution, and mining claims, which meant that trials were often severely delayed.

In 1899, news of the discovery of gold at Nome brought an end to the Klondike gold rush and drew prospectors away from Eagle. Only a few years later, gold was discovered at Fairbanks, further eroding the town’s population, and, in 1903, Judge Wickersham elected to move his court from Eagle to Fairbanks. Thus, by the time George arrived at Eagle, the town’s fortunes had declined. The Episcopal Church had, however, established a presence there in 1902, founding St. John’s Mission at Eagle Village, while the white residents of Eagle City had their own Episcopal church, St. Paul’s, as well as an incorporated “public” school. Alaska Native children were not permitted to attend the school, and their parents and other family members came to town only to do work, to trade at the stores, or to receive medical attention.