

Introduction

First-edition collectors need little searching to add *John Barleycorn* to their shelves. It was not only a best-seller in 1913, it was serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* and made into a movie whose scenes of children in saloons brought out the censors' scissors. This was, after all, the heyday of the Prohibition movement. *John Barleycorn* played a significant role in thrusting that cause toward its goal: an amendment to make alcoholic beverages illegal.

Although London consciously intended the work as propaganda, as in earlier years he had created *The Iron Heel* to warn the public about the dangers of capitalist oligarchy, it survives as much more than a quaint historical document. Indeed, critics known for their disapproval of London in general have described the work as a literary masterpiece. What lifts it to these heights is both its multiplicity of interpretation and its exploration of that most daunting theme, the meaning of life. It is a curious amalgam of confession, sociological commentary, and philosophy. And oddly, though it fails in any one of those categories, its totality is uniquely appealing and satisfying.

What likely most surprises readers familiar with only the mythic Jack London is the very opening page with its discussion of his voting for the suffrage amendment. (Like many Western states, California gave women the vote before the federal

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government agreed to grant it to their Eastern and Southern sisters.) The mythic Jack London is the archetypal macho sexist alcoholic American writer. Two sources have sketched this caricature. One consists of the many biographers (such as Irving Stone, Richard O'Connor, and Andrew Sinclair) who approached London's life with that prejudice firmly in mind and selected only those facts that seemed to fit it. The other is from most readers' exposure to London being his fiction, notably his Yukon tales or *The Sea Wolf*, stories peopled with tough, aggressive men.

The real Jack London was much more complex. He had a strongly developed "feminine" side, in the Jungian sense of that term. He admired strong, intelligent, talented women and surrounded himself with them. Many of his stories and novels feature women as assertive, vital, and brave as the men, what was known then as New Women. The most significant love of his life, second wife Charmian Kittredge, was a remarkably gutsy and adventurous companion. Though both were outspoken and independent in temperament, they believed such "masculine" virtue must be complemented by nurturance, generosity toward others, and a fostering of the artistic and intuitive. Jack dubbed Charmian his "mate-woman," his partner in life, this when wives and husbands went their separate ways. His friends were much peeved at her interloping!

As one quickly learns in *John Barleycorn*, Jack London became acquainted with liquor and ale in early childhood. His story of carrying a pail of beer to his stepfather, John London, in the field is so poignant that one cannot pass it off easily as invention. We know too from Jack's boyhood friend Frank Atherton that Jack's stepfather took the youngsters to bars, and, while drinking whiskey at home in the evenings, would repeat himself or

simply fall asleep mid-sentence. The signs are strong that John London was more than a casual drinker. In his younger days he had been a crafty, capable prairie settler who supported a large family by befriending Indians and borrowing their ways. When his wife died, he took his smallest children and moved to San Francisco, where he married Flora Wellman and welcomed her out-of-wedlock son. His health was not good, and his talents were not fit for city jobs. It is no wonder he went to the saloons and spun stories of past adventures.

Although Jack London more than once wrote inquisitive readers that *John Barleycorn* was not fiction, that it was "bare, bald, absolute fact," its facts are shaped by his strong fictional craft and his sociological bent. His compelling style can lead careless readers to misconstrue the frequency and extent of his drinking. These influences are particularly apparent in his descriptions of adolescent boozing. He ingratiates the reader with his tales of being a kind of Peck's Bad Boy. However, he was fifteen before he tried out the delinquency of oyster pirating. Up to that time he showed himself to be an earnest and obedient student in school, a hard-working youth who sought part-time jobs to help his family out. He was already the budding autodidact and well-known among both librarians and patrons at the Oakland Library.

In chapters nine and ten London astutely analyzes the role of the saloon in shaping male identity. This was a hard period in American culture for men with regard to feeling secure about their roles in life. On the one hand, Teddy Roosevelt and the mass media had fostered the myth of the tough, physically courageous man, while increasingly men were working in offices and organizations. It is not a coincidence that the Boy Scouts and spectator sports took off during this period.

The factory men in Jack London's Oakland faced periods of uncertain employment interspersed with sixteen-hour workdays in dirty, dangerous factories. The saloon provided them rituals surrounding alcohol to win their "manhood's spurs."

As an adolescent striking out for adult status, young Jack complied, all the while despising the routine. Decades later sociologist Howard S. Becker would reveal that, as Jack described, drugs are discomfiting at first try, that the user has to be taught to perceive their effects as pleasurable. Young Jack understood this process. Still, though he saw through the game, he was ashamed of his avoiding it and was unable throughout most of his life to resist the pressures from male peers to down one more.

London was prescient in proposing that two kinds of alcoholism existed, one hereditary, the other acquired. His case was the latter, he argues, for he had "no organic, chemical predispositions" toward the substance. Since Prohibition would remove the social pressures that nurture desire for alcohol in young men, alcoholism can be virtually eliminated, he predicted. It is only in the past decade that research has corroborated London's thesis. Investigators have found differences in the behavior patterns of alcoholics whose family line exhibits the addiction and those from families that don't. Interestingly, London expressed more of the syndrome of the nonfamilial alcoholic, namely a proclivity for depression and drinking under stress.

Of much dispute among London scholars is whether Jack London should even be called an alcoholic. He recounts, for example, long stretches of time without drinking, implying he was always in control, hence could not have been addicted to the stuff. (Besides, he keeps reminding, he never

did acquire a taste for it.) He was by no means a day-in and day-out drinker.

On the other hand, Charmian's diaries and his own admissions suggest he was an alcoholic as professionals use the term today. Most notably, when he drank or abstained was easy to predict, as *John Barleycorn* shows. He abstained on long sea voyages, whether on the sealing ship *Sophie Sutherland* or on his trip across the Pacific. On the ranch, he drank only later in the day, once his writing was done. In the city or with certain friends he drank heavily, and sometimes became argumentative, provocative, and downright nasty to those around him. He could be called a situational alcoholic or a binge drinker.

Another characteristic of alcoholism is the development of tolerance, which he documents well in chapter thirty-four. He says his friends never saw him drunk, and many testified to that fact. He learned to order two drinks at once at bars. As this heavy drinking escalated, his old depression was aroused, and he required more liquor to quiet it. "Alcohol tells truth, but its truth is not normal," he warns.

Denial is a psychological trait common to alcoholism. Here London is ambiguous. Chapter thirty concludes, "Oh, I was thoroughly master of myself, and of John Barleycorn." London means this boast ironically, however, for subsequent chapters recount the seductive trickery of drink on the mind. Yet by the end of the book he avers he has beat John Barleycorn, that he was never a drunkard and saw no reason to reform. He admits alcohol has been destructive, but thinks he has won the last round.

Contemporary alcohol experts can point to another feature of his disability, Charmian's attitude toward his behavior. She too denied his alcoholism, both during the time and after his

death when she wrote *The Book of Jack London*. She repeatedly claimed he was no dipsomaniac, that charming word for the disease in those days. This refusal to admit the drinking or confront the drinker is now understood to be a common response of family members. This covering-up exists in claims the drinker has a "tiny problem," a "delicate condition," or "can really control himself."

John Barleycorn was written following the worst of London's alcoholic periods. It was a visit to New York that provoked London's apologia. Jack told Charmian he wanted one last fling there before they set off on a trip around the Horn, the last voyage of the noted steel-hulled sailing ship, the *Dirigo*. In New York, he spoke on behalf of woman's suffrage. He also made long disappearances with fellow artists, writers, and editors. Meanwhile, Charmian fumed in their rented rooms or found escape with anarchist Emma Goldman, who comforted her with presents of flowers and diverting trips out of the city. Jack was on the biggest bender of his life. For several days he repented, promised to behave, then went off again for another spree.

When the time came for the *Dirigo* finally to depart, he shaved his head as a form of penance and supplication. That sight only repulsed Charmian and she boarded the ship aggrieved, angry, and close to giving up on the relationship. As he notes in *John Barleycorn*, London did not drink that entire one hundred and forty-eight days. Several weeks into the journey Charmian once again reopened her heart, as she had following his previous, less disruptive stints. The familiar intimacy returned, and she became pregnant with a child she would later miscarry.

At the conclusion of *John Barleycorn*, London proclaims he will not stop drinking. He could not imagine traveling about the world without a glass

in hand, as he had in the past. Yet this is not what happened. In fact, he cut back his alcohol consumption considerably, and for a while he lent his name and assistance to a grape juice product being pushed by the prohibitionists.

His abstinence was assisted by failing health. From this time one can trace in Charmian's diaries the clear and steady deterioration of his kidneys. The possible sources of this eventually fatal disease are several and still in dispute: damage from the arsenic- and mercury-based medicines he took for various ailments, the side effect of a tropical disease like malaria, or perhaps even lupus. Whatever, he returned to the ranch a renewed man who tempered his habit, and Charmian no longer penned distressful scenes in her tiny diary.

He had in a way done what Alcoholics Anonymous observes of those who turn to recovery; he had hit bottom. In the three years leading up to this episode, Charmian's only full-term child died following delivery, and she almost died as well; his dream of Wolf House burnt down just as they were ready to move in; and his first wife escalated her manipulations to keep him from his daughters. These tragedies, combined with business losses and problems with publishers, fed his natural pessimism. As he notes in the final, often elegaic chapters, he confronted the Noseless One, the specter of death, with its White Logic that proclaims life to be meaningless. "Our life's a cheat, our death a black abyss."

The White Logic is the final gasp of London's materialism, a philosophy developed during his youthful years of study of philosophy and reinforced by his observations of brutality and oppression toward the working class. It led to the Long Sickness, a period of depression during 1904, which he escaped through commitment to "the PEOPLE," socialism, and Charmian. By 1913, however, he

was growing critical of changes in socialism, especially the tendency to have professional leaders make decisions for the workers. He wisely foresaw that this development could as much disempower and abuse the workers as the system the socialists sought to overturn. And though he had not lost his love for Charmian, he had become preoccupied with work and other troubles, that she could not provide the solace from the White Logic she once had given.

Though London's vision of the White Logic is bleak and unrelenting, it did not remain. Hints of change are found near the close of his story, when he suddenly disarms the apparition by proclaiming "hedonism has no meaning." For a moment he sees "that still are mine the possibilities and powers which life and the books had taught me did not exist."

In his final years London was to find a spiritual regeneration and guidepost in modern psychology. Although he read Freud with some interest, it was Carl Jung, whose works were also just being translated, who excited him and gave him a way of answering the Noseless One. In his final short stories, which appeared in *On the Makaloa Mat*, he invoked such symbols as rebirth and the return to the Great Mother. In his copy of Jung he underscored Jesus' words to Nicodemus, "Think not carnally or thou art carnal, but think symbolically and thou art spirit."

Jack London died of uremic poisoning on November 22, 1916, following months of physical suffering and fearless self-exploration. He had traveled enormous distances from the cocky pessimist of John Barleycorn, but this should not be surprising, for after all, the Noseless One is itself an expression of spiritual force, the Knight of Darkness. What he did following completion of this book was allow his worldview to incorporate and

eventually make dominant the forces of light. He died in a state of optimism and hope.

His immediate goal for *John Barleycorn* came with the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919. This experiment brought unhappy consequences both in the growth of organized crime and a massive empowerment of police and intelligence agencies. Historians and sociologists generally interpret Prohibition a failure. Yet it did accomplish its purpose, for alcohol-related diseases fell in incidence, along with the accompanying social problems to family and community, such as domestic violence, desertion, and divorce. Alcohol-related auto accidents dropped by forty percent. Jack London would have believed these reductions in private pain worth the experiment.

—Clarice Stasz