

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Haggard, Sir (Henry) Rider (1856–1925),
novelist

by Morton N. Cohen

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Haggard, Sir (Henry) Rider (1856–1925), novelist, was born on 22 June 1856 at Wood Farm, West Bradenham, Norfolk, the eighth of the ten children of William Meybohm Rider Haggard (1817–1893), squire and barrister, and his wife, a poet, Ella (*d.* 1889), daughter of Bazett Doveton, of the East India Company. Rider Haggard was educated at Ipswich grammar school and by tutors and crammers. In June 1875, when he was nineteen, his father, learning from *The Times* that an old friend and Norfolk neighbour, Sir Henry Bulwer, had been appointed lieutenant-governor of Natal, offered Sir Henry the services of the son he had early proclaimed ‘only fit to be a greengrocer’ (*Days of my Life*, 1.5). Bulwer took the boy sight unseen and, before long, Rider found himself managing Bulwer’s household in Natal.

Africa stunned, excited, and ripened the youth. Thrust into the maelstrom in which Zulu, Boer, and Briton struggled for superiority, Rider Haggard worked hard, hunted wild game, travelled through jungle and over veld. He made a good impression, and in April 1877, when the British annexed the Transvaal, Haggard, as special commissioner to Theophilus Shepstone, raised the union flag in Church Square, Pretoria. The following year, at the age of twenty-one, he became master and registrar of the high court of the Transvaal, the youngest head of a government department in South Africa.

Before he left for Natal, Haggard had fallen deeply in love with a beautiful young woman he had met at a ball at Richmond: Mary Elizabeth Jackson, daughter of a wealthy Yorkshire farmer. But the elder Haggard had insisted that his impecunious son establish himself before he married and packed him off to South Africa instead. For three years Rider Haggard pined and yearned to return to be united with his love, but in vain. The young woman’s patience ran out and she married another. Deeply scarred, Haggard fell into a rash and reckless life, resigned his civil service post, and undertook, with a friend, to raise ostriches. He had an affair with a married woman, Johanna Catherine Ford, who bore his illegitimate daughter, Ethel Rider. In 1879 he returned, unannounced to his father, to England. He met (Mariana) Louisa Margitson (*b.* 1859/60), a schoolfriend of his sister staying at Bradenham Hall, the orphaned daughter of Major John Margitson and heir to Ditchingham House, a small Norfolk estate. Within a week, they were engaged, and they were married on 11 August 1880. Later that year he returned to South Africa with his wife and a retinue of servants. There he settled down to ostrich farming and their son was born, but the Anglo-Transvaal War began, and the trio returned to England in August 1881.

Family responsibilities weighed heavy upon Haggard now, and he entered Lincoln’s Inn to read for the bar. While studying in London he also wrote his first book, *Cetywayo and his White Neighbours* (1882; 2nd edn 1888), a denunciation of Britain’s South African policies. He paid his publisher £50 to have it published, but only 150 copies were sold in the year that followed. Haggard nevertheless kept on

writing because he found reading for the bar a drastic downturn from exhilarating South African adventures.

Haggard actually stumbled upon fiction as a means of expressing himself. While he and his wife were in church one Sunday morning, they noticed sitting near them a 'singularly beautiful and pure-faced young lady' (*Days of my Life*, 1.209) who, they decided, deserved to be the heroine of a novel. Husband and wife each began to write a story about her. Although Mrs Haggard soon gave up, Rider wrote on and completed his first three-decker, *Dawn*. Finding a publisher was not easy, but Hurst and Blackett finally brought it out in 1884. *Dawn* earned mixed reviews and did not sell; but it received sufficient notice to encourage Haggard to return to his writing, where he next produced *The Witch's Head* (1885), a hotchpotch of manners, morals, autobiographical ruminations, and excursions into the grotesque. When the hero is forced to escape from Britain, Haggard sends him to Africa, and, immediately, the piece takes on a brilliance not evident elsewhere. Now writing from the heart, Haggard found his true milieu, and readers were enthralled by this new adventure story set in a strange, uncharted, mesmerizing part of the world.

Haggard was called to the bar, but, once there, found the law stultifying. While his need to earn a living kept him rooted to his profession by day, his hunger for adventure drove him to his desk in the evening. In 1885 one of Rider's brothers asked his opinion of an adventure story that had just been published, *Treasure Island*, and Rider replied recklessly that, though it was certainly a good tale, he himself could write a boy's book just as good. His brother challenged him, and for the next six weeks Rider spent his evenings at his pedestal desk in his Kensington house, trying to win the wager with a tale of African adventure. Cassells, who had published *Treasure Island*, agreed to publish *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), and Haggard was offered a choice of terms: £100 outright for the copyright or a 10 per cent royalty. He was ready to accept the £100, when, in the chief editor's momentary absence from the room, a clerk advised him to take the royalty. Haggard reversed himself and made the right choice. *King Solomon's Mines* met with instant success and transformed his life. The barrister was at once subordinated to the author, and he completed three more works of fiction in the next six months. The third of these, strange, mystifying, and mythological, was *She* (1887), which he wrote in just over six weeks, done, as he put it, 'at white heat, almost without rest ... it came faster than my poor aching hand could set it down'. When it was ready, he took it to his recently acquired agent, slammed it down on the table, and proclaimed, 'There is what I shall be remembered by' (*Days of my Life*, 1.245–6). The novel was a *succès fou* and made Haggard and his heroine, Ayesha, household names. He gave up the law and wrote full time, producing at least a book a year until his death.

Now financially secure, Haggard retrieved Ditchingham House from tenants, took up residence, and donned the mantle of gentleman farmer, dividing his time on the one hand between writing his 'romances' (he took to dictating to a typist-secretary while pacing up and down in his study) and, on the other, in steeping himself in farming lore, developing his wife's estate, and conducting agricultural experiments. Three daughters were born during this period. Haggard also travelled widely, in Europe, the Americas, Egypt, the Holy Land, Iceland, and back to South Africa; he took easy inspiration from distant lands and foreign cultures. While he and his wife were travelling in Mexico in 1891, their son, in the charge of the Edmund Gosses in London, died suddenly of a perforated ulcer. The news turned Haggard's world upside down: years before, he had lost his only love; now he had lost his only male progeny. He returned to Ditchingham depressed and guilt-ridden, and lived for

years dejected, in deep melancholy.

Still Haggard continued to write, and he tended his gardens and his farms. Slowly, too, he returned to public life. In 1895 he stood for parliament as a Unionist in East Norfolk, but he lost; that same year he was elected to the Athenaeum. He pushed on, eager 'to do something ... more practical than the mere invention of romance upon romance' (Cohen, 158). To that end he addressed himself to the desperate state of farming in England and kept a diary for the year 1898, published as *A Farmer's Year* (1899), becoming an agricultural authority and expert on rural affairs. In 1901 and 1902 he travelled throughout England and Wales and wrote articles for the *Daily Express* on agricultural conditions. The result was *Rural England* (2 vols., 1902), a survey that depicted the wretched condition of farming and proposed reforms. Later he went on to publish *A Gardener's Year* (1905) and *Rural Denmark and its Lessons* (1911), a survey of co-operative farming which he held up as a model for England to adopt.

In 1895 Haggard was appointed to a royal commission to examine Salvation Army labour colonies for rehabilitating indigents in the United States. In America he was hailed in the press and lavishly entertained, not least by President Theodore Roosevelt in the White House. But when he returned to England, he, his report, and its recommendations were totally ignored. He none the less went on to serve on the royal commission for coast erosion, but after it had worked for three years the government again ignored its recommendations. Haggard resumed his daily routine of romance-writing. He also wrote a long autobiography which was published after his death as *The Days of my Life* (1926). In 1911 he was summoned to serve on the royal dominions commission, and its work took him around the world on visits to Canada, Newfoundland, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Later he served on the empire settlement committee, to help relocate veterans of the First World War.

Haggard was tall and swarthy, 'a Norseman in looks' (Cohen, 147); he moved easily among the public figures of his time, becoming friendly with politicians and literati alike. A man of his time, he was an imperialist who believed deeply in the superiority of white Britons. He was also a moody fatalist who steeped himself in the occult, in antiquity, in mysticism, Buddhism, anthropology, and archaeology; he more than dabbled in spiritualism, believed in reincarnation, and sought answers to the meaning of life in the world's ancient myths. He shared many of his views with two of his closest friends, Andrew Lang (with whom he wrote *The World's Desire*, 1890) and Rudyard Kipling (who helped him plot some of his romances).

Haggard's reputation rests on his two great *tours de force*, *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*, both of which appeal to successive generations. *King Solomon's Mines* has been filmed three times (1937, 1950, and 1985), and yet none of the versions has adequately captured the adventurous pace or atmosphere of the novel. Likewise, *She* has been adapted for the cinema several times, the 1935 version altering the setting from Africa to the Arctic. Nevertheless, Graham Greene said of this production that 'To an unrepentant Haggard fan it does sometimes seem to catch the thrill as well as the childishness of his invention' (*Halliwel's Film Guide*, ed. J. Walker, 1994, 964). The 1965 remake, however, starring Ursula Andress and Peter Cushing, was critically panned, although it did return the scene of the action to Africa. Of the other more than fifty works of fiction that he wrote, most significant is *Ayesha* (1905), the sequel to *She*; the *Allan Quatermain* series; and his Zulu chronicles, particularly *Nada the Lily* (1892), *Marie* (1912), *Child of Storm* (1913),

and *Finished* (1917). Haggard was a gifted story-teller, who drew upon his own experiences and observations to propel his readers out of grey and soggy England, on to adventures in uncharted lands and cultures, but he never achieved the refinements of art. He undervalued his talent and would have preferred to be accepted in the corridors of power.

Although Haggard suffered many tragic turns and disappointments, including waning popularity, his contributions were ultimately rewarded. In 1912 he was knighted, and in 1919 appointed KBE. He continued to write to the end, and to his labours he added a diary, which he kept from July 1914 to the end of his life in 1925, upon which he hoped later to base another book. It is, sadly, the account of a sour old man who sees himself betrayed by fate, a disillusioned imperialist with authoritarian, racist leanings, who ranted against the Jews, communists, Bolsheviks, trade unionists, the Irish, and Indian nationalists (the editor of his diaries omits from the published text most of Haggard's harangues).

H. Rider Haggard died in London at 3 Devonshire Terrace, a nursing home, on 14 May 1925; his body was cremated and the ashes buried in the chancel of Ditchingham church. His wife survived him; one of his daughters, L. R. Haggard, published a memoir of him, *The Cloak that I Left*, in 1951.

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Wealth at death £61,725 7s. 5d.: probate, 28 July 1925, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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