

Letter to Alexander Brownlee

Livingstone, David, 1813-1873

Published by Livingstone Online (livingstoneonline.org)

[0001]

Lattakoo 17th July 1843

My Dear Friend

Your kind & excellent letter reached me some months ago, and I felt it merited prompt acknowledgement . But to answer it has until now been beyond my power. Our Directors expecting at the time we left England that M^rMoffat would soon follow - instructed us to remain at this station, learn the language &c, until,we should the benefit of the local knowledge in choosing a location for a new mission But finding the language by no means as difficult as they imagined I have been during several long periods away from the region of postages acquiring a local knowledge for myself . The different journies I have undertaken into the interior of the country have been long & tedious this is not the region of railways. he heavy lumbering Dutch waggon drawn by oxen or slow paced riding oxen are the only means of locomotion unless we choose our own lower extremeties which are slower still. But with these imperfect conveyances I have gone very far into the interior. I have visited tribes never before seen by Europeans & preached the Gospel beyond every other man's line of things. You perhaps might be interested in something of these savage tribes, everything about them is so degraded & impure the mind cannot dwell on the more prominent features of their character I shall however give you a little & by that you may perhaps be enabled to form some opinion on that on which I shall be silent. The whole of the Bechuana nation is sunk into a state of the lowest degradation. It would be difficult to point to their inferiors in the world. Human nature can go no lower than in their case it has done. They are in point of courage the veriest cowards and yet if they can kill without danger of being killed they will murder without compunction and then make long incisions in their skins the scars of which are to be standing memorials of their prowess. I have seen men with from 30 to forty of these "scars of honour" (?) They pointed to them

[0002]

in triumph and were not ashamed to own that many of them betokened the murder of helpless women & children

heir sense of native duties will be understood when I tell
 you the wives are the tillers of the ground, the builders of the houses
 and the bearers of all heavy burdens. A man is not
 ashamed to say he is not able to carry a weight & his wife
 is & he will go & call her for that purpose. I speak of
 shame but shame they have none. It is a matter of wonder
 to me that have the word in their language they know so very
 little of the thing. heir knowledge of everything except what
 relates to their eating and drinking, oxen sheep and goats is most
 limited. A few fables contain all the knowledge they derive
 from their forefathers and all the future is darkness. heir
 lives are embittered with fears of being bewitched, nothing
 bad comes but by that agency & evils cannot be averted but
 by that means. hey seem to think that no one would
 ever die were he not killed by some witch, their notions
 of medicine are all based on these suppositions, their
 doctors pretend to suck out of the bodies of the sick
 pieces of bones, skins of animals, ashes, goats dung &c &c .
 These being the articles supposed to be used by witches to
 effect their evil purposes. I was lately with the chief
 of the Battens, his wife had been ill of an affection
 of the heart for more than a month, her medical
 man had extracted many wonderful substances from
 her system by his skill. I proposed giving him an
 emetic previous to his next operation lest he should
 have been decieving himself the things of witchcraft
 coming out of his own body instead of that of the
 patient, but my professional brother did not like
 the proposition. He slipped away unpercieved by me
 & having cupped her artfully separated the fibrine from
 the blood. The white clots of that he now exhibited
 in triumph. I don't know how he managed to wash
 of the red particles from that contistuent of the blood
 but I instantly took a little blood from the arm of
 a bystander, washed the clots with warm water and exhibited

[0003]

the same substance as he had done. During the day he
 found an opportunity of having the village & he availed himself
 of it. He had been deceiving them for more than a month
 perhaps they knew he must have put the things into his
 mouth before before he pretended to suck them out of his patient
 but they are so afraid of being bewitched by these doctors
 no one had dared to mention his suspicions, sometimes
 when I give a child medicine, if he makes any objections
 to drink it the friends pour it on his head or drink
 it themselves. If a man is found guilty of stealing
 they give him an emetic in order to make him vomit
 his [...] propensity. The chief of the Bakwains
 shewed me a root which he sprinkled on his legs
 to make him run fast. And the friends of another

chief were very angry with me because they thought
I had given him medicine to change his heart instead
of that to cure his disease.

In all other points they are equally degraded, their
foolish hearts are darkened. he mind & conscience
are defiled. O how we need the prayers of the church
for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Never did I
feel the necessity for this enlightening power as
now. Nothing nothing that the most exalted intellect
can do will be of any avail without it. Nothing
will penetrate the thick crust of ignorance which
envelopes their souls but the beams of the Sun
of Righteousness, the Redeemer mighty your almighty
to save. I ask you to remember us at the Throne
of Grace. We need the prayers of the Lord's people
But cannot face how much unless you were present
in the dark places of the earth. I might have told you
of the success of the gospel but I prefer giving you
these simple details in order to stir you up to more
ardent prayer on our behalf and that thus ~~thowe~~
may have greater cause to speak of sucesses than we have

[0004]

You will be pleased to hear the Directors have fully approved of our
commencing a new station in the interior. The spot is near
to the place Mr Campbell the traveller faced about to go home. he
iron foundaries he heard of but was not permitted to see belong
to our intended sphere of labour. The reason they refused
him a sight of them was not that which influences the prop-
rietors of our secret works at home. It must have been
the same fear which is now in operation a fear lest by
his presence the iron should be betwitched. Bewitched iron
you will say what is that? It is simply the effect of a too
energetic application of the bellows it becomes burned to a
cinder they then take these out exclaiming behold the effects
of witchcraft. The fact is so as the evidence being before
their clear eyes no one ever disputes it. hey then apply a
double portion of their prophylactic medicines to the ore
& commence the process anew. To prevent the iron
being thus spoiled they use a great many precautions
They won't allow anyone who has had intercourse with
the other sex since the commencement of the period for
working it to approach the furnaces & the men
employed at it always sleep in the enclosures for the
cattle during the whole of the smelting season. Their tools
are as rude as those of old Tubal Cain but my my space
won't allow me to particularize. I can only mention their
tongs are a piece of the bark of a tree folded on itself, the
hammer a stone & the anvil another & yet they manage to make

very neat work with their antediluvian implements
Among these people M^r Edwards who is older than you & I
intend soon to make a beginning. May the Lord smile on
our endeavour to carry his name into that dark region
It is also about 30 miles beyond the spot where the
tyrant Mosilikatze was visited by M^r Moffat I lately walked
over the site of his town & the place where he suffered a
dreadful defeat by the Boers but a very few human bones
were the only remains of all that belonged to the tyrant .

Please present my very kind regards to M^{rs} Brownlee &
all the family. Also to D^r Rankin &c I never hear anything
of the young James I always forget to remember in my letters some
information which may be interesting to you. I shall enclose it on a slip of paper .

[0005]

I need not say I shall be glad to hear from you as often as you can find it
convenient to write. Every thing is interesting that come from home
so you can be at no loss as what to say .

Yours Affectionately

D. Livingstone

[0006]

The information to which I refer is a new way of
treating Prurigo. I shall be glad if you do not need it
but lest you do I send it. It has the recomm-
endation of both British & Foreign medical journals
so I think it must be of value. It is as follows :
Begin by dipping a bit of rag in aromatic vinegar
undiluted, or acetic acid undiluted and touch
the pimples with it it causes smarting
as much as the patient can bear. Next
day apply a solution of the nitrate of silver
& proceed to apply it for two or three days running
then the acetic acid again the affliction is
cured. If you purchase a sixpence worth of
nitrate of silver commonly called lunar caustic
& dissolve it in a wine glass of rain water
it will do without the acid. The latter is however
cheap. Touching the pimples freely with
the lunar caustic is very good. This you
could do by putting a piece of the caustic in the end
of a quill. Mixing the part with a little water &
then touching them with the solid medicine .
drop or two of nitric acid added to the solution
will prevent it being decomposed.
I hope however you have no need of this advice

if so I shall be glad to hear that you have need
only to know this is in the fire

[0007]

Care of Rev^d D^r Phillip Cape Town

M^r M^{rs} Brownlee

23 Orr St. Mile End.

Glasgow