

The Nature Faker Controversy Between Jack London and President Teddy Roosevelt

President Roosevelt and his friend, John Burroughs, targeted a number of nature writers¹ for what the two men considered to be the anthropomorphizing of animals. Roosevelt's views were published in an article by Edward Clark, "Roosevelt on the Nature Fakirs,"² in *Everybody's Magazine* in 1907.

Roosevelt specifically leveled criticism at Jack and his novel, *White Fang*, over two animal encounters in the book. First, Roosevelt said Jack's depiction of a bulldog winning a fight with the wolf dog, White Fang, was absurd. Next, Roosevelt criticized Jack for having a lynx triumph over Fang's mother in a fight, saying "I can't believe Mr. London knows much about the wolves, and I am certain he knows nothing about their fighting . . ." . . . "[m]en who have visited the haunts of the wild beasts . . . resent such gross falsifying of nature's records."

Roosevelt's friend, John Burroughs, started the "nature faker" controversy with his article, "Real and Sham Natural History," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in March 1903, about nature writers who instead of making objective, scientific observations, depicted what Burroughs considered to be fantastical representations of animals. Burroughs was a naturalist and conservationist who wrote nature essays about birds, the Catskills, fly fishing, and other topics. He referred to these objectionable animal depictions as "yellow journalism of the woods," or as romanticized and inaccurate accounts of the natural world.

Jack was not the only author targeted by both Burroughs and Roosevelt. Burroughs had written his *Atlantic* article in response to the *Atlantic's* publication of an article by Rev. William J. Long. Rev. Long believed that animals demonstrated unique and individualistic behavior, could learn, reason, and adapt their behavior. Long's article incensed Burroughs. Burroughs and Roosevelt were of the school that animals were driven by instinct and lacked the ability to reason.

Roosevelt said he had no issue with fairy tales which anthropomorphized animals; his issue was with these "nature" faker writers. He called it an "outrage" that their books might be given to children to teach them about the natural world.

The "nature faker" controversy went on for several years with comedic depictions in newspapers across the country. One parody depicted a fictional book on how to tell

¹ Jack was considered a "naturalist" writer. Naturalism in literature, as initially developed by Émile Zola, is a late-19th-century movement that treats the novel as a kind of impersonal, objective, scientific experiment, suggesting humans are shaped by heredity and environment, without romantic idealization, supernatural explanations, or free will.

² "Nature Fakirs" was later changed to "Nature Fakers."

animals from wildflowers and included an anthropomorphic “Dandy Lion,” with a cane, top hat, and monocle.³

President Roosevelt, like Jack, was a complicated man. He was known as a big game hunter yet he also advocated against animal cruelty, protected approximately 230 million acres of public land, helped establish 150 national forests, bird reserves, game preserves, and national monuments.⁴ While the two men had their differences, they nonetheless showed support for one another. Roosevelt orchestrated Jack’s release from jail in 1904 when Jack was a war correspondent covering the conflict over Manchuria between Russia and Japan. In the presidential election of 1916, Jack said his preference was for Roosevelt even though Roosevelt was not even running.

Jack read about Roosevelt’s accusation of him being a “nature faker” while in Hawaii. According to Charmian, “Jack had much fun” over this charge. For starters, the President had gotten the facts wrong when he stated that in *White Fang*, the lynx killed the wolf-dog. It was vica versa; the wolf-dog killed the lynx and in fact devoured the lynx’s body.

The view that animals could not reason was prevalent during Jack’s time and many shared the Roosevelt/Burroughs belief that animals acted upon instinct alone.⁵

Jack took some time to respond to Roosevelt’s criticism but in 1908, his essay, “The Other Animals,” was published in *Collier’s Weekly*, directly addressing President Roosevelt and John Burroughs.⁶ In it, Jack called Roosevelt “an amateur” who “does not understand evolution.” He said that his two dog books were “in truth a protest against the ‘humanizing’ of animals,” showing that they acted not upon abstract reasoning but by “instinct, sensation, and emotion, and by simple reasoning.” He said he endeavored to keep his stories in line with evolution and scientific research yet awoke one day to find himself cast into the “nature faker” camp.⁷

³ For other cartoons from this time, see Kingman’s *Pictorial Life of Jack London*, pp. 174, 196.

⁴ We have John Muir to thank for taking Roosevelt on a fateful camping trip to Yosemite in 1903 that helped inspire Roosevelt’s conservation policies.

⁵ Roosevelt did believe that animals could feel pain, however, and cruelty to animals is said to have “infuriated” him. Like Jack, he also believed in Darwinism and that men were biological relatives of apes. According to one biographer, Roosevelt “believed that animals had feelings and perhaps even communicated with one another” in ways unknown to humans.

⁶ As for the alliance of Burroughs and Roosevelt, Jack said “there is no difference of opinion. That Roosevelt can do no wrong is Burrough’s opinion; and that Burroughs is always right is Roosevelt’s opinion.”

⁷ Roosevelt was not the only one who accused Jack of being a “nature faker.” Others, including his fellow Russo-Japanese war correspondent, Richard Harding Davis, wrote a story in mockery of Jack, about a man who lives in comfort while writing about the wild.

Jack then gave examples of how animals exhibited rudimentary reasoning, starting with two of his own dogs, Rollo and Glen. Rollo, Jack's childhood dog, loved to play and chase Jack; Rollo could not get enough of it. To get Jack to play with him, Rollo would feign sulking in a corner like something was wrong but as soon as Jack went to console him, Rollo would make "a wild outburst . . . tumbling me over on the floor as he dashed out in a mad scurry around the yard." Jack in turn played tricks on Rollo. Jack would fool Rollo by pretending someone was visiting in order to get Rollo to rush to the door, only to find no one there.

Glen, the dog Jack owned while living in Oakland, loved to ride in automobiles. Whenever he heard a car horn honk, he'd make a mad dash to jump inside the car on the passenger seat. Glen would leave his breakfast if he heard the horn, he so loved riding. Glen stopped this behavior when people kept honking the car horn without moving the car. He consequently learned to ignore the car horn and finish his breakfast.

Jack went on to describe reports from a doctor working with a female chimpanzee who was taught to count to five. She would hold up the number of straws she was asked to, up to five. When she was asked for five straws but had only been given four, she bent one of the straws in two "exposing both its ends and thus making up the required number."⁸

Jack described the views of Burroughs and Roosevelt as mechanistic concepts of animal behavior which were "medieval" and "homocentric." He said they ignored the intimate "kinship" humans have with other animals, warning:

"Let us be very humble. We who are so very human are very animal. . . though you stand on the top of the ladder of life, you must not kick out that ladder from under your feet. You must not deny your relatives, the other animals. Their history is your history, and if you kick them to the bottom of the abyss, to the bottom of the abyss you go yourself."⁹

Resources:

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⁸ Jane Goodall and others have since unequivocally established that some primates have sophisticated cognitive abilities which were previously reserved only for humans.

⁹ For his part, Rev. Long's rebuttal to President Roosevelt's disparaging comment that Long and others did not understand the heart of wild things, Long quipped, "every time [Roosevelt] gets near the heart of a wild thing he invariably puts a bullet through it." Roosevelt did not respond, saying that the author was "too small game to shoot twice."

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