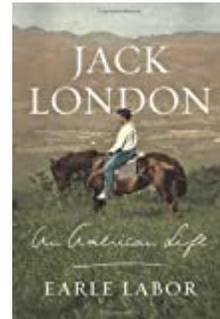




Earle Labor. *Jack London: An American Life.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013. 480 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-17848-2.



Reviewed by James Baugess

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There is no doubt that Jack London is one of the most-read authors in the canon of American literature—especially in high schools and colleges across the United States. Many a youngster has read with angst and wonder London’s short story “To Build a Fire” (1902), and gripped with pleasure and rapidly beating hearts the novels *White Fang* (1906) and *The Call of the Wild* (1903). A man of letters who produced prose that has excited readers for over one hundred years is worthy of close examination. Earle Labor, London’s biographer, has captured the essence of London’s short, albeit fascinating, American life.

The highlights of London’s early life are well known: his questionable paternity, his hardscrabble life, his willingness to solve problems with his fists, and his troubled (and ultimately) failed first marriage. He lived a life of excitement, high adventure, and danger. Though Theodore Roosevelt did not always approve of London’s worldview, he praised London’s work. Nevertheless, London lived to the fullest his short forty years of existence.

Labor stands as the acknowledged major authority on the novelist, and has the credentials and publications to merit the assertion. Labor serves as the curator of the Jack London Museum and Research Center in Shreve-

port, Louisiana, and he is Emeritus Professor of American Literature at Centenary College in Louisiana. Labor has given a life of study and research to London and his era, and his skill in constructing his narrative reveals his expertise and love for his subject. This work is not his first on London. For Twayne’s US Author series, he wrote *Jack London* (1974) and published a revised edition, which he subsequently co-wrote with Jeanne Campbell Reesman (1994). The author knows his subject.

Labor, like many young boys, became enamored with the literary work of London while in the seventh grade in Oklahoma. He experienced further exposure to London during his undergraduate education, and again when he read *Martin Eden* (1909) during his naval shore leave in 1948; therefore, this current work is the product of decades of interest and study. Labor wrote his most recent biography of London to set the record straight about all the negative caricatures of London as a drunk, drug addict, brawler, and womanizer, among other sensational faults, that Labor sees as mostly myth. Even so, the previous interpretations of London’s life are not entirely myth, as Labor reveals throughout his work. Some of these views on London’s life and character reflect what London himself wanted others to think in reference to his persona. Labor conceded that “London’s vigorous

self-promotion was responsible for many of these distortions, and his sensational exploits made him a magnet for the tabloid newspapersâ (p. xi). Labor thinks that London was much more complex and that there were logical reasons for his flamboyant behavior: âbeneath this persona, however, was a different Jack London: hypersensitive, contentious, moody (possibly bipolar), and mostly medically frail despite his vigorous muscularityâ (p. xii). After all, London spent his youth delivering papers, hauling ice, and setting up pins in bowling alleys; he became a âwork-beastâ in the dangerous factories of the Gilded Age, and later a prisoner. Out of these experiences his legend grew by âmeans of pluck, luck, and sheer determination,â and for his era, âLondonâs story is quintessentially Americanâ (p. xii).

Labor enjoyed a relationship with Londonâs daughters, Joan and Becky, as well as with Anna Strunkyâs daughter, with whom London fell in love in his early days. In addition, Labor used a collection of previously unpublished letters to Londonâs second wife, Charmian, that he acquired at an auction. Believing that accounts of Londonâs life lacked a complete portrayal of the man, and with additional sources at hand, he wrote this most recent biography because âthe world of Jack London is still calling for a reliable account of his life story,â and as a result, âthe present volume is a response to that callâ (p. xvii). What Labor hoped to achieve was a biography that is âas accurate, fair, and balanced as I can make it, based upon more than a half century of serious studyâ (p. xviii). Only Laborâs readers can decide if he achieved his goal.

Despite Laborâs lofty goal, readers of H-Socialisms may not be as interested in Londonâs personal adventures and his stormy relationships with women as they are in his views and work on behalf of the socialist cause in America. London suffered many deprivations in his early years, working painfully long hours with little pay and few safety standards. He also spent time in jail and experienced severe setbacks in his health, adventures, work life, and personal relationships. By 1894, he was a socialist, due to the things he had observed and experienced. In âHow I Became a Socialistâ (1903), he wrote that he began to view his life as one at the bottom, or as part of what sociologists at the time called the âsubmerged tenth.â To rise in the world would require education, which he would use to promote socialism. The nationâs social and economic wrongs needed correction and he determined to preach the socialist gospel publicly at every opportunity.

London was a charter member of the Ruskin Club (a group of Oakland intellectuals, mostly socialists, more Fabian than Marxian), founded by Frederick Bamford in 1898, and soon began speaking at various socialist gatherings in the Bay Area. In an effort to supplement his income, he began an extensive speaking tour suggested to him by Upton Sinclair. When several prominent liberals, including Clarence Darrow and Charlotte Perkins Gillman, founded the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, âthe ISS needed a president who was a dynamic model of liberal manhoodâ; hence, âJack London in absentia, was elected unanimouslyâ (p. 224). In Boston, âupon finishing his socialist sermon,â writes Labor, âthe famous activist Mother Jones marched up the rostrum and, to the crowdâs delight planted kisses on both his cheeksâ (p. 237). His receptions at Harvard and Yale were equally stimulating. Nevertheless, his relationships with various socialist groups were not always positive. When London published *The Iron Heel* in 1908, the response of the socialist press was cool at best. According to Labor, the Socialist Labor Party thought it set back the socialist cause, although Labor does not elaborate on their criticisms.

The image of socialists as racially progressive and enlightened does not hold for London. When asked to cover the world championship heavyweight bout between African American Jack Johnson and the former champion, James Jeffries, he took the assignment for one hundred dollars per day plus expenses. Labor suggests of London that, âlike the rest of white America, he yearned to see the arrogant black man dethronedâ (p. 306).

When Mexico unraveled during the revolutionary wave centered on Ricardo Flores MagÃ³n and Emilio Zapata, Londonâs sympathies were with the Mexican revolutionaries. Over the course of time, however, Londonâs sympathies took a right turn. This was especially evident in the early days of World War I. London wrote of the âmongrelizedâ mestizos who were bleeding Mexico dry and wreaking havoc on the land. Oddly enough, Labor interjects, âit was not Londonâs denigration of mestizosânor his blatant Anglo-Saxon racismâthat infuriated the socialists so much as Londonâs support of American interventionâ (p. 350). The socialists also objected to âhis endorsement of the capitalist spirit of enterprise and efficiency, and what they viewed as his subversion of the Marxist spirit of revolution.â For London, the only thing that could save Mexico was the âintervention of American military and industrial power.â âJackâs split with the party was assured,â writes Labor, âwhen he came out openly in support of Britain and the Allies in the Great War.â Even more troubling to the Left was the fact that

London felt compelled to carry an automatic pistol to protect himself (p. 306). His enthusiasm for the Socialist Party waned over time, and when one of his friends resigned from the party, he wrote that the party lacked fire and had lost sight of the class struggle. Despite his socialist sympathies, London was not averse to making big money when the opportunity arrived. On the same day as his resignation, he wrote to his daughters to ask if they liked the furs he had given them.

Despite the efforts of Labor to deny the effects of London's earlier life on his middle years, his habits eventually destroyed him. The heavy smoking, hard drinking, and general neglect of his health took its toll. London was forty when he died. *Jack London: An American Life*

ends rather abruptly, without a restatement or explanation of London's literary and historical importance. Labor has attempted neither an in-depth analysis of London's socialist ideals nor a literary biography or analysis of his writings; rather, the book is exactly what the subtitle promises.

H-Socialisms subscribers may find more about London's socialist activities and ideas in Carolyn Johnson's *Jack London, American Radical?* (1984). Nevertheless, Labor's work will remain the definitive biography of London for at least a generation. Students and devotees of biography will find much of interest in this sweeping narrative of London as a man of letters who led, as Labor notes, a quintessentially American life.

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