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BOOK REVIEW

The Blue Nile

by Alan Moorehead

Hamish Hamilton Ltd: London; 1962; 308 pp.; Ursula Davidson Library call no. 442/27157



With the West at war in the Middle East, it is instructive to read histories of previous attempts by foreigners to impose their will on the region by military force. *The Blue Nile* is one such history. Its author, Alan Moorehead, an Australian, became a renowned foreign correspondent for the *London Daily Express*. A war correspondent in World War II, he was appointed an officer in the Order of the British Empire and was mentioned-in-despatches twice. Post-war, he was an author of military and other histories before suffering a major stroke in 1966.

The Blue Nile is a beautifully written, well-researched, easy-to-read and at times exciting account of three 19th century campaigns. While Major General Gordon Maitland has been critical in these pages (e.g. *United Service* 61 (4) 10-11, December 2010) of journalist military historians "who show little respect for the facts in order to tell a good story", Moorehead tells a good story while keeping true to the facts.

Before dealing with the military campaigns, Moorehead recounts the reconnaissance of the Blue Nile from its source in Ethiopia to the sea which was undertaken in the 1770s by the wealthy Scottish adventurer, James Bruce. Bruce spent over a year in Ethiopia and claimed to have discovered the source of the Blue Nile, a small wetland at Ghish on the Little Blue Nile which flows north into Lake Tana. The Blue Nile itself debouches from Lake Tana further east. It flows south-east then west and eventually north through deep ravines as it descends into the Sudan, before merging with the White Nile at Khartoum. Many of Bruce's observations of Ethiopian culture, such as the stripping and eating of raw flesh from live cattle, seemed so preposterous to Europeans, that his accurate reports were not believed when he later made presentations in London and published his journals. Bruce became a society outcast and retreated to his Scottish estates.

The first military campaign described is the French invasion of Egypt led by Napoléon Bonaparte in 1798. The French amphibious landing and capture of Alexandria were easy, but the advance on Cairo was challenging, before Bonaparte comprehensively defeated the Mameluke¹ army at the Battle of the Pyramids. French occupation of Cairo and the lower Nile valley followed and Bonaparte honed his skills as a civil administrator. The scientists, geographers and archaeologists who accompanied the expedition opened up the antiquities of the valley to the world for the first time in over 1000 years

¹The Mamelukes were a military oligarchy that ruled Egypt, nominally on behalf of the Ottoman Turks. Purchased as white, Christian boy-slaves from southern Russia, they were imported into Egypt, converted to Islam and trained as horsemen and warriors. They formed a military clique that did not marry. Incidentally, their scimitar-like sword was adopted by the Duke of Wellington and is worn to this day by British and Australian general officers in dress uniform.

– including finding the Rosetta Stone, which proved the key to unlocking Egyptian hieroglyphs. The remnants of the Mamelukes, however, posed a threat to the colony from the upper Nile. General Desaix led a small French force against them. The Mamelukes avoided set-piece battles and engaged in a lengthy guerrilla campaign, especially against the French lines of communication. After more than a year, Desaix succeeded in clearing the Nile and imposed French rule on the full length of its valley within Egypt. With Nelson's successes over the French Navy at the battles of Abukir and the Nile, however, the French were trapped in Egypt.

Bonaparte slipped through the British naval cordon and returned to France to become its emperor, but the French garrison in Egypt, with no hope of relief, steadily declined. The Ottoman Turks took advantage. Led by Muhammad Ali, the Turks had little difficulty in supplanting the French and imposed a brutal, autocratic regime on lower Egypt. Desperate for slaves and gold, Muhammad Ali sent his son, Ismail, at the head of a strong force along the Nile into the Sudan. They easily overcame opposition from the Nubians, more remnant Mamelukes, and the city kingdoms further upriver. Slaves were continuously bought and sent back to Cairo in great numbers, those from Ethiopia being particularly prized. Gold, however, eluded Ismail, even when he reached the fabled gold mines at Fazughli, at the foot of the Ethiopian escarpment.

The last campaign recounted is that of the large Anglo-Indian force which entered Ethiopia in 1868 to free British hostages who had been held for several years by the vicious Ethiopian ruler-tyrant, Theodore, a Coptic Christian. There are many lessons for the modern soldier in this expedition. Led by Lieutenant-General Robert Napier², Commander-in-Chief, Bombay Army, the campaign was a masterpiece of logistics, including the construction of a port on the Red Sea coast, the building of a railway to the interior, followed by road and bridge construction from the railhead for some 600 miles to the south over most inhospitable terrain to Magdala (east of Lake Tana). The Battle of Magdala, at which Napier defeated Theodore, was almost an anti-climax. With the hostages freed, the return to the coast was a greater challenge than the battle itself had been.

This book is infused with the tribal and religious cultures of the region, cultures which persist to this day. It is very helpful in understanding the nature of the conflicts in which our forces in the region are currently engaged.

David Leece³

²Later Field Marshal Lord Napier of Magdala – his feat is commemorated by a bronze statue of him, horse-mounted, on Kensington Road outside the Queen's Gate entrance to Hyde Park, London.

³Lieutenant Colonel J. C. Southwell, OAM, RFD, ED (Retd) drew this book to my attention.