Birth of a Business Novel: 

*The Call of the Wild* and Its Time

Kwangjin Lee  
(Soongsil University)

*Men of business seemed the epitome of the era, models who served to lure “men of ambition and ability” into the fray of competition.* — Alan Trachtenberg (80)

I

In 1897 Jack London, a rarely known young man as a writer at that time, joined the Klondike Gold Rush. His efforts to find gold in one of the severest of natural environments were heroic, but he failed to find mineral wealth. He had to give up gold-seeking and come back to Oakland, California because of a case of scurvy. After he had mediocre success in publishing (and selling) some of his stories, in December, 1902,
Jack London wrote a new story. The writing project that lasted for about a month produced his masterpiece, about which Charmian London, his second wife, declared, “[it was] a story that was destined to ring around the world and be treasured in the universities of his country as a jewel of English literature” (388).

Arguably, he later became the most popular American novelist outside the United States. For example, in 1968, in the new introduction to her book on her father, Joan London introduced the estimation of Vil Bykov, Jack London authority at the USSR Academy of Sciences in Moscow. According to Bykov, “some twenty-seven million copies of London’s books have been sold in the Soviet Union” (Joan London xv). The sale included all other fictions written by London, and his Socialism appealed greatly to readers in the Soviet Union. But its popularity was not limited to that country. Claus Secher, a Danish literary scholar, insists that “Jack London is—as far as [he] can see—the most translated American writer of all in Denmark” (30). Rolf Lundén, another literary scholar in Scandinavia, credits London as the major cause of the increase in translations from English books between 1926 and 1930. According to Lundén, “much of the increase is due again to the popularity of writers like Jack London, whose works appeared in fifty editions during this time. American literature had by this time come to overshadow French and German literature, which had, respectively, only 13% and 12% of the market” (132). His popularity was worldwide, and definitely, The Call of the Wild was one of the greatest contributors to his fame.

The contemporary readers’ responses to London’s new novel were mostly positive. One of his biographers summarizes it this way: “It was instantly hailed as a ‘classic enriching American literature’, ‘a spellbinding animal story’, ‘a brilliant dramatisation of the laws of nature’. It was, indisputably, the best study ever of the ‘beastly manners of civilised men and the civilised manners of beasts’” (Kershaw 124).
Certainly, many of the readers were impressed by the masculine style and the adventures in the primitive world. One contemporary reviewer, as many others did, praised such style: “He has a powerful style in certain lines: His forte is the barbaric, the tragic, the unpleasant. He is rugged in description and always strikes home in his own vein. When he leaves that for lighter themes he is far less successful.” (“Jack London’s ‘Call of the Wild’ a Clever Presentation of Life, Human and Brute” 6) To many, it was, “above all, an absorbing tale of wild life, full of pictorial power and abounding in striking incidents of frontier town, camp, and adventure” (Mabie 4).

Most Jack London scholars seem to agree on the main factors that attracted particularly the American readers in the early twentieth century: its primitiveness and virility. And this theory is strongly supported by the research on the period (Rotondo 222). The best example of such manhood is Theodore Roosevelt, who promoted the doctrine of “the strenuous life”—also the title of a speech and essay he wrote. Roosevelt portrayed himself as a wild, adventurous, and sturdy “man” who strived for “manly” achievements.

In the era in which the primitive and virile man was idealized, the character of sled-dog Buck, the central figure of The Call of the Wild, may have been regarded as a desirable alter ego onto whom the readers—especially, male readers—projected themselves. Walker accurately asserts the following: “The part of Buck that was Jack London was escaping from the confining elements in society. For the contemporary reader, the ‘call’ represents the tug on all civilized men to get away from routine tasks, to simplify their lives in somewhat the same way Thoreau wanted them simplified, to find adventure in nature far from cities and family responsibilities” (Walker 227-28).

This paper suggests that there was another factor—though not as noticeable as the other factors such as primitiveness and virility—to the
success of the novel. With close text analysis for the internal evidence, Lee proves that the story has clear elements of organizational fiction within itself (“The Call of the Wild, an Organizational Novel”). Here, rather than text analysis, I focus on external aspects, including historical context, that possibly have contributed to the popularity of Jack London’s story. For that, this paper underscores the fact that though America at the turn of the twentieth century was experiencing the era of Passionate Manhood, it was also the era in which Americans saw the culmination of industrialization and, as a result of it, the great rise of business organizations—large and small. More than ever before, American life became yoked to various types of organizations, especially those of business in which people experienced unprecedented level of competition for survival and success. That may be what American men wanted to run away from, but the organization life was their new reality in which they were driven to live a “strenuous life” in a fairly different sense from what Roosevelt meant.

Even though Jack London did not know that he was writing an organizational fiction, he wanted to create a hero who is highly motivated to succeed (or survive) and who defiantly fought against extremely severe circumstances. This desire, enforced by his experience both as a laborer in various organizations and as a literary businessman, led him to create his masterpiece, which is not very common among the fictions not only of other novelists in his time but also of his own.

II

In the era when Jack London was born, lived, wrote, and did business, America was in the full bloom stage of the industrialization. As a result of industrialization, the size of American corporations grew drastically, and the emergence of big business brought fundamental
changes not only to American business but also to American society as a whole. Alfred D. Chandler, a prominent business historian, explains in great detail the changes in American business organizations (Chandler *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business*; Chandler *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism*). In the newly emerging business system, highly specialized managers were hired for specific functions: large-scale procurement of raw materials, efficient and faster process of production, national scale marketing and sales, and on-time delivery from factories to the customers. In a complex large-scale business, each task itself was a great challenge and required expertise in each of them, and those who were hired in order to meet those challenges were managers. Even though there were widely known big business owners such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Jay Gould, and J. P. Morgan who were thought to have ultimate power of management of their own companies and as such represented them in public, large American corporations from the late nineteenth century were, Chandler argues, run mainly by hired managers — not only middle and low level managers, but also top managers including CEOs — who made most decisions for their own organization.¹)

This drastic increase in the importance of hired managers was most prominent at the turn of the twentieth century. According to a study on the change in the model images of successful life — in other words, the images of American heroes — described in American magazines from right

1) Olivier Zunz emphasizes that the hired managers were not just passive executioners of what were ordered by the owners or higher-level managers. He once wrote, “Far from being the mere foot-soldiers of the elite, members of this new employee class [i.e. managers] interpreted the job of industrializing the land as their mission and, to a large extent, succeeded in shaping the workplace in their own image. Their lives exemplified the historically successful meeting of a large and ambitious project—the building of a continental economy—and an active social class” (4).
after the American Revolution to the end of the World War I, after 1914

[the] most significant development was the recasting of business leaders, of government bureaucrats, and of the military commanders alike into a new character-type, that of the manager. In these years American magazines marked the emergence of “The Organization Man” as a model for the successful life. (Greene 287)

Though the organizational managers were finally accepted as American heroes in the late 1910s, it was just a culmination of the previous process of Americans’ acceptance of organizational life.

The rise of the “new middle class”—which Richard Hofstadter termed to refer to “technicians and salaried professionals, clerical workers, salespeople, and public-service personnel” in order to contrast them with the “old middle class,” who were “business entrepreneurs and independent professional men”—was the result of “the great corporations and the specialized skills of corporate society.” The rise of large corporations in American society was phenomenal. He explains that, at the turn of the twentieth century, the portion of the new middle class grew from thirty-three percent in 1870 to sixty-three percent in the entire middle class in 1910 (215-16). In fact, most Americans as early as in the late nineteenth century could not help experiencing the influence of great business organizations when we think that the management model of big corporations must have been adopted by smaller businesses and other areas like political and labor organizations. Business and other kinds of modern organizations began to permeate into Americans’ everyday life directly or indirectly, and it became a serious issue among them. Far more Americans were involved in business organizations directly or indirectly. Most probably the readers of *The Call of the Wild* were one of those who were involved in business organizations or at
least who felt the change. Therefore it would not be far-fetched if we assume that they sensed—consciously or unconsciously—some features of business organization in the novel.

The sweeping current of such change was so powerful that it must have been felt even by those who were not at the center of the change—geographically and occupationally, like Jack London—and thus seemingly had little to do with the change. London, though he never was an organization man, was never totally free from the changes that eventually altered American life for good. True, he was never involved in organizational life as an independent writer. He even rejected an offer from Cosmopolitan for its editorship simply because he did not like the idea that he had to work under someone else. In a letter to his friend on December 22, 1900, talking about his rejection of the editorship, he wrote, “I want to be free, to write of what delights me, whенsoever and wheresoever it delights me. No office work for me; no routine; no doing this set task and that set task. No man over me” (Labor, Leitz and Shepard 226). It is important, however, to notice that the time span that Bunting’s study covered covers all the years from Jack London’s adolescence to his death in 1916. It can be safely said that London lived during the apex years of managerial capitalism, and thus the phenomenal rise of organizational life in the United States. As a laborer and businessman, he participated in the change in American society (Lee “‘I Shall Climb out of the Pit’: Jack London’s Labor in Writing as a Means of Survival”). In this historical context, his masterpiece came into being. Though it was mostly about extreme savageness and harsh conditions of the Klondike, and many of its characters are dogs, the novel is one of the most prominent organizational fictions. In essence, the plot develops around the teams (organizations) that Buck, the hero dog, was a member of, and it is a story of an organizational being with high achievement motivation who eventually becomes the leader of his own organization.
The book was a passport to instant world acclaim. It not only became a classic, but it also opened a new era of literature. Mush was out, and courageous, raw red-blooded life was in. The Call of the Wild [sic] proved that realism was what the new generation wanted. …… The book has never been out of print during the last one hundred years, and critics still rave about it. A few years ago Carl Sandburg said, “The Call of the Wild [sic] is the greatest dog story ever written and is at the same time a study of one of the most curious and profound motives that play hide-and-seek in the human soul.” (Kingman 116)

Though Russ Kingman is well-known as an overly devoted Jack London worshipper, his appraisal of The Call of the Wild is mostly accepted as accurate among London scholars. Indeed, there were some readers in London’s time unsatisfied with the novel,² but a dominant number of contemporary newspapers and magazines reported positive reviews. The popularity of the novel did not die out after the author’s death. Rather, it survived its creator and remained one of the most widely read books. According to Jeanne C. Reesman, as of 1999, there were thirty-three printed English language editions of the novel (146).

Jack London, however, never imagined—at least at the planning and writing stages—that the novel would be his representative work. Truly, he was a serious writer, and as such whatever he wrote he always did his best in great earnest. In that sense, The Call of the Wild was surely a product of his sincerity and genius. But it was never more than that. In

²) For example, a reader criticized, “A lot of printer’s ink and blank paper was wasted on ‘The Call of the Wild.’ Still, lots of people will read it, say it is great and pass it on to a friend, who will yawn over it in disgust, but try to read it because his friend said it was good” (“Gossip of the Day” 11).
fact, by the time he was thinking about writing the novel, he did not like the Klondike motifs any more. In a letter written several days before he began to write the novel, he even expressed his desire to get away from the Northland topics that he had been writing about since he came back from the Klondike. He felt that he was “better fitted now to attempt a larger and more generally interesting field” (Labor, Leitz and Shepard 318). Therefore, in a sense, rather than being another serious project, it was a passing practice of writing before he published what he regarded as his two important books—*The People of the Abyss* (1903) and *The Kempton-Wace Letters* (1903)—that he had been focusing on in previous years. Much was discussed in his letters in 1902 and 1903 about the two projects he had been working on, and *The Call of the Wild* did not appear very often. The amount of time that he invested to produce the novel was comparably less. While he spent years on planning, writing, and finally publishing the other two projects, it took only one month to write *The Call of the Wild*.

Though Jack London did not regard the novel as a serious project, it must not be disregarded as a minor novel. Rather, the lack of pressure to produce a story that would sell well in the market might have provided him the best working environment to produce his masterpiece with relative ease. Joan London, his daughter, agrees that “*The Call of the Wild,* of all his books,” was “the one conceived and executed with the least deliberation.” By “least deliberation,” she means both that London did not anticipate writing a great work and that it was a work in which he could be true to himself in the sense that “years of study and striving” naturally led him to the “fruit” of his masterpiece (252).

The novel might have been a relatively less burdensome—thus easier—task because of the circumstance which rendered him the greatest comfort both in a psychological and material sense. In fact, it was the first time in his life that he was free from financial concerns. Even
though he began to sell his writings and earned money to make a living from it as he became a nationally known writer, he had never been free from debts and financial problems. In the earlier days, his income was too small to make ends meet, and in later years when he could make much more money than before, his spending grew more rapidly than his income. He was the first writer who became a millionaire from the sales of books, but he had few moments that he was free from debt and financial problems. The several months right after he came back from London during the summer in 1902 were one of them. On the way home from London, he sent a letter to George P. Brett, the publisher of Macmillan Company, requesting financial support for the next two years. Brett agreed to provide him one hundred and fifty dollars per month for two years. It was not free money at all, but “advance royalties” according to his daughter, Joan London. Brett, who wanted London to write more slowly so that he might produce better works, saw the financial pressure that London had as a great obstacle. He wanted to free him from the burden by stabilizing his income for two years. According to Joan London, it seems to have worked. She reflected, “[the] release from hack work during the past few months had given him perspective and made him aware for the first time of the maturing of his powers. He knew past doubt that he was ready now to do his finest work” (241).

Indeed, he was ready. By the time he came back home to California, he already knew that his request was accepted. For the time being, he had only to focus on two writing projects that he was planning to publish the next year. Returning from a long journey, he might have wanted to warm himself up on lighter writing before committing to a serious project. Or, as Kingman imagined, “[before] starting on his ‘big work’, Jack decided to get something out of his system” (116).

The topic he had in mind was a dog story. In a letter to Anna Strunsky, the coauthor of _The Kempton-Wace Letters_, in March 13, 1903, he
wrote about a dog story he recently finished. He explained, he “started it as a companion to my other dog story ‘Batard,’ which you may remember; but it got away from me, & Instead of 4000 words it ran 32000 before I could call a halt. I hope you will like it when it appears” (Labor, Leitz and Shepard 352). “Bâtard” is a short fiction that had been published in The Cosmopolitan in June 1902. The original title in the magazine was “Diable, A Dog.” Later, he changed the title to “Bâtard” when he included it in a book published in 1904. It is a gloomy story of a wofldog named “Diable” and his vicious master Black Leclère who feels pleasure abusing his dog without any clear reason. Throughout the story, the dog and the owner, the twin devils, hate each other intensely, and they constantly look for opportunities to kill each other. At the end of the story, the dog kills his owner and is shot to death by other people who later conclude that the dog killed his owner. The motifs of this story are darkness, cruelty, and violence.

Kingman insists that the reason why London decided to write another dog story was that “being an animal lover, he had felt guilty over his story ‘Diable — A Dog’ …… in which he had portrayed a dog as a vicious beast, and decided to write one that would make the dog a worthy creature” (116). His “love” of dogs might have reminded him of a dog which he met and liked in Dawson, a town in the Klondike. It was the dog of “Marshall and Louis Bond, Yale-educated sons of a prominent Santa Clara, California judge. It was their mongrel dog which Jack would later immortalise in a work of true genius, The Call of the Wild” (Kershaw 69). Kingman’s assertion, however, seems to be the rather naive interpretation of a London worshipper. There is no denying that he began this fiction as a companion to the previous dog story, and as such he intended to write it short and simple like “Diable, A Dog” had been. Yet, it did not work out as he intended. In such a perfect situation to write as he pleased without any concerns about anything, he could
become truly himself and pour everything into it. That is why the original short fiction project with a few thousand words turned into a book project with more than thirty-two thousand words. 3)

In fact, the novel was an epitome of what he had experienced in previous years viewed from a fresh perspective. Particularly, his recent experience in a London slum must have had a great influence on the story. He began to write it right after his trip to the East End of London, the British slum, the miserable conditions of which overwhelmed him and gave him “the most astounding blues” he had ever experienced (Labor, Leitz and Shepard 308). In the summer of 1902, in order to experience the most miserable life in person, he actually lived there among other residents in the slum for seven weeks to write his report, *The People of the Abyss*. In a letter to George and Caroline Sterling, he wrote, “I have heard of God’s Country, but this country is the Country God has forgotten that he forgot. … I’ve read of misery, and seen a bit; but this beats anything I could even have imagined.” In the simplest terms, it was the “human hell-hole” (Labor, Leitz and Shepard 306). As for the people in the slum, he lamented in his report:

The unfit and the unneeded! The miserable and despised and forgotten, dying in the social shambles. The progeny of prostitution—of the prostitution of men and women and children, of flesh and blood, and sparkle and spirit; in brief, the prostitution of labor. If this is the best that civilization can do for the human, then give us howling and naked savagery. Far better to be a people of the wilderness and desert, of the cave and the squatting-place, than to be a people of the machine and the Abyss. (London 288)

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3) In fact, the story was first published as a serial in the *Saturday Evening Post*, and later Macmillan published in the book form.
The intense experience of the misery of the East End might have altered his view on American society as well as his own life. In fact, his nearly twenty-seven year life was far from being easy and comfortable, but the misery he experienced before the trip to East End was dwarfed by that of the people in the slum. In a letter to Frederick I. Bamford, he compared London with his home state: “Things are terrible in here in London, & yet they tell me times are good and all are employed save the unemployable. If these are good times, I wonder what bad times are like? There’s no place like California, & I long to be back” (Labor, Leitz and Shepard 310). His daughter rather hyperbolically—or wishfully—describes what her father felt: “In contrast with the poverty, squalor and loneliness about him, his home in California, his wife and baby, his well-planned life seemed nothing short of miraculous” (Joan London 240). Such an epiphany did not obliterate his socialistic criticism against American society, but at least for the time being, he must have seen it from a refreshed perspective. At least, America, without a strictly established social hierarchy, was different in that the rags-to-riches myth was shared and more cases of such success stories in the real world—he himself would be one of them in near future—were told in books, magazines, and newspapers. It is highly probable that he wanted to create an American success story in which a spirit was “beaten but not broken”—as is repeatedly emphasized in The Call of the Wild—by the cruelty of human beings and nature in the most harsh and miserable circumstances and not only survives but also dominates. Such a figure was what Jack London, who was—as his hero in the novel—so unbeatable and adventurous that given circumstances could not make him submissive, must have wished to see in the slum. Yet, the people that London met in the slum were thoroughly broken to their soul; thus they were without hope. In this sense, the novel might have been London’s wishful message to the downtrodden.
The desire to create a companion to the previous dog fiction and the motivation to present a hero who rises from the very bottom to the top against all odds led to the characterization of Buck and the severest natural and social environment of the Klondike. Among what London experienced in his short but intense life, the Klondike must have been the closest to the London slum in terms of cruelty, harshness, and hopelessness. He placed Buck there, and had him survive. However, as most critics agree, these settings also provided good experimental settings for the philosophical and scientific theories that swept the Western world: Nietzsche's “Superman” and “Will to power”, Darwin's evolution theory, and most of all Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinism which can be best explained with the phrase he coined – “Survival of the Fittest” (Johnston 81-82). These theories contributed to the formation of Jack London’s thoughts and understanding of society and world. When he was at the Klondike, he brought the books on these theories and read them carefully and debated about them with other adventurers. Though he gave them up in his later stage of life, their influence in The Call of the Wild is evident. Buck is the Nietzschean superman who has a strong will to power and dominates other plebian dogs and eventually human beings. He is also “the fittest” among all the dogs and people in the novel. He does grow throughout the novel, but essentially he was born as “the fit.” The process of growing is less of the change from a weakling to a strong dog than the externalization of the innate strength hidden and undeveloped within him. In short, he was born to be a superman who dominates the world, and he does it. This is the very backbone of the novel.

However, the novel is strikingly organizational – not in a sense that it is well-organized but that organizational settings into which Buck is thrown continuously play critical roles in the novel (Lee “The Call of the Wild, an Organizational Novel”). In other words, Buck the superman and
the fittest becomes a true hero in the organizational settings more so than as an individual. In fact, the environment in which he is forced to survive is not only natural but also organizational. Moreover, the concept of superman and the fittest is presented in the form of organizational leadership, so that the process of becoming a true survivor is the process of gaining full leadership of his own organization — no one is above him. He is an organizational hero. Organizations are dominant settings of the novel — more than its natural settings. In no other fictions of Jack London are organizations as critical as in this. In fact, London is an uncommon author because he made organization a central theme in his work unlike other novelists in his day.

IV

The historical context in American social change at the turn of the twentieth century and the personal situations of Jack London suggest that the popularity of The Call of the Wild is partly the result of its organizational (or business) elements. This findings urges researchers into further study on such aspects of the story in order for a better understanding of it. From that perspective, the harsh circumstance of the Klondike represents the cut-throating business environment in the laissez-faire capitalism, and Buck is an excellent example of organizational hero — like Frank Cowperwood in Theodore Dreiser’s The Financier and The Titan — who not only survives but also dominates the business world.

However, so far, no one viewed the story as an organizational or business fiction. In the twentieth century, some scholarly attempts have been made to find business figures or elements in literature; Robert Baumal’s “The Image of the Businessman in the American Novel” (1968), Robert A. Brawer’s Fictions of Business (1998), Charles Burden and Valerie
E. Mock’s “Businessman in Fiction” (1948), Charlotte Georgi’s *The Businessman in the Novel* (1959), Emily Stipes Watts’s *The Businessman in American Literature* (1982), to name only a few. None of them included Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* among their lists of “business literature”. This omission implies that the definition of “businessman” or “business literature” has not been clear enough and that a more serious consideration of the definition would be necessary for more productive discussion on the topic. In fact, all the scholars simply accept the characters that authors explicitly present as “businessman”, and label the literary works that have such characters “business literature.” But, as the analyses of *The Call of the Wild* show, there may be works which are not related with business at a glance but contain many business elements under their surface, and vice versa. As mentioned before, for more fruitful study of business elements in literature, we need a new definition, which is a good topic for further research in the future.

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Abstract

Kwangjin Lee

This paper focuses on the external (circumstantial) evidences that indicate that Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* became popular to the contemporary readers partly because it addresses readers’ experience at the turn of the twentieth century, and suggests that it may be read as an organizational (or business) novel. First it presents the main current of the era in which the novel was created. At the turn of the twentieth century, American society saw the rapid growth of business organizations—particularly, large ones—and accordingly the formation of managerial class which became a major part of the middle-class. Such change was prevalent throughout the United States, and almost all Americans felt the change, and many of them were in such organizations. This experience might have led them to sense the similarity of the novel with their everyday life in organization environments, which can be an explanation of the novel’s great popularity after its publication.

This paper also presents that Jack London, though never an organizational man himself, understood and the true Zeitgeist of his era and embodied it in his novel, particularly in a state that he was free from the financial burden that almost always strained him throughout his life. It briefly compares the novel with the other dog stories of London, which are all devoid of the organizational elements. It concludes with a suggestion of revision of the definition of “businessman” and “business literature.”
Key Words: Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*, Business novel, Businessman, American Fiction

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