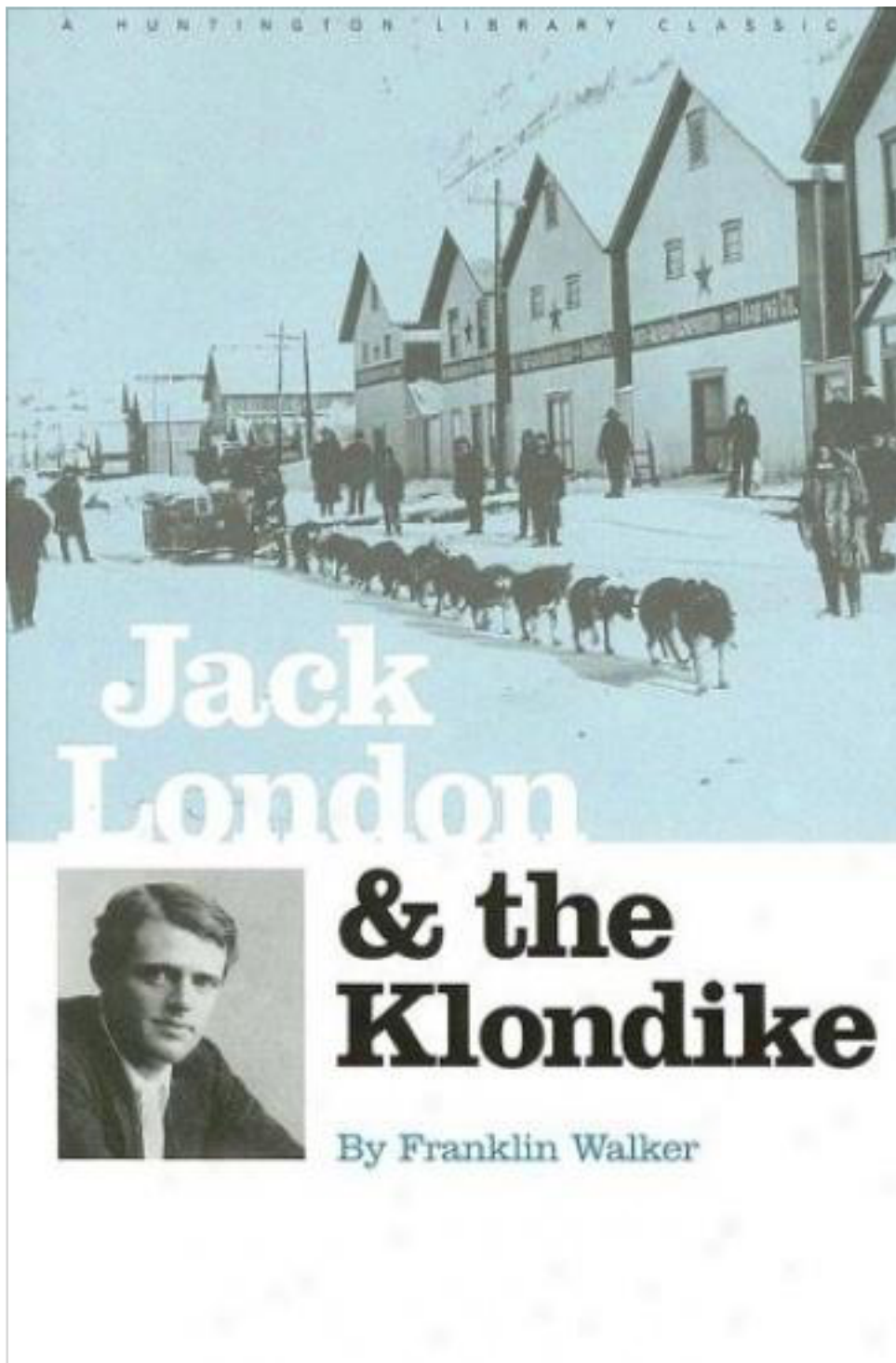


#98: Jack London & the Klondike

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Overview

I've read a decent amount of Jack London over the past couple years. So when I saw this

biography in a tiny bookstore in Ojai, I had no choice but to make it mine. It didn't disappoint.

Although he lived a truly remarkable early life, this book focused on probably the most formative part—his experiences in the Klondike. As a young man in his early twenties, he went North to seek his fortune during the Klondike Gold Rush. The adventures he had, the people he met, and the things he saw all formed much of the fiction that went on to make him famous. Before he embarked on the trip, he was a nobody. When he returned, he quickly became a successful writer. As he said of his time in the Klondike:

"I never realized a cent from any properties I had interest in up there. Still I have been managing to pan out a living ever since on the strength of that trip."

The trip itself is fascinating, but what I found most powerful were the later descriptions of his writing process and how he struggled to improve his craft.

"Eventually he settled down to a pace of about a thousand words per day, making his word count after each day's writing with the knowledge that eventually, 'brick by brick', the product would be finished. This remained his pace for the rest of his life, and in time he came to be able to write his stint in two or possibly three hours in the morning and leave the rest of the day for other things. He prided himself on turning out his thousand words, rain or shine, at home or traveling, on Sundays and holidays, as well as on weekends. He boasted that he never wasted more than five hours on sleep each night." (pg. 207)

Overall a great read, which I can tell by the fact that it will probably lead to reading another, more comprehensive Jack London biography, researching the [Klondike Gold Rush](#), and tracking down [short stories](#) referenced in the book.

If you haven't read anything by him before (*Call of the Wild*, *To Build a Fire*, etc.), [*The Mexican*](#) is a great place to start.

Book Notes

- London was strongly influenced by Browning, Kipling, and Stevenson (pg. 35)
- *Sourdoughs* - the old-timers who made their bread from sour-dough because they didn't have any baking powder, like the the new-comers. (pg. 113)
- Dinner during winter...
 - "Pervious to the men going out for a trip on the trail, he Cookes several gallons of

beans in the company of numerous chunks of slat port and much bacon grease. This mess he then moulds into blocks of convenient size and places on the roof, where it freezes into bricks in a couple of hours. Thus the men, after a weary day's travel, have but to chop off chunks with an axe and thaw out in a frying pan." (pg. 130)

- "On the eighth of June, 1898, Jack London left Dawson and the Klondike on his long journey home. He was glad to get out of the jerry-built town where men sometimes went for their mail in canoes; where bartenders watered down bad whisky to a third of its strength and restaurant owners charged five dollars for a poor meal; where fleas and floozies vied with each other for the miners attention; where there was no piped water and no sewer; and where dozens of new buildings were spraining up in the mud to take care of the suckers moving down from the passes and lakes and up from Seattle and St. Michael." (pg. 167)
- "He was never to make a better investment in the North. In less than two years his first book, *The Son of the Wolf*, was to be published, and from the date of its publication his success as a writer was to be assured. Just as Herman Melville was to find that a whaling ship was his Yale College, and his Harvard, Jack London was to discover that his adventure on the Yukon was his entrance to a wider world. At twenty-four years of age, when he normally would have been graduating from University, he had got his foot on the ladder of fame. And it was the Klondike that put him there." (pg. 191)
- On his desperation before success...
 - "When things got bad, Jack made one of his recurring trips to the pawnshop... 'The situation was desperate. I pawned my watch, my bicycle, and a mackintosh of which my father had been very proud and which he he had left to me.' Sometimes he held manuscripts because he did not have the stamps to mail them; sometimes he went no further than a rough draft, having no paper on which to type the finished tale." (pg. 197)
- "Eventually he settled down to a pace of about a thousand words per day, making his word count after each day's writing with the knowledge that eventually, 'brick by brick', the product would be finished. This remained his pace for the rest of his life, and in time he came to be able to write his stint in two or possibly three hours in the morning and leave the rest of the day for other things. He prided himself on turning out his thousand words, rain or shine, at home or traveling, on Sundays and holidays, as well as on weekends. He boasted that he never wasted more than five hours on sleep each night." (pg. 207)
- "He systematically copied page after page of successful writing by others, feeling that he could learn to express himself better by thus intensifying his perception of their methods. For this routine, Kipling was his favorite, just as in many ways he was his favorite author for narrative method and ideas." (pg. 208)
- His last words to his daughter...
 - **"That's the way it is, You look back and see how hard you worked, and how poor**

you were, and how desperately anxious you were to succeed, and all you can remember is how happy you were. You were young, and you were working at something you believed in with all your heart, and you knew you were going to succeed!" (pg. 212)

- On his trip to the Yukon...
 - "I never realized a cent from any properties I had interest in up there. Still I have been managing to pan out a living ever since on the strength of that trip." (pg. 213)
- While he succeed in recounting his own experiences of the Klondike, "he floundered in the implausible, the contrived, the ridiculous," when drawing largely from his imagination. (pg. 232)
- London is extremely popular in Russia, perhaps due to, "his creation of an atmosphere of heroism and struggle in his books. Even against the greatest of odds the London hero persists with resourcefulness and bravery." (pg. 262)
- On London's popularity...
 - "He may not be subtle and he is as a whole unpolished, but he tells a yarn with excitement and graphic vividness...London's stories have the compelling quality of truly exciting fiction"
 - "Their settings almost always have a romantic appeal...and they are imbued with the zest for battle, whether it be with a a man or an animal, with ravaging hunger or with bone-biting cold."
- "His enthusiastic social Darwinism seems dated, ...his jingoism is an offense now that we know his ethnology was inaccurate, and his historical determinism was far off the mark. Yet there is a very important place in our sophisticated and often tired world for London's hero who fights even while he is falling, and he by no means always falls." (pg. 264)
- T.K. Whipple on London's heroes...
 - "Physical stamina, physical courage and endurance and hardihood—the 'wild and free' strength which has so little place in our business civilization—surely these things are good in themselves, and there is no telling when we may need them again and need them badly." (pg. 265)

'Of man of the future! Who is able to describe him?

Perhaps he breaks our globe into fragments

In a time of warlike games.

Perhaps he hurls death through the firmament.

Man of the future! He is able to aim at the stars,

To harness the comets,

And to travel in space among the planets.

– Jack London