Meet Jack London

Jack London not only wrote adventure stories, he lived them. He was one of thousands of men who went to Canada during the 1890s to prospect for gold, and he once traveled hundreds of miles across the United States by hopping freight trains.

The author-adventurer was born John Griffith Chaney on January 12, 1876. Shortly thereafter, the boy took his stepfather’s last name, London. The family lived in Oakland, California.

London quit school when he was fourteen and alternately worked and traveled for several years. For awhile, he made a living stealing oysters. Then he switched jobs and worked on a government patrol to prevent people from stealing oysters. He also went to Japan, working as a sailor.

When London was nineteen, he returned to school. He completed a four-year high school curriculum in one year and entered the University of California. After a year at the university, he couldn’t resist the lure of the Klondike gold rush in Canada. He never returned to college, but he also never got rich from his trip to the goldfields.

London came home from Canada not with gold, but with ideas. Becoming a writer was one way to escape what he felt would be a dreary existence as a laborer. He trained himself by studying other writers’ works. He began submitting jokes, stories, and poems to magazines and received many rejection letters. Gradually, however, success came. His first book, The Son of the Wolf, was well received when it was published in 1900. The Call of the Wild, published three years later, brought London lasting fame.

London was a popular figure. He used his position to win support for certain causes in which he believed, such as socialism, women’s suffrage, and prohibition. He also endorsed, or recommended for use, certain commercial products, making him one of the first celebrity spokespersons.

Even after London achieved success as a writer, he continued to be well disciplined about his work. He completed fifty books—including novels and short story collections—during his seventeen-year writing career. At the time, he was the highest paid writer in the United States.

London was married twice. He and his first wife had two daughters. In 1905 he bought a ranch in Glen Ellen, California. There, he practiced agricultural techniques he had learned in Japan.

Though the circumstances of London’s death are somewhat controversial, he probably died from kidney disease. He was only forty years old when he died, but he had achieved a great deal in his lifetime. Translations of his works are still widely read all over the world.