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## “Utility and Beauty Should Be One:” The Landscape of Jack London’s Ranch of Good Intentions

### ABSTRACT

Jack London—popular author, avid traveler, and vocal socialist—left two legacies to the world: his writings and his Beauty Ranch. This paper examines the common principles influencing London’s self-expression in writing and across the landscape.

### Introduction

I ride over my beautiful ranch. Between my legs is a beautiful horse. The air is wine. The grapes on a score of rolling hills are red with autumn flame. Across Sonoma Mountain wisps of sea fog are stealing. The afternoon sun smoulders in the drowsy sky. I have everything to make me glad I am alive. I am filled with dreams and mysteries (London, *John Barleycorn* 1981 [1913]:310–313).

In the spring of 1905, Jack London moved to Glen Ellen in Sonoma County, California, and bought the first of many parcels of land that came to make up his Beauty Ranch. Until his death, eleven years later, London strove to develop these worn out properties into a model farm. London’s flight to Glen Ellen from an Oakland suburb had been precipitated by two factors: the disintegration of his first marriage and entrance of a new love, Charmian Kittridge, into his life and a feeling of weariness with city life and city people. Not yet thirty, Jack London was at the height of his literary career (Figure 1). In the seven years after the publication of his first story, London had risen from the ranks of the urban poor to become America’s best-paid author. His short stories and novella, *The Call of the Wild*, brought London wide critical acclaim and instant popularity with the reading public.

### John Barleycorn at the Plow

Having achieved success, London wrote for money: money to finance the building of the *Snark*, in which he and Charmian planned to sail around the world; for expansion and improvement of the ranch; and for the building of his fantasy home, the Wolf House. London drew heavily from personal experience for his writing. After moving to Glen Ellen, the inspiration for his work came in part from his travels, his relationship with Charmian, his studies of agriculture, and—at least for the first few years—from his conviction in the inevitability of a socialist revolution. However, London’s responsibilities and diverse interests produced a cash-flow problem of immense proportions; he took and spent cash advances long before producing final copy. A friend once lamented that Jack had “mortgaged his brain.” He had to write just to make good on advances. Throughout his career, London’s writing habits were very strict and regimented: he set himself a goal of one thousand words a day, which he reached each morning before socializing or attending to ranch business. By 1912, London was tiring of the pressure of having to write just to keep the ranch going; he had come to hate writing (Watson 1983:3). Nevertheless, London continued to meet his quota, often filling his work with events and scenes close at hand. Thus, the ranch contributed to London’s fiction as scene and plot, while the fiction brought cash to invest in his agrarian vision (Figure 2).

In the words of a contemporary, not only had London written many fine stories while at the ranch, “he had written even more largely and legibly with plough and cultivator” to create a landscape to his own design (Millard 1917:412). Yet, while idiosyncratic, the Beauty Ranch—or the Ranch of Good Intentions, as London once called it—was not the product of a mind isolated from contemporary intellectual movements; neither did he flit from one obsession to another like Mr. Toad of *Wind in the Willows* (Grahame 1966). London’s eccentricities were driven by his own particular fusion of the precepts of Socialism along with those of the Conservation and Arts and Crafts movements.



FIGURE 1. Charmian Kittridge and Jack London. (courtesy of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.)

With the dawning of a new century, many intellectuals looked back to the 19th century with regret and toward the future with despair. The frontier was “closed,” free land was no more, and most pioneer settlers had left the countryside to work in increasingly industrialized urban settings. In moving to the city, the pioneer lost control of the products of his labor and of his future; he lost his individualism and became just another wage worker in the impersonal, unstable developing capitalist system. Many people advocated the return to nature, to agrarian life and the individualistic values of the pioneers as a remedy for the personal alienation brought by rampant industrialization and the degrading urban existence. As Nash (1970:2) has pointed out, the popularity of London’s *Call of the Wild* (1903), in which a domesticated dog becomes wild, far surpassed that of his later *White Fang* (1906), which described the domestication of a wolf. This tension between nature and civilization found

its expression in the era’s literature, art, architecture, and political and social movements (White and White 1962).

At the center of London’s philosophy were principles that linked his ethics and his aesthetics, allowing him to comprehend the landscape like a morality play (or, perhaps, a soap opera)—its features the products of the playing out of human qualities: greed and dishonesty or altruism and stewardship. Thus, London’s Marxian socialist perspective shaped his reading of the landscape; his belief in scientific agriculture provided the techniques to redeem the land for future generations; and his artistic vision, wedding beauty and utility, designated the form and materials for his improvements. This paper shall examine how London wrote these principles into his fiction and across the landscape for all to read: It is an exercise in what one of London’s heroines described as “landscape vampirism,” or seeing the land through



FIGURE 2. Plowing the alfalfa fields on London's Beauty Ranch, ca. 1912. (courtesy of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.)

the eyes of another (*Little Lady of the Big House*, 1916:208).

### Utility and Beauty

In an essay “The House Beautiful,” London rails against his Greek Revival pied-a-terre in Oakland (Figure 3). Its decorative columns topped with wooden Ionic capitals had, he said, “no use, no work to perform. They are plastered gawds that tell lies that nobody believes” (1910a:141). Such houses were also built in San Francisco, where, according to London, “like the dwellers in all cities,” the residents lied in their buildings as “they lied and cheated in their business life.” In 1906, “the earth wrinkled its back for twenty-eight seconds, and the lying cornices crashed down” upon the heads of the people whose immorality was reflected for London and all others to see in their dishonest structures (1910a:142).

These images were more than analogy to Jack London. The material world did not merely symbolize human social and moral relations. To London, humanity’s imprint on the landscape was a concrete representation, a direct result of these relations. In the eroded hills of Beauty Ranch, London read a tale of greed, inefficiency, and ignorance, encouraged, he believed, by the capitalist market system. The history of the Beauty Ranch, of those “men who broke their hearts and their backs over this stubborn soil that now belongs to me” (London, *John Barleycorn* 1981 [1913]:313), became part of London’s personal landscape, which he wove and rewove into his fictional creations.

London was attracted to his Sonoma County ranch by its rural beauty. Raised in the city of Oakland, the young London worked in many menial positions. Later, he traveled to London, England’s East End, where he experienced the wretched poverty of the slum dwellers (*People of the Abyss*, 1903). These



FIGURE 3. Jack London's much-despised Oakland house: "I am hurt every time I look at it." (courtesy of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.)

experiences brought Jack to the conclusion that urban life itself degraded and alienated human beings, both coercing and cajoling them into narrow, self-destructive lives, as he put it, pulling them "down into the senseless vortex of misery and heartbreak of the man made world" (*The Valley of the Moon*, 1913:255). Escape was possible only for those with determination and vision, such as the young couple, Saxon and Billy, in London's novel *The Valley of the Moon*:

Her mind was made up. The city was no place for her and Billy, no place for love nor for babies. The way out was simple. They would leave Oakland. It was the stupid that remained and bowed their heads to fate (1913:271).

Although he idealized the natural life and was awestruck by the Alaskan wilderness, London was not cast in the mold of David Henry Thoreau or John Muir, for, said Jack, "utility and beauty must be indissolubly wedded" (1910a:145). The beauty of his ranch did not come from pristine nature. Far from

it. London's ideal was a pastoral but vigorous landscape that would reflect a working ranch. It was the artist and craftsman William Morris who said that one should "have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful" (cited in Makinson 1977:12). Jack London's aesthetic sense comes straight out of this Arts and Crafts tradition. Indeed, London took Morris' axiom one step further, for, said he, "perhaps it is because of the practical life I have lived that I worship utility and have come to believe that utility and beauty should be one. . . ." (1910a:139). This principle, above all others, guided his vision of the Beauty Ranch.

### Efficiency

In his reading of the landscape, London soon found that even the land, the very soil of his new ranch, had been corrupted by the greed of exploita-





FIGURE 4. Terraced hillsides on the Beauty Ranch: “By these contours I keep the moisture in the soil.” (courtesy of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.)

tive pioneer farmers. “My neighbors,” wrote London, “were typified by the man who said: ‘You can’t teach me anything about farming; I’ve worked three farms out (myself)!’ ” (Haughey and Johnson 1985:13). According to Jack Hastings, London’s alter ego in *The Valley of the Moon*, exploitation had become a profession, engaged in by people he called the “movers,” and had spawned a distinctive lifestyle: “The ‘movers,’ ” said Hastings, “. . . lease, clean out, and gut a place in several years, and then move on . . . skin the soil and move, skin the soil and move” (1913:434).

One of London’s major criticisms of the capitalist class was its inefficiency in the management of the world’s productive capability: “Less blindness on its part, less greediness, and a rational management, were all that were necessary” (1910b:500). However, before the land could be productive again, the work of destructive men had to be undone, and a new, sustainable agricultural system devised. In London’s

mind, an important benefit of socialism would be its efficiency. Applying this principle on his ranch, London arrived at scientific agriculture as the key to rationalized, sustainable production. An outgrowth of the Conservation movement, scientific agriculture provided the technical means by which natural resources could be developed without the waste and inefficiency of the earlier era. London instituted the necessary changes by means of a well-planned, highly rationalized, and centrally directed system. The emphasis was on efficiency in design, in the application of labor, and innovative technology, both mechanical and what we would now term appropriate technology. These ideas can be seen in the innovative design of London’s agricultural buildings and their arrangement in efficient complexes.

While working in Korea as a newspaper correspondent in 1904, London had been struck by the benefits of terracing the hillsides for agriculture. Later, he used this technique on the Beauty Ranch



FIGURE 5. Jack London riding manure spreader in his usual ranch attire of broad-brimmed hat, white shirt and pants, and riding boots. London rarely did any physical labor on the ranch; this photo taken during a ranch “open house” held for the press. (courtesy of The Bancroft Library)

(Figure 4). “I had noticed,” London told a fellow journalist, “the way the soil was washed down the hillsides by the rains, and I determined to prevent that, which I did by grading the land, making it over into rolling contours and abrupt terraces” (Millard 1916:154). The contour following terraces had the additional benefit, in this semi arid region, of keeping the moisture in the soil, rather than allowing it to run off (Haughey and Johnson 1985:24). London’s obsession was, in his words, “to make the dead soil live again” (Hendricks and Shepard 1965:429). This he did, without the aid of commercial fertilizers, through such innovative practices as rotating crops, planting nitrogen-fixing plants, and recycling animal wastes.

Jack London took great pride in his system for the storage and use of liquid manure. His design used gravity to drain wastes from the cattle barn into a concrete holding tank and from there, through an underground pipe, to the liquid manure spout. The

spout was mounted on a platform above a ramp. Tank wagons would drive down the ramp, under the spout, collect their load, and take it out to be sprayed on the fields. Elsewhere on the ranch, a roofed manure pit was constructed to receive wastes shuttled in along a metal track in containers from the stables. The material remained in the concrete lined pit until it had partly decayed, and was then carted out onto the fields and plowed under (Figure 5).

### Honesty and Beauty

While the utility of these features was one dimensional—that is, they enhanced only the productivity of the land—London’s delight was in creations that served leisure as well as economic needs. Through efficient management, London sought to significantly reduce the amount of time that one had to devote to making a living. To Jack London, work was a necessary evil. “To hell with



FIGURE 6. Jack and Charmian enjoyed swimming and boating on their artificial lake. (courtesy of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.)

work if that’s the whole of the game,” said London through one of his characters, “work’s the least part of life!” (*The Valley of the Moon*, 1913:425). Thus, a reservoir constructed in the hills above his hay fields was doubly beautiful, for it supplied irrigation water and a lake for swimming and boating (Figure 6). The scene was complemented by a rustic cabin—known as the bathhouse—used for changing rooms by his many guests. Yet London did not conceal the artificial source of this idyllic setting behind ingenious landscaping, decorative plantings, or other artifice. The concrete dam is uncompromising and visually central to the scene. Nearby, a concrete box connected to two mysterious looking iron pipes juts abruptly from the water. Such intrusions seem incongruous in such a setting; indeed, modern descriptions and photographs of the place, which now bears a veneer of weeds, stress its natural beauty. To its creator, however, the visibility of the dam and the pipes that regulated water depth were essential

to the honesty of the scene (Figure 7). This is a manufactured landscape, he seems to say, and we should not be ashamed of the fact. To imitate nature through the craft of the landscape architect would have denigrated London’s efforts, by which this natural resource was conserved and put to use without being abused.

The principle of honesty in landscape, in design, and in materials was not merely an abstract aesthetic vision but a reflection of London’s political philosophy. In his essay, “What Life Means to Me,” London presents the image of himself as a revolutionary, working to destroy the “edifice” of capitalism:

Some day we’ll topple it over, along with all its rotten life and unburied dead, its monstrous selfishness and sodden materialism. Then we’ll cleanse the cellar and build a new habitation for mankind . . . in which all the rooms will be bright and airy . . .” (1947 [1906]:399).

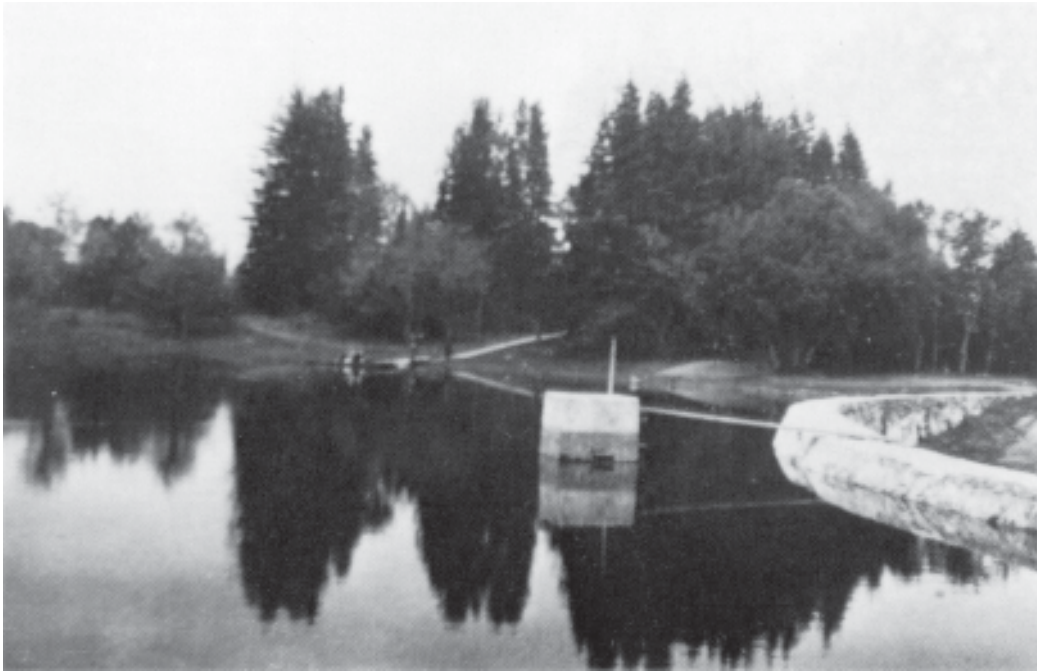


FIGURE 7. The utility of London's lake—expressed in the square, concrete water-control device and iron piping—was not concealed for the sake of a 'natural' appearance. (courtesy of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.)

In the same way that the rotten condition of the edifice of capitalism was exposed by the system's inefficiency and cruelty, for London a man's house both spoke of and affected the moral quality of his life. Those who dwell in "lying house(s)," said he, are not responsible for their own morals (1910a [1906]:143). So, when it came to building a house for himself, Jack London planned carefully (Figure 8).

Construction on the Wolf House took more than two years. Its architecture was heavily influenced by the work of southern California architects Charles and Henry Greene. Like London, the Greene brothers were concerned with the honest treatment of construction materials. In the words of Charles Greene, "Leave them as they are—stone for stone, brick for brick, wood for wood . . . Why disguise them? . . . The noblest work of art is to make common things beautiful for man" (cited in Guinn 1907:540–41). The Wolf House was to be made of stone, wood,

fired clay, and concrete. "Construction and decoration," declared London "must be one" (1910a:140). Accordingly, unpeeled redwood logs were used both to frame the great house and for its walls. The lower level was of local stone, not artfully shaped but just as it was blasted from the quarry. The entire structure was built on a huge concrete raft to protect it from earthquakes.

To the modern urbanite, concrete is the archetypical artificial substance. But to Jack London, who produced the cement himself in the ranch's rock crusher, concrete was nature reassembled and improved. Just as animal wastes were transformed into fertilizer, the rolling, erosion prone hills reformed into terraces, and the potential of water captured by a reservoir, in the creation of the Wolf House, materials provided by nature were transformed without being debased. Tragically, just before the Londons were due to move in, the Wolf House was gutted by fire (Figure 9).





FIGURE 8. Early drawing of the Wolf House by San Francisco architect Albert Farr. Jack required that his house “be honest in construction, material, and appearance.” (courtesy of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.)

For London, honesty was achieved where design served function, and substance not made subservient to style. “What is form?” he once questioned, “What intrinsic value resides in it? None, none, none—unless it clothe pregnant substance, great substance” (Watson 1983:4). His concern with efficient function is expressed in many varied design elements of the ranch. The innovative pig house, known as the “Pig Palace,” was designed in a circle so that one man could manage 17 families of pigs, or up to 200 individual animals (Haughey and Johnson 1985:30). The animals’ food was stored in the upper level of a centrally located building for easy distribution (Figure 10). On a much smaller scale, the hardwood floors of a house on the ranch, designed by Charmian London, were built with curved corners so that dust could not accumulate and the floors could be swept easily (Praetzellis et al. 1987:1–6). Beauty and honesty, as well as efficiency, demanded that there could be rugs but no carpets in the Wolf House:

Beauty, because, states London, “carpets are not beautiful to the mind that knows they are filled with germs and bacilli” (1910a:148); and honesty, because these coverings conceal the floor itself, the solid matter on which people actually stand.

By minimizing the time that would have to be spent in mechanical occupations like sweeping floors and feeding pigs, London hoped to give more leisure time to his employees. However, London’s demands on himself—which led to the authorship of 16 books, 28 volumes of stories, and scores of articles in his short 17-year writing career—were matched by his demands of productivity on others. His employees had to obey a strict code of conduct and accountability. To save money, he employed mostly casual, immigrant labor. “This month,” he wrote to a friend, “they have not worked more than two weeks on account of the rain. They got paid accordingly” (cited in Hendricks and Shepard 1965:366).



FIGURE 9. The Wolf House ruins. The cause of the fire was never determined. (courtesy of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.)

Such practices, by the man who penned such phrases as “There is no brotherhood in unorganized labor” (Foner 1947:121), is an apparent contradiction. Yet London, the creator of such individualistic characters as Buck in *Call of the Wild* (1903) and the rugged Burning Daylight (1910c), was not a believer in universal equality. The superior person strives toward the betterment of humanity but should not thrust liberty, freedom, or independence on the rest of society for, wrote Jack, “. . . if such royal things are kindly presented to them by superior individuals . . . they will not know what to do with them . . .” (Foner 1947:123). While Socialism would encourage a climate of self-improvement, in the final analysis, people can only achieve these “royal things” through their own individual efforts.

This American pioneer like ethic is to be seen throughout London’s creations, both literary and material. The Beauty Ranch was to be a self-sufficient unit, in the tradition of the mythic western

homestead. The visual quality of the place was to be pastoral, a tamed landscape, a “middle landscape” (Marx 1969). In the Wolf House, the brazen use of timber and stone echos, out of conscious choice, the vernacular creations of the pioneers. Redwood, basalt, and field stone from the ranch provided the primary materials for all of London’s construction, while the ranch’s garden, orchards, fields, and livestock supplied food for employees and guests. In contrast to the short-term, destructive practices of the pioneers, London emphasized permanence in construction, which can be seen in his extensive use of stone and concrete, and in agriculture, which is reflected in his erosion control and soil enhancement programs. After the destruction of the Wolf House, the Beauty Ranch became Jack London’s main interest. In poor health, and probably aware that he had not long to live, Jack London built for future generations, “to leave the land better for my having been” (Haughey and Johnson 1985:28).

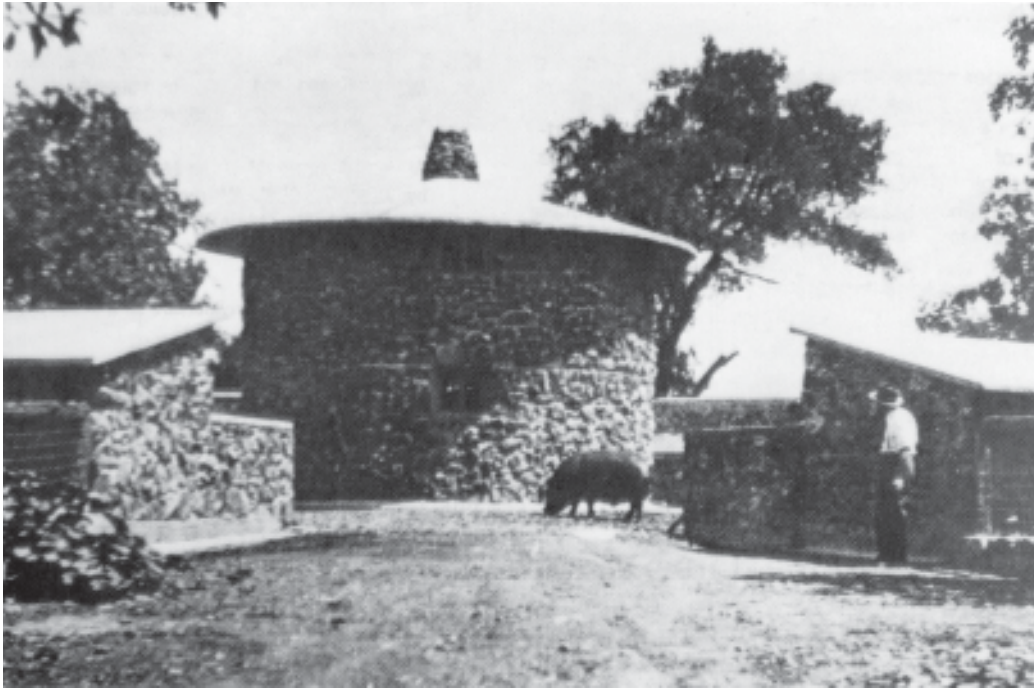


FIGURE 10. The “Pig Palace” designed by Jack London: “It cost three thousand to build and will pay twelve per cent in the mere cost of labor.” (courtesy of the California State Library.)

I am the sailor on horseback!  
Watch my dust'.  
Oh, I shall make mistakes a many;  
But watch my dreams come true . . .  
Try to dream with me my dreams of fruitful acres.

Do not be a slave to old conception.  
Try to realize what I am after.  
(Jack London quoted in Charmian London  
1921[11]:267–268).

### Postscript

Jack London died, at age 40, in 1916. He was buried on the ranch, near the ruins of the Wolf House. His wife, Charmian, lived at the ranch until her death in 1955, at the age of 84. Five years later, part of the ranch was given to the California Department of Parks and Recreation. Today, the Wolf House ruins, the recently renovated Pig Palace and silos, the bathhouse and reservoir, and many other London built features, as well as several hundred acres of wooded countryside, are part of Jack London State Historic Park.

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