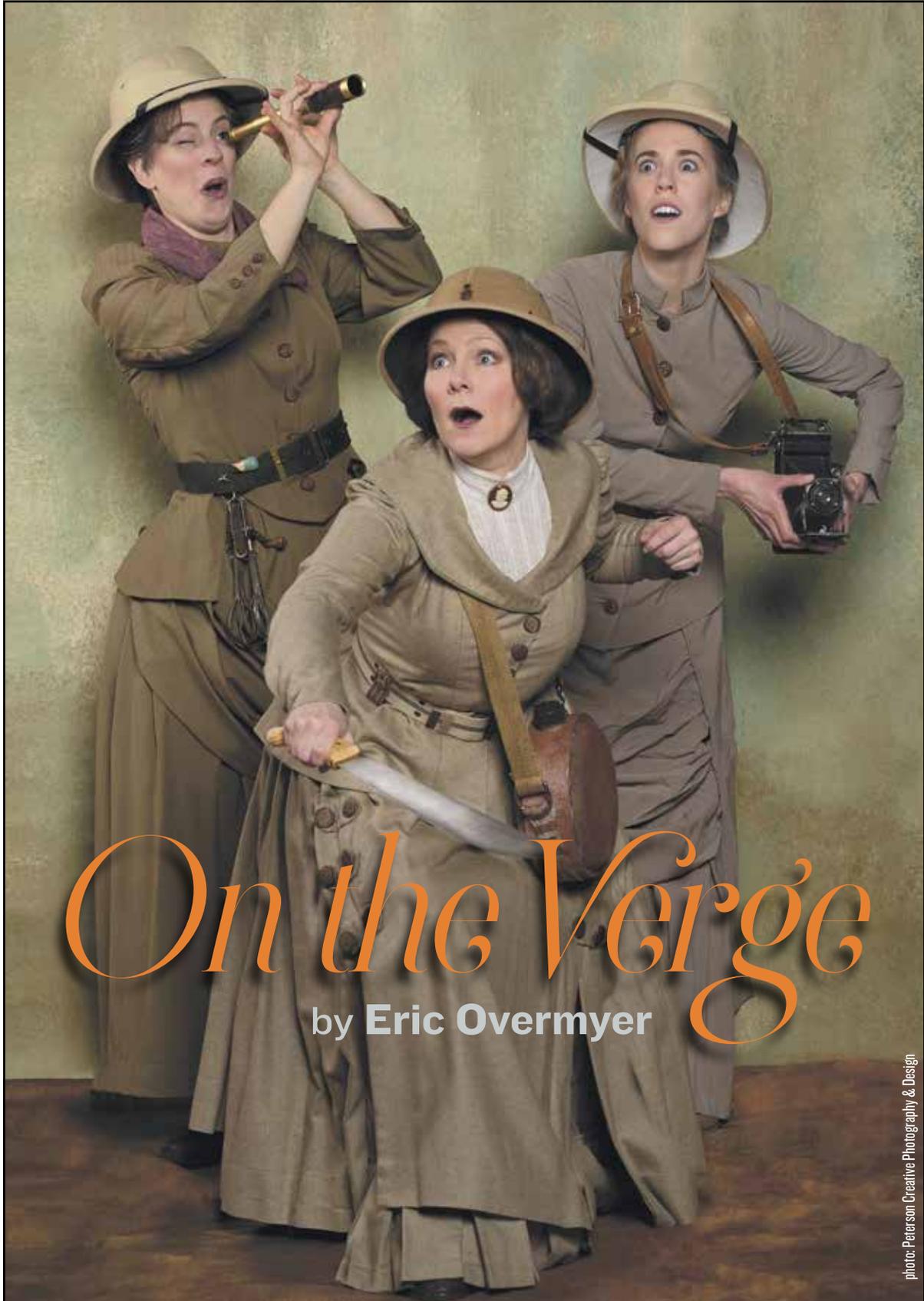


A Deeper Look



On the Verge

by Eric Overmyer

photo: Peterson Creative Photography & Design

A Study Guide for the play.

COMMONWEAL THEATRE COMPANY

presents

On the Verge

by Eric Overmyer

Directed by Michael Bigelow Dixon

Stage Manager Lacey Szerlip,
Kelsey Heathcote

Assistant Stage Manager Matt Donahue,
Jodi Rushing

Set Design Justin Hooper

Costume Design Janis Martin

Lighting Design Thomas White

Sound Design Kelsey Heathcote

Assistant Sound Design . . Caroline Hawthorne

Props Design Anna Hill

Choreography Betti Battocletti

CAST



Elizabeth Dunn
Alex



Betti Battocletti
Mary



Brandt Roberts
Grover, Alphonse,
et al.



Adrienne Sweeney
Fanny

About the Playwright

Eric Overmyer (b. 1951) is an American playwright, writer and producer. *On the Verge* is one of his eleven published plays. He is also writer and/or producer of numerous TV shows, including *St. Elsewhere*, *Homi-*

cide: Life on the Street, Law & Order, The Wire, New Amsterdam, Bosch (which he developed), *Treme* and *The Man in the High Castle*.

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Tom Joyner Ph.D.
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On the Verge

by Eric Overmyer

Presented by the
Commonweal Theatre Company
September 6 - November 10, 2019

The Characters

FANNY—The most conservative of the group in all aspects: socially, politically and morally. She is the only married member of the group. Fanny generally disapproves of everything she sees and hears in the future, finding it immoral. Her sensual side is brought out in the second act, and she gradually warms up to the future. Fanny is the second-oldest member of the expedition.

MARY—constantly cites her favorite periodical (the fictional newspaper “The Boston Geo”) as a source of wisdom. She remains unmarried, and considers exploration her

From University of Wisconsin/Whitewater’s *Study Guide*.

unequivocal calling. Mary is the oldest member of the lady explorers’ expedition. She is utterly devoted to studying and experiencing the future, both from an objective and subjective perspective.

ALEXANDRA—The youngest of the group, Alexandra allows her age to make up a considerable amount of her personality. She is typically forgetful and tends to daydream. Upon encountering a new word (a frequent occurrence in their journey), she plays with it, trying to find rhymes and alternative meanings, to the endless irritation of her comrades. Any new discovery enralls her.

Glossary

CULTURAL

baksheesh

Tipping, charitable giving and certain forms of political bribery in the Middle East and South Asia.

chronokinesis

The ability of the mind to manipulate and control one’s perception of time.

clairvoyant

A person who claims to have a supernatural ability to perceive events in the future.

ecdysiastical

Of or related to striptease performance or performers.

ginchiest

Colloquial adjective of the 1950s meaning sexy, cool.

Maasai

A Nilotic ethnic group inhabiting northern, central Kenya and northern Tanzania.

palaver

Prolonged and idle discussion, chat; a parley or improvised conference between two sides.

peregrinations

Journeys, especially long or meandering ones.

phenomenologist

One who studies the philosophy of the structures of experience and consciousness. Developed by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in the early 20th century.

“Poobah of the first water”

A high-ranking official. The word poobah is based on the character Poo-Bah in Gilbert & Sullivan’s *The Mikado*. Often used sarcastically.

pro forma

“For form’s sake,” from Latin. Something done or produced as a matter of form or politeness.

quotidian

Of or occurring every day; daily.

sojourner

A person who resides temporarily in a place.

somnambulist

Sleepwalker.

tonorial

Related to hairdressing.

truculent

Eager or quick to argue or fight; aggressively defiant.





“Willie and the Hand Jive”

A 1958 song by Johnny Otis. Reached #9 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart.

HISTORICAL

Bébé Bwana

The name given by native Africans to Mrs. Mary (May) French-Sheldon, a white female explorer and author of the book *Sultan to Sultan: Adventures among the Masai and other tribes of East Africa, 1892*. She was appointed a Fellow of the National Geographical Society in 1910, one of the first women to be so appointed.

dirigible

Also “airship.” A lighter-than-air craft that can navigate through the air under its own power (e.g., *Hindenburg*).

Great Leap Forward

An economic and social plan (1958-62) in China (aka “Red China”) led by Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong.

National Review

An American semi-monthly editorial magazine founded by author William F. Buckley Jr. in 1955. Credited with helping to develop U.S. conservatism.

Silurian

A geologic period spanning 24.6 million years from the end of the Ordovician Period (at 443.8 million years ago) to the

beginning of the Devonian Period (at 419.2 million years ago).

GEOGRAPHICAL

Hindu Kush

An 800-kilometer-long mountain range that stretches through Afghanistan, from its center to northern Pakistan and into Tajikistan and China.

Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) River

Myanmar’s largest river and most important commercial waterway.

manioc (also: cassava)

A food starch, prepared from the root of a species of plants native to subtropical and tropical regions of South America, Africa and Asia.

Orinoco

A large river in South America, draining an area of about 340,000 square miles, mostly located in Venezuela and Colombia.

Putumayo

A tributary of the Amazon River, originating in southwestern Colombia.

Terra incognita

“Unknown land,” from Latin. A term used historically in cartography to denote lands that have not been mapped or documented.

Terre Haute

The U.S. city which is the county seat of Vigo County in western Indiana.

“On the Cusp of Adventure: The Victorian ‘lady travelers’ and their world” by Thomas Joyner, Ph.D.

I am doing what a woman can hardly ever do—leading a life fit for a man.

—Isabella Bird

In the Victorian Era of the 19th century women were often thought of as unable to perform many of the tasks that men did. The worlds of politics, higher education and business were virtually closed to them. Instead, society expected women to stay in the home, raise children, and perform “social” tasks.

In the late 1800s, a small group of women (supported by an even smaller group of men) began to protest the dominant legal, social, and cultural view that they were inferior to men. Beginning in America with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, these women

pressed for changes in property law that would allow them the same rights as men—the right to own property, vote, and have equal protection in the workplace.

Mary, Fanny, and Alexandra, the heroines of *On the Verge*, are fictional characters based on actual women—those Victorian women known collectively as “lady travelers” who escaped their own closed society by exploring places far beyond the bounds familiar to most Westerners, male or female. Though most expeditions into the uncharted regions of the American West, Africa, Asia and the islands of the Pacific were made by men, these women played an important role in opening up the world to Western society. At the same time, their travels effectively furthered the emerging cause of women’s rights



by demonstrating the error of relegating women to an inferior role.

Most of these real-life Victorian lady travelers came out of British and American upper-middle-class households that provided them with enough money (and time) to begin their travels. Isabella Bird, for example, began her travels on money left to her by her father upon his death and supplemented this income with earnings from a series of books, beginning with those she wrote on her travels to the United States just prior to the Civil War. Others, such as Frenchwoman Alexandra David-Néel, married men who supported their urge to travel and provided the funds for it. David-Néel only lived with her husband for a short period of time, spending the rest of their marriage traveling while he worked as a colonial official in Tunisia. She also managed to make her own living as an actress and journalist. In the play, Alexandra speaks of an inheritance, Mary a “commission from the Boston Geo” (the Boston Geographic Society), and Fanny of her husband’s willingness to support her while she travels.

Like their fictional counterparts, the lady travelers journeyed to many parts of the globe. One of the most popular destinations was the Himalayan mountain range of South Asia, the favored destination of the play’s Alexandra. Many portions of this remote region remained unexplored by Europeans, even into the 20th century.

Mountain traveling posed many dangers, especially in an age when existing equip-



David-Néel with adopted son Yongden, 1933

ment gave little help in more extreme climates. Fanny Bull-ock-Work-man, an American traveling in the Karako-rum range, watched as one of her experienced guides fell to his death only a few steps

in front of her when a portion of a glacier collapsed. She continued her journey and produced invaluable surveys that would help her become the first American woman to lecture at the Sorbonne.



Mary Kingsley, tamer of the Mighty Silurian

Alexandra David-Néel became the first European woman to visit the holy capital of Tibet, Lhasa. In order not to be caught, she disguised herself as a Tibetan peasant traveling with her son—actually her longtime aide, Yongden—through some of the least-traveled mountain passes. For several months, they hiked at elevations of 10-15,000 feet and higher to reach the city. The unexplored jungle could be just as dangerous. Mary Kingsley, like Fanny in the play, drove off crocodiles by “thwacking” them on the head—though she used a canoe paddle instead of an umbrella. These dangers were potentially fatal, but these women persevered.

In most cases, the Victorian “lady travelers” saw many problems with the way Europeans treated native populations. Kingsley, who traveled among various tribes in the jungles of West Africa, found the administration of the British short-sighted, solely serving the colonists’ self-interest. She expressed the view that, “Whatever we do in Africa today, a thousand years hence there will be Africans to thrive or suffer for it.” She wanted Europeans to see the African tribes as “brother humans” with cultures of their own. Alexandra David-Neel went one step further, actually attempting to teach Europe about the traditions of South Asia. She became a Buddhist and, in her writings, explained Buddhism in terms Europeans could understand. The Dalai Lama was so impressed with her studies that he allowed her to live in a monastery, a place otherwise forbid-





“On the Cusp of Adventure” (Cont’d.)

den to women. In an era where writers like Rudyard Kipling were extolling the virtues of European colonialism, some of these woman adventurers joined a tiny minority of voices calling for change. When the fictional Mary says, “English is the engine and its vehicle is Empire,” she expresses an understanding many of the actual “lady travelers” shared as they witnessed first-hand the devastation that Europeans frequently brought to the societies they colonized.

Through their books and lecture tours, the Victorian “lady travelers” expanded Western

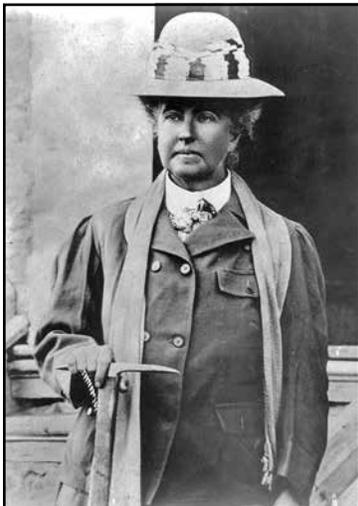
knowledge of the world beyond its borders. At the same time, they pushed back the rigid frontiers of women’s conventional roles in society by demonstrating that women could explore uncharted territory and survive hardship with the same pluck and daring as their male counterparts. Though not all of these travelers saw the liberation of women as any part of their goal, the cumulative effect of their perseverance was to help the cause of women’s rights. They were truly “on the verge” of a revolution.

Notable Contemporary Women Explorers (*see more photos in our lobby*)

Nellie Bly (1864-1922, American)

Nellie Bly was the pseudonym for Elizabeth Cochran Seaman, an American journalist who was widely known for an exposé article that brought to light the abuses in Women’s Lunatic Asylum, on Blackwell’s Island (now Roosevelt Island, NYC). Nellie’s greatest exploration began when, inspired by Jules Verne’s novel *Around the World in 80 Days*, she decided to do just that and traveled the globe by ship, train and horseback. She returned within 72 days. Her adventure later became the basis of several news stories and a memoir.

Fanny Bullock Workman (1859-1925, American)



Fanny Bullock Workman

Fanny traveled with her husband and broke many records of altitude for women climbers. She became a geographer, cartographer and travel writer. She was known for shameless self-promotion

but could also back up her talk with detailed notation of measurements she would take on her explorations. Fanny became the second woman to join the Royal Geographical Society of London.

Alexandrine Petronella Francina Tinne (1835-1865, Dutch)

Also known as Alexine, she was the first European woman to attempt to cross the Sahara. On her first extensive African expedition she was accompanied by her mother and aunt. The women ascended the White Nile to Gondokoro and were the first European women to arrive there. Her collections of ethnographic specimens were thought to have been destroyed in a bombing raid in Liverpool in 1941, but about 75% of the collection survived. Besides their value as an irreplaceable document of her two Sudan journeys in 1862-1864, her collection represents rare specimens of an early date belonging to material cultures in Sudan.

Isabella Bird (1831-1904, British)

Bird made a remarkable series of journeys at the end of the 19th century. In 1854, her father gave her £100 and told her she was free to go wherever she wanted. She used it to travel to North America and stayed for several months in eastern Canada and the United States. On her return, she used the letters she had written to her sister, Hennie, as the basis

for her first book, *An Englishwoman in America*. She was the first woman elected Fellow in the Royal Geographical Society.



Annie Smith Peck

Annie Smith Peck (1850-1935, American)

After four years and five attempts, sixty-year-old Annie Smith Peck reached the summit of Peru's Mount Huascarán. She was the first person to scale this peak. It had never been accurately measured, so at the

time she believed she had climbed the highest mountain in the Western Hemisphere. As Peck began to climb, lecture, and explore in Latin America, she also promoted Pan-Americanism (peace between the Americas) and geographic education through her lectures and publications.

Amelia Earhart (1897-1937?, American)

Earhart was an aviator who set many flying records and championed the advancement of women in aviation. She became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic, and the first person ever to fly solo from Hawaii to the U.S. mainland. She set many other records, wrote best-selling books about her flying experiences and was instrumental in the formation of The Ninety-Nines, an organization for female pilots. During an attempt to circumnavigate the globe in 1937, she disappeared in the central Pacific.

Olive Murray Chapman (1892-1977, British)

In the '30s, Chapman visited a variety of countries and wrote books about her travels

in Iceland, Cyprus, Madagascar and Lapland—books that included photographs and watercolors. Her writings about the cultures of Madagascar and Lapland gave brilliant insight to areas new to the “civilized” world.

Valentina Tereshkova (b. 1937, Russian)

She is the first and youngest woman to have flown in space with a solo mission on the *Vostok 6* on 16 June, 1963. She orbited the Earth 48 times, spent almost three days in space and remains the only woman to have been on a solo space mission. Tereshkova is a member of the Russian State Duma, remains active in the space community, and her legacy is widely celebrated in everything from books to museums to stage productions. In 2017, London's Science Museum opened a temporary exhibit called “Valentina Tereshkova: First Woman in Space,” which celebrated her contributions through artifacts as well as photographs.

Sylvia Alice Earle DSc (née Reade; b. 1935, American)

American marine biologist, explorer, author and lecturer. She has been a National Geographic explorer-in-residence since 1998. Earle was the first female chief scientist of



Sylvia Alice Earle

the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and was named by *Time Magazine* as its first Hero for the Planet in 1998. She is also part of the group Ocean Elders, which is dedicated to protecting the ocean and its wildlife. Earle tied the world solo dive depth record (1,000 m.) in a submarine.



A Timeline of Selected Early Female Adventurers

Queen Zenobia 240 - 274? CE

Queen of Palmyra (in modern Syria). Resisted the might of the Roman Empire.

Egeria (or Etheria or Aetheria) c. 380 CE

Pilgrim to the Holy Land, wrote a detailed account of her journey.

Grace O'Malley 1530-1603

Sea captain and fearless pirate who fought for her clan in Ireland.

Marie of the Incarnation 1599-1672

Ursuline nun who traveled to the New World to convert the inhabitants.

Maria Sibylla Merian 1647-1717

German botanist, traveled to Dutch Surinam to study metamorphosis.

Isabel Godin des Odonais 1728-1792

Chilean woman who traveled down the Amazon alone against terrible odds to meet her husband.

Weetamoo (or Weethao, Namumpum, etc.)

c. 1635-1676

Fearless Wampanoag chief during King Philips War in colonial New England, during a clash of cultures.

Jeanne Baret 1740-1807

French naturalist, First woman to circumnavigate the world (disguised as a man).

Eliza Fay 1755-1816

English letter writer and traveler to India.

Louisa Catherine Adams 1775-1852

English wife of U.S. President John Quincy Adams. Traveled in winter through Europe in 1815, at the end of the Napoleonic wars.

Hester Stanhope 1776-1839

British traveler, archeologist in the Holy Land.

Emily Eden 1797-1869

English poet and novelist. Traveled to India and wrote accounts of travel in *Up the Country*; "Thoroughly disliked traveling."

Ida Laura Pfeiffer 1797-1856

Austrian who traveled to Iceland, Europe, Egypt, S. America, and around the world.

Susanna Moodie 1803-1885

English-born Canadian author. Wrote about her experiences as a settler in Canada.

Mary Seacole 1803-1881

British-Jamaican businesswoman, served as a nurse during the Crimean War, traveled extensively.

Narcissa Whitman 1808-1847

American missionary. One of the first women to travel across the Rocky Mountains.

Anita Garibaldi 1821-1849

In her brief life, this fearless woman followed her true love and fought beside him in Brazil and Italy.

Marianne North 1830-1890

English biologist and botanical artist, traveled alone around the world.

Martha Maxwell 1831-1881

American naturalist and taxidermist traveled in the Rockies.

Amelia Edwards 1831-1892

English writer, traveler, and pioneering Egyptologist.

Lady Anne Blunt 1837-1917

English aristocrat who traveled through Arabia and the Middle East in Bedouin attire.

Florence Baker 1841-1916

Hungarian-born British explorer. Traveled with her husband in Africa in search of the source of the Nile.

May French Sheldon 1847-1936

American publisher, traveled alone in Africa.

Flora Annie Steel 1847-1929

Lived and traveled in the Punjab, India.

Jane Dieulafoy 1851-1916

French archaeologist, explorer, novelist and journalist. She dressed in men's clothing all the time.

Annie Royle Taylor 1855-1922

English explorer missionary to China, first western woman to visit Tibet, attempted to reach the "forbidden" city Lhasa.

Zelia Maria Magdalena Nutall 1857-1933

American archeologist and anthropologist who specialized in prehistoric cultures in Mexico.

Kate Marsden 1859-1931

British missionary, explorer, writer. Traveled to Siberia to find leprosy cure.

**Helga Etsby** 1860-1942

American who walked across the U.S. in 1896 to win a prize. She won!

Mary Kingsley 1862-1908

English ethnographer and explorer in West Africa.

Florence Augusta Merriam Bailey 1863-1948

American ornithologist did field work in the American West.

Mary Edith Durham 1863-1944

British traveler, artist, writer; famous for anthropological accounts of life in Albania.

Ella Sykes 1863-1939

English woman traveler, rode side-saddle through Persia in 1895, and rode yaks through central Asia.

Margaret Alice Murray 1863-1963

Anglo-Indian Egyptologist, archeologist, anthropologist, historian and folklorist.

Gertrude Bell 1868-1926

English explorer. Mapped much of the Middle East; hung out with T.E. Lawrence; called “Queen of the Desert.”

Delia Julia Akeley 1869-1970

American explorer in Africa, lived with Pygmies in Zaire.

Annie Londonderry 1870-1947

American, first woman to bicycle around the world.

Inez Mexia 1870-1938

Mexican botanist and adventurer—began her career at age 55!

Harriett Chalmers Adams 1875-1937

American writer, photographer. Explored South America, Haiti, Gobi Desert.

Isabelle Eberhard 1877-1904

Swiss explorer; traveled to Algeria, converted to Islam, dressed as a man.

Marguerite Baker Harrison 1879-1967

American reporter, spy, filmmaker—one of the founders of the Society of Women Geographers.

Louise Arner Boyd 1887-1972

American who explored Greenland and the Antarctic.

Rosita Forbes 1890-1967

English travel writer and explorer. She explored Egypt and Libya at a time when foreigners were forbidden.

Marthe Cnockaert (McKenna) 1892-1966

Spy in Belgium in World War I. Codename: Laura.

Freya Stark 1893-1993

British-Italian, traveled within and wrote about the Middle East.

Vera Brittain 1893-1970

British war nurse, pacifist, writer. Wrote about her experiences in World War I.

Phyllis Munday 1894-1990

Canadian mountaineer and explorer; had a mountain named in her honor.

Further Reading

One Thousand Miles Up the Nile by Amelia Edwards

My Journey to Lhasa by Alexandra David-Néel

Victorian Lady Travellers by Dorothy Middleton

On Top of the World by Luree Miller

Traveling Ladies by Alexandra Allen

Travels of Alexine by Penelope Gladstone

Ladies on the Loose by Leo Hamalian

Victorian Women Travel Writers in Africa by Catherine Barnes Stevenson

