

Jack London in Black-and-White:

The Photographer as Sociologist, Artist and Story Teller

By Jonah Raskin

The American socialist and best-selling novelist, Jack London, stood on both sides of the camera. He was in front of it and he was behind it, and he presented himself as a glorious creature of the magnificent age of photography. As his daughter, Joan London, observed, “for a time he was more photographed than any other writer in America.” If a camera was present, he was either the subject of the photo, or else he was taking the photos of ragged workers, near-naked tribesmen, soldiers, sailors, earthquakes, and Asian children with whom oddly enough he empathized.

London dearly loved his Kodak - one of the first on the market – and he took it with him around the world, along with his notebooks, typewriters, and Victrola to play music. Technology never troubled him, not telephones, telegraph machines, or the Kodak 3. A first-rate photographer who taught himself the art of photography, he had a keen sense of framing, of foreground and background, but his photos were rarely if ever precious and never purely aesthetic, either, except for some of his beautiful sailing photos.

Occasionally, he enjoyed art for art’s sake. Like Annie Leibovitz, the famed contemporary photographer who insists, “It’s always been about the content not the camera,” London aimed to document in the manner of a sociologist and to preserve little known cultures, rather than tinker endlessly with the aperture and to refine techniques in a dark room.

Starting out as a photographer half-a-century or so after the invention of the first camera, he used his Kodak to amplify his own words and he published his black-and-white photos in books such as

The People of the Abyss (1903), a graphic portrait in words and images of poverty in the city of London at the start of the 20th-century. The camera and the daguerreotype had, of course, influenced American writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne as early as the 1850s, but perhaps no American writer at the start of the 20th-century was as completely captivated by the camera as Jack London. He also went to the movies, and he thought of himself as a character in an on-going picture. Like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nathaniel West, he migrated to Hollywood, wrote for Hollywood studios, and became embroiled in legal disputes and copyright issues with Hollywood producers.

Photography - as opposed to the motion picture industry - led him into less troubled territory, though his black-and-white pictures have continued to be provocative long after they were first published a century ago. The famed European-born photographer, Edward Steichen, who curated the 1955 photo exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art entitled, "The Family of Man," would probably say that London's photos depict the human family around the world. Edgar Allan Poe might call his pictures studies of the grotesque and arabesque. Naomi Klein, author of *Disaster Capitalism*, might say that they explore the global disasters orchestrated by the capitalist system - and by nature, too. They certainly focus on war and revolution - class war and violent revolution - and on crises of all kinds. If they pull viewers in they also push them away; they attract and repel and prompt one to wonder what London meant to say.

Jack London, Photographer, a new, gorgeous coffee-table book that's available in English and in French - and published in France as well as the United States - divides London's photos into six sections: the East End of London in 1903; the Russian-Japanese War of 1904; the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906; the islands of the South Pacific as they were in 1907-1908; an oceanic voyage aboard the *Dirigo* in 1912; and finally the Mexican Revolution in the year 1914. London appears in two photos of the East End of London, England, looking clear-eyed and brawny, his chest puffed-up, while many of the inhabitants of London look broken down and dejected, whether they're little children, or grown women and men.

London had ambivalent feelings about the working class and that ambivalence is apparent here. He admired physical strong human being. After all, physical strength was essential for survival in the Darwinian world that he saw. The British workers and the British unemployed look weak and wasted in his photos; we see them harassed by the police, beaten down by factory toil and trounced by the whole environment of poverty, hunger, and homelessness. There's hardly a heroic or a happy human face here, except perhaps for a group of smiling children with a few mothers and a pet dog in the Jewish ghetto. They look joyful. Perhaps they really were happy. It could also be that he wanted to show his Jewish, socialist girlfriend, Anna Strunsky, that he wasn't anti-Semitic. She thought he was because he created fictional Jewish characters who often fit many of the stereotypes of Jews.

In the pictures from the Russian-Japanese War, there are some close-ups, but most of the photos are taken from a distance as though London wanted to remain at arm's length from his subjects. There are also more photos taken of the backs of human beings not the faces of people. Perhaps the most harrowing of the photos depicts Russian soldiers who had been captured by the Japanese and held prisoners. That sight unnerved London in large part because he thought that white soldiers the world over were invincible and would defeat brown, yellow and black soldiers. "My place was there inside with them," he wrote of the Russians, "rather than outside in freedom among aliens." Still, all Asians didn't seem alien to him, especially in the photos of Korean kids and elder men. Their humanity comes through.

When he photographed San Francisco immediately after the 1906 earthquake, London was back in the city in which he was born and that he knew building-by-building and street-by-street. More than 100 years later, the devastation that he saw is still shocking to see. The imperial city is in ruins and looks uninhabited, too, as though a nuclear bomb has incinerated the inhabitants. London's own heartbreak comes through; you can practically feel his sense of loss and tragedy.

The photos of the cruise aboard the *Snark* in the South

Pacific transport the viewer into a world of glimmering seas, sleek sailing ships, palm trees, tribesmen armed with spears, bows and arrows, and naked women, too. Yes, there are women with naked breasts in the style once favored by *The National Geographic* and photos of cannibals, too, or so London claimed. He wanted his fans to think of him as eternally intrepid and if that meant portraying islanders of the South Pacific as eaters of human flesh that didn't faze him. He stretched the truth and he lied even with his camera, making contrasts black-and-white with his black-and-white photos.

Probably the most eye-catching of the South Pacific photos shows Charmian London, Jack's second wife, wearing western clothes and smiling broadly alongside "wild women," as London called them. Many of these photos seem staged. If the South Sea islanders were as savage and as cannibalistic as London insisted, how, one wonders, was he able to get close to them and have them remain perfectly motionless for his camera? There's sorcery on the part of the photographer who aims to boast to the white world of his adventures among "uncivilized" brown men and women.

In the photos that London took aboard the *Dirigo*, the camera almost caresses the ropes, the sails, and the rigging. The ship and the sky look immense; the sailors seem small, except in the close-ups that suggest the nobility of the crew members, a feeling that's magnified by the fact that the camera looks up at the men and that they tower above it. The photos of Mexico during its revolution show American soldiers marching in neat formation and disheveled Mexican troops who were captured in battle. There's a riveting photo of a Mexican woman, a "soldadera," as London calls her, who was his kind of woman. "She was young, strong, uncorseted, cotton-frocked, all Indian," he wrote. "She had ridden for two years with the revolutionaries." He couldn't ask for more than that – a revolutionary and young and strong, free from restraints, and pure blooded, too. He never approved of "mixed-bloods." Mixing of blood produced inferior human beings, he claimed.

All of the photos are valuable records – however fictionalized and doctored - of cultures and ways of life that no longer exist. They show us how London viewed the worlds of race and class. They're

valuable for what they reveal about him as a voyager and a voyeur peering into the lives of people who seemed alien and yet who also intrigued him – people for whom he felt a profound attraction and at the same time a powerful repulsion. The attraction and the repulsion exist side-by-side.

Fortunately, the introduction to the book offers a dozen photos of London that show him in a variety of poses, expressing the range of his many selves: wearing hats and hatless; smoking cigarettes and not smoking them; indoors and outdoors; posing for the camera and behind the camera. The introductory essays by the book's three skillful editors - Jeanne Campbell Reesman, Sara Hodson and Philip Adam - provide compelling historical background and intriguing biographical information, though London's photos themselves are, to borrow and tweak a cliché, worth thousands of words – save, of course, for those he himself wrote. My own favorite photo of London that's included in this volume, shows him at work in his bedroom in 1900, when he was 24-years-old, wearing a suit and a tie, his hat perched on a chair, his eyes on the page in front of him as though the words he was writing were all that mattered to him at that moment, and as though the world beyond didn't exist. He's even oblivious of the camera in the room that captured him for eternity.

Jonah Raskin is the editor of *The Radical Jack London: Writings on War and Revolution*, and a professor emeritus at Sonoma State University.