

Jack London: Socialist and Reformer
By: Cecelia Tichi

In the autumn of 1905 Jack London launched a lecture tour of the nation's colleges and universities. Audiences who expected colorful anecdotes of the famous author's Gold Rush days in the Yukon were in for a jolt. The famous author of *The Call of the Wild* was formerly nicknamed the "Boy Socialist of Oakland" and was now a founding member of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society. His lectures were a campaign to recruit the young Americans whose baccalaureate degrees guaranteed prestige and status, which is to say, powerful future leadership.

The tour was no lark. It meant zigzagging by train at ungodly hours through Kansas, Wisconsin, Illinois, and elsewhere. It meant a strenuous effort to stay healthy despite broken sleep and irregular meals. At times, it meant playing the role of a literary heavyweight while fevered and chilled by the flu.

The promise of a socialist future was London's driving force. To Jack, the wondrous, modern industrial system had become pathological, if not criminal. It benefitted a few while subjecting multitudes to needless suffering. The socioeconomic and political status quo needed radical change, and the stakes for America's future were bannered in the titles of London's lectures—"The Coming Crisis" and "Revolution."

Although Jack London volunteered for the tour, he was drafted by socialist principles distilled from his impoverished boyhood and youth. In Oakland he had toiled in a jute mill and a cannery for ten cents an hour; shoveled coal while his wrists swelled and throbbed; labored in a steam laundry where a friend compared him to a "robot" and "slave." His story, Jack realized, was typical of legions of America's boys and girls, men and women. The US working class, he saw, toiled for near-starvation wages in mines, mills, and factories. Workers labored for twelve or sixteen hour shifts and lived in foul tenement slums. (At one point the young London's struggling family was housed in a scrap lumber shack.)

London grew up in the post-Civil War decades variously called the Age of Energy, the Age of Steam and Steel, or the Age of Enterprise. The name that stuck, however, was The Gilded Age, a title from Mark Twain's novel of 1873. A story of American schemers and fraudsters masquerading as high-minded gentlemen and ladies, *The Gilded Age*, in its title, implied a shining surface covering and concealing an underlying base metal.

The socialists, including Jack London, held the captains of industry responsible for the base conditions of their era. Their names—Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, Carnegie, the railroader Collis Huntington—were bywords for great wealth and power. As London said, these tycoons "organized the machinery of life and made possible a wonderful era for all mankind ...wherein no creature should cry aloud because it had not enough to eat." However, he emphasized, they failed "horribly" at serving mankind. In a national census of over 80 million, some 10 million Americans' bodies were weakened from a lack of sufficient food, London reported. Coast to coast, from the Berkeley campus to the eastern "ivy" colleges, Jack's audiences heard him describe America as a nation urgently in need of a revolution to reform a socioeconomic and political system that some compared to the feudalism of the Middle Ages, with modern day citizen-workers as serfs.

Rejecting the dark "isms" of communism and anarchism, Jack endorsed socialism for its promise to distribute the goods and services of the bountiful industrial age to the nation as a

whole. "A socialist is of necessity social," he proclaimed in 1895 article in the *San Francisco Examiner*. And he (or she) "wishes to live in a society formed of social beings" comprised of groupings of the "family, community or State."

It sounded self-evidently simple, but the message was radically disruptive. Through the one-nighters at colleges and universities from the heartland to the East Coast, London exposed as false the established "truths" of the contemporary political, economic, and social system that was legitimated by the social Darwinist motto of "survival of the fittest" and the prevalent economic system of laissez faire (a freedom from any and all regulation). His new-found wealth notwithstanding, Jack London pledged lifelong allegiance to working class and the socialist cause. His writings bear the imprint of his convictions.

Cecelia Tichi is the author of twelve books, including her recent *Book Jack London, A Writer's Fight For a Better America*, mystery novels and nonfiction. She is the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English and Professor of American Studies at Vanderbilt University and the winner of the Jay B. Hubbell Medal for lifetime achievement in American literature. She has lectured by invitation at universities and community groups of upwards of one thousand persons on topics ranging from technological change to national monuments.