

But miraculously, Kivebulaya survived. “Mboga was stirred to its depths; everyone flocked to see the dead man who had come to life again, foremost among them the startled chief.... He declared with weeping that God had spoken to him. After due teaching, he was baptized.”⁴⁴ Kivebulaya continued on in the ministry for thirty years until he died in 1933. “It could be said that the entire Anglican province of today in eastern Zaire has grown out of Kivebulaya’s work,” writes Adrian Hastings, “a work wholly untouched by the pursuit of power, wealth, or any physical satisfaction whatsoever.”⁴⁵

Mary Slessor

The exploration and missionary work of Livingstone and Stanley inspired scores of others to embark on Africa—women as well as men. Most of the women, not surprisingly, envisioned their ministry sheltered within the confines of an established mission station, such as Kuruman where Mary Moffat spent most of her life. Exploration and pioneer work was not even an option for a single female missionary—until Mary Slessor arrived on the scene.

The story of Mary Slessor, as much as that of any missionary in modern history, has been romanticized almost beyond recognition. The image of her as a Victorian lady dressed in high-necked, ankle-length flowing dresses, escorted by tribal warriors through the African rain forests in a painted canoe, is far removed from the reality of the barefoot, scantily clad, red-haired, working-class woman who lived African-style in a mud hovel, her face at times covered with boils and often without her false teeth. Yet her success as a missionary pioneer was amazing, and the oneness she felt for the Africans has been equaled by few. She held the distinction of being the first woman vice-consul in the British Empire, but the greatest tribute she ever received was paid to her before her death by fellow missionaries who knew her well and, in spite of her faults and eccentricities, honored her as a great woman of God.

Mary Mitchell Slessor, the second of seven children, was born in Scotland in 1848. Her childhood was marred by poverty and family strife due largely to the sporadic work habits of her alcoholic father, who had been known to throw her out into the streets alone at night after he had come home drunk. At age eleven she began working alongside her mother at the textile mills as a half-timer while she continued on in her schooling. By the time she was fourteen she was working ten-hour days, and for the next thirteen years she was the primary wage earner in the family.

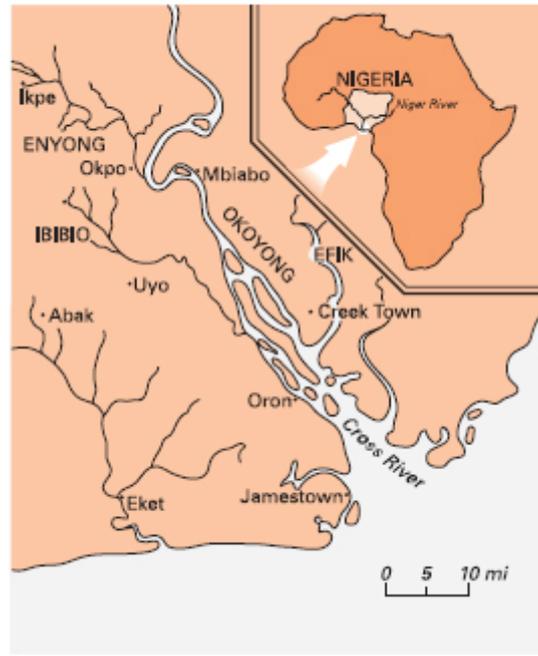
Though she later referred to herself as a “wild lassie,” there was little time or opportunity for leisure in the crowded, polluted working-class district where her family lived. Church activities, however, offered a fulfilling outlet from her miserable home life. She taught Sunday school, and when she was in her early twenties, she began working with the Queen Street Mission. Here she confronted street gangs that tried to break up her open-air meetings in the blighted neighborhoods of Dundee—neighborhoods that served as a training ground for her work in Africa.

Since early childhood, she had been deeply interested in overseas missions—particularly in the Calabar Mission (located in present-day Nigeria), established two years before her birth. Her missionary-minded mother hoped her only living son, John, would become a missionary, but his death shattered her dreams. However, the tragedy opened the way for Mary to escape the mills and to take her brother’s place. The Calabar Mission had always made room for women, and she knew she would be a welcome addition to the staff. The death of David Livingstone clinched her decision.

In 1875 Slessor applied to and was accepted by the Calabar Mission, and in the summer of 1876, at the age of twenty-seven, she sailed for Calabar, long known for its

slave trade and deadly environment. Her earliest years in Africa were spent at Duke Town, where she taught in a mission school and spent time in the nearby villages. But she was dissatisfied with her assignment, never feeling at ease with the social niceties and ample lifestyle of the missionary families comfortably stationed there. (And no doubt they also had reservations about her—a twenty-nine-year-old woman who admittedly had climbed every tree worth climbing between Duke Town and Old Town.) Life was too routine. Only a month after her arrival she had written, “One does need a special grace to enable one to sit still. It is so difficult to wait.”⁴⁶ Her heart was set on doing pioneer work in the interior, but for that “privilege” she would have to wait.

CALABAR, WEST AFRICA



After less than three years in Africa and weakened by several attacks of malaria (and many more of homesickness), Slessor was allowed a furlough to regain her strength and reunite with her family. She returned to Africa, refreshed and excited about her new assignment at Old Town, three miles farther inland along the Calabar River. Here she was free to work by herself and to maintain her own lifestyle—living in a mud hut and eating local produce allowed her to send most of her mission salary to her family back home. No longer was her work routine. She supervised schools, dispensed medication, mediated disputes, and mothered unwanted children. On Sundays she became a circuit preacher, trudging miles through the jungle from village to village, sharing the gospel with those who would listen.

Evangelism in Calabar was a slow and tedious process. Witchcraft and spiritism abounded. Cruel tribal customs were embedded in tradition and almost impossible to eradicate. One of the most heartrending of these customs decreed that a twin birth was a curse. In many cases both babies were killed, and the mother was exiled to an area reserved for outcasts. Slessor not only rescued twins and ministered to their mothers but also fought the perpetrators, sometimes risking her own life. But after three years she was once again too ill to remain in Africa.

On her second visit home she was accompanied by Janie, a baby girl she had rescued from death. She and Janie were a sensation—so much so that the mission committee extended her furlough. She was also detained by her sickly mother and sister. In 1885, after

nearly three years' leave, she returned to Africa, determined to penetrate farther into the interior.



Mary Slessor, pioneer missionary to Calabar, West Africa.

Soon after she returned, Slessor received word of her mother's death, and three months after that, of her sister's. Another sister had died during her furlough, and now she was left alone with no close ties to her homeland. She was despondent and almost overcome with loneliness: "There is no one to write and tell all my stories and troubles and nonsense to." But along with the loneliness and sorrow came a sense of freedom: "Heaven is now nearer to me than Britain, and no one will be anxious about me if I go up-country."⁴⁷

"Up-country" to Slessor meant Okoyong, a remote area that had claimed the lives of other missionaries who had dared to penetrate its borders. Sending a single woman to that region was considered by many to be an exercise in insanity, but she was determined to go and would not be dissuaded. After visiting the area a number of times with other missionaries, she was convinced that such work was best accomplished by women, who, she believed, were less threatening to unreached tribes than men. So in August of 1888, with the assistance of her friend King Eyo of Old Town, she was on her way north.

Life was very difficult up-country—especially during the first months, as entries in her diary indicate:

In the forenoon I was left alone with the mud and the rain ..., with a gap round the window frame and more round the doorway. I looked helplessly on day after day at the rain pouring down on the boxes, bedding, and everything.... I am living in a single apartment with a mud floor and that not in the best condition. Moreover it is shared by three boys and two girls and we are crowded in on every side by men, women, children, goats, dogs, fowls, rats and cats all going and coming indiscriminately.⁴⁸

For the next quarter of a century and more, Slessor would continue to pioneer missions in areas in which no white man had been able to survive. Her reputation as a peacemaker spread to outlying districts, and soon she was acting as a judge for the whole region. In 1892 she was appointed the first vice-consul to Okoyong, a government position she held for many years. In that capacity she acted as a judge and presided over court cases

involving disputes over land, debts, family matters, and the like. Her methods were unconventional by British standards (often refusing to act solely on the evidence before her if she personally was aware of other factors), but they were well suited to African society.

Slessor was very isolated from outsiders during much of her missions career, but in 1893 she enjoyed a visit from Mary Kingsley, a British journalist who would later write *Travels in West Africa*. Though Kingsley confessed that she was not a believer, she greatly admired her missionary hostess. Of Slessor, she wrote:

This very wonderful lady has been eighteen years in Calabar; for the last six or seven living entirely alone, as far as white folks go, in a clearing in the forest near one of the principal villages of the Okoyong district, and ruling as a veritable white chief over the entire district. Her great abilities, both physical and intellectual, have given her among the savage tribe a unique position, and won her, from white and black who know her, a profound esteem. Her knowledge of the native, his language, his ways of thought, his diseases, his difficulties, and all that is his, is extraordinary, and the amount of good she has done, no man can fully estimate. Okoyong, when she went there alone ... was given, as most of the surrounding districts still are, to killing at funerals, ordeal by poison, and perpetual internecine wars. Many of these evil customs she has stamped out. ... Miss Slessor stands alone.⁴⁹

Slessor's life as a pioneer missionary was a lonely one, but she occasionally traveled back to England or to Duke Town. During one of her sick leaves to the coast, she met Charles Morrison, a missionary teacher who was much younger than she was. Their friendship grew, and Slessor accepted his marriage proposal, with the provision that he would work with her in Okoyong. The marriage, however, never took place. His health did not even permit him to remain in Duke Town, and for her, missionary service came before personal relationships.

She was probably not suited for marriage anyway. Her living habits and daily routine were so haphazard that she was no doubt better off remaining single. Women had tried to live with her but usually without success. She was careless about hygiene, and her mud huts were infested with roaches, rats, and ants. Meals, school hours, and church services were irregular—more suited to Africans than to time-oriented Europeans. Clothing, too, was a matter of little concern for her. She soon discovered that the modest, tightly fitted long dresses of Victorian England were not suited to life in an African rain forest. Instead, she wore simple cotton garments, often clinging to her skin in the dampness (causing one male missionary to insist on walking ahead of her on jungle treks so he would not have to look at her, even though she was the one who was familiar with the trails).

Though Slessor often failed to take the most basic health precautions and “lived native” (as other missionaries were prone to say), she outlived most of her fellow missionaries who were careful about health and hygiene. Nevertheless, she did suffer recurring attacks of malaria, and she often endured painful boils that appeared on her face and head, sometimes resulting in baldness. At times, however, she was surprisingly healthy and robust for a middle-aged woman. Her many adopted children kept her young and happy, and she could heartily say that she was “a witness to the perfect joy and satisfaction of a single life.”⁵⁰

Although she was highly respected as a judge and civic leader, she reported few conversions. She viewed her work as preparatory and was not unduly anxious about her lack of converts. She organized schools, taught practical skills, and established trade routes, all in preparation for others to follow. In 1903, near the end of her term at Okoyong, the

first baptism service was held (with seven of the eleven children baptized being her own), and a church was organized with seven charter members.

In 1904, at the age of fifty-five, she moved on from Okoyong with her seven children to do pioneer work in Itu and other remote areas. Here she encountered great success with the Ibo people. Janie, her oldest adopted daughter, was now a valuable assistant in the work, and another woman missionary was able to take over the work at Okoyong. For the remaining decade of her life, she continued in this pioneer work while others followed behind her—their ministry made easier by her pioneering efforts. In 1915, nearly forty years after coming to Africa, she died at the age of sixty-six in her mud hut.

During the span of her ministry in Africa there had been a dramatic increase in missionary work. Independent faith missions were rapidly developing. The denominational missions supported by the Anglicans (who grew from a little over a hundred to more than a thousand during this period), Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists made dramatic increases in their overseas outreach. Likewise, such missions as the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Evangelical Alliance Mission, the Sudan Interior Mission, and the Africa Inland Mission had all gained a solid foothold in the interior and were on their way to becoming a major missionary force in Africa.

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