

## THE BURIED MAN: A LIFE OF H. RIDER HAGGARD

by STEPHEN COAN

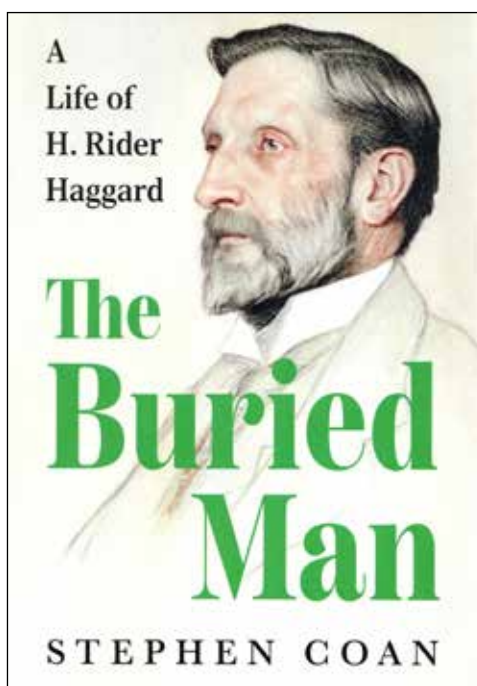
London: C. Hurst, 2025

On a winter's day in 1875, fresh off a steamer in Durban, there arrived in Pietermaritzburg a lanky 19-year-old Englishman. He was in the colony of Natal because his despairing father had pulled strings to secure his directionless youngest son the position of unpaid secretary, or general dogsbody, to the incoming lieutenant-governor, Sir Henry Bulwer. His predecessor, Major-General Sir Garnet Wolseley, was unimpressed by Henry Rider Haggard, considering him weak-looking and dull.

No sooner had the newcomer settled into his accommodation in Government House at the top of Longmarket Street – today, Unisa's Pietermaritzburg campus in renamed Langalibalele Street – than he was run off his feet organising the bachelor governor's social diary. Even if the town of Pietermaritzburg looked to him 'very pretty', he was itching to start hunting in the countryside. Way beyond everyone's comprehension was that in eleven years this unpromising-seeming young man would be the most famous living writer in the English-speaking world.

Following decades of scholarship, former *Witness* assistant editor and features writer Stephen Coan has produced a monumental biography of Haggard, author of such enduring adventure classics as *King Solomon's Mines*, *Allan Quatermain* and *She*, to say nothing of seventy other books and an abundance of articles and reports.

In nearly 500 pages, with an additional 140 pages of notes, in a richly layered text Coan leads us through the stages of Haggard's life. How, as one of eight sons and three daughters of a domineering Norfolk squire father and a gentle literary mother, he was the only son considered not intelligent enough to justify the cost of a private school education. How, after a year in Pietermaritzburg, he joined a mission led by Theophilus Shepstone to annex the Transvaal, where young Haggard himself raised the Union Jack in Pretoria's Market Square. And how, as a junior legal assistant,



he then set off with John Kotzé, the Transvaal's only judge, on circuit through the new colony's rural districts.

It was during these early years in Natal and the Transvaal that Haggard fell deeply under Africa's spell, even if shortly afterwards he was to return briefly to England, largely to reassure his father that he was making progress. During this home visit he met and married orphaned Norfolk heiress Mariana Louisa (Louie) Margitson before returning with her to Hilldrop, a farm outside Newcastle.

While heading inland through Pietermaritzburg, the young cou-

ple were invited to dinner at Government House, Haggard's previous workplace. On a hot January evening, seated formally around the table were thirteen people: the Haggards; an unnamed woman; hosts General Sir George and Lady Colley; and eight officers and members of the general's staff. Two months later, of the men at the dinner only Haggard was alive, all the others having been killed at Laing's Nek or Majuba.

As farming at Hilldrop proved unprofitable, and because of the insecurity felt by English settlers in the area after the recent military defeats, the couple and their infant son, Jock, who had been born on the farm, headed back to England, where in 1881 Haggard began half-heartedly training to become a barrister, even though writing was his overriding interest. And then, four years later, the unexpected and overwhelming success of *King Solomon's Mines*, followed in rapid succession by *She* and *Allan Quatermain*, transformed his life. Thereafter, he juggled writing with a public career, campaigning for causes such as agriculture and social reform, and was knighted for his services. He remained nevertheless in thrall to Africa, returning twice to the continent as a member of British government commissions.

Yet, as the title of Coan's biography infers, there was to Haggard a hidden side. The phrase *The Buried Man*, taken from an essay, 'Rider Haggard's secret', by Graham Greene, refers to the depression that dogged

him throughout his life, leading him to confide to his friend Rudyard Kipling that ‘this world was one of the hells’. Adding to his sense of despondency was the sudden and undiagnosed death of his son Jock, aged nine, who was staying with friends in London while his parents were on a trip to Mexico.

But the extent to which Haggard’s years in Natal were pivotal to his creativity is evident from his writings. His alter ego, hunter and adventurer Allan Quatermain, the narrator in eighteen of his works, when not venturing into a mythical African interior lived in an unfired-brick cottage with a corrugated-iron roof in a garden of loquats, oranges and mangoes on Durban’s Berea.

More specifically, a social occasion in Pietermaritzburg provided a memorable episode for *King Solomon’s Mines*. On 29 March 1876, with various other government officials Haggard was invited for ‘Tea and Witches’ at the home of Lady Anne Barker, wife of the Colonial Secretary John Broome, in what is nowadays the suburb of Mountain Rise. On the lawn, the tea-drinking guests were entertained by five prancing, chanting ‘witches’ (*izangoma* or sangomas) decked out in skins, goat bladders and sakabula feathers, who demonstrated to the wide-eyed colonists how ‘evildoers’ in Africa were ‘smelt-out’ for punishment.

So great an impression did the performance make on Haggard that nine years later he had Quatermain and his party, while en route to King Solomon’s mines, witness in the kingdom of tyrannical King Twala of the Kukuanas the ‘smelling-out’ of 103 ‘evil’ warriors who are then summarily put to death. The tea party

that fired Haggard’s imagination took place at what is nowadays 87 Royston Road, formerly Cowan House school and the New Horizon (now Arthur Blaxall) School for the Blind.

Another notable link with Natal is Umslopogaas, a battleaxe-wielding Zulu poet-warrior who in several other Haggard novels is the companion of Allan Quatermain. Historical sources attribute him to a warrior, Mhlopekazi, who in his obituary in the *Natal Witness* is described as a son of ‘Mswati, King of Swaziland’. An imposing man with a prominent battle-scar on his forehead, Mhlopekazi was personal assistant to Theophilus Shepstone and died, aged 80, in 1897; reputedly buried in a cemetery off lower Roberts Road in Clarendon.

Even if Lady Barker’s house has been demolished, and the old cemetery has been overrun by suburbia, the episodes and characters linked to both places live on in Haggard’s fiction. But just as some of the sentiments in Percy Fitzpatrick’s *Jock of the Bushveld* and certain Herman Charles Bosman stories are nowadays considered unacceptable, so are some of the sentiments in Haggard’s writings, all being products of another time. And even if sometimes Haggard’s prose is unpolished, which given the number of books he wrote is to be expected, at his best he deserves his place in the pantheon of literature.

Although a number of the earlier accounts of H. Rider Haggard are commendable reference works, this excellent book about his life and African years must surely be the definitive biography. It is hard to imagine it ever being surpassed.

JOHN CONYNGHAM