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Jack London and George P. Brett (Macmillan): economics and ethics of "one of the greatest publisher-writer duos"

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Abstract. The research is devoted to the analysis of ethical and economic aspects of the relationship between Jack London and his major publisher, Macmillan President George P. Brett. Until recently, these relations, which are the brightest example of the synthesis of friendship and mutual benefit, were not the subject of a separate study. The influence of publishers, editors and the literary market as a whole on the writer's creativity was also underestimated. The purpose of this study is to confirm the significant role of Brett in London's writing career, who became not only a business partner for the writer, but also a friend and mentor. The relationship between the writer and the publisher is traced in a historical perspective, showing their changes as the writer's career develops from a literary aspirant to a popular author, conflicts and contradictions, including those that resulted in London's brief apostasy from Macmillan and a contract with Century. It is shown that many of London's works, radical or different from the demands of the mass reader, such as The People of the Abyss, The Kempton – Wace Letters, The Iron Heel, The Road, Martin Eden, saw the light solely due to Brett's liberalism. The firm intention of the writer to publish a significant number of works unclaimed in the literary market debunks the myth of Jack London as a commercial writer. On the other hand, it was precisely the generous and steady advances from Macmillan that gave London freedom for literary experiments, without which he would never have been able to go beyond the short story genre, as well as the "discourse of bargaining" was an integral part of this amazing friendship between writer and publisher.

Keywords: Jack London, George P. Brett, Macmillan, literary market, American literary history

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Джек Лондон и Джордж Бретт (Macmillan): экономика и этика «одного из величайших союзов писателя и издателя»

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Аннотация. Анализируются этические и экономические аспекты взаимоотношений Джека Лондона с его главным издателем – президентом Macmillan Джорджем Бреттом. До недавнего времени эти отношения, являющие собой ярчайший пример синтеза дружбы и взаимной выгоды, не были предметом отдельного изучения. Также недооценивалось влияние на творчество писателя издателей, редакторов и литературного рынка в целом. Цель исследования – подтверждение значительной роли Бретта в писательской карьере Лондона, ставшего для писателя не только деловым партнером, но и другом и наставником. Отношения между писателем и издателем прослеживаются в исторической перспективе: показаны их изменения по мере развития карьеры писателя от новичка до популярного автора, конфликты и противоречия, в том числе вылившиеся в кратковременное отступничество Лондона от Macmillan и контракт с Century. Показано, что многие радикальные либо отличающиеся от запросов массового читателя сочинения Лондона, такие как «Люди бездны», «Письма Кемптона – Уэсу», «Железная пята», «Дорога», «Мартин Иден», увидели свет исключительно благодаря либерализму Бретта. Твердое намерение писателя публиковать значительное количество невостребованных на литературном рынке произведений развенчивает миф о Джеке Лондоне как о коммерческом писателе. С другой стороны, именно щедрые и стабильные авансы от Macmillan дали писателю свободу для литературных экспериментов, без которых он никогда бы не смог выйти за пределы жанра рассказа, а «дискурс торга» был неотъемлемой частью этой удивительной дружбы писателя и издателя.

Ключевые слова: Джек Лондон, Джордж Бретт, Макмиллан, литературный рынок, история литературы США

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Introduction

Well-conducted publishing policy is of great importance for a writer's success in the literary market. In this domain, the writer partly has to rely on his publisher's experience and professionalism. The dependence not only of a literary career but also of literary works of writers on internal writer-publisher relations has long been underestimated by many Russian historians of literature and rarely attracted the attention of scholars. This makes the topic of Jack London's relationship with his major publisher, Macmillan President George P. Brett, which we are covering, especially in demand.

George Platt Bret was not only Jack London's reliable business partner but also his friend, mentor, passionate admirer and delicate critic. Due to such a publisher and his unique personal and professional qualities, London was able to become one of the most popular writers of his time. The role of Brett's personality in the writing career of Jack London can hardly be overestimated, but their relationship had not been the object of separate study for a long time. Their correspondence, published in the three-volume edition of Jack London's letters (The Letters of Jack London, 1988), was used only for clarifying the details of creation of a particular work of the writer. On the other hand, these relationships are interesting in themselves, as they reveal the personality of Jack London and peculiarities of the American literary market at the beginning of the 20th century. The recent study by K.K. Brandt was the first to raise the issue of the influence of G. Brett on the creative process of Jack London, and also made a significant contribution to debunking the myth of Jack London being a commercial writer (Brandt, 2017).

Brandt tends to idealize the partnership of Jack London and George Brett as "one of the great editor-writer duos of the twentieth century" (Brandt, 2017, p. 75). This article will be focused on the contradictions that arose between the writer and the publisher, including those that resulted in Jack London's "brief apostasy" (Labor, 2013, p. 158) from Macmillan and signing the contract with the Century Company. It will be shown how London and Brett's relationship (including contracts and royalties) changed as London's career progressed from literary aspirant to popular writer. And also, the unique writer's path of Jack London will be correlated with a "typically American" context, in which even sincere friendship can be heavily mixed with the discourse of bargaining, so characteristic of all American literature.

Discussion

George Brett as a person and his role in the writing career of Jack London

George Brett was a British native. He inherited the presidency of the American branch of the Macmillan Company and in ten years turned it into a separate and prosperous corporation. He was a "short, stocky, 'bantam rooster' of a man, with the rimless spectacles, the dark moustache, and the 'thrusting chin' and its pert little grey goatee, superintended every facet of his business", who "hired thoroughly competent people and dominated them through the sheer force of per-

sonality" (Brandt, 2017, p. 74). One of the key factors in the rapprochement of refined Brett and "Frisco Kid" Jack London was an amazing coincidence of their life experiences and interests: in his youth, Brett had a ranch in California and travelled to Australia, Hawaii and Tahiti. This made him one the most enthusiastic admirers of London's "robust, western prose", reading each of his new books with great pleasure. Brett differed from typical New York publishers, because he knew and truly loved what London wrote about. He marveled at London's adventures and was ready to support his risky and extremely expensive projects, such as the *Snark* cruise and building up the "dream ranch" in California, with huge writer's advances reaching up to 10 thousand dollars. The soul affinity between these outwardly dissimilar people resulted in their mutual trust and respect, and tact in resolving disagreements which arose during publishing process. On the other hand, Brett possessed qualities that London lacked. The writer lived on a "literary periphery" and could not have Brett's experience and extensive connections in the literary and publishing circles that also allowed the publisher to feel the market intuitively, to know the needs and demands of the audience, and to give London's creative thought a strategically correct direction.

Under Brett, Macmillan was the largest publishing house which produced radical and socialist literature for a broad audience, that was particularly important to London's career. Brett was a Republican in his political views, but his commercial savvy allowed him to make profit from politically progressive literature and to print authors such as Henry George, William James Ghent, Jacob Riis, Upton Sinclair, and Jack London. Thanks to Brett's professional agility and social flexibility, he "managed to remain inoffensive to reformers and conservatives alike" (Brandt, 2017, p. 75).

Many of Jack London's socialist or scandalous writings, such as *The People of the Abyss*, *The Road*, *The Iron Heel*, and even *Martin Eden*, could only be printed without editorial cuts and changes in Macmillan. Only in exceptional cases did Brett delicately propose to omit, for example, an open criticism of King Edward VII from *The People of the Abyss* (Letters, vol. 1, p. 331), or contempt of court from *The Iron Heel*, since it threatened the book to be banned (Letters, vol. 2, p. 664). But the final editing decision always remained with London. Brett's another one great merit is also in publishing those London's books, which obviously didn't appeal to the mass reader. They included not only his leftist writings, but also such novels as *The Kempton–Wace Letters*, *The Mutiny of the Elsinore*, *The Star Rover*, and *The Scarlet Plague*. The publisher's support for London's creative experiments allowed the writer to step forward beyond his time and the limits of literary realism and naturalism, becoming the forerunner of modernism in American literature (Williams, 2017, p. 8).

Contracts and conflicts of Jack London with Macmillan

London first applied to Macmillan when he was looking for a publisher for his very first book, *The Son of the Wolf*, a collection of Klondike short stories, but the publisher didn't even answer him (J. London to G. Brett, 10 July 1899) (Letters, vol. 1, p. 94). But just after his second published collection *The God of His*

Fathers (1901), London was named a young talent, and George Brett himself invited the writer to publish in Macmillan some of his stories, which seemed to the publisher "the best work of the kind that has been done this side of the water" (G. Brett to J. London, 27 December 1901) (Letters, vol. 1, p. 267). The first short story collection by Jack London published in Macmillan was *Children of the Frost* (1902). The contract for its publication was stipulated as $200 in advance, $300 after the publication, and a fifteen percent royalty for the first 5,000 copies sold and a twenty percent royalty for subsequent copies (Letters, vol. 1, p. 291). The following permanent contract marked the beginning of their long-term cooperation. London wrote to Brett that he felt himself prepared for serious work and wished to write novels. All that he needed in order to take his time to think and embody the best that is in him and do something great is a monthly advance of $150 for one year, which he can devote entirely to writing (J. London to G. Brett, 21 November 1902) (Letters, vol. 1, p. 320). Brett believed in the young but promising author, and even extended the period for his writing experiments to two years. During this time, London wrote two masterpieces that became not only bestsellers, but also classics – *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *The Sea-Wolf* (1904). These two books instantly made Jack London one of the most popular writers in America. Brett bought the full copyright of *The Call of the Wild* from London for $2,000 and subsequently earned a fortune from its numerous reprints, of which London was not owed a cent. But the writer did not hold a grudge against Brett, since, in his opinion, the publisher was taking a big risk (Letters, vol. 1, p. 358). Brett also wanted to buy the copyright for *The Game*, but London, having become wiser and more experienced, henceforth only agreed to contracts on a royalty basis (J. London to J. Brett, 22 December 1904) (Letters, vol. 1, p. 458). On the other hand, Brett very accurately paid London both advances and royalties, which was strikingly different from other New York editors who often deceived the writer. London said that Macmillan "never behaved like bargain-drivers", does its business "straight from start to finish", and he had "never yet had any experience with them that would suggest in the slightest way that they are anything else than absolutely honorable" (J. London to Ch. Lowrie. 1 July 1909) (Letters, vol. 2, p. 811). Such business honesty of Brett evoked London's deep loyalty – the writer claimed to "accept Macmillan as his publisher for as long as he lived" (J. London to G. Brett, 25 May 1910) (Letters, vol. 2, p. 892).

However, as London's fame rose, other publishing houses increasingly tried to outbid Macmillan for the writer. London initially refused all tempting offers (J. London to C. Whitney, 8 December 1906) (Letters, vol. 1, p. 646), but soon decided to ask Brett for such royalty as others offered him. In addition, from Walter Page's book *A Publisher's Confession* (1905), he learned that modern publishing houses pay their most popular authors not ten percent royalty, as was considered fair price for a long time, but twenty percent (Page, 1905, p. 5). Page viewed this tendency very negatively, since the publisher, who was paying the author large royalties, gave away almost everything that the book could earn and risked to ruin all his business. Such a publisher had to save on advertising and manufac-

turing the book, and this was detrimental to its sales, and consequently, it was detrimental to the writer too (Page, 1905, p. 6). But London learned something else from Page's book – publishers could and did pay such a royalty! And he wished to know if he was this very popular writer who deserved it. London proposed to Brett to have the contract on new terms: a monthly advance of $300 and a twenty percent royalty for the book sold more than 5,000 copies (J. London to G. Brett, 1 August 1905) (Letters, vol. 1, p. 504). He believed that his books would not need loud advertising, as he successfully advertised his name in the pages of Hearst's million-circulation newspapers as both a correspondent and a hero of social gossip (J. London to G. Brett, 1 August 1905) (Letters, vol. 1, p. 505). But the consequences that Page had warned about were beginning to show, partly because Macmillan had to invest less in the promotion and production of London's books, partly because London could not write a book that would achieve the same success as *The Call of the Wild* or *The Sea-Wolf*. Sales and popularity of his books began to decline. London's popularity was also damaged by his two-year absence from the literary scene (1907–1908), while sailing on the *Snark* around Pacific Islands. London tried to put aside the Northland theme, but his such books were not commercially successful. His novel *Before Adam*, although it initially sold well (65,638 copies) (O'Connor, 1964, p. 245), was charged of plagiarism. *The Road*, the collection of autobiographical short stories about London's tramp experience, though did not ruin the writer's reputation against Brett's fears, was only sold 5,814 copies (O'Connor, 1964, p. 254). The socialist dystopian novel *The Iron Heel* was equally criticized by both bourgeois and socialist magazines. Even *Martin Eden*, now considered one of the best writings of London, was not popular during his lifetime: "an attack upon the bourgeoisie and all that the bourgeoisie stands for", as London called it (J. London to C. Jones, 17 February 1908) (Letters, vol. 2, p. 737), having been severely criticized by reviewers, sold poorly. Despite the further recognition of *Martin Eden*, sales of this novel were only half that of *The Sea-Wolf* and 1/10 that of *The Call of the Wild*, at 232,606 copies (O'Connor, 1964, p. 281). During his sea voyage, London was able to write much less than his usual rate (one or two thousand words a day), as he had to learn navigation and drive the ship by himself, and he also suffered severely from numerous tropical diseases. Usually he published two or three books a year, but now he was hardly able to publish at least one. Upon returning home, London hastily began to make collections from all his miscellaneous works of different years that had not yet been printed in a book. One after another, *Lost Face*, *Revolution and Other Essays*, *When God Laughs*, as well as a number of collections on the South Seas theme, *The Cruise of the Snark*, *South Sea Tales*, *House of Pride,* were published. Brett didn't like the fact that London "threw on the market" too many books – it reduced sales and being in demand of the writer as a whole. London, who was crucially in debt, more and more insistently asked the publisher for huge advances, which were higher than his earned fees at that time. Brett advised London to write novels to restore his reputation and good sales of his books, rather than collections of short stories. The sales of short stories in

the literary market were greatly diminished due to the vast expansion of cheap magazines filled mostly with third-rate stories, which cast a shadow over this genre, and editors and magazine publishers asked their authors mostly for novels (Brandt, 2017, p. 85). But London was not ready to abandon short stories, he considered this crisis in the art of the short story and the rush demand for novels to be a "seasonal" phenomenon associated with publishers' liability "to a sort of herd psychology" (J. London to H. Lanier, 18 January 1912) (Letters, vol. 2, p. 1063).

The growing mutual claims between the writer and the publisher ended with Brett suggesting to cancel their annual contract and make separate contracts for selected books (G. Brett to J. London, 13 June 1911) (Letters, vol. 2, p. 1013). This would allow Brett to publish only London's profitable works, leaving it up to the writer to sell his collections elsewhere. London didn't seem to care much about this change of the contract. He believed that another publisher could more effectively sell his books, namely to release more reprints for different audiences and actively promote his books. The writer even planned to buy out the plates for all his 25 books that had been already published by Macmillan by that time (J. London to G. Brett, 18 October 1911) (Letters, vol. 2, p. 1038). The last book for which London received an advance from Brett in June 1911 was the novel *The Valley of the Moon*. Over the next two years, Macmillan published six collections that London had already sent them, and Jack London, for the first time in 10 years, began to look for a new publisher.

The Century, The Players Club plan and return to Macmillan

At first, London seemed to be doing well without Brett. He quickly and profitably sold his next book, *A Son of the Sun*, to Doubleday, Page & Co. (J. London to H. Lanier, 11 October 1911) (Letters, vol. 2, p. 1032). However, finding a new publisher on a regular basis proved to be difficult. Neither Doubleday, nor the little Bobbs-Merill Co. (initially offering London $7,500 in advance for *Smoke Bellew*), nor Bostonian Houghton, Mifflin & Co., nor Stokes were willing to sign a permanent contract with twenty percent royalty. London decided to go to New York for personal negotiations with publishers. Brett, who had extensive connections in New York, almost immediately became aware of his appearance in the city. Suspecting that he might soon lose his beloved author forever, Brett invited London to a confidential meeting at the bohemian club *The Players* and proposed to the writer to play out the emergence and meteoric rise of a new star in the literary firmament. This star was supposed to be Jack London writing under a penname. *The Players Club* plan would allow London to publish as many books a year as he wished, to experiment with his writing, and most importantly, to fulfill his contractual obligations with other publishers without breaking ties with Brett (Brandt, 2017, p. 86). Although this plan was discussed for almost a year, it was never implemented, as London no longer needed to work hard, writing for himself and for the fictional author. In February 1912, he signed an advantageous permanent contract with The Century Company for the publication of six books: the novels *The Abysmal Brute, Smoke Bellew*, and *The Scarlet Plague*, the collections *The Night-Born*, *The Strength of the Strong*, and *The Hobo and the Fairy*.

However, very soon Jack London became disillusioned with the new publisher, who appeared to be intractable in the matter of additional advances and unable to understand the value of writer's works. When London shared the idea for his autobiographical novel *John Barleycorn* with Century President, William Ellsworth, he initially considered it unpromising and refused to publish this book. Ellsworth wrote to London: "… it appeals to rather a new audience, – not just the people who like *Smoke Bellew* and most of your writings. It is a tremendous temperance tract, – there is nothing like it – but the ordinary novel reader likes enjoyment and there isn't any enjoyment in *John Barleycorn*" (W. Ellsworth to J. London, 10 January 1913) (Letters, vol. 3, p. 1118). Only after the novel began to be published in *The Saturday Evening Post* magazine and caused a loud public outcry, Century accepted it for publication. Another unpleasant surprise for London was that the retail price of a book published by Century was not $1.50, as in Macmillan, but only $1.35, which proportionally reduced his twenty percent profit from each copy sold. The last straw for London was that Century refused to pay him $6,000 advance for *The Mutiny of the Elsinore*. Ellsworth replied to the writer: "We are really very nice people, and are not at all hard, although you may think so from the fact of our occasionally refusing to advance all the money an author wants. We simply cannot afford it. We are not bankers or moneylenders, – we do business on a very moderate capital" (W. Ellsworth to J. London, 11 March 1913) (Letters, vol. 3, p. 1149). London then wrote to Brett that he wanted to return to Macmillan with all the books already promised to Century. Brett even agreed to compensate for the $11,000 that London had already received from Century as an advance. But an unexpected obstacle to the transition was the very book *John Barleycorn*, which the current publisher categorically refused to let go of his hands. Century referred to the fact that its printing plates had already been prepared, but the truth was that this book promised enormous profits, which the publisher, it was now clear to everyone, didn't want to lose. London tried to get rid of the contract with Century by bombarding Ellsworth with insults and accusations: "You desire to make money more than you desire to sever the unpleasant relationship. You are listening to the voice of money rather than to the voice of spirit which is the voice of your better conscience" (J. London to W. Ellsworth, 22 April 1913) (Letters, vol. 3, p. 1157–1158), "You would eat dirt before you would forego the pound of flesh. You would sell yourself and your company's good name for a handful of silver. … The millions who read *John Barleycorn* will later on read about you" (J. London to W. Ellsworth, 10 May 1913) (Letters, vol. 3, p. 1163). However, Century showed enviable self-control and only once answered the writer's curses with restraint: "You may be sure that your inexplicable attitude toward us will not make the slightest difference in our work as publishers" (The Century to J. London, 22 May 1913) (Letters, vol. 3, p. 1176).

Brett agreed to accept London even without *John Barleycorn*. His only stipulation was to limit the number of books published yearly, as their current output threatened to ruin the market (G. Brett to J. London, 2 June 1913) (Letters, vol. 3,

p. 1179). London agreed, moreover, during this last period of his creative work, he completely abandoned writing short stories and published no more than two novels a year. Although the reunion of writer and publisher happened to their mutual satisfaction, and London was "glad indeed to get back home" (J. London to G. Brett, 29 June 1913) (Letters, vol. 3, p. 1204), in practice, when concluding a new contract, many nuances arose and the process of active bargaining began. If a few years ago Brett argued that the author should handle translation rights himself (G. Brett to J. London, 28 March 1906) (Letters, vol. 2, p. 561), now he believed that these rights, as well as second serial rights (for a magazine publication after the book publication), should belong to Macmillan. Brett also suggested limiting the advances to the real profit that London's books bring in the current quarter. It was not favorable for the writer, since in recent years he lost in popularity even to such now forgotten writers as the imitator of Jack London's style Rex Beach (J. London to G. Brett, 26 December 1914) (Letters, vol. 3, p. 1400) or Harold Bell Wright (O'Connor, 1964, p. 362). London's last novels sold worse and worse: *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* – 49,181 copies, *The Star Rover* – 30,634 copies, and *The Little Lady of the Big House* – 21,679 copies (O'Connor, 1964, p. 366). This was partly due to the fact that all of these novels were published in the popular *Cosmopolitan* magazine, and people who had already read the novel in the magazine did not need to buy a book for a dollar and a half. Therefore, in his last years, London had been betting not on book sales, but on royalties from magazines, reprints, and stage productions and film adaptations of his bestsellers.

Conclusion

Macmillan has been the exclusive publisher of Jack London for over 15 years and has published over 40 of his books. London's brief change of a publisher only confirmed the fact that George Brett proved to be an irreplaceable partner providing London with huge advance privileges, and venturous enough to publish London's radical writings. All this allowed London, definitely bound by the requirements of the literary market, to think not only about royalties, but also to create a large number of non-commercial works that perpetuated his name in world literature.

On the other hand, Brett helped London to be the most successful seller of his literary works, which skillfully combined market and artistic value. The need to write to "two addresses" pleasing both the reader and the critic is a distinctive feature of American literature. In this sense, Jack London is the successor of the traditions coming from E. A. Poe, H. Melville, and M. Twain (Venediktova, 2003, p.149–150). Therefore, it is not surprising that Jack London's alliance with George Brett is marked by a similar "duality": thoroughly saturated with pragmatics and "discourse of bargaining", it is at the same time one of the most touching examples of sincere friendship and mutual respect between writer and publisher.

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