



Jack London

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Jack London



Born: January 12, 1876
San Francisco, California
 United States

Died: November 22, 1916 (aged 40)
Glen Ellen, California
 United States

Occupation: Writer of fiction and non-fiction;

Jack London (January 12, 1876 – November 22, 1916),^{[1][2][3]} was an American author who wrote *The Call of the Wild* and other books. A pioneer in the then-burgeoning world of commercial magazine fiction, he was one of the first Americans to make a lucrative career exclusively from writing.^[4]

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Personal background

Jack London, probably^[5] born John Griffith Chaney, was deserted by his father, William Henry Chaney. He was raised in Oakland by his mother Flora Wellman, a music teacher and spiritualist. Because Flora was ill, Jack was raised through infancy by an ex-slave, Virginia Prentiss, who would remain a major maternal figure while the boy grew up. Late in 1876, Flora married John London, a partially disabled Civil War veteran. The family moved around the Bay area before settling in Oakland, where Jack completed grade

school. Though the family was working class, it was not so impoverished as London's later accounts claimed.

Biographer Clarice Stasz and others believe that Jack London's father was astrologer William Chaney.^[6] Whether Wellman and Chaney were legally married is unknown. Most San Francisco civil records were destroyed in the 1906 earthquake (for the same reason, it is not known with certainty what name appeared on his birth certificate). Stasz notes that in his memoirs Chaney refers to Jack London's mother Flora Wellman, as having been his "wife" and also cites an advertisement in which Flora calls herself "Florence Wellman Chaney."

Early life

Jack London was born near Third and Brannan Streets in San Francisco. The house of his birth burned down in the fire after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and a plaque was placed at this site by the California Historical Society in 1953. London was essentially self-educated. He taught himself in the public library, mainly just by reading books. In 1885 he found and read Ouida's

long Victorian novel *Signa*, which describes an unschooled Italian peasant child who achieves fame as an opera composer. He credited this as the seed of his literary aspiration.^[7]

An important event was his discovery in 1886 of the Oakland Public Library and a sympathetic librarian, Ina Coolbrith (who later became California's first poet laureate and an important figure in the San Francisco literary community).

In 1889, London began working 12 to 18 hours a day at Hickmott's Cannery. Seeking a way out of this gruelling labor, he borrowed money from his black foster-mother Virginia Prentiss, bought the sloop *Razzle-Dazzle* from an oyster pirate named French Frank, and became an oyster pirate himself. In *John Barleycorn* he claims to have stolen French Frank's mistress Mamie.^{[8][9][10]} After a few months his sloop became damaged beyond repair. He switched to the side of the law and became a member of the California Fish Patrol.

In 1893, he signed on to the sealing schooner *Sophie Sutherland*, bound for the coast of Japan. When he returned, the country was in the grip of the panic of '93 and Oakland was swept by labor unrest. After gruelling jobs in a jute mill and a

street-railway power plant, he joined Kelly's industrial army and began his career as a tramp.

In 1894, he spent 30 days for vagrancy in the Erie County Penitentiary at Buffalo. In *The Road*, he wrote:

"Man-handling was merely one of the very minor unprintable horrors of the Erie County Pen. I say 'unprintable'; and in justice I must also say 'unthinkable'. They were unthinkable to me until I saw them, and I was no spring chicken in the ways of the world and the awful abysses of human degradation. It would take a deep plummet to reach bottom in the Erie County Pen, and I do but skim lightly and facetiously the surface of things as I there saw them."

After many experiences as a hobo, and as a sailor, he returned to Oakland and attended Oakland High School, where he contributed a number of articles to the high school's magazine, *The Aegis*. His first published work was "Typhoon off the coast of Japan", an account of his sailing experiences.

Jack London desperately wanted to attend the University of California and, in 1896 after a summer of intense cramming, did so; but financial

circumstances forced him to leave in 1897 and so he never graduated. Kingman says that "there is no record that Jack ever wrote for student publications there".^[11]

While living at his rented villa on Lake Merritt in Oakland, London met poet George Sterling and in time they became best friends. In 1902, Sterling helped London find a home closer to his own in nearby Piedmont. In his letters London addressed Sterling as "Greek" owing to his aquiline nose and classical profile, and signed them as "Wolf". London was later to depict Sterling as Russ Brissenden in his autobiographical novel *Martin Eden* (1909) and as Mark Hall in *The Valley of the Moon* (1913).

In later life Jack London indulged his very wide-ranging interests with a personal library of 15,000 volumes, referring to his books as "the tools of my trade."^[12]

On July 25, 1897, London and his brother-in-law, James Shepard, sailed to join the Klondike Gold Rush where he would later set his first successful stories. London's time in the Klondike, however, was quite detrimental to his health. Like so many others malnourished while involved in the

Klondike Gold Rush, he developed scurvy. His gums became swollen, eventually leading to the loss of his four front teeth. A constant gnawing pain affected his abdomen and leg muscles, and his face was stricken with sores. Fortunately for him and others who were suffering with a variety of medical ills, a Father William Judge, "The Saint of Dawson," had a facility in Dawson which provided shelter, food and any available medicine. London survived the hardships of the Klondike, and these struggles inspired what is often called his best short story, *To Build a Fire* (v.i.).

His landlords in Dawson were two Yale and Stanford-educated mining engineers Marshall and Louis Bond. Their father Judge Hiram Bond was a wealthy mining investor. The Bonds, especially Hiram, were active Republicans. Marshall Bond's diary mentions friendly sparring on political issues as a camp pastime.

Jack left Oakland a believer in the work ethic with a social conscience and socialist leanings and returned to become an active proponent of socialism. He also concluded that his only hope of escaping the work trap was to get an education and "sell his brains". Throughout his life he saw writing as a business, his ticket out of poverty, and,

he hoped, a means of beating the wealthy at their own game.

On returning to Oakland in 1898, he began struggling seriously to break into print, a struggle memorably described in his novel, *Martin Eden*. His first published story was the fine and frequently anthologized "To the Man On Trail". When *The Overland Monthly* offered him only \$5 for it—and was slow paying—Jack London came close to abandoning his writing career. In his words, "literally and literarily I was saved" when *The Black Cat* accepted his story "A Thousand Deaths", and paid him \$40—the "first money I ever received for a story".

Jack London was fortunate in the timing of his writing career. He started just as new printing technologies enabled lower-cost production of magazines. This resulted in a boom in popular magazines aimed at a wide public, and a strong market for short fiction. In 1900, he made \$2,500 in writing, the equivalent of about \$75,000 today. His career was well under way.

Among the works he sold to magazines was a short story known as either "Batard" or "Diable" in two editions of the same basic story. A cruel French

Canadian brutalizes his dog. The dog, out of revenge, kills the man. London was criticized for depicting a dog as an embodiment of evil. He told some of his critics that man's actions are the main cause of the behavior of their animals and he would show this in another short story.

This short story for the Saturday Evening Post "The Call of the Wild" ran away in length. The story begins on an estate in Santa Clara Valley and features a St. Bernard/Shepherd mix named Buck. In fact the opening scene is a description of the Bond family farm and Buck is based on a dog he was lent in Dawson by his landlords. London visited Marshall Bond in California having run into him again at a political lecture in San Francisco in 1901.

First marriage (1900-1904)

Jack London married Bess Maddern on April 7, 1900, the same day *The Son of the Wolf* was published. Bess had been part of his circle of friends for a number of years. Stasz says "Both acknowledged publicly that they were not marrying out of love, but from friendship and a belief that they would produce sturdy children."^[13]

Kingman says "they were comfortable together Jack had made it clear to Bessie that he did not love her, but that he liked her enough to make a successful marriage."^[14]

During the marriage, Jack London continued his friendship with Anna Strunsky, co-authoring *The Kempton-Wace Letters*, an epistolary novel contrasting two philosophies of love. Anna, writing "Dane Kempton's" letters, arguing for a romantic view of marriage, while Jack, writing "Herbert Wace's" letters, argued for a scientific view, based on Darwinism and eugenics. In the novel, his fictional character contrasts two women he has known:

[The first was] a mad, wanton creature, wonderful and unmoral and filled with life to the brim. My blood pounds hot even now as I conjure her up ... [The second was] a proud-breasted woman, the perfect mother, made preeminently to know the lip clasp of a child. You know the kind, the type. "The mothers of men", I call them. And so long as there are such women on this earth, that long may we keep faith in the breed of men. The wanton was the Mate Woman, but this was the Mother Woman, the last and highest and holiest in the

hierarchy of life.^[15]

Wace declares:

I propose to order my affairs in a rational manner Wherefore I marry Hester Stebbins. I am not impelled by the archaic sex madness of the beast, nor by the obsolescent romance madness of later-day man. I contract a tie which reason tells me is based upon health and sanity and compatibility. My intellect shall delight in that tie.^[16]

Analyzing why he "was impelled toward the woman" he intends to marry, Wace says

it was old Mother Nature crying through us, every man and woman of us, for progeny. Her one unceasing and eternal cry: PROGENY! PROGENY! PROGENY!^[17]

In real life, Jack's pet name for Bess was "Mother-Girl" and Bess's for Jack was "Daddy-Boy".^[18] Their first child, Joan, was born on January 15, 1901, and their second, Bessie (later called Becky), on October 20, 1902. Both children were born in Piedmont, California, where London also wrote one of his most celebrated works, *The Call of the Wild*.

Captions to pictures in a photo album, reproduced in part in Joan London's memoir, "Jack London and His Daughters", published posthumously, show Jack London's unmistakable happiness and pride in his children. But the marriage itself was under continuous strain. Kingman (1979) says that by 1903 "the breakup ... was imminent Bessie was a fine woman, but they were extremely incompatible. There was no love left. Even companionship and respect had gone out of the marriage." Nevertheless, "Jack was still so kind and gentle with Bessie that when Cloudsley Johns was a house guest in February 1903 he didn't suspect a breakup of their marriage."^[19]

According to Joseph Noel (1940), "Bessie was the eternal mother. She lived at first for Jack, corrected his manuscripts, drilled him in grammar, but when the children came she lived for them. Herein was her greatest honor and her first blunder." Jack complained to Noel and George Sterling that "she's devoted to purity. When I tell her morality is only evidence of low blood pressure, she hates me. She'd sell me and the children out for her damned purity. It's terrible. Every time I come back after being away from home for a night she won't let me be in the same room with her if she can help it."

[20] Stasz writes that these were "code words for [Bess's] fear that [Jack] was consorting with prostitutes and might bring home venereal disease." [21]

On July 24, 1903, Jack London told Bessie he was leaving and moved out; during 1904 Jack and Bess negotiated the terms of a divorce, and the decree was granted on November 11, 1904. [22]

Second marriage

After divorcing Maddern in 1904, London married Charmian Kittredge, in 1905. Biographer Russ Kingman called Charmian "Jack's soul-mate, always at his side, and a perfect match.". Their time together included numerous trips, including a 1907 cruise on the yacht Snark to Hawaii and on to Australia. Many of London's stories are based on his visits to Hawaii, the last one for 8 months beginning in December 1915.

Jack had contrasted the concepts of the "Mother Woman" and the "Mate Woman" in *The Kempton-Wace letters* [23] His pet name for Bess had been "mother-girl;" his pet name for Charmian was "mate-woman." [24] Charmian's aunt and foster

mother, a disciple of Victoria Woodhull, had raised her without prudishness.^[25] Every biographer alludes to Charmian's uninhibited sexuality; Noel slyly—"a young woman named Charmian Kittredge began running out to Piedmont with foils, still masks, padded breast plates, and short tailored skirts that fitted tightly over as nice a pair of hips as one might find anywhere;" Stasz directly—"Finding that the prim and genteel lady was lustful and sexually vigorous in private was like discovering a secret treasure;";^[26] and Kershaw coarsely—"At last, here was a woman who adored fornication, expected Jack to make her climax, and to do so frequently, and who didn't burst into tears when the sadist in him punched her in the mouth."^[27]

Noel (1940) calls the events from 1903 to 1905 "a domestic drama that would have intrigued the pen of an Ibsen.... London's had comedy relief in it and a sort of easy-going romance."^[28] In broad outline, Jack London was restless in his marriage; sought extramarital sexual affairs; and found, in Charmian London, not only a sexually active and adventurous partner, but his future life-companion. During this time Bessie and others mistakenly perceived Anna Strunsky as her rival, while Charmian mendaciously gave Bessie the

impression of being sympathetic.

They attempted to have children. However, one child died at birth, and another pregnancy ended in a miscarriage.

In 1906, he published in *Collier's* magazine his eye-witness report of the big earthquake.

Beauty Ranch (1910-1916)

In 1910, Jack London purchased a 1,000 acre (4 km²) ranch in Glen Ellen, Sonoma County, California on the eastern slope of Sonoma Mountain, for \$26,000. He wrote that "Next to my wife, the ranch is the dearest thing in the world to me." He desperately wanted the ranch to become a successful business enterprise. Writing, always a commercial enterprise with London, now became even more a means to an end: "I write for no other purpose than to add to the beauty that now belongs to me. I write a book for no other reason than to add three or four hundred acres to my magnificent estate." After 1910, his literary works were mostly potboilers, written out of the need to provide operating income for the ranch. Joan London writes "Few reviewers bothered any more to

criticize his work seriously, for it was obvious that Jack was no longer exerting himself."

Clarice Stasz writes that London "had taken fully to heart the vision, expressed in his agrarian fiction, of the land as the closest earthly version of Eden ... he educated himself through study of agricultural manuals and scientific tomes. He conceived of a system of ranching that today would be praised for its ecological wisdom." He was proud of the first concrete silo in California, of a circular piggery he designed himself. He hoped to adapt the wisdom of Asian sustainable agriculture to the United States.

The ranch was, by most measures, a colossal failure. Sympathetic observers such as Stasz treat his projects as potentially feasible, and ascribe their failure to bad luck or to being ahead of their time. Unsympathetic historians such as Kevin Starr suggest that he was a bad manager, distracted by other concerns and impaired by his alcoholism. Starr notes that London was absent from his ranch about six months a year between 1910 and 1916, and says "He liked the show of managerial power, but not grinding attention to detail London's workers laughed at his efforts to play big-time rancher [and considered] the operation a rich man's

hobby."

The ranch is now a National Historic Landmark and is protected in Jack London State Historic Park.



The cottage where Jack London died on November 22, 1916 (Robert E. Nylund, November 8, 2006)

Accusations of plagiarism

Jack London was accused of plagiarism many times during his career. He was vulnerable, not only because he was such a conspicuous and successful writer, but also because of his methods of working. In a letter to Elwyn Hoffman he wrote "expression, you see—with me—is far easier than

invention." He purchased plots for stories and novels from the young Sinclair Lewis. And he used incidents from newspaper clippings as material on which to base stories.

Egerton R. Young claimed that *The Call of the Wild* was taken from his book *My Dogs in the Northland*. Jack London's response was to acknowledge having used it as a source; he claimed to have written a letter to Young thanking him.

In July 1901, two pieces of fiction appeared within the same month: Jack London's "Moon-Face", in the *San Francisco Argonaut*, and Frank Norris's "The Passing of Cock-eye Blacklock", in *Century*. Newspapers paralleled the stories, which London characterizes as "quite different in manner of treatment, [but] patently the same in foundation and motive". Jack London explained that both writers had based their stories on the same newspaper account. Subsequently it was discovered that a year earlier, one Charles Forrest McLean had published another fictional story based on the same incident.

In 1906, the New York World published "deadly parallel" columns showing eighteen passages from

Jack London's short story "Love of Life" side by side with similar passages from a nonfiction article by Augustus Biddle and J. K. Macdonald entitled "Lost in the Land of the Midnight Sun". According to London's daughter Joan, the parallels "[proved] beyond question that Jack had merely rewritten the Biddle account." Responding, London noted the World did not accuse him of "plagiarism", but only of "identity of time and situation", to which he defiantly "pled guilty". London acknowledged his use of Biddle, cited several other sources he had used, and stated, "I, in the course of making my living by turning journalism into literature, used material from various sources which had been collected and na by men who made their living by turning the facts of life into journalism."

The most serious incident involved Chapter 7 of *The Iron Heel*, entitled "The Bishop's Vision". This chapter was almost identical with an ironic essay Frank Harris had published in 1901, entitled "The Bishop of London and Public Morality". Harris was incensed and suggested that he should receive 1/60th of the royalties from *The Iron Heel*, the disputed material constituting about that fraction of the whole novel. Jack London insisted that he had clipped a reprint of the article which had appeared in an American newspaper, and believed it to be a

genuine speech delivered by the genuine Bishop of London. Joan London characterized this defense as "lame indeed".^[29]

Political views

Jack London became a socialist at the age of 20. Previously, he had possessed an optimism stemming from his health and strength, a rugged individualist who worked hard and saw the world as good. But as he details in his essay, "How I Became a Socialist", his socialist views began as his eyes were opened to the members of the bottom of the social pit. His optimism and individualism faded, and he vowed never to do more hard work than he had to. He writes that his individualism was hammered out of him, and he was reborn a socialist. London first joined the Socialist Labor Party in April 1896. In 1901, he left the Socialist Labor Party and joined the new Socialist Party of America. In 1896, the *San Francisco Chronicle* published a story about the 20-year-old London who was out nightly in Oakland's City Hall Park, giving speeches on socialism to the crowds—an activity for which he was arrested in 1897. He ran unsuccessfully as the high-profile Socialist nominee for mayor of Oakland in 1901 (receiving

245 votes) and 1905 (improving to 981 votes), toured the country lecturing on socialism in 1906, and published collections of essays on socialism (*The War of the Classes*, 1905; *Revolution, and other Essays*, 1910).

He often closed his letters "Yours for the Revolution".^[30]

Stasz notes that "London regarded the Wobblies as a welcome addition to the Socialist cause, although he never joined them in going so far as to recommend sabotage."^[31] She mentions a personal meeting between London and Big Bill Haywood in 1912^[32]

A socialist viewpoint is evident throughout his writing, most notably in his novel *The Iron Heel*. No theorist or intellectual socialist, Jack London's socialism came from the heart and his life experience.

In his Glen Ellen ranch years, London felt some ambivalence toward socialism. He was an extraordinary financial success as a writer, and wanted desperately to make a financial success of his Glen Ellen ranch. He complained about the "inefficient Italian workers" in his employ. In 1916

he resigned from the Glen Ellen chapter of the Socialist Party, but stated emphatically that he did so "because of its lack of fire and fight, and its loss of emphasis on the class struggle".

In his late (1913) book *The Cruise of the Snark*, London writes without empathy about appeals to him for membership on the Snark's crew from office workers and other "toilers" who longed for escape from the cities, and of being cheated by workmen.

In an unflattering portrait of Jack London's ranch days, Kevin Starr (1973) refers to this period as "post-socialist" and says that "... by 1911 ... London was more bored by the class struggle than he cared to admit." Starr maintains that London's socialism

always had a streak of elitism in it, and a good deal of pose. He liked to play working class intellectual when it suited his purpose. Invited to a prominent Piedmont house, he featured a flannel shirt, but, as someone there remarked, London's badge of solidarity with the working class "looked as if it had been specially laundered for the occasion." [Mark Twain said] "It would serve this man London right to

have the working class get control of things.
He would have to call out the militia to collect
his royalties."

Racial Views

Many of Jack London's short stories are notable for their empathetic portrayal of Mexicans (*The Mexican*), Asian (*The Chinago*), and Hawaiian (*Koolau the Leper*) characters. But, unlike, say, Mark Twain, Jack London did not depart from the views that were the norm in American society in his time, and he shared common Californian concerns about Asian immigration and "the yellow peril" (which he actually used as the title of an essay he wrote in 1904[3]); on the other hand, his war correspondence from the Russo-Japanese War, as well as his unfinished novel "Cherry", show that he greatly admired much about Japanese customs and capabilities.

In London's 1902 novel, *Daughter of the Snows* the character Frona Welse states the following lines . (Scholar Andrew Furer, in a long essay exploring the complexity of London's views, says there is no doubt that Frona Welse is here acting as a mouthpiece for London):

We are a race of doers and fighters, of globe-encirclers and zone-conquerors While we are persistent and resistant, we are made so that we fit ourselves to the most diverse conditions. Will the Indian, the Negro, or the Mongol ever conquer the Teuton? Surely not! The Indian has persistence without variability; if he does not modify he dies, if he does try to modify he dies anyway. The Negro has adaptability, but he is servile and must be led. As for the Chinese, they are permanent. All that the other races are not, the Anglo-Saxon, or Teuton if you please, is. All that the other races have not, the Teuton has.

Jack London's 1904 essay, *The Yellow Peril*, is replete with the views which were common at the time: "The Korean is the perfect type of inefficiency — of utter worthlessness. The Chinese is the perfect type of industry"; "The Chinese is no coward"; "[The Japanese] would not of himself constitute a Brown Peril The menace to the Western world lies, not in the little brown man; but in the four hundred millions of yellow men should the little brown man undertake their management." He insists that:

Back of our own great race adventure, back of

our robberies by sea and land, our lusts and violences and all the evil things we have done, there is a certain integrity, a sternness of conscience, a melancholy responsibility of life, a sympathy and comradeship and warm human feel, which is ours, indubitably ours ...

Yet even within this essay Jack London's inconsistency on the issue makes itself clear. After insisting that "our own great race adventure" has an ethical dimension, he closes by saying

it must be taken into consideration that the above postulate is itself a product of Western race-egotism, urged by our belief in our own righteousness and fostered by a faith in ourselves which may be as erroneous as are most fond race fancies.

In "Koolau the Leper", London has one of his characters remark:

Because we are sick [the whites] take away our liberty. We have obeyed the law. We have done no wrong. And yet they would put us in prison. Molokai is a prison. . . . It is the will of the white men who rule the land. . . . They came like lambs, speaking softly. . . . To-day all the islands are theirs.

London describes Koolau, who is a Hawaiian leper—and thus a very different sort of "superman" than Martin Eden—and who fights off an entire cavalry troop to elude capture, as "indomitable spiritually—a . . . magnificent rebel".

An amateur boxer and avid boxing fan, London was a sort of celebrity reporter on the 1910 Johnson-Jeffries fight, in which a black boxer vanquished Jim Jeffries, the "Great White Hope". Earlier, he had written:

[Former white champion] Jim Jeffries must now emerge from his Alfalfa farm and remove that golden smile from Jack Johnson's face ... Jeff, it's up to you. The White Man must be rescued.

Earlier in his boxing journalism, however, in 1908, according to Furer, London praised Johnson highly, contrasting the black boxer's coolness and intellectual style, with the apelike appearance and fighting style of his white opponent, Tommy Burns: "what . . . [won] on Saturday was bigness, coolness, quickness, cleverness, and vast physical superiority... Because a white man wishes a white man to win, this should not prevent him from

giving absolute credit to the best man, even when that best man was black. All hail to Johnson." Johnson was "superb. He was impregnable . . . as inaccessible as Mont Blanc."

A passage from *Jerry of the Islands* depicts a dog as perceiving white man's superiority:

He was that inferior man-creature, a , and Jerry had been thoroughly trained all his brief days to the law that the white men were the superior two-legged gods. (pg 98).

Michael, Brother of Jerry features a comic Jewish character who is avaricious, stingy, and has a "greasy-seaming grossness of flesh".

Those who defend Jack London against charges of racism like to cite the letter he wrote to the Japanese-American Commercial Weekly in 1913:

In reply to yours of August 16,1913. First of all, I should say by stopping the stupid newspaper from always fomenting race prejudice. This of course, being impossible, I would say, next, by educating the people of Japan so that they will be too intelligently tolerant to respond to any call to race prejudice. And, finally, by realizing, in

industry and government, of socialism—which last word is merely a word that stands for the actual application of in the affairs of men of the theory of the Brotherhood of Man. In the meantime the nations and races are only unruly boys who have not yet grown to the stature of men. So we must expect them to do unruly and boisterous things at times. And, just as boys grow up, so the races of mankind will grow up and laugh when they look back upon their childish quarrels.^[33]

In Yukon in 1996, after the City of Whitehorse renamed two streets to honor Jack London and Robert Service, protests over London's racist views forced the city to change the name of "Jack London Boulevard" back to "Two-mile Hill."^[34]

Death

Jack London's death is controversial. Many older sources describe it as a suicide, and some still do.^[35] However, this appears to be at best a rumor, or speculation based on incidents in his fiction writings. His death certificate gives the cause as uremia, also known as uremic poisoning. He died



Grave of Jack and Charmian Londo

November 22, 1916, in a sleeping porch in a cottage on his ranch.^[36] It is known he was in extreme pain and taking morphine, and it is possible that a morphine overdose, accidental or deliberate, may have contributed. Clarice Stasz, in a capsule biography, writes "Following London's death, for a number of reasons a biographical myth developed in which he has been portrayed as an alcoholic womanizer who committed suicide. Recent scholarship based upon firsthand

documents challenges this caricature."^[37]

Suicide does figure in London's writing. In his autobiographical novel *Martin Eden*, the protagonist commits suicide by drowning. In his autobiographical memoir *John Barleycorn*, he claims, as a youth, having drunkenly stumbled overboard into the San Francisco Bay, "some maundering fancy of going out with the tide suddenly obsessed me", and drifted for hours intending to drown himself, nearly succeeding before sobering up and being rescued by fishermen. An even closer parallel occurs in the denouement of *The Little Lady of the Big House*, in which the heroine, confronted by the pain of a mortal and untreatable gunshot wound, undergoes a physician-assisted suicide by means of morphine. These accounts in his writings probably contributed to the "biographical myth".

Biographer Russ Kingman concluded that London died "of a stroke or heart attack." In support of this, he wrote a general letter on the letterhead of The Jack London Bookstore (which he owned and ran), handing it out to interested parties who wandered in asking questions. The letter offers many facts discrediting the theories of both "suicide by morphine overdose" and "uremic poisoning".

Jack London's ashes are buried, together with those of his wife Charmian, in Jack London State Historic Park, in Glen Ellen, California. The simple grave is marked only by a mossy boulder.

Works

Short stories

Western writer and historian Dale L. Walker writes [4]:

London's true métier was the short story London's true genius lay in the short form, 7,500 words and under, where the flood of images in his teeming brain and the innate power of his narrative gift were at once constrained and freed. His stories that run longer than the magic 7,500 generally—but certainly not always—could have benefited from self-editing.

London's "strength of utterance" is at its height in his stories, and they are painstakingly well-constructed. (In contrast, many of his novels, including *The Call of the Wild*, are weakly constructed, episodic, and resemble linked

sequences of short stories).

"To Build a Fire" is the best known of all his stories. It tells the story of a new arrival to the Klondike who stubbornly ignores warnings about the folly of travelling alone. He falls through the ice into a creek in seventy-below weather, and his survival depends on being able to build a fire and dry his clothes, which he is unable to do. The famous version of this story was published in 1908. Jack London published an earlier and radically different version in 1902, and a comparison of the two provides a dramatic illustration of the growth of his literary ability. Labor (1994) in an anthology says that "To compare the two versions is itself an instructive lesson in what distinguished a great work of literary art from a good children's story."^[38]

Other stories from his Klondike period include: "All Gold Canyon", about a battle between a gold prospector and a claim jumper; "The Law of Life", about an aging man abandoned by his tribe and left to die; and "Love of Life", about a desperate trek by a prospector across the Canadian taiga.

"Moon Face" invites comparison with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart".

Jack London was a boxing fan and an avid amateur boxer himself. "A Piece of Steak" is an evocative tale about a match between an older boxer and a younger one. "The Mexican" combines boxing with a social theme, as a young Mexican endures an unfair fight and ethnic prejudice in order to earn money with which to aid the Mexican revolution.

A surprising number of Jack London's stories would today be classified as science fiction. "The Unparalleled Invasion" describes germ warfare against China; "Goliath" revolves around an irresistible energy weapon; "The Shadow and the Flash" is a highly original tale about two competitive brothers who take two different routes to achieving invisibility; "A Relic of the Pliocene" is a tall tale about an encounter of a modern-day man with a mammoth. "The Red One", a late story from a period London was intrigued by the theories of Jung, tells of an island tribe held in thrall by an extraterrestrial object. His dystopian novel, *The Iron Heel*, meets the contemporary definition of "Soft" science fiction.

Novels

Jack London's most famous novels are *The Call of*

the Wild, White Fang, The Sea-Wolf, The Iron Heel
and *Martin Eden*.^[39]~

Critic Maxwell Geismar called *The Call of the Wild* "a beautiful prose poem," editor Franklin Walker said that it "belongs on a shelf with *Walden* and *Huckleberry Finn*," and novelist E. L. Doctorow called it "a mordant parable ... his masterpiece."

Nevertheless, as Dale L. Walker^[5] commented:

Jack London was an uncomfortable novelist, that form too long for his natural impatience and the quickness of his mind. His novels, even the best of them, are hugely flawed.

It is often observed his novels are episodic and resemble a linked series of short stories. Walker writes:

The *Star Rover*, that magnificent experiment, is actually a series of short stories connected by a unifying device ... *Smoke Bellew* is a series of stories bound together in a novel-like form by their reappearing protagonist, Kit Bellew; and *John Barleycorn* ... is a synoptic series of short episodes.

Even *The Call of the Wild*, which Walker calls a "long short story", is picaresque or episodic.

Ambrose Bierce said of *The Sea-Wolf* that "the great thing—and it is among the greatest of things—is that tremendous creation, Wolf Larsen ... the hewing out and setting up of such a figure is enough for a man to do in one lifetime." However, he noted, "The love element, with its absurd suppressions, and impossible proprieties, is awful."

The Iron Heel is interesting as an example of a dystopian novel which anticipates and influenced George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Jack London's socialist politics are explicitly on display here. Its description of the capitalist class forming an organised, totalitarian, violent oligarchy to crush the working-class forewarned in some detail the totalitarian dictatorships of Europe. Given it was written in 1908, this prediction was somewhat uncanny, as Trotsky noted while commenting on the book in the 1930s.

Martin Eden is a novel about a struggling young writer with some resemblance to Jack London.

Nonfiction and autobiographical memoirs

He was commissioned to write *The People of the Abyss* (1903), an investigation into the slum conditions in which the poor lived in the capital of the British Empire. In it, London did not write favorably about London.

The Road (1907) is a series of tales and reminiscences of Jack London's hobo days. It relates the tricks that hoboes used to evade train crews, and reminisces about his travels with Kelly's Army. He credits his story-telling skill to the hobo's necessity of concocting tales to coax meals from sympathetic strangers.

Jack London's autobiographical book of "alcoholic memoirs", *John Barleycorn*, was published in 1913. Recommended by Alcoholics Anonymous, it depicts the outward and inward life of an alcoholic. The passages depicting his interior mental state, which he called the "White Logic", are among his strongest and most evocative writing. The question must, however, be raised: is it truly *against* alcohol, or a love hymn to alcohol? He makes alcohol sound exciting, dangerous, comradely, glamorous, manly. In the end, when he sums it up, this is the total he comes up with:

And so I pondered my problem. I should not care to revisit all these fair places of the world except in the fashion I visited them before. *Glass in hand!* There is a magic in the phrase. It means more than all the words in the dictionary can be made to mean. It is a habit of mind to which I have been trained all my life. It is now part of the stuff that composes me. I like the bubbling play of wit, the chesty laughs, the resonant voices of men, when, glass in hand, they shut the grey world outside and prod their brains with the fun and folly of an accelerated pulse. No, I decided; I shall take my drink on occasion.

As nonfiction, John Barleycorn should be taken with a grain of salt. Memoirist Joseph Noel (who is quite unflattering toward Jack London) quotes a friend of London's as saying:

Jack has a right to put out as his life story anything he likes, but he lays himself open to just criticism to those who know, when he draws on his imagination for his facts. If he is writing fiction, as in "Martin Eden," that is all right... This "John Barleycorn" of his, however, is not disguised. It is put out as

fact. It tells who Jack London is, and of his bouts with liquor, and his reactions. Nearly every line of it provokes thought, but the incidents in many cases are untrue. I know them to be untrue. They are like spurious coins found in a cash drawer supposed to contain good money.^[40]

The Cruise of the Snark (1913) is a memoir of Jack and Charmian London's 1907-1909 voyage across the Pacific. His descriptions of "surf-riding", which he dubbed a "royal sport", helped introduce it to and popularize it with the mainland. London writes:

Through the white crest of a breaker suddenly appears a dark figure, erect, a man-fish or a sea-god, on the very forward face of the crest where the top falls over and down, driving in toward shore, buried to his loins in smoking spray, caught up by the sea and flung landward, bodily, a quarter of a mile. It is a Kanaka on a surf-board. And I know that when I have finished these lines I shall be out in that riot of colour and pounding surf, trying to bit those breakers even as he, and failing as he never failed, but living life as the best of us may live it.

Apocrypha

Jack London Credo

Jack London's literary executor, Irving Shepard, quoted a "Jack London Credo" in an introduction to a 1956 collection of Jack London stories:

I would rather be ashes than dust!
I would rather that my spark should burn out
in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled
by dry-rot.
I would rather be a superb meteor, every
atom of me in magnificent glow, than a
sleepy and permanent planet.
The function of man is to live, not to exist.
I shall not waste my days trying to prolong
them.
I shall use my time.

Clarice Stasz notes that the passage "has many marks of London's style". Shepard did not cite a source. The words he quotes appeared in a story in the San Francisco Bulletin, December 2, 1916 by Journalist Ernest J. Hopkins, who visited the ranch just weeks before London's death. Stasz notes "Even more so than today journalists' quotes were

unreliable or even sheer inventions" and says no direct source in London's writings has been found.

The phrase "I would rather be ashes than dust" appears in an inscription he wrote in an autograph book.

In the short story "By The Turtles of Tasman", a character, defending her ne'er-do-well grasshopperish father to her antlike uncle, says: "... my father has been a king. He has lived Have you lived merely to live? Are you afraid to die? I'd rather sing one wild song and burst my heart with it, than live a thousand years watching my digestion and being afraid of the wet. When you are dust, my father will be ashes."

The Scab

A short diatribe on "The Scab" is often quoted within the U.S. labor movement and frequently attributed to Jack London. It opens:

After God had finished the rattlesnake, the toad, and the vampire, he had some awful substance left with which he made a scab. A scab is a two-legged animal with a corkscrew soul, a water brain, a combination backbone of

jelly and glue^[41]

This passage figured in a 1974 Supreme Court case, in which justice Thurgood Marshall quoted the passage in full and referred to it as "a well-known piece of trade union literature, generally attributed to author Jack London." A union newsletter had published a "list of scabs," which was granted to be factual and therefore not libellous, but then went on to quote the passage as the "definition of a scab." The case turned on the question of whether the "definition" was defamatory. The court ruled that "Jack London's... 'definition of a scab' is merely rhetorical hyperbole, a lusty and imaginative expression of the contempt felt by union members towards those who refuse to join," and as such was not libellous and was protected under the First Amendment.^[41]

The passage does not seem to appear in Jack London's published work. He once gave a speech entitled "The Scab"^[42] which he published in his book *The War of the Classes*, but this speech contains nothing similar to the "corkscrew soul" quotation and is completely different from it in content, style, and tone. Generally Jack London did *not* use demotic language in his writing except in dialogue spoken by his characters.

One online source, no longer accessible, gave a chain of citations which credits the diatribe as having been published in *The Bridgeman*, official organ of the Structural Iron Workers, which in turn credited the *Elevator Constructor*, official journal of the International Union of Elevator Constructors, which credited the Oregon Labor Press as publishing it in 1926.

Might is Right

Anton LaVey's Church of Satan claims that "Ragnar Redbeard", pseudonymous author of the 1896 book *Might is Right*, was Jack London. No London biographers mention any such possibility. Rodger Jacobs published an essay ridiculing this theory, arguing that in 1896 London was unfamiliar with philosophers heavily cited by "Redbeard," such as Nietzsche, and had not even begun to develop his mature literary style.^[43]

B. Traven

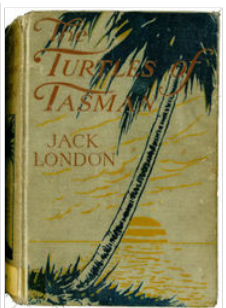
During the 1930s, the enigmatic novelist B. Traven, best known in the U. S. as the author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, was hailed as "the German Jack London". His politics, themes,

writing style, and settings really do bear a recognizable resemblance to Jack London's. Traven kept his identity secret during his life. Almost every commentator on Traven mentions in passing a fanciful speculation that Traven actually was Jack London, who presumably would have had to have faked his own death. It is not clear whether this suggestion was ever made seriously. No London biographer has even bothered to mention it. The identification of Traven with London is one of many such speculations—another unlikely one being Ambrose Bierce—which were laid to rest by a 1990 interview in which Traven's widow identified Traven as Ret Marut, a left-wing revolutionary in Germany during World War I.^[44]

Novels of Jack London

- *A Daughter of the Snow* (1902)
- *Children of the Frost* (1902)
- *The Call of the Wild* (1903)
- *The Kempton-Wace Letters* (1903) Published anonymously, co-authored by Jack London and Anna Strunsky.
- *The Sea-Wolf* (1904)
- *The Game* (1905)

- *White Fang* (1906)
- *Before Adam* (1907)
- *The Iron Heel* (1908)
- *Martin Eden* (1909)
- *Burning Daylight* (1910)
- *Adventure* (1911)
- *The Scarlet Plague* (1912)
- *A Son of the Sun* (1912)
- *The Abysmal Brute* (1913)
- *The Valley of the Moon* (1913)
- *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* (1914)
- *The Star Rover* (1915, published in England under the title *The Jacket*)
- *The Little Lady of the Big House* (1916)
- *Jerry of the Islands* (1917)
- *Michael, Brother of Jerry* (1917)
- *Hearts of Three* (1920, novelization by Jack



Cover of *Turtles of Tasman* by Jack London

London of a movie script by Charles
Goddard)

- *The Assassination Bureau, Ltd* (1963, half-completed by Jack London; completed by Robert Fish)

Short story collections

- *Tales of the Fish Patrol* (1906)
- *Smoke Bellew* (1912)
- *The Turtles of Tasman* (1916)

Autobiographical memoirs

- *The Road* (1907)
- *John Barleycorn* (1913)

Nonfiction and essays

- *The People of the Abyss* (1903)
- *Revolution, and other Essays* (1910)
- *The Cruise of the Snark* (1913)
- *How I became a socialist*

Short stories

- *By The Turtles of Tasman*
- *Diable — A Dog* (1902), renamed to *Bâtard*

in 1904

- *An Odyssey of the North*
- *To the Man on Trail*
- *To Build a Fire*
- *The Law of Life*
- *Moon-Face*
- *The Leopard Man's Story* (1903)
- *Negore the Coward* (1904)
- *Love of Life*
- *All Gold Canyon*
- *The Apostate*
- *In a Far Country*
- *The Chinago*
- *A Piece of Steak*
- *Good-by, Jack*
- *Samuel*
- *Told in the Drooling Ward*
- *The Mexican*
- *The Red One*
- *The White Silence*
- *The Madness of John Harned*
- *A Thousand Deaths*
- *The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone*
- *Even unto Death*
- *A Relic of the Pliocene*
- *The Shadow and the Flash*
- *The Enemy of All the World*
- *A Curious Fragment*
- *Goliah*

- *The Unparalleled Invasion*
- *When the World was Young*
- *The Strength of the Strong*
- *War*
- *The Scarlet Plague*
- *The Seed of McCoy*
- *The Sundog Trail*
- *The King of Mazy May*
- *South of the Slot of Fun*

Plays

- The Acorn Planter: a California Forest Play (1916)

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Sources

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A Critical Anthology on the Writings of Robert E. Howard. Wildside Press. ISBN 0-8095-1566-0.

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504233-6

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- Stasz, Clarice (2001). *Jack London's Women*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press. ISBN 1-55849-301-8.

Notes

1. ^ Birth and death dates as given in Dictionary of American Biography Base Set. American Council of Learned Societies, 1928-1936. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2006.
<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>
2. ^ Joan London (1939) p. 12, birth date
3. ^ "JACK LONDON DIES SUDDENLY ON RANCH; Novelist is Found Unconscious from Uremia, and Expires after Eleven Hours. WROTE HIS LIFE OF TOIL His Experience as Sailor Reflected In His Fiction—*Call of the Wild* Gave Him His Fame." **The New York Times**, story datelined Santa Rosa, Cal., Nov. 22; appeared November 23, 1916, p. 13. States he died "at 7:45 o'clock tonight," and says he was "born in San Francisco on January 12, 1876."
4. ^ (1910) "Specialty of Short-story Writing," *The Writer*, XXII, January-December 1910, p. 9:
"There are eight American writers who can get

\$1000 for a short story—Robert W. Chambers, Richard Harding Davis, Jack London, O. Henry, Booth Tarkington, John Fox, Jr., Owen Wister, and Mrs. Burnett." \$1,000 in 1910 dollars is roughly equivalent to \$20,000 in 2005.

5. ^ The relevant records were lost in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906
6. ^ Stasz (2001), p. 14: "What supports Flora's naming Chaney as the father of her son are, first, the indisputable fact of their cohabiting at the time of his conception; and second, the absence of any suggestion on the part of her associates that another man could have been responsible... [but] unless DNA evidence is introduced, whether or not William Chaney was the biological father of Jack London cannot be decided.... Chaney would, however, be considered by her son and his children as their ancestor."
7. ^ London, Jack (1917) "Eight Factors of Literary Success", in Labor (1994), p. 512. "In answer to your question as to the greatest factors of my literary success, I will state that I consider them to be: Vast good luck. Good health; good brain; good mental and muscular correlation. Poverty. Reading Ouida's *Signa* at eight years of age. The influence of Herbert Spencer's *Philosophy of Style*. Because I got started twenty years before the fellows who are trying to start today."
8. ^ *John Barleycorn by Jack London'*, available at Project Gutenberg. Chapters VII, VIII describe his stealing of Mamie, the "Queen of the Oyster Pirates": "The Queen asked me to row her ashore in my skiff...Nor did I understand Spider's

grinning side-remark to me: "Gee! There's nothin' slow about YOU." How could it possibly enter my boy's head that a grizzled man of fifty should be jealous of me?" "And how was I to guess that the story of how the Queen had thrown him down on his own boat, the moment I hove in sight, was already the gleeful gossip of the water-front?

9. ^ Joan London (1939) appears to credit this story, op. cit. p. 41
10. ^ Kingman (1979) expresses skepticism; p. 37, "It was said on the waterfront that Jack had taken on a mistress... Evidently Jack believed the myth himself at times... Jack met Mamie aboard the Razzle-Dazzle when he first approached French Frank about its purchase. Mamie was aboard on a visit with her sister Tess and her chaperone, Miss Hadley. It hardly seems likely that someone who required a chaperone on Saturday would move aboard as mistress on Monday."
11. ^ Kingman (1979) p. 67.
12. ^ Hamilton (1986) (as cited by other sources)
13. ^ Stasz (2001) p. 61, "Both acknowledged... that they were not marrying out of love"
14. ^ Kingman (1979), p. 98
15. ^ *The Kempton-Wace Letters* (2000 reprint), p. 149 ("a mad, wanton creature....")
16. ^ *The Kempton-Wace Letters* (2000 reprint), p. 126 ("I purpose to order my affairs in a rational manner....")
17. ^ *The Kempton-Wace Letters* (2000 reprint), p. 147 ("Progeny! progeny! progeny!")
18. ^ Stasz (2001) p. 66: "Mommy Girl and Daddy Boy"

19. ^ Kingman (1979) p. 121
20. ^ Noel (1940) p. 150, "She's devoted to purity..."
21. ^ Stasz (2001) p. 80 ("devoted to purity... code words...")
22. ^ Kingman (1979) p. 139
23. ^ op. cit.
24. ^ London, Charmian [1921] (2003). *The Book of Jack London, Volume II*. Kessinger. ISBN 0-7661-6188-9. p. 59: copy of "John Barleycorn" inscribed "Dear Mate-Woman: You know. You have helped me bury the Long Sickness and the White Logic." Numerous other examples in same source.
25. ^ Kingman (1979) p. 124
26. ^ Stasz 1988 p. 112
27. ^ Kershaw, Alex (1999). *Jack London: A Life*. St. Martin's Press. ISBN 0-312-19904-X. p. 133
28. ^ Noel (1940) p. 146
29. ^ Joan London (1939), p. 326: "This time Jack attempted to defend himself rather than defy his accusers, but defiance would have served him better and been more effect, for his excuse was very lame indeed. He claimed that he had read the article in an American newspaper and that he had mistaken it for a genuine speech..."
30. ^ See Labor (1994) p. 546 for one example, a letter from London to William E. Walling dated November 30, 1909.
31. ^ Stasz (2001) p. 100
32. ^ Stasz (2001) p. 156
33. ^ Labor, Earle, Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard: *The Letters of Jack London: Volume Three: 1913-1916* Stanford University Press

1988. p. 1219, Letter to Japanese-American Commercial Weekly, August 25, 1913: "the races of mankind will grow up and laugh [at] their childish quarrels..."

34. ^ Lundberg, Murray.
[<http://www.explorenorth.com/library/yafeatures/t-london3.htm> The Life of Jack London as Reflected in his Works]. *Explore North*. Retrieved on 2006-11-27.
35. ^ Columbia Encyclopedia [1], entry for Jack London: "Beset in his later years by alcoholism and financial difficulties, London committed suicide at the age of 40."
36. ^ Kingman, Russ, *A Pictorial Life of Jack London* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1979)
37. ^ Stasz, Clarice (2001). "Jack (John Griffith) London" [2]
38. ^ Both versions are online: 1908 version; 1902 version
39. ^ These are the five novels selected by editor Donald Pizer for inclusion in the Library of America series.
40. ^ Noel (1940), pp 276-277
41. ^ *a b* Thurgood Marshall (1974-06-25). Letter Carriers v. Austin, 418 U. S. 264 (1974). Retrieved on 2006-05-23. The court decision cites the passage in full. A Google search on "corkscrew soul" turns up scores of others.
42. ^ "The Scab", speech given to the Oakland Socialist Party Local on April 5, 1903; also in Pizer (1982) p. 1121
43. ^ Rodger Jacobs (1999). Running with the

Wolves: Jack London, the Cult of Masculinity, and "Might is Right". Retrieved on 2006-05-24.

44. ^ Rohter, Larry, "His Widow Reveals Much Of Who B. Traven Really Was," *The New York Times*, June 25, 1990, p. C13

External links

- Jack London's writings
- Works by Jack London at Project Gutenberg
- The Jack London Collection Site featuring Information about Jack London's life and work, and a collection of his writings.
- The World of Jack London Biographical information and writings
- Jack London - his life and books Capsule biography from Jack London State Park website
- Jack London State Historic Park
- The Huntington Library's Jack London Archive
- Obituary, NY Times, November 23, 1916
Jack London Dies Suddenly On Ranch

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