It is true that missionaries were often closely tied to colonialism, unashamedly identifying European civilization with the Christian message. But they, more than any other outside influence, fought against the evils that colonialism and imperialism brought. They waged long and bitter battles (sometimes physically) against the heinous traffic in human cargo. And after the demise of slave trade, they raised their voices against other crimes, including the bloody tactics used by King Leopold to extract rubber from the Congo. The majority of missionaries were pro-African, and their stand for racial justice often made them despised by their fellow Europeans. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that without the conscience of Christian missions, the crimes of colonialism might have been even more horrific.

Missionaries have also been accused of being racists. They were. They were men and women of their time, and racist language and beliefs were commonplace. But perhaps more significant, they appear to have been significantly less racist than many of their contemporaries. It was the nineteenth-century intellectual of high society who viewed black Africans as inherently inferior—many rungs below Caucasians on the ethnologists' evolutionary ladder. Missionaries, on the other hand, were sometimes ridiculed in scholarly journals for their shallow thinking in regard to race, and most educated English citizens would have agreed with Mary Kingsley (whose Africa travelogue was widely circulated) when she criticized missionaries for their "difficulty in regarding the Africans as anything but a Man and a Brother" and their belief in "the spiritual equality of all colors of Christians."[2]

If missionaries frequently sounded like true nineteenth-century racists, it was because they viewed Africans (or any unchristianized peoples) to be degraded because of their lack of Christian moral teaching. Henry Drummond's views were characteristic. He described Africans as "half animal and half children, wholly savage and wholly heathen," but he qualified his blatant racism by concluding that "they are what we were once."[3]

Perhaps the greatest criticism of African missions has come from social scientists and anthropologists who have charged that Christian missions have wreaked havoc on African culture. It is true that missionaries of the nineteenth (and even the twentieth) century often failed to appreciate the distinctive qualities of unfamiliar cultures and failed to make Christianity compatible with the customs of other societies. But there were some customs, such as twin-murder and cannibalism and witchcraft, that did not contribute to a healthy environment. The missionaries' efforts to eradicate these practices helped preserve Africa's most valuable cultural asset—the people themselves.

The most significant missionary contribution that has profoundly affected African culture relates to Bible translation—an endeavor that influenced all aspects of life. This contribution "has few parallels, and should stand as a monument to the scaling down of cross-cultural barriers," writes Lamin Sanneh of Yale University. "We should give praise and honor to God that he raised in the Western church servants of his cause in Africa and elsewhere. The dry bones of many of these missionaries, rising from their unmarked graves, gave voices to our ancestors."[4]

The early Protestant missionaries to Africa, like Carey and his colleagues in India, were not ordained clergy. They were artisans and gardeners and factory workers who often spent much of their time as manual laborers and artisans in the mission work. Yet despite their mundane labors, they were missionary evangelists—and in some instances, notable Bible translators.

Robert and Mary Moffat

Robert Moffat is sometimes regarded as the patriarch of South African missions, a man who had a significant influence in that region for more than half a century. Yet even during his own lifetime, he was overshadowed by his famous son-in-law, often being referred to as "the father-in-law of David Livingstone." Moffat, nevertheless, was the far greater missionary of the two. He was an evangelist, a translator, an educator, a diplomat, and an explorer, and he effectively combined those roles to become one of the truly great missionaries to Africa.

Born in Scotland in 1795, Moffat was raised in humble circumstances that offered very limited education and no formal biblical training. His parents were Presbyterians with a strong missionary zeal, and on cold winter evenings his mother gathered the children around her and read aloud stories of missionary heroes. But young Moffat was not inclined toward spiritual things. He "ran off to sea" for a time, and at the age of fourteen he became apprenticed to a gardener, learning a skill that he would use the rest of his life.

At the age of seventeen, he moved to Cheshire, England, to begin his work as a gardener. There in 1814 he joined a small Methodist society that met in a nearby farmhouse—an association that offered him a harmonious blend of Scottish Calvinism and Methodist "enthusiasm." The following year, after making contact with William Roby, a director of the London Missionary Society (LMS), he applied to that board for missionary service. The society responded by saying that they could not "receive all who offered their services for missionary work" and were thus "obligated to select those who possess the most promising acquirements," which in their view did not include him. He was turned down.[5]

Undaunted by his rejection, Moffat secured a new gardening position near Roby's home and began studying theology with him on a private basis. After a year he again applied to the LMS, and this time he was accepted. Founded in 1795, the year of Moffat's birth, the LMS was an interdenominational evangelical mission board. In its twenty years it had seen steady growth and had missionaries stationed all over the globe. Moffat was sent to South Africa with four other new missionaries. After eighty-five days at sea they arrived in Cape Town to launch their missionary careers.

Moffat had hoped to begin his missionary career as a married man. During his last year as a gardener in England he had become interested in his employer's daughter, Mary Smith, whom he perceived as having a "warm missionary heart." Though her father was enthusiastic about Moffat's missionary plans, he was less excited about involving his only daughter into such work. So Moffat went to South Africa single, waiting more than three years before Mary's parents relented and agreed to let their twenty-four-year-old daughter join him.

In the meantime, Moffat was introduced to the realities of missionary work and African culture. He was distressed by the strong prejudice against missionaries by both the English and the Dutch colonists, and he was impatient when, for that very reason, government officials stood in the way of evangelism of the interior. But if he was disturbed by government policy, he was shocked by the open immorality and dissension among the missionaries themselves. Writing to the LMS secretary in London, Moffat lamented that "never was there a period when a body of missionaries were in such a confused and deplorable (and awful to add) degraded condition."[6]

While the LMS had seen its share of problems (including moral lapses) with some of its Cape Colony missionaries, there were many who served honorably. The first missionary to South Africa was John T. Vanderkemp, a physician from Holland. Though the son of a Dutch Reformed pastor, the well-educated young Vanderkemp had become a religious skeptic and remained so until the tragic deaths of his wife and daughter in a boating accident, which he himself witnessed. With a renewed faith in Christ, he arrived in the Cape Colony in 1799 when he was past the age of fifty. He worked primarily among the Hottentots where, despite discouraging setbacks, he won hundreds of converts.

Vanderkemp was greatly distressed by the slave trade he daily witnessed and spent thousands of dollars in freeing slaves, including a seventeen-year-old Malagasy slave girl whom he married when he was sixty—an act that created an uproar among the colonists and missionaries as well. Vanderkemp died in 1811 after only twelve years of missionary service, but he was recognized then and in the years that followed as one of the great pioneers of the LMS.

After several months of delays, Moffat and a married couple were granted permission to journey into the bleak arid regions of Namaqualand, hundreds of miles north of Cape Town. There he first met Afrikaner, a once-feared Hottentot chief, whose life had changed after coming in contact with a Dutch missionary. Moffat spent nearly two years at Afrikaner's camp and then invited him to travel to Cape Town so that the white colonists could see the change Christianity had made in this man, whose reputation for raiding colonists' farms was widely known. It worked, and Moffat's star as a missionary statesman began to rise.

Showing off Afrikaner was not Moffat's only reason for traveling back to Cape Town. In December of 1819, Mary Smith arrived from England, and three weeks later they were married. It was a happy union from the start and remained so for fifty-three years. Their honeymoon, a six-hundred-mile wagon trek north-east to Kuruman was a taste of their future together. There were parched deserts, dense forests, quagmire swamps, and raging rivers to be crossed, which no doubt made them grateful they were not alone. With them throughout their honeymoon was a single male missionary.

Kuruman was, in Moffat's eyes, a choice spot for a mission station. He had hoped Afrikaner and his people would move to the location, but Afrikaner died not long after their journey. The Moffats settled at the mouth of the Kuruman River, which was fed by a crystal-clear underground spring. "Here over the years," writes Adrian Hastings, "he built up the Mission of Kuruman with its canal, its irrigated gardens, its square stone houses standing in a straight line beside the canal, its fences, its fruit trees, its wheat, barley, grapes, and figs. By 1835, there were 500 acres under irrigation and a population of 700 souls."[7]

This model mission station consumed many years of arduous toil. Indeed, the Moffats' early years in Kuruman were filled with hardships. They lived in primitive conditions, their first home being a mud hut with the kitchen separate from the house. Although Mary was not used to doing heavy domestic work, she adapted to African life remarkably well. She washed clothes by hand in the river and cooked on an open fireplace. She soon overcame her aversion to cleaning the floors with cow dung and even recommended it: "It lays the dust better than anything, and kills the fleas which would otherwise breed abundantly."[8]

Africa

The greater hardship at Kuruman related to their ministry. The Bechuanas, with whom the Moffats worked, were not receptive to the gospel message. Tribal superstitions prevailed, and when the official rainmaker could not prevent long periods of drought, Moffat was blamed. Theft also was common, and the Moffats' house was ransacked on many occasions. "Our labours," wrote Moffat, "might be compared to the attempts of … a husbandman labouring to transform the surface of a granite rock into arable land."[9]

As time passed, however, Moffat's prestige among the Bechuanas grew. In 1823, after only a few years at Kuruman, the situation in the area began to change. Waves of nomadic tribes began sweeping across the arid plains, and the very existence of the Bechuanas was in danger. Moffat exercised his diplomatic prowess, and through mediation and military arrangements with another tribe, he was able to avert the impending destruction of the Bechuanas. He became a civilian general of sorts, and on one occasion rode out to meet the

enemy. Though his peace efforts failed and a fierce battle ensued, the invading Mantatee tribe was severely weakened and driven back.

From this point on, Moffat's leadership role at Kuruman was secure. As a diplomat and military leader, he commanded the highest respect, though there was little corresponding success in his evangelistic efforts. His converts were few. Polygamy was a nagging problem at Kuruman as it was elsewhere in Africa. How should the missionary counsel a convert who has many wives? Church membership was typically denied the individual, and consequently the church remained small. It was a discouraging situation, and Mary, particularly, was inclined to periods of despondency: "Could we but see the smallest fruit, we could rejoice midst the privations and toils which we bear; but as it is, our hands do often hang down."[10]

Perhaps the greatest reason for the slow progress of Christianity among the Bechuanas was simply a lack of understanding. Neither Moffat nor the Bechuanas fully comprehended the other's beliefs in spiritual matters. Moffat had little interest in the Bechuana religious traditions, and he sought to evangelize them with the mistaken impression that the tribe had no concept of or word for God. But an even greater handicap to his ministry was his failure to learn their language. For several years his sole means of communication was Cape Dutch, a trade language that some of the Bechuanas understood for rudimentary business transactions but that was hardly suitable for presenting a Christian message. Moffat wasted years of precious time trying to squeeze by on this shortcut, but he finally realized that learning the language, as difficult as it was, was the only solution to communicating the gospel. So convinced was he of this necessity that in 1827 he left Mary with their little ones, turned his back on his gardens, and went out into the bush to spend time with some of the men. For eleven weeks he immersed himself in language study.

On his return, he was ready to begin translating the Bible, a task that he began very slowly and that took him twenty-nine years to complete. Beginning with the gospel of Luke, he agonized over each sentence, and even then he was painfully aware that his translation was filled with errors. Only the patience of continual revising made the translation comprehensible. Printing the text also became a complicated ordeal. After traveling all the way to Cape Town in 1830, he found printers unwilling to print Scripture in a tribal tongue, fearing the equalizing tendencies it might have on the "inferior" race. His solution was to learn how to print himself and to secure a press for Kuruman.

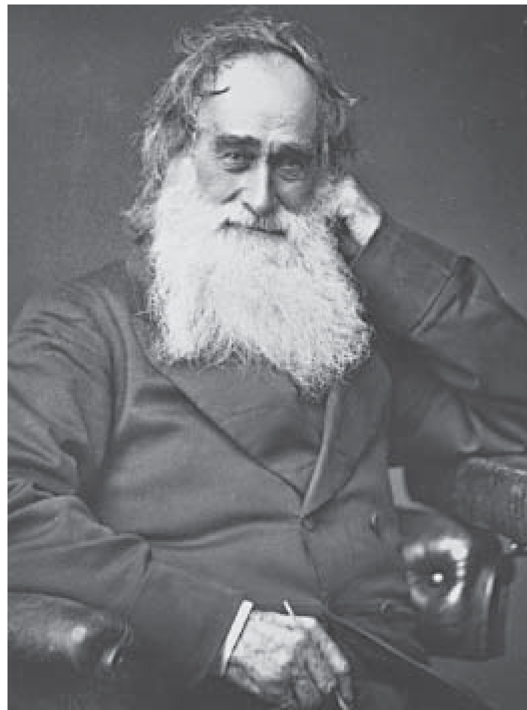
Translating and printing the Bible often seemed like a fruitless, thankless task, but it also had its rewards. In 1836, while conducting a service in an outlying area, Moffat was astonished when a young man stood up and began quoting passages from the gospel of Luke. To Mary he wrote: "You would weep tears of joy to see what I had seen."[11]

But even before he was able to make his translation available to the people, Moffat was seeing positive results from his language study. His ability to speak the language of the people brought a new understanding of his teaching. He started a school with forty pupils, and soon his message began to take hold and a religious awakening followed. The first baptisms took place in 1829, nearly a decade after their arrival in Kuruman. In 1838 a stone church was built that still stands today.

Although Moffat's career is generally associated with Kuruman, his work extended far beyond that area. In fact, the nucleus of believers at Kuruman never exceeded two hundred, but his influence was felt hundreds of miles around. Chiefs or their representatives from distant tribes came to Kuruman to hear his message. The most notable instance of this occurred in 1829 when the great and fearsome Moselekatse, one of Africa's most infamous tribal chiefs, sent five representatives to visit Moffat and bring him with them on their return journey. The meeting of Moffat and Moselekatse was an unforgettable encounter. The naked Moselekatse was overwhelmed that the great white "chief" would come so far to visit him, and so began a thirty-year friendship built on a deep respect of one man for the

other. Though Moselekatse himself was never converted to Christianity, in later years he did allow missionaries, including Moffat's son John and daughter-in-law Emily, to establish a mission station among his tribe.

As far away as Moffat often traveled, his thoughts were never far from Kuruman. Over the years, Kuruman had become a showpiece of African civilization, where his philosophy of "Bible and plough" was practiced. Their stone house had a large enclosed backyard where their five servants did domestic chores around a huge open brick oven. It was a homey atmosphere, with children always at play. (The Moffats had ten children, though only seven survived to adulthood; and of those seven, five became actively involved in African missions.) Though Kuruman was an out-of-the-way settlement, not on the main route to the interior, it attracted so many visitors that Moffat sometimes regretted the circus atmosphere that interfered with his Bible translation and revisions.



Robert Moffat, missionary patriarch of South Africa.

After fifty-three years in Africa with only one furlough (1839–43), the Moffats were ready to retire. They had suffered some severe tragedies, particularly the deaths of their two oldest children within the space of a few months in 1862, but the work was moving forward. There were several native pastors active in the work, and their son John, who had joined them at Kuruman, was prepared to take over the mission. It was a sad departure from Kuruman and perhaps an unfortunate mistake. Kuruman was the only home they had known for half a century, and readjustment back in England proved difficult, particularly for Mary, who died only months after their return. Moffat lived on for another thirteen years, during which time he became a noted missionary statesman, traveling throughout the British Isles challenging adults and youth alike with the tremendous needs of Africa.

David Livingstone

David Livingstone was the hero of Victorian England—and a hero for generations to follow. "After his death and his burial in Westminster Abbey," writes Geoffrey Moorhouse, his "reputation was secure from assault by anyone but the most reckless heretic. Even in the middle of the twentieth century, historians would still acknowledge him as the greatest