

## PRELUDE

### *Mosi-oa-Tunya*

*The indigenous Tonga name, The Smoke That Thunders,  
later known as the Victoria Falls*

In November 1911, twenty-two-year-old Claude Oldfield emerged onto the terrace of the Victoria Falls Hotel and blinked in the bright morning sunshine. Built by the British seven years earlier as accommodation for workers on the planned Cape to Cairo railway, the hotel, with its secluded loggias, lily ponds and elegant verandas, was quite splendid, and despite the heat he had slept well. Perhaps he was starting to acclimatise sooner than expected? Before leaving home in England, the Colonial Office had warned him it might take a while. It was all a far cry from his home in Maida Vale. Since disembarking at Cape Town, and throughout the long journey up country, he had hardly ceased to marvel that he was here at all, in Africa! The sights, the sounds, the smells; the never-ending skies and the sheer scale of the landscape. He had barely clapped eyes on any Africans before, apart from a fellow student at Cambridge, who was reputedly from a wealthy family, possibly the son of a tribal chief. Still, he had been diligently working at his language studies, hoping at least to be able to greet the local Bemba people and to create a good first impression.

Claude knew his history, of how in early November 1855, David Livingstone had travelled down the Zambezi to see for himself *Mosi-oa-Tunya*, the ‘smoke that thunders’. Approaching in canoes, the party could see columns of spray and hear the thunderous roar, miles before reaching the Falls. Livingstone’s own account continues:

When about half a mile from the falls, I left the canoe ... and embarked in a lighter one, with men well acquainted with the rapids, who ... brought me to an island situated in the middle of the river ... I believe that no one could perceive where the vast body of water went; it seemed to lose itself in the earth, the opposite lip of the



*The Victoria Falls at Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia, called by the natives  
“The smoke that sounds” – Claude, 1911*

fissure into which it disappeared being only 80 feet distant. At least I did not comprehend it until, creeping with awe to the verge, I peered down into a large rent which had been made from bank to bank of the broad Zambesi, and saw that a stream of a thousand yards broad leaped down a hundred feet, and then became suddenly compressed into a space of fifteen or twenty yards.<sup>1</sup>

Livingstone continued his epic journey following the Zambezi downstream to the east coast, completing a 3,000 mile trek from the west to east coasts of Africa. Returning to England, his account of his travels caught the excitement and imagination of the Victorian public and his first book, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, published in 1857 became an instant success.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently other Europeans visited the Falls but it is generally accepted that Livingstone was the first European to announce their discovery. James Chapman and Thomas Baines, who had accompanied Livingstone in 1855, visited in 1862.<sup>3</sup> Baines' strikingly beautiful album of prints, *The Victoria Falls, Zambezi River*, was published by Day & Son in 1865, and as the first artist to portray the grandeur of the Falls, he also did much to capture the enthusiasm of the nation.<sup>4</sup>

Crossing the river then had been a daunting proposition. At the most advantageous point, beyond the Victoria Falls at a crossing called the Old Drift, the earliest explorers climbed into dugout canoes. Later, came the luxury of a metal vessel paddled by half a dozen Lozis who now ruled the area. Another option for reaching the north bank of the Zambezi was to be towed across in a barge by a steel cable.

By the 1890s, Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company had pushed north over the Zambezi in their pursuit of skins, timber and ivory, and had also begun prospecting for minerals. This activity, coupled with the improvement in river transport, had drawn British settlers to the Old Drift, the surrounding area becoming known as Livingstone, in honour of the missionary and explorer. Mosquitoes carrying malaria brought high rates of mortality, which consequently drove the settlers six miles north to higher ground, Constitution Hill. This became the new, burgeoning town of Livingstone.

The railway had already reached as far as Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia and was officially opened on 4th November 1897 by Sir Alfred Milner, High Commissioner of the Cape Colony. The man behind the development of the railway, Cecil Rhodes, had contracted a severe bout of fever and could not be present, Milner likening his absence to a performance of *Hamlet* without the Prince. Rhodes sent a telegram:

We are bound, and I have made up my mind, to go on to the Zambesi without delay. We have magnificent coalfields lying between here and there, which means a great deal to us engaged in the practical workings of railways. Let us see it on the Zambesi during our lifetime.

It will be small consolation to me and to you to know it will be there when we are dead and gone.<sup>5</sup>

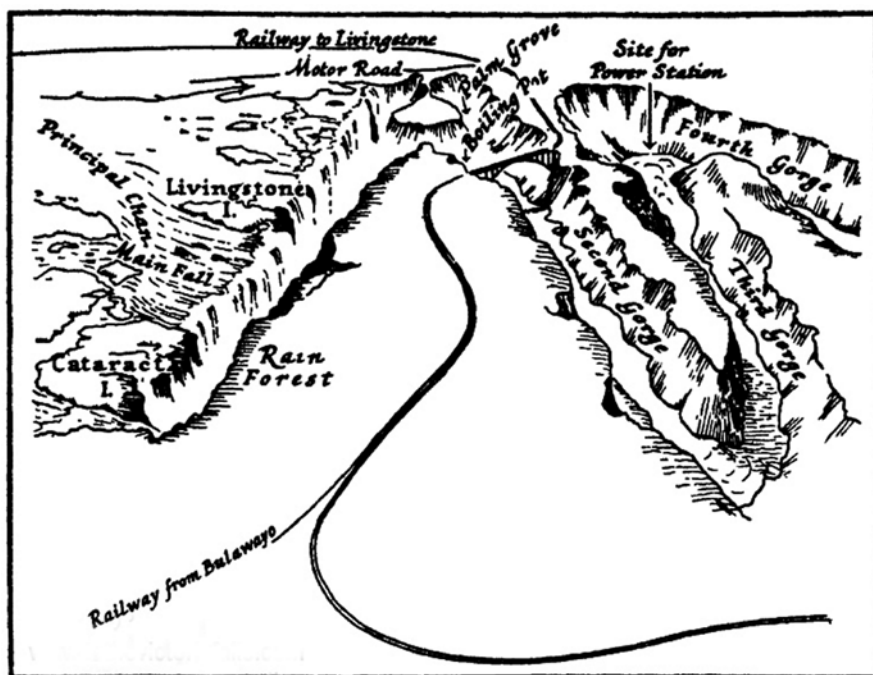
The railway was first extended to access the rich coalfields of Wankie (now known as Hwange), 60 miles south-east of the Falls. When the line finally reached the Falls in 1904, a bridge over the Zambezi had already been started. The preliminary surveying of a possible bridge site had started four years earlier, in 1900, at the height of the Second Anglo-Boer War but with communications to the south having been cut, some delay in construction was inevitable.

Rhodes wanted to ensure that his vision was not misunderstood, writing in 1900:

... every one supposes that the railway is being built with the only object that a human being may be able to get in at Cairo and get out at Cape Town. This is, of course, ridiculous. The object is to cut Africa through the centre, and the railway will pick up trade all along the route. The junctions to the East and West coasts, which will occur in the future, will be outlets for the traffic obtained along the route of the line as it passes through the centre of Africa. At any rate, up to Bulawayo, where I am now, it has been a payable undertaking, and I still think it will continue to be so as we advance into the far interior. We propose now to go on and cross the Zambesi just below the Victoria Falls.<sup>6</sup>

Rhodes was not a man to pause for breath. Rather than wait until the bridge was finished, he instructed track to be laid in advance on the northern side from Livingstone to Kalomo, and even sent the component parts for a small locomotive across the river on an aerial runway. The Victoria Falls bridge was a crucial link in the route of the railway north. Surprisingly, Rhodes never visited the Falls, yet dared to envisage building a 'bridge across the Zambesi where the trains, as they pass, will catch the spray of the Falls'.

Ewart Grogan and Arthur Sharp, writing in 1900, believed that 'the concept ... was bold, to the point of arrogance: to build a modern steel bridge supported by a single slender span here, in the middle of the deserted jungle.'<sup>7</sup> Rhodes, who died in 1902, never lived to see his bridge completed; a magnificent structure of which he would have been justly proud, an emblem of the Empire and a vital stepping-stone in his Cape to Cairo vision.



Bridge location map (by H.F. Varian)<sup>8</sup>

Boarding his train, Claude would have wanted a good view of the Falls and would have known of Rhodes' insistence that the bridge should be positioned close to the mighty cascade of water so that passengers could feel the spray. This had meant spanning the river just below the 'Boiling Pot'. As Claude crossed the Zambezi toward Livingstone, the newly-designated capital of Northern Rhodesia, he could contemplate the imminent start of his new life. Just now he could sit back and immerse himself in the sublime, spectacular surroundings unfolding around him, and recall the words of David Livingstone as he had looked down for the first time into the churning chasm:

No one can imagine the beauty of the view from anything witnessed in England. It had never been seen before by European eyes; but scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, John Murray, 1857

<sup>2</sup> Livingstone, *ibid.*



*The Victoria Falls Bridge in 2014 (Author in foreground)*

- <sup>3</sup> James Chapman (1831–72) had been near the Chobe in 1853 and, like Livingstone and Oswell on their first visit to the region two years previously, had been told stories of the Falls. In *Travels in the Interior of South Africa*, Bell & Daldy, 1868, he writes of his later arrival at the Falls: ‘Here the panorama first broke upon us in all its grandeur, and I could not avoid the reflection that, could I but have known of the magnificent sight I lost in August 1853, after being very near it, and how nearly I had forestalled Dr. Livingstone’s discovery, I should certainly have made another effort at that time to accomplish the object.’
- <sup>4</sup> Thomas Baines, born at King’s Lynn, Norfolk in 1820, was well known as an artist, explorer, cartographer and naturalist. He was a member of Livingstone’s Zambezi Expedition (1857–59) and spent most of his life in southern Africa. He died in 1875 in Durban.
- <sup>5</sup> Peter Roberts, *Sun, Steel & Spray – A History of the Victoria Falls Bridge*, Victoria Falls Bridge Company, 2011 and B. White, *The Trailmakers, The story of Rhodesia Railways*, Supplement to *Illustrated Life*, Rhodesia, 31 May 1973.
- <sup>6</sup> Introduction by C. J. Rhodes in Ewart S. Grogan and Arthur H. Sharp, *From the Cape to Cairo: the first traverse of Africa from south to north*, Hurst and Blackett, 1900
- <sup>7</sup> Grogan and Sharp, *ibid.* and Mark Strage, *Cape to Cairo*, Jonathan Cape, 1973
- <sup>8</sup> H. F. Varian, *Some African Milestones*, George Ronald, Oxford, 1953
- <sup>9</sup> Livingstone, *ibid.* (Chapter 26)