HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn considers one of the founders of modern missions

HEROES 10: DAVID LIVINGSTONE 1813-1873

2013 is the 200th anniversary[1] of the birth of perhaps the most famous European explorer of all time, David Livingstone. Born to disadvantage in Blantyre, Scotland, he spent his childhood working in a mill 14 hours per day, six days per week. Less that 10% of his workmates achieved literacy. Yet he managed to memorise Psalm 119 (the longest Psalm) in order to win a Bible and won a place at medical school. His educational supervisor at the London Missionary Society described him as 'remote from brilliant'.[2] Unable to afford transport and before the days of student loans, it is claimed he once walked the 60 miles from London to Ongar, Essex, and back in one day! And the medicine he studied was primitive: it was seven years before chloroform and 25 years before antiseptics. Livingstone himself became sick with a chest infection ascribed to inhaling 'too much of the effluvia of dissecting rooms'.

a human being, even as we are

He also suffered from personal weaknesses. Strong-willed and intolerant of the less committed, he fell out with many others such as his younger brother, who called him the 'Cursing consul of Quillimane'[3], 'no Christian gentleman' who was 'employed in the service of the devil'. He sent petty letters to his employers about a fellow missionary who would not take a subordinate role. And he was criticised for sending his family back to live with his parents in Scotland, which was a disaster. Later, he was criticised when his family joined him on mission and his wife Mary and daughter died of malaria. His other children became estranged. His rebellious son Robert avoided using the family name to avoid shaming his father. Robert eventually met a sad end when he was drugged and press ganged into the American civil war, where he died.

Livingstone could be tactless. Soon after the death of Bishop Mackenzie, a close co-worker who died in his 30s from cerebral malaria, he blurted out in front of the grieving widow: 'This sad loss will have one good effect: better men will be sent out and no one hereafter come for a lark or play the missionary for a few years and then reap laurels'. But God uses flawed men and women like you and me. Scripture tells us that a hero such as 'Elijah was a human being,

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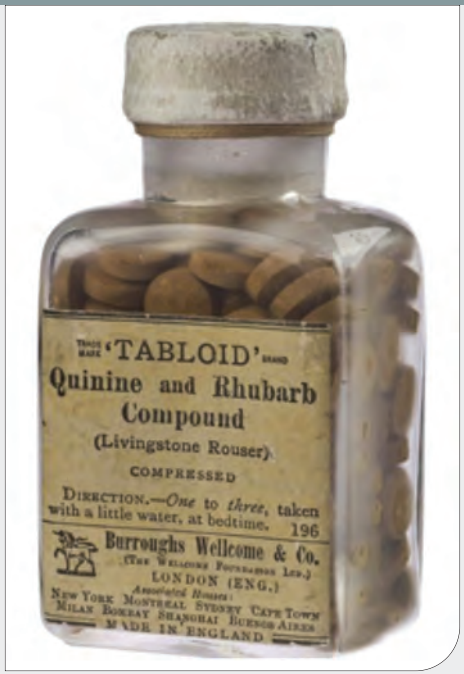
even as we are' (James 5:17). So what set Livingstone apart was not some inherent quality, but perseverance and faithfulness to Christ's calling.

medical pioneer

And his perseverance was tested. He faced constant illness, such as haemorrhoids from persistent diarrhoea, live maggot infestation and regular bouts of malaria that had killed hundreds of his predecessors. But his experiments on his own body made great advances.[4] 'His breakthrough was using adequate doses of quinine. He brought chests loads of it on expeditions. He would have died 100 times over without it.'[5] Wellcome marketed his quinine recipe as 'Livingstone's Rousers' until the 1920s.



He made vital observations about sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis) that devastated cattle in Africa. He used a solution containing arsenic to treat a horse that recovered temporarily.[6] Researchers read his notes 50 years later and developed drugs still used in treatment today for humans too.[7] He made the first documented observation of a fever following tick bite. The patient? Livingstone himself. Unusually, he suffered a throat complaint, for which he had his uvula excised, to help him 'more freely preach unto the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ'.

Junior doctors may find membership exams arduous: arguably Livingstone earned his qualifications the hard way by field research: 30,000 miles of death-defying travels on foot. But his motivation was not professional accolade, as he made clear when he received his Fellowship of the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons: 'My great object was to imitate Christ, as far as he could be imitated … to bow down before God was not mean; it was manly'.

Livingstone contended with other tropical enemies: 'To be aroused in the dark by five feet of cold green snake gliding over one's face is rather unpleasant'. There are stories of him being attacked by wild animals: it's said a lion shook him in its mouth 'like a cat does a mouse' and crushed his left arm. Livingstone's autopsy was published in the *BMJ* to prove that the right body had been brought home to rest. Before the days of DNA testing, the ununited fracture of humerus identified him to an adoring public.[8]

in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits

So what was his particular calling in Africa? Livingstone believed that slavery was an abomination, the 'open sore of the world'[9] and that only the gospel and development would help eradicate it. Hence Livingstone worked tirelessly to open up the African interior with the backing of the British state. Some critics wrongly see him as a colonialist who prompted European land grabbing. But Livingstone could not be accused of self-interest, a man who lost his family and his life for the cause and died with only £3 in his pocket.

He simply alerted the world's conscience to the horrors of a trade that had long been eradicated elsewhere. He witnessed numberless corpses floating past his steamer, clogging its paddles, skeletal remains festering in the open, and already-poor communities ransacked. In contrast to the colonialism of his day, Livingstone believed in racial equality which he said dated back to teaching of the Apostles. They assumed 'in all men the existence of a "spiritual discernment" enabling the mind to recognise the divine voice'. In other words, if the gospel is for all, then all are equal. Hence he was appalled when he saw Africans treated as animals: 'the teeth are examined, the cloth lifted to examine the lower limbs, and a stick is thrown for the slave to bring, and thus exhibit his paces'.

As a result, Livingstone became an enemy to virtually every local power: the Arab traders, Portuguese agents, Boer farmers and any profiteering African chiefs. South Africans saw him as a 'Kaffir-lover' who supplied independent chiefs against them. As a result, his mission house in the Transvaal, was trashed and 60 Africans died in its defence.

And yet he never counted his hardships and battles as sacrifice. 'Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay... it is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather, it is a privilege!'

university militants

Once he was attacked by Ajawa warriors who were capturing slaves near Lake Malawi. He was travelling with several missionaries sent by the UK Universities' Mission who had been mobilised by Livingstone's appeal. He borrowed a pistol from a bishop to defend his group, but several Africans died. It was a dilemma that challenged missions then

and now: whether to use force even to protect the vulnerable. Later Livingstone criticised his co-workers who were more militant, even burning villages down to oppose slave traders: 'a missionary ought to identify himself with the interests of his people, but it is doubtful whether this should extend to fighting for them'. Therefore, if he ever had to use a gun, he always fired high to miss. But he was more opposed to those who retreated. When Bishop Tozer decided to withdraw the Universities' Mission to the safety of Zanzibar, another missionary resigned in order to care for the widows and orphans left behind. 'This we believe is the first case of a Protestant mission having been abandoned without being driven away'. He was so opposed to the slavers, that to avoid his riverboat falling into their hands, he motored 2,500 miles across open sea to sell it in India.

missionary explorer

Livingstone's later career was officially secular, exploring the source of the Nile. He was media savvy and realised this quest would bring attention to the 'dark continent' and its need of the gospel and development. Unfortunately an earthquake decalibrated the equipment he relied on for navigation, and he was hopelessly lost, destitute, sick and emaciated for many months. But this only served his purpose, leading to one of the most famous rescue parties of all time. A reporter, Henry Stanley, was dispatched by the *New York Herald* with a caravan of 190 porters, which took two years to find him. It was the scoop of the century. Stanley finally found him in Ujiji on the shores of Lake Tanganyika on 10 November 1871, greeting him coolly with the now famous words 'Doctor Livingstone, I presume?'

a pickled doctor

Livingstone was unstoppable in his mission to the very last hour. One Sunday he led a service barely able to stand and was then transferred to a sling bed. Determined to continue his journey the next morning, his companions smashed a hole in the side of the hut to lower him into a canoe. His body racked with pain he clasped his arms around the neck of his loyal assistant Chumah, who carried him to the village where he died, head in hands praying to his death on 1 May 1873.

His loyal supporters carried his body 1,500 miles to get to the coast, one of the longest and riskiest corteges in history; it cost ten lives.

His body was preserved in salt and brandy, bent double and wrapped in tarred sailcloth. The chiefs did not want corpses passing through their territory: they believed that could bring calamity. But even the Arabs traders saluted the man they had been at war with as his mortal remains passed. When his body finally reached home he became the only pauper buried at Westminster Abbey. But appropriately, his heart is still in Africa, buried where he died in present day Zambia.

Livingstone's legacy

Some have judged Livingstone harshly as a missionary failure, as he left only one named convert, Chief Sechele, in modern day Botswana. This man is an example of the dilemmas of mission. He was the tribe's rainmaker, a practice condemned by Livingstone. But Sechele was delighted to gain literacy and devoured books, especially the Bible. He was advised to divorce four of his previous wives; to Livingstone's disappointment he later returned to them. Yet development brought him prosperity and by his death he had expanded his rule one hundredfold, to 30,000 people. Seven years later the first British missionaries to the Zulu Ndebele tribe in modern Zimbabwe, were staggered to find a kind of Christian worship. They had been beaten to it by Livingstone's protégé, who had travelled hundreds of miles as a missionary to other tribes. Sechele instigated a new mixture of Christianity and paganism, using charms and venerating ancestors. It was the birth of a diverse indigenous African church, which remains vast today. Livingstone would have had mixed feelings about this result.

Livingstone's dream and prayer of ending the slave trade was realised. Florence Nightingale called him a modern John the Baptist, the forerunner of many missionaries who followed his example. Perhaps he was the greatest European friend Africa ever had.

An old man reminisced about meeting Livingstone as a boy: 'He had fallen from the sky...I went near, I touched but the headman pulled me back "you'll be bewitched by his medicine" he said. But there was love in his eyes, he was not fierce. He made a path through our land, God's light-bringer, and more come today.'

Livingstone challenges us today to live wholeheartedly for Christ, a reminder of our calling as medics: 'I am a missionary, heart and soul. God had an only Son, and he was a missionary and a physician. A poor, poor imitation of him I am, or wish to be. In his service I hope to live; in it I wish to die.' ■

REFERENCES

1. For events see *www.davidlivingstone200.org/events.php*
2. All quotations unless otherwise stated are from Mackenzie R. *David Livingstone, the truth behind the legend*. Christian Focus, 1993.
3. Quillimane was a port in Mozambique used by Livingstone to oppose slavery
4. Fever in the Zambesi. *Br Med J* 1861;1:681.2
5. Mike Barrett, Professor of Parasitology at Glasgow University, quoted at *www.bbc.co.uk/history/0/21525201*
6. Arsenic as a Remedy for the Tsetse Bite. *BMJ* 1858;s4-1:360.2
7. *ibid*
8. Examination and verification of the body of the late David Livingstone. *Br Med J* 1874;1:522
9. The Livingstone memorial in Westminster Abbey contains an appeal to heal all who would help heal this sore. Tony Blair referred to the 'festering sore of African poverty' as the modern equivalent, see *www.bmj.com/content/330/7492/622.1*