

THE GHANA YEARS

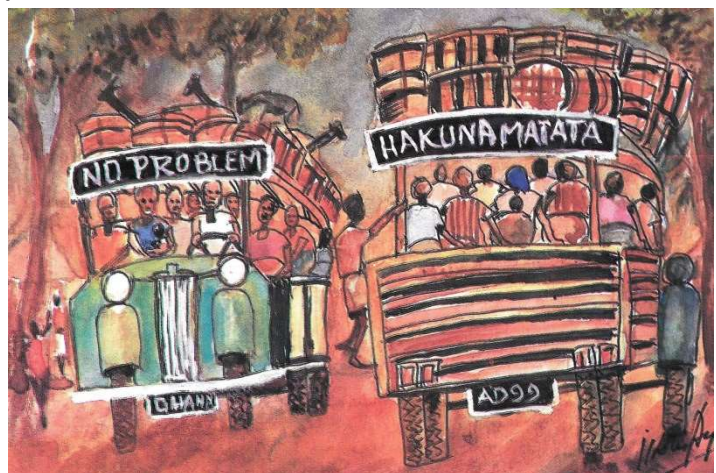
“The mosquitos are as big as elephants in Bolga.” So quipped a Ghanaian friend when I said that I was going to live and work in Bolgatanga. This was Cape Coast, Ghana, West Africa and the year was 1979. I was sharing the news of my anticipated move to Bolgatanga in the far north of the country and the remark was not encouraging. I had just completed a teaching year with Holy Child Sisters in their secondary boarding school for girls in Cape Coast and in that time I had developed a love-hate relationship with mosquitos – they loved me and I hated them. Living on the hill with the native African Infant Jesus Sisters – it was their novitiate and Sr. Peg Rahilly DMJ was involved in their formation at that time as well as being local superior to the Ghana D.M.J. – it was my first taste of the warmth and gentility of the Ghanaian people. But mosquitos apart, those first months were a period of huge adjustment for me as I battled with the Ghanaian heat, a mixture of tribal languages to which I was an outsider and homesickness. Mobile phones were a thing of the future; telephone calls to Europe could be made from the local post office at certain times; the mail was erratic and delivered to the post office in town from where it had to be collected.



Christmas 1978 saw the D.M.J. gather at Akim Swedru and Ofoase, a few hours' drive north over difficult dirt roads. That was a memorable celebration and so good to be together as a community. However, it meant that I had no Christmas mail from my family and friends in Ireland and England. That hit me hard as homesickness took hold. But Sr. June Bell caused me to smile on a daily basis as her personal postal system kicked in with a humorous note that was slipped under my door every single morning of my stay. She will never know how precious that was.

Months later the educational needs of young people in the north were considered to be much greater and hence the move six hundred miles inland.

The journey north was made by state transport, a coach, which was luxury compared with the everyday lorries and tro-tros that most people used. Sr. Joan Roddy, DMJ was my companion on that long journey. Sharing a little food with a fellow traveller on the way seemed to suggest to him that he could expect more from me and not just food! Later and in a car borrowed from the local White Fathers, Joan and I made our way to my new home. On the road between the town and Big Boss (as my school was known locally) we stopped by a stream where Joan pointed out the water lilies, a welcome sight. Any and every subsequent picture of water lilies has conjured up that moment, that journey and the enormous support that Joan was to me during those initial days in Bolga. Following her return south I was joined by Sr. Kate Creedon DMJ RIP and we taught together for the following three years at Big Boss.



Semi-desert Bolgatanga was a shock to my system, coming as I did from rain-drenched Ireland, more recently from an equally green southern England and the newly discovered lush growth of coastal Ghana.

My new school was situated outside the town which was really a large village at that time. The actual campus was enormous by European standards. The teaching block was closest to the main road with dormitories for male and



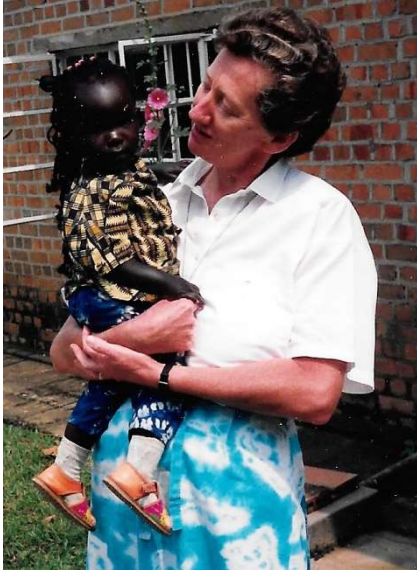
female students towards the centre and staff bungalows in a circle around the perimeter. Sr. Kate Creedon and I were Irish. Then there was Mike who was English. He taught Science and was serving with the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). There was also an American, Donna who taught Mathematics and she was part of the U.S. Peace Corps. Ghanaians and mostly men provided the main body of teachers and they were drawn from a variety of tribes.

It was certainly hotter than Cape Coast but a lot less humid, thankfully. With a much shorter wet season, rain that fell in rods combined with intense heat, the growth of groundnuts and millet was evident overnight with a soft green fuzz carpeting the area surrounding the school.

A local Holy Child Community along with a group of White Fathers and the Presentation Brothers in Navrongo kept us afloat when our own stocks ran low. Periodically we received packages from Sr. Judith (formerly Eulalie) in Brussels, containing pancake mix and a dessert mix like Angel Delight which were a real treat. Regular aerogrammes from England in Sr. Sheila Maloney's handwriting kept me smiling as she regaled me with updates of life at Coloma Secondary School and the staff there among whom I had taught for one school year. Such letters from family and friends were treasured and more precious than those at home could imagine. And of course, we made an occasional trip north across the border into Ouagadougou, Upper Volta as it was then known, now Burkina Faso. There we stocked up on tins of food, La Vache qui Rit cheese and French bread sticks. L'Eau Vive restaurant was the highlight where we dined royally, served by an international group of Sisters who wore the most elegant and colourful ethnic outfits.

Three years in Bolga taught me much about the openness of the local people, their innate courtesy and a friendliness that connected strongly with those of us who were Irish. They too valued education, some of the students availing of the opportunity much later than Irish teenagers to which the boys' beards sometimes testified. They came to secondary school when released from family obligations on the land or when finances permitted.

In that time too, I learned that while we might want many things in life, we actually need very few. Food, clean water (local women walked miles for it), a safe home but especially human company. And so those trips south in the yellow Datsun when school broke up for the holidays were a time of much-needed reunions with the D.M.J. An early start in the coolest part of the day before the sun came up was a special experience. As darkness gave way to light, the flat treeless north was left behind. Silhouettes of wayside villages, their circular houses silent and still sleeping, slipped into the past. Now the black shapes of actual leaf-bearing trees emerged with the dawning light, mighty and mysterious. As the day grew stronger, individual figures emerged making their way to farm, to work,



to face the new day. The sun grew hotter, the traffic heavier, the road dustier until our hair and clothes were covered with a fine red film. But Akim Swedru and Ofoase drew closer with every mile.

Delays were common – wayside accidents, vehicle break-downs, lack of petrol, dirt roads swept away by the rains. I have a very clear memory of arriving in Akim Swedru at some unearthly hour. The world around us slept but not Sr. Joan Roddy. She welcomed us as if it were the middle of the day. We were given food, drink, a welcome bed and enveloped in Joan's unmistakeable warmth. It was balm to the scorched and weary travellers.

(Photo : Joan Roddy)

January 2017