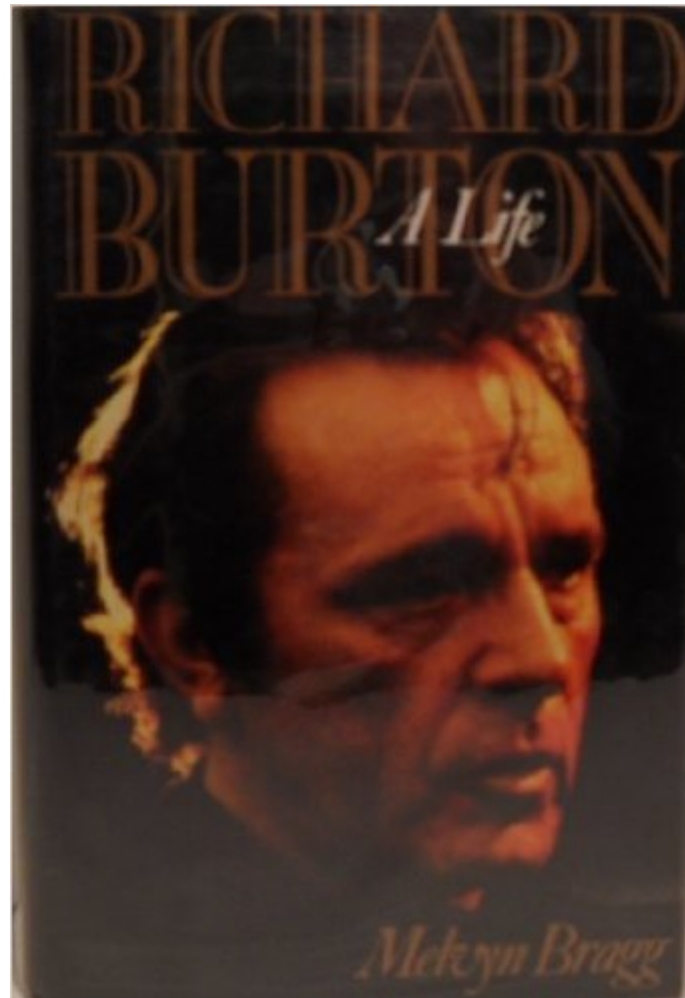


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Richard Burton: A Life



Synopsis

A biography of Richard Burton containing his own words, through the co-operation of members of his family who made available to Bragg various diaries and letters. There are also fresh insights from Burton's peers, to provide a frank and intimate account of his life. The sensational highlights of Burton's private life are well known - his marriages to Elizabeth Taylor, abundant drinking and womanizing and jet-setting lifestyle. Less well-known are his own thoughts on acting, alcoholism and his roots in Wales. These are all revealed in extracts from his diaries and letters. The contributions from Sir John Gielgud, Lauren Bacall, Sir Alec Guinness, John Hurt, John Le Carre and many others add an extra dimension to this biography.

Book Information

Hardcover: 576 pages

Publisher: Little Brown & Co (T); 1st U.S. ed edition (February 1989)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0316105953

ISBN-13: 978-0316105958

Product Dimensions: 9.5 x 6.5 x 2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.9 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (19 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #952,802 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #428 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Theatre](#) #4404 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Performing Arts > Theater](#) #7977 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Actors & Entertainers](#)

Customer Reviews

There's a photo of Richard Burton in this book that's probably my own personal favorite: he's sitting on the back step of his house and completely absorbed in a book, oblivious to everything else around him. He loved to read and there's also a photo of the inside of his house--and it looks like a library! (In fact, the only thing he ever asked for in his divorces were his books). But what really makes this biography worth reading is that the author quotes Burton's own "notebooks," his diary that he kept over the years. You definitely get a deeper look into this celebrity as a person than most show business books provide. He was certainly a conflicted man. Here was someone who was starring in the biggest movie ever made (CLEOPATRA), having an affair with the world's most glamorous actress (he'd buy Liz the Hope Diamond as one gift), living on a yacht off Monte Carlo, and yet he would grouse in his diary: "The French, American and Russian revolutions have meant

nothing--the rich still get everything!" (I'm paraphrasing a bit). I believe his own personal demons brought out his best performances: his HAMLET (available on DVD), BECKET (still not on DVD!), WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?, THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD, EQUUS. There was such a despair in his eyes that it rarely looked like acting at all. There always seemed to be something haunting him: his poor Welsh upbringing and alcoholic father, his abandonment of the "legitimate British stage" for the "Hollywood quick buck," his guilt over failed marriages. Unfortunately, he turned to drink too often to numb himself. Richard Burton was a great actor. Even if some of the pain and rage was real.

This is a well-researched and thoughtfully-written biography of a man who was perhaps the most famous man in the world in the decade of the 1960's. Now, sadly, Burton's legacy and fame have dimmed considerably and he's remembered more as Elizabeth Taylor's fifth (and sixth) husband. He was much more than that. I have always thought Burton overacted miserably in most of his roles and I was chiefly intrigued with him because of his beautiful physicality and because he was an erudite, deeply intelligent man. He was also a prodigious reader and a keen intellect, but this genius seemed utterly wasted on Liz, a woman with whom he shared a passionate sex life, but precious little else. The highlight of this book is the inclusion of over 100 pages of Burton's diaries, kept meticulously from 1965 until his death. Burton writes candidly, wittily and brilliantly. It's devilishly exciting to read his words about Liz and his vicious put downs of others, including a visceral tirade against poor Lucille Ball. He also muses on occasion about his autistic daughter, Jessica, who was hidden by the Burtons and kept in an institution all her life. Burton had a larger-than-life appetite for living, sex, booze... you name it. He was self-destructive, manic-depressive and difficult, but all of those things make for a compelling character and this book illuminates him like no other.

Richard Burton was much more than just another actor who married Elizabeth Taylor. He was an acting prodigy at a young age. He attended Oxford to study acting. He was a good enough rugby player to get a tryout with one of the English rugby leagues better clubs. He was a prolific reader who read books by the dozen, sometimes two or three a day. He was very generous to his large extended family. He was loyal to them and they loved him in return. I picked this book up in a newstand in Singapore in 1996. I read it as I traveled north by rail to Bangkok via Butterworth and Kuala Lumpur. I finished it in a day. It is a well written account about a fascinating literary man who grew up poor in Wales, his father a coal miner. Burton knew early on that he had to work hard in school to get out of the misery of that future. This is the first Melvyn Bragg book I have read. I was

impressed with the book and can't think of any criticisms. If you can find the book, read it! You'll be glad you did. Also check out some of the movies that Burton did. Some were dogs, but many were very good. It would be worth it to just see him act. He was a master. Underrated and scripted for many mediocre films. Taming of the Shrew is one I would recommend highly. He and Elizabeth Taylor are superb.

I approached this book simply as a comprehensive biography of Richard Burton and instead found it to be the most well-written and very detailed. It draws heavily on Burton's own Notebooks, his diary, and while "Rich" may have taken the mickey out of journos over the years, he is candid and blunt in his personal writings. I enjoyed this book very much, and found it difficult to put it down once I began reading it. It makes me wish I had a moment to converse with Burton himself, a true bookworm and erudite man who was still down-to-earth enough.

I always admired Richard Burton as an actor but it was only when I read his biography by M. Bragg that I realized how vast his acting repertory really was. What I wouldn't give to have all of his recordings too! This is conveniently listed in the book for further research by the dedicated few. One can appreciate the personal glimpses into his life and background, his family ties and his final years. The author has done considerable work in compiling so much information which is much appreciated by lifelong fans such as myself.

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