

## Individuals of Conscience: David Livingstone (1813-1873)

Americans know David Livingstone's name first and foremost through the phrase "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" Those well-known words came from the mouth of another famous explorer, Henry Stanley, at the end of a much-publicized journey into the interior of Africa. His goal was to confirm or refute the rumors that the beloved Livingstone, the most famous explorer of the 19th century, had been killed. The reputation of Livingstone was so strong in Europe that for nearly a hundred years after he had started his missionary and exploratory work in Africa, other explorers, missionaries, and others with less noble goals, invoked his name to support their causes. While he clearly lived a life dedicated to helping others, his legacies are a bit more controversial.

As a young man he joined the London Missionary Society with a desire to study medicine. Soon he was ordained as a minister, and in 1841 he set off on a journey through southern Africa, a journey that would change his life, and that of millions of Africans and Europeans as well. He spent most of the next 32 years in Africa, returning to Europe from time to time to describe his discoveries and rally support for his causes.

What were those causes? He had set out originally to spread the message of Christianity and to bring modern European medicine to tropical Africa. Over time, his concerns evolved. He dreamed of finding an "open path" to help heal "the open sore of the world." The open sore was the slave trade that he found still thriving in the interior and on the east coast of Africa. His explorations led him to some of the most remarkable geographic discoveries of the century. When Livingstone began his work, European maps showed most of the interior of Africa as a large, blank area whose features were known only to the African people themselves. Livingstone hoped he could discover a way to easily reach the interior with what he saw as the saving graces of European civilization.

He became the first white man to cross the continent from coast to coast, he was the first European

to lay eyes on the famous Victoria Falls and Lakes Nyasa and Ngami and the River Lualaba. But what he sought most of all was the source of the Nile River, for he felt once that was found, the Nile could serve as the pathway to bring European civilization into the heart of Africa. While he failed to achieve his greatest goal, he did in fact find one of the major sources of the Congo River, although he died without fully understanding the significance of what turned out to be one of his greatest discoveries.

Sharing a belief common to many of his British compatriots at the time, Livingstone felt that the extension of European trade networks to the interior of Africa would be the key to replacing the slave trade. He wrote that it would be "extremely desirable to promote the preparation of raw materials of European manufacture in Africa, for by that means we may not only put a stop to the slave trade but introduce the Negro family into the body of corporate nations, no member of which can suffer without others suffering with it." While he meant it quite sincerely, similar language would later be used by King Leopold and others to justify the exploitation and abuse of the Congo.

During his time living among the various peoples of Southern, East and Central Africa, Livingstone developed a reputation as a gentle, caring, almost saint-like man. If at times he might be criticized for playing the role of a condescending father-figure, he is also recognized for trying to protect his "adopted" peoples from the various forces, European, African, or Arab, that sought to harm them. He began to see his mission as less one of preaching Christianity to the African people and more a matter of preaching to the people of Europe about the urgency of working to end the slave trade once and for all. It is for this that he is perhaps most warmly remembered.

Livingstone believed he must treat the African people with respect if he was to win them over to his message. Even when cheated by his own African servants, he refused to punish them. When he

encountered Swahili slave-trading caravans he was overcome with feelings of revulsion. Stanley described him as "being almost Christ-like for goodness, patience...and self-sacrifice." It was thanks to these qualities that when he died in 1873 a small group of his African followers, many of them slaves he had helped free, risked their own lives to insure that his body would be well preserved. They personally embalmed the corpse of their dead hero and carried him through hostile territory 1500 miles from the interior of Zambia to the Indian Ocean island of Zanzibar. From there, the body was accompanied by Jacob Wainwright, one of his African servants, all the way back to England to receive a hero's burial in Westminster Abbey.

His body might be buried, but his spirit lived on. His call for Commerce, Christianity and Civilization (the 3 Cs), to put an end to the African slave trade was to echo through the European debate on Africa for the next several decades. The French explorer Pierre de Brazza would adapt these same ideals to the French colonizing mission while adopting Livingstone's same gentle manner. Meanwhile, Henry Stanley would write "May I be selected to succeed him in opening up Africa to the shining light of Christianity! My methods, however, will not be

Livingstone's...His, I think, had its defects...the selfish and wooden-headed world requires mastering." It was this desire to "master" the African continent and its peoples that characterized Stanley's exploration of the Congo River basin as he built upon his role model's discovery of the source of that great river.

In an equally fateful occurrence, Livingstone's writings about the fabled gold and copper wealth of the Katanga region provided King Leopold with the motivation to subdue and exploit that vast region using violent methods that would have horrified the dead hero. Livingstone had envisioned the Africans trading with the Europeans in dignity and the Europeans using this trade as a way of showing the best aspects of their own civilization while providing a substitute for the slave trade. Instead, a humiliating new form of European-inspired slavery developed for the sake of enriching a small group of investors and one king back home in Belgium. They had listened to his plea that he had made in 1857 to an audience at Cambridge University "I beg to direct your attention to Africa...which is now open: do not let it be shut again!...Make an open path for commerce and Christianity...carry out the work which I have begun," but the results were hardly what Livingstone had in mind.