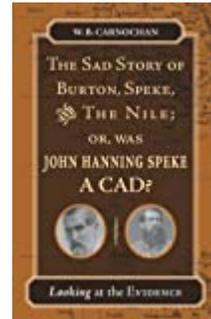


W. B. Carnochan. *The Sad Story of Burton, Speke, and the Nile: Or, Was John Hanning Speke a Cad.* Stanford: Stanford General Books, 2006. xii + 140 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-5571-9.



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The topic of this book is the conflict between Captain Sir Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke over the discovery of the source of the Nile. In summary, Speke claimed that he discovered the source of the Nile when he first saw Lake Victoria in 1858; Burton rejected this claim on grounds of insufficient evidence. The conflict began with Burton and Speke's expedition to East Africa in the late 1850s and in one sense ended with Speke's death in September 1864. Speke died of an apparent hunting accident (some say suicide) the evening before he and Burton were to debate their theories in Bath at the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Despite the tragedy, the controversy over the discovery continued long after Speke's death in two ways: the continued search for the source of the Nile and the controversy over the validity of Speke's claim to have found it in 1858. Empirical contributions to the geographical problem were made by Samuel and Florence Baker, Henry Morton Stanley, James Cameron, the members of Livingstone's Zambesi Expedition, and others. In Britain, analysts such as James Macqueen used classical, Arab, and Portuguese sources to offer further opinions. All of this exploration and scholarship added observations and puzzles that were slowly synthesized into a Victorian understanding of the region's hydrography. Concerning the validity of Speke's claim the controversy persists today, with biographers, historians, and

modern "explorers" continuing to exchange thoughts on whether Speke's claim to discovering the source of the Nile was empirically justified and if Burton's attack on Speke's claim was overzealous.

The approach taken by Carnochan to examine this story will be described below, but first some points of criticism. For the uninitiated general reader *The Sad Story of Burton, Speke and the Nile* will not serve as an easy introduction. The text throws one into the fray of the "Nile Controversy" very quickly and some familiarity with the Victorian exploration of Africa in the 1850s and 1860s is expected of the reader. It seems a shame to have this wider context only thinly introduced when this would help the reader to understand why there was a controversy at all and make for a richer story. After reading *The Sad Story* we may rightly ask why it was necessary to make claims to know where the source of the Nile lay when prudence indicated that further data were required: what was everyone so excited about? For those who know nothing of this story a more general biography of Burton's life or even the film *Mountains of the Moon* (1990) is recommended as a prerequisite; then they should turn to this focused study.

Those who are familiar with the Nile Controversy may wonder if Carnochan's latest book is itself necessary, especially given the extensive writing that already

exists on the topic. Indeed, the book's self-limitation to "redress the balance [typically favoring Burton] by examining the conflict as it was waged in a series of duelling texts by the protagonists" (p. 2) would seem to indicate that it covers already travelled ground. Nevertheless, those who have studied this controversy would do well to read this book because *The Sad Story* puts the bulk of the textual material in one place and glosses it effectively. Carnochan raises new questions and opens avenues for further digging in unpublished manuscripts. We can still learn more, and this book sets a baseline for scholars and interested readers alike as to what is known and how it has previously been interpreted; this is no small thing to have accomplished.

It appears that the main reason this book was written at all is because there is an exciting piece of new evidence for the controversy. This book reveals a recent bibliographic discovery by the author. Late in the text (probably too late) we learn of eight lost pages that were written by Speke and printed only for his family. In these pages Speke discusses his departure from Aden in mid-April 1859 (Aden is where many believe that Speke and Burton agreed to not reveal their discoveries until they could do it together). The discovered pages suggest that Speke thought Burton would not be in London for a long time (he thought the latter was going to visit Jerusalem) whereas Speke himself was traveling to London, and the Royal Geographical Society, directly. Thus, Speke's decision to inform Sir Roderick Murchison of his observation of Lake Victoria and his belief that it was the source of the Nile *before* Burton returned from Aden was not a breach of a promise to make the announcement together. The found pages are certainly significant for our understanding of the relationship between these two men, but they are also yet another uncorroborated source. We believe Speke in this case or we do not solely on our intuition, and then we wonder if our reasons are more emotional than empirical. Any telling of the sad story of Burton and Speke and their friendship gone awry includes so many

such decisions upon which we do not have enough data for solid conclusions. The list of "Probabilities" given by Carnochan indicates many of these insoluble issues (pp.114-15). We may never know for certain what was said between these two men, but we will always speculate. Much of Carnochan's prose reflects the difficulty of dealing with the sources for the Nile Controversy and at times reads like a conversation between historians discussing possibilities. This is not a negative critique at all, for the possibilities suggested here lead to new research directions and new ideas about the status of geographical and historical knowledge; more conversations are needed.

Overall, the strongest conclusion to draw from this book is that more research, particularly in publisher's archives, should be done. David Finkelstien's identification of Speke's unedited manuscript of *What Led to the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (1864) is a recent and important development in our understanding not only of this story, but of how geographical knowledge is made and the interests that shape it.[1] Finkelstien's discovery demonstrates that we have more to uncover, and more to learn from this "sad story" about geographical knowledge in the mid-nineteenth century. *The Sad Story* does not expand on these possibilities directly, in part because Carnochan is writing for a popular audience and in part because this was never his intent. For what he portends it to be, an analysis of the evidence, this book is indeed a success. However, having read it alongside Dane Kennedy's excellent biographical study *The Highly Civilised Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (2005) I suggest that Carnochan's book works best as an adjunct to other books which discuss the Nile Controversy in wider context.

Note

[1]. David Finkelstien, *The House of Blackwood* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

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