

The Acorn Planter

by Breck Parkman

He was an oyster pirate, deep-sea sailor, hobo, convict, political activist, Alaskan prospector, war correspondent, photographer, rancher, and farmer, but Jack London is most remembered as a writer; and what a writer he was! Jack published 41 books and countless magazine articles and short stories during his brief life. There's a line in his final book, *The Turtles of Tasman*, that reads, "I'd rather sing one wild song and burst my heart with it, than live a thousand years watching my digestion and being afraid of the wet." Jack was not afraid of the wet! He had a thirst for life. In spite of deteriorating health, he wrote until the very end.

At the close of his life, after he had written about wolves and men, and ships at sea, Jack turned his attention to the lowly acorn. "*The Acorn Planter: A California Forest Play*" was published in 1916, just a few months before *The Turtles of Tasman*. Jack intended to stage his play at the Bohemian Club's High Jinks, an annual retreat held in the Bohemian Grove on the Russian River. It was to be performed as a musical, with singers and orchestra in accompaniment. A central theme of plays performed in the Bohemian Grove was the mystique of this grove of ancient coast redwoods. Jack's play would have been no exception. However, *The Acorn Planter* was never performed, as it was considered too difficult to set to music.

In *The Acorn Planter*, Jack used the act of planting acorns to celebrate the coming of agriculture to Sonoma Valley and, in doing so, he connected acorn planting with peace making. A local indigenous man named Red Cloud is portrayed as a peace maker. There is tension between Red Cloud's people and the coming of the first American settlers and the play ends in tragedy. It's clear that Jack saw himself in Red Cloud. In the story, Red Cloud uses the planting of the acorn as a metaphor for making peace. That's how Jack perceived the act of planting as well. The acorn represented peace because it represented the fruits of agriculture and Jack felt that the bounty of agriculture would lead to peace among men. In the words of Red Cloud,

"When you plant kindness you harvest kindness. When you plant blood you harvest blood. He who plants an acorn makes way for life. He who slays one man slays the planter of a thousand acorns."

Jack spent his final years working in a writing room he had created in his Beauty Ranch cottage. The room's many windows looked out on several large coast live oak trees that stood nearby. The oldest of the trees was likely the parent tree. That tree, now thought to be 350-400 years old, still survives, although its health is waning, much like Jack's health waned, as he sat writing in the tree's shadow. Just imagine what this old tree witnessed. It's a living link to Jack himself and to the time of Red Cloud's people.

The year following Jack's death, his widow, Charmian, planted an oak seedling on the lawn of Oakland City Hall. The tree was to be a living memorial to her late husband, who had spent his childhood years in the East Bay. Today, the tree is known as the

London Oak. It's a healthy tree and a fitting memorial to its famous namesake. The tree's silhouette serves as the logo for the City of Oakland.

The seedling that Charmian planted in Oakland was a coast live oak, as is the tree that still stands near the London Cottage. Because this older tree will someday be lost to the harsh realities of old age and bad health, a handful of its acorns were recently collected and then germinated at nearby the Quarryhill Botanical Garden. This resulted in about a dozen healthy seedlings. On February 1, 2015, one of the seedlings was planted near the London Cottage. Whereas Charmian had planted her seedling in honor of Jack, this one was planted in honor of the old tree itself. For all we know, both seedlings are the progeny of that one great oak still standing sentinel beside the London Cottage. After all, where else might Charmian have found her acorn?

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