Gentleman, Scholar, Muscular Christian Role Model: The Many Faces of Dr. David Livingstone

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r. Livingstone, I presume? (Delahunt and Dignen). It is an axiom that rings out across the annals of British imperial history, and even those unfamiliar with the man may recognize the phrase uttered in 1871 by journalist Henry Morton Stanley upon finding the famous adventurer in the heart of Tanzania, weary and close to death (Delahunt and Dignen). There is no doubt that Dr. David Livingstone was a highly influential figure in Victorian society, even before that famous phrase left Stanley’s lips. Upon returning to London in 1856, he found he was an instant celebrity as his writings about Africa, and particularly his book Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa had been an overwhelming success and captured the imagination of the public (Wisniki 225). This rise to fame transformed Livingstone into a cultural hero, and as such, his name and personality was appropriated time and again to champion a host of different causes from missionary work to the expansion of empire. He was a prime candidate for figurehead of Britain’s interests in Africa and “[a]s a result, the Livingstone represented in the popular and scholarly biographies published while Britain remained a colonial power in Africa fit the archetype of colonial hero and explorer” (Petrusic 22). While imperialists appropriated him to promote colonial expansion, religious institutions such as the London Missionary Society made use of his popularity to encourage missionary pursuits in Africa. However, Livingstone’s own goals and views differed in many instances from the causes and institutions that used his name and image. He opposed the British Empire’s forceful methods of expansion, advocating a system of “benign imperialism” to develop central Africa and stamp out the slave trade (Wisniki 256). Moreover, he was notoriously stubborn and “despised those who attempted to instruct him or to control his movements” (Jacobson 96). Additionally, despite his missionary work, Livingstone only ever succeeded in converting one man, Sechele, chief of the Tswana tribe. The Juvenile Missionary Magazine — a religious children’s periodical funded by the London Missionary Society — likewise sought to appropriate Livingstone, and to set him up as a role model for its youthful readers. Livingstone’s romps through the jungle and hands-on approach to exploration and conversion promote a muscular Christian ideology that works in the context of the Magazine to entice young men and boys into religious and missionary pursuits. By casting Livingstone’s work as exciting, the magazine attempts to channel the male desire for adventure and excitement into constructive missionary work, in a part of the world where it was thought to be most needed.

In the March 1857 issue of the Juvenile Missionary Magazine, an article entitled “Travels and Discoveries of the Rev. Dr. Livingston [sic]” introduces the famous explorer through the eyes of a young boy who overhears his parents discussing the missionary. The boy is struck by what he hears, but does not quite understand all the “hard names and long words” used, and therefore entreats his mother to tell him about Livingstone, and to “show me upon the map where he travelled” (“Travels and Discoveries” 50). His mother is only too glad to do so, and the ensuing eighteen page article (an unheard of length for a children’s magazine whose articles average three to four pages in length) casts Livingstone as the ultimate gentleman, scholar, adventurer, and perhaps even prophet. Introducing the article through the perspective of a little boy, the Magazine encourages its primary demographic to think of Livingstone as a role model. The validity of this message is reinforced by the fact that it is the boy’s parents who introduce him to the subject, and encourage him to learn more. The boy’s mother tells her son that Livingstone “went many thousand miles through countries never before trodden by the foot of a white man,” aligning him with the heroic exploratory legends of Captain Cook and Christopher Columbus, which excites the boy’s sense of adventure (“Travels and Discoveries” 50). But the excitement of Livingstone’s exploits is tempered by his selfless mission and unwavering resolve. The boy’s mother recounts the tale of a journey undertaken by Livingstone to find a great lake which the “Griquas and others had tried again and again to get to,” but had failed due to the great distance and the presence of the Kalahari Desert (“Travels and Discoveries” 50). Livingstone resolves to find the lake for the Africans because he “wanted to do good to the people,” even though he “knew that he should suffer a great deal by the way,” and that perhaps he should die in the attempt (“Travels and Discoveries” 50). Thus, Livingstone acts as a saviour figure, a powerful white man who steps in to help the African people reach their goal. The search for the great lake serves as a metaphorical expedition as well; it is a spiritual journey, and Livingstone is the suffering martyr who must endure the heat of the desert and tromp through the jungle to lead the wayward Africans away from heathenism and towards the light of Christianity which is symbolized by the utopic, even baptismal lake. Dr. Livingstone’s selflessness was understood as a sign of his staggering moral integrity, something that was not only noble, but a sign of manliness. As noted by
Christopher Petrusic in his article "Violence as Masculinity: David Livingstone’s Radical Racial Politics in the Cape Colony and the Transvaal, 1845–1852," to be masculine was to have moral character, shown in the conviction and will to fight for a higher cause" (22). Petrusic notes that Livingstone "pushed himself to the limits of endurance," not for his own personal gain but, he believed, for "the higher purpose of helping Africans" (22). The robust masculinity Dr. Livingstone is portrayed as possessing aligns him with the muscular Christianity movement, which began in the nineteenth century when the clergy "observed that church pews were filled by women," and that there was a "young men problem" (Marshall). Muscular Christianity promoted physical activity and exertion which was "suited to the age of missions that demanded young men who could confront the most challenging conditions in home and foreign mission fields" (Marshall). Muscular Christianity served as the ideal recruitment tool for missionary work, and Dr. Livingstone served as the perfect recruitment officer. However, the Magazine not only portrays Livingstone as selfless and masculine, it also reveals him to be a shining example of a self-made gentleman. In January of 1858, a year prior to the publication of Samuel Smiles’ Self-Help, an article was run in the Juvenile Missionary Magazine which shed light on the humble beginnings of David Livingstone. The article describes how, being born very poor in Scotland, Livingstone was forced at the age of ten to work from dawn until dusk at a factory. Yet, despite this grueling occupation, young Livingstone still managed to “[attend] school from eight to ten o’clock at night” (“The Rev. Dr. Livingstone and His Missionary Travels” 4). The article states that very soon, Livingstone knew that he wanted to study medicine and to become a missionary, which prompted him to study incessantly; even at work "you would have found him… with a book [laid] out before him, and while his hands were employed spinning, his eyes and thoughts were occupied." (“The Rev. Dr. Livingstone and His Missionary Travels” 6). The portrait of Livingstone and his exploits painted by the Magazine’s numerous articles is a carefully contrived cocktail of scholarly discipline, work ethic, and selflessness, balanced with robust masculinity, adventure, and danger, designed to appeal to a young male readership, but also to conform to societal and parental ideals.

Another article in the Juvenile Missionary Magazine, published in the June 1852 issue and simply titled “The Rev. Dr. Livingstone,” promises to tell the reader some exciting tales about Livingstone and his work. The reader is informed that Livingstone is the son-in-law of the already legendary missionary Robert Moffat, and a “bold man, who will not be kept back by fear from doing what is right” (“The Rev. Dr. Livingstone” 139). This lofty description is followed by an incident from Livingstone’s career which is meant to illustrate the extent of his perseverance and boldness of character, yet the anecdote inadvertently reveals another side of the missionary: a tendency for rash action and stubbornness. After becoming separated from his African guides on a journey to preach at a remote village, Livingstone "wandered about, shouting and firing off his gun, in the hope that the natives might hear him" (“The Rev. Dr. Livingstone” 139). After nightfall, he is left defenseless in the midst of a lion infested jungle, having used up all his gun powder trying to alert his guides, and fails to get a fire lit “as the natives get it” (“The Rev. Dr. Livingstone” 140). After spending the night in a tree, Livingstone is eventually found and rescued by his guides. This harrowing situation is recounted to demonstrate the hardships which the missionary puts himself through in order to spread Christianity, yet these obstacles were the product of Livingstone’s own ineptitude and poor decisions. Consumed with his calling, Livingstone crisscrossed southern Africa, towing his neglected wife Mary and their four children in his wake. Dan Jacobson points out that Livingstone was “prepared to do the lord’s work only on his own terms,” and as a result, quarreled endlessly with his fellow missionaries, stating that there was “no more Christian affection between most if not all the ‘brethren’ & me than between my riding ox and his grandmother” (96, 99). Not only did Livingstone stir up animosity amongst his fellow missionaries, but he also endangered the lives of those whom he persuaded to follow his extreme lifestyle, sending “other brave missionaries and their wives and children to die of fever or thirst” in the Kalahari and the interior of south central Africa (Jacobson 97). Moreover, his actual conversion work was a “failure,” which yielded one solitary convert, “Sechele, the chief of the Kweni tribe” (Jacobson 96). While an important ally, Sechele was “constantly backsliding,” and frequently “argued about the nature of the Almighty” with Livingstone (Jacobson 97). It is interesting to note that an inking of Livingstone’s self-absorption and inexperience shows through even in the Juvenile Missionary Magazine, although it is disguised as a part of the unavoidable hardships of missionary life in Africa. A large part of Livingstone’s fame
can be attributed to the success of his writing; indeed, one of the main causes of the marketability and malleability of Livingstone’s image was his own ‘skillful self-fashioning’ (Livingstone, Justin D. 2). He ensured that his book Missionary Travels had “something for everyone” (Livingstone, Justin D. 2), transforming the interior of Africa, which, Adrian Wisnicki indicates, had previously been perceived through the lens of “myth and uninformed speculation… into a very inviting field… for the capitalist and missionary alike” (257). Livingstone puts his faith in “the inborn energy of English colonists” to develop the African interior and establish “healthy inland commercial stations” which would eliminate the demand for slavery (Livingstone, David 679). He argues that even from a purely economic stand point (though he vehemently opposed slavery from a moral position as well), developing the interior of Africa through a system of ‘benign imperialism’, and working to bring Christianity, commerce, and civilization would be more logical and profitable: “in Africa, the land is cheap, the soil good, and… labour is to be found on the spot. Our chief hopes rest with the natives themselves” (Livingstone, David 679). However, despite Livingstone’s appeals to work with native Africans, the British Empire continued to expand its territories in Africa in a much more aggressive imperialistic manner, displacing the Xhosa and other tribes from their land (Petrusic 20). Livingstone became bitter, questioning “Britain’s right to appropriate the lands and resources of the Xhosa and other African peoples,” with whom he had even supplied weapons to reclaim their land (Petrusic 20). Yet, despite this admittedly revolutionary behaviour, he continued to be portrayed as “an iconic symbol of the expanding British colonial empire in Africa,” a legacy that persisted and amplified after his death (Petrusic 21). He had simply been too deeply ingrained as the face of African colonialism in the empire’s imagination. The appeal of Livingstone’s persona and exploits to ‘missionary and capitalist alike’ is loaded with irony, as he ultimately failed to fulfill his role as a missionary, and did not succeed in establishing his system of benign imperialism. He was instead transformed into “a suite of heroes of multiple identities produced out of a plurality of Victorian cultures,” to champion the aggressive colonialism he fought, and to inspire the young missionaries whom he failed (Livingstone, Justin D. 3). Livingstone helped engineer his usefulness as a cultural icon through his own self-fashioning writing, but upon achieving such grand heights of fame, the reins left his hands. For the Juvenile Missionary Magazine and its readers, he was the epitome of muscular Christianity and a shining example of selfless service to God: a role model for the active young male, seeking adventure and thrills, in danger of wavering from the path of Protestant faith and humility. However, his own overzealous nature endangered the lives of his followers, and, by extension, the Magazine endangered its own readers by enticing them to follow Dr. Livingstone’s example. A martyr, a gentleman, a hero: David Livingstone was all of these things and none of them.

Works Cited


