

## **“THAT DEAR VILLAGE” - MARY SLESSOR’S BOWDEN.**

Mary Slessor turned to memories of Bowden for comfort during a long spell of fever: “I never had such a time, I live everything again during these sleepless nights; it grips me more than my real home life of long ago.” (1) A revered figure in Scotland and Nigeria, Mary was called: “Queen of Calabar”, “Mother of all the Peoples” and “Vice Consul of the Niger Coast Protectorate”. Hers is the face on a Scottish banknote. But Mary Slessor needed Bowden.

Until she came here, life had been unremitting struggle. As a girl in Aberdeen and Dundee she had coped with an alcoholic father, family illnesses and premature deaths, mill work, slums and poverty. During 40 years in Calabar, she tackled starvation, disease, alcoholism, a gun culture, the practice of strangling the wives of a chief who had just died, the killing of newly born twins, witchcraft, and blood sacrifice. In a land of fierce heat, jungles and swamps, diseases and infections were legion. But Mary wanted to live like local people. She learned their language. She ate the same food.. She went barefoot over ground infested with snakes and poisonous plants, and hatless, despite the remorseless sun. She refused to use a mosquito net, to filter or boil her water. She was dogged by continuous ill health - fevers, boils, arthritis and blood poisoning – but her achievements were staggering. She encouraged trade and explored the upper reaches of the region. She nursed the sick and provided vaccination against smallpox. She opened missions, schools and clinics, She fought to raise the status of women. She became all things to all people: missionary, teacher, nurse, mother, adjudicator, diplomat, explorer, housekeeper, friend and correspondent. The only person she seems ever to have been careless about was herself. She was also a shy, lonely, self denying figure. Much of her salary was sent to her mother and sisters. When appointed Vice President of the native court she refused to accept the salary. She found public speaking difficult, impossible if men were present.

Contemporaries were always impressed. Miss Amess, one of her helpers, wrote: “She had been so courageous that I imagined she must be somewhat masculine, with a very commanding appearance, but I was pleasantly disappointed when I found she was a true woman, with a heart full of motherly affection....Her originality, brightness and almost girlish spirit fascinated me.”(3) Another perceived : ”A slim figure, of middle height, fine eyes full of power, she is no ordinary woman.” (4) A “Morning Post” journalist met: “a woman close on sixty, with a heavily lined face and skin from which the freshness and bloom had long, long ago departed; but there was fire in her old eyes still, tired though they looked. There was sweetness and firmness about her lined mouth. Heaven knows who had dressed her. She wore a skimpy tweed skirt, and a cheap nun`s veiling blouse, and on her iron-grey hair was perched rakishly a forlorn, broken picture hat of faded green chiffon with a knot of bright red ribbon ....“Ye`ll excuse my hands”, she said and she held them out. They were hardened and roughened by work, work in the past,

and they were just now bleeding from work finished now; the skin of the palms was gone, the nails were worn to the quick; that they were painful there could be no doubt, but she only apologised for their appearance.”(5)

She returned to Scotland only four times in 40 years , so weak on two of the journeys that she had to be carried on board ship. By 1898, all of her own family had died, so Miss Adam of Bowden House, a retired schoolteacher and Free Church member, invited Mary to come to stay in Eastbank House which had been bought by Miss Adam`s brother, a trader in Buffalo, USA. Mary managed to have most of her adopted children cared for in Calabar. She decided to take the remaining four children with her to Scotland - Janie, Mary (5), Alice (3), and Maggie (16 months). At Eastbank, Mary was looked after properly, possibly for the first time in her life. In 1900 she wrote: “Mrs Symington I shall never forget all you did for us and how your care was more like a mother`s than to a stranger lodging with you...when I think of going home again it is always to that dear village and to your warm hospitable fireside.”(6) Bowden was just what Mary needed. Physical care restored her health, friendship banished loneliness, peace and quiet removed tension, the reassurance and security of the Eildons obliterated memories of the jungle. When she came to Bowden, Mary Slessor came home.

She returned during her last visit to Scotland in 1907. The “Southern Reporter” noted: “On Saturday Miss Slessor`s “little black boy” from old Calabar made his appearance in Bowden and created quite a lot of excitement, following as the visit did upon Miss Slessor`s interesting address in the U F Church on the previous Sabbath.” (7)

During her last years in Calabar she continued to draw on these memories. “The sun is so brilliantly bright that the last time I raised my head I felt quite giddy, so I shut my eyes for a bit, and have gone over all your homes, and the lane up to the Tweed, and the road far out that we went for the Sabbath School trip to Sandyknowe, then up the road towards Newtown, past the church and manse, the houses and shops under the railway bridge, and up the lovely road round (?by) the Eildons to Bowden, each farmhouse and each garden standing out separately, and it has been such a blink that it has made a feeling like homesickness. I wish I could just get a fortnight or even a weekend to realise it, and to grip each hand, and look into each face, and to hear the dear homeland language, and to have an English service with the congregation singing a psalm, “O thou, my soul bless God the Lord”; or “Praise waits for thee in Sion, Lord”; or “T`ll of salvation take the cup”. Just a wee blink of home and a home Sabbath.” (8) The people of Bowden have never forgotten Mary and her adopted African children. Every year, Miss Hume used to climb the Eildons to pick a bunch of heather to send to one of the boys. (9)

By 1912 Mary had to be pushed about in a basket chair on wheels. But her vision never dimmed, her work never lost pace. “T`m a wee, wee wifie, verra little buikit – but I grip on well, none the less.” (10 )

In today`s jargon, Mary “walked the talk”. Fierce commitment to purpose and a kind of raw, feisty courage enabled her to work with the people of Calabar to alleviate suffering and improve their quality of life. To them she was simply “Ma”. Bowden provided respite, solace and memories which sustained her until she died in Calabar in 1915, aged 67.

## **References, photographs and sources for the article on Mary Slessor:**

### **References:**

- (1) Mary Slessor of Calabar, W. P. Livingstone, 1916, p.173
- (2) Mary Slessor of Calabar, W. P. Livingstone, 1916, pp. 129-130
- (3) Mary Slessor, Cuthbert McEvoy, undated, p. 60
- (4) Mary Slessor, Cuthbert McEvoy, undated, p.59
- (5) Mary Slessor, Cuthbert McEvoy, undated, p. 59
- (6) A letter from Mary Slessor to Mrs Symington, 17 March, 1900. Mr Alistair Campbell, 46 Pinacleshill Park, Kelso, has a copy of the original letter which was held by the late Misses Symington of Bowden.
- (7) The Southern Reporter, 3 October, 1907, Borders Library Service, Archives Department, Hawick..
- (8) A letter from Mary Slessor to friends, presumed to be from the Women`s Missionary Magazine of 1910, Mary Slessor letters and documents, Dundee City Archives website.
- (9) A letter printed in the “Bowden Bulletin”, 1998, by J. Macdonald, Birkside, Bowden.
- (10) Mary Slessor of Calabar, W. P. Livingstone, 1916, p.281

### **Photographs:**

The photograph of Mary and Janie, and permission to include it in this paper, were kindly given by Fiona Sinclair, the Slessor and Calabar Collection, the McManus Galleries, Dundee City Council. The photograph of Mary and her four adopted children is contained in “Mary Slessor of Calabar” by W. P Livingstone 1916. All attempts to trace and contact the copyright holder of this photograph have been unsuccessful.

### **Sources:**

The Scottish Empire, Michael Fry, 2001

Mary Slessor of Calabar, W. P. Livingstone, 1916, gifted by Joan Mackay, Edinburgh.

Mary Slessor, Cuthbert McEvoy, undated, lent by Andrea Beavon, Bowden.

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Dundee City Council`s Central Library, Local History Website, a collection of books and letters and Slessor Source material.

Bowden Church 1128-1978, J. S. M. McDonald.

A collection of newspaper articles and videos given by Mrs Jeanette Chalmers, Eastbank House, Bowden.

The reminiscences of Mrs Mabel Preston, Bowden WRI.