

Transatlantic Project Retrieves Rare Livingstone Manuscripts

I am terribly knocked up but this is for your own eye only [-] in my second childhood [-] a dreadful old fogie – doubtful if I live to see you again

—David Livingstone to Horace Waller, 5 February 1871

For 140 years, rare manuscripts crucial to our understanding of the last years of the celebrated Victorian explorer and abolitionist David Livingstone in Africa were inaccessible due to their fragility and near-indecipherable script. Now a pioneering transatlantic collaboration among scholars from Birkbeck College (University of London), U.S. imaging scientists, and British and American cultural institutions has begun to make these manuscripts available online, starting with the publication of the revised edition of *Livingstone's Letter from Bambarre* (<http://livingstone.library.ucla.edu/>) by *Livingstone Online* and the UCLA Digital Library Program. The transatlantic collaboration is the first to apply multispectral imaging--a preservation technology previously used to recover erased writing in medieval palimpsests--to restore the text of a nineteenth-century British manuscript. The revised critical edition (2011, orig. 2010) of Livingstone's 1871 letter to his close friend and future editor Horace Waller includes a full transcription of the text, detailed critical notes, an extensive bibliography, an overview of spectral imaging, and a selection of spectral images processed to enhance both text and topographical features.

In February 1871, while searching for the source of the Nile, Livingstone was in ill health, low on supplies, and living in extreme environmental conditions--a virtual prisoner in Bambarre, a village in what is now the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He had also run out of paper and would shortly run out of ink. As a result, when he decided to write to Waller, Livingstone improvised. He used pages torn from a proof copy of the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* to describe his thoughts on the slave trade, the prospects for commerce and Christianity in the African interior, and relationships of the lake and rivers in Central Africa.

Livingstone's expedient might have provided a short-term solution, but today the letter--and similar documents produced by Livingstone at the time--present serious obstacles to the researcher. The letter's pages are yellowed and brittle, and Livingstone's ink has bled through the paper, in effect creating two layers of superimposed text. The improvised ink used for other documents, such as Livingstone's diary, has faded to the point of invisibility. The problem is also compounded by Livingstone's method of writing, which weaves an unsteady course around the margins of the page before it meanders vertically across the horizontal print of the *Proceedings*. With unintended irony, the letter's disorienting text visually captures Livingstone's frail mental and physical state.

The imaging and formal publication of Livingstone's letter to Waller--from the private collection of the distinguished American photographer Peter Beard--concludes the first phase of an 18-month project to produce a critical edition and spectral image database of the diary and letters Livingstone wrote in the year before his famous meeting with Henry Morton Stanley in late 1871. The project is funded by the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities and the British Academy. The diary and letters, except for the letter from Peter Beard's collection, are held at the David Livingstone Centre in Blantyre, Scotland and the National Library of Scotland. The two organisations are collaborating with a team of academics and scientists--known as the David Livingstone Spectral Imaging Project--in order to bring these texts to the light of day. The full results of this project will eventually be made available through a unique partnership between the UCLA Library (<http://www.library.ucla.edu/>) and *Livingstone Online* (<http://www.livingstoneonline.ucl.ac.uk/>), the main digital resource for Livingstone's writings. For further details contact the Project Director, Dr. Adrian S. Wisnicki <[awisnicki\(at\)yahoo.com](mailto:awisnicki(at)yahoo.com)>.