

Dr. Livingstone, I Presume? Missionary Icon Turns 200

When journalist Henry Morton Stanley found the world's most famous missionary barely alive at the tiny village of Ujiji on the shores of Lake Tanganyika on Nov. 10, 1871, he gave the English language one of its most famous introductions: "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

As Britain marks David Livingstone's 200th birthday on Tuesday (March 19), Christians are being reintroduced to one of the greatest missionaries and explorers of the 19th century.

That 1871 meeting in the heart of Africa is the stuff of legend.

In 1864, Livingstone – already one of the world's most famous men because of his trek across Africa and the 1855 "discovery" of the Victoria Falls that straddles modern-day Zambia and Zimbabwe – mounted an expedition to discover the source of the Nile River.

As months stretched into years, nothing was heard from the famed explorer.

Rumors swirled in London that he was dead. "Where is Livingstone?" yelled newspaper headlines. The public demanded an answer. By 1871, the hunt for Livingstone had reached fever pitch.

James Gordon Bennett, publisher of the New York Herald, sensed a major scoop and commissioned Stanley to find Livingstone, dead or alive.

After eight months of back-breaking travel, Stanley arrived in Ujiji to learn that Livingstone was alive but far from well.

"I did not know how he would receive me," he later wrote. "So

I did what cowardice and false pride suggested was the best thing—walked deliberately to him, took off my hat and said, ‘Dr. Livingstone, I presume?’”

“Yes,” he said, with a kind smile, lifting his cap slightly.

“Then,” said Stanley, “I said aloud – ‘Thank God, Doctor, I have been permitted to see you.’”

And Livingstone answered: “I feel thankful that I am here to welcome you.”

Born into extreme poverty in Blantyre, Scotland on March 19, 1813, Livingstone started work as a mill hand at the age of 10, working up to 14 hours a day in temperatures that often reached 90 degrees.

Livingstone studied to become a medical doctor, and at age 27 he was accepted as a missionary to Africa. Soon after his arrival in 1840, he set three goals: to explore the continent, convert Africans to Christianity (he managed only one) and help end the slave trade.

The letters he sent back to the London Missionary Society helped fuel the movement to end the slave trade, which he often described as “the world’s open and running sore.” His work sowed the seeds for the modern Anglican Communion, the global outpost of the Church of England scattered across the British Empire.

“Livingstone was an outstanding, distinguished missionary and much more,” said Scottish historian Tom Devine. “He was not the most famous man in Scotland; he was the most famous man in the world.”

The former Anglican bishop of Botswana, Musonda Mwamba, added: “Livingstone identified very much with our people. He fell in love with Africa. He was one of us.”

Livingstone remains popular in his native Scotland and

England, but also in Africa, where leaders are usually quick to tear down any street name or building that reminds them of their British colonial past. The Livingstonia Mission in Malawi was established by missionaries from the Free Church of Scotland in 1875, and remains a Christian learning center.