David Livingston Essay, Research Paper

DAVID LIVINGSTONE

David Livingstone was one of the most revered and respected African explorers

of his time. He spent almost 30 years exploring a region little known to the

outside world. He often put ambition before family and his own personal health in his quest to open the interior of Africa to Civilization, Christianity, and

Commerce. (Hollett 236) Through his daring explorations into the unknown, he

discovered and documented many new landmarks inside the dark continent, and at

times became obsessed with his determination to find a single source of the Nile. He had a major impact on later expeditions into central Africa. .

Livingstone was born to a poor Scottish family in 1813. Starting at age ten,

Livingstone worked in a cotton mill while pursuing his studies at night. He was an avid reader, and would often stay up until twelve or later, buried in a book. Livingstone enjoyed reading on a variety of subjects, but read mostly scientific works and explorer s journals. As a boy, David made few friends. Others described him as quiet, sulky, and unremarkable. Yet despite this, David was a tireless worker, and extremely motivated toward his goals.

By age 17, Livingstone had decided he wanted to leave the mill and become a

doctor. Livingstone s father, a deeply religious man, wanted him to go into a

religious field, and would not allow him to go. Livingstone eventually convinced

his father to let him go to school and become a missionary in China. After

finishing school, Livingstone had planned to go to China to perform his missionary duties, but because of the Opium War, Livingstone s plans were altered. He continued his studies, and became a respected member of the medical community. Soon though, he offered his services to the London Missionary Society, and was assigned to a mission in Africa.

Early knowledge and exploration of Africa was confined to desert and coastal

regions. The interior humid regions held many difficulties for prospective

explorers. This included climate, vegetation, and hostile peoples and creatures. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, most of Africa was unexplored, and unmapped. The British were the first Europeans to make a serious attempt at exploration of the interior of Africa. Earlier European contacts were related primarily to the slave trade, which England opposed. This was reinforced in 1814-15, at the Congress of Vienna, when Britain and France continually acknowledged that the slave trade should be abolished (Hugon 21).

In 1841, at the age of 27, Livingstone sailed to Africa. After spending a month in Cape Town with the London Missionary Society Secretary of South Africa,

Livingstone sailed to Algoa Bay. He then trekked 125 miles over land to a

missionary camp to wait for Dr. Robert Moffat, a Scottish born missionary who

had worked there for over 20 years. Livingstone was deeply disappointed in the

mission, a small and very unkempt village. Despite Moffat s years of work, only a few natives had converted and most of those had done so for material reasons.

The thought of working at the mission for so long with nothing to show for it

dismayed Livingstone. At the first opportunity he made excursions to the north

with another missionary looking for a site for another mission. A new site was

found near a region called Mabotsa. Once the mission had been established,

Livingstone found the people of the region to be unresponsive to Christian

teachings, and began to realize the enormous difficulties of missionary work.

After being attacked by a lion near Mabotsa, which severely damaged his right shoulder and inflicted a wound that would trouble him throughout his life,

Livingstone returned to the main mission operated by Robert Moffat. Once there

he married the Moffat s eldest daughter, Mary. The marriage was done with little enthusiasm, and Livingstone carried almost no affection for his new bride whom he described as stout and stumpy. Despite this, Mary Livingstone was a capable and hard working woman who taught in the mission schools and helped the

missionaries make soap, clothes, and candles for the local natives. At first David and Mary lived in Mobotsa, but after a conflict between David and a colleague, they moved around until finally settling at Kolobeng. Here, they lived in poverty within a primitive home built by Livingstone. The family was ever increasing in numbers, and were often hungry. Livingstone s days were filled with translating the local language, teaching, preaching, and carrying out other miscellanies duties. In all the time he spent at Kolobeng, Livingstone made only one convert, his only one ever, and even he relapsed. Perhaps because of these experiences Livingstone decided that it was best that he not settle in one place for too long. He became convinced that the best course of action would be a move to the north to extend the gospel to all the surrounding tribes. (Hibbert 258)

Livingstone s relations with the other missionaries were continually getting worse, and he decided it was time for a change. For a long time he had held a wish to travel across the Kalahari Desert in search of the legendary Lake Ngami. Livingstone had been previously discouraged by the cost of such an expedition but having met a young English sportsman, Captain Thomas Steele, on one of his previous expeditions, he now approached him with the proposal. Steele had many wealthy friends and was glad to fund the expedition. The funding primarily came from two other sportsman, William Colton, a businessman; and Mungo Murray, a big game hunter.

On June 1, 1849 Livingstone, Oswell, and Murray set out across the Kalahari

with a guide, Ramotobi, who had spent most of his life there. They traveled along the great border of the desert in their search for Lake Ngami. The desert was very harsh and without Ramotobi s guidance, Livingstone and the others would certainly have perished. On August 1, 1849, Livingstone and the party finally reached the lake. Although gratified that they had reached the lake, Livingstone was distraught when he discovered that he would not be able to meet Sebituane, the great chief of the Makololo tribe. Sebituane resided almost 200 miles away, on the other side of the lake. The young chief that held the lands between them would not allow Livingstone to pass, because he feared they would trade guns to the Makololo. Livingstone was forced to turn back.

Livingstone tried again to reach the Makololo the next year, but was held back by fever, and the dreaded tsetse fly. In April 1851 Livingstone set out once again, this time accompanied by Oswell. He was also, to Robert Moffat s distress, accompanied by his wife and children. The Moffat s pleaded with him not to take the family, but Livingstone insisted that all of them must go. He promised to deepen the wells along the route through the desert. Despite this, the entire party nearly died of thirst on the way there. A careless servant allowed the water to drain out of the storage tanks. Then, an incompetent guide took them wandering off in circles while deep in the desert, and after professing ignorance of everything, vanished altogether. (Hibbert 260)

The chief of the Makololo finally rendezvoused with the Livingstone party. He had traveled over 100 miles through the burning sands in hope of trading for guns. Sebituane greeted them warmly, and promised to help them on their way. Much to Livingstone s distress though, Sebituane died of an infection shortly after the meeting took place. Although his daughter, whom he had named as successor, allowed the party to stay within Matololo territory, she would not negotiate trade. Livingstone decided that the party was not yet ready for the long and strenuous journey across the desert, and stayed with the Makololo for about one year.

During his time in Makololo country Livingstone explored the middle reaches

of the Zambezi river. He discovered that its course lay right through the middle of the country, where it had not been thought to exist at all. The discovery excited Livingstone, he had always believed that a navigable course from the coast to the heart of Africa existed. Soon though, Livingstone s family, and the rest of the party began contracting the various jungle diseases and the party was forced to return to Cape Town. Once there, Livingstone bid his family farewell, and shipped them home to England. He also began plans on a trans-Africa expedition which was to fortify his reputation. By the middle of May in 1853, Livingstone had once again come to live among the Makololo. He had been forced to leave Cape Town, due to suspicions that he was partial to the northern tribes, and in the business of selling guns. He had then arrived at the mission at Kolobeng, only to find it had been looted and destroyed. Livingstone was not discouraged. He preferred to travel light, and was happy to live among the natives, eating their food, and existing with what could be found in the jungle. Livingstone had always had little pity for those who could not exist as he did, living off what could be found in the current environment, and enduring what had to be endured. (Hibbert 262)

In May 1853, Livingstone and a party consisting mostly of Makololo, began an expedition to find a link between the Zambezi River and the west coast of Africa. Livingstone s goal had always been to have a trade route, and a way for

missionaries to reach the African interior. A link between west Africa and the

Zambezi would accomplish that goal. When the party had finally reached the

upper part of the Zambezi, Livingstone began searching for a suitable site for a

mission station. While in his various wanderings throughout the area, Livingstone discovered a huge waterfall which he named Victoria Falls. From then on, the journey along the Zambezi was disastrous. Tolls were demanded by hostile tribes, and the party was often pursued and confronted by natives who were often cannibals. Rain poured steadily, and members of the party came down with fever and other disorders. Livingstone himself was plagued by malaria, and was often too weak to walk by himself.

We were becoming exhausted, wrote Livingstone in his account of the last

days of the journey. Many of the members of Livingstone s party talked of

abandoning their leader to return home. Livingstone stated, And my people were now so much discouraged that they proposed to return home….After using all my powers of persuasion, I declared that I would go on alone, and trudged into my tent….. Livingstone was soon followed by one of the men who proclaimed, We will never leave you. Do not be disheartened. Wherever you lead, we will follow. (Hibbert 256)

By 1856 Livingstone had returned to England to share his experiences and

information with colleagues and other members of the Royal Geographical

Society. One of his main objectives was to persuade his compatriots to return to Africa and spread Civilization (Hugon 76). He was given a hero s reception in England and received many honors and medals. He also gave lectures and conferences about the importance of African exploration. An account of his

voyages to date was published in Missionary Travels , which became an instant

best seller (Hugon 76).

Despite this, Livingstone had lost all support from the London Missionary

Society which had funded his first journey to Africa. The Society felt that

Livingstone was placing his explorations over his missionary duties. This fact

became even more evident years later when Livingstone acknowledged in his

memoirs that his pursuit to understand, cooperate, and assist the native peoples

was second to none.

Livingstone returned to Africa in 1858 with government and public support behind him.(Hugon 80). His second expedition was backed by the British Foreign Office which had requested that he establish a base on the Zambezi for the Civilized Mission (Hugon 80). The second expedition had far more resources (funds, supplies, and porters) than any previous. Accompanying Livingstone this time was his brother, as well as a Thomas Baines, a known painter at the time.

Despite the discovery of a new lake, Lake Nyasa, the second expedition was a failure overall. Although an effective explorer, Livingstone had trouble working with others, was a poor team leader, and manager. Livingstone s wife Mary returned to Africa to join him on the Zambezi, but succumbed to malaria and died in April 1862.

Livingstone was summoned back to England in 1863. While there he completed

another book, The Zambezi and it s Tributaries, which was an instant success

despite the lack of any meaningful scientific advances on the second expedition

(Hugon 80).

In January 1866, Livingstone received funding from the Royal Geographic

society to once again lead an African expedition. This time the expedition landed further north, at the mouth of the Ruvuma River with the objective of exploring the region of Lake Tanganyika. The party instead ended up around Lake Nyasa and it s affluent, the Lualaba River, which they thought to be the Nile. Despite sickness and lack of proper supplies, Livingstone continued to explore the area around the Tanganyika and Lualaba regions. His supporters in England failed to get news of his progress. Rumor began to spread concerning his death.

Livingstone was exhausted by disease and travel. The porters and guides of the expedition were increasingly unreliable. This third expedition was becoming much like the second as the days passed. Livingstone s hope lay in a shipment of supplies he had ordered sent to Ujiji. Traveling was difficult though, as the tribes in the surrounding country were constantly at war. On September 22, 1867, Livingstone had a chance meeting with an Arab merchant. Although the Arab slave merchants were distrusted by the majority of the party, Livingstone was greatly helped by him, as he used the medicines and tonics provided to nurse himself back to health.

On November 10, 1871, Henry Morton Stanley arrived in Ujiji. (Moorehead

105) As an American journalist born in Wales, Stanley had been sent by the

proprietor of the New York Herald newspaper, James Gordon Bennett, who was

quite certain that Livingstone was still alive despite the absence of any confirmed news for almost two years (Hugon 83). The legendary meeting took place on the

shores of Lake Tanganyika. In an excited but controlled tone, Stanley stated, Dr. Livingstone, I Presume? Yes , replied the missionary explorer (Moorehead

108).

Despite some major differences of opinion and character, Livingstone and

Stanley set out together on Lake Tanganyika in their quest to solve the mystery of the source of the White Nile. They discovered that the Rusizi River flowed into, and not out of the lake, and thus had to admit that it could not be related to the Nile. This enforced Livingstone s belief more than ever that the Lualaba River was the Nile. He and Stanley walked from Ujiji to Tabora late in 1871 in order to get additional supplies and porters for a return trip to the Lualaba region.(Moorehead 111)

Livingstone was insistent on continuing his search to confirm the source of the Nile despite his continued physical decline. He refused to return to England as Stanley recommended. Livingstone and Stanley departed company at Katch in March 1872 (Hugon 84). Livingstone s health continued to deteriorate, as wasnoted in his journal, 20 April 1873, Utterly Worn Out And Excessively Weak (Hugon 84). He was experiencing hemorrhages and was having trouble

consuming food. He had difficulty maintaining his bearings during his slow

movement in the Lake Bangweula area (Northern Zambia).

He had become obsessed with documenting the source(s) of the Nile before his death, regardless of his personal well being. Livingstone died on the morning of 1 May 1873 in a small village in what is now Zambia. His African companions found him at the foot of his bed. News of Livingstone s death reached England on 28 January 1874. His body was carried to London for burial in Westminster

Abbey on April 18, 1874. (Moorehead 310) Despite having convinced himself that the Lualaba River was the source of the Nile, it was not confirmed until after Livingstone s death that Lake Victoria and the Mountains of the Moon were the actual sources of the Nile.

Livingstone s missions began and ended in Africa. His explorations were

primarily in the Lake Tanganyika and Lualaba River regions. He enjoyed living

with the native peoples, eating their food, sleeping in their huts, and without losing his own identity, he made their life his own. He probably understood the African people; their beliefs, fears and needs better than anyone outside of Africa at that time. He sacrificed personal needs for what he believed was his mission to Africa,and was probably more spiritually content to meet his death there than any place else.

David Livingstone s three works on South and South Central Africa had major

impacts on the worlds understanding of, and social and political attitudes and

policy towards Africa. Although his books made him one of the most famous and

respected explorers, he was not as concerned with fame and riches as much as

having the backing and resources to pursue his objectives in the then dark

continent of Africa.

328