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David Livingstone

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David Livingstone

Even before his *Viagem contra Costa*, as the Portuguese referred to his extraordinary march one and a half times across south central Africa, Livingstone already had a reputation in the United Kingdom among those interested in travel and exploration as well as in missionary circles. He first came to the attention of this audience in 1849 after he, together with William Cotton Oswell (someone who would remain his life-long friend) and Mungo Murray of Lintrose, were the first Europeans to see Lake Ngami. They were able to confirm the existence of the lake which had been the subject of a good deal of speculation among Europeans in southern Africa (DL to D.G. Watt 17-1-1841). More importantly they reported that although a desert had to be crossed to reach central Africa from the Cape, the region was not a vast desert but a well-watered and well-populated savannah, crossed by a great river.

I have to make a small but necessary digression from the topic at this point. Why was the misunderstanding of Central Africa as a vast desert so prevalent in Britain even among the membership of the Royal Geographical Society? The Portuguese knew very well that Central Africa was not a desert.

Livingstone reported this sighting of Lake Ngami and the information he and his companions had gained about the great river (the Zambesi) to Arthur Tidman, Secretary of the London Missionary Society, who immediately contacted Sir Roderick Murchison, the newly elected Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society.

Ordinarily Livingstone's report might have expected to end up as an interesting communication at the next scheduled meeting of the Royal Geographic Society and then been forgotten, African exploration was not yet the rage it was to become. This did not happen because Murchison and Tidman each made a great deal of this «discovery». It was the deliberate public relations efforts of these two men in London that made the discovery an «event». Tidman, as ever, was seeking to increase the financial and recruitment base of the LMS and

publicising Livingstone's discovery seemed a good way to do it. His ideas meshed neatly with the plans of Roderick Murchison, the new Secretary of the RGS, who was determined to increase the public's awareness of the Society. Whether these efforts significantly improved the prospects of their two societies or not, their efforts certainly succeeded in making Livingstone's name known to the readers of the nation's newspapers and serious periodicals.

As for Livingstone, the Ngami journey was a major step in his growing certainty that God was calling him to be a pioneer in Africa and the agent of focussing the Christian world's attention on that continent. This was an idea that had entered his mind as early as his first trek in Africa, the journey from Port Elizabeth to Kuruman. His letters written on the journey to various friends reflect a fierce enjoyment of life in the bush and a growing sense that pioneering was perhaps his true calling. In one such letter he wrote prophetically to his friend Watt in July 1841,

What do you say to my going up to Abyssinia? This is talked of by many of the missionaries as a desirable object, and some propose doing it. Would it not promote our cause by making known to the churches the awful degraded state of an immense population? Look at the map... you see far beyond us «very populous country» etc. I think one may be quite safe if alone and without anything to excite the cupidity of the natives. I should cost the society nothing during those years I should be away. It might be for six or seven years before I should return but if the languages are dialects of the Bechuana I should soon make known a little of the liberal plan of mercy to the different tribes on the way and if I should never return perhaps my life will be as profitable spent as a forerunner as in any other way.

In keeping with his new resolution Livingstone repeated the journey to Ngami the next year 1850, this time with Mary and the children. On the journey Mary gave birth to a little girl and worries about the health of mother and child meant that Livingstone had to return earlier than he had intended and again failed to meet with Sebituane and the Kololo who dominated the area politically and whose language he spoke fluently. (The Kololo were the only Tswana/Sotho speaking people to leave what is now South Africa to settle in Central Africa as a result of the Difaqane, the others Shangaan, Ndebele and Ngoni were all Nguni speaking.) Livingstone, with

his characteristic stubbornness went north again with Oswell in 1851. This time the travellers reached the Kololo capital of Linyanti and Livingstone was able to talk at length with Sebituane before the sudden death of that great man.

By this time, Livingstone was convinced that if he could find a readily travelled route from the West Coast, the Kololo could provide the channel for the entry of Christianity and commerce to Central Africa. The well-watered and well-populated Zambesi basin was very different from the sparsely populated and semi-desert Tswana lands where Robert Moffat had planted his famous Kuruman mission and where Livingstone had worked at Kolobeng and Mabotsa. Not only was the Zambesi basin fertile with a large population, it was free from the threat of white invasion, unlike the Tswana lands that were under constant threat from the expansionary pressure of the Transvaal and of the British in the Cape. In addition Livingstone had the confidence of Sekeletu, Sebituane's son and successor, who saw Livingstone as a friend who could bring new wealth and power to his people.

The route from the Cape, which Livingstone had now travelled three times, was clearly unsuitable for any kind of commerce. He was convinced that it was his duty to go back north and seek a route that would link the Kololo with the Portuguese ports on the Atlantic coast.

In 1851 Livingstone and Mary together made the fateful decision that she and the children would go to Scotland while he followed what she and he firmly believed was a divine. The long separation that ensued which saw Mary suffer so badly from loneliness in, for her, a totally alien environment, has been the source of severe criticisms of Livingstone in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Had Mary and David foreseen that the separation would be four years not eighteen months would they have made the same decision? It also has to be asked why Mary and children did not go to stay with her parents at Kuruman her old home. Mary's relations with her formidable mother, Mary Moffat, need to be looked at before judgement is finally passed on that episode on this sad episode.

When Livingstone eventually set off from the Cape he had such meagre financial backing that when, in May 1853, he reached Sekeletu's court, he had no resources save his wagon and his somewhat limited medical kit. He was consciously or unconsciously acting out the kind of African travel he wrote of

in those letters to Watt and company ten years before. He turned to Sekeletu for help. Each of these men had affection for the other, but each also saw how they could use the other. To cap it all Livingstone, somewhat inadvertently, saved the chief's life during an attempted *coup d'État* (Ross, 2002, p. 92). In response to Livingstone's urging it was Sekeletu then who created the resources for an expedition to explore a route to and from the West Coast. Thus Livingstone embarked on this journey as the head of a party of Kololo warriors, as an «nduna» of Sekeletu and as an ambassador to the Portuguese authorities seeking to gain their cooperation, or at least their acquiescence in the establishment of a viable route into the Kololo lands from Loanda. It was as such an embassy that he and his party were received by the Portuguese Governor-General in the Angolan capital.

In Loanda the next critical moment occurred in the creation of a national reputation for Livingstone, both in the short term as well as in the long term. There were ships of the Royal Navy's anti-slavery squadron at Loanda, where Edmund Gabriel, an Anti-Slavery Commissioner, was stationed. Gabriel and the British naval officers received Livingstone with enthusiastic admiration and the Royal Navy offered him a free passage back to the UK on a man of war.

By then Livingstone had, however, decided that the West Coast was not a suitable point of entry for his projected highway for commerce and Christianity. The decision was forced on him by the increase of Portuguese slave raiding in the area he and the Kololo had just traversed. He decided therefore to go back and try to find an East Coast route. He explained his situation to Gabriel and to the naval officers, adding that in any case the Kololo had to get back home. How far the naval officers or Mr Gabriel were responsible for the very different story that was presented to the British public, or how far a sober report from them was transformed by Tidman and Murchison or how far they all contributed to the story is not now clear. The story reported widely in Britain and elsewhere was not simply the story of an extraordinary journey but was reshaped as that of «the lone European hero, who, rather than return to the plaudits of his countrymen, plunged back into darkest Africa in order to take his poor native followers home»!

That moment was the creation of the first of those inaccurate snapshots that shaped Livingstone's reputation well

into the twentieth century. At that time, and for the majority of writers up to the end of the twentieth century, this journey has been described as a great feat of European exploration, the lone European traveller triumphing against the odds. When in the second half of the nineteenth century the exploration of East and Central Africa became a massive concern of the British public in the era of Burton, Speke and company, Livingstone's leadership of the Kololo expeditions was judged to be the beginning of the movement. It was not. The journey to Loanda was an African embassy attempting to open a route for trade with the outside world. The nduna of the party was a European but it was financed by the Kololo and was made up of free warriors carrying their chief's ivory and not a massive expedition of professional porters paid by European funds. The march to the East Coast that followed, after Livingstone and his men returned to Linyanti, the Kololo capital, was an extension of that effort. Livingstone says so utterly unambiguously on page 516 of his best seller, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*. On page 272 of the same book Livingstone had already made explicit for the reader that his authority over these men on the journey was not that of an employer but that of an nduna of Sekeletu. Nonetheless the great walk from the centre of Africa to the West Coast and the return back to Linyanti and on to Quilemane on the East Coast has remained in the British popular imagination and in the literature African travel as a great European journey of exploration.

Having heard the dramatic reports of Livingstone's decision to march back into Africa, the British public waited eagerly to see if the white hero would re-appear out of the African forest. So the report of his arrival at Quilemane with news of the Zambesi as God's highway into the centre of Africa and of the astonishing falls he was the first European to see and had named after Queen Victoria, provoked a vast amount of publicity. The new railway system and the beginning of a modern cheap press enabled him, on his return to the United Kingdom, to gain a national image in a way that would not have been possible earlier in the century. He was run ragged by trying to fulfil as many as he could of the invitations to speak which flooded in. The only peace he had was when he sat down in a rented house in Sloane Square, Chelsea, to write his *Travels and Researches*.

Although he was a popular hero at that point, his whole stance on Africa and her future was being questioned by the pioneers of scientific racism. As a result, Dr Monk who edited for publication Livingstone's famous Cambridge Lectures used his Introduction to the Lectures to attack scientific racism and cited Livingstone's understanding of Africans as fully human beings in arguing against the new science of race.

Popularity did not mean understanding, as the public perception of his aims shows. How alien he was in the British society which welcomed him so warmly is exhibited in the story told by Professor Sir Richard Owen about his escorting Mary Livingstone to a reception and display of photographs at Kings College, London.

Mrs L., with a straw bonnet of 1846 and attired to match, made a most singular exception to the brilliant costumes. Who could that odd woman be that Professor O., is taking around the room and paying so much attention? I caught sight of Will's countenance... disgust and alarm strongly portrayed. He could not conceive what badly dressed housemaid I had picked up to bring to such a place. Carry was equally mystified. The extraordinary scrutinies of many fine ladies as they shrank from contact as far as the crowd permitted! But when the rumour began to buzz abroad that it was Dr and Mrs Livingstone... what a change came over the scene. It was which of the scornful dames could first get introduced to Mrs Livingstone and the photographs were comparatively deserted for the dusky strangers. (Owen, 1894)

It was on the crest of this wave of hero-worship, which can be measured by the astonishing publishing success of his *Missionary Travels* that Livingstone returned to Africa as head of the Government Zambesi Expedition which lasted from 1858-1863. This is not the place to discuss the expedition which, despite real achievements, was a failure, the Zambesi was not navigable as he had hoped and the dramatic increase in slaving by the Swahili and by the Portuguese had disrupted traditional society profoundly and removed any hope of the peaceful development in what are now Zambia and Malawi which he had so confidently predicted.

When he returned to the UK the public response to him ranged from deep disappointment to savage criticism. His astonishing achievement, after the Expedition was officially over, of sailing a three-foot draught riverboat crewed by Africans who had never seen the sea, from the mouth of the

Zambesi to Zanzibar and then on across 2400 miles of the Indian Ocean to Bombay. A genuine «Boys Own Paper» piece of British derring-do that would have been expected to gain wide acclaim went unnoticed. This example of Livingstone's leadership, navigational skill and courage was not publicised and so it was as if it had never existed in terms of affecting Livingstone's reputation.

On his return he was seen widely as someone who was either a deliberate liar or a romantic unrealistic dreamer; in any case he was not someone to be trusted by Government, missions or business. In particular the failure of the UMCA mission in southern Malawi and the tragic deaths of London Missionary Society missionaries to the Kololo were blamed on him quite unfairly, and as far as the British and South African public were concerned Livingstone's heroic Kololo were revealed as revengeful and cruel savages. A classic example of the hostility which Livingstone and his ideas aroused can be found in a long article first printed in a minor periodical then reprinted in the *Times* and other important newspapers. The writer berates Livingstone thus

We were promised cotton, sugar, indigo... and, of course, we got none. We were promised trade; and there is no trade, though we have a Consul at \$500 a year. We have been promised converts to the Gospel, and not one has been made. In a word, the thousands subscribed by the Universities, and the thousands contributed by the Government, have been productive only of the most fatal results. (*Times*, 20 January 1863)

In stark contrast with the desperate burden of lecture tours imposed on him during his last stay in Britain, this time there were very few invitations to speak. Two of the few were, however, particularly significant. The first was an invitation to address the British Association, which is a reminder that at the time Livingstone continued to be highly regarded as a scientist, particularly as an accurate observer and reporter. The other invitation was from the Duke of Argyll, who invited him to stay at Inverary Castle and tour Livingstone's ancestral area of Argyll. What is interesting is that in Argyll he was warmly and enthusiastically welcomed by the people of the Gaeltacht. Significantly, it was at that time that the story emerged in the local oral tradition that Livingstone's great-grandfather did not die at Culloden but was one of the Livingstones who rescued from the red-coat guarded gibbet, the body of James

Stewart of the Glen who had been convicted of the Appin murder; an incident not recorded in the official records *Was this the Gaels* claiming him as their own and, in a fashion of typical of nineteenth century Gaeldom, going against mainstream UK opinion?

After Livingstone began his last extraordinary journey and in 1866 disappeared into that area of Africa, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, eastern Congo that was being ravaged by ever increasing Portuguese and Swahili slave-raiding, a gradual but massive change took place in regard to his reputation. In a very short time the British public again became fascinated by him and admiration appeared to overcome the bitter criticisms that had been heaped on him on his return from the Zambesi Expedition. Yet this was at a time when he is not able to communicate with the outside world, or was it because it was such a time? Very soon the only word of Livingstone are rumours coming out of the bush – he had been murdered, married a young woman chief and so on. The process of people creating their own Livingstones without his being able to challenge or contradict them had begun.

The rapid rebirth of an admiring fascination with Livingstone at this time has still to be explained. As early as 1868, the British Government financed an expedition to southern Malawi to check on the story that he had been murdered there, this cost much more money than the derisory grant they had allowed him to help his return to Africa. From that first government-sponsored expedition the interest went on increasing and there followed a series of six search and or rescue expeditions. It has often been argued that it was H.M. Stanley's despatches and his rapidly produced book of 1872, *How I Found Livingstone*, which sparked off interest in an almost forgotten man but that is not so as these search expeditions and the publicity they generated show. The hard-nosed businessman, who owned the *New York Herald*, Gordon Bennet, was not going to finance an expedition unless he knew that the story was going to be a big one and it was. What undoubtedly is true, however, is that Stanley's despatches and his book imprinted on the public imagination a picture of Livingstone divorced from anything Livingstone ever wrote. This was Livingstone, the gentle, almost helpless, worn-out old man, doggedly staying on in Africa to do his duty, an image that the British public took to its heart.

The subsequent dramatic story of Livingstone's faithful companions carrying his body 1400 miles from the Bengweulu swamps to the coast; the massive crowds and military escort meeting the body at Dover; the all-but state funeral with the Queen's empty carriage following the cortege, watched by thousands lining the London streets; these constituted the apotheosis of the unreliable romantic dreamer and embarrassing negrophile into the supreme hero, not only of Christian mission but even more of British pluck and Imperial virtue.

A great deal of this was also due to Horace Waller, who had been part of the UMCA mission to Malawi. He had bombarded the *Times* with letters about Livingstone throughout the absent years and kept the interest aroused by the funeral at a high pitch with his publication of Livingstone's *Last Journals*. He carefully edited these journals to suit the taste of the wide audience in the UK and US who had been well prepared by Stanley's work. Engraved on the cover of each volume of the *Journals* was a drawing of Livingstone sitting on the shoulders of Chuma while crossing a stream. Again we have an example of a hopelessly inaccurate but important snapshot defining the public image of Livingstone. When, near the end of his life when he was physically almost helpless Livingstone was thus carried across streams and through marshes, but throughout the rest of his life in Africa Livingstone had prided himself on being able to out-walk anyone, African or European. Indeed, Stanley remarked in his despatches how the old man had insisted on walking from Ujiji to Tabora when he had offered a machila to ease his hero's burden. What is seen and remembered, however, is the picture of Livingstone on the back of the African.

Waller's editing removed not only DL's bouts of bitter anger and depression, but also his intimacy with those whom he had called «my faithfuls». As well as the men, Chuma, Susi, Amoda *et al.* these included Amoda's wife Halima, and Ntaoeke, whom Livingstone had married off to Chuma because he insisted she was far too good looking to be allowed to stay with the company otherwise. It was this intimacy with Africans which began in his earliest days in Africa which forces me to disagree with those writers sympathetic to Livingstone who insist that David Livingstone was a paternalist, he was not. No paternalist could act as «nduna» to an African chief as Livingstone did to Sekeletu, nor have his ability to relate to many individual

Africans in the way he did, as in the case of the beautiful and naked woman chief Manenko. But here's the rub; you only get a true picture of these relationships from the diaries and notebooks, the intimacy is dramatically toned down by editors like Waller, or indeed as with Halima and Ntaoeke, the objects of that intimacy are simply erased from the record. This process was begun by Livingstone himself in the best-seller *Missionary Travels and Researches*. The beginning of the invention of an expurgated Livingstone began with his own published writing, leaving the way open for those who would transform his image into the opposite of who he was. The worst example of this was the awful *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and its Tributaries*, attributed to David and Charles Livingstone, but thoroughly edited and re-shaped by a committee of Livingstone's establishment friends.

Even in his published writing, particularly *Missionary Travels*, his attitudes can be discerned by those who have eyes to see. Just recently in a BBC interview with Chinua Achebe on Joseph Conrad, the interviewer, in reply to Achebe's accusation that Conrad's view of Africans was essentially paternalist if not racist, said surely that was true of all Europeans in Africa at that time. Achebe instantly replied David Livingstone was not like that, he saw Africans simply as people, some he loved, some he liked, some he disliked and some he abhorred — they were just people. Livingstone's intimacy with his African friends and his radical ideas on human equality are completely absent from the literature on him, good bad and indifferent that followed his death and he must bear some of the blame for this himself.

To explain Livingstone's self-editing we have to go back to Cape Town in 1851 where he had gone to see Mary and the children off on their fateful voyage to Scotland. Livingstone found the Colony at war with the Xhosa people. He was appalled by British policy towards the Xhosa and towards their allies, the so-called «Cape Coloured» rebels. He produced, after much careful re-writing, a passionately argued attack on the war policy. This article was based on his insistence that the Xhosa had every right as human beings to take up arms against the British to defend their independence. In the article he tried to use what he had gleaned from periodicals to play on what he understood to be British public attitudes. So he asserted that the Xhosa had as much right to fight for their freedom and nationhood (concepts which at that time and for another

hundred years most Europeans did not believe applied to groups like the Xhosa) as any Magyar, playing on the widespread support in Britain for the Magyar rising of 1848. This was to no avail and no one in Britain would publish this piece.

This essay is in sharp contrast with what writers, even those as well informed as John Mackenzie assert, which is that the freedom Livingstone talked of was not a political one. The freedom of which Livingstone spoke was as political as the ANC would have wished and he makes this explicit again in letters to relations and friends insisting that only if Africans could get guns would they have any hope of being free.

After the complete brick wall he ran up against in trying to get his condemnation of British South Africa policy published, (people were ever ready to publish his condemnation of Transvaaler policies) he learned his lesson. So afterwards when writing to try to arouse British commercial, governmental and religious concern about Africa he tempered his beliefs and played down what he believed might not be acceptable. Thus in a way he began the slippery slope that, in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, led to his reputation as a hero of liberal or paternalist imperialism, and an icon for those Christian and missionary interests that saw the Empire and race as part of God's purposes. A classic example of this is Edward Hume's study of Livingstone for the National Sunday School Union.

It is not too much to say that the work of exploration and development carried on by his successors has been made easier by the perfect frankness with which he dealt with the coloured races of Africa.

In such a sense, therefore, Livingstone still lives. And as confidence in the honesty of purpose of the governing race will need to be the foundation of British rule in South and Central Africa, as it has been in India, so the man whose labours resulted in strengthening this reputation for fairness has a claim on Anglo-Saxon gratitude which each year should see deepened and extended.

It was this Livingstone in whose name Selous led the settler columns into Zimbabwe, that Stanley and Leopold wrought their havoc in the Congo, that Harry Johnston carried out his Imperial tasks, that «Slim Jannie» Smuts envisioned southern Africa's future. It was still this Livingstone that was celebrated

in Britain during the nation-wide festivities and special church services that took place in 1913.

That same year, however, signs of a change appeared. Hamish McCunn, the Scottish composer, published his cantata «Livingstone the Pioneer». This has been seen by some as the beginning of an association of Livingstone with a renewed sense of Scottish national identity. It was not a beginning, however, but a further step in an existing link between Livingstone and a renewed Scottish assertiveness. This association began in the late 1880s and developed in parallel with the Livingstone, hero of imperialism movement. It began with the concerted pressure of the Scottish public, Tory and Liberal, Free Kirk and Auld Kirk, to persuade the British government to intervene and prevent the Portuguese occupation of what is now Malawi. This movement continued its activities into the 1890s with the campaign which succeeded in preventing Cecil Rhodes incorporating Malawi into his greater Rhodesia. That development, it was asserted, would be a betrayal of Livingstone and of Scotland's obligation to attempt to fulfil their hero's dream. It is important to note that, at this point in Scotland at least, unlike later in the twentieth century, Livingstone and Rhodes are seen as opponents.

This association of Livingstone with a renewal of Scottish self-consciousness continued into the 1920s and took a new and class twist, class and nationhood have been peculiarly intertwined in the modern Scottish story. In this case the focus was the tenement block and its outhouses in Blantyre, where Livingstone had grown up. In the late nineteen-twenties it was to be demolished but a campaign, particularly strong in the West of Scotland saved it. Funds raised primarily by public subscriptions enabled the property to be bought, refurbished and turned into the National Memorial; it is to be noted a *national* not a church or missionary memorial. At a time of terrible post General Strike poverty among the working class of Scotland, Sunday Schools and Kirks in working class communities in central and west of Scotland provided a disproportionate amount of the needed funds. As McNair described it and wanted it to be, it became a shrine, a centre of pilgrimage for Sunday school trips and picnics from the late twenties until well into the 1960s, David Livingstone had become Scotland's specifically working class hero.

This reputation continued alongside Livingstone's reputation as British imperial and missionary hero until after the Second World War, then in the nineteen-sixties and seventies there appeared works that pictured Livingstone primarily as scientist and as an obsessive geographer rather than as a missionary (Coupland, 1945; Debenham, 1955; Gelfand, 1957). The centenary of Livingstone's death in 1973 saw the publication of Jeal's massive biography which concentrated to a marked degree on the failure of the Zambesi Expedition and Livingstone's appallingly bad relations with the original Europeans recruited for the adventure. Whether this and the other more insubstantial works published at the time made any difference to Livingstone's reputation in Scotland, England and elsewhere is not at all clear.

It is interesting and somewhat puzzling that since 1990 at least three substantial biographies of Livingstone have appeared and been well reviewed in the London quality press and academic journals but ignored by the Scottish broadsheets. On the other hand in Michael Fry's *Scottish Empire*, Livingstone is very sympathetically treated as he was also in the African episode of Tom Devine's series, *Scotland's Empire*, on BBC2 in 2003.

What would be much more important to David Livingstone, were he alive, is how he is remembered in the areas of Africa where he spent his life. He would have been pleased that when all the European names of places in East and Central Africa were being removed, in Zambia and Malawi three names *only* did not change, the town of Livingstone still exists as do Blantyre and Livingstonia. Perhaps what would have pleased Livingstone most was President Kaunda of Zambia's decision to raise a memorial over where his heart lies at Chitambo's and there to declare him, «Africa's first Freedom Fighter».

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