

plight as a means for bursting out of the confinement of poetry in an irrelevant isolation from the broad world's concerns. It is an exciting achievement, here described in detail; and it is largely a tale of triumph, not defeat.

But there is, of course, the inescapable, intrusive, too early death of Keats—which, if it was not his defeat, was certainly our loss. Bate, by his sheer control and accumulation of detail, makes his final pages far more touching than the end of Miss Ward's book, in which she rails at the friends she thinks should have flocked around the dying poet in Rome. Here, too, Bate follows his great exemplar—in this case, Johnson's life of Savage, where every restraint placed upon one's sympathy makes it cut a deeper channel.

It is a very great book, the kind Keats deserves; and written in accordance with Keats' own wish, expressed with typically classical restraint: "English ought to be kept up."

Reviewed by CARRY WILLS

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## *A Picaresque Prodigy*

***Burton: A Biography of Sir Richard Francis Burton***, by Byron Farwell.  
New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston,  
1964 xi & 431 pp. \$5.95.

I GATHER from conversations that the remarkable Victorian Englishman who is the subject of this admirable study is in some danger of popular confusion with the living, Welsh-born celebrity who now bears the name—an ironic illustration perhaps of the influence of Occam's law of parsimony. It is another irony, and no doubt a commentary on our times, that the fame and distinction so ardently coveted and so arduously and vainly sought by the nineteenth century Richard Burton, adventurer, swordsman, soldier, explorer, linguist, naturalist, anthropologist and translator of exotic pornography, should have come almost fortuitously to the twentieth century Richard Burton, actor and *grand amant*.

In some ways, though, the older Burton might seem the more gifted actor of the two; certainly his were the more strenuous performances and the

more expansive stages. His life—or rather lives, for his adventures were so many and varied that the plural is almost required—would provide the stuff for a half dozen film epics costlier and more dazzling than *Cleopatra* or even *Lawrence of Arabia*. There was, for example, his sociological investigation, while a young subaltern of the Indian Army, of the bazaars and brothels of the Sind, made possible by his skill at make-up and disguise and his mastery of native dialects; there was his ingenious though accidentally frustrated effort to abduct a beautiful nun from a convent in Goa; there was his audacious journey to Mecca and Medina in the guise of an Afghan pilgrim; there was his perilous expedition into savage Somaliland and his visit to Harar, whither no white man had ever been before him; there was his quest for the secret of the Nile and his discovery of Lake Tanganyika; there were his excursions to the American and Canadian frontier West, his sojourn with the Mormons of Deseret and his overland journey to the California mine fields; there was his mission to Dahomey in the days of its Amazon army, his explorations of the Andes, his search for gold in the unmapped mountains of Midian beyond the Red Sea.

Burton was also an indefatigable writer, though writing was hardly the strongest of his manifold talents. His prose is undisciplined, marred here by pedantic arrogance and there by labored facetiousness and eccentricities of vocabulary and spelling; his verse is mostly trite and adolescent. Yet the list of his published work fills nearly three pages of Mr. Farwell's bibliography. Most of it was indiscriminately thrown together from the notebooks in which Burton recorded everything that caught his interest. His books are cluttered with multitudinous footnotes into which he crammed whatever details he might inadvertently have omitted from his text. It is hardly surprising that most of them were disparaged by reviewers and ignored by the public. It was not until late in life, and then mainly through his translations of the *Lusiads* of the Portuguese adventurer-poet, Luiz Vaz de Camoens, for whom he felt a profound spiritual kinship, and by his monumental and often obscene version of *The Arabian Nights*, that Burton gained any literary recognition or financial reward from his books. Of all his works only the *Kasidah*, a series of philosophic and pseudo-mystical speculations set forth in quatrains and possibly suggested by Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat*, remains in print.

There was a somewhat diabolic aura to Burton's personality, which his contempt of Victorian

moralties, his notorious preoccupation with Asiatic and African sexual practices, and his defenses of Moslem and Mormon polygamy did much to enhance. He was widely supposed to possess a strong strain of Gypsy blood, a belief that gained plausibility from the dark and sinister cast of his features—the perpetual scowl, emphasized by the whiskers that drooped from his jowls, the brooding, resentful eyes that glared from behind the thick shaggy brows. The whole effect was heightened by a long jagged scar down his cheek, the handiwork of a Somali spearman. The diarist Wilfred Blunt, who had known Burton in South America, remembered him long afterward as having exhibited

a countenance the most singularly and incongruously hideous I have ever seen, dark, cruel, treacherous, with eyes like a wild beast's. He reminded me by turns of a black leopard, caged but unforgiving, and again, with that close-cropped poll and iron frame, of that wonderful creation of Balzac, the *ex-gallérien*, Vautrin, hiding his grim identity under an Abbé's cassock.... In his talk he affected an extreme brutality, and if one could have believed what he said, had indulged in every vice and committed every crime. I soon found however, that most of the recitals were indulged in *pour épâter le bourgeois* and that his inhumanity was more pretended than real.... I came at last to look on him as less dangerous than he seemed and even in certain aspects of his mind "a sheep in wolf's clothing."

The various portraits and photographs of Burton, especially the painting by Leighton, made in 1876 when the sitter was well into middle age, support Blunt's impressions; and Mr. Farwell's narrative affords some examples of Burton's delight in making the flesh of his readers or listeners creep with descriptions and anecdotes far beyond the innocent imagination of Wardle's Fat Boy. It is no wonder that the perverse young poet Swinburne was fascinated by Burton's real or affected diableries and that he celebrated the publication of *The Arabian Nights* as a joyous and prophetic triumph of Eastern eroticism over Western prudery.

... All that glorious orient glows,  
Defiant of the dusk. Our twilight land  
Trembles....

With Burton on his expedition to Somaliland were some younger officers of the Indian Army. Among them was John Hanning Speke, who later accompanied Burton on the Central African exploration. At Tabora on their return journey

from Tanganyika Nyanza they heard reports of a still larger lake to the north; and Burton, who was then ill and weak from African fever, sent Speke to investigate. On August 3, 1858, Speke reached the southern shore of a vast expanse of water to which he gave the name of Lake Victoria in honor of his Queen. He made no effort at further exploration, but returned to Tabora and reported his discovery to Burton, who from pride in his own discovery discounted its importance. At Zanzibar the companions separated. Speke was the first to reach England, and created an immense sensation by announcing that he had found the true source of the Nile; Burton, who arrived about a fortnight later with his claims for Lake Tanganyika, found himself virtually ignored. There followed a long and virulent controversy, conducted with scorn and bitterness on Burton's part and spitefulness on Speke's. Speke's theory was of course the correct one, though he had then no real evidence to support his boast that he had solved a riddle that had baffled ancient and modern geographers for thousands of years. In 1860, however, accompanied by James Augustus Grant, he made another expedition to Lake Victoria and nearly two years later located its northern outlet at the Ripon Falls. Burton nevertheless continued to dispute Speke's claims, even after they were confirmed by the testimony of H. M. Stanley, and to urge his own theory.

Thus at Tabora, as Mr. Farwell observes, Burton had let pass his one great opportunity for the renown and honor that he craved above all else and which provided the impelling motive for all his adventures. Had he put more confidence in Speke, and had he followed a northern route instead of returning to his starting point at Zanzibar, he might have found the outlet himself and followed the waters down into Egypt. "To have done so would have made Burton the foremost explorer of his generation.... This had been his main chance. He would never get another."

This stubborn and contemptuous quality in Burton, who once having adopted a theory would never relinquish it, may help to explain why his talents and achievements were so much slighted by his official superiors. In his army service Burton never rose above the rank of captain, and with the transfer of rule in India from the Company to the Crown after the Mutiny he was dropped from the rolls. In his consular service he was given such undesirable posts as the malarial African island of Fernando Po and Santos in Brazil, described by his wife as then "hardly better than a mangrove swamp." But as an officer

Burton was rarely with his regiment and as a consul rarely at his desk, preferring to spend his time in travel, with or without official permission, and in piling up new mountains of notes. At Damascus, the one post in which his special knowledge and experience might have been of diplomatic value, he ran afoul of the Turkish governor, allowed himself to be embroiled in Christian-Moslem antagonisms and was recalled under a cloud and in some danger for his life. A year passed before he was entrusted with a new assignment—but this time it was to Trieste, considered a charitable haven for “scribbling consuls,” and where he succeeded the popular Irish novelist, Charles Lever. Sure enough, it was at Trieste that Burton’s major literary labors were accomplished, and it was there, after many more travels and explorations, that he was to die on October 19, 1890.

Four years before his death he was awarded a knighthood by Queen Victoria on the recommendation of Lord Salisbury. He took it as a sign that his merits had been recognized at last in high places and would now be fully utilized. In this he was mistaken. The title, says Mr. Farwell, “was not a promise of things to come but a consolation prize. The road ahead was all downhill.”

In 1861, soon after his return from North America, Burton had been married to Isabel Arundell, one of the ancient English Catholic family. It was an incongruous match, greatly deplored by relatives on each side, yet, as it proved, a singularly successful one. The bride in her own way was almost as extravagant a character as Burton himself, a remarkable compound of piety, superstition, romantic enthusiasm and sacrificial devotion. Blunt considered her “a very foolish woman” who hurt as much as helped her husband’s career. There is no doubt that by her well-intentioned officiousness she contributed to some of his troubles at Damascus; yet it is difficult to see how Burton, especially in his later years, could have managed without her. Throughout their thirty years of wedded life she lavished upon him a whole-souled adulation so close to idolatry that it sometimes distressed her Christian conscience. She attended to his every need and wish, accompanied him on many of his travels, joyously sharing hardships. She copied and edited many of his manuscripts for the printers and saw them through the press. She sheltered him

from unwelcome or importunate visitors seeking to bother him about consular affairs. When in England she haunted the Foreign Office and nagged the Foreign Secretaries with visits and letters in efforts to get him the appointments he desired. For his part Burton loved her genuinely, though, as Mr. Farwell seems to imply, for the most part sexlessly.

He resisted, however, her unceasing efforts to convert him or divert him from his pornographic and skatological interests; yet at his death she was able to persuade two complaisant bishops to allow him the full rites of the church. She had him buried on consecrated ground near London in a vast marble sarcophagus built in the shape of a bedouin tent, and on the anniversary of his death she decorated it with strands of camel bells. For the sake of his reputation, perhaps also of his salvation, and much to the indignation of his admirers, she burned some of his unpublished manuscripts, most notably a translation of *The Perfumed Garden*, another and grosser piece of Arabian eroticism.

There have been several efforts to write the life of Sir Richard Burton, beginning with Lady Burton’s two-volume hagiography published in 1896, but Mr. Farwell’s is the first fully successful one. This is not only because he has gone through the enormous mass of Burton materials and has handled them with great selective skill and because he has taken the pains to retrace Burton’s footsteps in many parts of the world. It is also and mainly because he writes without either prejudice or predilection, exhibiting all the strange and contradictory aspects of personality that marked his man. “It would be easy,” says Mr. Farwell in his preface, “. . . to show that [Burton] was cruel, dirty-minded, stupid, pretentious and basically evil. But it also would be easy to collect an equally impressive array of evidence (as was done by his wife) to show that he was kind, scholarly, brave, brilliant and badly neglected by the nation he devoutly served. In reality, Burton was all these things.” And it is precisely these extreme paradoxes of character and action, so rarely to be observed in a single human being, that make Mr. Farwell’s biography of such absorbing interest.

Reviewed by J. M. LALLEY