

# Jack London Newsletter

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ANNOUNCING  
THE FORTHCOMING PUBLICATION

OF  
A. M. ZEREV'S

## JACK LONDON

This 72-page pamphlet was published in Russian in late 1975 to commemorate the centennial of London's birth. It is an extraordinarily sensitive essay concerning London's works and one that may bring new insights to the English-speaking reader.

It should be ready in April or May. Those who have already ordered and paid for this translation will have their pre-publication price honored. The price to all others, that is those who order it during 1979, will be \$3.00. Make-checks to Jack London Newsletter.

This study is being published in a limited edition of only 500 copies.



Clarice Stasz<sup>1</sup>

Most devotees of Jack London are aware that his second wife, Charmian, wrote a biography of him and a travel log of their *Snark* adventures. The biography has been dismissed by many as being "sentimental" and euphemistic in its presentation of some facts, such as the origins of Jack's birth.<sup>2</sup> Several biographers mention Charmian's *Log of the Snark*, but none seems to have studied the volume in preparing their discussions of the *Snark* voyage. Rather, researchers refer to Jack's brief, somewhat fictionalized *Cruise of the Snark* or Martin Johnson's sketchy *Through the South Seas with Jack London*. Thus Charmian London's writings have been virtually ignored by London scholars. Here I will trace her writing activities: their origins, Jack's influences, and the curious deterioration of her efforts following Jack's death.

Charmian's mother, Dayelle Wiley, was an unusually literate young woman for one raised in a Wisconsin log cabin. She early took to composing lengthy poems and romantic stories as an escape from her family's turbulent ways. Some of these were published in *Godey's Ladies Book* and California newspapers.<sup>3</sup> As the eldest, she educated the other siblings, her favorite being Ninetta, who was later to take over Charmian's rearing when Daisy died at age 30. (The Wiley clan maneuvered the six-year-old girl from the hands of her devoted father, Willard Kittredge.) Ninetta followed Daisy's path, publishing non-fiction articles, often about travel topics, such as "Autumn Days in Ventura" or "To the Feet of Shasta" in such magazines as *Sunset*.

Emphasizing the humanities and arts, Ninetta educated Charmian at home. At age 16, the girl entered Mills Seminary, then

in the process of becoming a college, to specialize in music, literature, and philosophy. Such higher education for anyone, man or woman, was considered bizarre in those days by all but the wealthy. In her twenties, Charmian joined Netta and husband Roscoe Eames, who had taken over publication of the noted West Coast literary magazine, *Overland Monthly*. It was here she obtained the meticulous editorial craft she could later apply with deftness to Jack London's manuscripts.

Charmian's first publications of her own were likely book reviews for the *Overland*. Unfortunately, these essays went unsigned and cannot be identified independently from other sources. Her earliest identifiable articles were "A Rival of Blind Tom in California" and "Cross-Saddle Riding for Women." The former was an account of a seven-year-old blind boy whose piano talents astounded his rural community. An accomplished pianist herself, Charmian was invited to corroborate the boy's ability, which she did. Her writing displays a firm control of the journalist's craft, with its straightforward, concise language and human interest touches.

"Cross-Saddle Riding for Women" is characteristic of feminist physical culture articles of the time with its assurances that riding astride was a healthful, indeed preferable form of going on horseback for women. Some of this essay displays the tongue-in-cheek humor Charmian expressed throughout her life:

It does seem incredible that for some five hundred years intelligent women have been twisting their bodies into the one-sided position on horseback, and it may be that if the origin of the side-saddle were more generally known, there would be less delay about discarding it as an out-of-date nuisance. According to the records, Richard the Second of England took to wife Anne of Bohemia, who, unluckily for herself and especially for posterity of her sex, suffered from hip disease. The royal lady, unluckily again for all concerned, cherished a fondness for riding, and some contrivance had to be devised to meet her peculiar needs. Thus the side-saddle came into existence, and it is more than probably that the first cavalcade of mounted cripples—for of course the court ladies were not to be outdone by their royal mistress—called forth many stares of wonder and smiles of amusement for spectators of both sexes, while it is a safe hazard that the court jester laughed in his sleeve. Here, as in countless other things, vogue plays a desperate game with judgment and sense, and whatever happens to be the fad wins.

Charmian spent most of 1901-02 on the East Coast, including a brief trip to Europe. During this time she published nothing that we know of. Upon return, her "Jack London Afloat" informed *Sunset* readers of that upcoming author's new sloop, the *Spray*, upon which he intended to write, board his family, and entertain friends. The final paragraph is highly ironic in view of events that would shortly transpire:

And now we may expect to see at almost any time, Jack-tar London's curly head above the cockpit rail of his flying sloop, all canvas spread; and while the wild flower vandals who infest the Piedmont hills reveal this spring undisturbed in the poppy field within the gates of the Bungalow, lusty yachtsmen skimming the familiar waters of San Francisco Bay, may listen for the industrious click-clicking of a typewriter mingling with the singing of ores and the swish of blown spray, as

Jack London sails his boat and weaves romance.

Within a few months, the romance would weave Charmian into his life. However trivial today, Charmian's early publications hint that she could have settled upon a comfortable niche in the world of magazines or newspapers. As we know, she did not. Jack London came along and she chose the role of assistant to her author lover and husband. An independent woman for thirty-three years, she was understandably proud of her virtuoso typing and shorthand skills at a time when most secretaries were male.

Except for a series of newspaper articles on the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, Charmian's work shifted to editing Jack's manuscripts.<sup>4</sup> She was granted *carte-blanche* by him in preparing the final manuscript of *The Sea-Wolf* while he was in Japan:

As I understand it, Macmillan's expect to bring out the *Sea Wolf* late this fall. I shall not be able to go over the proofsheets. And you must do this for me. I shall write Brett telling him this and asking him to get into communication with you. In the first place, before any of the book is set up in print, you must get from him the original ms. in his possession. Much in this ms. will have been cut out in the *Century* published part. What was cut out I want put back in the book. On the other hand, many *good* alterations have been made by you, and George, and by the *Century* people—these alterations I want in the book. So here's the task—: Take the Macmillan ms., and, reading the *Century* published stuff, put into the Macmillan ms. the good alterations.

Furthermore, anything that offends you, strike out or change on your own responsibility. You know me well enough to know I won't kick.<sup>5</sup>

Upon his return he overloaded her with typing and editing work, which she continued to do even through the winter of 1904-5, a time when their personal relationship seemed doomed to end and she suffered a serious monthlong illness. He paid her with his original copies of his manuscripts, as he did throughout their life together. She decided consciously she would rather contribute to his writing than anyone else's, including her own.

After their marriage, at the onset of the *Snark* voyage in 1907, the couple decided Charmian should keep a lengthy diary of their adventures, which was to be mailed home and sent round robin among their many friends. This, they rightfully thought, would save them time and repetitious accounts. Soon into the voyage Jack became so impressed with her narrative that he urged her to prepare the material in book form. Throughout this journey beset by many physical and emotional hardships, perhaps none was more trying for Charmian than this task. Jack was a most demanding advisor, driving her to tears on some days.<sup>6</sup> Yet she knew he was correct in his guidance. She wrote about her feelings in letters to Blanche Partington and Netta, the most complete statement being:

I don't care about it [the book] for myself as I do for Jack—it seems like "making good" to the world, for the possession of him! . . . But the best of all is that he says it is "good Stuff" that I am doing. And I tell myself that it is good in a way . . . a great advance over my first work, Jack tells me . . . Somehow, all at once, I seem to be coming into my own in a way—getting back some practical

yours, and the rigorous following up of that education in my life with Jack. Without office-life to vex and distract my life is now all education—the very living of it is such, and the work I do for Jack is practical education; and there is no let-up. Wouldn't it be fine to go on writing. Perhaps I shall . . . I don't think my style is anything like Jack's. I'd love to have his style; but I don't want to copy anyone's style. I think I express myself more directly, logically, and simply, than I used to, what of his influence—and of this I am glad, if it be so.<sup>7</sup>

She concluded this discussion by stating that, at the least, the work was preparing her for future involvement in journalism, that she could join Jack as a war correspondent if the opportunity arose.

Once home in 1910, Charmian apparently lacked either time or interest to continue her work, for the travel manuscripts went unmentioned in her personal diaries. In 1911 she confessed to a reporter that attempts to market them had been unsuccessful. She did write during this period; however, her creations were adapted by Jack for his own books. Her strength—descriptive writing—complimented his starker style, and he regularly assigned her specific topics to provide padding for his rougher forms. For example, while he was writing *Valley of the Moon*, she provided selections on innumerable passages, including Saxon's sewing and lingerie, household objects, pregnancy, the scenery on the trip through Northern California, and more. Similarly, she later provided much of the description for "The Red One." During the Mexican war, Charmian attended events Jack could not get to, providing him with sufficient notes for him to write articles in the first person. Thus her dream of seven years earlier, of being a journalist, came to fulfillment, although it was Jack who completed the articles and received full credit.

During the *Dirigo* voyage in 1912, without Jack's knowledge she wrote "The Wheel," a slight fictional sketch based upon her observations of sailors' interactions and games with one another. Jack thought the story most acceptable when he read it, and soon sold it to the *Semi-Monthly Magazine Section* and some unknown British journal. Charmian's evaluation of the work was less favorable. She valued it only symbolically, in that it was the first income of her own she brought in since her marriage. In later years she not only refrained from mentioning the work in her biographical sketches, she specifically asked people to ignore it. On this voyage too she kept a log as notes for possible future book publication.

By 1915 Macmillan accepted Charmian's *Snark* manuscripts, and decided to split the material in two volumes. *Log of the Snark* appeared to excellent reviews.<sup>8</sup>

. . . She writes with charm, she shows keen observation and an abounding interest in the human side of the experiences she met with, and she knows how to enliven her pages with humor and anecdote.

. . . Being a sociable sort of woman, she had no trouble getting into the palaces, the homes, and somewhat into the lives of the people. Being naturally curious, the author took special interest in the women, in their customs and habits, their religion, morals, and social standards. Few writers have gone into these features as thoroughly and as carefully as Mrs. London.

Many reviewers agreed that the book was an excellent companion to Jack's *Cruise of the Snark*, and several apologized for approaching the work with the expectation that it would be mediocre.

The reviews were deserving. Even today the book retains a charm and appeal beyond obvious nostalgia. Furthermore, as a study of the day-to-day habits of the Londons, the book is indispensable. Save for certain episodes of the most intimate passion or drama, the information provided here considerably matches the material in Charmian's personal diaries from the time. Indeed, Jack thought the book too revealing of their intimate life. Still, his hard-driving paid off in this volume, and he could rightly be proud of it.

During the final months of Jack's life, Charmian was editing *Our Hawaii*, the task serving a bridge to the widowhood she saw approaching in her clearer moments. Thus when he decided to go to New York in the fall of 1916, she refused to accompany him, arguing that she needed the time to meet her deadline. The success of *The Log* inspired her with rare confidence about the possibility of her earning money as a journalist. Not a writer like Jack, she would be quick to point out, but one who could spin fine anecdotes about travel adventures or human interest material.

With Jack's death she was not freed—as some might expect—to develop her own career, but more burdened than when he was alive, for now she must carry his faltering banner, secure his ranch from its indebtedness, support the various families and friends he had fed, and oversee the publication of his surviving writings. Though she hoped her own writing would bring in money, these other duties continually drained her energy, eroded her time. Contrary to oft-written claims, Charmian never had much income, and though she was proud enough to create the appearance of the rich widow, it was a facade constructed through guile and sacrifice. In fact, the unremitting financial pressures steadily ate at her self-esteem as the years passed, leaving little to feed her creativity.

*Our Hawaii* appeared in 1917, to good, though not glowing, reviews. The writing retained passages of charm and richness, but the gleam, the sparkle of *The Log*, which so entranced readers, failed to shine here. Jack had been too ill to work as an editor for her, and his many problems may have disturbed the concentration required for this type of work.

And with Jack's death also passed her sense of competency as a writer. Though George Brett of Macmillan, noted New York critic John Hovey, and others in publishing praised and encouraged her to continue, she preoccupied herself with her inadequacies. On Brett's urgings she did complete *The Book of Jack London*, at the cost of a most austere existence between 1918-1920. She so exhausted herself by the end that she contracted the appended bibliography to an assistant, Margaret Barrangon. Though Charmian later caught many of Ms. Barrangon's errors in that compilation, she was too preoccupied with other problems to catch them all, and London scholars have inevitably faulted her for those deficiencies.

This two-volume ecomium to Jack was well-received by most reviewers, who based their opinions more on Jack's personality than the book itself. Perhaps only one reviewer, Lewis Mumford, judged the book with perception, calling it "one of the best, and one of the very worst examples of the art that has come out of America during the last decade." He admired Charmian's utter frankness (which we know today to have been less open than it seemed then) about Jack, her willingness to mention his faults, his intimate musings, his inner

struggles.

The problem, he rightly indicated, was the style. "Had she been able to write clear, coherent prose, this titanic weaking might have lived in the memory of men as a sort of American Cassanova." The structure of the book lacked all perspective, as though Charmian were so blinded she could not distinguish the relevance of Jack's favorite piano piece from his most searing Socialist speech. The prose exuded the violet hues so popular two decades earlier. Discrimination in her selection of materials had appeared in her previous works, and even in her pre-London days her prose had displayed a modern clarity. What could have accounted for so terrible a book, one that would mislead so many in their denunciations of her character and talents?

Perhaps the major reason was her choice of editors: she could scarcely have selected so poorly. First, Netta and Edward Payne, hardly modern stylists, oversaw major changes. Second, George Sterling, whose little continuing fame rests more on his life adventures than his writing, spent long days with Charmian, always leading her to believe her worst instincts were fine. Finally, her good friend John Hervey may have been an adept editor of a magazine about horses, but that hardly qualified him to evaluate a major biography.

George Brett alone was sufficiently competent to judge, and he ordered the work be cut in half. Unfortunately, the day his letter arrived, Charmian received word from Charles Boon, her English agent, that he was ready to print the manuscript immediately and without revision. Thus she doubted Brett's opinion, and sought another American publisher.

Still, how odd that the friends and wife of a man so responsible for the change to modern voice in American literature would think a florid, embroidered prose, decorating a story with excess panels, flourishes, and sleeves, would constitute good art. How curious that Charmian, since girlhood a reader of the most innovative and controversial American literature, did not recognize either her husband's historical position in that art nor the worthwhileness of her adapting the type of contemporary writers. No, she, and presumably her errant advisors, believed "people do not want long, perfect sentence construction any more. They want up-to-date, direct phraseology. Jack, though a great artist, would sacrifice form to matter. No art for art's sake with him. And it all boiled down to: *What is art.*"<sup>9</sup>

Brett still thought her to have potential, and encouraged her to revise *Our Hawaii*, so as to include Jack's essay "My Hawaiian Aloha." Published in 1922, this book is best seen as a separate volume from the first of the same name. The *Snark* material is cut almost two-thirds, and a large addition (140) pages, covers Jack's later visits to the islands, as well as Charmian's return as a widow. This final section has little liveliness or interest for those not exploring Jack's life. One senses the tiredness, the struggle waged each day in putting words to page. The reviews were mixed, generally of the form, "In spite of being badly written the book derives some interest from its exuberant impressions and also from the biographical facts about the author's husband."

The completion of *Cherry* (or "Eyes of Asia") was her next goal. *Cosmopolitan* agreed to print Jack's unfinished manuscript in one issue, with Charmian's version of the way he intended to complete it in the subsequent issue. Fiction had never been her medium, and her surviving manuscript of the work runs interminably, a litany of all the errors the novice fiction writer can mindlessly repeat. Although she tried determinedly to see the full volume in

print, working over five years on it, she never succeeded, and with no loss to the London devotee. *Cosmopolitan* published the briefest abridgment of her work, and it only corroborated one's sense of the work from Jack's segment, namely, that *Cherry* was a sadly unfitting work for a great writer to have left hanging.

Although Charmian was to publish sporadically to the early 1940s, she now returned to her more proper form, the journalistic essay. Among these sundry articles only one displayed the competence of her best works, a memorial to George Sterling. How ironic that George, who was more responsible than anyone in the Crowd for the disparagement of Charmian, should have his grave so sweetly garlanded by her perceptive phrases. Here was George at his most delightful and deplorable, virtues and faults presented in balance and perspective, with no blame attached to his unsavoriness. The description included many touches of humor, such as an explanation of his strange habits (he would never carry a parcel) and accounts of his antics (his notorious hasheesh parties. *Overland Monthly* so liked the article that a half year later they printed it in abridged form).

Generally, Charmian spent her days as a writer would—putting in long hours with notes and drafts, but her production steadily deteriorated. She simply did not know what to say, and in the 1930s was still writing variations of her cross-saddle article. She wrote saccharine essays on pets, exotic birds, or Sonoma County, and effusive introductions to books authored by her friends.

Doubtless some of her capacity had been impaired by arterial deterioration, for by the end of the decade it is clear that her ability to categorize and order data had vanished. It was partly in recognition of this loss that she helped both Irving Stone and Joan London with their biographies of Jack.

Nonetheless she took on new projects, hoping to complete a one-volume version of her own biography as well as a book on the *Dirigo* voyage. She saw herself as a writer, was a faithful member of P.E.N., retained contacts in the Bay Area literary scene (particularly with the venerable Gertrude Atherton), helped Sonoma County women writers by hosting Penwoman meetings and assisting in the production of the writers' magazine, *Redwood Empire Woman*, and encouraged the young writers who sought her help. The tragedy for her was believing herself at base unworthy of the role of a literary person.

In retrospect, Charmian London's writings—excepting *Log of the Snark*—retain only a specialized interest for either students of London, of Pacific Island history, or of the history of the privileged class in American society. She had the potential for a journalistic career, and might have done so had Jack not died at a critical point in her development. His caring support and editorial comment had not yet bolstered her confidence and skills sufficiently for her to achieve a professional sense of her strengths and limitations, a feeling for her own voice. Her later editorial consultants were either sycophantic or incompetent. Her own self-effacement prevented her from making the courageous moves that a developing craftsman or artist must make to achieve excellence. Her accumulating failures furthered other insecurities. Youthful dreams led to a sad nightmarish reality.

Thus in her final years, this woman who so loved independence, who had hoped to support herself through writing—however modest the results—, who aspired to fill her dead poet mother's shoes, futilely sat at her desk in knowledge that her expectations were fantasies. She accepted her fate without rancor or felt

victimization, took pleasure in the daily attempts to put a manuscript together, and there, in this segment of her life, is one sight of Charmian London worth admiration. Ultimately, she would rather be known for this determination than as the writer of some books.

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## NOTES

1. I am grateful for the assistance of Diane Price in part of this research, and to Milo

## The Toast: A Turn-of-the-Century Fad

Shepard for permission to quote from letters.

2. For a more detailed discussion of London biographers' views of Charmian, see my article "The Social Construction of Biography: The Case of Jack London," *Modern Fiction Studies* 22 (1076):51-71.
3. Daisy's manuscripts of poems and stories are in the Jack London collection, Huntington Library, under "Kittredge family."
4. These articles were written for Iowa newspapers. Some are in the London scrapbooks, Huntington Library.
5. Jack London to Charmian Kittredge, 4-17-04, Huntington Library.
6. Charmian describes her struggles with this manuscript in her personal diaries, Huntington Library. I discuss this more fully in my forthcoming book, *Mate-Woman: The Story of Charmian Kittredge London*.
7. Charmian's letters to Netta (Huntington Library) and Blanche Partington (Bancroft Library) repeatedly express self-effacement over her writing. She refers to herself an "amateur" and worries that her work will not be an embarrassment to Jack. Only toward the end of the voyage does she display some self-confidence. The quote is from a letter to Netta, 11-10-07, Huntington Library.
8. The best sampling of reviews are in the London scrapbooks, Huntington Library.
9. This is from a letter to Frederick Bamford, 5-11-21, Walker Collection, Huntington Library.
10. This is not a complete listing of Charmian's published writings. After Jack's death she wrote and published essays on various topics—Jack, her travels, animals—which appeared in newspapers and obscure magazines. She never kept records on these publications, and in almost all instances the manuscripts have also disappeared. There is also reason to believe that some of the minor articles written about her during the twenties and thirties were written by herself and printed whole by the journalists over their bylines. She did not object, preferring that she be presented from her own viewpoint.

James Henry

In the early 1900's toasts were the "in" thing. As evidence to support this statement we have, *Prosit: a book of toasts*, published by Paul Elder of San Francisco. It was issued under the by-line of Clotho, a pseudonym of a Spinners Club member. Research shows the first edition was copyrighted May 31, 1904. No record could be found on the publication date of the second edition. A third edition appeared Dec. 1905. The fourth edition reprint was published April 27, 1907.

What importance could this be to Jack London fans? To the serious collector of early London, a great deal. The first separate, and untitled, printing of the Malemute Kid's famous toast to the man on the trail appears on page 56 of this book. The original of the quote is printed on pages 105 and 118 in the short story "To the Man on the Trail". This selection can be found in London's first book, *The son of the wolf* (1900). This is very early London, indeed. And, I might add, a must for any complete collection.

Anyone wishing to add *Prosit* to his files is faced with a most difficult problem in selecting the first printing from among the confusion of editions. To that end, I supply the 15 major "points" that distinguish the book you must have.

1. No double-line box bordering the copyright page.
2. Page 1, line 5: weep,
3. Page 5, line 18: pocula:
4. Page 23, line 18: You may
5. Page 23, line 20: But here's
6. Page 23, toast 6: (No author given for last toast)
7. Page 24, line 3: ranges,