

This Day in History... January 12, 1876

Birth of Jack London

Acclaimed writer Jack London was born on January 12, 1876, in San Francisco, California.

Born John Griffith Chaney, the future author adopted the name “Jack” at an early age. And he took the surname London from his step-father John London, a Civil War veteran.

The young London credited his rise to literary success to his reading of the Victorian novel *Signa* in 1885. He spent many of his childhood hours in the Oakland Public Library with librarian and future poet laureate, Ina Coolbrith.

To help support his struggling family, London began working in a cannery in 1889. Desperate for a more exciting life, he borrowed money to buy a ship and became an oyster pirate. When that ship became damaged beyond repair, he took a job with the California Fish Patrol. London then joined a sealing schooner off the coast of Japan. During that voyage, his ship was caught in a typhoon that nearly killed everyone on board.



London is considered an innovator of what eventually became known as science fiction.

When he returned home, London took a job in a jute mill earning 10¢ an hour. One day he told his mother the dramatic story of the typhoon, and she convinced him to enter it in a local writing contest. With just an eighth-grade education, London won the \$25 first prize, beating college students. London believed he had found his calling.

But making a living as a writer wasn't as easy as London had hoped. Unable to find a publisher, he briefly attended the University of California at Berkeley. After hearing stories of the gold strikes in the Alaska Klondike, London loaded a steamship with supplies and headed north through the Inside Passage of Alaska. Arriving in Alaska in the fall of 1897, London and his men used handmade boats to travel the dangerous One Mile and Whitehorse Rapids.

Once in Dawson City, London found that most of the gold was already claimed. One of the fortunate few, he and his men found gold in the Stewart River. Occupying a cabin near a popular crossroads, London hosted many miners as they passed through the area. Many of them shared their stories with him. These stories formed the basis of some of his greatest

works, including *White Fang* and *The Call of the Wild*.

Returning to California in 1898, London recommitted himself to getting published. *The Overland Monthly* paid him \$5 to publish his first story in years – “To the Man on Trail.” He was disappointed, but continued writing. London was relieved when *The Black Cat* bought his story, “A Thousand Deaths” for \$40. In the coming years, new printing technology led to a boom in magazines for a wide variety of interests. London benefited, selling story after story. One of London's most famous works, *The Call of the Wild*, was first published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1903. It was then released as a short novel, earning London significant fame.

In 1904, London took a job with the *San Francisco Examiner* covering the Russo-Japanese War. Over the course of six months there, he was arrested four times and eventually returned to America.



London wrote several stories based on his experiences in the Klondike Gold Rush, most famously, The Call of the Wild.

Hoping to find more financial success, London bought a ranch in Glen Ellen, California, in 1905 and frequently added to it. He once claimed that “Next to my wife, the ranch is the dearest thing in the world to me.” Soon, his writing became a means to expand his beloved ranch. However, the ranch was never economically successful for London.

London also used the earnings from his writing to buy a yacht, which he and his second wife used to visit Hawaii and Australia. During their 1907 visit to Hawaii, London witnessed surfing for the first time. He tried it himself and then wrote a long essay about it, titled, “A Royal Sport.” It was published in *Women's Home Companion* that October, and is often credited with giving surfing national attention in America.

London's adventurous life and alcoholism took a toll on his health, leading to his death at just 40 years old on November 22, 1916.



London wrote 51 books during his life, though several weren't released until after his death.



London was also an animal activist, writing about the conditions of circus animals.

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