

Adventure and Jack London by Kenneth K. Brandt*

Today, adventure and the name Jack London remain nearly synonymous. 2016 marks the centenary of London's death at the age of 40 in 1916. Outspoken and defiant, this writer-adventurer stuffed a bounty of living into a short life. Sounding like a rock star, he asserted that "the proper function of man is to live, not exist. I shall not waste many days in trying to prolong them. I shall use my time."

It was a life of excess by conventional standards—no shortage of drinking, smoking, and partying—but his exuberant energies propelled him out of the working class to become a world famous writer. Works like The Call of the Wild, "To Build a Fire," and "Koolau the Leper," explore concepts of the feral and the primeval that emerged from London's varied experiences and travels.

As an adolescent he prowled the Oakland waterfront and was an oyster pirate on San Francisco Bay. By 17 he had traversed the Pacific and visited Japan on a seal hunting voyage. He crisscrossed North America as hobo in 1894. After dropping out of UC Berkeley, he joined the Klondike Gold Rush in 1897, where, instead of real gold, he snatched a hoard experiential loot for his fiction. In 1899 he broke through as a writer, publishing his work in the Atlantic Monthly and Overland Monthly. Lucrative book deals soon followed. In a pioneering feat of embedded journalism, he masqueraded as a stranded sailor in London, England to investigate first-hand the impoverished living conditions the city's East End slums, which became the basis for The People of the Abyss, a biting exposé and one of his finest books. In 1904 he journeyed to Korea to report on the Russo-Japanese War, and in 1907 he began a voyage to the South Seas on his self-designed ketch, the *Snark*.

As London traveled and explored, he also found time to engage in politics. He was a passionate socialist, twice running unsuccessfully for mayor of Oakland. In addition, he was an ardent documentary photographer, a progressive rancher who experimented in sustainable agriculture, and an early advocate for animal rights. London was continually transmuting his experiences into fiction, and those experiences also included hefty doses of reading and research. London's writings still resonate today largely because they dramatize a diversity of ideas from Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer. London's inner, intellectual journey was the most significant adventure path he ever travelled.

For London, physical adventure entails a process of stripping away civilization's props—all those appurtenances and pretenses that make life comfortable but false. Most of us sense how our app-infested lives are tenuous fabrications; hence, one aspect of our continued attraction to London's fiction as an antidote to our homogenized realities.

To adventure with London is to confront the world chiefly with our bodies and our wits, aided only by the crudest technology—perhaps a hand axe and maybe some rope. He depicts the primordial in terms of wholeness and balance rather than mere savagery or simple primitivism. Adventure is the fundamental, tactile confrontation of self and wild, a trial that draws from its survivors a primal, cooperative intelligence rather than brutish subjugation or exploitation—moral perversions London tended to associate with machinations of the capitalist marketplace, not the adaptive practices of the wild.

London stated his adventure ethic best in the story "In a Far Country," declaring that "when a man journeys into a far country, he must be prepared to forget many of the things he has learned, and to acquire such customs as are inherent with existence in the new land; he must abandon the old ideals and the old gods, and oftentimes he must reverse the very codes by which his conduct has hitherto been shaped." The adventurer needs to reshape the "mind's attitude toward all things, and especially toward his fellow man. For the courtesies of ordinary life, he must substitute unselfishness, forbearance, and tolerance. Thus, and thus only, can he gain that pearl of great price, -- true comradeship." Mutual support is province of the true adventurer, but London—correctly so it now seems—was skeptical about a genuine morality of interdependence ever finding its way back to civilization.

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