

Helen Fallon

# Celebrating Thirty Years of the Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership

**In** 2022, the Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership (SLIP) marked its 30th year with the publication of *Leaves from the Cotton Tree: Celebrating Thirty Years of the Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership* (funded by a grant from Irish Aid).

The book takes its name from the iconic cotton tree where, in 1792, a group of former slaves, who had come from Nova Scotia, established the beginning of the settlement that became Freetown. Sadly, the tree, which was a national landmark, suffered significant damage during a heavy rain storm in May 2023.

The 37 contributions to the book include reflections, interviews, poetry, reports and recollections from Sierra Leoneans and Irish people who have lived and worked in Sierra Leone. It captures many diverse aspects of the strong relationship between Ireland and Sierra Leone, and creates a unique record of enriching, challenging, heartbreaking and indeed sometimes, amusing experiences, from the early days of independence from Britain in 1961 to the present day.

## Beginnings and Activities

The Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership (SLIP) had its origins in the Sierra Leone Liberia Solidarity Group established in 1993. The rationale for the group, and the activities of the group are detailed. These include: the annual commemoration of Sierra Leone Independence Day, book launches, conferences, seminars, religious services, media events, and awareness raising of issues such as the illegal diamond trade, the civil war, child soldiers and Ebola.

Since 1999 SLIP has had direct meetings with every Irish government minister responsible for overseas development, and has lobbied for support for Sierra Leone in rebuilding its political, social, economic and educational structures, which were devastated by a ten-year civil war. Their efforts yielded fruit when, in 2005, Irish Aid opened an office in Freetown. In 2013 Sierra Leone became Ireland's ninth Key Partner Country, ensuring an increase in aid from Ireland to the country. This was followed by the establishment of the first resident Irish Embassy in Freetown in 2014.

## Education and Empowerment

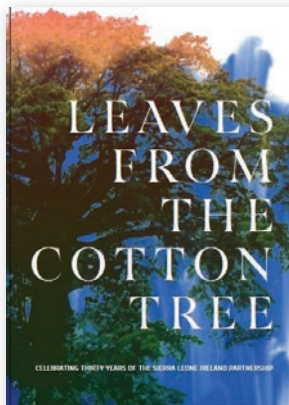
The enormous contribution of Irish missionaries to health care, education and development in Sierra Leone began over 150 years ago with the arrival of the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny in 1823 and the Holy Ghost Fathers (the Spiritans) in 1864. They established the foundations that Irish Aid and other organisations such as Concern, Trócaire, Christian Aid and others, built on and continue to develop.

The Sisters of Cluny established numerous schools, including St Joseph's School for the hearing impaired in Makeni. Here, in addition to the traditional education curriculum, carpentry, dressmaking, catering, farming and information technology are on offer. The Sisters place a strong focus on empowering women and have initiated a number of projects for women displaced by war, including schemes to provide microcredit to start small businesses such as selling fruit, vegetables, soap etc in local markets. While the Christian Brothers arrived much later than the Sisters of Cluny, in 1985, they quickly established schools and in the post-war period have co-ordinated trauma healing workshops.

Empowering women, challenging gender-inequality and gender-based violence are themes that feature strongly in the collection, which includes descriptions of projects developed by Christian Aid and Concern. The Irish League of Credit Unions has built a strong credit union network throughout the country, with great emphasis on training local staff and upskilling people in financial literacy.

## Perspectives from Sierra Leonean Students in Ireland

The students on ICOS (Irish Council for International Students) Fellowships share insights into their studies in Ireland and their hopes and ambitions for Sierra Leone. Ishmail Bai Bundu, a student on the Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development Masters degree programme at University College Dublin (UCD) writes: *...this scholarship has developed my thinking ability, my innovative skills and has equipped me with practical skills and knowledge to make a meaningful contribution to issues affecting agricultural and educational*



Book cover design by  
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*development in Sierra Leone.* Fatmata Turay, a student at the Heuston School of Film and Digital Media, at the National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway, is exploring marketing Sierra Leone through film. Hassan Jalloh, a postgraduate student in International Human Rights Law and Public Policy at University College Cork (UCC) shares his dreams of a brighter future for Sierra Leone. Abbas Kargbo, a student of economics at Trinity College, writes about his ambitions for a diversified economy.

### **Making a home in Ireland**

While the ICOS Fellowship recipients are making their home in Ireland for a year, there are many others who, for a variety of reasons, have come to live here and they share their experiences in personal essays. Reverend Sahr Yambassu left Sierra Leone in 1995, with his wife and three children. He has continued his Methodist ministry here, serving for a year as Head of the Methodist Church in Ireland. Joseph Bockarie worked for a number of years as an engineer with South Dublin County Council before retiring to the land of his birth. Cecilia Kadie Bangura moved with her Polish husband to Ireland in 2007 and is active in a number of voluntary organisations. Kai Matturi left Sierra Leone in 1997, with his Irish-born mother. His father, a doctor in Bo, remained to continue to provide medical services during the war. Sadly they were not to meet again.

### **Honouring Local Customs and Traditions**

Throughout the collection, the value put on respecting the traditions and beliefs of different ethnic groups is evident. Many of the missionaries learned the local languages. Father Pat McKeever, who served in Sierra Leone for fifteen years, writes of how learning the Kono language helped to grow his knowledge of the people and their culture. Attracted to some of the songs of the Poro secret society, he worked with locals and got permission for the melodies of Poro songs to be used with Catholic lyrics for Mass. He notes: "We had adapted Kono culture with Catholic spirituality."



**Top, left: The late Dr Hilary Lyons MSHR and colleagues in the operating theatre at Serabu Hospital, Sierra Leone, founded by the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary (MSHR) with the support of the Diocese and local community.** (Photo: H. Lyons MSHR)

**Top, right: ICOS Fellowship students, left to right, Assiatu Jalloh, Aminata S Conteh, Kaata Minah, Emmanuella Sandy, Lois Simche Lebbie, and Patrick Lumumba with the Irish Ambassador to Sierra Leone, Claire Buckley (centre).** (Photo: SLIP) **Right: Elizabeth Smith (SLIP Chairperson 2017-2021) and her former pupil Sister Clare Stanley, Superior General, Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny, at the book launch.** (Photo: Blaise Smith)

The late Sister Hilary Lyons MSHR also explores the issues of respecting local traditions and beliefs in the context of practising as a medical doctor in Sierra Leone. Elsewhere Father Tom Rafferty describes the visit of Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh to Freetown, having arrived with Father Raymond Barry to Sierra Leone a few months before the country gained its independence from Britain in 1961.

### **Displacement and Tragedy**

The book acknowledges the backdrop of tragedy during the Civil War. Fr Brian Starkan provides a first-hand account of the killing of Dublin-born Fr Felim McAllister, Dutch doctor Elko Krijn, his wife Karim and their four year-old daughter Zita in 1994. Brother Noel Bradshaw records the murder, by marauding rebels, in 1995, of Wexford-born Brother Senan Kerrigan. Holy Rosary Sister, Redempta Connolly, who worked in education, describes the trauma of being evacuated from Sierra Leone in 1995.

This collection presents the ties of joy and energy that bind Sierra Leone and Ireland. ■

For more information about SLIP visit: <http://slip.ie/>  
*Leaves from the Cotton Tree* is available from Veritas and can be ordered online at [www.veritasbooksonline.com](http://www.veritasbooksonline.com)

Helen Fallon worked in libraries in Sierra Leone, Namibia, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia and Ireland. She is now retired and focusing on writing.