

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The mid-nineteenth century in Britain was a great age of African exploration. The missionary David Livingstone (1813–1873) and the adventurers Richard Burton (1821–1890) and John Hanning Speke (1827–1864) were public heroes. But the partnership of Burton and Speke, in their legendary search for the source of the Nile, was strained almost from the start of their acquaintance. A climax came after Speke claimed, in 1858, to have discovered the Nile source in the lake he named after Queen Victoria. Burton did not accompany Speke to the lake, for reasons that are less than clear, and he passionately rejected Speke's claim. He also charged him with violating a promise not to report his discovery to the Royal Geographical Society without Burton also being present. The sad ending of their story came in September 1864, following another African expedition by Speke and James Augustus Grant to confirm the Nile source. Speke and Burton were to debate the question of the Nile at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Bath. On the day before the debate, the two met on the platform where it was scheduled to take place. Speke immediately left in agitation without a word to Burton. A few hours later he was dead, dying of a gunshot wound suffered while shooting partridge at his cousin's estate nearby. Burton lived twenty-six more years.

Of the two travellers, Burton has had by far the larger amount of attention. He is so compelling a figure that, in addition to the many biographies, both popular and scholarly, that he has inspired, a website is now devoted to his life and work. Burton's domination of the airwaves, as it were, has had consequences in narratives devoted to him and to Speke. What we think we know has been largely filtered through a Burtonian lens. This book attempts to redress the balance by examining the conflict as it was waged in a series of duelling texts by the protagonists. Though I have made grateful use of archival work by others, I have not otherwise drawn on the rich materials housed in the Royal Geographical Society, the National Library of Scotland, and elsewhere. In a sense, this might even be called a "literary" or at least a textual study, in that way harking back to my earliest training in literature at a time when "close reading" was all the rage. I have tried to read the relevant texts closely—and to see what we learn thereby.

And, if there is a single lesson embodied in the duelling texts, it is that history itself is a battle of competing stories, dependent on inference and intuition, not on the bedrock of some supposedly plain facts. Nothing is new in this lesson, but the countless questions raised by the story of Burton and Speke provide pointed illustration of its basic truth. Although some of the evidence I offer counts in Speke's favor, and though I think history has done him something less than justice, this is less important, in the last analysis, than the tangled skein of historical evidence, illustrated here in a setting that has long evoked strong feelings on one side or the other. Perhaps Speke, as some have thought, was a cad. More likely, as I think, not; or not really. But what is conclusively so: we will not ever know perfectly for sure.