



*Robert Moffat waving farewell to London, January 30, 1843*

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# ROBERT MOFFAT: PIONEER IN AFRICA

1817-1870

by  
CECIL NORTHCOTT



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357 pp

MOFFAT



ferocious than some tribes; but this is saying little in commendation of those who could with impunity rob, murder, lie, and exchange wives. No matter how disgraceful the action might be, or what deceit, prevarication, duplicity, and oaths, were required to support it, success made them perfectly happy in a practice in which most were adepts.<sup>22</sup>

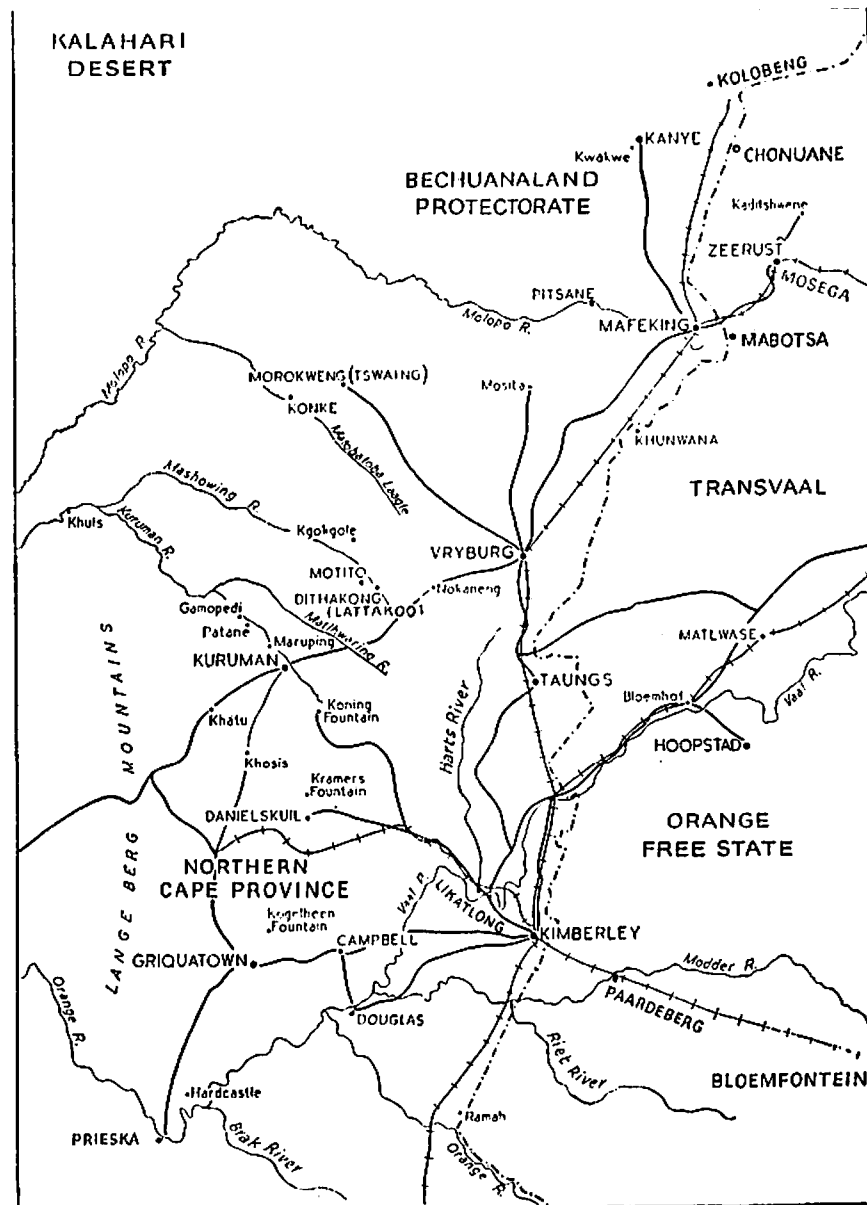
Behind Moffat amongst the Bechuana rose the massive edifice of evangelical Britain, with its concern about the state of the individual soul, the recognition of sin, and the need for repentance and conversion. He transposed the familiar techniques of one religious climate into another, and expected the same kind of responses; and, while frequently depressed at the barrenness of the soil, and the absence of any harvest worth calling a harvest, those very metaphors helped to sustain him. Seedtime and harvest were within the divine ordering and were not to be presumed or anticipated. Moffat would have been frustrated by lightning success. He was made for the long haul. 'Often have we met together to read the word of God, that never-failing source of comfort, and, contented with being only the pioneers, have poured out our souls in prayer for the perishing heathen around. There were seasons when, by faith in the sure word of promise, we could look beyond the "gloomy hills of darkness" and rejoice in the full assurance of hope in the approaching latter-day glory'. Tucked away in the forechest of his wagon were those 587 quarto pages in his own copper-plate script of the evangelical theology of Messrs. Bogue and Roby—his mentors in the faith of which the Bechuana got full benefit, and Moffat the satisfaction of fulfilling his calling.

3

His first period on the Kuruman River at New Lattakoo was very short. It lasted only from March to July 1820, for the authorities in Capetown were still nervous about his presence beyond the colonial frontier and the desirability of reinforcing the missions with new recruits.<sup>23</sup> Philip, in Capetown, failed to persuade the government on Moffat's behalf, and the young couple were forced to go back to Griqua Town, but not before a gleam of unexpected thanksgiving shone from out of the west. His old friend Afrikaner came riding

<sup>22</sup> *Labours* 254

<sup>23</sup> R.M. to R.M. Senr. 18.9.20 NA.



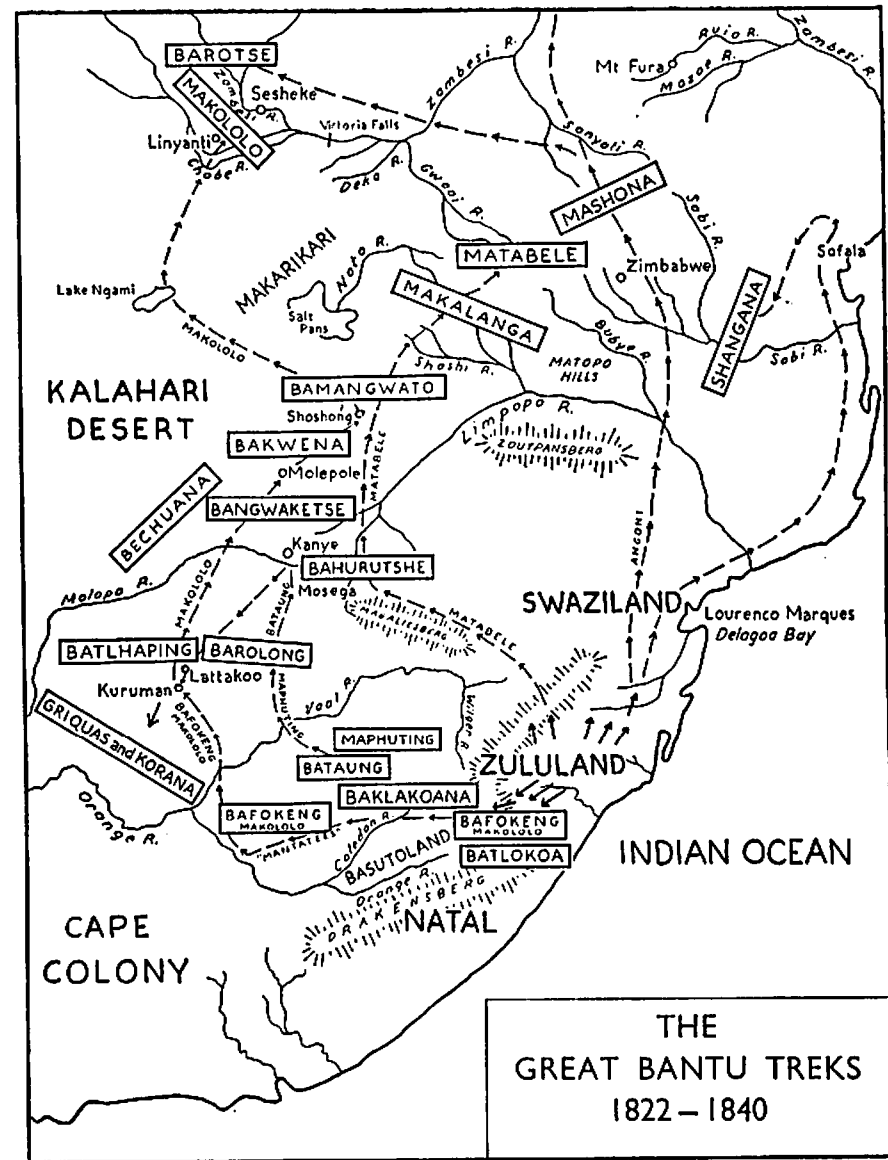
KURUMAN AND SURROUNDING AREA

Shaka and his rival Zwide. In numbers, the Hlubi could muster over 8,000 people, to the Ngwane 4,000 and the Shaka Zulu 2,000—but numbers were unavailing in face of the skilled battering the Hlubi received from Matiwane, which sent them off across the Drakensberg where some of them froze to death in the passes. After crossing the mountain barrier, this fugitive Hlubi horde found itself in the land of the Batlokoa, probably in the upper Wilge Valley region of the modern Harrismith, with old scores to pay off against the Batlokoa, then ruled by their formidable woman ruler, Mantatisi.

This warrior widow of the Batlokoa was evidently a terrifying person with a record of battle and subterfuge and has given her name of 'Mantatees' to this section of tribal eruption of the Sotho people as they clashed and scattered on the veld. Beaten in the north of the Free State by the invading Hlubi (later known to the Boer Trekkers as the Fingo), Mantatisi retreated southwards, where she met the Bafokeng (later known as the Makololo) and drove them northwards. In the south of the Free State, round the mountain of Kurutlele, between the Vet and the Sand Rivers, she defeated more Bafokeng and scattered them across the Vaal to join the other fugitives as they roamed north-westwards.<sup>7</sup>

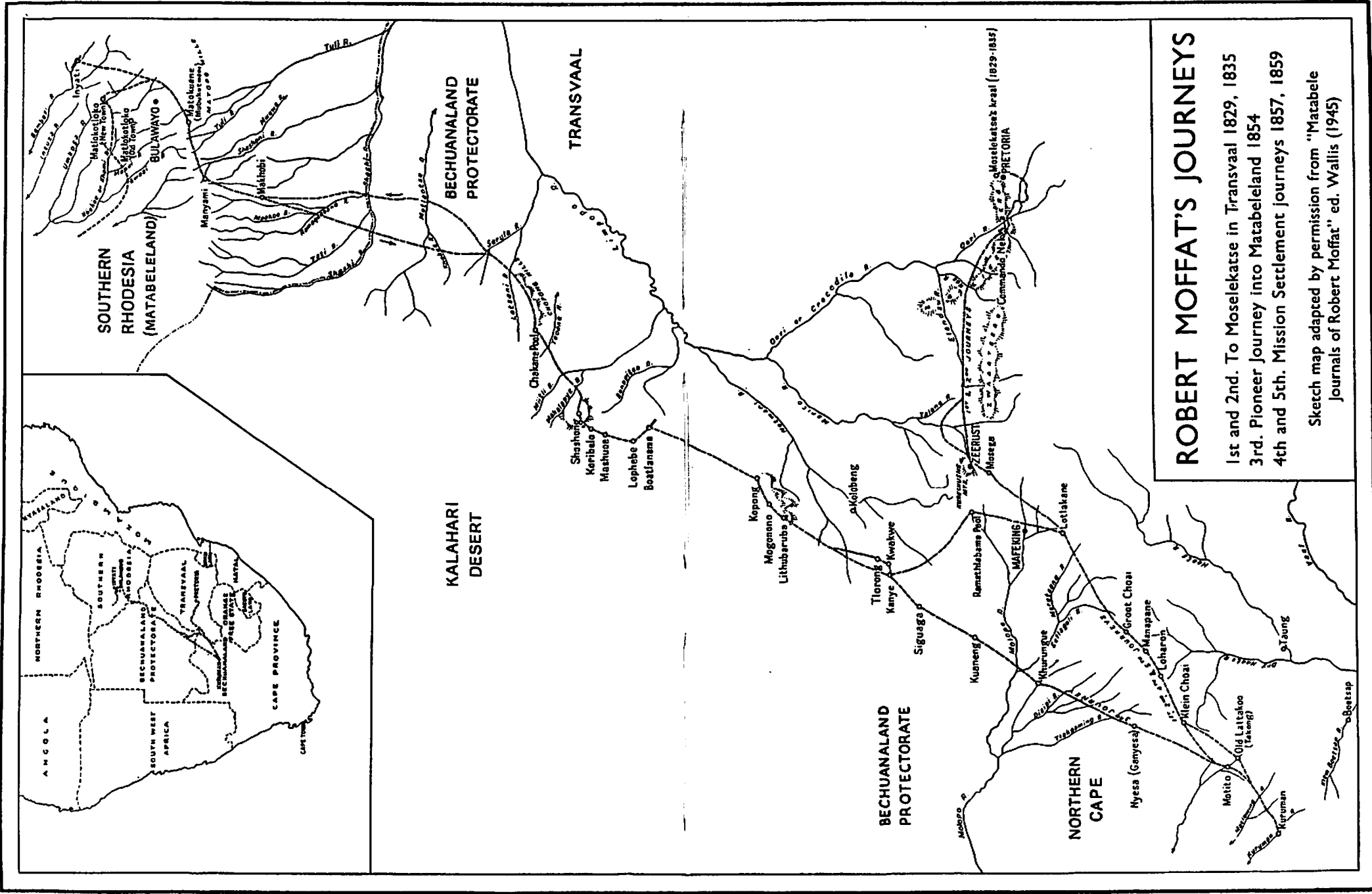
No wonder that rumours of her valour and campaigning skill spread across the veld. She was supposed to nourish her warriors at her own breast, and to be at the head of an invincible host laying all the world waste in its march.<sup>8</sup> Although the name 'Mantatees' smote terror over the veld, as Moffat records, Mantatisi and her people never crossed the Vaal and were certainly not present at the battle of Lattakoo, where the tribal hordes broke against Moffat's generalship and the rifles of the Griquas.

The name 'Mantatees' was used indiscriminately for all sorts of marauding groups coming from the east during this period of *mfecane*, even being used by some to include the Matabele—then emerging on their own independent trek out of Zululand.<sup>9</sup>



By expelling the Bafokeng (Makololo) across the Vaal by 1822, Mantatisi had also prompted another of the great treks of the Bantu

<sup>7</sup> Bryant, 151ff. <sup>8</sup> How, 70, and Smith GL n. 371. <sup>9</sup> Smith GL n. 371.



**ROBERT MOFFAT'S JOURNEYS**

1st and 2nd. To Moselekatse in Transvaal 1829, 1835  
 3rd. Pioneer Journey into Matabeleland 1854  
 4th and 5th. Mission Settlement journeys 1857, 1859

Sketch map adapted by permission from "Matabele Journals of Robert Moffat" ed. Wallis (1945)

Another reliable Matabele, Siatsha, whose father came as a youth with Moselekatse into Matabeleland, is even more explicit:

Mzilikazi and his people moved on and eventually met Mr. Moffat . . . advised Mzilikazi to go east until he came to a large open space with a long hill in the centre . . . a suitable home for the Matabele. Acting on his advice Mzilikazi moved east until he came to the junction of the Gwaai and the Bembezi rivers . . . he then turned south-east up the Bembezi River and eventually found the two hills described by Mr. Moffat and now known as 'Ntaba ye Zinduna' and Maxim Hill . . .<sup>4</sup>

This tradition is hard to reconcile with the fact that Moffat's last personal contact with the Matabele was in the Transvaal in 1835, and that he himself knew nothing further of them until the journey of 1854. But it may have been that amongst his admonitions to Moselekatse in 1835 Moffat pointed to the north as a way of escape from the pressure of the Zulus and the Boers, and that a possible route lay through the Bechuana country; for it was this route which Moselekatse took after his defeat, following roughly in the footsteps of the Makololo who had gone this way in 1823, after the battle of the 'Mantatees', and eventually reaching the shapely hill of the Intabas Induna near Bulawayo in 1838, which is normally considered to be the foundation date of the Matabele nation.<sup>5</sup>

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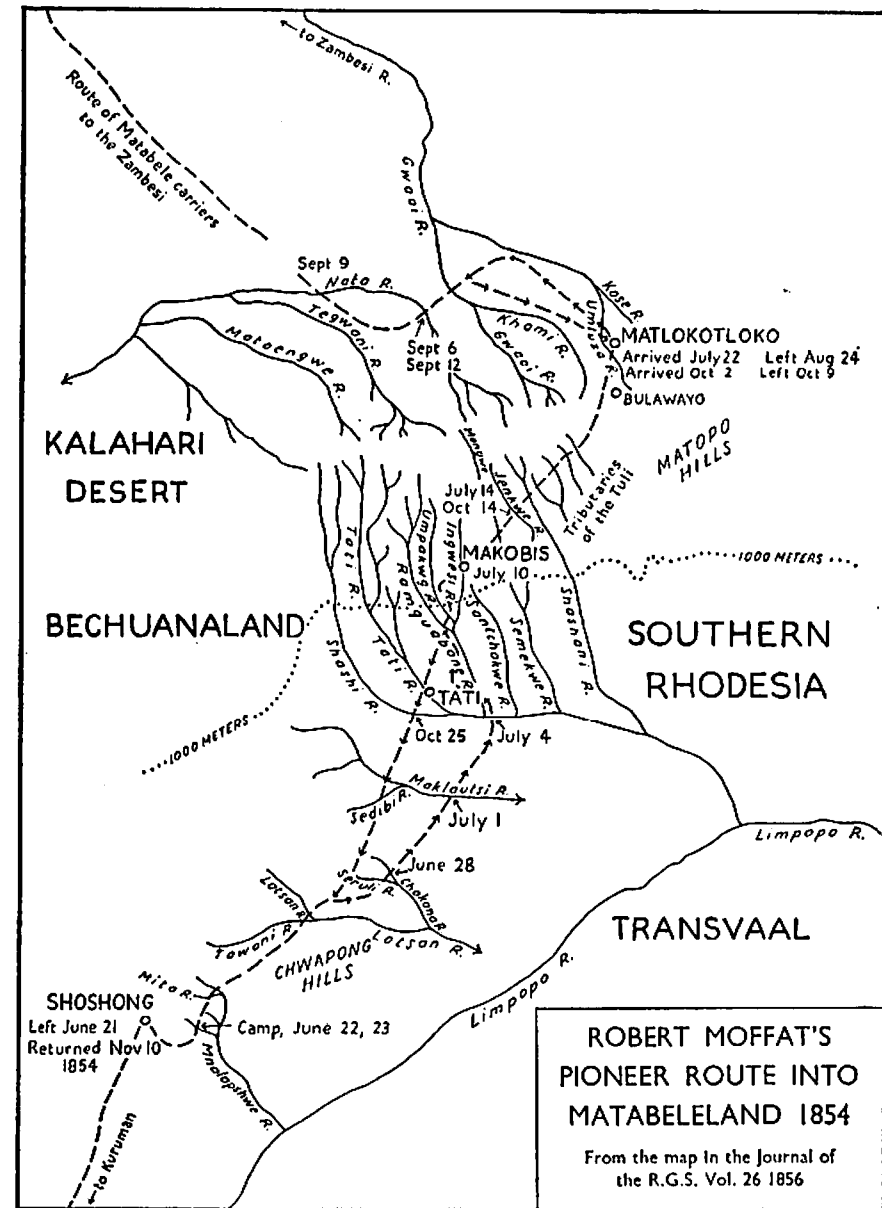
In his despotic isolation Moselekatse had not forgotten that his seclusion was pierced in 1847 by the brilliant commando of his old Boer enemy, Andries Hendrik Potgieter, who had been the prime instrument in ousting him from the Transvaal. This determined, 'obstinate, conservative, old patriarch' (he was only 55!),<sup>6</sup> in his blue blouse, short coat, moleskin trousers and wide-brimmed straw hat, was persistently trek-minded, seeing in it a ready answer to the Boers' immediate domestic problems as well as the fulfilment of a land dream which might give the northern farmers access to the sea.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the reasons for it, this Boer thrust into Southern

<sup>4</sup> *Nada* (Pitout) 1953 57ff.; also (Jackson) 1927 21 and *Nada* (E.H.B.) 1935 14ff. (Carbutt) 1948 38ff. & (Sigola) 1959 87ff.; PRSA (Posselt) 1919 18ff.; R.M. to D.L. 29.10.57; D. L. Bruce Coll.

<sup>5</sup> Hughes, *Ndebele*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Bulpin, *Lost Trails in Transvaal*, 91.

<sup>7</sup> Tredgold, *Matopos*, 62.



wanted Livingstone himself.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, he ardently desired someone associated with Moffat as an insurance against his most powerful enemies, the Matabele. The Makololo 'undoubtedly liked and respected Livingstone for himself, but it was as Moffat's son-in-law that they wanted him permanently among them. They were not interested at all in the other missionaries who came to settle among them'.<sup>9</sup> It may well have been Sekeletu's sharp disappointment that no one with a Moffat-Livingstone connection came with the new missionaries that led to Sekeletu's abominable behaviour towards them, which contrasted so sharply with his polite manners to Livingstone, who, according to Gluckman's view, broke faith with the Makololo by not going himself to lead them, as they had hoped, into the drier uplands across the Zambesi.<sup>10</sup>

Did Livingstone also break faith with the mission itself in not meeting the party at Linyanti? Was there any undertaking to do so? On this the Livingstone historians are divided. Lovett, the L.M.S. historian, says there was an arrangement,<sup>11</sup> but offers no evidence; while Blaikie says 'No',<sup>12</sup> and Campbell quotes Livingstone's own sentence in a letter to Tidman after visiting the scene of the disaster in August, 1860: 'I was too late to render the aid which I had fondly hoped to afford.'<sup>13</sup> Seaver is of the opinion that no definite promise was made but that it was Livingstone's purpose to arrive at Linyanti about the same time as the mission party,<sup>14</sup> and undoubtedly Helmore, as leader, was anxious to be there in time to meet the doctor and be introduced by him to the Makololo.<sup>15</sup> In the pathetic scrap of a journal which Isabella Price kept of the ill-fated venture, she records that 'nothing has been heard here of Livingstone' and suggests that consequently 'our course is rather obscure'.<sup>16</sup>

2

With a scratch team of oxen, Moffat left Kuruman on January 5, 1861, on his single-handed venture. The disaster must have lain

<sup>8</sup> *Zambesi Journal* A3 20.3.59 NA.

<sup>9</sup> *Zambesi Narrative*, 300; and Gluckman, *Listener*, 22.9.55.

<sup>10</sup> *Travels* 431.

<sup>11</sup> Lovett i 619.

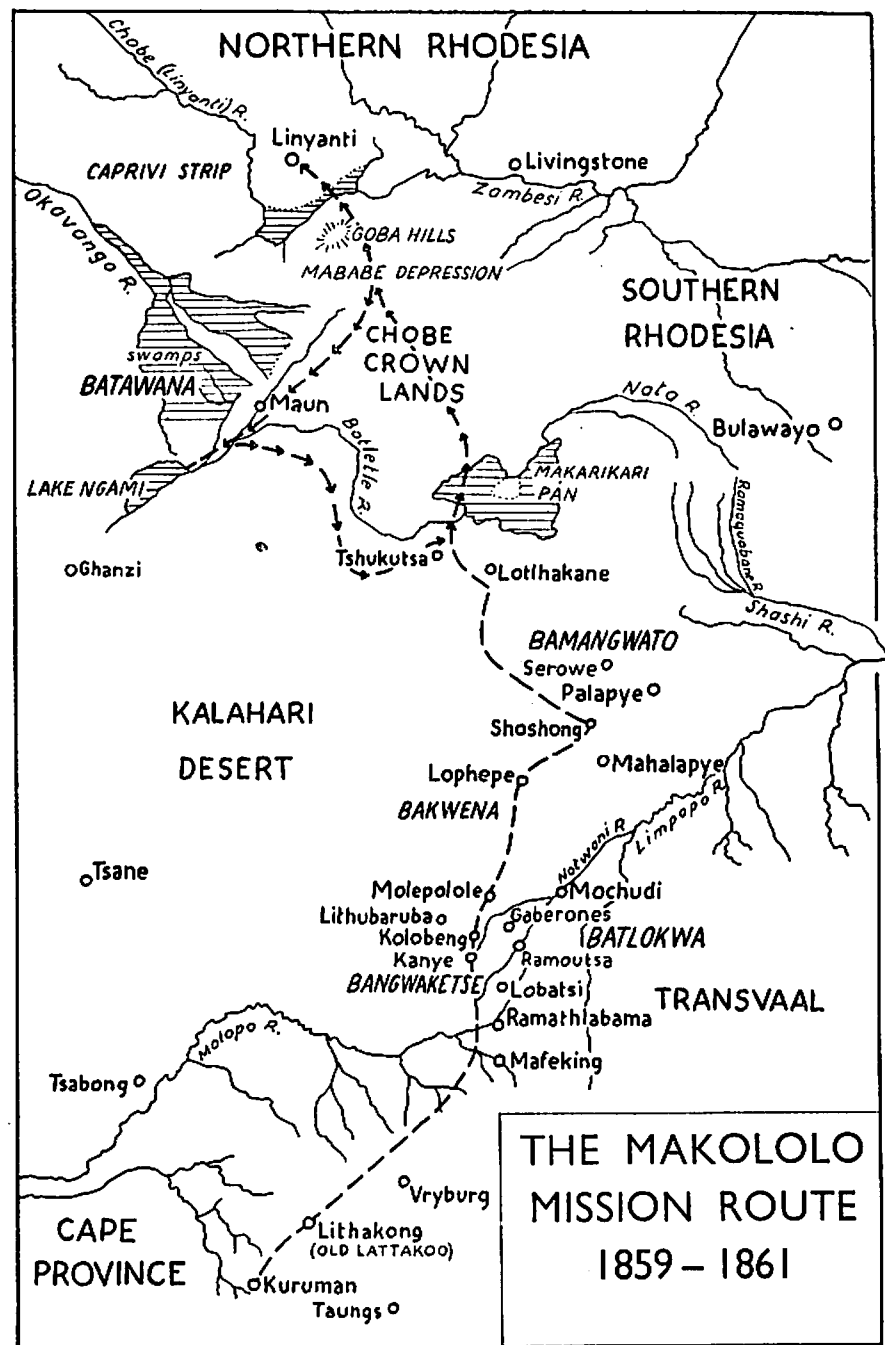
<sup>12</sup> Blaikie, 231.

<sup>13</sup> Campbell, *Livingstone*, 270.

<sup>14</sup> Seaver, 315.

<sup>15</sup> Mackenzie, 39.

<sup>16</sup> *Journal*, Isabella Price 21.2.60 LMS; R.M. to J.S.M. 8.1.61 NA.



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Stow	<i>Races of South Africa</i> 1905
Tabler	<i>The Far Interior</i> , Capetown 1955
Travels	<i>Livingstone's Missionary Travels</i> 1857
Walker	<i>History of South Africa</i> 1935
Wallis MJI	<i>Matabele Journals</i> (Vol. 1) 1945
Wallis MJII	<i>Matabele Journals</i> (Vol. 2) 1945
Wallis MM	<i>Matabele Mission of J. S. and E. Moffat</i> 1945

(N.B. In date abbreviations 18 . . . is omitted throughout.)

## MANUSCRIPT SOURCES

THE Robert and Mary Moffat papers in the National Archives in Salisbury Southern Rhodesia (referred to as NA) are arranged in four main groups: Correspondence (M9/1/1-18) for the years 1808, 1810-28, 1830-72; visits to Moselekatse (M9/2); Sundry Journals (M9/3) and Miscellaneous including family reminiscences (M9/4). The 813 letters in the correspondence group cover Moffat's life from his Scottish boyhood to the eve of his leaving Africa. They are a mixture of official communications to the L.M.S. of which Moffat usually made drafts to keep in his own files; letters to and from his family, and letters within the family which have not been used in any modern study of Moffat. The discovery of these papers in the saddle room of Mr. Livingstone Moffat's farm at Quagga's Kerk at Tarkastad in Cape Province, South Africa in 1941, provided an important source of historical evidence for southern Africa between 1817 and 1870.

Moffat wrote a tightly packed, copperplate hand and sometimes wrote cross-wise over his own hand-writing to save paper which, like Livingstone's, was often large foolscap. The *Letter-Journals*, written to Mary as he jogged on in the wagon, are of prime importance for the history of the Christian faith in Bechuanaland and Southern Rhodesia. The Journals of 1854 and 1857 offer main evidence for the remarkable personal relationships between Moselekatse and Moffat which is examined in Appendix 1.

Allied to this material in the Salisbury Archives are 113 letters associated with John Smith Moffat and his wife Emily, including

22 from Livingstone chiefly about the Matabele and Makololo missions which he instigated. There are another 53 letters from Livingstone to Moffat, written between 1844 and 1856, when they were close colleagues in the Bechuana Mission, in the possession of Miss Diana Livingstone Bruce, and since edited and published by Professor Schapera in *Family Letters* 1959.

The other main manuscript source is in the archives of the London Missionary Society (referred to as LMS). It consists of *Correspondence from Cape Colony* (1817-1823), a mixture of very individualistic letters from missionaries and formal reports to the Society. Moffat's own first letters are youthful and naïve. One more mature letter he incorporated in his *Missionary Labours* (1842), as a description of his Namaqualand venture. The *Bechuanaland Correspondence* extends from 1820 to 1870, again a mixture of letters and reports from men in lonely places and with Moffat's long letters packed with observations about native life. A great deal of this found its way, in various forms, into annual reports and missionary magazines. In Paris, the archives of the *Société des Missions Évangéliques de Paris* (referred to as PMS) has a carefully arranged series of *Bechuana Mission Letters* 1837-66, and the Church Missionary Society in London has a box of papers and letters about its ill-starred South Africa mission. Moffat wrote regularly to the Bible Society in London and his letters in the Society's archives run from 1830-1857.

In compiling a Moffat family pedigree I used the Miscellaneous Collection of papers in the Salisbury Archives in addition to the Parish Registers for Ormiston and Pencaithland (at the Register House Edinburgh) and the Customs and Excise Registers 1797-1811 at the King's Beam House London. In these searches I had welcome help from Mr. J. F. Mitchell of Edinburgh. In the L.M.S. Archives there are also 53 letters to friends which Moffat wrote after his retirement, some sixty sermon notes, and his manuscript copies of William Roby's theological lectures and David Bogue's missionary lectures—587 quarto pages—the only formal vocational training he ever had. The sources for Appendix 2 on the work of the Kuruman Press are given there.

Mary Moffat herself was a lively correspondent as her manuscript *Journal* (LMS) of her voyage to the Cape in 1818 shows. Correspondence with her family and friends, now in the archives of Rhodes



University, Grahamstown, is full of domestic observations. In Salisbury the allied Moffat papers collected by H. U. Moffat (Premier, Southern Rhodesia 1927) and John Smith Moffat have been referred to as well as the relevant Colonial Office Papers in the Public Records Office London 1850-59, and the Horace Waller Papers in Rhodes House, Oxford. A poignant personal journal is that of Isabella Price (LMS) who perished in the Makololo venture.

Visits to the Northern Cape, to the Bechuanaland Protectorate and to Southern Rhodesia showed the kind of country Moffat and his colleagues were pitted against. While travel conditions are easier now the Africa of Moffat and Livingstone is still there to be reckoned with.

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