

## **Sir Christopher Ondaatje's speech at the East India Club, May 19<sup>th</sup> 2010, on the occasion of the fund raising dinner for the restoration of Sir Richard and Lady Burton's Mausoleum at Mortlake.**

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"I first found out about Richard Burton in the early 1970s when I was hacking my way through the jungles of finance in North America. I had come across Fawn Brodie's marvellous biography of him "The Devil Drives" and it changed my life. From that moment I read everything Burton had written, and everything anyone had written about him. This was the life I should have had. Sadly, I did nothing about it for fifteen years. By then I had done so much research on Burton that I almost knew him better than he did. Eventually, in 1988, I chucked everything – sold all my business interests in Canada, came to England, got involved with the Royal Geographical Society and determined to follow Burton's footsteps, first in Sindh, and then tracking that ill-fated journey with John Hanning Speke in 1857, searching for the source of the Nile. These journeys resulted in two books and gave me the courage never to look back.

Sir Richard Francis Burton was born on 19<sup>th</sup> March, 1821 in Hertfordshire, England, son of Colonel Joseph Netterville Burton. His youth was spent on the Continent where, with his brother Edward and his sister Maria, he enjoyed what can only be regarded as a highly irregular education at the hands of servants and schoolmasters who were shocked at the boy's high spirits and apparent inability to obey any rules. He did, however, excel at duelling, riding, smoking, gambling and experimenting with anything he'd been forbidden to try.

When he reached adolescence, his father sent him to Trinity College, Oxford. There he showed a remarkable talent for the acquisition of languages, learning quickly and retaining all that he had picked up. But his time at Oxford ended in infamy when he was sent down for demonstrating outstanding insubordination.

So Burton now embarked upon his lifelong international career by joining the army of the British East India Company. From the moment he set foot in Bombay, India was a revelation to him. Despite the strictures of army life, he threw himself fully into the mysteries of the East, concentrating on the three aspects that would provide him with the greatest opportunity for fulfilment for the rest of his life: eastern erotica, native languages, and the mysteries of culture and religion.

Assigned to the Sindh Survey, Burton explored the farthest regions of this desert province, moving freely among its peoples, often in disguise.

One of his assignments in Sindh, however, appears to have led to the premature end of his army career. General Charles Napier assigned Burton to investigate the boy brothels of Karachi. Some time after Burton completed the assignment, his report reached army authorities who were shocked at its content and who assumed that Burton's detailed descriptions could only have been achieved through his own participation in what he was describing. Whatever the truth of the matter, Burton was shipped back to England.

After a short recuperation, he set off on a lifetime of further adventures. He entered Mecca in disguise in 1853; he fought in Somaliland; he searched for the source of the Nile in 1855 and 1857; he crossed America to be among the Mormons of Salt Lake City. In 1861, he was posted as a diplomat to Fernando Po, an island off Africa. By that time, he had married Isabell Arundell, who was to remain his faithful companion for decades to come. He was posted to Santos, Brazil in 1865, to Damascus in 1869, and finally, in 1872, to Trieste where he and Isabel lived out the years remaining until his death in 1890.

When Burton died, it is possible that his loyal wife committed one of the greatest literary crimes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by burning all his papers, notes and manuscripts. But she also organised the building of the Burton Mausoleum in Mortlake, in the form of an extraordinary stone-built Arab tent – largely inspired by Burton's poem *The Kasidah* – a work which throws rare light on Burton's religious beliefs.

The Mausoleum at Mortlake, where both Richard and Isabel Burton are buried, is one of London's more unusual monuments. Isabel chose Mortlake as their burial place some years before he died in 1890. She persuaded Burton to buy a plot in the little cemetery behind the Catholic church of St Mary Magdalen. It was not then submerged, as it is today, in suburbia.

Perhaps it reminded her of some corner of Trieste, but it is also, importantly, where many of her Arundell relations were buried. "A nice little family hotel" Burton called it.

I first saw the unique Mausoleum one gloomy afternoon in the early 1990s. You cannot see it at first as you walk round the church because it is hidden by straggling bushes. Suddenly the magnificent tomb comes into view, dwarfing all the tombstones around it – an Arab tent built of stone with a gilded star crowning its sloping roof.

Sadly, the Mausoleum has suffered structural damage over the years, and vandals broke down the door. They also dislodged two marble tablets dedicated to Burton, and smashed the small window at the back of the Mausoleum which was later replaced with tin. These modern tomb-robbers had evidently been encouraged by stories of buried treasure. These were not wholly without substance. The damage was only partially restored in 1974.

Fortunately, Isabel left a very full description of the Mausoleum as it looked on the eve of Richard's funeral on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1891.

"The tent", she wrote, "is sculptured in Forest of Dean stone and white Carrara marble. It is an Arab tent, twelve foot by twelve and eighteen foot high, surmounted by a gilt star of nine points. Over the flap of the door of the tent is a white marble crucifix. The fringe is composed of gilt crescents and stars. The flap of the tent supports an open book of white marble, on which are inscribed Richard's name and the dates of his birth and decease. A blank page is left for "Isabel his wife". Underneath is a ribbon with the words 'This monument is erected to his memory by his loving countrymen'. Below, on a white marble tablet is a beautiful sonnet written in a passion of grief by Justin Huntly McCarthy,"

Isabel then describes the interior of the Mausoleum:

"The interior is nearly all marble, the floor of white and black marble, covers a base of Portland cement, so that no damp can arise from the ground. The coffin of steel and gilt lies above the ground on three marble trestles, with three trestles on the opposite side for me. At the foot of the coffin is a marble altar and tabernacle, with candles and flowers, a window of stained glass with Richard's monogram, and the white roof adorned with seven hanging and various oriental lamps."

Burton, it seems, had once expressed the wish that they should lie side by side. He had, according to Isabel, a horror of darkness.

And so she concludes:

"He has got the very thing he wanted, only of stone and marble instead of canvas – to be buried in a tent above ground; to have sun and light and air, trees, birds and flowers. I have sent to the desert for strings of camel bells, which will hang across the tent, and like an Aeolian lamp when the wind blows, the tinkle of camel bells may still sound near to him."

This, ladies and gentlemen, is a dream worth preserving.

Thank you.

Christopher Ondaatje

for "The Friends of Burton"