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Mary Mitchell Slessor: Serving God and Country

In a letter written a few years before her death, Mary Mitchell Slessor, in a typically self-effacing manner, described herself as 'just an insignificant wee auld wifey'.[1] History, however, has used a different vocabulary in delivering a verdict on her extraordinary life. Since 1915, this humble and unassuming Dundee weaver and, later, missionary, has become perhaps the most celebrated Scotswomen of the last century. W. P. Livingstone, her first biographer, wrote: 'She will be remembered . . . and each generation will hand down to the next the story of the Great White Mother who lived and toiled for their good.'[2] That verdict has been sustained over subsequent decades in the various publications of the Church of Scotland and (mainly Christian) historians. James Buchan, in the early 1980s, citing the late historian Margery Perlam, stated that she was 'one of the greatest women of her generation'.[3] The work of these and other writers has conferred iconic status on Mary, as witness the recent issue of a ten-pound note by the Clydesdale Bank bearing her face and a map of her mission stations. Although there is much that is fascinating about Mary and her story, these historical constructs of her life have created a one-dimensional and almost mythological character. The narrative in their accounts is fairly standardised, indeed, virtually a cliché: drawn from the slums of Dundee, Mary is called through her love of Christ to undertake the most hazardous missionary work in a part of Nigeria – Calabar – where literally no white man would go, and endure the most appalling dangers to her life and well-being. The result is little short of hagiography, but that is the image that has been handed down to generations of Scottish children since her death in 1915. Fortunately, reappraisals taking place in the writing of imperial history, particularly in regard to gender, allow us to move from hagiography to more intellectually stimulating ways of assessing Slessor and her work in Africa. Research on the experiences of women travellers and female missionaries in the 'Dark Continent' and in India, has opened up new possibilities for evaluating Mary's relationship to the imperial project, and in interpreting the role of missionaries in this respect.[4] However, before discussing her in

this context, it is necessary to explore the background of her early life through to womanhood, since much of this serves to provide an explanation of her desire to become a missionary and her relationship with the peoples of West Africa.

She was born at Gilcomston, Aberdeen, on 2 December 1848, the second-eldest child in what became a family of seven. Her father, Robert, was from Buchan and was a shoemaker to trade. His family was reasonably well-to-do and of farming stock. Some of the scions of the Slessors were educated and had a church connection. Mary recalled many years later that 'two sons were at Cambridge' and one of them had become a clergyman in Aberdeen.[5] Similarly, her mother was from a respectable background and raised in a 'home of refinement and piety'.[6] Thus, Mary's origins and connections were far removed from the poverty-stricken condition that characterised her family life in Dundee. That situation was brought about by her father's over-fondness for strong drink, which cost him his job in Aberdeen and plunged his wife and children into poverty. Consequently, when Mary was eleven, the Slessors moved south to Dundee to a 'bare and comfortless' house[7] in an effort to find Robert employment: firstly, as a shoemaker and, latterly, as a labourer in the jute mills. This attempt at a new start, however, proved only temporary. Her father took to drink again and became increasingly abusive. In common with the experience of many families in Scotland, Saturday night for Mary and her mother became one to dread. On a number of occasions they were driven from their home and forced to spend the night on the streets until Robert had sobered up.

Perhaps just as damaging as the physical scars of alcoholism on the women was the threat of losing face in the community. Respectability was a social value that the middle class and the skilled working class shared, although they might have interpreted it in different ways.[8] For the working class it was staying clear of the Poor Law and that meant subscription to sobriety and thrift. Robert Slessor's drinking, thus, seriously compromised not only the women's concept of respectability, but also that of the community they worshipped in. Both mother and daughter constantly feared that 'church friends should come to know the secret', thus, according to Livingstone, a great deal of effort went into 'hiding the skeleton in the house'.[9]

As her father spent every penny he earned on drink, the burden of providing for the family fell more and more on the shoulders of Mary's mother, and eventually upon Mary herself after the death of three of her siblings. From the age of eleven Mary was a half-timer in Baxter's Mill and from the age of fourteen she graduated to full-time work putting in

twelve hours a day at the power loom. Her father's death around this time, as well as that of her brother John, further burdened Mary to provide for her family. The long hours in the mills left her with very little leisure time, and what she had was devoted almost exclusively to the church and its activities. She graduated from Sunday School to Bible Class, later becoming part of the Home Missions and a teacher in the Sabbath School of the United Presbyterian Church (UPC) in Dundee. Although a reluctant and often embarrassingly shy public speaker, her upbringing in the slums of Dundee helped her to bring a Christian message to the poor of the city in a way they could relate to. On a number of occasions Mary had to show real courage when faced with hostile groups of young men. Livingstone says that when she and some others in the Cowgate Mission attempted to launch open-air services their efforts were continually disrupted by a gang of youths. One night they surrounded her and the leader swung a lead weight so close to her that it nearly shaved her head, but in spite of the intensity of the provocation, Mary never wavered and stood her ground. 'She's game,' he exclaimed, and the gang trooped into her meeting.[10]

The early evidence of religious commitment raises questions regarding one of the myths surrounding Mary's childhood. In her writings she liked to present herself as a 'wild lassie' that was brought to Christ by an old neighbour who told her if she did not mend her ways she would suffer eternal damnation. The idea of burning in hell allegedly worked on her imagination and she thus repented and accepted Christ. This story has been repeated in all biographies of Slessor, including the most recent.[11] The story, however, can be deconstructed on both an empirical and theological basis. All the evidence points to the fact that Mary was in regular attendance at Sunday School and Wishart UPC in Dundee's Cowgate, where she was sent by her deeply religious mother on Sundays with a 'scented handkerchief'.[12] The scented handkerchief not only contradicts the tomboy image, but is also a symbolic token of her mother's commitment to respectability, despite difficult economic circumstance. From a theological point of view, her alleged wild behaviour fits extremely well with the whole process of conversion in Presbyterian doctrine. To be saved involves the repentance of one's sins, thus, there has to be a past to repent, hence the image of the 'wild lassie' persists. Furthermore, what did being 'wild' constitute? Was it merely childish boisterousness or something more serious? There is no evidence that her behaviour ever bordered on the criminal or that she was ever involved with the police, although she did a have a fiery temperament and was actually known as 'fire' by her brothers and sisters. The nickname, however, might also have

been given to her because of her shock of red hair; indeed, she was known too as 'carrots'.[13]

Once 'converted', Mary's deeper connection with the church led to self-improvement and to greater social interaction with Dundee's middle class. Mary's education had taken place mainly in factory schools, and the poor quality of the schooling she received left her with only a very rudimentary knowledge of arithmetic and reading. However, she was later introduced to the 'beauties of literature' by an unnamed older, but 'intimate friend', who worked as a bank manager in the city. They discussed papers written by Mary for the UPC Fellowship society and enjoyed reading and discussing the works of Dante and Milton, as well as other literary figures.[14] The church also helped polish her in social terms and that speeded the process of acceptance by the middle class. When the Foreign Missions Board (FMB) of the UPC accepted her as a trainee missionary it was on the basis that in the interim she smoothed out her accent and improved her English. The local minister's wife was on hand to 'introduce her to the manners of the drawing room'.[15] By her mid-twenties Mary, in spite of her working-class origins, was an articulate and well-read young woman who had been to a large extent accepted into middle-class Victorian society and its values. As Buchan says, 'she was only saved from becoming prim and proper . . . by her earthy commonsense'.[16]

Although it might seem as if the answer to why Mary was so receptive to the overtures of middle-class society and enthusiastic towards self-improvement lay in the social connections of religious affiliation, a clue might also be found in the status hierarchies of Dundee's mill culture. As a weaver Mary was viewed as a 'cut above' spinners and ancillary workers. As one spinner put it, 'The weavers thought themselves somethin', aye and winders tae . . . they never looked at us . . . they thought they were somethin' special . . . They used to walk past you as if you were something low and they were "it".' Weavers also wore hats and gloves to work and laboured in cleaner conditions and, unlike the spinners, who finished the day covered in mill dust, they were never dirty. 'Books and magazines' were also circulating throughout the factory, which suggested a literary culture of some sort.[17] Eleanor Gordon summed up the significance of 'pride in one's appearance' in her study of the jute industry, when she stated that it was tied up with 'the notion of femininity and gentility'. She also pointed out that weavers had aspirations of finding a man with a trade behind him and becoming non-working wives, 'that other symbol of working-class respectability'.[18] This does not mean that the weavers had in some way become embourgeoisified, on the contrary,

there was a strong oppositional mill culture in operation, but it did point to the importance of respectability as a key component of this lifestyle and one that was shared with the middle classes. In Mary's case a commitment to the values of respectability may have made the transition from one cultural milieu to another less difficult once her superiors had added the social polish.

Her growing interest in literature and theology was matched by a strong attraction to the missionary work of the UPC. This impulse was largely the result of her mother's influence. She was enthralled by the stories of visiting missionaries and took a particular interest in the UPC mission at Calabar. As a result of her mother's influence, when Mary as a child played at keeping school the 'imaginary scholars she taught . . . were always black'.[19] Mary's mother had fantasised that one day her eldest son might become a missionary, but Robert's premature death saw her hopes thrust on Mary. Thus, to a large extent her motivation derived from a sense of duty to the church, to contribute to its work, and to her mother, to fulfil her wishes. Stimulation also came from reading exotic accounts of the 'Dark Continent' in the *Missionary Record* and by listening as her mother did to the blood-curdling tales of visiting missionaries. The immediate trigger, however, was the death of David Livingstone in 1874. Inspired by an appeal to carry on the work of the great Scottish missionary, Mary decided to apply to the Foreign Missions Board (FMB) of the UPC the following year. She was accepted and left Dundee in March 1876 to begin her training for missionary work at Moray House in Edinburgh. The training was academic and intellectual rather than 'practical',[20] which she reflected at a later date ill-equipped her for the realities of missionary work. It would have been better, Mary thought, if students had spent their time learning to mix cement than in analysing biblical texts! She claimed that what missionary work needed was:

> affectionate women who are not afraid of work or of filth of any kind, moral or material. Women who can nurse a baby or teach a child to wash and comb as well as to read . . . If they can play Beethoven and paint . . . and speak French and German so much the better, but we can want all these latter accomplishments if they have only a loving heart, willing hands and common sense.[21]

Nonetheless, equipped or not for what lay ahead, after four months at Moray House she set sail for Calabar – 'the white man's grave' – on 5 August on the SS *Ethiopia*.

In volunteering for missionary work as a single woman she was at this time doing something extraordinary and quite revolutionary. Women in

missionary life were normally married and seen as helpmates to their husbands and as such they were restricted to work considered the province of the feminine, that is, the education of girls.[22] Shortage of male volunteers forced the missionary societies across Britain to accept females and Slessor benefited from changing recruitment strategies. As Jane Haggis points out in her study of Anglo-Indian relations, many of the women volunteers were drawn to the life of a missionary from a misguided sense of compassion. They portrayed native women as 'innocent and passive victims' of a cruel and heartless system of oppression, while portraying themselves as 'having the virtues and responsibilities of free-born and independent' women.[23] Not only did this constitute a form of political delusion by unenfranchised British women, it also created a stereotype of a victim whose only protection from their abusive menfolk was to be found in British rule and imperial laws. Arriving in Calabar on 11 September, there is little evidence at this point to suggest that Slessor was any different to her English middle-class counterparts in her perceptions of Africa and its peoples, particularly the women. An emotional dualism existed within her: she experienced both revulsion and compassion for the people she was to evangelise. In her first letter home, Slessor wrote despairingly: 'It is impossible to love these people for their own sakes, one can only do it for Christ's sake.'[24] Mary encountered a world fundamentally distinct from her own, but given her experiences of alcohol-fuelled abuse and poverty there were parallels.

Christian biographers have strongly emphasised the pioneering role of Slessor in Calabar and the extent of barbarism found there. Her obituary in *The Scotsman* set the tone for succeeding publications, stating that

> With dauntless courage, she set her self single-handed to the hard task of putting down the cruel and barbarous superstitions and customs that were everywhere rampant, acquiring by her wise administration and intrepid spirit an extraordinary influence over even the most bloodthirsty of the natives.[25]

W. P. Livingstone did his best to underline this imagery of bravery in the face of barbarism. Words such as 'savages', 'heathens', 'drunkards' and 'murderers' are used freely by him to stress the dangers faced by Mary and, of course, her ultimate triumph in civilising the barbaric. This image has also been reinforced in more recent biographies. James Buchan, writing in the early 1980s, claims that the Calabar chiefs 'killed and tortured . . . with impunity'.[26] Such emotive assertions, however, create a distorted picture of the nature of Calabar, or indeed African, society. These societies had managed to survive in very hostile circumstances for many centuries. This was achieved by adhering to a common value system which was

based on a complex mixture of duties, rights and taboos, some of which, for example, trial by ordeal and twin murder, were offensive to Christian eyes. Even Livingstone was forced to concede that the peoples of Calabar were not 'destitute of religious beliefs . . . Nor were their lives unregulated by principles and laws; they were ruled by canons and connections as powerful as those of Europe.'[27] Moreover, these writers fail to appreciate the extent to which Calabar had been influenced by western culture. As Michael Fry, in his recent study of imperialism,[28] points out, the mission there had been an established enterprise for some forty years and the port of Duke Town was relatively 'sophisticated and respectable'. After thirty years of missionary work, there were 174 members in all congregations, although church attendance was put at around 1,000. There were four ordained missionaries, of whom the Reverend William Anderson was the leader, four male teachers and four female, a native ordained missionary and eighteen agents.[29] Mary herself was placed under the supervision of the redoubtable Euphemia Sutherland, a veteran of some twenty-seven years missionary service in Calabar and a 'human dynamo'.[30]

The founding of the mission was due to the work of an Irish clergyman, Hope Masterton Waddell, who became convinced after reading a book on the slave trade while serving in Jamaica that Christianised West Indians should return to Africa to preach the gospel. To that end, and with the permission of the FMB of the UPC in Edinburgh, a mission was established in Calabar in 1846. From its foundation, Hope Waddell adopted a strategy that combined 'bringing social and cultural reform through calls for spiritual transformation'.[31] Thus the Bible was an integral element of a programme designed to elevate the native population both materially and spiritually. It was this strategy that was bequeathed to and adopted by Mary, a fact that questions the pioneering image. But if the conversion strategy was second-hand, the same cannot be said regarding her missionary work and the way she redefined her femininity. In both instances she was pioneering. Mary used idiosyncratic methods in spreading the gospel, and was generally in a state of disorganisation. This meant that although colleagues 'declared that they loved Miss Slessor, they could not work with her'.[32] Mary didn't need them. Regardless of the dangers, or the approval of the FMB, she pushed into the interior of the region carrying with her an unshakeable faith and a manifest desire to improve social conditions. She literally went where no white man would go, penetrating far into the uncharted interior of south-east Nigeria: from Duke Town to Ekenge in Okoyong and, finally, to Itu in Igboland.

In doing so she went native and by adopting this lifestyle, even though described as 'that coarse woman' by a wife of one of the missionaries,[33]

she redefined the possibilities for white women: what they could do, and what they could not. She cut her hair short, thus challenging one of the main symbols of Victorian ideals of femininity, long hair. So oblivious was she of contemporary notions of femininity that Mr Gardner, of Arochuku, said that he always walked in front of her so as he would be spared 'the sight of Mary in her single cotton garment, often damp from heat or rains, clinging to her skin'.[34] She refused to wear shoes or socks, or use a mosquito net; she ate native food and drank unfiltered water; she lived in overcrowded mud huts, with animals and humans; and learnt the language. By going native Slessor undoubtedly challenged conventional notions of femininity, although it could be argued that it was not as daring as it would have been for a single woman from a comfortable middle-class background. She was determined to live on her small salary and to send part of it home to help support her mother and sisters. With a history of working for a pittance, she was used to poverty. Thus going without was something that was to prove unproblematic; indeed, the only 'luxury' she could not do without was tea. Moreover, her ability to live native brought her closer to those she was trying to convert, something that was aided by her knowledge of the local language – Efik – which she picked up by ear.

Engagement with the local communities was as empowering as it was exhausting for Mary. She was on call it seems twenty-four hours a day, settling disputes, saving twins from murder, finding a home for abused and unwanted women, educating, evangelising, nursing and administering justice when made a magistrate. The following account is rather typical of the hours she invested in her calling:

> I sat [in court] 8 hours on Thursday, from 6 o/c till night I was occupied on Friday & all night I was out at Ikot Obon with a woman in trouble, got home at dawn & and was at it yesterday till late, was up at midnight with a twin mother who died overnight after a week of severe suffering leaving her babies with us. I've had a hard mornings work getting the body buried & Jeans room cleaned, where she lay.[35]

A fellow female missionary, Miss Ames, also commented on her punishing daily schedule:

> There was no routine with 'Ma'. One hour she might be having a political discussion with a District Commissioner, the next supervising the building of a house, and later on judging native palavers. Late one evening I heard a good deal of talking and also the sound of working. I went to see what was doing and there was 'Ma' making cement and the bairns spreading it on the floor with their hands in candle light.[36]

The cost of these exhausting routines was immense in terms of her health. Africa was a dangerous place for westerners, indeed, in the first forty years of the Calabar mission thirty Scottish missionaries had died and many more had their health ruined. Mary's punishing schedule weakened her and made her more vulnerable to disease and illness. At times, especially in the later years, she could only keep up her punishing schedule by overdosing on laudanum. She was frequently malnourished, living from 'hand to mouth', her hair occasionally fell out, her face was covered in boils at times, and she suffered temporary blindness. An extract from a letter to her friend and confidant DC Charles Partridge gives us some indication of her suffering:

> I went to the 'Commission' & went very ill with at least 100 boils over my head! . . . I lay down . . . & for a whole month I was in one prolonged agony of pain. Then the boils came in shoals, over my face . . . all over my neck & ears . . . I cried like a child. When I was not shrieking all the long weeks, no sleeping draught could keep out the pain, & I am a very shaky bundle of nerves . . . I could not see to read . . . Poor hair! Poor head! It is as bald as a sixpence . . . for the few hairs left on the front are like those of a dolls head put on with bad glue.[37]

But not only was Mary a pioneer, she was also, like other missionaries, a revolutionary. As the Nigerian historian, E. A. Ayandele, points out: 'No society could be Christianized without it being upset to a remarkable extent . . . In a "pagan" society it was the missionary's task to overturn.'[38] Mary endorsed Ayandele's perceptive comment much earlier when she stated: 'They are afraid lest this [Christianity] upset the very roots of their life, by allowing the old groundwork of all their existence to be taken away.'[39] But as a young and inexperienced missionary Mary at this stage was less reflective and as such she saw much to overturn. Moreover, her upbringing and her experience of drink-fuelled male violence also directed her to aspects of African life that she fought most to reform – the condition of women and children, particularly twins and their outcast mothers.

The peoples of Calabar believed that twins were the product of some kind of sorcery or evil spirit and as such they were killed at birth and their mothers forcibly excluded from tribal society. Children of slave mothers were abandoned and left to die. Mary's mission stations became sanctuaries for twin children and she exhorted the chiefs in palavers to allow her to assume responsibility for their welfare. Saving them, however, never meant acceptance: twins were still pariahs. The last twin to be saved by her, Madge, recalled that her rescue branded her as an

object of special derision, explaining, 'I go to the market and they know I am a twin, raise two fingers to my face and run away laughing.'[40] However, through her interventions in such cases Mary built up a family of six girls and two boys – her 'bairns'. Some of them, including her favourite daughter, Janie, accompanied her on her return trips home.

Mary's adopted family became increasingly important: indeed, it grew in size as her own family decreased dramatically. The health of her mother and siblings was never robust and despite relocating the family further south to Topsham in Devonshire following the death of her sister, Susan, in April 1883, all her remaining family were dead within four years. Her mother died at the turn of the year 1886–7 and three months later her only surviving sister, Janie, was dead too.[41] Perhaps her relatively indifferent attitude to her health and to the dangers posed by her pioneering activities was the realisation that she had nothing to lose, and the knowledge that in spite of her mother's death she could still live out her wishes – the ultimate form of filial piety. These feelings were likely to have been compounded by the failure of her one, and seemingly only, relationship.

Through a shared love of literature and poetry, Mary became attached to a teacher on the mission staff, Charles W. Morrison from Kirkintilloch, who was eighteen years her junior. He was described as 'delicate, sensitive . . . a loner like Mary'.[42] They became engaged sometime in 1890–1, although no one is certain of the date. The engagement was agreed on the basis that they would work together as man and wife at Ekenge, where she had gone in 1888, in spite of the opposition of the FMB and William Anderson's decision to temporarily withdraw her salary. On this 'she was adamant'.[43] However, the marriage never took place as the Board refused permission for Morrison to leave Duke Town and join Mary at Ekenge. She reacted to the cancellation of the engagement with typical stoicism, saying: 'If God does not send him up here then he must do his work and I must mine where we have been placed.'[44] In spite of her rationalisation, it's clear that Mary was profoundly affected by the termination of her engagement. Among her papers when she died were several of her favourite books with the initials 'C.W.M.' and 'M.M.S.' close together.[45] The collapse of the relationship saw Morrison's health begin to fail and he returned to Scotland before moving to North Carolina, where he lived in a wooden hut. He died some time later when a fire destroyed his literary papers: he simply lost the will to live.

Africa became home for Mary. In any case, she was gradually becoming disenchanted with life in Britain, not simply because she associated it with personal loss, but also due to the general hurly-burly of urban life

and the dull conventionalism of social relationships. Scotland was a much-changed place from the one she knew as a young woman: a country in which 'I'm hardly myself'.[46] Although she loved the shops, displaying an uncharacteristic 'revelling for frocks & furbelows',[47] after getting into an 'electric car . . . I nearly shrieked . . . just from the fear . . . It is an awful country for bustle & movement'.[48] In spite of her friends' attempts to persuade her to take a two-year term of leave in October 1907, Mary was eager to return to Africa, saying:

> though it was good to be at home, & to enjoy many things, it is far too tame, & far too exacting, to be borne willingly. Life is so full of conventional duties, which are as hard . . . as the real things of life, but much less satisfactory.[49]

Her experiences and the hardships and premature deaths of her mother and sisters made Mary acutely aware of the need for women to achieve economic independence. The subservient position of African women further intensified her belief. As she explained:

> There is no place for them outside the harem system . . . they have no proper status . . . being simply the creatures of man to be exploited and degraded . . . A girl-child, if not betrothed by her guardian, lacks the protection of law. She can, if not attached to some man, be insulted or injured with impunity.[50]

The solution was economic and involved providing girls and women with farm and industrial work and educational opportunity. From her arrival in 1876 she fought against the practice of fattening pubescent girls to increase their attractiveness as bride fodder, arguing that girls ought to be provided with the same educational opportunities as boys. Five years later Mary began training local females to staff and run orphanages, but it was at Use, in the Itu district, in 1907 that her ideas took a practical form. A settlement was established there for abused women. Fruit trees gifted by the imperial government were planted, and livestock was purchased. All of the women had their own plots to farm and primitive manufacturing using local resources, such as bamboo and coconut, was initiated.[51] In 1908 a Home for Women and Girls was established in Ikot Obong, specialising in teaching females dressmaking skills and basket-making. She also bought land to be worked as a farm.[52] On such farms women were taught basic agricultural skills, including hoeing, sowing and harvesting. Another centre was opened in 1913 in Odoro Ikpe, but by this time Mary's health had seriously deteriorated and little progress was made.

Slessor placed emphasis on practical rather than academic training. In many ways she had no choice, as there were practically no books or

writing materials available to her. Rote learning of spelling and arithmetic and the study of biblical texts formed the basis of the curriculum, although creative arts and play were also a part of the school day. A cooked meal was also provided in the middle of the day, something that took until the mid-1900s to be introduced in Scottish schools. Mary's schools were free and open to all ages and social strata. No one was refused, unlike in other establishments where missionaries 'withheld schooling from those who would not agree to be baptised or take the church's sacraments'.[53] Mary was able to keep the preaching and teaching separate and until 1891 classes were delivered in the local language. The main intention was to provide a basis for the industrial training that was to follow. However, with the establishment of formal British rule in that year all instruction in state-funded schools was to be in English; she characteristically defied the ruling. Her schools were contemptuously dismissed as 'hedge schools' by the Governor General and were in time increasingly shunned by the more ambitious pupils looking for work in government service. For this she has been criticised by some Nigerian historians.[54] In spite of this, it has been estimated that she 'personally opened more than fifty elementary schools (some of which closed soon after being opened) and that, by the time of her death, over 2,000 pupils were attending small bush schools that she had started'.[55] These schools were established at no cost to either the FMB or the British administration, with most of the money and materials coming from Mary's own pocket and her friends and admirers back in Britain. Moreover, it could be reasonably argued that it was Slessor's campaigning on the issue of vocational education that led to the opening of the Hope Waddell Training Institute in 1895 in Calabar, which soon became and remained the largest institute of its kind in West Africa.[56]

The promise of education was strategically used by Slessor as a tool in shifting traditional attitudes and bringing about social reform. She realised that the chiefs were hungry for schooling 'for their boys',[57] claiming that they want their 'boys educated and they want someone to guide them safely through the new world in which they are being enclosed by the white man of whom they know so little and whom they fear'.[58] However, in exchange for schools she demanded reforms in the important areas of child marriage, sale of alcohol, Sunday markets and the acceptance of twin mothers.[59] She also used her position as magistrate to improve the position of outcast women. On one occasion she fined a town £3 for not providing water for twin mothers.[60] All this had a salutary affect on the habits and customs of the native population. Slessor could report with pride to DC Partridge's father that her work at Itu had borne fruit, saying:

> We have boys educated as far as the ordinary artisans child at home, a reverent assembly worshipping regularly, & intelligently every Sabbath, paying its own expenses, and living Xtian [Christian] lives. The old drinking habits are gone & men are married, & men are buried, & are as sober, & well behaved as they are in your own neighbourhood. They do not shirk the Govts. Work nor need to be asked to do mine, & we now have a cemetery & our first Baptized Christian woman is laid in it with a Xtian burial . . . Surely a change from old times.[61]

But Mary was not simply active in advocating equal opportunities for native females and social reform, she also opposed any hint of male condescension and argued for a more prominent role for women in missionary service. In one of her bibles she wrote in the margins opposite St Paul's rules for the subjection of wives to husbands: 'Na! Na! Paul, laddie. This will no do.'[62] She wrote to DC Partridge criticising him for suggesting that men should not bring their wives to Calabar, saying: 'Women are as eager to share in all the work and sacrifice of the world as men.'[63] Women, she felt, made better missionaries and were more suited to the pioneering role than men. They were less associated with imperial government in the minds of the natives and as a result less likely to suffer opposition. Only when confidence had been achieved would men enter and build up the congregation in the usual missionary manner.[64] She also thought that women would be more sensitive to the customs and practices of tribal society and thus less judgemental or prudish than men. Mary occasionally shocked the colonial bourgeoisie with her relaxed attitude to marriage and dress. She condoned 'friend' marriages for women whose husbands were in gaol or temporarily estranged because she appreciated that women could live only precariously without the protection of a male.[65] When a black male clerk wrote to her asking that her female church members cover their 'nakedness' when they passed by his place of work, Mary answered: 'Rather a tall order, seeing Govt. has planted its shed at the ford where the women cross the Creek to their farms, & which takes a woman up to her armpits.'[66]

Although she promoted women's rights and demanded equal opportunities for both sexes, it would be difficult to describe Slessor as a proto-feminist. As Cheryl McEwan points out, she 'did not perceive the missionary life as one of liberation, rather as one of service, and despite devoting a great deal of energy to the cause of West African women, she remained remote from the debates over the rights of British women'.[67] She opposed the illegal activities of the militant suffragettes, although she was not against votes for women in principle. In a letter to a friend,

Slessor declared that she had little time for the concept of the so-called 'new woman', saying: 'I have enjoyed the old world gentlewomen, who after all are more to my taste than the new women. I'm too old for the new clever independent hand I fear.'[68] For Slessor it was the intimate domain of the home and the church that constituted the proper place for women: 'God – like motherhood is the finest sphere for women, and the way to the redemption of the world.'[69] She also found it difficult outside of Africa to assert her femininity. While serving as a magistrate in Okoyong, she was quite capable of 'administering a blow on the side of the head', in spite of the obvious difference in size and strength, as punishment to an errant husband. However, when Slessor was back in Britain on fund-raising tours, she became embarrassingly withdrawn and unable to speak in the presence of males. If males were allowed in the audience they were to be screened off. On a visit in 1898 she took fright and ran off stage in Edinburgh; in Glasgow at a reception she became so distressed after shaking hands for an hour that 'she could not speak'.[70]

Although open to qualification, the portrait of Slessor thus far is one that might be easily recognised by her legion of admirers. She is caring, particularly in regard to children and abused women, pioneering and motivated by an overwhelming desire to serve her church. But that would be a one-dimensional view. Her activities to have any meaning for a modern audience need to be placed in the context of race and Empire: two of the dominant themes of nineteenth century history.

Race became the dominant scientific discourse in late-nineteenth-century Europe. Charles Darwin's theories on evolution, particularly regarding the survival of the fittest, laid the basis for a division of the world based on higher and lower racial types. As the imperial powers were in this discourse undoubtedly the highest, the native populations of the undeveloped world were the lowest. Slessor, arriving in Calabar in 1876, was in a mindset no different from other missionaries, in spite of her working-class background. Her superiority lay in her colour: to be exact, in her whiteness. Initially, she was shocked at the indigenous culture and lifestyle, but as her knowledge of it grew and her relationship with the people developed, she moved away from this overtly racist discourse. Mary came to view European superiority as based only on knowledge of God and Christian virtues. She argued that once the West Africans accepted God and the codes of behaviour and morality associated with Christianity then any sense of superiority would dissolve. She was strongly opposed to natives turning themselves into Europeans.[71]

Admittedly, there are odd references in her letters that are racist, as well as morally superior and patronising, in tone. As late as 1905 she

described the Ibibios as 'ignorant, besotted, [and] cowardly'.[72] Earlier she described Okoyong people as 'addicted to witchcraft . . . lawless . . . oppression and outrage were of common occurrence',[73] and, as Cheryl McEwan points out, on occasions she referred to West Africans as 'simple and affectionate',[74] and patronisingly referred to native men as 'boys'. All her adopted children were given western Christian names. Janie saw Britain as 'home', and English was her first language, although spoken with a strong Dundee accent![75] Thus, undoubtedly, Slessor saw British culture as superior to that of West Africa and 'British rule . . . [as by] far & away the best thing for Africa & for all subject races, that the World Powers know'.[76] She was able to demonstrate her strong sense of allegiance and patriotism during the First World War, saying: 'Oh, I wish I were twenty years younger, and if I were a man! We must not have peace until Germany licks the dirt and is undeceived and stricken once for all.'[77] The question is, how far did her innate belief in superiority of British culture and Christian virtues involve her in the imperial project?

There is an old saying among the Africans that 'When the whites came here they had the Bible and we had the land. Now they have the land and we have the Bible.'[78] The link between religion and imperial expansion could not be more explicit in native eyes. Some modern writers, echoing the sentiments of the imperial authorities, have argued that Slessor had a large part to play in relieving the natives of their land in West Africa. Michael Fry, for instance, has argued that since 'oversight of public affairs took up most of her time, her main achievement was indeed finally imperial . . . she contributed largely to extension inland of British control'.[79] The Governor General of Nigeria, Sir Frederick Lugard, claimed that she had become 'a great political factor of much value to the administration'.[80] This view is somewhat underscored by the lack of progress in bringing Christianity to the native populations. As Mary herself noted: 'They went into rapture over the Gospel, prayed aloud, clasped their hands, shed tears, and then went back to their drinking, sacrificing, and quarrelling . . . "Yes Ma . . . that is right for you: but you and we are different."'[81]

Livingstone gloomily concluded that despite seventy years of missionary work in the Calabar region only 10,800 Christians had been converted and the communion roll only stood at 3,412. As he says, 'No real impression has been made . . . she [Slessor] did what she could do in vain.'[82] Part of the problem was the insistence as central to the conversion process in Presbyterianism that repentance of one's sins is made. The peoples of Calabar had no concept of sin and thus had nothing to repent. What progress was made in converting south-east Nigeria to Christianity

after 1900 was made by Efik missionaries when 'Scottish missionaries preachers were least responsible for the transmission of the Christian message in the area'.[83]

Perhaps taking a lead from the popular Victorian travel writer, Mary Kingsley – an acerbic critic of missionaries and their work in Africa, but who nevertheless felt that Slessor's '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 . . . and the amount of good she has done, no man can fully comprehend'[84] – some historians have placed a more positive spin on Mary's imperial involvement. Proctor argues that it was her humanitarian desire to address injustice, cruelty and suffering among the most vulnerable in south-east Nigeria that 'prompted her to serve both God and Empire'.[85] Taylor argues that through her educational and political activities, Slessor was sowing the seeds of later African nationalism. Her politics were those of 'liberation and amelioration, not of imposition and blatant imperialism'.[86] Underscoring this view, Joseph Anene and Godfrey Brown claim that she fostered an independent, nationalistic spirit that ultimately terminated colonial rule.[87]

Thus, there are some compelling and convincing arguments on both sides. The problem with such highly partisan judgements is that they fail to adequately recognise that the relationship of Slessor in particular and missionaries in general to the imperial project was more ambiguous and complex than they allow for. While not wishing to fundamentally disagree with either of these conflicting perceptions, some modifications are essential if we are to arrive at a fairer assessment of Mary's imperial role.

In confronting that 'awful thing heathenism' and, from a Christian point of view, unacceptable forms of social behaviour, Slessor, like other missionaries, was drawn into a symbiotic relationship with the imperial authorities in a number of important ways. Firstly, in terms of the representation of the African male as drunken, bloodthirsty and promiscuous she along with others provided further justification for the extension of British rule and values. Jane Haggis has observed that female reformers in Britain, by depicting Indian women as abused victims of Hinduism and themselves as free born and independent, were privileging one stereotype over another, and in doing so they were making an important 'contribution to the public perceptions of India as an appropriate subject for British imperial rule'.[88] The appropriation of landscape is also important in this respect. The depiction of Africa as the 'Dark Continent' not only fuelled the imagination of those back home, but also created further pressure for an extension of civilisation. Slessor once wrote: 'I feel drawn on

and on by the magnetism of this land of dense darkness and mystery.'[89] As Cheryl McEwan argues, her writings in the *Missionary Record* were part of a literature 'of the imperial frontier, a colonising discourse that titillated Western imagination with glimpses of radical otherness'.[90]

Secondly, the imposition of law and order, the introduction of education and the extension of trade, could only be achieved with assistance from the imperial authorities. In order to implement the 1878 treaty with the kings of Calabar, which outlawed twin killing, human sacrifice and fatal poisoning, the threat if not the actuality of armed forced was necessary. As Buchan states the treaty was the result of 'pressure from [John] Beecroft [British Consul] and the Royal Navy'.[91] The White Queen of Okoyong, as the younger colonial authorities christened Slessor over a gin one night in Calabar, could never have left Ekenge to establish a mission at Itu but for the punitive British military expedition against the Aro people in 1901.[92] Mary herself justified the relationship by declaring: 'God has had to employ the British Government to do what we could not do.'[93] Missionaries were also dependent on the imperial powers for funding, particular in the areas of education and economic development.

Mary herself was a key link between the imperial project and the native populations. Without her presence in Calabar many successful negotiations between British colonial officials and native West Africans would never have been achieved. Her knowledge of the region and her grasp of Efik was recognised and appreciated by officials. Coupled to this was the fact that she was also successful with the Okoyong and Efik peoples in establishing good relations among traditionally warring enemies and allowing British traders to penetrate further into the interior of West Africa. As Livingstone states, the adoption of unrestricted trade 'helped open up the country'.[94] Building the infrastructure of the region and the establishment of manufacturing also created employment for natives and inculcated in them the steady discipline and work ethic associated with capitalist enterprise. When '600 or so of the boys' were taken off a road-building project Mary told the High Commissioner that she was:

> sorry for he would not get a cheaper or safer way of steadying & pacifying & civilizing the country. These Ekit & Aro men, Anan & etc have been utterly transformed by the steady discipline of hours & etc, & are my best friends, & they will go to their distant homes, exponents of the White Man, and thus open his way.[95]

The military and colonial officials followed close on the heels of the traders and the establishment of the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1891

placed the land under formal imperial rule. Once established, the 'benefits' of British rule were bestowed on native populations. British laws were substituted for local laws and customs that had governed personal and tribal relationships for centuries. In those parts of West Africa in which British rule was less tangible, Mary acted as consular agent and through this office helped to advance imperial interests by establishing 'native courts'. These courts were not simply judicial institutions; they were designed to assist in the process of bringing considerable areas of land under colonial control and became in time 'the basis upon which a British legal system was imposed upon Nigeria' in the twentieth century.[96] The courts were in session twice a week and sometimes lasted all day. Mary had responsibility for preparing warrants and summaries, writing reports on her decisions, supervising punishment, and conducting correspondence with the District Commissioner.[97] She also had to meet with chiefs and discuss grievances. One Sunday Slessor stated that 'twenty three chiefs . . . from Ibiaku Itam' attended on her, and this was a fairly common occurence.[98] In recognition of her work in native affairs, in May 1905 Mary was appointed a member of the Itu Native Court with the status of permanent Vice-President, giving her the powers of a magistrate, although she refused payment. This was the first time in the history of the British Empire that a woman had been appointed a magistrate, an honour that reflected the high esteem the imperial authorities held her work in. A further honour was bestowed in 1913 when she was awarded an Honorary Associate of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of which King George V was the sovereign head, for services to philanthropy.

Thus, although the roles of the missionaries and the colonisers were symbiotic, they were also in some ways fundamentally antagonistic. As Fiona Bowie and others point out, 'the colonial authorities were often unimpressed with the efficiency of the missionaries as agents of colonialism'.[99] This is because the projects were not entirely the same. The Christian missionaries were intent on saving souls. It was only the realisation that this could not be achieved without interfering with local cultures and by introducing superior values that they were pushed into a close relationship with the colonialists: something that Mary was acutely aware of. The interdependence was, thus, one of accident rather than design; however, the tensions in the relationship were ongoing as an examination of Slessor's dealings with the colonial authorities shows.

Mary did play a part in the extension of British rule in West Africa, but at no time did she embrace the grander imperial design. In an important statement she says that

> this land belongs to the native and worked by the native, tho' our officers do not believe it . . . I am not only writing rank treason, but I am doing so unrepentantly as we live in the bush under bush conditions, and I owe nothing to the government.[100]

This was further emphasised when she stated to DC Partridge: 'The very men you are educating with gun & motor & Telegraph will turn you all out & keep Africa for the Africans.'[101] Moreover, although she held positions of authority within the Empire, Mary often found herself at odds with the colonial judicial system. As a magistrate she frequently opposed policies that conflicted with local customs and laws. Indeed, she was forced to resign her position in 1909 over a clash with the authorities regarding the rights of native labourers. British companies, engaged in road-building projects, complained to the authorities of Mary's interference in industrial matters and the imperial authorities, who in any case were eager to privilege British law over tribal customs and laws, upheld their complaints. Slessor bitterly remarked, 'I'm dismissed & that by utter strangers . . . I'm too old to be trusted with the affairs of a people.'[102] This attitude is also evident in a letter to the district commissioner when the Akpap tribe complained in 1910 that they were being forced to build a road through a sacred grove of yams. In it she expressed her opposition to such insensitivity, ending the letter with 'I am NOT your obedient servant'. She believed in peaceful conquest through the demonstration of superior values and lifestyles, rather than force of arms, saying, 'I can't bear those dreadful expeditions.'

In spite of her championship of native rights, the relationship between Mary and the people of Calabar was not one of equality. Because of her pivotal role as mediator between colonialists and natives she exercised a degree of power unthinkable for a woman of any social class in Britain. She was a Vice Consul of the British Empire and this guaranteed respect in a highly patriarchal society. One missionary noted that she never allowed 'a native to sit in her presence . . . and she never shakes hands with them'.[103] The mother–child relationship she had with the native peoples also 'involved elements of inequality: she was British, her children were African'.[104] Indeed, in an evaluation of her imperial role, McEwan argues that perhaps Mary's later anti-imperial statements were the result of her marginalisation within colonial affairs as the government took a more active role in administering the Protectorate.[105]

Thus, an analysis of Slessor's work in West Africa raises some of the complexities and ambiguities in the relationship between native people

and missionaries, missionaries and colonialists, Empire and the Scots. Her presence in West Africa was undoubtedly of significance to the colonial administration in a numbers of ways. Firstly, her forays into the interior allowed British rule to expand into previously inaccessible territories; secondly, her skills in mediation brought closer links between the imperial powers and the indigenous peoples, particularly with the kings; and, thirdly, the native courts she presided over allowed British law to usurp native customs and traditions. Her importance to the Empire was recognised in the honours bestowed on her when alive, but also in death. When Mary died on 11 January 1915 a state funeral was held in Duke Town. The coffin was draped in a Union Jack and attended by government officials, merchants and missionaries. Great crowds watched the procession, which moved along in silence. The mourners at the graveside sang two hymns – 'When the day of toil is done' and 'Asleep in Jesus'[106] – and she was laid to rest beside William and Louisa Anderson. But Slessor never saw herself as a tool of Empire; in fact, as we have seen she spent a great deal of her time in fighting colonial expansion. She set out to spread the Christian faith and remove the more barbaric customs, without adversely affecting native culture, believing West Africans to be inferior only because they had not accepted the word of God. In this she may have been naive, but as a missionary in West Africa she is still remembered as *Eka Kpukpro Owo* – 'the mother of all the peoples'. She is still revered in Calabar to this day. In 1987 a statue of Slessor holding a pair of twins was erected in her memory and a street was named after her, and the University of Calabar recently launched a medical journal bearing her name.[107]

In her native Dundee there are also memorials to Mary Mitchell Slessor's work and memory, such as the stained glass window in the McManus Gallery and the Mary Slessor Centre. Municipal veneration is not only bestowed for her missionary activity, but because she stands as potent symbol of self-improvement to the working class of Dundee. Mary's life remains testimony to a powerful narrative enshrined in the kailyard school of Scottish literature in which individuals overcome social adversity through the adoption of appropriate values, rather than engage in collective action. In her case it was the values of Presbyterianism: devotion to God, hard work, uncomplaining suffering and service to others. A humble weaver from an impoverished background had become an imperial icon, a role model for those in her social position to emulate. Thus, Mary's legacy is not simply to be located in the mud huts of Calabar, but can also be found reverberating in the slums of Dundee.

NOTES

1. W. P. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar: Pioneer Missionary* (1916), p. 323.
2. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 344.
3. J. Buchan, *The Expendable Mary Slessor* (Edinburgh, 1980), p. xi.
4. See J. Haggis, 'White women and colonisation: towards a non-recuperative history', in C. Midgley (ed.) *Gender and Imperialism* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 45–78; C. McEwan, *Gender, Geography and Empire: Victorian Women Travellers in West Africa* (Aldershot, 2000); F. Bowie et al. (eds), *Women and Missions: Past and Present* (Oxford, 1993).
5. Letter to C. Partridge, 16 October 1913 (Dundee City Archives)
6. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 1.
7. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 2.
8. For an extended discussion of the importance of respectability in working-class culture see W. W. Knox, *Industrial Nation: Work, Culture and Society in Scotland, 1800–Present* (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 94–103.
9. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 6.
10. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, pp. 8–9.
11. E. Robertson, *Mary Slessor* (Edinburgh, 2001), p. 6.
12. J. Stein, 'Mary Slessor', in J. Harrison Hudson et al., *Let the Fire Burn* (Dundee, 1978), p. 47.
13. Letter to C. Partridge, 15 April 1908.
14. Letter to C. Partridge, 10 January 1911.
15. Robertson, *Mary Slessor*, p. 9.
16. Buchan, *Mary Slessor*, pp. 17–18.
17. E. Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland, 1850–1914* (Oxford, 1991), p. 156.
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21. Quoted in Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 135.
22. Haggis, 'White women', p. 56.
23. Haggis, 'White women', p. 59.
24. Quoted in Stein, 'Mary Slessor', p. 57.
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26. Buchan, *Mary Slessor*, p. xi.
27. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 27.
28. M. Fry, *Scotland and Empire* (2001), pp. 180–1.
29. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 25.
30. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 32.
31. W. Harrison Daniel, 'Patterns of mission preaching in the UPC of Scotland

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32. Christian and Plummer, *Redhead*, p. 110.
33. Buchan, *Mary Slessor*, pp. 169–70.
34. Christian and Plummer, *Redhead,* p. 176.
35. Letter to C. Partridge, 29 March 1908.
36. Quoted in Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 236.
37. Letter to C. Partridge, 7 July 1909.
38. E. A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842–1914* (London, 1966), p. 330.
39. *The Women's Missionary Magazine*, July 1912, p. 149.
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41. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 51.
42. Buchan, *Mary Slessor*, p. 121.
43. Christian and Plummer, *Redhead*, p. 86.
44. Quoted in Christian and Plummer, *Redhead*, p. 89.
45. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 115.
46. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 244.
47. Letter to C. Partridge, 11 July 1907.
48. Letter to C. Partridge, 27 June 1907.
49. Letter to C. Partridge, 25 October 1907.
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55. Taylor, *Mission*, p. 126.
56. Taylor, *Mission*, p. 128.
57. Letter to Mr Stevenson, 20 February 1914.
58. Quoted in Taylor, *Mission*, p. 126.
59. Taylor, *Mission*, p. 125.
60. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, p. 233.
61. Letter to C. Partridge (senior), 10 January 1911.
62. Quoted in Buchan, p. 195.
63. Quoted in Christian and Plummer, *Redhead*, p. 165.
64. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, pp. 320–1.
65. Buchan, *Mary Slessor*, p. 195.
66. Letter to Partridge, 27 April 1910.
67. McEwan, *Gender, Geography and Empire*, p. 58.
68. Quoted in McEwan, 'Mother of all the peoples', p. 147.
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70. Buchan, *Mary Slessor*, p. 159.

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72. Letter to C. Partridge, 6 January 1905.
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93. *Missionary Record*, November 1906, p. 279.
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95. Letter to C. Partridge, 30 April 1906.
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97. Proctor, 'Serving God', p. 55.
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99. Bowie, 'Introduction', *Women and Missions*, p. 19.
100. Letter to Mrs Findlay, 24 August 1912 quoted in McEwan, *Gender, Geography and Empire*, p. 39.
101. Letter to C. Partridge, 7 July 1909.
102. Letter to C. Partridge, 9 December 1909.
103. M. Kearny, Great Scotswomen (1933), p. 253.
104. McEwan, *Gender, Geography and Empire*, p. 103.
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