

Report on Monthly Meeting 26 May 2022

We learnt at school that in 1871 Henry Morton Stanley met David Livingstone in central Africa with those immortal words 'Dr Livingstone I presume'. Fran Sandham, the speaker at the May u3a meeting, was not sure that these words had been said but the greeting has become familiar to generations and Stanley never denied saying it. Livingstone and Stanley had very different personalities. Livingstone was in Africa carrying out Christian missionary work and at the time of the meeting, looking for the source of the Nile. He was also an abolitionist. He had not been heard of for several years and it was not clear whether he was still alive. Stanley by contrast was an ambitious, ruthless and at times, brutal individual, with an extremely chequered career. He was determined to find Livingstone and obtain a newspaper scoop. Livingstone's account of the meeting makes no reference to the well-known greeting and Stanley had removed the relevant pages from his diary. However, the words do appear in the New York Herald dated 10th August 1872. The editor, James Gordon Bennett, had sent Stanley to Africa in the first place to look for Livingstone. The greeting may also have become famous because of the perceived humour, given that they were the the only two white people for hundreds of miles. Livingstone was by then very ill and he died in 1873. His followers then carried his mummified body to the west coast, a distance of more than 1000 miles, before it was transported to England, where he was buried in Westminster Abbey. He was one of the most popular British heroes of the late Victorian era. Stanley was a pallbearer at the funeral.

Although different personalities, Livingstone and Stanley did have some things in common. They both came from humble beginnings and had striven hard to achieve what they had done. They were both very conscious of their backgrounds. Stanley was born in Wales but tried to deny it and wanted to be regarded as an American. He did consider Livingstone's work important and following his death, he continued to explore the Congo and Nile systems. He became a significant explorer in his own right and was also involved in the colonisation of Central Africa, particularly helping King Leopold 2nd of Belgium establish the Congo.

The vote of thanks was given by Tim Meacham. The next meeting is on Thursday 23rd June when Kim Harding will be speaking on Richard 3rd, including some new research.

Ian Reid