

# Navigating the Congo



The Angus Library and Archive

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## ***Introduction***

Europeans first arrived on the Congo River in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, establishing trading relations with the well-established Kongo kingdom. European colonialism did not take hold until the 18<sup>th</sup> century in what became known as the 'Scramble for Africa', fuelled by the growing demands of the transatlantic slave trade.

The land surrounding the Congo River came under the control of Portugal, Belgium and France. What had begun as mutually profitable commercial trading was soon replaced by exploitation of the land and its peoples. It was in this climate that Baptist missionaries found themselves entering the Congo, both participating in the colonial ideals and regimes while also fighting against the atrocities that they witnessed.

In 1878 the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) invited the Rev. Thomas Comber and the Rev. George Grenfell to undertake an exploratory journey to the Congo, establishing a BMS presence in the region.

Featuring artefacts, navigational equipment, maps, photographs, personal letters and diaries, *Navigating the Congo* explores the history of non-conformist involvement in the Congo River regions during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

By looking at the collections held in The Angus Library and Archive, the exhibition seeks to bring to light the relationships that developed between Baptist missionaries and the Kongo people during the period of European colonialism and some of the challenges faced in navigating this history.



**1. Nameplate and memento from the steam ship *Peace*, 1882–1884 and blueprint of a BMS stern-wheel launch manufactured by W. Sisson & Co Limited, Gloucester, 1910.**



The steam ship *Peace* was launched on the Upper Congo River in June 1884. It was the brainchild of Robert Arthington, a wealthy Baptist who donated £4,000 to the BMS in 1880 to explore the Upper Congo with a steam ship. Assembled by George Grenfell with people from the Cameroons, the ship made journeys along the Congo for many years. The BMS continued to commission steam ships for use in the British colonies using the same stern-wheel design shown in the blueprint manufactured by W Sisson & Co.

**2. Sextant, mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century.**



Sextants were vital pieces of navigational equipment during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, helping explorers to plot their latitude. Using the stars as reference points along with celestial charts and an almanac, the sextant would determine the user's position by measuring the angle between the celestial body and the horizon. Also used in coastal navigation, this example from Grenfell's archive would have helped in his navigation and mapping of the Congo region.

### 3. Chronometer, manufactured by Morris Tobias, London, mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Chronometers were essential aids to determine longitude when navigating at sea by providing a very accurate reading of time at a fixed reference point, such as the Greenwich meridian. Local time could be measured by observing the sunrise, and the difference between the readings used to calculate the explorer's longitudinal position. Taken from the Grenfell archive, this chronometer would have helped Grenfell navigate his journeys to and around the Congo.



### 4. Hypsometric thermometers, manufactured by L. Casella, London, late 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Hypsometric thermometers were used to determine height above sea level by measuring the boiling temperature of water at different heights. The changing boiling points are a result of the difference in air pressure the higher one is above sea level. These specially crafted thermometers, with their apparatus, were used by Grenfell and other explorers to plot the height of mountains and hills.

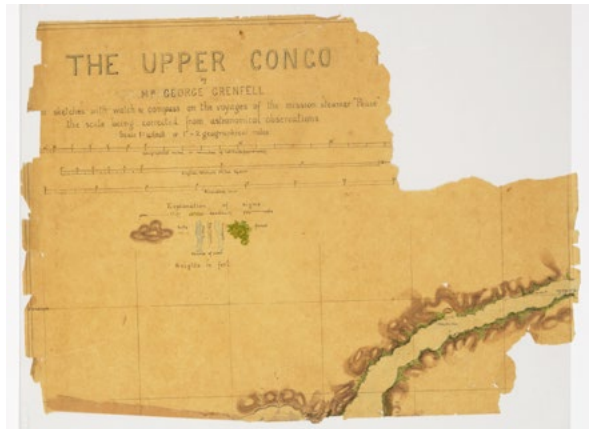
## 5. Diaries of the Rev. George Grenfell, 1885–1899.



The six diaries of George Grenfell cover many of the years between 1885 and 1899. They encompass the Lunda Expedition, commissioned by the Belgian King to arrange the delimitation of the Lunda region, and tell of daily life on the expeditions. This includes the natural hazards encountered in the Congo while navigating the

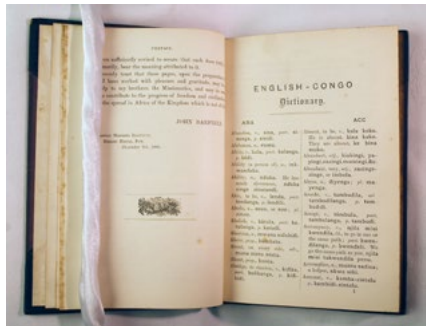
river, such as shooting snakes onboard ship, accounts of peoples' health and his time spent fixing mechanical problems on the ships.

## 6. Upper Congo River working papers, drawings and maps by the Rev. George Grenfell, 1884-1889.



The papers, drawings and maps created by Grenfell over these five years show his dedication and skill in cartography. Using graph paper, Grenfell undertook surveys of the river between Leopoldville and Stanley Falls using the steam ships *Peace* and *Goodwill*. Working these papers into coloured drawings and then printed maps, Grenfell also wrote an accompanying booklet describing the river's many features. These were later published by the Royal Geographical Society in 1902.

## 7. *English-Congo and Congo-English Dictionary*, Henry Craven and John Barfield, 1883.



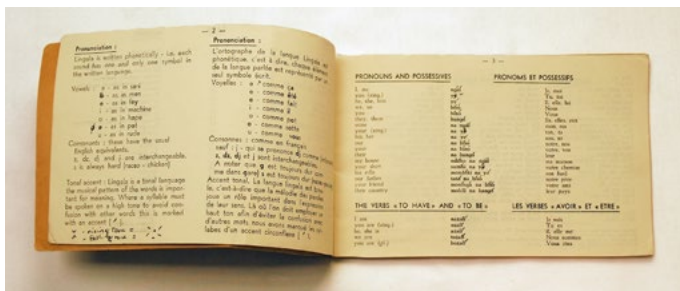
This text is one of the earlier examples of missionary efforts to both learn and record oral traditions of Kongo languages. The documenting of linguistic practices was a central element of missionary activities, as it created a direct channel of communication between the local people and Europeans, allowing them to pass on their Christian teachings.

## 8. *Comparative handbook of Congo languages*, H. W. Stapleton, 1903 and *A grammar of the Lomongo languages*, E. A. and L. Ruskin, 1934.

The peoples of the Congo do not speak a single language. These texts, written in the style of Latin primers, contain the basics of nine principal Congolese languages and highlight the importance of direct communication in the activities of the missionaries.

## 9. *An English-Lingala-French phrase book*, J. F. Carrington, c.1960.

This phrase book, which includes translations of the Lingala language in both English and French, showcases the linguistic pragmatism of



missionaries in the Congo. The Belgian colonisation of the Congo meant that French speakers, as well as English speakers, were present in the Congo. A phrase book which encompassed both languages was therefore seen as beneficial for effective communication between the different nations. During the period of the Belgian Congo, Lingala was used for administrative purposes in an attempt to create a vehicular language that could be used among all Congo peoples.



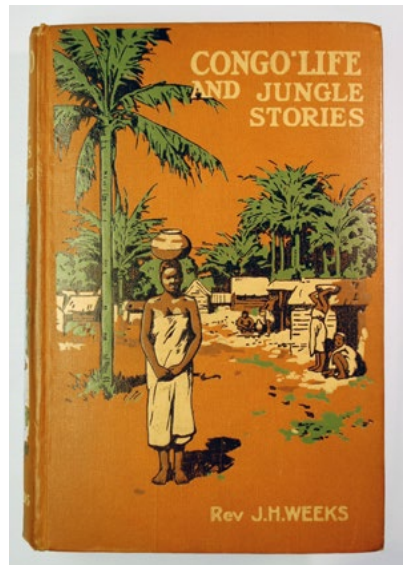
## 10. Photographs taken by Baptist missionaries, late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Photos taken by missionaries such as the Rev. George Grenfell, the Rev. James Davidson and the Rev. John H. Weeks illustrate elements of local daily life, traditions and culture, such as fishing, food preparation and scarification; as well as the missionaries' own lives and houses.



## 11. *Congo Life and Jungle Stories*, the Rev. John H. Weeks , 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, c.1911.

John H. Weeks was a Baptist missionary, amateur anthropologist and explorer. A member of the Anthropological Institute and the Folklore Society, he chronicled Congo life, traditions and folklore in the two-volume work *Congo Life and Jungle Stories*. The proverbs included in *Jungle Stories* explain habits, behaviour and customs of the Kongo people, as interpreted by Weeks, or take the form of moral fables. These fables were gathered by the teachers and boys at Wathen Mission School in Ngombe Lutete.



## 12. Spears and Weapons, late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The use of spears and weapons in the Congo was not restricted to hunting, fishing and fighting. These items would also have a role in ceremonies, often being prestige possessions and carried by men to enhance and confirm their status. Metal was a very important and valuable commodity in Africa and iron spearheads were also used as a form of currency.



**Spear/Javelin** - Iron and wood

**Short Sword** - Leather-bound scabbard, with a bulbous tip

**Knife and Sheath** - Iron knife and sheath made from wood and hide

**Throwing knife** - Iron and wood, with carved blade



### 13. Large Knife or Sword, late 19<sup>th</sup> century.



This large knife or sword with an elaborately carved iron blade and triple pommel was often thought to be used for executions, although there is no direct evidence of this. Although many missionaries reiterated brutal stories about how the knives were used for slave and ceremonial executions, it is difficult to identify reliable first-hand accounts. These types of weapons often had value in trade and as symbols of status or authority. The elaborate design suggests that it may have been used for ceremonial purposes.

### 14. Necklace and Bracelet made from leopards' teeth, late 19<sup>th</sup> century.



These examples of a necklace and bracelet made from leopards' teeth are believed to have been collected by the missionary W. H. Bentley, who was stationed at Ngombe Lutete during the 1890s. Such jewellery is often worn by chiefs and other people of importance.

### 15. *Nkisi* with mirror, c. 1879–1930.

*Minkisi* (singular *Nkisi*), have been described as “the name of the thing we use to help a man when he is sick and from which we obtain health.” These objects, which take various forms, are often regarded as the location of a force, spirit or medicine and were used by a diviner or healer to provide protection.



### 16. Rattle and Wooden bell with clappers, c.1879-1930.

Bells and rattles similar to the examples seen here, from northern Angola, were used by a *nganga* (diviner or healer), along with a *nkisi* to discover who or what has caused illness or harm.



From the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the European term “fetish” was often used by missionaries and other European settlers to describe examples of *Minkisi*. Having limited understanding of the Kongo people, the European concept was used as short-hand for a number of complex beliefs and practices that they did not fully understand or believe to be compatible with western Christian culture.

17. Slides and Images of *Minkisi* from the Lower Congo, early 20<sup>th</sup> century.



The Angus Library and Archive holds hundreds of photographs and glass slides that document the missionary experience of life in the Congo.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, missionaries and Belgian administrators attempted to eradicate what they termed “fetishism”. These efforts included the burning of hundreds of *Minkisi* and other cultural objects, as shown in these slides.

18. George Grenfell photograph album, late 19<sup>th</sup> century.



This photo album contains images of George Grenfell’s mission work in the Congo. Despite the arguably good intentions of mission workers in the British Colonies, the photographs and captions reveal much about the ways in which missionaries viewed their work and their relationship with the Kongo people. Many of the converted locals appear in westernised clothing, reflecting the presumed superiority of western Christian culture by white settlers.



## 19. *A Young Congo Missionary: memorials of Sidney Roberts Webb MD, William Brock, 1897.*



The experience of Webb, as outlined in the text, offers an individual's insight into the reality of missionary life and of a man who was 'prepared, at a moment's notice, to lay down his life for Africa.' The sense of duty and love directed toward the Congolese boys, along with the superior attitude conveyed

toward Congolese culture, illustrates the complex relationship between the missionaries and the local people whom they sought to Christianise.

## 20. *Photograph album of Congo missionaries, c.1890–1915.*

This album provides a rare glimpse into the lives and work of the Congo missionaries, as well as underlining the cultural and behavioural differences between the missionaries and Congo people. In addition to their evangelical work, missionaries in the Congo also became involved in other areas of society including education and medicine.



## 21. *Congo Missionary Conference Report, 1907.*

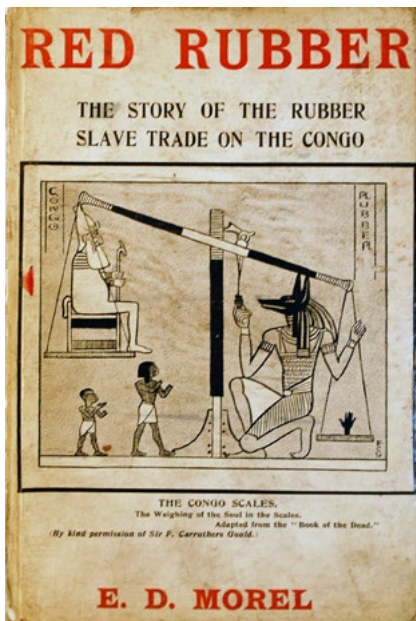
Issues raised in the Congo Missionary Conferences again demonstrate the tension between the western Christian faith and indigenous cultures. In a discussion about whether or not indigenous people should adopt western dress, many contributors expressed concerns that traditional indigenous clothing was immoral and encouraged sinful behaviour.

## 22. Photographs of the victims of the Force Publique, early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These photographs were taken by Baptist missionaries as part of the Congo Reform Association's campaign. Both depict the aftermath of the infamous practice of cutting off hands. Members of King Leopold II's army operated under strict instructions not to waste ammunition and had to bring back a hand for each bullet used, which often led to them being removed from living victims.



## 23. *Red Rubber*, E. D. Morel, 1906.



The evocative cover of this publication, drawn in the style of Ancient Egyptian artwork, shows King Leopold II being judged for the sufferings of the Congo. This is exemplified by a solitary mutilated hand and two handless figures at the bottom of the picture. Though the cartoon uses stereotypes, such as exaggerated facial features, to depict the native people in a way that would now be considered offensive, the artist's intention was to create an image that would have appeared sympathetic to the local people.

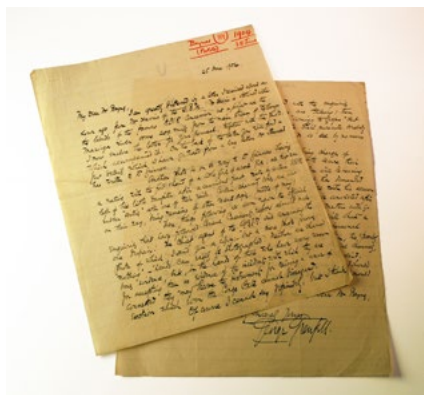
Morel's book used the accounts taken from missionaries who testified against the atrocities committed by the Belgian regime.

## 24. Medal of the Order of the Lion of Africa, presented to the Rev. George Grenfell by King Leopold II of Belgium, 1891.

This medal of the Order of the Lion of Africa was presented to Grenfell by Leopold II for the work he had done in the Congo since the 1880s. In 1903 Grenfell wrote a letter to the king rejecting it. As the letter shows, this was because of the uneven treatment of Protestant and Catholic missions by the government. Despite the growing belief among missionaries that King Leopold was committing huge atrocities against the Kongo people, Grenfell continued to believe that the king wanted to promote the well-being of the Kongo people. It was not until April of 1904 that he became convinced otherwise, resigning from his position on the Commission for the Protection of the Natives.



## 25. Letters from the Rev. George Grenfell describing Belgian harassment of the Baptist missionaries, 1904.



In this first letter we learn that Grenfell's mission is being harassed by the Belgians, ostensibly over building permits but in reality over British involvement in the Congo.

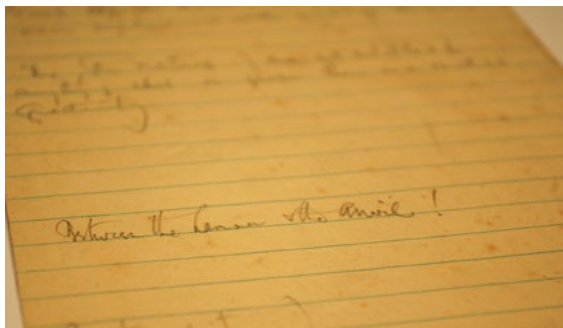
The second mentions plans to bring charges against Whitehead, a Baptist missionary, and others for their claims of state atrocities. Newspaper articles show that in 1906 another Baptist, Edgar

Stannard, was convicted of libel in the Congo and fined the equivalent of £3,400 in today's money, for testifying against the Belgian regime.



**26. 'Between the Hammer and the Anvil', personal papers belonging to the Rev. George Grenfell, c.1905.**

A rare draft of a paper written by George Grenfell, probably dating to 1905, at the height of the crisis in relations between missionaries and the Belgian administration. Though largely illegible, near the bottom he has scribbled 'Between the Hammer and the Anvil' referring almost certainly to the difficult position that the Baptist missionaries were in by this date after having spoken out so publicly against a regime that was still in power.



**27. Press cuttings presented to the Rev. J. S. Bowskill on his return from the Congo, 1915.**



In November 1913, Tulante Buta attacked São Salvador, in then Portuguese Congo, in revolt against the Bakongo king, Kiditu. Buta accused Kiditu of betraying the Kongo people by allowing the forcible recruitment of labourers by the Portuguese. In the aftermath of the uprising, Portuguese officials arrested Bowskill, believing that the Protestant missionaries had instigated the uprising to challenge Portuguese control. Reports in the newspaper cuttings claim that Bowskill, who had spoken out against colonial atrocities, was arrested as an act of revenge.

## **Further reading:**

The following titles have been consulted during our research and provide further information on the topics covered:

Robert Burroughs, *Travel Writing and Atrocities: Eyewitness accounts of Colonialism in the Congo, Angola and Putumayo*, London, 2010.

Susan Cooksey, Robin Poynor, Hein Vanhee, Carlee S. Forbes, *Kongo across the Waters*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013.

Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Boston, 1998.

Nancy Rose Hunt, *A colonial lexicon: of birth ritual, medicalization, and mobility in the Congo*, London, 1999.

John M. Janzen, *A Carved Loango Tusk: Local Images and Global Connections*, Kansas, 2009.

Wyatt MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo, Commented by Themselves: Minkisi from the Laman Collection*, Stockholm: Folkens museum—etnografiska, 1991.

Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1992*, Edinburgh, 1992.



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With funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and The Baptist Union Newington Court Fund, we would like to see more people from a wider cross section of society using The Angus. We aim to help people engage with the heritage of the nation and the Baptist denomination, taking advantage of the true value of this wonderful collection.

Curated by Sally Pearson, Qaleeda Talib,  
Alex Landucci, David Cox, Sonja Kunjansuu,  
Kira Hopkins and Vikki Hawkins

Sukie Trowles, Learning and Participation Officer

Emma Walsh, College Librarian

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