

# EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS: JUNGLES, MARTIANS, AND DINOSAURS

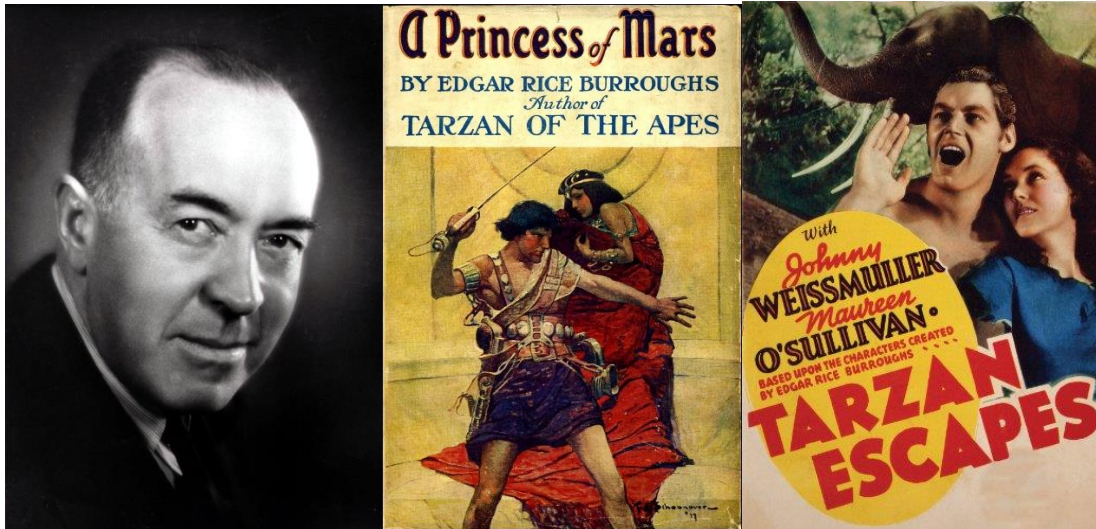
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**Edgar Rice Burroughs** (1 Sept. 1875-19 Mar. 1950) was born in Chicago, the fifth of six sons of businessman George Tyler Burroughs and Mary Evaline Zieger. He was the creator of Tarzan, a unique icon of twentieth-century literature whose name is recognized around the world. Burroughs's early struggles against poverty and failure and his ultimate celebrity have been cited as the quintessential American success story.

Burroughs received his primary education in Chicago, where he studied Greek and Latin before learning English composition. Early in 1891, when an epidemic of influenza broke out in Chicago, his parents sent him to Idaho where his two older brothers, Harry and George, with a Yale University classmate named Lew Sweetser, owned a ranch in Cassia County. For a fifteen-year-old city boy, the change was dramatic and exciting. Burroughs's lifelong love of horses and cowboys dates from this period. He became an expert broncobuster and met such characters as "Texas Pete," whom he wrote into his western novel *The Bandit of Hell's Bend* (1925).

In fall 1891, he was sent to Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where he was elected class president, but he rebelled against the formal curriculum and was expelled after one semester. His father, a Union cavalry officer during the Civil War, was convinced that his son needed the discipline of military training and sent him to the Michigan Military Academy at Orchard Lake (near Pontiac) in autumn 1892. The commandant was Captain Charles King, whom Burroughs greatly admired as a stern but fair disciplinarian as well as "the writer of the best army stories that ever were written." It is no accident that four fictional characters in Burroughs's later works were named "King."

After graduation from the academy in 1896, Burroughs remained briefly as assistant commandant with the rank of professor of geology, cavalry, and Gatling gun. He had set his sights on West Point but failed the entrance examinations (14 of 118 applicants were accepted), so he enlisted in the regular army, requesting the most difficult assignment possible. He soon was at Fort Grant, Arizona, attached to "B" Troop of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry. He described his duties as "digging boulevards in the desert where no boulevards were needed" and riding after Indian outlaws such as the "Apache Kid" without strategy or success. He developed a powerful sympathy for Geronimo and his band of renegade Apaches, whose history he later wrote in two acclaimed novels: *The War Chief* (1927) and *Apache Devil* (1933).

To allay the drudgery of camp life, he and a few close friends formed "The May Have Seen Better Days Club," one of whose members was a former British army officer, Carson Napier, who became the model for the hero of Burroughs's popular Venus stories, written between 1931 and 1941. Burroughs suffered severe dysentery and was sent to the post infirmary where, to his dismay, it was discovered that he had a heart murmur that would disqualify him for an army commission. He obtained an honorable discharge and returned to his brothers' cattle ranch in Idaho.

Always restless and eager to start his own business, Burroughs bought a stationery store in Pocatello in early 1898, but by the end of the year he was glad to sell it back to its original owner and rejoin his brothers at the Snake River ranch. By 1899 he had decided that the cattle business was not for him either, so he returned to Chicago to work for his father, who owned and operated the American Battery Company. At the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Burroughs created a sensation by driving the world's first electric car through the fairgrounds as an advertisement for his father's company. His preoccupation with cars probably stemmed from this experience.

Encouraged by a regular salary of \$15 per week, he married his childhood sweetheart, Emma Centennia Hulbert, in 1900. After three years of hand-to-mouth living, the couple yielded to the lure of gold and joined brother George in Idaho where they operated a gold dredge in the heart of the Sawtooth Mountains, a region that Burroughs later recalled as "the most beautiful spot on earth." But the gold business soon failed, and he and Emma moved to Salt Lake City, where he took a job as a railroad policeman. When this work palled, the couple returned to Chicago.

From 1904 to 1910 Burroughs held a succession of temporary jobs: he was a timekeeper for a construction company, sold light bulbs to janitors and candy to drugstores, peddled Stoddard's lectures from door to door, and worked as an accountant for the E. S. Winslow Company. Finally, at a low point, he offered his services as a commissioned officer in the Chinese army, a venture mercifully aborted. Early in 1908 he landed an excellent job as manager of the clerical department at Sears, Roebuck & Company, but he felt that his destiny lay elsewhere and resigned in August, determined to go into business for himself.

An even bleaker period followed, during which he pawned his wife's jewelry to buy food, lunching daily on three cents' worth of ginger snaps. The couple were living in Oak Park, a suburb, when their first child was born in 1908. In 1909 a second child was born, by which time Burroughs was working as an office manager for Physicians Co-Operative Association, which sold a nostrum called "Alcola," advertising it as a cure for alcoholism. The Food and Drug Administration closed down the business within a year, after which Burroughs and his Alcola partner formed the Stace-Burroughs Company, which sold booklets (written by Burroughs) on

expert salesmanship. This experience was amusingly parodied in Burroughs's *The Efficiency Expert*, written in 1919 but not published in book form until 1966.

When this company sank without a trace, Burroughs formed a business that sold pencil sharpeners. Checking through various pulp fiction magazines to see if his ads were correct, he began reading some of the stories and decided, "If people are paid for writing such rot, I can write something just as rotten."

Thus, early in 1911 he began to write his first story, influenced by the currently popular theories of astronomer Percival Lowell regarding the canals of Mars. It was a Martian romance, replete with dried riverbeds, the atmosphere plant, incredible flora and fauna, a beautiful princess, and a swashbuckling hero from Virginia named Captain John Carter. It ended in a cliffhanger that promised an exciting sequel (a Burroughs trademark). He sent it to Thomas Newell Metcalf, editor of *All-Story*, a pulp fiction magazine owned by the Frank A. Munsey Company. Metcalf accepted the story immediately, changed its title to "Under the Moons of Mars," and published it in six installments from February to July 1912. Burroughs received \$400 for the story, a staggering sum for him at that time.

Metcalf suggested that Burroughs write a second story along the lines of Arthurian legend. Burroughs obliged with a carefully researched Gothic romance of the Plantagenet kings of England, entitled "The Outlaw of Torn." The manuscript was rejected by *All-Story*, but Burroughs eventually sold it to Street & Smith's *New Story Magazine* where it was published in five installments in 1914. In the meantime, he had begun writing his third story, "Tarzan of the Apes," in December 1911, finishing it the following May. It was a compelling study of the interplay between heredity and environment, which had occupied him for some time. Metcalf liked it so well that he published it complete in one issue of *All-Story* in October 1912. It was immediately popular. Burroughs received \$700 and decided to devote full time to writing.

The floodgates were down: during the next twelve years he wrote eight novels and sold all of them. In true business fashion, he kept a daily ledger of the number of words written and the dates on which he began and ended each story. Although he protested that writing was a business like any other, merely to keep food on the table, he found himself expressing pent-up ideals in a way that captivated his reading public.

J. H. Tennant, editor of the New York Evening News, published "Tarzan of the Apes" as a serial, and other newspapers followed suit, so that a demand was created for the story in book form. After many rejection slips from major publishing houses, Burroughs received an offer from A. C. McClurg & Company, Chicago, which had previously rejected it. A contract was signed, and *Tarzan and the Apes* was published on 17 June 1914. It became a national bestseller. McClurg went on to publish twenty-nine of Burroughs's books between 1914 and 1929, subcontracting with the A. L. Burt Company for reprints of the first five Tarzan novels and with Grosset & Dunlap for reprints of all other titles. The majority of them were illustrated by J. Allen St. John, a Chicago artist who became identified with Burroughs.

For the rest of his writing career, Burroughs adopted the practice of selling first serial rights to the pulp magazines while retaining reprint and book rights for himself. Thus, with few exceptions, his works were serialized in magazines before appearing in book form. His first story, retitled *A Princess of Mars*, was published as a novel by McClurg in 1917. It was dedicated to his third child, John Coleman Burroughs, who eventually illustrated the first editions of twelve of his father's books.

*Tarzan of the Apes* was adapted for the silent screen in 1916 with Elmo Lincoln in the title role and Enid Markey as Jane. A huge success when it premiered two years later (1918), it

was one of the first six films ever made that grossed more than \$1 million. Two more Elmo Lincoln films followed, as well as five additional silent films featuring, in succession, Gene Pollar, P. Dempsey Tabler, James H. Pierce (who married Burroughs's daughter), and Frank Merrill, a professional gymnast. In 1932 Olympic swimming champion Johnny Weissmuller made his debut as Tarzan with Irish actress Maureen O'Sullivan as Jane. The musclebound Weissmuller was advertised as "the world's most perfect man." He made twelve Tarzan movies from 1932 through 1948, during which time three other Olympic champions were given their chance at the role: Buster Crabbe (1933), Herman Brix (1935 and 1938), and Glenn Morris (1937). The film characterizations of Tarzan, which included both full-length features and serials, were entirely unlike the literary Tarzan, much to the disappointment of his creator.

After Weissmuller's retirement in 1948, and continuing through 1991, the successive actors to play Tarzan were Lex Barker, Gordon Scott, Denny Miller, Jock Mahoney, Mike Henry, Ron Ely, Miles O'Keefe, Christopher Lambert, Joe Lara, and Wolf Larson.

In 1919 Burroughs purchased a 540-acre ranch in the San Fernando Valley of California. Here, he played at being a gentleman farmer while solidifying his multimillion-dollar industry. He named the ranch "Tarzana," and the city that inevitably sprang up around him was so named on 11 December 1930 with the official installation of the Tarzana Post Office.

Burroughs incorporated himself on 26 March 1923 and by 1931 decided to publish his own books without the intervention of a "middle man." One of the most enduring enterprises initiated by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc., was the syndication of Tarzan in daily and Sunday newspapers, beginning in 1931 with Rex Maxon as artist; later artists included Hal Foster and Burne Hogarth. The first Tarzan radio shows were produced in 1932 featuring Burroughs's daughter, Joan, and her husband James H. Pierce (star of Tarzan and the Golden Lion, 1927). These shows were the first to be prerecorded for shipment to foreign markets. In 1934, when the Pierces left the show, Carlton Kadell assumed the title role, playing two 39-episode serials until 1935. In 1951 a new series started with Lamont Johnson as Tarzan. These half-hour features aired every Saturday night for a year. A Tarzan television series began in 1966, featuring Ron Ely, and ran for four years. A second series with Wolf Larson began in 1991 but was discontinued after three seasons. Meanwhile, Tarzan had become a staple for the comic book industry worldwide, while the novels were translated into thirty-four languages, including Russian, Esperanto, and Hebrew.

In 1934 Burroughs and his wife divorced. Four months later he married Florence Gilbert Dearholt, a former actress and divorcée with two small children. They divorced in 1942.

During World War II Burroughs, who in 1919 had held the rank of major in the Illinois State Militia, became the country's oldest war correspondent, serving until 1945. His "Laugh It Off" column was published regularly in the Honolulu Advertiser. He visited Australia and several Pacific atolls as a reporter, and he went on several bombing missions.

After the war, Burroughs retired to a modest home in Encino, California, where he died. His ashes were buried beneath a black walnut tree in the front yard of his corporation headquarters on Ventura Boulevard. In the last year of his life he reread all of his books "to see what I had said and how I'd said it." His published legacy was enormous, with a total of twenty-six Tarzan books, eleven Martian stories, seven Pellucidar ("Earth's Core") books, five Venus stories, and eighteen miscellaneous novels including four westerns, four social satires, a moon saga, and an incomparable prehistoric trilogy, *The Land That Time Forgot*. He was planning a new series of stories on Jupiter at his death. An unpublished novel written in 1941, *I Am a*

*Barbarian*, was found in his safe in 1965. It was a historical romance of imperial Rome during the reign of Caligula and was the last book to be published by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc.

Burroughs did not write for children. His style was lucid and poetic; his words chosen intuitively to stimulate emotion and intellect simultaneously, resulting in a basic appeal to readers of all ages. For this reason, he cannot be compared with other writers, nor did he seek or desire comparisons. He rarely read fiction, preferring documentary accounts and biographies. His favorite poets were Robert Service, Henry Herbert Knibbs, and Rudyard Kipling. He greatly admired Jack London and once offered to write his biography, but he gave it up when he learned that a London biography was already in progress. Burroughs predicted the invention of radar, sonar, television, teletype, radio compass, the automatic pilot, homing devices on bombs and torpedoes, genetic cloning, living organ transplants, antigravity propulsion, and many other concepts deemed totally fantastic in his time. His soaring imagination, coupled with the sure instinct of a master storyteller, assures him a position of honor among American writers of the twentieth century.

## Bibliography

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