

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.

Introduction

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