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THE LOVES AND LIVES OF TWO WOMEN CALLED MARY

*I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my
soul can reach. – Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

**Compiled by
Rose Willis
Doreen Atkinson**



**The Moffat Mission
James Backhouse, 1839**

The road to Kuruman conceals many a love story. Among the greatest is the tale of two women - both named Mary - who fell in love with Scottish Congregationalist pioneer missionaries, arguably among the greatest Men of God this continent has ever seen. Both suffered hardships, but neither complained.

When the great Robert Moffat trailed across the dryland towards Kuruman, he was a lonely man. He had left his heart in Scotland with the lovely Mary Smith. They had fallen deeply in love, but three years would pass before she would be given permission - and a blessing - by her father and allowed to travel across the world to marry him. Then, their daughter Mary's love for pioneer medical missionary David Livingstone was so immense that she could not live without him. In the end, it cost her dearly.



The young Robert by George Baxter, 1843

In the 1800s, love often prevented a young man from answering the call to become a missionary. Many eager to take up service in foreign lands rejected the call because they had fallen in love, says Belle M Brain in *Love Stories of the Missionaries*. “Neither faith, patience, nor prayer would move some women to accompany the men they loved to missions in the wilderness.” Also, few young men had sufficient courage to ask for a daughter's hand in marriage and then add “you may never see her again because I will take her to the other side of the earth into an unknown, heathen territory filled with hardships and suffering.”

Fortunately love often won and among the men who took their wives to the furthest, wildest, unknown, unheard-of places were Robert Moffat and his son-in-law, David Livingstone.

FROM GARDENER TO GOD

Robert Moffat grew up in Ormiston, East Lothian, Scotland. His mother had a “stern, religious faith but possessed a most tender loving heart.” She instilled in him a “deep love of God,” states one of his biographers, David J Deaner.

As Robert matured, he felt an intense desire to become a missionary. So, on the advice of Reverend William Roby, he offered his services to the London Missionary Society (LMS), but they turned him down telling him there were many applicants and only the best could be sent. There was thus nothing for it but to seek other work. In 1813 he moved to Manchester, in England, and took a job as a gardener with James Smith, a pious Scottish merchant.

James “took a look” at the young man, liked him and thought he might be a good worker, so he decided to give him “a try.” He later questioned his wisdom when he saw a deep friendship developing between Robert and his only daughter, Mary. However, he concluded, nothing would come of it because the lad had little in the way of learning, and she was well educated. Mary, who had been taught by Moravian ministers, had polished manners and every expectation of a good marriage.

Nevertheless, Robert and Mary fell in love. Deaner says Robert found her “beautiful of countenance, but more beautiful in heart. Also, she displayed a fervent piety as well as deep sympathy with the missionary cause.” Their “esteem for each other quickly deepened and they secretly decided to marry”.

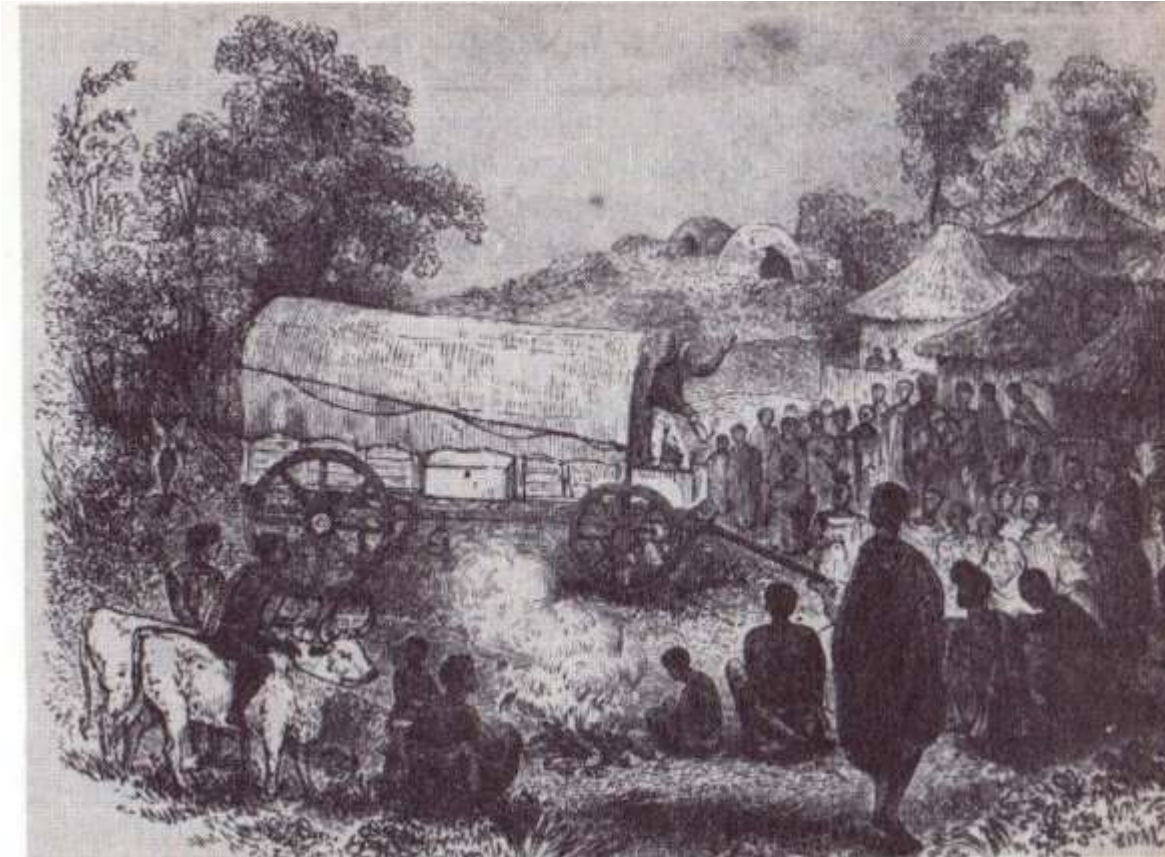


The young Mary Smith

Robert was just about to ask James for his daughter’s hand when the LMS advised him that they had decided to accept his application to become a missionary.

He and Mary were delighted, but her parents were not. Despite being pious people and supporting the idea of foreign missions, they did not want their daughter to go off to a faraway land. James refused to give his blessing. Mary was in a quandary. She loved Robert very dearly, but she respected her parents so deeply that she decided to let him go. He was devastated.

The LMS preferred married missionaries. Robert stressed he needed her at his side. She held his heart, he said, and he would never be able to give it to another. But her father remained resolute, and she would not go against his wishes. So, Robert put the matter into the hands of God and sailed from England on his own on 18 October 1816.



Robert Moffat preaching from his wagon-pulpit
From his book, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*

In Africa, Robert greatly missed Mary. They wrote frequently.

A BOAT WITH ONLY ONE OAR

In one letter he said: “A missionary without a wife in this country is like a boat with one oar. Here, I am carpenter, smith, cooper, tailor, shoemaker, miller, baker, and housekeeper. The last is most burdensome. I never eat until I am impelled by hunger.” Mary’s parents realized that they could not halt this love, so they agreed to let her go and in 1819 she left to join her beloved Robert.

The couple was married in Cape Town on 27 December 1819, and after the wedding left immediately for Kuruman and his mission at Lattakoo (Dithakong, north of the modern town of Kuruman). There their home became a welcoming haven for northbound travellers and those bound for Central Africa. Here they happily worked passionately together enduring many hardships. Robert once he went without water for days and his mouth became so dry, he was unable to speak. It was here too that Robert translated the Bible into Setswana.

Mary wrote telling her mother of their journey. She marveled at the vast country, the route through fertile valleys, mountains and hundreds of miles across the desolate Karoo.

Half-way through this arid district, they came to the little village of Beaufort West, close to the colonial boundary. They were welcomed by the newly-appointed Scottish magistrate, David Baird. Reverend John Taylor, who had travelled to Africa on the same ship as Robert, was away visiting his flock. "It is a fine fertile spot, with trees planted on both sides of the road," wrote Mary.

Baird spoke well of Taylor, and described him as a good auxiliary magistrate. They regularly ate at Baird's home and were supplied with fruit from his garden.

Then the Moffatts they left on a ten-day journey to Griquatown and the world of missionary William Anderson, who was highly regarded.



Moffat Mission in the 1840s

From: David J Deane, *Robert Moffat: The Missionary Hero of Kuruman*

A MARRIAGE OF 50 YEARS

Robert created well-irrigated gardens and orchards at his Kuruman mission. He at times joked that he had more fruit trees than Christian followers. Mary and Robert were married for 50 years. She never left his side.

Robert and his wife raised a large healthy family, with ten children and they adopted two more. Robert was her life, but he also needed her.

The Moffats' home at Kuruman mission

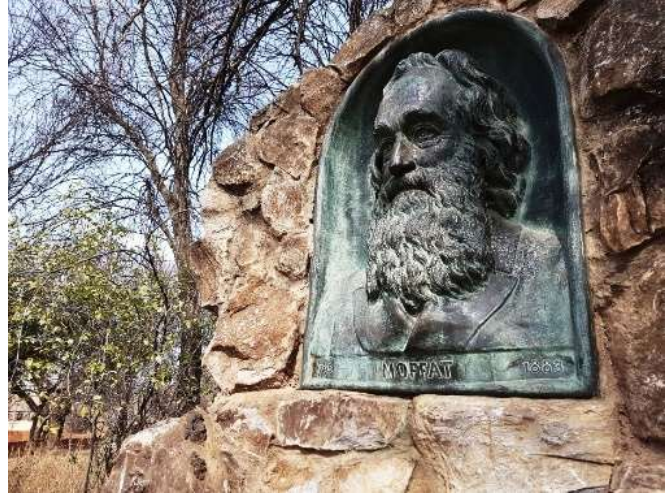


Mary Moffat and her husband returned to Britain in 1870. They lived in Brixton, where she died in 1871.

When she died, he was totally overwhelmed. Their son later said: "My father could never have become the missionary he was without her."

Mary Moffat, in old age

Mary committed all her children to "the Dark Continent" and was bitterly grieved that some took up other work. Their eldest child and first daughter, Mary, who was born in Griquatown, spent her early life in Kuruman, married Dr David Livingstone, despite her mother's doubts which grew to full blown anxiety. He became one of Africa's greatest missionaries and explorers.



The statue of Robert Moffat at Kuruman mission

Those who continued in the ministry were Ann, who married the French missionary, Jean Frédoux; Bessie, a younger daughter, who wed Reverend Roger Price; and a son, John, who became a missionary and imperial agent and for a while took over the running of the mission at Kuruman.

On a trip with Robert to Europe, Mary met David Livingstone who told her he also wished to become a missionary. Mary tried to persuade him to marry, but he scoffed at that. He was a far more arrogant man than Robert and convinced he would be able to make it without a wife. He was determined not to let “any bonnie young lass who crossed his path change things.”

Livingstone told the LMS: “I am not married, nor engaged to be married, in fact, I have never even been in love.” He stressed that he exulted in his ability to overcome fatigue and deprivation.

Little did Mary know that he was destined to become her son in law.

A WORKING-CLASS BOY

Once a working-class boy and Sunday school teacher from Blantyre in Scotland, Livingstone clawed his way out of poverty through sheer determination, studying at night after working in the mills and training as a doctor. He had initially set his heart on serving the Lord in China, but the Opium Wars put paid to that, so he came to the Cape in 1841. He arrived while the Moffats were in Europe and found a man in Britstown to travel with him to Kuruman.

Livingstone was determined to distinguish himself by taking God’s word deeper into Africa than any white man had ever done before.



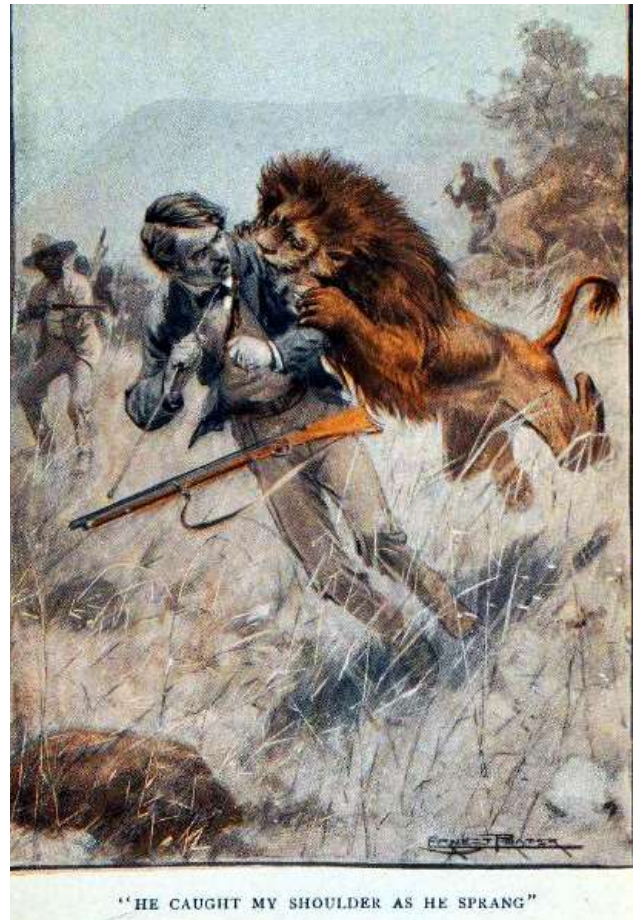
David Livingstone

When he again met motherly Mary on African soil, she once more tried to persuade him to seek a wife. She knew well the hardships he would have to face on his own. But he was adamant. He would make it on his own and would not be encumbered by “a weak female companion.” However, he admitted that being his own “laundress, housekeeper, and seamstress,” was a bit tough, but said if things got too bad, he would advertise in the Evangelical Post for a widow “to do for him.”

A LION CHANGED HIS LIFE

All went well for four years. His name was exulted in the annals of great glorious African explorers. Then, one day lions killed nine of his sheep, He vowed to shoot the creatures and tried, but one sprang out suddenly and almost killed him. It bit his shoulder, crushed the bone, badly tore the flesh and “shook him about like a terrier.”

Livingstone managed to escape, but with no one to attend to him, he rushed back to the Moffats at Kuruman for help.



Source: <https://www.frontlinemissionsa.org>

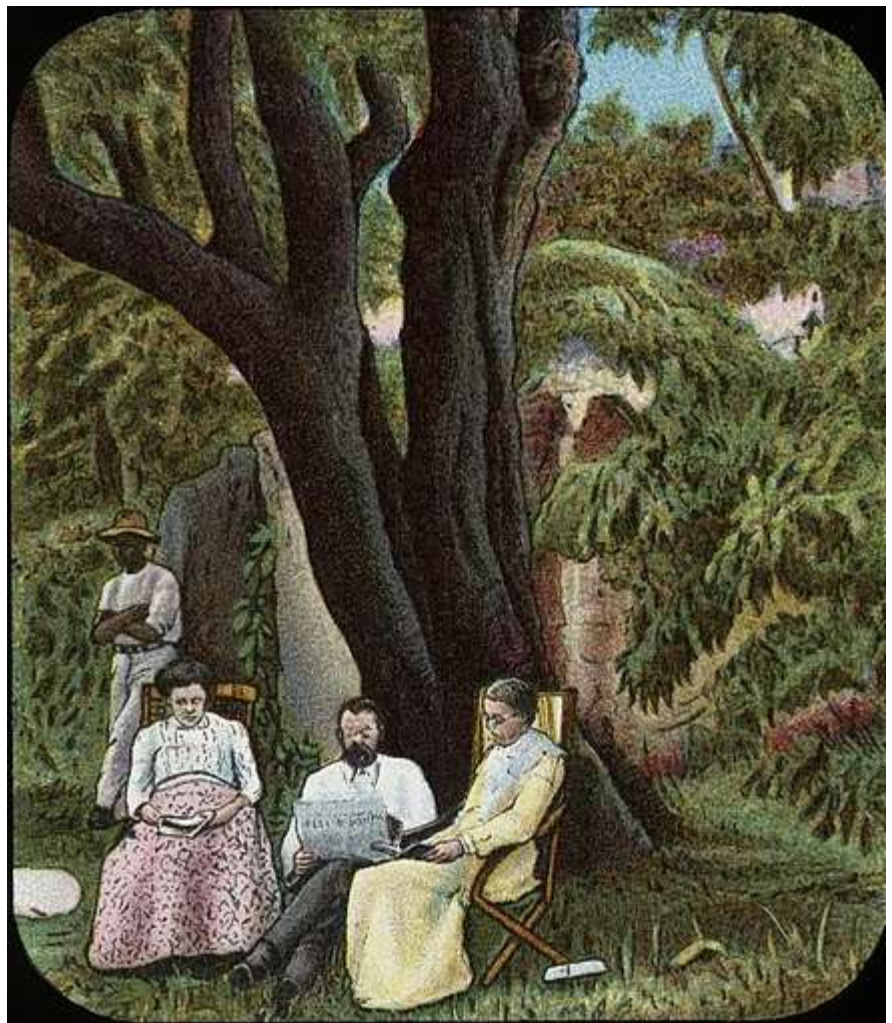
He then met their daughter, the quiet, determined, practical Mary, who was teaching at the local school. He found her a good companion. He wrote: "She is a little, thick, black-haired girl, sturdy, but all I want." He proposed "beneath a fruit tree" and she accepted. They were married on 9 January 1845, in the church at Kuruman.

She was twenty-three years old; he was thirty-one. He was not a romantic man, so their marriage began as a purely utilitarian unromantic venture. However, in time he grew to love her deeply.

Mary gave her heart to David Livingstone. Shortly after they were married, he wrote: "I see no face to be compared with the little sunburned one that greets me with kind looks each time I return home."

He wrote her letters which she treasured for her entire life. He once wrote:

"I can say truly, my dearest, that I loved you when I married you, and the longer I lived with you, I loved you the better," in another he said. "May God bless you! Let your affection be towards Him more than towards me. I hope I shall never give you cause for regret. Whatever friendship we feel towards each other, let us always look to Jesus as our common Friend and Guide, and may He shield you with His everlasting arms from every evil!"



Mary Moffat and her parents, about 1840,
at the Moffat mission.

Painting by an unknown artist, issued by the London Missionary Society

A WISE CHOICE INDEED

Those who knew him said that without doubt his choice of a wife was a wise one. Had he searched the whole world he would never have found a more suitable bride, they claimed. She was brave, austere, not gushing. Like her mother she “had schooling”, was well read and spoke six languages. This made her the ideal companion for such a scholarly man. There is no doubt that his marriage into the Moffat family was one of the great providential things in his life. “No family on the face of the earth could have been more helpful to him and no wife could have done more for him,” said Dr. Blaikie.

Hers is a very human story of a powerful, robust, independent, courageous woman, who understood mission work. From a young age, she toiled fetching water, making and mending clothes, preparing meat, planting vegetables, making butter and soap and generally helping with the daily grind for survival. She was compassionate, able to roll up her sleeves and do backbreaking manual work. She had the respect of the African people. Her language skills, knowledge of the country and its people opened many doors for Livingstone in places where he would otherwise have encountered hostility and suspicion. He called her “the most important member of my team.”

A DEEP AND ABIDING LOVE

After several false starts, they settled among the BaKwena and began raising a family. Mary expected to stay there as her parents had done at Kuruman, but Livingstone loved exploring. When the Lord called him to venture deeper into Africa, Mary tried to accompany him on every long journey. She suffered greatly when she did. Yet she could not stand being separated from him, and when she was, she missed him terribly. He also missed her. He said she was a great travelling companion.



David, Mary and their children

However, while he loved her, he was so obsessed with exploration that he neglected her and his children. In the end his passion for spreading the word of God cost him his family.

Livingstone has often been criticized for his treatment of Mary, but there is no doubt that between them there was a deep and abiding love. They were devout, pious and happy. They were married for 18 years but spent only seven together. For six of these years, Mary was annually pregnant, and David delivered some of the children. Her first baby, Robert (1845) was a sickly child, when the second Agnes arrived (1847), Mary was so gaunt that she startled the locals at Kuruman. Then, came Thomas (1848), Elizabeth (1850), William Oswell (1851), and Anna Mary (1858).

In 1850, Mary became the first white woman to cross the Kalahari. She crossed this desert twice - despite being pregnant on both occasions. On each occasion, they travelled into the desert with three toddlers under the age of six. "Mary had her hands full with the babies, but went because she wanted to go, and they wanted to be together." Each trip, however, was a dreadful ordeal. The children all got malaria and high fever.

MARY SUFFERS A STROKE

David Livingstone dragged his family further and further into the remote interior, travelling across a relentless, rugged territory with small children.

Livingstone toiled patiently and relentlessly in faith. Life was exceedingly hard. Everything had to be prepared from raw material. Bread was baked in an oven made by scooping a large hole in an anthill and using a slab of stone for the door.



Mary Moffat, probably in her late thirties, in the late 1850s

On their first journey across the Kalahari, their fourth child Elizabeth was born. Mary suffered a stroke, and the child died a few weeks later. There were no fruit or vegetables, and diseases such as malaria were rife. Finding food and water was such a problem that their tongues turned black. They were forced to eat locusts and drink foul, muddy water. Livingstone said there wasn't a square inch on their bodies that hadn't been bitten by mosquitoes. "The idea of the children perishing before our eyes was terrible," wrote Livingstone. Her fifth child, William Oswell, was born in 1851, shortly after her second trip across the Kalahari.



Mary Livingstone and her son Oswell, around 1857

Livingstone's mother-in-law, Mary Moffat, harangued him about the treatment of her daughter and grandchildren. So Livingstone then sent them to his parents in Scotland. (It is not clear why he did not send them to Kuruman.) William Oswell, a hunter friend, who came to see them off in Cape Town, was so horrified to see the state of their clothes that he bought them all a new wardrobe.

Livingstone expected them to be separated for two years and planned for his family to live on his meagre missionary salary. However, the separation stretched to four-and-a-half years. It proved impracticable for Mary and four children to stay in his parents' little cottage. The families fell out. With no money or home, they endured a precarious existence.

Mary led a wandering life with the children, staying in boarding houses. Stress and loneliness led to a drinking problem. It seems this was her only way of coping with the horrific stress of trying to have her children educated, and keep a roof over their heads. She could not even pay for medical care. She was also desperately lonely and worried about David. She knew the territory he was travelling through and the conditions he was facing.

FINALLY RE-UNITED

They were finally reunited when Livingstone went to England in 1856 to lecture and receive a gold medal. Things went well. He was even able to buy a house. In 1858, he decided to return to Africa. She steadfastly refused to stay, so they left Robert, Agnes, and Tom in the care of friends, supported by the proceeds of his book, *Missionary Travels*.

Almost immediately after setting sail, however, Mary discovered she was pregnant again. She went first to Kuruman, then back to Scotland, where she left 6-year-old William Oswell and the new baby, Anna Mary, with Livingstone's relatives. As soon as she could, in February 1862, she rejoined him. She lasted only three months on the Zambezi.

Mary fell ill with acute malaria at Chupanga, Mozambique, on 22 April 1862. Her condition quickly worsened despite David's medical attention. He did everything in his power to try and save her, but she died within five days, on 27 April. She was only 41.



Livingstone was devastated. "I am left alone in the world by one whom I felt to be a part of myself," he wrote. In a letter to his daughter, after Mary's death, he wrote: "Your mamma was famous for roughing it in the bush, and was never a trouble."



Mary's grave today



A remote spot in a far-flung country

Belle Brain wrote: “Mary should be remembered for her courage, her sacrifice, her sense of duty - not so much to God, but to her husband, to whom she was devoted. In many ways this is a painful love story. He loved her and she loved him. But his central mission overwhelmed that.”

“Mary was not only neglected by her husband, but also by history,” said historian Julie Davidson.

Fifty years later, in May 1873, an exhausted Livingstone died from dysentery in Chitambo, a village near Lake Bangwelu in modern Zambia, His two faithful African servants preserved his body, removing his vital organs. His heart remained in Africa, it was buried under a tree. They carried his body more than a thousand miles to the coast. It was sent to Britain by sea, and interred in Westminster Abbey in April 1874.

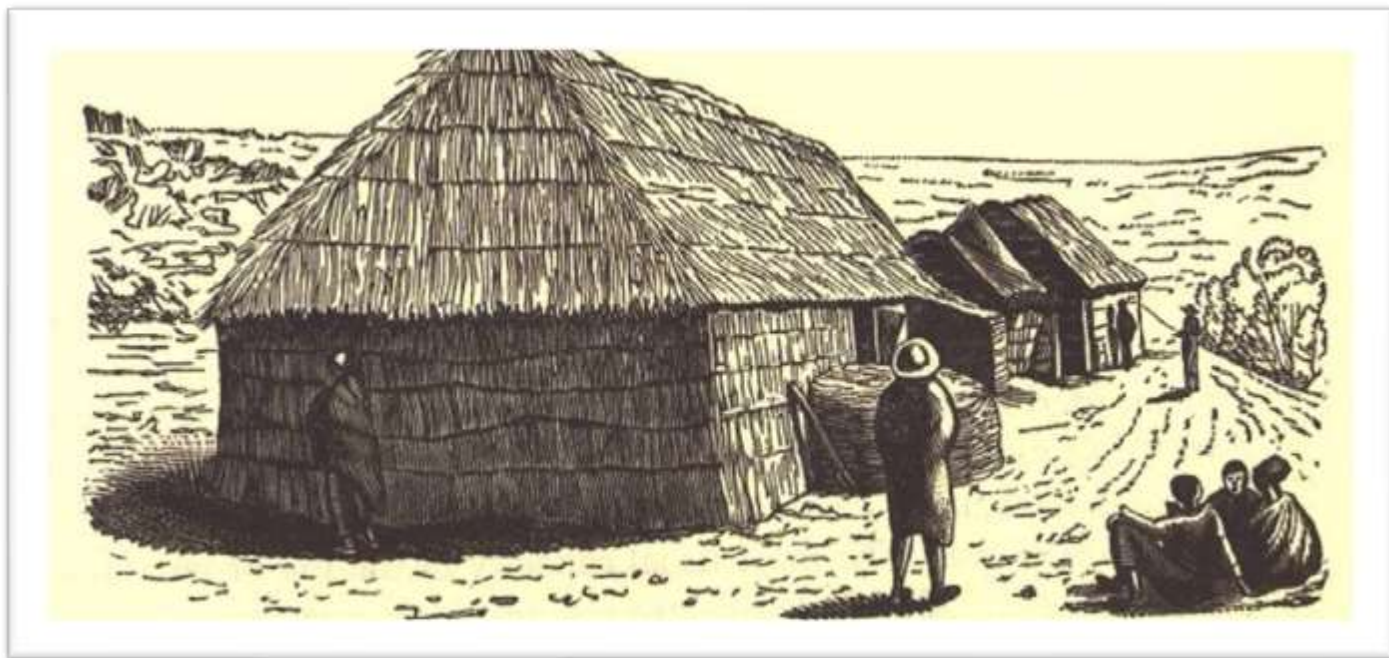
Opening up Africa cost both David and Mary very dearly, but they left a massive legacy.

A museum in Blantyre, Scotland, is dedicated to David’s remarkable life. It is located in the former textile mill buildings which once housed 24 families including Livingstone's, and where he was born on 19 March 1813.

The David
Livingstone
Birthplace
Museum in
Blantyre,
Scotland,



A much less elaborate museum is dedicated to Mary Moffat Livingstone. It is housed in the original Moffat building in Griquatown, built about 1810.



Klaarwater mission (now Mary Moffat Museum), sketched by William Burchell in 1811



SOURCES

Julie Davidson, *Looking for Mrs Livingstone*; David J Deane, *Robert Moffat Missionary Hero of Kuruman*; M Brain, *Love Stories of the Missionaries*; Nick Drainey, Sunday Post: “Mrs Livingstone, we proclaim: extraordinary life and achievements of explorer’s wife in the spotlight after £9 million museum refurbishment”; Kobus Dreyer, *The life of Moshoeshoe*, Von Prophalow Society; Christian History Institute, *The Man with Three Wives*.