

JACK LONDON, THE MAN OR THE MYTH

Jack London is one of the best known American authors in the world. At Jack London State Historic Park we encounter many foreign visitors who admire the works of Jack London and say they have enjoyed his stories since childhood. In my job as a docent, which is to interpret Jack London history to American and foreign visitors, I have found that many people have an inaccurate knowledge of Jack London's life in the areas of his drinking and his death.

When I became a docent at Jack London State Historic Park fifteen years ago, I found differences in what other docents told visitors regarding Jack London's death, his alcohol consumption, and his relationships with women. I decided I needed to research and to study in order to obtain the most accurate information possible. As I read through London biographies, I discovered that there was little or no documentation regarding these important areas of death, alcohol, and women. Instead, there was much speculation passing itself off as fact. As I got deeper into reading and research, I decided that it would be possible to gain some insight into London's drinking and death, but that information regarding extra-marital affairs was limited to hearsay. I will omit that area from the rest of my presentation. The following is the result of my research regarding the negative portrayals of Jack London's drinking and his death.

Irving Stone

Sailor on Horseback

Irving Stone probably has done more than any author to present Jack London, the myth, rather than the man. Stone's book was first published in 1938, later went out of print, and was published again to coincide with Jack London's one hundredth birth anniversary in 1976. The first printing in 1938 included "A Biography" in the title. This was replaced with "A Biographical Novel" in subsequent printings until the more recent 1970's editions which again included "A Biography" in the title. By then, there was no possibility of a lawsuit. Stone had promised Charmian a fine biography, but instead produced a sensational work that included Jack London dying by suicide and describing Charmian in a negative way. In 1938, Charmian London, feeling betrayed by Stone, threatened a lawsuit for libel against Stone and his two publishers.¹

In reviewing Sailor on Horseback, I found that Stone had taken freely from London's own writing, both non-fiction and fiction, to depict London's life. Stone used a scene from the short story, "The Apostate" to apply to London as a boy, awakened early in the morning to go to work.² London's book, John Barleycorn was used to describe London's early drinking days. Curiously, there is one account Stone changed from John Barleycorn. In regard to the five month long sailing trip that Jack and Charmian took aboard the *Dirigo*, London said he took no alcohol on board. Stone, more dramatically, said he took forty gallons of whiskey but didn't touch it during the voyage. Stone also said that London had committed suicide. A 1938 letter from Dr. William Porter, Jack's personal doctor, to Charmian London indicates that Stone tried very hard to get Dr. Porter to say Jack's death was not due to uremia.³ Stone was attempting to support his suicide premise. He included no documentation in his book.

Andrew Sinclair

Jack, A Biography of Jack London

Sinclair talks about London's ability to stretch the truth, when he states, "Jack certainly knew how to tell a good story at the bar of The First and Last Chance Saloon. He was not so much a liar as an improver upon the truth, the heir of Mark Twain and Bret Harte and the frontier tradition, which held that the story of a stranger should never deny the pleasure of others for the sake of the facts. Boasting of his fantastic exploits was a man's job in the west."⁴ Sinclair goes on to say that The Cruise of the Dazzler and John Barleycorn are the only records of London's indulgence in

alcohol during his teen years.⁵ Although Sinclair relates episodes from these two books, he doesn't mention whether he believes London's writing is factual. Sinclair continues to speculate that London switched from alcohol to opiates during the last few years of his life. Sinclair states that London used Dr. Porter as a means of getting increasing supplies of opiates. "From this time forward, morphine and heroin began to replace alcohol as analgesics for his white nights." This very important statement includes no documentation. Regarding a possible suicide, Sinclair thinks it unlikely.

John Perry

Jack London An American Myth

There is only one page in Perry's book where he refers to Jack London's drinking. The index refers to it as "London's Alcoholism." Perry states that Upton Sinclair claimed that London told him "tales of incredible debauches; tales of opium and hashish, and I know not what other strange ingredients; tales of whiskey bouts lasting for weeks."⁶ Perry says that this ended a friendship between London and Sinclair, but goes on to say they exchanged letters for years and reviewed each other's books. Perry's source, "About Jack London" by Upton Sinclair includes an assessment of London, not mentioned by Perry: "He knew all about the uphill fight a young radical has to make and to such he gave both praise and money, for the helping of the glorious cause. That is the thing for which I loved him most; I have saved it to the last, so it may be the thing the reader carries away with him-the memory of a man strong, yet tender-hearted as a child, honest and open as daylight, generous as Mother Nature herself."⁷ It is important to note that Upton Sinclair was one of the speakers at London's funeral service, according to Andrew Sinclair in his book, Jack.⁸ All of this seems to indicate that they were friends.

Perry also states that Upton Sinclair said, "Every now and then London extended an invitation to Glen Ellen, one Sinclair refused because George Sterling said 'Jack's drinking has become tragic.'"⁹ In tracing this footnote in The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair I found that Sinclair made this statement referring to when he went to live in Pasadena in 1916, the year of London's death.¹⁰ What Perry fails to mention is that a physically suffering London did not return from Hawaii until August, four months before his death. It is noted by Russ Kingman, Andrew Sinclair, and Clarice Stasz, that London was in very poor health, suffering greatly at this time. London would not have done well with company, on and off, during this period. He was also taking powerful painkillers that could have made him appear drunk. According to Clarice Stasz, by 1915 London was ravaged by illness. She says that London would break into tirades with Charmian, and that he was also eating less, because he was vomiting within half an hour of eating. He also suffered from kidney stones. According to Stasz, in the last few months "Totally out of character, he made nasty comments about friends and grew suspicious of those who did appear on the ranch."¹¹ This information is from an Irving Stone interview of Finn Frolich, London's close friend.

Charmian London

The Book of Jack London, diaries

In her The Book of Jack London, Charmian's accounts of Jack's early drinking follow closely with what Jack said in John Barleycorn. Included are stories of oyster pirate and Fish Patrol days. The most detailed, personal account by Charmian describes Jack's last experience with alcohol before sailing from Baltimore to Seattle in 1912. "Coincident with our arrival, he warned that he was going to invite one last, thoroughgoing bout with alcohol, and that when he should sail on the Cape Horn voyage, it was to be 'Good-by, forever, to John Barleycorn.' To me, the promised end was worth the threatened means; and my comprehension and acceptance of his intention was appreciated. But I could not fail to regret that new friends should know and base their judgment of Jack London upon this unfortunate phenomenon of him."¹² In her diary, Charmian says of the

morning before sailing, “Don’t want to look at Jack, he’s awful. He drinks pretty steady all morning, throws up some of it. Well, this is his last drinking day.” Charmian mentions why she didn’t want to look at Jack. Jack had surprised her by having his head totally shaved. This devastated Charmian and she cried for nearly three hours. “I did not again look directly at Jack until there was at least half an inch of hair on his head.”¹³

In regard to narcotics, Charmian said, “Only three times did he tamper with a narcotic, for he realized its peril. ‘Oh have no fear, my dear,’ he reassured me more than once, ‘I’ll never go that way. I want to live a hundred years!’”¹⁴

In her diaries dated from after the Snark voyage in 1909 until Jack’s death, Charmian mentions alcohol only nine times. The only negative entry is regarding the preparation for the 1912 trip around Cape Horn. A typical example would be October 23, 1914, “Dinner at the Saddle Rock-ducks and Liebfraumilch; then Orpheum-a good show.” Another is January 10, 1912 “We leave Sophie’s and go to Mouguin’s where we drink Chateau Lafitte and eat good cold meats and things.”

Charmian’s assessment of the truth in the book John Barleycorn is that it is “semi-autobiographical.”¹⁵ Regarding the cause of Jack’s death she mentions the uremia that had previously been diagnosed.¹⁶

In summation regarding alcohol, it seems that all accounts of Jack London’s early drinking come directly from John Barleycorn. Also, both Charmian London and Andrew Sinclair agree that Jack embellished the truth. The only direct negative witness account we have by someone close to Jack is Charmian’s recollection of the morning before the 1912 Dirigo voyage.

Charmian London does not give us very much information in her diaries regarding Jack’s drinking, since there are very few related entries. If there were episodes similar to the 1912 diary entry, she didn’t record them. John Perry attempts to use Upton Sinclair’s observations as proof of London’s alcoholism, but leaves out important facts that would give us a more complete picture. This is possibly the result of incomplete research.

I believe that in accepting Jack London’s book, John Barleycorn as truth, any writer might believe in Jack’s “alcoholism.” But, if John Barleycorn is used as proof, then one must also accept Jack’s stating that he is writing from the point of view of someone who suffered through part of his life with alcohol, survived that phase, and has conquered the organic need for alcohol. My assessment of Jack London writers regarding Jack’s drinking is that none has proven that Jack London should be labeled an alcoholic. This is not to say that Jack was not an alcoholic, but that the burden of proof should be the responsibility of the accuser. The writers who tried to do this failed in the attempt.

In summation regarding Jack London’s death, we actually have very few biographers who called it a suicide. The most prominent was Irving Stone, who left no documentation at all, and tried to get Jack’s personal doctor to negate uremia as cause of death. Richard O’Conner, who, in spite of being denied access to the Jack London collection at the Huntington Library, still managed to publish a biography. O’Conner did use Irving Stone’s notes in the Stone U.C.L.A. collection. Joan London did not mention suicide as a definite cause of death in Jack London and His Times, her first book about her father. Her second book, Jack London and His Daughters, was unfinished when Joan died in 1971. The book was finished by her son, Bart Abbott, and was published in 1990. In this book, Joan London now seems convinced that her father’s death was a suicide. However, in a letter from her to Alfred Shivers in 1966, Joan London recalls Dr. Porter, Jack

London's doctor, swearing that uremic poisoning was the cause of her father's death, although morphine might have been a contributing cause.¹⁷

The most important papers concerning Jack London's death were written by Alfred S. Shivers, Philip J. Klemmer, M.D. and Kirk Labor, M.D.

Alfred S. Shivers, a pharmacist, in his paper "Jack London: Not a Suicide," examines the supposed note pad mentioned by Irving Stone that supposedly was found by London's bed. That pad, according to Stone had a calculation for the lethal dose of morphine. Shivers states that there is no exact lethal dosage, even today, and that morphine would have been an unwise choice, especially with better means at hand. Shivers also says that the amount of morphine used by London the night before he went into a coma is total conjecture.

Philip J. Klemmer, M.D., in a recent paper, co-authored by Andrew S. Bomback, M.D., "Jack London's 'chronic interstitial nephritis': A historical differential diagnosis" focuses on the most likely contributing cause of London's uremia which was the mercury chloride applied to treat his open sores caused by yaws. Yaws is a disease caused by mosquitoes that carry a bacterial spirochete that is related to the syphilis bacteria. London possibly used the mercury chloride for the full five months spent in the Solomon Islands. Dr. Klemmer goes on to say the accumulation of the mercury would occur mostly in the renal tubules where it would do its damage and eight years later result in end stage renal disease. In regard to the morphine theory, Dr. Klemmer states: "If Jack London did, in fact cause his own death with a self-administered toxin, the fatal medication for London was almost certainly not morphine, which he had been using for at least three years for renal colic. London's tolerance for this narcotic would have made a calculated overdose nearly impossible and undoubtedly would have required more than found in his bedroom at the time of his death. The poison in London's case may have been the agent which caused the 'uremia' from 'chronic interstitial nephritis' listed on his death certificate, the agent that London presciently called a 'corrosive poison' upon his first use: mercury."¹⁸

Kirk Labor, M.D., in his paper "Jack London's Death: The Homicide of the Suicide Theory," believes the contributing factors in Jack London's death include the use of mercury chloride, smoking, alcohol, and his diet. He suggests that London may have been afflicted with Polyarticular Gout. A diet rich in protein may have contributed to worsening renal function. Add this to the mercury toxicity, tobacco, and alcohol also linked to renal disease. The renal, cardiac and pulmonary systems "interact in such a way as to create circumstances of worsening hypertension which in turn acts to cause a decline in the function of all three of these systems collectively." Dr. Labor goes on to say that there is no way to know if morphine was contributory to his death, and that it seems more likely that London died naturally from the consequences of his poor health. Dr. Labor notes that it has been reported that London was unable to move his left arm before he died. Dr. Labor's conclusion is that death was likely caused by the "breakdown of a

combination of physiological systems in his body manifested as cardiopulmonary and renal disease and ultimately stroke or heart attack."¹⁹

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