



RIVER *of the* GODS



GENIUS, COURAGE,
and BETRAYAL
in the SEARCH *for the*
SOURCE *of the* NILE



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Also by Candice Millard

Hero of the Empire
Destiny of the Republic
The River of Doubt

River *of the* Gods



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IN THE SEARCH
FOR THE SOURCE OF THE NILE



Candice Millard

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FOR MY CHILDREN

The lake rippled from one end of the world to the other.

Wide as a sea cradled in a giant's palm.

—*“Sidi Mubarak Bombay” by Ranjit Hoskote*

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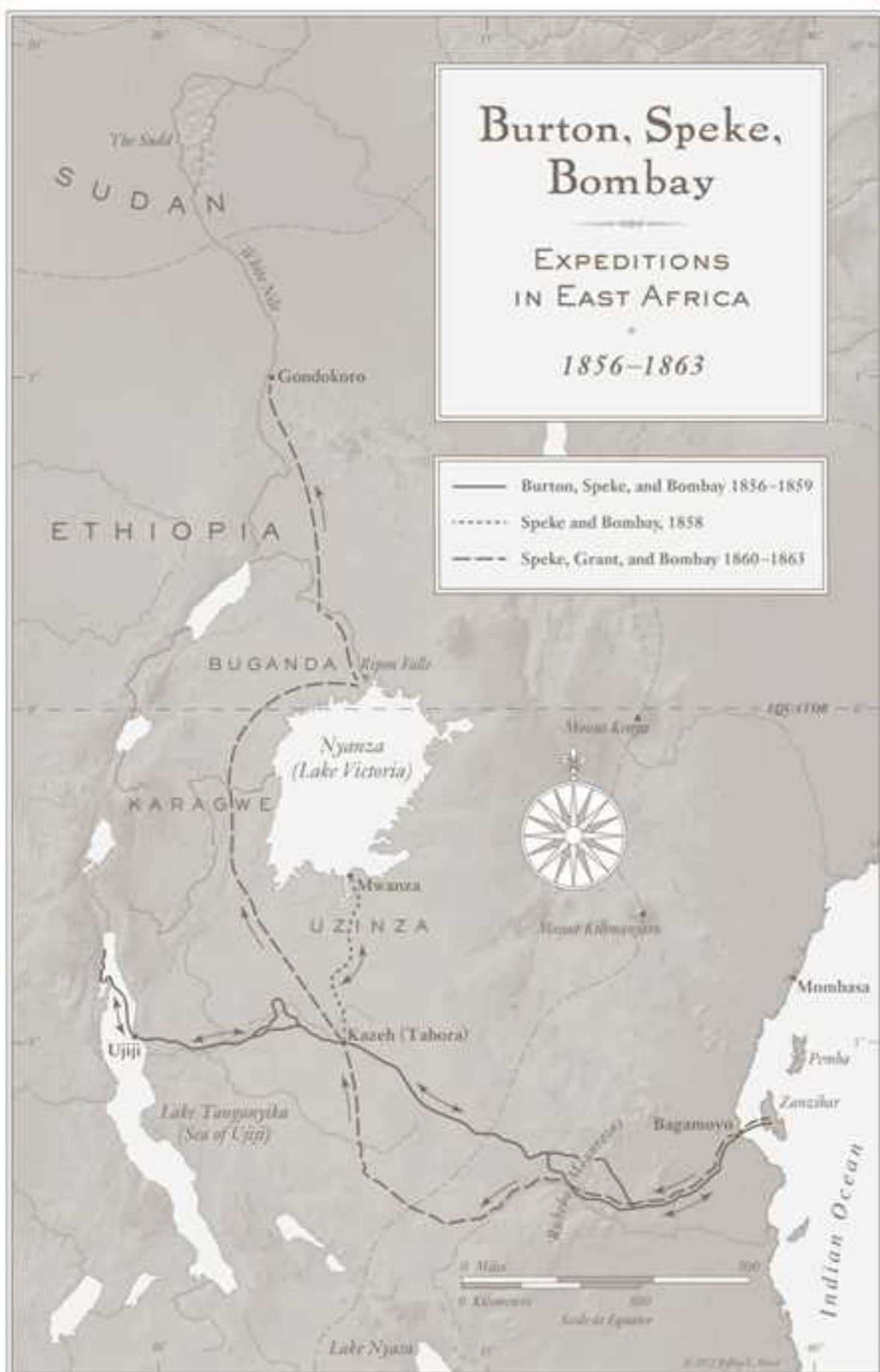


Burton, Speke, Bombay

EXPEDITIONS
IN EAST AFRICA

1856-1863

- Burton, Speke, and Bombay 1856-1859
- Speke and Bombay, 1858
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Prologue

OBSESSION

As he walked through the storied gates of Alexandria in the fall of 1801, a young British officer named William Richard Hamilton found himself in the middle of a stunning tableau—abject misery set against the lost grandeur of the Pharaohs. Once the ancient world’s greatest center of learning, the city of Alexandria was now a burning ruin, caught in the grip of a European war played out on African land. In the wake of Britain’s crushing victory over Napoleonic France, injured soldiers lay dying in the scorching sun; prisoners freed from dungeons dragged their battered bodies through the streets; starving families fought over the last of the armies’ dead horses. To Hamilton, however, the moment was the opportunity of a lifetime. On his own, the twenty-four-year-old Cambridge-educated classicist had been sent to Egypt with a single mission: to find the Rosetta Stone.

Largely ignored for centuries by European elites schooled in the glory and languages of Greece and Rome, Egyptian culture had only recently begun to receive recognition for its astonishing achievements and even greater antiquity, making it a new and especially coveted prize for European powers obsessed by military and cultural supremacy. Three years earlier, in the summer of 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte had landed on the Egyptian coast, hoping to weaken Britain by blocking its land route to India. That conventional military objective, however, also forced open the door for a far more audacious scientific and cultural conquest. Behind his invading troops, Napoleon brought another, highly trained army—for scholars. These ambitious men from France, known as “savants,” were charged with appropriating everything they could unearth from the tombs

or pry from the ground, attempting to assert French sovereignty over Egypt's ancient culture. They measured the head of the Great Sphinx, mapped Cairo, surveyed towns, and painted everything that could not be rolled up and carried away. These men, botanists and engineers, artists and geologists, were living, as one of them excitedly wrote home, "at the center of a flaming core of reason," and they believed that there was no greater symbol of their military and intellectual power than their seizing of the Rosetta Stone.

Although its neatly carved hieroglyphs were as yet undeciphered, the stone offered access to the spectacular mysteries that European scholars now realized were waiting for them along Egypt's Nile River—mysteries that predated anything they understood, and that promised to rewrite everything they knew about history. The French had unearthed the forty-five-inch-tall stone two years earlier, in the summer of 1799, when Napoleon's soldiers were trying to reinforce a crumbling, ancient fort on the west bank of the Nile, in the port of Rosetta. His officers immediately recognized that the dark gray slab was an object of extraordinary value, what scholars spent lifetimes hoping to find. On its face was etched a two-thousand-year-old decree written in three different languages: two unknown—Demotic, once the everyday language of the Egyptian people, and hieroglyphs, the tantalizingly mysterious language of its priests—and one known: ancient Greek, which had the power to unlock the other two. News of the find had spread quickly, and scholars and scientists throughout Europe began speaking in hushed tones of the Rosetta Stone.

That Napoleon should possess such a treasure map to ancient wisdom was intolerable to France's imperial rival, Britain. Emerging victorious from the bloody siege of Alexandria, the British now demanded their rights as conquerors: every sarcophagus, every sculpture, every gleaming golden scarab, and, most of all, the Rosetta Stone. In defeat, hiding the stone had been France's only remaining option, so despite its massive size—estimated at some three quarters of a ton—Napoleon's soldiers had already moved it several times, from the fort where it was found, then to Cairo, and, finally, to Alexandria. Now it was in a warehouse, concealed in a pile of ordinary baggage and covered with mats. For the benefit of the British, the French let a rumor circulate that the stone was already gone, slipped aboard a ship

leaving for Europe in the middle of the night, just as Bonaparte himself had done as soon as defeat had appeared imminent.

William Richard Hamilton, however, refused to accept such evasions. Working his way through the rubble of Alexandria, he would not believe that the Rosetta Stone had left Egypt and demanded to know where it was hidden. The commanding French general, who had personally supervised much of the cultural plunder, raged at the irritatingly determined young man, accusing the British of extorting him with “a cannon in each of my ears, and another in my mouth” and uttering a phrase that would live on as a timeless caricature of imperial double standards. “*Jamais on n’a pillé le monde!*” he railed scornfully—“the world had never been so pillaged!” As he knew he would, Hamilton eventually discovered the stone’s hiding place, and five months later, carried aboard the captured French frigate HMS *Égyptienne*, it finally reached London, where it immediately became the greatest treasure in the British Museum.

Far from quenching Europe’s interest in the mysteries of the Nile, the arrival of the Rosetta Stone fueled a decades-long obsession with Egypt, Middle Eastern cultures, and “orientalism.” By the time the stone’s hieroglyphs were finally deciphered twenty-three years later by a French scholar named Jean-François Champollion, Europe’s fascination with Egyptian history and the Nile Valley had grown into a full-scale frenzy. Once the cryptic secrets of the Pharaohs’ forgotten language were unlocked, they opened a floodgate of interest and scholarship, which in turn cascaded through popular culture. From archaeology to art, poetry to fashion, the allure of a vast, gleaming civilization lost in time proved irresistible to the public. Generations of aristocrats would devote their money and time competing to unearth new dimensions of this ancient world, and to reconcile it with the classical Greek and Roman texts and history they had been steeped in from their first days in school. Among the most beguiling of the stories they had read were the wide-ranging theories about the source of the Nile, from speculations by the Greek historian Herodotus to the failed expeditions of Roman emperor Nero’s elite Praetorian Guard.

Having vaulted his country to the forefront of this new trend, Hamilton, like the rest of the world, only grew more captivated by the

secrets of the Nile. As his youthful features became creased with lines and his patrician chin softened with age, he intensified his study, publishing his own translation of the Greek portion of the Rosetta Stone. Adding yet another controversial cultural icon to his record, he helped retrieve the Parthenon Sculptures after one of the ships carrying them sank to the bottom of the sea. In 1830, he then helped enshrine Britain's national preoccupation in institutional form by becoming an original member and later president of the Royal Geographical Society, even giving it its Latin motto: *Ob terras reclusas*—"For the discovery of lands."

Putting its greatest minds and vast imperial fortunes behind the task of exploring humanity's ancient roots, Britain rapidly took a leading role in the new fields that were opened up by that quest, with the Royal Geographical Society as its principal organizer and advocate. Even as it filled the British Museum with artifacts appropriated by imperial force, however, the Society's ambitions in pursuing ancient Egypt to the headwaters of the Nile were frustrated by the sheer scale of the majestic river, the longest in the world, which defeated countless attempts to reach its origins. Standing in the way of any attempted exploration were vast uncharted territories, defended by local peoples and countless physical hardships, that were presumed to conceal the secret heritage of the entire modern world.

Rather than fighting their way upriver, which would also entail discerning which of the bewildering number of tributaries would qualify as the principal source of the Nile, explorers shifted their attention to a bold alternative plan: landing on the eastern coast of Africa, well below the equator, and proceeding inland in hopes of finding the watershed where a stream began to course northward on the four-thousand-mile journey to Egypt. This epic end-around tactic was supported by rumors of a giant lake region that was said to exist in the central part of the continent. This strategy also took advantage of Britain's burgeoning military and naval strength, allowing the explorers to transport their supplies and equipment by sea to key ports and staging areas such as Aden and the island of Zanzibar, which lay protected by twenty miles of sea just off the coast where an expedition would need to land and start its journey inland.

By bringing British explorers into direct contact with the interior of Africa this undertaking would effectively reconnect, as DNA analysis

would later prove, a culture from a more recent site of development to some of the most ancient lands where human migration first began. It thus set the stage for the “discovery” of regions that had in fact been occupied continuously by human beings for hundreds of thousands of years longer than London or Paris. As similar encounters from Hispaniola to Peru had amply proved, however, the disparity of power and resources between the two sides in such meetings was fraught with the potential for tragedy and exploitation. The consequences of that dangerous asymmetry had been demonstrated in Africa over the preceding centuries, as European, North American, and Arab traders who moved between two worlds capitalized on their power by enslaving African peoples and selling them for profit. For explorers, that wrenching injustice was as much a reality of the region as geography or climate, shaping everything from the location of ports and availability of food to the paths they would follow. In fact, their own efforts would doubtless lead to the plunder of the very land they wished to explore. As the British writer Samuel Johnson had written less than a century earlier, after the Arctic expedition of Captain Constantine Phipps, “I do not wish well to discoveries for I am always afraid they will end in conquest and robbery.”

Still, with all of Britain’s growing knowledge and imperial might, the task of searching such an unfamiliar region for the source of a faraway river was so difficult and forbidding that it remained all but impossible. By the 1850s, with Britain’s national pride engaged and the prestige of transformative scientific discovery and the plans for imperial expansion at stake, the Royal Geographical Society resolved to mount one of the most complex and demanding expeditions ever attempted. Although among its members were scientific luminaries that ranged from Charles Darwin to David Livingstone, the Society knew that this undertaking would require experience and insight that were beyond the reach of anything it had accomplished in the past. It would need the help of skilled African guides and porters, a heavy debt that was rarely acknowledged, but it would also need more than just an explorer. It would need a scientist and scholar, an artist and linguist, an extraordinarily skilled writer and an ambitious, obsessive researcher—an army of savants in a single man.

Part One



Some
Gallant Heart

CHAPTER ONE

A Blaze of Light

Sitting on a thin carpet in his tiny, rented room in Suez, Egypt, in 1854, Richard Francis Burton calmly watched as five men cast critical eyes over his meager belongings. The men, whom he had just met on the Hajj, the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, “looked at my clothes, overhauled my medicine chest, and criticised my pistols,” Burton wrote. “They sneered at my copper-cased watch.” He knew that if they discovered the truth, that he was not Shaykh Abdullah, an Afghan-born Indian doctor and devout, lifelong Muslim but a thirty-two-year-old lieutenant in the army of the British East India Company, not only would his elaborately planned expedition be in grave danger, but so would his life. Burton, however, was not worried. Even when his new friends found his sextant, the most indispensable, and obviously Western, scientific instrument in his possession, he did not think that he had anything to fear. “This,” he later wrote, “was a mistake.”

Burton’s goal was to do something that no other Englishman had ever done, and that few had either the ability or audacity to do: enter Mecca disguised as a Muslim. It was an undertaking that simultaneously acknowledged what was most sacred to the Muslim faith and dismissed the right to protect it, making it irresistible to Burton, who studied every religion and respected none. The birthplace of the prophet Muhammad, Mecca is the holiest site in Islam and, as such, forbidden to non-Muslims. Burton knew that, “to pass through the Moslem’s Holy Land, you must either be a born believer, or have become one,” but he had never even

considered performing the Hajj as a convert. “Men do not willingly give information to a ‘new Moslem,’ especially a Frank [European]: they suspect his conversion to be feigned or forced, look upon him as a spy, and let him see as little of life as possible,” he wrote. “I would have given up the dear project rather than purchase a doubtful and partial success at such a price.” An Oxford dropout, self-taught scholar, compulsive explorer, and extraordinarily skilled polyglot, Burton wanted unfettered access to every holy site he reached, the trust of every man he met, and the answer to every ancient mystery he encountered—nothing less, he wrote, than to see and understand “Moslem inner life.” He also wanted to return to England alive.

By disguising himself as a Muslim, Burton was risking the righteous wrath of those for whom the Hajj was the most sacred of religious rites. Although “neither the Koran nor the Sultan enjoins the killing of Hebrew or Christian intruders,” he knew, “in the event of a pilgrim declaring himself to be an infidel, the authorities would be powerless to protect him.” A single error could cost him his life. “A blunder, a hasty action, a misjudged word, a prayer or bow, not strictly the right shibboleth,” he wrote, “and my bones would have whitened the desert sand.”

Burton’s plan, moreover, required crossing the Rub’ al-Khali—“Empty Quarter”—the world’s largest continuous desert and, in his words, a “huge white blot” on nineteenth-century maps. So ambitious was the expedition that it had captured the attention of the president of the Royal Geographical Society, Sir Roderick Impey Murchison. For Murchison, who had helped to found the Society nearly a quarter of a century earlier, this was exactly the kind of exploration that the Society had been created to encourage. He “honored me,” Burton wrote, “by warmly supporting...my application for three years’ leave of absence on special duty.” The East India Company, a 250-year-old private corporation with armies of its own, had argued that the journey was too dangerous and that Burton, who had made more enemies than friends during his years in the military, should be given no more than a one-year furlough. The Royal Geographical Society stood by its promise to help finance the expedition. For a challenge of this magnitude, Murchison believed, Burton was “singularly well-qualified.”

Although the members of the Royal Geographical Society were impressed by Burton's achievements, most had reservations about this unusual young man who seemed to be British in name only. Burton had been born in Devon, on the English Channel, but he had spent far less time in his homeland than he had roaming the rest of the world. It was a pattern that had begun early in life, when his father, Joseph Netterville Burton, a retired lieutenant colonel in the British Army, moved his family to France before Richard's first birthday. Over the next eighteen years, he moved thirteen more times, briefly settling in towns from Blois to Lyons, Marseilles to Pau, Pisa to Siena, Florence, Rome, and Naples. By the time he was an adult, Burton, along with his younger siblings, Maria and Edward, felt less like a citizen of the world than a man without a country. "In consequence of being brought up abroad, we never thoroughly understood English society," he wrote, "nor did society understand us."

Not only did Burton not feel British, he had often been told, and never in an admiring way, that neither did he look particularly British. No one who met him ever forgot his face. Bram Stoker, who would go on to write *Dracula*, was shaken by his first encounter with Burton. "The man riveted my attention," Stoker later wrote. "He was dark, and forceful, and masterful, and ruthless.... I never saw anyone like him. He is steel! He would go through you like a sword!" Burton's friend, the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, wrote that he had "the jaw of a devil and the brow of a god," and described his eyes as having "a look of unspeakable horror." Burton's black eyes, which he had inherited from his English-Irish father, seemed to mesmerize everyone he met. Friends, enemies, and acquaintances described them variously as magnetic, imperious, aggressive, burning, even terrible, and compared them to every dangerous wild animal they could think of, from a panther to a "stinging serpent." Equally striking were his thick, black hair, his deep, resonant voice, and even his teeth, which may have inspired literature's most iconic vampire. Stoker would never forget watching, enthralled, as Burton spoke, his upper lip rising menacingly. "His canine tooth showed its full length," he wrote, "like the gleam of a dagger."

Burton had grown up fighting, from street brawls to school skirmishes to violent encounters with enraged tutors. Although his father had dragged

his children from one European town to another, he wanted for them a British education, which began at a grim boarding school in Richmond. All that Burton remembered learning at the school, which he described as “the ‘Blacking-shop’ of Charles Dickens,” was “a certain facility in using our fists, and a general development of ruffianism. I was in one perpetual scene of fights; at one time I had thirty-two affairs of honor to settle.” When he and Edward were finally sent back to Boulogne, after an attack of measles killed several boys and shut down the school, they scandalized everyone on their ship by joyously celebrating the fact that they were leaving England at last. “We shrieked, we whooped, we danced for joy. We shook our fists at the white cliffs, and loudly hoped we should never see them again,” he wrote. “We hurrah’d for France, and hooted for England; ‘The Land on which the Sun ne’er sets—nor rises.’”

Burton’s father taught him chess, but most of what he learned came from a succession of alternately terrifying and terrified tutors. No matter the subject, the tutors were given permission to beat their pupils, until the pupils were old enough to beat them back. In later years, Burton would express his sorrow for the incalculable harm done by “that unwise saying of the wise man, ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child.’” As a teenager, he fought back. The poor, nervous musician Burton’s parents hired to teach him violin —“nerves without flesh, hung on wires,” as Burton would later contemptuously describe him, “all hair and no brain”—finally quit after his student broke a violin over his head.

The only childhood teacher Burton respected was his fencing master, a former soldier who had only one thumb, having lost the other in battle. Richard and his brother threw themselves into fencing with such wild enthusiasm that their studies nearly ended in tragedy. “We soon learned not to neglect the mask,” Richard wrote. “I passed my foil down Edward’s throat, and nearly destroyed his uvula, which caused me a good deal of sorrow.” The lessons, however, not only paid off but eventually produced one of the most skilled swordsmen in Europe. Burton earned the coveted French title *Maître d’Armes*; perfected two sword strokes, the *une-deux* and the *manchette*—an upward slashing movement that disabled an opponent, often sparing his life; and wrote both *The Book of the Sword* and *A Complete System of Bayonet Exercise*, which the British Army published the