

## **River of the Gods, by Candice Millard**

*Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy*

Candice Millard, a former National Geographic editor, writes non-fiction books with the suspenseful pacing of a thriller. Subtitled “Genius, Courage, and Betrayal in the Search for the Source of the Nile,” *River of the Gods*, her latest endeavor, is a captivating tale.

For centuries, explorers had sought in vain to find the White Nile’s source in the heart of Africa. In 1850s Victorian England, scientists were keen to claim the discovery for Britain. The Royal Geographical Society established the East African Expedition and appointed two men to lead the quest: Richard Francis Burton and John Hanning Speke.

Burton, “an Oxford dropout, self-taught scholar, and compulsive explorer,” spoke over twenty-five languages and “wanted the answer to every ancient mystery he encountered.” Mercurial and fearless, Burton had been the first Englishman to enter Mecca, disguised as an Arab.

In many ways, Speke was Burton’s opposite. Born into the British aristocracy, Speke was a military officer who prided himself on self-discipline. While Burton immersed himself in books, Speke, an excellent marksman, was devoted to big-game hunting.

Bound by a common goal, Burton and Speke trekked from the east African coast to the interior, hoping to find a great lake which might be the White Nile’s source. Their expedition—Burton had coined the term “safari” from safar, the Arabic word meaning journey—was fraught with peril. At every turn, the caravan confronted tropical diseases, wild beasts, and near starvation. Burton, with his superior language skills, considered himself the group’s leader, while Speke, an expert surveyor and hunter, chafed under his command. Each had saved the other’s life, but their mutual distrust simmered. While Burton was sidelined by illness, Speke and his entourage came upon a vast lake (which he named Lake Victoria in the Queen’s honor), declaring that he had found the source of the White Nile.

Speke, returning to England first, was lauded as a hero when he presented his claim to the Royal Geographical Society. Deeply wounded, Burton wrote scathing articles disputing Speke’s findings. To settle the matter, the Society invited both men to speak at the “Great Nile Debate.” The day before the debate, however, an unforeseen event occurred, resulting in tragedy for one man and bitter regret for the other.

Although *River of the Gods* focuses on the Burton and Speke rivalry, Candice Millard’s prodigious research sheds light on an unsung hero: Sidi Mubarak Bombay, their intrepid African guide. Praised by Burton as “the gem of the party,” Bombay in the end became “likely the most traveled man in Africa, covering six thousand miles, most of it on foot.”

(Note: *River of the Gods* is part of the Heritage Hills Library and Somers Library collections. For a list of new books at the Heritage Hills Library, see page 11.)