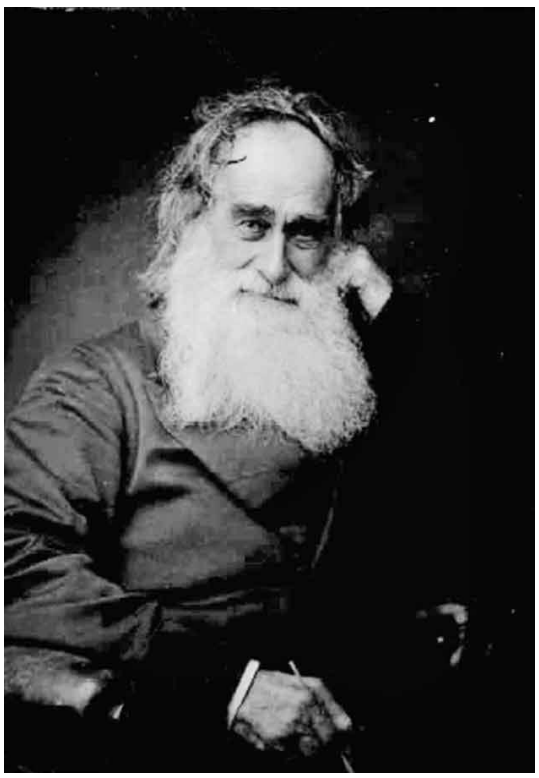
CHRISTIAN RESOURCES

THE LIFE OF ROBERT MOFFAT

(THE FATHER OF MISSIONS IN AFRICA)

(1795 – 1883)



By: Bishop Warwick Cole-Edwardes

Footprints into Africa

Over two hundred years ago, on the shortest day of the year, 21 December 1795, one of Scotland's greatest sons was born at Ormiston, East Lothian. Nearly eighty years later he was to be the first Nonconformist to speak in Westminster Abby since 1662. The occasion was a Day of Intercession for Missions, 30 November 1873, and, unknown to him, at that very time the body of his son-in-law was being carried by loving African hands to the coast for its return to Britain. Five months later Moffat was to be at the Abbey again for the investment of those earthly remains beneath a slab which bore the words "David Livingstone…For thirty years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelize the native races… "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold, them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice". Both father and son-in-law were missionaries of the London Missionary Society. Today it is the memory of the younger man which is the best remembered and yet J. du Plessis could write in his classic History of Christian Missions in South Africa, "Robert Moffat was undeniably the greatest missionary which that Society sent to South Africa – the greatest in natural ability, in patient devotion to duty, and in deep, transparent piety".

It is one of the mysteries of divine providence that while the gospel should have entered parts of North Africa within the apostolic age, it was only in recent centuries that it penetrated the darkness of the centre and the South. The unknown nature of the terrain was undoubtedly part of the explanation, a fact which led Livingstone to contribute more towards the construction of the map of Africa than perhaps any three other explorers who could be named.

Van Riebeck, a Dutch colonist with a desire to see the knowledge of Christ spread, had arrived in Cape Town in 1652. But, apart from the labours of some Moravians, little of a missionary character seems to have been done until early in the nineteenth century. In January 1806 the Cape was violently taken from the Dutch East India Company by the British. An unhappy eye-witness of that event was the twenty-five-year-old Henry Martyn, en route to India. At the Cape, he wrote in his journal for 10 January:

"I had a happy season of prayer. I prayed that the capture of the Cape might be ordered to the advancement of Christ's kingdom; and that England whilst she sent the thunder of her arms to the distant regions of the globe, might not remain proud and ungodly at home; but might show herself great indeed, by sending forth the ministers of her church to diffuse the gospel of peace."

Part of the answer to such prayers surely lies in the subject now before us. The son of poor but godly parents, Robert Moffat left home to make his way in the world at the end of 1813. He was not long settled as a gardener in Cheshire, England, when the milestone came of which he later wrote in these words:

"*I had undergone a great change of heart; and this I believe was produced by the Spirit of God through reading the Bible and the Bible only, for my small stock of books consisted chiefly of works on gardening and botany. Beyond visitors to see the gardens, and the men in daily employ who returned home after their labours of the day, I saw no one. I occupied my leisure in studying the Scriptures, and when opportunities offered I did not fail to try and convince others of the necessity of repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I thought I had only to tell them what Christ had done for them and what was required of them to be saved. I wondered they could not see what I saw, and feel what I felt, explaining to them the great truths of the everlasting gospel."*

Henceforth Moffat's life revolved round these two words, "Bible" and "Gospel". September 13, 1816, found him standing beside other future missionaries at a funeral service in Surrey Chapel, London. One of the others was John Williams, the future martyr of Erromanga. It had been proposed that Williams and Moffat should go together to the South Pacific but this was overruled by the counsel of an elder statesman of the London Missionary Society, Alexander Waugh (1754-1827) who judged "thae twa lads ower young to gang tegither".

Moffat respected the decision and refers to Waugh as “that worthy Scotsman, like another John Knox”. So it was that Moffat, with four companions, sailed for South Africa and arrived at the Cape on 13 January 1817. He was not to see England again until the summer of 1839.

Young or not, Moffat soon found himself the only European in the kraal of Afrikaner, a chief in Namaqualand. “For the best part of the year,” his son later wrote, “he did not see the face of a fellow countryman, or hear a word in his mother tongue”. A letter which he wrote home on 15 December 1818, tells us a little of how he felt the isolation. “I long to hear from you. I have now been nearly 2 years in Africa, and only received one letter from you… Write me fully, and forget me not in your approaches to the throne of grace. “The same letter carried the news that his expectation that his Cheshire sweetheart, Mary Smith, might join him had failed: “her last two letters have been completely effectual in blasting my hope. She has most reluctantly renounced the idea of ever going abroad, her father determining never to allow her. “Next to Moffat’s conversion, undoubtedly the most important event in his life was James Smith’s change of mind which led to Mary arriving in Cape Town before the end of 1819. In all the years ahead no one was to exemplify more than Mary Moffat of her husband’s words, “A good missionary wife can be as useful as her husband in the Lord’s vineyard. “Without her, Moffat knew he would have been “like a boat with one oar”.

Many hard years lay ahead. Moffat was now designated to another area, the Batlaping people among the Bechwanas, some 800 miles north from the Cape and eight weeks travel by ox wagon. In that region a base was eventually established at Kuruman, close to the Kalahari Desert. Discouragements abounded. Initial threats From the Batlaping subsided into constant thieving, allied with stony indifference to anything spiritual, “the moment a word was said about divine things their ears seemed to become deaf at once”. Still more disturbing was the poor testimony of the professing Christian Hottentot, employed by the mission from other parts, to aid as interpreters – they proved “too weak in the faith to meet the demands which were made upon their community, surrounded as they were by a heathen and corrupt people. By the exercise of discipline, the little Christian community was reduced to a “mere fraction” and so it remained as one year followed another. There were days when Moffat and his sole mission colleague and fellow Scot, Robert Hamilton, wondered if they were in the right path. But Mary Moffat permitted no such doubts. Pointing to the promises of God, she would say, “We may not live to see it, but the awakening will come as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow”. It was Mary, at this time, who, when asked by a friend in England what they needed, replied. “Send us a communion service; we will want it some day”. A cup and plates for that purpose eventually arrived in 1829 and, remarkably, just twenty-four hours before the day when Batlaping converts were to sit down with the missionaries at the Lord’s Table for the first time. A new era had dawned at Kuruman. In the word of John Moffat:

“At length in 1829, a marvelous awakening began. It came; as such things do come, without any human or visible existing cause. There was a wave of tumultuous and simultaneous enthusiasm. The two brethren who witnessed it were sober-minded and hard-headed Scotchman, by disposition not willing to lend themselves to any movement which might seem to have the taint of mere sensationalism. They had been schooled to adversity, and they could but dread some new device of the devil to obstruct their path; but it was not long before they were forced to admit that there was something that could not be gainsaid. In a few months the whole aspect of the mission had changed. The meeting house was crowded before the service had begun. Heathen songs and dancing had ceased, and everywhere were to be heard the songs of Zion and the outpouring of impassioned prayers. The missionaries were beset even in their own houses by those who were seeking fuller instruction in things which had become to them all at once of paramount importance. The moral condition of the community rapidly improved, and the dirt and indecency of heathen costume were exchanged for cleanliness and European habits of clothing, as far as the supply could be met by the visit of occasional traders.”

From this time Kuruman was to be among the Bechwanas what Serampore was in Bengal, a centre for Bible translation, a printing depot (the press hauled overland from the Cape), a strong church and a spring-board for further advances far into Africa, Mary Moffat wrote home in 1836: “The translating and printing are going on. The Scripture lessons which were in hand are finished, a volume of 443 pages. The Assembly’s Catechism (ie. the Shorter Catechism) is also in print and in use; readers are increasing in every direction”.

Moffat’s work was as varied as his gifts. At Kuruman he might be found not only in the pulpit but supervising agriculture and drainage, putting roofs on buildings, corresponding with native teachers, visiting out-stations, giving medical advice, extracting teeth, welcoming visitors, and all the while pressing on with Bible translation, with the New Testament and Psalms at last complete in 1840. As a translator Moffat belonged to the same noble succession as Tyndale and Carey. In some ways his translation work was more difficult than theirs, for before any translation could start, he had to be the first to reduce the language of the Bechwanas into written form. The difficulty was so great that he felt as if the task had “shattered his brain”. But this was by no means all. At heart he was ever the pioneer and was not infrequently long distances away from his beloved Mary, befriending those who were to hear the gospel for the first time. Even when turned sixty he led a party more than a thousand miles into the interior and “seemed”, says his son, to have the strength of three men, and was here, there, and everywhere in turn”. Yet this was the man who was conscious.

> *that we want in zeal. The work of conversion, or endeavours to convert sinners, is not so much the primary object of our souls as it ought to be. If I speak for myself I must say that I do not feel that sympathy for the awful condition of my fellow men which their state ought to excite in every Christian bosom. When I look at the Man of Sorrows, His toilsome days and midnight prayers, and the burning zeal of the first ministers of the gospel, I feel as if I had not the same mind or spirit.*

To understand the real nature of Moffat’s labours the condition of South Africa at that time must also be remembered. Bitter disharmony and bloodshed in that region do not only belong to more recent times. The tragedy of contemporary strife in the former Yugoslavia is only a pale resemblance of what Africa endured as tribes and nations were successively threatened and devoured by one another. Chaka, the Zulu chief, had the reputation of being responsible for the death of two million fellow Africans. The Cape’s original white settlers, the Boers felt pressured by the British to move further inland where they, in turn, intimidated and sometimes decimated aborigines. Zulus, moving west from Natal, threatened and slew the Bapedi and Basuto, while the terrible Matabele fell on both Bapedi and Bechwanas. Some tribes utterly disappeared. Lands were abandoned and emigrations commonplace as fugitives sought new homes. In the midst of so much danger and confusion, Moffat was one of the very few who could move almost freely among warring factions. To a marked degree he possessed the gift of winning the friendship of the most unlikely persons. He loved and trusted the blacks in a manner they had never known before and this often gave him an entrance where others would have feared to go. Take, for example, his speaking with Makaba, the powerful chief of the Bangwaketsi, though Moffat reported the following story in order to illustrate a quite different lesson”

> *In the course of my remarks, the ear of the monarch caught the startling sound of a resurrection. “What!” he exclaimed with astonishment, “what are these words about? The dead, the dead, arise!”. “Yes”, was my reply, “all the dead shall arise. ‘Will my father arise? ‘Yes’, I answered, ‘your father will arise’. ‘Will all the slain in battle arise?” ‘Yes’, “And will all that have been killed and devoured by lions, tigers, hyenas, and crocodiles, again revive”. “Yes, and come to judgment. “And will those whose bodies have been left to waste and wither on the desert plains, and scattered to the winds, again arise?” he asked, with a kind of triumph, as if he had now fixed me. “Yes”, I replied, not one will be left behind”. This I repeated with increased*

emphasis. After looking at me for a few moments, he turned to his people, to whom he spake with stentorian voice: "Hark, ye wise men, whosoever is among you, the wisest of past generation, did ever your ears hear such strange and unheard of news?" And addressing himself to one, whose countenance and attire showed that he had seen many years, and was a person of no common order. "Have you ever heard such strange news as this? "No, was the sage's answer, "Surely he must have lived long before the period when we were born".

Makeba, then turning and addressing himself to me, and laying his hand on my breast, said, "Father, I love you much. Your visit and your presence have made my heart white like milk. The words of your mouth are sweet as honey, but the words of a resurrection are too great to be heard. I do not wish to hear again about the dead rising! The dead cannot arise. The dead must not arise! "Why", I enquired, can so great a man refuse knowledge, and turn away from wisdom? Tell me my friend, why I must not add to words and speak of a resurrection? Raising and uncovering his arm, which had been strong in battle, and shaking his hand as if quivering a spear, he replied, "I have slain my thousands, and shall they arise?.

The lesson Moffat drew from this incident was that of the power of divine revelation upon an accusing conscience. But what an extraordinary scene it must have been – an unarmed man standing alone among a warlike tribe and addressing the chief, who had carried out "thousands of deeds of rapine and murder," as "My Friend".

Still more surprising than this was Moffat's almost lifelong bond with Mosilikatse, chief among the Matabele and one-time lieutenant to the great Chaka. Moving into the uplands of what is now the Transvaal, Mosilikatse behaved "like a wolf among a flock of sheep" and "deluged the Bakwena country with blood". Hearing news of the white men at Kuruman he proceeded to send two of his most trusted servants to examine and report on the situation. They arrived not long after the great change at the mission station had begun in 1829 and were amazed at what they saw – the worship and singing, the gardens and houses, the strange irrigation system and much else. Their mission accomplished, Moffat feared for their safety if they returned alone through country justifiably hostile to the Matabele and he determined to accompany and shield them through the most dangerous part of their journey. This done, he was about to run round for the return to Kuruman when Mosilikatse's servants informed him that their master would be ready to kill them if they allowed him to go back after coming so far. So, it came about, on one of the most memorable days of Moffat's life, that he entered the camp of the dreaded Mosilikatse, where the eyes of more than a thousand warriors "in full dress" watched him arrive in profound silence. Moffat stayed there eight days and later reported, "I have never before come into contact with such savage and degraded minds". But the care which he had shown for the chief's two servants had won a way to the tyrant's heart: What you did to them you did to me, he told Moffat, "I am still wondering at the love of a stranger who never saw me". Thereafter Mosilikatse, though never as far as we know converted, was his friend.

Many years later, after this Matabele chief had been forced to take his tribe far north, he pleaded for a visit from Moffat and the veteran missionary took the vast journey with the hope of establishing a mission there. By that date (1859) Mosilikatse was, with good reason, deeply suspicious of white people. Experience in the south had shown that the opening of the country for whites to settle was the beginning of the end. Offered missionaries by the London Missionary Society, Mosilikatse replied that Moffat himself must come. These new men, I do not know them. All men are not alike. Arriving in Matabele country, Moffat was welcomed and the other missionaries who were to remain, including the Moffat's own son, John were also gradually trusted and befriended by the heathen chief. One of the finest passages in John Moffat's *Life* of his father is the description of the last Sunday which his father spent in Mosilikatse's kraal (17 June 1860) and of the service which "closed a long series of such in which the friend of Mosilikatse had striven to pierce the dense darkness of soul which covered him and his people".

There was still another ten years of work ahead of Robert and Mary Moffat at Kuruman, although they were conscious that the time was short. “It will soon be said of us, “Mary wrote to her far-off brother, “They are gone”. Well, the grand thing is to be found prepared. If I had not felt it before, I should do so now, that all earthly things are not in vain and trifling, except we are enabled by Divine grace to use them to His glory. My strength is gone, and I begin to feel myself of so little use in the world that my affections are more and more loosened from it, and I feel that I could very willingly leave it for I know in whom I have believed.

The years still ahead brought new cares and anxieties. In 1862 their eldest son, Robert, who was a valuable help to the mission station as a trader, died suddenly. Only weeks after this they heard the news that their daughter Mary, who had been married to Livingstone at Kuruman some eighteen years earlier, had succumbed to Malaria on the fever-stricken Zambezi. Other deaths followed. They included that of their other missionary son-in-law, Jean Fredoux, who was blown up while trying to settle a dispute, leaving seven orphan children; and then of Mrs. Brown, “a woman of exceptional accomplishments”, who with her husband had not long arrived to help at Kuruman. Amidst these events, Moffat, as he returned one night from church in the dark, was savagely attacked by a black with a knob Kerrie. Such a thing had never happened before in Kuruman where the Moffats “maintained an almost absolute rule, though welding no other scepter than that of gratitude and affection. “The attacker proved to be a lunatic and while Moffat’s iron frame” saved him from such consequences as others might have suffered, the sorrow that such a thing could happen lingered with him.

Although Kuruman was now far more home than Britain could ever be, the conclusion was slowly reached that their work there was done. Moffat took his last service on 20 March 1870. Even a quarter-of-a century later, John Moffat could write “Many years must pass before that service can be forgotten in Bechwanaland”. Then there was the one last wagon trek to the Cape before they sailed in June 1870, more than fifty-four years after Moffat first arrival. He had lived to see large parts of southern Africa occupied by an army, not merely of missionaries, but of missionary societies; while his own Bechwanaland is through its length and breadth feeling the influences of his work and that of his companions, a work which had extended its operations to the very banks of the Zambezi River.

Mary Moffat had scarce time to adjust to England, praying to the last, before she was gone to a brighter world. At the end, “her mind occasionally wandered, but it was always in the right direction: the Redeemer’s reign among the heathen, the printing of the scriptures, Kuruman and the Bechwanas. “Her husband’s first words to others on her death were, “For fifty-three years I have had to pray for me. “He was to remain busy, serving his “two masters”, The London Missionary Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society and travelling to speak for them all over the country. Other Christian agencies and churches received his willing help and he delighted to welcome visitors from overseas. Scotland was of course revisited several occasions although he chose to make his home at Park Cottage in the beautiful grounds of Samuel Morley’s home at Leigh in Kent. He reached this age of eighty in 1875. In July 1883 we find him writing, “some seem to suppose that I do not get old like other folks, as applications still come in for services at public meetings. My platform and public days are over, and I have had a tolerable share”. One month later he was where

Our best friends and kindred dwell,
And Christ our Saviour reigns

John Moffat gives a moving portrait of his father and one sentence seems to summarise it all. “He was just full of his Saviour’s love and mercy all through his life”. But a further comment is too important to miss:

Another life-long impression was that produced by his reverence for holy things. No man relished a joke more than he – there was a good deal of fun hidden away under that long

beard; but woe to the man who thought to approach the ark of God in a jesting spirit. The Word of the Lord was too real and too great for triviality. Even when I was alone with him on the journeys spoken of, no meal was commended without a reverent doffing of the Scotch bonnet, his usual head-dress in those days, and the solemn blessing; our morning and evening worship were never missed or hurried.

Moffat's life is full of general importance for the church at the present time. I will mention only two. With the decay of moral standards in the English-speaking world Moffat's work is a clear reminder of the only real source for true moral change in any community. In his day, as in our own, there were those so concerned for the moral improvement of society that they seemed to think that Christians should treat it as the primary concern. They put "civilization" first. On this point Moffat wrote:

Much has been said about civilizing savages before attempting to evangelise them. This is a theory which has obtained extensive prevalence among the wise men of this world, but we have never seen a practical demonstration of its truth. We ourselves are convinced that evangelization must precede civilization. It is very easy in a country of high refinement to speculate on what might be done among rude and savage men, but the Christian missionary; the only experimentalist, has invariably found that to make the fruit good the tree must be made good. Nothing less than the power of Divine grace can reform the hearts of savages, after which the mind is susceptible of those instructions which teach them to adorn the gospel they profess.

A second lesson which Moffat's life brings to us has to do with the qualification necessary in all workers for Christ. I mention only one and it arises more from his example than from any actual statement. He gave a high place to the exercise of sung praise – not simply in congregational song, but wherever he was the praise of God marked all his days. Once wagons stopped for rest at night, says his son, all would assemble at one fire and a hymn would be sung. We find the words of hymns interspersed in his letters, on the lips of dying Bechwana Christians, and song was with him to the last. Speaking of a Sunday shortly before his death, John Moffat wrote:

> *In the evening he enjoyed the singing of a few hymns, after our usual stroll around the garden. He could not join in the singing, but chose the hymns –*
> *"The sands of times are sinking", as it is in the Presbyterian Hymnal, and he seemed to enjoy it peculiarly; also, "Come, Thou Fount of every blessing, "How Sweet the name of Jesus sounds". "At even when the sun was set" and "Nearer, my God, to Thee:" He was very fond of hymns, and at home, even when quite well, it was his habit when most of the household had gone to bed, and he smoked his pipe before going himself, to repeat hymn after hymn.*

It is earnestly to be hoped that Christians around the world will not let the month of December 1995 pass without remembering Robert and Mary Moffat. And we can remember them without wanting to pray afresh for the land they loved. For as W.G. Blaikie has said, if we were to re-adopt the old Roman custom of giving heroes the names of countries, then the pioneer, preacher and Bible translator of Kuruman, should be called "Robert Moffat Africanus" – ***The Father of Missions to Africa.***