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ILLUSTRIOUS FROM THE NILE: THE HERALDIC AFTERLIFE OF JOHN HANNING SPEKE

Jeremy Goldsmith

'Thus on the fatal Banks of the Nile
'Weeps the deceitful crocodile'

Nahum Tate, *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), Act III

Africa fascinated the Victorian public. The exploration of the continent by predominantly British adventurers excited the popular imagination, fuelled by the reports of the press and the scientific societies. Few projects attracted greater interest than the search for the source of the Nile. Two men – Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke – claimed to have found it but their divergent claims divided the geographical community. In an attempt to resolve the issue a meeting of the geographical branch of the British Association was convened on 18 September 1864. The claimants were to state their cases, with the great David Livingstone as judge. It never took place, for on the eve of the debate Speke met 'a sudden and violent death' while hunting.¹ Most considered this a dreadful accident though some less charitably suggested the suicide of a fraudster. A few even suspected the hand of his rival, who cryptically wrote that 'Capt. Speke came to a bad end, but no one knows anything about it.'²

History was to vindicate the dead man, and his belief that the Nile began at Lake Victoria was in time found to be correct. His deeds were commemorated by a monument, erected by public subscription. The dead hero's family were even granted a Royal Warrant for the augmentation of their hereditary arms, together with supporters. The award of the latter to an individual or neither noble nor knightly rank, let alone posthumously, formed a unique episode in the story of English heraldry.

African Exploration

Victorian obsession with the exploration of Africa was the result of a long interest in that continent. This had first been fired by the establishment of the African Association in 1788, and was further fed by the Royal Geographical Society (founded 1830). The R.G.S. absorbed the African Association in 1831, the new organization's aim – according to the memoranda agreed at the founding meeting – being to create a Society for the 'promotion and diffusion' of geography. This dedication was not entirely altruistic, the British national interest also being noted. The benefits of

¹ *The Times* (17 September 1864), p. 12.

² *The Search for the Source of The Nile: Correspondence between Captain Richard Burton, Captain John Speke, and Others* (London, 1999), p. 196.

a geographical society would be 'of the first importance to mankind in general, and paramount to the welfare of a maritime nation like Great Britain, with its numerous and extensive foreign possessions'.³

Aside from the promotion of Britain's trading and imperial ambitions, there was a powerful excitement for the unknown. The African Association, in its Plan of 1788, asserted that:

Of the objects of inquiry which engage our attention the most, there are none, perhaps, that so much excite combined curiosity, from childhood to age; none that the learned and the unlearned so equally wish to investigate, as the nature and history of those parts of the world, which have not, to our knowledge, been hitherto explored.⁴

Henry Morton Stanley, the journalist and adventurer who famously found Livingstone was inspired by the mystery of Africa to name it 'the dark continent'.⁵ During the mid-nineteenth century the R.G.S. hosted 'African Nights' when letters from explorers in the field were read to the membership; these events attracted more enthusiastic audiences than any other event.⁶

Exploration in this context may be explained as akin to a pilgrimage experience. Anthropological thought regards such a journey as a 'liminal' experience comprising three stages (originally applied to rites of passage): a separation from the community, an encounter with the unknown, and an ultimate reintroduction into society.⁷ This theory has been extended to pilgrimage experiences, since these also require an individual or group leaving normal society and becoming subject to a socially ambiguous ('liminoid') experience, before returning enriched by the process.⁸ The experience of nineteenth-century explorers are similar liminal experiences. The act of seeking the source of the Nile may be seen as an act of pilgrimage in itself, considering the importance such places had assumed in British cultural life through ancient history and literature.

The Search for the Source of the Nile

The geographical origin of the great river had been discussed and debated in Antiquity, as well as being a by-word for what was unknowable and remote.⁹ Similar debates and stock ideas endured into later periods and the adage *facilius sit Nili caput invenire* ('it would be easier to discover the source of the Nile') achieved currency.¹⁰ An early nineteenth-century glossary of sayings remarked that 'the principal source of the Nile

³ H. R. Mill, *The Record of the Royal Geographical Society, 1830-1930* (London 1930), p. 17.

⁴ R. Hallett (ed.), *Records of the African Association, 1788-1831* (London 1964), p. 42.

⁵ H. M. Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent* (London 1878).

⁶ Mill, p. 87.

⁷ A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London 1977), p. 21.

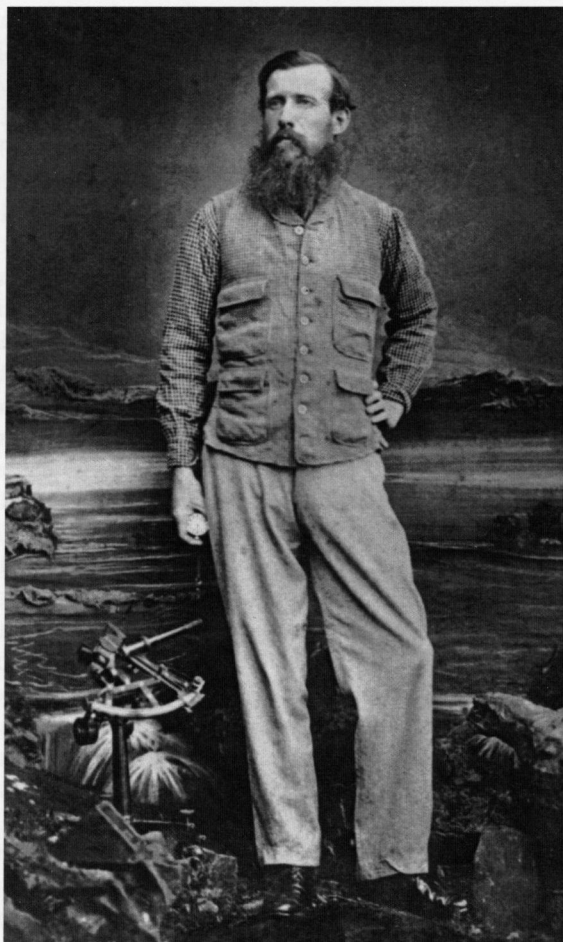
⁸ V. W. and L. B. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (Columbia, New York 1978), pp. 1-39.

⁹ See for instance Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 8.35; Claudian, *In Rufinum* 2.2.244-5.

¹⁰ For the image, see for instance Petrarch, *Epistolae metricae* 6.86-7. The adage appears in the preface by the learned printer Guarino Favorino to his *Thesaurus Cornucopiae et Horti Adonidis* (Florence 1496).

Figure 1: John Hanning Speke (1827-1864). Sepia photograph by Southwell Brothers, 1863.

© The National Portrait Gallery, London. NPG



remaining still undiscovered, the proverb continues in full force.’¹¹ In spite of earlier attempts at exploration it was only in the Victorian period that European influence in Africa made British expeditions feasible. In 1856 what came to be the most famous Nile quest was launched with John Hanning Speke (see **Figure 1**) partnering Richard Burton. Both men were officers in the Indian Army, though conspicuously different as individuals. Burton was already famous as an intellectual orientalist, having travelled to Mecca; later he wrote a memoir on the subject.¹² Speke, more rugged and less bookish, was yet to impress himself upon the public mind. Burton was interested in literature, Speke in hunting. Thus the two men, different in sentiment and personality, began their explorations in tandem. Speke’s previous explorations had been confined

¹¹ R. Bland, *Proverbs chiefly taken from the Adagia of Erasmus* (London 1814) vol. 2, p. 219-22, at 222.

¹² *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Medinah and Meccah* (3 vols., London 1855-6).

to shooting game and the study of Himalayan flora until he joined Burton's 1854 journey to Somalia.¹³

In December 1856 Burton and Speke arrived at Zanzibar leading an expedition supported by the R.G.S. and funded by a grant of £1,000 from the Foreign Office. The two explorers set out from Zanzibar in June 1857 and by November had reached Tabora. Together they discovered Lake Tanganyika the following February. Sickness and privation necessitated their retreat to Tabora in May 1858, where Burton was laid low with malaria.

Speke volunteered to explore alone, which Burton allowed. A fortnight into his march Speke came across a lake even larger than Tanganyika. Enquiries were made of the natives as to how far away the northern shore lay. The locals had never ventured that far and believed it could well stretch to the edge of the world. It was then, on 3 August 1858, that Speke had an epiphany. It was there he realised that he had 'solved a problem which it had been ... the ambition of the first monarchs of the world to unravel'.¹⁴ He spent three days on the shores of the water that he named Victoria Nyanza (Lake Victoria) after his Queen. Returning to Burton, he claimed he had discovered the Nile's source.

Burton, unimpressed, did not believe him. He admitted Speke might have found a feeder to the Nile, but not its ultimate source. Jealousy may naturally have played a part, but the primary reason for Burton's rejection of Speke's theory was that it was founded upon gut reaction rather than scientific confirmation. As Burton himself put it, 'the fortunate discoverer's conviction was strong; his reasons were weak'.¹⁵ It seems that Speke was seized with an impression that this was the source, rather than undertaking extensive exploration to prove it. Although he suggested Burton return with him, the older man insisted they return to Zanzibar to recuperate and acquire fresh funds.

Burton remained in Africa to regain his health while Speke sailed back home. According to Burton he promised that 'you may be quite sure I shall not go up to the Royal Geographical Society until you come to the fore and we appear together. Make your mind quite easy about that'.¹⁶ On the voyage though he was persuaded to tell his story and take his credit before Burton outshone him.

By the time Burton had recovered his health and returned to England, Speke had been telling all who would listen about 'his' discovery. He had even organised a new funded expedition to confirm the initial findings about the Nile's source. Sir Roderick Murchison, a leading figure at the R.G.S., had high hopes for Speke's success; he had been President during Burton and Speke's trip, and would be again when Speke returned once more. Accompanied by a loyal and unambitious fellow officer, James Grant, Speke set off from Tabora in 1861. On the journey he reached the point

¹³ R. Burton, 'Narrative of a trip to Harar', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 25 (1855), p. 137.

¹⁴ 'Captain J. H. Speke's discovery of the Victoria Nyanza Lake, the supposed Source of the Nile', *Blackwood's Magazine* 86 (1859), p. 397.

¹⁵ Isabel Burton, *The Life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton* (London 1893) vol. 1, p. 312.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 424.

where Lake Victoria becomes the Nile, naming this Ripon Falls after the peer who had helped sponsor the expedition as President of the R.G.S. when the explorers set out.¹⁷ While Speke had not fully explored the lake he had seen it at its southern and northern extremities. It was this partial investigation that was later to fuel controversy over the identification of the Nile's source.

In Britain nothing had been heard from Speke and Grant for some time, but fears for their safety were dispelled when at Khartoum on 27 March 1863 Speke sent a telegram to the R.G.S. unequivocally stating that 'the Nile is settled.'¹⁸

Murchison, keen that Speke's achievement should be officially marked, wrote to Austen Layard at the Foreign Office (2 May 1863) suggesting that a knighthood at least should be his reward for the discovery.¹⁹ This attracted a somewhat lukewarm response from Downing Street. Lord Palmerston, then Prime Minister, wrote privately to his Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell, acknowledging that Speke had with difficulty 'solved a geographical problem, which it is strange nobody ever solved before & so far he seems deserving of reward'.²⁰ However, in Palmerston's view 'the practical usefulness of the Discovery is not very apparent', while other African explorers such as Livingstone might expect similar treatment. That was the end of the matter as far as Palmerston was concerned.

Nevertheless, Speke on his return from Africa arranged for *Blackwood's Magazine* to publish his account. There were a number of problems with this plan. First, although Speke could talk engagingly about his travels, he had virtually no literary ability. It was ultimately necessary to employ a ghost writer to make Speke's work appealing to the public. There was also a question as to the content of some of Speke's material; his original draft revealed the explorer's less than savvy approach to dealing with Arab and indigenous traders, as well as his impatience with the natives, and also contained graphic accounts of sexual matters. *Blackwood's* arranged for Speke's rebranding 'as a standard bearer of British values, the stern imperialist, paternal, and patient yet firm in coping with adverse circumstances and unruly porters'.²¹

This did not prevent others, chiefly Burton, from doubting that Speke had really found the Nile's source. His rival maintained that Lake Tanganyika – his discovery – was the source. The two schools of thought were so polarized that a resolution seemed impossible. Both Burton and Speke were arrogant and egotistic about their achievements, and their respective followers were no better. In an attempt to settle the matter a debate between the two men was organized at Bath in September 1864.

On the eve of the debate Speke went hunting locally with a relative, shooting animals being his consuming passion. What happened that day is still mysterious. All that is certainly known is that Speke's gun discharged into his chest and a quarter of an hour later he died of the wound. The general view is that this was a dreadful

¹⁷ *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle* (1863), p. 388.

¹⁸ T. Jeal, *Explorers of the Nile: the triumph and tragedy of a great Victorian adventure* (London 2011), p. 189.

¹⁹ BL Ms Add 3906.

²⁰ TNA: PRO 30/22, p. 173.

²¹ D. Finkelstein, *The House of Blackwood: author-publisher relations in the Victorian era* (University Park Pennsylvania 2002), p. 62.

accident, his shotgun going off as he crossed a stile. Others thought the timing was too good to be coincidence – perhaps he was a fraud whose suicide was the only way to avoid exposure. Perhaps he had been dispatched by his rival. As Burton wrote to a friend, ‘the charitable say that he shot himself, the uncharitable that I shot him’.²²

Shortly after Speke’s death, his family received the news that Murchison had written again to the Government on behalf of the R.G.S., recommending that Speke be awarded a knighthood, with a C.B. for his fellow explorer Grant. As the dead man’s brother put it in a letter to the publisher John Blackwood (29 September 1864), ‘it would have been a great pleasure to him to have been allowed to receive it. Nevertheless it is a consolation to us and perhaps a satisfaction to them.’²³ It transpired that Speke himself, lacking patience, had written to Murchison on 7 March that year, asking for his intercession in obtaining official recognition; at that time though the R.G.S. were unimpressed at Speke’s refusal to deliver a proper scientific paper on his discoveries.²⁴

The controversy remained unsolved. Nonetheless, Murchison headed the campaign for a monument in London which was supported even by Burton. Though Burton was genuinely grief-stricken at Speke’s death, this did not prevent him from continuing to write about his opponent’s geographical errors. It was only in 1875 that Henry Morton Stanley circumnavigated Lake Victoria, demonstrating that this was the Nile’s ultimate source. Speke was vindicated, a decade too late.

Augmentation of the Speke Arms

While the Speke family were comforted by the assurance that their explorer relative had been about to be honoured at the time of his death, there was still no official recognition. There was only the obelisk erected to his memory in Kensington Gardens (**Plate 4a**) with the equivocal inscription: IN MEMORY OF / SPEKE / VICTORIA NYANZA / AND THE NILE / 1864.²⁵

It was not until September 1867 that a Royal Licence was issued for the granting of honourable augmentations to the family arms. Since Speke was already dead, unmarried and without issue, the grants were made to his father, William Speke of Jordans, Ilminster, Somerset. In the words of the Warrant,

taking into our Royal consideration the Services of the late John Hanning Speke, Esquire, Captain in our Indian Military Forces, in connection with the discovery of the sources of the Nile, and who was, by a deplorable accident, suddenly deprived of his life before he had received any mark of our Royal favour; and being desirous of preserving in his family the remembrance of those services by the grant of certain honourable armorial distinctions to his family arms

the Queen proceeded to allow additions to the Speke heraldry.²⁶

²² V. Klinkenborg et al. (edd.), *British Literary Manuscripts: Series II, 1800-1914* (New York 1981), p. 75.

²³ National Library of Scotland (NLS) Ms 4185, quoted in Alexander Maitland, *Speke* (London 1971), p. 204.

²⁴ Maitland, p. 204.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

²⁶ J. Woodward, *A Treatise on Heraldry British and Foreign* (Edinburgh and London 1896) vol. 2, p. 397.

The family was an ancient one. Their arms of *Argent two bars azure overall a double-headed eagle displayed gules* had been confirmed at the Visitation of Somerset in 1623, and the Spekes still lived in the county. The pedigree that was recorded in the Visitation traced this particular line back, somewhat uncritically, to an ancestor living c.1300.²⁷ These arms were now augmented by the following addition: *On a chief a representation of flowing water superinscribed with the word NILE*. The crest of a crocodile was also granted, in addition to the family's existing crest, a porcupine proper.²⁸

The addition of a word to a family coat of arms was historically unusual in the British heraldic tradition, but had latterly become a recognised type of augmentation. The best known example of such an honour conferred upon the family of a deceased individual, posthumously recognizing his achievements, was of course that of the Nelson arms. Following Lord Nelson's death, his family were permitted by Royal Licence (dated 11 January 1806) to add a fess wavy azure bearing the word TRAFALGAR to their armorial bearings (exemplified at the College of Arms 11 September in the same year).²⁹

The Speke warrant, however, went further, providing for a grant of supporters to William Speke – a crocodile on the dexter and a hippopotamus on the sinister. This was far more controversial, as Mr Speke possessed none of the qualifying attributes required for the use of supporters. Indeed, neither did his deceased son.

Supporters

Though long part of English heraldry, supporters – human figures, beasts, or monsters holding a shield of arms – seem only to have emerged in the 1400s. Henry VI was the first monarch to have certainly used supporters, though others have been attributed to Edward III.³⁰ Strong evidence for the use of supporters by noble families also begins to appear in the mid-fifteenth century.³¹ The earliest of the stall plates made for the knights of the Garter to feature supporters is that made for John Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, appointed to the Order c. 1440.³² The evidence of seals suggest that they were in use by the nobility earlier than this, though perhaps in a decorative capacity: another Garter knight, Thomas Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, who died in 1401, had supporters on his seal.³³

Despite the occasional grants and confirmations of supporters to non-noble individuals, the general position was, and is, that the law of Arms 'does not allow

²⁷ CA record Ms 2C22 fo 267v; F. T. Colby (ed.), *Visitation of the County of Somerset in the Year 1623* (London 1876), p. 103.

²⁸ Woodward, loc. cit.

²⁹ D. V. White, 'Heralds and their clients – the arms of Nelson', *CoA* n.s. 12 (1998), no. 182, p. 233.

³⁰ J. H. and R. V. Pinches, *The Royal Heraldry of England* (London 1974), p. 97.

³¹ Boutell, rev. JBL, p. 176.

³² W. H. St John Hope, *Stall Plates of the Knights of the Garter, 1348-1485* (London 1901), plate lviii.

³³ *Ibid.*, plate xli.

supporters to commoners except by Royal Warrant'.³⁴ A ruling of the Chapter of the College of Arms in 1694 confirmed that supporters belonged only to peers and their successors in title, to Knights of the Garter, and to Knights Banneret (but not baronets).³⁵ The clear indication was that the gentry had no rights to the use of supporters in their arms. In 1806 a grant of supporters recited that 'the Privilege of bearing Supporters be limited to Peers of the Realm, the Knights of His Majesty's Orders [i.e. not to Knights Bachelor] and the Proxies of Princes of the Blood Royal at Installations', though it did reserve the possibility for supporters to be conferred by a Royal Licence.³⁶ In that case the exception was being made, as the grantee was Admiral Sir Thomas Louis, the supporters having been granted in respect of his contribution to the 'Brilliant and decisive Victory' at the Battle of the Nile in 1798; he was to be created a baronet and the supporters to unusually descend with the title.

Although baronets were not entitled to supporters, a small number of grants to men of that rank did occur. Some of these baronets were even permitted to transmit the supporters to their successors, though the last occasion on which this occurred was in 1863. Supporters were granted to knights of Orders of Chivalry, such as the Garter, but also to orders such as the Bath which later became stratified, after which only knights grand cross were permitted to use supporters, and for the term of their life.³⁷

Arthur Fox-Davies stated that supporters had been granted to commoners in the United Kingdom on two occasions only. Both grants were made in the nineteenth century and resulted from royal intervention.³⁸ One of course was the Speke grant. Fox-Davies also reported that a grant of supporters had been made to George Watson Taylor in 1815, the grantee being a particular favourite of the Prince Regent. Watson Taylor (c.1770-1841) was the son of one successful plantation owner in Jamaica and the son-in-law of another, Sir John Taylor, 1st Bt. He entered Parliament as MP for Newport in 1816, and represented a number of seats until 1832. Said to have inherited vast sums from his brother-in-law, he was ruined by the collapse of his West Indian interests and by his own profligacy.³⁹

The case was administered at the Lyon Office in Scotland. The Royal Warrant (dated 28 September 1815) permitted George Watson to take the name and arms of his deceased father-in-law. In the words of the warrant, whereas

in the Lyon Office it appears that the said Sir John Taylor Baronet was entitled to bear and use for Supporters 'Two Leopards proper, Armed and Langued Gules, having Collars round their necks, and thereto Chains affixed, passing between their forelegs and reflexed over their backs Or' and the said George Watson Taylor being desirous, from Affectionate regard to the Memory of the said Sir John Taylor Baronet, his Father in Law,

³⁴ T. Woodcock and J. M. Robinson, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* (Oxford 1998), p. 99.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³⁶ CA record Ms Grants 23/422.

³⁷ S. Friar, *Heraldry for the Local Historian and Genealogist* (Stroud 1992), p. 178.

³⁸ A. C. Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry*, revised ed. J. P. Brooke-Little (London 1969), p. 318.

³⁹ *Hist. Parl.: The Commons 1790-1820*, vol. 5 p. 497; www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/watson-taylor-george-1770-1841.

and also of the late Sir Simon Richard Brissett Taylor Baronet also deceased (the only Son of the said Sir John Taylor) by whom the said supporters were also borne and used, that the Privilege enjoyed by the family of his aforesaid Wife may be continued to him he was accordingly permitted to use the supporters.⁴⁰ Even more significantly, the exemplification (23 October 1815) specified that these supporters were 'to be borne and used for ever hereafter by him the said George Watson Taylor Esquire and the heirs Male of his Body': they were to be hereditary.⁴¹

This anomaly is most easily explained as the personal favouritism of the Prince Regent and is at any rate subject to the jurisdiction of the Lord Lyon. Thus the Speke grant is the sole example in English heraldry of supporters being conferred upon an individual below the rank of knight and holding no foreign title or precedence.

The Speke Supporters

The timing for the grant of the supporters and the augmentations is curious. It was not made immediately following Speke's discovery, when Palmerston refused to make him a knight. Nor was it made during his lifetime. It did not even follow directly upon his death, when other posthumous distinctions were made. Only in 1867 were the changes to the arms effected, four years after the source of the Nile was 'settled', and three after his fatal accident.

The answer may lie in the Speke family's reaction to the success of another African explorer. Samuel Baker was a friend of John Hanning Speke and he met up with him and Grant after their expedition. Baker wished to achieve something himself and asked Speke whether there was anything left for him to do in Africa. Speke showed him a map and explained that another lake lay to the west of Victoria Nyanza which might be a second source of the Nile; he had not been able to explore this due to tribal wars in the region.⁴² Baker duly seized the gauntlet, discovered the lake Speke had described – Lata N'zige – and named it Albert Nyanza; he determined that although Lake Victoria was the Nile's ultimate source the river then flowed through Albert Nyanza, increasing its volume as it did so. Baker was rapturously received on his return home, lionized by the R.G.S. and knighted in August 1866.

The Spekes were outraged by the honours lavished upon Baker. He had completed a shorter journey than Speke, and had merely helped to confirm their relative's discovery that Lake Victoria was the Nile's headwater. Speke's brother Ben wrote to a friend (20 August 1866) that 'I think it is the most shameful thing I ever heard of. None of our people are going to congratulate the knight. It hurt poor mother very much.'⁴³

Such was the affront to Speke's reputation that it seems the family were forced into action. While it is still unclear how the project for augmentations to the family arms began, surviving correspondence held at The National Archives suggests that the Speke family petitioned the Queen for hereditary additions to the arms including supporters and that she looked favourably upon this request (see Lord Derby's comment on the letter of 4 July 1867 below).

⁴⁰ Lyon Office, PRABScot vol. 2, p. 145.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 147.

⁴² S. Baker, *The Albert Nyanza, Great Basin of the Nile* (London 1866) vol. 1, p. 71.

⁴³ NLS Ms 17931, quoted in Jeal (note 18 above), p. 244.

Despite the suggestion in the Warrant that the augmentations to the arms were to be hereditary, as well as the grant of a second crest and supporters, when the augmentations provided for by Royal Warrant were exemplified at the College of Arms, a distinct approach was taken. The chief depicting flowing water and the word NILE in gold letters were granted to William Speke in respect of his son's achievements; this grant was 'to him and his descendants'.⁴⁴ The supporters, however, were granted to William Speke alone, 'for and during his life'.⁴⁵ The subtle difference of treatment meant that the supporters did not create a precedent for the hereditary use of supporters by commoners.

The only correspondence we have on the matter of the grant consists of a collection of Home Office letters and notes now at The National Archives. As a result the picture is patchy and confused, but a reasonable narrative can be constructed.

It appears that the decision to honour the Spekes came from Queen Victoria herself. While there is no surviving letter from her, there is mention of one. The correspondence in the file begins on 2 July 1867 with a letter from the Earl of Derby, then Prime Minister, instructing the Home Secretary to carry out the Queen's wishes that an augmentation of arms and supporters were to be granted to the family of the late Captain Speke in recognition of his achievements.⁴⁶

The first contact with the College of Arms appears to have been with Albert William Woods, then Lancaster (later Garter). Although the licence and grant were made under the auspices of Sir Charles George Young as Garter, in his last months Woods often acted on his behalf. An internal investigation at the College made after Young's death in 1869 revealed that 'Woods acted as Deputy for Sir C. Young during his illness, which accounts for people resorting to him for information.'⁴⁷ It is therefore probable that Woods was already assisting Young in running his business before then.

John Streatfield was one of the four senior clerks at the Home Office in 1867.⁴⁸ On 4 July he wrote to an 'H. Murray Esqre' whose identity has not been discovered; it is unclear whether he was connected with Downing Street, the Home Office, or the College of Arms. Streatfield asked Murray

Are we to understand that the Supporters are to be limited to the late Captain Speke's Father, or are they to descend to his Heirs Male?

Mr. Woods understands that the supporters are to be confined to the Father only – while the Augmentation of the Arms is to be borne by him & his Descendants.

On the reverse of this Lord Derby himself wrote what he believed to be the answer:

Speke supporters

The Queen's letter is not down here, in which her assent was given. The application of the Family is for the supporters to be hereditary. It is unusual, in fact exceptional – but I think it was intended to be allowed in this case.

Hereditary

D[erby]

⁴⁴ CA record Ms Grants 56/288.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 56/290.

⁴⁶ TNA: HO 45/8568/1.

⁴⁷ A. R. Wagner, *Heralds of England* (London 1967), p. 514.

⁴⁸ *Royal Kalendar 1867*, p. 160.

There had clearly been correspondence between the College and the Speke family. Woods wrote to Streatfield on 9 July, explaining that the intention of the grant was that the augmentations were to be hereditary apart from the supporters: they were 'not to descend'. 'I have written to Mrs. Speke [the explorer's mother] by this post and explained this much to her.' Then on 16 July Georgina Speke (Mrs Speke) wrote (to an unknown recipient) that her husband agreed to 'retain the supporters shown by the Lancaster Herald [Woods], though it may be only for his life.'⁴⁹

Garter produced a note, undated, entitled 'What is meant by hereditary?' It is impossible to tell whether this material was put into a letter or other communication. Nevertheless, it corrected Derby's understanding and set out the traditional position of the Kings of Arms towards supporters:

Supporters only descend to the eldest son and heir male, when limited with an hereditary dignity – they are otherwise of a personal character, and borne only for life. This would be a perfectly novel precedent to a Commoner having no dignity, and would form ground for a similar application from the coadjutors of the late Mr. Speke in the said field.

The proposed Grant to Mr Speke is a mark of favor as great as the Grants to Knights Grand Cross of the Bath, whose Supporters are only personal, however great their services.

CGY
G

Young knew what he was talking about. In a long career at the College of Arms – he had been appointed Rouge Dragon in 1813 – he had been active both professionally and as a scholar, publishing significant works on precedence. In 1835 the College of Arms had to deal with a petition by the committee of baronets, making claims including the right to use supporters. The report, if not authored by him, was signed by Young as Registrar, rejecting the baronets' claims.⁵⁰

Garter's advice may have been passed to the Palace, as a letter from Sir Thomas Biddulph (Keeper of the Privy Purse) to Viscount Barrington (Lord Derby's private secretary) on 13 July referred to a letter and 'Memorandum' having been passed to him concerning the supporters. He conveyed the Queen's wishes that she wished to proceed as suggested by Woods, presumably referring to the non-hereditary nature of the supporters.

On 15 July, Barrington sent Biddulph's answer on to Streatfield at the Home Office. Finally, on the 19th, Garter sent a draft of the Royal Warrant to Horatio Waddington, Permanent Secretary at the Home Office.⁵¹ By this time the difficulties over hereditary supporters had evidently been resolved, as the letter referred to the augmentation of the arms being hereditary, but the supporters to be used only during the life of Captain Speke's father. The draft of the Warrant is substantially the text which was ultimately used, although Downing Street excised the words 'as well as the zeal and energy displayed by him in the prosecution and promotion of Geographical Science', following reference to Speke's discovery of the Nile's source (see Appendix).

⁴⁹ TNA: HO 45/8568/2.

⁵⁰ T. Woodcock, *Oxford DNB*, vol. 60, p. 878; www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30258.

⁵¹ TNA: HO 45/8568/3.

This revision may be the result of lingering doubts over Speke's scientific credibility or even an acknowledgement of Garter's fears that the grant of supporters to the Spekes might lead to similar applications from explorers.

Eventually the hereditary augmentations to the arms were granted by Garter Young and Clarenceux (Robert Laurie) on 28 October 1867. The lifetime grant of supporters (see **Plate 3**) was made the following day.⁵²

John Hanning Speke had been buried in the family chapel within the church of St Andrew, Dowlish Wake, Somerset, 'the sanctuary of the Spekes'. He was commemorated by a life-size bust, 'bearded and masterly, above the big black marble sarcophagus that contained his remains – ornamented by laurel leaves, embellished with gun, sword and sextant, and supported as the College of Heralds had decreed, by a Crocodile dexter and a large Hippopotamus sinister'⁵³ and the Latin tag A NILO PRAECLARUS – 'Illustrious from the Nile': see **Plate 4b**.

The grant of supporters for John Hanning Speke, like the man himself, was without precedent and without sequel. Such an honour was never again bestowed on an individual. The *Evening Star* summed up Speke in its obituary, stating that he 'was not a man of genius; he was not even a clever book-writer...He was a simple Indian officer who had a taste – a too fatal taste – for field sports.'⁵⁴ But while Speke was not a scientist or a poet, he was an adventurer. If he discovered the source of the Nile without geographical rigour, he was the discoverer. He is perhaps remembered in Africa (and not only the Anglophone parts) with honour: 2014, the sesquicentenary of his slightly mysterious demise, saw the issue of commemorative postage stamps in Togo and the Central African Republic. Fittingly, the conquest of 'NILE' would always be commemorated in the arms of the Spekes.

⁵² CA record Ms Grants 56/288, 290.

⁵³ J. Morris, *Heaven's Command: an imperial progress* (London 1973), p. 300. On the tomb, its imagery and adjacent material, see D. Simpson, 'An explorer's memorial', *Royal Commonwealth Society Library Notes* n.s. no 154 (1969), pp. 1-2, and catalogue entries for photographs by Donald Simpson, librarian of the Royal Commonwealth Society, on janus.lib.cam.ac.uk with the reference RCS/RCMS 22/30/4.

⁵⁴ Maitland (note 23 above), p. 203.

Appendix

(a) Garter Young's letter to Horatio Waddington (Home Office), 19 July 1867

College of Arms
July 19th 1867

Sir,

I have the honor to acknowledge / the receipt of your letter of the 9th inst.; / signifying Her Majesty's Pleasure / that a Warrant be prepared for a / Grant of a certain Augmentation / to the Arms of the family of the late / Captain Speke to be borne by his Father / W. Speke Esq; and his descend-ants / and at the same time granting the / privilege of bearing Supporters during / his life in further recognition of the / services of the said Captain Speke / in connection with the discovery of / the sources of the Nile.

In obedience to Her Majesty's / pleasure, I beg leave to enclose a / War-rant for your approval.

I have the honor to be

Sir,

Your most obedient Servant,

Chas Geo: Young
Garter

The Rt Hon:

H. Waddington

(b) Draft Licence attached to Garter's letter

Victoria by the Grace of God of the / United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland / Queen Defender of the Faith &c. To Our right / trusty and wellbeloved Councillor Edward / George Fitzalan-Howard (commonly called Lord / Edward George Fitzal-an-Howard) Deputy to / Our Right trusty and Right Entirely Beloved / Cousin Henry Duke of Norfolk Earl Marshal / and Our Hereditary Marshal of England / Greeting, Whereas We taking into Our Royal / consideration the Services of the late John / Hanning Speke, Esquire, Captain in Our / Indian Military Forces in connection with / the discovery of the sources of the Nile ~~as / well as the zeal and energy displayed / by him in the prosecution and promotion / of Geographical Science~~ [margin: Downing Street] and who was by a / deplorable accident suddenly deprived of his life / before he had received any mark of Our Royal Favor / and being desirous of preserving in his family / the remembrances of these Services by the / Grant of certain honorable Armorial dis- / tinctions to his family Arms. Know ye / that We of Our Princely Grace and Special / Favour have given and granted and by / these Presents do give and grant unto / William Speke of Jordans in the Parish / of Ilminster in the County of Somerset, / Esquire, the father of the said John Hanning / Speke, Our Royal Licence and Authority that / he and his descendants may bear to his and / their Armorial En-signs the honorable / augmen- / tation following that is to say On a Chief / a repre-

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sentation of flowing water super-inscribed / with the word “Nile” And for a Crest of / honorable augmentation a Crockodile and / although the privilege of bearing Supporters / be limited to the Peers of Our Realm, the / Knights of Our Orders, and the Proxies of / Princes of the Blood Royal at Installations / yet in order to give a further testimony / of Our approbation of the services performed / by the said Captain John Hanning Speke / We are graciously pleased to give and grant / unto the said William Speke Our Royal / Licence and Authority that he may for and / during his life bear and use the Supporters / following that is to say On the dexter / side a Crockodile and on the Sinister / side an Hippopotamus Provided the same be / first duly exemplified according to the Laws / of Arms, and recorded in Our College of Arms / otherwise this Our Licence and Permission to / be void and of none effect. Our Will and / Pleasure therefore is that you Edward George / Fitzalan Howard (commonly called Lord Edward George Fitzalan-Howard) Deputy to / Our said Earl Marshal to whom the / cognizance of matters of this nature doth / properly belong do require and command / that this Our Concession and Especial mark / of Our Royal Favour be registered in Our / College of Arms to the end that Our Officers / of Arms and all others upon occasion may / take full notice and have knowledge thereof / And for so doing this shall be your Warrant. / Given at Our Court at Saint James’s this / day of July 1867 in the thirty / first year of Our Reign.

By Her Majesty’s Command

PLATE 3



The augmented arms, two crests and supporters of William Speke of Jordans, Ilminster in Somerset, in the office copy of the exemplification of the supporters, 29 October 1867. CA record Ms Grants 56/290. See page 94.

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PLATE 4



Memorials to John Hanning Speke. Left (a), Kensington Gardens, London: obelisk erected in 1864 to the design of Philip Hardwick, R.A. The short and equivocal inscription is now supplemented by a bronze plaque in the ground in front of the obelisk, placed in 1995. *See page 88.*

Below (b), St Andrew's Church, Dowlish Wake, Somerset: monument over Speke's tomb, erected in 1867. The keystone of the arch, on which the explorer's bust sits, is flanked by a crocodile and a hippopotamus, facing outwards. *See page 94.*

