



Revisiting and Remembering

*It is fifteen years since **Helen Fallon** lived in Sierra Leone.
On a recent visit, she caught up with some old friends.*

Fifteen years have passed since I lived in Leicester, a small village in the hills outside Freetown in Sierra Leone. On a short return visit I'm surprised at how little it has changed.

"The rebels did not come here," Lansana, the taxi driver I hired in Freetown, explains matter-of-factly.

GOING BACK IN TIME

Wandering along the dusty red path that snakes through the village, I try to remember who lived where: Musa, the young woman who tried to wind my hair into tiny African plaits; Laetitia, the brewer of *Daddy Cool*, *Power Life* and other local gins and wines; the little boy – I forget his name – who passed each evening through the village, calling "Kerosene, Kerosene" in a haunting voice; Malagie, the seller of spring onions.

The Anglican church, a focal point in the small village, is much as I left it fifteen years ago. The church, the whole village, in fact, has an Irish connection.

Leicester, neighbouring Gloucester and other villages outside Freetown, are collectively known as MacCarthy's villages after Charles MacCarthy who was half-Irish and half-French. Britain's interest when MacCarthy arrived as governor in 1816 was a twenty-eight mile stretch of coastal land, established as the Province of Freedom, a home for freed slaves from England and the British colony of Nova Scotia.

Concerned that thousands of people were arriving destitute in Freetown, MacCarthy established a number of villages, naming them after famous English people and places – Leicester, Gloucester, Regent, Hastings, Waterloo, Wellington – and a Dublin on Banana Island which is just off the coast. Himself a Catholic, MacCarthy invited both the recently established Anglican Church Missionary Society and the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny to come and minister to the freed slaves.

Sister Anne Marie Javouhey, foundress of the Cluny order, was working in neighbouring Senegal. On a visit

to Sierra Leone to discuss establishing a convent, she contracted typhoid and had to return to Senegal. It was to be a number of years before the nuns established a base in Sierra Leone, where they are still today very much involved in education.

IN SEARCH OF ABDULAI AND ISATU

The tailor's tiny shop, made from galvanised zinc, stands rusted and forlorn, the shutter firmly closed. I study the tiny house, where Abdulai, his wife Isatu, their daughter Soribenta, his son Mohammed and a niece from Guinea, Bella, once lived; and I remember the whirring of Abdulai's sewing machine and the rasp of crickets and other forest insects which filled the warm African nights.

I sense someone is watching me and look around.

A woman, in a wrapper that lends a rainbow of colour to her green lettuce plot, greets me with the familiar Krio greeting.

*Aw di bodi? (How are you?)
Di bodi well. A tell God thanke. (I'm well, thank God)*

I enquire about the whereabouts of Abdulai, and she points to a zinc-roofed shop at the nearby junction between Leicester and Gloucester.

At first he does not recognise me. Nor do I recognise in this grey-haired middle-aged man the tall youth whose jet black hair and angular features marked him out as one of the Fulani muslim traders from nearby Guinea who had settled in Sierra Leone.

His wife Isatu has gone visiting, he explains. Seventeen years ago, when I first met him, Abdulai told me Isatu had gone to visit her family in Guinea. Regularly I would ask when she would return. The answer was always the same, maybe tomorrow or maybe next tomorrow or maybe next next tomorrow. It was eight months before she returned.

Now I know not to ask when she will return, nor to talk about the number of years that have elapsed since I left the village. For Abdulai marks the passage of time in market days and prayer days, in wet seasons and dry seasons.

SURVIVING THE CIVIL WAR

We talk of events and people. He has lived through a ten-year civil war, remaining in Leicester long after most of the villagers had fled, believing wrongly that they would be safer down in Freetown.

Quietly he tells me how his daughter Soribenta and his son Mohammed missed out on years of schooling and how people no longer required the service of a tailor. It wasn't safe to go to Freetown to buy the bag of sugar he sold by the spoonful nor the rice people bought by the cupful. He had to close his shop.

Now, things are a lot better for him and his family. In his new shop he sells mobile phone cards and bags of cement as well as cups of rice and spoons of sugar. Because it is at a crossroads, passing trade is good. His sewing machine, however, is still silent.

Abdulai doesn't ask about how things are in my country. He has never heard of the Celtic Tiger. He asks about my family, expresses sympathy on the death of my mother, joy on the birth of nieces and nephews, concern that I am unmarried and genuine pleasure that I have returned to visit.



Soribenta and her mother Isatu at the family shop in Leicester (opposite page), Sierra Leone.
(Photos: H Fallon)

Isatu returns and I give her some photographs of her now almost grown-up children when they were little. We laugh remembering those times. Later, their son Mohammed guides me to Malagie's house which is nearby.

SPRING ONIONS AND CYBERCAFES

Malagie has kept in touch intermittently down the years. E-mail, available in cybercafés in Freetown, has largely replaced the aerograms bearing beautiful stamps of the different birds and butterflies of Sierra Leone.

Malagie was once a porter in the nearby university and sold spring onions and set rat-traps to supplement his meagre income. He has now completed a technical course, and repairs fridges and other electrical goods. His wife sells vegetables in the Freetown market. Their sons Abdul Karim and Ishmael Karim are at secondary school.

Like most Sierra Leoneans I meet, he is quietly rebuilding his home and life. He enquires about my family and whether I can get spring onions in Ireland.

"The road to Gloucester is impassable by car," Lansana, the taxi driver, explains when I rejoin him. I think he senses my disappointment.

"Next time," he says.

"Next time," I nod in agreement and we begin the journey downhill to Freetown. ■

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