

**‘Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots: Exeter’s Multi-Coloured History’:
The story of Mary Slessor and Atim Eso, aka Janie Annan Slessor and their visits to
Topsham, Devon, in 1885 and 1891.**

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Fig 1. Photo of Mary Slessor and some of her adopted children (photo also known as ‘The Okoyong Household in Scotland’).

Photograph taken in Selkirk by A. R. Edwards, 1898.

This copy courtesy of the Local History Centre, Dundee Central Library.

Janie is understood to be the child on the left, followed left to right by Alice (age four), Maggie (age one), Mary (age five) and little Mary’s namesake, Mary Slessor (age fifty) on the right.

Mary Slessor was a Scottish United Presbyterian missionary who went to work in what is now known as Nigeria, in the nineteenth century, with the Calabar Mission.¹ Born in 1848, she was later inspired by David Livingstone’s much publicised expedition to Africa, and she sought an outlet for her faith and her independent spirit in the rural regions of West Africa.

She had grown up in Aberdeen, and moved to Dundee under difficult family circumstances when she was eleven, where she went to work in a linen factory.² She overcame her disadvantaged situation by developing her talent for teaching Bible Classes in Queen Street Mission, conducting prayer meetings and helping poor families. These practices served as her credentials for becoming a missionary with the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

When David Livingstone died in 1874, Slessor applied to serve as a missionary in Africa and she was accepted for service at the Hope Waddell Mission in Calabar. After training in Edinburgh she sailed out in 1876 and was based first at Duke Town (now Atakpa) and then in Old Town (Obutong).

¹ Much of the information in this brief account is taken from two books, Carol Christian and Gladys Plummer’s record of Mary Slessor’s life: *God and One Redhead*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970; and also a more recent book by Jeanette Hardage, *Mary Slessor: Everybody’s Mother*, Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2010.

² Baxter’s factory where Mary worked for sixteen years made ‘sheeting, sail canvas, salt sacks, tablecloths and towels’. Christian and Plummer, p. 21.

In Calabar at the time, the birth of twins was treated with suspicion: the Efik people feared twins and such babies were usually killed or cast aside to die. Slessor made it her mission to protect both the babies and their mothers who were rejected from the normal life of the community.

Among the children taken in by Slessor was an infant girl called Atim Eso. Slessor rescued her in 1882. The baby's twin brother had been kidnapped and killed by their mother and Slessor was therefore especially protective of Atim Eso.³ When Slessor was invalided home in April 1883 she brought the baby- now six months old- to Britain. She renamed her Janie, after her own sister, and had the child baptised in the church in Wishart, Dundee, in 1883.⁴ Janie apparently charmed the Scottish congregations and was taken on Slessor's speaking engagements.⁵

In February 1885, Slessor chose to move south because her sister Janie, who was still living in Dundee, had become very ill with tuberculosis.⁶ Slessor, her sister and the toddler all moved down to Devon. They chose a house to rent in Topsham where Janie senior could take the improving mild air. This was a Georgian house at 48, the Strand, directly overlooking the widening river Exe, with its marshes, birds and river traffic. Their mother soon joined them.⁷



Fig. 2. The house at 48, The Strand, Topsham, and home to Mary Slessor, her sister Jane, their mother, and Mary's adopted daughter Janie from February to November 1885.

Photo Sally Ayres 2013.

³ Hardage, p. 40, p. 138. The baby's mother died a year or two later. Her father, after a brief reconciliation, died when his daughter was three years old. Hardage, p. 138.

⁴ Christian and Plummer, p. 48. Atim Eso was christened Janie Annan Slessor.

⁵ Hardage, p. 41. Christian and Plummer state that Janie '[melted] the hearts of congregations up and down the country' and 'created a sensation everywhere', p. 48.

⁶ Hardage, p. 44.

⁷ Christian and Plummer, p.50



Fig. 3. View from the jetty next to 48 The Strand, Topsham.
Photo Sally Ayres 2013.



Fig 4. Front door of 48. The Strand, Topsham.
Photo Sally Ayres 2013.

In April 1885 the Slessors joined the Congregational Church in Topsham, where Slessor taught Bible classes and led meetings.⁸



Fig. 5. Interior of Topsham Congregational Church at Harvest Festival, date unknown.
Photo Courtesy Topsham Museum: TOPMS 5431

Mary Slessor wrote to her Foreign Mission Board while she was living in Devon that she also planned to undertake some dispensary training at the Exeter Infirmary and by the late autumn she was eager to return to Calabar.⁹ She sailed from Liverpool on 11th November, 1885 with little Janie, now three years old, and arrived in Calabar on 5th December, heading for their new home in Creek Town (now Obio Oko).¹⁰ Janie was now speaking with a Dundee accent and had spent most of her life away from Africa.¹¹

Slessor's sister and mother remained in Topsham and before she was gone a month, her mother died of bronchitis. Mrs Slessor was buried in Topsham cemetery. Slessor's sister Jane, aged only twenty-four, died just three months later and was buried beside their mother.¹²

⁸ The *Minutes of Meetings of the Congregational Church, Topsham* for April 1885 read 'Mrs Slessor and Jane Slessor admitted to the congregation'. The Topsham Congregational Church records are held in digital form by Topsham Museum and the original archive is kept in the Devon Record Office.

⁹ It appears that there are no records of Slessor's work in the hospital. Hardage, p. 46.

¹⁰ Hardage, p. 46.

¹¹ Christian and Plummer, p. 85

¹² Christian and Plummer, p. 51. The Topsham Congregational Church Records show Jane's cause of death on 5th March 1886 as 'Consumption'.



Fig. 6. The grave of Mrs Slessor and Janie Slessor in Topsham Cemetery.
Photo Sally Ayres 2013

It was another five years before Mary Slessor returned to Britain. She made Devon her first destination. Landing in Plymouth in January 1891 she went straight to Topsham where she visited the graves of her mother and sister.¹³ Janie was again by her side. Slessor rented another Topsham house and her entry on the census for 1891 records Mary Mitchell Slessor, aged 41, as the ‘head of household’ and ‘Teacher of Church in W. Africa’ living at a house in Majorfield Lane with her adopted daughter Janie Annan Slessor (now eight years old), the only person living with her.¹⁴

Slessor and Janie reconnected with the congregational church and they remained in Devon for the spring months before moving up to Scotland until the autumn.¹⁵ She and Janie stayed with friends called the M’Crindles in Joppa, near Edinburgh.¹⁶ Again, Janie accompanied Mary when she gave talks to church congregations.¹⁷

They returned to Devon for the winter before leaving once again for Africa in February 1892.¹⁸ The Topsham Congregational Church held a farewell meeting for Slessor and Janie before the two sailed from Liverpool, bound for Calabar and their latest home in Ekenge (now Okoyong).¹⁹

Janie made one more visit to Britain. In March 1898 Slessor brought a group of children with her on furlough.²⁰ Alice, Maggie and Mary joined Janie and Slessor on the trip.²¹ The family

¹³ Hardage, p. 103.

¹⁴ Today’s maps show only a ‘Majorfield Road’ in Topsham.

¹⁵ The Congregational Church building is in Victoria Road, Topsham, but it is no longer functioning as a church.

¹⁶ Christian and Plummer, p. 86.

¹⁷ Hardage reports that Janie was ‘a big hit in Scotland during Slessor’s furloughs’. Hardage, p. 139.

¹⁸ Christian and Plummer, p. 88. Slessor was engaged to be married at this time and a photo taken in 1891 shows her wearing her engagement ring. The marriage did not take place. See photo in Christian and Plummer, facing p. 49.

¹⁹ A ‘farewell service’ is recorded in the *Mary Slessor Factfile*, Topsham Museum.

²⁰ It is thought that the photograph of Slessor and the four girls dates from this visit.

²¹ Christian and Plummer, p. 107.

initially stayed with the M'Crindles in Scotland.²² Janie, who was now just sixteen, accompanied Slessor and the three small children.²³ They later moved to Seton Mill and then to Bowden near Melrose.²⁴ The party sailed to return to their home in Akpap Okoyong in January 1899.²⁵

At seventeen Janie was married, on 12 December 1899.²⁶ She married a local young man called Akibu Eyo in 1899 but when their first child died her husband abandoned her, possibly suspecting a superstitious reason for the death of his son.²⁷

Janie did however play an important role in the survival of a different baby boy. In 1900, or early 1901, a local baby boy was orphaned. He was brought to Slessor by a leading chief in the district.²⁸ The infant was taken in and nursed by Janie. Janie apparently found any new baby to be a pleasure and never 'any trouble'.²⁹ This baby boy's affection for his adopted family and his memories of his life with Janie and Slessor are recorded in his *Reminiscences of Miss Mary Slessor*, 1958.³⁰ He grew up to be one of Slessor's favourites and was given the name Daniel Macarthur Slessor after the son of the manse at Bowden in Scotland.³¹ The two Daniels met in 1907 when Slessor took the adopted boy with her on her last trip to Scotland.³²

While Slessor made her final visit to Scotland, Janie was entrusted with the care of the younger children. After Slessor's return with Dan, her health declined, and Janie provided constant nursing care. She was called 'wonderful Jean' by the doctor who witnessed how diligently Janie tended to the older woman's medical needs.³³ Janie also looked after the many rescued children, ran the Sunday school and managed the household affairs in these years.³⁴

In January 1915 Slessor died in her home in Use Ikot Oku, at the age of sixty-seven.³⁵ Janie only survived Slessor by three years. She remained in Use with two members of Slessor's adopted family but in 1918 Janie became a victim of the global influenza epidemic. She died, aged thirty-six. Janie's resourcefulness, her strength, her love of reading and her equal love of babies is recorded in Slessor's own letters and in Daniel's reminiscences.

²² Christian and Plummer, p. 107.

²³ The family arrived with little warning to stay with the M'Crindles. Christian and Plummer, p. 107. Little Mary apparently attended the primary school in Portobello. Christian and Plummer p. 108.

²⁴ Christian and Plummer, p. 108.

²⁵ Hardage, p. 314.

²⁶ The service was conducted by Slessor herself. Hardage, p. 139.

²⁷ Hardage, p. 140.

²⁸ Christain and Plummer 115; Hardage, p. 147.

²⁹ Slessor wrote this in a letter to her friend Charles Partridge in 1910, quoted in Hardage, p. 140.

³⁰ Daniel Slessor, *Reminiscences of Miss Mary Slessor*, June 1958, Dundee Local Studies department Central Library, 1958/8380E.

Daniel was alive until 1970 and it was he who supplied Christian and Plummer with much of the information about Mary Slessor's adopted family. Christian and Plummer, *Acknowledgements*, np. Daniel descendents also contributed to Hardage's research. Hardage, p. 302.

³¹ Janie had carried the baby's namesake to his christening in Scotland and according to Christian and Plummer it was Janie who chose this name for the baby boy. Christian and Plummer, p 115.

³² Christian and Plummer, p. 153.

³³ Christian and Plummer, p. 114.

³⁴ Hardage, pp. 140-141. Slessor referred to Janie as Jean in later years.

³⁵ Hardage, p. 280. Slessor's significance was recognised in Scottish currency when her face replaced Livingstone's on the Scottish ten pound banknote in 1998.

However in Devon Janie was remembered as a little child visiting the women of the town, and sitting with Mary Slessor on a Topsham verandah. Correspondence in the Topsham Museum bears the following handwritten message: ‘...An old aunt of mine remembered M. S. visiting her and sitting on her verandah with a little African child, so it was thought only fitting that a memorial should be erected over the Mother’s grave and a curb set around the Sister’s grave...’³⁶ The note was written by Arthur Holman who took an interest in the grave for more than forty years.³⁷



Fig. 7. View from the jetty running alongside 48, The Strand, Topsham.
Photo Sally Ayres 2013

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I would also like to thank the staff at Dundee Central Library, and the McManus Art Galleries and Museums, Dundee, for helping me to find several photographs that clarify dates and illuminate this story.

Finally thanks to Dona Robertson and the Steeple Church Dundee, for the delightful photos of Mary Slessor and numerous children taken in Scotland.

³⁶ TOPMS 2365.8

³⁷ Arthur Holman’s care for the grave is indicated in correspondence with the Church of Scotland dated 4th Feb 1919 (TOPMS 2365.9) and June 1959 (TOPMS 2365.8).

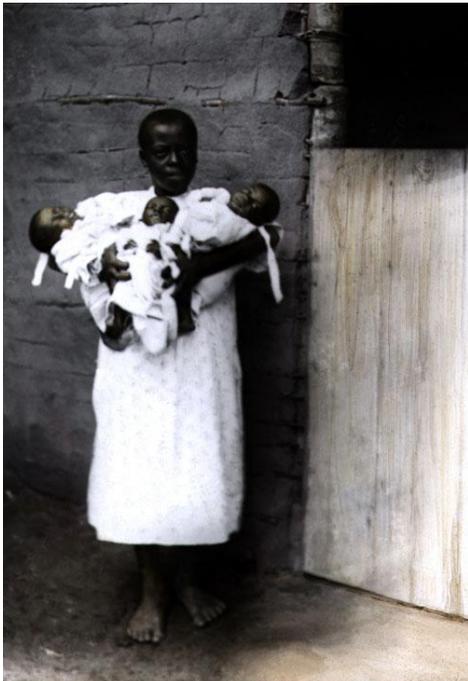
Appendix.

The following images do not refer to Janie's time in Topsham but they do indicate aspects of her life in Africa. They have been provided courtesy of Dundee Art Galleries and Museum and by The Steeple Church, Dundee.



(i) Mary Slessor and Janie, probably taken in Dundee in 1891, the year in which they also stayed in Topsham in 'Majorfield Lane'.

Photo Dundee Art Galleries and Museum. 1987-273.



(ii) Photo known as 'Jean Holding three babies', undated photograph from Calabar.

Photo Dundee Art Galleries and Museum 1978-1993-23.



(iii) Photo known as ‘Twins, Okoyong’

Some sources suggest that this picture shows Janie and her adopted sisters in Calabar. This is unconfirmed. Date unknown.

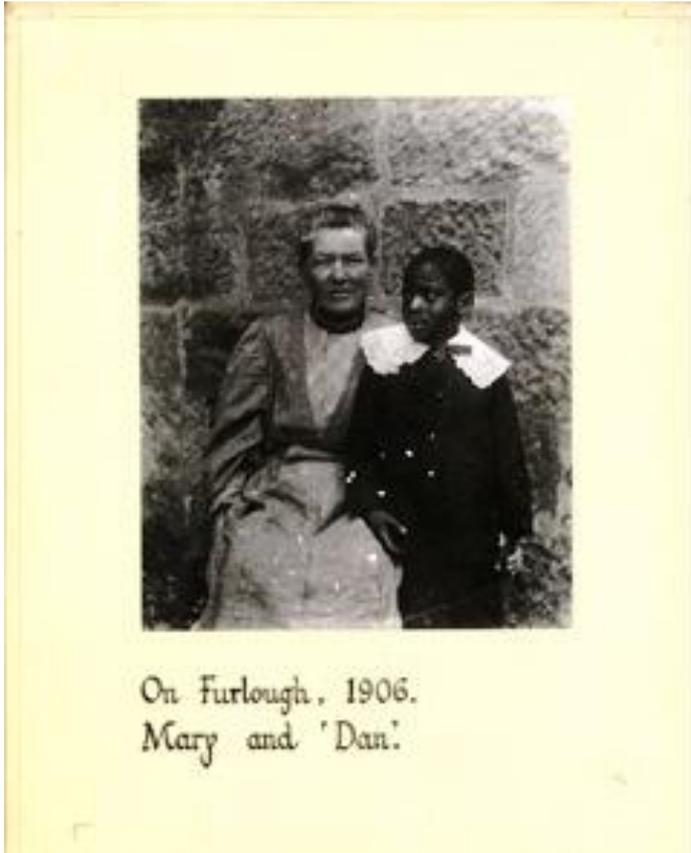
Photo Dundee Art Galleries and Museum 1995-296-2.



(iv) Mary Slessor and a baby, date unknown.

Dundee Art Galleries and Museum

The photo has been variously labelled ‘Mary with Janie in 1883’ (Christian and Plummer, facing p. 129); also ‘Miss Slessor and Mary’ (*Dundee Art Galleries and Museum* archive, number 1978-1993-63). This particular copy was provided by the Steeple Church, Dundee where the baby is identified as Janie. It may, however, show the infant Dan.



(v) Mary Slessor and Daniel Macarthur Slessor on Furlough.

Mary Slessor and Dan had a furlough together in Scotland from 18th May to 9th November 1907 which raises questions about the date on this photograph.³⁸

Photo the Steeple Church Dundee.

³⁸ Hardage, p. 314.