Visualizing Africa – Complexities of illustrating David Livingstone’s *Missionary Travels*

Leila Koivunen

One of the fields of growing interest in the history of books has been the communication between a book and its audience. For sure, the book’s ability to communicate with people is a complicated and many-sided issue that can be approached from different angles. This time, the perhaps most obvious means of communication, the written words, is put aside while the focus is on visual elements. Maps, diagrams, ornaments, decorations and illustrations have been an essential part of books for centuries. Even if they are often forgotten or ignored in scholarly research, it seems that they have been, at least during certain periods, more important and efficient in spreading the information and communicating with people than the texts. In order to take a look at the communication by visual means and to understand the relationship between the production and the messages or ideas spread, I will outline the process of the nineteenth century book illustration. This will be done by concentrating on one of the most famous African travel accounts in the nineteenth century, David Livingstone’s *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (1857).

As a subject of a little case study, *Missionary Travels* proves interesting in many ways. Firstly, more material relating to its illustration survives than in most other contemporary cases. Besides the manuscript material, for example sketches, written descriptions and correspondence, plenty of research material on the Victorian favourite explorer is available. Another interesting issue in *Missionary Travels* is that the illustrations in it were only partly based on Livingstone’s own sketches so that other means had to be found to complement them. In addition, thanks to the wide collection of correspondence, tracing the role of the publisher John Murray is possible, as well as some of the artists’, in illustrating the book.

---

1 Leila Koivunen is a doctoral student at the University of Turku. leikoi@utu.fi

1 Descriptions of the illustration processes of other contemporary travel accounts can be found in author’s Lic.Phil. thesis, Koivunen 1999.
At that time of the publication of *Missionary Travels* in 1857, the exploration of the interior of Africa was just beginning and the European public was eager to receive information of the previously unknown regions. Livingstone’s travel account – as well as those by other travellers – took part in a long process of image formation. During this process, which still continues, the images and ideas of Africa and its inhabitants gradually took shape in Europe. The impact of the pictures in creating a notion of the ‘newly found’ Africa was important. It was increased by the fact that most of the Europeans had never seen a picture of black people, elephants or other astonishing things. I argue that the legacy of this impact can still be found everywhere in our ‘modern’ ways of representing Africa visually.

The immense popularity and impact of the African travel literature among the European public has often been emphasized – usually without any clear evidence. Nevertheless, in the case of Livingstone’s *Missionary Travels* much of this can be proven to be correct. Based on his first journey across the African continent from 1853 to 1856, it was one of the first real success stories bringing him great amounts of glory and wealth. The first edition of 20,000 copies, which was already large in comparison to many other travel accounts, was soon sold out. It has often been claimed that all together 70,000 English copies of the book were sold but whether this happened within a few months or years remains unclear.² The book was also quickly translated into many European languages.

A contemporary of Livingstone wrote:

> African explorers have overstocked the libraries with journals and travels – no one ever reads or buys them. Dr L’s book had a wonderful sale – the pictures did it – but I have never met with anyone who had read the book through tho’ it is so very interesting.³

This critical comment may tell us something about the manners of reading travel accounts but it also turns our attention to one of the functions of illustration. The idea of the pictures’ ability to attract people to buy a book and thus increase the sale was recognised early by the publishers. Also John

²Different, often poorly documented estimations have been presented by, e.g., Brantlinger 1985: 176, McLynn 1992: 45 and Finkelstein 1996: 230.
Murray, Livingstone’s publisher in London, was ready to pay some £1100 to get a map and forty-five woodcut illustrations into the book. This sum was about ten pro cents of the total expenses.\(^4\)

In the late 1850’s, the production of an illustrated book involved various phases and individuals that all had an effect on the resulting image. When planning to publish a travel account, the traveller usually offered the publisher his sketches, paintings and photographs to be used in illustration. However, none of the pictures could be used as such: in order to be printed they had to be copied by artists and engraved into wooden plates by engravers. These and many other specialists involved in illustration were advised and supervised by the publisher himself or his assistants. In the end, the original picture was turned into a printed image that could be, at best, almost identical with the original. In the worst case, however, the resulting image turned out to be something quite different.

**Sources of illustration**

When Livingstone arrived to England from his African expedition, he had no difficulties in finding a publisher to his book. John Murray was pleased to secure Livingstone as his client but was soon faced with a serious problem. Unlike many other travellers, Livingstone had brought very little visual material to Europe and most of them were rough maps and diagrams. In fact, only one of the forty-five illustrations in the book is based on a sketch made by Livingstone himself. It is a scenery over the Victoria Falls, which he had discovered in 1855 (Fig. 1). The original sketch has not survived but, according to Livingstone himself, it was very rude, exhibiting the columns of vapour only, and a ground plan. Livingstone was very pleased in the way the artist had composed the drawing on the basis of his sketch. Still, he wanted to inform the readers that two things in it were not quite right: more depth was shown than was visible on the spot and the size and the shape of vapour columns were slightly incorrect.\(^5\)

\(^4\)Ledger E 222, John Murray Archives, London.

John Murray had to find other means to complement the lack of original sketches. As a matter of fact, Livingstone himself proved extremely energetic and active in helping Murray in his work. Livingstone sent other material he had collected in Africa to Murray to be used as models for illustration. By copying these, for example various artefacts, African musical instruments, tools, coins, dried plants, seashells and preserved insects, eleven illustrations could be made (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: “Shell, and ornament made of its end.” Livingstone 1857: 300.

One of the illustrations of main importance, a portrait of Livingstone, was composed on the basis of an oil painting. John Murray commissioned it from a portrait painter Henry Phillips just for the
occasion. Although the engraving was almost identical with the image in the oil painting, Livingstone himself was not very satisfied with it (Fig. 3). He wrote to Murray to say that ‘my friends all call out against the portrait by Philips, Vardon says it will do for any one between Captain Cook & Guy Fawkes!’

More pictures were still urgently needed. Livingstone approached other African travellers to find out whether they were willing to lend their African sketchbooks for his purposes. Some accepted. Twelve illustrations in Missionary Travels are based on sketches that other travellers produced in Africa. The subjects of these pictures loosely related to Africa, even to those regions Livingstone had traversed but none of them was more closely connected to him. This situation could, however, be changed. One of the illustrations is known to have been made on the basis of a sketch by Mr. Alfred Ryder, a young Englishman who had visited the Lake Ngami just a few months before Livingstone arrived there. He had died on his way back. Ryder had made a sketch of the lake and although it was left unfinished, Livingstone persuaded Mrs. Ryder to lend it for the illustration of his book. Besides carefully copying the lake scenery, the artist employed by Murray was asked to add a family group into the picture to make it more suitable for Livingstone’s purposes (Fig. 4).

---

6 Phillips’s painting is still owned by John Murray, Publishers, London.
8 Letter from Livingstone to J. J. Freeman, Kolobeng, 24 Aug 1850 quoted in Livingstone’s Missionary Correspondence 1961: 153, note 4. Also see Livingstone’s letter to John Murray, 4 Feb [1857], National Library of Scotland, David Livingstone Papers, Ms 10779/12a.
The rest of the illustrations in *Missionary Travels*, eighteen pictures all together, were made on the basis of Livingstone’s written or verbal descriptions. Most of these were given to Mr. Joseph Wolf, the main artist responsible for the illustration. The cooperation between Livingstone and Wolf was not, however, as fluent as it could have been. Later in his life, Wolf mentioned that Livingstone’s power of vivid verbal description was poor or lacking altogether. Also, Livingstone was said to be so ignorant of art that the subjects he proposed were the most impossible. Wolf recalled:

> I used to go to see Livingstone at Sloane Street; and he would propose subjects; but there was no *handle* to what he said. He had a thing in his mind that couldn’t be illustrated. I couldn’t make pictures of what he thought would be the best subjects. I didn’t feel the inspiration to work with Livingstone...⁹

In spite of these difficulties, Wolf made several sketches, which were used as basis for engravings (e.g. Fig. 7). Livingstone praised his work as ‘spirited’.¹⁰ The subjects Livingstone requested Wolf to draw were mainly related to the African cultures or to Livingstone’s adventures in Africa. In

---

⁹Palmer 1895: 124.
¹⁰Livingstone 1857: vi.
addition to Wolf, Livingstone also described the things he wanted to be illustrated to some other persons. One of them, for instance, was a lady friend who was in a childbed. According to Livingstone, she drew well and he asked her to draw sketches of African hairdressing styles and of a musical instrument (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: “Bashinje chief's mode of wearing the hair.” Livingstone 1857: 365.

The illustrations of other books were also used as models or points of comparison in illustrating Missionary Travels. Two of the pictures in Sir John Gardner Wilkinson’s book on ancient Egyptians (1857) were used as such to illustrate the similarities between the tools Livingstone had seen in Egypt and those that were used in ancient times (Fig. 6). The illustrations in another African traveller, Charles John Andersson’s recent book Lake Ngami (1856) were often referred by Livingstone in his letters to Murray.

To sum up, the illustrations in Missionary Travels formed a mixture of very different pictures. Instead of having any common source or background, they had been gathered up from different directions (see the table below). There seems not to have been any clear and explicit plan or vision of how the book should be illustrated. On the contrary, anything even with a faint connection to Africa or Livingstone seemed to be accepted.

Sources of pictures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Livingstone’s own sketch</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants, objects etc. brought by Livingstone</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livingstone’s description</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrait of Livingstone</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sketches by other African travellers etc.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations from other books</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Livingstone’s vision
Although the publisher did not seem to have any clear plan for the illustration, Livingstone himself was very concerned about the pictures. He demanded to see all the proofs taken from the plates before the actual printing. He also wanted some of the pictures to be shown to other African travellers so that they could tell whether the pictures looked right.\footnote{Letters from David Livingstone to John Murray, 57 Sloane Street, 28 April 1857; Liverpool, 13 October 1857. John Murray Archives, London.} The correspondence between Livingstone and Murray reveal that although the plate had already been finished by engravers, Livingstone usually wanted some details in it to be changed. In a letter to Murray, he commented an image of a reception by Shinte, an African ruler, as follows:

The reception at Shinte ... is very poor. I have made some notes for the artist.\footnote{Letter from David Livingstone to John Murray, Sloane St, 22 May 1857. John Murray Archives, London.}

These notes were written into the proof of engraving, which has, luckily, survived. In it, Livingstone writes:

... could the artist not make the shaves of arrows on the boys shoulders as a soldier carries his musket & not on their backs. Many more rings on the legs & arms of Shinte would be an improvement. Plenty of beads round the necks of women.\footnote{A framed proof engraving, John Murray Archives, London.}

This proof was then sent back to Murray, who wrote his instructions to Mr. JW Whymper, the engraver, to the same paper:

...please place more rings on the chiefs arm & legs - up to the knees & elbow.

In the final image, we can see, at least some of the instructions have been followed (Fig. 7).

Slight corrections like these could be easily made by the engraver but it seems that sometimes Livingstone proposed bigger changes. A famous example is an image where a huge lion is attacking Livingstone. Livingstone was horrified by the size of the lion in the proof and insisted Murray on giving orders for changing it. “It really must hurt this book to make a lion look larger than a
hippopotamus”, he wrote to Murray.\textsuperscript{16} Whether any changes were made is unclear, as the original version of the plate or proofs of it do no survive so that the comparison to the final image is impossible. It seems, however, that in most cases the illustrations were corrected according to Livingstone’s instructions.

Fig. 7: “Reception of the mission by Shinte.” Livingstone 1857: facing page 291.

In many respects, the illustration process of \textit{Missionary Travels} resembles that of editing the texts: in order to produce a printable image, it had to be frequently altered and improved. Many individuals took part in the process, but it seems that Livingstone himself was extraordinary active in deciding what his book should look like. \textit{Missionary Travels} serves an interesting example of the various means and possibilities of constructing illustration out of almost nothing. Although these pictures were probably regarded as first hand documents, most of them were created quite coincidentally in Europe by someone who had never visited Africa. This was something that was not confined to

\footnote{Letter from David Livingstone to John Murray, Sloane St, 22 May 1857. John Murray Archives, London. See the final image, Livingstone 1857: facing page 13.}
Livingstone’s book alone. Rather, this technique was prevailing in illustrating most contemporary African travel accounts. The production of an illustrated book was always an active process with an endless amount of choices, coincidences, uncertainties and communication between different people. The construction of a picture included constant balancing between the possibilities and the limitations.

An important question arises: what do these pictures tell us about Africa? Not much. Yet they are fascinating sources in analysing the development and the spreading of European ideas, images and stereotypes of Africa at that time. Thus, tracing the complexities and coincidences involved in the illustration process provides a means to analyse and to get deeper in understanding the mechanisms of constructing an image of something new, something that had not yet been defined, at least visually.

Bibliography

Manuscript archives
John Murray, London
National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh

Secondary sources


