This pioneering book is a chronological study of Jack London’s relationships with his English agents and publishers as he strove to conquer England’s literary marketplace—“the gateway to the rest of the world” (157). Drawing on unpublished sources—notably letters to and about London—and equipped with an impeccable knowledge of early twentieth-century publishing practices, Joseph McAleer illuminates a hitherto overlooked facet of London’s life.

McAleer warns readers that the picture of London emerging from the examination of his clashes with the cutthroat overseas marketplace “is not a pretty one” (xiv). This is hardly surprising: even at home, London was not above using bullying tactics. Writing to his wife from his hotel room in New York in 1914, he boasted of having intimidated a theatrical agent, George Pelton, into virtually signing over dramatic and film rights: “For two days I purposely let my beard grow, and you know how black it comes out. I opened my pajama-coat so that the mat of hair showed on my chest. And of course I left out my upper teeth … I was not pretty.” The ploy worked: “scared” by this unconventional man of letters ferociously “closing and unclosing [his] fists,” the agent caved in.¹ Such primitive showdowns are morally questionable, but at least they contain an element of straightforwardness that was often lacking in London’s transatlantic dealings. The absence, on English soil, of a trusted publisher-cum-mentor, a role assumed by Macmillan’s George P. Brett in America, compelled London to face, rudderless, an unfamiliar foreign market. Suspicious, impulsive, and all the while generating an indigestible volume of stories that was bound to generate “confusions and mix-ups,” he made poor decisions that quickly earned him “a reputation for unpredictability” (43, 72). Worse, his shenanigans, coupled with some vituperative letters, eventually made him “persona non grata in the English publishing world” (105). If the correspondence between London and his almost sole publisher in America, Brett, “shows both men at their best,” that with his several English publishers often exposes London at his worst.²

McAleer suggests that things could have turned out differently if London had allowed his first two English literary agents—Alexander Pollock Watt and James Brand Pinker—to handle the publication of his flood of tales not only in serial but also in book form, if he had remained with one English firm instead of working with half a dozen, and if transatlantic communication had been always successful. But none of this happened. London’s autocratic and manipulative ways, and the occasional misunderstanding, combined to try the patience of his agents and to dampen his publishers’ enthusiasm, thereby thwarting any hopes of long-term association, which

alone could have brought the kind of security he enjoyed at home. Later, in 1911, London found a third agent and an umpteenth publisher in England—Hughes Massie and Mills & Boone respectively—with whom he enjoyed healthier relationships. But these collaborations proved short-lived: in 1914 the war wreaked havoc in the publishing industry, and two years later London was dead.

As he chronicles London’s overseas transactions, McAleer reveals the negotiations behind the publication of his books, discusses their (good) sales, and summarizes their critical reception. He deftly weaves this information into a broader picture of the early twentieth-century literary scene, which he knows very well, having previously dissected it in his excellent Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain, 1914–1950 (1992). Thus readers are never simply showered with sales numbers; they are told, always, what these numbers mean, as compared with those of contemporary best-selling authors or in relation to book-production costs. McAleer’s study also features nine figures showing the evolution of the marketing of London’s works as well as his branding as an author. These illustrations range from the prospectus accompanying his first short-story collection and introducing “a new Great Writer,” to cheap reprints of his successful books under lurid covers, and finally to his apotheosis as an international star: a 1929 German catalogue bills him as “The Favorite Writer of Our Generation,” whose thirty translated works had already sold one million copies (Figures 1, 5, 9).

One rarely finds such a wealth of new and neatly organized information between covers; McAleer has done a tremendous service to Jack London scholarship. However, in a second edition, references, wherever possible, should be made systematically to the letters already published in the The Letters of Jack London (1988).

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