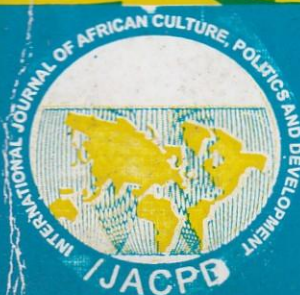


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# **THE MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE ERA OF JOHN KIRK**

**UWEM JONAH AKPAN**

Department of History & International Studies  
University of Uyo, Uyo

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the contributions of Rev. John Kirk, the pioneer Christian missionary in Etinan and its environs whose memory seemed to have been placed in the dustbin of history. Indeed, Rev. John Kirk is remembered today because of his contributions to the development of Akwa Ibom State and indeed Nigeria during the period of his service. After his era, his contributions have continued to serve as the template for Church and governance. For instance, Rev. John Kirk introduced Western education in Etinan and its environs in 1898. This early initiative culminated in the establishment of Etinan Institute, Etinan - the pioneer post-primary institution in Ibibioland in 1915. He also introduced modern health services in the area; an act that laid the foundation for the establishment of the Qua Iboe Mission Hospital, Etinan in 1927 and the Leprosy Colony, Ekpene Obom in 1932. Moreover, Rev. John Kirk introduced the rudiment of the executive and judicial arms of government in Etinan area. As the representative of the British Consul who then resided at Eket with administrative jurisdiction extending to Etinan area, he influenced the introduction of Native Court in Etinan in 1902. He used his influence to avert the bombardment of Etinan by the British colonial expeditionary force during the period of colonial subjugation of Ibibio land. He also combined civil service administration with evangelistic duties as the purveyor of the Christian faith in the area. Undoubtedly, his pioneering endeavours have earned Etinan area the unique appellation of "the brain basket of Akwa Ibom State". However, his contributions have not been coherently documented. Apart from a primary school, "John Kirk Memorial School" which has been named in his honour in Etinan, the name of John Kirk is rarely remembered. This work therefore, is a tribute to his memory.

## Introduction

All through her years of existence, Christianity has perhaps proved more influential in shaping human destiny than any other institutional philosophy in the world. The Church has characteristically withstood and overcame obstacles that stood in its way. It has from birth, had to argue often from a minority position to a majority position (Abia, 2007). The import of this statement becomes obvious when viewed against the backdrop of historical significance of the missionary enterprise in Nigeria in general and in Etinan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State and its environs in particular, beginning from the closing decades of the 19th century. It could be safely stated that the social history of Etinan and its environs will reflect an uneasy vacuum if the activities of the Qua Iboe Mission and that of Rev. John Kirk in particular are left out (Akpan, 2015).

This study re-captures the profound transformational exploits of Rev. John Kirk the pioneer Qua Iboe missionary in Etinan and environs and pays tribute to his courageous and unrelenting efforts. In addition, a brief history of the growth of the Church in the area has been examined. It should be added that the area, referred to as "Etinan and Environs" stands for the present Etinan, Nsit Ibom and Nsit Ubium Local Government Areas, Awa Clan in Onna Local Government Area, Ikpa Ikono and Ibiaku Clans of Mkpato Enin Local Government Area as well as Ikono Clan in Uyo Local Government Area. Although the contributions of Rev. Kirk transcended these areas, the catchment area is, however, being used as a template, because his footprints boldly dot the areas.

## The Establishment of the Qua Iboe Mission

In April 1846, the Presbyterian Mission was established at Calabar following persistent appeals by Efik chiefs for a missionary to settle among them and teach them the word of God and also help them establish agricultural plantations (Abasiattai, 1987). Converts were made and the fame of the missionaries spread rapidly and Calabar being a very important administrative and commercial headquarters in Southern Nigeria, attracted many people from the hinterland among whom were some Ibeno people in the present day Akwa Ibom State (Ekpa, 1980).

In 1886, the Ibeno traders came in close contact with the Presbyterian missionaries and Efik Christians, and became keenly interested in the gospel. As enthusiasm grew, the people sent a letter to the Presbyterian missionaries asking for a missionary to be sent to Ibeno to teach them more about God (Akpasom, 1999). The letter was received by Mr. Foster, a Jamaican missionary, who forwarded it to Dr. Grattan Guinness, the Principal of Harley College, London - an institution where missionaries were being trained. Dr. Guinness effectively placed the request before his graduating students of 1886, announcing to them that it was an appeal from some chiefs for a white teacher to teach their people about God. He also informed them that the area was a wild country with harsh climate (Qua Iboe Fellowship Publication 1987). Rev. Samuel Alexander Bill, born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in January, 1864, and a student at the Harley College responded to the "Macedonian Call". On the 14th of September, 1887, he left Belfast for Ibeno and arrived Calabar on the 6th of October, 1887. After sojourning with the Presbyterian missionaries in Calabar for some weeks, he arrived Ibeno on the 1st of December, 1887, (Abasiattai, 1991).



The name "Qua Iboe" which the Mission now bears is a peculiar one. It is the name of a river in South Eastern Nigeria. The Qua Iboe River is so named because it enters the sea at a place in Ibeno called *Aqua Obio* (Big Town), but wrongly spelt and called "Qua Iboe" by the early Europeans who came to Nigeria. The river had already been named Qua Iboe before the arrival of Rev. Samuel Bill. In order to locate the area of his missionary activities which were concentrated along the basin of Qua Iboe River, Rev. Bill chose to call the Mission Fiel Field - "Qua Iboe Mission" that is, the Mission operating along the Basin of the Qua Iboe River, just as the first Presbyterian missionaries called their mission "Calabar Mission", (Akpasom, 1999).

In 1888, Rev. Samuel Bill was joined by another missionary, Rev. Achie Bailie. Both of them worked untiringly and began to reap the fruits of their labour in terms of soul winning. The first convert was a woman, Mma Etia. The second was Rev. Bill's house servant, David Ekong, who later became the first ordained Pastor of the Qua Iboe Mission. One of the major highlights of the missionary engagement was the first communion service which took place in February, 1890 with 11 communicants participating (Corbett, 1965). As recalled by one of the early missionaries in the Qua Iboe Field, Rev. J. W. Westgarth:

Unlike many missionaries, Samuel Bill was not sent by any Church or Missionary Society, so he was without the support such Societies gave, and had no means of his own, but trusting his God, he made up his mind to take this arduous work, travelling from Ireland, he arrived Eastern Nigeria, about 4,000 miles from Ireland (Westgarth, nd. p. 6).

However, in 1890 Mr. and Mrs. Guinness could no longer support the two missionaries; they suggested that Revs. Samuel Bill and Archie Bailie should withdraw to Congo, but the two determined missionaries argued that they would not withdraw from the door that God had opened before them. To ensure the perpetuation of their vision, Rev. Samuel Bill went to Belfast in 1890 to solicit for help from individuals and groups. As a result of this, a Qua Iboe Mission Council was born in January, 1891 in Belfast. The members of the Council were represented by leading denominations. The Constitution of the Qua Iboe Mission was then framed on evangelical and inter-denominational lines (Ikpe, 1987).

### **Birth and Parentage of John Kirk**

The exact date of birth of Rev. John Kirk is not available at the moment for this work; however, available records show that he came from a religious background in Ireland. His father was an Elder of the Presbyterian Church, and he was a middle aged man at the time of his arrival in Etinan in 1898. Like Rev. Samuel Bill, the founder of the Qua Iboe Mission, he was one of the young men who came under the influence of the 19th century religious revival led by Moddy and Sankey. Before he came out as a missionary, he was an active worker in the Young Men's Christian Association in his home Church in Belfast. After Rev. Bill left for the mission service in 1887, Rev. Kirk became interested in the same kind of enterprise. This led to his joining Rev. Bill in Ibeno and his coming to Etinan as the pioneer missionary to the area (Ekere, 1998).

## **The Early Spread of Qua Iboe Mission**

In 1891, the gospel had spread from Ibeno its "primary nursery" to Okat in the present day Okara Local Government Area with Rev. Archie Bailie as the first missionary (Watt, 1951). It was the "wind" of commerce that blew the gospel to Etinan and its environs where it eventually spread to many parts of the present Akwa Ibom State and beyond. It should be noted that Etinan is one of the chief towns in Akwa Ibom State. At present, it is the headquarters of Etinan Local Government Area which consist of 64 villages. It is situated on the Qua Iboe River, South West of Uyo, the Capital of Akwa Ibom State, and North of Eket, which is also on the Qua Iboe River. Before the coming of the missionaries, Eket was the seat of the British administrative authority in the area and the commercial centre. Shortly afterwards, Uyo became the administrative centre while Eket remained the commercial centre. Etinan, which is almost equidistant from Uyo and Eket, is favorably situated as a trading centre of the area (Ekere, 1998).

Before that period, there were close commercial contacts between the people of Etinan and those of Ibeno. It was these Ibeno traders resident at Etinan that first preached the gospel to the people of Etinan. A prominent Efik middleman by name, Asuquo Etefit, who was a Presbyterian convert then, residing at Etinan used to strongly emphasize the importance of observing Sunday as a work free day and a day of worship. Moreover, some Etinan traders including one Akpan Udo Ema, who travelled to Calabar heard the gospel from some converts of the Presbyterian Mission, (Ibanga, 1985). Following the full acceptance of the new faith by Akpan Udo Ema, he suggested to the Chiefs and Elders that a letter should be written and taken to the missionaries at Calabar requesting for missionaries to send to Etinan. By this time, the only person that could read and write around the area was Mr. John Mfon, a District Interpreter at Eket. Consequently, the invitation was written by Mr. Mfon and taken to the Presbyterian missionaries at Calabar by Akpan Udo Ema (Ekpa, 1980).

At Calabar, Akpan Udo Ema was introduced to a missionary called Rev. Wilkie. He however, lamented that he could not spare him a missionary but rather gave him a letter to Rev. Samuel Bill of the Qua Iboe Mission at Ibeno. On his return to Etinan, Akpan Udo Ema led a deputation to Ibeno comprising himself, Isaac Eshiet, Moses Umo Afia, Andrew Akpabio and Ikwo Inyang and asked for a missionary to be sent to Etinan. The delegates were cordially received by Rev. Samuel Bill, who expressed lack of missionaries at the time. From that time, close contact was maintained between Rev. Bill and Etinan people (Ekere, 1998). In November, 1898, Rev. Samuel Bill and Rev. John Kirk set out by canoe for Etinan. According to a missionary source:

Making for Etinan beach, they had paddled about five hours upstream, when their way was blocked by hostile Ibibios. The river was narrow, and the armed savages had felled trees, blocking the water way to cut off any possibility of their return. The situation was saved by the sudden arrival of several large canoes from Bonny Creek, which swept round the corner and right up the beach, full of armed men with rifles and swords, about one hundred and fifty of them. They were coming up to settle a private trading palaver.

For instance, the increase in the number of Christians and some of their teachings and activities caused considerable alarm in certain sections of the community. It should be noted that at this time a number of influential secret societies like *ekpo*, *idiong*, *ekong*, *atat* and *ebre* existed in the area. Members of these secret societies feared that they would lose their members and that the ancestors would visit the people with calamity if they abandoned the traditional form of worship. Among the Christian teachings objected to by the traditionalists, was the teaching that twins and their mothers should not be ostracized and the denunciation of the slave trade and slavery.

Several attempts were made to destroy the Etinan Church and the Mission House as well as carrying out a general massacre of the Christians. Perhaps, the most gruesome incident was the hacking to death of one Madam Ndana Udofia Nwa Inyang by her husband, Ekot Essien Anwa, for becoming a Christian. Ekot later committed suicide. The women suffered a great deal during the period of persecution. One practice introduced by the missionaries for the women particularly displeased the members of the *Ekpo* society, and that was the practice of wearing *ewura*. *Ewura* was a flowing sleeveless robe with long wide skirt (Ekere, 1998).

The *Ekpo Nyoho*'s objection of the robe was that it makes a woman to resemble *Eka Ekpo* (mother *Ekpo*). For a woman to dress like that was in their view an abomination against the ancestors. The opposition to the dress was so strong that the women had to pull it off when going to the market. On one occasion, the members of *Ekpo* society decided to administer a stern lesson to the women who had, by their mode of dressing violated the community's sacred custom and abused the ancestors. While the Church was in session, they brought *Eka Ekpo* along and left her near the precincts of the Church. *Eka Ekpo* was instructed to direct her weird look at the Church, and all the women in the Church would be blighted by her evil power. This was done but none of the women was harmed. In a bid to check the attacks by the traditionalists, the new converts formed a band to guard the mission house and patrol the village particularly at night. Each group had a drum which they were directed to use to signal their member in the other group if an imminent danger was perceived.

### The Spread of the Church in Etinan and its Environs

Despite the challenges, Rev. John Kirk was able to make in-roads to areas outside Etinan. The first of such villages was Afaha Ikot in the present Nsit Ibom Local Government Area. The tremendous success recorded in soul winning alarmed the village chiefs and members of the secret societies. They openly expressed the fear that the whole clan might soon embrace the new faith. Consequently, the Chiefs had to stir up trouble against the converts, causing many of them to seek refuge at the Mission House at Etinan. Missionary records indicate that the persecution became so strong that the matter had to be reported to the District Officer for Eket. When the District Officer started to subtly support the Chiefs and members of the secret societies who were opposing the spread of the gospel, Rev. John Kirk had to report the matter to the High Commissioner of Southern Nigeria in Calabar (Qua Iboe Fellowship Publication, 39).

In 1903, Rev. Kirk received a deputation of young men from Ikot Abasi No.1, who wanted him to send a teacher and evangelist to the village. Rev. Kirk responded in the same year by sending Pastor Joseph Ekandem of Etinan. Attempts were made to shoot and poison Rev. Kirk by those that opposed his evangelistic incursion into the village. The Church was planted in Afaha Offiong, Nsit Ibom Local Government Area in 1907.

The persecution was stern to the extent that the pioneer Christian convert in the village, Udo Eboro was murdered for attempting to erect a Church building in Afaha Offiong. In Mbiokporo 11, the advent of the gospel was also opposed (Ibanga, 1985).

In Mbioto 11, the resistance against the missionaries was also pronounced and took the forms of use of charms and open fighting in the market square. It was during one of these open fights in Mbioto No. 11, that a convert, Godwin Ekwere was killed. In another instance, a woman convert, Adiaha Udo Ekpo fought so courageously that she became feared by even the members of *Ekpo Nyoho Society*. It is confirmed that some medicine men were invited from Ekom Iman, the ancestral home of Iman Ibom people to come to Mbioto No. 11 to help in the preparation of charms and poisons that could be used against the early converts in the village (Etukudo, 1982). In Ikot Udo Abia, the members of *Ekpo Nyoho Society* destroyed the Church building on two occasions and sternly threatened to kill the converts. Eventually a new site was chosen and six villages namely: Ikot Udo Abia, Ikot Akpabio, Ikot Nkang, Nnung Asang Ikono, Anan Ikono and Ikot Ebo Ikono joined to own the Qua Iboe Church, hence the name, "Six Towns, Qua Iboe Church". By 1914, the Six Towns Church had about 150 communicants and an attendance of about 700 people – a number which was more than double in the next three years (Qua Iboe Fellowship Publication, 1965). By 1912, there were 16 out-stations, and Mbioto 11 was eventually recognized as the centre for the whole area, with its own Resident Missionary (Ekpa, 1980).

The growth of the Church became phenomenal and almost all the villages in Etinan and its environs had a Qua Iboe Church. Other areas that the missionaries had problems with the people were their condemnation of polygamy and the consumption of alcohol. The consumption of alcohol was considered by the missionaries as being responsible for serious moral decadence and laxity among the people. At the Qua Iboe Church United Conference held at Etinan on the 26th of January, 1915, a resolution was unanimously adopted; prohibiting the taking of the following intoxicating liquor by members: schnapps, whisky, brandy, kola wine, ginger wine, quinine, port and sherry wines, gin, daret and beer, because of their known intoxicating qualities (Ekpa, 1980). Another Conference resolution was that no teacher should engage in any native play. In addition, no worker was allowed to do any form of work on Sundays. They were expected to attend Church services in their respective stations and pay Church dues. The worst kind of rule, by modern standard was that connected with morals. The authorities of the Mission banned their teacher's sisters and female relatives from living with them at their stations. This was done to prevent teachers from having sexual relations with their sisters and female relatives, a strange regulation for Etinan people who already considered such act as being sacrilegious (Ekpa, 1980).

### **John Kirk and the Provision of Social Services in Etinan and its Environs Education**

On his arrival in Etinan, Rev. Kirk soon started a night school which used to last from 7.30 p.m. to 8. 30 p.m.; with 30 pupils, all of them were adults. It is reported that five of them were very intelligent and could read the New Testament in Efik, produced by the Presbyterian Mission. By 1925, the Qua Iboe Mission had 25 schools in Uyo District with a total attendance of about 1,700 boys and 150 girls. This development afforded the people of the area the opportunity of sending their children to school early (Ekpa, 1980). By 1915, the famous Etinan Institute, the first post-primary school in Ibibioland was established. According to Ekere:



John Kirk's activities were not confined to saving souls only; he was also interested in caring for the body. He had some training in first aid and the rudiments of medicine. Sick persons were frequently brought to him for treatment because he had fair supply of drugs. He organized a dispensary and trained one of his servants.... People who had accidents and sustained injuries were usually brought to him for treatment. Occasionally, persons mauled by leopards were brought to him, it is reported that, on one occasion, he successfully restored the dislocated jaw bone of an Etinan woman. Minor operations, like the incision of boils were frequently performed by him. Besides this, he also did carpentry work (Ekere, 1998 pp. 11-12).

### Health

The introduction of Western type of medical services by Rev. John Kirk led to the establishment of a full-fledged hospital in Etinan in 1927, known as Qua Iboe Mission Hospital, about 29 years after the establishment of the Qua Iboe Mission in Etinan. In the same year, an Irish medical practitioner, Dr. Bernard Wheatley arrived Etinan to start work as the Qua Iboe Medical Doctor. Since no special building was prepared for the medical venture, Dr. Wheatley had to use the ground floor of the Mission House. One room served as his Dispensary, Consulting and Out-Patient Room. The other room served as a Theatre, Ante-Natal and Maternity Room. On 4th of January, 1928, the hospital was officially dedicated by Rev. Samuel Bill, founder of the Qua Iboe Mission (Etuknwa, 1985).

### The Qua Iboe Mission Printing Press

The missionaries also took a very active interest in printing. As early as 1916, a printing press was established at Nditea in Afaha Eket, but was later transferred to Etinan in 1928. For many years, this press was the only source of supply of religious tracts, vernacular readers, hymn books, catechism, primary readers, school syllabuses, lesson notes and so on. Beside the supply of all these printed materials to the Churches and their schools, the press also served an ever growing demand by individuals, government and organizations. In 1930, the Uyo Native Administration obtained all its stationary and court proceeding books from the Qua Iboe Mission Printing Press in Etinan (Ekpa, 1980). Some developmental projects were embarked upon by the colonial authorities during the era of Rev. Kirk. For instance, a colonial source in the 1930s described the present Etinan Local Government Area thus:

The area is well supplied with motor roads. Running north and south is a road which links up Uyo with the Etinan Native Court and then continues to join the Ndiya-Opobo P. W. D. road. There is a pontoon across the Qua Iboe River at Ekpene Ukpa. Branching off the above road at Ikot Ekan, where a Government School is situated, a road runs through to Abak. Three other short motor roads leave the main Uyo-Etinan road, one going to the factory at Ekpene Obom the second linking the Etinan Native Court with the Nnung Udofe Native Court and third running to the Mission Hospital at Etinan. Bush paths abound and are kept in excellent order by the villages. The area is plentifully supplied with water by the Qua Iboe and Akpa Ubom Rivers and their many tributaries, with the exception of an area in the extreme north around Ekom and Ikot Ekan (Wetherell, 1932 p.70).



Rev. Kirk had earlier in 1896 created a niche for himself when he served as the Qua Iboe missionary at Okat, in the present day Onna Local Government Area. During the visit of the Acting Consul for Calabar Division Mr. Horace Bedwell and his team to the neighbouring village known as Mkpok to investigate the murder of a teenager in the village by the Village Head, Chief Offong and his accomplices, Mr. Bedwell and his team were attacked by the villagers. Rev. Kirk did not only rescue Mr. Bedwell and his team, he also treated their injuries in the Mission House at Okat (Shute, 1932).

### Judicial Services

Rev. Kirk after being posted to Etinan, carried out some of the judicial functions such as the Clerk of the Native Court amongst other roles on-behalf of the Consul. He taught the people to seek redress for wrong not by violence and vengeance, but by judicial process. He helped to check trafficking in slaves and the practice of selling offenders into slavery. It was the practice at that time to expose twin babies to death and to isolate their mothers from the community. He taught the people that twin and their mothers should be given normal treatment accorded to other babies and women. Based on his pedigree, he intervened when the government expeditionary force came to attack Etinan during the period of colonial subjugation of Ibibioland. When Rev. Kirk heard that the team was coming to Etinan, he advised the indigenous warriors to bring their guns to *Ufet Afiaessien* and pile them near the Church. He also advised them to bring as many eggs as possible and other food items like yam, plantain, goats and fowls. When the expeditionary force arrived, Rev. Kirk intervened by telling them that Etinan people were peace-loving and were prepared to obey the government, and that as a demonstration of their good faith, they had surrendered all their guns and brought the items to them as a sign of their friendliness. This mollified the leader of the expedition, he ordered the destruction of the guns and also accepted the gifts, and Etinan was saved from destruction (Akpan, 2015).

As noted earlier, the strong resistance posed by the traditionalists in Afaha Nsit which manifested in incessant threat to life and in the pulling down of the Church building, warranted Rev. Kirk accompanied by Pastor Joseph Ekandem to pay an official visit to the High Commissioner in Calabar to intimate him of the ugly trend, particularly the non-chalant attitude of the District Commissioner at Eket, "who acted foolishly; taking sides with the heathen societies against the Church". According to a missionary source, it was during the meeting, that the "High Commissioner" enlisted the loyalty of Rev. Kirk and Pastor Ekandem as regards the free passage of the expeditionary force through Etinan area (Qua Iboe Fellowship Publication, 1965). Rev. Kirk also believed in grooming young men in Etinan and environs to grow up and contribute meaningfully in the development of the society. One of such young men was Obong Sampson Udo Etuk, Government Education Officer, College Master of outstanding qualities, and a born leader of his country men and women. Obong Etuk was the founding President-General of the Ibibio Union and indeed, one of Nigeria's most outstanding educationists and statesmen, (Udoma, 1987). Obong Sampson Etuk, whose parents were amongst the first set of converts of the Qua Iboe Mission, lived with Rev. Kirk and received his early education (Etuk, 1999).

In another corollary, Pastor Joseph Ekandem who was the Pastor Emeritus of Qua Iboe Mission in Etinan and its environs was also groomed by Rev. Kirk. The 1959 Conference of the Qua Iboe Church unanimously praised Pastor Ekandem after his demise and noted that "the statesmanship he displayed was of a high order and no one contributed more to laying of the foundations of the Qua Iboe Church than he did". Chief J. S. B. Ikpe, an outstanding

Education Officer, a one-time Secretary of the Ibibio Union and first Clan Head of Iman Ibom, as well as Elder Effiong Etukudo and Obong Charles Ekere, both distinguished educationists were also products of Rev. Kirk.

## Conclusion

It is on record that some African scholars view the missionaries as representing the secular wing of European imperialism; it is obvious that they did their best to spread evangelism and other aspects of enlightenment. For instance, the spread of the gospel turned many away from the idolatry and caused them to embrace a new way of life. It should be noted that Rev. Kirk and his successors were faced with a number of challenges which included language, transportation, finance and personnel. The question of denominational supremacy and struggle for spheres of influence with other mission organizations operating in the area also greatly affected the spread of the Mission. Rev. Kirk was indeed a "merchant of light". His arrival changed the social and economic climate of Etinan and its environs and made the people the envy of other areas; in other words, he helped to give them the unassailable name of "the brain basket of Akwa Ibom State" and by extension, economic nucleus. Without any exaggeration, no other section of Akwa Ibom State has been able to produce more educated persons than Etinan and its environs. This did not just happen by chance; it is the manifestation of Rev. Kirk's labour, vision and goodwill.

As the work has shown, Rev. Kirk was the first proprietor/teacher of Western type of education in Etinan and its environs, the first Doctor/facilitator of Western type of medical services, and the pioneer Administrator/Judicial Officer as well the pioneer resident Evangelist who was committed to aggressive evangelism and discipleship in Etinan and environs. His footprints adorn the landscape of Etinan and indeed, other parts of Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria thereby making him a portrait of history. After serving for more than 25 years, Kirk was "in 1924 obliged through advancing years", to retire from active service and return to Belfast. Yet, he never lost interest in the Qua Iboe, until his transition to eternity in 1930. Rev. Kirk was succeeded by Rev. D. H. O'Neil, and later Rev. C. S. Benington, who also followed the path of development initiated by the "early bird".

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