Research Article

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R. F. BURTON Revisited: Alternate History, Steampunk and the Neo-Victorian Imagination

Abstract: This article draws on an alternate history approach to the Victorian world and discusses steampunk and neo-Victorian literary and cultural features. It focuses on Richard Francis Burton—one of the most charismatic and controversial explorers and men of letters of his time—who stands out in a complex web of both real-life and fictional characters and events. Ultimately, the essay presents a twenty-first-century revisitation of the British Empire and the imperial project, thus providing a contemporary perception of Victorian worldliness and outward endeavours.

Introductory Remarks

The English author Mark Hodder has so far written six volumes in the Burton & Swinburne literary series, the most recent being *The Return of the Discontinued Man* (2014) and *The Rise of the Automated Aristocrats* (2015). The series began with *The Strange Affair of Spring-Heeled Jack* (2010) and *The Curious Case of the Clockwork Man* (2011), and all the volumes can be examined from the point of view of alternate history, steampunk and the neo-Victorian imagination. In order to examine the combination of fact and fiction, this article includes information on Richard Francis Burton as a historical figure and looks at *Expedition to the Mountains of the Moon* (2012) and *The Secret of Abdu El Yezdi* (2013) so as to discuss the alternate history model used in the novels and the uses of steampunk and neo-Victorian conventions.

Thus, the making of Burton's reputation and his depiction as a literary character are addressed to explore how Hodder's works re-frame Victorian imperialism and to highlight the way in which the steampunk and the neo-Victorian appropriation and revision of historical events promote critical engagement with nineteenth-century Britain. Steampunk as a concept owes its designation to the development of steam technology in the Victorian Age and, unquestionably, "to the minds of the Victorians the momentum of industrialization, the force which actually revolutionized industry itself, was steam power" (Newsome 28). As is commonly known, the perception of steam as a key factor in progress, innovation and creativity inspired the development of steampunk as a science fiction subgenre in the 1980s and 1990s. In spite of previous texts by H. G. Wells and Jules Verne, the term itself was an analogy with cyberpunk, and it was used for the first time by the American writer K. W. Jeter to characterise his own works as well as those written by Tim Powers and James Blaylock, all in their early twenties. In a letter to the editor in 1987, Jeter wrote: "I think Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing, as long as we can come up with a fitting collective term . . . like 'Steampunk,' perhaps" (qtd. in Vandermeer and Chambers 48).

Steampunk texts can be characterised as "a piece of speculative historical fiction that deploys Victorian subjects" (Bowser and Croxhall 1), a notion that offers insight into the features that are common to both steampunk and speculative fiction—the latter being associated with the alternate history genre, a category

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which has been subject to considerable debate and proposals of systematisation (Hellekson 251-55; Rosenberg 90-94). In point of fact, because it uses appropriation, recreation and adaptation of the past in order to create its own reality, different from the real one, steampunk is often also identified with neo-Victorianism.[1] It must be taken into account that the term neo-Victorianism itself has been and continues to be under discussion, and even that a concept such as "neo-nineteenth century" might prove more useful within a global context (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 16). As Arias and Pulham report, some authors use designations such as "post-Victorian" and "retro-Victorian" inasmuch as these concepts imply a historicist and nostalgic perspective (xii), but the prefix "neo" reinforces a sense of reinvention of the past as well as a more interventive position from the reader, embodied in what Llewellyn coined as "critical f(r)iction" (170, 180). As a result, "neo-Victorianism" has been established as the most widely accepted term. According to the following much-quoted point of view,

> . . . the 'neo-Victorian' is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. . . texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect *be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4. Emphasis in the original)

The two novels selected from the Burton & Swinburne series combine their generic hybridity with a leading protagonist who appears to be a typical hero but is, in fact, a controversial empire-builder who is constantly questioning his own identity and purposes. It becomes apparent that Hodder's use of these hybridities is more than just a play with the reader and is indeed ideologically-motivated since contemporary readers ultimately become engaged in their own (re)vision and (re)evaluation of the past and, in particular, of the Victorian imperialist project.

The Making of a Reputation

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in the aftermath of the desire to leave the Victorian age behind, Richard Francis Burton could have been forgotten by all except a small number of antiquaries and specialists on African exploration and Arabic translation (Godsall xxvii; Kennedy 2-3). This particular public would be familiar mainly with the distinguished scholar and linguist who published nearly 40 volumes on his explorations alone and knew about 30 languages and innumerable dialects, but also with the celebrated hero, the Army officer, the experienced world traveller and the fake Muslim pilgrim who travelled to Mecca disguised as an Arab. Over the years, a number of readers might possibly be interested in knowing more about his secret activities as a spy and finding more details about his private life, especially his marriage to the Catholic Isabel Arundell, who, after meeting him, wrote to her mother: "I wish I were a man. If I were I would be Richard Burton; but, being only a woman, I would be Richard Burton's wife" (Lovell 331). He might also have been known for his expertise in oriental pornography and his translations of *The Kama Sutra* (1883), *The Arabian Nights* (1885), *The Thousand Nights and a Night* (1886-88) and *The Perfumed Garden* (1886). As a matter of fact, and taking into account the wide twenty-first-century audience, Burton was described as "the first great anti-hero" and "the godfather to the sexual revolution" in the documentary entitled *The Victorian Sex Explorer*.[2]

Burton's deeds as an explorer of Africa—more significantly, his desire to map the dark continent, something he had in common with the Portuguese explorers Serpa Pinto, Hermenegildo Capelo and Roberto Ivens—and his diplomatic actions in Brazil are bound to have caught the attention of the Portuguese-speaking public since the late nineteenth century to the present. He has also been remembered as one of the translators of *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusiads*), published for the 1880 commemorations that marked the 300th anniversary of Camões' death (Ramos 186). However, Burton was more than a mere language translator. Not

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1 It is worth mentioning that the special issue of the e-journal *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3:1 (2010) is dedicated to "Steampunk, Science, and (Neo)Victorian Technologies."

2 The documentary was directed by Michael Waldman, presented by the actor Rupert Everett—who claimed he had been interested in Burton and the contradictions in his character for years (qtd. in Farndale)—and aired on the BBC in 2008. A previous relevant television series was *The Search for the Nile*, screened by the BBC in 1971 and narrated by the actor James Mason.

only was he deeply impressed by the sixteenth-century Portuguese poet's unhappy life and his outstanding work but he identified with the one he called his Master. Moreover, he paid tribute to his brother-in-arms-and-adventure by stating that "none but a traveller can do justice to a traveller" (Burton xii).

Born in 1821, the diplomat, African explorer, soldier, geographer, cartographer, ethnologist, Orientalist, writer, poet, linguist and translator of Arabic and Portuguese—who in 1886, four years before his death,[3] was made a Knight Commander of St Michael and St George—has been constantly and variously revived throughout the years, thereby reaching a wider public and transgressing the borderlines between 'high' and 'popular' culture. In my view, his various talents, charismatic personality, fascination for the Other and ambiguities regarding both the Establishment and the imperial enterprise may explain why he was and remains to be appealing to different generations. He does not emerge from the past as an old-fashioned Victorian; on the contrary, he embodies a modernist man with the ability to develop critical inquiry and "a relativist conception of difference . . . connected to the encounter with the wider world of difference" (Kennedy 9). It must be noted that during Burton's lifetime his books were not sold to the extent as those of Livingstone, Stanley and other well-known travellers, but after a period of relative decline in interest in him in the early years of the twentieth century (Godsall xxvii-xxviii), there was a revival of his popularity—he was praised as an Englishman built on the heroic scale—on the centenary of his birth (1921), as well as in the 1960s—not only due to the sexual nature of some of his publications but to his attitude towards the Arab world[4] and British imperialism—with the reprinting of several of his works and the publication of several biographies and critical assessments, enhanced in the 1980s—the Thatcher years of heritage culture—and on the centenary of his death (1990). All things considered, the dimension of Burton's reception is certainly not small, and he has not been consigned to oblivion to this day.

On the one hand, there are his own works—such as *Goa, and the Blue Mountains* (1851), *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah* (1855-56), *Wanderings in West Afric*a (1863) and *The Nile Basin* (1864)—that narrate his own version of events. On the other hand, there are several biographies, among which the two-volume *The Life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton*, written and published by his wife in 1893, as well as the works by Burton's contemporaries such as Alfred Bate Richards' *A Sketch of the Career of Richard F. Burton* (1880), *The True Life of Capt. Sir Richard F. Burton* (1896) by his niece Georgiana M. Stisted, and Thomas Wright's *The Life of Richard Burton* (1906). As a matter of fact, Burton continued to inspire biographers throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and even the titles of the biographies are often very significant: Fawn Brodie's *The Devil Drives* (1967), Edward Rice's *Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton* (1990), Mary Lovell's *A Rage to Live: A Biography of Richard and Isabel Burton* (1998), Dane Kennedy's *The Highly Civilized Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (2005), Jon R. Godsall's *The Tangled Web: The Life of Sir Richard Burton* (2008) and James L. Newman's *Paths Without Glory: Richard Francis Burton in Africa* (2010).

Burton himself left an autobiographical fragment published in 1852 as a postscript to *Falconry in the Valley of the Indus* about his early career in the Army of the East India Company. This is relevant because it constitutes the primary source of information regarding his own claims that he operated undercover for General Charles Napier. His ability as an explorer was well known and has often been recreated in works of fiction. To name but a few examples, his name was evoked in Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912), and he inspired Mr Murthwaite, the adventurer who provides the epilogue in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), but it is the assumption that he was a spy that has proven crucial to Mark Hodder's fictional series and its twenty-first-century readers.

It can, therefore, be asserted that there are various sources of information at our disposal (biographies, works, cultural representations) that provide complementary perspectives on the writing and rewriting of Burton's story. The film *Mountains of the Moon*, directed by Bob Rafelson in 1990 and based on William Harrison's 1982 novel *Burton and Speke*, with the two African explorers being portrayed by Patrick Bergin

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3 Burton joined the British Foreign Office and served as consul in Brazil, Syria and Italy, in the cities of Fernando Pó, Santos, Damascus and Trieste, where he eventually died. Isabel Burton died in London in 1896, six years after her husband, and was buried side by side with him in the churchyard of St. Mary Magdalen in London, in a tomb designed by Lady Burton in the shape of an Arab tent.

4 Since 2011, what Burton might have thought about the conflict in Syria may be a matter of curiosity to a contemporary reader.

and Iain Glen, respectively, can claim its share of responsibility for Burton's posthumous reputation in contemporary culture. In addition to this, not only is Burton mentioned as one of the Victorian explorers of Africa in an important website such as the Victorian Web, but he is listed as a Victorian explorer, writer and translator among the historic figures on the BBC website and as a British scholar and explorer in the online *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. More significantly, there are specific websites dedicated to this remarkable Victorian, notably the Burtoniana edited by Gavan Tredoux for educational and scholarly purposes. Along with other entries, the site has Burton's biography, his major and shorter works, and a gallery of portraits and photographs of him—including the oil portrait painted by Frederic Leighton in 1875 when Burton was 54 years old, one of the most well-known images of Burton and now on display in the National Portrait Gallery in London, and a similar but uncredited actual photograph of him (Tredoux, "Sir Richard Francis Burton: 1821-1890"). Given its multidisciplinary approach, this is a key online resource for both the general public and any scholar interested in Burton's life and works.

The internet contribution to Burton's popularisation is thus unquestionable, as the website called "The Sir Richard Francis Burton Project" also demonstrates. In 2008 the aim of its author, James Gifford, was to "lift Burton from his dusty niche and bring an understanding of the man and his full range of accomplishments to a present-day audience—to restore him to life, of a sort." Although the situation has indeed changed since he recorded these words, one cannot fail to sympathise with his opinion: "It is a sad thing that a fascinating titan like Burton had fallen into such small and faint repute in our age" (Gifford). The site includes a section entitled "Burton Today" which draws the reader's attention not only to Burton's legacy of writings but also to "the ongoing interpretation by authors outside the scholarly bounds" (Gifford). Accordingly, the author mentions a few minor fictional constructions but he highlights the representation of Burton by the late American science fiction writer Philip José Farmer in his award-winning 1971 novel *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*, the first of the Riverworld Series which is set on an unknown planet in the future and revolves around the explorations and adventures of Burton in this new world. In fact, Farmer depicts historical figures who interact with fictional characters in the five novels he wrote between 1971 and 1983 which were to inspire two television films entitled *Riverworld*. However, Burton does not feature in the 2003 pilot episode of the series which was never actually produced and he is no longer the hero but the villain in the 2010 film. Last but not least, a brief account of the work by the Bulgarian author Iliya Troyanov is in order. This fictionalised report of Burton's life and times was published in German in 2006 and translated by William Hobson into English two years later as *The Collector of Worlds: A Novel of Sir Richard Francis Burton*. The book is based on facts and incorporates some of Burton's own writings, but the narrator's perspective is complemented by other characters' conversations, impressions and subjective opinions, thus providing two versions of events. In October 2012 the book was translated into Portuguese by João Bouza da Costa as *O Colecionador de Mundos: Uma História de Sir Richard Francis Burton*, this being the most recent novel based on Burton's life that was published in Portugal as far as I know.

In addition to his reputation during his eventful life, Burton has thus proven to be the subject of remembrance over more than one century. Not only is he a matter of persistent interest in the real world but, as a fictional character, he embodies an actual transtemporal man who both travels in time and transcends time.

A Man for All Times

Fact and fiction are interwoven in Hodder's novels, particularly in the whole series which features Burton, a special agent and explorer as well as a scholar and linguist,[5] and Swinburne, his fearless, eccentric

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5 Not only does the reader become aware that the natives call him *Murungwana Sana* of Many Tongues (*Expedition* 412) but his familiarity with the Portuguese Renaissance poet Camões, which was a factual issue as aforementioned in this article, is shown in a dialogue with Speke (613-14).

assistant and a young, thrill-seeking poet,[6] working together so as to solve some of Victorian London's strangest mysteries. Richard Francis Burton stands out as the hero who helps to prevent a world war in a complex web of both historic and imagined episodes where Queen Victoria, John Hanning Speke, H. G. Wells, Herbert Spencer, Isambard Brunel, Charles Darwin, Florence Nightingale, Jack the Ripper and many other real-life people are referred to or act as leading characters in the story. Isabel Arundell, for instance, embodies the leader of a band of Amazonian warriors in Arabia (*Expedition* 248). Hodder in fact includes a biographical appendix in all the books in the series, significantly introduced with the sentence "[m]eanwhile, in the Victorian Age, and Beyond…" (*Expedition* 653-66; *Secret* 383-94), where the reader is provided with accurate information about the Victorian figures and the episodes that inspired Hodder's novels. In my opinion, this enhances the plausible framework of his literary creativity for, in his books, not only is Victoria assassinated in 1840 but Burton openly becomes an agent of King George V, to name just two of the main events that could indeed have been true. In Hodder's fiction, Victoria's widower became king, and George Augustus of Hanover succeeded to the throne when Albert died, in 1900 (*Expedition* 98).[7]

In his "Acknowledgements" to *Expedition to the Mountains of the Moon*, Hodder admits he was worried that he might be insulting the memory of men and women "who, by virtue of their hard work and astonishing talents, had made their mark on history" (7). He also justifies his treatment of some of Britain's national heroes with this remark: "[w]hen one man changes Time, Time changes everyone" (Hodder, "Burton & Swinburne: An Introduction"). And he added: "It's the ripple effect. One event turns out differently, and from it new opportunities and challenges are born, and in meeting them, people travel different paths to those we've recorded as history" (Hodder, "Burton & Swinburne: An Introduction"). In my view, this is a statement that may point to historical contingency in terms of how both personal actions and historical events are not inevitable or predetermined but depend on multiple random circumstances.

The series itself is not sequential and the books referred to in this article can, therefore, be read separately, as *Expedition to the Mountains of the Moon* relates to 1863 and *The Secret of Abdu El Yezdi* to 1859. More significantly, the narrative does not match our knowledge of the events as set out in history books and biographies. As the fictional Burton puts it in *Expedition*: "[t]his world, this time we live in, it is not as it should be" (42). Time has been set off course under the threat of a world war against a United Germany that rules over Europe. Lord Palmerston, the British Prime Minister, is convinced that if he gets hold of all the black diamonds that were the fragments of the three mystic gemstones known as the Eyes of Nāga he will be able to coerce the minds of his German opponents, change the course of events and prevent war from ever happening. He already has two of the stones and wants to convince Sir Richard Francis Burton to win back the third, which is hidden in the heart of unexplored Africa. Therefore, as part of the plan to employ his military and geographical experience to secure strategically advantageous African territories, Burton becomes the king's agent in the alternate history set in 1914, and also gains the opportunity to return to the Mountains of the Moon in order to make a second attempt at locating the source of the Nile. This is particularly important to Hodder's alternate narrative of the development of German imperialism—under Bismarck and Nietzsche—and the disintegration of the British Empire (*Expedition* 95-97, 376-81; *Secret* 333, 374), against which background Speke is presented as a bloodthirsty hunter (*Expedition* 409) and a traitor in the service of the Greater German Empire.

In point of fact, the discovery of the sources of the Nile had been the cause of a fierce dispute that destroyed Burton and Speke's friendship and was set against the background of the Victorian controversy over gentleman-like behaviour (Ramos 190). Back in Britain and on 15 September 1864, on the eve of the very day when a debate had been arranged in the Royal Geographical Society in order to settle the dispute between the two African explorers, the controversy over the so-called Mountains of the Moon culminated in Speke's death. This was attributed to a shooting accident although there were grounds for suspecting

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6 In real life, Swinburne deeply admired Burton's adventurous spirit and shared with him an interest in erotic literature among other things. The poet dedicated his *Poems and Ballads* (1878) to Burton, who reciprocated by dedicating the first volume of his translation of *Os Lusíadas* (1880) to him. Swinburne also wrote *Verses on the Death of Richard Burton*, published in 1891, as a tribute to his close friend. Two stanzas of the elegy are quoted in *Secret* (359).

7 As the author explains (*Secret* 383-4), if Victoria had died in 1840, Ernest Augustus I of Hanover would have succeeded to the British throne followed by his son, George V.

suicide. Not surprisingly, these episodes are alluded to in Hodder's *Expedition* (617-8). The plot itself goes back and forth in time from 1840 and 1863 to 1914 and 1919, applying the notion that "there are alternatives . . . the boundaries of time can be breached" (93-4). Although Hodder does not explain his choice of the dates, 1840 is the year of Edward Oxford's attempt to assassinate Queen Victoria; in 1863 Speke and Grant's expedition helped to locate another Nile source, Lake Albert, and Burton published his *Wanderings in West Africa*; 1914 and 1919 are obviously related to the First World War. In this regard, from a contemporary point of view, it is noteworthy to mention the opinion expressed by the character Bertie Wells,[8] a war correspondent, about the relation of the present with the past:

> … we possess an in-built craving for narrative structure. We want everything to have a beginning, a middle, and an end…. I disagree with the philosophy of what you might term *sequentialism*. The problem, as I see it, is that we don't truly understand the nature of the past. We mythologise it. We create fictions about actions done to justify what we undertake in the present. We adjust the cause to better suit the effect. The truth is that the present is, and will always be, utter chaos. There is no story and no plan. (*Expedition* 153-4)

Although they play their roles in the alternate histories entangled in the plot, the characters themselves reveal their uncertainties about what will happen to them when the past of the history they are actually in is changed, affected by cause and effect in reverse. In Swinburne's words, "these alternate histories are proliferating and turning time into a cacophony" (*Expedition* 572). Burton's opinion corroborates the queries but also throws some light on the issue:

> I can't be sure … but I suspect that all the alternate histories will metamorphose from the Actual to the Potential…. Whatever act caused each of them to come into being will be nullified, and they'll detach from what was meant to be, like branches being pruned from a bush. (*Expedition* 633)

He does not know the answer to whether they would remember anything but he presents his viewpoint: "Perhaps each individual's subjective apprehension of the world will re-adjust, returning to the original version of history" (*Expedition* 633). It must also be pointed out that in Hodder's alternate history "the individual who now thought of himself as Sir Richard Francis Burton" (89), previously known as Frank Baker,[9] realizes that he died in 1890 but has the impression that—without knowing by what means and for what purpose—he was transported into the future from 1863 directly to 1914, living another life until 1919.

(De)constructing History

Therefore, despite being the leading character in this alternate narrative, Burton is not aware that the Germans had overrun Europe at the beginning of the 20th century and, with Russia as an ally, had conquered Britain and destroyed London. The Empire had disintegrated after India, Australia, South Africa and the West Indies declared their independence, and British North America fell to an uprising of natives and slaves. Both Burton and the reader are provided with more details in the course of the account given to the British explorer by the commander of the German forces in East Africa, General Major Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, who accuses the British of opposing evolution:

> The Greater German Empire seeks to advance the human species. We wish to liberate every man and every woman from slavery so that each can fulfil his or her greatest potential. So each can become an *Übermensch*…. We are forced to employ the Africans to oppose British assaults on the infrastructure we are building here. Were it not for your people, Africa would have atmospheric railways and well-developed cities by now. And Europe would be a paradise, where trivial jobs and the necessities of survival are taken care of by plant life, leaving the human species free to explore its best potentials. Instead, we must assign our resources on both continents to resisting your vandalism. (*Expedition* 374)

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8 In his biographical appendix to *Expedition*, Hodder identifies Wells as George Herbert Wells although he correctly writes H. G. Wells (656).

9 Frank Baker or F.B., a supposed translator and editor, was actually one of Burton's pseudonyms, Richard Baker being the name of his maternal grandfather. *The Kazîdah*, published in 1880, was written by Burton under another pseudonym, Haji Abdu El-Yezdi, a fictive Sufi poet suited to his "ventriloquist purposes" (Kennedy 195). This is crucial to our understanding of Hodder's novels.

Consequently, not only does Lettow-Vorbeck disregard the objections to this utopian/dystopian plan for the future of humanity, but he disdains the British imperialist project with a surprising argument: "[i]t is typical British thinking, for you built your empire on the premise that an educated and privileged minority should benefit from the labours of a downtrodden majority" (375). From the British point of view, it was up to them to put an end to the barbarities that had been committed on the African continent in the name of one ideology or another, as is foreseen in a dialogue between Swinburne and Wells:

> "... I shall make a Utopia of Africa!"
> "Utopia!" Wells's eyes glistened with hope.
> "For as long as this version of history exists, Africa will be an Eden." (*Expedition* 571)

Swinburne had previously considered Africa to be real, authentic, primal and the very essence of poetry (409) and Wells admitted he had been an idealist who believed the human race capable of building Utopia (98). It must be noted that a disillusioned Wells, who had once believed that all men could work together as equals for the good of the species, is bound to argue that the imperialistic drive is an animal impulse: "We disguise imperialism as the spread of higher civilisation, but it's blatantly animalistic in its nature. We are no better than carnivores . . . Having beast-men fighting this dreadful war is wholly appropriate" (329). As part of the novel's critique of empire-building, Burton himself expresses a vivid criticism of the notion that Africans were accorded the rights granted to all British subjects, given the fact that, at home, there were undernourished people toiling in factories and inhabiting slums, countless beggars in the streets, and servant girls abused and impregnated by their employers with no other choice than to become prostitutes (151-52).

However, as the reader is told in *Secret*, the birth of a new world would not be achieved by the destruction of the old one but by "the avoidance of war; the establishment of a permanent peace; the beginning of a stable Europe" (373), in Burton's words to Aleister Crowley, who was a great admirer of Burton and Swinburne in real life as Hodder points out (*Secret* 387). Crowley plays one of the main roles in both novels as the reader realises throughout the pages of both books. He is presented as a "wizard of wizards . . . a tremendously powerful mesmerist" (*Expedition* 435), who had been feeding off Palmerston's mental energy "like a damned vampire" (487) so as to supplement his mediumistic powers. In fact, according to him, "Such are the convolutions of time. What is true of this history is not necessarily the truth of another" (*Secret* 347).

In his novels, Hodder revisits the past and rewrites history, given that multiple futures imply different histories and different endings. Therefore, looking back from 1919, a possible scenario was that in 1914 Nietzsche had overthrown Bismarck in Germany, and Rasputin had deposed the Tsar in Russia (*Expedition* 377), so that the three great powers were ruled by mediums in as much as Aleister Crowley was manipulating the history of the British Empire so that it would not go to war against Germany (*Secret* 333-4). For the purposes of this article, it is important to bear in mind that Victorian spiritualism, mesmerism and mediumship are recurrently invoked in neo-Victorian novels so as to fulfil "the complicated desire to communicate with the dead as part of our collective yearning to know something, to have a sense of revelation, of what lies beyond our own existence" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 172).

Re-framing Cultural and Literary Frameworks

Consequently, Hodder not only presents alternate histories in his series of books but also anachronisms and multiple versions of the characters' personalities, within the framework of Burton's alter egos in the 19th and 20th centuries. This is the case for Abdu El Yezdi, his elder self. On the one hand, we know that the Persian poet whose work was translated by his friend and pupil, Richard Burton, was actually made up by Burton and used by him as a pseudonym, as stated above in this article. On the other hand, Abdu El Yezdi is portrayed in Hodder's *Secret* as the spirit of a dead mystic who is helping to steer the British Empire into a period of unprecedented peace and creativity due to an Anglo-German alliance that prevents World War I. The blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction is apparent from the last sentence of the book

when Burton and Swinburne lay Abdu El Yezdi to rest in a mausoleum sculpted as an Arabian tent (381), something I believe is intended to remind the reader of the tomb Lady Burton designed for her and her husband, as noted above in this article. Moreover, a short excerpt from *The Kazîdah* of Haji Abdu El-Yezdi is used as the epigraph to the Second Part of *Expedition* (251).

Hodder's plots thus present heroes and villains that both manipulate and are manipulated by the use not only of mediumistic abilities and supernatural elements but technological and scientific advances. Timing mechanisms, babbages embedded in skulls and replacing parts of the brain, electrical power generated by substances like crystals, botanical weapons such as carnivorous plants and eugenically altered giant mushrooms that cause vomiting, delirium, convulsions and death in ten minutes—all these serve the purposes of the Eugenicist faction of the Technologist and Rake alliance, and in my view Hodder's depiction of a German eugenicist imperialism aims to expose the actual dehumanisation which is known by the reader to have taken place in the 1930s and 1940s. German Eugenicists implement treatments among people, plants and animals for frontline warfare. In short, as Wells explains to Burton, the Eugenicists were turning animals into soldiers because "they're running out of Africans," to which Burton comments: "So the loathsome treatment of this continent now extends even to its flora and fauna? . . . How despicable we are!" (*Expedition* 329). The breeding out of inherent weaknesses in plants, animals and humans and the propagation of their strengths aims at creating the Supreme Man and mediumistically controlling atmospheric conditions (*Secret* 348-9). A scientific—clearly Darwinian—perspective is also applied by Burton to the course of History as "a sort of natural selection, wherein decisions are a response to context, and consequences evolve, and only the fittest of them survive to contribute to the ongoing narrative" (*Secret* 160).

Hodder won the 2010 Philip K. Dick Award for science fiction writing, and he declared ("Looking Back at 2011") he was inspired by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Dickens, Thackeray, H. G. Wells and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, among others. The information on the back cover of *Expedition to the Mountains of the Moon* is enlightening: "[b]ack to where the adventure began! It is 1863, but not the one it should be. Time has veered wildly off course," while the back cover of *The Secret of Abdu El Yezdi* claims that "[t]he Beast is coming. History will be remade." The association of adventure literature with the imperialist mood has long been established by several authors, especially in the political and ideological Victorian setting (Showalter 80; Richards 2, 7; Brantlinger 11-12; MacKenzie, *Imperialism and Popular Culture* 69; MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire* 203). According to Phillips, "[a]s they engaged popular geographical imaginations, adventure stories promoted popular support for, and involvement in, imperialism" (68). There is actually no clear distinction between colonial adventure literature and juvenile literature as literary (sub)genres, for they all supply thrill, excitement and exoticism, involving risk and physical danger by way of putting individual character to the test in battles, fights, escapes, rescues and so on. Adventure narratives often include the finding of a treasure—whether material, like gemstones such as the Eyes of Nāga, or symbolic, like self-improvement of any kind—at the end of the hero's journey. From taking personal pleasure in travel and having a sense of adventure *per se* to the pursuit of fame and fortune, from the literary forms of the Victorian Robinsonades to commitment to the imperial cause, there were various reasons for adventure writers to be implicitly or explicitly empire-builders.

Both *Expedition* and *Secret* relate to the benefits and iniquities of empires but, in spite of his unconventional view of imperialism, the fictive Burton clearly acts in order to save "the bloody Empire!" (*Secret* 370). There is an unquestionable tradition of adventure in British literature which is identified as "robust, masculine and direct" (Green, qtd. in Richards 2) and Hodder's choice of the manly Burton is no coincidence. Those who were acquainted with Burton were impressed both by his domineering personality and his impressive looks. Swinburne held him to be "my tempter and favourite audience," whereas Bram Stoker, for instance, who first met Burton in 1878, was struck by him: "[h]e was dark and forceful, and masterful and ruthless. I have never seen so iron a countenance" (Godsall 343; Kennedy 166-8; Tredoux, "Sir Richard Francis Burton: 1821-1890"). On addressing issues related to masculinities and adventure fiction, Kestner claims that the latter imprints codes of masculinity based on "rescue, heroism, survival, courage, duty, isolation, voyaging" (1). Thus, he asserts that being English implied being an adventurer in the late Victorian period and, more significantly, that "adventure can be the focus of inquiry, examination,

challenge, doubt and dispute" (2). These are features that Hodder takes up and reworks so as to both engage with and revise the adventure genre. His portrayal of Burton's masculine figure matches our expectations of the hero archetype but also emphasises what can be regarded as weaker traits: on the one hand, the work he undertakes for the Empire leaves him stricken with fevers that cause hallucinations in which his essence is perceived as divided and fighting against itself; on the other hand, he spends so much time away from his native country that he is unable to fit back into it, being very conflicted about his role in society. Therefore, the Burton depicted in Hodder's novels is "helpless, directionless, and lost" (*AOB*).[10] According to the author, "[t]he idea behind my portrayal was to make Burton's masculinity and heroic qualities as hollow as the supposed strength of the Empire" (*AOB*).

It becomes clear that Hodder's novels can be read as straightforward entertainment, but they also aim to question the motivations for imperialism. In fact, as a contemporary appropriation of empire-building within an alternate history framework, the narrative revises the adventure genre by having a faulted man as the hero who strives to support a concept that he himself doubts and which Hodder hopes the reader recognises as "a complete fallacy" (*AOB*). In addition to this, the novels bring together a retro perception of the Victorian era—shaped by the knowledge we have of the changing conventions, ethics, and cultural politics of the period, referencing a "cultural myth created by the elite" (*AOB*)—and a forward-looking perception in terms of what the Victorians intended for the future and where they thought their world was headed, which implies a knowledge of "the hypocrisy, racism, misogyny and violence employed to promote the 'vision' and of the chaos that lurked behind the illusion" (*AOB*).

In the narrative, this perception is also connected to the temporal shifts (between 1840 and 1963, 1914 and 1919) for, as previously mentioned, Burton is given the opportunity to redeem himself after his initial failure to discover the source of the Nile on the one hand, while on the other hand, in the context of European imperialism, his ultimate mission might have prevented the First World War. This is appealing to a twenty-first-century revision of the course of nineteenth and twentieth-century historical events. As is well known, a different outcome of the two World Wars and German hegemony in Europe have supplied material for many novelists and historians to speculate about. In a universe of multiple times, in which even trivial factors may influence the course of great events, unpredictability and randomness contribute to a "chaostory" (Ferguson 89), a chaotic theory of the past. Alternate (or alternative) history, also known as counterfactual or virtual history, is one of the three manifestations—the other two being "ficto-critical" history and historical reenactments—of the questioning of the temporal logic underlying modern historiography, challenging irreversible linear narratives and the inevitability of historical process (West-Pavlov 75-76). In relation to fiction, the alternate history genre, "the branch of literature that concerns itself with history's turning out differently than what we know to be true" (Hellekson 248), explores time travel, parallel worlds and uchronias in order to create plausible universes and alternate timelines. Despite having its roots in the mid-nineteenth century, this literary genre was promoted by science fiction, which in turn helped boost its allohistorical offshoot (Rosenberg 91-92). The "what if"—and sometimes "almost was"—(de)construction of fictive outcomes of given historical events is explained by the fictional Burton in terms of Time not being a unidirectional phenomenon but a series of moments extending backward, forward and sideways, therefore sending out ripples in all directions, within any given history, into the alternate histories (*Secret* 165).

Like most contemporary authors who wish to reach a wide audience, Mark Hodder has taken advantage of the social media and online resources that are at our disposal nowadays. On his book publisher's blog he chose one of the most charismatic photos of Burton and characterised both the explorer and the series in a very explicit way:

> [h]is name is Sir Richard Francis Burton and he's the hero of my alternate history steampunk series, THE BURTON & SWINBURNE ADVENTURES. . . . the emphasis is on mystery and adventure and, well, BRITISHNESS, I guess! This is alternate history, . . . so a great many of the characters that appear in the story were real Victorians. ("Burton & Swinburne: An Introduction." Hodder's emphasis)

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10 I would like to thank Mark Hodder for kindly answering my questions and enlightening me on topics relevant to the writing of this article. The e-mail "Re: Article on Burton" is identified in the text as *AOB*.

Moreover, he was delighted to learn that readers were enthusiastically consulting various other sources in order to learn more about the real people he had, in his own words, "hijacked" (*Expedition* 7). He was also very keen on asserting that "My alternative histories are places where individuals have encountered different challenges and opportunities to those met in real life . . . They should not be in any way regarded as accurate depictions of those who actually lived" (8). Similarly, he answered with "a resounding, No!" to the question "If a person whose life is well documented had been presented with completely different opportunities and challenges, would they have turned out the same?" (*Secret* 7), a notion that draws on the contingency of personality, which can be connected to Hodder's experiments in reimagining Burton.

Given that Hodder himself considers his series to be not only alternate history but also steampunk, his own words while he was still writing *Expedition* must be taken into account:

> . . . my total disrespect for British history's great and good is PUNKY; where does the STEAMY come into it? . . . Sorry to disappoint, but there aren't any airships of the dirigible variety. I do, though, have rotorcars, communication pipes, velocipedes and steam-horses. There's a good deal of copper, brass, studded metal bands, dials, levers, flywheels, gyroscopes, cogs, funnels and crankshafts. ("Burton & Swinburne: An Introduction." Hodder's emphasis)

The several different trends in the literary field and the various groups within the steampunk movement are heirs to the punk legacy of individual creativity and acknowledge steampunking as a political act. It is almost impossible to address nineteenth-century Britain without the imperial setting, but this does not mean aiding the process of legitimating imperialism. In spite of his heroic actions, the real Burton—as well as Hodder's fictionalised version of him—despised the mores and manners of the period and, consequently, the very Empire he protects. Steampunk references to a period when everything was overt, imperialism was accepted as a given and heroes were absolutely resolute in their convictions. In that context, the author claims that Burton "cannot be a steampunk hero" (*AOB*). It is worth mentioning that *Expedition* has been singled out as an example of "doing it right," that is, of combining classic steampunkery with a "multi-dimensional African setting that treats both colonizers and colonized in rich human detail" (Carrott 71). As mentioned above, steampunk also conveys the following aspects, which can be found in Hodder's novels:

> [f]irst, it's simultaneously retro and forward-looking in nature. Second, it evokes a sense of adventure and discovery. Third, it embraces divergent and extinct technologies as a way of talking about the future. (Vandermeer and Chambers 9)

Besides making use of the inevitable goggles and "eccentricities" (*Expedition* 473) like zeppelins, huge vessels and extraordinary steam-powered vehicles such as towering, long-legged arachnids, mechanised insects and gigantic crabs with lobster-like claws, one of the real-life people turned into a fictional character in *Expedition* is Isambard Kingdom Brunel, whose nickname was "the Steam Man." It is likely that a contemporary reader will recall the London 2012 Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony when Brunel was embodied by Kenneth Branagh standing on a green hill as drums foreshadowed the coming of the Industrial Revolution, just before chimneys grew up through the landscape. For the purposes of this article, it must be added that Kenneth Branagh had played the villain—stuck to a sophisticated steam wheelchair—in *Wild Wild West* (1999), the film which is considered to be the first steampunk film. More significantly, Branagh's Brunel delivered a speech, in fact Caliban's words from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, conveying a controversial representation of British culture and a sense of Britishness that was very much discussed at the time (Kelso, "London 2012"; "Sir Kenneth Branagh reading Caliban's Speech from The Tempest"; "London 2012 Opening Ceremony").

As aforementioned in this article, Hodder himself has established that his series of books is steampunk and that "the Age of Steam is synonymous with the Age of Empire" ("Steampunk and Empire"). The steampunk dimension of the novels contributes to the author's critical purpose to the extent that he depicts a steampunk hell so as to illustrate the notion that "the British Empire's steampunk machinery is taking 'civilisation' to the 'savages' but that machinery is eccentric, faulted, unreliable and running out of control" (*AOB*).

Given that neo-Victorianism implies an "imaginative re-engagement" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 6) with the Victorian Age, it, therefore, benefits from the process of adaptation as a literary and cultural practice

of postmodernity that involves acts of "critique, transformation, revision, or destabilisation" (Bowler and Cox 2) with regard to the nineteenth century. More than just accepting long-established clichés about the Victorians themselves, neo-Victorianism relies on both a reader's and a writer's appropriation of metatextual and metahistorical parameters so that the reader and the writer themselves become engaged in a self-conscious critical analysis of the past. In the case of Hodder's novels, the author re-frames Victorian imperialism by stripping away the myth of civilisation—exposing British civilising influence as a delusion—and depicting "the sheer mind-numbing savagery of warfare" (*AOB*). Not only are machines constantly breaking but progress is out of control, which communicates the notion that "the tools of imperialism were as dysfunctional as the core concept" (*AOB*).

Final Remarks

As Mitchell demonstrates, neo-Victorian fiction "prompts authors, readers and critics to confront the problem of historical recollection" (3), it re-creates history and fashions of the past for consumption in the present. Enriched by subgenres akin to it such as steampunk, it is not only based on actual facts but also on plausible versions of the past which self-consciously mimic Victorian reality. Consequently, if we bear in mind Heilmann and Llewellyn's claim that "metafictional neo-Victorianism is fuelled and sustained by textual illusion" (175), we may add that an alternate history perspective both questions and sustains an appropriation and projection of the past in an act of metacultural rediscovery of the imagination. In fact, Hodder's express purpose in writing his novels is

> to highlight the hypocrisy and viciousness of imperialism because I feel we are currently at a crucial crossroads, where fallen empires are fighting to retain (or re-establish) their identity at a time when a contrary impulse for smaller interconnected communities is striving to emerge. (*AOB*)

In sum, the revisitation of R. F. Burton puts forward his ability to conquer a contemporary audience as a challenging, versatile, multitalented and, above all, transtemporal man. In Hodder's novels, and in accordance with his hero's life and works, Burton is portrayed as a most remarkable man. According to the Nāga high priest, he is: "[t]he one with an open and inquiring intellect; the observer; sufficiently separated from his own culture as to be able to easily absorb the ways of others; one who isn't disoriented by the unusual or unfamiliar" (*Expedition* 559). If we assume that the Victorians were like us, we are bound to transcend the boundaries of time and agree with Matthew Sweet when he writes that "The Victorians invented us, and we in our turn invented the Victorians" (xii). Ultimately, this relates to what the fictive Oscar Wilde[11] tells to Captain Burton:

> [i]f the processes of time and history truly are subjective, do not be afraid of the past. If people tell you that it is irrevocable, do not believe them. The past, the present and the future are but one moment. Time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of thought. The imagination can transcend them. (*Expedition* 489)

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11 Although Hodder does not mention it, the words correspond to what the real Wilde wrote in *De Profundis*, in 1897.

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