

CAPTAIN SIR RICHARD F BURTON:
Victorian Archetype
by
Scott Rhymer
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In a century that was filled with extraordinary explorers, Richard Burton stands out an archetype of the Victorian scholar-adventurer. His personality and his physical and mental prowess would have been unbelievable, were he a character of fiction: a master linguist, keen observer of cultures and other minutiae, a master of sword and pistol, physically tough and powerful, handsome (in a roguish way.) He was a spy, soldier, geographer, ethnographer, and a prolific, skilled writer. In every way, the epitome of Victorian hero.

However, he was not the only man with these traits at this time. There were other explorers who were more successful, just as intelligent, observant, and skilled in languages. Other men engaged in acts of daring comparable to his. In addition to having this competition, Burton was also brash, rude, judgmental, cynical, and a bit of a bully. He reveled in breaking convention and taking his superiors to task. He was obsessed with religion, spiritualism, and the erotic--fatal traits in a gentleman in his time; his defense of Islam and other religions as valid methods of worship was nearly heretical. Some of his contemporaries suggested his support of these religions was simply a cynical ploy to earn trust, so that he could defile their sacred places--as with Mecca, but many of his peers in the Indian Army were much more direct about offending native sensibilities.

So why is Burton such an enduring character? Partly, it is the wealth of material he has left behind, some fifty plus books, papers, magazine articles, reviews, letters to editors and

newspapers, and other short pieces. The subjects he wrote on ranged from books on the use of sword to travelogues packed with some of the most detailed observations, to literary works of the East that he translated. It is hard to decide which of his works is more enduring, his travelogue of his travels, in disguise, to Mecca, or his translations of *The Arabian Nights* (or more properly, *Thousand Nights and a Night*, a compilation of pre-Muslim Arab and Persian folk tales) and the saucy *Kama Sutra*, a famed “love manual” from India.

Perhaps another reason for his lasting fame was his skill as an early anthropologist, and his willingness to delve into every aspect of life in the places he traveled. Nothing was too small to escape his interest. He recounted folk stories, gave descriptions of dress, grooming habits, and folkways, often trying to find a functional or religious basis for them. Sexual habits, taboo in the Victorian age, were addressed and led many to believe Burton was a pornographer of sorts. His works were more in depth and accurate than many of his fellow explorers, to the point of pedantry.

There are many factors in his popularity at the time, and his enduring popularity as a historical figure. Many of these elements of his intellect, his personality, his bravery and physical skills have been played up, making him more of a mythic icon of Victorian heroism than as a complex man who was driven by several personality traits that are sometimes overlooked or minimized. The first was an uncontrollable wanderlust; the second a desire to test himself against the world, a particularly Victorian, and English trait, of the time, and lastly a powerful urge to find some kind of spiritual enlightenment.

Burton’s father was a retired lieutenant colonel, Joseph Burton. His father had been a

soldier during the Napoleonic Wars and had been, during that time, part of the circle of Princess Caroline, while stationed in Genoa. His downfall from service had been due to refusing to testify at the divorce proceedings between George IV and Caroline. He was sacked by the Duke of Wellington for this outrage. During this incident, he had returned to Ireland where the family lands had fallen into disarray (Despite the Irish lands, the family was English, not Irish,) and during that time met and married a well-off woman, Martha Baker. Richard Burton was born on March 19, 1821. At birth, Burton was blond and blue-eyed; the dark, “Gypsy” looks would come about in his early childhood.

His father quickly tired of the chores of running the family lands and was additionally asthmatic. The family moved to Tours, where there was a small English expatriate community. A sister for Richard, Maria, followed in 1823, a brother Edward in 1824. The Burton children were mostly left with servants, and their education was haphazard at best. Most of their time was spend playing, and save for a short stint at a boys school run by an Irishman in the area. When the schoolmaster ran off to avoid debts, a tutor worked them on drawing, French, music, and dancing, but the favored study for the boys was arms: toy swords, popguns, and other means to violence. This streak of violence was necessary: the tutor was fond of “discipline,” the French and English children of the community continually fought. In addition to physical courage and prowess, Burton prided himself on his willpower. He would not show fear, could endure pain without complaint, deny himself the pleasure of sweets and the like, just to see if he could do it. He was also an inveterate liar, not to protect himself from some trouble he had gotten into, but for the sheer pleasure of the creative process of prevaricating. All in all, by age nine, Richard was a complete delinquent.

The French idyll came to an end in 1830, when a sudden surge of anti-British sentiment made Tours unsafe. The Burtons returned to England, where the children were horrified by the cold, the pollution, and above all, the awful food. There was a meanness to English life which Burton remarked on in the bits of his autobiography that have survived: he lamented the sharp division of the classes, the fierce national temperament, and the violence--not the competitive brawling of the French children in Tours, but the aggressive combat of the unhappy, the drunk, or the wife beater. Boarding school honed the fighting skills of the Burton boys, and their education, already inadequate, suffered at the school. With their schooling an utter failure, Colonel Burton packed up his family and headed for the warmer climes of Europe.

The next few years were spent in constant motion. Their father was restless and nowhere the family settled suited him. They moved about Italy aimlessly, living in Leghorn, in Florence and Siena, in Rome, and in Naples. This wanderlust most likely infected Richard with a restlessness of his own. This inability to find a place for himself would keep him moving until shortly before his death in 1890. No matter where he might be stationed, Burton could not stay put for long. Throughout this period, Richard and Edward had matured and another of Richard's traits developed--his love of women, no matter their color or looks. His rumored sexual appetites might not be so far-fetched. The boys took up with prostitutes that lived across the street from the family in Naples. The discovery of this was enough for the colonel, who sent his dissolute, violent, whoring sons back to England and college. Neither Richard nor Edward were interested in academics; both wanted to join the military, but the cost of the commissions, as well as the colonel's dreams of his sons being respectable men kept them from this path.

The return to England and schooling was hard on Burton, but his tutor, Dr. William

Greenhill, worked hard to integrate the young Burton into his circle of friends--a circle that included luminaries like Dr. John (later Cardinal) Newman. He repaired Burton's weaknesses in Greek and Latin, and taught him the beginnings of Arabic, but once through the gates of Trinity College at Oxford, Burton found only "a hotbed of toadyism". Dull and unchallenging, Burton directed his interests toward the Gypsies that lived in the wood nearby the campus, or studying Arabic with Greenhill's friends. Philosophy and religion also attracted his attention and it was during this period that Burton became to formulate his theory of *gnosis*, a spiritual enlightenment that he pursued in the more arcane and esoteric forms of these studies. He was introduced to the *Kabbala* at this time. He delved into the study of the ancient Jewish text, as well as dabbling in Hermetism. The *Kabbala* had a strong impact on Burton, and he frequently saw connections in the more mystical religions he would later study.

Despite these past-times, Burton was bored. He continued to try and convince his father to allow him entry into the army, but it was not until he and his brother were sent down for gambling, that the opportunity arose. Unlike his brother, who was fortunate enough to gain a commission in the 37th Foot through Lord Raglan, Richard was hampered by his father's disgrace in the Princess Caroline affair, and was forced to accept a position with the East India Company.

Burton arrived in India in October of 1842. He arrived in a land that was exotic and dangerous; a land where the "Great Game" was just heating up in the aftermath of the massacre of the English garrison in Kabul the preceding year and a successful campaign to punish the Afghans that had just finished. During his time in transit, Richard had diligently studied Hindustani and he continued to study that language, as well as Gujarati and Persian with a *munshi*, while trapped in Bombay awaiting orders. The romantic and exotic locale soon paled

and Burton was eager to be out and about. He busied himself with the *bhendi bazaars*--the prostitute markets of the city and it is during this time that he begins to start taking copious ethnological notes, a habit that would continue throughout his life.

Six weeks later, he received orders to join his regiment in Baroda, in Gujarat. He found the place and the regiment in poor shape and immediately began to alienate himself by not drinking beer, but port, which had been prescribed for him as an antidote to fever. It was another habit he was to stay with life long, drinking port not just to cure fever, but offset it. He was contemptuous of his fellow officers and Englishmen, and he foresaw the problems that would lead to the India Mutiny in the Company troops. Lower-class men, brought out here, found themselves in positions of authority and superiority over the natives, and they set to proving that superiority by abusing the native troops and civilians verbally and otherwise. The English “meanness” that he had seen as a child was evident here in the Orient, and he predicted that it would spark off trouble between the unwanted intruders and the indigenous population. He also began frequenting the streets of the town, instead of remaining in the cantonment, seeking out the exotic and erotic in a place that was so different from the Continental and English towns of his youth. The India of Burton’s days was highly sexual, especially for the company soldier. Many involved themselves in the intrigues of “poodle-faking”, of cheating with the wives of other officers. There was another alternative, however, the custom of the “temporary wife,” or *bubu* (later adulterated into *bibi*) was not uncommon, despite the official stance against it, and Burton seems to have taken to this custom quickly. Having a *bubu* also taught him another important part of linguistic training:

“Pros: The “walking dictionary” is all but indispensable to the Student, and she teaches him not only Hindostani grammar, but the syntaxes of native life. She keeps house for him, never allowing him to save money, or, if possible to waste it. She keeps the servants in order...She looks after him in sickness, and is one of the best nurses, and ,as it is not good for a man to live alone, she makes him a manner of a home.”¹

The intolerable weather and the routine of drill pushed Burton to work on his language skills and after just four months, he was able to test in Bombay. He finished first of twelve candidates. He turned his attention to the study of Hinduism with a Nagar Brahmin, a holy man of the Snake Cult. His studies were more than just learning the cursory elements of the religion. Burton delved into the practices, the history, the prejudices and customs of the people; he was interested not just in how to be Hindu, but what is *was* to be Hindu. He learned Tantric practices as well, delving into the mystical and more esoteric of the Hindu practices. He eventually was given the right to wear the Brahminical thread, the symbol of the highest caste. It was an incomparable honor to a non-Hindu. However, his entrance into Hinduism was matched by the speed in which he set the belief aside. In his later years, he was uncomplimentary about the superstitions and baseness of the practices of the people, and it shows in his translation of *Vikram and the Vampire*, written later in his life, after his conversion to Islam, and supposed conversion to Catholicism.

Eventually, his unit was moved to Karachi, the seat of the British presence in the Sind and a small and unhealthy place. Here Burton’s particular talents were noticed by General

Charles Napier, then head of the district and charged with extending the influence of the Company along the Indus. He employed Burton as a set of eyes and ears in the court of Aga Khan Mahallati, the Prince-Imam, or leader of a religious sect of Shi'a Muslims known as Isma'ili. Burton's connection to the court was high-placed. His language teacher, or *munshi*, was the brother of the prince-imam. This sect had once been famed world-wide but was now mostly made of small bands of people in Persia. They were the Brethren of Sincerity...or more popularly, Assassins.

The court was centered around the prince-imam, who was in exile after his failed attempt to remove the Qajar shah from power in Persia. He had come to the attention of Napier's predecessor, who had groomed Aga Khan as a British puppet to be installed in Persia as a bulwark for India against the Russians. Aga Khan himself was of little talent in any area, but the lure of the exotic, mystical Sufi sect was irresistible for Burton. He found himself increasingly drawn into the study of this ancient cult, which had once used cannabis (the name Assassin comes from a corruption of *hashashin*--cannabis user) to fire themselves up with the holy power prior to battle with their enemies. The practice would appeal to Burton, who was already a heavy cannabis and opium user, as did the *sama* – a ritual dance in which the worshiper becomes ever more animated and ecstatic, often spinning recklessly while chanting the name of God. The myth of the Ismai'lis revolved around imams, relatives of the Prophet Mohammed who carried in them a spark of the divine. Some of these imams were claimed to have gone into occultation – having removed themselves from the world until the time was right for the return of the Mahdi – a savior figure that would unite the world under the rule of Islam. Burton saw in Sufism connections to secret knowledge passed down from Zoroastrianism, from the Hindus, from Plato and the

Essenes, from the cabalistic studies of the Jews. Could this Secret Path, the way of the Sufi, be the gnosis he was looking for? To defend themselves from discovery by other sects of Islam, the Sufi use a technique dissimulation, the concealment of their beliefs. This dissimulation seems to have become a practice Burton used throughout his life to disguise his true beliefs, but the continual Islamic references and Muslim-based works that he would write up until his death would seem to suggest that his conversion to Sufism was genuine. He certainly compared Islam favorably to the other major faiths and was always very conscious of the sensibilities of the Muslims he dealt with throughout his life. He followed the practices of a Muslim long after it was necessary to his activities in the Middle East and Africa, though a claim that this was to tweak the nose of proper society could be made.

Throughout the next year, Burton was used by Napier to investigate the surrounding area of the Sind. He traveled in disguise at times, at other times openly as a British officer working on the survey of the region. A report on the brothels in the region and the possible contamination of the soldiers under his command concerned Napier and Burton was turned loose, in the disguise of a native, to investigate the situation. His report was embarrassing to the Company government: he had discovered massive homosexual activity between the British men and the local boys in the brothels. The report was buried and Burton was labeled a troublemaker. Additionally, his ability to blend with the natives, his interest in the natives' cultures and languages got him labeled "the White Nigger;" he was unsuitable company. This honesty and willingness to buck convention would continually dog Burton. The disreputable nature of the report was applied to Burton himself, instead of the subjects of his inquiry.

His connection to the Aga Khan was also used by Napier; through Burton, the British

were urging the prince-imam to retry and take the throne from the Qajar. Burton, at this time, also seems to have met a woman in the court of the prince-imam with who he became enamored, and who died tragically, perhaps due to an honor killing for a dalliance with Burton. This was the belief of his niece Georgiana Sinstead, who claimed to have gleaned this from some of the papers later destroyed by Isabel Burton. The romantic image of the exotic Eastern love of his life is certainly possible, but might also simply be the poetic notions of a Victorian woman, looking to breathe more passion and romance into the life of her famous relative. During this time, Burton also came down with a fever and was suffering from ophthalmia, a disease he chronically suffered from his whole life.

The relieve his boredom, for the excitement of wandering the hot, detestable Sind was beginning to wear off, and to try and recover from the fever that would not break, Burton requested and received leave to travel to a health spa in the south of India. He seems to have been in no hurry getting to the hillside station, and indeed, his condition seems to have quickly improved as soon as he sailed from Karachi. In fact, he took a detour through the Blue Mountains and visited the city of Goa, the site of early Portuguese missions and the locale of one of his favorite books by the Portuguese writer Camoes. He found the Goans to be contemptible people who lacked any of the exotic or noble qualities that Camoes has breathed into them. He continued on to Ootacamund, where he was unimpressed with the cliquish and shallow English company. Eventually, he returned to the Sind, and took up his position in Aga Khan's court in 1847 or early 1848, and continued to try and convince the prince-imam into rebellion against the shah.

Already, Burton was a prolific writer, not just of notes. He had produced a book on his

travels that would lead to the publication of *Goa, and the Blue Mountains; or, Six Months of Sick Leave*, the two volume *Scinde, or the Unhappy Valley*, as well as *Sindh, and the Races that inhabit the Valley of the Indus*. His return to the Sind marked his return to the study of Sufism, as well. He writes that he had undergone *chilla* – the forty day ritual of fasting, meditation, and yogic exercises – and that he was eventually made *murshid*, or a master of the Sufi rituals. It was his only real advancement during his time in India; despite his intelligence, his fluency with the native languages and cultures, he was prevented from taking part in the Sikh War of 1848, denied better postings, a chance at promotion. Disheartened, still sick from fever that would not break, and the return of the ophthalmia, Burton finally resolved to return home in 1849. He left behind an already impressive array of feats: the inclusion into two of the most exclusionary faiths in India, a mastery of several languages, exploration of the Sind – often alone -- and the writing of several works.

His health was mostly recovered by his arrival in England, but he still suffered from reduced energy and bronchial troubles. He visited with his Baker relatives and tried to find a new course for himself. During this period, he traveled to Boulogne, a popular resort for the English, for his health. His condition must have been still somewhat serious, for his father and mother came from Italy, his sister Maria and her daughters from England to stay with him. To regain his strength and test his physical stamina, he took up the study of fencing with the same gusto he applied to languages. He found it the best of calisthenics and a great builder of confidence and self-reliance, and he would continue to hone his skills until nearly the end of his life. His mastery of the weapon was legendary in both the English and French communities. He had studied with Constantin, a prestigious master, and earned the rank of *Brevet de Pointe* in a

matter of months. The regimen of sword brought him back to health, and he continued to write. He also turned his attention to the women of Boulogne in an attempt to assuage the melancholy he was feeling. His books were not selling well and the critics were hostile, mostly due to his “extreme opinions.” He had also fallen in love with his cousin, Elizabeth Sisted. As a lieutenant on half-pay, and with only a career in India in front of him, he was a poor prospect for marriage. Unable to marry his cousin, he continued to garner attention from the ladies of the town, eventually drawing in the woman that would be his wife.

Isabel Arundel was nineteen when Burton met her. Beautiful and romantic, she was well-liked and was debuted well in society at the age of seventeen. Also, her family had a pedigree that went back into the beginnings of English history, but they were Catholic and they had moved to France to avoid the strong anti-Catholic backlash that came in the wake of the Oxford Movement. Isabel had particularly hated leaving society for France, though she had generally had a low opinion of her suitors. None lived up the romantic, Oriental fantasy she had created for herself after reading Disraeli’s *Tancred*. Her first encounter with Burton sealed her fate, as far as she was concerned. They were well-suited, emotionally. Both were overly dramatic, romantic, and bucked convention. Their courtship progressed not at all during the time in Boulogne, however, and in 1852, the Arundels returned home. She would not see Burton again for four years.

Another goal had been brewing in Burton’s mind during this time, making the *hajj* to Mecca and Medina. Though his detractors would claim this was done solely for self-aggrandizement, or as an insult to Muslims, reading his accounts of his pilgrimage suggest that this was not the case. Though he had to travel in disguise, posing as an Afghani from India,

Burton seemed to embrace the call of the *hajj* and was careful to observe all of the rituals, and to try and see all of the holy sites during his trip. Also as a practicing Sufi, Burton was required to go to Mecca, eventually; the *hajj* is a duty of all Muslims, who must make the trip once in their lifetime. The excuse he used to get the leave from the Company army, and to get the funding from the Royal Geographical Society, was to fill in the blank spaces on the map that were the Arabian Peninsula, and to study the commonality of the Arab races. It was also a test of his will. He could, through the trip, “prove, by trial, that what might be perilous to other travelers was safe to me.”² Permission for the venture to Mecca was eventually secured and in the spring of 1853, Burton headed for Egypt and the first leg of the trip that would make him a household name.

His disguise was worked out on route. He experimented with various ideas: a Persian nobleman, a wandering dervish, and finally a Pathan (or Afghan) doctor. While in Egypt, he began his ethnographic studies with the study of Egyptian dancing girls, then moved by boredom, began his pilgrimage in earnest. In the company of other *haji*, he traveled to Cairo as the month of Ramadan began. Burton observed the proscriptions of the month, but also commented on the effect the fasting had on the Muslims. They were cross, unhealthy, and violent. He would, for prayers, visit Sufi oratories, which he would not speak of in *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Medinah and Meccah*. This was *taqiya*, the concealment or dissimulation of belief. The only real reason for Burton, usually very liberal with footnotes and pedantic detail in his works, should avoid describing the Sufi rituals would be that he was a practicing Sufi at the time. Were he truly just posing as a Muslim, exposing the Sufi rituals would have been no sharp matter to him. After all, his description of the *hajj* – in excruciating detail – was in no way expurgated.

Though it would seem Burton considered himself legitimately Muslim, it did not stop him from drinking and this nearly cost him dearly during his trip. He had been noticed drinking while waiting for transport from the Suez and had had to cut out quickly for Mecca. During his trip around Mecca and Medina, he had to content himself with a bottle of cognac that had been colored to resemble medicine; he made a point of defending this in *Pilgrimage*, which would have been unnecessary for one who was there to simply infiltrate the Islamic holy sites. He pointed out that the Turks often drank arak and other liquors. Burton seems to be attempting to excuse his drinking, done in secret during the *hajj*.

Tired from the exertions of concealing his identity, suffering from an injury picked up early in the trip (he had trodden on a sea urchin and his foot was infected the entire time in Arabia), and with suspicion of his true nature beginning to be aroused due to his drinking and making surreptitious notes at all times, Burton completed his sightseeing of the holy sites in and around the two cities and turned back for Cairo. News of his feat reached England quickly and he was lionized as a hero, while in Cairo, Burton continued to wear Muslim dress and pass himself off as an Arab. He returned to the prostitutes of Oulid Nahl and somewhere in this period contracted syphilis, which was not discovered until much later. These diversions did not last long, and he was not able to enjoy the notoriety. He was required to return to his regiment by March 1854 and he had no time to return to London. Even on the trip back to India, he continued to dress in Arab fashion, adding the green turban of a *haji* to his kit.

It was during his brief time at Cairo that he met Johannes Krapf, a missionary who had been working in Abyssinia, and had traveled with another missionary into Somaliland. These men had heard reports of a great inland sea which, if it existed, would be near the estimated

source of the Nile. Already looking for an adventure to best his Mecca travels, the idea of discovering the source of the Nile appealed to Burton immediately. The source of the Nile had been a mystery to the West since Herodotus, and the presumed location of the river's birth were based on the hearsay from Arab traders and slavers that plied the Eastern coast of the continent. Hostile natives, burning deserts, and impassible jungles had prevented white explorers from settling the matter. As with Mecca, where they failed, Burton thought he might succeed.

In India, Burton found himself in better circles than before. His fame had reached the subcontinent before him and his friends now included such men as Lord Elphinstone, the Governor of the Bombay Presidency. He returned to his regiment and began work on *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Medinah and Meccah*, which was published in 1855. The book was a marvel in its time and is still an important work in Arab ethnography, though it was not without its critics. Many were competitors in the adventure writing field, who attempted to impugn his work, or his methods in gaining entry to the Holy City as "dishonest" or "ungentlemanly." He responded with similarly harsh words for his detractors, which may have later weakened his position with members of the Royal Geographical Society.

Burton barraged his superiors in the East India Company and in the Royal Geographical Society with requests for backing to pursue his expedition into the African interior. The East India Company was more interested in a mission that would be more germane to their trade, the exploration of the Somaliland coast. The coastline had better ports than the one they currently inhabited at Aden – an infernal spit of black rock on the tip of the Arabian Peninsula. In London, there was little interest in Africa; the attention of the nation was focused on the conflict between 'poor little Turkey' and the Russian bear. War had been declared, and with their French allies,

English forces had sallied forth to put paid to the tsar and his activities in the Black Sea. Still, confident of gaining permission, Burton had gone to Aden to prepare.

The mission was immediately imperilled. The new Political Agent in Yemen was Colonel James Outram, the predecessor to Napier in the Sind and that officer's arch-rival. The enmity was also extended to Burton. Outram set about gaining support against the popular explorer but was unable, ultimately, to stop him. Instead, Outram set terms on the expedition, including Burton and his two companions traveling separately to, as the colonel put it, increase the chances of success. He also added another person to the team, a man that was to become an important part of Burton's life from then on: John Hanning Speke.

Speke had come out to Aden to get permission to go to Africa to hunt. Even by the standards of the nineteenth century, Speke was ruthless and cold-blooded in his pursuit of game. He made outrageous claims to have surveyed Tibet (not the case), was humorless, priggish, and easily offended – and once offended, he held a grudge. He had interest, however, having been a protege of the Duke of Wellington and had been in combat in India – unlike Burton – and was highly decorated for his bravery. He was a dullard, uninterested in learning, a loner, and a perfectionist, but hard-working. He did not drink, he did not gamble, and he did not consort with women. However different he may have been from Speke, Burton found the man likeable. He was obviously courageous, physically fit, and interested in joining the expedition. That Outram wished him along also secured the mission's official support.

The mission goals were broken down between the four men. That this would lead to great peril for the men could not have escaped Burton's notice, but if he disagreed with the idea, he did not report it in *First Footsteps in East Africa*, the work that would recount the adventure.

Burton reserved for himself the most difficult and dangerous task, a trip to the forbidden and “holy” city of Harar. He traveled as an Arab again, and ordered the others to travel in Muslim garb. Speke found this point offensive. Burton might have insisted that it was to make the men, venturing alone, more safe, but Speke saw it as an affront to his dignity to dress beneath himself. Speke was given the task of finding a river bed, Wadi Nogal. Burton equipped himself with guides and ventured into the interior. Once again, he took copious notes on everything from the flora and fauna to the sexual customs of the Somali. He paid particular attention to the practice of female circumcision, which he had remarked on in *Pilgrimage*. During his trip, he fell in with a bedouin, the Gerard Adan, a small warlord beholden to the *amir* in Harar. Burton was able to convince the Gerard to help him get to Harar, though the man could not promise his safety. Ultimately, he suggested Burton arrive at Harar as an Englishman, not as an Arab. Any suspicion would have him tortured and put to death, a favored pastime of the *amir*. Burton penned a message, ostensibly from Outram, and passed himself off as an envoy from the government. The ploy worked. He was able to see the *amir*, and to wander Harar. Although it was too dangerous to take notes, he was able to recreate a map of the city that was surprisingly accurate. Life and limb intact, Burton was able to escape Harar and return to the coastline, where he met up with the others of the expedition.

The Somali adventure would be a great success for Burton. He had once again proven himself physically and mentally, had tested his courage and had seen through, but for Speke, the mission was a failure and a source of contention with Burton. Speke’s reports were almost unreadable, the information scant. Burton had declared it unfit for publication, and rewrote the entire diary, making it an addendum to *Footsteps*. He wrote it third person, since he did not want

to take credit for Speke's work, but the rewrite exacerbated the embarrassment and sense of failure Speke felt. Speke was not the only one to feel abused by Burton. In a series of reports and suggestions to the Company, Burton was critical of the Company, of the Governor-General, and suggested boldly that Berbera on the Somaliland coast be taken over. His reasoning for the latter was the abolition of slavery, to which he was strongly opposed.

He pressed for another expedition to find the source of the Nile and even signed releases absolving the Company of any responsibility for his safety. The expedition would include Speke, as well as their companions from the first mission Herne and Stroyan; they would enter at Somaliland, then work their way inland and south to the alleged inland sea or lake. But within a day of setting foot on the African coast, the company was set on by bandits or a rogue tribe of Somali. Burton's party put up a fight, but Stroyan was cut to pieces, Herne managed to escape and had secured the aid of a native vessel. Speke was injured and captured, and after an evening of abuse, was able to break free of his captors and escape to the shore, where he found Herne and Burton alive. Burton had suffered a spear through his face, in one cheek, splitting his palette and knocking out four teeth, and coming out the other side. He had fought the raiders and made it to the shore with the aid of one of the head of the caravan, the spear in his face the entire time!

In Aden, they were treated for their wounds (it was at this time Burton was diagnosed with secondary syphilis symptoms) and the recriminations began. The society at Aden, never fans of Burton, began to lay the blame on Burton for the failed mission. All of the officers involved, however, defended their actions, citing the large size of the attacking body, the cowardice of the native guards, who ran at the first sign of trouble. The Indian Government, however, waited until the men had returned to England, then issued a report laying the entire

fault on Burton and citing the native troops claims that Burton had not set enough men on watch.

Burton made the rounds in London, trying to secure a commission for the Crimean War. He obtained letters of introduction and quickly headed for Constantinople to try and gain employment in the war. He was able to gain a commission of captain in the Bashi-Bazouks (“Rotten Heads”) of Beatson’s House, an irregular cavalry unit that was not only not used in the war, but found itself the center of controversy. Burton found himself defamed, due to his Indian officer status, and rumors of his involvement in everything from a Turkish harem debauch in which he was castrated to his robbing the Post Office at Alexandria was passed about. None of this seemed to concern him overly much, but the trend of being unfairly infamous would continue to injure his chances for position and wealth from that point on.

Failure was not something Burton was accustomed to. The debacle in Somaliland did nothing to stop him from planning a new attempt at the African interior and the source of the Nile. He had researched thoroughly anything on the subject, had planned intimately his course and goals in the mission, and had laid this before the Royal Geographical Society in 1856 while in London. His destination was Ujiji, a village one thousand miles inland on an unknown lake that might be the source. He had already chosen a doctor, an old friend and Oriental literature buff, as well as a German missionary in the area who was an intimate of Dr. Krapf from Cairo. The fourth man was to be Speke, should he get the leave from the Company in India. However, circumstances were already making the ability of the other men to join him untenable. The RGS granted his subscription, but the East India Company decided at the last minute not to support the expedition, to no one’s surprise. He and Speke left for Bombay in November of 1856, where they gained permission from Elphinstone for the excursion, and by the end of the year, they were

in Zanzibar – the island from which they were to base their journey. “Journey” is precisely the term Burton used for the expedition, but he used the Arabic word...and introduced a term into English that would be forever used with Africa: safari (my journey).

Burton began immediately working, taking notes that would eventually become another of his many works. He observed all from the geological to the prevalence of gonorrhoea in the island nation. Slavery was rampant, and the people were insolent, lazy, and without any appreciable culture...even the *lal bazaar* and its prostitutes were unappealing; for Burton, who reveled in native customs and cultures, it was truly damning. The sultan had recently died and his family were scrambling for power, a situation that prompted the British Resident to suggest Burton return to Bombay. He, of course, did no such thing. Preparations for the trip were conducted quickly and within two weeks, Burton and Speke were ashore at Mombasa. The first of their trouble followed right behind. Their doctor would not be able to make it to them in time due to a cholera epidemic in Aden and the missionary was not interested since he would not be allowed to proselytize. The monsoon prevented their immediate departure for almost five months, but allowed Speke time to hunt. He took great pleasure in the act and in *The Lake Regions of Central Africa*, Burton recounts his killing of a dozen hippopotami, including young. When the rains broke, Burton and Speke, with thirty-six bearers, a contingent of Baluchi soldiers – Burton was not risking his life on native guards – and a staggering array of equipment, almost none of which would be left by the end of their safari, headed out for the interior.

Burton shortly into the trip realized that their pace would not be as swift as he wanted. They had provisions for a year, yet within three months, they were running low and nowhere in sight of the Mountains of the Moon. He had not been able to hire the 120 bearers he'd wanted

and the thirty pack animals were insufficient to the task. The rains continued, the majority of the Baluchis were near mutinous, and would steal off in the night with supplies as “pay.” Burton and Speke were nearly always sick from fever, malaria, or some other malady. Both men suffered from ophthalmia and would walk for miles blind. In some ways Burton may have been lucky. Fever is a known cure for syphilis; the fever kills the spirochaete that causes the disease and he never suffered recurrences of syphilis afterward.

Cracks in the relation between Speke and Burton began to show. Although Burton referred to his “as a brother” in the later work, *The Lake Regions of Central Africa*, Speke had stopped showing his journals to Burton, perhaps remembering the rewrite in *First Footsteps*. He was annoyed that they would not stop to hunt, save for food. He could not speak to any but Burton or Sidi Bombay – one of the Baluchi soldiers they had hired (and later a celebrity in his own right,) nor did he have any intention of learning their language. He was offended by Burton’s wearing of native garb and his fascination with native customs and above all, native women. Burton would stop at every village on the way to talk with the people, trade, and to take notes.

One hundred thirty four days into the trip, they arrived at an Arab trading post in Kazeh, where Burton reorganized and gained information about the road ahead. The troubles between Speke and he were already in full force, and later, Speke would try to claim he had been the one to glean information from the Arabs...unlikely, as he spoke no Arabic. In fact, he seems to have stopped trusting Burton to translate Arabic, trying to rely on Sidi Bombay, but the Arabs would not speak with him. By the time they had rejoined their trek, they had been in Africa a year. Though both were suffering from ill health, Speke would later claim that Burton was near death

and that he would have to beg Burton to take command, lest that man die. Two months later, after almost eight months, Burton called a halt to his march. Though trees, and though half-blind, he saw something shimmering. They had found Lake Tanganyika.

They removed themselves to Ujiji to start their preparations to explore the lake. At this point the writings of both men diverge sharply. Burton claims to have sent Speke, who like him was half-blind from ophthalmia, to investigate the northern portion of the lake. Speke claims he set out on his own, over Burton's objections. What seems most likely is Burton wished to wait until their party – all of whom were sick – to recover, but Speke, tired of being the second man on the expedition, his nerves frayed by the delays and difficulties, meant to set off anyway. It seems likely Burton may have sent him off, if only to appear still in command, and to placate Speke. He wrote that Speke had a manner of angering the Arabs they were traveling with; he may have been afraid the other man would get into trouble while he (Burton) was gone, should he take the expedition. Either way, it set the stage for their later battles. Speke would attempt to hire a native boat to search the lake for an affluent, but was unable to procure one after much delay. Burton sent him and a small detachment in canoes to investigate the north of the lake.

With Speke gone, Burton delved into collecting specimens, taking notes on the people and their language. He was making the necessary preparations to get them back to the coast and was slowly taking the rest of the party back to Kazeh, where he and Speke were to meet. Speke, by contrast, wandered north along the lake with a small, mutinous group and Sidi Bombay. He was still half-blind and half-deaf from a beetle that had punctured his eardrum. He was stunned by the vastness of the lake, and eventually relied on the testimony of natives that the lake “had no end”. Speke felt the question was settled and turned for Kazeh, confident he had found the

source of the Nile. When the two men met in Kazeah, Burton quizzed Speke on his mission. Speke recounted events and his reasons for believing the lake to be the source, but without actual proof, Burton was skeptical. Speke was unwilling to discuss the matter further. He had claim to the Nile, he felt, and Burton was not going to take it away.

Two years and two months after their landing at Zanzibar, the two men returned to the island, sick, tired, and as far as Speke was concerned, enemies. They had no money left, and their men – although paid along the way – were clamoring for more. The two men were able to skip out to Aden, but once there, Speke was able to gain immediate transport with a friend on a naval sloop for London. While aboard, he made the acquaintance of an old rival of Burton's from the Crimea, a Lawrence Oliphant, the man who from that point on managed Speke's career. Burton, sick, tired, and depressed, remained in Aden with an old friend.

On his arrival, Speke immediately began publishing and speaking on "his" discovery, despite an agreement to wait for Burton to arrive so they could co-present their case. He was able to wrangle an immediate subscription for a second expedition to the African interior from the Royal Geographical Society...one not including Burton in the manifest. Burton was crushed by the betrayal. Worse, while he had been in India, the conflagration he'd warned of in reports in the '40s had come to pass. The India Mutiny had destroyed the Company's rule in India, and with it his brother's sanity. With his career and reputation on the line, his parents dead in the interim, his brother gone for all purposes, and his health and spirit sapped, he turned his attention to new matters.

He sought out Isabel Arundel. He had always retreated, when in England, to family, usually his sister. This time he sought love of a different sort and he began to court Isabel in

earnest. The last time he had seen her was briefly, after the Crimean War and before he set off for Africa. They had both exchanged portraits and had declared their love, but it was not until this time that he seemed to seriously seek her out as a wife. During the trip in Africa, he had written her only four letters and did not mention her in his journals. He had inherited £16,000...a sizeable sum which made him more suitable, but he was still somewhat disreputable – particularly under the constant barrage of slander that Oliphant was directing from Speke into the papers. Isabel's mother, however, was dead set against any marriage to this ruffian, particularly her opinion that he was not (most likely correctly) not a Christian. Isabel would try to convince her mother, and herself, that he was Christian, and a sort of Catholic, but it was no use.

Burton was not without his own friends, of course. He was a popular figure with the *literati* of London and his friend soon included Lord Palmerston, Lord Stanley, and the future Lord Houghton. Houghton, in particular, had been a supporter of Burton's from the start of his efforts to go to Africa and he exerted his considerable pressure on the Royal Geographical Society to get Burton the funding for the Africa mission. With this array of support, Burton began to make some inroads against Speke's assertions concerning the Nile and his part in the expedition. But the stress of the conflict, the continuing illness from the trip, and the disappointment with the Arundels wore on him, and at the suggestion of an old friend, Burton picked up suddenly in 1860 and traveled across America.

There is some suggestion by his biographers that Burton was on some kind of mission for the crown during this trip. He does not write about the first part of it, and he kept a very low profile while traveling through both the North and South of the country. The election of Lincoln had nearly assured a split in the country and tensions were high. The British government would

have been anxious for all the intelligence it could have garnered, so this is not a far-fetched idea, with Burton's background. It was not until he had been in the country for three months that he begins documenting his activities. He traveled across the plains to see Utah and the Mormons – yet another fringe religious group at the time. He was most complimentary about the religion, and was supportive of the practice of polygamy. All of this was chronicled in *City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California*, as was his continuation to San Francisco. Once again, he was most diligent in keeping notes on the people and practices of the Americas, but was denied some of his research, including Indian customs of scalping.

He was back by Christmas of 1860. The War between the States was raging and Speke, with his companion James Grant, were in Africa, tracking the source of the Nile. Burton was much improved physically and mentally and ready for a fight. He contacted Isabel and laid down an ultimatum: she would either marry him or she could refuse him in which case he would never come back for her. Isabel chose to defy her mother. There were scenes between her parents and the Catholic Church would only give dispensation if they were married in a Catholic service and raised their children Catholic, but ultimately, the wedding was conducted in a small, almost secret, service. Her mother was not told of the marriage, though she was surely aware of it. The marriage solidified Burton's place in society. He might still be 'Ruffian Dick', but he had married into an influential family and between his circle of friends and hers, the Burtons became a powerful team.

Due to his long service and exploits, Burton hoped for a diplomatic position, particularly Damascus, but he was thwarted by the enemies he had made in the past. Worse, the Company army had been disbanded while he was away and the new regulations forbade him keeping his

commission while in foreign service. He was dropped from the rolls without a hearing and was fated to remain Captain Burton to the end of his days. Isabel set out to bullying and beg her husband into a position worthy of him. She was only able to gain him an appointment to Fernando Po, a backwater posting in the “White Man’s Grave” of West Africa. The salary was low and the climate deadly, but Burton packed and headed out, leaving Isabel in England for her safety.

The posting was as retched as he had expected. The consulate was falling apart and he had it repaired. The government argued the cost and would not pay. He felt alone and suicidal and drank heavily. He would frequently leave his post to wander the area, ostensibly to sound the natives. And as always, he wrote. He did however file many perspicacious reports about the situation for the natives. The end of the slave trade was hurting the native economy, competition in tallow and petroleum from the United States was also cutting into native profits and spurring troubles between the tribe. For three years, he was exiled to Fernando Po. In that time, he completed nine pedantic volumes of work, none as engaging as his earlier pieces. He returned just as Speke and Grant were returning from their expedition, and again the battle over the Nile was joined.

Speke had come back from Africa in a state. He had traveled to the lakes region and followed the river that left it. However, he had not continued along its course the entire way, breaking off when it was inconvenient to follow the river. He had made arrangements to meet the British consul in Khartoum, where boats would be waiting, but the journey had taken too long and the consul had left him the boats and returned to Cairo. This slight had incensed him, as had the rigors of the trip. Never the most stable of men, Speke had returned in a condition that

worried his friends. He had accused Burton of cowardice, malice, and jealousy in his first work on the Nile, and had returned to find his publishers had removed the section. As with his diaries of the first Somaliland expedition, Speke felt betrayed. Life, to him, was uninteresting. After having bested Burton and frequently spoke about death. Instead of working to insulate Speke and allow him time to recover from the damage to his mind the second African journey had inflicted, Oliphant engineered a great clash of the titans. Burton and Speke were to debate in front of the Royal Geographical Society. Already, things were swinging Burton's way. The terrible notes and shoddy science of Speke was coming under intense criticism from many in the RGS, including the famed Dr. Livingstone, who despite a disliking for Burton personally, backed his concerns about the accuracy of Speke's work. On the day of the great debate, Speke was killed in what was termed a hunting accident. He had shot himself while stepping over a stone wall, unlikely for a man with such a wealth of experience behind the gun. Rumors of his suicide were immediate.

The effect on Burton was strong. He may have been hurt by the actions and slanders he suffered from Speke, may have disagreed with his inaccurate science and braggadocio, but he would never be able to piece together how a man of Speke's bravery and accomplishment could have possibly killed himself. He would continue to write of Speke as "a brother." With his death, the Nile debate quickly faded from public and academic view. That chapter of Burton's life was closed.

The rest of his life was a series of diplomatic postings, first to Brazil in 1864, where he and Isabel could finally live together. The Fernando Po mission had sapped his finances, and his works were not bringing him money. He began to look to ways to make money. While in Brazil,

he traveled the interior extensively, taking an interest in the gold mining there, as well as the usual interest in the native customs, but no money was to be had. Isabel was finally able in 1867 to wrangle him a position in Damascus, over the complaints of the British consul in Beirut and the Turkish *pasha* of the Syria region. His time there was marked by conflict and betrayal.

Opposition to him came mostly from the Jewish quarter, who saw him as too friendly with the Muslims, the Turks disliked his honesty, and the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire thought him to rough around the edges for such an important position. The natives disliked Isabel's tendency to try and convert anyone to Catholicism. Things came to a head in 1870, when a series of riots between Jewish creditors and Muslims debtors. The merchants requested aid from Burton in retrieving the debt. He refused. The Jewish community then began a campaign to get him removed from his position, writing Sir Moses Montefiore, a philanthropist who backed Jewish interests in the Levant; and Sir Francis Goldsmid, a powerful Jewish barrister. Pressure for his removal built up and was brought to fruition by his attempt to move a group of Muslim converts to Christianity out of the Ottoman Empire, even offering to pay himself. The Turks demanded, and got, his dismissal without warning or recourse. It was a serious slight to Burton and he chafed.

The failure of his Damascus mission wore on him upon his return to England, but public support for Burton, who was seen as a lone heroic figure trying to save Christians in distress and righting injustices, was strong. The Foreign Office was forced to issue a White Paper on the matter but did not apologize. He was refused Tehran as a posting and offered another consulate in a pestilential swamp in Brazil. He refused and began to see the hand of Montefiore and Goldsmid in every setback. Burton developed a strong anti-Semitic streak which he would never

lose from this point on. The last of his inheritance was spent and the Burtons were broke. He became obsessed with money-making schemes, none of which panned out. But as things were their darkest, the government suddenly relented and gave him Trieste. Though not a great posting like Tehran or Damascus, Trieste was European. The pay was not great, about the same as Fernando Po, but better than the income from his books. It would be their home for eighteen years until his death.

Trieste was a city of contrasts, pretty but dangerous. Anarchists and anti-Austrian factions were continually bombing things. The climate could be good, or terrible, with winds that could overturn carriages and driving rains. Society was decent and soon the Burtons were included in circles that included the Emperor and Empress of Austria. They were a weird pair, the Burtons, dressing in oriental fashion, both practicing fencing together (Isabel became quite accomplished in her own right with the sword.) It was during this period that his great literary works, *The Kasideh* was an esoteric work that was a rival to the famous *Rubiat of Oman Khayyam* and included some of Burton's ideas on *gnosis*. Though the *Kasideh* was ill received, the failure of it would more than be made up for by the success of the translations of the *Kama Sutra*, and *The Arabian Nights*. Finally, his works were recognized and he gained some financial security.

The Arabian Nights also showed his passion for Islam was still strong. Though many of the stories predate Mohammed, the work is begun with a standard prayer, "In the name of Allah, the Compassionating, the Compassionate! Praise be to Allah..."³ Some of the stories had been modified by Burton to more accurately reflect Muslim society in Persia and Arabia. The translation work is brilliant with the stories being adapted only slightly to retain their flavor. The

book brought him international fame and his translation is still one of the best today. It is often used as a guide for newer translations of the book.

In 1886, while traveling in Tunisia, Burton received a telegram. He had been knighted Knight Commander in the Order of St. Michael and St. George, a great honor, though not the Order of Bath that Lady Burton had hoped for. He continued in his post at Trieste, where he followed up his literary works with a translation of *The Perfumed Garden*, an erotic primer from Arabia. It was an immediate bestseller. Burton, however, was in ill health and tried to get leave from his position in 1888. Despite his health problems from a life of banging around dusty and dangerous places, Burton continued to work a grueling schedule, sleeping only a few hours a night. Throughout 1890, Burton was cleaning up, saying his goodbyes and making certain his affairs were in order. In October of 1890, time caught up with him and he died with Isabel at his side. She made certain of his receiving the sacraments and prepared for a proper Catholic burial in England. The undertaker found a body covered in hundreds of scars from hundreds of battles.

The aftermath of Burton's death is a nightmare to historians. Isabel, in an attempt to improve the image of her husband, went through his massive diaries and notes, culling them for anything embarrassing or controversial and destroyed them over the wishes of his relatives in the Sisted family. Her fire burned away many of the recollections that might have solved certain questions: was Burton truly converted to Catholicism, or had he remained Sufi, dissembling about his true faith? What of the supposed love of his life, a Persian girl in Aga Khan's court of which there is only a poem to remember her? Part of Burton's allure is that there are no answers to his motivations and character, to the questions that biographers of the man have. He is at once an open book, his personality, beliefs, and actions laid down in the multitude of works he

produced, and an enigma – a man of words that have been erased by his wife to polish his posthumous memory. What is certain is Burton was a man who was searching for his own limits, for knowledge, for his own soul.

ENDNOTES

1. Rice, Edward. *Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton...*, 50
2. Burton, Richard. *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Medinah and Meccah*, 4
3. Burton, Richard. *The Arabian Nights*, 1

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