

**AFRICAN HISTORIES AND MODERNITIES**

# **VICTORIA FALLS AND COLONIAL IMAGINATION IN BRITISH SOUTHERN AFRICA**

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**Turning Water into Gold**

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**Andrea L. Arrington-Sirois**



# African Histories and Modernities

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Andrea L. Arrington-Sirois

# Victoria Falls and Colonial Imagination in British Southern Africa

Turning Water into Gold

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Andrea L. Arrington-Sirois  
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*For Tom,  
I finally present to you my “little book.” Thank you for making it possible.*

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Victoria Falls and surrounding region. *Source:* Copyright Andrea L. Arrington-Sirois



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## Introduction: Toward a Transcolonial History of Victoria Falls

“Half a century hence Livingstone is supposed to cover 30 square miles, and we all hope the writer will prove a true prophet.”<sup>1</sup>

L.F. Moore, the editor of the lively newspaper printed in Livingstone, North Western Rhodesia was also one of the frontier town’s strongest supporters. Moore was a resident of North Western Rhodesia in its earliest days, when the territory was still growing into its status as a new British South Africa Company (BSACo) holding.<sup>2</sup> He first lived on the northern bank of the Zambezi at Old Drift, the original white settlement near Victoria Falls, and then resettled in Livingstone, North Western Rhodesia. Moore, like his fellow Old Drifters and Livingstonians, was drawn to Victoria Falls because he believed the site was destined to be a premier tourism destination and he hoped to capitalize on what he expected to be explosive development around the Falls. Less than a decade after his

<sup>1</sup>“Livingstone Going Ahead,” *South Africa*, January 4, 1908, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup>North Western Rhodesia was first defined as a geographical place in 1890–1891 when the Lozi’s Chief Lewanika and the BSACo signed the Lochner Concession and then the BSACo administered it as a charter colony. Its solidification as a BSACo protectorate occurred when a series of tighter concessions and agreements were signed in the late 1890s. North Western Rhodesia was often conflated with Lewanika’s territory known as Barotseland (other spellings include Barotziland, Loziland, and Barotsiland), but in fact, the borders of North Western Rhodesia did not simply conform to Barotseland’s borders (as elusive as they were). For a contemporary point of reference, the Western Province of Zambia is roughly the same area formerly known as North Western Rhodesia.



arrival to the banks of the Zambezi, L.F. Moore became one of the loudest critics of BSACo rule in North Western Rhodesia. In 1907, Moore wrote a description of how he envisioned Livingstone in the mid-twentieth century. He predicted:

The new capital of North-Western Rhodesia is going ahead...Half a century hence Livingstone is supposed to cover 30 square miles, and we all hope the writer will prove a true prophet. The Zambezi is covered with every description of craft, and travellers and tourists from America, Europe, Australia, and the East promenade or drive or shop in the grand esplanades by the river. The visitor is able to go up and down the Gorge below the Falls in lifts, while the Gorge is lined with mills, factories, and workshops of mammoth proportions.”<sup>3</sup>

By the time he wrote his vision of Livingstone’s future as a tourism and industrial hub, Moore had already engaged in tense public debates with the BSACo and was clearly concerned about the colonial administration’s goals for its new holding. Despite an increasingly hostile relationship with the BSACo, Moore’s grand hopes for Livingstone’s development demonstrates that Moore never swayed from the vision he had for his beloved town and he remained optimistic about Livingstone’s prospects.

Tellingly, Moore’s hopes for Livingstone focused on Victoria Falls as the central feature of life not just in Livingstone, but also North Western Rhodesia. Victoria Falls compelled many white settlers to move to this African frontier. That push by white entrepreneurs into this frontier landscape accelerated the colonization process and influenced the discourse about colonial goals and policies in the region. The Falls inspired enthusiasm and ambition among these would-be entrepreneurs who hoped to build a modern tourist destination as an oasis of western civilization in what they perceived to be an untamed frontier. Moore and his fellow pioneers were not the first, nor would they be the last to be drawn to Victoria Falls and this unique geographical feature symbolized the high expectations for British expansion into this part of Africa shared by explorers, traders, missionaries, colonial administrators, investors, industrialists, journalists, white settlers, African leaders, African workers, and members of the British public. In many ways and for many people, Victoria Falls became an icon of the British Empire in southern and central Africa.

<sup>3</sup>“Livingstone Going Ahead,” *South Africa*, January 4, 1908, p. 45.

This book focuses on Victoria Falls and the symbolism imagined and attached to the site as the British Empire expanded into the African frontier in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Falls simultaneously represented the end to the beginning, as a demarcation of the most remote interior borders of British possessions already claimed by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the end, as it marked the opening of the last sections of southern and central Africa available for British expansion in the early twentieth century. There is thus a provocative juxtaposition in the colonial imagination, as Britons and other Europeans associated Victoria Falls with the untamed frontier in deepest, darkest Africa while also considering it the launching pad for a bigger, more modern British South Africa. The geographical delineation itself was a problem, as Victoria Falls marked the ephemeral space where southern Africa gave way to central Africa and where the Middle Zambezi Valley blurred into the Upper Zambezi Valley. Local African populations made competing claims of guardianship and spiritual utilization of the cataract, inscribing their own mixed messages about the Falls into the increasingly discordant vision of the site. Victoria Falls was situated squarely and multi-dimensionally in a contested terrain and as a remarkable feature of that uniquely contradictory landscape the Falls embodied and inspired imperial discourse and ambitions.

The consequences of these competing visions and interpretations of Victoria Falls were conflicting agendas and oppositional ideas on how best to proceed with British expansion at and north of the Zambezi. In 1898, an article lauding the commercial prospects of the region declared, "...now that the territory has been ceded to the British South Africa Company... there is reason to suppose that...the newly-acquired territory will be the scene of considerable activity on the part of the new owners."<sup>4</sup> Yet just a year later the Duke of Abercorn, then president of the BSACo used more measured and less clear language when he proclaimed, "The British flag must for ever hereafter float from Capetown to the Zambesi,"<sup>5</sup> suggesting the Zambezi (and Victoria Falls) as an endpoint of British activities in the region. The mixed messages and occasional lack of enthusiasm for British expansion north of the Zambezi influenced historians to overlook

<sup>4</sup>"British Central Africa. Commercial Possibilities of Barotseland," *Aberdeen Journal*, November 9, 1898, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>"The British South Africa Company. Meeting in London," *Manchester Evening News*, December 14, 1899, p. 3.

the significance of Victoria Falls. One historian of the BSACo dismissed the significance of the company's activities at and beyond Victoria Falls, stating "[H]eavy expenditures in Mashonaland made it impossible for the company to spend much money north of the Zambezi."<sup>6</sup> Lack of financial resources did not however mean that North Western Rhodesia was off the radar of the BSACo and industrialists and by the turn of the twentieth century, the BSACo and private investors raised a huge amount of capital to begin developing Victoria Falls into a hydroelectric power source. This study challenges the region's historiographical lack of attention to Victoria Falls' power and demonstrates why the site be considered more than simply a geographical point of interest.

Historians have overlooked the scholarly contributions made possible by a closer and more critical analysis of Victoria Falls and its relationship to development in North Western Rhodesia. In his study on the Tonga Plateau economy during British rule, Kenneth P. Vickery includes significant mention of the town of Livingstone and its white settlers, but aside from identifying the Falls to indicate a physical location he offers no consideration on the symbolic and physical importance of the site.<sup>7</sup> Even L.H. Gann, an authority on Northern Rhodesia's history, failed to contextualize Victoria Falls beyond a mark on the map. His characterization of the town of Livingstone was markedly different from the portrayal of the town in my work. He described, "Livingstone was small, forlorn, and with an atrocious climate in the hot season...; it possessed few means of entertainment and no attraction beyond the Zambezi and the magnificent Victoria Falls a few miles away."<sup>8</sup> While it may be true there was not much that could compete aesthetically with Victoria Falls, the white settlers and African migrants in the town created within a very short period of time a vibrant rural cosmopolitan environment in this frontier space.<sup>9</sup> Most of

<sup>6</sup> John S. Galbraith, *Crown and Charter: The Early Years of the British South Africa Company* (Berkeley, CA, and London: University of California Press, 1974), p. 204.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth P. Vickery, *Black and White in Southern Zambia: The Tonga Plateau Economy and British Imperialism, 1890–1939* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> L.H. Gann, *The Birth of a Plural Society: Northern Rhodesia 1894–1914* (Manchester and New York: University of Manchester Press, 1958), p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that in a subsequent study, Gann gives a bit more credit to Livingstone's livability and atmosphere, conceding, "Livingstone was the only settlement in Northern Rhodesia which could boast of a permanent newspaper, and was the centre of whatever European political activity was going on. As in all other Rhodesian townships, a large variety of different voluntary societies sprang up to cater for sporting and social purposes...As far as entertainment was concerned, Livingstonians were thrown on their own resources; there was

the earliest white settlers saw great promise in Victoria Falls' future as a modern tourist destination. Industrialists who followed with their grand schemes for the extension of the railway and establishment of a hydroelectric station were not as quick to dismiss this area's potential.

This study places Victoria Falls as a central focus of analysis, which allows for a close examination of the transcolonial process of British expansion that often centered on this fixed geographical site. Perhaps better than any other sub-Saharan landscape feature, Victoria Falls serves as a clear example of why colonial African history cannot be simplified into a colony-by-colony historical approach. Even after the BSACo formally acquired territory north of the Zambezi, the Falls continued to be contested terrain as it served as a natural border between North Western Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia. It is impossible to write the history of this important site as only a part of North Western Rhodesia's history, or as a component solely in Southern Rhodesia's past. Indeed, I argue that to analyze the history of colonial development around Victoria Falls is to analyze the history of British Southern Africa. This special place in the African landscape reflected and stimulated numerous interests of multiple colonial actors from within and outside of that particular territory and cannot be limited to being analyzed as part of only one colony's history.

Furthermore, this transcolonial analytical approach illuminates the need for an expanded consideration of Africa's colonial history. As transnational approaches to historical studies become increasingly popular, historians of Africa's colonial period may do well to think beyond colonial borders to better understand localized policies, ideologies, and realities.<sup>10</sup> The British in

of course plenty of sport... there was drink and politics, and there were home-made variety shows." L.H. Gann, *A History of Northern Rhodesia: Early Days to 1953* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), p. 140.

<sup>10</sup>Of course, some historians argue that the trend toward global history or transnational history minimizes the importance of nation-state history in the postcolonial African context, to the detriment of individual African countries. Toyin Falola, for example, argues "global history, as a narrative of Western power and its expansion, provincializes history, turning the national history of one great power into the metanarrative of global history. National histories of Africa represent one of the powerful counters to the attempts to provincialize history." Toyin Falola, "Writing and teaching national history in Africa in an era of global history," *Africa Spectrum* 40, no. 3 (2005), 500. I would argue that in the case of Africa's colonial history, it is of crucial importance that historians understand how the local fit into the regional or imperial goals of the colonizers. A territory like North Western Rhodesia, as this book demonstrates, was viewed by some as a backwater dead end, while many others (administrators, farmers, settlers, industrialists, traders, African leaders, and African laborers) consid-

southern Africa were intent on establishing authority territory by territory, but also had much more ambitious goals for the British Empire in Africa. Thus, each colonial holding or territory served as one piece in a larger, more complex and ambitious puzzle. This was an evolutionary process; a close examination of the twists and turns in the development at and around Victoria Falls reveals the dynamic nature of colonial expansion, reminding us that vision and plans were never static or complete. Often, colonial history is analyzed in a vacuum, where the local is the most important point of reference. This study on the importance of Victoria Falls, a celebrated anomaly in the African frontier's landscape, to the larger aspirations of the many actors involved in making the British Empire in southern and central Africa offers compelling evidence that a transcolonial approach expands our understanding of the colonization process. In their recent book on the Cahora Bassa Dam on the Zambezi in Mozambique, Allen Isaacman and Barbara Isaacman develop a compelling case of how the damming activities in Mozambique in the late colonial, early postcolonial era utilized local resources to open up exportable resources (in this case, electricity) to meet the needs of the greater southern African region.<sup>11</sup> Transcolonial and transnational development out of the Zambezi did not start in the late colonial era; the processes and disruptions affecting local environments and communities along the Zambezi started much earlier, as formal colonial rule spread to the banks and beyond of the river. In this sense, *Turning Water into Gold* offers a prequel to the development described at the Cahora Bassa and other like projects along the Zambezi that filtered resources to the south.

By looking beyond the borders of North Western Rhodesia, we learn more about how this seemingly inconsequential BSACo holding actually provoked hot debates about the future of the territory, but also over the trajectory of the British Empire in south central Africa. Victoria Falls, as part of the much-referenced Zambezi River, was undoubtedly the most popular and provocative feature of North Western Rhodesia's landscape. This book demonstrates that Victoria Falls inspired discourse about industrialization, tourism development, land conservation, urbanization, African leadership, native rights, white settlers' rights, and African labor,

ered North Western Rhodesia as a critical addition to British South Africa and understood the provincial territory to be part of a bigger system of colonial development.

<sup>11</sup>Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Dams, Displacement and the Delusion of Development: Cahora Bassa and Its Legacies in Mozambique, 1965–2007* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013).

not just in a localized context but as regional concerns. Development in North Western Rhodesia for many years occurred as a natural consequence of increased tourist traffic and white settlement around Victoria Falls, thus ideas about the potential of North Western Rhodesia cannot be disentangled from the inspiration and aspiration sparked by the magnitude and perceived beauty of the waterfalls.

The periodization of the study, roughly 1855 to 1912, is reflective of my desire to capture the energy and fluidity of early colonialism and is supported by a rich collection of primary sources collected in archives in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and England and through ethnographic inquiries via oral interviews in Zambia and Zimbabwe.<sup>12</sup> With a site as provocative as Victoria Falls, there is much to contemplate about the dynamic and multi-layered visions for simultaneously preserving this magnificent feature of the landscape while also using it to spearhead a push for modernity and industrialization in the African frontier. The strongest focus is on the ten years before and after the turn of the twentieth century, when the Cape-to-Cairo dream dominated the imperial imagination and influenced BSACo strategic planning.<sup>13</sup> The sources employed are varied, from colonial periodicals, British newspapers, and South Africa-based magazines to engineering reports published in trade journals; explorers' travelogues, memoirs, and artwork to internal BSACo memos between London, South Africa, and North Western Rhodesia (and many stops in between); accounts from missionaries to letters written by and to Chief Lewanika; interviews with Tonga "old-timers" living near Victoria Falls to recent online discussions about hydroelectric power exports. A large part of the data is comprised of BSACo correspondence documents, in which administrative discourse about colonial expansion at and north of Victoria Falls abound, and *The Livingstone Mail* and British-based newspapers, where the British public and whites living in southern Africa aired their hopes and concerns about the future of British Southern Africa.

<sup>12</sup>Field work for this project was executed in 2003, 2005, 2006, and 2008. The consulted archives include the National Archives of Zambia, Livingstone Museum Archives, National Heritage Conservation Commission Archives (Zambia), National Archives of Zimbabwe, and the Public Records Office in London, England.

<sup>13</sup>As Thomas Pankenham asserts, "in short, the Cape to Cairo idea was not simply a pipe-dream...By 1888 it was seriously entertained by Salisbury as a way of meeting Britain's strategic imperatives at the Canal and at the Cape." Thomas Pankenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (New York: Avon Books, 1991), p. 341.

“SO STRANGE IT IS, THIS FAR AWAY HEART OF AFRICA:”<sup>14</sup>  
 LANDSCAPE AND COLONIAL IMAGINATION

There are few European discoveries in Africa that garnered as much publicity as David Livingstone’s heavily discussed visit to the grand waterfalls on the Zambezi River. On November 17, 1855, Livingstone reached the Falls and set into effect an intense enthrallment Britons and other Europeans developed for this unique element of the African landscape. Livingstone and the explorers who followed him portrayed through their writings, lectures, and artwork a vision of Victoria Falls as an exotic but significant center of Africa. It was imagined and depicted as the frontier; the place where Africa was most “African.” African expeditions contributed to the growing European curiosity about unknown lands and peoples and the public response to accounts of journeys to Victoria Falls exemplified the ever-entangling relationships between travel, mass publishing, and empire building. As William Beinart and Lotte Hughes explain, “From the mid-eighteenth century a particular kind of traveller did more than most to promote the natural potential of empire: those who combined touring with botany and other scientific, or quasi-scientific, enquiries...Since European expansion coincided with the development of print...the production and publication of texts became a by-product of travel.”<sup>15</sup> Certainly, visits to Victoria Falls spurred the growth of a large body of travelogues, as the site was often represented as the primary destination or apex of expeditions. Readers of these travel accounts were provided a seemingly unending stream of Victoria Falls imagery, and hype and the result was an increased fascination and interest in not only the waterfalls but also the frontier landscape beyond it.

Explorers, adventure sportsmen, missionaries, traders, and scientists provided some of the earliest published works that referenced Victoria Falls and these texts are what first brought the Falls to life in the British (and Western) imagination.<sup>16</sup> Each account offered detailed reports of the

<sup>14</sup>“Victoria Falls and the Cape to Cairo Railway,” *Nottingham Evening Post*, September 12, 1905, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup>William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 76–77.

<sup>16</sup>Just a few examples of these mid- to late-nineteenth century narratives include David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa: Including a Sketch of Sixteen Years’ Residence in the Interior of Africa* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1858); Francois Coillard, *On the Threshold of Central Africa: A Record of Twenty Years’ Pioneering Among the Barotsi of the Upper Zambezi*, 3rd ed. (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1971); William Charles Baldwin, *African Hunting and Adventure from Natal to the Zambezi* (London:

physical attributes of the Falls, but even more importantly, the writers produced flowery, and often rambling, descriptions of the landscape around the waterfalls in hopes of representing the scenery to an audience that, for the most part, would likely never get to see the site for themselves. The steady flow of early European visitors to Victoria Falls firmly entrenched the site as a fantastical and captivating component of popular British imagination.<sup>17</sup> Although the first European visitors debated the potential usefulness of the Falls, the common theme in the writing produced about the waterfalls was that a grander sight could not be found in Africa and that it was one of the most breathtaking and evocative sites one could imagine.<sup>18</sup> It is no wonder that such writing helped stimulate interest in British northward expansion to the Zambezi and beyond.

Despite a rich history of travel writing, there is a dearth of scholarly studies focused on Victoria Falls. This is surprising, given how important Victoria Falls was and continues to be as a center of urbanization, economic development, industrialization, and political activity. For many

Richard Bentley and Son, 1894); Alfred Bertrand, *The Kingdom of the Barotsi, Upper Zambezia: A Voyage of Explorations in Africa Returning by the Victoria Falls, Matabeleland, the Transvaal, Natal, and the Cape*, trans. A.B. Miall (Cape Town, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, and Stellenbosch: J.C. Juta & Co., 1899); James Chapman, *Travels in the Interior of South Africa 1849–1863: Hunting and Trading Journeys from Natal to Walvis Bay & Visits to Lake Ngami & Victoria Falls*, Vol. 2 (Cape Town: A.A. Belkema, 1971); A. St. Hill Gibbons, *Africa from South to North Through Marotseland*, Vol. 1 (London and New York: John Lane and The Bodley Head, 1904); D.W. Stirke, *Barotseland: Eight Years among the Barotse* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969); and John Kirk, *The Zambezi Journal and Letters of Doctor John Kirk, 1858–63*, Vol. 2, ed. R. Foskett (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1965).

<sup>17</sup>Visitors to Victoria Falls in the mid- to late-nineteenth century seemed intent on publicizing their travels and the site itself to a captive European audience. Art exhibits displaying sketches and photographs of the Falls toured around Great Britain and other parts of Europe. Travel accounts were published by the handful, and newspapers reprinted excerpts and reviews that were eagerly read by an increasingly intrigued audience. The Royal Geographical Society in particular popularized Victoria Falls by sponsoring public lectures, art and model exhibits, and publications about the waterfalls. Newspaper announcements of events like the June 1874 ‘conversazione,’ hosted by the president of the society, were common. This particular event, for example, included “a model of the Victoria Falls of the Zambesi...Near to this was a miniature of Livingstone, and the instruments he had carried with him on his last journey.” Clearly, Victoria Falls occupied a special place in the British imperial imagination. “Sir Bartle Frere’s Conversazione,” *Edinburgh Evening News*, June 11, 1874, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup>David Livingstone, for example. In *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* Livingstone extolls the beauty of the landscape at Victoria Falls. For other examples of nineteenth century travel writing that emphasizes the beauty of Victoria Falls and its environs, see footnote 16.



years around the turn of the twentieth century, Victoria Falls was at the center of discussions about the future of the British Empire in Africa, yet the site earns few mentions in historical studies. The historical studies that do exist were often published as sponsored projects by various government entities, such as *The Victoria Falls: A Handbook to the Victoria Falls, the Batoka Gorge and Part of the Upper Zambezi River*, edited by B.M. Fagan and published in 1964 by Northern Rhodesia's Commission for the Preservation of Natural and Historical Monuments and Relics. This narrative provides a survey of the land and information about the local African populations, along with numerous illustrations. D.W. Phillipson's edited collection *Mosi-oa-Tunya: A Handbook to the Victoria Falls Region*, first published in 1975, offers a rich overview of many aspects of the waterfalls: from the geographical and geological formation of the site to the archaeology around the Falls and the area during the Stone Age and Iron Age, as well as short essays on early European exploration and settlement at Livingstone. The collection extends into botany and zoology as well, with chapters about the flora and fauna around Victoria Falls, and it ends with a discussion of how to conserve the environment around the Falls. There are also other studies written by geologists and geographers about the Falls, but lacking in the literature is an in-depth consideration about the historical significance of Victoria Falls.

Until recently, Victoria Falls served as little more than an occasional footnote in the Zambian and Zimbabwean historical literature and even less frequently in southern African studies. The 2009 publication of JoAnn McGregor's seminal text *Crossing the Zambezi: The Politics of Landscape on a Central African Frontier* definitively places Victoria Falls for the first time as an analytically important component of the region's history. Her study examines African and European appropriation of the Zambezi over the past 150 years, with a focus on the river from Victoria Falls to Lake Kariba, with special focus on the claims of "river people" (local African populations) within the changing political landscape.<sup>19</sup> McGregor considers the various, and often, competing political uses of the river in this African frontier as a source of ongoing discourse and stimulus for African

<sup>19</sup> McGregor's study, which also uses Victoria Falls as an important marker in the frontier, focuses on the riparian communities and activities that flow downstream from Victoria Falls in an east/northeast trajectory, into what she identifies as the "mid-Zambezi." My study, however, focuses on Victoria Falls and the Upper Zambezi Valley, or what was known as Barotseland during the early colonial period and is now the Western Province of Zambia.

resistance during the colonial period and extends her study into the post-colonial era to analyze the significance of the Zambezi as a national border claimed by both Zambia and Zimbabwe. With Victoria Falls as one of the sites used to define her study, McGregor's text emphasizes the significance of this geographical marker in migration and settlement patterns.

In her chapter on science and colonization, McGregor writes that Victoria Falls "...became a focal point—a 'site of memory'—in the naturalization and legitimation of British imperial expansion and rule over the Rhodesias and of white settlement. The new political uses of the landscape at the Victoria Falls popularized a genealogy for Europeans in central Africa...."<sup>20</sup> *Crossing the Zambezi* offers the strongest critical examination of Victoria Falls to date and uncovers fertile ground for further analysis on the importance of this "site of memory." Building on this, my work places Victoria Falls even more to the center of the colonial discourse: using a different data set, I argue that Victoria Falls became a symbol of British Southern Africa's aspirations and helped solidify an agenda of how northward expansion was crucial to fulfilling the Cape-to-Cairo dream and the answer to several problems already plaguing British holdings south of the Zambezi.<sup>21</sup>

McGregor's work is one of a few recent entries in the southern African historiography that uses landscape as an analytical lens. Scholars increasingly understand the need to account for how the landscape inspired imperial agendas and dictated colonial machinations in the region. Jeremy Foster's inspired text *Washed with Sun: Landscape and the Making of White South Africa* opens with his observation that "the nation of South Africa has become known for its turbulent political history as well as the distinctiveness of its landscapes, yet relatively little attention has been paid to

<sup>20</sup> JoAnn McGregor, *Crossing the Zambezi: The Politics of Landscape on a Central African Frontier* (Suffolk, UK and Avondale, Harare, Zimbabwe: James Currey and Weaver Press, 2009), p. 82.

<sup>21</sup> In particular, Victoria Falls marked the opening of a region that was seen as a possible answer to labor shortages and industrial power needs, and opened up the possibility of further profits through commercial farming and mining. Although in the early days of colonial expansion, the BSACo was reluctant to pursue a strong presence north of the Zambezi, white settlement at Victoria Falls and Lewanika's insistence to bring the British flag to Barotseland necessitated increasing BSACo activities in the area. By the early twentieth century, the BSACo indicated high expectations of how North Western Rhodesia could serve the British Empire in southern Africa.

how these two factors might have been connected.”<sup>22</sup> This brilliantly obvious critique of South African historiography extends beyond South Africa. Land and landscape and its perceived value, so often the motivating force behind precolonial and colonial migration and settlement patterns, are often pushed to the periphery or are left unexplored altogether in historical studies. It would seem then that Foster’s deduction that “[W]herever history and mythology are used to construct a common past, landscape has the potential to stand for an imaginary shared space in which the great story of nationhood has unfolded, rendering it timeless and indisputable”<sup>23</sup> can also be applied to colonial claims to landscape. As white settlers made proprietary claims to Victoria Falls, invoking, as McGregor suggests, a historical genealogy based on European explorers’ history at the site, we clearly see how history and mythology were used to justify and propel the European appropriation of this feature of the African landscape.

Such claims to land were intensely important to the making of British Southern Africa. Foster’s book offers a compelling case for how imagined ownership of land and the subsequent appropriation of the land created a distinct aspect of the white South African experience and personality. Anthropologist David McDermott Hughes explores the extent of how important white claims to land are to the colonization process in *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging*. Hughes convincingly argues that colonization is not just about usurping African claims and connections to land, but rather relies upon the ability of white settlers to “convince themselves of their fit with the landscape of settlement.”<sup>24</sup> Like Foster and McGregor, Hughes also emphasizes the imaginative quality of this process. Whites had to convince themselves of the legitimacy of their presence in Africa. In this regard, Hughes asserts “[T]he savannah pushed whites’ imagination to its limits and beyond...Since they could belong comfortably to African society, such whites sought to belong to African ecology.”<sup>25</sup> In order to completely buy into their own agenda, whites at Victoria Falls had to imagine a historical precedent for their appropriation of the site and convince themselves that they had as much justification in

<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Foster, *Washed with Sun: Landscape and the Making of White South Africa* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> David McDermott Hughes, *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

claiming the waterfalls as anyone else. White settlers created a sense of belonging based on their connection to the land, not to the people.

Both Hughes and McGregor focus their analyses on the Zambezi River as a place, though of course rivers are more than one fixed place and constantly in flux. Though the emphasis of my study is on Victoria Falls as an important point in the southern African landscape, it is worth contemplating why the Zambezi and other rivers earn such concentrated analytical attention. Meredith McKittrick suggests that in precolonial southern Africa, rivers, as important sources of water, transportation, communication, and trade, had incalculable value attached to them; thus rivers were at the core of political, cultural, and economic activities. It is then unsurprising that Europeans would also attach such value to river systems. Access to water was a priority in places where the floodplains of riparian systems gave way to semiarid land.<sup>26</sup> This description of the extreme value of rivers applies to Zambezi and its banks, where water security and navigability was of utmost importance. But McKittrick's concept of riparian "value" can be pushed even further. As my study shows, Victoria Falls and the Zambezi were valuable resources not only in physical terms, but also symbolically to Africans and Europeans alike. Different parties promoting various agendas asserted guardianship of the Falls and the river near the Falls during the early colonization process. White settlers and the Lozi aristocracy, perhaps the least justified in their claims to the Falls, viewed the appropriation of this part of the riparian system as an important component to emerging dominant in the transitioning political landscape.

McGregor posits that landscape itself was changed through colonial projects, inscribing new symbolism and materiality determined according to European cultural, technological, and political values.<sup>27</sup> Jocelyn Alexander's *The Unsettled Land: State-making & the Politics of Land in Zimbabwe 1893–2003* employs the concept of "unsettled land" as a metaphor for the various conceptualizations of landscape and the upheavals and disruptions provoked by colonial land policies. The concept of land as both place and symbol provides an opening into understanding Zimbabwe in the last century, and it becomes clear through her analysis that in this context, "[S]ettling the land was fundamentally about building and legitimis-

<sup>26</sup>Meredith McKittrick, "Colonial Backwater: International Boundaries and Political Identities on the Kavongo River," Unpublished paper circulated at Emory University Seminar in African History, Culture, and Society, October 13, 2005, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup>McGregor 2009, p. 2.

ing the state, and its successes and failures profoundly shaped Zimbabwe's political allegiances, identities and social relations."<sup>28</sup> Both of these scholars establish a strong case for analyzing landscape as more than just the backdrop to history and demonstrate through their studies how landscape activates change and is changed in both physical and metaphorical ways.

The African landscape is much more than a neutral setting where history unfolded. In southern Africa particularly, land can be examined as an historical actor: landscape is dynamic and multi-dimensional, and it evoked numerous and often competing responses and inspires disparate visions of past claims and future usage. Victoria Falls at the turn of the twentieth century represented much more than a singular geographic anomaly. Instead, it was a site that generated enthusiasm for British expansion to and beyond the cataract among explorers, missionaries, traders, white entrepreneurs, BSACo and government administrators, industrialists, commercial farmers, scientists, and a captivated British audience in the metropole. Africans too were drawn to Victoria Falls, long before any European ever laid eyes on it. Various local populations in the Middle Zambezi Valley used the site to meet their physical and spiritual needs. The site inspired Lozi chief Lewanika and African laborers to imagine new claims and uses for the Falls to fit into the transforming political economy of the early twentieth century. The fact that this one site inspired so many divergent groups to develop multiple visions for the future of British Southern Africa at and beyond the Falls is testament to its iconic status and to the need to give the site proper consideration in a transcolonial context. Although this study focuses on Victoria Falls as a stimulus for varying colonial agendas and as a contested site, in a broader sense, it joins the push of previous scholarship to give landscape more than a cursory glance.

### “ALL ABOARD FOR THE VICTORIA FALLS!”<sup>29</sup> IMAGINING BRITISH SOUTHERN AFRICA

In 1929, a South Africa Travel Bureau advertisement published in *National Geographic* declared that tourists would discover that “South Africa is one of the most modern and progressive sections of the world...”<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, the choice of the word “section” rather than the less precise term “country,” or

<sup>28</sup> Jocelyn Alexander, *The Unsettled Land: State-making & the Politics of Land in Zimbabwe, 1893–2003*, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> “Cape Town to the Victoria Falls: Incidents on the Luxurious Railway Journey,” *South Africa*, January 20, 1906, p. 174.

<sup>30</sup> “Native South Africa,” South Africa Travel Bureau ad. *National Geographic*.

even “union” or “dominion” indicates that the travel agency looked beyond formal borders when trying to draw visitors to South Africa. Indeed, the advertisement continued with its promotion of a transborder travel experience, informing would-be visitors that although there was much to see within South Africa proper, it was all “within easy access for the tourist, as are all the other matchless wonders of South Africa...great Victoria Falls, the ancient Ruins of Zimbabwe...”<sup>31</sup> Even as late as 1929, when the Southern Rhodesian side of the Falls had all but claimed victory in capitalizing on tourist traffic to Victoria Falls, the South Africa Travel Bureau appropriated the site as a way to draw more tourists to this part of the world. The borders between Southern and Northern Rhodesia and South Africa faded into the landscape, and a more blurred and undefined regional connectivity emerged. The advertisement exemplifies the transborder or transcolonial nature of British Southern Africa.

This study situates Victoria Falls as a dynamic site—not just as a fixed place in the riparian border between Southern Rhodesia and North Western Rhodesia, but as an important symbol in the greater British Southern Africa imagination. Of course, there was no singular image or vision for British Southern Africa, so there were often competing ideas of what the goal for British colonial expansion should be and how the final product should look. This analysis examines multiple imagined possibilities for British Southern Africa, with the understanding that administrators, entrepreneurs, African leaders, African laborers, missionaries, and travelers all had different visions of British colonization in the region. Throughout the course of this book, Victoria Falls serves as the center of analysis in multiple historical dimensions of imperial and colonial expansion in this region of the continent. Chapter 2 establishes the precolonial context of the waterfalls with an overview of how African populations utilized the Falls as part of their physical, political, and spiritual activities. It also examines responses of early European visitors who were responsible for not only publicizing the existence of the site but also helped imprint Victoria Falls in the imperial psyche of the British public. Although it was unclear to the early visitors how the waterfalls would be used in British expansion efforts, it became clear that it was a part of the landscape worthy of British appropriation and exploitation. Chapter 3 reinterprets the actions and motivations of Chief Lewanika of Barotseland, as he invoked Lozi claims to the people and resources at and near Victoria Falls as a way to fulfill his alliance-building ambitions of bringing the British north of

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.