JACK LONDON, PHOTOGRAPHER

By Jeanne Campbell Reesman, Sara S. Hodson & Philip Adam (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 288 pp., $49.95 cloth)

Reviewed by Clarice Stasz, Professor Emerita of History, Sonoma State University, Consultant to the State about London's Photographs, and Author of Jack London's Women

This coffee table book of 230 duotones introduces a segment of photographs from Jack London's holdings. Over twelve thousand images exist, the original negatives now preserved at the Sonoma State Historic Park. Interpretive essays introduce the six sections: London's East End slums, the Russo-Japanese War, the 1907 Earthquake, the Snark journey, the Mexican-American Revolution, and the voyage of tall ship Dirigo. Lengthy quotes from London's writings and letters comprise many captions and suggest sources for relating the images to his publications. Missing is the Beauty Ranch, central to London's self-definition as a man preserving the land and to his California novels.

The authors represent three fields: literary scholar, curator, and photographer. Adam created silver gelatin prints from the original negatives, along with commentary on photographic technology and practice of the era. Adam's prints elicit the full range of focus and contrast from what are sometimes difficult negatives. A chapter from one of Reesman's previous books introduces the Russo-Japanese War. The other essays, which vary in depth and consistency, interweave London's activities during each episode with reference to his writing. Most interesting is material that covers London's professional approach to photography, his troubles with censors, and his harangues with editors.

The collection reveals two photographic "eyes," one documentarian, one portraitist. The best pictures, aesthetically and historically, vividly reveal the people of the London slums and the Russo-Japanese War. London experimented with the panorama camera for even more evocative wide-angle scenes, an inventive application of what was used then to capture expansive city views. His portraits are posed straight on to reveal dress and body ornamentation of native peoples, material he used in his later South Sea tales. Although Reesman argues that London avoided the Exotic bias prevalent then, the portraits seem rather images in which racist viewers would find corroboration. The layout is appealing, except when images are enlarged beyond their original clarity, as in the Dirigo section.

Within the collection are portraits of London taken with his own camera. Though the editors "developed techniques for differentiating London's photographs from those taken by [others on location]," they do not reveal their methods for corroboration. Acknowledging that first wife Bess Maddern London was an amateur photographer, they omit that her successor, Charmian London, was a published one. Consequently, the finger on the shutter may not always be London's. Nonetheless, this fascinating introduction will surprise many and spur further examination of this significant anthropological and historical visual archive.

73