

front of the casket bearing the man who decades before in that same city had caught a vision of “a thousand villages, where no missionary had ever been.”

The death of David Livingstone had a tremendous psychological impact on the English-speaking world. Missionary fervor reached a high pitch as zealous young men and women volunteered for overseas duty, no matter what the cost.

George Grenfell

George Grenfell was one of the many British citizens inspired by the work of Livingstone and drawn to Africa in the wake of his death. He was born in Cornwall, England, in 1849. It was through reading Livingstone’s first book that he committed himself to African missions. After working in a warehouse for a number of years while serving as a lay minister, he enrolled for a year at the Baptist College in Bristol to prepare for his missionary service.

In 1874, at the age of twenty-five, Grenfell was accepted by the Baptist Missionary Society (the same mission that commissioned William Carey some eighty years before), and the following month he left for the Cameroons. In 1876, he was back home in England for his marriage to a Miss Hawkes, who returned to Africa with him but died less than a year later, leaving him bereaved and regretful: “I have done a great wrong in taking my dear wife into this deadly climate of West Africa.” He remarried two years later, this time to a “colored” woman from the West Indies who was also widowed.²⁴

After a three-year apprenticeship in the Cameroons, Grenfell was assigned to do pioneer work on the Congo River, following on the discoveries of Stanley’s 999-day journey. It was Grenfell’s hope to pave the way for a network of mission stations across Africa. His mode of travel was a river steamer, the *Peace*, which he assembled himself after three engineers who were sent one at a time to carry out the task all died. The *Peace* became a home for Grenfell and his family, who accompanied him on his exploratory trips.

The Congo lived up to the reputation of a “white man’s graveyard.” Only one out of four missionaries survived their first term of service. Yet Grenfell pleaded for more missionaries: “If more men don’t soon come, the Congo mission will collapse, and the work that has cost so much will be thrown away.” His own family did not escape the clutches of death. Four of his children were buried in the Congo, including his oldest daughter, Pattie, who had come from England as a teenager to help in the work.²⁵

But the disease-ridden jungle was not the only obstacle standing in the way of bringing Christianity to the Congo. Unfriendly tribesmen, known for their cannibalism, were a constant threat. Grenfell recalled as many as twenty harrowing experiences of “running away from cannibals.” “The people are wild and treacherous, for several times after a period of apparently amicable intercourse, without any other cause than their own sheer ‘cussedness,’ as the Yankees would say, they let fly their poisoned arrows at us.”²⁶

Grenfell’s own perspective on the situation was very different from that of others. Sam Lapsley, a young Presbyterian missionary, visiting in 1890, was disillusioned, according to Pagan Kennedy:

But lingering day after day at this remote outpost with the famous Grenfell had unsettled the young missionary. Yes, the station appeared to be comfortable enough, with its machine shop, photography studio, and observatory, its tall palm trees and its steamship, *Peace*, docked in front. But Mr. Grenfell himself was a mess—“very anxious,” Lapsley commented. Grenfell hated the natives, and they hated him. They had even threatened him with murder.... Was this what it meant

to be a missionary? Hiding in your fancy house, terrified that the people you'd pledged to help might shoot you in the head?²⁷

Lapsley's concerns were reinforced when he later encountered refugees from Grenfell's steamship *Peace* who were disoriented and starving. "According to the refugees, they had run off after being starved and then whipped," writes Kennedy. "Without enough rations, the *Peace* had become a floating torture chamber with hungry white men beating even hungrier black men."²⁸

Grenfell, like many missionaries before and since, was in over his head. The dangers were real. That he had intentionally gone to Africa to torture the native people for his own benefit is an accusation that no serious historian would make. But it would be difficult to make the case that he was a true *friend* of Africa. He found himself caught between hostile Africans and the imperialistic power of Belgium's King Leopold, who viewed the Congo as his private domain. Grenfell's private maps and notes, and later his steamboat, were confiscated. His years in the Congo corresponded with the increasing atrocities against Africans—atrocities that were happening all around him. But "he was not willing to go public with what he knew, or even to protect the villages against encroaching State men," writes Kennedy. "It's no wonder some of the Africans wanted him dead."²⁹

Despite these circumstances, Grenfell continued on in his missionary work, supervising the Baptist missions in the Congo for twenty years—with surprising success in later years. In 1902 he wrote: "You will be glad to know that here at Bolobo, shorthanded as we are, we are not without evidence of progress and blessing. People are more willing to hear, and give heed to the message they have so long slighted. In fact, many are professing to have given their hearts to the Lord Jesus, and there are signs of good times coming." Growth did continue, and soon there was a need for a larger chapel. He told of how twenty years before he had been driven off by spears, but now was greeted with the singing of "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name."³⁰

Though Grenfell was prevented by the Belgian government from completing a network of mission stations linking up with stations of the Church Missionary Society from the east, he continued to do pioneer work until his death from African fever in 1906.

After thirty years in Africa, Grenfell left behind a mixed legacy. Although he "had seen firsthand the full range of abuses, including Leopold's state employees buying chained slaves," he was mostly silent. In a letter home, he wrote that he was hesitant to "publicly question the action of the State."³¹ There would be others, however, who would take a stand against this Mafia-like lawlessness. Among them was an African-American missionary whose writings drew the world's attention to this holocaust claiming an estimated ten million lives.

William Sheppard

A missionary overlooked in most mission histories has been William Sheppard, a black American who went to the Congo in 1890 as a missionary sponsored by the Southern Presbyterians. He was part of a broader plan of "recruiting missionaries from the African race," which coincided with the "back-to-Africa" movement engineered primarily by Southern whites. But whites were not the only ones attracted by the prospect of black missionaries in Africa. Returning to the land of their ancestors had long captured the imagination of many African Americans.

Born in Virginia at the end of the Civil War, Sheppard had the rare fortune of acquiring a good education, first at Virginia's Hampton Institute and later in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, at the Colored Theological Seminary. He became a Presbyterian minister and served