

## PREVIEW

### *JACK LONDON: A WRITER'S FIGHT FOR A BETTER AMERICA*

By 1903, millions knew the name Jack London as a blockbuster entertainer. The author of *The Call of the Wild* and numerous Klondike Gold Rush stories was a cultural icon, a living legend, an American tall tale of strength and power, fame and success. Born in the Gilded Age and blessed with a "splendid constitution," Jack London boasted that he "learned how to fight" in the streets and to spar in the ring. With a stroke of his pen—and against incredibly long odds—he reached millions. His story speaks to the twenty-first century with special urgency as the nation once again experiences the travails of a Gilded Age.

*Jack London: A Writer's Fight for a Better America* tells the story of the famous author as a dedicated reformer who campaigned to win the American public to the side of social progress. Biographers have tracked London's impoverished boyhood and his grueling apprenticeship from 1898 at borrowed and rented typewriters where he pounded out fiction and verse, essays and jokes that boomeranged with rejection slips. The rumor that publishers paid ten cents per word triggered his resolve, but mastering the formula for salable writing was excruciating. "I am groping, groping, groping for my own particular style," London confessed in 1899 to a fellow writer, admitting it to be a style that he had

“not yet found.” Most of his possessions, he added, were in pawn shops. “My assets were nil,” he recalled, “and my liabilities legion.”

Economics did not favor the likes of Jack London. "Big men" with "Big Interests" were the fundamental pillars of modernity in his time. Andrew Carnegie meant steel, Edison signaled electricity. The Standard Oil Corporation denoted one name only--John D. Rockefeller. Synonymous with the industrial system and imperial power, these names connoted authority and achievement. Their railroads crossed deserts and snaked through mountain passes to become the arterial supply line for the continent. Their talents shrank time and space across three thousand miles and insured steady supplies of consumer products. "The captains of industry," London recognized, are “building the house humanity lives in and is to live in." Like everybody else, Jack London also lived in that house.

In his impoverished youth, however, London toiled in the basement of that “house” as a self-styled "work beast" of the modern industrial system. He shoveled coal into fiery furnaces, toiled in a jute mill for ten cents an hour, and survived the cannery with his fingers intact only by dint of his lightning-fast reflexes. He knew to his marrow the extreme exhaustion of these labors and also how mind numbing they were. Firsthand experience taught him that many of the vagrant boys and men riding the rails as tramps sought freedom from the work that stole their minds, crushed their spirits and wrecked their bodies. Not until his contact with East Asia did London encounter Buddhism, but he sensed its teachings instinctively. "The body feels what the mind knows, and the mind knows what the body feels."

Body and mind, London grasped the hidden meanings of Gilded Age America—his America. Becoming the country’s first million-dollar author, the most popular writer in the

nation, he shoved back the curtain to expose the “house” that the tycoons of the industrial era had created. As he put it, "I do not propose to live in the front parlor with the blinds drawn. I want to see the kitchen and the scullery . . . . We are no cleaner because we have someone else to do our dirty work for us."

How this 20<sup>th</sup> century celebrity author became a reformer, all the while spinning bestselling tales of the Arctic and South Seas is the bedrock story of *Jack London: A Writer's Fight for a Better America*. Genial, courteous and sociable, London was a hail-fellow-well-met, a man of "sympathy and understanding." He hobnobbed easily with artists and with the political and business elites who welcomed him to fellowship. He was as sociable with business nabobs as with disenfranchised Hawaiians and the Solomon Islands cannibals whom he lived with and photographed. Yet Jack London developed powers of critical insight that others denied themselves. As a writer and talented photographer, his gaze was both close-up and wide angle. He knew that his livelihood--and later his wealth--came from social, political and economic arrangements he both relied on and loathed—and vowed to change. Loud and clear, Jack London (1876-1916) speaks to us today, his message relevant, timely and urgent.