Birth of a Business Novel:
*The Call of the Wild* and Its Time

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*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)

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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).