



Mary Slessor 1848-1915

From an early age of only eleven, Mary Slessor worked in the sweat shops of Dundee, Scotland, as a common mill hand, preparing jute and flax for the weavers. In time, she became a skilled weaver herself, able to manage two sixty-inch looms at once, turning out ships' canvas, sacking, sheets, and cloth. While a little girl, and exhausted by her work, for she was "wee and thin and not very strong," Mary still made the most of her opportunities. She attended school when not working and learned reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, sewing, knitting, and a little music. If she was too tired to follow the arithmetic problems, the teacher punished her by making her stand during class. In winter, when the nights came early, she dodged drunks and thieves as she walked home in the dark to do her chores.

Mary described herself as a "reckless lassie" full of mischief who ran barefoot, jumped, and climbed trees like a boy. She would never completely outgrow her tomboy practices. But one day an old widow gathered Mary and some friends around her hearth. Pointing to the fire blazing in it, she warned them that unless they repented and believed in Christ, their souls would "burn in the blowin' breezin' fire forever and ever!." The words startled Mary and she gave her life over to Christ.

After she became a Christian, Mary tried to help children whose lives were as bleak as her own. She held Bible classes to tell them of the friend she had found in Jesus. She took classes of boys into the countryside for picnics and raced and played with them. Some toughs did not want to hear what Mary had to say. They jeered and slung mud at her. They tested her by whirling a lead weight around and around on a string, coming ever closer to her face. She stood without flinching, praying inwardly, but determined not to duck or run. Finally, the ringleader dropped the lead. He made his whole gang attend meeting that night. With persistent effort, she led many youngsters to Christ.

From early childhood on her mother's lap, Mary had learned about Calabar, the deadly coast of Nigeria. Eventually, as she matured in Christ, Mary asked the Presbyterian Church to send her to Calabar as a missionary. In 1875, her answer came in the mail, "Dear Miss Slessor, I take great pleasure informing you that the Board of Foreign Missions accepts your offer to serve as a missionary, and you

have been appointed teacher to Calabar." Mary, a twenty-seven year old factory worker, rejoiced in reading those words.

On August 5, 1876, she sailed for Africa. When she arrived in Calabar, Mary quickly learned about cruel gods carved of wood and stone. The Nigerians sacrificed humans to these gods. Mary put her own life on the line, trying to rescue slaves and women from death. She also fought against the practice of judging by ordeal. A person suspected of doing wrong might be forced to eat poison beans, or boiling oil might be poured over him. The gods were supposed to protect the innocent from harm, but of course they didn't. Everyone tested by these methods was found guilty. Such cruelty infuriated Mary. She confronted these practices with some success.

The Nigerians enslaved and branded each other. Girls were fattened up to sell as slave wives. Slaves were expendable, and when a chief died, dozens were killed. Other evils included throwing unwanted babies into the bush to be nibbled by insects or gobbled by leopards. Twins were believed to be a great evil. They were buried alive or thrown into the forest. The tribes fought and danced and got drunk. Sometimes, they ate one another. Everyone lived in fear. A secret society known as the Egbo went around in masks and beat people.

After a bout with malaria, Mary began a work in Old Town. Her house was soon full of orphans and twins that she rescued, fed, and cuddled. While in Old Town, Mary ate African food and learned African ways. With simple medicines she cured sickness. When trade routes were cut off by war, she secretly led men across the mission station at night so they could sell their goods. When Chief Okon asked her to visit Ibaka and teach his people about Christ, she was brought up river in an impressive war canoe with thirty-three oarsmen.

However, Mary again became ill and had to return to Scotland. When she recovered, she could not go directly back to Africa because her sister was dying. The last three members of Mary's family died within a year of each other. It was almost two years before Mary could return to Africa.

With the consent of the mission board, Mary was sent into the interior of Calabar in 1888. From then on, Mary worked alone, pushing further and further inland. Because Mary understood the people's customs so well, they brought their quarrels to her to settle. The British government made her a vice-consul with authority to judge. When the slave trade ended, the people of the countryside needed new income. Mary helped them make peace with people on the coast so that they could trade palm oil in exchange for goods.

Mary Slessor made a major contribution in bringing an end to some of the worst practices. She grabbed women and took them to her house before they

could be forced to drink poison. More than once she sat up all night, or even several nights, to protect slaves from execution. When the natives insisted on clinging to cruel practices, Mary asked the British to send an armed force into the interior to "palaver" with the chiefs. The expedition won a peaceful end to some of the evils. More importantly, Mary increasingly and widely helped the Africans recognize that lives were worth saving.

In 1914, Mary fell so sick that she was taken by canoe to the government hospital. After a short recovery, she lay semi-conscious and whispered, "O God, release me." She died January 13, 1915. She had not ended all evil practices, but she had an extraordinary influence for good over thousands of square miles of Africa.

Years after Mary's death, African women still reenacted the story of the time she drove off a hippopotamus by yelling and waving her umbrella. "God and one are always a majority," Mary often said. Mary Slessor was one of the most incredible missionary women ever.