

The controversies surrounding the life and death of Jack London

FINDING THE REAL JACK LONDON

Who was Jack London, the person? Developing an understanding of the real Jack London is quite difficult if you rely on Jack London's biographers. Many writers have chosen to depict Jack London in a sensational tabloid manner. The reader, in many cases, is left to decide what is true and what is merely speculation. The areas that have developed much controversy and disagreement are those concerning London's death, his alcohol consumption, and his relationship with women. Research in these areas has been mostly incomplete, thus resulting in much speculation. Some writers have used London's own writing, both fiction and non-fiction, to define him. Some have used the flawed work of previous writers and have continued an inaccurate, incomplete depiction of Jack London.

To choose one area of focus, let us take a look at what some writers have said about Jack London's drinking to see if there are documented facts that allow us to understand this part of London's life. The writer who has had the largest circulation in the past has been Irving Stone with his Sailor on Horseback, first published in 1938 and re-published in 1978 after Jack London's hundredth birth anniversary in 1976. The first printing in 1938 included "A Biography" in the title. This was replaced with "A Biographical Novel" in printings that followed, until the new printing in 1978 which again included "A Biography" in the title.

Irving Stone
Sailor on Horseback

Stone takes freely from London's writing to depict London's life. Stone used a scene from the short story "The Apostate"¹ to apply to Jack London as a boy, awakened early in the morning to go to work. Some of the details used by Stone to describe drinking accounts come directly from John Barleycorn. Others have no source given. Another John Barleycorn episode Stone used describes a Hayward political rally where London got free whiskey. Small details such as knocking the necks of bottles off against concrete curbs are included.² Repeated is the story where French Frank tried to run London down with his schooner while he stood on deck holding French Frank off with a shotgun, steering with his feet.³ Also repeated is the story of a dead drunk London who falls into the water in Benicia and nearly dies.⁴ Curiously, there is one account that is changed from John Barleycorn. Regarding the five month long sailing trip that Jack and Charmian London took aboard the *Dirigo*, London said he took no alcohol on board. Stone said he took forty gallons of whiskey, but didn't touch it during the voyage.⁵ Sailor on Horseback has no documentation.

Andrew Sinclair
Jack A Biography of Jack London

In regard to London's teen years, Sinclair says The Cruise of the Dazzler and his confession of his drinking in John Barleycorn, are the only records of this time. Sinclair mentions London's teenage drinking at the First and Last Chance Saloon⁶ and his drunken episode of falling into the Carquinez Straits where he faced possible death and was saved by a Greek fisherman.⁷ He also mentions the Hayward political rally.⁸ These three incidents come from John Barleycorn.

Sinclair talks about London's ability to stretch the truth, when he states, "Jack certainly knew how to tell a good story at the bar of The First and Last Chance Saloon. He was not so much a liar as an improver upon the truth, the heir of Mark Twain and Bret Harte and the frontier tradition, which held that the story of a stranger should never deny the pleasure of others for the sake of the facts. Boasting of his fantastic exploits was a man's job in the west."⁹

Sinclair states that London switched from alcohol to opiates during the last few years of his life, after an appendicitis operation in the summer of 1913. "An Oakland doctor called Porter operated on him and took him as one of his patients, warning Jack that he would die of kidney failure if he did not stop drinking, give up raw fish and meat, and start exercising and losing weight. Jack ignored the advice and went on drinking, gobbling underdone duck, and avoiding exercise. To him, the chief merit of his new doctor was that he could now get increasing supplies of the opiates he had first begun taking in the Solomon Islands to ease the pain of his double fistula and psoriasis. From this time forward, morphine and heroin began to replace alcohol as analgesics for his white nights." Sinclair provided no documentation for this information or conclusion.

Sinclair goes on to use an excerpt from The Little Lady of the Big House where Paula is dying and the doctor injects her with morphine:

"Sleepy, sleepy, boo'ful sleepy, "she murmured drowsily....After a long time, she sighed faintly, and began so easily to go that she was gone before they guessed."

Sinclair says: "The closing lines suggest Jack's own reliance on drugs to kill the unceasing pain of his kidneys and his bladder. Dr. Porter was prescribing mixtures of morphine and belladonna, and also heroin and strychnine, to allay the pain and to stimulate his bladder so that he could get rid of the toxins his kidneys could not handle." (Sinclair did not include documentation for this information.)

Russ Kingman
A Pictorial Biography of Jack London

Kingman also uses John Barleycorn to describe London's early alcoholic experiences with the account of the Hayward political rally where London consumed so much

whiskey that he came close to death. Kingman includes London's recollection saying, "Heavens! That was twenty years ago and I am still very much and wisely alive; and I have seen much, done much, lived much, in the intervening score of years; and I shudder when I think how close a shave I ran, how near I was to missing that splendid fifth of a century that has been mine since."

Kingman writes, "Jack's drinking has been terribly exaggerated, and his 'pirooting' periods were few and infrequent. When things went wrong to the point where he was disgusted enough, he would revert back to his waterfront need for a few drinks. This only happened on a few occasions during his life, after marriage with Bessie and later with Charmian."¹⁰ Kingman goes on to say that there is no reliable record that anyone saw London drunk after his Fish Patrol days. Kingman also believes that London drank enough to injure his health, but that he was never known to be drunk. London supposedly had the ability to drink more than the average man and not show it. Kingman says that London never drank excessively while with Charmian and that there were very few nights from the day they were married that they were apart. Kingman does say, however, that "Jack flirted with alcoholism is undeniable, but to call him an alcoholic would be an injustice of major proportion."¹¹ He goes on to mention Martin Johnson, who was with London on the entire Snark voyage, stating that he never saw London show the slightest effects of liquor. Others mentioned by Kingman, who shared this same observation, were Janet Winship and Carrie Burlingame who both spent a lot of time at the ranch.

Kingman believed that the best source for information on Jack London's drinking was in Charmian London's diaries. He quotes a few entries that he says are the only ones regarding drinking.

February 2, 1907, "Mate not looking well. Drinks cocktails-takes no exercise."

February 15, 1907, "Mate takes three cocktails before dinner, all by himself. I cry!"

February 16, 1907, "Mate came home very late, full."

On May 15, 1912 on board the *Dirigo*, sailing from Baltimore to Seattle, Charmian wrote. "I feel blue. The uncertainty of the alcohol future depresses me unspeakably." Jack and Charmian apparently discussed her concern and Charmian entered his response: "I have learned, to my absolute satisfaction, that I am not an alcoholic in any sense of the word. Therefore, when I am on land again, I shall drink, as you drink, occasionally, deliberately, not because I have to have alcohol in the economy of my physical system, but because I want to, well say for social purposes." Charmian included this quote in her The Book of Jack London and added "Although I know he was giving me the honest content of his best conclusions in the matter, I also felt that I knew he would fail in the perfection of the plan. He did. But what counts in the end-is the end and near that end he drank very little."¹²

John Perry
Jack London an American Myth

There is only one page in Perry's book where he refers to Jack London's drinking. The index refers to it as "London's Alcoholism." Perry states that Upton Sinclair claimed that London told him "tales of incredible debauches; tales of opium and hashish, and I know not what other strange ingredients; tales of whiskey bouts lasting for weeks."¹³ Perry says that this ended a friendship between London and Sinclair, but goes on to say they exchanged letters for years and reviewed each other's books. Perry's source, "About Jack London" by Upton Sinclair includes an assessment of London: "He knew all about the uphill fight a young radical has to make and to such he gave both praise and money, for the helping of the glorious cause. That is the thing for which I loved him most; I have saved it to the last, so that it may be the thing the reader carries away with him- the memory of a man strong, yet tender-hearted as a child, honest and open as daylight, generous as Mother Nature herself."¹⁴ It is important to note that Upton Sinclair was one of the speakers at London's funeral service, according to Andrew Sinclair in his book, Jack.¹⁵ It is possible that they were friends.

Perry goes on to say that Upton Sinclair said "Every now and then London extended an invitation to Glen Ellen, one Sinclair refused because George Sterling said 'Jack's drinking has become tragic.'"¹⁶ In tracing this footnote in The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair I found that Sinclair had made this statement referring to when he went to live in Pasadena in 1916, the year of London's death.¹⁷ What Perry fails to mention is that a physically suffering London did not return from Hawaii until August, four months before his death. It is noted by Russ Kingman, Andrew Sinclair, and Clarice Stasz, that London was in very poor health, suffering greatly at this time. London would not have done well with company, on and off, during this period. He was also taking powerful painkillers that could have made him appear drunk. According to Clarice Stasz, by 1915 London was ravaged by illness. She says that London would break into tirades with Charmian, and that he was also eating less, because he was vomiting within half an hour of eating. He also suffered from kidney stones. According to Stasz, in the last few months "Totally out of character, he made nasty comments about friends and grew suspicious of those who did appear on the ranch."¹⁸ This quote is from an Irving Stone interview of Finn Frolich, London's close friend.

Charmian London
The Book of Jack London

In her The Book of Jack London, Charmian's accounts of Jack's early drinking follow closely with what Jack said in John Barleycorn. Included are stories of oyster pirate and Fish Patrol days. The most detailed, personal account by Charmian describes Jack's last experiences with alcohol before sailing from Baltimore to Seattle in 1912. "Coincident with our arrival, he warned that he was going to invite one last, thoroughgoing bout with alcohol, and that when he should sail on the Cape Horn voyage, it was to be 'Good-by, forever, to John Barleycorn.' To me, the promised end was worth the threatened means; and my comprehension and acceptance of his intention were appreciated. But I could not fail to regret that new friends should know and base their judgment of Jack London upon this unfortunate phenomenon of him."¹⁹ In her diary, Charmian says of the morning before sailing, "Don't want to look at Jack, he's awful. He drinks pretty steady all morning, throws up some of it. Well this is the last drinking day." Charmian mentions why she didn't want to look at Jack. Jack had surprised her by having his head totally shaved. This devastated Charmian and she cried for nearly three hours. "I did not again look directly at Jack until there was at least half an inch of hair on his head."²⁰

In regard to narcotics, Charmian said "Only three times did he tamper with a narcotic, for he realized its peril. 'Oh, have no fear, my dear,' he reassured me more than once, 'I'll never go that way. I want to live a hundred years!'"²¹

In her diaries dated from after the Snark voyage in 1909 until Jack's death, Charmian mentions alcohol only nine times. The only negative entry is regarding the preparation for the 1912 trip around Cape Horn. A typical example would be October 23, 1914, "Dinner at the Saddle Rock-ducks and Liebfraumilch; then Orpheum-a good show." Another is January 10, 1912 "We leave Sophie's and go to Mouguin's where we drink Chateau Lafitte and eat good cold meats and things."

Charmian's assessment of the truth in the book John Barleycorn is that it is "semi-autobiographical."²²

In summation, it seems that all accounts of Jack London's early drinking come directly from John Barleycorn. Also, both Charmian London and Andrew Sinclair agree that Jack embellished the truth. The only direct, negative witness account we have by someone close to Jack is Charmian's recollection of the morning before the 1912 Dirigo voyage.

Charmian London does not give us very much information in her diaries regarding Jack's drinking, since there are very few related entries. If there were episodes similar to the 1912 diary entry, she didn't record them. John Perry attempts to use Upton Sinclair's observations as proof of London's alcoholism, but leaves out important facts that would give us a more complete picture. This is possibly the result of incomplete research.

In reading these five authors I conclude that accepting Jack London's book, John Barleycorn, with its many drinking episodes is the only way any writer might believe in

Jack's "alcoholism." But, if John Barleycorn is used as proof, then one must also accept Jack's stating that he is writing from the point of view of someone who suffered through part of his life with alcohol, survived that phase, and has conquered the organic need for alcohol. My assessment of these writers regarding Jack's drinking is that none has proven that Jack London should be labeled an alcoholic. This is not to say that Jack was not an alcoholic, but that the burden of proof should be the responsibility of the accuser. The writers that tried to do this failed in the attempt.

Lou Leal, M.A.
Sonoma, CA
October 2010
Edited by Laurie O'Hare

Bibliography

1. Irving Stone, Sailor On Horseback, p.29
2. Ibid., pp.35-36
3. Ibid., p.33
4. Ibid., pp.36-37
5. Ibid., p.314
6. Andrew Sinclair, Jack A Biography of Jack London, p.12
7. Ibid., p.12
8. Ibid., p.13
9. Ibid., p.12
10. Russ Kingman, A Pictorial Biography of Jack London, pp.189-190
11. Ibid., p.190
12. Ibid., p.191 and C. London, The Book of Jack London, II, p.245
13. John Perry, Jack London An American Myth, p.210
14. Upton Sinclair, "About Jack London," The Masses, 10 (November-December 1917) p.17
15. Andrew Sinclair, Jack A Biography of Jack London, p.240
16. John Perry, Jack London An American Myth, p.210
17. Kevin Mattson, Upton Sinclair, And The Other American Century, p.96
18. Clarice Stasz, American Dreamers, p.316
19. Charmian London, The Book of Jack London, II, p.230
20. Ibid., p.239
21. Ibid., p.326
22. Ibid., p.249

Susan Nuernberg
 University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
 Jack London Society 10th Biennial Symposium
 Santa Rosa, CA
 November 4, 2010

Finding the Real Jack London

When I systematically investigated biographies of London to see how his “drinking problem” has been characterized, I discovered that, with one notable exception, they all retell the same litany of “purple passages” and “red letter events” that are recorded in *John Barleycorn*. Although there are minor variations, which I will discuss in a minute, the one notable exception to is to be found in **Richard O’Connor’s 1964 *Jack London: A Biography***. O’Connor actually quotes sources other than *John Barleycorn* to depict London as a heavy drinker. Richard O’Connor was a professional writer who produced over 50 volumes of biography, popular history, Civil War subjects, novels and Americana (Walker 35).

O’Connor views *John Barleycorn* as “the first honest, self-revelatory effort to understand the drinker and his compulsion” (317). O’Connor believes that London perfectly fits the typical alcoholic personality: “highly emotional, ultra-sensitive, egotistical, easily bored, restless, and an exaggerated sense of his own importance coupled with an inferiority complex rooted in his childhood” (317).

One of O’Connor’s sources is Dr. Frank Topping, who was in charge of the bar at the Bohemian Club encampment. Topping recalls that “Jack wanted to open the bar at 2 o’clock in the morning and rouse the whole camp to drink with him. I wouldn’t let him.” “He was pretty mad,” Topping recalled, “but he got over it the next day.”

Another tidbit O’Connor relates comes from Louis Stevens, who witnessed London on a sizeable bender in San Francisco. Stevens saw Stanley Ketchel, the high-living, middleweight champion throwing money to people from a hansom cab. Inside the cab were Jack London and Ketchel’s manager, Willus Britt. When they all went inside a saloon, Stevens followed them in and told London that he wanted to be a writer. London replied, “The hell you say,” and went back to drinking. Surprisingly enough, Stevens went on to become a highly successful screen writer.

While these two tales may lack the rhetorical element of ethos, O’Connor’s next source is reputable. Adela Rogers St. Johns was a Hearst reporter and columnist for many decades, and she often visited the Londons at Glen Ellen with her father, Earl Rogers. Her father was a famous criminal Lawyer in Los Angeles, and the real-life model of the fictional “Perry Mason.” In 1962, Adela Rogers St. Johns published *Final Verdict*, a memoir of life with her father.

She recounts in her memoir the “despairing vigil” she and Charmian kept while her father and London went on a 5-day drinking spree. When the men returned, she overheard her father say, “I am a little confused.” “Why am I riding this burro?” London replies, “You are confused because at this moment you are

not sure whether you are a man dreaming you are a burro or a burro dreaming you are a man. We all have these moments” (320).

O'Connor believes it was self-delusion on London's part to say he could master liquor. He also disputes London's statement that Heinhold ever lent him \$50. to continue his education. According to O'Connor, that statement “aroused much sardonic laughter along the Oakland waterfront, where Heinhold was regarded as notably tight-fisted” (331). O'Connor points out that *John Barleycorn*, was “an important factor in the campaign which succeeded six years later in bringing Prohibition to the United States” (331).

O'Connor also quotes two reviews of *John Barleycorn*. The first appeared in the *New Review* (November 1913) by Andre Tridon, a famous psychoanalyst who translated the works of Sigmund Freud. Tridon saw *John Barleycorn* as “an indication of why [London's] talent was fizzling out.” Tridon continues, “I knew there was something wrong with London's stuff. The vocabulary was apparently gone, his imagination seemed to be failing him, he repeated himself frightfully, his stories were becoming as safe as those of any popular novelist.” *John Barleycorn* was, Tridon wrote, an indication that London “does not even seem to know how far he has gone.” Tridon even went so far as to advise London to “cease to abuse alcohol. It isn't alcohol that is troubling you, it's people, the small, nice, human, uninteresting, hearty, loyal, trashy people with whom you drink. Alcohol may have something to do with your temporary downfall, but people have and are having more to do with it. . . .” (332).

The second review of *John Barleycorn* that O'Connor discusses is titled “*John Barleycorn Under Psychoanalysis*” by Wilfrid Lay (1917). Lay popularized psychoanalysis in many books. In his review of *John Barleycorn*, Lay charged that London's masculinity was “suspect.” A psychoanalyst, Lay wrote, would find “traits of sadism-masochism, homosexuality and extraversion to a high degree” in the London personality (332). Lay goes on to state, “A man's man, among other characteristics, rates women, horses, dogs and other animals on much the same level. . . looking at them all as animals. . . . In his pages his dogs live; his women do not. . . . He does not appreciate a woman. . . .” Although O'Connor's citation for this article was off by several years, I did manage to find it. Lay says many more silly things of this ilk in his article, yet it appears that his theme—London's suspect masculinity—struck a deep chord among biographers as it is still a subject of interest.

Another amusing story O'Connor relates that does not appear in *John Barleycorn* is London's encounter with the “Eminent Tankard Man,” Ambrose Bierce, in 1912 at the Bohemian Club's annual ‘High Jinks.’ The two men engaged in a drinking duel exchanging epithets and insults late into the night. As O'Connor notes, “Despite that convivial night in the Bohemian Grove, Jack and Bierce never became friendly. . . . Bierce was convinced that Sterling had escaped from his patronage and would ruin himself through association with Jack—and Bierce could never forgive the loss of a protégé” (309).

O'Connor concludes that London was not moved “by his own stark admonitions” in *John Barleycorn* “and still believed that he could handle John Barleycorn, given the discretion he mistakenly believed he had acquired “ (333).

Joan D. Hedrick relies heavily on *John Barleycorn* throughout her biography, ***Solitary Comrade: Jack London and His Work* (1982)**. In a chapter titled "Domesticity," she quotes from Charmian's diary—the same three entries from 1907 that Lou found in Kingman's *Pictorial Biography*. Although Kingman claims that they are the only ones in her Diary regarding drinking, Hedrick quotes five more entries, and they all have to do with Charmian's proposition that if Jack will limit himself to 3 drinks a day, she will make another baby. Ultimately, she did not conceive again, and he continued to drink.

Clarice Stasz, in her 1988 biography of Jack and Charmian, ***American Dreamers***, also relies heavily on *John Barleycorn* and Charmian's diary entries. She focuses on the harmful effects of Jack's destructive addictions (smoking and drinking). In her opinion, "Whether Jack London was an alcoholic in the technical sense mattered little to those closest to him. From their points of view, his behavior was clearly affected by his drinking in a way that made their lives more difficult" (228). According to Stasz, Joan's life was marred by a memory of Jack showing up drunk at Bess's house. Years later, Joan recalled: "On one particularly besotted day he threw Becky through the living room window" (229). Stasz portrays Joan as "the real victim" in the event, stating that "She was traumatized by what she had seen, and even when her mother assured her that Jack had not meant to hurt Becky, refused to believe her" (230). Regarding Becky's point of view, Stasz includes a long quote from Kingman's *Pictorial Life* (228) in which Becky (also many years later) recalls that Jack

"was so angry I'm sure he didn't know what he was doing. He picked me up from the floor and swung me toward the window. One foot crashed through, there was a loud noise and he pulled me back instantly" (229).

According to Becky's account, Jack was angry, not drunk, at the time. Stasz reports that Becky "said Jack never drank before arriving nor in their presence, and that her memory was substantiated by others she spoke with after his death" (229). While these recollections may provide a rare glimpse into the trauma and drama of London's personal life, on the question of whether Jack's behavior was affected by his drinking on this occasion, they are inconclusive.

In 1997, **Alex Kershaw** published ***Jack London: A Life*** in London. Kershaw is a British writer of some popular books about World War II who has lived in the United States since 1994. He views London as a "spectacular" drinker and relies heavily on *John Barleycorn*, on all earlier biographies of London, and on the writings London's acquaintances. While his well-written biography serves a useful purpose by introducing London to the Brits, it provides no new insights on London's drinking for those of us already familiar with the territory.

Kershaw believes that London wrote honestly about himself in *John Barleycorn*, and that it is entirely truthful. He states, "*John Barleycorn* was both bully pulpit and confession box" (252). He quotes John Sutherland who wrote the introduction to an edition of *John Barleycorn*. Sutherland calls the book "a classic of American autobiography," and states: "In terms of London's remarkable life, the early chapters are among the most self-revealing things the author wrote. The later chapters are among the most thoughtful things he ever wrote . . . Too

often London's supporters have neglected the book out of existence, downgrading it as mere fiction so as to protect their man's reputation" (252).

The most recent biography of London is **James Haley's *Wolf: The Lives of Jack London* (2010)**. Haley identifies himself as a rogue biographer who writes "from totally outside the existing circle" (xiii). His purpose is to make London's story "accessible to a larger audience that needs to know why he was important" (xv).

Haley's book is very readable, in fact it was read aloud on NPR, and Haley gave a two-hour, live radio interview on NPR's show, *On Point with Tom Ashbrook*. The media blitz generated some strikingly bizarre responses, however. For example, one reviewer writing for *Slate* remarked, "This man [London] was the most-read revolutionary Socialist in American history, agitating for violent overthrow of the government and the assassination of political leaders—and he is remembered now for writing a cute story about a dog. It's as if the Black Panthers were remembered, a century from now, for adding a pink tint to their afros" (Hari).

Haley was reviewed from within "the existing circle" by Jonah Raskin, editor of *The Radical Jack London*. Raskin identifies a duplicitousness in Haley's approach to London. According to Raskin, Haley "repeats unnecessarily the fact that London is untrustworthy as a source of information." For example, Haley states that "Throughout London's written recollections of his life, he often changed the facts of various experiences to suit the needs of its telling." However, as Raskin points out, "But then [Haley] goes on to repeat London's own boast that he wrote 'a thousand words per day, every day,' as a fact, and it's not true."

Haley simply rehearses the litany of purple passions and red-letter events recorded in *John Barleycorn*. On the one hand, Haley states that London is untrustworthy as a source of information, and on the other hand, he believes that in *John Barleycorn*, London "tells the truth without varnish" (44). This double-dealing is, as we have seen, standard fare among London's biographers. Logic would dictate that if we accept *John Barleycorn* as a truthful account, we should accept as truthful London's statement in it that "I was never a drunkard, and I have not reformed" (338). If we accept that London embellished the written recollections of his life, we should accept that *John Barleycorn* is primarily a larger-than-life and largely-fictitious memoir and treat it as such.

Thank you.

Works Cited

- Haley, James L., *Wolf: The Lives of Jack London*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
- Hari, Johann, "Jack London's Dark Side: A new biography confronts the good, bad, and repellent." *Slate* <http://www.slate.com/id/2261928/> Posted Sunday, Aug. 15, 2010, at 6:59 AM ET
- Hedrick, Joan D., *Solitary Comrade: Jack London and His Work*. Chapel Hill: U of No. Carolina P, 1982.
- Kershaw, Alex, *Jack London: A Life*. London: HarperCollins, 1997.
- Lay, Wilfrid, "John Barleycorn Under Psychoanalysis." *Bookman*, 45 (1917): 47-54.
- London, Jack, *John Barleycorn*. New York: Century, 1913.
- O'Connor, Richard, *Jack London: A Biography*. Boston: Little Brown, 1964.
- Raskin, Jonah, "'Wolf,' by James L. Haley." *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 30, 2010. http://articles.sfgate.com/2010-05-30/books/21649616_1_jack-london-wolf-basic-books
- Sinclair, Upton. "About Jack London." *The Masses*, 10(November-December 1917): 17-20.
- Stasz, Clarice, *American Dreamers: Charmian and Jack London*. New York: St. Martin's, 1988.
- *Jack London's Women*. Amherst, U Mass P, 2001.
- Walker, Dale L., "Richard O'Connor [1915-1975]." *Jack London Newsletter*, 8 (May-August 1975): 35-37.

JACK LONDON, ROMANTIC ASSOCIATION WITH WOMEN

Due to a lack of reliable information, Jack London's association with women other than his two wives is an area that has long been open for speculation. Jack's first true love was Anna Strunsky, a fellow socialist. Due to his own perceived lack of higher education Jack considered Anna his intellectual superior. Jack and Anna spent a lot of time together, including collaboration in writing The Kempton-Wace Letters, a book about romantic love versus pragmatic love. There is no evidence that Jack and Anna ever had a sexual relationship. The problem between them seems to be one of lack of communication. I will read a letter Jack wrote to Anna when he was one year into his first marriage:

April 3, 1901

Dear Anna,

Did I say that the human might be filed in categories? Well, and if I did, let me qualify—not all humans. You elude me. I cannot place you, cannot grasp you. I may boast that of nine out of ten, under given circumstances, I can forecast their action; that nine out of ten, by their word or action, I may feel the pulse of their hearts. But of the tenth I despair. It is beyond me. You are that tenth.

Were ever two souls, with dumb lips, more incongruously matched! We may feel in common—surely, we oftentimes do—and when we do not feel in common, yet do we understand; and yet have no common tongue. Spoken words do not come to us. We are unintelligible. God must laugh at the mummery.

The one gleam of sanity through it all is that we are both large temperamentally, large enough to often understand but in vague glimmering ways, by dim perceptions, like ghosts, which, while we doubt, haunt us with their truth. And still, I, for one, dare not believe; for you are that tenth which I may not forecast.

Am I unintelligible now? I do not know. I imagine so. I cannot find the common tongue. Large temperamentally—that is it. It is the one thing that brings us at all in touch. We have, flashed through us, you and I, each a bit of universal, and so we draw together. And yet we are so different.

I smile at you when you grow enthusiastic? It is a forgivable smile—nay, almost an envious smile. I have lived twenty-five years of repression. I learned not to be enthusiastic. It is a hard lesson to forget. I begin to forget, but it is so little. At best, before I die, I cannot hope to forget all or most. I can exult, now that I am learning, in little things, in other things; but of my things, and secret things doubly mine, I cannot, I cannot. Do I make myself intelligible? Do you hear my voice, I fear not? There are poseurs. I am the most successful of them all.

Jack¹

As his datebook reveals, Jack had an affair with Blanche Partington, a reporter and columnist, during his marriage to Bessie.² Most other affairs have not had much documentation and/or are mostly assumed. Jack's affair with Blanche Partington continued for about a year after Jack and Charmian had become lovers and were waiting to be able to marry. Charmian had not wanted to be involved in the gossip that developed after Jack's separation from Bessie, so she left the area for months at a time. Jack wrote many letters to Charmian expressing his loneliness during these separations from her. He found solace in Blanche. When Jack ended his affair with Blanche, Charmian welcomed her in a friendship that lasted many years.³

There has been speculation over possible infidelities when Jack was alone in New York City, without Charmian, while dealing with business matters. In January 1914, Charmian received an unusual telegram which stated that Jack was spending all his time with a

woman at the Van Cortland Hotel. Charmian wrote to Jack about it. Jack answered that he had been at that hotel and despite encountering women there, he kept a vision of Charmian's sweet, beautiful body. To him, she was a thoroughbred mare, and he "had never been infatuated with cows."

Another New York incident was in a taxi with the director of a burlesque theater along with four of the black women who had been in the performance Jack had attended. The taxi was hit by a limousine causing cuts and bruises to those in the cab, but no injuries requiring a trip to the hospital.

Clarice Stasz, in her book American Dreamers, said that George Sterling was more deserving of the womanizer label than Jack. She quotes Robinson Jeffers who noted that George would take up with "the most unattractive, most sexless females, imaginable," because they loved poetry.⁴

There is some evidence that Jack was unfaithful during one of his last visits to Hawaii. The evidence is in the form of photographs passed down to a woman's granddaughter showing Jack in a pose with a young woman. Jack London's servant, Sekine, in an interview made in the 1930's, recounted an occurrence after Jack had sent Charmian out for a swim. "One day when we were at Waikiki Beach, he had a young lady, I don't know where he found her." The woman came to Jack's bungalow. Sekine said "The minute the girl entered the house, London asked me to gather all the chairs, even the chair from my room, and he piled all the chairs against the front and back doors. When Mrs. London later tried to come in she found chairs piled up against the screen door." Sekine also stated, "...she then went out again to the beach. The girl went out after a couple of hours. Only this once he was a bad boy. The rest of the time he was very fair."⁵

Lou Leal, Park Historian
Jack London State Historic Park
January 31, 2018

SOURCES

1. Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz III, and Milo Shepard, The Letters of Jack London p.244. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1988.
2. Earle Labor, Jack London, An American Life, p. 407. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2013.
3. Clarice Stasz, American Dreamers, p.127. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1988.

4. Ibid pp. 98-99.
5. Barry Stevens, "A Hero to His Valet." A 1930's interview of Yoshimatsu Nakata and Tokinosuke Sekine, from research of Clarice Stasz. To be published.

THE WOLF HOUSE

The Wolf House

For Jack London and Charmian Kittredge, the concept of having their own home began before they were married. They needed some property for a building site and found the 128-acre Hill Ranch in Glen Ellen to be a perfect, beautiful piece of land which they purchased in June of 1905. Jack was now thinking big with his new-found celebrity and would not have been content with a small average size building lot. He decided to first build a barn where he and Charmian could live while the house was being built. This was made possible with a \$10,000 advance from his publisher which included money for the land purchase. By fall Jack had already begun the initial stone work when he suddenly decided to put off the remainder of the construction until the next year. Wolf House

construction was also to start in 1906. Some early planning on Wolf House was done, but it was interrupted when Jack and Charmian decided that they wanted to have the adventure of sailing around the world as Joshua Slocum had accomplished in 1898 in his boat, the Spray. The building site for the Wolf House would be prepared and would be ready for construction upon their return. Johannes Reimers, a close friend was given the job of doing the landscaping. Four cabins were to be built at the same time construction began on the house. In 1909, after the Snark voyage was terminated and Jack and Charmian were aboard the Tymeric sailing from Sydney, Australia to Ecuador, Jack worked on plans for the four guest cabins to be built near the Wolf House. His intent was to live in one of them during the Wolf House construction.

With their return to Glen Ellen on July 24, 1909, Jack and Charmian settled back into Wake Robin, a short distance from their ranch. Then on May 14, 1910, Jack purchased the seven hundred-acre Kohler and Frohling Ranch and on May 12, 1911, he was able to purchase the twelve acres in the middle of the Kohler and Frohling Ranch that contained the Kohler and Frohling stone buildings and the cottage. With the old cottage now his, it was decided that he and Charmian would live in the cottage during the two-year Wolf House construction. Jack went through the cottage with his step-sister, Eliza, who was also his ranch superintendent, to discuss the remodeling and maintenance needed to make the cottage ready. Since the cottage was to be temporary quarters, no extra money was spent to install electricity. Then on June 12, 1911, Jack, Charmian, and Nakata, their man-servant, were off on adventure. They rode on a wagon pulled by four horses on a journey to central Oregon and back, mostly on dirt roads. On their return on September 11, 1911 they moved into the cottage that Eliza had prepared. Electricity was eventually installed in the cottage in 1914 after the Wolf House burned down.

The Wolf House Design

Jack London was well aware of the dangers of earthquakes and fires. He made sure the foundation of the house could withstand the strongest possible earthquake by having it consist of an enormous slab with steel reinforced concrete designed to support a forty-story building on a sandy ground foundation. The house design was inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement. Form and function were wedded to produce beauty. The building materials were from local sources and included redwood trees, a deep chocolate maroon volcanic rock from nearby Bocca's Quarry, slate, boulders and concrete. The roof was made with Spanish tiles from a pottery business in Alameda which was close to where Jack had lived as a boy.

In the interior, the highest floor was reserved for Jack's quarters, perched like an eagle's nest above the rest of the house. The floor below this had Jack's work studio on the third level, which was 19x40 feet with a library the same size under it connecting the two rooms with a spiral staircase. This would allow Jack to have his 5,000 plus books organized with easy access. Right below Jack's quarters were Charmian's quarters, on the same floor as Jack's work studio. The second level had a bedroom, gun and trophy room, Jack's library, and an 18x58 foot living room which was two stories high with an alcove for Charmian's Steinway grand piano. The lowest level, partially below grade, included the dining room, a stag party room, a vault, and a utility area that included

servant quarters. These quarters were designed to be spacious and comfortable. Jack never wanted the servants to feel like second class citizens.

The Wolf House Fire

After nearly two years of the construction of the Wolf House, Jack was anxious to finish the house before the coming winter in 1913, so he took out new mortgages on Eliza's house, which was nearly completed, and the cottage where he and Charmian were living. Then he added a mortgage on the Hill Ranch. The dream of moving into the Wolf House was nearer to fulfillment. However, 1913 became what Jack later described as his "bad year." A series of events happened: First came the death of a woman friend who was an invalid. Jack could not comprehend how someone so young and full of life could suddenly be gone. He confessed to Charmian that he had "concentrated every thought and tried to call the girl back." "Of course, there was no answer," he said. The next event occurred when Irving Shepard, Eliza's son, climbed a tree at school and was electrocuted when he came in contact with a power line. He was placed in the cottage so that both Eliza and Charmian could nurse him. Next came a bitter cold winter. There were three snowfalls in Sonoma Valley. After that came a false spring, followed by heavy frost and showers. An invasion of grasshoppers destroyed many young eucalyptus trees which were thought to be immune to pests. On May 3, Eliza's estranged husband came to the ranch with a pistol and demanded money. Irving ran to the cottage to for help. Jack quickly found James Shepard, disarmed him, and ordered him off the ranch. Eliza gave him ten dollars. Shepard used the money to go to Santa Rosa to swear out a warrant for the arrest of Jack London and his brother-in-law, Jack Byrne, Ida's husband. Ida was Jack London's step-sister. The case was quickly thrown out of court the next week. After this event, one of Jack's most valuable brood mares was found dead in the pasture from a bullet. Jack responded by posting no trespassing signs. In July, Jack went to Merritt Hospital in Oakland to seek a diagnosis regarding his abdominal pain. Jack's physician, William Porter, diagnosed appendicitis and operated on Jack two days later. It was at this time his doctor determined that Jack's kidneys were in terrible condition. Jack recovered from the operation, but he now knew his life would be shortened. Another event had occurred earlier in the year. Jack invited a reporter, Allan Dunn to the ranch where he stayed for about two weeks, spending a lot of time with Charmian, who developed a strong attraction to him. Charmian wrote many entries of her fondness for Dunn in her diary. Jack was aware of the chemistry between Charmian and Allan, which caused many discussions with Charmian. His fear of Charmian being unfaithful led to an emotional confrontation during which Charmian seemingly convinced Jack that she had not had a sexual relationship with Allan.

The 1913 ultimate tragedy was the Wolf House fire on August 22nd. Jack and Charmian's beautiful dream house was lost, never to rise again. They were within weeks of moving in. Most thought the fire was arson. Jack thought a socialist had started the blaze, upset over his building of a castle which was counter to the socialist cause. Other theories emerged: Charmian had set the blaze, a fired worker had done it, Eliza's estranged husband was to blame, and that Jack had burned down his own house. Not many believed Natale Forni, the construction foreman, who correctly blamed it on spontaneous

combustion and felt himself to blame for not inspecting the house at the end of the work day.

The Forensics Fire Investigation

In 1995, a team of fifteen, including eleven engineers and investigators completed a full scale, several days investigation, pro bono, of the Wolf House fire. The team was headed by Dr. Robert Anderson, president of RNA Consulting, Inc., a forensic engineering consulting firm that specialized in material engineering and sciences. The team found pieces of charred wood timbers in the notched masonry pockets where beams had connected to stone walls. The timbers in the dining room were burnt more severely than in the other rooms. With these clues, the dining room seemed to be the area of fire origin. The remaining timbers in the pockets in the adjacent living room were canted and showed signs they had failed first by the force of the tile roof dropping down and then were charred by the fire. The dining room had the only fireplace finished with wood in the house. This is significant because workmen were applying finishing oils to all the wood on the day of the fire.

The study team did a complete review of the design and construction documents, witness statements, and historical records. A computer recreation of the structure was also made. The conclusion of the findings led to a low probability that arson was to blame. The day and night of August 22, 1913, were a very hot. There was no evidence the phone system had yet been installed. The house was wired for electricity, but it did not appear to be connected. The most likely area of origin of the fire was determined to be the kitchen or dining area. This area and the library above it would be the areas with the greatest amount of woodwork and therefore would have received the most linseed oil that was applied on the day of the fire. The workmen left by 6:00 P.M. and were in the habit of throwing oil stained rags on the floor. Tests done by Dr. Anderson, head of the study team showed that a loosely piled handful of rags dampened with linseed oil is capable of ignition in a few hours. With the extremely hot weather that day and night, a faster oxidation process was created, contributing to the spontaneous combustion of the rags that was determined to be the most likely cause of the fire.

As stated above, the dining room had the only fireplace finished with wood in the house. The eight other fireplaces were finished in stone. The significance appears to be that workmen were applying finishing oils to the wood the day of the fire.

A complete review of the design and construction documents, witness statements and historical records were considered, along with a computer recreation of the structure, in order to determine the most probable cause of the fire.

Although arson cannot be completely ruled out, it is of the least probability as the dining area would not be the natural choice for an arsonist, nor would an arsonist be content with a single place of origin. In addition, the site was so remote that traveling to the house after dark would have required a lantern which could easily be observed from the London cottage or Eliza's house.

August 22, 1913 was a typically hot and still California night. This ruled out lightning out as a cause. Building plans show a telephone system, but there is no evidence that the system had been installed. The house was wired for electricity as evidenced by electrical junction boxes, conduit embedded in the walls, copper wire, old knob and tube porcelain insulators, and an electrical plan. However, it does not appear that the system was connected to a generator.

There are several factors that strongly suggest linseed oil-stained rags as the culprit. There were no furnishings in the house at the time of the fire, yet it was known the cabinetry was being finished the day of the fire. Even though there are few details of the interior finish, the local Santa Rosa Press Democrat newspaper reported that the extent and quality of the walnut and oak interiors were magnificent. We know that Jack's insistence on natural products and natural finishes would demand linseed oil based stains and varnishes. These were the "industry standards" for fine woods, as they had been for centuries. The most likely area of origin for the fire has been identified as the kitchen or dining area on the ground floor of the west wing. These two areas and the library on the floor above would be precisely the areas where these finishes would be used in greater amounts. The hazards of careless disposal were known to the wood finishers of the age, but knowing a hazard does not imply elimination of it.

Prior to ignition, the self-heating process of linseed oil on cotton releases large quantities of dense white smoke with a choking lacrimatory effect, apparently as a result of aldehydes being generated. This smoke could be readily detected by a person in the vicinity. In the Wolf House, everyone was gone. A loosely piled handful of cotton rags dampened with boiled linseed oil has been shown in experiments to be capable of self-heating to flaming ignition in a few hours.

The final key is temperature. We know that the higher the ambient temperature, the lower the heat losses to the surroundings will be, and the faster the oxidation will occur. The one observation of London's neighbor was that the night of the fire was the hottest night in memory, thus possibly providing just the one extra factor to enhance ignition. The flaming fire created by even a modest pile of linseed oiled rags can be sustained as a very energetic fire for more than an hour. This is surely enough heat and time to ensure the ignition of any wooden shelves or cabinetry in close proximity. The time factor is correct. Workmen reportedly left by 6:00 P.M.; Jack may have visited there early in the evening, prior to the smoke being detectable. The fire was reported shortly before midnight, which is just the right time frame for carelessly discarded rags to self-heat, ignite and initiate the tragic fire that hot August night in 1913.

For spontaneous chemical combustion to occur, the presence of an unsaturated oil, such as those derived from linseed, tung, or soybean is required, with sufficient exposure to oxygen and surrounded by enough insulation to allow the exothermic heat of oxidation to accumulate to the point of ignition. Spontaneous combustion can occur in large piles of oily cotton rags, wet with drying oils, such as may accumulate during painting. The combustion starts as a smoldering reaction within the material and propagates slowly outward and eventually bursts into flames.

Computer programs have been used to determine the development of the fire. Using the Hazard I program developed by the Center of Fire Research at the National Institute of Standards and Technology, a timeline estimate of the fire was formulated for the origin being in the dining area and is consistent with the report of when the workmen left the site and when the fire was discovered.

The sequence of the fire development was as follows:

- Linseed oil soaked rags are discarded in the dining room.
- Rags start smoldering and eventually ignite
- Nearby wood floor ignites and begins smoldering
- Additional rags and wood floor burst into flame, slow fire growth occurs in room
- Wood paneling burst into flame, fire growth rate increases
- Ceiling reaches high temperature causing flashover
- Windows start breaking out
- Fire burns through door to stairway leading to library
- Fire burns into pantry
- Fire is discovered

Lou Leal

Jack London State Historic Park Historian

January 31, 2018

THE DEATH OF JACK LONDON: FACT AND FICTION

THE BEGINNING OF THE SUICIDE RUMOR:

According to Earle Labor, the recognized, foremost Jack London scholar, “The rumor was apparently started shortly after London’s death by his erstwhile friend, George Sterling, who told Upton Sinclair among others that Jack killed himself because he was desperately torn between his love for his Mate Woman Charmian and newfound passion for a beautiful (but nameless) Hawaiian woman.” A few years later C. Hartley Grattan “suggested that London had actually killed himself in despair over the tragic decline of humanity and civilization. The appearance of his article elicited vigorous denials not only from London’s attendant physicians, but also from his daughter Joan.” The doctors’ reaction appeared in a San Francisco Call article dated February 15, 1929, titled “Doctors

Deny Jack London Killed Self.” Dr. Thomson is quoted saying “There is absolutely no foundation to the suicide story. Jack London died of internal poisoning brought about through kidney trouble.”¹

DEATH EVENTS:

The death certificate was signed by Dr. William Porter, Jack London’s personal doctor. It stated the cause of death was: uraemia following renal colic. Dr. Porter had diagnosed a significant kidney problem back in July of 1913.

The press bulletin issued by doctors Porter, Thomson, Hayes, and Shiels said, “At about 6:30 p.m., November 21, 1916, Mr. Jack London partook of his dinner. He was taken during the night with what was supposed to be an attack of acute indigestion. This, however, proved to be a gastro-intestinal type of uraemia. He rapidly entered coma and died at 7:45 p.m., November 22, 1916.”²

SAILOR ON HORSEBACK

Irving Stone’s 1938 book, Sailor on Horseback, had “Biography” included in the book title, quickly changed to “A Biographical Novel” in its second printing. Stone only mentions local doctors Thomson and Hayes. He conveniently leaves out that Dr. Porter was not only there in attendance, but had been treating Jack for terminal uremia for some time and had also signed the death certificate. In his book, Stone says, “Dr. Thomson found Jack in a state of narcosis; he had apparently been unconscious for some time. On the floor of the room he found two empty vials labeled morphine sulfate and atropine sulfate; on the night table he found a pad with some figures on it which represented a calculation of the lethal dose of the drug.” Doctor Thomson reports that “in conversation with me during the day Mrs. Charmian London [to whom Jack’s 1911 will left his entire estate] said it was important that the now probable death of Jack London should not be ascribed to anything but uremic poisoning.”³

When Stone published the book a third time in 1978, again including “Biography” in his book title, he added something not included in the original 1938 publication. Stone said a third vial of morphine was found by Dr. Thomson. Stone added, “Dr. Allan Thomson gave me one of the morphine sulfate vials, he put it, for safekeeping. It still has four tablets in it.”⁴ Sekine, Jack’s servant at the time of Jack’s death, said in an interview many years later that he had found one tube of morphine on the floor that morning and had picked it up and put it in his pocket.⁵ This would mean that Dr. Thomson could not have found the container, or containers on the floor. Earle Labor writes in his paper, “A Biographical Hydra: The Myth of Jack London’s Suicide,” that Dr. Thomson declared that Stone was a liar and had put words in his mouth.

Stone did an interesting thing in 1937, the year before Sailor on Horseback was published. He visited Dr. Porter as is acknowledged in a letter from Dr. Porter to Charmian London. Here are some excerpts: “My dear friend; Yesterday a Mr. Irving

Stone called on me said, he had just come from Glen Ellen where he had spent five weeks.” “He said he was to write a ‘Life of Jack London.’” He tried very hard to get me to say that death was due to other things than uremia and stones. This he was unable to do.” “I am sure he wants to write a hot sensational thing, something to startle the public and sell- I am very much upset about the matter for Jack’s memory and those near him as well as his friends. Always, Sincerely Wm. S. Porter”⁶

In his interview, Nakata, Jack’s servant before Sekine, said Jack had a little packet in his strong-box, and towards the end of Nakata’s years with him Jack told him about this packet. He said, “You know Nakata, I have a very powerful poison, and this poison will finish up a man quicker than anything else. If I get into an accident or anything and you think I am not going to get any more fun out of life, you give me this.” This information was not available to any of the writers who said Jack’s death was suicide. What it tells us is that Jack had the means to kill himself quickly if he chose to do so. The fact that he lasted over twelve hours indicates he didn’t choose to do this.⁷

JACK LONDON, A BIOGRAPHY (1964)

When writing his 1964 book, Jack London A Biography, Richard O’Connor was not allowed by Irving Shepard, Jack London’s nephew and inheritor of the ranch and the Jack London legacy, to see the extensive Jack London collection at the Huntington Library. O’Connor says he used Irving Stone’s notes for Sailor on Horseback which were in the U.C.L.A. collection plus materials in other collections. It is not surprising that O’Connor came to the same conclusion as Stone regarding suicide. He wrote “Whether the attending physicians were swayed by her (Charmian’s) pleas or not, they joined in concealing the cause of his death; it remained a secret, so far as the public was concerned, until 1938 when Irving Stone’s Sailor on Horseback was published.”⁸ O’Connor uses nothing beyond Stone as documentation to conclude that Jack committed suicide.

JACK LONDON AND HIS DAUGHTERS (1990)

Joan London started to write Jack London and His Daughters in the 1950’s. Progress was slow and Joan London died in 1971 before finishing the book. Her son, Bart Abbott, finished the book for publication in 1990. In his introduction to the book he says that his mother’s book was somewhat short of being finished and that the “last section of the book appears as a synopsis, written by Joan, but with the intention of later expanding it.” On the next to last page is an interesting statement: “He died on November 22; mercifully, we did not know for some time that he had taken his own life.”⁹ In Joan London’s Jack London and His Times, published in 1939, she mentions two small vials which had contained morphine sulfate and atropine sulfate, just as Irving Stone had mentioned in 1938. She then said, “He had taken a lethal dose, but who could say whether it had been with suicidal intention, or merely an overdose miscalculated in the midst of his agony?”¹⁰

In a newspaper article, dated September 8, 1938, which appeared in the Times Star of Alameda, California, an article was published based on an interview with Joan London. Here are some excerpts: “Disappointed is Joan London, daughter of the famous novelist and socialist, Jack London, in the biography of her father as recently completed in the

Saturday Evening Post.” “Miss London dug into an old trunk and came up today with the last letter written by her famous father, Jack London, the author, in refutation of a recent biography intimating London committed suicide. It told of plans for a picnic and a sail on Lake Merritt in Oakland the following Sunday and announced London’s plans to leave California on a trip the following week. The letter showed no indication of despondency, the daughter said. “...and it indicated to me that he had no intention of committing suicide.” In regard to writing a book on her father’s life herself, which was to be published in the Spring of 1939, Joan said “Although my book can hardly help contradicting other works about my father, it is in no sense a retaliation or reply to them. I’m disappointed, not retaliating in my book.”

What we know is that Joan London did not herself publish Jack London and His Daughters, since she had died nineteen years prior to its publication. We know that Joan London had disagreed with Stone’s suicide conclusion in 1938. She also wrote a letter to Earle Labor in 1969, thirteen months prior to her death, thanking him for writing “An Open Letter to Irving Stone,” in which Labor took issue with Stone’s assertion that London had died an unnatural death. She said she hoped Irving Stone had read Labor’s letter. So, if Joan London did change her mind in her last year of life, what possible reason could she have to do so? We may never find the answer to this question.

MEDICAL STUDIES:

Alfred Shivers, pharmacist, in the Spring of 1969, published an article titled “Jack London: Not a Suicide.” Shivers discounts Irving Stone’s assertion that Jack London committed suicide. Shivers states that Stone left no documentation, plagiarized many passages from John Barleycorn and the short story, “The Apostate,” and asserted that London had calculated the lethal dose of morphine on a pad of paper. Shivers, after consulting a physician and two pharmacists could not find a precise figure for what a toxic dose of morphine might be. He also said that Jack London had a severe kidney disease that would have slowed down the excretion of metabolized morphine, even a normal dose taken that last night of consciousness could have easily cumulated dangerously in his body.¹¹

Andrew S. Bomback, M.D. and Philip J. Klemmer, M.D., in their paper titled “Jack London’s chronic interstitial nephritis: A historical differential diagnosis” state that the main factor leading to Jack London’s death was likely mercury poison. While on the voyage of the Snark through the Solomon Islands, Jack London acquired the bacterial disease, yaws, that invaded his body through open sores and cuts. London’s treatment in a time before anti-biotics was mercury chloride. During the five months spent in the Solomon Islands, there was ample time to accumulate a significant amount of mercury that would mostly settle in his kidneys. “Neurological, gastrointestinal, and renal systems are the most commonly affected organ systems in mercury exposure.” Over the next eight years, after abandoning the Snark voyage, Jack London suffered declining kidney function, a severe dermatitis with swelling and irritation of hands, feet, cheeks, and nose. Regarding Irving Stone’s claim of a calculation of an overdose of morphine, the doctors state that with London’s use of morphine for possibly as long as three years, he would have developed a tolerance, thereby making a calculation nearly impossible.¹²

In April 2011, Philips Kirk Labor, M.D., published a paper, “Jack London’s Death: The Homicide of the Suicide Theory” that presents a broad perspective. He mentions that in addition to London’s intake of mercury during the Snark voyage and the possibility that he suffered from systemic lupus erythematosus as suggested by Charles Denko, M.D., there is also a very real possibility that he may have suffered from both cardiovascular and cardiopulmonary disease brought on by his history of tobacco, alcohol, and poor diet. Labor suggests that London may have been afflicted with polyarticular gout due to his protein rich diet. This would explain the many joint problems that afflicted him during the last eight years of his life. This rheumatologic disorder also afflicts the kidneys. The mercury and possible lupus support the claim that he had renal disease. London’s heavy use of tobacco would have had an adverse effect on his cardiovascular and cardiopulmonary systems as well as contributing to hypertension. Lastly, alcohol can negatively act on the cardiovascular system and also contribute to hypertension which can cause deterioration of kidney function. Regarding the use of morphine before Jack London went into a coma, Labor states that a dose that normally might have been therapeutic, might easily have been rendered toxic by his weakened renal condition with the kidneys slowing down of metabolism.¹³

Another possible factor that has not yet been studied is the use of water pipes containing significant amounts of lead during London’s time. The Centers for Disease Control states that the effects of lead in adults can cause progressive nephron loss leading to renal failure, gout, and hypertension.

So, with all the health factors presented by these men in the medical profession, it would seem that Jack London really did not have a chance to survive and was probably fortunate to last his forty years and ten months.

Lou Leal, Park Historian
Jack London State Historic Park
October 2016
Edited by Laurie O’Hare

REFERENCES

1. Labor, Earle. “A Biographical Hydra: The Myth of Jack London’s Suicide.” Jack London Foundation, Inc. Quarterly Newsletter, April 2011.
2. Labor, Earle. Jack London, an American Life. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York. 2013.
3. Stone, Irving. Sailor on Horseback. Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York. 1947.
4. Ibid.

5. Stevens, Barry. "A Hero to His Valet." Annotations by Clarice Stasz, an interview of Yoshimatsu Nakata and Tokinosuke Sekine, late 1930's.
6. Box 434, Jack London Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
7. Stevens, Barry. "A Hero to His Valet." Annotations by Clarice Stasz, an interview of Yoshimatsu Nakata, and Tokinosuke Sekine, late 1930's.
8. O'Connor, Richard. Jack London, A Biography. Little, Brown & Company. Boston, 1964.
9. London, Joan. Jack London and His Daughters. Heyday Books, Berkeley, 1990.
10. London, Joan. Jack London and His Times. Doubleday, Doran & Company, New York, 1939.
11. Shivers, Alfred S. "Jack London: Not A Suicide." *The Dalhousie Review*, Volume 49, No. 1, 1969.
12. Bomback, Andrew S., M.D. and Klemmer, Philip J., M.D. "Jack London's 'chronic interstitial nephritis': A historical differential diagnosis" Corresponding Author and reprints: Andrew S. Bomback, M.D., University of North Carolina Kidney Center, 7024 Burnett-Womack Building, Campus Box 7155, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7155 (e-mail: abomback@unch.unc.edu) Published in *The Pharos* medical journal, Winter, 2008.
13. Labor, Phillips Kirk, M.D. "Jack London's Death: The Homicide of the Suicide Theory." *Jack London Foundation Quarterly Newsletter*, April 2011.