



## Burton, Sir Richard F. (1821-1890)

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Sir Richard Burton.  
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Although Sir Richard F. Burton bore the stamp of the Victorian era in which he lived, in his outlook on sexuality there was little about him that seems "Victorian" in the sexually restrictive sense of that term. Based on his extensive travels in exotic lands, Burton translated and published works that were shocking for their sexual frankness. Moreover, his accounts of homosexual brothels and other activities severely stigmatized him. Although evidence of his own homosexual leanings is inconclusive, in his lifetime he was regarded with suspicion because of his knowledge and understanding of same-sex sexual activity.

Burton was born in Torquay, England on March 19, 1821, the son of Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Netterville Burton. In Genoa, Colonel Burton served Queen Caroline, the unwanted wife of George IV. She was known for being "gracious" to the officers of the garrison and won their loyalty and devotion. When she was called before the House of Lords on charges of adultery, Colonel Burton was summoned to testify. When he refused to do so, he was dismissed from his post at half pay.

This willingness to defy societal strictures and authorities also manifested itself in Richard and his younger brother Edward. By 1840 the Burton boys had been sent to separate schools because of their bullying and troublemaking habits. Richard Burton was expelled from Oxford University in 1842. It was then that he sought and obtained a commission in the Bombay Army of the East India Company.

From 1842 to 1850, Burton served as army field surveyor and intelligence officer in the Indian province of Sindh. Burton studied and learned several foreign languages and local dialects. He made himself invaluable as the only British officer who could speak Sindh. When he went to the local bazaar, he excelled at being able to identify the caste of the individuals he met. He quickly absorbed the local customs, manners, superstitions, and religions of each caste.

Because of his talent and ease in learning foreign languages and customs, General Sir Charles Napier appointed Burton the delicate task of investigating the brothels of Karachi. Napier wanted every detail of the activities inside the three brothels that rented young boys and eunuchs, and he wanted it in writing. Up to this point, reports given to Napier were submitted verbally.

Richard created and devised a wide variety of costumes and disguises so that he could infiltrate the brothels and obtain the needed information. Napier himself could not go on this mission because he was repulsed by and adamantly opposed to homosexual activity; but he did have a burning desire to find out if any of the British officers were engaged in homosexual encounters.

When Burton took on this mission, he assumed that the report would remain within Napier's administration and would not be forwarded to the Bombay Government. Burton may have consequently made his report more detailed than he might have otherwise. His fascination with sexual matters, along with his fine-tuned instinct for discerning the slightest shade or nuance of cultural nicety, led him to fill his report with the minutest details.

Many of the people who read the report criticized Burton. They believed that the only way a report with such intimate particulars could have been written was if he had engaged in, not merely observed, the homosexual activities. Throughout the remainder of his life, rumors circulated regarding his homosexual escapades in India. More than any other individual, John Henning Speke, the army lieutenant with whom Burton had an adversarial relationship, spread these rumors through his written reports back to their commanders.

Beyond the surprisingly exact and intimate knowledge of brothel practices, there was never any clear-cut evidence that Burton was homosexual. He was well known for keeping a *bubu*, a Hindu girl who was an unpaid prostitute and general housemaid. She also nursed him back to health during his numerous bouts with tropical diseases.

Despite the rumors, Burton continued his service and managed to rack up his own share of personal glory along the way, including a knighthood in 1886 awarded for his consular service and intelligence work.

Burton traveled extensively, in areas as remote as Abyssinia, Arabia, India, and America. He trekked through Africa with Speke in search of the source of the Nile. Bitter controversy arose when both men claimed to have discovered Lake Tanganyika.

In addition, Burton was among the first white men ever to traverse the Empty Quarter of Arabia. In authentic Arab garb, he passed himself off as Muslim and completed a successful pilgrimage to Mecca.

Another rumor that haunted him for the rest of his life arose from this trip. Supposedly a young Arab boy witnessed Burton standing to urinate rather than squatting in the Arab manner. The story goes that Burton killed the boy rather than risk exposure as a Westerner. Although the tale has the hallmarks of an urban legend about it, it nevertheless dogged him relentlessly.

When Burton sought to assimilate an indigenous culture he threw himself into the local *milieu*, seeking the common man's life rather than upper class ways. This propensity of immersing himself among the lower classes gave rise to Burton's being referred to by his fellow Britons as the "White Nigger."

After a long engagement, Burton married Isabel Arundel in 1861. Marrying a Roman Catholic afforded Burton yet another opportunity to affront English sensibilities, as did his publication of exotic sexual manuals and how-to books. Burton's marriage seems to have been happy, and his wife seems to have supported his scholarly works, including the famous translations.

Throughout his career, Burton collected literature in its original language and translated it into English. It is through his efforts that *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana* (1883), *Ananga Ranga* or the Hindu Art of Love (1885), *The Perfumed Garden of Cheikh Nefzaoui: A Manual of Arabian Erotology* (1886), and *The Arabian Nights* (1885-1888) made their way to Victorian readers. In addition, he translated salacious Roman classics, such as *The Carmina of Gaius Valerius Catullus* (1894-posthumous), and *Priapeia, or the Sportive Epigrams of Divers Poets on Priapus* (1890). By publishing such scurrilous works, he flirted with violation of the Obscenity Acts.

In the "Terminal Essay" of *The Arabian Nights*, published in 1885, Burton announced his theory of a "Sotadic Zone" where homosexuality allegedly flourished. Burton averred that homosexuality was "geographical and climatic, not racial." The Sotadic Zone encompassed most of the Mediterranean countries, the Middle East, China, Japan, and the islands of the South Seas. This theory was not widely adopted, but it may have confirmed the opinion of many British readers that homosexuality was essentially a foreign vice.

Burton died October 20, 1890 in Trieste. His wife ordered a marble monument for him shaped like a tent, where he lived so much of his life.

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## **About the Author**

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