Title of Paper: **THE GOLD MINES OF MIDIAN AND THE LAND OF MIDIAN REVISITED: BURTON’S “IMPERIAL EYES”**

Author: John Wallen  
Affiliation: University of Sharjah, UAE  
Section: Articles  
Date of Publication: December 2015  
Issue: 3.3

Abstract:

In many ways, it is the earlier work, *The Gold Mines of Midian*, that is the more successful of the two books. While on the surface the narrative is usually academic and dry, there often seems to be an unconscious attempt to name and categorize everything that Burton sees--and this sometimes gives the account a strange and symbolic feel: almost as if a struggle between pre-history and modern man is somehow taking place through the medium of language. The idea is communicated of a stranger in a new and long-forgotten territory giving names, speculating, analyzing and categorizing in such a way that the force of Burton’s own character begins to bring new order to the chaos and even to “civilize” the desert sands. Of course, the “naming of parts” was a well-known technique of colonialists for taming unknown lands and bringing them under the aegis of the colonial power.

Keywords: Burton, Midian, Hejaz, Imperialism, colonialism, postcolonialism

Author Bio: John Wallen is an academic and creative writer who teaches literature at Sharjah University in the UAE. He acquired his PhD from RHUL in June, 2011.

Author email: johnwallen79@gmail.com
In his preface to *The Gold Mines of Midian*, Burton informs us that “the present publication” should be considered “a sequel and a continuation of my Pilgrimage to El Medinah and Meccah.” It is difficult, however, to see the connection—other than the obvious one of it also being about a journey in Arabia. *The Gold Mines of Midian* is the narrative of Burton’s attempt to find gold in a north western area of Arabia, Midian, under the auspices of the Khediv of Egypt in 1877. Burton’s narrative does reintroduce Haji Wali, an old friend from the days of Burton’s *Pilgrimage*, but as a sequel to Burton’s great account of his journey to the two Holy cities of Islam, *The Gold Mines of Midian* falls lamentably short.

Nearly twenty-five years after that previous great adventure, Burton was in late middle age, married and pursuing a consular career in Trieste that left him little free time for exploration. Furthermore, *The Gold Mines of Midian* recounts only a first reconnaissance expedition that lasted barely two weeks: a humble enough journey on which to hang a sequel to the *Pilgrimage*. As might be expected, not much happens during this brief foray into north-west Arabia, and Burton fills most of his book with the minutest examination of local flora and fauna, geological speculation, historical re-enactment, and scientific and anthropological notes from previous travelers. The style is dry and scholarly throughout, and, if the intention was merely to set the scene for a far more interesting expedition in the future that would locate the gold of Midian and make Burton rich and a national hero in both Egypt and Britain, then that intention was based on a fallacy. The full expedition, the details of which were recounted in Burton’s two volume work, *The Land of Midian (Revisited)*, in 1879, found no minerals of great value, and Burton was left out of pocket for the expenses of the expedition.

The two-volume work which followed *The Gold Mines of Midian* is rarely read today. In spite of the interesting information collected during Burton’s exploration of north and south Midian, the essential truth that no sources of gold were found during the expedition, marked it as a failure. Burton himself had hoped that the expedition would end his own financial difficulties by the discovery of gold in great quantities. The subsequent analysis of the minerals collected was disappointing, though Burton remained determinedly hopeful. When an analysis of Burton’s samples by the Royal
The Victorian School of Mines in London proved pessimistic about the large-scale presence of gold in the area, Burton was prompted to add a more hopeful addendum:

Upon this able report I would offer the following observations. We, who have traveled through a country like Midian, finding everywhere extensive works for metallurgy; barrages and aqueducts, cisterns and tanks; furnaces, fire-bricks, and scoriae; open mines, and huge scatters of spalled quartz, with the remains of some eighteen cities and towns which apparently fell to ruin with the industry that founded and fed them;--we, I say, cannot but form a different and far higher idea of its mineral capabilities than those who determine them by the simple inspection of a few specimens. The learned Dr. Percy at once hits the mark when he surmises that worthless samples were brought home; and this would necessarily occur when no metallurgist, no practical prospector, was present with the Expedition. As will appear from the following pages, all the specimens were collected a ciel ouvert, and wholly without judgment.  

In fact no grand discovery of gold was to crown Burton’s exploratory efforts and so the account of his expedition has a certain blunt edge from the beginning. If the explorations had been rewarded with the discovery of still-unworked gold mines, then the conclusion of the second book would have been triumphant. The failure to find significant deposits of gold reflects back unfavorably on the long account of the search for its discovery. The secondary geographical, historical, archaeological, botanical and mineralogical work of the expedition cannot finally compensate for the disappointment of not finding gold.

In the first volume of his work, Burton explores northern and eastern Midian, while, in the second, the interest is on southern Midian. It was Burton’s belief that while northern Midian was rich in other metals, the expected gold was to be found in the southern region. However, as we have noted, no very substantial find was made anywhere. Nevertheless, the first volume begins hopefully enough:

Throughout the summer of 1877 I was haunted by memories of mysterious Midian… The tale of her rise and fall forcibly suggested Algeria, that province so opulent and splendid under the Masters of the World; converted into a fiery wilderness by the representatives of the “gentle and gallant” Turk, and brought to life once more by French energy and industry. And such was my vision of a future Midian, whose rich stores of various minerals will restore to her wealth and health, when the two Kedivial Expeditions shall have shown the world what
The expedition proper began from El Muwaylah on the north-western coast of Arabia, and the first three stages took the explorers to the White Mountain, or “Jebel el-Abyaz”. Even in these early pages of Burton’s account, the mood is set of growing disappointment, a mood which is to permeate both volumes:

We camped upon the old ground to the southwest of the Jebel el-Abyaz; and at the halt our troubles forthwith began. The water, represented to be near, is nowhere nearer than a two hours’ march for camels; and it is mostly derived from rain-puddles in the great range of mountains which subtends maritime Midian. But this was our own discovery. The half-Fellah Bedawin, like the shepherds, their predecessors, in the days of Abimelech and Jethro, are ever chary of their treasure; the only object being extra camel-hire.

Lacking the opportunity to describe the one find that he most desired, it is almost as if Burton was able to find compensation in a kind of prolix minutiae which, he hoped, even in the absence of gold finds, would justify his expedition:

The Jebel el-Abyaz is apparently the centre of the quartzose outcrop in North Midian (Madyan proper). We judged that it had been a little worked by the ancients, from the rents in the reef that outcrops, like a castle-wall, on the northern and eastern flanks. There are still traces of roads or paths; while heaps, strews, and scatters of stone, handbroken and not showing the natural fracture, whiten like snow the lower slopes of the western hill base. They contrast curiously with the hard felspathic stones and the lithographic calcaires bearing the moss-like impress of metallic dendrites; these occur in many parts near the seaboard, and we found them in Southern as well as in Northern Midian. The conspicuous hill is one of four mamelons thus disposed in bird’s-eye-view; the dotted line shows the supposed direction of the lode in the Jibal el-Bayza, the collective name.

After continual disappointment in the north, Burton and his team turn their attention to the exploration of Southern Midian, and this is fully described in the second volume of his work. It was here that Burton believed the most important gold mines lay—even if this discovery was made rather late. Towards the end of the second volume, Burton gives a resume of his exploration of Southern Midian. He is in
no doubt that this is where the most important gold finds are to be made, and he even discovers the ruins of a classical Roman shrine in the middle of the desert. Burton contends that, while silver and other metals were mined in North Midian, gold was the common metal in the south:

If the characteristics of North Midian (Maydan Proper) are its argentiferous, and especially its cupriferous ores, South Midian worked chiefly gold and silver, both metals being mentioned by the mediaeval geographers of Arabia.  

In spite of Burton’s eager certainty in passages such as this (and, as already noted) no significant gold finds were to be made by the expedition.

In many ways, it is the earlier work, The Gold Mines of Midian, that is the more successful of the two books. While on the surface the narrative is usually academic and dry, there often seems to be an unconscious attempt to name and categorize everything that Burton sees--and this sometimes gives the account a strange and symbolic feel: almost as if a struggle between pre-history and modern man is somehow taking place through the medium of language. The idea is communicated of a stranger in a new and long-forgotten territory giving names, speculating, analyzing and categorizing in such a way that the force of Burton’s own character begins to bring new order to the chaos and even to “civilize” the desert sands. Of course, the “naming of parts” was a well-known technique of colonialists for taming unknown lands and bringing them under the aegis of the colonial power.

Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out how the development of the Linnaean system of scientific categorization changed the nature of travel writing forever. This was a classificatory system, developed by the Swede Carl Linnaeus in the middle of the eighteenth century, through which all the plants on Earth could be categorized according to the characteristics of their reproductive parts. “Parallel systems were also proposed for animals and minerals.” Linnaeus’s taxonomy was simple in its application and gave even the amateur naturalist the possibility of making a real contribution to science as new specimens could easily be placed within the classificatory system. Pratt sees the development of these taxonomies, in tandem with
The Victorian imperialist expansion, as a kind of intellectual dominance that acted as a counterpart to the more overt political domination:

Travel and travel writing would never be the same again...Alongside the frontier figures of the seafarer, the conqueror, the captive, the diplomat, there began to appear everywhere the benign, decidedly literate figure of the “herborizer”... What is also told is a narrative of “anti-conquest”, in which the naturalist naturalizes the bourgeois European’s own global presence and authority. This naturalist’s narrative was to continue to hold enormous ideological force throughout the nineteenth century, and remains very much with us today.\(^8\)

Pratt describes this “naturalist’s narrative” as a narrative of “anti-conquest”. By “anti-conquest” she refers to “the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony.”\(^9\) Pratt’s definition of the typical son of Empire, involved in the activities of the anti-conquest, seems to suggest such a figure as Burton on his Midian expedition: “The main protagonist of the anti-conquest is a figure I sometimes call the “seeing man”, an admittedly unfriendly label for the European male subject of European landscape discourse—he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess.”\(^10\)

This is an interesting hypothesis in the light of Said’s view of Burton as an imperialist adventurer who, though a rebel in his own land, traveled in the East with the intention of establishing his own mastery and control there. Said’s description of Burton chimes interestingly with Pratt’s noted “anti-conquest”:

Burton thought of himself both as a rebel against authority (hence his identification with the East as a place of freedom from Victorian moral authority) and as a potential agent of authority in the East.\(^11\)

According to Said’s assessment, then, Burton, though a rebel in his own country, was looking to play the role of imperial agent in the East and make a name for himself in the process. It is certainly true that Burton had found difficulties in “getting on” in England. His family, while of gentlemanly stock, hailed from Ireland, and this
was enough to implant a sense of inferiority in any gentleman of the time.\textsuperscript{12}

Moreover, Burton had spent his childhood on the continent, moving from country to country with his peripatetic parents and did not fit easily into the England of his early manhood. After enduring a period of personal hardship at Oxford (where he had been sent by his father, to study theology, with the idea that he would later enter the clergy, \textsuperscript{13}) Burton had begged his father’s permission to enter the Indian army as an officer, and it was only when this request had been granted and Burton found himself once again outside England, that the true genius of the man began to come into its own. Always, Burton was glad to escape the responsibilities of “civilized Europe” and set out on a new exploration—as is clearly shown by his preamble to his Midian journey.

At last! Once more it is my fate to escape the prison-life of civilized Europe and to refresh body and mind by studying Nature in her noblest and most admirable form—the Nude. Again I am to enjoy a glimpse of the “glorious Desert”; to inhale the sweet pure breath of translucent skies that show the red stars burning upon the very edge and verge of the horizon; and to strengthen myself by a short visit to the Wild Man and his old home.\textsuperscript{14}

Like other travelers, Burton opposes “the prison-life of civilized Europe” to the sense of freedom associated with the desert.

When Burton reaches Cairo with his old friend Haji Wali in tow, a “great repose” falls upon his spirit when he sees how little things have changed since his earlier visit nearly twenty five years before:

I did not fail when returning to Cairo with my old friend, Haji Wali, to visit the place where we first met. This was the Wakalah Silahdar, so called from the ‘armour bearer’ of old Mohammed Ali Pasha, in the Jemeliyyeh or Greek quarter. The sight of familiar objects revived me much. Hard by the little shop of my Shaykh, Mohammed el-Attar, or the druggist, had fallen to ruins—this was in the fitness of things. Outside the entrance door, hung with its heavy rusty chains, sat or squatted the same old bread-seller who had supplied me nearly a quarter of a century ago; and the red capped Shroff in the stifling rooms on the first floor to the north had apparently been gazing out of his window, smelling the air, ever since. Not an object was altered inside. The Patio, or hollow square, was still cumbered with huge bales of coffee, gums, and incense, whilst from the two rooms we had occupied, on the south and the east sides, issued the same
The Victorian grating and guttural accents of traders from Hazramaut and El-Hejaz.15

In its evocation of what Burton calls “the unchangeableness of the East”, this does seem to suggest that timeless “East” of “Orientalism”. However, it is in no way indicative of a foreign agent come to claim an ancient land for the imperialist power he represents. As is so often the case in Burton’s writings, what comes across here is a genuine and even humble appreciation of the good things that the East, and particularly Muslim societies, have to offer to the traveler from the West.

In the same way, Burton can also wax lyrical when it comes to a description of the characteristics of the Bedawi, or wild Arab nomad:

The Bedawi, who becomes fawning and abject when corrupted by contact with the town Arab, is still a gentleman in his native wilds. Easy and quiet, courteous and mild mannered, he expects you to respect him, and upon that condition he respects you—still without a shade of obsequiousness or servility.16

Later, when describing his collection of botanical specimens, Burton is once again eager to heap great praise on the Bedawi.

The Bedawin lent willing aid, and gave me the names and the peculiarities of every plant, rarely saying, ‘I don’t know it.’ Their excellent memories enabled them to remember every item that we gathered; and they took the kindly interest of the Eastern man in adding to my store. This unaffected and childlike display of benevolence in small things, be it genuine or affected, is, perhaps, the great charm of Oriental life and travel; and it explains the fact that many an ancient maiden has regarded with peculiar complacency her berry-brown drago-man and his very big bags.17

This is far from implying any kind of simplistic interest on Burton’s part in becoming a Lord and Master in the simple communities of the East due to his exclusion from the centers of power in England. Rather, it may be said that Burton appears to have imaginative sympathy for the Bedawin and simple Muslim in passages such as these. At the same time, that reference to the “childlike display of benevolence” indicates a clear understanding of their power relationship—and repeats a regular imperialist trope.
Burton, after all, did see himself as a source of knowledge and authority in the East: a knowledge and authority that was also always willingly at the disposal of the English center. This can be illustrated by looking at what Burton subsequently has to say about the Bedawin after his previous panegyrics:

Should we find it necessary to find regiments of these men, nothing would be easier. Pay them regularly, arm them well, work them hard, and treat them with even-handed justice—there is nothing else to do. I presume that this was the Roman system of garrisoning the forts and outposts to the east and the south of Syria.  

Burton’s “We” clearly refers to himself and his English comrades engaged in various colonial enterprises across the Arab world. In other words, Burton’s appreciation of the Bedawin and ordinary Muslims’ fine qualities in no way leads him to lose sight of his own allegiance to and involvement in the English colonial enterprise. And as the reference to the “Roman system” suggests, Burton clearly saw himself as an agent for the English Empire in the East. Burton could also be more powerful and influential in the East as an individual due to his representation of his country’s interests there. In other words, Burton’s personal ambitions and his ambitions for his country in the East were twin tributaries running into the same river of ambition. Burton’s intellectual “relativism” enabled him to appreciate the good qualities of other peoples while not for a moment departing from his essential view that the white European was by far the best and most “civilized” of races. In this context, it is also worth noting that the Burton of Midian is not entirely the same Burton as the Burton of the Pilgrimage and First Footsteps. By this time, he was far more integrated into British society, being both married into an aristocratic family (albeit a minor one) and in the employ of Britain’s consular service.

In The Gold Mines of Midian, there is a definite sense that by minutely describing the barren landscape around him, Burton is also involved in a kind of civilizing practice: a bringing of civilization to a lifeless area. The knowledge of antiquity, forgotten for hundreds, even thousands, of years is returned to the barren desert sands by Burton’s all-knowing voice speaking out, an omniscient logos in the desert
wilderness. To give a taste of this we can look at some of Burton’s observations on the surrounding land during his party’s journey from El-Muwaylah to Wady Aynunah:

I must describe these blocks of porphyry, granite and syenite with some detail. They have been carelessly laid down in the Hydrographic Charts, which, contented with determining the coast line, often ignore correctness in the inner features, upon which the sailor sighting the shore is often forced to depend. The apparent wall is cut by broad Wadies, all of which, like the same features in Mount Sinai, are “Elath” or “Eloth,” bearers of terebinths and palms (Elim) wherever water is superficial or lies near the surface; and we presently discovered that every greater Fiumara has its ruined settlement or settlements, each possibly, in days of yore, ruled by its own chiefs.  

Here Burton displays his knowledge of geography and cartography. He exposes a flaw in the hydrographic charts created and used by the navy. He further adds to the store of knowledge useful for the West by drawing attention to signs of accessible water. He continues:

Beginning from the south is Mount Mowilah high peak, 9000. This splendid block, rising sudden and sharp from the flat sea board, and invading the sky with its four giant arms, looks from afar more like a magnified iceberg than a thing of earth: the people call it Jebel el-Sharr, the director or landmark, because it is first seen by the seaman. It must be the “Hippus Mons” of Ptolemy: no topographer or cartographer could leave so remarkable a feature unnamed.

Burton here provides a verbal mapping of the physical features, notes another landmark for sailors and travelers, and then displays his classical learning.

Burton displays a different kind of learning in his account of the Midianites. He draws first on philology, and then demonstrates that he has done the appropriate scholarly reading: Ptolemy, Josephus, Strabo, etc. Burton then provides a review of Midian’s history as portrayed in ancient Hebrew, medieval Arab, and classical writings.

“Midian” is quite ignored by the classical authors of Greece and Rome; although it frequently occurs in the sacred books of the Hebrews, and in the Talmud and Rabbinical writings, and finally reappears under the form ‘Madyan’ in the
mediaeval Arab geographers, and in the language of the present possessors.\textsuperscript{23}

The region, however, was not completely ignored by classical writers:

Although the classical writers never adopted the word Midian, they have left ample notices of the Midianite region, or, as they called it, Nabathaea and Nabataea. The first and not the least satisfactory, is Agatharkides of Cnidos (B.C. 130), whose description of the Erythrean Sea has been preserved by the Sicilian of whom Pliny said, \textit{Primus apud graecos desiit nugare Diodorus}, and by Photius, the literary patriarch.\textsuperscript{24}

Again, Burton displays his knowledge of classical investigations, which his own expedition now supplements.

Burton and his followers also constructed a map of Midian during the course of their expedition which appeared in the first 1879 edition of Burton’s book. This, of course, was \textit{de rigeur} for serious travelers of the time. Pratt points out how mapping and the naming of the unfamiliar with familiar words could be, in itself, a way of colonizing and claiming what had previously been unknown. After noting how “mapping exerted the power of naming”, Pratt observes:

Indeed, it was in naming that the religious and geographical projects came together, as emissaries claimed the world by baptizing landmarks and geographical formations with Euro-Christian names...Here the naming, the representing and the claiming are all one; the naming brings the reality of order into being.\textsuperscript{25}

This same point of view is present in Matthew Edney’s book, \textit{Mapping an Empire}.\textsuperscript{26} Edney is specifically concerned with the mapping of British India, but what he has to say is equally applicable to all imperialistic map-making exercises:

Imperialism and mapmaking intersect in the most basic manner. Both are fundamentally concerned with territory and knowledge...knowledge of the territory is determined by geographic representations and most especially by the
Burton’s map-making can thus be directly related to the imperial project as a whole, though (complicating matters) map-making is also a natural activity of explorers everywhere.

As we have seen, Burton is determined to show off his intimate knowledge of the surrounding landscape and everything in and pertaining to it during his exploration of Midian, and, to this extent, he might easily be viewed as one of Pratt’s empire builders (or Edney’s mappers) seeing everything through his “imperial eyes”. Insofar as this is the case we might be prepared to follow Said’s reading of Burton as an agent of the West speaking with an imperialist authority and perspective that invests both himself and his country of origin with power and authority in the East. However, there is a contradictory strain also present in this work of Burton’s and, sometimes, his continuous narration of facts, theories and ideas seem to create an almost symbolic or semiotic stratum beyond the veracities of the information imparted. It is almost as if the East gives something to Burton on a personal level that he needs but cannot find in his homeland: a sense of belonging somewhere out in an ancient land on the edge of danger, mixing with simple but honest and pious people. Sometimes this subterranean element appears in the kind of direct and laudatory form that we have already looked at in Burton’s paean of praise to the Bedawin. On other occasions, however, it is more muted, expressing itself through a certain wistfulness and aesthetic appreciation in the prose, as in this description of the desert sky.

Returning to camp by another direction, where we found signs of a made-road, we enjoyed a pleasant evening talking over the prospects of the Grand Filon, and admiring the exquisite beauties of the sky, whose deep blue crystalline vault gained double distance purity and serenity. Never did the after-glow, the zodiacal light, though clearly visible every evening, appear so brilliant; changing from purple and indigo to gold and pink, and finally to a pale sea green. It was so distinctly defined that the apex of the pyramid seemed to touch the zenith.
A height of upwards a thousand feet had placed us above the grosser vapours of the shore. Seawards, the stars—glowing red sparks like distant ship-lamps or lighthouses—showed themselves upon the very line where air and water meet. Inland, the misty giants in panoply of polished steel towered above the huge curtain of the bulwark, enchanted sentinels guarding the mysterious regions of the East.

Sometimes Burton’s appreciation of the marvels of the East is more simple and straightforward, as in his description of his party’s short stay at Makna, where there is a strong sense of Burton’s personal investment in the place he is describing:

Decidedly the most enjoyable part of a delightful and eventful visit to old Midian was the short stay at Makna, and the glimpse of the Dahi, or true Desert, which it offered us. What a contrast with the horrors of the civilized city—‘the clouds of dust by day, and glare of gas by night, and the noise of the streets, roaring like an angry beast!’ How easy to understand the full force of the Bedawi expression, ‘Praise be to Allah that once more we see the Nufud!’ the soft clean sand of the wilderness, with its sweet fresh breezes and its perfumed flora, ‘the Desert’s spicy stores;’ its glorious colouring and its grand simplicity that engender male and noble breeds of man and beast.

Again, we have the trope of “the horrors of the civilized city” in contrast to the cleanliness and sweetness of the “wilderness”. Burton shared with other Victorian travelers this appreciation of “primitive” cultures and how they exposed limitations in the supposedly “civilized” way of life. One way in which Burton deals with this contradiction is to turn the desert into a “land of reverie”:

The Desert, with its sudden and startling changes from utter desolation to exuberant vegetation, is pre-eminently the Land of Fancy, of Reverie; never ending, ever renewing itself in presence of the Indefinite and the Solitude, which are the characteristics of this open world. The least accident, the smallest shift of scenery, gives rise to the longest trains of thought, in which the past, the present, and the future seem to blend.

Burton’s meditation on the desert contrasts it favorably with both the “civilized city” and the tropical forest:

In the forested land of the tropics Nature masters man; his brain is confused with
the multiplicity of objects; he feels himself as prisoner in a gorgeous jail... But in the Desert man masters Nature. It is the type of Liberty, which is Life, whilst the idea of Immensity, of Sublimity, of Infinity, is always present, always the first thought. 32

What to make then of these strange and contradictory currents in Burton’s psyche? On the one hand he is the relativist who, though he can appreciate the qualities of other peoples and places, is certain of the white man’s—and in particular his own country’s—superiority and right to rule. On the other hand, he is also an outcast alienated from his own society by birth and inclination, who relishes the simple veracities of the Bedawin and Muslim as opposed to the ‘noise’ and ‘horrors’ of the civilized city from which he comes and to which he is also always destined to return. Said resolves the dilemma in the following way:

In no writer on the Orient so much as in Burton do we feel that generalizations about the Oriental...are the result of knowledge acquired about the Orient by living there, actually seeing it firsthand, truly trying to see Oriental life from the viewpoint of a person immersed in it. Yet what is never far from the surface of Burton’s prose is another sense it radiates, a sense of assertion and domination over all the complexities of Oriental life...For even in Burton’s prose we are never directly given the Orient; everything about it is presented to us by way of Burton’s knowledgeable...interventions, which remind us repeatedly how he had taken over the management of Oriental life for the purpose of his narrative. And it is this fact...that elevates Burton’s consciousness to a position of supremacy over the Orient. In that position his individuality perforce encounters, and indeed merges with, the voice of Empire. 33

For Said, then, Burton was an individual pursuing his own idiosyncratic agenda in the East, but at the same time a representative of Britain’s imperial presence there. More profoundly, Said asserts that Burton was unable to transcend the agenda of the ideologically loaded body of knowledge that was known as “Orientalism” in the West. For Said, the whole Orientalist enterprise, from Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798 onwards, was no more than an attempt to establish the West’s control over large swathes of Africa and Asia. On this reading, Burton’s deep knowledge of the East and sympathy for many of its practices was finally no more than part of the complex will-to-power exhibited by European nations throughout the nineteenth
Of course Orientalism was, in part, intended to control the East by generating knowledge about it. However, Burton, in particular, possessed a real empathy with Eastern and, particularly, Muslim practices. He rarely, if ever, criticized Islam as a religion. Rather, even in later life, he was concerned with what the East could teach his fellow countrymen about morality and attitudes towards sex (though this latter concern also had a double edge). In his account of his journey to Midian, Burton nevertheless falls into “Orientalist” ways of seeing and identifies with imperialist agendas, but he also expresses a sense of being at home in this world in a way that he doesn’t feel in Europe.

The three-volume account of Burton’s search for gold in the Midian region of Arabia has none of the verve and human interest of his earlier works on Arabia. Even Haji Waly disappears after the introductory volume, and with him seems to go Burton’s last interest in making his books entertaining for the average reader of his time. Only at the end of the final volume, when Burton’s wife joins him in Cairo, does a personal story begin to shine through: and this mostly entails the frustrating events of the Burtons’ return to Trieste and civilization:

The next Sunday placed us on board the Austro-Hungarian Lloyd’s screw steamer *Austria* (Capitano Rossol). As usual, the commander and officers did all they could to make their voyagers comfortable; the company did the contrary. At this spring season, true, the migratory host of unfeathered bipeds crowd northwards; even as in autumn it accompanies the birds southwards. But when berths are full, passengers should be refused; and if the commercial director prefers dead to live goods, travellers should be duly warned. The accommodation would have been tolerable in a second-class or third-class English steamer, which charges fifteen shillings to a sovereign per diem; here; however; we were paying between 2 and 3.34

So concludes the unsatisfactory exploration of Midian. No significant deposits of gold were found there, and neither the Egyptian Khedive nor Burton were to finally be any richer for the exhaustive and detailed expedition.

In conclusion it may be noted that, although the *Midian* volumes represent some of Burton’s least successful writings, they do, nevertheless, present us with a Burton
The Victorian who is largely at one with the East and emotionally and intellectually inspired by it. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Burton also enacts numerous well-known Orientalist traits of behavior during his exploration, exemplified by his obsession with scientific categorization, mapping and the naming and “discovery” of previously unknown regions.
NOTES


3 *The Land of Midian* 3-4.

4 *The Land of Midian* 50.

5 *The Land of Midian* 52-53.


8 Pratt 27.

9 Pratt 7.

10 Pratt 7.

11 *Orientalism* 194-195.

12 Burton’s father, Joseph Burton, came from the lesser ranks of the Anglo-Irish landowning class which was a common recruiting ground for the English officer class. In 1820, Joseph married Martha Baker who came from a prosperous Hertfordshire family. However, after a sudden decline in his military fortunes due to his support for Queen Caroline in her struggles with her husband, King George IV, Joseph left the army and, with his family, commenced a series of peripatetic wanderings in France and Italy which were to see the Burton children grow up abroad. Almost everything we know about Burton’s early life comes from the first chapters of Isabel Burton’s *Life*. See also “Notes on the Burton Genealogy, Collected at Different Times, by Isabel,” in the Burton Papers, 2667/26, Box 1, Wiltshire Record Office, Trowbridge, Wiltshire.

13 *A Rage to Live* 15.


15 *The Gold Mines of Midian* 60. It might be interesting to speculate to what extent travellers like Burton, who emphasised “the unchangeableness of the East”, contributed to the later view of the Orient as something primal and unchanging that constituted a real threat to the Occident. In popular culture, this sinister apotheosis of the East reached its culmination in the works of Sax Rohmer and his tales of Dr. Fu-Manchu. The “yellow peril” became the threat of the Orient personified.

16 *The Gold Mines of Midian* 154-155. Burton, in this appreciation of the Bedawii, seems to have taken on board the idea of the “noble savage” hook, line and sinker. Is it really likely that the Bedawi (or anyone else) “never tells a lie”?


18 *The Gold Mines of Midian* 155.
See the first part of Robert Hampson’s *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Conrad’s Malay Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2000) for a detailed account of just how important a reading tradition was for travellers of the time.

23 Hampson 178.

24 Hampson 178-179.

25 *Imperial Eyes* 33.


27 *Mapping an Empire* 1.

28 *The Gold Mines of Midian* 220.

29 *The Gold Mines of Midian* 220.


31 *The Gold Mines of Midian* 357.

32 *The Gold Mines of Midian* 357.

33 *Orientalism* 196.

34 *The Land of Midian (Revisited)* Vol. II, 257-258.
a) First Editions of Burton’s Works


b) Other Editions of Burton’s Works


c) Works About Burton


d) Background Reading


Rosenthal, Donald A. *Orientalism, the Near East in French Painting, 1800-1880*. The Victorian


The Victorian

Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983.


e) Selected Articles


