



**Toby Young**

**And God Created Burton**

by Tom Rubythron  
Myrtle E20  
£16 inc p&p  
★★★★★

**R**eading Tom Rubythron's acknowledgments in this 812-page biography, you could be forgiven for thinking it's the product of a lifetime of scholarship. He complains about the poor job the archive department of Swansea University has done of indexing and cataloguing Richard Burton's papers, and compliments his own 'staff' for their work on his original research. 'Thousands of hours were devoted to this task before I even wrote a word,' he says.

Is this the same Tom Rubythron who, less than a year ago, published a 764-page biography of James Hunt? Either he's exaggerated the seriousness of his approach or he's some kind of promethean scholar; the Boswell of modern celebrity.

A clue is provided in Chapter 33 when Rubythron refers to a memoir published by Rosemary Kingsland in which she claims to have slept with Burton when she was a 14-year-old schoolgirl. At the time of the book's publication in 2003, the story was widely dismissed as a fabrication, but Rubythron is convinced it's true. Why? Because there are stories about Burton's childhood that Kingsland recounts in her memoir that she couldn't have known unless Burton had told them to her personally.

An example is the claim that Burton was sexually abused by his adoptive father. Rubythron says this was a 'diabolical untruth', but because it was exactly what Burton would have said when he was drunk it follows that Kingsland simply could not have made it up. Clearly, Rubythron's notion of what constitutes evidence of a story's truthfulness is somewhat flexible. If it corroborates his portrait of the Welsh actor as a sexually voracious alcoholic, he's willing to believe it, no matter how implausible.

Which isn't to say this doorstop of a biography is bad. On the contrary: because Rubythron rehashes just about every tabloid story ever told about Burton, there's scarcely a dull moment. We learn, for instance, that he slept with 2,500 women, including most of Hollywood's leading ladies in the Fifties and Sixties. He even made love to Jean Simmons while her husband, Stewart Granger, slept soundly beside her. Rubythron tells us: 'Of all the men that have ever walked the planet, it is probably true to say that Richard Burton, between the years of 1948

REX FEATURES



# Genius who went for a Burton

and 1962, was the most attractive.' Note the precision of the dates. Quite the scholar, this Rubythron.

particularly enjoyed the stories about the sheer extravagance of Burton's life with Elizabeth Taylor. To be fair, Rubythron does allow that there is some doubt over the tale of how the Peregrina pearl came to be eaten by Taylor's dog. But the question mark concerns the exact location of the incident: Caesars Palace in Las Vegas or the Burtons' private yacht? That the dog ate the pearl is beyond dispute.

Rubythron does what most apparently lazy journalists do when faced with a morass of apocryphal stories about a showbiz legend: he fashions them into a morality tale.

He lovingly documents all Burton's excesses, then, with even more relish, details his long and ignominious decline. God may have created the handsome young actor with the fiery temperament and mellifluous voice, but he forsook him in middle age.

Between 1971 and 1974, Burton made one box-office disaster after another, including *The Assassination Of Trotsky*, *The Battle Of Sulyeska* and a soft porn film called *Bluebeard*.

The chapter titles give you a flavour of just what a catastrophe Burton's life became – 'Trouble At The Top: The Year To Forget, Return To Oxford: Fiasco Among The Spires and Total Career Collapse: Four More Turkeys'. A low point was a TV mini-series

**BURNING OUT:** Burton filming in the Seventies, when he was drinking as much as three bottles of vodka a day

This complex and ambitious book examines not only life in the bullring but also Spain's cultural identity and modern ideas of masculinity.

Fiske-Harrison admits that with each of his fights he knows more, not less fear. When he kills his first and only bull he feels not triumph but overwhelming sadness for a life taken.

His point that the matador's disregard for his own life in the ring makes him respect it more keenly outside appears incontestable. One only wishes that our own discredited sports stars were as wise.

# Where Hemingway feared to tread

**James Owen**

into **The Arena**

by Alexander Fiske-Harrison  
Profile Books £15.99 £14.99 inc p&p  
★★★★★

Whatever you think of Alexander Fiske-Harrison's account of his quest to become a bullfighter, you have to admire his guts. Not literally, happily, but there are times in his year as an amateur matador in Spain in which he seems likely to learn first-hand how cruel the arena can be.

Which perhaps is as it should be. For all his writing about it, Ernest Hemingway never went into the bullring. For Fiske-Harrison, the only way to justify bullfighting is by fully understanding the risks involved.

It is a far fairer contest than fox-hunting. The bulls weigh more than

a ton, turn nimbly as ice-skaters and can lift a horse and rider up on the point of a horn. When the greatest current fighter, Jose Tomaco, was gored at a bullfight in Mexico, he lost a total of 17 pints of blood.

No wonder studies show that

psychopaths and bullfighters have the same unnatural calm body chemistry. In Spain, bullfighters are bigger celebrities than footballers.

But do the artistry and spectacle justify the suffering? Fiske-Harrison's argument that the interplay between man and bull, when done with the highest skill, merits the tragedy will not convince many readers.

But his descriptions of the fights are compelling and lyrical, and his explanation of different uses of the matadors' capes is illuminating. One begins to understand what has captivated Spaniards for centuries.

Craig Brown is away.

**If you like this WHY NOT TRY**

Furious Love: Elizabeth Taylor And Richard Burton. The Marriage Of The Century, by Sam Kashner (JR Books).