



PROFILE IN FAITH

Mary Slessor

“Mother of All the Peoples”

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Making a purchase a few years ago in a bookstore in St. Andrews, Scotland, I was given a ten-pound note as part of my change. I was amazed and pleased to see the face of Mary Slessor on the front and a map of her mission station in Calabar, now eastern Nigeria, on the back of the note.

Mary Slessor was born into a poor family in Aberdeen, Scotland in December 1848, the second of seven children.¹ Mary’s father, a shoemaker, was an alcoholic. Seeking a new beginning, he moved the family to Dundee, where they lived in a tiny one-room house, with no water and of course no electricity. Mr. Slessor soon died, leaving his wife the task of supporting their large family. To help out, Mary became, at age eleven, a “mill-lassie.” She was a tough, street-smart girl, with striking blue eyes, red hair, and a flaming temper. For fifteen years, she worked fifty-eight hours a week in the mill. She also taught a Sunday school class, supported a youth club in her church, and soon had the unruly boys and girls of the club joining her in helping with the sick and elderly people around them. Years later, after Mary died, a member of her church wrote: “She sat down among the poor as one of themselves . . . She stooped very low. She became an angel of mercy in miserable homes.”

Like her hero, David Livingstone, Mary read and studied books while she worked at her loom. More and more she was drawn to missionary work—by her mother’s influence, the stories of the mission work of her United Presbyterian Church reported in the *Missionary Record*, and the death of David Livingstone in 1874.

To the delight of her mother, Mary volunteered as a missionary to Calabar, Nigeria. She signed her farewell letters “Yours in Royal Service, Mary M. Slessor”

and sailed on the SS Ethiopia in 1876. When she saw scores of casks of rum being loaded onto the ship, Mary ruefully exclaimed, “All that rum! And only one missionary!”

With Mary Slessor, the mission in Calabar had a staff of thirteen. Some of the missionaries were Scottish; some were Jamaican. The mission had been founded in 1824 by Hope Masterton Waddell, an Irish clergyman who had served in Jamaica. He became convinced that Black Christians from the West Indies could and should go to Africa as missionaries.

Two centuries of slave trade had cheapened human life, divided tribes, and perverted culture in western Africa. Unwanted babies were thrown into the bush to die. Twins were killed and their mothers driven out of the tribe, since it was believed that one of each set of twins was the child of the devil. Because it could not be determined which, both were killed. Mary Slessor developed an almost fanatical love for African children and, in her thirty-eight years in Calabar, saved the lives of hundreds. She rarely had fewer than a dozen rescued babies in her huts. Appropriately, the Scottish ten-pound note shows Mary Slessor holding a child, surrounded by other children.

One of the little girls she saved from death Mary named Jean Anna Slessor; “wonderful Jean,” Mary called her. She took her to Scotland with her in 1891, where Jean was baptized. Jean became Mary’s friend and often her only companion. She nursed her “ma” when Mary was sick, taught in her schools, helped in her dispensary, walked miles with her to collect abandoned babies, dug latrines, planted gardens, laundered, and cleaned.

Mary was often sick with fever, an inescapable part of life in Africa. Less than three years after she ar-

rived in Calabar, she seemed to crumple under the strain. She wrote, "I want my home and my mother." Mary went back to Scotland and stayed there for sixteen months. Her health returned and so did her determination to be in Calabar again. Mary's mother died at the end of 1886, and three months later Janie, Mary's only surviving sibling, was dead. Mary wrote: "Heaven is now nearer to me than Britain."

The Presbyterian mission board regarded Mary Slessor as a valuable asset, but her independent and pioneering spirit made it difficult for her to work as part of a team. She was constantly pressing the board to allow her to expand her mission work by going deeper into the forests. She wrote to a friend, asking her to pray that she would be allowed to do this. "Pray in a business-like manner, earnestly, definitely, steadily," she wrote.

More and more towns wanted "Ma Akamba," their name for Mary, and her God, and his book. In 1888 Mary convinced the mission board to allow her to work alone among the Okoyong tribe. The mission report for 1890 noted that "Miss Slessor has been labouring at Okoyong with extraordinary courage and perseverance." Mary literally went where no white man would go, penetrating far into the uncharted interior of southeast Nigeria: from Duke Town to Ekenge in Okoyong and, finally, to Itu in Igboland. At her prime, she could go down the bush paths as fast as most Africans. When one of the ordained missionaries came out to take a service for her in a stifling little church, he was exhausted after the service and ashamed when he discovered that Mary had held twelve services that day and walked more than ten miles. Friends were concerned about her. One wrote, "Do be careful. Do take quinine and sleep under a net and drink filtered water. Don't be so ridiculously unselfish."

Mary worked hard to understand the Africans, including their religion, believed by most Europeans to be only a mixture of superstition and nonsense. She loved and respected the people. Despite their faults, she could speak of the Okoyong as "gentlemanly and gracious." To the dismay of European visitors, Mary Slessor dressed and lived like the Africans—indeed like the poor Africans. She ate what they ate, except for one important item: tea. She could do without food and shelter, but not without tea! She spoke the African languages well. The Efiks said that she was "blessed with an Efik mouth." She mastered not only the colloquial phrases but also the inflections, the guttural sounds, the interjections and sarcasms, as well as the quick characteristic gestures of the people. The Af-

ricans loved singing. Mary translated some English hymns into Efik and set them to rousing Scottish tunes such as "Sweet Rothesay Bay," "The Rowan Tree," and "Scots Wha Hae." They were sung to the accompaniment of a drum or two and as many tambourines as could be found.

Pressed by the overwhelming needs in Africa, Mary only reluctantly agreed to return home for furlough or even to take a vacation in Africa. Friends, on one occasion, paid for her and Jean to go to the Canary Islands for a rest. The two missionaries, one White and one Black, were overcome by the splendor of their hotel. They enjoyed the flowers and relished cool sea breezes. Mary wrote: "I sat and knitted and worked my way through the Bible all day long." It was "the most wonderful holiday" she had ever had. In December 1889, Mary was due to leave for Scotland, but when no one could be found to take up her work, she refused to go. And so Mary, as she put it, "drudged on." When progress was slow, Mary reminded herself that "Christ was never in a hurry. There was no rushing forward, no anticipating, no fretting over what might be. Every day's duties were done as the day brought them and the rest was left to God." Mary never gave up and was delighted when Africans began to live in "God's fashion." Many of the people came to love this intrepid Scottish woman, calling her Eka Kpukpro Owo—"mother of all the peoples."

Mary Slessor was on call, it seems, twenty-four hours a day—settling disputes, saving twins from death, evangelizing, nursing, and administering justice. Instead of fighting, the tribal chiefs from as far away as a hundred miles began to take disputes to Mary for arbitration. During the hours she sat listening to arguments about witchcraft, wives, divorces, dowries, slaves, livestock, and land, Mary sustained herself by knitting and chewing homemade toffee. It was said by the Africans that she wanted nothing for herself, that she would walk miles to cure sick people and rescue worthless babies, and that she was a messenger from God who had magic powers. Some of the Africans, however, resented Mary's domineering spirit; even so, it is interesting that they did not harm her. This woman must be protected by the spirits, they reasoned, and therefore no one in his right senses would attack her. And no one, in this world of cruelty and killing, ever did. Mary admitted that she was sometimes frightened, but "Fear not for I am with thee" was a text she fervently believed. The story is told that when Mary was confronted by a leopard, she sang hymns in a loud voice, until the big cat gave up and ran away!

Some Africans and British officials put Mary Slessor down as “a mere woman.” She replied to one chief that in judging “the power of the woman, he had clearly forgotten the power of the woman’s God.” She was concerned and angered that women suffered so much from men in the African culture. In the margin of one of her Bibles by the passage in which Paul states that wives must be subject to husbands, she scribbled, “Na! Na! Paul, laddie! This will no do!” Mary sought to improve the lives of women by providing them with schools and jobs. Mary’s fifty elementary schools were free and open to all, including girls. Her work in vocational education led to the opening of Calabar’s Hope Waddell Training Institute in 1895, still the largest institute of its kind in West Africa.

The British officials began to take note of the Scots-woman who lived, dressed, and spoke like an African and who could prevent battles, out-shout chiefs, and stop riots merely by walking into the middle of them. When a new consul-general appointed vice-consuls to supervise the running of native courts in the various parts of his territory, he chose Mary for that office among the Okoyong. The officials were only too glad to have a magistrate who needed no interpreter, understood African customs, and had a personal authority greater than anything they had achieved with their soldiers and weapons. Mary Slessor did not seem to realize it, but she was in fact the first woman to be appointed to such a post in the whole of the British Empire. If she did know that, she was not impressed. Mary was admitted as an honorary associate into the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of which King George V was the sovereign head. She received the Silver Cross on behalf of the mission but felt it was not for any special work of hers. She said, “If I have done anything in my life, it has been easy, because the Master has gone before.”

Mary appealed for recruits to help her, stating that the Okoyong needed “consecrated women who are not afraid of work or filth of any kind, moral or material. Women who can wash a baby or teach a child to wash and comb as well as read and write. Women who can take it all to Jesus and there get strength to pull on under any circumstances.” When a new missionary asked Mary what she should do to influence the Africans, Mary replied: “Do, lassie? Do? You don’t have to do, you just have to be, and the doing will follow.”

Mary Slessor had no strategy, no fixed plans, no schedules. She simply relied on the Lord to guide her in her work for him and to provide for her. She did not worry about money. She wrote to a friend who had asked her what she would do for money: “Money

is something I do not understand because I’ve never had to deal with it. What’s money to God? The difficult thing is to make men and women. Money lies all about us in the world, and He can turn it on to our path as easily as He sends a shower of rain.”

She was not “over-enthusiastic about church methods.” She wrote that she would “not mind cutting the rope and going adrift with [her] bairns.” The mission finally agreed that Mary was free to go and start new stations where she and the Africans wanted them, provided that she did not obligate the mission to additional expense. She was indeed, as she said, “dragging a great Church behind her” into Africa. She wrote: “Just now I am the feet of the Church, as it were, and I am to go with the shoes of Peace.” She summed up her theology with these words: “Creeds and ministers and books are all good enough but look you to Jesus!”

In books written about her for children and young people, Mary Slessor is presented as a larger-than-life woman, a single-minded missionary, a saint. A visitor, expecting a stern woman of commanding appearance, found “a true woman with a heart full of motherly affection. Her originality, brightness, and almost girlish spirit fascinated me.” She was indeed a real person and “a true woman.” On one of her infrequent visits home, she wrote to a fellow missionary in Calabar: “I have been reveling in frocks and furbelows. It is simply lovely to see the shop windows and very nearly envy the beautiful creations the girls wear, and to look at their milk-and-roses complexion and the beauty and roundness of form which they possess. But all this is most unbecoming in the senior member of a Presbyterian Mission.” Her last sentence, I believe, was written with a smile on her face.

Charles W. Morrison, a teacher on the mission staff who was eighteen years younger than Mary, asked her to marry him. She agreed, provided that he could join her at Ekenge. The mission board, however, refused to release Charles from his work of training African teachers at Duke Town. Mary was saddened but determined to carry on her work at Ekenge. She wrote to a friend: “If God does not send him up there, he must do his work and I must do mine where we are placed.” When Charles’s health began to fail, he returned to Scotland before moving to North Carolina, where he died. Mary kept two books in which they had signed their names side by side, and she wrote the words: “When you have a good thing or read a good thing or see a humorous thing and cannot share it, it is worse than bearing a trial alone.”

Mary Slessor marked many passages in her Bible and wrote comments in the margins. By Paul’s words

to the Corinthians, "Death is swallowed up in victory," she wrote, "Hallelujah! What a climax!" The climax came for Mary Slessor on January 13, 1915. A state funeral was held in Duke Town, attended by governmental officials, missionaries, and great crowds of Africans. The mourners at the graveside sang two hymns, "When the Day of Toil Is Done" and "Asleep in Jesus." And Mary Slessor was laid to rest beside the tombs of two Scottish missionaries, her close friends, in a cemetery once used to throw the corpses of slaves. One friend who served with her in Africa wrote: "Mary Slessor was a whirlwind and an earthquake, and a fire, and a still small voice, all in one." Mary's own view was that her life was "one long, daily, hourly record of answered prayer."

Mary Slessor had no husband, but she was loved by God. She had no children, but she was "mother of all the peoples."

Notes

1. There are scores of books, many for children and teenagers, telling the story of Mary Slessor; biographies include W. P. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar: Pioneering Missionary* (1915); James Buchan, *The Expendable Mary Slessor* (1980); and E. Robertson, *Mary Slessor* (2001). In this article the quotations come from *The Expendable Mary Slessor*. A recent book, *Lives of Scottish Women: Women and Scottish Society, 1800–1980* by William W. J. Knox (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), includes a chapter titled "Mary Mitchell Slessor: Serving God and Country" (pp. 117–39). Knox presents Mary Slessor as a dedicated servant of God and a supporter of the British program of colonization. He recognizes, however, the ambiguous nature of his evidence for the latter point. A better title would be "*Mary Slessor: Serving God and the Africans.*"



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