Mary was nineteen when she met William Mason Scharlieb, a barrister whom she married on 19 December 1863; shortly afterwards they sailed for India. She borne two sons (1866 and 1870) and a daughter (1868). While in India, Scharlieb helped her husband collect material and write précis for the Madras Jurist journal that he was editing. She reviewed Sir Joseph Forrester’s article, which concerned the plight of Mahometan and Hindu women during childbirth, under the strict rules of purdah. Consequently, she studied midwifery and became a nurse in training at the lyving hospital in Madras. She later persuaded her husband’s professional contacts to support the right of women patients to have female medical practitioners. She was one of four new women students at the Madras Medical College, where she graduated in 1887 with a licentiate in medicine, surgery and midwifery. Later that year she returned to England and enrolled at the newly founded London School of Medicine for Women (LSMW). In 1882 she graduated MB from the University of London, the first woman to be awarded the Gold Medal and Exhibition in Obstetric Medicine.

On her return to India in 1883 Scharlieb saw the need for a hospital for women. With British Royal support, the government set up the Royal Victoria Caste and Cogha Hospital, where Scharlieb worked. She also lectured on midwifery, gynaecology and diseases of children at Madras Medical College. Scharlieb returned to London in 1887 and became the first woman to lecture in medical jurisprudence at the LSMW. In 1888 she was appointed Lecturer in Diseases of Women, became the first female medical practitioner in Harley Street, and in December of that year she graduated MD from London and MS in 1897, being the first woman to acquire these degrees. In 1892 Scharlieb was appointed gynaecologist to the Royal Free Hospital and thus became the first female member of staff of a London general hospital. She was also lecturer to the Queen’s Nurses and examiner to women candidates of the civil service. Ten years later she was appointed gynaecological surgeon at the Royal Free and in 1908 was made consulting gynaecological surgeon. Scharlieb became President of the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Section at the 1910 Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association. In 1917 she was elected to the presidency of the Lombok (Royal Free Hospital) School of Medicine for Women.

Scharlieb was concerned with issues arising out of nineteenth-century debates on race regeneration and social purity, and she sat on the Royal Commission on Venerable Diseases (1913-16). An advocate of state support for women who produced healthy children, she published several books and pamphlets on eugenics and the importance of the mother’s role in improving the next generation. In August 1917 she was awarded a CBE and in 1926 was created Dame of the British Empire.

Although she became a suffragist only towards the end of her life, due to her distinguished career as a gynaecological surgeon and her academic accolades, she was an asset to the women’s movement and an inspiration to the next generation of women medical students.

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Further Reading


MSV

SCHUMBURGK, Robert Herman (or Hermann) (1804-63)

Robert H. Schumburgk was born in Freiburg, Saxony, on 5 June 1804 and died in Berlin on 11 March 1865. From the German lands he came, and to them he returned in the end, but scientific collecting, cartographic surveying and civil service to the Crown of Victoria led this anglicized Prussian on a career of global penetration. After the age of twenty-two, while he made his way to Virginia on a commercial venture, Schumburgk seldom resided in Europe from the United States, to the Caribbean, South America and South-East Asia, he spent most of his life at the margins of expanding European colonial power in the nineteenth century.

Through apparently without formal training in hydrography, Schumburgk came to the attention of the recent Royal Geographical Society in the early 1830s, when he submitted to them a detailed chart of Aneagada, a treacherous, low, outlying island in the British Virgin Islands, notorious for its wrecks and wrecker. Approval and publication followed. In search of, as he put it, "a more ample field ... as a naturalist and geographer", he then volunteered his services to the Society by mail, expressing an interest in the botany of the Louisiana territories, but having no doubt that this would be content with any position offering his expedientary expenses (RGS Archive, Schumburgk Correspondence, Schumburgk to RGS 1832). By 1833 opportunity beckoned, and he was sent south to send Schumburgk to northern South America on an expedition of geographical investigation and plant collecting that would depart from the British colony of Demerara, and that might reach Bogota, traversing regions made familiar to English and Continental readers by the publication of Alexander von Humboldt's Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent. Wrote Schumburgk, "what advantage might Von Humboldt retrieve from such a field, which since Raleigh's time has created the greatest interest with geographers and haunted the imagination of adventurers" (RGs Archive, Schumburgk Correspondence, Schumburgk to RGS 1833). So began nearly a decade of intensive travel, surveying, natural history and ethnographic research in British Guiana and its environs. Through his publications (e.g., A Description of British Guiana, Geographical and Statistical, 1840; Twelve Views in the Interior of Guiana, 1841), his public exhibition of artefacts, specimens and even living Amazons, and his communications with the Colonial Office, the Colonial Society, missionary organizations and other institutions, Schumburgk was largely responsible for nineteenth-century metropolitan understanding of Britain's unique colony on the South American mainland.

Successful in his efforts to draw attention to the ambiguous extent of British territory, Schumburgk received a Crown commission in 1840 to survey and mark the boundaries of the colony, work that preoccupied him for half a decade, and that would see him knighted on his return to England in 1844. This work remains Schumburgk's most significant, if controversial, legacy: the boundaries of what has become the independent nation of Guyana have been a source of considerable discord, and the 'Schumburgk Line' was at issue in major international disputes at the turn of the century, disputes which have attracted partisans ever since.

Involved in railroad projecting in the Caribbean in the late 1840s, Schumburgk returned to the region, and composed a well-regarded study of the history, commercial prospects and natural productions of Barbados. In 1848 he became British consul in Santo Domingo, where, in addition to pursuing his scientific avocations (charting, botany, ethnography) he embarked on a diplomatic career. His success defending and extending British trading interests in the Dominican Republic led to a further posting as British consul in St. Vincent in 1857. Continuing to publish notes on the natural history, he was made a
Schomburgk's name remains attached to a number of plants and animals that he and his brother, Richard (also a skilled botanist, who accompanied Robert on part of his South American journeys, and who would go on to head the Botanical Garden at Adelaide), helped bring to taxonomic attention. Robert's greatest botanical coup, however, wears the name of the sovereign he took pride in serving: the giant water lily once known as the Victoria regia, now Victoria amazonica. In 1837, during a singularly unsuccessful effort to reach the Guayana highlands on the Corentyne river, Schomburgk came upon a pool that harboured this "vegetable wonder" whose leaves can spread to a diameter of eight feet and whose blossoms are as large as a man's head. Delftly, the Royal Geographical Society offered the flower (or, rather, a painting of it) to Victoria on her accession to the throne, and the giant lily would go on to become a Victorian sensation, particularly after the duke of Devonshire's redoubtable gardener, Joseph Paxton, succeeded in cultivating a live bud in the hothouse of Chatsworth in 1849. Paxton would later claim that he based his design for the Crystal Palace on the plant's marvellous structure, sealing the Victoria regia in the glass and steel pantheon of the Victorian age. It would be remiss not to note that several other botanical explorers, not to mention countless Amerindians, had plausible claims to priority on the discovery of this remarkable, but not particularly rare, plant. On botanical matters, particularly concerning orchids, Schomburgk provided observations of interest to Charles Darwin, whom he would presumably have met when presenting his 'Remarks on the Geology of British Guiana' to the Geological Society of London in 1839, during Darwin's tenure as Secretary. In February 1848 Darwin wrote of inviting the Guiana explorer for the weekend to Down, though it appears he did not attend the gathering in question. Darwin would, however, later draw on Schomburgk's ethnographic observations of the Taruma in the important discussion of "savages" in The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication (1868), and cited his work on birds and plants in other publications.

While extensive geographical exploration through very difficult terrain, and the maps that came of this work, must be accounted Schomburgk's greatest achievement (he was awarded the Patron's Medal by the Royal Geographical Society in 1840), he should also be remembered for his sympathetic view of the Amerindian communities he encountered in those travels. Though increasingly pessimistic about their possibilities for survival, and always committed to Christian missionary work in their midst, he nevertheless consistently expressed concern about the well-being of these peoples, and worked to draw the attention of those in power to their plight. His long periods traversing the interior in the company of Maisuki, Akawiso, Patamuna, and Taruma guides enhanced his appreciation for the skills and local knowledge of the inhabitants of the region, from whom he consistently drew intelligence, and on whom he often depended.

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