

Her name was Mary Slessor of Calabar. Not Mary Slessor of Aberdeen (where she was born) or Mary Slessor of Dundee (where she lived and worked) but Mary Slessor of Calabar. She would be given many titles and nicknames: "The White Queen," "The White Ma who lives alone," and "The Ma who loves babies." To British administrators she was "the uncrowned queen whose word was law," because of her influence over otherwise uncontrollable natives. But her enduring title links her name inseparably with the land where she labored for the Lord she loved:

"Mary Slessor of Calabar."

Born on December 2, 1848, Mary was converted as a child in Dundee, Scotland, where her father was an abusive drunk and her mother a factory worker. When she was 11 years old, she began working 12-hour shifts daily at the looms in the textile mill. On early winter nights, Mary dodged drunks and thieves as she walked home in the dark to do her chores and face her drunken father. Often her mother pushed her out into the street so that her dad would not be able to beat her. During her off time from the mills, she helped teach a Sunday school Bible class in a slum district. The exploits of David Livingston in Africa stirred her spirit. For 14 years, as she worked in the factory, she learned to read, taught the poor children, and prayed about serving the Lord in Africa. She learned about conditions in Calabar through reading the *Missionary Record*. In 1874, Livingston died and the next year Mary Slessor volunteered to the Scottish Missionary Society. She sailed for Calabar in 1876.

Don't mess with Ma ...

In her service for the Lord Jesus in Africa there were times when she faced extreme danger. At home in Scotland, this diminutive woman was afraid of cows. She was even afraid of crossing busy streets by herself. But in Africa she often faced down angry armed natives and stood between warring armies of various cannibal tribes, demanding they surrender their

weapons to her. Once she halted an intertribal war by marching between the two opposing armies and demanding they pile their weapons at her feet. The heap of spears, bows, arrows, clubs, and knives that was laid at her feet was five-feet high! The protection of the Lord Who sent her and the respect she had among the tribes were all that preserved her life.

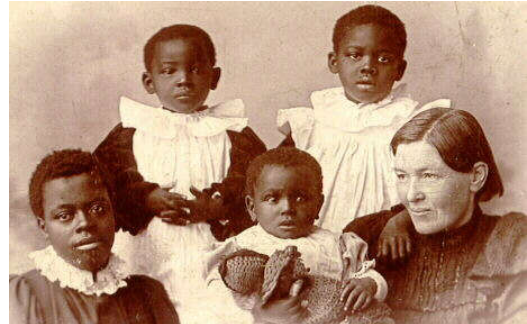
She labored for 39 years in Calabar (in what is modern-day Nigeria). The impact this little woman had was completely out of proportion to her size. She brought the Gospel to souls who otherwise would never have heard it. A hymn she taught the natives sums up her message:

*Jesus the Son of God came down to earth;
He came to save us from our sins.
He was born poor that He might feel for us.
Wicked men killed Him and hanged Him on a tree.
He rose & went to heaven to prepare a place for us...*

In order to win the natives to Christ, Mary Slessor abandoned her European clothing and dressed in the Calabar national custom. She seldom wore shoes. She ate the same food as the people she taught and drank unpurified water. These practices injured her health but she felt that the more she could identify with the people the more they could focus on the content of her teachings. *"It is a real life I am living now, not all preaching and holding meetings, but rather a life and an atmosphere which the people can touch and live in and be made willing to believe in when the higher truths are brought before them,"* she said. She built her own hut out of sticks and mud. Her bed was a mat on the floor and she made cupboards, table, and chairs out of mud molded into shape and dried. *"In a home like mine, a woman can find infinite happiness and satisfaction ... I cannot fancy anything to surpass it on earth ... All is dark, except above. Calvary stands safe and sure Christ is here and the Holy Spirit, and if I am seldom in a triumphant or ecstatic mood, I am always satisfied and happy in His love."*

Rescue the perishing ...

She was enabled by God to change some of the brutal and barbaric customs that had been practiced for years. Chief among these was the horrible abuse of women and children. Before she arrived, twins, especially, were the target for superstitious fear. If a mother gave birth to twin children, one of the children was thought to be demonic, capable of bringing disaster and a curse on the whole tribe. Mothers who gave birth to twins immediately threw away the “evidence.” Mary started by rescuing these abandoned babies; she strenuously combated the notion that they were less than human. She literally gathered castaway babies off the village trash piles and raised *dozens* of sets of twins in her home. For years she was seldom without a baby in her arms whatever else she might be doing. She saw many of the twins she had rescued as infants grow to adulthood, marry, go to college, or become Christian workers.



Companionship is nice but ...

Another barbaric practice she fought was the murder of innocent people at funerals. When a man died, his wives and slaves had to accompany him into the spirit world. The more important the dead man, the higher the number of people strangled at his graveside to be buried with him. Once, when the chief's mother had died, he returned from the funeral and happily reported to her that he had given the old lady a grand send-off by killing 24 people to be buried with her. Four “witches” had died in the “bean trial,” proving they had been responsible for her death. Mary wrote, *“The tribe seemed so completely given over to the devil that we were tempted to despair.”*

The “bean trial” involved the use of the Calabar bean, a horribly poisonous bean that brought swift death. In the trial, poison beans were given to a suspected witch or accused person. If the person was guilty, then the beans would kill him (*lots* of people were “guilty”). If he lived, he was innocent. Throughout her ministry she labored to convince the tribes to abandon the bean test. She intervened in numerous ways. One time this shy little Scottish woman marched out of her hut, snatched the bag of beans and stood the armed men down face to face. Another “trial by ordeal” involved the use of boiling oil. If an accused person was burned by the hot oil, he was guilty. On one occasion, when a man poured boiling oil on the hands of an eleven-year-old boy, Mary grabbed a scoop of the scalding liquid and chased the man to pour it on him and “prove” that he was “guilty” also. As she saved people's lives, more and more natives began to turn to her to settle their disputes. By demonstrating a better way to obtain justice, she influenced the eventual abandonment of such practices.

Did the other hippos make fun of him ...?

Once she was traveling to a new village with a group of her baby twins. Thirty-three men paddled the huge canoe when a hippopotamus attacked. Dozens of men dove overboard to escape. Mary would not leave her babies. She grabbed up a tin dishpan from the supplies and pounded the beast on the nose as it tried to bite the canoe in half. The startled hippo knew when it had bitten off more than it could chew; it swam away.

“Them that honor Me ...

Not only did the tribes and the colonial government honor her, but King George V awarded her the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem. She kept the honor secret from her fellow missionaries until telegrams of congratulation began pouring in from all over the world. *“I have lived my life very*

quietly and in a very natural and humble way. It isn't Mary Slessor doing anything, but Something outside of her altogether uses her as her small ability allows," she said. "God has been good to me, letting me serve Him in this humble way. I cannot thank Him enough for the honor He conferred upon me when He sent me to the Dark Continent." She felt uncomfortable at being addressed as Lady Slessor and said, "I am Mary Mitchell Slessor, nothing more and none other than the unworthy, unprofitable, but most willing, servant of the King of Kings."

Working right up to the end, she died on January 13, 1915. Among her last words were these: *"I should choose this life if I had to begin again: only I should try to live it to better purpose."* By the end, the natives seemed to forget the color of her skin and called her touchingly, "eka kpukpru owo," –

"Everybody's Mother."