

Foreword

MARY SLESSOR IS ONE of the few missionaries—David Livingstone is another—to have become a legend in their lifetime and leave an impression on the lives of a generation after it. And Livingstone achieved much of his celebrity after his missionary career had ended; Slessor died in missionary harness. Even today, when missionaries are not in fashion, the Scottish Clydesdale Bank identifies her as one of the great Scots whose image, together with a map of the area of Nigeria where she worked, properly belongs on currency notes.

Yet no satisfactory biography of Slessor has yet appeared. Those that have been published suffer from grave defects; tendentiousness, superficiality, sentimentality, ignorance of context, inadequate research. In Nigeria her name is celebrated (the National Museum Service is planning a commemorative exhibition); yet so hazy is knowledge of the details of her life that a newspaper recently took for granted that this doughty Presbyterian must have been a Catholic sister. There have been scholarly studies of the church and mission of which she was part, and of imperial policy in the area in which she held office as a magistrate for a time under the British crown; but even these do not fully uncover her life and activity.

One reason for this is that both in mission and in government, she was an exception, an anomaly, to whom the usual rules did not apply. She flouted many of the established conventions about lady missionaries, whether as to their role or their dress. She was prepared to take on male missionaries, colonial servants, the consensus of colleagues, substantial chiefs, venerated decision-makers or rowdy young men. She was a curious mixture of evangelical preacher and reforming chief. In the former capacity she employed a homespun eclectic spirituality; in the latter (where she held a position without precedent for a woman at that time) she profoundly and permanently affected the area in which she lived. Her emotional life was marked by volcanic eruptions that included a curiously assorted marriage that never took place. Much energy went into the res-

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cue of twins at a period when custom demanded their death; she founded her own family of adopted children.

Jeanette Hardage has produced a sympathetic and convincing portrait of this extraordinary, fascinating, impossible woman, the attraction and the contradictions duly displayed. She has made excellent use of Slessor's surviving letters and of the memories of people who knew her, including her Nigerian family. The copious interlinings and marginalia in her Bible have been quarried to good effect. The author also takes account of existing scholarship on the history of South East Nigeria.

This is undoubtedly the best biography of Slessor so far produced. It has no realistic competitor. It is also very readable. It is, quite simply, a good story. It helps to illuminate an important region of Africa, and aspects of missions, of colonial policy, of culture contact and conflict, and of Scottish life, all handled very accessibly. It is also a significant contribution to women's literature; it presents a woman who, without pretensions to gentility or to much education, moved the bounds, not only of what was acceptable for women, but of what was conceivable.

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