

Jack and the Holidays/Religion

According to Charmian, Jack had an “aversion to spending Christmas in the prescribed way” which “caused many an outing to begin on the twenty-fourth of December.”

This desire to be on-the-go may have helped Jack manage his depression (which he referred to as the “long sickness”) that sometimes affected him more over the holidays. One Christmas he wrote Anna Strunsky an apology for failing to send her a Christmas greeting, blaming it on his immobilizing “blues.” After he missed a Thanksgiving gathering with his friends, the Applegarths, a twenty-two-year old Jack wrote Mabel Applegarth apologizing, saying he was so nervous he could hardly shave, was “miserable and half sick,” and that everything had “gone wrong.”¹

A month after this missed Thanksgiving, on Christmas day, December 25, 1898, Jack wrote Mabel again saying that it was “about the loneliest Christmas I ever faced . . .” He added that “the vagabondage of my nature succumbs to a latent taste for domesticity.” He described looking at a picture of a Christmas scene with a longing to be a part of it: the cottage, the hanging stockings, a couple of servants, gathering of friends, with “a cozy grate fire, the sleepy children cuddling on the floor ready for bed, a sort of dreamy communion between the fire, my wife, and myself . . .”

While Jack may not have succumbed entirely to this “latent taste” of the pictured domesticity, he nonetheless experienced markedly improved holidays. On December 24, 1911, for example, Jack and Charmian celebrated with champagne at the Saddle Rock Restaurant in Oakland to toast their departure to New York and then onto Baltimore for their *Dirigo* sailing adventure.² A month earlier, on November 30, 1911, they had celebrated Thanksgiving by having 14 guests for dinner at the ranch.³

As Charmian correctly noted, they often had non-traditional Christmas holidays. In 1907, the Londons celebrated Christmas aboard the *Snark* on a meal of tinned soup, shrimp fritters, fried taro, tinned corn, a salad of tinned French beans and mayonnaise, sliced oranges and bananas garnished with grated coconut, with a bottle of champagne. The month of December could also find Jack and Charmian traveling to San Diego on a “motor-trip” or sailing on the *Roemer*. As for Christmas presents, Nakata said Jack did not give them because he gave presents all year long. Jack also celebrated by decking “three or four of his fastest horses in jingle bells” and riding them at top speed down the country roads for the “sheer exhilarating joy” of it.

¹ Jack’s financial situation was grim; he had not been paid for his writing nor heard back about the Civil Service exam results. Kingman mistakenly states that Jack couldn’t make it to the Applegarths for Thanksgiving because Frank Atherton was still visiting with Jack but Jack’s letter makes clear that Frank had not yet arrived.

² Jack visited with his daughters before leaving for New York. From March 2nd to July 26, 1912, Jack, Charmian, Nakata, and Possum (their dog), sailed on the windjammer, the *Dirigo*, from Baltimore, around the Horn, to Seattle. The *Dirigo* was not a passenger ship so they sailed as crew.

³ On November 25, 1909, Frank Matsuyama, their cook, also prepared a “big Thanksgiving dinner” for them.

Jack's merriment never clouded his sight of those in need, and his writing sometimes reflected the contrast between the festive spirit of Christmas and the hardships suffered by the less fortunate. At nineteen he wrote an essay titled, *What Socialism Is*, explaining that the socialist movement was not some "monster" terrorist program seeking to "cast a chill upon the [Christmas] festivities," but rather it sought to awaken those who were better off to be more inclusive and "all-embracing." Another writing contrasting hardship with the backdrop of Christmas occurs in Jack's Klondike story, *The Devil's Dice Box*, involving a deadly duel on Christmas Day. On a lighter note, *A Klondike Christmas*, presents a more uplifting tale of holiday camaraderie. Similarly in Jack's tale, *Thanksgiving on Slav Creek*, he explores the theme of generosity in the harsh Yukon winter.

Jack described himself as "an agnostic" with the exception that he believed in the soul – but a soul which like the body, disintegrates with death. Jack also described himself as a "hopeless materialist" or "materialist monist," who believed that ". . . when I am dead, I am dead . . . just as much obliterated as the last mosquito you or I smashed." He wrote that he did "not believe in God nor in any other personal super-interference with the affairs of the world, or the universe," and was "not a believer in re-incarnation in any form. Neither am I a believer in immortality." Jack compared himself to the frog in *When God Laughs*, relying upon "cold facts" and scientific reasoning.

Jack may have called himself an agnostic and an atheist, but as with everything else, he was endlessly curious about religious themes, always researching, discussing, evolving, and not easily categorized. Jack was a Bible scholar who considered Jesus a hero, described himself in one letter as a "follower of the Christ," and advised his daughter, Joan, to study the life of Christ.⁴ He occasionally attended a Congregationalist Church with Charmian, and frequently used the *Rubiayat* to discuss religious matters with his valet, Nakata.⁵ Jack even schooled Nakata on the Buddhist religion and reincarnation after discovering that Nakata knew nothing about one of the principal religions of Nakata's native country, Japan. Jack told Nakata that while a non-believer, he thought Buddhism was a "very good religion."⁶

Jack's "faith [was] in the working-class" and he believed that "spiritual sweetness and unselfishness" should prevail.⁷ Perhaps one of his most compelling writings which echoes both this "spiritual sweetness and unselfishness" came near the end of his life, in 1915, when he wrote this introduction for Upton Sinclair's anthology, *The Cry for*

⁴ See also the discussion in Answer #5 of Jack's Facts #5 (Mar. 2025).

⁵ *The Rubiayat* by Omar Khayyam is a collection of Persian poems, probably the best known is "a jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou beside me singing in the wilderness. . ." According to Nakata, Jack particularly liked the Rubiayat's references to "dust." (e.g., ". . . make the most of what we yet may spend, before we too into the dust descend . . .")

⁶ In her foreword to *A Hero to his Valet*, Clarice Stasz writes that she was surprised to learn that Jack had an "insistence on grace before meals." The actual text of Nakata's interview is not so clear and it appears more likely that Jack bowed his head and went along with the prayer but not that he insisted upon it. Nakata, in discussing a visit from Cloudesley Johns, says "the usual thing is to say a little prayer before eating, and London always bowed his head. When he went into somebody else's house, he obeyed the custom of that house. Mr. Johns was not the same. While they had the prayer he was looking all over the table . . ."

⁷ Jack also described himself as a "pessimist" regarding the class struggle during a 1913 interview about the *Iron Heel*.

Justice: “[h]e, who by understanding becomes converted to the gospel of service . . . will serve kindness so that brutality will perish; And he who is strong will serve the weak that they may become strong . . . It is so simple a remedy, merely service . . . he who serves all, best serves himself.”

With Jack’s consistent themes of brotherhood and caring for the less fortunate, it’s small wonder that biographers describe him as having “theological insights deeper than many theologians of his day,” with writing that “radiates a sense of spirituality.”⁸

Resources:

- Labor, Leitz, Shepard, *The Letters of Jack London: Volumes One through Three* (1988) Stanford, Stanford University Press, pp.21-22, 31-32, 63, 85-86, 228, 847, 950-951, 1339, 1203, 1257-1260, 1391, 1402, 1454, 1502, 1514
- London, Charmian, *The Book of Jack London Vols.1&2* (1921) Miami, Hard Press Publishing, pp. 1:286, 296; 2:229
- Nakata, Yoshimatsu, *A Hero to His Valet* (transcribed by Barry Fox Stevens with introduction by Clarice Stasz; Interview sometime in the late 1930s); Sonoma State University, Jack London Special Collections) en passim
- Signorelli, Ruth Burd Thompson, “*Quickies on Jack London*” (1963 oral history), Sonoma State University, Jack London Special Collections, en passim
- Kingman, Russ, *Jack London: A Definitive Chronology* (1992) CA, David Rejl/Jack London Research Center, pp. 85, 138, 143, 189, 197, 198
- Kingman, Russ, *A Pictorial Life of Jack London* (1979) NY, Crown Publishers, Inc., pp. 85-87, 111-112
- Forner, Philip, *Jack London: American Rebel* (1964) NY, Citadel Press, pp. 119-120
- Stasz, Clarice, *American Dreamers* (1988) NY, St. Martin’s Press, pp. 145, 290-291, 348, fn. 5
- Freeman, A.W., *A Search for Jack London* (1973) Chicago, Adams Press, pp. 25, 76-77
- Brandt, Kenneth K., *Jack London: Writers and their Work* (2018) Liverpool, Liverpool Press, pp. 66-67
- Labor, Earle, *Jack London: An American Life*, (2013) NY, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, p. 361
- Williams, Jay, *Author Under Sail: The Imagination of Jack London, 1893-1902* (2014) Nebraska, Univ. of Nebraska Press, pp. 1, 144-145, 431, 517-518, fn 89
- Raskin, Jonah, *The Radical Jack London* (2008) Berkeley and L.A., U.C. Press, pp. 117-118
- Bembridge, Steven, *Jesus as a Cultural Weapon in the Work of Jack London*, Studies in Am. Naturalism, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Sum. 2015), pp. 22-40
- Campbell, Donna, “*Jack London’s Allegorical Landscapes*,” Literature and Belief, Vol. 21:1-2 (2001), pp. 59-75
- Jack’s introduction to Upton Sinclair’s anthology:
<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/65775/pg65775-images.html>
- Jack’s 1895 essay on socialism:

⁸ The “answer” to #2 provides only a sliver of information on this topic, upon which much has been written. I am working on a more comprehensive list of references along with some further analysis of Jack’s beliefs, including his views on metaphysics, which will be titled “Jack and the Spirit World,” to be posted on the Volunteer Resources webpage.

<https://nebula.wsimg.com/5c9c92866897dc77e311377536050427?AccessKeyId=94861742399A59C7B18A&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>

A Klondike Christmas:

<https://www.prosperosisle.org/spip.php?article1106#Christmas>

Written by Kate Johnston and updated 3/21/26 (see also Jack's Facts #13, Nov. 2025)