

David Livingstone 1813-1873 A Flawed Hero?

John S. Ross*

* Dr. John Ross is the minister of Glenurquhart and Fort Augustus Free Church of Scotland. John formerly lectured at Dumisani Theological Institute, South Africa and was CEO of Christian Witness to Israel. He has held pastorates in Inverness, Scotland and Belfast, Northern Ireland and has served as a missionary in Nigeria. John recently authored, *A Time for Favour*.



Among Edinburgh's many fine monuments, the one that most fires my imagination, whisking me back to the hot African bush, is that of David Livingstone in Princes Street Gardens. When I walk up from Waverley station and turn left into Princes Street, I often stop to admire this wonderfully dynamic sculpture by Amelia Hill, the wife of pioneering photographer, artist and passionate supporter of the Free Church, David Octavius Hill, whose famous Disruption picture hangs in the Presbytery Hall on the Mound.¹

Few communities give missionaries civic recognition, but in an age of hero worship the mill lad of Blantyre became Britain's greatest hero. Following Livingstone's burial in Westminster Abbey in April 1874, a number of uncritical and adulatory obituaries, tributes and biographies were published, many showing scant regard for honest scholarship. Some time later, however, there arose a very different approach to Victorian heroes and heroines. In 1918, Lytton Strachey published his *Eminent Victorians*, in which he took aim at four highly regarded figures, including Florence Nightingale and General Gordon. With cutting wit and sneering satire, he sought to knock his subjects off their pedestals and assassinate their characters. Although Living-

¹ For Amelia Hill see Patricia de Montfort, 'Hill [Paton], Amelia Robertson (1820–1904)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/47294>, accessed 27 Sept 2013]. For David Octavius Hill see Larry J. Schaaf, 'Hill, David Octavius (1802–1870)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2013 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13270>, accessed 27 Sept 2013]. For the Disruption Picture, see John Fowler, *Mr Hill's Big Picture: The Day that Changed Scotland Forever – Captured on Canvas* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2006).

stone was spared Strachey's cruel attentions, he has fallen foul of other debunkers and negative critics.²

The first biography of Livingstone, *Personal Life of David Livingstone*, and perhaps still one of the very best, was written in 1880 by Free Church Professor, William Garden Blaikie.³ But the reader soon detects that Blaikie himself recognised that Livingstone was controversial and that he shields his subject from the criticism and gossip of those who thought that behind the heroism lay a darker side to the story. The two most common personal criticisms levelled at Livingstone were that he was a failed missionary and he had a flawed marriage.

A failed missionary?

As soon as he arrived at Robert Moffat's London Missionary Society station at Kuruman, on the edge of the Kalahari desert in South Africa, on 31st July, 1841, David Livingstone began casting about a critical eye and identifying defects. He wrote to the directors of the mission admitting that his original belief, that Kuruman could be a strong mission institute, was misguided. He had hoped to see a greater use of African evangelists, but Kuruman was surrounded by too small a community from which to draw such agents. The station should be abandoned and re-established further north, where the population was more dense.⁴

He acknowledged good work had been done at Kuruman and his remarks did not imply criticism of Robert Moffat, but it is hard to believe they did not hurt the man who was his friend and mentor and who would become his father-in-law. Moffat, in turn, encouraged Livingstone to explore two hundred and fifty miles further north where he had seen 'the smoke of a thousand villages, where no missionary had ever been.'⁵ So, in 1842, Livingstone made two expeditions into what is now Botswana, in course of which he learned to speak seTswana fluently.

² See Dorothy O. Helly, *Livingstone's Legacy. Horace Waller and Victorian Myth-making* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1987); Timothy Holmes, *Journey to Livingstone: Exploration of an Imperial Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993); Tim Jeal, *Livingstone* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973); Tim Jeal, *Explorers of the Nile*, (London: Faber and Faber 2012).

³ William Garden Blaikie, *The Personal Life of David Livingstone, LL.D., D.C.L.: Chiefly from His Unpublished Journals and Correspondence in the Possession of His Family* (London: John Murray, 1880), available free online as a Kindle ebook, and at <http://archive.org/details/personallifedav00blaigoog>. Citations in this article from the Kindle ebook edition.

⁴ Cf. e.g. George Seaver, *David Livingstone: His Life and Letters* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957), pp. 47ff.

⁵ Moffat's words were: 'a man in full health and vigour, with his best years before him, could undoubtedly advance the cause of Christ in Africa if he would be content not to settle down in an old station, but penetrate to the North, where no missionary had yet set foot, and where in the bright light of an ordinary morning there could often be seen the smoke of a thousand villages.' Cited by Blaikie, op. cit.

In January 1845, Livingstone married the Moffat's daughter, Mary. They first settled at Chonuane, but when the water supply gave out, they moved to Kolobeng, where they adopted a conventional missionary life. Mary opened a school, and David preached, doctored, and taught local farmers the skills of irrigation and European methods of building. Here too Kgosi Sechele I of Bakwena, Livingstone's only recorded convert, was baptised, though soon suspended from communion for taking back one of his former wives.

Discouraged by minimal success and distracted by rumours of an unexplored lake in the interior, in 1851 Livingstone set off to cross the Kalahari with William Oswell, a wealthy amateur explorer and big game hunter, reaching the upper Zambezi River by August.⁶ Livingstone then returned to Kolobeng to accompany his family to Kuruman, but after deciding to mount an expedition to follow the Zambezi to the coast, he changed the family's destination, sending them back to Britain, via Cape Town.

In his absence, the Kolobeng mission was sacked by Hendrick Potgeiter's Boers, who were strongly opposed to missions. They smashed or stole everything, forcing the African women and children into slavery.⁷ Angered by the violence, Livingstone interpreted it as a judgement on the people's rejection of the gospel. Despite pleas from his father-in-law to exercise patience, he turned his back on Kolobeng, and went north, arguing that, 'We ought to give all if possible a chance, and not spend an age on one tribe or people'.

Things were little better among the Tswana in the north. The people liked Livingstone, he knew their language, healed their sick and, unlike Moffat, appreciated their customs. He preached twice each Sunday and sometimes thought he was making an impression, but a speedy reversion to entrenched traditional religion left him looking on impotently and sighing. Livingstone took comfort in believing that the important thing was not to contribute to the conversion of a few souls, however valuable these may be, but to spread widely the gospel. Nevertheless, he honestly concluded that he was not cut out for conventional missionary life. As his vision was for all Africa, he now altered his course. Despite the disapproval of a risk-averse public, who want-

⁶ For Oswell see: Thomas Seccombe, 'Oswell, (William) Cotton (1818-1893)', rev. Norman Etherington, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20925>, accessed 28 Sept 2013].

⁷ Afrikaner opposition to Christian missions to Africans, especially British missions, was complex, resting in part on the resentment they felt for the losses they had sustained after their slaves had been emancipated in 1833-4, as well as a fear that contact with missionaries might result in Africans obtaining horses and firearms and thereby be able to resist their own superiority, and also the suspicion that the missionaries might themselves seize territory for the British. After the sacking of his home at Kolobeng, Livingstone set himself on a course to oppose the Boer policy of excluding all influences that might bring the benefits of western progress to the interior. He was determined to open up the country. Cf. Isaac Schapera, 'Livingstone and the Boers' in *African Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 235 (Apr., 1960), pp. 144-156.

ed easily picked fruit, he would attempt to open the interior for Christianity. He knew full well the risks he ran – he once had his arm nearly bitten off by a lion, suffered dysentery and malaria, and his life was in jeopardy from Afrikaners, hostile tribes and slave traders – but he argued that it was not facing danger that tempted Providence, but ‘proceeding on our own errands with no . . . conviction of duty, and no prayer for aid and direction.’⁸

In 1856 he returned home as a national hero and the following year published his *Missionary Travels and Researches*. In 1858 he resigned from the London Missionary Society and returned to Africa under an assignment from the Royal Geographical Society. He was adamant that exploration was not a diversion from his missionary calling, it was just a different way to achieve the same end.⁹ When his critics saw this approach as insufficiently or not at all missionary, he responded with spirit:

My views of what is missionary duty are not so contracted as those whose ideal is a dumpy sort of man with a Bible under his arm. . . . I am serving Christ when shooting a buffalo for my men, or taking an astronomical observation . . . and . . . by God’s help, [getting] information which I hope will lead to more abundant blessings being bestowed on Africa than heretofore.¹⁰

He believed exploration would prepare ‘the way for a glorious future in which missionaries telling the same tale of love will convert by every sermon.’¹¹

His work was successful; it achieved its goal. He inspired generations of new missionaries and opened the way for Christian traders, such as Free Church brothers John and Fred Moir, whose African Lakes Company worked in close cooperation with the missionaries, combated the slave trade by introducing legitimate trade, made a fair profit, and developed British influence.¹² His tireless campaign against slavery was also successful. Within a few weeks of his death a treaty to end the trade was signed by the British government and the sultan of Zanzibar.

⁸ Blaikie, *op. cit.*

⁹ David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (London: John Murray, 1857).

¹⁰ Blaikie, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Blaikie, *op. cit.*

¹² For a discussion of the African Lakes Company and John and Fred Moir, see Kenneth R. Ross, *Malawi and Scotland Together in the Talking Place since 1859*, (Luwanga: Mzuni Press, 2013) pp. 35 f. Cf. H. W. Macmillan, ‘The Origins and Developments of the African Lakes Company, 1878-1908,’ unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1970. For the Moirs brothers, see: Hugh Macmillan, ‘Moir, John William (1851–1940)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, May 2007 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/94727>, accessed 28 Sept 2013].

As a missionary physician Livingstone diagnosed and treated disease, grasping the underlying science. More than thirty years before Ronald Ross proved the link between mosquitoes and malaria, he recognised that the incidence of malaria was invariably related to the presence of mosquitoes and was one of the first to administer quinine in suitable doses as a remedy.

The most remarkable geographer of his time, he mapped a million square miles of Central Africa, was the first European to cross the Kalahari, and the first to set eyes on the Victoria Falls. Although filled with wonder at God's spectacular African creation, he never lost his vision of the greater glory: 'Amidst all the beauty and loveliness with which I am surrounded, there is still a feeling of want in the soul, – as if something more were needed . . . the eternal, to which my soul stretches away, in ever returning longings.'¹³

A flawed marriage?

It was his shrewd and far-sighted future mother-in-law, the redoubtable Mary Moffat, who first noticed the character traits that spelled ruin for her daughter. There was much in this young man to admire, but not all. True, he was a man of Christian commitment, vision and enthusiasm, but there was another side too. He was temperamental and impractical in the ordinary affairs of life, with a disconcerting restlessness in his nature. Robert Moffat was unaware of such traits. A strong bond grew up between the two men, who shared a similar sense of humour and enjoyed a joke together. But between Mary and David lay a wariness that kept them honest with each other.

Mary concluded that Livingstone needed a wife, but he showed no sign of taking the hint. When he did, it was to daughter Mary that he proposed. His mother-in-law thought there was much to be said for the marriage, but her astute insight saw that David retained too much the instincts of a bachelor.¹⁴ Livingstone's thoughts about marriage crystallised as he recuperated from the lion attack that had left his shoulder damaged. Mary Moffat senior remarked that, 'We . . . set him down as a stereotyped bachelor, nor did the idea [of his marrying Mary] ever enter our minds until he came here after recovering from the bite of the lion.'¹⁵ Writing to the directors of the London Missionary Society, Livingstone took a pragmatic, matter-of-fact approach to the question, after prayer he had concluded he had been guided to the decision because it would increase his usefulness. In a more breezy vein, he wrote to Mary to remind her father to apply to Colesberg for a marriage license. What would they do if he forgot or there was some official impediment in the way? Disregard it! 'We shall license ourselves.'¹⁶ They were legally married at Kuruman on 9th January, 1845. He was thirty and she twen-

¹³ Blaikie, op. cit. Kindle edition.

¹⁴ Moira Dickson, *Beloved Partner: Mary Moffat of Kuruman* (London: Denis Dobson, 1974), p. 126, 129.

¹⁵ Dickson, op. cit. p. 138.

¹⁶ Dickson, op. cit. p. 139.

ty-two years old. Despite her approval of the union and her regard and affection for her son-in-law, Mary saw problems ahead, as Dickson rightly points out, her daughter was ‘marrying a man whose consuming passions were to bring her great unhappiness’.¹⁷

It was not that she was unwilling to remain in Africa. Like her redoubtable mother, Mary was tough, never complaining about the rugged conditions. For five years she lived and taught at Kolobeng, the only white woman in the most remote London Missionary Society mission station. She was the first white woman to cross the Kalahari, which she did twice. She gave birth seven times, suffered ill health – she had a stroke after the birth of one child – raised her surviving children and eventually died in Africa. What destroyed Mary was not Africa, but the urban wilderness of Victorian Britain. In 1858, she insisted on returning from Scotland with David, but became pregnant for a seventh time and retired to her parents’ home in Kuruman. After a further brief period in Scotland, in 1861 she left her five remaining children in Britain and set out to meet Livingstone at the mouth of the Zambezi.

Mary Livingstone had asked to accompany the young James Stewart who was planning to join her husband’s expedition to the Zambezi. Stewart, who was Thomas Livingstone’s tutor, had been inspired by Livingstone’s *Missionary Travels and Researches*, to travel to Africa to join Livingstone and explore the possibility of establishing a Free Church mission.¹⁸ By the time they reached Cape Town, poor Mary’s reputation was at the mercy of cruel gossips who relished the insinuations, which turned out to be justified, that she drank rather too much, and trafficked in the vain speculation that on the voyage she and Stewart had had an affair.¹⁹ Although there was nothing untoward in their relationship, Mary felt she could confide in Stewart that she was at the end of her tether, she felt unsupported, her faith was tottering and profound unhappiness had led to a drink problem.

The tragedy deepened when a few months later, ‘at the close of a long, clear, hot day, the last Sabbath of April, 1862’, Mary died of fever. Stewart was with Livingstone at her bedside at the last. Livingstone was beside himself with grief, the spirit utterly knocked out of him. He asked Stewart to

¹⁷ Dickson, op. cit. p. 141.

¹⁸ The standard biography of Stewart is James Wells, *The Life of James Stewart* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909).

¹⁹ According to the somewhat gossipy John Kirk, a Zambezi expedition partner, who had little sympathy or liking for Mary Livingstone – he called her a ‘coarse, vulgar woman’ – it was Stewart himself who had given wings to the rumours when he had injudiciously risked both their reputations by his going at late hours into Mary’s bedroom in an attempt to help her. Stewart also confided in Kirk that Mary ‘drank very freely, so as to be utterly besotted at times’. John Kirk, *The Zambesi Journal and Letters of Dr. John Kirk* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965), p. 569. Cf. George Martelli, *Livingstone’s River: A History of the Zambezi Expedition, 1858-1864* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), pp. 196ff.

commend her soul to God in prayer.²⁰ Sickened by this catastrophe and thoroughly disillusioned by Livingstone, Stewart marched to the river's edge and flung in his copy of *Missionary Travels and Researches*, never wanting to see a copy again. From being one of Livingstone's staunchest advocates, Stewart turned to become one of his bitterest detractors.²¹ Ten years later, however, Stewart found himself at Livingstone's funeral, when something of the prevailing national mood ameliorated his animosity, rekindling his earlier regard. Within a few months he had urged the Free Church Assembly to establish a Central African mission, to be called 'Livingstonia', to which he would lead an integrated team of black and white, male and female missionaries from the Lovedale Missionary Institute in South Africa.

Modern evangelical opinion reproaches Livingstone for only living with Mary less than half of their seventeen years of marriage and it accuses him of driving her to distraction by placing on her the intolerable burden of bringing up their family single-handed. Hindsight makes it easy to find fault. Livingstone lived in a day when leaving one's family in Britain was precisely what many a soldier, civil servant or explorer did. Despite the cruel gossip, the truth is that he and Mary did not prefer to live apart, as those who knew them best understood. It was clear that when David and Mary were together the spark of love had not been extinguished by long separation. He freely admitted they enjoyed rather more 'merriment and play' than was generally thought decorous. After Mary's death, her mother was scathing of those responsible for 'the cruel scandal' that alleged that David and Mary were not 'comfortable' at home (the word 'comfortable' was a polite reference to a good marriage that included sexual satisfaction).²² That David and Mary were thus 'comfortable' seems to be confirmed by Mary's frequent pregnancies, considering how little she saw of her husband. So who are we at such a distance to judge, still less to condemn?

Postscript: God uses flawed people.

Was David Livingstone a flawed hero? Perhaps he was, but not in the way his detractors suggest. He freely recognised he was far from his ideal, Jesus Christ, noting, 'I need to be made more like my blessed Saviour, to serve my God with all my powers.' But the amazing thing is that the people God usually uses are weak and flawed, frail and imperfect. Judged by the Bible and

²⁰ Seaver, op. cit., pp.411 ff.; Martelli, op. cit. pp. 205f.

²¹ Cf. Seaver, op. cit., pp. 435ff.

²² The expression 'comfortable' was that of Livingstone's mother-in-law, Mary Moffat. She wrote to Livingstone: "As for the cruel scandal that seems to have hurt you both so much, those who said it did not know you *as a couple* . . . we never had a doubt as to your being comfortable together. I know there are some maudlin ladies who insinuate, when a man leaves his family frequently, no matter how noble is his object, that he is not *comfortable* at home. But we can afford to smile at this, and say, 'The Day will declare it.' Blaikie, op. cit.

Church history, the idea that ‘God only uses clean vessels’ falls at the first hurdle. The men Jesus chose as His apostles were a dubious bunch of doubters, deniers and deserters. The greatest of all the apostles was paradoxically the self-confessed foremost of sinners. Yet the logic is simple. God works this way in order to exclude all human boasting, ‘we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us’ (2 Cor. 4.7). So let’s leave the last word with the eminently sensible Horace Waller, a close friend of Livingstone’s whom Stewart thought to be one of the soundest Christians he had ever met. He wrote:

[Livingstone’s] heart’s in the right place and he’s the bravest man I ever saw or expect to see, which, for one who has longed to have a tithe of his pluck, is a go-and-do-thou-likewise object to gaze on and not pick to pieces.²³

For further reading:

Blaikie, William Garden. *The Personal Life of David Livingstone, LL.D., D.C.L.: Chiefly from His Unpublished Journals and Correspondence in the Possession of His Family* (London: John Murray, 1880), available free online as a Kindle ebook.

Martelli, George. *Livingstone’s River: A History of the Zambezi Expedition, 1858-1864* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970).

Seaver, George. *David Livingstone: His Life and Letters* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957).

²³ Cited by Seaver, op. cit., pp. 435ff.