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BAKER [*NÉE* VON SASS], FLORENCE BARBARA
MARIA, LADY BAKER (1841–1916)

Traveller in Africa

MIDDLETON, Dorothy

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Baker [*née* von Sass], Florence Barbara Maria, Lady Baker (1841–1916), traveller in Africa, was born on 6 August 1841, probably in a German-speaking region of Hungary. She was the sole survivor of an attack on her home in which the rest of her family died during the disturbances of 1848. Nothing more is known of her antecedents or early life. She is next recorded in January 1859 in the Turkish town of Widden, later in Bulgaria, being offered for sale in the slave market; at that time she was using the name Finnian. Samuel White Baker (1821–1893), who was in Widden on a hunting excursion, offered the highest bid and made off with his prize. He told no one of Florence's existence, and, rather than return to England, took her off with him on his quest for the source of the Nile. He later hinted that they had been married abroad, but it seems certain that they were not married until 4 November 1865, soon after they arrived in England, at St James's Church, Piccadilly, London. Despite Samuel Baker's attempts to keep the story of their meeting and subsequent relationship secret, rumours spread sufficiently for Queen Victoria to refuse to receive his wife at court.

Despite its inauspicious beginning, theirs was to be a very happy partnership. As her husband was later to write, Florence Baker possessed 'a share of sang-froid admirably suited to African travel' and particularly 'was not a *screamer*' (Baker, Albert Ny'anza, 67). She was slight and small and, in spite of her long golden hair, was often mistaken for a boy, since she dressed in blouse, breeches, and gaiters. She was as active physically as she was mentally alert and coped with African exploration as well as did her husband, a man renowned for

his strength. The first lap of their journey, exploring the Abyssinian tributaries, was easy going, allowing her time to decorate their camps with 'many charms and indescribable comforts that could only be provided with a lady's hand' (Baker, Nile Tributaries, 251). She also learned enough Arabic to be an effective partner in their joint enterprise. The hard work began at Gondokoro, the navigable head of the Nile, where traders in slaves and ivory made strangers unwelcome. A mutiny among the porters was quelled by Florence Baker's appeal to the men for loyalty and to her husband for clemency. The dramatic appearance of Speke and Grant dashed Baker's hopes of being the first at the source of the Nile, but they urged him to find his way to a second lake said to be linked to the Victoria. Speke and Grant were surprised and rather shocked to meet Florence and neither mentioned her in his account of their travels. The Bakers left Gondokoro and after a gruelling journey lasting a year, in which both suffered from fever and Florence nearly died from sunstroke, they reached the lake (which they called Albert), the first travellers from the outside to do so.

On their arrival in England in 1865 Florence Baker was to need all her composure to face Victorian society and the Baker clan, which included her husband's four daughters by his first marriage, the eldest of whom was only six years her junior. However, she was soon at home in Hedenham Hall, Norfolk, and on good terms with the Baker family. Her husband was knighted in 1866, and, although she did not welcome his appointment in 1869 as commander of the khedive of Egypt's expedition into the country south of Gondokoro to annex territory to Egypt and abolish the slave trade, she went with him. She maintained high domestic standards on the houseboat from where the mission was directed, took charge of the health of the party, did what she could for the victims of the slave hunt, and found time to keep a meteorological record. When her husband's attempt to raise the Egyptian flag over Bunyoro brought fierce opposition and they were driven out under a rain of spears, Lady Baker marched 'close to [Samuel] with some ammunition for a large rifle ... two bottles of brandy, two drinking cups, and two umbrellas and my pistol in my belt' (letter to Agnes Baker, quoted in A. Baker, 157, 160). They reached safety in one of their old camps where they were welcomed and Lady Baker was given the name Myadu or Morning Star.

On their return to England in 1873 Sir Samuel bought the small estate of Sandford Orleigh, at Newton Abbot in Devon, where Florence proved as good a chatelaine as in their African camps. Here in October 1883 she effectively vetoed Gordon's suggestion that her husband go out to the Sudan to restore order, broken down by the Mahdist uprising: she would not return to Egypt and he had promised not to go without her. After Sir Samuel's death in 1893 she was at first inconsolable, but she mustered her courage to live on cheerfully until her death at Sandford Orleigh on 11 March 1916. She was buried with her husband in the family vault at Grimley, near Worcester.

Dorothy MIDDLETON

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R. Hall: *Lovers on the Nile* (1980)
T. D. Murray and A. Silva White: *Sir Samuel Baker: a memoir* (1895)
A. Baker ed.: *Morning Star: Florence Baker's diary of the expedition to put down the slave trade on the Nile, 1870–1873*, (1972)

Archives

RGS

Likenesses

photograph, NPG [*see illus.*]

Wealth at death

£11,748 1s. 5d.: resworn probate, May 1916, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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Baker, Florence Barbara Maria, Lady Baker (1841–1916), by unknown photographer

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