

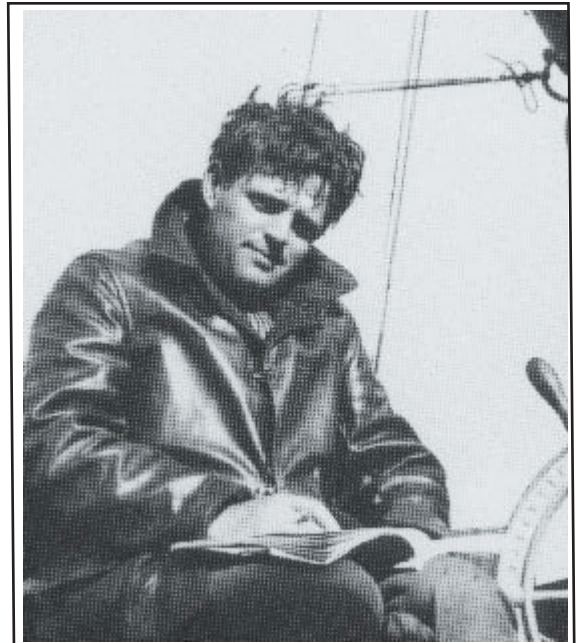
Jack London, California Cannabis Pioneer

By Dale Gieringer March 2005

Despite California's modern reputation for being on the forefront of cannabis culture, surprisingly little evidence of cannabis use survives from the state's golden era when drugs were still legal. It was Jack London, California's most celebrated author of the turn of the last century, who became the first California literary figure to describe his adventures with hashish.

In that bygone era, "marihuana" was still unknown to the American public.¹ Pharmacies did however carry preparations of cannabis indica, a familiar ingredient of the 19th century pharmacopoeia used for coughs, migraines, and other complaints. More rarely, cannabis could be had in the concentrate form known as "hasheesh," an exotic intoxicant indulged in by Orientals and a handful of bohemians. The hashish experience had been famously described by two American writers, Fitz Hugh Ludlow and Bayard Taylor, in the 1850s, but interest soon faded. Unlike their European counterparts in the decadent *fin de siecle*, American writers betrayed little interest in drugs other than alcohol, and there exists no account of bohemian hashish use in 19th-century California.²

Jack London was California's most celebrated literary figure at the turn of the last century. Not so much a bohemian as an aspiring he-man, London was an energetic worker, sportsman and adventurer who was also much given to rousting and drinking.³ London had achieved worldwide fame through such novels as *Call Of The Wild*, *The Sea-Wolf*, and *White Fang*. He was also an enthusiastic booster for social reforms ranging from socialism to - paradoxically - prohibition.



Jack London on the *Snark*

London first described his adventures with hashish in *John Barleycorn*, his "alcoholic memoirs," devoted to his struggles with drink. Published in 1913, the book was dedicated to the prohibitionist cause, which was then in the midst of a statewide initiative campaign. In the book, London describes what he calls the "White Logic," the irresistible drive leading him to intoxication. There he mentions his experience with hashish.⁴

"How to describe this White Logic to those who have never experienced it! It is perhaps better first to state how impossible such a description is. Take Hasheesh Land, for instance, the land of enormous extensions of time and space. In past years I have made two memorable journeys into that far land. My adventures there are seared in sharpest detail on my brain. Yet I have tried vainly, with endless words, to describe any tiny particular phase to persons who have not travelled there.

"I use all the hyperbole of metaphor, and tell what centuries of time and profounds of unthinkable agony and horror can obtain in each interval of all the intervals between the notes of a quick jig played quickly on the piano. I talk for an hour, elaborating that one phase of Hasheesh Land, and at the end I have told them nothing. And when I cannot tell them this one thing of all the vastness of terrible and wonderful things."

London was introduced to hashish by a fellow Oaklander, the poet George Sterling. Now largely

forgotten, Sterling may be best remembered for his lines about San Francisco, "The City by the Sea," the "Cool, Grey City of Love." He achieved minor fame as a kind of unofficial bohemian poet laureate presiding over an artists' colony in Carmel. There he and his friends indulged liberally in alcohol and occasionally in other drugs, including hashish.⁵ Sterling left no account of his own hashish travels, though he is said to have written his masterwork, "The Wine of Wizardry," under the influence of opium.

London's boyhood friend, Frank Atherton, tells the tale of London's first hashish trip with Sterling.⁶

"Sometimes Jack would go out for an afternoon with George Sterling. I well remember one night when they had been together. It was quite late when Jack came home. His eyes looked glassy, and apparently he had been drinking too much. Still he was very quiet, retiring immediately. We didn't see him again until the next morning when he related his experience of the previous night. He and George had tentatively indulged in hashish.

"To one who has never entered the land of hashish,' he said, 'an explanation would mean nothing. But to me, last night was like a thousand years. I was obsessed with indescribable sensations, alternative visions of excessive happiness and oppressive moods of extreme sorrow. I wandered for aeons through countless worlds, mingling with all types of humanity, from the most saintly persons down to the lowest type of abysmal brute.'

"But why in the devil did you want to take the damned stuff?' I asked him. "It's a wonder you and George didn't go crazy.'

"Jack smiled evasively. 'Say, Frank, you've read some of Marie Corelli's books, haven't you? No doubt you've read *Wormwood*.'

"Yes, I have, but what has that to do with hashish?"

"Everything.' Jack replied. 'Marie Corelli couldn't have written *Wormwood* if she hadn't drunk enough Absinthe to experience all those strange dreams and fancies described in *Wormwood*. And I've read that she even became an inmate of brothels to get the material for other books. So you see in order to write intelligently, one must have certain experiences that coincide with the subject.'"

London's hashish adventures ended abruptly during his famous yacht voyage on the *Snark* on a visit to the Solomon Islands. There the party was entertained by the charming British owners of a coconut plantation, Penduffryn, on the island of Guadalcanal. The story is told by Martin Johnson, the *Snark's* cook, engineer and photographer:⁷

"The merrymaking lasted several days, until it ended by all present agreeing to take the Oriental dope called hashish.

"Darbshire was the first to partake. After he had passed under the influence, we decorated him with parts of Mrs. London's clothes, and I did a little artistic work with water-colors. For several days he went around the house in a half-dazed state, and would at times drop dead asleep while standing on his feet. One after another took this hashish, until the night Jack took it. He went clear off his head, acted so wild that Mrs London was frightened; and no one else would take it. Next night was to have been my turn."



Group photo from the "Hasheesh Party" on Guadalcanal, during the voyage of the *Snark*.

From the Jack London Collection, UC Berkeley Digital Library SunSITE
<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/London/Images/S0000012.jpg>

Cannabis was still legal when London and Sterling tried it. However, just as *John Barleycorn* was being published in the spring of 1913, the California legislature outlawed cannabis at the behest of the state Board of Pharmacy. The Board, a nationally recognized pioneer in the war on drugs, expressed concern about the use of cannabis by East Indian "Hindoo" immigrants. Ironically, only after cannabis was prohibited did it come into widespread popularity in California, but that would be years in the future.

Of far more immediate concern to most Californians, including London, was alcohol. London himself supported prohibition because he saw it as the only way to stop himself from drinking. He confessed to having voted for women's suffrage for the express purpose of advancing the cause of prohibition, as he explained in *John Barleycorn*:⁸

"The moment women get the vote in any community, the first thing they proceed to do is to close the saloons. In a thousand generations to come men of themselves will not close the saloons. As well expect the morphine victims to legislate the sale of morphine out of existence."

"The way to stop drinking is to stop it. The way China stopped the general use of opium was by stopping the cultivation and importation of opium. The philosophers, priests, and doctors of China could have preached themselves breathless against opium for a 1000 years, and the use of opium, so long as opium was ever-accessible and obtainable, would have continued, unabated. We are so made, that is all. We have with great success made a practice of not leaving arsenic and strychnine, and typhoid and tuberculosis, germ, lying around for our children to be destroyed by. Treat John Barleycorn the same way."

London was not perceptive as a social prophet, either with respect to socialism or prohibition, neither of which he lived to see. He died in 1916 from a morphine overdose while suffering acute kidney disease. Whether the overdose was deliberate or accidental is unclear. One can only speculate whether Jack might have lived longer had he used more cannabis and less alcohol and morphine.

NOTES

1. "Marihuana" is a term of Mexican origin referring specifically to cannabis cigarettes. It first appears in the English language in travel accounts from the first decade of the 20th century. Marihuana was introduced to the U.S. from Mexico during the revolution of 1910-20. The first newspaper reports of marihuana use on U.S. soil are in El Paso (1913) and Los Angeles (1914).

2. On the history of cannabis use in California, see Dale Gieringer, "The Forgotten Origins of Cannabis Prohibition in California," *Contemporary Drug Problems*, Vol 26#1, Summer 1999; <http://www.canorml.org/background/ca1913.html>.

3. On London's life and character, see Joseph Noel, *Footloose in Arcadia: A Personal Record of Jack London, George Sterling, Ambrose Bierce* (Carrick & Evans, New York, 1940); Russ Kingman, *Pictorial Life of Jack London* (Crown Publishers NY 1979); and, Kevin Starr, "The Sonoma Finale of Jack London, Rancher," Chap. 7 in *Americans and the California Dream: 1850-1915* (Oxford Univ., 1973)

4. *John Barleycorn* (Ed. John Sutherland, Oxford Press, 1989) Chap. 35, p. 185. Printed in 1913, this book was dedicated to the temperance movement and distributed to the WCTU. It was originally published in serial form in the *Saturday Evening Post*, where the passage on hashish appeared on April 26, 1913.

5. On Sterling's drug use and alcoholism, see Joseph Noel, *Footloose in Arcadia* (Carrick & Evans, NY 1940), pp. 162-5; a solitary mention of hashish occurs in Sterling's Carmel diaries: Franklin Walker, *The Seacoast of Bohemia* (Peregrine Smith, Inc., Santa Barbara, CA 1973), p. 28.

6. Russ Kingman, *Pictorial Life of Jack London* (Crown Publishers NY 1979), p. 124. Jack's hashish journey with Sterling occurred sometime after he left his first wife Bessie and moved in with Atherton in July 1903. Frank Atherton's original account, "Jack London in Boyhood Adventurers," appears in the *Jack London Journal*, Vol. 4 (1997).

7. Martin Johnson, *Through the South Seas With Jack London* (T. Werner Laurie, London 1913), p. 311 (account repeated in Russ Kingman, op. cit., p. 202). The date of London's visit to Pennduffryn was July 15 - Aug 8, 1908.

8. Dale Gieringer, op. cit.

9. *John Barleycorn*, Chap. 38.