

An illustration of a man with dark, curly hair, wearing a blue jacket and a striped shirt, sitting on a ship's deck. He is reading a newspaper. To his right is a large wooden ship's wheel. The background shows the ship's rigging and a glimpse of the sea. The word 'OXFORD' is printed in the top right corner.

OXFORD

CALL
OF THE
Atlantic

JACK LONDON'S PUBLISHING
ODYSSEY OVERSEAS, 1902-1916

JOSEPH MCALEER

CALL OF THE ATLANTIC



Frontispiece Jack London seen writing after the success of his third novel, *The Sea-Wolf*; circa 1905. He set a personal goal of writing 1,000 words a day.

Huntington Library

Call of the Atlantic

*Jack London's Publishing Odyssey Overseas,
1902–1916*

JOSEPH MCALEER

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For Andrew and David

Acknowledgments

The idea for this book originated with a paper I was invited to deliver in 2010 at the biennial symposium of the Jack London Society, an international non-profit organization that promotes study of the life and work of the great American author. As the lone historian among literature experts, I felt like an interloper, but the leading lights of the society could not have been more welcoming and encouraging; among them, Jeanne Reesman, Kenneth Brandt, Jay Williams, Eric Carl Link, Keith Newlin, and Thomas Harakal.

There, I also met Sue Hodson, Curator of Literary Manuscripts at the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA, who has been an invaluable (and patient) source of information over a five-year period, not to mention a loyal friend. Archival material and illustrations from the Huntington have been reproduced with permission; likewise from The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations; University of Reading, UK, Special Collections; University of Southern California Libraries, Special Collections, Los Angeles; Stanford University Special Collections, Stanford, CA; and Special Collections & Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan.

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Lastly, this book is dedicated to my brothers, Andrew and David, without whose support and inspiration it could not have been written.

Joseph McAleer

Greenwich, Connecticut
July 2015

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Preface

In 1915, one year before he died, Jack London responded to a fan letter from an aspiring writer, a housewife in Kentucky. She asked London if he had been satisfied with his career as a writer. “I can assure you, in reply to your question, that after having come through all of the game of life, and of youth, at my present mature age of thirty-nine years I am firmly and solemnly convinced that the game is worth the candle,” London wrote. “I have a very fortunate life. I have been luckier than many hundreds of millions of men in my generation have been lucky, and while I have suffered much, I have lived much, seen much, and felt much that has been denied to the average man.” He concluded that the “game” was indeed “worth the candle,” as she inquired. “As a proof of it, my friends tell me I am getting stout. That, in itself, is the advertisement of spiritual victory.”¹

Jack London (1876–1916) wasn’t just lucky at what he called the “writing game.” He is, by many accounts, the most popular American author in the world today. Two of his novels, *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, are literary classics and have never been out of print. His forty-four published books and hundreds of short stories and essays have been translated into more than one hundred languages and hailed by critics from South America to Asia.² His international admirers over the years have included George Orwell, Anatole France, and Jorge Luis Borges. He remains enormously popular in Russia and China despite his affirmation of freedom and the individual—concepts unpopular among the authorities in those countries. “Jack London brought to the Russian reader a world full of romanticism and vigor, and the reader came to love him,” wrote Russian critic Vil Bykov, who compared London to Tolstoy and Chekhov. Lenin admired his work. In China, Professor Li Shuyan wrote, “Whatever happens in the critical world, London will go on enjoying the admiration of the Chinese readers. Martin Eden and the many heroes of London’s stories of the North will always be an encouraging force to those who are fighting against adversities, and who believe the worth of the man lies in doing, creating, and achieving.”³

London, moreover, was America’s first novelist to earn more than one million dollars a year (in today’s currency) from his writing. A vigorous self-promoter and the kind of media celebrity we would recognize today, he was proud of his chosen profession and happy to dispense advice to would-be authors on how to get

¹ Letter, London to Ethelda Hesser, September 21, 1915, in *The Letters of Jack London*, ed. Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 1503. Hesser referenced George Herbert in his collection of proverbs, *Jacula Prudentum* (1640): “It is a poor sport that is not worth the candle.”

² For a comprehensive (and monumental) listing of foreign translations of London’s works, see *Jack London: A Bibliography*, compiled by Henley C. Woodbridge, John London, and George H. Tweney (Georgetown, CA: The Talisman Press, 1966).

³ See Earle Labor, editor, *The Portable Jack London* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), xi–xii.

published, and how to earn a good living from writing. His insistence on discipline and perseverance (even if he often fell short of his own daily writing goal of 1,000 words) has encouraged generations of writers. “Don’t loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club,” he said, “and if you don’t get it you will nonetheless get something that looks remarkably like it.”⁴

London’s death in 1916, aged forty, at the zenith of his writing career, shocked the world but sealed his reputation as one of the greats. “London was a very likeable man and had a manner which appealed especially to Colonials,” ran his obituary in *The Times* in London. “His works, too, have found perhaps their greatest appreciation in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. They have a primitive passionate force, and his nature stories appeal to a very wide circle of readers.”⁵ The obituary added that London’s works were “extraordinarily popular at the front and wherever soldiers are gathered together.” The secret of his appeal? “He was an honest writer, and although so virile, full-bodied and materialistic, he was a dreamer, with great visions of making the world better. He will be greatly regretted in America, where he was always extremely popular in spite of his Bohemianism and his somewhat unorthodox views with regard to labour and capital.” Indeed, London’s lifestyle and socialist beliefs were often controversial but also made headlines, and publicity—of any kind—was always welcome when it came to selling books.

There are many accounts of Jack London and his classic Horatio Alger life, as there are numerous literary analyses of his published works of many genres, from thrilling novels to socialist non-fiction. This book is neither, although it is necessarily biographical and literary in parts, and seeks to place London’s experience in the wider context of the history of publishing, reading, and authorship. Instead, this book aims to look behind the public persona and reveal a side of the author’s life that has been overlooked by academics and critics, yet is essential to understanding the character, drive, and success of this extraordinary man—namely, London’s publishing odyssey overseas. We shall ask how London achieved international fame, and what part he played in engineering his own success with his foreign publishers. At his death, London was a recognized “brand,” as readers looked forward to “the next Jack London book.” The answers to how this happened take us to his namesake city on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

The English-language publishing world at the turn of the twentieth century was divided between two spheres of influence, America and England. England was the gateway to the British Empire and Dominions, as well as the European Continent. Landing an English publisher was akin to buying a round-the-world ticket for one’s book, in multiple affordable editions. The transatlantic road had been plowed successfully in the late nineteenth century by American authors such as Bret Harte and Mark Twain. As Jack London entered the world’s stage in 1902, two fellow Americans, Winston Churchill (no relation to the future Prime Minister)

⁴ Jack London, “Getting into Print,” *The Editor*, March 1903, in Dale L. Walker and Jeanne Campbell Reesman, editors, *No Mentor but Myself: Jack London on Writers and Writing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 57.

⁵ “Jack London: A Novelist’s Adventures,” *The Times*, November 24, 1916, 6.

and Owen Wister, were setting sales records as Yankee novelists in King Arthur's Court. London burst onto the scene in 1903 with *The Call of the Wild*, and was a red-hot commodity afterwards. He was wooed by English publishers large and small, as well as by literary agents hungry for a share of his earnings. A clash of cultures was inevitable, with London impatient with traditional ways of doing business across the "Pond," and maverick publishing barons confronted by the ravings of an easily agitated Californian. The characteristics that Earle Labor, London's definitive biographer, describes—"hypersensitive, contentious, moody (possibly bipolar) . . . Famous for his ever-ready public smile and generousness of spirit, he was subject to spells of mordant invective and emotional cruelty"⁶—were all on display. Impulsive, bullying, and often unwilling to listen to reason, this free-spirited, demanding author from the New World went through three agents and a half-dozen publishers over ten years before finally settling down with Mills & Boon (in the firm's pre-romantic fiction days), a few years before his death.

What makes London's dealings overseas especially interesting is that he made his own decisions, unlike many of his contemporaries who depended upon the goodwill of their literary agents and/or publishers. In America, he linked up early on with a mentor and friend in George P. Brett, president of Macmillan. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement that lasted for his sixteen years as a published author, and it has been well documented. It's also not very exciting, as Brett called the shots in America. But London retained the all-important English book and serial rights, and so was able to try his hand at managing his own affairs. Hands-on he certainly was: having suffered through hundreds of rejections from publishers before landing his first contract, London was anxious to cut his own deals and control his destiny. He held all the cards—and was his own worst enemy. His ultimate success on the international front was only achieved when London swallowed his pride and learned to trust in the better judgment of others. His timing, however, was perfect. London helped to build the overseas market for his books by harnessing the tools of commercialization which were transforming the publishing industry—namely, more affordable books backed up by flashy advertising wrapped around the personality of the author, who in turn was becoming a "brand" of his own, issuing at least two books and several short stories every year.

The single-author focus of this book is unusual for a publishing history, but entirely warranted due to the richness of the primary source material and the deeply personal nature of the story. Jack London's overseas adventure is revealed through his correspondence, and that is how this story will be told. He was a chronic letter writer (manna to an historian), and kept copies of letters sent and received. Most have survived, although they are scattered across several institutions coast-to-coast in America and in England.⁷ By piecing letters together, conversations and

⁶ Earle Labor, *Jack London: An American Life* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), xii. Of course, the concept and diagnosis of "bipolar disorder" did not exist in London's time, and Labor is not a medical doctor, so one must tread carefully in suggesting a specific mental illness.

⁷ The principal repository of Jack London correspondence is the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. However, because London made carbon copies of most of his letters, signing the carbons as he did the originals, copies have found their way into other libraries: notably, Stanford

transactions are revealed—most hitherto hidden from history—as are the misunderstandings caused when letters (which could take up to three weeks to arrive) crossed in the mail. We are afforded a rare window into the complex triangular relationship between author, agent, and publisher; the behind-the-scenes horse-trading and deal making; the competitive nature of a changing industry; and the quest for fame and fortune. Emotions ran high, and the picture that emerges of London is not a pretty one. It was his way or nothing as he played the “writing game” right to the very end—and secured his place in history.

University, the University of Southern California, and Utah State University in Logan, Utah. Hence, there is much overlap. The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library, and the British Library are useful for letters written to London from his publishers and agents. Outgoing and incoming letters were rarely filed together or kept in the same collection, making the piecing together of exchanges a particular challenge.

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1. Isbister introduced English booksellers and readers to Jack London's first short-story collection, *The God of His Fathers*, with this four-page promotional booklet in 1902. 18
2. Macmillan advertised heavily in America to promote Jack London's second novel, *The Call of the Wild*, in 1903. 27
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List of Abbreviations

- HUNT Jack London Papers, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California
- LMET London Metropolitan Archives, City of London
- NYPL The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations
- READ Special Collections, University of Reading, U.K. Formerly the Harlequin-Mills & Boon Archives
- STAN Special Collections, Stanford University, Stanford, California
- USCA Special Collections, University of Southern California Libraries, Los Angeles, California
- UTAH Special Collections & Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah

Introduction

Commercial as this generation of writers may be, almost every writer of books has an ambition to win literary esteem. They want dignity. They seek reputation on as high a level as possible. “The trouble with the whole business” (I quote from a letter from a successful novelist) “is that novel-writing has become so very common. ‘Common’ is the word. It is no longer distinguished. What I want is distinction. Money I must have – some money at least; but I also want to be distinguished.” That is a frank confession that almost every writer makes sooner or later.¹

A Publisher’s Confession, 1905

In 1905, George P. Brett, president of the Macmillan publishing house in America, sent a book to his star client, Jack London, to read. These were early days in the famous mentor–mentee relationship that began in 1902. With two veritable blockbuster novels already under his belt—*The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *The Sea-Wolf* (1904)—London was in demand by other publishers and literary agents. The book was called *A Publisher’s Confession*. “I do not myself believe in ‘crying baby’ in this fashion, but the book should be read, I think, by all popular authors so that they understand the other man’s point of view,”² Brett advised.

Published by Doubleday, Page & Co., *A Publisher’s Confession* was written anonymously by Walter Hines Page, co-founder of the firm that was one of the most successful American publishing companies of the day and a rival of Macmillan’s.³ It was a frank, unbiased look at the reality of publishing at the turn of the century, taking on the misconceptions about royalties, production costs, and advertising, and debunking myths about authors and editors. It is at once encouraging and disheartening. To London it was fascinating, fueling his already obsessive interest in the industry. He wrote to Brett, “I have just read ‘A Publisher’s Confession’ and found it interesting and instructive, and have learned a lot out of it that I did not know about the relations of publishers and writers.”⁴

Brett’s desire for having London read this book is telling in more ways than one. Walter Hines Page was lamenting the current state of the publishing industry that was obsessed with profits, and paying out too much to “star” authors such as

¹ *A Publisher’s Confession* (New York, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1905), 67–8.

² Letter, George P. Brett to Jack London, July 11, 1905, HUNT JL 3046.

³ Walter Hines Page (1855–1918) was partner and vice-president of Doubleday, Page & Co. from 1900–1913, when he was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Britain by President Woodrow Wilson. Page was instrumental in persuading America to enter the First World War in 1917.

⁴ Letter, London to Brett, August 1, 1905, HUNT JL 11065.