JEANETTE HARDAGE

MARY SLESSOR EVERYBODY'S MOTHER

The Era and Impact of a Victorian Missionary

Mary Slessor – Everybody's Mother

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Jeanette Hardage

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To The Presbyterian Church of Nigeria

past—present—future

Soli Deo gloria!

Contents

Photographs follow page 134.

Topical chapters (see parentheses) vary from an otherwise chronological format.

Foreword

Mary Slessor is one of the few missionaries—David Livingstone is another—to have become a legend in their lifetime and leave an impression on the lives of a generation after it. And Livingstone achieved much of his celebrity after his missionary career had ended; Slessor died in missionary harness. Even today, when missionaries are not in fashion, the Scottish Clydesdale Bank identifies her as one of the great Scots whose image, together with a map of the area of Nigeria where she worked, properly belongs on currency notes.

Yet no satisfactory biography of Slessor has yet appeared. Those that have been published suffer from grave defects; tendentiousness, superficiality, sentimentality, ignorance of context, inadequate research. In Nigeria her name is celebrated (the National Museum Service is planning a commemorative exhibition); yet so hazy is knowledge of the details of her life that a newspaper recently took for granted that this doughty Presbyterian must have been a Catholic sister. There have been scholarly studies of the church and mission of which she was part, and of imperial policy in the area in which she held office as a magistrate for a time under the British crown; but even these do not fully uncover her life and activity.

One reason for this is that both in mission and in government, she was an exception, an anomaly, to whom the usual rules did not apply. She flouted many of the established conventions about lady missionaries, whether as to their role or their dress. She was prepared to take on male missionaries, colonial servants, the consensus of colleagues, substantial chiefs, venerated decision-makers or rowdy young men. She was a curious mixture of evangelical preacher and reforming chief. In the former capacity she employed a homespun eclectic spirituality; in the latter (where she held a position without precedent for a woman at that time) she profoundly and permanently affected the area in which she lived. Her emotional life was marked by volcanic eruptions that included a curiously assorted marriage that never took place. Much energy went into the res-

cue of twins at a period when custom demanded their death; she founded her own family of adopted children.

Jeanette Hardage has produced a sympathetic and convincing portrait of this extraordinary, fascinating, impossible woman, the attraction and the contradictions duly displayed. She has made excellent use of Slessor's surviving letters and of the memories of people who knew her, including her Nigerian family. The copious interlinings and marginalia in her Bible have been quarried to good effect. The author also takes account of existing scholarship on the history of South East Nigeria.

This is undoubtedly the best biography of Slessor so far produced. It has no realistic competitor. It is also very readable. It is, quite simply, a good story. It helps to illuminate an important region of Africa, and aspects of missions, of colonial policy, of culture contact and conflict, and of Scottish life, all handled very accessibly. It is also a significant contribution to women's literature; it presents a woman who, without pretensions to gentility or to much education, moved the bounds, not only of what was acceptable for women, but of what was conceivable.

—Andrew F. Walls
Founding Director, Centre for the Study of Christianity
in the Non-Western World, University of Edinburgh, Scotland;
formerly Guest Professor of Ecumenics and Mission at Princeton
Theological Seminary and Visiting Professor of World Christianity
at Harvard and Yale Universities.

Introduction

She had been dead eighty years when I met Mary Slessor. Vacationing in Canada, I picked up a three-inch by four-inch, 237-page book called *Famous Scots*. I read, "David Livingstone's is the name that immediately comes to mind when one thinks of Scots missionaries, but in bringing practical benefits to humanity he was far outstripped by Mary Slessor."[1]

As I would learn later, there are statues of her in Nigeria, and her face is on a ten-pound note in Scotland. Why hadn't I heard of her? The first biography about her was written the year she died, and many others followed. Legend sometimes replaces reality in the telling of a life story, and that appears to be the case in some stories told about this remarkable woman to this day.

I read everything I could find by and about Mary Slessor. I accumulated books, documents, papers, articles, and letters in Scotland. Those I met in Calabar repeated stories passed down through the years in Nigeria. My search took me on alluring sidetracks. I learned about slavery and malaria, about hippos and termites, about Nigeria and the British Empire and colonization. I met fascinating people, in person and in the materials I read.

Many events known about Slessor can be verified:

- She went where few Europeans went, sometimes over the objection of fellow missionaries and her mission board.
- She was criticized when she climbed trees, marched barefoot and bareheaded through the forest, ignored pleas to filter drinking water, shed her Victorian petticoats, and cut her hair short.
- The British government appointed her a magistrate, the first woman to hold that position, because of her understanding of and rapport with tribal peoples, and later honored her by nam-

1. Shaw, *Famous Scots*, 198–99.

ing her an Honorary Associate of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem.

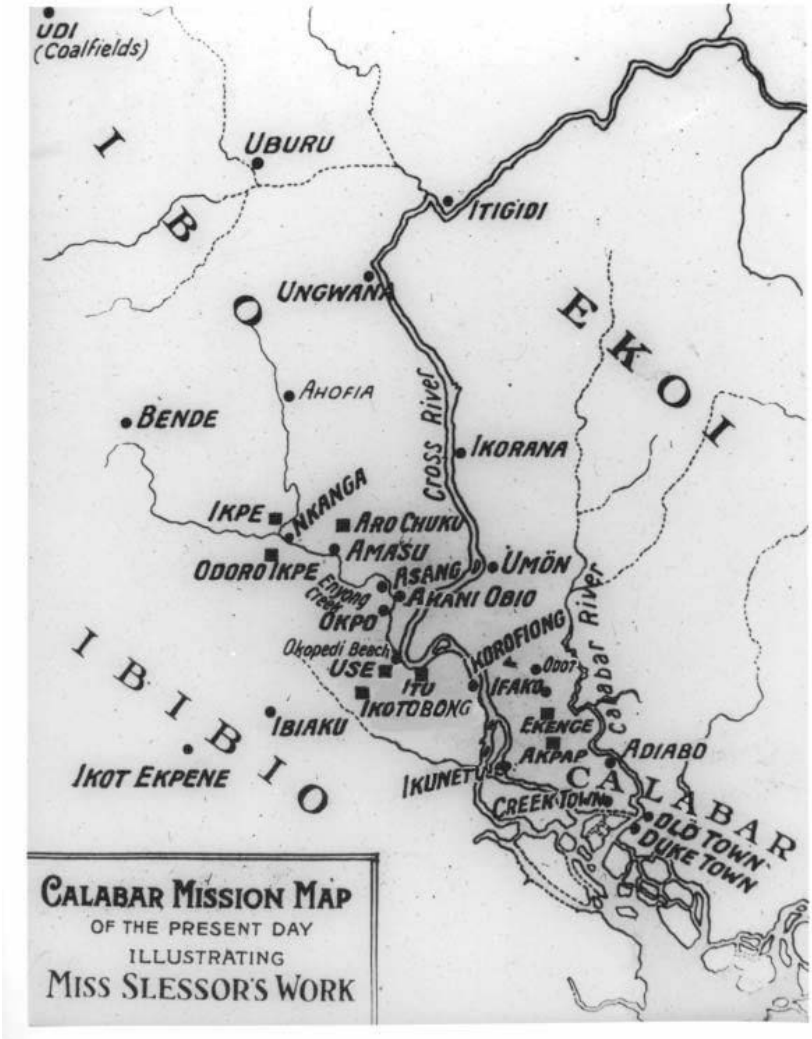
- Her name appears on a plaque at Millennium Park in Calabar, Nigeria, where she is one of one hundred honorees of the last millennium in Cross River State.

But there was more to this woman than eccentricities and exploits, more than audacity in remote areas of Nigeria contrasted with dread and timidity in public meetings in Scotland. She could be obstinate and headstrong. Fellow missionaries sometimes felt her biting criticism. Some British officials found her hard to work with. Nigerians in trouble with the law felt her censure.

I was drawn to Mary Slessor because of her faith, her certainty that she was where God wanted her to be, her desire to go and teach and be a witness of the good news a people had not yet heard. Her love for the people among whom she lived and for her adopted children appealed to me.

I determined to write a biography that showed Slessor's interaction with the people, one that showed her relationship with colonizers, traders, and Nigerians; one that included information gleaned from her own writings and those who knew her; one in which dialogue was not invented, in which unwarranted assumptions were not made, and where documentation would back up the writing. Here, then, is *Mary Slessor—Everybody's Mother*.

—Jeanette Hardage
Charleston, South Carolina
June 2008



Calabar Mission map (1915)

Prologue

In 1841, Hope Masterton Waddell, an Irish clergyman serving in Jamaica with the Scottish Presbyterians, received a copy of T. Fowell Buxton's book, *The Slave Trade and Its Remedy*. The author insisted that God would inspire some from the West Indies to return to their African homeland with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Scottish Mission had a strong ministry among former slaves in Jamaica. Waddell, his colleagues, and Jamaican congregations were already praying about the need for a work in Africa when Buxton's book arrived. It confirmed their sense of urgency.

When the Jamaica Mission Presbytery sought permission from the Missionary Society in Edinburgh to establish a work in Africa, their request was denied. The committee declared the plan "premature, displaying more zeal than judgment" and "highly presumptuous" in view of earlier disastrous trailblazing efforts.[1] They knew the tales of expeditions where many or all of the parties died. They worried about hostile encounters. They feared missionaries could not survive the tropical climate, thought to be a major cause of disease and death. Even Charles Dickens echoed a belief that "religion should spread slowly and temperately." He wrote about the Niger Expedition of 1841, "The useful lives of scholars, students, mariners and officers—more precious than a wilderness of Africans—were thrown away!"[2]

After lengthy delays and with invitations in hand from "King Eyamba and the chiefs of Old Calabar,"[3] opposition in Scotland faded. Enthusiasm grew for the mission among church leaders and their congregations. Robert Jamieson of Liverpool loaned his 150-ton brigantine *Warree* "for so long as it shall be required" plus a hundred pounds per year toward

1. Christie, "Annals," September 14, 1841; McFarlan, *Calabar*, 9.

2. Powers, "Converting a Savage Mind" (Dickens, 56).

3. Christie, "Annals," January 19, 1843. The name Old Calabar was officially changed to Calabar, August 12, 1904.

sailing expenses.[4] The Missionary Society sent its emissaries out with their blessing:

> The *Warree* . . . is wholly a Mission Ship . . . rigged, painted, provisioned, and manned for the noblest ends. It conveys the servants of Christ, bent on deeds of mercy and love. . . . It is freighted with the blessings of a full salvation. . . . Go, little bark, on thy peaceful and noble errand . . . and may the children of Africa not merely welcome thy approach, but commemorate through succeeding generations the day of thy arrival, as the season when the jubilee trumpet was sounded on their shores, proclaiming the reign of Satan at an end, and the freedom of the Sons of God to all their sable tribes.[5]

Waddell and five others arrived in Calabar, on the Cross River delta of Africa's west coast, in April 1846. The party included Waddell, Mr. & Mrs. Samuel Edgerley, Jamaicans Andrew Chisholm and Edward Miller, and George Waddell, a rescued slave boy. The determined group set up mission stations at the settlements of Duke Town and Creek Town almost immediately and began to preach and to teach reading. They were the vanguard of many who followed for the next century. Among those who soon joined the mission were Waddell's wife, Jessie; Hugh and Jane Goldie; and William and Louisa Anderson. All came to Calabar from mission service in Jamaica.

Hope Waddell is recognized as the founder of the Calabar Mission. He was adept at garnering support for the mission and often acted as spokesman to Presbyterians in Scotland. After seventeen years in Jamaica, he remained another twelve in Calabar. Although he looked forward to expansion of the mission, as evidenced by more than a dozen visits with fellow missionaries to other villages along the Cross River and elsewhere, he is described as being cautious and austere. He wanted to have a firm base before proceeding too far or fast. He tended to be domineering with associates and sometimes sent hostile letters to them.[6] He was, however, an excellent observer, who faithfully recorded each day's events and

4. Ibid., May 7, 1845.

5. *Record*, 1846, 9. Secession and Relief churches joined as United Presbyterian Church in 1847; United Presbyterian and Free Church of Scotland became United Free Church in 1900. Each published magazines that included the wording *Missionary Record*.

6. Ajayi, *Christian Missions*, 279; E. U. Aye, "Foundations," 7; Johnston, *Maxim Guns,* 15; Nair, *Politics and Society*, 59; Waddell, "Journal," Letters to William Anderson, 10–15.

sights. He bartered with Efik traders, dealt with British merchants and government representatives, and deliberated with kings and chiefs.[7] King Eyo VII wrote to Waddell after his retirement: "We of Creek Town are still having much interest in you as the one that had been first sent to open the way for the rest to walk thereby. . . . May we all meet in Heaven to part no more from each other."[8]

Hugh Goldie is remembered not only for many years of ministry at Creek Town but also as a scholar. Besides his New Testament and catechism translations, he produced a two-volume dictionary, an Efik grammar, many hymns, and a history of the mission's first forty years. William Anderson was the fighter of the mission, at least in his early service in Calabar. He often disagreed with fellow missionaries and with chiefs during his many years as pastor at Duke Town, though he mellowed with age.[9]

All three of these pioneers died in 1895. Waddell had retired to Ireland in 1858 for health reasons. Mary Slessor would have occasion to work with both Goldie and Anderson for nearly twenty years of her own missionary service.

Eyo Honesty II, king of Creek Town, was one of the most important men during the foundation era of the mission. Mission historian Geoffrey Johnston describes Eyo as "a typical Victorian businessman—honest, shrewd, and industrious."[10] Historian Kannan K. Nair states that the motive for Calabar's kings to invite missionaries was "the hope that they would in some way strengthen their respective economies," primarily because of the social changes caused by the change from slave trade to a palm oil economy.[11] Eyo did not become a Christian, but he did aid the mission's endeavors. He invited missionaries to hold meetings in his yard and translated at their preaching services. He provided canoes and often escorted missionaries on trips to other communities. Nair declares, though, that Eyo sanctioned reforms only in instances where tradition was already changing.[12].

7. *See* Nair, *Politics and Society*, Chapter 1, for a thorough discussion of Calabar society, including kings and lineage, the house system and Ekpe.

8. Goldie, *Memoir*, 36.

9. Buchan, *Expendable Mary Slessor*, 52; Johnston, *Maxim Guns*, 16.

10. Johnston, ibid., 14–15; *See also* Aye, *Efik People*, 165.

11. Nair, *Politics and Society*, 36, 85.

12. Ibid., 59.

The missionaries continued the work—preaching, education, translation and basic medical assistance—among the Efik people. They added outstations from time to time and made occasional exploratory visits and contacts in more distant places. By the 1860s some of the work was undertaken by Efik converts. The number of mission stations remained small for years, not only because of staff shortages, illnesses, furloughs and deaths but also because missionaries were sometimes not welcomed in other villages. By 1856, ten years after the founding of the mission, there were two dozen staff members at Calabar. They included ordained missionaries; teachers and evangelists; industrial missionaries (printers and carpenters); women missionaries; wives of missionaries; and "assistants and domestics," both Jamaicans and Scots.[13] Their number had shrunk to a dozen by the time of Mary Slessor's arrival in 1876, but nearly doubled by 1900 and stood at more than fifty by the time of Slessor's death in 1915.

SOCIETY IN CALABAR

When the missionaries arrived in Calabar, they came with the great commission of Jesus on their minds—go into all the world and preach the gospel. But they also came with preconceived ideas about the status of society in Calabar. They held prevalent Victorian views: They considered Africa a "dark continent," partly because it was a great unknown to Western Europeans, but also because Christianity had not reached it. They believed Africans were not only unchristian but were uncivilized heathen who were unable to govern themselves. They decried unacceptable cultural practices, the most notable of which were human sacrifice, twin murder, and trial by ordeal.

There were many more Ibibio in the Calabar area than Efik,[14] as well as a number of other tribes who did not speak Efik,[15] but the first missionary (and British trader) contacts were with the Efik community. They were the middlemen between the coast and inland markets. They spoke some Pidgin English, the trade language of the time, and had done so for years.[16] With their domination of the area's commerce and politics, Efik

13. Christie, "Roll of Missionaries" in "Annals."
14. Essien, *Grammar*, x–xi.
15. Goldie, in *Conference of West African,* 5–7.
16. Aye, *Old Calabar*, 108; Forde, *Efik Traders*, ix–x, 79.

became "the *lingua franca* of the lower Cross River area."[17] Thus, Efik was the first language selected for translation by the missionaries.

In Efik-speaking and neighboring communities, two powerful systems exercised authority: the "house" (*ufok*), and a secret society, Ekpe.[18] The *ufok* represented a patriarchal system that adapted to meet changing economic and social conditions.[19] Composed of a group of related families, it dealt mainly with lineage and property, while the powerful Ekpe made and enforced laws governing the social, political, and religious life of the people. Waddell wrote, "The towns of Calabar, are, in fact, a number of small republics, each with its own chief and council, united only by the Egbo confraternity."[20]

When writers refer to kings and chiefs, they have in mind the leaders of various houses,[21] though such leaders were also in positions of authority within Ekpe. An *ufok* included everything a chief owned—not only land and personal property but also family, servants and slaves, and some who simply chose to align themselves with a particular house leader. Lineage determined leadership to a large extent, but the chiefs and village councils of a house selected an individual as their king by vote. Chosen rulers tended to be among the wealthiest members of the community.

Ekpe was originally for religious purposes,[22] but like the house system, it changed to meet other needs, especially as Europeans became an increasing force to be reckoned with. Hope Waddell wrote, "The want of a bond of union among the different families, and of supreme authority to enforce peace and order between equals and rivals, became apparent, and the Egbo institution was adopted."[23] Every free male[24] became a member of the fraternity, paying an initiation fee. Each grade within the

17. Ibid., 3.

18. The society was called *Ekpo* in the Ibibio language, *Ekpe* in Efik, and originally written *Egbo* by Europeans.

19. Aye, *Efik People*, 86.

20. Dike, *Trade and Politics*, 33; Nair, *Politics and Society*, calls them a "conglomeration of loosely-knit towns," 6.

21. *See* Oku, *Kings & Chiefs* for biographies and genealogical charts.

22 Aye, *Efik People*, 70.

23. Waddell, *Twenty-nine Years*, 313.

24. European traders and slaves could sometimes purchase membership. Some historians say membership was open to women, but eligibility seems to have varied with different years and localities.

organization[25] had its duties. Entrance fees escalated with each succeeding grade and were distributed to those in higher grades.

Each village had a clearing for community gatherings. Here Ekpe staged colorful ceremonial masquerades, with dancing, plays and beating of drums. But "Egbo runners," enforcers of Ekpe laws, were feared when they ran through villages with whips, assaulting those who had the audacity to remain outside of their homes. Hugh Goldie wrote, concluding that Ekpe was given "all scope . . . for the oppression of the weak":

> Ekpe, the native [Efik] name for a leopard . . . is represented to be a supernatural being that inhabits the forest, and is brought into the town only on great occasions, concealed in a small tent borne along to suit his progress. . . . His voice is heard . . . resembling the growl of an angry animal; on hearing which the town is hushed, the street door of every house is shut, and all business is suspended while he remains. Though himself never seen, he has his *idems* or representatives, who mask themselves in fantastic dresses, a bell being hung at the back of those of the higher grades, who run about the town armed with formidable whips, which they lay mercilessly on the back of any one out of doors. . . . A grand display is, however sometimes made as part of the funeral rites of a great man, or on some other special occasion, to which all are free to witness. . . . It is a capital crime for any one not initiated to look upon any secret observance, or take part in any ceremony. Mr. Waddell mentions the case of a young man who intruded on the mysteries at Creek Town. . . . He was denounced by his own father . . . [and] was captured and publicly executed.[26]

Ekpe could arrest, fine or execute those judged guilty of wrongdoing. Boycott of an offending person or group (called "blowing Egbo") was another punishment imposed by the group. This action prevented trade or other contacts with the offender. In fact, it was used at times against the Calabar Mission during its early years, when chiefs were incensed at the harboring of slaves or rescue of twins.

Missionaries put pressure on both Africans and British officials to change or eliminate some cultural practices and excesses of Ekpe, especially the seeming disregard for the sanctity of human life. However, they

25. The number of grades named varies from five to twenty-three. *See* Aye, *Efik People*, 81; Ema, "The Ekpe Society," 314; Forde, *Efik Traders*, 137–38; Nair, *Politics and Society*, 16; Offiong, "Functions," 80.

26. Goldie, *Calabar*, 30–34.

often failed to recognize that there was some value in the systems that were already in place and that had governed the indigenous society for many years. Nair states, "Because they were horrified by some cruel customs, [they] tended to condemn everything."[27]

A modern Nigerian writer states, "Despite the fact that women and male non-members know quite well that the masquerades are not ancestral spirits, Ekpo [Ekpe] members, even to this day [1984] still want people to believe that they are." He says that despite attempts of the colonial administration to eliminate Ekpe/Ekpo, it continues to exert its influence in modern Nigeria.[28]

Charles Partridge, a District Commissioner during Mary Slessor's era, believed that secret societies were an outgrowth of change. "They play an important part in the progress of civilisation," he wrote, "but, in course of time, their power tends to become tyrannical and antagonistic to progress." He expressed the hope that someone would one day explain the organization completely.[29] Explanations continue to be varied and at times confusing. Missionary letters and reports detailed encounters with Calabar's kings, chiefs and Ekpe for years.

AN INFAMOUS TRADE

Thousands of slaves were exported from Calabar. Britain encouraged and participated in that infamous period of history, as did France, Portugal, Holland, and independent traders from America, the West Indies, and elsewhere. James I issued the first royal charter to establish slave trading in Africa in 1618. Charles I did the same in 1631. In 1662 a new company was formed, headed by the Duke of York. That charter stipulated that the company would supply 3,000 slaves annually to Jamaica.[30] With the development of the Americas, more and more workers were required to meet the needs of expanding markets. Sugar, gold, coffee, rice, and cotton were important products shipped from the new to the old world. Estimates are that a half-million slaves were shipped to the United States, as many as ten million to all the Americas. Brazil imported more than four million,

27. Nair, *Politics and Society*, 69.
28. Offiong, "Functions," 87.
29. Partridge, *Cross River*, 35.
30. Hutchinson, *Impressions*, 33.

and the West Indies, two million.[31] At least thirty percent of the total were shipped from the Gulf of Guinea—the Bights of Benin and Biafra.[32]

Slavery was nothing new in the land that is now Nigeria. European slave-traders simply created (or expanded) a market, and Africans met the market demand. When the slave trade was abolished, it did not mark the end of slavery in Africa. Palm oil became the top export, and slaves became a surplus commodity. Waddell wrote in 1847 that slavery seemed to be "normal" in West Africa. He contrasted it with the slavery that resulted from the slave trade, when campaigns tracked down people to sell and send across the sea. For domestic slaves in Calabar, "Absolute authority on the one part, entire subjection on the other, is the theory; but in practice both the authority and subjection are checked and limited in many ways." He did not approve of slavery but disclosed the frequent family-like relationships that existed in Calabar between slaves and their masters. The Efik had no word for "master" or "mistress," so "the sweet and precious names, father and mother, alone are used to express the relation," he wrote.[33] That does not mean that to be a slave was desirable. The powerful secret Ekpe organization managed to keep slaves in subjection. Sometimes masters inflicted punishments such as flogging, chaining, drowning, or death (especially when a man of importance died).[34] One punishment was to free an unwanted slave, which left him incapable of protecting or providing for himself. Waddell listed the ways in which a person could become enslaved:

> *First*, [free men may become slaves] by selling themselves, either in time of famine, or for protection, or to better their circumstances; as a rich, head slave may be better off than a poor despised freeman. . . .
>
> *Second*, Men may be sold for debt. . . . Egbo [Ekpe] is powerful in enforcing such claims. . . .
>
> *Third*, Men may be sold as prisoners of war, or as criminals. . . . It is a matter of choice whether to kill them or sell them. . . .[35]

Domestic slavery existed well beyond Mary Slessor's years of service.

31. Klein, *Atlantic Slave*, 208–11.

32. The Bight of Biafra is also known as Bight of Bonny since 1970.

33. Waddell, *Twenty-nine Years*, 315.

34. Aye, *Old Calabar*, 96; Ayandele, *Missionary Impact*, 83; Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years*, 320.

35. Waddell, ibid., 316.

VICTORIAN DUNDEE

The beautiful city of Dundee, fourth largest in Scotland, bears little resemblance today to the Dundee of the Victorian era. It was then a part of the Scottish wellspring for much missionary effort that arose from the evangelical movement.

A typical city of the Industrial Revolution, it grew at such a pace during the nineteenth century that proper housing and sanitation could not be provided. Wealth increased, but so did poverty. Although the city was a leading whaling port, it was the proliferation of textile mills—especially after the introduction of jute—and the need for workers that drew immigrants in droves.

As in other industrial cities in the mid-nineteenth century, Dundee's factories spewed smoke, and slum living was the norm for many people. Workers spent long hours in mills, and women and children formed a large part of the work force. Unemployment for men was extremely high because working women and children received lower pay.[36] Alcoholism became a severe social problem, even among women.

Some historians compare Victorian Dundee to Charles Dickens' depressing, mythical Coketown.[37] The population of the city doubled to over 90,000 between 1841 and 1861 (the Slessor family was among the newcomers), but fewer than six hundred new houses were built.[38] By 1871, another 30,000 people had moved into the overcrowded city. Some mill owners built a few tenements for their employees. Baxter's,[39] where Mary Slessor worked, was among them. They built a tenement block of two- or three-room dwellings in the 1860s for eighty families, an improvement over some "houses" being built in the city that were said to be just ten feet square.[40]

Tenements clustered around the mills. The majority of people survived in one- and two-room dwellings with no running water or toilets. Disease and crime flourished. Because of the high incidence of

36. Dundee was known as a woman's city. *See* N. Watson, "Emerging from Obscurity," 199–213.

37. Whatley, *Remaking of Juteopolis*, 12.

38. Whatley, *Life and Times*, 103, 106.

39. Baxter's produced linen, canvas, tarpaulins, and gun covers to meet the needs of the Crimean War and the American Civil War. They were the largest firm in town in 1864, with 4,000 workers. *See* Cooke, ed. *Baxter's of Dundee*, 55.

40. Wilkinson, "Housing and Health," 55.

alcoholism, concerned Dundee citizens reacted by forming temperance societies and temperance hotels, but even long after Mary Slessor's working days in Dundee "Winston Churchill, who represented Dundee from 1908–1922, dubbed it the most drunken city in the British Empire."[41] Dundee's citizens eventually organized the Prohibition Party, and one of their own became the only Prohibitionist ever elected to Parliament.[42]

Life in Dundee, as in other growing industrialized cities, was hard enough for adults working twelve to fourteen hours a day. For children, conditions would be unthinkable today. By 1844, all the mills worked children on a half-time system, after laws were enacted to limit child labor. Children (including Mary Slessor fifteen years later) worked six hours and attended school six hours while they were half-timers. At age thirteen or fourteen they went to full-time work and could attend school at night. Few of those who worked twelve-hour days, however, had the incentive to spend the evening at school. Since families often depended on the earnings of their children to keep them above the starvation level, there was a thriving business in falsified birth certificates, especially after 1872, with enactment of stricter laws regarding the employment of children.[43] Factories were required to provide basic education by Mary Slessor's time. In 1858, a year before her employment, Baxter's opened a new school with "washing up facilities" that boasted hot and cold water, and even combs and mirrors.[44] Some people insisted that children were better off working in the mills than they were at home, where conditions could be worse.

Hunger was common among the poor of Dundee. A poem by Robert Mullen of Dundee published in 1849 bears witness to the problem of hunger, as well as to the resistance of some in society to sending missionaries to foreign lands. A portion of it follows:

41. Ogilvy, "Most Drunken City," in *Scotsman*, 2000.
42. Peterkin, "Spirits Above and Spirits Below," 181.
43. Lenman. *Dundee*, 59.
44. Blackburn, "Baxter's Half-Time," 65.

STARVED TO DEATH

"The Jury returned a verdict of—'Death from Starvation.'"
"Starved to death!" "Starved to death!"
Think on it, Christian women and men;
This is no idle sentence I pen;
'Twas the verdict of "twelve good men and true"
On the corpse of one whom gaunt hunger slew;
Who sank beneath want's pitiless wave,
With none to help her—no hand to save;
This is the epitaph over her grave—
"Starved to death!"
. . . . . .
"Starved to death!" "Starved to death!"
Think on it, Christians! think, is it right,
While want and darkness around we slight,
To spend so much money, and toil, and thought,
That the savage afar may be fed and taught?
Let's look at home, and do all we can
To help our struggling, weak fellow man,
That no more those fearful words we may scan—
"Starved to death!"[45]

The Slessor family was one of many that struggled with hunger, as Mary herself would do years later in Africa.

45. Mullen, in *Poems by the People*, 5–6.

PART ONE

Preparing and Going

1848–1879

1

Early Influences

> I have a note from Miss Crawford asking me to send you the exact date of my birth: that's rather a large order isn't it! To a gentleman I do not have the honour of knowing personally either. But as I am settled in a large family, having 13 of my own rearing in hand, I need not blush, need I? Well, I don't know whether I was born in 1848 or 49, & the old Family Bible is given away, & the "Act & Testimony" in which also our births were registered was eaten by the ants here [in Africa] years ago, so I don't know when I can get it. But it was the 2nd day of December of one of those years, that had the doubtful honour of my entrance into this world.
>
> —Mary Slessor, 1901[1]

Robert Slessor and teenaged weaver Mary Mitchell, both born in Aberdeen, Scotland, were married there on May 16, 1840. Daughter Mary is listed as second of seven children by other biographers. Mary Mitchell Slessor was born December 2, 1848 at her maternal grandmother's house in Gilcomston, a suburb of Aberdeen. A brother Robert was born there in 1844, but there are no further records about him or another unnamed sibling. Mary's next brother, William (Robert) was born in 1850, sister Susan in 1855. John and Jane were born in Dundee in 1857 and 1862.[2]

Mrs. Slessor took her children to services at Belmont Street United Presbyterian Church in Aberdeen. She, like hundreds of other Scottish

1. Mary Slessor [MS] to Stevenson, GD/X260/1, December 16, 1901.

2. Birth and death records are scanty. There is no further information for Robert, born in 1844, nor for another child. It is likely they died young, possibly in infancy. Mary's next brother, William (Robert), born in 1850, is listed as William in both the Dundee census of 1861 and on his death certificate. I will refer to him as Robert, the name he was apparently called at home.

Presbyterians, eagerly read each issue of *The Missionary Record*. Churches circulated the monthly magazine to inform members of mission comings and goings, progress, problems and needs. The chronicled exploits of David Livingstone, as well as stories of those serving in Calabar and elsewhere, enthralled Mrs. Slessor. She communicated her enthusiasm to her young children, telling them missionary stories.

The mission work at Calabar became a part of Mary's earliest memories. She often played "church" and "missionaries" with her siblings. With a fiery temper to match her red hair—Mary wrote years later about her brothers and sisters calling her "Carrots" and "Fire"—she was upset when Robert insisted that women couldn't be preachers or missionaries. She didn't intend to let him have all the glory she imagined went with being a missionary. When he relented and told her he would take her with him into the pulpit, she was satisfied..

Mary's childhood had a dark side. The skeleton in the closet was her father. Mrs. Slessor tried to keep her husband's drinking and its dismal results hidden from those around them. He lost his job in Aberdeen in 1857 because of his increasing dependence on alcohol, and the family moved to Dundee. They hoped Mr. Slessor could get a fresh start and that the family's financial situation would improve. He worked briefly at his old occupation as a shoemaker, then in one of the city's textile mills. Soon, though, he joined the ranks of the many unemployed men in Dundee and reverted to his old lifestyle. His alcoholism, which one biographer attempts to blame on Mrs. Slessor,[3] played its part in molding Mary's character.

W. P. Livingstone, Mary Slessor's first biographer wrote: "She was usually reticent regarding her father, but once she wrote and published under her own name what is known to be the story of this painful period of her girlhood. There is no need to reproduce it."[4]

Later biographers would wish he had reproduced this manuscript. It is nowhere to be found today, as Livingstone's papers were destroyed during World War II. His biography first appeared the year Mary Slessor died and went through many reprints. It presents many details of her life that are not available elsewhere. Mary's report apparently expressed the dread that came with a father who arrived home drunk late on Saturday

3. Young-O'Brien, *She Had a Magic*, 16–18. Neither Mary's writings nor any others support this portrayal of Mrs. Slessor as a puritanical nag.

4. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 6.

nights and threw food saved for him into the fire. She told of being locked out at night in tears and waiting until her mother could let her sneak back inside. She told of the embarrassment of often carrying a parcel to the pawnbroker for enough funds for the week's needs, then rushing off to pay the most urgent bills. All the while, she and her mother tried to keep the facts hidden from the family's younger children, the neighbors and, more especially, church members.

Mrs. Slessor, already a skilled weaver, began work in one of the mills to help support the family. Mary went to work in the mill, too, probably before she was eleven. Dundee's 1861 census shows Mary working as a power loom weaver at age twelve, her brother Robert employed as a power loom worker at age ten. Both children were listed as "partly at school," and both contributed to family sustenance.[5]

The conversion of the young "wild lassie," as she called herself later in life, came through the frightening counsel of an old widow who lived nearby. She invited several girls into her warm room from their play. Once they were inside, she began to tell them of their need for a savior. With her strong Calvinist beliefs, she compared the fire in her hearth to the horrors of hell. Their souls would burn in hellfire "for ever and ever" if they did not repent, she told them.[6] Mary was appalled. She decided that "repent and believe" was her only option, and once she made that decision she never looked back. Hellfire-and-damnation was never a part of her own mode of operation. In her years of ministry she emphasized a loving God and freedom from fear to a people who already had too many fears.

When Mary was eighteen, Mrs. Slessor took her and her brother John (nine years younger) to hear Calabar missionary William Anderson speak in Dundee. She hoped that one of her sons would go as a missionary to Calabar, but Robert died of tuberculosis in 1870. (Mr. Slessor also died a few months later.) That left only thirteen-year-old John as a possible missionary candidate, but John, too, developed tuberculosis—one of the diseases that plagued slums everywhere. Advisors thought a warmer climate might help. He emigrated to New Zealand in 1873 but

5. Both Mary and her mother worked as linen power-loom weavers in Baxter's Lower Dens factory, an occupation a step up socially from some other jobs. To be a weaver was more desirable than to be a "mill girl."

6. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 3.

died a week after arriving there, leaving behind only Mary, her mother and two younger sisters.[7]

EDUCATION AND WORK

In 1550, Scotland's Protestant reformers produced their *Book of Discipline*, which served as a guide for three centuries. Parishes were admonished to provide education. "Elementary schooling for all, girls and boys alike, was the means to salvation: no longer to be gained through the intercession of priests or saints, but by a justification of faith achieved by an individual and personal reading of the Scriptures."[8]

Government became involved in education in the 1800s, partly at the behest of church leaders requesting financial aid. The Argyll Commission and others made enquiries and wrote reports, but the major changes came with Scotland's Education Act of 1872. It outlined strict regulations and required annual inspections of schools.

It is possible that Mary obtained some schooling at Belmont Street United Presbyterian Church in Aberdeen in her early childhood. As a half-timer at Baxter's Lower Dens Factory in Dundee, Mary attended Baxter's new school after work: six hours a day for two or three years. When she went to work full-time at age fourteen, she attended evening school, where she continued to study the required subjects: reading, writing, arithmetic, Bible and Scottish history. Her teens and twenties show an intermingling of education with work and the church. More and more, she began to read independently, often under the direction and encouragement of an older church friend, but she also enjoyed the popular fiction of the day.[9] Widespread stories tell of Mary following the lead of David Livingstone by propping a book on her loom at work and snatching moments to read surrounded by the clamor of the factory's machines. She was also known to read while walking to and from work at the mill. It is obvious, from "lessons" she wrote, that she depended on the Bible as a textbook and for devotional study.

When Mary read Philip Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, she was dismayed.[10] She complained to a friend that

7. Ibid., 13.

8. Withrington, *Going to School*, 7.

9. Slessor referred to (and sometimes critiqued) novels in later correspondence.

10. Doddridge was a stern Calvinist minister of the eighteenth century, whose works were translated and greatly admired in Scotland.

she couldn't meditate, "and Doddridge says it is necessary for the soul." Her friend advised her not to worry about her wandering mind but to "Go and work, for that's what God means us to do."[11]

When someone gave her *Sartor Resartus*, though, she stayed up all night reading. She, like many Victorians, appreciated Thomas Carlyle's best-selling portrayal of his moral and spiritual crisis and his admonition, "Love not Pleasure; love God."[12]

CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT

Besides work and reading, Mary Slessor's life was filled with church meetings—worship, Sunday school, youth work and prayer meetings. The family (except for Mr. Slessor) attended Wishart Church, in the Cowgate district of Dundee. The area was one of tenements and slums. The church met in the upstairs of a large brick building. John O' Groats pub and other shops were downstairs.[13] Mary wrote to a friend in later years of being washed with Brown Windsor soap before church, having a drop of Bergamot perfume on gloves and handkerchiefs, "and each [child] a peppermint for the sermon time, when mother had babies and could not be there to give us the lozenge herself."[14] Shortly before she died, she wrote, "We would as soon have thought of going to the moon as of being absent from a service. And we throve very well on it too. How often, when lying awake at night, my time for thinking, do I go back to those wonderful days!"[15]

As a teenager, Mary volunteered to teach children when the church began a mission work around the corner. "I had the impudence of ignorance then in special degree surely," she admitted years later.[16] She also began to distribute the YMCA paper, *Monthly Visitor*.[17] (It is difficult to imagine how she added this project, which required house-to-house visi-

11. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 11.

12. Ibid., 12. *See also* Robertson, "Carlyle."

13. Wishart Church and John O'Groats pub (also known as "Heaven and Hell") can be viewed at http://tinyurl.com/2fg7k2.

14. MS to Mrs. Jaime, August 24, 1912.

15. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 8.

16. Ibid., 7.

17. The *Monthly Visitor* was published as an evangelistic tool by the YMCA. By the time Mary Slessor left for Calabar, it had a circulation of more than a quarter million with some 500 distributors.

tation. Her hours were already filled with work, study and church.) At the mission she was first confronted by the bullying of young ruffians. Boys who had nothing to do and no supervision took delight in harassing those who worked at the mission, as well as those who attended the meetings. Rude taunts were easier to ignore than the mudslinging that often accompanied them. Sometimes unemployed men joined in the torment, too. Mission workers were admonished to travel in pairs for their own safety. Mary didn't always abide by that advice. She learned to dodge trouble, just as she had learned to dodge her father when he was drunk, but she also wasn't afraid to stand up to the gangs. Growing up in their midst and with an alcoholic father, she learned to be tough and resourceful.

A story Mary often told, after years as a missionary, was of her encounter with a gang of boys whose leader had a lead weight tied to a cord. As he began to threaten her, swinging the weight around his head, she carefully removed her new hat (decorated with cherries) and stood facing him. He swung the weight closer and closer to her head until it nearly grazed her forehead. Finally, the boy threw the weight down and declared, "She's game, boys!" whereupon the group sheepishly followed her in to a prayer meeting.[18] One frame of the memorial stained glass windows erected in her honor depicts this episode. The leader of the gang sent Mary a picture of himself and his family when she lived in Africa. He told her that day was a turning point in his life.

Another tough youth cracked a whip at those coming to meetings. Mary confronted him one day, saying, "If we changed places what would happen?" When he said he would get the whip across his back, she proposed a deal: "I'll bear it for you if you'll go in." The astonished boy deserted his whip and followed her. He also decided to become a follower of Jesus.[19]

Mary's mission work and her commitment to the gospel continued to bear fruit. She cajoled youths and kidded with them and preached to them. Her sense of humor, her honesty and her down-to-earth temperament attracted them.

Minister James Logie, under the auspices of Victoria Street United Presbyterian Church, opened another mission for the young people of Dundee. By this time, Mary was in her early twenties and no longer at-

18. *Record*, 1913, 372.

19. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 10.

tending school. She offered to help with meetings. Logie soon came to appreciate her devotion and her influence. He saw that those from the slums confided in her in a way they would not do to those of a so-called higher class. She had earned their respect; she was one of them. She knew the hardships they faced: the hand-to-mouth existence, poor housing, hunger, problems at home and at work (when there was work) and sometimes despair.

Logie became Mary's mentor. He and his wife introduced the shy but tough, petite redhead to the niceties of Victorian society in their own home. Even though the minister's home was not luxurious, its possessions and the social conduct there differed from what Mary was accustomed to in the slums. She learned how to behave "in polite society." Once, when she and her sister Susan were cleaning one of the mission rooms, an elder suggested they shouldn't be doing a charwoman's job. The famous temper surfaced again, and Mary snapped back that *they* were not ladies.[20] Victorian class-consciousness extended to all levels of society.

Mary not only taught the youths on Sunday but took them on Saturday walks. She hiked up her skirts, ran races with them, and climbed trees. This unacceptable behavior drew criticism from stern church elders. They complained to Logie. When he suggested that Mary be more discreet, biographer James Buchan reports that "[Logie's] normally respectful assistant flared up and told him what she thought of elderly hypocrites."[21]

When Logie asked Mary to read aloud a paper she wrote for a church discussion group, she refused. Her reason? She feared they would laugh at her "rough accent."[22] As Slessor's popularity grew, church groups in other parts of Dundee asked her to address meetings. At first, she balked. She was too shy to consider such audacity. Finally convinced it was her duty, she began to fulfill requests. She insisted that she speak seated in the center of such groups, would not go up on the platform, and sometimes asked men in the audience to hide themselves behind a pillar or leave the meeting.[23] Her talks and papers always included a plea for commitment to Jesus Christ.

20. Buchan, *Expendable Mary Slessor*, 16, 20.
21. Ibid., 18.
22. Ibid., 21.
23. Christian and Plummer, *Redhead*, 20; Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 12.

DAVID LIVINGSTONE AND MISSION

In 1874 the world received news of the death of David Livingstone, Scotland's famous missionary-explorer of Africa. Newspapers were full of the story of his life and of the remarkable undertaking of two native men carrying his body hundreds of miles across Africa so that it could be returned to England. Full honors were accorded Livingstone, with burial in Westminster Abbey. A wave of missionary enthusiasm swept through Scotland. For Mary Slessor, now twenty-five years old, it was the final prod she needed to fully consider missionary service herself. Her brothers were gone. The family had moved to better living quarters.[24] Both Susan and Janie were working. Her mother consented without hesitation when Mary suggested she apply to go to Calabar. James Logie and a few other church friends encouraged her, too.[25]

Mary applied to go to Calabar in May 1875, though she agreed to go where she was most needed. Most single women missionaries were the educated daughters of churchmen or other professional men. Mary didn't fit the mold. Nevertheless, the Foreign Mission Board[26] was impressed by her character references and reports of her Christian activities.

Most folks were aware of some version of the ditty, "Beware, beware of the Bight of Benin. There's few come out, though many go in." Some asked why Mary would want to go to "the white man's grave." Surely, they reasoned, she could serve God in a better place. She was not swayed.

In December she won approval to go to Calabar as a "female agent." She would continue her unofficial education in Dundee until she received word to travel to Edinburgh for a brief training course. Hamilton MacGill, Foreign Mission Secretary, wrote, "The branches of education which it is most desirable for a female teacher in Old Calabar to possess are those which would enable her to teach the art of reading in Efik as well as English and this with the view of giving Bible lessons to the women and

24. The family moved frequently throughout Mary's years in Dundee, but moves were within about a mile of each other. The 1861 census shows them on Dura Street; in 1862 they were on Stobbswell Road; in 1870 at 6 Eliza Street. The 1871 census lists Mrs. Slessor as a grocer at 2 Catherine Street; in 1874 they were at 17 Harriet Street.

25. W. P. Livingstone reported that James Logie was interested in missionary work and later became a member of the Foreign Mission Committee. J. H. Smith was another of Slessor's older friends and mission co-workers in Dundee who encouraged her to apply for missionary status.

26. There are frequent mentions of both a Foreign Mission Committee and a Foreign Mission Board in writings of the time.

girls. Attendance at a Normal Seminary would be an immense advantage as the way of acquiring practically the art of teaching."[27]

Fear and uncertainty finally overwhelmed Mary Slessor on the eve of her departure for Edinburgh in March 1876. A friend found her crying in the narrow alleyway by her home. "Pray for me," she begged.[28]

EDINBURGH

Mary's first stop in Edinburgh was Darling's Temperance Hotel. The Darling family participated in the Moody and Sankey evangelistic meetings. Slessor may have attended with them; at least, we know that she took part in evening worship meetings held at the hotel. She next found a room in the home of city missionary Robert Martin and became friends with his daughter, Mary. Another Mary entered the picture when Slessor met and moved in with the Doig family.[29] The three young women became known in local circles as the three Marys. They participated in various mission activities in the city together. At one mission meeting, Slessor met John Bishop, a missionary-printer from Calabar. He would later accompany her on at least one trip in Africa. The other two Marys also became missionaries. Both went to China.[30]

Whatever the course at Moray House in Edinburgh entailed, Mary later complained that it was not practical enough.[31] Building or roofing houses, mixing and spreading cement—projects Slessor found herself occupied with in Africa—were obviously not included in the studies. In Africa, she would come to exemplify the truth missions historian Andrew Walls propounds, that missionaries "set themselves to intellectual effort and acquired learning skills far beyond anything which would have been required of them in their ordinary run of life."[32]

By July 1876, the Board decided Mary Slessor was ready to go to Calabar. She packed her high-necked white blouses and long dark skirts, looked forward to her sixty pounds annual salary plus the twenty-five

27. Foreign Mission Board [FMB] to MS, MS7654, 735, December 9, 1874.

28. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 17.

29. Slessor also became friends with the Doig's married daughter, Mrs. McCrindle, who welcomed and housed her during furloughs from Africa.

30. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 18–20.

31. Buchan, *Expendable Mary Slessor*, 25.

32. Walls, *Missionary Movement,* 172.

pounds allowed for outfitting, and went home to Dundee for a farewell visit. On August 5, two friends accompanied her on the train to Liverpool to see her board the steamship *Ethiopia*. There, as she watched the ship's cargo of rum being loaded, she complained, "Scores of casks, and only one missionary!"[33]

33. Buchan, *Expendable Mary Slessor*, 25; Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 20. The casks probably carried rum. Missionaries and others often referred only to gin, but gin was the term commonly used for all alcoholic beverages. Slessor may not have known it before the voyage began, but according to Christie's "Annals," Mr. and Mrs. George Thomson and two craftsmen reached Calabar on the same steamer, en route to erect a sanatorium in Cameroon. Mary Kingsley reported (*Travels in West Africa*, 619): "A very noble and devoted Scotch gentleman named Thomson, possessed of considerable wealth and anxious to do what he could to aid the mission work of the United Presbyterians in Calabar, came out and did his best to establish a sanatorium where fever-stricken missionaries could come and recruit their health without having to make the voyage home to England." Thomson died in Cameroon two years later.