



Halliburton, Richard (1900-1939)

by Mark Staebler

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Once every schoolboy's idol, a best-selling author, and a household name in the United States and abroad, American adventurer and writer Richard Halliburton became virtually forgotten soon after his death in 1939. Recently, however, there has been renewed interest in him, at least in part because of his homosexuality, which he understandably took efforts to conceal during his lifetime but which nevertheless surfaced in his writing and has subsequently been confirmed.

Halliburton was born on January 9, 1900, in Brownsville, Tennessee, near Memphis, to a prosperous family. A sickly child, he manifested a congenital heart problem at age 15 and spent eight months in isolated recovery. His brother's death from a similar condition two years later motivated Halliburton to take the offensive against infirmity, and to determine to seek a life of adventure and daring.

After graduating from prep school, Halliburton entered Princeton University. At Princeton he was an indifferent student, but sold an article to *Field and Stream* magazine for \$150. This success encouraged him to pursue a life of traveling and writing.

Just weeks after his graduation from Princeton in 1921, Halliburton signed on as a merchant seaman on a freighter bound for Hamburg, Germany. His ceaseless quest for adventure had begun.

He climbed the Matterhorn in September of that year. His wanderlust took him through Paris and on to the "rock of Gibraltar," where taking photographs of defense weapon emplacements at the strait landed him in jail. Already a published writer (if only in *Field and Stream*), he realized the value of publicity and of pictures: he published a dozen of his forbidden photos along with a breathless account of the escape.

Halliburton went on to Egypt, sleeping on top of a pyramid and swimming the river Nile. He hid himself on the grounds of the Taj Mahal in India, so that he might bathe in its pools by moonlight. Continuing through the Malay peninsula, he played beachcomber on Bali, steamed to Singapore as a stowaway, survived an attack by pirates, and trekked through Manchuria. When he reached Japan, he climbed Mt. Fuji in winter. This "impossible" feat he turned into an article for a Tokyo newspaper, along with pictures from the summit.

By the time Halliburton returned to the United States from this whirlwind trip, he had logged 50,000 miles in only 600 days, and published his Tibetan tales in *National Geographic*.

Publishers rejected Halliburton's first book, however, until his success at lecturing to ladies' clubs prompted Bobbs-Merrill to accept what would become *The Royal Road to Romance* (1925). That publisher's editor-in-chief reported Halliburton to be "an Apollo . . . His light hair made an aureole round his face. His eyes flashed. He was on fire with enthusiasm. . . . The effect was electric."

Halliburton's next adventure was to replicate Byron's swimming of the Hellespont. The combination of literary motivation, high romance, and daredevilry became his trademark. He went on to further adventures described in eight more books, including *The Glorious Adventure* (1927), *New Worlds to*

Conquer (1929), *The Flying Carpet* (1932), *Seven League Boots* (1935), *Richard Halliburton's Book of Marvels: the Occident* (1937), and *Richard Halliburton's Second Book of Marvels: the Orient* (1938).

Halliburton's books achieved enormous popularity and he became one of the highest paid celebrity authors to appear on the lecture circuit between the two world wars.

A master of publicity and self-promotion, Halliburton shrewdly exploited his escapades in order to increase interest in his books and lectures. In one such stunt, he registered himself as a ship, paid a toll of 36 cents, based on his weight of 140 pounds, and swam the Panama Canal. He remains the only person to have swum all 50 miles of the Canal.

Fittingly, perhaps, Halliburton apparently perished at sea while in pursuit of adventure. On March 3, 1939 he had embarked on a journey eastward from Hong Kong across the Pacific to San Francisco on a custom-built Chinese junk. On March 24, a typhoon struck. Although neither their bodies nor the ship were ever found, Halliburton and his crew are presumed to have drowned.

Halliburton's natural bent toward same-sex sexual relations surfaces in his work despite an effort to conceal it. In *The Royal Road's* first pages, he revealingly describes himself as a Princeton student intoxicated by springtime. "A rebellion against the prosaic mold . . . rose up inside me. I flung my book away and rushed out of the apartment on to the throbbing shadowy campus . . . surging within at the sense of temporary escape from confinement. . . . My roommates back in that penitentiary room [were] so utterly indifferent to the divine madness of the spring moonlight."

What book did he "fling away"? One of the primary texts of queer letters, Oscar Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray*. Halliburton credits the book with inspiring his romantic attitude toward life: "I began to recite lines from it that had burned themselves into my memory: 'Realize your youth while you have it . . . Don't squander the gold of your days.' Let those who wish have their respectability--I wanted freedom, freedom to indulge in whatever caprice struck my fancy. . . . Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you. Be afraid of nothing. . . . The romantic--that was what I wanted."

In *New Worlds To Conquer* Halliburton claims to have ended one of his champion swims in the arms of a "lovely senorita," a character he undoubtedly created to mold his public persona as appropriately heterosexual. But his actual erotic interests surface in descriptions like this one from *The Royal Road*. "[A] dugout appeared . . . manned by an extraordinarily fine-looking young Dyak. He wore only the usual red cotton cloth, wrapped tightly about his loins. His trim muscular body, shining in the sun and extravagantly tattooed on arms and legs, made a perfect picture of natural grace and strength. Thick, straight, jet-black hair hung in bangs across his forehead."

In 1989, popular science lecturer and writer David M. Schwartz "outed" Halliburton to contemporary readers in the *Smithsonian Magazine*. He notes that "though it was a fairly well kept secret during his lifetime, he was evidently homosexual. He took pains to conceal this in his books, but he had numerous gay contacts around the world and at home in California."

Halliburton's "home in California" was both a landmark of contemporary architecture and an emblem of his interior life. The early modernist house sits on a promontory in Laguna Beach, and was dubbed "Hangover House" by Halliburton himself, both for its craggy position and for the obvious alcoholic pun. The name also suggests the carefree, fun-loving character of Laguna at that time.

The house was designed in Mies van der Rohe's International Style by William Alexander Levy, then a 28-year-old student of Frank Lloyd Wright's and involved in a ménage-à-trois with Halliburton and his lover, editor, and ghostwriter Paul Mooney. As architectural critic Ted Wells has reported, Levy "met Paul Mooney

in 1930 and the two men became lovers. By that time, Mooney had a prolific professional and personal relationship as editor and ghostwriter to Richard Halliburton, the world-traveling adventurer, who at the time was as famous as Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart." Hangover House thus served as exterior emblem of the private, interior Halliburton by physically securing the ménage-à-trois of Levy, Paul Mooney, and Halliburton under one roof.

Mooney and Halliburton apparently died together in the typhoon that sunk their ship. Levy survived until 1997, but produced no other architectural design as successful as Hangover House.

The choice of Laguna as the site for the stunning home was probably due to factors in addition to its spectacular views. The area was sufficiently far from Los Angeles to afford Halliburton privacy, and it had become known as a gay haven. According to the Orange County L/G/B/T Timeline Project, which includes Halliburton in its survey of notable county queers, as early as 1920 Laguna made "a great [film] shooting location, and Laguna's first wave of gays arrive[d] as members of these early crews."

That Mooney and Halliburton were romantically involved is confirmed by Gerry Max in his 2007 book, *Horizon Chasers*, and by Winston Wilde in his forthcoming Haworth Press volume on "Queer Bonding." Allan Ellenberger's biography of Ramon Novarro also posits an erotic bond between the adventurer and the film star.

While the gay explorer-adventurer-writer may seem an unusual phenomenon, that persona itself figures prominently in American and British letters: Halliburton maintained the tradition exemplified by Herman Melville, Charles Warren Stoddard, Richard Henry Dana, and the late Tobias Schneebaum, to say nothing of Sir Richard Burton, T. E. Lawrence, Sir Wilfred Thesiger, and Bruce Chatwin.

The very names of these men may conjure the contemporary distaste for what Edward Said termed "Orientalism," the objectification of a sexually-desired, remote "native." Indeed, one reason for Halliburton's decline in popularity after his death was that his writings were perceived as racist, even as they glorified the exotic. Perhaps, however, contemporary gay culture has matured to a point where it can appreciate the gay travel romance as a legitimate historical genre, and appreciate Halliburton as an artist who wished to expand human understanding and to unite men through universalized desire.

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About the Author

Mark Staebler helped organize the first gay student group in the 300-plus year history of Harvard College in 1971. He holds a Ph.D. from Stanford University and has published a verse translation of Boiardo's *Orlando*

Innamorato, over 500 reviews and essays on music, a study of gay Puerto Rican poet Manuel Ramos Otero, and feature articles in *TWN*, South Florida's longest-running gay newsweekly.