

JACK LONDON'S "HUMAN DOCUMENTS" by Sue Hodson and Jeanne Reesman

Jack London is, of course, renowned as a best-selling writer, having produced some 50 books during his short lifetime. It has been less well known that he was also an accomplished photographer, capturing images from the Russo-Japanese War, the South Pacific, and the Mexican Revolution, to name just a few. Far from being merely a tourist who took snapshots, London possessed great skill that approached the professional level in his accomplished and well-composed photographs. London called the photographs he made "human documents," a phrase first used by the French novelists Alphonse Daudet and Edmond Goncourt and picked up by London through his participation in a project overseen by Sarah Orne Jewett. For a series in McClure's Magazine, Jewett proposed to compare photographs from different stages of a great man's life in order to "tell his affairs openly." She regarded the series as an attempt "to read the sign-language of faces, and to take the messages they bring."

Such thinking seemed to inspire London's photographs, which engages the viewer with portraits of people of all ages the world over. Like London's best short stories, his photographs tend to dwell closely on their subjects, presenting intimate portraits of diverse characters.

London learned photography from a former schoolmate at Oakland High School, Fred Jacobs, and Jacobs' fiancée, Bessie May Maddern. (Bessie became London's first wife after Jacobs was killed in an accident in 1898.)

London's first significant photographs were made during his stay in the East End of London, England, in 1902, and appeared in *The People of the Abyss*, his nonfiction study of the poor. In these photographs.

In these and all of his photographs, as in his fiction, London most often sought to capture the common emotional life of his subjects – not a culture, but the individuals who made up the culture. Even in his photographs of the many buildings destroyed by the San Francisco earthquake, his compositions evoke the human toll of the cataclysm, sometimes by contrasting the size of human subjects with the massive ruins around them. London sought to depict the potential for human drama. He was drawn to any subject – even a ruined city hall that would later be rebuilt – that indicated something of the struggle to survive. Throughout his photographic work, London sought to capture the "human documents" and to express in his images the stories of who his subjects were.

Earthquake



Dupont Street, now Grant Avenue, from the north of Pacific Avenue, San Francisco, 1906.

When the catastrophic earthquake struck San Francisco and the bay area early in the morning on April 18, 1906, Jack and Charmian quickly went to San Francisco to witness the disastrous event and photograph the devastation. Jack wrote "The Story of an Eyewitness" about what he saw, and his first-hand account was the first to appear when it was published in *Collier's Magazine*. In this article, London captured the human tragedy he saw all around him: "Before the flames, throughout the night, fled tens of thousands of homeless ones. Some were wrapped in blankets.

Others carried bundles of bedding and dear household treasures. Sometimes a whole family was harnessed to a carriage or delivery wagon that was weighted down with their possessions. . . . Often, after surmounting a heart-breaking hill, they would find another wall of flame advancing upon them at right angles and be compelled to change anew the line of their retreat. In the end, completely played out, after toiling for a dozen hours like giants, thousands of them were compelled to abandon their trunks."

Cruise of the Snark

In the South Pacific, London did not photograph the island peoples in customary, stereotypical ways, and he did not portray men and women as types or examples but rather as individuals. In his photographs, peoples' human dignity fills the frame as he depicts them in the same activities as people anywhere. They are shown in families, fishing parties, hunting parties, or holding babies and children – ordinary human activities. As we approach London's images, when we view a photograph of an islander, we sense the connection and trust between photographer and subject.

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The authors co-wrote, with Philip Adam, Jack London, Photographer, a volume of selections from London's extensive body of photographs, published in 2010 by the University of Georgia Press.



Mother and child,
Samoa, 1908