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In Praise of Sir Richard Burton

Book News of the Day

OSTRACIZED by Victorian England, baited by officialdom, ruined by gossip, speaker of more than twenty languages, author of more than forty books, traveler in five continents, the foremost Orientalist and explorer of his own and perhaps of any time, Sir Richard Burton was called, during his lifetime, "England's neglected genius." The title has held good for fifty years.

Suddenly we get, in THE ARABIAN KNIGHT, by Seton Dearden (London: Arthur Barker, 12s. 6d.) and SIR RICHARD BURTON, by Hugh J. Schonfield (London: Herbert Joseph. 15s.) two first-rate studies of the man and his work which, by the stanch nature of their championship and the lively color of their portraiture, ought to do much to re-establish Burton not only as a great explorer and a great writer but as a great man.

His position as an explorer needs, really, no re-establishment. Intended for the church, Burton contrived to get himself sent down from Cambridge, joined the army and went to Bombay. He there lived as wild an existence as regulations allowed, learning languages and dialects from every kind of native, disguising himself in the bazaars, planning mad expeditions, steeping himself in Oriental mysticism and religions, offending officialdom and laying the foundation of his future as an explorer.

Later he was to perform three feats of exploration which make the achievements of almost every other Arabian traveler, even including Lawrence and Bertram Thomas, seem inconsiderable. Disguised as Haji Abdullah, he entered Mecca, the first non-Moslem European ever to do so; it was a colossal achievement. He then made an expedition to Harar, at that time utterly barbaric, a fanatical Moslem fortress with a tradition that it would fall at the entrance of the first Christian.

Finally, starting from Zanzibar, he led "without money, support or influence, lacking the necessaries of life, the most disorderly caravan that ever man could gather together into the heart of eastern Africa and discovered the Tanganyika lake." It was a stupendous but unhappy and, later, unsavory *tour de force*. A disagreement with Speke, his lieutenant, led first to Speke's discovery of Lake Victoria as the source of the Nile, then to Speke's triumph with the British public, then to Burton's utter discredit with public and government alike, and finally to Speke's probable suicide.

Smashed, Burton had no refuge but in consulates—Fernando Po, Damascus, Santos, Trieste; in his numerous writings, and in that peculiar lady who, next to himself, was perhaps his worst enemy —Isabel, self-styled Countess Isabel Arundell of Wardour, his wife. She seems to have been, in almost everything, his exact opposite—intensely religious, a Roman Catholic, romantic, almost adolescent in her zeal, her notions of love and her ambitions for Burton. She was a kind of Ouida heroine married to a cosmopolitan tiger. It was an amazing match—contradictory, absurd, volatile, successful.

But if she was amazing, Burton himself was more. One gets the picture, from these two books, of a volatile, sensuous, courageous, diabolical nature; of a creature of vitriolic perversity and white-hot independence; a man of splendid achievements; a personality standing out from contemporary Victorian society like a buccaneer from a crowd of monks.

As to the books, there is not a pin to choose between them. Telling the same story, in almost the same idiom, they are both first rate: twin monuments to a superman.

H. E. BATES