

The River Nile * 3 – Speke of DeNile (1827-1864)

The history of Nile exploration is made of legends and amazing stories. The first question that Alexander the Great asked when he came to the temple of Jupiter Ammon in Luxor was what caused the Nile to rise? Julius Caesar said that the one thing he most wanted to know about the world was where the source of the Nile was. In ancient Greece, the source of the Nile was considered one of the Earth's most compelling mysteries, written about extensively by the 460 BC historian Herodotus, who believed the river sprang from between two massive mountains. The Emperor Nero sent two centurions to follow the Nile to its origin. They returned to Rome and reported that they "came close to immense swamps of which not even the local people knew the end".

Before 1850, maps of the continent had blank centres or were filled with guesswork and monsters in an area that covered almost half of Africa. Formidable obstacles prevented travellers from venturing far inland; disease, hostile tribes, harsh climates, wild animals and difficult terrain all contributed to keeping central Africa unknown and unreported to the outside world. Finding the source of the White Nile provided much of the motivation for European exploration of Africa in the 19th century.



In 1854, John Hanning Speke (previously an officer in the British Army in India) met the renowned explorer and raconteur Richard Burton (1821-1890). Together they went on a voyage of exploration to Somaliland. On the 19th April their party was ambushed and many of the party were killed. Burton was speared through the mouth and Speke was captured and speared in both legs but with perseverance and luck they both escaped.

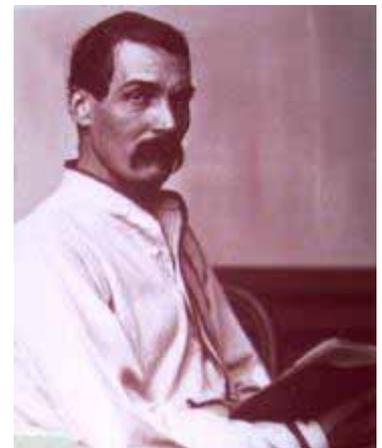
The *Royal Geographical Society*, a London based organisation which promoted and funded exploration in many parts of the World, in 1856 asked Burton was asked to lead an expedition to explore the River Nile. He chose Speke as a partner. Because of expense and time, a decision was made to march inland from East Africa rather than follow the River from Egypt upstream. They landed in Zanzibar at the beginning of 1857 and started inland from the coast, at Bagamoyo, on 27th June. A very difficult trek, often threatened by

warlike tribes, robbed by their own porters and besieged by sickness; took them to Tabora, a town used by Arab slaver collectors. There they received information about the 'inland sea' that they were seeking. It was not one but three great lakes. To the south was *Niassa* (Lake Malawi), west to *Ujiji* (Lake Tanganyika), and north was *Ukerewe* (Lake Victoria).

The expedition continued west. By the time that they reached the 'Sea of Ujiji', Speke was almost blind (probably from *river blindness*) and one night a beetle crawled in his ear, got stuck and rotted causing him to become deaf in one ear!

Despite the handicaps, Burton and Speke set out in a canoe towards the north end of the lake but were stopped by local men who told them that the river at the end of the lake flowed into it – Lake Tanganyika could not be the source of the Nile. They decided that this must lie in the mountains to the west but with supplies running low, Burton decided that the only option was to try later, following the Nile upstream from Gondokoro in southern Sudan and they headed back to Tabora.

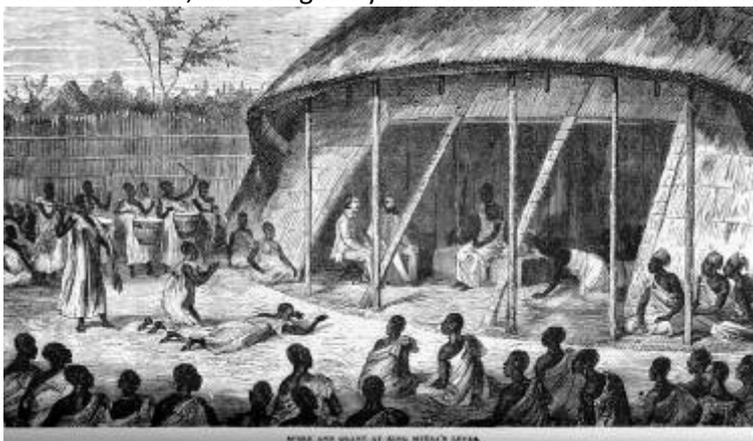
The team recovered there and rested through the rainy season. Speke had recovered and decided to find the *Sea of Ukerewe*. With a few porters he headed due north and on the 3rd August 1858 he sighted a huge 'sea' of fresh water. He assumed that Lake Victoria was the source of the White Nile and rushed back to share the news with Burton, who argued that Speke had not seen enough of the lake to be sure and that Lake Victoria was too far east to be the *source* of the Nile. They returned to Zanzibar together but Speke returned to England first. He had promised not to discuss their findings but met an old friend of Burton's, a journalist called Laurence Oliphant, who published the story. Almost overnight Speke was famous as the man who had found the Source of the Nile. Both Burton and Speke were awarded gold medals by the Royal Geographical Society. When Burton arrived in England two weeks later his chance for glory had gone. Jealous and convinced that Speke was wrong, a very public quarrel ensued.



Burton was criticised, Speke was a hero, but no one had yet confirmed to the outside world that Nile did flow out of Lake Victoria. The RGS planned another expedition to be led by Speke. He chose James Augustus Grant, a friend from his army days, as his companion, while John Petherick, the British consul in Khartoum, was ordered to send ships upstream the Nile to Gondokoro to aid the explorers in their voyage back home. The Expedition departed Zanzibar on October 2nd, 1860. His journal 'The Discovery of the Source of The Nile' is an awe-inspiring if sometimes laborious account written by an very unusual man, still very much a product of the Victorian era. They started with over 150 porters and soldiers as an escort. Huge quantities of *hongo* (toll payments being mainly; beads, brass wire and cloth) were slowly whittled away as the Expedition's progressed through what is now Tanzania and around the western shores of *Victoria Nyanza*.



Reading between the lines there is an incredible tale involving the meeting of very different outlooks and attitudes. Speke and Grant show remarkable patience and perseverance in the face of extreme difficulties, always embracing a 'Victorian' mind-set. His journal is a saga of subterfuge and endless scheming as the pair relentlessly pushed onwards from one chiefdom or kingdom to the next, bestowing *hongo*, often as a condition of survival and losing large amounts through theft. They also had major problems hiring and retaining porters. The region was in chaos through on-going wars among the local tribes, encouraged by the Arab slavers and failure of rains meant that there was famine all along the route.



Grant became very ill was unable to travel for several months while Speke continued ahead with half the party.

Finally Speke reached the Buganda kingdom and arrived at King Mtesa's palace in the province of *Bandawarago*. Grant had been left behind on the west side of the lake as he was too ill to travel. Further delays occurred as Speke waited until Grant and was promised but never offered permission to continue east to where he was told that a mighty river left the Nyanza. In the several months that

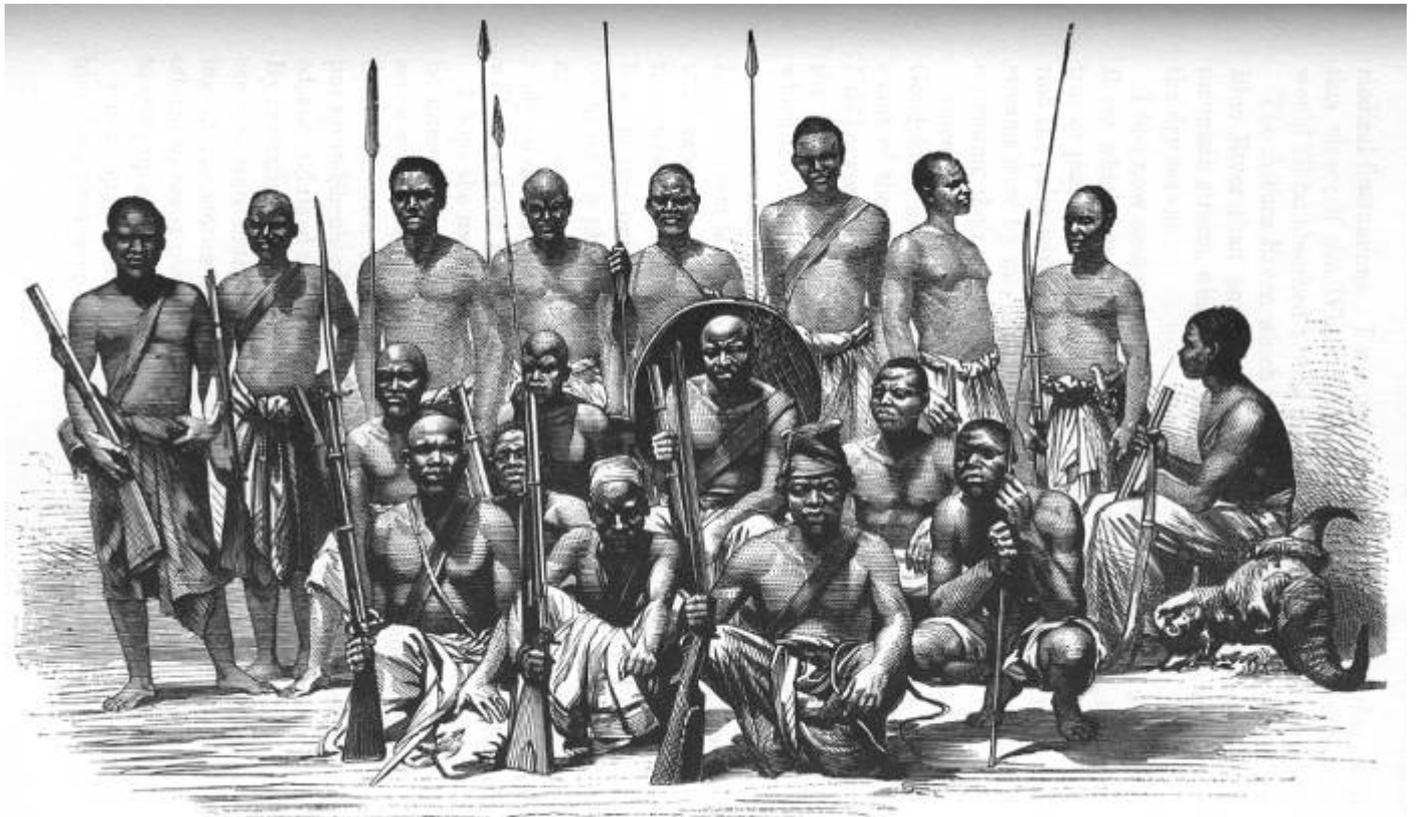
Speke spent attending Mtesa he was able to learn much about the customs and traditions, providing a fascinating and unique record at that time of initial European contact. Speke travelled as a prince rather than a trader, and insisted on being treated as such. Once Speke offered a gun to the king, and to test it, the king gave it to a young servant with the order to go and shoot someone. The boy quickly returned saying that the gun worked very well!



After several months, although Grant was again to ill to travel, Speke took the first opportunity to continue, arriving on the banks of the Nile some 50 km downstream from where the Victoria Nile leaves the lake, at a place he called Urendogani, on July 21, 1862. From here he travelled upstream and 6 days later reached Rippon Falls,



THE RIPON FALLS—THE NILE FLOWING OUT OF VICTORIA N'YANZA.



SPEKE'S FAITHFULS.

visually confirming the river's starting point. He then travelled west to meet with Grant who had recovered and together they travelled north, crossing the Nile just above Karuma Falls and into the kingdom of Unyoro. Eventually he was permitted to visit the court of King Kamrasio. Again the King's and his followers' desire for gifts and political intrigue resulted in them being held for agonising, long weeks.

The remnants of the expedition were finally allowed to continue downstream, but not permitted further west, and so were unable to travel along the Nile past what became known as Murchison Falls and Lake Albert. This opportunity was instead taken up soon afterwards by Samuel (later Sir) Baker who is another European adventurer closely associated with exploration of the Nile.



After following the river downstream to Egypt, the Expedition over, the remaining African servants and porters returned to Zanzibar while Speke and Grant went back to England. In a footnote to the account, the longstanding argument between Burton and Speke continued. A debate at the Royal Geographical Society was arranged but 2 days prior to this Speke died by his own hand in what was officially described as a hunting accident. Burton and several others believed that Speke had committed suicide.

The well known British explorer and missionary David Livingstone failed in his attempt to verify Speke's discovery, instead pushing too far west and entering the Congo River system instead. Ultimately it was the Welsh-American explorer Henry Morton Stanley who verified Speke's 'discovery', by circumnavigating Lake Victoria and reporting the great outflow at Ripon Falls on the Lake's northern shore. There are two monuments to Speke; in London at Hyde Park and in the Nile Gardens on

the west bank opposite Jinja in Uganda.

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