

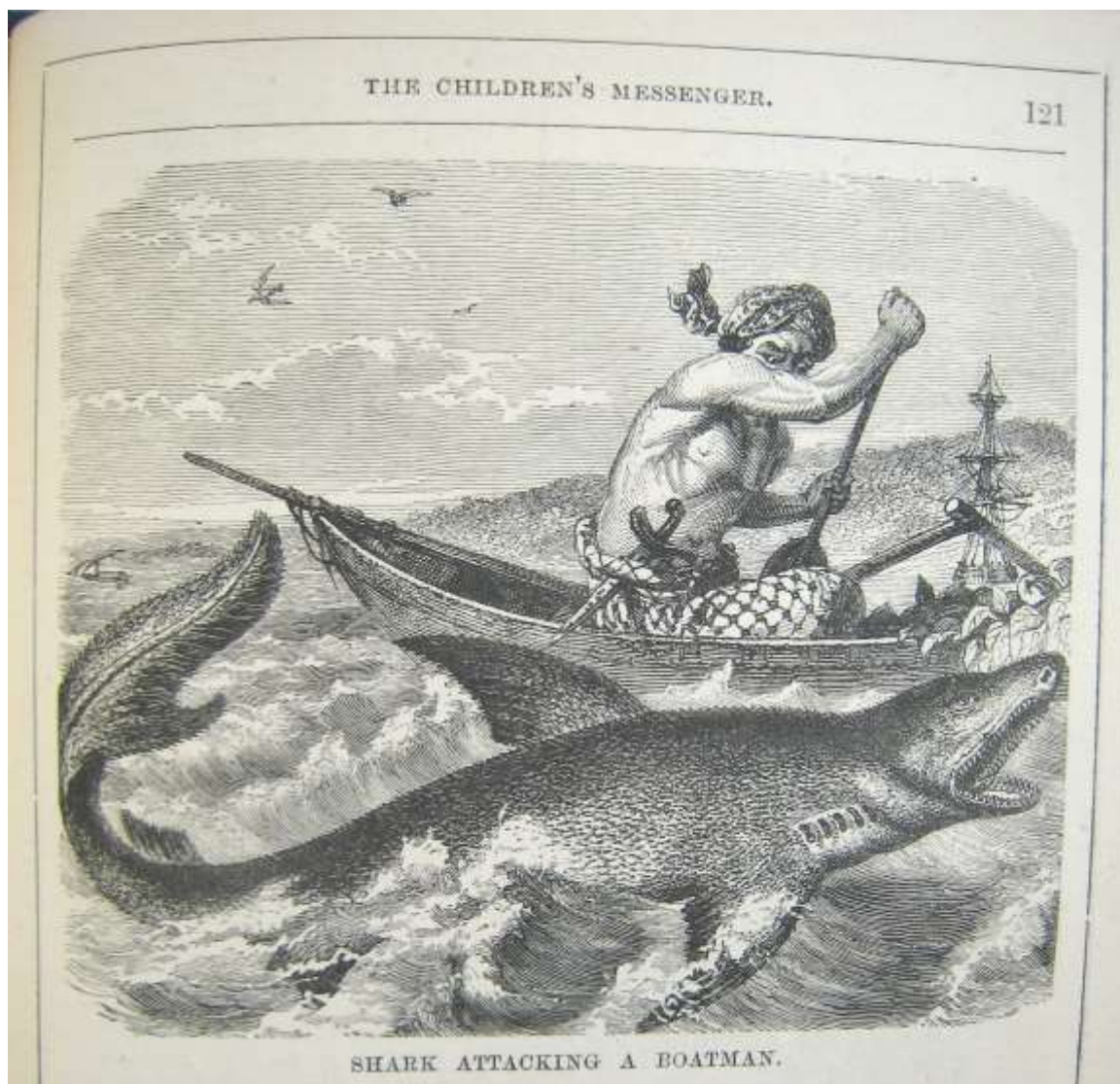


## The Shark Ascending

I recently happened upon an interesting image from 1877 entitled "Shark Attacking A Boatman", in our series of *The Children's Messenger* in the library here.

It's an illustration from one of a series of articles by Rev. Archibald Hewan describing a journey to the Old Calabar Mission, and this one is specifically about "the sharks at Lagos".

The *Children's Messenger* was a monthly magazine produced by the Presbyterian Church of England for young members, and, as well as moral stories and Bible studies, it included many letters from missionaries describing life in far parts of the world – and the *Messenger* tried to accompany its articles with illustrations.



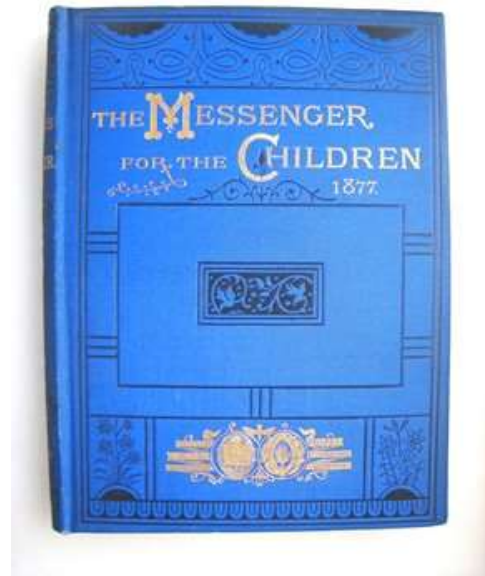
"The Sharks at Lagos", by Rev Archibald Hewan, in *The Children's Messenger*, 1877.  
With permission of Westminster College, Cambridge.

Nowadays, television and photography and zoos and the internet mean that we are familiar with wildlife from around the world; but it seems pretty clear, looking at this picture from 140 years ago, that it was drawn by someone who had never actually seen a real shark.

This shark has a pointed snout and (rather strangely-placed) gills, but the eyes and head are more like those of a seal. Its fins are reminiscent both of the fins of a bony fish, and of the flippers like a sea lion or a walrus - but are nothing like the smooth cartilage fins of a shark. It has a leaf-shaped tail straight out of a Mediaeval bestiary; and strangest of all, it has fur!

**Archibald Hewan (1832-1883) was a Jamaican medical missionary to Calabar, in Nigeria, appointed in 1854; but the artist is unknown.** The anatomical descriptions in Hewan's text are very vague, if you don't already know what a shark looks like: it only says "Look at his flat head. You can't see his mouth; that is quite under" and later refers to his "great eyes", "great fins" and "great tail"... though if you look closely, you can see that someone has also told the artist that sharks have more than one row of teeth.

**However, if the artist had only heard or read descriptions of sharks before beginning this illustration, then he's not alone in the task of trying to draw an animal he's never laid eyes on.**



**Albrecht Durer's woodcut** of an enthusiastically-armoured rhinoceros from 1515 is one of the best known pictures of an animal by an artist who has never seen his subject. Another famous example is **George Stubbs's portrait of a kangaroo**, with a very long tail and no pouch, held at Royal Museums Greenwich, which was based on descriptions given to the artist by Joseph Banks on his return from voyaging with Captain Cook in 1771, and painted soon afterwards. So our shark is in illustrious company!

Helen Weller, Archivist  
June 2018