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Finding the Real Jack London

When I systematically investigated biographies of London to see how his “drinking problem” has been characterized, I discovered that, with one notable exception, they all retell the same litany of “purple passages” and “red letter events” that are recorded in *John Barleycorn*. Although there are minor variations, which I will discuss in a minute, the one notable exception to is to be found in **Richard O’Connor’s 1964 *Jack London: A Biography***. O’Connor actually quotes sources other than *John Barleycorn* to depict London as a heavy drinker. Richard O’Connor was a professional writer who produced over 50 volumes of biography, popular history, Civil War subjects, novels and Americana (Walker 35).

O’Connor views *John Barleycorn* as “the first honest, self-revelatory effort to understand the drinker and his compulsion” (317). O’Connor believes that London perfectly fits the typical alcoholic personality: “highly emotional, ultra-sensitive, egotistical, easily bored, restless, and an exaggerated sense of his own importance coupled with an inferiority complex rooted in his childhood” (317).

One of O’Connor’s sources is Dr. Frank Topping, who was in charge of the bar at the Bohemian Club encampment. Topping recalls that “Jack wanted to open the bar at 2 o’clock in the morning and rouse the whole camp to drink with him. I wouldn’t let him.” “He was pretty mad,” Topping recalled, “but he got over it the next day.”

Another tidbit O’Connor relates comes from Louis Stevens, who witnessed London on a sizeable bender in San Francisco. Stevens saw Stanley Ketchel,

the high-living, middleweight champion throwing money to people from a hansom cab. Inside the cab were Jack London and Ketchel's manager, Willus Britt. When they all went inside a saloon, Stevens followed them in and told London that he wanted to be a writer. London replied, "The hell you say," and went back to drinking. Surprisingly enough, Stevens went on to become a highly successful screen writer.

While these two tales may lack the rhetorical element of ethos, O'Connor's next source is reputable. Adela Rogers St. Johns was a Hearst reporter and columnist for many decades, and she often visited the Londons at Glen Ellen with her father, Earl Rogers. Her father was a famous criminal Lawyer in Los Angeles, and the real-life model of the fictional "Perry Mason." In 1962, Adela Rogers St. Johns published *Final Verdict*, a memoir of life with her father.

She recounts in her memoir the "despairing vigil" she and Charmian kept while her father and London went on a 5-day drinking spree. When the men returned, she overheard her father say, "I am a little confused." "Why am I riding this burro?" London replies, "You are confused because at this moment you are not sure whether you are a man dreaming you are a burro or a burro dreaming you are a man. We all have these moments" (320).

O'Connor believes it was self-delusion on London's part to say he could master liquor. He also disputes London's statement that Heinhold ever lent him \$50. to continue his education. According to O'Connor, that statement "aroused much sardonic laughter along the Oakland waterfront, where Heinhold was regarded as notably tight-fisted" (331). O'Connor points out that *John Barleycorn*, was "an important factor in the campaign which succeeded six years later in bringing Prohibition to the United States" (331).

O'Connor also quotes two reviews of *John Barleycorn*. The first appeared in the *New Review* (November 1913) by Andre Tridon, a famous psychoanalyst who translated the works of Sigmund Freud. Tridon saw *John Barleycorn* as "an indication of why [London's] talent was fizzling out." Tridon continues, "I knew there was something wrong with London's stuff. The vocabulary was apparently

gone, his imagination seemed to be failing him, he repeated himself frightfully, his stories were becoming as safe as those of any popular novelist.” *John Barleycorn* was, Tridon wrote, an indication that London “does not even seem to know how far he has gone.” Tridon even went so far as to advise London to “cease to abuse alcohol. It isn’t alcohol that is troubling you, it’s people, the small, nice, human, uninteresting, hearty, loyal, trashy people with whom you drink. Alcohol may have something to do with your temporary downfall, but people have and are having more to do with it. . . .” (332).

The second review of *John Barleycorn* that O’Connor discusses is titled “*John Barleycorn Under Psychoanalysis*” by Wilfrid Lay (1917). Lay popularized psychoanalysis in many books. In his review of *John Barleycorn*, Lay charged that London’s masculinity was “suspect.” A psychoanalyst, Lay wrote, would find “traits of sadism-masochism, homosexuality and extraversion to a high degree” in the London personality (332). Lay goes on to state, “A man’s man, among other characteristics, rates women, horses, dogs and other animals on much the same level. . . looking at them all as animals. . . . In his pages his dogs live; his women do not. . . . He does not appreciate a woman. . . .” Although O’Connor’s citation for this article was off by several years, I did manage to find it. Lay says many more silly things of this ilk in his article, yet it appears that his theme—London’s suspect masculinity—struck a deep chord among biographers as it is still a subject of interest.

Another amusing story O’Conner relates that does not appear in *John Barleycorn* is London’s encounter with the “Eminent Tankard Man,” Ambrose Bierce, in 1912 at the Bohemian Club’s annual ‘High Jinks.’ The two men engaged in a drinking duel exchanging epithets and insults late into the night. As O’Connor notes, “Despite that convivial night in the Bohemian Grove, Jack and Bierce never became friendly. . . . Bierce was convinced that Sterling had escaped from his patronage and would ruin himself through association with Jack—and Bierce could never forgive the loss of a protégé” (309).

O'Connor concludes that London was not moved "by his own stark admonitions" in *John Barleycorn* "and still believed that he could handle John Barleycorn, given the discretion he mistakenly believed he had acquired" (333).

Joan D. Hedrick relies heavily on *John Barleycorn* throughout her biography, *Solitary Comrade: Jack London and His Work* (1982). In a chapter titled "Domesticity," she quotes from Charmian's diary—the same three entries from 1907 that Lou found in Kingman's *Pictorial Biography*. Although Kingman claims that they are the only ones in her Diary regarding drinking, Hedrick quotes five more entries, and they all have to do with Charmian's proposition that if Jack will limit himself to 3 drinks a day, she will make another baby. Ultimately, she did not conceive again, and he continued to drink.

Clarice Stasz, in her 1988 biography of Jack and Charmian, *American Dreamers*, also relies heavily on *John Barleycorn* and Charmian's diary entries. She focuses on the harmful effects of Jack's destructive addictions (smoking and drinking). In her opinion, "Whether Jack London was an alcoholic in the technical sense mattered little to those closest to him. From their points of view, his behavior was clearly affected by his drinking in a way that made their lives more difficult" (228). According to Stasz, Joan's life was marred by a memory of Jack showing up drunk at Bess's house. Years later, Joan recalled: "On one particularly besotted day he threw Becky through the living room window" (229). Stasz portrays Joan as "the real victim" in the event, stating that "She was traumatized by what she had seen, and even when her mother assured her that Jack had not meant to hurt Becky, refused to believe her" (230). Regarding Becky's point of view, Stasz includes a long quote from Kingman's *Pictorial Life* (228) in which Becky (also many years later) recalls that Jack

"was so angry I'm sure he didn't know what he was doing. He picked me up from the floor and swung me toward the window. One foot crashed through, there was a loud noise and he pulled me back instantly" (229).

Becky directly contradicts her sister's account when she says Jack was angry, not drunk, at the time. Ironically, Stasz reports that Becky "said Jack never drank

before arriving nor in their presence, and that her memory was substantiated by others she spoke with after his death” (229). While these recollections may provide a rare glimpse into the trauma and drama of London’s personal life, they fail to support Stasz’s claim that Jack’s behavior was affected by his drinking in this case.

In 1997, **Alex Kershaw** published *Jack London: A Life* in London. Kershaw is a British writer of some popular books about World War II who has lived in the United States since 1994. He views London as a “spectacular” drinker and relies heavily on *John Barleycorn*, on all earlier biographies of London, and on the writings London’s acquaintances. While his well-written biography serves a useful purpose by introducing London to the Brits, it provides no new insights on London’s drinking for those of us already familiar with the territory.

Kershaw believes that London wrote honestly about himself in *John Barleycorn*, and that it is entirely truthful. He states, “*John Barleycorn* was both bully pulpit and confession box” (252). He quotes John Sutherland who wrote the introduction to an edition of *John Barleycorn*. Sutherland calls the book “a classic of American autobiography,” and states: “In terms of London’s remarkable life, the early chapters are among the most self-revealing things the author wrote. The later chapters are among the most thoughtful things he ever wrote . . . Too often London’s supporters have neglected the book out of existence, downgrading it as mere fiction so as to protect their man’s reputation” (252).

The most recent biography of London is **James Haley’s** *Wolf: The Lives of Jack London* (2010). Haley identifies himself as a rogue biographer who writes “from totally outside the existing circle” (xiii). His purpose is to make London’s story “accessible to a larger audience that needs to know why he was important” (xv).

Haley’s book is very readable, in fact it was read aloud on NPR, and Haley gave a two-hour, live radio interview on NPR’s show, On Point with Tom Ashbrook. The media blitz generated some strikingly bizarre responses, however. For example, one reviewer writing for Slate remarked, “This man

[London] was the most-read revolutionary Socialist in American history, agitating for violent overthrow of the government and the assassination of political leaders—and he is remembered now for writing a cute story about a dog. It's as if the Black Panthers were remembered, a century from now, for adding a pink tint to their afros" (Hari).

Haley was reviewed from within "the existing circle" by Jonah Raskin, editor of *The Radical Jack London*. Raskin identifies a duplicitousness in Haley's approach to London. According to Raskin, Haley "repeats unnecessarily the fact that London is untrustworthy as a source of information." For example, Haley states that "Throughout London's written recollections of his life, he often changed the facts of various experiences to suit the needs of its telling." However, as Raskin points out, "But then [Haley] goes on to repeat London's own boast that he wrote 'a thousand words per day, every day,' as a fact, and it's not true."

Haley simply rehearses the litany of purple passions and red letter events recorded in *John Barleycorn*. On the one hand, Haley states that London is untrustworthy as a source of information, and on the other hand, he believes that in *John Barleycorn*, London "tells the truth without varnish" (44). This double-dealing is, as we have seen, standard fare among London's biographers. Logic would dictate that if we accept *John Barleycorn* as a truthful account, we should accept as truthful London's statement in it that "I was never a drunkard, and I have not reformed" (338). If we accept that London embellished the written recollections of his life, we should accept that *John Barleycorn* is primarily a larger-than-life and largely-fictitious memoir and treat it as such.

Thank you.

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