

Digital Humanities Review

--

Resensie van Digitale Geesteswetenskappe

Comprehensive new online research tool

Livingstone Online

<http://www.livingstoneonline.org>

Livingstone Online is an open-access internet resource and publishing project hosted by University of Maryland Libraries in the USA. The aim of the website is to make available online all the letters, journals, diaries, books, notebooks and known miscellaneous items which originated from David Livingstone's pen. The project collaborates with leading British and international archives, libraries and educational institutions and is also responsible for the *Livingstone Spectral Imaging Project* which is a collaborative, international effort to use spectral imaging technology and digital publishing to make available a series of formerly illegible diaries and letters produced when Livingstone, during his last years, was stranded without ink or writing paper in central Africa (<http://livingstoneonline.org/spectral-imaging>).

Why should this comprehensive new research tool be significant in the postcolonial era in which we live? The reason is that more than 150 years after his death in 1873, David Livingstone still stands at the intersection of many of the most controversial events of the past two centuries. His writings illuminate European imperialism and colonialism, African history and the nineteenth-century slave trade, all of which continue to influence contemporary geopolitics. He was a missionary who helped introduce European religious and cultural values to Africans. He was also an abolitionist who fought for the end of the East African slave trade. He was an explorer who "opened up" the African continent for European penetration and who helped inform the imperialist "scramble" for the continent in the decades after his death.

In all these guises, Livingstone's life continues to resonate into the postcolonial present. The vicissitudes of his posthumous reputation reflect the changes in Western society's understandings of race, culture, religion, and nationhood over the past century and a half. *Livingstone Online* is a comprehensive website which not only provides the user with direct access to Livingstone's literary legacy, but also gives a detailed account of the fascinating history, the development and management of the project, as well as the interesting educational spin-offs created by the programme developers for children aged nine to 13 years old.

Because Livingstone hailed from Scotland, it is logical that the first effort to preserve his written legacy came from the National Library of Scotland where in 1979, the David Livingstone Documentation Project published their monumental *David Livingstone: A Catalogue of Documents*, edited by Gary Glendennan and Ian

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-8392/2017/v62n2a9>

Cunningham. This was followed by a supplement a few years later in 1985. The original *Catalogue* listed over 2 000 letters written by Livingstone; 11 substantial journals; 39 field diaries of various sorts; 18 notebooks; 30 papers and reports; and almost 200 other miscellaneous items. This project, which continued until April 1985, resulted in a significant portion of these manuscripts, either in original or copy, being brought together at the National Library of Scotland.

In 2004, *Livingstone Online* commenced as a pilot project driven by a small team of scholars at the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at University College London, with Professor Christopher Lawrence as its director. The team sought to design and build an online resource which would include transcriptions and high-resolution images of original archived materials related to nineteenth and twentieth-century explorers, particularly those with connections to medicine and science.

With Livingstone being one of the main incumbents, Lawrence and his team soon shifted their overriding goal to publishing a wide range of Livingstone letters. In 2010 the closing down of the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine almost brought an end to the work of *Livingstone Online*, had it not been for Professor Adrian S. Wisnicki (University of Nebraska, Lincoln) who had joined the team in 2009. Wisnicki proposed that *Livingstone Online* should publish Livingstone's damaged and unreadable 1870 and 1871 Field Diaries by making use of spectral imaging – a project which would require the collaboration of the UCLA Digital Library and for which an application for funding was submitted to the US National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the British Academy.

Approval of this application resulted in the *Livingstone Spectral Imaging Project* which has since delivered readable online versions of Livingstone's 1870 and 1871 Field Diaries plus a letter he wrote from Bambarre on 5 February 1871. *Livingstone Online* also took over the work of the Wellcome Trust Centre documentation project and apart from producing an integrated digital version of the original print *Catalogue* and its supplement, acquired digital image copies and/or created rigorous scholarly transcriptions of some 700 letters plus a variety of other items. The *Livingstone Online* Enrichment and Access Project (LEAP) which is also funded by the NEH further extended this work which led to the collection and digitisation of some 100 previously uncatalogued items, including maps, and the addition of some 5 000 new manuscript pages covering all phases of Livingstone's career. Today *Livingstone Online* provides what is possibly the most comprehensive and diverse surviving collection of manuscript documents related to any single nineteenth-century British expeditionist to Africa. Upon opening the website the user is introduced to six components or section pages differentiated by different colours, each of which addresses some aspect of Livingstone's life or of project development activities regarding *Livingstone Online*.

1. "About this Site" (coloured green) features an introduction to the site's goals, content, practices, and educational value; its theoretical objectives; plus the history of documenting and assembling Livingstone's surviving manuscripts to bring digital editions of these manuscripts to a global audience. Attention is also given to the key

components of the site, the site's aesthetic objectives, as well as the collaborative process that led to the development of the site. To conclude, this section outlines Livingstone's importance as an imperial travel writer and the overall importance of Livingstone's manuscripts for understanding both nineteenth-century and contemporary global events.

2. "In his Own Words" (coloured orange) provides the user with direct access (including download access) to the *Livingstone Online* digital collection which comprises thousands of high-resolution images and detailed transcriptions of Livingstone's original manuscripts. The manuscripts can be browsed by Addressee, by Repository, or by Timeline.

3. "Spectral Imaging" (coloured purple) describes the *Livingstone Spectral Imaging Project* where spectral imaging and processing were used to reveal text which was illegible to the naked eye. When Livingstone ran short of writing paper, he wrote crosswise on newspapers, using ink made of local berries. As time passed, his writing faded to such an extent that it became illegible. The manuscripts treated in this way are his 1870 and 1871 Field Diaries, and the letter dated 5 February 1871 which he wrote from Bambarre to Horace Waller.

4. "Life and Times" (coloured blue) comprises a series of critical essays which discuss Livingstone's life, publications, the age in which he lived, and the ways in which his legacy has been presented and re-represented. Topics of which overviews are presented are Livingstone's early years; his education and intellectual formation; his early travels (1841–52); his famous cross-continental journey (1852–56); his return to Britain (1856–58); the Zambesi Expedition (1858–64); his second return to Britain (1864–65); his final journeys to find the origin of the Nile, and his death and burial. Attention is also given to his posthumous reputation, focusing on his status as an icon of the British Empire and the numerous biographies that explore the changing ways in which Livingstone was represented as the British Empire developed and declined.

5. "Behind the Scenes" (coloured reddish) provides an overview of the staff of *Livingstone Online* and details the international standards that guide their research. It also lists the multitude of collaborating institutions (libraries, museums and archives) which support the work of *Livingstone Online*, the terms upon which content is made available and the ideals which guide the development of the website as a whole.

6. "Resources" (coloured olive) includes a comprehensive Bibliography of books by Livingstone; edited collections of primary Livingstone works; Bibliographies of Livingstone works; Biographies of and Critical Sources on Livingstone plus a list of selected websites dealing with Livingstone. Also discussed here is the *Livingstone Online* Outreach Programme which is a web-based educational resource situated within *Livingstone Online* which provides materials for teachers to guide students aged 9 to 13 in learning about the life and work of David Livingstone. Through Livingstone's writings, students can explore many important nineteenth-century issues that continue to resonate in our own time. By using the eleven worksheets

available, teachers can cover topics ranging from African animals to the industrial revolution, and from abolition to global citizenship. The materials encourage students to explore *Livingstone Online* on their own, and through these resources students should be able to gain a better understanding of the historical and cultural impact of David Livingstone's nineteenth-century life and travels in Scotland and Africa.

The staff involved in the *Livingstone Online* project refer to their website as “a digital museum and library”, a description every user of the site would agree with. The project is ongoing and with the possibility of eventually being able to view and download Livingstone's entire written legacy – 1 200 published items comprising some 15 000 images and 700 transcriptions by late 2017 – from a single digital site, is a luxury which past researchers of this most iconic figure of the British Empire could only dream. For South African historians who until now have shied away from researching Livingstone owing to the inaccessibility of his personal documents, *Livingstone Online* presents new and exciting possibilities.

Although minor when compared to the website's many excellent features, two points of criticism should be mentioned. The first is that the site contains too much information on its design, its development, its theoretical objectives and the staff involved. Although marginally interesting, this information distracts from its main function which is the online availability of all the letters, journals, diaries, books, notebooks and known miscellaneous items which came from David Livingstone's pen. The second is that almost no mention is made of a very important product of David Livingstone's labours, namely his maps. Livingstone was not a cartographer but to him, his maps were of prime importance. He had no formal schooling on the rudiments of geography and had never taken any formal courses in surveying or mapping. He was, however, a keen observer of the natural environment and possessed an innate ability to meticulously record what he observed. His maps which he kept forwarding, initially to the London Missionary Society and later to the Royal Geographical Society, were exemplary of what he had achieved in Africa, namely opening up the continent for European settlement by plotting the geographical coordinates of the routes he had followed with exceptional accuracy.

Whilst living at a time when the possibility to make an exact copy of a map with ease was non-existent, he nonetheless made copies of his maps himself with the result that there are various maps of the same area all made by him. His maps are found mainly in the Royal Geographical Society; the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London; the National Library of Scotland; the Livingstone Centre in Blantyre; and the Livingstone Museum in Livingstone, Zambia. Hopefully *Livingstone Online* will consider it a priority for the future to acquire high-resolution scans of these maps for its users to appreciate and study.

Elri Liebenberg
University of South Africa