What was Livingstone *really* up to in 1870 and, more broadly, on his final expedition (1865-73)?

Livingstone himself offers a variety of answers, even within the scope of the 1870 Field Diary.

Tracing the western line of drainage of the Nile, he notes, continues his work in identifying the source of the Nile and mapping the hydrography of Central Africa.

It extends his efforts to correct the mistakes of rival explorers while reaffirming the geographical writings of ancient explorers – i.e., of confirming “the sacred oracles” and finding evidence that Moses visited Africa.

Finally, he notes, it represents a key dimension of his desire to turn the benefits of this exploration towards stopping the Central and East African slave trades (1870h:XVIII, 1870d:{18}-{19}, 1870i:LVI-LXI, cf. Jeal 2011:15-17).

The question of Livingstone’s objectives has also occasioned significant debate among scholars.

In an essay written long ago (1973), Roy Bridges offers what remains the most succint and perspicacious of such assessments.

Livingstone, writes Bridges, sought to attack the African “slave trade by means of legitimate trade, treaties and missions,” but he also hoped to return to the “halycon days” of his first expedition to Africa, to “repeat the success” of his celebrated transcontinental journey of 1852-56, and to “crown it with the fulfillment of his ideas” (1973:166-67).

Livingstone found motiviation in “the solution of the Nile problem” being the “one task [he] thought he could succeed in tackling,” from his “intense desire to stand well in the eyes of those influential men who had now become his friends,” and, finally, from believing it his God-given duty to improve Africa through the Nile quest (1973:168-70).