

A Tribute to  
Sr. M. David Mannion, Columban Sister



15th. August 1923 - 8th. November 2012



L to R Daire Mannion, Mattie Ronayne and Babs Mannion

## **Sr. Mary David (formerly Babs) Mannion**

Milltown, Tuam, in County Galway is a village which has won many of the Tidy Towns awards, a much admired village. Heading northwards you pass a building on the left-hand-side just before you cross over the bridge which was once the home of Sr. David Mannion.



### **The Mannion Family**

David and Bridget Mannion had four daughters:

**Margaret** was born on 26 November 1918. She qualified as a radiographer and worked for many years in the Regional Hospital in Galway before returning to Milltown to care for her elderly mother. After a number of years at home Margaret became ill herself and died on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1976 aged 57.

**Mary** was born on 2 December 1920 and, following her father's death on 6 November 1953, she was given the responsibility of running the successful family business.

**Bridget Mary**, affectionately known as Babs, was born on 15 August 1923.

**Sarah Christina** was born on 15 May 1926 and died from appendicitis and peritonitis aged 5 years old on 24 January 1932.



Mary and Sister David (Doctor)  
now a novice after entering the  
Order of Columban Sisters  
(early 1950s).



Babs and her sister Margaret at Ashford Castle (late 1940's)

The girls went to the local national school before going to the then recently established Gortnor Abbey boarding school.

Babs went onto University in Galway to pursue a degree in medicine..



*Gortnor Abbey and the much larger school it developed into subsequently*

After her graduation with an MB degree in 1948 she went to England where she did her internship.

Having spent four years in England, she joined the Columban Sisters in March 1952 and took the name Sr. Mary David.

Her first cousins from Kilgevrin - Sadie (Sr. Mary Stephen) and Bridget (Sr. Mary Assumpta) Mannion were also in the order of St. Columban.

In 1968 she qualified as an Obstetrician and Gynaecologist.



## Some of the Sr. David's Connections

Sr. David's mother, Bridget (nee Kirrane), had three sisters and three brothers:

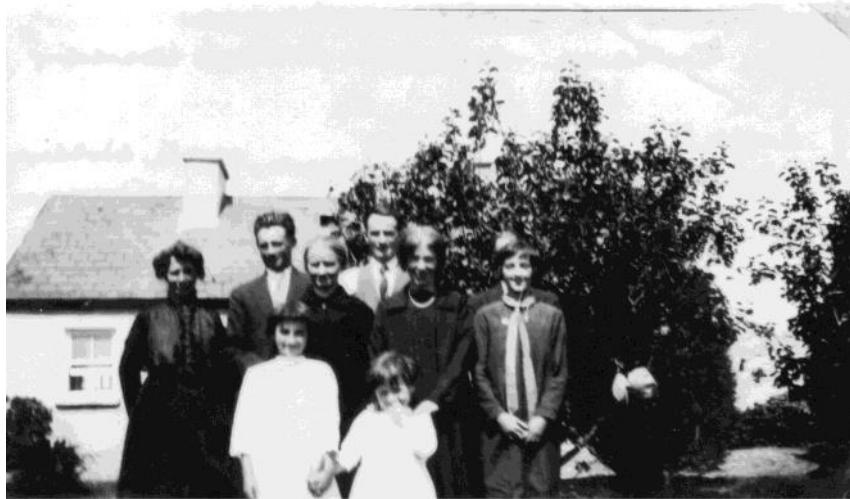
Sisters:

Catherine Ronayne of Kilmacnella, Irishtown was Mattie Ronayne's mother (Mattie worked all his life in Mannion's) and Fr James Ronayne's grandmother.

John Hehir's grandmother, Kate Ronayne, was Mattie Ronayne's aunt and as a result of this connection there was a lifelong relationship between the Hehir's and the Mannion's.

Mary Waldron of Cullane, Irishtown was the grandmother of John Waldron and his siblings from Conagher.

Sara Mannion of Kilgevrin had two sons and two daughters Sadie and Bridget, the above mentioned nuns.



Back row are Luke Ronayne and Matt Waldron

Middle row are Sara Mannion, Catherine Ronayne, Bridget Mannion and Kathleen Waldron.

Front row are Peg Waldron and Babs

Photo was taken at Waldron's house in Cullane on the occasion of Delia's wedding



Babs at Delia Waldron's wedding with her parents  
David and Bridget on the right-hand side

Brothers:

Of Bridget's 3 brothers, William Kirrane's grandson, Brendan, lives in Feamore, Kilvine which was the Kirrane homestead.

The two other brothers, Matt and Martin, emigrated to the US. While Matt died young, Martin settled in Dixon, California where he raised his family.

On her father's side of the family, David came from Kilgevrin and he had two brothers.

His brother Patsy married Sara Kirrane, his wife Bridget's sister.

His other brother, Stephen, became a school teacher in Cross, Co. Mayo and remained single.

The Mannion line ended on the passing of Sr. David.



Martin Carey, Sr. David, Paddy Ronayne, Sr. Assumpta, John Ronayne. Photo taken in Dixon, California.



## Sr. David's Missionary Life

In 1954 the Columban Sisters were asked to open a mission in Korea, a country devastated by the effects of Japanese colonisation (1910-1945) and the Korean civil war (1950-1953). The first contingent of three sisters arrived in Korea in January 1955 with the purpose of opening a medical clinic in Mokpo. As a point of interest, one of these sisters was Sr. Rosarii McTigue of Foxford, Co. Mayo, sister of Nora Kirrane who was married to Milltown's much-loved sacristan, Pa Kirrane.



The second contingent, comprising of Sr. Mary David and Sr. Philomena O'Sullivan, arrived in Korea in June 1955 with the purpose of opening a second medical clinic in Chuncheon, sixty-five kilometres from Seoul and only 9 kilometres from the border with North Korea.

The journey from Ireland to Korea was a long and arduous one as described by Sr. Philomena in an interview with journalist Ann Marie Foley in 2018. They travelled by boat from Cobh to New York, then a three-day train journey to Los Angeles before boarding a Swedish freighter to take them via Manila to Tokyo.

From there they travelled by USA army plane to Seoul and then on a 12-hour train journey to Mokpo.

While waiting for the clinic in Chuncheon to be ready they stayed in Mokpo for a number of months learning the language. In the book 'Companions on a Journey' (2012) by Sr. Mary McHugh, she describes the conditions the sisters encountered – potholed roads, broken bridges, emaciated children, undernourished people, patients with far-advanced tuberculosis and the sad reality of many people separated from their loved ones in the North never to be reunited again. People were living in abysmal conditions in refugee camps with little or no medical care.

The medical clinic in Chuncheon was ready in November 1955 for Sr. David and Sr. Philomena.

Over the years, Sr. David's skills as a doctor saved many lives and people came from far and near to be treated by this wonderful doctor.

In 1960 Sr. David returned to Mopko where as Medical Officer she worked in the busy hospital wards, was involved in the setting up of a Nursing School and the providing of a midwifery course.

In 1970, after doing post graduate medical studies in Ireland she worked in the clinic in Samcheok, 100 kilometres northwards of Chuncheon.

In the early 1980s Sr. David returned to Milltown to look after her mother Bridget who died on 18th January 1982, aged 97.

She returned periodically to Milltown in the early 1990s when her last remaining sister Mary, fell ill. During these years she undertook a course in Pastoral Counselling in Dublin and went to London where she worked in pastoral ministry. In Mary's final years Sr. David returned to Milltown full-time to look after her. On Mary's death on 13 August 1998, aged 77, the family business was left to Sr. David.

At Dunmore District Court, Judge Bernard Brennan remarked that in his 21 years on the bench he had never come across such a case.

Before him was Sr. Mary David Mannion. On the 12 November 1998 the Irish Independent, the Irish Times, the Belfast Telegraph and national radio, RTE, etc all reported on the case. Sr. Mary David, as she was known for over 40 years and now a nun of 75 years of age, was transferring the licensed premises into her own name which she needed to do in order to sell the business.

Sad to think that the media focussed on the sensational headlines rather than report on what was a most remarkable woman. It was a field day for the media, such fun that a nun was applying to the courts to transfer a licensed bar into her name.

While this court case put Sr. David's name before the nation, it did not define the wonderful, inspiring, humble, dutiful and caring daughter, sister and person that she was.

Following the sale, the much loved family home became the home of the Finn family who established the well-known Finn's Restaurant. After a most extraordinary life Sister David went to live in the Columban Convent in Magheramore where she remained until her death on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2012.

In remembering Sister David we should also remember so many others from our villages, towns and county who went out to the missions to serve others because of their religious beliefs. We know that after arriving in Korea her skills as a doctor were quickly put into use and



this was only just one of her many talents. We have heard of the generous friendships she formed with her patients over a lifetime and there are many such stories we will never know about. We would have to go to Korea and do research to find out the enormous work she did out there.

*Mary and Sr. David with their mother Bridget (early 1980s)*

We know Sister David would hate to have her life distinguished in this way as she remained a most humble woman but she and so many others should not be forgotten for the wonderful work they did. They brought comfort and hope, they helped others to live a better life, and did it with such love and generosity.

Motto of Sr. Mary David Mannion MD was:

***“Thy Kingdom Come”***

## Memories of Sr. David

### **Mary Kelly, nee Diskin, Russelstown:**

As a little girl my mother, Bridie Diskin, brought me to see the Nun's Story as the film was being shown locally. Sr. Luke, the part played by Audrey Hepburn, was my new idol. From then on I imagined I was Sr. Luke to my two little dolls, my secret friends.

It was sometime later that my father, Paddy Diskin, came home having been to Mannion's. He said Bridget a missionary nun had served him; she was home on holidays.

On hearing this, there was no peace in our house as I pestered my parents to bring me to meet Sr. Bridget, imagining maybe that she was Audrey Hepburn. On meeting her I was at first tongue-tied and I remember looking at her angelic, kind, gentle face that had all the beauty of the nun in the film. Soon I was chatting away; I was made feel so relaxed by this wonderful nun. On leaving, I can still recall how highly valued she made me feel and I was delighted with the bag of sweets she had given me. I remember her telling me to always hold onto my dreams.

*But I, being poor, have only my dreams*

*Tread softly because you tread on my dreams*

*W. B. Yeats*

### **John Hehir, Kilgevrin**

Growing up on the outskirts of Milltown, visiting Mannion's shop is one of my early memories. Mary and her sister Margaret ran the business, the shop on one side and the public bar on the other side.

My Dad's cousin Mattie Ronayne was a cousin of the Mannion's and did a variety of jobs around the shop and yard. He also ran the travelling shop and was viewed as one of the family.

Margaret did the housekeeping and also took care of her mother. My father Paddy, a great friend and relation of the Mannion's, visited them on a daily basis and helped out in the Bar on a Sunday morning.

I can remember the timber floors, the large brown paper roll hanging from the ceiling, the spool of twine and a scale for weighing items.

When you had made your purchase of groceries, Mary would pull down the sheet of paper to wrap the purchase. It was fascinating to

watch her take the twine, tie the parcel and snap the twine with her fingers, all done in seconds.

On entering through the front door, to the left, was the public bar which could be hidden by a big heavy curtain hanging from an iron rail. This was to conceal the men having a drink especially on Sundays after Mass. Customers doing their grocery shop were unable to see who was having a drink. If any ladies wanted a glass of sherry they would have to go into the snug, strange times indeed.

I remember Sr. David on her visits home to Milltown. She loved to meet and speak with the locals and had such an interest in their welfare when she met them in the shop.

She was always a part of this wonderful family.

### **Marguerite Slattery, Milltown**

When I was a young girl it was the norm to be sent up to Mannion's shop on almost a daily basis for some grocery items. As Mannion's was only across the road from us, we were very friendly with all the family.

When speaking about Sr. David, my mother Kathleen and Mary Mannion always referred to her as Babs but to me, she was always Sr. David. I remember in particular, after the business closing, being with Sr. David and Mary in their sitting room having long conversations about life and the world in general. Sr. David always amazed me with her memory of friends I might have mentioned previously and she would recall their names and situations and often enquire after their wellbeing.

After Mannion's was sold Sr. David moved to the convent in Magheramore. I visited her there and it was lovely to see how content and happy she was. Her interest in all things Milltown had not diminished and she asked after so many people as well as mentioning those who had passed away since she had left the village. She also arranged a lovely surprise for me by introducing me to Sr. Rosarii McTigue, Nora Kirrane's sister.

### **Ann Mullarkey, Milltown**

For all my married life my children and I were daily back and forth to Mannions' shop and we all have cherished memories of the family.

Sr. David came and went from her missionary post over the many years but it was when Mary became ill that I came to spend a lot of time with Sr. David. I had the privilege of driving Mary to many of her hospital appointments, always accompanied by Sr. David. It must have been heartbreaking for Sr. David to watch her much loved sister through her final illness and I witnessed this kind, gentle and caring nun, nursing her sister with such devotion.

I have always admired Sr. David's spiritual faith; she was an inspiration to me and must have been a wonderful support to her deeply religious sister Mary.

### **Fr. James Ronayne's homily given at Sr. David's funeral**

In 1975 my first assignment was to Inishere, one of the three Aran Islands. My first trip to the neighbouring island of Inis Meain was by curragh to attend the traditional "stations" or house Mass (a revered custom on the island) in the home of Mairin Ni Dhomhnail. At the breakfast table in her cosy sitting room Maureen pointed to the mantelpiece which had an array of magnificently coloured dolls which would do justice to any Christmas shop.

She proceeded to relate to myself and my fellow priest at the table the extraordinary story of her own near death experience at the very complicated birth of one of her children which necessitated the sending for and subsequent arrival of the emergency flying squad from Galway Regional Hospital. Thankfully, the outcome of the emergency was a happy one. Maureen told us in her own words about this "Bean rialta, an t-Suir David" who saved her life and that of her baby. Sr. Mary David was home on a two-year leave from Korea to do a course in Obstetrics. This was 1968. At that time Providence allowed that she was on duty that night and attended the emergency needs of Mairin Ni Dhomhnail and her child. The remarkable thing was that every year since then Sr. Mary David would send a Korean toy to that new-born child. Now years later at a Station Mass in 1975, here they were on display on Mairin's mantelpiece.

I could only bask happily in Maureen's telling the story about "Bean rialta, an t-Suir David" and when she had finished telling her story I

smiled and said that I too could fill a mantelpiece with all the birthday cards I received from Sr. Mary David who was both my godmother and my cousin. It was one of life's rare confluences of grace to be able to hear and tell about Sr. Mary David on that night in Inis Meain. What struck me then and now was that Sr. Mary David's care wasn't just in the moment, but enduring.

I have never been to Korea but I feel sure that there are many Inismean-experiences and many Maureen Ni Dhomhnails with a similar story. After long hours of working as a doctor in her clinic whether in Mokpo, Samchok or on the Island of Cheju Do, Sr. David would make her way through villages carrying medicines for the poor. She was a brilliant doctor. She always put the patient first. She was sharp in her diagnosis, thorough in her treatment and always humble in her manner. She would often be heard to say: "The Lord is at work here."

For us, her family and her cousins, Sr. Mary David is our last link with all our parents. We have memories and stories to cherish of those earlier times when they would meet, in Patrick Kavanagh's words "going to second Mass on a summer Sunday", or "on a fair day by accident after the bargains are all made." The place for meeting was her home at Mannion's Pub or in the kitchen, where they would meet, greet and share their lives. Those lives had an extraordinary work ethic, a loyalty and decency. It was here that Sr. Mary David was born Bridget Mary, and known affectionately to all in Milltown as well as to all her family as "Babs." She grew up a very bright, attractive young woman and when she had just qualified as a doctor she decided to be a missionary in the spirit of St Columban. She became a wonderful missionary giving herself totally to the work of the Lord and totally to the Lord of the work. Today's reading from Isaiah (41:28-31) describes so well the struggle of serving the Lord when it says: "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength."

Coming here to Magheramore for this final farewell to Sr. Mary David, it was comforting to hear all the Sisters describe the peace she had in her final moments and indeed in her last weeks. It was a most extraordinary blessing because Sr. David so desired such a grace and I believe her whole life was a very conscious preparation for this moment of blessed departure from this life.



*Fr. James Ronayne with Godparents Sr. David and Uncle Andy*



Sr. David



*Sr. David, Sr. Philomena\*, Sr. Winifred*



Sr. Enda, Sr. David,  
Sr. Philomena\*

\* In 2017 the people of Cork city nominated Sr. David's companion, Sr. Philomena, for Person of the Year award in recognition of the wonderful work that she had done in Korea.

## Conclusion

Babs, a beautiful young lady, a qualified doctor, financially secure, living in London – she literally had the world at her feet. It must have been her deep faith and love for her fellow human beings that she came to the decision to devote herself to a life of service to the missionary order of the Columban Sisters.

This is just our small tribute to a wonderful brave woman.



*Photo from the book; 'Companions on a Journey'*

## **Appreciation**

We are grateful to Fr. James Ronayne, Sr. David's godson, for his support and encouragement as well as providing many family photos for this article.

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**Compiled by** PJ and Mary Barrett

**References** Companions on a Journey by Mary McHugh, 2011, Veritas Publications

Article by Anne Marie Foley for Catholic Ireland.net on 29 June 2017



Mannion's Bar and Grocery and Hardware

**PARISH BORN NUNS**

Sr. Otteran Burke	Banagher	Sr. Mary Kirrane	Dillonbrook
Sr. Marg. Brennan	Conagher	Sr. Nellie Kirrane	Dillonbrook
Sr. Mary Corless	Conagher	Sr. Mary Mallon	Illane
Sr. Ciss Corless	Conagher	Sr. Brigit Mannion	Kilgevrin
Sr. Ciss Connolly	Russelstown	Sr. Brigit Mannion	Milltown
Sr. Eliz. Connolly	Ilaune	Sr. Sarah Mannion	Kilgevrin
Sr. Brigit Diskin	Dillonbrook	Sr. Mary Mannion	Tonemoyle
Sr. Mary M. Diskin	Ballymara	Sr. Margt. Mannion	Tonemoyle
Sr. Mary Diskin	Dillonbrook	Sr. Nora Mannion	Tonemoyle
Sr. Ciss Dolan	Dalgin	Sr. Julia Mannion	Clashaganny
Sr. Maud Dolan	Dalgin	Sr. Mary Molloy	Cartron
Sr. Mollie Dolan	Dalgin	Sr. Mary A Mongon	Cloondroon
Sr. Eileen Dolan	Millown	St. Nora Moran	Carnageehy
Sr. Maeve Dolan	Millown	Sr. Ita McEnnis	Pollaturick
Sr. Nancy Dolan	Milltown	Sr. Teresa McEnnis	Pollaturick
Sr. Teresa Delaney	CarranThomas	Sr. Mary K. Mullen	Pollaturick
Sr. Joy Flannery	Milltown	Sr. Dorothy Mullarkey	Milltown
Sr. Katherine Fitzpatrick	Carnageehy	Sr. Mary Murray	Banagher
Sr. Katherine Gormally	Russelstown	Sr. Sabina Nicholson	Tonemoyle
Sr. Sarah Gormally	Russelstown	Sr. Mary Nolan	Clashaganny
Sr. Brigit Garvey	Dillonbrook	Sr. Marg. Nolan	Clashaganny
Sr. Katherine Garvey	Dillonbrook	Sr. Mary K.O'Donnell	Davros
Sr. Monica Garvey	Dillonbrook	Sr. Kathleen Tierney	Belmont
Sr. Nora Garvey	Dillonbrook	Sr. Maureen Tierney	Belmont
Sr. Mary M. Grady	Milltown	St. Teresa Tierney	Belmont
Sr. Brigit Hession	Bawnmore	Sr. Una Tierney	Belmont
Sr. Margt. Hession	Bawnmore	Sr. Marg. Tierney	Carnageehy
St. Una Heaney	Ballyglass	Sr. Ellen Toole	Conagher
Sr. Margt. Healy	Russelstown	Sr. Julia Toole	Conagher
Sr. Una Healy	Russelstown	Sr. Margt. Toole	Conagher