



# The Blue Nile

*Alan Moorehead*

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In the first half of the nineteenth century, only a small handful of Westerners had ventured into the regions watered by the Nile River on its long journey from Lake Tana in Abyssinia to the Mediterranean-lands that had been forgotten since Roman times, or had never been known at all. In *The Blue Nile*, Alan Moorehead continues the classic, thrilling narration of adventure he began in *The White Nile*, depicting this exotic place through the lives of four explorers so daring they can be considered among the world's original adventurers - each acting and reacting in separate expeditions against a bewildering background of slavery and massacre, political upheaval and all-out war.

## The Blue Nile Details

Date : Published August 1st 1972 by Harper & Row (NYC et al.) (first published 1962)

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Author : Alan Moorehead

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# From Reader Review The Blue Nile for online ebook

## John Croall says

Read it in the 80s. Excellent.

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## Lauren says

A thoroughly entertaining read about the 18th and 19th century clash of cultures between Europeans and the inhabitants of Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. The stress here is on colorful characters: eccentric and sometimes woefully underprepared European explorers, and megalomaniac rulers (including Napoleon, representing the Europeans and the Emperor Theodore, representing the Ethiopians). Much of the history here was completely unknown to me.

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## Jane E says

Fascinating historical stories beautifully written. What more could one want? Alan Moorewood's narrative of the eccentric characters and dictators that gathered around the Blue Nile in Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopian is full of interesting information. I knew nothing about the Mamelukes apart from the name and as for the other dominant tribes south of Egypt, not even their names. Napoleon, Emperor Theodore of Ethiopia. The list goes on and on. Every era threw up fantastic stories. This is a book to read and re-read. (Purchased secondhand at Miami International Book Fair)

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## Liz says

Using the stretch of river known as the Blue Nile as a geographical common denominator, the author does a good job of chronicling the upheavals that occurred when the traditional, deeply entrenched culture of the East met the grasping culture of the West, and Egypt's long isolation from the outside world ended. In four separate parts of the book he follows four historical personages that had great parts to play in this drama: Bruce, the explorer who journeyed to the source of the Blue Nile, Napoleon, Muhammad Ali, and the deranged Emperor Theodore of Ethiopia. The writing style is engaging and witty, and even the battles and maneuverings of Napoleon held my interest (which is saying a lot, because stuff like that usually leaves me bored to tears). I am definitely going to read this book's predecessor, *The White Nile*.

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## Erik Graff says

This serves as a companion to Alan Moorehead's *The White Nile*. Whereas that book was more about the race to discern the source(s) of the Nile River, this one is more about the history of the region. It was also my introduction to the Emperor Theodore of Ethiopia and the British invasion which overthrew him.

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## David says

Review to come (when I figure out when I read it).

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## Brian says

I've had *The Blue Nile* on my list of things to read for a long time. It's been sitting around the house for several years, always pre-empted by something else. I finally read it. It's not quite what I expected. I had expected it to be a single narrative about the exploration of the Blue Nile. Instead, it's a collection (non-fiction) of four distinct adventures regarding exploration of the Blue Nile in the early 1800's. The first and third of the stories are about rather obscure people, and make for rather slow reading. The second and fourth are about Napoleon in Egypt, and the British in Ethiopia, respectively.

The portion of the story about the British, rescues the book. Here, some British explorers find themselves taken hostage in Ethiopia, and the British government finds themselves in a situation in which they feel honor compels them to bring the full weight of the empire to the rescue. The account of that rescue is fascinating, because it's no small operation. England literally comes to Ethiopia.

So, the book has slow moments, but ends on a high note. It would also benefit from a few more maps.

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## Eliszard says

"We are back at Jericho: the trumpets blow, the walls fall down and an age vanishes in an instant." writes Moorehead in the epilogue of *The Blue Nile*, which summarizes perfectly the spirit of the book. Unlike *The White Nile*, which described almost as in a mystery all the expeditions to discover the source of the river, there aren't many explorers nor much mystery in *The Blue Nile*. The location of the river source is settled early on, and although there are explorers/savants/military types who contribute to fill in geographical details, the real focus of the book seems to me the beginning of globalization.

In *The White Nile*, the protagonists were people - explorers, missionaries, merchants who encountered, lived and did business with locals. Here the focus is much more on the (violent) encounter of civilizations, from Napoleonic France in Egypt to Victorian Britain in Abyssinia. The emphasis on individuals (Napoleon, his lieutenants and his savants, Theodore and Napier) is deceptive, because they really stand for the advancing, Western, global modern versus the disappearing age of isolation and "savagery".

The essence of this clash is captured in the rather absurd British expedition to Ethiopia in 1868. In order to rescue a handful of frankly annoying Europeans who were kept somewhat prisoners by Emperor Theodore, and more importantly to rescue a wounded racial pride, the British mounted an extraordinary campaign. It involved 4,000 European soldiers, 9,000 'native' ones (a mix of Turks, Persians, Egyptians, Arabs, Sikhs, Hindus and who knows who else), Indian elephants to transport heavy artillery ("A seasick elephant was a formidable thing, and in the Calcutta moorings they had to face a cyclone" p235), camels and mules for the

lighter artillery, horses, a fleet of 280 sail and steam ships, and the setting up of an entire city, Zula, complete with 2 piers, a railway, hospitals, storehouses and condensers to desalinize water. Except for the piers, everything else was dismantled and taken away at the end of the campaign. (The campaign ended with a handful of British casualties, thousands of Ethiopian ones, the prisoners rescued, and the British out of the country, at least for a time).

Aside from some comments that have not aged well ("The Arab compromised, schemed and bargained, the Ethiopian made rash hysterical gestures to satisfy his pride; and both races, when aroused, were absolutely ruthless" on p276 - sounds like it could easily be a fair description of French and British behavior throughout this period), the book is a pleasure to read, engaging, very well and passionately written, and very useful to understand a lot of what is going on in that area of the world today.

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### Christopher Saunders says

More expansive than *The White Nile*, Moorehead focuses on large-scale military campaigns rather than individual explorers. He devotes most of the narrative to Napoleon's disastrous invasion of Egypt and the more successful British expedition to Abyssinia in 1868 (subject of a Flashman novel). Despite the larger scope it retains Moorehead's eye for natural and sociological detail, and his stories are fascinating. Both volumes get my highest recommendation.

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### Jake Stephens says

A compelling view of the exploration of the Nile by the West -- and glimpses of both the rigors and beauties of the land. Worthwhile context for contemplating the ebb and flow of civilization as you realize exactly how far the great Egyptians ebbed out of the annals of time -- literally covered in sand -- and the barbarism which followed. Quite worthwhile.

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### Philip says

Excellent book - Alan Moorehead is to Nilotic Africa what Peter Hopkirk is to Central Asia, except that Moorehead did it decades earlier. That said, I cannot give this the 5 stars it probably deserves unless I could upgrade Moorehead's **The White Nile** to 6. **The White Nile** is simply the better book, if only because the White Nile itself is the better story.

**The White Nile** focuses on the exploration of the Nile and the search for its source, telling a number of other stories along the way but all still in the service of the greater history of the river itself. However, there is no such thread in **The Blue Nile**, since its source was never truly in question; the entire story of the Blue's exploration is fully told in the book's first 50 pages. After that, the book focuses on three separate stories - the French in Egypt, the Turks in the Sudan, and the British in Ethiopia - which in descending order have less and less to do with the river proper, until in the final section on Ethiopia, the river is barely mentioned at all. And so the overarching theme of **Blue** is more of a stretch than in **White**.

Still, those three stories are riveting, and additionally benefit from being ones I had never heard before, (whereas I was already familiar with at least the basics of most of **The White Nile**'s stories - Burton/Speke,

Gordon/the Mahdi, Stanley/Livingstone, etc). The tale of a young Napoleon invading Egypt while still in his 20's presents a much different picture of Bonaparte than the one painted in his Waterloo years; and the story of Emperor Theodore of Ethiopia is just insane, both literally and figuratively - I cannot wait now to read **Flashman on the March**, the last book in that excellent series, which brings together Flashman and Theodore, (talk about a match made in literary heaven!).

So yes, by all means I resounding recommendation for **The Blue Nile**. Just remember to think of it as a delicious and surprising desert following the more substantial main course of **The White Nile**, and you'll be able to enjoy them both in the proper perspective.

**AUDIOBOOK COMMENTS:** Great narration by British actor Patrick Tull, in full-on Nigel Thornberry mode. However, I would recommend reading rather than listening; it helps keep the various people and places straight by seeing them spelled out. And even though the book would greatly benefit from more maps and pictures (perhaps they're in the hardcover version; I merely looked at the paperback), just being able to refer to the main map in the front of the book helped everything make a lot more sense.

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## Al says

This was an extremely well written book, and it ended all too soon. Moorehead starts with a highly descriptive section on the environment of the Blue Nile, beginning with its source at Lake Tana in Ethiopia, and he describes the change in landscape from mountains and jungle to waterless desert. The book is organized into four sections: "The Reconnaissance", which covers early European exploration in the 17th and 18th centuries; "The French in Egypt", which is about Napoleon's invasion and the breaking of Mameluke power; "The Turks in the Sudan", which describes the Turkish invasion of the Sudan in the quest for slaves; and "The British in Ethiopia", about the British column which invaded to rescue a large group of European prisoners held by the Ethiopian emperor Theodore II. Moorehead's writing and his powers of description help the reader to understand how the native people lived and adapted to the climate.

Perhaps the best summary is found in the epilogue: "Three abortive cavalry charges against modern firearms had destroyed the isolation of the Nile valley from Lake Tana to the sea. None of these engagements, whether of the Mamelukes against the French at the Battle of the Pyramids, of the Shaiqiya tribesmen against the Turks at Korti, or of the Ethiopians against the British at Magdala, had lasted more than an hour or two...Yet these were genuine crises: once their defenses were breached none of these countries were ever to be the same again....But perhaps it is in the nature of history to declare itself through apparently small events; certainly such catastrophes as the mass killings on the Somme and at Passchendaele in the First World War decided nothing."

This was a truly enjoyable book which went by quickly and well worth the time to read.

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## James says

The second of two books on the European exploration and exploitation of the Nile River regions of Africa, it benefits from more exciting historical subjects- Napoleon & Theodore of Ethiopia, for example - and the more direct conflict of multiple civilizations & theologies. Read both it and it's predecessor - 'The White Nile' for a great introduction into African history, even with a very English voice.

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## Stephanie says

Surprisingly captivating. Moorehead brings to life the conquerors, tribal rulers, and European explorers of the Blue Nile in the 19th century. For those who slept through seventh grade geography class, the Blue Nile starts in Ethiopia, flows up through eastern Sudan and then meets the White Nile at Khartoum, forming the no-color-in-the-name, famous Nile that eventually dumps into the Mediterranean in Egypt.

And what a band of characters Moorehead describes. He clearly admires most of them, despises a few, and thinks all of them quite mad. A typical paragraph:

"Nothing is more intriguing in African exploration in the nineteenth century than the casualness with which it was often undertaken. A group of friends meet and discuss a trip abroad. Shall it be Vienna, Naples, or the Canary Islands? Or possibly Africa? Yes, of course, Africa. They know nothing about Africa....The gunsmith in the Strand supplies them with firearms, the banker gives them draft on Cairo, the latter furnishes sun-helmets with flaps at the back, and off they go as light-heartedly as if they were setting off for the south of France to avoid the English winter."

Here Moorehead describes Napoleon Bonaparte:

"Yet he was still a gauche figure in the Parisian salons, long uncombed hair straggling down to his shoulders, a sallow complexion, sombre blue eyes, an air of fatigue and dull restlessness, a short, thin, ugly body covered with clothes that were ill-kept and too big for him. His sword dragged [yes, "dragged"] ineffectually at his side. Perhaps these outward effects might not have counted for much among intelligent people, but he was generally silent, and when he did speak it was with an ungainly Corsican accent. In brief, he is the intense young genius who is perfectly conscious of his own superior powers and just as perfectly unable to see how he will ever manage to express them."

Then Moorehead tackles Josephine with just as much gusto and keen observation. Just beware, that this book, originally published in 1960, is definitely not very politically correct. There is a preference for the Christian religion and educating the "savages." Unfortunately, this was still the norm fifty years ago, even amongst "enlightened" anthropologists and "objective" journalists. If you let that go, you'll learn about a part of the world most Westerners have never really learned about, let alone visited.

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## Palmyrah says

This is history written as tales of brave adventure. The subject is the discovery of the Blue Nile by Western civilization, and the end of the isolation of its remote hinterlands and their peoples. Moorehead begins with an account of early explorations, then moves on to the tales of conquest: first, Napoleon's star-crossed adventure in Egypt, which revealed the antiquities of Egypt to western eyes for the first time since the retreat of Roman power from Africa; next, the horrific empire-building of Muhammad Ali, which brought the Sudan under Egyptian control following Napoleon's retreat from Egypt; and finally an account of Napier's 1867 expedition to Ethiopia to rescue European prisoners, including a British consul, held there by the ruler

of the country, the mad, brilliant, extravagantly cruel Theodore.

All three countries fell in a series of fantastic, anachronistic battles between mediaeval cavalry on one side – the Mamelukes of Egypt, the Shaiqiya warriors of Sudan and the Emperor Theodore's Christian knights – and modern Western armies on the other. In every case these confrontations ended in overwhelming defeat for the defenders; they were massacred.

Moorehead writes evocatively of the landscapes and moods of the Nile, describing the countries through which it flows, their peoples and rulers, the ruins left by earlier Nilotic civilizations. He has an engaging eye for nature and particularly for birds. The book ends with his personal account of a journey by helicopter up the Blue Nile gorge below its source at Lake Tana. In 1962, when this book was written, this part of the river was unnavigable and the sides of the gorge could not be traversed on foot. Thus he leaves the reader with a view that only one Westerner before his time, Col. R.E. Cheesman, had ever seen.

Upholders of Professor Said's Orientalist thesis will find much to despise in this book. Its sources include some of the fathers of what has come to be called Orientalism: Denon, Flaubert, Burkhardt. And the view of the Nile and its peoples presented in the book often seems very close to Lady Duff Gordon's descriptions of Egypt, with the author approvingly quotes: 'The real life and the real people are exactly as described in that most veracious of books, the *Thousand and One Nights*.'

Yet there is no jingoism here, nor any kind of apparent prejudice. Bear in mind that views have changed since the 1960s, and that a fifty-year-old history book is itself a historical artifact that should not be made the subject of anachronistic judgements. If you do this, you will find much to praise, and very little to damn, in this excellent book. I now have an eager eye out for Moorehead's other works, including the companion volume to this one, *The White Nile*.

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## Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

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## Ebookwormy1 says

Another excellent history from Alan Moorehead. I never knew the Ethiopians ate raw meat, or of their King Theodore and his defeat by the English. I never understood the tribal wars between the Arabs and black Africans in the Sudan (Darfur ring a bell?), and I was never fully aware how much the Arab slave trade of black Africans was ingrained in the culture and lifestyle of eastern Africa. Why didn't the Ethiopians go down into the desert and why didn't the desert dwellers penetrate the hills? And why wasn't the course of the Blue Nile mapped until the 1950s? Nor could I understand how the Sphinx was "discovered", I mean, how do you forget about something like that? Or the lifestyle and culture of the, rather strange, Mameluke. Finally, I never really grasped what Napoleon was trying to accomplish via his invasion of Egypt and how the French lost Egyptian influence to the English. Now, I get it. You will too, if you read this well documented, well articulated history of the Blue Nile Basin. This book is a companion to "The White Nile", which I also highly recommend (see my review).

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## **Melissa says**

This is a remarkably well written book and I enthusiastically recommend it to anyone who enjoys history. There are so many fabulous characters, intrepid explorers and extraordinary rulers and conquerors that are part of the story of the exploration of the Blue Nile, and Alan Moorehead leads the reader deftly through the complex cast of characters and myriad sights and events. Like the best of adventure stories, I could hardly put it down!

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## **Natalied says**

An engaging read for anyone interested in the peregrinations of mainly European explorers along the course of the Blue Nile down from Ethiopia, through the founding of the city of Khartoum by the Turks, and on past the marvels of ancient Egyptian civilization into the Mediterranean. A bit dated in tone, but good story-telling and history.

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## **Suzanne Auckerman says**

Good history of Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt with respect to the course of the Nile. I did not know anything about Tewodros II, baptized as Sahle Dingil, and often referred to in the west by the english equivalent Theodore II) (c. 1818 – April 13, 1868) was the Emperor of Ethiopia from 1855 until his death. He was a lunatic on the order of Stalin, just didn't have the same resources.

I, also, was trying to find out the differences between Coptic Christians and other Christians. According to this book and The Tenth Parallel, it is because the Coptics believe that Christ had one nature that was divine and human and Christians believe he had two natures, one divine and one human. No one mentions the Holy Ghost, so I don't know if that plays into it or not. It is too arcane for me.

Wikipedia says: The precise differences in theology that caused the split with the Coptic Christians are still disputed, highly technical and mainly concerned with the nature of Christ.

That is probably the line I will use if ever asked about this at a party.

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