

"Charmian Kittredge London: Jack's Collaborator and Mate"

By Susan Nuernberg and Iris Jamahl Dunkle

Charmian Kittredge London, Jack London's second wife, is often dismissed as his typist, or worse, as a frivolous airhead who hindered her famous husband's writing career. When one looks at her life and work closely, however, what is revealed is an entirely different story. She was a modern woman who had a status of her own. She was an avid reader, a fine equestrian, a pianist and a talented writer who created one of the most successful literary partnerships in the history of American letters.

Perhaps, their most famous collaboration is on *The Valley of the Moon* which they wrote while on the *Dirigo*, a 148-day trip from Baltimore around Cape Horn to Seattle that she and Jack took on a four-masted tall ship in 1912. Jack first asked her to write notes for the character of Saxon drawn from her own early life and family background and her pregnancy and childbirth. She shared her perspective on the loss of a child and on a woman's love for a man, and she wrote many of the descriptive passages throughout the book, including Saxon's sewing and lingerie, household objects, and the scenery on the trip through Northern California. Charmian records her feelings about this collaboration in her *Dirigo* diary for 27 March 1912: "Having an interesting time 'collaborating' with Jack in the novel, VALLEY OF THE MOON". At one point, she notes with pleasure that Jack incorporated into the sketch of the Hales (two characters from the book) "almost word for word" a description she had drawn up. As the days passed, work on *The Valley of the Moon* continued between them. Being on the ship was conducive to their collaboration. At sea, they shared their work and discussed the stories, as she states, "[w]e smile at each other in our mutual fabrication of a book to get it ready for publication" (15).

Like Jack, Charmian wrote everyday: diaries, letters, but also her own creative projects. She was a serious writer who wrote most frequently in the genre of travel writing. Her full-length works include, *The Log of the Snark* (1915), *Our Hawaii* (1917), *The Book of Jack London* (1921) and *The New Hawaii* (1923). She also wrote dozens of articles, a short story "The Wheel" and many versions of what seemed to be the epiphany of her wish to live a creative life: the *Dirigo* voyage.

Of course, they didn't just collaborate while at sea. Charmian had a hand in the making of *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* (1914), which is a fictionalized account of incidents and characters they encountered on the *Dirigo* voyage. She also contributed to Jack's story "The Red One," which was published in 1918, two years after his death. When Upton Sinclair asked her if Jack's friend, the poet George Sterling, had written it, Charmian replied that Jack wrote all of it except for "some of the description of the quality of the red orb," which she had written. She went on to explain, "I can generally speak with authority because Jack and I worked right together for sixteen years, and I typed everything he wrote, and he was the sort who shared everything almost moment by moment." Charmian also wrote the "Preface" to *Dutch Courage and Other Stories* by Jack London (1922). Furthermore, she completed a work-in-progress called "Cherry" that Jack was writing at the time of his death on November 22, 1916. The story with her ending is called "Eyes of Asia" (1924).

Jack London wasn't a solitary genius as most biographers and scholars imagine; rather, he was part of a vibrant, literary team. Throughout her life Charmian faced immense hardships, losing her mother at the age of five, her father soon after, losing her own child and her ability to have children, then losing the love of her life; however, she was a woman who, throughout her life, smiled into the ruins and found joy in writing and capturing the beauty that was around her from the fog that rolled off Sonoma Mountain at the ranch to the luminous sunsets that lit up the sea.

Susan Nuernberg and Iris Jamahl Dunkle have co-authored several essays on novels by Jack London, including 'Martin Eden' and 'The Valley of the Moon.' They are currently writing a biography of Jack's wife, Charmian London.