

# The Oxford Handbook of Jack London

Edited by Jay Williams

## Introduction

Jay Williams

In the late 1940s, in *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac imagined the ghost of Jack London inhabiting a rusted-out ship in the middle of San Francisco Bay, as if the name of London's most famous fictional ship—*The Ghost*, from *The Sea-Wolf*—had been magically transferred from London's imagination to the form of his physicality (if a ghost can be said to have a body). More than an homage to a trusted and influential predecessor, Kerouac's imagining places himself in a long line of American hobo writers that begins with London. As Frederick Feied wrote in *No Pie in the Sky*, an early work of criticism that links the two plus John Dos Passos along this thematic vector, "Fictional treatment of the tramp or hobo tends, at first, to be mawkish and superficial. Not until the appearance of Jack London is the hobo treated with much understanding."<sup>1</sup> More than just sympathy or even understanding, London's creation of hobo characters—including of himself in *The Road*—and hobo-like characters, including those homeless migrants that roam the snows of the North, or the sailors in his sea stories, came out of a necessity he felt in order to create in the first place. Writing and travel depended on each other and,

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Feied, *No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero in the Works of Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Jack Kerouac* (Citadel Press: New York, 1964), 15.

conjoined, help form his ideas of what an author was.

Thinking of London as a traveling writer gives us a different perspective on his life. One traditional assessment of that life was first promulgated by Julian Hawthorne in 1905, Alfred Kazin picked up the theme, and it is continued today in Earle Labor's *Jack London: An American Life*. Hawthorne, the son of Nathaniel Hawthorne, interviewed London in Los Angeles, and he concluded: "I think a circumstantial account of his inward and outward life from beginning to end would be a human document more instructive, absorbing and significant than, perhaps, any story that he will ever write."<sup>2</sup> In *On Native Grounds*, Alfred Kazin wrote, "the greatest story [Jack London] ever wrote was the story he lived," as if London's work and life could be so easily separated.<sup>3</sup> This easy, reductionist line of his is quoted throughout the literature on London, but its recent use, in Eric Miles Williamson's review of Labor's *Jack London* in *The Washington Post*, 22 November 2013, cited approvingly, joins Labor to Kazin and so creates a continuum of thought for over seventy years that the present volume seeks to contest.

London's life story, even if told as if it were a forty-year-long road adventure, represents his deliberate strategy to combine writing with traveling. As he says in a seminal 1903 essay "Getting into Print," "Keep a notebook. Travel with it."<sup>4</sup> At the very

---

<sup>2</sup> Julian Hawthorne, "Jack London in Literature," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 16 Jan. 1905, Jack London Scrapbooks, vol. 5 reel 3, HEH. The phrase "human document" is one of great significance and is discussed at length in my two-volume biography of London as an author entitled *Author under Sail: The Imagination of Jack London, 1893-1916* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (Reynal and Hitchcock: New York, 1942). Interestingly, and we will return to this subject, Kazin in the forties calls London a "modern."

<sup>4</sup> Jack London, "Getting into Print," JL 674, HEH.

beginning of his career, travel simply offered him a temporary escape from poverty. More importantly it provided him the chance to observe and to contemplate and to rework the notes he had taken on his adventures. Home became associated with manual labor, with his mother's spiritualism, with duty to his family. Traveling became associated with thought and writing, brain work. It gave him a chance to enter the theater of politics, of war, of ideas. Even one of his earliest trips demonstrates his desire to be on stage, in all the senses of that phrase. His numerous cross-country trips—whether by train, boat, or four-horse wagon—gave him, perhaps paradoxically, freedom from distraction and a feeling of control and stability; once on a boat, or a train, or on the back of a horse, he was sure of his footing.

Probing deeper, we see that traveling changed both his personal and his authorial identity. Traveling made an internationalist out of a man who otherwise would have remained a parochial Californian. First, Jack London was not merely a California writer or even a western writer. He was a writer and denizen of the Pacific rim. In fact, his work begins and ends in the Pacific. From “Story of a Typhoon off the Coast of Japan” (his first published work, in 1893) to *Cherry* (his unfinished manuscript at the time of his death in 1916) London's fiction and nonfiction were formed by his experiences in what we now call the Pacific rim. But in what other, less straightforward senses can we place London as a Pacific rim writer? Historians and literary theorists have exposed the ideological import of the word *Pacific*; they have shown how it is a EuroAmerican construct and how capitalism has thoroughly underwritten that construct. Today, globalization—the formation of capital and culture and the migration and transplantation of peoples regardless of national

boundaries—and imperialism are necessary parts of our understanding of what it means to use the label *Pacific rim* or *Pacific writer*. Arlif Dirlick, who prefers the term *Asia-Pacific*, argues,

dynamic forces emanating from Euroamerica, from the secular growth of capitalism to contingent political rivalries, were projected onto the Pacific and played the central part in its formation as a region as well as in its conceptualization. . . . To define, as to name, is to conquer. EuroAmericans were responsible not only for mapping the Pacific, but also for attaching names to the maps. . . . The confrontation of the EuroAmerican and the Asian Pacifics entailed a vocabulary change for one and a language change for the other. From mai-tais to taboo and tattoo, a whole range of vocabulary has entered EuroAmerican languages. But for the people of the Pacific the confrontation has entailed the rephrasing of metaphysical and historical experience in a new language.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, as Rod Edmond writes, “the history of European presence in the Pacific is not necessarily coterminous with the history of colonialism in the region.”<sup>6</sup> Pacific cultures changed and did not change with contact with European and American travelers. In our efforts to avoid replicating the discourse of colonialism, we tend to retain the binary EuroAmerican/Pacific islanders and so miss the multifaceted history of travel, migration, racial mixing, and economic and cultural exchange and

---

<sup>5</sup> Arif Dirlick, “Introducing the Pacific,” in *What Is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*, ed. Dirlick (Boulder, Colo., 1993), pp. 5, 6. This discussion of the Pacific rim is modified from James Williams, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Jack London Journal* 6 (1999): 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Rod Edmond, *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 13.

diversity within and among the Pacific peoples before European contact. Thus Edmond's history of colonialism in the Pacific provides a necessary balance to Dirlick's position, which ignores the historical self- and national-formations that arose out of the Pacific. Both theoretical viewpoints (as Edmonds himself argues) help us understand the Pacific world that defined London as a writer. The question then is not whether London is a Pacific writer, but, rather, to what extent and in what terms did he participate in the white business class's construction of the Pacific rim? Did he use his own writings as a counternarrative? Do the voices of his characters work in opposition to or in service to those business interests? In Christopher Gair's terms, was he complicit or resistant?<sup>7</sup>

In "The Language of the Tribe," a speech he delivered repeatedly in 1915 and 1916, London argued that American citizenship should be extended to Japanese living in Hawai'i and that social organizations should be created so that all races can congregate, smoke, meet the wife, and "learn to understand each other.... I come down to Honolulu and . . . I meet Americans, I meet Englishmen. . . [but] I do not meet the Japanese." In effect, London is arguing for a realignment of the social and the political within, specifically, Hawai'i, but more generally the world "where the people of all the countries that rest around the edge of the Pacific meet." These are the terms in which London understood the Pacific rim, having traveled from San Francisco to Alaska, to Hawai'i to Japan, to Guadalcanal to Australia to Ecuador to New Orleans, from San Francisco to Mexico and back. Well aware of the ideological force of map making and labels, infinitely sensitive to the power of language and the

---

<sup>7</sup> See Christopher Gair, *Complicity and Resistance in Jack London's Novels: From Naturalism to Nature* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1997).

need to share languages or, more optimistically, to expand “the language of the [human] tribe,” London contested the hegemony of white America in the Pacific region. Edmonds makes a similar point: London’s late “non-fictional writing . . . sheds much of its earlier racism in an optimistic contemplation of the rich mix of twentieth-century Hawaiian culture.”<sup>8</sup> London, lecturing in Hawai`i, became the outside agitator.

But just as we think we have circumscribed the totality of London’s oeuvre, we see what has been left out: major works such as *The People of the Abyss*, *The Road*, *The Iron Heel*, *Before Adam*, *The Scarlet Plague*, *Burning Daylight*, and *John Barleycorn* that address concerns apart from the Pacific rim. How is it, then, possible to compass this totality?

Perhaps we can start with a different sailor from San Francisco. Albert Sonnichsen was an able seaman who had voyaged around the world and in and out of many countries. London was twenty-seven when he read Sonnichsen’s memoir (who was also twenty-seven) while working on the *The Sea-Wolf* and when he read Sonnichsen’s *Deep Sea Vagabonds*, a rather long passage at the conclusion would have seized his imagination and authorized his enthusiasm for world travel. Sonnichsen was returning to America after two years, and he was puzzled by his lack of patriotism on first sighting the US. He quotes Walter Scott, “Breathes there a man whith soul so dead/Who never to himself hath said, This is my own, my native land?” Yes, says, Sonnichsen, apparently there are indeed men like that. “A man may be a citizen of the world and still not a soldier of fortune. . . . If by patriotism we

---

<sup>8</sup> Edmonds, *Representing the South Pacific*, p. 19.

mean love of and blind allegiance to one particular flag and one particular geographical division of land, to the exclusion of the rest of the great world, it is true. Travel had had that effect on me as well as on many others.” This effect is not limited to the elimination of nationalism. It includes the elimination of racism as well, and Sonnichsen’s story in this regard is worth quoting at length. He is walking about San Francisco after his absence, observing daily routines that seem inferior to those he has seen abroad. “At first he is alarmed. Has he lost his love of country, noblest of all emotions? He continues his walk and comes to a large building from which thousands of children are poring out. Some are ragged and poor, but they all carry books. Then, to his intense gratification, a glow of pride thrills him, as he notes that this school-house is larger than any he has seen in other countries, He watches the children and among them finds types of all nations; a little brown imp of a Japanese boy is skylarking with his white mates, a little negro girl is walking arm in arm with a red-haired companion of undoubted Irish extraction. A lump rises in his throat—somehow he notes these things more than the glad that floats over the roof. And years ago he might have shouted ‘Nigger, nigger.’” (329, 330). He could well be describing the maturation of Jack London, whose “The Language of the Tribe,” as I said above, is about the desire for a world language that would unite all peoples.

For “the man without a country” (330) Sonnichsen says, “the newspaper is the most emotional kind of literature” because it carries the news of the progress of humankind, “of new and more liberal laws enacted in oppressed lands, of slaves liberated from bondage and the progress of human enlightenment and scientific discoveries.” For a veteran newspaperman like London, who sold papers on the

corner as a boy, who published his first work in a newspaper and continued to the very end to do so, who learned what it meant to be a professional writer by hanging out in Bay Area newspaper offices, these words rang true, as did the following enthusiastic passage: "After all, this man [without a country] has a flag, for his is the mil-white flag of universal justice, and under it he will enlist when a right cause demands, to fight, whether with gun or pen or speech, even if it should unfortunately be against the government under which he was by accident born. And this man has as much right to say, 'This is my own, my native land,' as any swashbuckling jingoist that ever drew sword for evil cause." Thomas Paine, Lafayette, Von Steuben, and Kosciuszko were all internationalists, says Sonnichsen, "and there will be still more in the future, and when they grow numerous, wars will cease, boundary lines will fade, war-ships will have to go into the freight business and soldiers will have to direct their energies to more productive and more honest ends." London may not have written "To the Good Soldier," but Sonnichsen's utopian vision of the future, while not socialist, matched London's own.

We don't know when exactly London crossed the line between being, in his mind, a mere citizen of the US to being "a citizen of the world," but from the very beginning he was primed to make that transition. He was born to travelers. His biological parents, Flora Wellman and William Cheney, were settled in San Francisco when Jack was born in 1876, but not for long. Cheney lit out back east that same year, and Flora, after she married John London in 1874, moved how many times in the span of how many years. San Francisco and Oakland, being major international ports, encouraged travel; even today one cannot look past the Golden Gate Bridge without thinking of

possible futures in foreign lands. Geography alone instilled a Pacific rim consciousness in London. In 1891-1892, he became an accomplished small boat sailor, first by pirating oysters in the bay and then joining the Fish Patrol that policed those same oyster beds and other illegal fishing practices. Out of these experiences came *The Cruise of The Dazzler* and *Tales of the Fish Patrol*. In 1893 he joined the crew of the *Sophie Sutherland* to hunt seals in the northern Pacific. This initial and seminal voyage provided him with material for his first publication, "The Story of a Typhoon off the Coast of Japan," stories and essays he published in his high school literary magazine (*The Aegis*), *The Sea-Wolf*, "That Dead Men Rise up Never," and other works.

To list and discuss in detail the multiple trips, cruises, and voyages London took is too lengthy a task for this introduction. Suffice it to touch upon them and link some of the more important works to the various excursions. In this way we can see how life on the road was interrupted by stays at home and not the other way around.

Home in November 1893, he left Oakland five months later. His next trip was across America, from Oakland to Buffalo and back again through Canada. The most reliable factual information about this trip can be found in his diary, though there is no complete and trustworthy account of the thirty days he spent in the penitentiary in Buffalo. His incarceration, however, informs much of his socialist writing, and his hoboing found expression in, again, early stories like "'Frisco Kid'" and essays like "The Tramp," numerous other stories and story ideas about hoboes, *The Road*, and *The Star Rover*.

Committing himself to a (relatively) formal education, he stayed home for roughly three years, but never completing college. In July 1897, he boarded *The Umatilla*

in San Francisco and headed north to the Klondike—first by ship and then by foot and small boat. Winter came, and he rarely ventured out of the cabin; he did stay in Dawson City for a month or so. When the Klondike River thawed, he and two others constructed a raft and floated and rowed down to the Bering Sea, a trip of nearly 1000 miles. He then shoveled coal on a steamer back to Oakland. His first three short story collections and his first two novels—*A Son of the Wolf*, *The God of Our Fathers*, *The Children of the Frost*, *A Daughter of the Snows*, and *The Call of the Wild*—came out of that famous thirteen-month adventure, as well as later works such as *Smoke Bellew* and one of his last short stories, “Like Argus of the Ancient Times.” In each year of his career he wrote at least one Klondike story.

This is not to say that life in the Bay Area did not provide material for his writing. His newspaper work (especially for the *San Francisco Examiner*), his socialist essays (“The Class Struggle,” “How I Became a Socialist,” “The Scab,” and others), and his sporting life novels (*The Game*, *The Abysmal Brute*, and “The Mexican,” to name a few) render what he saw when he stayed home. They even work to place his home town in the context of the Pacific rim. But one senses that they are more of a respite, a codification of all that he had been learning while on the road.

In fact, it was his deep knowledge and participation in the newspaper world that led to his next trip. In August 1902, he went east again, this time above the rods instead of on them, to New York and then by ship to London. His treatise on English poverty, *The People of the Abyss*, carries within its title the opposite of what he derived from traveling. The abyss of poverty that was Oakland became a theoretical construct for all that was wrong with capitalism. It also implied stasis both in terms of overcoming class

boundaries as well as the inability to simply trade one's life in the city for something better elsewhere.

Again newspapering led him away from home. After wiring William Randolph Hearst, offering himself as a correspondent for the *San Francisco Examiner* in December 1904, he crossed the Pacific again for Japan, took a sampan to Korea, and then trudged and rode horseback across the country, looking for battles or any kind of war news. He filed a number of reports, enlarged upon his ideas about the military and economic strength of China and Japan, and returned home largely frustrated by how the Japanese military controlled the reporters, denied access to the front, and cost him a book.

Now an internationally famous author and correspondent, London could tour the country in late 1905 under the auspices of a lecture tour company. From 22 October in Kansas City till 3 February 1906 in Grand Forks, North Dakota, he read fiction and essays to huge crowds at nearly every venue. The most famous moments occurred when he read "Revolution," at Yale University and at Madison Square Garden. London may not have been the best lecturer, but he could energize large crowds. By the time he was on his return west, his provocative style was well known and attractive to the burgeoning socialist movement. At the University of Chicago, for example, scheduled to speak in a small lounge in a dormitory, the crowd was so enormous that everyone walked across campus to Mandel Hall, where he again created controversy and received accolades. The entire trip generated so much publicity and his work had become so multivarious that the person who had been known nationally as the author of *The Call of the Wild* and *The Sea-Wolf* now was known as a prominent revolutionary socialist. The public mind could deal with only one facet of his career at a time.

That's not to say that his private life was less interesting to America. Just as in 1904 and early 1905, when he separated from his first wife Bessie Maddern and the newspapers combined that news with speculation about how his coauthorship with Anna Strunsky of *The Kempton-Wace Letters* may have broken up his marriage (it hadn't), now the papers couldn't resist combining reports on his lectures with the news of his second marriage to Charmian Kittredge in Chicago in November 1905. He received a brief respite from being the subject of news when the couple traveled to Maine to see her people and then to Jamaica for a honeymoon.

After the 1906 earthquake in the Bay Area (about which he wrote "Story of an Eyewitness") delayed the building of his ketch, *The Snark*, he, Charmian, and three others finally left in April 1907 on his longest voyage. Their intent was sail around the world, a desire he had harbored since at least 1903 when he used money from serialization of *The Call of the Wild* to buy a sloop instead to cruise the bay, sloughs, and rivers near his home in Sonoma County. With a leaky boat and a captain whose ignorance of navigation forced London to learn it on the fly, they rested in Hawai'i. London would complete *The Cruise of the Snark*, *Martin Eden*, and *Adventure*, as well as "To Build a Fire" and other stories on this voyage. It ended prematurely, though, because of health reasons. After recuperating in Australia and Tasmania, where he managed to attend and report on a fight by one of the greatest boxers of all time, Jack Johnson (whom he greatly admired), he, Charmian, and the crew returned home in the July 1909. Besides the work he created while sailing, he wrote a number of stories based on material he gathered in the Pacific, including *A Son of the Sun*.

Apparently with every intention to roost in Sonoma County, he purchased nearly

200 acres of ranch land over the course of three years, as well as 50,000 eucalyptus trees, farming equipment, farm animals, a new set of silos, and a revolutionarily designed pig sty, as well as employing more men for the ranch work. This did not mean he stayed home. In 1910 he and Charmian took a month and a half cruise on their boat *The Roamer*, and then in early 1911 they spent a month in Los Angeles and all of April and most of May back on *The Roamer*. That same year they set out on a wagon drawn by four horses, and from 12 June to 5 September they roamed northern California and southern Oregon. Only two years had passed since their last major trip. But less than four months would pass before they left Glen Ellen again for an extended period of time. This trip took them to New York on 24 December 1911, then to Baltimore to board *The Dirigo*, and then on that sailing vessel to San Francisco, arriving home on 4 August 1912. He completed *Valley of the Moon* on that trip, based in part on their four-horse journey, and then stayed home in 1912 and 1913 to write *The Mutiny of the Elsinore*, a novel infused with his *Dirigo* voyage.

Partly they were on the road so much in the second decade of the century to avoid the construction of the Wolf House, which was nearly completed in August 1913 only to then burn down on 22 August. He started a new novel two weeks later (*The Star Rover*) and then he and Charmian boarded a new boat, *The Roamer*, and sailed from 18 October to 7 January 1914, with intermittent visits to Oakland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. *The Star Rover* was completed in March, and the next month they left for Vera Cruz to cover the US's military intervention in Mexico. On 4 July they were back in Glen Ellen, only to leave two months later for their fall and winter cruise on the waterways of northern California, again with side trips to Oakland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. At

the end of January 1915 they went home, and nine days later they were planning a trip to Hawai`i, which began on 19 February and ended 22 July. They forego their usual fall-winter small boat sailing trip only because they had been so taken by their time in Hawai`i that they returned on 16 December. They didn't come back to the mainland until late August of the next year. In Jack's last year of life, he spent only three months at home, dying in November 1916.

I wanted to rush through this massive itinerary just to mimic the frantic restlessness of Jack London. But I also want to emphasize how much London's composition process—a process we think of as needing quiet, stability, and solitude—depended on excitement, stimulation, and company. At the end of it all, we realize that he wasn't merely traveling to gather sociological, political, and psychological data for his writings, writings that nonetheless depended on what Joseph Conrad called the deep layer of fact that underlay all London's work. And though his constant movements were fodder for the newspapers, keeping his name and public persona alive and subject to speculation and discussion, he didn't do it for that. His traveling was part and parcel of the imaginative process. It was a nonnegotiable marker of his authorial identity.

Did this first-hand engagement with the world—the process of becoming and maintaining himself as a citizen of the world—help define the kind of writing he produced? It does seem rather insufficient now to call him a naturalist writer if his principal concern was to reflect and represent, not the usual fare of violence and natural forces that we as literary theorists have used to periodize London's work, but rather something larger, more indeterminant, contemporary. The word *modern* appears often in the pages of this handbook, and though it is not new to call London a modernist, the sheer

weight of the scholarship in this present volume that attests to this alternative designation gives it a thorough grounding that previous attempts perhaps lacked. For example, in a 1916 letter to an editor, George Lorimer, London asks him to read a manuscript sent to him from a thirteen-year-old. He read it out loud at a party at his house, everyone laughed, and he thought Lorimer might publish it in the *Saturday Evening Post*. “It’s a human document,” he told Lorimer, and added that “Mr. Freud and Mr. Jung would find it interesting.” This casual, jokey reference to Jung and Freud comes out of a deep reading for a number of years—as Layne Craig describes—in sexology, especially Otto Rank, Freud, Jung, and other psychologists. He owned two volumes by Kraft-Ebbing and a whole host of pamphlets and clippings and books by cranks and the now-forgotten. But it wouldn’t be until the late twenties that mainstream America reached that same point of familiarity and saturation. The point isn’t that London was ahead of his time. The point is that to understand the tenor of his work in its entirety one has to be willing to call London both modern (that is, a direct participant in his own modernity) as well as a premodernist, someone in touch with themes and social issues that became dominant during literary period known as high modernism.

Perhaps this balancing act between being of one’s age and at the same time slightly ahead of it is a principal tension in his life and work. If we look at London’s high valuation of poetry—he regarded it as the highest form of art—we can trace out why he should be disqualified as an artist ahead of his age. For example, no one who held George Sterling’s poetry in such high regard, as London did, could be called a modernist. London admired Stephen Crane’s *Black Riders*, but he called it

“strange” and “already old.”<sup>9</sup> That is, he didn’t see it revolutionizing poetic form, and why would he. He valued poetic structure above all else. When writing about poetry he cared for to his constant literary correspondent, Cloudeley Johns, he preferred to do a “take-off on Stephen Crane’s style, which, in turn, I deem to be a take-off on that of Walt Whitman’s. Whiled away a few minutes on it, just for fun.”<sup>10</sup> But when he discussed the poems of Rudyard Kipling, William Wordsworth, Robert Louis Stevenson, Charles Swinburne, and his all-time favorite Robert Browning, he was enraptured. These are the poets that appear in name and quotation in his work. These are the works that he admired the most because of their affinity to music, to rhythm, to the elemental need in human nature for song. Deeply romantic in his poetic nature, London would have had no patience, I imagine, for Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, or even journalist turned poet like Djuna Barnes. If Ezra Pound’s injunction “make it new” is the modernist’s credo, then Jack London, in perfect harmony with S. S. McClure and the cutting-edge magazine and newspaper world of his time, would have enjoined, “make it interesting.” Draw readers in, have them lose themselves in the text just as he instructed Johns to lose himself in the atmosphere of a story. Both author and reader must be completely absorbed, made sensitive to every emotion evoked by the words. As Michael Millner describes it, London was after the communication of “the feels.”

But, as Millner continues his argument, how London constructs the contrast between individual and mass experience prefigures the same concern of a modernist like Walter Benjamin, with whom he seems to have more in common

---

<sup>9</sup> Jack London, letter to Cloudeley Johns, 28 May 1899, *Letters*, 1:79.

<sup>10</sup> London, letter to Johns, 7 June 1899, *Letters*, 1:82.

than with Henri Bergson, Herbert Spencer, and other thinkers of his own age. In a quite different analysis but one that bears similar fruit, Cecilia Tichi, in her work on “modernist America” that is continued in her essay here, traces a continuity between London’s age’s concerns with instability, waste, and efficiency (especially measurement and factuality) with Pound’s and Eliot’s. London’s mystification by the power of words to turn black marks into emotion tempted him to think of language as a kind of machine or even black box. The whole creative process—from the nature of his own imagination to the act of how one reads—baffled him, and he sought to regulate it by focusing on the mechanics of publishing: the ancillary process of counting words, assigning them a monetary value, submitting manuscripts and tracking their whereabouts, negotiating with editors and publishers, collecting his published works, and finally signing them and distributing them to friends and strangers in the same way he had first sent out the manuscripts for review. The cycle was comprehensible, regular, and repeatable. Efficiency might control the instability not only of the imagination but also of modern life itself.

Perhaps the turn here from a modern to a modernist may be explained by London’s other mode of writing, the theatrical or, as it is more commonly ascribed, the political. We find affinities with the modernists not so much in his aesthetic but in his thematic concerns. That sense of instability that Tichi isolates as a hallmark of American modernism appears throughout London’s work. For example, I agree with Stephen Mexal’s recent analysis of London’s stories of the North: they interrogate the binaries of savage and civilized, white and nonwhite, natural law and man-made law. Read for years as upholding those binaries, these stories actually reveal the

savagery within the white, especially Anglo-Saxon, imperialistic drive. As Mexal concludes, “most literary criticism, in evaluating the ontological and political hierarchies posited by literary naturalism, has been content to aver that those hierarchies hew to a simple deterministic order governed by the survival of the fittest.” But London’s fiction “suggests that one cannot know what *fittest* actually means . . . . Most often, ‘survival of the fittest’ simply means ‘lucky.’” (209). That word *lucky* should prompt us to see how Mexal could extend his argument even further. Concerned that London may or may not have intended this consequence of his racist thought, he nevertheless accepts London’s seeming narrative ambiguity as a sign that he is creating a space where savagery wins out “in a way that critically examines the role of luck and circumstance in constructing personhood.” But London defines capitalism as the operation of economic luck, as essentially civilized gambling, and so we can accept the intentionality of these narratives but note what London intentionally leaves out: the political alternative of socialism. We tend to think that London left his politics behind when he went to hunt for gold, but in fact his revolutionary socialism infuses all his writings, if only when it is absent as a viable alternative to corrupt, so-called civilized practices. A socialist government would never have allowed the gold rush to happen in the first place. That essentially is the argument of all his Northland fiction. The communitarian peoples of the North, unpolluted by the white race, live closest to his political ideals, and they do not place any value whatsoever on gold metal found in the ground. Only Anglo-Saxons, the wolves of the north, and the Russians before them (see, for example, “Negore, the Coward”) gamble with their own lives and the lives of hundreds of

thousands to shore up their economic system that sustains a corrupted civilization that pretends to have left this savage state behind.

So this handbook also emphasizes London's political thought. London never moved beyond a skeletal presentation of his ideas, content to attack rather than construct. He famously declared that all liberal democratic solutions—charity work being the prime tool—had failed, especially in a city severely divided by class difference like London. The only real solution was to bulldoze the entire city and start over, though what the new political architecture would look like was beyond his imagining. It certainly wouldn't be a monarchy invested in international warfare, like the Boer War, that had practically bankrupted the country and so created new forms of social malaise for the underclass. London was concerned with instigation and shock. He wasn't a propagandist, he was a troublemaker. When it looked like his role as troublemaker had run its course, he resigned from the Socialist Party. He had done his duty, he felt. He had exposed the fallacies and illusions of capitalist society. If unions, capitalists, and political parties had no interest in reworking the status quo from the ground up, then he would exit the theater of politics and live on his ranch, guided by a local and individualized economic system that above all else sustained his artistic production.

In their recent book on Pound, magazines, and modernism, Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman return to basics: "Modernity is a social condition. Modernism was a response to that condition." Modernity "is an urban condition" "reached in certain parts of the world in the late nineteenth century. . . . a mass phenomenon"

characterized by the rise of technology, print culture, and material consumption.<sup>11</sup> London called it the Machine Age, and created his role of political artist to respond to it. If we keep this basic terminology in mind, I think we see why the emphasis on London as a modernist takes us further than the usual periodization of naturalism and realism. He participated in but exceeded that literary historical period. London's response to his times was deeply complex (I would argue, not contradictory), a response that we are still grappling to understand. We can do that only if start with the idea of London the author. We need to locate his work in his life, not the other way around, and we need to somehow view his multivarious, extremely wide-ranging production—so prolific, so unceasing—as a whole. I hope this handbook's essays go some distance to achieve that understanding.

---

<sup>11</sup> Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman, *Modernism in the Magazines: An Introduction* (Yale University Press: New Haven, Conn., 2010), 27.