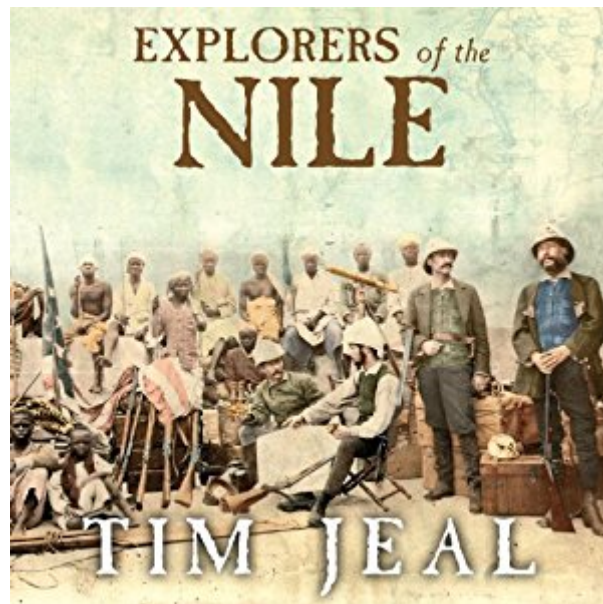


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Explorers Of The Nile: The Triumph And Tragedy Of A Great Victorian Adventure



Synopsis

From award-winning author Tim Jeal comes a vivid examination of the six larger-than-life men and one extraordinary woman who set out to find the source of the White Nile in the 19th century.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It is hard to know which was the greater task, discovering the sources of the Nile or discovering just who did that, as Tim Jeal goes to heroic lengths to establish his hero, Speke, as the un-credited one. It is a dramatic tale, and Jeal's sense of injustice having been done in this determination, he makes sure you get the correct picture; being the author, he has taken on the roles of judge and jury, infusing it with new layers of passion. This skews the evidence always in favor of Speke and to the detriment of most anyone else, particularly Sir Richard Burton. It appears to start with Speke's unhappiness at being refused permission by the British Resident to explore in Africa, until Burton is on the horizon, and he is told he may go into the interior, IF he can get Burton to sponsor him (p 45). His unspoken grudge at being beholden to Burton spurs his every observation, the sting of ingratitude like the bite of an asp, and poisons the venture, as well as Jeal's retelling: although Burton desires to have no engagement with the prevalence of slaves, they are called porters or bearers in relation to Speke, but become slaves when it is a very sick Burton they carry (p.83) When the chronometers fall out of commission, no blame is leveled (p 73), though it was Speke's job to mind them (p 58); Jeal loves to use hindsight to excoriate Burton for such lapses of judgment as not buying enough cloth or beads for trade (p68), yet when it is noted that Speke 'perfectly well knew'

Somalis were a grave danger in the area of their campsite and did not speak up (p 51), there is no note about his failure, although they became victims of a vicious Somali raid in the morning and were lucky to escape though badly wounded.

By the nineteenth century, the greatest unsolved geographical riddle was: where does the Nile come from? It was an ancient question; Herodotus and Alexander the Great had pondered it. The mystery was that the river flowed through over a thousand miles of desert in which it got no inflow from any tributary. It was only through the often agonizing efforts of a few explorers that the answer became clear. It was a group effort made by Richard Burton, John Hanning Speke, David Livingstone, Henry Morton Stanley, and others, but there was competition and personal nastiness between them. The greatest conflict was between the once-partners Burton and Speke, and because of Burton's astonishing range of interests and influence, Speke's contribution has often been downgraded. *Explorers of the Nile: The Triumph and Tragedy of a Great Victorian Adventure* (Yale University Press) by Tim Jeal is revisionist, in that it seeks to place Speke in a far brighter light than before, and to rescue him from a reputation that Burton took the first steps to sully. Burton looks worse after reading this big, exciting, and surprising history, and Speke looks brighter, and the entire enterprise of all the explorers looks more heroic and optimistic. We can't do exploration the same way today, and Jeal helps us understand how the death-defying adventures of these men, which might seem to us perversely self-destructive, were in accord with Victorian ideals of chivalry and redemption through suffering. Jeal centers on the contributions of Burton and Speke. The two were badly matched. Burton was a brilliant blusterer, always conscious of his image, while the younger Speke was modest and easy-going, and had no reputation to keep up.

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