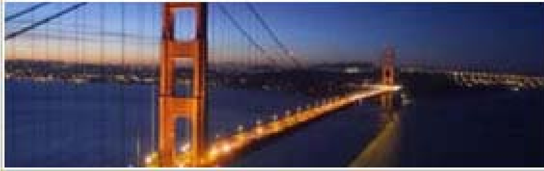
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A more perfect union in the deep of Africa

By Zachary Karabell
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Boils. Fever. Scorching heat. Samuel and Florence Baker "marched on through black and smoking lands that had been burned to clear the dead grass. The ashes stank and stuck to their sweating bodies; the sharp stems of burned vegetation poked through bare feet, trousers, boots, and gaiters, leaving bloody, filthy wounds." And yet this was their idea of an adventure, a "romantic fantasy of going to Africa" in search of the source of the White Nile, author Pat Shipman writes. The couple set out in 1861; they would spend four long years and face death multiple times before finding what they were seeking.

The hunt for the source of the Nile was to England in the 1860s what the race to the moon was to America in the 1960s: a side story to the larger arc of international affairs but one that excited deep passions. Though Egypt was a relatively familiar destination for Europeans (and the construction of the Suez Canal soon would link northeastern Africa more closely to Europe and Asia), the Sudan was a forbidding, pestilential place of nomads, Nubians and Arab slave traders.

The second half of the 19th century also was the golden age of royal geographic societies eager to map, chart and rationalize nature. Though the Nile makes a leisurely straight line through Egypt, in Sudan it winds and then splits into two branches. That made the search for its headwaters extremely challenging, and a number of intrepid (or addled) explorers set off to chart its course. Sir Richard Burton and John Speke were the most famous of these, but the Bakers braved just as many dangers. The fact that Florence accompanied her husband made the two of them that much more extraordinary at a time when proper Englishwomen of her class spent their lives in sitting rooms.

But as Shipman reveals in "To the Heart of the Nile: Lady Florence Baker and the Exploration of Central Africa," Florence was not, in fact, a proper Englishwoman, though she became one later in life. She was born in Hungary, and after her family fled the turmoil of 1848, she ended up orphaned and raised in a harem in the Ottoman Balkans. When she was barely a teenager, Sam, who was more than 20 years her senior, stole (or rescued) her from the harem during a slave auction. The two would be inseparable for the next 34 years, until Sam's death in 1893.

It was, to say the least, an odd way to meet, and it got odder. Sam couldn't return to England with a teenage concubine without losing his status. Instead, he set off with Florence for Bucharest. Inspired by the news of Burton and Speke, he was able to wrangle a small commission from the Royal Geographic Society to head up the Nile to aid Speke. What followed was four years of arduous travel through the deserts of Nubia, the barren grasslands of Uganda and the wetlands in the vicinity of what would be named Lake Albert.

The books that Sam wrote of their travels became bestsellers, and when the couple finally materialized in England in the late 1860s, Florence had been magically transformed into a lady with a pedigree. Rumors would dog the couple for the rest of their lives, but they were so popular and respected that no one really wanted to puncture the myth.

Sam ascended to even greater heights when Ismail, the ruler of Egypt, appointed him governor of the Sudan, with the enormous salary of 10,000 pounds a year and the impossible task of ending the slave trade. Though blessed with a large army and ample funds, Sam failed utterly, as anyone would have. The Sudan was vast, and one man with several thousand troops could not end a practice that had sustained the local economy for centuries. The Bakers returned to England; the Sudanese slave-trade continued. More than a decade later, when Sudan fell under the control of a messianic leader determined to free the country from both the Egyptians and the British, Sam was nearly called back to lead the British army to Khartoum. Instead, the assignment went to Charles Gordon, who was slaughtered along with his entire army.

The Bakers' story is a marvelous gem, and Shipman is keen to portray it as an epic love affair. The two were devoted to each other, and Florence was nothing if not strong, passionate, intelligent and vehemently dedicated to ending slavery. During their first trip to Africa in 1861, she kept copious journals and recorded her horror at the widespread practice of female circumcision and infibulation, which involves attaching a ring or other device to prevent intercourse. That may have been one reason for the Bakers' determination to bring European mores to the Sudan, though Florence, who had been raised from an early age to be sold at auction, had cause enough to detest slavery even without exposure to its Sudanese variety.

Shipman's affinity for the pair, and for Florence especially, shines through, but she writes in a novelistic style that doesn't do the story justice. The author of seven previous books, most notably "The Man Who Found the Missing Link," and an adjunct professor of anthropology at Penn State, Shipman tries to infuse her historical narrative with the intimacy and immediacy of fiction. She is not the first to do so, but like many before, her reach exceeds her grasp. Too often, we are told what the characters were thinking and doing – "Sam sensed her distress," "Florence tried to understand his reticence" – as if Shipman were the omniscient narrator of a novel. Though some of these characterizations can be traced to journal entries, often they are Shipman's leaps of imagination, meant to create an emotional bond between reader and story.

When Simon Schama used these techniques in "Dead Certainties," he was assailed for breaching the wall between fact and fiction; historian Edmund Morris was excoriated for his use of similar literary devices in "Dutch." These writers and Shipman recognize that emotions and thoughts, which occupy a considerable amount of human experience, are more or less lost to history. The result is that most history is about what happened, not about what people felt. How to convey emotions and thoughts while staying true to what is known is a conundrum that no one has solved.

The problem with Shipman's style is not that she tries to use novelistic techniques. It's that too often the book ends up sounding like a dime-store romance. That's a shame, because it is a powerful story of adventure, love and romance, as well as a perfect antidote to the criticism that history tends to focus inordinately on white males. Shipman's literary devices end up being a distraction to what is otherwise a fascinating and at times moving story.

After four years searching for the Nile's headwaters and finally reaching what they would name Lake Albert, Sam recorded in his journal that he and Florence were despondent to learn they had not been heard from for so long that they were assumed dead.

Florence told Sam that it didn't matter whether anyone ever knew what they had done. "We did not do it for anyone else but for ourselves. We wanted to find the source of the Nile. We wanted to fill in that great, white void on the maps, and we have

That is the core of Shipman's account: two people, a man and a woman, going to the ends of the Earth to follow a shared dream. It needs no embellishment. *