

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Who The Hell Is Jack London?

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21 April 2021

Who the hell is Jack London? That's a complicated question. If you superficially glance through the Google Search results for Jack London, it's easy enough to find out that he was a socialist. If you dig a little bit deeper, you'll see he also wrote horribly racist things about indigenous, Greek, Mexican, and Asian people. If you dig even deeper, you'll see that Jack London was an especially virulent anti-Asian racist. So why did Alexander Berkman personally ask Jack London to write the introduction to his *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*? Like I said, it's complicated.

In case you didn't know, Alexander Berkman was an insurrectionary anarcho-communist who tried to assassinate Henry Clay Frick, the right-hand man of Andrew Carnegie, infamous steel-baron of the Gilded Age. Berkman only managed to wound Frick and in 1892 he was sentenced to 14 years in prison. He was released in 1906 and spent the rest of that decade writing his *Prison Memoirs*, a book that was far ahead of its time. In the post-Victorian era, the existence of homosexuality and rape in US prisons was hardly ever

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written about, but Berkman expounded on it at length. When he finished the book in 1912, he sent a copy to Jack London and asked the famous author to write an introduction. Little did Berkman know, but Jack London had once been raped in jail, a subject he never discussed.

It's hard to say what Jack London was thinking as he sat in the farmhouse on his Sonoma Valley ranch, casually leafing through the *Prison Memoirs*, but I'd guess it triggered him. In the 1890s, Jack London was arrested for vagrancy and jailed in Buffalo, New York, a situation which led to him being assaulted by another inmate. He was still in his teens and the rape scarred him deeply, so when he set down to write an intro for the *Prison Memoirs*, something terrible came out of his hands. He denounced anarchism and claimed no affiliation with it. In one venomous sentence, he declared, *the man who can't shoot straight, can't think straight*. The man he was referring to, of course, was Alexander Berkman.

Berkman and Goldman tried to get Jack London to alter his introduction, but he consistently refused, a position that hurt them deeply. As he explained in 1916, *I was naive enough to think that when one intellectual disagreed with another intellectual the only difference would be intellectual. I have since learned better. Alexander Berkman could not see his way to using my introduction, and got someone else to write a more sympathetic one for him. Also, socially, comradely, he has forgotten my existence ever since*. Shortly after he wrote these words, Jack London killed himself with a morphine overdose.

One might think Alexander Berkman would want nothing to do with Jack London or his memory, but less than a month after the author's death, Berkman helped create the Jack London Memorial Library and School of Social Science. It was located in San Francisco and united the anarchists, the socialists, and the IWW. All of this was done just months after the Preparedness Day Bombing, an act that was likely carried out by Berkman and the Italian anarchist *Gruppo Volontà*, an informal

group that also published articles on birth control in his paper *The Blast*.

The Preparedness Day bomb killed 10 people, wounded 40 more, and was aimed at supporters of US entry into World War One. The state immediately raided all the anarchist spaces in San Francisco and charged prominent labor leaders with the bombing. In the midst of all this repression, Berkman and the *Grupo Volontà* helped create a new radical space, the Jack London Memorial Library. This space was raided again in 1919 as part of the pre-Red Scare and eventually disappeared from history. Again, I have to ask, why did Berkman help create this library in Jack London's name, given his bad experiences with the famous author?

I don't really know, but I have a few ideas. Let's rewind several years back to 1910, when Emma Goldman came to visit his ranch in the Sonoma Valley. There was no bad blood, none at all, and the *Prison Memoirs* were still being written at the time. Goldman tried to get him to attend her lecture in San Francisco but Jack refused, claiming he *would not go to a meeting even if God Almighty were to speak there. The only time I attend lectures is when I am to do the talking. But we want you here. Will you not come to Glen Ellen and bring whomever you have with you?* As Emma Goldman would write in her 1931 autobiography, *it was not Jack London's politics that mattered to me. It was his humanity, his understanding of and his feeling with the complexities of the human heart...it was this Jack London, and not the devotee of a mechanistic creed, who lent meaning and joy to my visit to Glen Ellen.*

Rewinding just a bit further to 1906, we can find Jack London talking with Lucy Robins Lang, an anarchist born in the Ukraine. After converting her to vegetarianism, Jack London advised Lucy to start a vegetarian restaurant in San Francisco, given the other one burned down in the Great Fire of 1906. Shrewd business advice for a socialist, but Lucy took it seriously. She studied cooking at Saint Helena Sanitarium, just one

valley over from Jack London's ranch in Glen Ellen, so it's unlikely she didn't stop by to visit, although there's no documentation of this.

When she graduated from her cooking school, Lucy returned to San Francisco and opened up the Saint Helena Vegetarian Restaurant on Market Street, the only one of its kind in the fire ravaged city. Lucy and her partner *papered the inside with a warm, red-flower pattern, and hung up racks of newspapers and magazines in imitation of European cafes. While gangs of fishermen, dock workers, longshoremen, stokers, and sailors thronged the bars and brothels of the waterfront, we of the radical tribe sat over our chaste dishes on crisp linen, discussing the revolutionary parties of all the European nations. As she would cynically remark, by the time we opened our restaurant, [Jack London] had abandoned vegetarianism and was living on raw meat.*

One day, an anarchist named Eric Morton strolled into the restaurant with Olaf Tveitmoe, an old-time labor militant who was leading an armed uprising against the United Railroads, a Wall Street-backed street-car monopoly. Lucy and Eric were old friends, and when he introduced her to Olaf, he said, *this is the lady who doesn't believe in direct action but sometimes practices it.* He was referring to an incident in 1905 when Lucy helped Eric store two cases of weapons in her New York City cigar shop. These weapons were then shipped across the Atlantic to Saint Petersburg where they saw action in the Russian Revolution of 1905. Lucy was what you might call an anarcho-pacifist, but she saw nothing wrong in helping to smuggle guns, for whatever reason.

Years earlier, Eric Morton dug a tunnel into the prison where Alexander Berkman was being held, although this plan failed. He and Emma Goldman were lucky to escape their tunnel entrance without being captured, and they never tried to rescue Berkman again. Lucy first met Morton in New York City at the 210 East 13th Street apartment of Emma Goldman, a

project, and all my threads kept leading back to him. Few people know the basic truth of Jack London, so I made a basic pamphlet about him and attached the link just below. This pamphlet has already been scattered across the Oakland waterfront, although the printer I've been using needs repairs so I had to stop making them for now. None of what you've just read is in the pamphlet, by the way, so feel free to print it out. I'm sure it will just make everything more confusing. The text was designed to draw up some of the US Left's dirty skeletons, and there's simply none bigger than Jack London, given his insane levels of racism. Feel free to print and distribute, although it might not have much interest outside Oakland, where his name is literally everywhere. Either way, I hope you learned something from all of this. I'm honestly tired of thinking about him.

place where she felt uncomfortable. She soon got into a debate with Morton about the meaning of direct action, and when he asked her what it was, she replied with one word: *murder*. As she described, *Morton's laugh boomed out...detaching herself from the whole business, Emma ruffled through the pages of a book, and I felt that I was through with her for life.*

Months later, Eric pulled up in a wagon outside her New York City cigar shop with a *large, sealed crate*. *Indicating with a wink that we were not to ask questions, Eric came back for a second crate. Then, when the driver had left, he said: "I am continuing the debate on propaganda by direct action, and I have brought two crates of arguments." He threw back his head and roared at our stricken faces. "Arms for Babushka's revolutionaries," he explained. "I'll take them off your hands in the morning...I don't agree with you, little Lucy, but I do trust you. Emma says you're first-rate. We'll finish that discussion when I get back from Russia."*

Eric Morton and Emma Goldman ran this gun-smuggling network from the ports of New York City and San Francisco, and after delivering that shipment to Saint Petersburg, Eric Morton reappeared on the opposite coast where he strolled into the Saint Helena Vegetarian Restaurant and introduced Lucy to Olaf Tveitmoe. Once again, Lucy only started this restaurant on the advice of Jack London, and all of these people trusted each other with the direst secrets. Her restaurant was one of the two public radical spaces in San Francisco, and she kept it open until a few more had been rebuilt. After that, she left for the anarchist commune in Home, Washington.

Years before, one of Jack London's friends left San Francisco and became the anarchist school-teacher at the Home commune. This man was named James Morton (not Eric Morton), and he was a long-time friend of W.E.B. DuBois, having been his classmate at Harvard. In fact, he helped DuBois start the NAACP and served on its various committees. James Morton was also friends with Jack London, having met him sometime

around 1900, and at the time Morton was a contributor to *Free Society*, an anarchist magazine published in San Francisco by the Isaaks, a family of Ukrainian exiles. At the urging of Emma Goldman, they moved their paper to Chicago in 1900.

After the anarchist Leon Czoglosz assassinated President William McKinley in 1901, the Isaaks were jailed for alleged conspiracy in the act. A few weeks later, Jack London would write to one of his correspondents, asking, *do you remember [James] Morton, the anarchist you met at my place? He was editor of Free Society, the paper of which [Abraham] Isaak is now editor and for which editorship he now rots in jail in Chicago. Morton, had he remained editor, would now be in Isaak's place.* As it happened, James Morton had already left for Home, Washington, and was never involved in the repression that followed this historic assassination.

It's unclear if James Morton ever challenged Jack London on his racist sentiments, but it is known they were friends when Jack London was writing explicitly racist content. Morton did challenge another author for his racism, a man named H.P. Lovecraft, and somehow the two managed to be friends, despite Morton's major involvement with DuBois and the NAACP. In fact, the entire Cthulhu mythos was inspired by a real-life meeting between Lovecraft and Morton overlooking the Great Falls of the Passaic River. All that might seem irrelevant to the question, *who the fuck is Jack London?* It might be, but it's probably not, especially after this last bit.

James Morton wasn't the only white man to help the NAACP. There were a lot of white men like him, and today we still call many of them liberals. Jack London was also one of these white liberals, and all together, these men and women began to constitute what has since become known as "the Left in the US." For example, Jack London and Upton Sinclair co-founded something called the Intercollegiate Socialist Society (ISS). Jack London didn't just co-found it, he seeded it across the US in his 1905 lecture tour, going from campus

to campus telling all the *yanqui* students to join the Russian Revolution.

This ISS eventually became the League for Industrial Democracy (LID) in 1921, which re-organized its student branch into the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID), a campus-based organization made up of liberals, communists, and socialists. In 1960, SLID transformed itself into the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), an organization that contributed to the Civil Rights and Free Speech movements of the 1960s. SDS soon became involved in opposing the Vietnam War and eventually dissolved over the question of direct action. Out of SDS came the Weather Underground Organization, an armed guerrilla group of white student radicals who committed a string of bombings from 1969 to 1975. In addition to this, they broke Timothy Leary out of jail on behalf of an LSD cult in exchange for money. Never mind that Leary was part of the CIA's experiments with LSD.

Anyway, because of the COINTELPRO leaks, most of the white ex-student guerrillas decided to cash in on their privilege and utilize the amnesty being offered by the state. One by one, these privileged, white student radicals made their peace with capitalism, all with news cameras rolling just to the side. These white ex-radicals telegraphed a message of defeat with each of their surrenders, all the while preparing to integrate themselves into capitalist reality. A few of them held true to something, I guess, and I can count them on two hands, maybe one. They got involved with the Black Liberation Army and some of them were thrown in jail after trying to rob an armored bank car. Two of them, David Gilbert and Kathy Boudin, had a son. His name is Chesa Boudin, and he is currently serving as the District Attorney for the City and County of San Francisco. I hope this paints a simple enough portrait of the Left in the US, and the central roll Jack London played in creating it.

Who the hell is Jack London? I'm still not really sure. I ended up doing all this research on accident, as part of another