

FINDING THE REAL JACK LONDON

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Who was Jack London, the person? Developing an understanding of the real Jack London is quite difficult if you rely on Jack London's biographers. Many writers have chosen to depict Jack London in a sensational tabloid manner. The reader, in many cases, is left to decide what is true and what is merely speculation. The areas that have developed much controversy and disagreement are those concerning London's death, his alcohol consumption, and his relationship with women. Research in these areas has been mostly incomplete, thus resulting in much speculation. Some writers have used London's own writing, both fiction and non-fiction, to define him. Some have used the flawed work of previous writers and have continued an inaccurate, incomplete depiction of Jack London.

To choose one area of focus, let us take a look at what some writers have said about Jack London's drinking to see if there are documented facts that allow us to understand this part of London's life. The writer who has had the largest circulation in the past has been Irving Stone with his Sailor on Horseback, first published in 1938 and re-published in 1978 after Jack London's hundredth birth anniversary in 1976. The first printing in 1938 included "A Biography" in the title. This was replaced with "A Biographical Novel" in printings that followed, until the new printing in 1978 which again included "A Biography" in the title.

Irving Stone

Sailor on Horseback

Stone takes freely from London's writing to depict London's life. Stone used a scene from the short story "The Apostate"¹ to apply to Jack London as a boy, awakened early in the morning to go to work. Some of the details used by Stone to describe drinking accounts come directly from John Barleycorn. Others have no source given. Another John Barleycorn episode Stone used describes a Hayward political rally where London got free whiskey. Small details such as knocking the necks of bottles off against concrete curbs are included.² Repeated is the story where French Frank tried to run London down with his schooner while he stood on deck holding French Frank off with a shotgun, steering with his feet.³ Also repeated is the story of a dead drunk London who falls into the water in Benicia and nearly dies.⁴ Curiously, there is one account that is changed from John Barleycorn. Regarding the five month long sailing trip that Jack and Charmian London took aboard the *Dirigo*, London said he took no alcohol on board. Stone said he took forty gallons of whiskey, but didn't touch it during the voyage.⁵ Sailor on Horseback has no documentation.

Andrew Sinclair
Jack A Biography of Jack London

In regard to London's teen years, Sinclair says The Cruise of the Dazzler and his confession of his drinking in John Barleycorn, are the only records of this time. Sinclair mentions London's teenage drinking at the First and Last Chance Saloon⁶ and his drunken episode of falling into the Carquinez Straits where he faced possible death and was saved by a Greek fisherman.⁷ He also mentions the Hayward political rally.⁸ These three incidents come from John Barleycorn.

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."⁹

Sinclair states that London switched from alcohol to opiates during the last few years of his life, after an appendicitis operation in the summer of 1913. "An Oakland doctor called Porter operated on him and took him as one of his patients, warning Jack that he would die of kidney failure if he did not stop drinking, give up raw fish and meat, and start exercising and losing weight. Jack ignored the advice and went on drinking, gobbling underdone duck, and avoiding exercise. To him, the chief merit of his new doctor was that he could now get increasing supplies of the opiates he had first begun taking in the Solomon Islands to ease the pain of his double fistula and psoriasis. From this time forward, morphine and heroin began to replace alcohol as analgesics for his white nights." Sinclair provided no documentation for this information or conclusion.

Sinclair goes on to use an excerpt from The Little Lady of the Big House where Paula is dying and the doctor injects her with morphine:

"Sleepy, sleepy, boo'ful sleepy, " she murmured drowsily....After a long time, she sighed faintly, and began so easily to go that she was gone before they guessed."

Sinclair says: "The closing lines suggest Jack's own reliance on drugs to kill the unceasing pain of his kidneys and his bladder. Dr. Porter was prescribing mixtures of morphine and belladonna, and also heroin and strychnine, to allay the pain and to stimulate his bladder so that he could get rid of the toxins his kidneys could not handle." (Sinclair did not include documentation for this information.)

Russ Kingman
A Pictorial Biography of Jack London

Kingman also uses John Barleycorn to describe London's early alcoholic experiences with the account of the Hayward political rally where London consumed so much whiskey that he came close to death. Kingman includes London's recollection saying, "Heavens! That was twenty years ago and I am still very much and wisely alive; and I have seen much, done much, lived much, in the intervening score of years; and I shudder when I think how close a shave I ran, how near I was to missing that splendid fifth of a century that has been mine since."

Kingman writes, "Jack's drinking has been terribly exaggerated, and his 'pirooting' periods were few and infrequent. When things went wrong to the point where he was disgusted enough, he would revert back to his waterfront need for a few drinks. This only happened on a few occasions during his life, after marriage with Bessie and later with Charmian."¹⁰ Kingman goes on to say that there is no reliable record that anyone saw London drunk after his Fish Patrol days. Kingman also believes that London drank enough to injure his health, but that he was never known to be drunk. London supposedly had the ability to drink more than the average man and not show it. Kingman says that London never drank excessively while with Charmian and that there were very few nights from the day they were married that they were apart. Kingman does say, however, that "Jack flirted with alcoholism is undeniable, but to call him an alcoholic would be an injustice of major proportion."¹¹ He goes on to mention Martin Johnson, who was with London on the entire Snark voyage, stating that he never saw London show the slightest effects of liquor. Others mentioned by Kingman, who shared this same observation, were Janet Winship and Carrie Burlingame who both spent a lot of time at the ranch.

Kingman believed that the best source for information on Jack London's drinking was in Charmian London's diaries. He quotes a few entries that he says are the only ones regarding drinking.

February 2, 1907, "Mate not looking well. Drinks cocktails-takes no exercise."

February 15, 1907, "Mate takes three cocktails before dinner, all by himself. I cry!"

February 16, 1907, "Mate came home very late, full."

On May 15, 1912 on board the *Dirigo*, sailing from Baltimore to Seattle, Charmian wrote. "I feel blue. The uncertainty of the alcohol future depresses me unspeakably." Jack and Charmian apparently discussed her concern and Charmian entered his response: "I have learned, to my absolute satisfaction, that I am not an alcoholic in any sense of the word.

Therefore, when I am on land again, I shall drink, as you drink, occasionally, deliberately, not because I have to have alcohol in the economy of my physical system, but because I want to, well say for social purposes.” Charmian included this quote in her The Book of Jack London and added “Although I know he was giving me the honest content of his best conclusions in the matter, I also felt that I knew he would fail in the perfection of the plan. He did. But what counts in the end-is the end and near that end he drank very little.”¹²

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.”¹³ 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: “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 that 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.”¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ It is possible that they were friends.

Perry goes on to say 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.’”¹⁶ In tracing this footnote in The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair I found that Sinclair had made this statement referring to when he went to live in Pasadena in 1916, the year of London’s death.¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ This quote is from an Irving Stone interview of Finn Frolich, London’s close friend.

Charmian London
The Book of Jack London

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 experiences 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 were 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."¹⁹ 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 the 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."²⁰

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!'"²¹

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 Mougain'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."²²

In summation, 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.

In reading these five authors I conclude that accepting Jack London's book, John Barleycorn, with its many drinking episodes is the only way 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 these 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 that tried to do this failed in the attempt.

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