Source of Dispute

THE WHITE NILE. By Alan Moorehead. Illustrated. 385 pp. New York: Harper & Bros. $5.95.

By JAMES DUFFY

IN the middle of the nineteenth century, the source of the Nile was still, in Sir Harry Johnston's words, "the greatest secret after the discovery of America." Classical travelers had followed the river's course into the wastes of the Sudan; Ptolemy the geographer had drawn his celebrated map showing the Nile rising from two Central African lakes. The rumors of Central African "fountains" persisted for almost two centuries, and the purpose of the Burton-Speke expedition of 1856 was to investigate new reports of the legendary inland seas.

That expedition, which struck inland from the East African coast, was successful. In August, 1858, the English explorer John Hanning Speke stood on the shore of a great Central African lake. "I no longer felt any doubt," he later wrote, "that the lake at my feet gave birth to that interesting river." His discovery was scorned and challenged not only by his companion, Richard F. Burton, but by half the geographers of Victorian England. It was not until Henry M. Stanley's exploration of the lake regions in 1875-1876 that the matter was finally resolved in Speke's favor. Though the geographical question had been answered, subsequent events along the Nile dominated English attention for another twenty-five years.

IN "The White Nile," Alan Moorehead, author of such books as "Gallipoli," "The Russian Revolution" and "No Room in the Ark," has written a lively and often compelling book about English contact with the "mightiest river in the world" during the Victorian half century. This was the golden age of African exploration and the heroic age of British imperialism. Mr. Moorehead has taken the best from both in putting together the extraordinary story of English penetration into Central Africa and the Sudan. Speke, Burton, Samuel Baker, Dr. David Livingstone, Stanley, Gen. Charles Gordon, Lord Kitchener—the great names are all here; and if "The White Nile" (a Book-of-the-Month dual selection for January) turns out to be better drama than history, no matter; it is vastly interesting reading.

Mr. Moorehead has divided his book into four parts: the Exploration, the Exploitation, the Moslem Revolt and the Christian Victory. The first part, sections of which appeared earlier in The New Yorker magazine, is the most important part of the book and the real reason, one suspects, for the book's existence. There are few more heroic (and perversely disturbing) chapters of exploration than the two decades of English adventure in Central Africa in pursuit of the Nile's mysterious sources; and the narratives of the exploits, on which Mr. Moorehead has largely based these pages, are among the most revealing travel accounts ever written.

From the beginning it was more than a search for a river's rising. Travel in Central Africa in the mid-nineteenth century was always difficult, often impossible. The terrain, the deadly conditions of life, and the consistently visible horrors of the slave trade worked a psychological transformation in the English explorer and brought out the best and the very worst in his nature. So it is that Speke's great discovery, made while Richard Burton remained in the distant base camp, is almost secondary to the story of his association with the satanic Burton. By every standard the Burton-Speke expedition should have been a success. Two large Central African lakes had been discovered, one of which was almost certainly the source of the White Nile; but for both men it was a personal failure. What could have been a joint triumph turned into a spiteful feud between the two vain explorers exhausted and perhaps corrupted by their African experience.

At Zanzibar they parted forever. Speke arrived in London twelve days before Burton and, "putting justice before generosity," reported his private discovery to the Royal Geographic Society. Burton denied Speke's theory and put forth Lake Tanganyika as the Nile's source. While Burton went to West Africa, Speke, with James Grant, returned to Central Africa in 1860 to verify his convictions. The two men made their way to the far side of Lake Victoria and then north to where the White Nile rises from the lake. From there they followed the river's course into the Sudan and then down the Nile to Cairo.

THE question should have been settled; but, thanks in large part to Burton's vindictive persuasion, it was not. The controversy dragged on, and in September, 1864, the British Association for the Advancement of Science arranged a meeting to hear the conflicting theories of the two rivals. Just before the meeting, Speke, who dreaded the thought of debating with the eloquent Burton, lost his life in a hunting accident. His death created more embarrassment than remorse, and Speke's great accomplishment passed into oblivion. The search went on.

On their journey north from Lake Victoria, Speke and Grant had met Samuel Baker and his beautiful young wife at Gondokoro in February of 1863. Baker and his wife were pursuing the river's course southward, and for the next two years they traveled at random in the area Baker was to call the "Great Basin of the Nile"—that is, the country in the vicinity of Lake Albert. Baker's account of their dreadful and aimless wanderings read like chapters from a Victorian "Inferno." The couple suffered from malaria. Mrs. Baker had a sunstroke which deprived her for a while of her senses. They were attacked by wild beasts, and they were held for six months as the privileged prisoners of an African chief. Baker's account of their vicissitudes added little to geographical knowledge, but the dramatic story of their adventures roused an English awareness to Central Africa as Speke, and even Burton, had not done. The region now began to hold a political, commercial and humanitarian interest.

The separate travels of David Livingstone and Henry Stanley bring the important period of Central African exploration to its close. For Livingstone the erratic wanderings of the years 1866-1873 were geographically anti-climatic but spiritually redeeming. Livingstone, while pursuing his fantasy that the Lualaba River (an extension of the Congo) was really the Nile, died near Lake Bangweolo in Northern Rhodesia. His journal of these last years is a deeply moving chronicle of the solitary pilgrim seeking his redemption —and destruction—in the heart of Africa. It made Livingstone, more than ever before, England's conscience in Central Africa.

Like no other explorer of his age, Livingstone threw his lot in with Africa and with the African. It was therefore logical and proper that after his death his faithful servants Susi and Chuma should have buried his heart in Africa where it belonged and then carried his shrunken body a thousand miles to the sea so that it could be buried with his own people in his own country.

Henry Stanley, the most successful explorer of them all, was, as Mr. Moorehead points out, the entrepreneur who brought the modern world to Central Africa. Stanley was a man of spectacular and publicized triumphs. On his first trip to Africa in 1871 the young reporter "found" Dr. Livingstone for James Gordon Bennett of The New York Herald. On his second trip, in 1874-1877, he navigated Lake Victoria and proved beyond a doubt that Speke was right; he navigated Lake Tanganyika and proved that Burton was wrong; he followed the course of the Lualaba into the Congo and then out to

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On their return from the second Nile expedition, John Speke and James Grant are acclaimed by the Royal Geographical Society, June 22, 1863.

Speke in eastern Africa, 1862.

Speke on Lake Victoria, 1862.

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the Atlantic. A savage, methodical man who brooked no interference from African or European in his demonic pursuit of geographical knowledge and glory, Stanley was the bridge between the golden age of African exploration and our own troubled times in Africa.

With the opening up of Central Africa and the charting of the Nile's course, new problems arose, imperial problems of political complexity. In the last half of "The White Nile" Mr. Moorehead deals mostly with events in the Sudan, and their effects in the lake country, during the years 1880-1900. The completion of the Suez Canal had brought a new European interest in Egypt and the lands to the south. A resurgence of Islamic nationalism caused the British invasion of Egypt in 1882 and resulted in the saga of Khartoum which Mr. Moorehead describes in detail.

The story of General Gordon's resistance at Khartoum in 1884-1885 to the besieging Arab army is a study in Victorian character and heroics. The incredible sufferings of the people within the city, the painful progress of the British expedition sent up the Nile to rescue Gordon, the curious courage of Gordon himself and the shocking incidents of the sacking of Khartoum by the Mahdi's legions (Gordon's head was fixed in the fork of a tree and his body thrown into the palace yard) are told in vivid detail.

With the recapture of Khartoum thirteen years later by Gen. Henry Kitchener, whose conduct during the campaign was as ruthlessly unrelenting as that of the Arab chieftains, Mr. Moorehead brings his book to an end. If the final sections do not achieve the success of the earlier pages, it is largely the fault of the material. The exploits of discovery stand in dramatic isolation, while subsequent events in the Sudan are part of larger more complex problems that cannot be fully characterized by the heroics of Gordon and Kitchener.

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