

Persuasive landscapes:
representations of Victoria Falls
and colonial migration in the
mid-nineteenth century

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This article studies the representations of Victoria Falls through David Livingstone's descriptions in Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa and Thomas Baines' colour lithograph, The Falls from the Western End of the Chasm, exploring how the portrayal of the landscape through text and image encouraged migration to the colony.



Figure 1. Thomas Baines, 1865, *The Falls from the Western End of the Chasm*, Zambezi River, colour lithograph, 36.5 x 56.2 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Renée and Geoffrey Hartman, Yale PhD 1953. <<https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/catalog/tms:62325>> [accessed 8 April 2021].

Following the abolition of slavery in 1833, the civilising mission became the means to maintain control and power in the African colonies by bringing religion, medicine, and education to those in the 'dark continent.' This approach meant that a number of missionaries and explorers continued to operate in Africa, as they had before the abolition of the slave trade, working in and exploring Southern Africa and relaying their findings through journals, sketches and paintings back to the motherland. Not only did these findings expand their scientific knowledge of the regions, but the tales of adventure and descriptions of this beautiful, exciting, fertile, and unpopulated world became a tool to maintain control over, and continue building, a successful colony by encouraging migration to Southern Africa.¹ David Livingstone's activities fulfilled the desires of three different audiences back in Britain. The scientific community demanded 'accurate observations of the geography, flora and fauna', the general audience was riveted by tales of adventure and danger in this unknown continent, and finally there was the audience who sought to gain information 'to enable the exploitation of Africa for either commercial gain or evangelizing purposes.'² Both Livingstone's

Missionary Travels and several paintings of Victoria Falls by Thomas Baines can be analysed through these lenses to explore how they sought to fulfill these desires. This article will study the works of Thomas Baines and David Livingstone, analysing their representations of Victoria Falls, the intentions behind the works and how they were likely to be received back in Britain.

David Livingstone, born to 'poor, honest, God-fearing parents' in Blantyre, Scotland on 19th March 1813, first set sail to Cape Town from England in 1840.³ In *David Livingstone: The Weaver Boy who became a Missionary*, published in 1874, Henry Adams describes Livingstone's aim as 'to minister to the temporal and spiritual wants of the benighted millions in that far land, - to heal the sick, as far as human means could do so, - and at the same time to direct them to the Great Physician who alone could cleanse them from the leprosy of sin, - this was the work which he had set before him for which he was now pursuing the study of medicine and divinity.'⁴ In order to achieve this, he studied medicine and divinity at Glasgow University.

John Thomas Baines, born in Norfolk in 1820, sailed to Cape Town two years after Livingstone following a five-year apprenticeship as an ornamental painter.⁵ His talent as an artist and cartographer enabled him to join a few expeditions. As a war artist, he documented the bloody events of the Eighth Frontier War before joining Augustus Gregory's 1855-1857 expedition across Northern Australia, as the official artist.⁶ His experience led him to be selected by Livingstone to be the artist and storekeeper for his Zambesi expedition in 1858.⁷ The goal of this expedition was 'to open up the Zambesi River for navigation from Indian Ocean to the Victoria Falls to act as a conduit for commerce and colonisation.'⁸ However, the expedition failed on many counts. Baines was falsely accused of theft and left the party under a cloud.⁹ Despite this, his desire to explore the interior of Southern Africa continued and he joined trader-explorer James Chapman on an expedition to Victoria Falls in 1861.¹⁰ Livingstone was the first European man to discover Victoria Falls on the 16th of November 1855 and Baines was the first artist to see and illustrate the Falls seven years

later.¹¹ Both men documented their observations in great detail; Baines through a series of detailed sketches of Victoria Falls and Livingstone through *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* and later, *A Popular Account of Dr. Livingstone's Expedition to the Zambesi and Its Tributaries: And of the Discovery of Lakes Shirwa and Nyassa*.

David Livingstone's detailed yet emotive descriptions appeal to those seeking a gripping and informative view into the Southern African ecosystem. As he nears his first glimpse of Victoria Falls, he describes the 'columns of vapour'¹² that rise above the landscape. He describes these five columns 'bending in the direction of the wind, they seem placed against the lower ridge covered with trees; the tops of the columns at this distance appear to mingle with the clouds.'¹³ The attention that Livingstone gives to his descriptions reveal a desire to invite his readers to experience this scene through his words, and to appreciate its beauty as he does. Livingstone reports that 'the banks and islands are adorned with sylvan vegetation' and that '... several trees were spangled over with

1 John McAleer, *Representing Africa: Landscape, Exploration and Empire in Southern Africa, 1780-1870* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 161.

2 L. C. Henderson, 'David Livingstone's Missionary Travels in Britain and America: Exploring the Wider Circulation of a Victorian Travel Narrative.' *Scottish Geographical Journal* 129.3-4 (2013): 179-93, p. 182.

3 H. G. Adams, *David Livingstone: The Weaver Boy who became a Missionary*, New and Enlarged ed. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1874. p5.

4 Ibid., p. 4.

5 E. Liebenberg, 'Thomas Baines's Contribution to 19th Century South African Cartography', *Terrae Incognitae* 51.1 (2019): 36-59. Web.p. 39.

6 Ibid., p. 39.

7 Ibid., p. 40.

8 Ibid., p. 41.

9 Ibid., p. 41.

10 E. Liebenberg, p. 42.

11 Ibid., p. 42.

12 Livingstone, p. 519.

13 Ibid., p. 519.

blossoms.¹⁴ His observations, compact with decorative verbs and adjectives, seek to personify the vegetation in front of him. ‘Towering over all...’ he describes ‘...the great burly baobab, each of whose enormous arms would form the trunk of a large tree, beside groups of graceful palms, which with their feathery-shaped leaves depicted on the sky, lend their beauty to the scene.’¹⁵ Livingstone gives no scientific information on individual species of flora or fauna, which certainly creates the image of a beautiful, fertile, mysterious, and unknown world. A world that those in Britain can only reach through his writing unless they are so enraptured by these descriptions that a select few may be able to follow his lead and seek out this adventure for themselves.

In *Representing Africa*, John McAleer discusses the use of landscape to encourage the migration of Europeans to the colonies. He explains that ‘as soon as formal British control had been established in Southern Africa, British travellers were seeing landscapes as places to be filled by settlers.’¹⁶ In order to do this, ‘...it was helpful to represent landscape as something pleasant, usefully picturesque, or in some way related to what prospective settlers were familiar with at home.’¹⁷ Livingstone was aware of his audience and their

14 Ibid., p. 519.

15 Ibid., p. 519.

16 McAleer, p. 157.

17 Ibid., p. 159.

18 D. Livingstone, p. 519.

experience. He often compared what he saw to landscapes at home; this allowed his audience to feel closer to this other world. Without these comparisons, the portrayal of this landscape could easily be too far removed from a typical British reader’s experience to be real. These descriptions give enough familiar information to intrigue the reader and encourage them to understand that the landscape he describes is more beautiful than what can be found at home. He explained, ‘some trees resemble the great spreading oak, others assume the character of our own elms and chestnuts; but no one can imagine the beauty of the view from anything witnessed in England.’¹⁸ Livingstone’s connections between England and foreign landscapes become more persuasive as he asks his reader to:

[imagine] the Thames filled with low, tree-covered hills immediately beyond the tunnel, extending as far as Gravesend, the bed of black basaltic rock instead of London mud, and a fissure made therein from one end of the tunnel to the other down through the keystones of the arch, and prolonged from the left end of the tunnel through thirty miles of hills, the pathway being 100 feet down from the bed of the river instead of what it is, with the lips of the fissure from 80 to 100 feet apart, then fancy the Thames leaping bodily into the

gulf, and forced there to change its direction, and flow from the right to the left bank, and then rush boiling and roaring through the hills, he may have some idea of what takes place at this, the most wonderful sight I had witnessed in Africa.¹⁹

Livingstone contrasts the Zambezi River to the Thames, manipulating its movements to describe to his audience in familiar images how the view before his eyes can in no way be compared to famous English landscapes such as the Thames.

It is difficult to picture exactly what Livingstone saw and impossible to share in that experience without visual representations. Hence why it was so important to have an artist like Baines on such expeditions. The colour lithograph *The Falls from the Western End of the Chasm* (Figure 1) by Baines was created from sketches he did on site during his expedition with James Chapman. Although they are not illustrations of Livingstone’s descriptions, the similarity is undeniable. In Baines’s work we see ‘the falls are bounded on three sides by ridges 300 or 400 feet in height, which are covered with forest, with the red soil appearing among the trees.’²⁰ In the background we see the

19 Ibid., p. 520.

20 D. Livingstone, p. 520.

21 Ibid., p. 521.

22 Ibid., p. 521.

23 Baines, T.. “The Great Victoria Falls in Africa” *The London Journal, and Weekly Record of Literature, Science, and Art*, Mar. 1845–Apr. 1906 40.1036 (1864): 397–98. Web.

24 Ibid., pp. 397–98.

25 Ibid., pp. 397–398.

‘dense white cloud’ where a ‘great jet of vapour rises’²¹ and in the foreground the rainbow that Livingstone discusses. The focal point of Baines’s artwork is the white foam that rises from the chasm which Livingstone describes as a ‘snow-white sheet [which] seemed like myriads of small comets rushing on in one direction, each of which left behind its nucleus rays of foam.’²²

In ‘The Great Victoria Falls in Africa,’²³ an article by Baines published in *The London Journal* in 1864, Baines gives his own remarkably similar account of this scene. He describes this body of water rushing ‘forward with so much violence as to break up the whole into a fleecy, snow-white, irregularly seething torrent with its lighter particles glittering and flashing like myriads of living diamonds in the sunlight.’²⁴ Baines also describes the ‘lighter particles’ of water forming into ‘comet or rocket-like trains of spray and vapour...’²⁵ These descriptions, paired with Baines’s artwork, reveal a scene out of this world; a landscape of abundance where water glitters like diamonds and flies like comets; a landscape that has to be seen to be believed and designed to encourage migration to the colonies where lay the

possibility of experiencing them in the flesh.

Advertised in exhibitions, fairs and publications, images of Africa were designed 'to portray the colonies... as worthy of investment, as places where civilised society had been firmly planted and taken root, and where the scientific and technological advancements of nineteenth-century Europe were being deployed for the benefit of the settlers.'²⁶

The Great Exhibition of 1851 was one of many platforms that the colonies used to showcase their landscapes to the European public.²⁷ There is no doubt that, as an artist, Baines was aware of the use of suggestive landscapes which held the promise of a better life in the colonies, he saw these images as tools to actively encourage migration to the colonies. Baines displayed many of his works in Alexandra Palace, London, as well as in the Paris Exhibition of 1867. However, he was disappointed by the artworks selected for display, claiming that '...they chose all the pretty homesteads that would encourage immigrants to go to the Cape, and not my best pictures.'²⁸ Baines seems to recognise that his 'best pictures' were not the pretty homesteads, but the dramatic, untamed landscapes.

²⁶ McAleer, pp.170, 171.

²⁷ Ibid., p.164.

²⁸ Ibid., p.167.

²⁹ McAleer, p. 138.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 133.

³¹ Ibid., p. 133.

The selection of paintings that depict a beautiful, established community imply that it would be more appealing for viewers of the artworks to see a landscape which was immediately accessible and a life which they could easily identify with.

Although *The Falls from the Western End of the Chasm* does not fall into the category of a 'pretty homestead', Baines was very aware of what his market wanted and this conveniently unpopulated, fertile, idyllic view of Victoria Falls, abundant with flora and fauna would be appealing to his audience. Both Baines and Livingstone can be seen to fulfill these requirements in the portrayal of this beautiful landscape and the comparisons with landscapes and flora that the European audience would be familiar with.

The missionary movement played a key part in the migration of Europeans to form settler colonies in Southern Africa.²⁹ The abolition of the slave trade 'was the first evangelical success in terms of orientating Britain's relationship with the wider world to Christian principles espoused at home.'³⁰ Consequently, 'religion became fashionable and newsworthy, and information about missionary endeavours was highly sought after.'³¹

The works of David Livingstone, paired with images like Thomas Baines's, appealed to this audience and were widely circulated. Baines's artworks were published as colour lithos and made into lantern slides. This meant that they could be copied, distributed and easily accessible for the 'civilised society' that they were intended for. The conversion of works such as this into lantern slides revealed a market that desired to be submerged in this imagined world and experience it in their own homes, if not in the real landscape itself.

Livingstone's *Missionary Travels*, published by John Murray in 1857, had 12,000 advance subscriptions and it was not long before 30,000 copies of the guinea edition were printed. This was achieved in a time where travel narratives rarely sold over 10,000 copies and highlighted how sought after Livingstone's accounts were.³² Looking back to his early life and his initial reasons for choosing his career path, Henry Adams explains that, 'with a deep sense of the responsibility of his holy calling, [Livingstone] had left home and friends to go forth into the desolate places of the earth, for the salvation of souls.'³³ With this in mind, McAleer claims that 'many of those

³² Henderson, p. 179.

³³ Adamas, p. 11.

³⁴ McAleer, p. 134.

³⁵ Livingstone, p. 519.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 524.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 524.

who brought the Christian message to Southern Africa believed that the landscape encoded the work and provided evidence of the perfection of a divine creator.'³⁴ This influence is seen clearly in Livingstone's descriptions of Victoria Falls. He states that, '[Victoria Falls] had never been seen before by European eyes; but scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight.'³⁵ In this description, he appeals to both evangelists and those hungry for adventure: who would not be tempted to share this experience fit for angels?

Livingstone describes the rainbows over the falls as 'the abode of Deity.'³⁶ He explains that some of the Makololo who travelled with him looked up at the scene with the same awe. When the rainbow is seen in the sky it is called 'motse oa barimo' - the pestle of the gods. Regardless of religion, Livingstone describes this as a holy place. Baines cultivates this same heavenly scene in his artwork, highlighted by the presence of the rainbow or 'pestle of the gods'³⁷ in the right-hand corner of his artwork. However, Livingstone goes on to say that although the Makololo were aware of the presence of a God, they were not aware of his God. They were '...not aware of His true character, they had no admiration of the beautiful

and good in their bosoms. They did not imitate His benevolence, for they were a bloody, imperious crew.’³⁸ Livingstone emphasises the need for missionaries in this part of the world, to educate those about his God and to emulate His ways. Furthermore, he highlights the importance of resident missionaries in civilizing local tribes and nurturing this fertile, unpopulated paradise to its full potential. In *A Popular Account of Dr. Livingstone’s Expedition to the Zambesi and Its Tributaries: And of the Discovery of Lakes Shirwa and Nyassa*, published in 1875, Livingstone explains how the ‘hippopotami had destroyed the fruit trees’ that he had planted on his first visit, claiming that ‘...when a tribe takes an interest in trees, it becomes more attached to the spot on which they were planted, and they prove one of the civilizing influences.’³⁹

Thomas Baines’s artworks of Victoria Falls, accompanied by David Livingstone’s descriptions give us insight into the power that the representation of Southern African landscapes had in encouraging migration to the colony. The abundance of flora, fauna and unpopulated fertile land made it appealing to those who sought a life of adventure, exploration and the potential wealth and status that populating a relatively small, new community promised. Livingstone and Baines reveal enough in their detailed portrayals of the landscapes to show

what is there, whilst hinting at what is missing and can only be found by witnessing it in the flesh. The wild, untamed landscape, with its heavenly beauty made it attractive to both adventurers and those who wanted to be closer to God and take part in the ‘civilizing mission.’

The undeniable similarities in both Baines’ and Livingstone’s representations of the landscape, albeit their differing disciplines, suggest an individual fascination and awe of the environment, as well as an awareness of a shared wonderment and intrigue that would be felt by the recipients of their artworks and publications.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 524.

³⁹ D. Livingstone, and C. Livingstone, *A Popular Account of Dr. Livingstone’s Expedition to the Zambesi and Its Tributaries*, pp. 259–260.