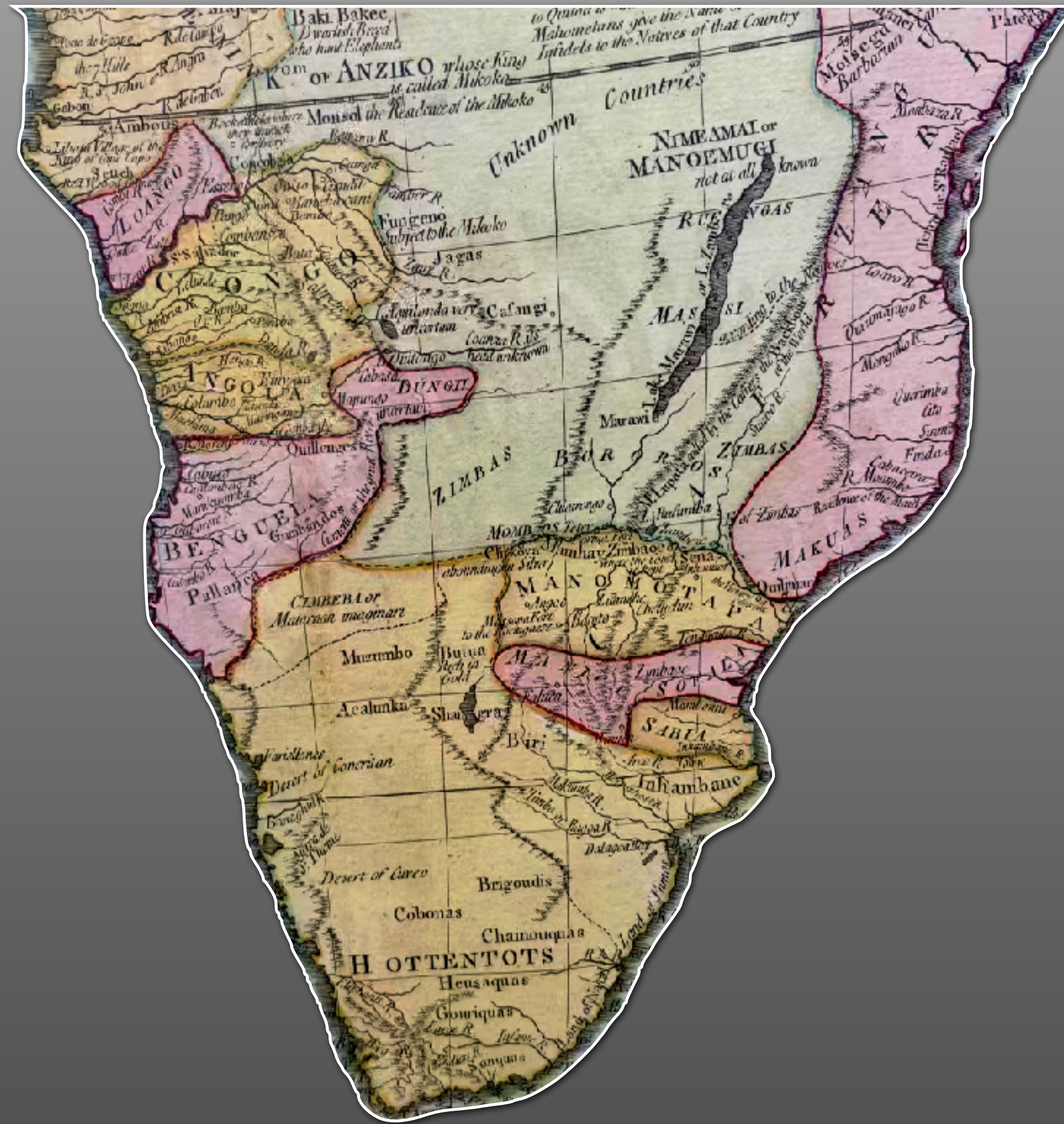




How the photography of exploration shaped the Victorian image of Africa (Southern Africa 1860 - 1910)

Tim Ewbank

Autumn 2026

Talk addresses these questions

- What did mid-Victorians know of Africa?
- Who were the African explorers?
- What equipment did expedition photographers use?
- What was the purpose of expedition photography?
- Who sponsored their journeys?
- What did they photograph?
- Were any subjects not photographed?
- What was the overall impact on Victorian views of Africa?

mid-Victorian knowledge of Africa



Limited factual information

“The dark continent”

Wild, jungle, savage

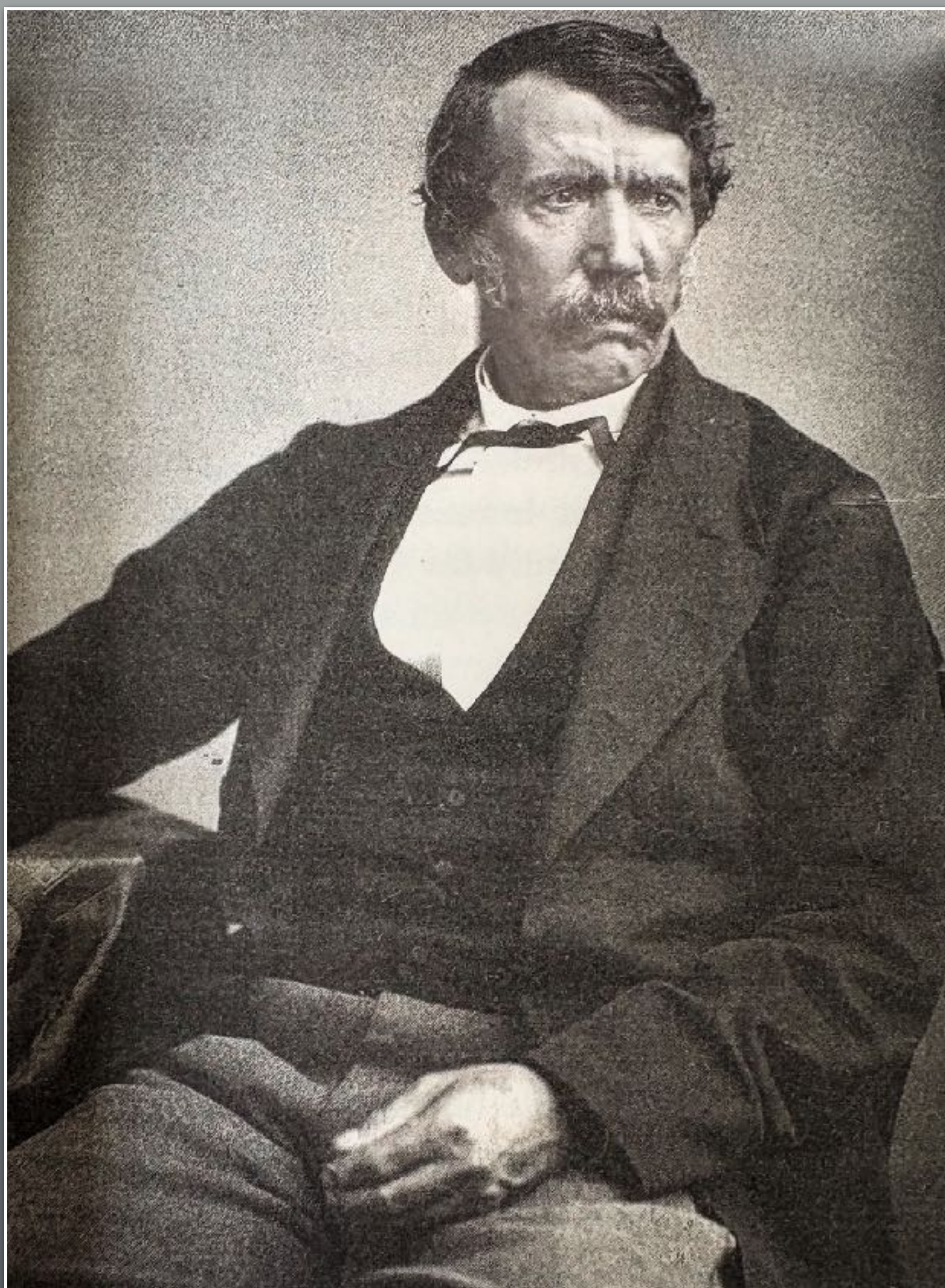
Primitive, barbaric

Ferocious animals

Romantic rumours of fabulous ancient civilisations

Fuelled by popular fiction eg. Rider Haggard

Huge public interest in exploration



Rare photo portrait, 1865

David Livingstone

Explorer, Missionary & anti-slavery campaigner

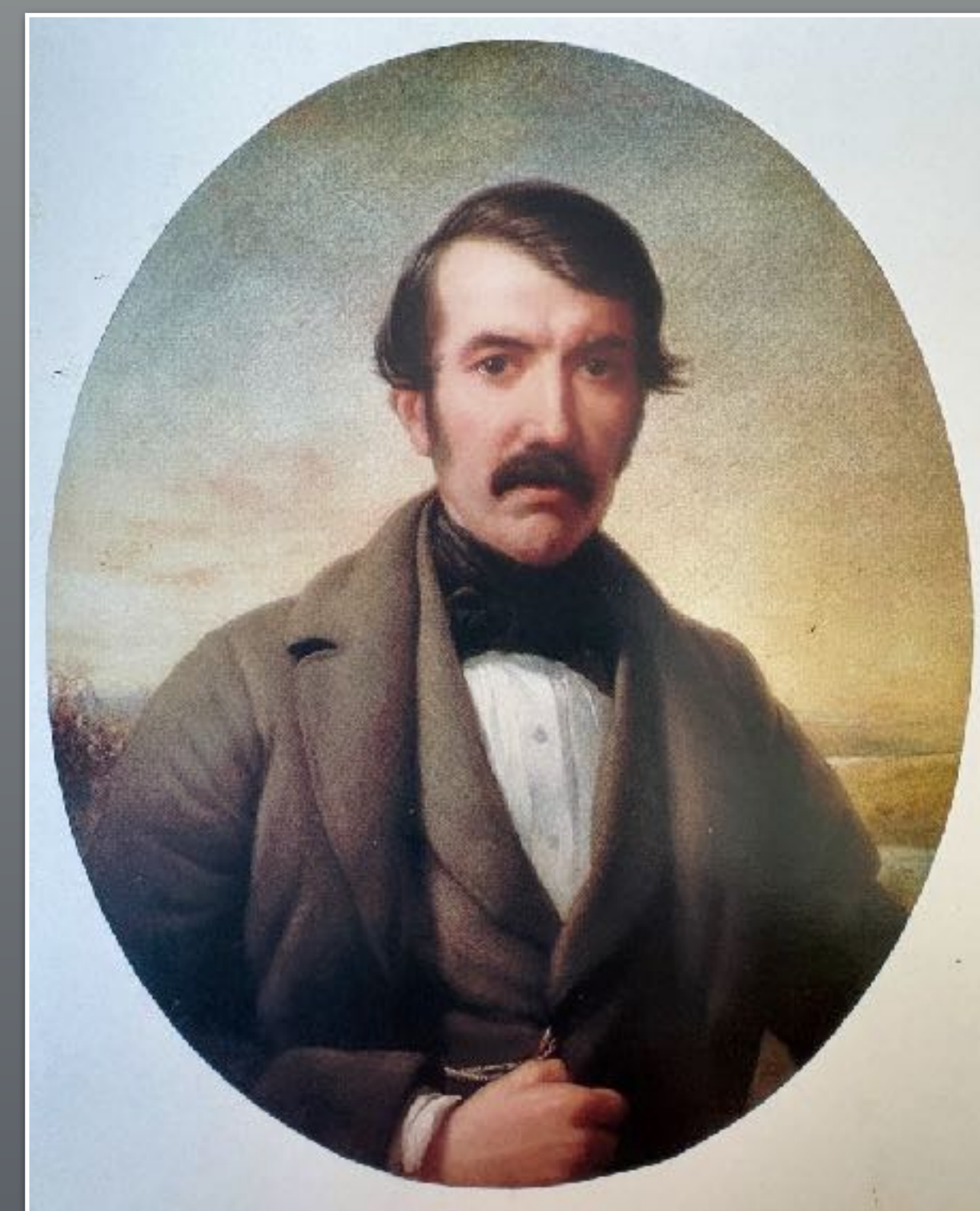
1841 - 1853
3 trips inc trans-contintenal

1866 - 1873
East & central Africa

Oct/Nov 1871
met Stanley in Ujiji, Tanzania

April 1873
died in Zambia

Buried in Westminster Abbey



NPG portrait

Henry Morton Stanley



US journalist & explorer

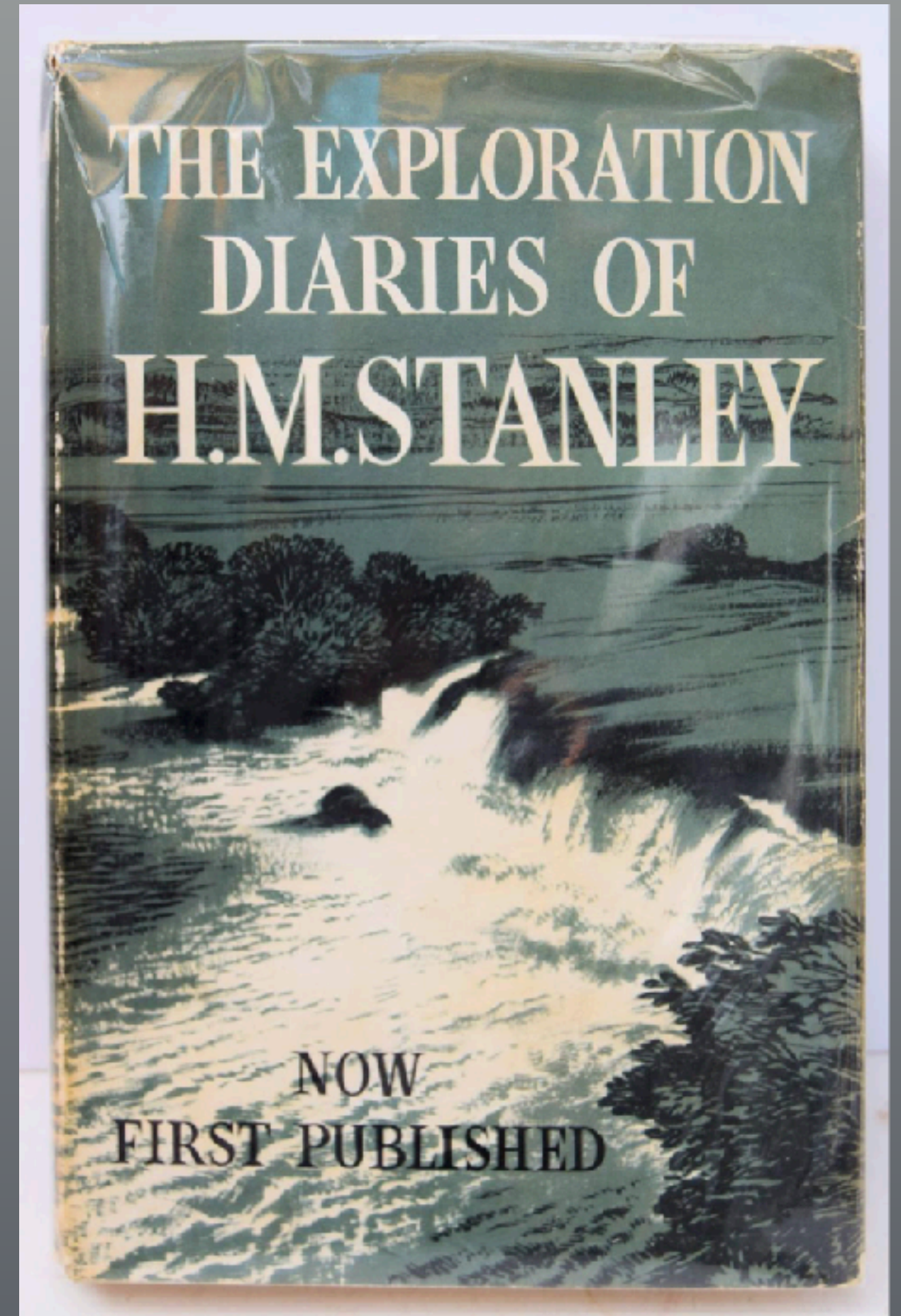
1871- 1872

1st journey (“found” Livingstone)

1874 - 1877 trans-Africa (west - east)

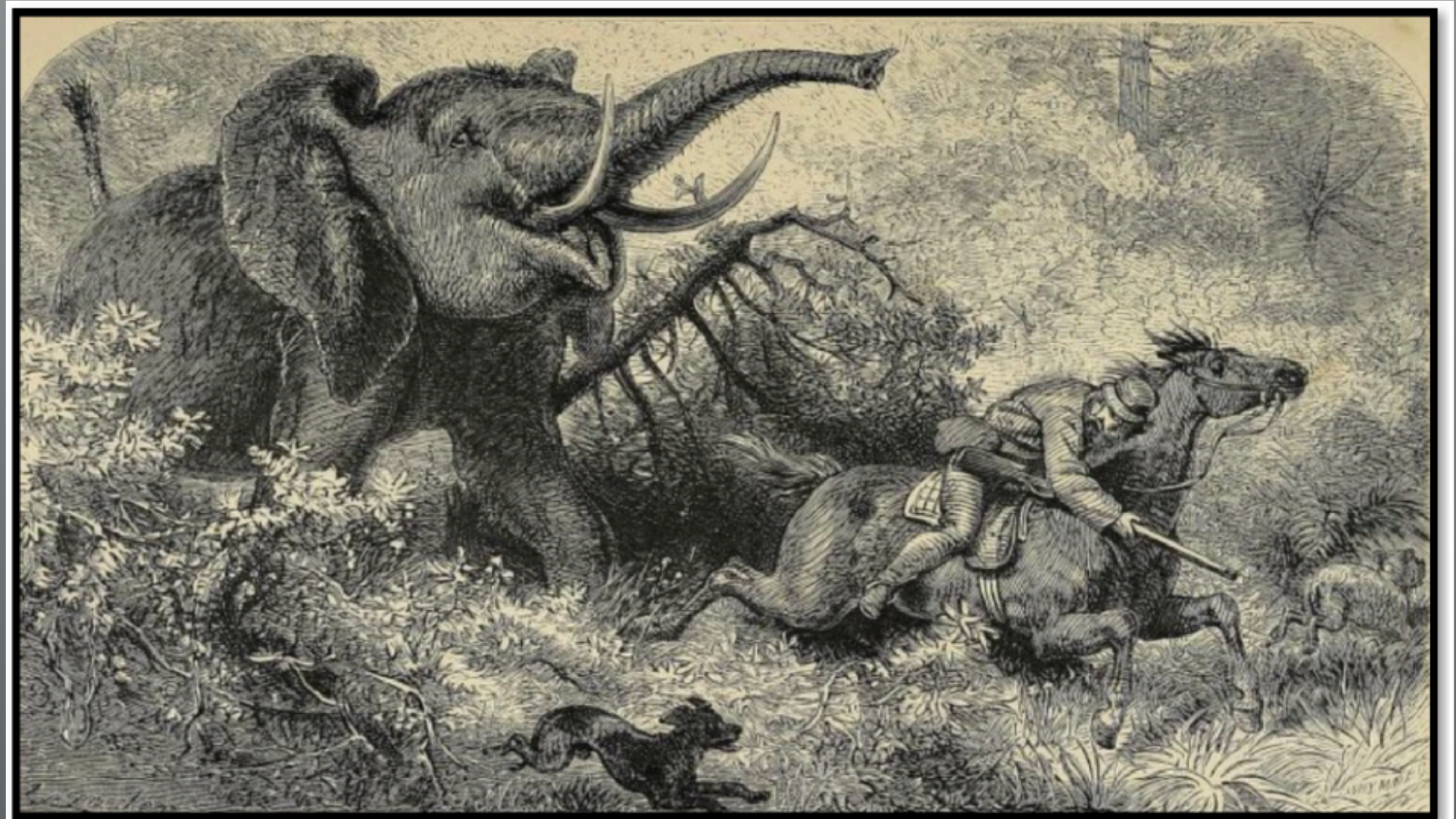
Self-publicist

Later involvement in Congo Free State damaged his reputation



Fredrick Courtney Selous

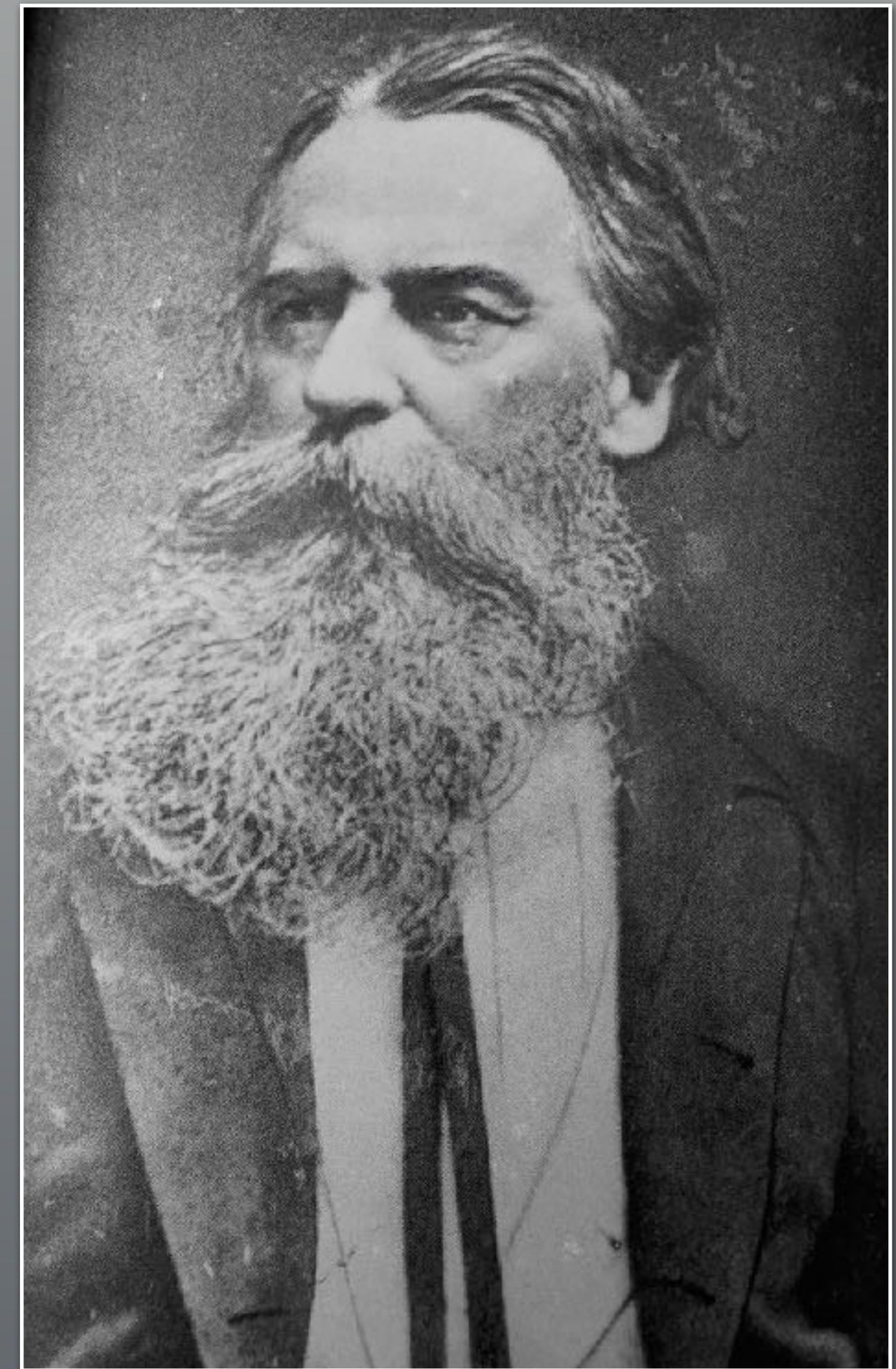
Big game hunter, scout & explorer



From *African Hunting: from Natal to the Zambesi* - W.C. Baldwin and his dogs flee from an enraged bull elephant

Thomas Baines

*“An explorer who painted, rather
than an artist who travelled”*



Lived in South Africa for 33yrs,
Numerous journeys
700+ drawings & paintings of Africa

Thomas Baines at the Victoria Falls 1864



Adapted European artistic genre

Eg. Orientalism

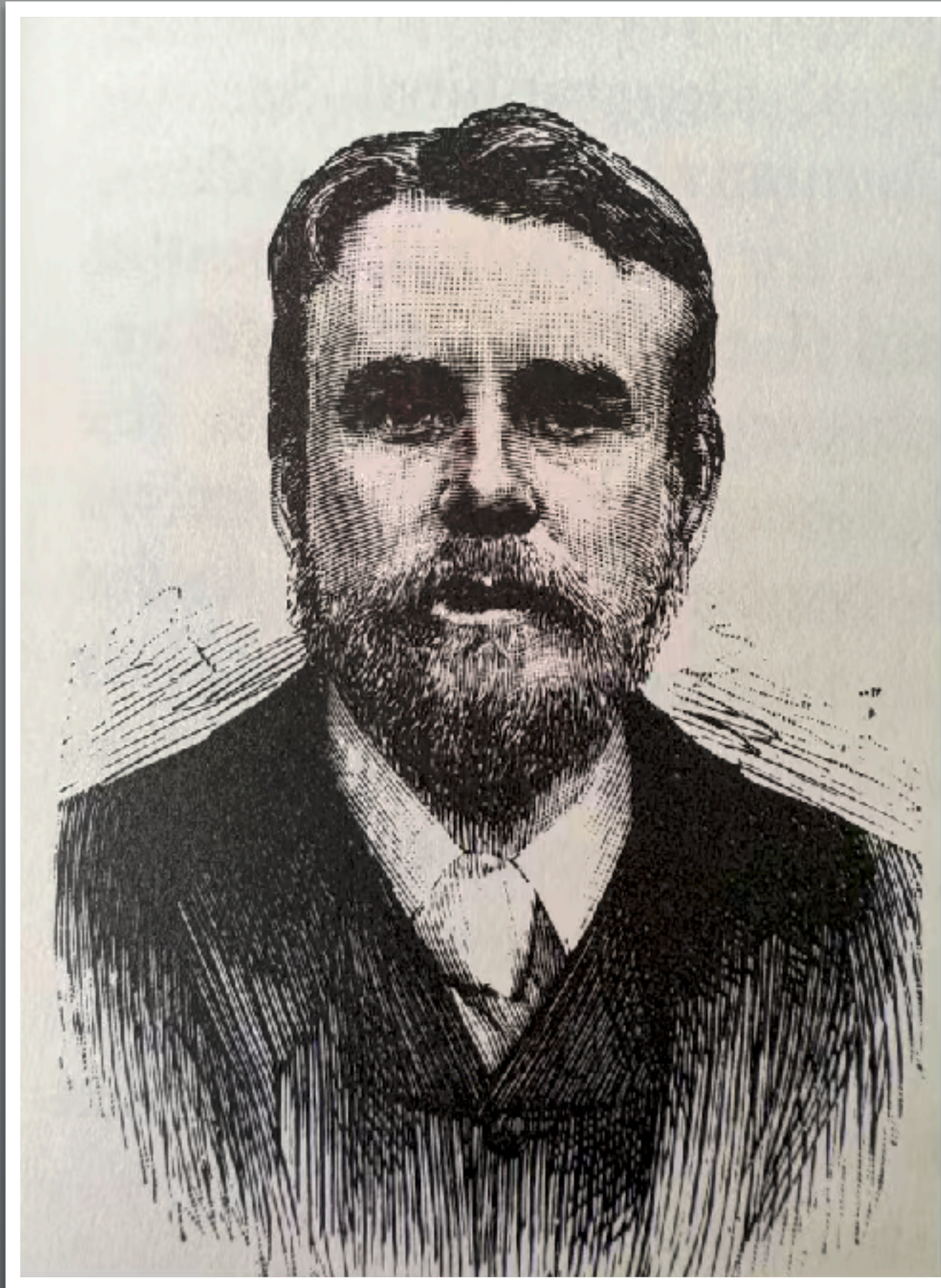


Jean-Léon Gérôme 1870



Thomas Baines 1869

Dr Theodore Bent



Theodore Bent

Traveller & archaeologist
Wife, Mabel was photographer

Travelled around Mediterranean
Multiple journeys in Middle East
Abyssinia & three further trips to Africa

Numerous books of travels,
plus sketches and photographs

Not well known public figures



Mabel Bent

Camera equipment & travel photography

First “portable” cameras

Rapid progress in image development processes 1840-1860

Mainly British and French pioneers

Variety of wet & dry formats used

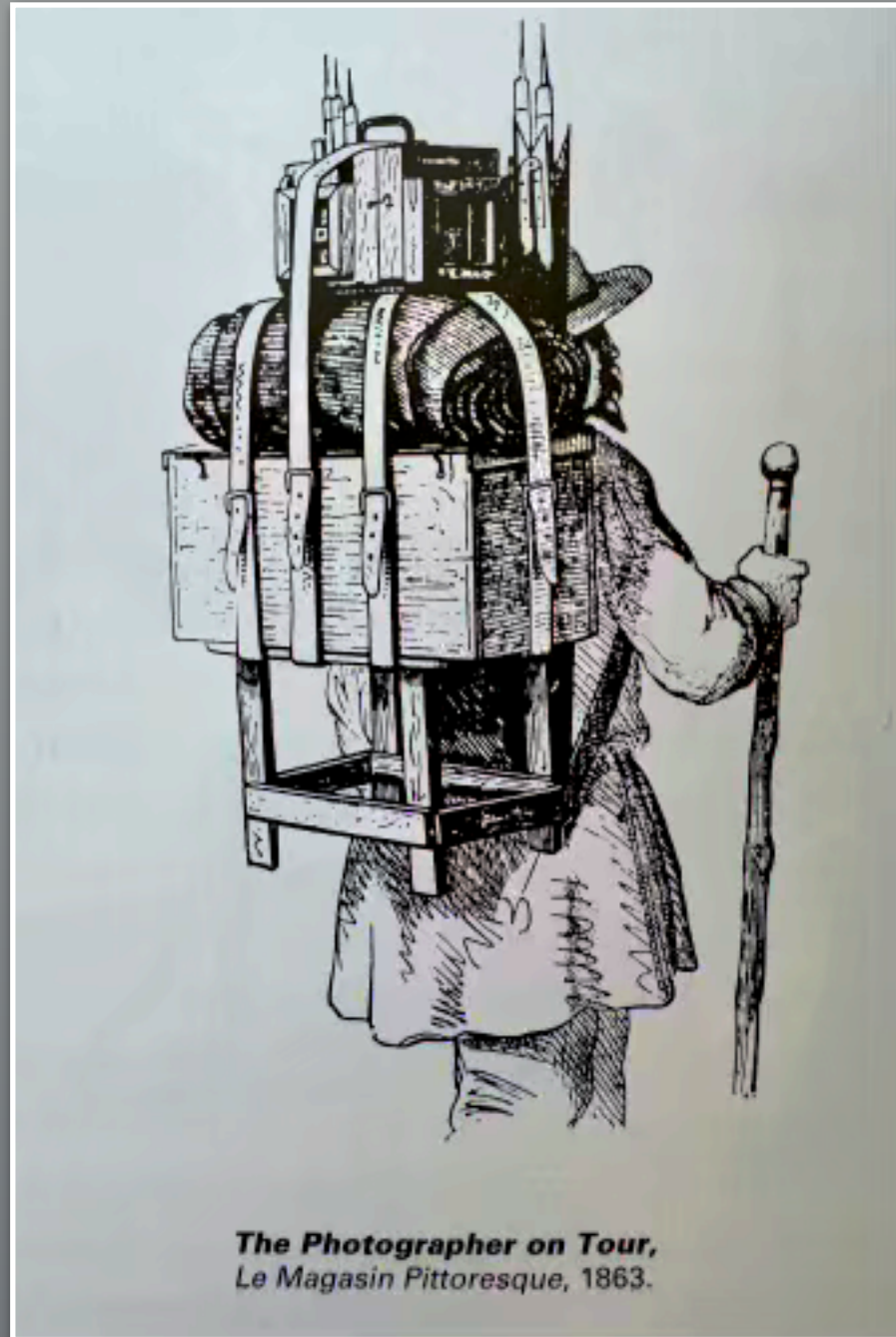
First European travel photographers in 1840s

By 1860 prints from Australia, Far East, Russia and Peru

Main subjects was landscapes, with a few ethnographic studies

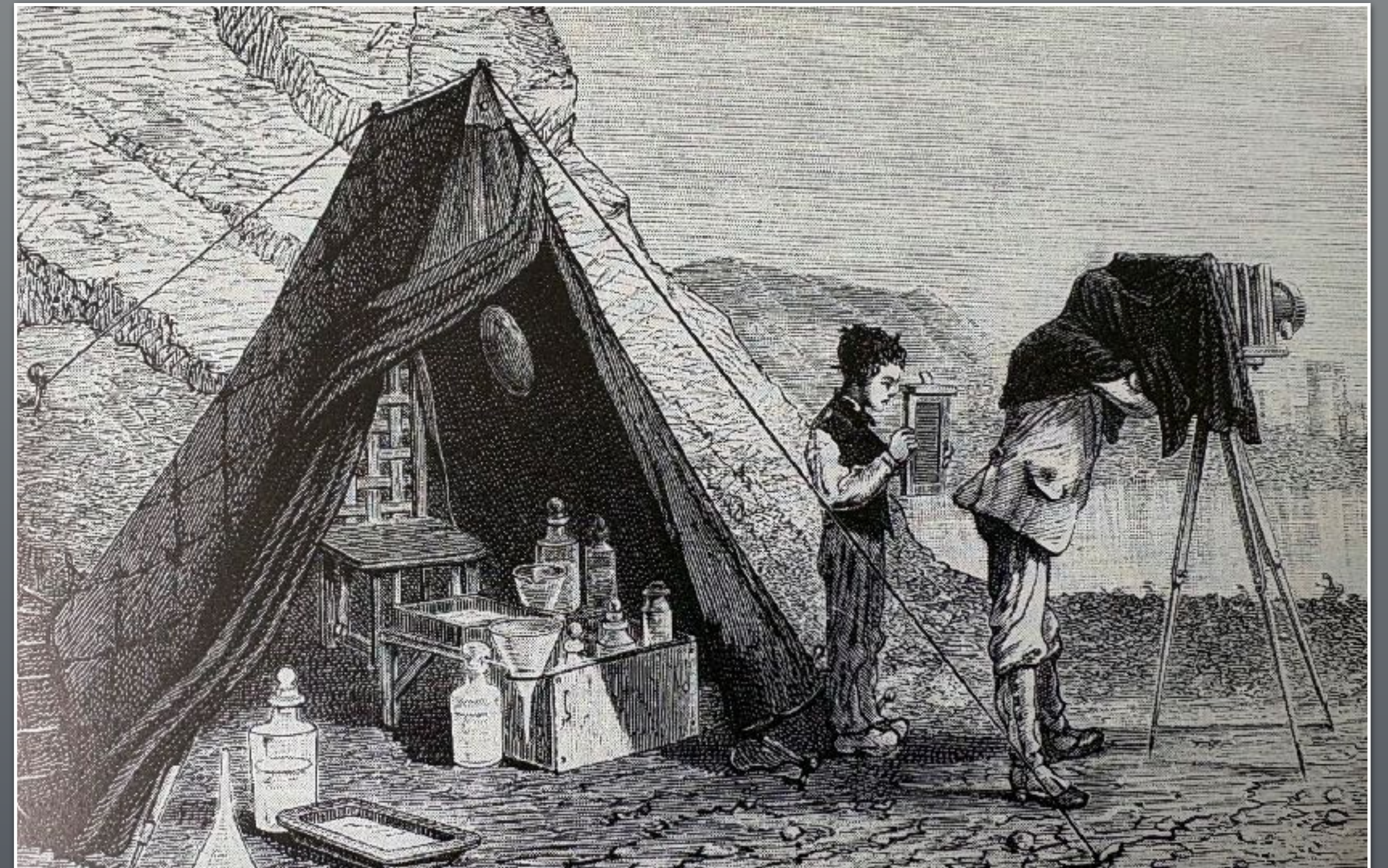
First photographs of Africa south of the Sahara in mid-1860s

Technical challenges



- Bulky equipment
- Limited supplies of materials (plates, chemicals etc)
- Time consuming to set-up
- Slow shutter speeds
- Limited lens focal lengths

- Environmental conditions (heat, humidity, dust)
- Transporting images home



Sponsors of expedition photographers

Scientific institutes

eg Royal Geographical Society, British Association for the Advancement of Science, Geological Society, The Royal Society

Privately funded exploration companies

eg Rhodes's British South Africa Company

Missionary societies

eg London Missionary Society, Baptist

Not individual traders, hunters & prospectors

Purpose of expedition photography

Accurately record newly discovered world

Surveying & mapping of new territories

Assess viability for commerce and settlement

Record heroic exploits

Campaign for specific causes, usually treatment of local people

Show progress of civilising impact of empire

What did they photograph?



William Ellerton-Fry 1892

Exotic landscapes



Matobo hills

Ethnography



Zulu chief and his indunas



Village huts

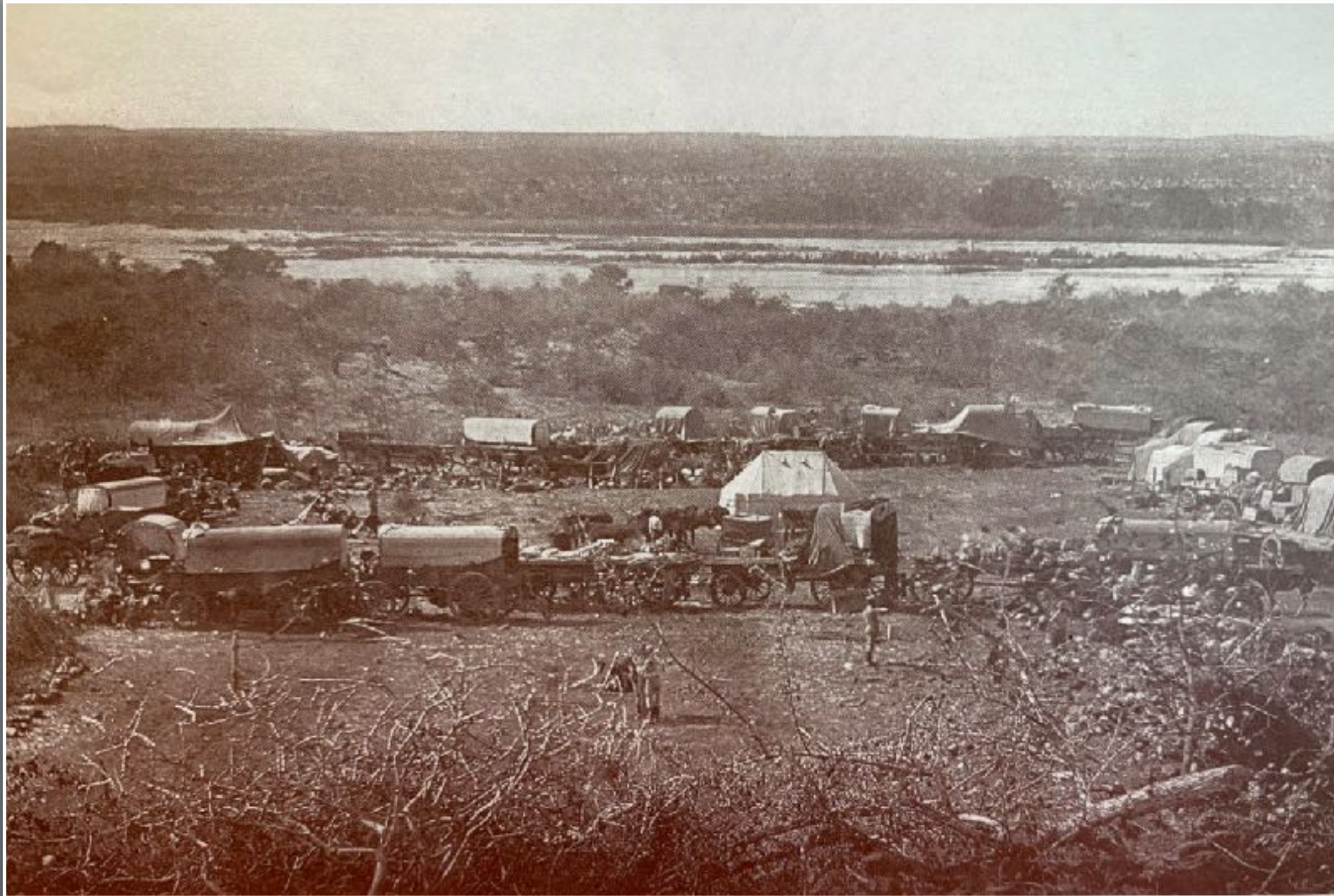
Ethnography?



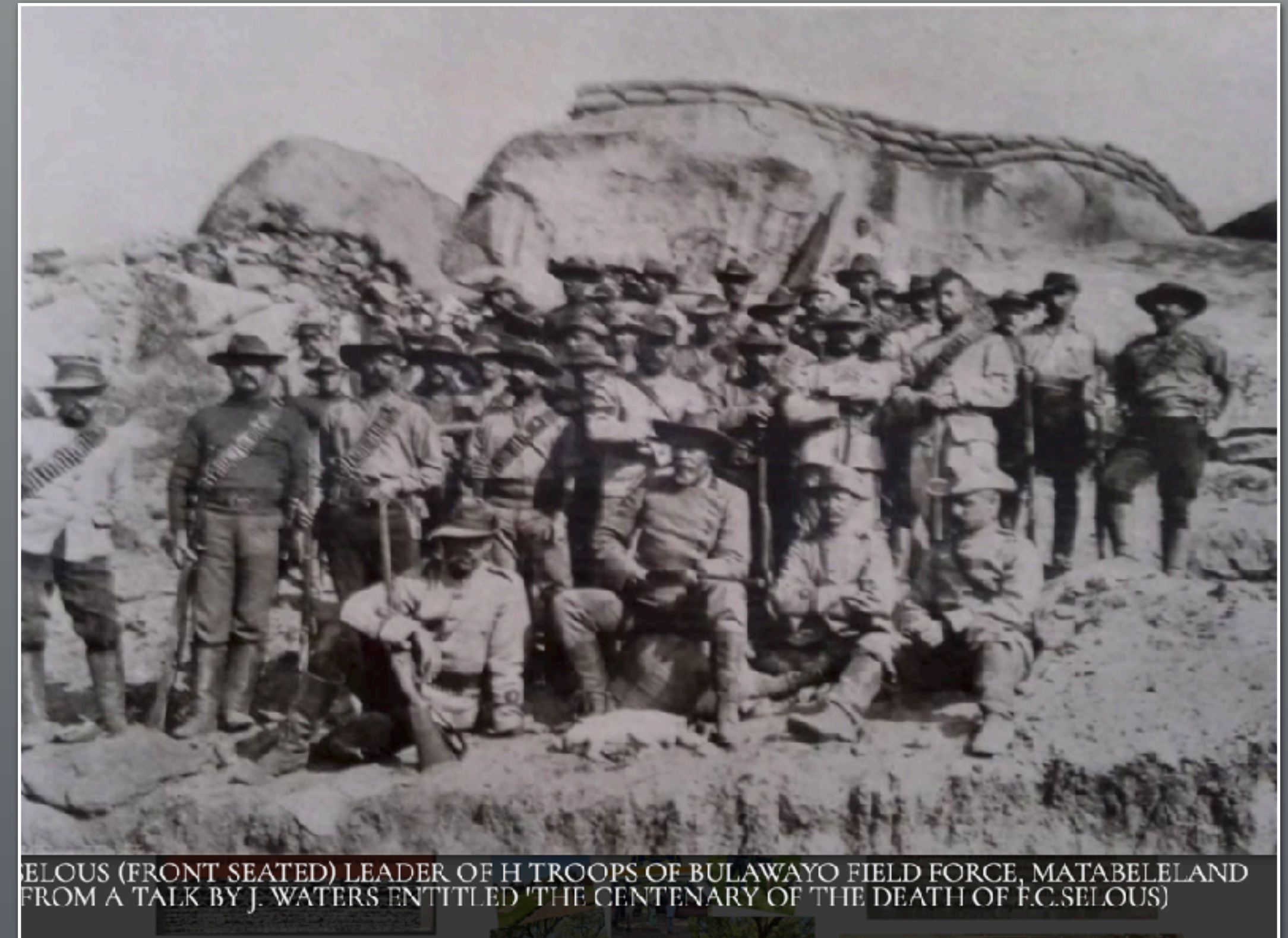
Zulu chief and his wives

Is this truly an ethnographic study or Victorian voyeurism?

Heroic exploits



Pioneer column laager
William Ellerton-Fry 1890



SELOUS (FRONT SEATED) LEADER OF H TROOPS OF BULAWAYO FIELD FORCE, MATABELELAND
FROM A TALK BY J. WATERS ENTITLED 'THE CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF F.C.SELOUS)

Ruins of fabulous ancient kingdoms



Courtesy of National Archives of Zimbabwe. The Conical Tower photographed by Mrs Bent showing the undergrowth and creepers still remaining after some clearance – Mauch must have experienced the same conditions



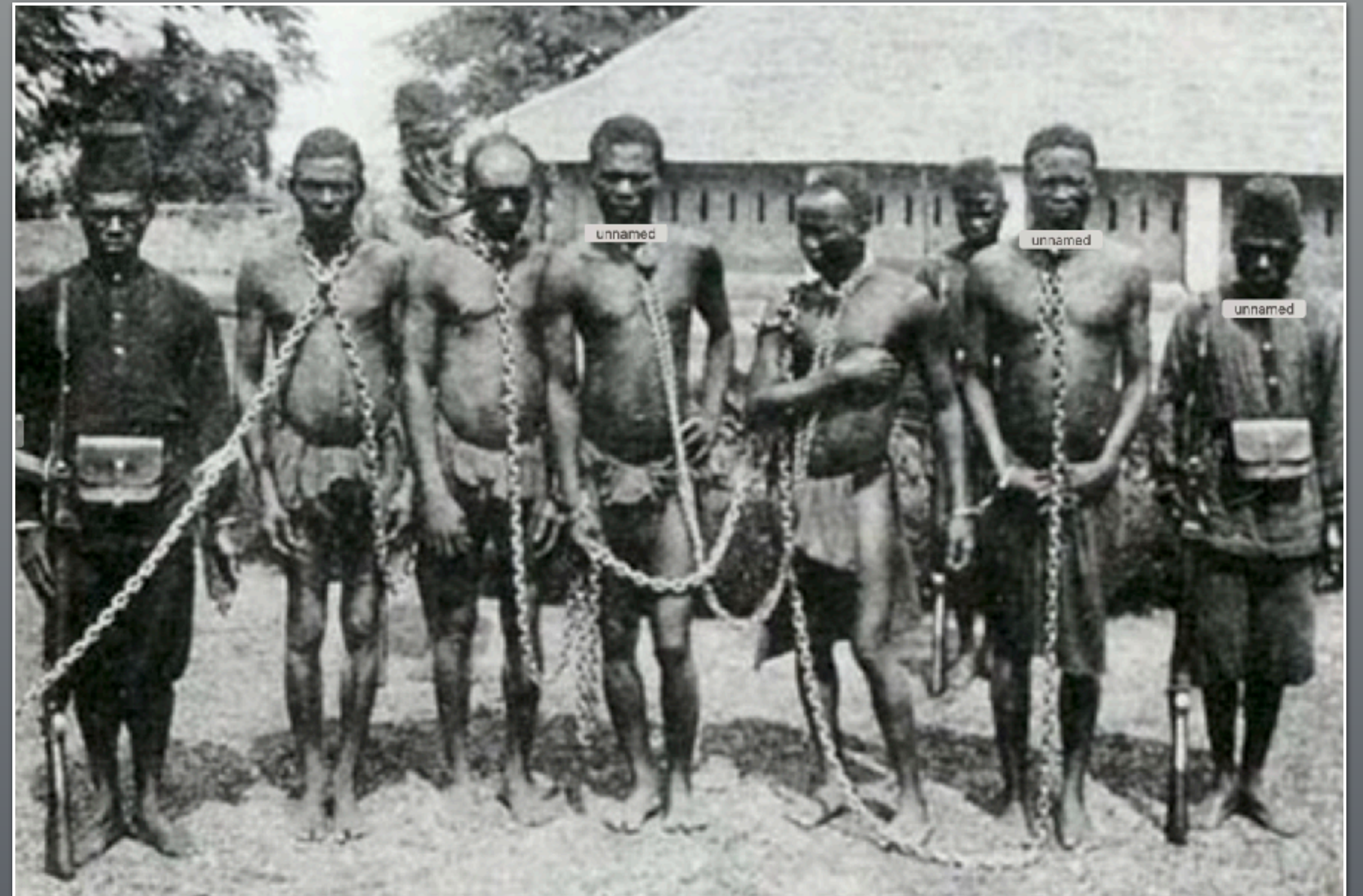
Ruins on Lundi River

Exposing reality of Congo Free State



Nsala & his child's limbs

Photos by Alice Seeley-Harris



Chain gang & guard

Progress of civilising mission of Empire

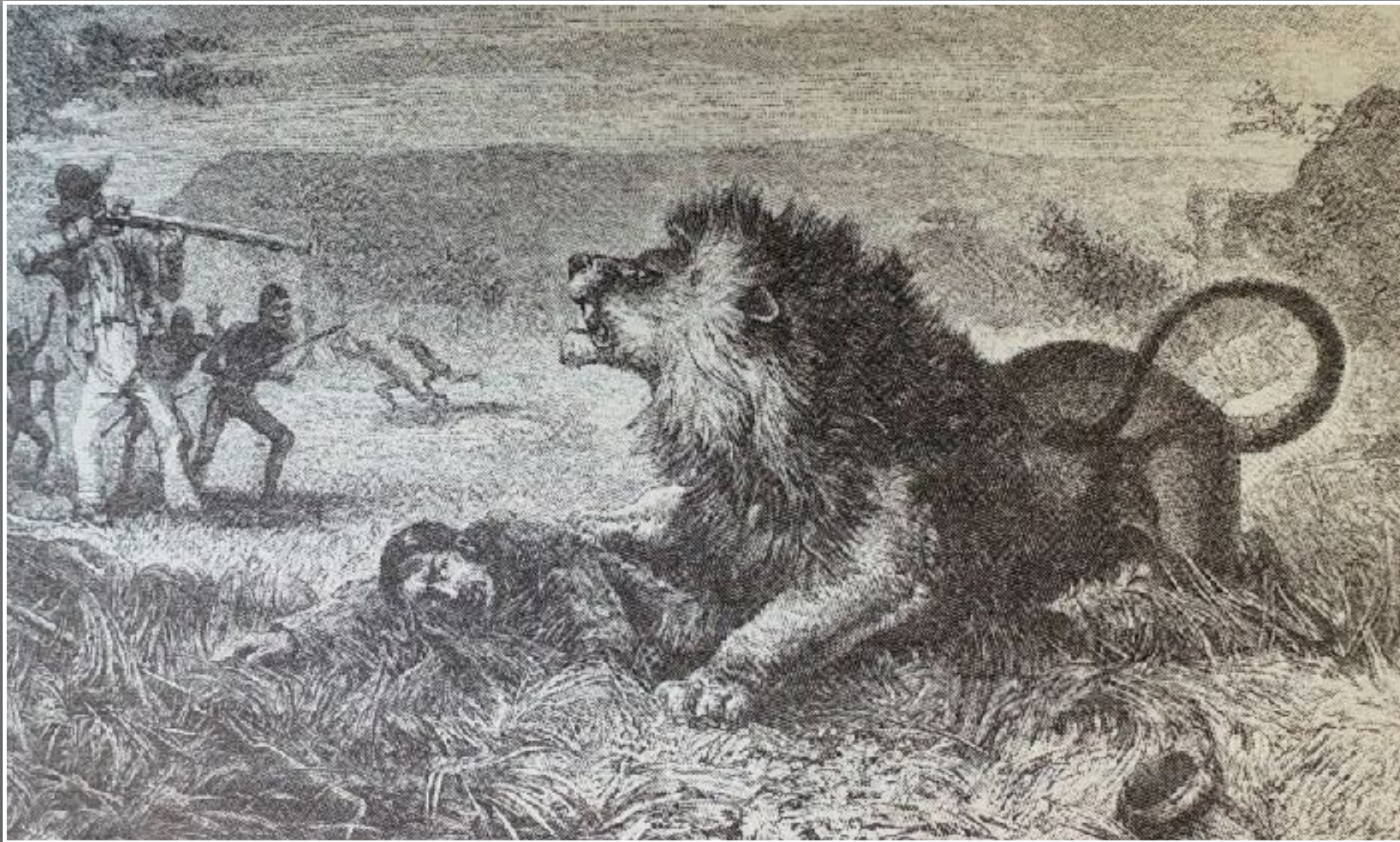


Port of Beira, Mozambique



Victoria Falls bridge 1905

What photographers did not depict



Engraving of Livingstone being attacked by lion

Much public interest in exotic African wildlife, especially Big Game

Photographers were not able to capture them effectively for two technical reasons:

- Camera shutter speeds were too slow to capture moving animals.
- Focal length of lenses too short for wildlife photography

Wildlife only shown in engravings until 1890s

Did not photograph huge numbers of African workers supporting heroic endeavours

Big game hunters only interested in trophies



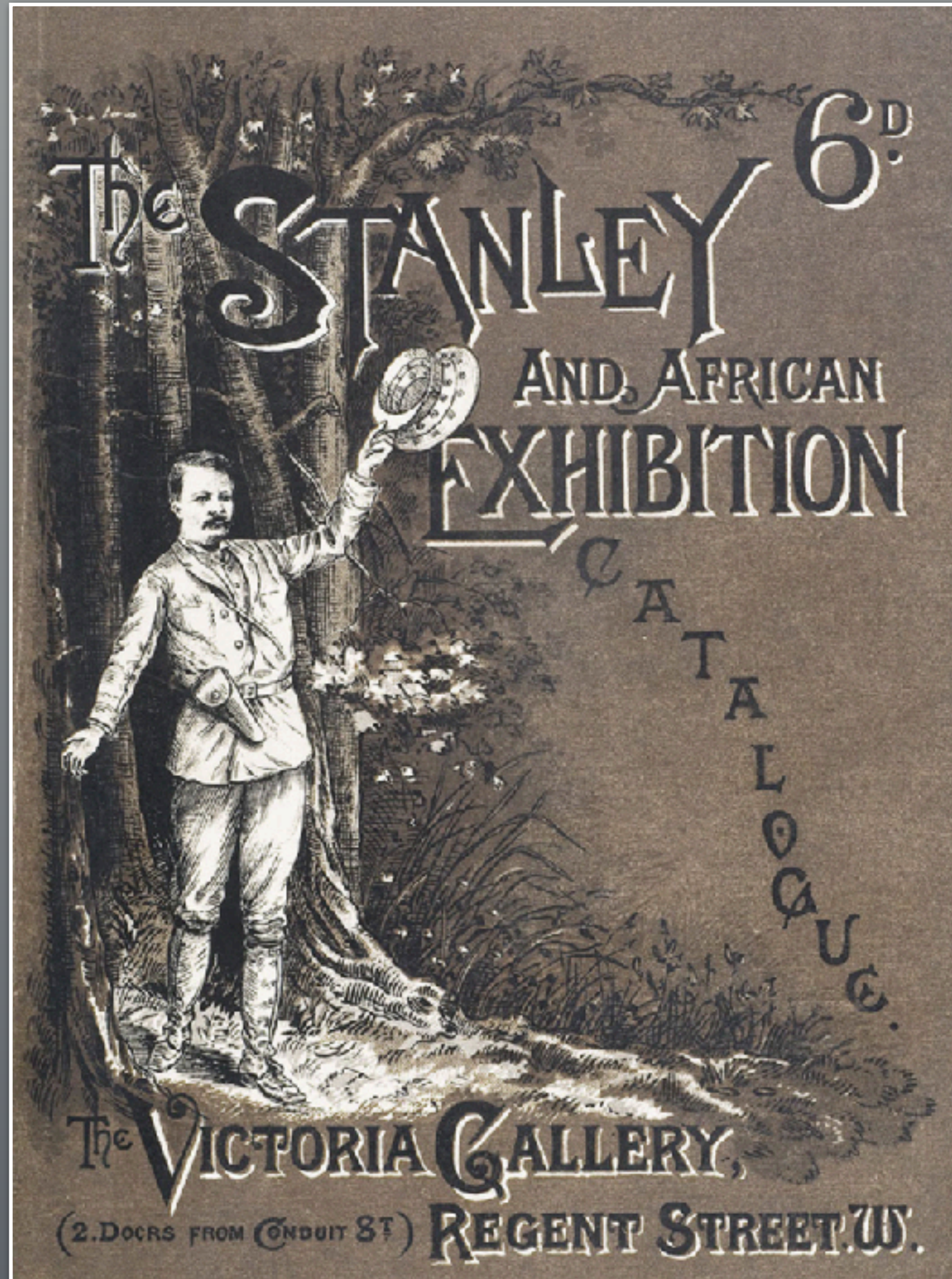
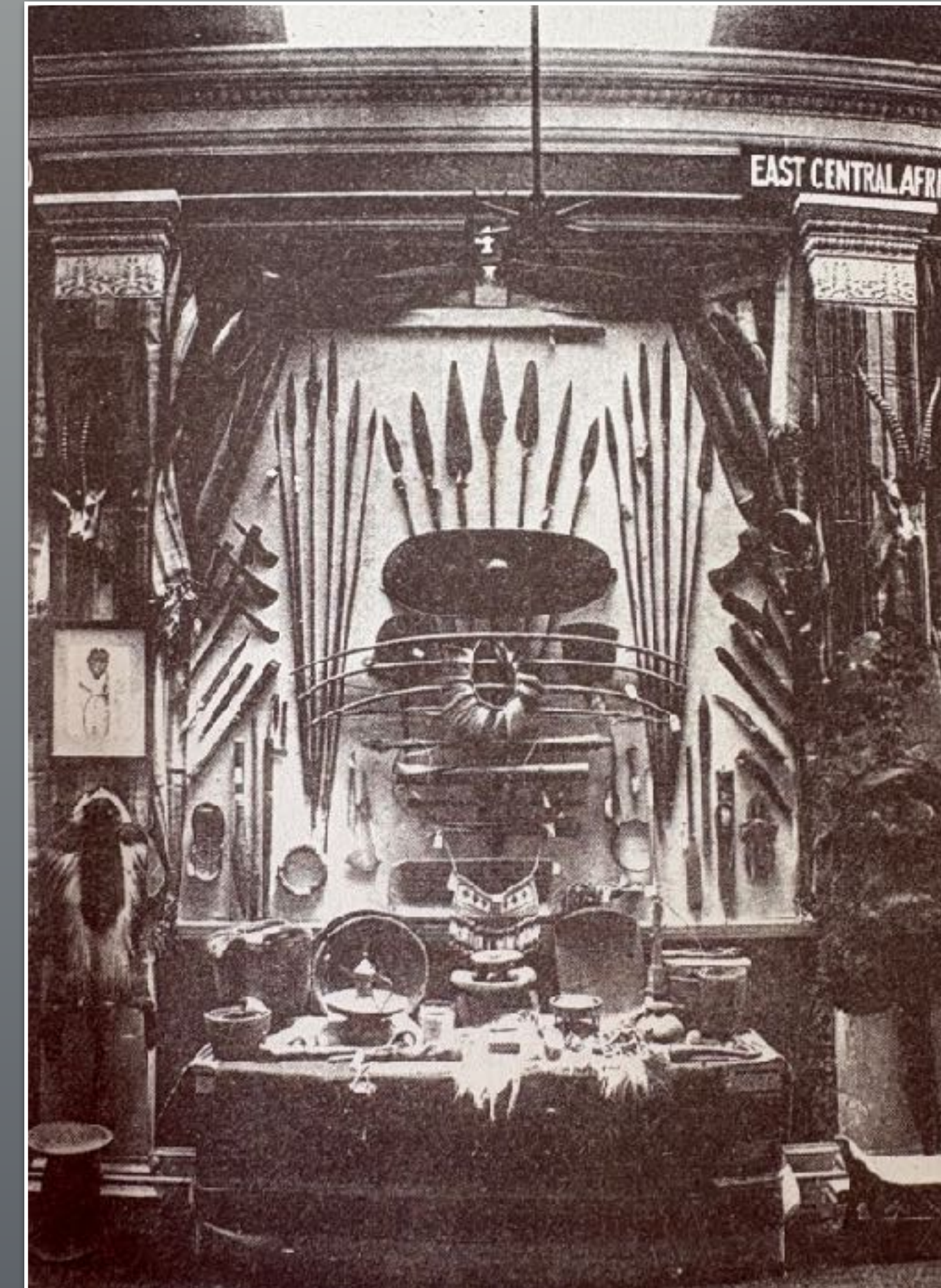
How travelers publicised their experience



Lantern slide talk

Scientific lectures
Speaking tours
Illustrated books
Travelogues
Private albums
Exhibitions

Stanley and African Exhibition



Exhibition display case

Printing photographs in newspapers



Engraving from Mabel Bent's photograph of Great Zimbabwe

Before newspapers were able to print photographs, images were printed from engravings

Reproduction of photographs in newspapers was widely adopted in 1890s.

Reproduction in newspapers greatly increased interest in exploration

Impact of photography on Victorian views of Africa

- Photographs have an authority that paintings & engravings do not
- Greatly expanded knowledge, but selectively
- Taught viewers how to see & interpret Africa from a colonial viewpoint
- Technology, logistics, and sponsorship, not just curiosity, determined what was photographed
- African subjects had no agency in choice of images & seldom saw the results
- Intrepid female photographers rarely credited
- Photographs are not static moments in time; their interpretation can change and will continue to do so

Photography created a colonial lens through which to “understand” Africa