

Hopes and Disappointments

I need scarcely [say] that I am much interested in the proposal which you and Mr. Morrison make, and the whole matter will have our best attention.

—James Buchanan, 1891¹

Mary and Janie landed in Plymouth, Devon in January 1891 and headed for Topsham to meet old friends and visit the graves of Mary's mother and sister. Staying at "Majorfield," a nearby house in the village, Mary rested much of the spring to regain her strength.²

In both March and April Slessor received letters from James Buchanan, Foreign Mission Secretary, which chided her for not sending in her required reports. In April he wrote,

The report which I expected from you is of course the Annual report which each missionary is instructed to send home as prescribed in our *Rules & Methods of Procedure*. The rule prescribes that missionaries "transmit from time to time to the Foreign Mission Secretary such extracts as are fitted to show the progress of the work and promote the interest which the Church at home takes in the Missionary cause, and *to transmit, each year, before 31st January, full account of the income and expenditure of the congregations of the Membership and attendance, of the day School, the Prayer Meetings, the classes for religious instruction, and of the Spiritual State of the Stations.*"

1. FMB to MS, MS7666, August 8, 1891.

2. Christian and Plummer, *Redhead*, 85.

MARY SLESSOR—EVERYBODY'S MOTHER

In the month of May last I sent a circular letter to all the Missionaries, calling attention anew to this rule and asking that reports should be sent to me early.³

Slessor disregarded this rule more often than not. It did not appear to be a matter of importance to her, and the secretary frequently had to make up a report from various letters and columns Mary wrote.

REMEMBERING

In Topsham Mary would have had time to think of her fiancé, to recall the times they spent together and the promises they made. She and Charles both had concerns about the reception news of their engagement would receive from the Foreign Mission Board. She may have spent time rereading the only two books she left behind at her death besides her Bibles, books in which she and Charles had inscribed their initials: Charles Dickens's collection of essays of often comic characters, *Sketches by Boz: Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People*, and a popular psychological crime thriller by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Eugene Aram*.

It is tempting to speculate on the question of the relationship between the couple and on the strength of their love for each other. Was Morrison simply infatuated with the popular, if eccentric, woman seventeen years his senior? Was Slessor just hoping for the closeness she saw in some missionary couples around her, a closeness she never witnessed in childhood? Their feelings remained a private matter. Some time during the spring or summer, Mary let friends know about her engagement and posed for a photograph wearing an engagement ring.

Slessor did not even send the letters she carried from Calabar to the Mission Board—one from Morrison and one her own—until August, after she had been home more than six months. A letter from Secretary Buchanan in August acknowledged receiving the letters and informed Mary the Board would not meet again for another month.⁴

One wonders if eyebrows were raised on learning the popular forty-one-year-old missionary was engaged to a younger man. Some people may have been shocked; others may have thought this was simply one more example of eccentric, headstrong Mary Slessor, making another rash decision. The Board may have taken the age difference into account,

3. FMB to MS, MS7666/171, Mar. 31, and MS7666/173-4, Apr. 7, 1891.

4. FMB to MS, MS7666/338, Aug. 8, 1891.

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but they expressed a legitimate concern when they finally got around to making their decision.

When Mary began the mandatory round of speaking engagements, she made her headquarters with her friend Mrs. McCrindle at Joppa for churches in the Edinburgh area. She stayed with Charles Morrison's parents in Kirkintilloch when she visited churches there. She stayed in Bowden in the Scottish Borders—the Bowden church had sent “missionary boxes” to Calabar. She also stayed in Annan with Mr. and Mrs. William Peebles, who had served in Calabar from 1881 to 1883. She wrote to Mrs. Peebles in September 1891 apologizing for taking so long to thank her for her hospitality. She had been ill with a severe cold, she said, but she had a fire to keep her warm and “plenty of over kind nurses” to take care of her. She was better by the time she wrote, had her hair cut, and planned to go for a walk and drive that day.⁵

From time to time, Buchanan sent Slessor a new list of speaking engagements. September and October were filled up, as May and June had been. Some weeks Mary had to speak several times to various groups. By mid-November she was ill in Dundee, and the secretary cancelled meetings for a time. (W. P. Livingstone said she had influenza and bronchitis.⁶) There was no letup in requests from churches and women's groups to meet and hear the famous missionary and see her daughter Janie, who was now nine years old.

Livingstone reported that Mary loved to sit at tea and tell stories of her adventures in “the bush.” When it came time for a meeting, though, the people were apt to get a sermon. “It is a trial to speak,” she said; “but He has asked me to, and it is an honour to be allowed to testify for Him in any way, and I wish to do it cheerfully.” She intimated that God didn't really need any outside help in raising support for missions “if the heart was right and the life consecrated.”⁷ She wanted to see hearts made right and lives consecrated, both in Scotland and in Calabar.

THE BOARD DECIDES

The Foreign Mission Board didn't answer Slessor's or Morrison's letters about their engagement until November. To Charles Morrison, Secretary

5. MS to Mrs. Peebles, MS5239/1, Sept. 3, 1891.

6. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 116.

7. *Ibid*, 112.

Buchanan wrote two letters on the same day. One communicated the Board's decision: "That it be intimated to Mr. Morrison that in view of the fact that he offered his services for Teaching work in Duke Town, that a school has been erected there under his superintendence, and that it is of the utmost importance to the mission that school work should be vigorously carried out in that populous centre, the Board cannot see their way to sanction his removal from Duke Town until full provision is made for carrying on the school work there to the satisfaction of the Calabar Committee and the Board." Buchanan added, "I may state that we are making every effort to secure one or even two additional teachers for Old Calabar, and we trust that we may be successful ere long."⁸

The second was a normal business letter thanking Charles for a report regarding his students, telling of correspondence with shipping company Elder Dempster & Co. regarding coal they failed to deliver, and making general comments and observations, including the hope that the mission's steamboat had been fixed.⁹

Buchanan wrote to Mary a week later asking her to meet with the Western Committee in Glasgow on December 1 to discuss her ideas about an industrial school in Calabar. The only other paragraph of the letter simply said, "I suppose you are quite aware of the decision of the Board regarding Mr. Morrison's proposal to go to Okoyong." Then he repeated the Board's written decision.¹⁰ No word of sympathy or hope was added.

Mary accepted the Board's decision without question. "I lay it all in God's hands, and will take from Him whatever he sees best for His work in Okoyong." If God would let Charles join her work, she would be grateful, she wrote. "If not I will still try to be grateful, as He knows best. . . . What the Lord ordains is right." She had already told Charles she could not marry him unless the Mission Board sent him to serve in Ekenge. "If he does not come," she said, "I must ask the Committee to give me some one, for it is impossible for me to work the station alone."¹¹

No correspondence between Mary and Charles survives to give an indication of their disappointment. Biographers Christian and Plummer report that Mary wrote to Charles's mother telling her the two missionaries

8. FMB to Morrison, MS7666/424-25, Nov. 3, 1891.

9. *Ibid.*, 426.

10. *Ibid.*, MS7666/438, Nov. 11, 1891.

11. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 114-15.

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could not marry for the present, but that if his health improved and he could come to Ekenge, their marriage would still be possible.¹²

INDUSTRIAL MISSIONARIES

The Calabar Mission had a missionary printer on staff from its inception. Printing was considered essential once translations were made of Bible portions, hymns, lessons and creeds. Samuel Edgerley was among those who arrived in Calabar in 1846. He remained there until his death eleven years later. His son, Samuel Howell Edgerley, landed in Calabar the year before his father died and served twenty-six years, until he, too, died in Duke Town in 1883. Both father and son are listed in William Christie's "Annals," first as printers, then as teacher/evangelists, and finally as ordained missionaries.¹³ Mary treasured her memories of working with the younger Edgerley and his sister.

When the mission acquired steamboats for river travel, a missionary engineer became a necessity. One of those engineers, James Lindsay, who stayed in Calabar just over a year, talked about one of Mary Slessor's eccentricities: not wearing shoes. "I walked many miles with her through the bush," he said, "and only once did I know her to be troubled with her feet. She had been to Duke Town, attending Presbytery, and made some small concession to the conventions by wearing a pair of knitted woolen slippers. On returning to Okoyong through the bush, small twigs and sticks penetrated the wool and pricked her feet. With an expression of disgust she took the slippers off and threw them into the bush. That was the only time I saw her other than barefoot."¹⁴

A succession of carpenters served the mission. Most of them remained for just a couple of years. But Charles Ovens, who brought Slessor to into the limelight of the church in Scotland, served almost fourteen years before he resigned.

Not long after reading the Foreign Mission Board's letter in which her hopes for marriage were dashed, Slessor picked up a new issue of *The Missionary Record of the United Presbyterian Church* and found an article from James Luke appealing for more industrial missionaries. Mary immediately wrote a very long letter to *The Record*, which she addressed to the

12. Christian and Plummer, *Redhead*, 89–90.

13. Christie, "Roll of Missionaries" in "Annals."

14. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 131.

church at large. She applauded Luke's letter in the December 1891 issue and expressed her hope that people would respond. "Surely the call in that letter has already entered the hearts of many of our Christian artisans," she wrote, "and prompted the prayerful question, 'Lord, is it I?'"

Mary went on to address the need for a training institution for Calabar's people, "to provide legitimate employment for the young people being educated and brought up under Christian influence." She said missionaries couldn't do everything themselves and that the church should not expect the Foreign Mission Board to meet the need: the Board's function was to be administrative. "A question like this belongs to the Church at large," she insisted. "Too much is expected of the Mission Board, and too little of the Church." Her solution? "Let the science of the evangelisation of the nations occupy the attention of our sessions, our congregations, our conferences, and our Church literature, and we will soon have more workers, more wealth, and more life, as well as new methods." She made the challenge more explicit: "Surely there are half-a-score of leisured men in the United Presbyterian Church who could make this matter their special business." A practical step, she added would be to send a deputation of two men to Calabar to determine what could and should be done. Mary even outlined a plan of operation for when artisan missionaries came and how their work could be financed.

Each worker could manage his own department, live in his own compound with his own men, influence them, educate them, have stated days on which he will accompany them, either by boat or on foot, to the villages and hamlets all round—he thus learning the language and the manners of the people, while he guides and encourages, and gives prestige to them as they deliver the message of God's salvation. . . . Why should not a private individual, or a dozen of individuals, send out and support each an artisan missionary, the Mission Board and local Presbytery guiding and controlling and superintending him?¹⁵

Mary's letter discounted a popular notion that Calabar's wood was not fit for good use. "Would it be like God's ordinary way of working to make hundreds of miles of fine forest of unworkable wood?" She told of the export of ebony, of how early missionary Samuel Edgerley sawed wood to floor his house, of how the natives "with a sixpenny matchet, or an ordinary hatchet" made canoes, paddles, doors, tables, and other items.

15. *Record*, 1892, 11–12.

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She also addressed the belief that Africans couldn't be trained. It had been proven otherwise, she claimed, not only in Africa but also in the West Indies and the Americas.

"The weak point in the race, with ourselves as elsewhere, is their want of staying power, their want of perseverance and persistency in the face of difficulties," Slessor wrote. She attributed this to their history and added, "This no more proves that they cannot be trained, than the fact that there are lapsed masses in Britain proves the European incapable of steady work."¹⁶

Mary did not sign her name to this lengthy letter, but simply ended with "One of the Zenana staff." (The Scottish Presbyterian women's work had come under the "Zenana Committee" in 1886.)¹⁷

Foreign Mission Board members were already aware of Slessor's views on a training school. She had not kept it a secret, and the Board had invited her to meet with them to discuss it, before her illness in Dundee. As the time drew near for her return to Calabar, Buchanan wrote to say that Board members "were much grieved" about her illness, then expressed displeasure that she continued to operate outside regular channels.

We all have been much disappointed that you could not arrange for meeting our Committee or even for calling here before you went South. There are a number of matters that our Committee would like to confer with you about, especially some matters bearing upon industrial work in Old Calabar. We know something of your views from the letter which you have sent to the *Record*. . . . You cannot however but feel that this is not satisfactory as the Board would like to do full justice to any suggestions which you would like to make, and this can only be secured by having a personal conference with you.¹⁸

Perhaps the Board appreciated Mary's attempt to shift responsibility to the church at large, but they still thought proposals should first come through the Board. Ever the renegade, Slessor operated on the spur-of-the-moment when it suited her. Buchanan kept trying for a meeting. The

16. Ibid.

17. The interdenominational work with women in India's zenanas (harems) began in 1852 as Indian Female Normal School Society. By 1880, the mission added medical work and became Zenana Bible & Medical Mission under the Church of England. As time passed, Zenana became a generic term for women's missionary work.

18. FMB to MS, MS7666/485, December 31, 1891.

upshot was that the Western Committee would hold a special meeting in Glasgow on February 12. "Kindly note the place, day and hour," Buchanan stressed.¹⁹ Slessor had already missed two meeting dates.

DURING MARY'S ABSENCE

While Mary was on furlough, newly arrived missionary Elizabeth Hutton went to help Margaret Dunlop in Okoyong. The diary of her early days in mission territory sheds light on the time during Mary's furlough.

Hutton wrote in her diary of her first trip to Ekenge by canoe and commented on the "pretty little Creek" and the three-mile walk along the narrow path to the village. "On either side long grass, ferns, bush of all description. Foliage of trees so dense as to exclude the sky, but when we come to an open part, how pleasant is the bright blue sky." She remarked that she had slept well "in spite of the rats which abound here," and expressed her fear the house would fall completely down with a few more storms. Rain was coming in through the roof, and part of the house had already fallen.²⁰

Hutton chronicled her approval of Ma Eme, always helpful to the missionaries, who had sent them "a large Calabar chop, and yams and vegetables, and jug of mimbo." But her high opinion of Eme was affected by an episode four months later.

The two women missionaries heard a commotion and learned that Chief Edem was about to administer the oil ordeal to some of his men. Hutton and Dunlop rushed to see what was going on and found a large crowd of people. Hutton wrote:

In the middle was a pot sitting on a fire. This pot contained oil, not only boiling but also burning, flames coming out of it. One man standing with a long wooden spoon, ready to lift the oil and pour it on the hands of two men who were standing close by. We ran forward and stood between the men and the pot and told them to stop [just as Mary Slessor would have done]. Edim [*sic*] came forward then and said that the oil would not harm them unless they were guilty.²¹

19. FMB to MS, MS7666/506, January 22, 1892.

20. Marwick diary, April 23, 1891.

21. *Ibid.*, August 3, 1891.

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Hutton could hardly believe that the men who were about to undergo the ordeal were angry that the women had interfered. Since they were innocent, the men were certain they would not be harmed. Edem reluctantly threw the oil out. The missionary was even more shocked to learn the reason for the ordeal. "Last week," she wrote, "Ma Eme had a quantity of yams devoured by wild beasts at her farm, and she declared that the souls of these men had entered into the beasts and caused them to do so. It is disappointing to find that Ma Eme, of whom we expected better things, should still cherish such superstition."²²

Another time, Elizabeth wrote of seeing native dancing for the first time in Ekenge. "It is a weird performance," she wrote.

The instruments are large pieces of trunk or thick branch of tree, hollow, and skin covering the ends. The musicians beat on this drum with their fingers and palms of their hands, and though not very musical, still there is a pleasing rhythm and all keep time. The dancing is not so much with feet as the body. The dancers slowly move round in a circle or ring and wiggle their body, keeping time to the music, and they either get giddy or are magnetised by their performance, for they get quite absorbed in it and pay little or no attention to what is going on around. At intervals one and another leave the ring and make obeisance to the players and to the on-lookers. They also sing in a chanting strain, one sings a little alone, then the others reply in chorus.²³

Charles Morrison visited Okoyong a few times during Mary's absence. Elizabeth Hutton recorded that he and physician William Rae preached at Ekenge and the people enjoyed some of "Sankey's Hymns." When Morrison preached again, she said he "spoke very earnestly and well." On another occasion she and Dunlop had a surprise visit from Charles. He promised to bring mails to them and to return to take them to Presbytery in Duke Town. He would take Ma Eme along to see the town, too, he said. Elizabeth also wrote of a steamboat trip with other missionaries, including Morrison.

The Congregational Church at Topsham gave Mary a big sendoff before she left for her return to Calabar. Even as she prepared to return to Okoyong, Charles Morrison's health waned. She arrived back in Calabar on March 19, 1892, along with fellow missionary Ebenezer Deas. She and

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., June 23, 1891.

Charles had a brief reunion at Duke Town before she returned to Ekenge. She was saddened by the death of her friend, King Eyo, less than a week after her arrival.

Three weeks later she traveled from Okoyong back to Duke Town to see several of the mission staff off for home on the weekly steamer: Mary Edgerley, who had already been in Calabar thirty-eight years and would return to serve four more; Mary Johnstone, in Calabar twenty years; Charles Ovens, going home on furlough; and Morrison, his health failing. Hutton wrote of the visit, "They were all looking pretty well and all were very lively except Miss Johnstone. She seemed so sad and lonely."²⁴ Mary and Charles may have felt particularly lonely, too, at this parting. There is no record of their meeting and time together, but Mary surely was at the departure because of their relationship. He was among those mentioned by Hutton as "looking pretty well" and "very lively."

When she returned to Ekenge, Mary found herself as busy as ever. She wrote to a friend in Scotland about the problem of repairing her house. "Our mud and sand is very easily let out of order, and will not patch up," she wrote. She complained that she was fatigued but otherwise had not been ill.²⁵ Ebenezer Deas came from Duke Town to lend a hand before he went to Ikotana, another thirty or so miles up the Cross River, where he would serve until his death five years later. Slessor appreciated him as much as she appreciated Charles Ovens. She wrote of Deas,

He came up and worked like a hatter to get my flitting done. . . . He said, as we sat at my beach one day, "What would some of the braw folk of Edinburgh think if they saw you just now?" referring to my bare feet and very unconventional dress. He sat on the ground as I did, so I just said, "And what would they think if they saw you?" A woolen under garment, and some unmentionables on his understandings. He looked as much a tinker as I did. . . . It is splendid to have people who know your people at home, and who can sympathise with your inclination to shout "Hallelujah!" sometimes.²⁶

24. *Ibid.*, April 16, 1892.

25. Christian and Plummer, *Redhead*, quoting May 27, 1892 MS letter to "Dundee friends" 92.

26. MS to "My dear brother & sister," May 27, 1892, 1984-259-2/1, 4.

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A DISTANT CHARLES

Back in Scotland, Charles Morrison wrote “A Chapter of Old Calabar History,” which appeared in *The Record* on October 13, 1893. The article told the story of the mission’s expansion. “When the mission was firmly established in Calabar territories, the missionary began to turn his thoughts towards the interior,” he wrote. Near the end of the article, Morrison paid tribute to several men who were instrumental in bringing about changes in those later years. “One man will long be remembered in this connection—Samuel Edgerley the younger. . . . Then a Jarett, a Porteous, a Ludwig, a Gartshore, a Luke sat down amongst these tribes, and gave the last blow to Efik’s assumed power and dominion. . . . [Their influence is] bringing about a state of progress and prosperity.”²⁷

It seems odd that Morrison did not mention Mary Slessor in his article, while he extolled the virtues of the work of Edgerley, Jarrett, Porteous, Ludwig, Gartshore, and Luke. Gartshore did not even arrive in Calabar until the year Mary moved to Okoyong territory, and Luke not only mentioned Slessor’s work but also named his own book after her.²⁸ Hugh Goldie wrote of Mary’s entry “into this wild tribe” of Okoyong, “She was cordially received, and is treated with all respect, as she visits their various farm hamlets with the Divine word of light and love . . . giving herself to a labour which few would undertake. She is making an impression upon them, denouncing vehemently their customs of blood, and teaching more confidence in each other.”²⁹

Morrison’s health did not improve greatly in Scotland. In April 1893, when it was time for his furlough to end, the Foreign Mission Board notified him they had continued his pay until the end of April and that they were granting a “parting gift” of twenty-five pounds.³⁰ Morrison kept in touch with the Mission Board, obviously hoping to return to Calabar. In December 1894, when he had already been home thirty-two months—matching Slessor’s “long pause”—the Foreign Mission Secretary wrote to him, “Our medical adviser, Dr. Robertson . . . thinks it would be very unwise for you to return to Calabar and he seems strongly to recommend such a climate as South Africa, Australia or New Zealand as being

27. *Record*, 1893, 284–86.

28. Luke, *Pioneering*.

29. Goldie, *Memoir of King Eyo*, 19–20.

30. FMB to Morrison, , 7667/244, April 25, 1893.

favourable for your health. In these circumstances we should never think of exposing you to the risk of the West Africa climate, but if you think of looking towards any of the Colonies . . . we will do all in our power to give you a recommendation and to further your interests.”³¹

Biographer Livingstone wrote that Morrison volunteered to serve in Kaffraria, South Africa, but no position was available for him there. “To the regret and disappointment of the Committee, who regarded him as an able and valued worker, he resigned.”³²

There is no evidence to indicate Charles was depressed or lovesick. He emigrated to America, probably in 1895, where his brother was helping build a railroad in the North Carolina mountains. Dates remain unclear, but it is known that Morrison's writings were destroyed by a fire in the forest cabin where he lived and that he died some time later. When Mary learned of his death, she wrote to Morrison's mother—a letter “that left his family in no doubt that the bond between them was heartfelt and strong.”³³

31. FMB to Morrison, , 7708/10, December 21, 1894.

32. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor*, 115.

33. Christian and Plummer, *Redhead*, 90; See also Buchan, *Expendable Mary Slessor*, 137.