

**PINKERTON'S**  
*and the HUNT for*  
**SIMON GUNANOOT**

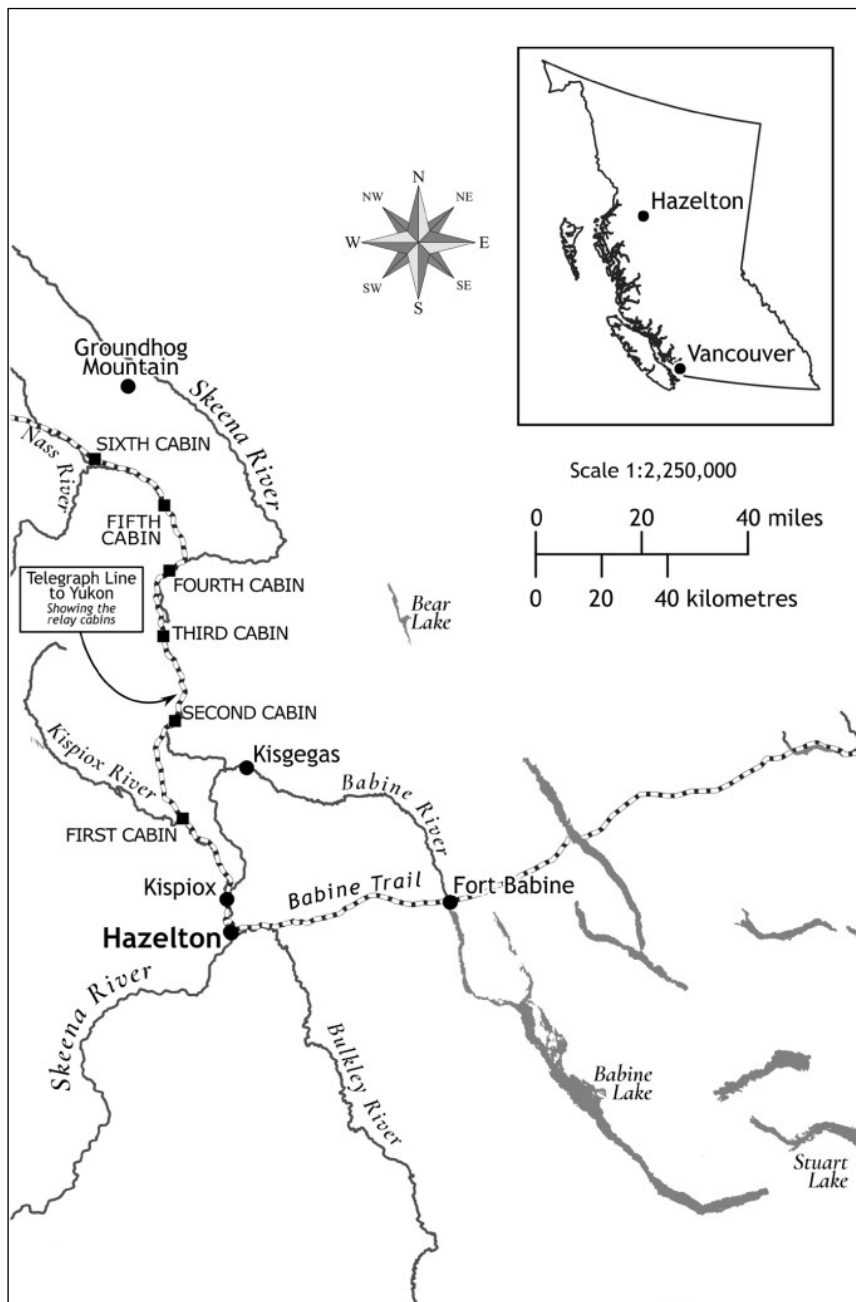
DOUBLE MURDER, SECRET AGENTS AND AN ELUSIVE OUTLAW

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# THE UPPER SKEENA, 1909–1910

showing the area searched by Pinkerton's operatives





Simon Gunanoot riding in the cemetery above Hazelton, not far from the grave of Alex MacIntosh. Image P0476 courtesy of the Bulkley Valley Museum.

## PREFACE

One night in June 1906, a Gitxsan trapper and storekeeper named Simon Gunanoot argued and then fought with a packer named Alex MacIntosh. When MacIntosh's dead body was found the next morning, Police Constable James Kirby swiftly concluded that Gunanoot and his brother-in-law, Peter Himadam, were the killers and set out to bring them to justice.

Gunanoot eluded capture and escaped into the forests, mountains and lakes of northern British Columbia. With him went his family and Peter Himadam and his wife. He became the most famous outlaw in British Columbia's history.

The police tried to catch him for almost three years, sending out search party after search party. After all these attempts had failed, the superintendent of provincial police, Frederick Hussey, contacted Pinkerton's National Detective Agency in Seattle. Could they send two experienced men to Hazelton to continue the search? Disguised as mining prospectors, these operatives went to Hazelton and roamed the district, searching for information about the two men. For almost a year, they sent back regular reports on their progress. These reports, written around the campfire, in tents along the trail or in lonely roadhouses, provide a vivid picture not only of their search but also of Hazelton and the settlers and prospectors living there.

Hazelton, a small town on the Skeena River in northern British Columbia, is situated at the confluence of the Bulkley and Skeena Rivers. It lies in the heart of the territory of the Gitxsan First Nation. The Gitxsan village of Gitanmaax surrounds Hazelton on three sides and the Skeena River flows along the fourth. Across the Bulkley River lies the territory of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation. Their closest village is Hagwilget, close to Hagwilget Canyon.

As far as the settlers and prospectors were concerned, from 1870 to 1913 Hazelton was the most important town in the interior of northern British Columbia. Although the first non-Indigenous person had visited the confluence of the two rivers in 1833, the first settlement had been established by merchants such as Thomas Hankin in early 1871. The discovery of gold in the Omineca Mountains to the east and the aborted Western Union Telegraph line to Europe through Russian Alaska (the Collins Overland Telegraph) pulled traders, prospectors, packers, settlers and missionaries into the district.

The first steamer managed the difficult journey upriver from Port Essington in 1891. Until then, supplies had to be brought upriver by canoe or by pack train from the Cariboo. After 1891, steamers could reach Hazelton only between May and October. In winter, ice and treacherous water closed the river. When the river was navigable, the journey upriver could take from four days to three weeks; the journey down could take as little as one day.

During these years, Hazelton had been an isolated community. By 1900, though, it was beginning to open up. In that year, the telegraph connecting Canada to the Yukon arrived, as did Hazelton's first resident policeman and its first resident doctor. In 1904, a hospital was built just outside Hazelton on the way to Two Mile, the little hamlet that was home to the bar at which Gunanoot and MacIntosh had fought.

At the time of the murders, Hazelton had neither railway nor automobiles. With a population of under 150, it was still very much a frontier town, dependent on the steamers. Local transportation was by horse in summer and by dogsled or snowshoes in winter. In 1910, it was considered the pack train capital of North America. Pack trains, usually made up of mules because they could carry more weight than horses, plodded out into the forests, mountains and lakes to take supplies to the telegraph operators and mining camps.

Gunanoot fled into this wilderness. Even more than a hundred years later, his story enthralls. There are still tales about him, passed down through families, that are not widely known: stories of missionaries lying to the police about their knowledge of his whereabouts; stories of where he was during all those years.

At the time of this story, many non-Indigenous people in the district used language about First Nations people that today is considered deeply offensive and unacceptable. I have used the original language in this book only in the extracts from the reports and letters

from the time. Without intending any disrespect, not to set it down as it was written would be dishonest to the often uncomfortable facts of history.

The killings of MacIntosh and Max LeClair, a hunting guide who was also found dead the day MacIntosh was murdered, were not racial. The government made them so by making the arrest of the accused men a test of the supremacy of colonial power. The early years of the twentieth century were ones of rising—and often justified—resentment and anger among the Gitksan population of the Upper Skeena. I am not an expert in these relations and have confined myself to the written record and anecdotal stories that come out of the letters and reports of the time. These show the huge and growing imbalance of power and the increasing presence of governmental regulations, but they also show the attempt by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to coexist.

The Gitksan people did not have a written language. This led the settlers to spell Gitksan names any way they could, sometimes differently in the same sentence. Spelling of Gitksan names was often wildly personal. Kispiox, for example, was variously spelled Kispiax, Kishpiax, Kishpyax, Kitsbyox and Kish-py-axe and now also bears the Gitksan name of Anspayax. Kitwanga or Kitwangah is now called Gitwangak. Kitsequeckla, Kitsegucla or Kitsequykla is now called Gitsegukla. Kisk-kags, as the operatives wrote it, was Kisgegas.

The name Gunanoot was frequently spelled Gun-a-noot, Gun-an-noot or, in a few places, Na Ghan. An earlier version of his name was Sim-ghatm-nim-oot, which means “young grizzly bear in a tree.” To simplify matters, I have called him Gunanoot in this book. In contemporaneous documents the name of the first murder victim was spelled as either McIntosh or MacIntosh. For the sake of consistency, I have used the latter spelling throughout. I have also spelled LeClair without a final *e*, and I have used the spellings Beirnes and Deane, although the operatives spelled these names Burns and Dean in their reports.

This book is built around the reports that the two Pinkerton’s men sent back to their employer in Seattle. I have used under half of the reports, dispensing with duplication. It is important to keep in mind that merely because the Pinkerton’s operatives reported something as fact does not necessarily mean it was true. In some cases, they reported information that was more gossip than truth. We can accept the operatives as honest; we need not accept them as infallible.

In this account of the Gunanoot story, I do not state any conclusion as to whether Simon Gunanoot did or did not kill MacIntosh and LeClair. I do, though, lay out the evidence and leave it to readers to make up their own minds.