

**Ita Mahon RIP**  
**Funeral Mass**  
**Monknewtown Church Slane**  
**Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> December 2021**

*The death has occurred of Ita Mahon Nee McDonald, Balfaddock, Slane, Co. Meath. Peacefully at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda. Predeceased by her husband Bill. Deeply regretted by her loving family Maeve, Eoin, Daragh & Brian, grandchildren Chris, Emily, Josh, Ciaran, Julianne & Sam, daughters in law Judith, Christine & Yvonne, sisters in law, nephews, nieces, relatives and friends.*

Just over three weeks ago I called into see Ita on my way up to County Monaghan. Yes, she was physically more frail than I had last seen her but mentally was still as sharp as ever. The conversation covered a number of topical issues on which she had very definite opinions, no surprise there. Our conversation was briefly interrupted by a phone call which apparently was to arrange a hair appointment. Ita was looking forward and getting ready. She was very much looking forward to having her entire family with her for Christmas. Did she have some inkling that it might be her last? I'm not sure but later in that conversation there was a curve ball I was not really prepared for when quite casually she asked me if I would celebrate her funeral Mass. It might even have been more along the lines of a statement than a question. Either way I kind of dodged the topic and moved on. However, as I drove away that day and indeed in the weeks since I reflected a little on the life and character of this valiant woman I have come to know and admire over the last twenty-five years or more.

And so Ita, a lot sooner than I expected we are gathered here today in Monknewtown Church to pray with you and for you, to accompany you on your final earthly journey and to celebrate your life. If I may I would like to reflect a little on Ita's life from three different perspectives.

(I hope this doesn't get me into bother with the American branch of the family) but a few years ago the former US First Lady and Secretary of

State Hillary Clinton together with her daughter Chelsea co-wrote a very interesting book called *The Book of Gutsy Women*. It is a collection of 100 essays about very strong formidable women who have made quite a contribution in their own communities and beyond. Some of them are well known, many are not. What they all share in common is a 'can do' kind of approach to life often in the face of personal or community adversity. The reason I draw attention to this book is that I kind of feel that Ita Mahon and her life story might well have made it into the pages of a book with a title like that. From her earliest days there was evidence of the independent, resilient and formidable woman we all came to know and love. She was one of only a handful of girls who sat their Leaving Cert in the Mercy Convent in Dundalk back in 1952. That independent streak was obviously encouraged at home, and it was her father Owen who taught her to drive at a very young age. She was later known to boast that it was *she* who taught her husband Garda Bill Mahon to drive.

I was very struck by one of the condolence messages on RIP.ie which read "*You burned bright always "Today you are with your beloved husband Bill, the love of your life"*" Bill and Ita met when he was stationed as a garda in Dundalk, and they married in 1962. Sadly, they had only twenty years of marriage together before Bill died after a short illness in 1982. At 47 Ita was left to raise her four children alone. Despite her absolute commitment to her family Ita also found the time and energy to contribute to the local community. As the First Reading from Ecclesiastes noted there is a time and a season for so many things and that was certainly true of Ita. From her time in the Order of Malta in Dundalk. She was then a founding member of the ICA in Slane and played an active role in the Drama Society, Historical Society, Parish Council to name but a few. She was a Minister of the Word here in Monknewtown Church until very recently. She was passionate about history, politics and loved her garden. After Bill's death she decided to channel her own experience of grief into becoming a Bereavement Counsellor with the Community Services Centre in Drogheda where she

worked in a voluntary capacity for many years. During that time, she made wonderful friends and helped many people begin to come to terms with their grief. She also loved to travel. Her first trip in a plane was to Paris in 1990 and from then on, she travelled extensively in Europe, the States and one memorable trip to Jordan and the Holy Land. She had treasured memories of many visits to Eoin & Judith in Arizona and Daragh and Christine in Georgia and continued to travel on her own to the US right into her early 80s, steadfastly refusing any form of assistance that would make the journey through the airport easier. Indeed, she flew to visit one of her best friends Peggy in New York just weeks after 9/11 declaring that there was probably never a safer time to be there. As we have already alluded to Ita was fiercely independent, outspoken, resilient, formidable always ready to engage in robust debate and rarely letting anything go unchallenged. There is a line from Taylor Swift's song 'Marjorie' which says, '*Never be so polite, you forget your power*' and I think that could easily have been a motto for the woman we honour with Christian burial today. I had first-hand experience of this trait in the early days of my friendship with Ita. She had come to Rome on a pilgrimage I organised. We had what I considered to be a very good guide but one day as he was explaining some aspect of Roman history, he was challenged from the back of the bus about the accuracy of some of his facts. I dived for cover and I think in the end they both agreed to differ. It did however put me on edge for the rest of the trip and it also insured that our guide had to be on the top of his game. Ita was diagnosed with a tumour on her spine in the mid-80s and again her indomitable spirit and a very gifted surgeon meant that she was soon back working full time and living life to the full. She was driving and living independently right up until 2019 when her health began to fail. That characteristic of not letting anything go unchallenged also I believe followed through into Ita's faith life. She was a woman of very strong faith, but it was a faith nurtured not just by prayer and worship but also by reading, by study by intellectual debate.

My second perspective on Ita's life is also to some extent influenced by another female American author with strong presidential connections. Some years ago, I received the gift of a book of poetry entitled; *She Walks in beauty* edited by President John F. Kennedy's only daughter, Caroline. Introducing a section of poems about motherhood, Caroline writes the following: "*But I can certainly say, like everyone does, that becoming a mother is the best thing that ever happened to me. Having a child defines us for the rest of our lives. No matter what else we do, we will always be that person's mother. We give our children the gift of ourselves, and they give us so much in return....Each mother-child relationship teaches us our limitations and our strengths. It changes us in constantly unfolding ways and entwines us in the unpredictable mystery of another life*" I'm very conscious that while there has been a time and a season for so many things in Ita's life the one thing which gave her the greatest satisfaction was her vocation to be mum to you Maeve, Eoin, Daragh & Brian. She was immensely proud of each of you and what you have achieved in your lives. She taught each of you never to be afraid to speak up and to say what you thought or believed. Well now Eoin, Darragh and Brian I can't say with any great knowledge how successful Ita was in this regard in your lives but I can say with great certainty, and I'm sure Bishop Denis might even be able to support me here, when it comes to the female line of transmission your mother could not have done better. Yes, to borrow Caroline Kennedy's beautiful words, Ita was *entwined in the unpredictable mystery of your lives*. Inside that slim body beat a big heart which expanded over the years to embrace Judith, Christine & Yvonne and of course her six grandchildren. Chris, Emily, Josh, Ciaran, Julianne & Sam, Ita delighted to see all of her grandchildren grow into such wonderful young people and the one thing that made her sad in recent times was that she wouldn't be around to see you blossom even further.

My final perspective on Ita's life brings me to a place she loved and where she worked for so many years. Newgrange, particularly in these final days of December is symbolic of that very deep struggle within all of our lives, between light and darkness. As the light in Ita's earthly life

was being extinguished this week every house and street up and down the country is festooned with light. Of all the symbols of this Christmas Season, Light is probably the most evocative. The story of how light triumphs over darkness has so much to do with why we celebrate Christmas on December 25th (at least in the Northern Hemisphere!) The pagan peoples of ancient times saw the world as a great cosmic struggle between light and darkness. At a certain period of the year the darkness seemed to be getting the better of the light as the days became shorter and the dark nights became longer. Each year they feared that darkness would finally overcome the sun and the light, and that their world would be destroyed. Then every year without fail something would happen around the 21<sup>st</sup> of December. The sun would begin to fight back. Ever so gradually the days became a few minutes longer as the sun regained its strength. It was a cause for celebration and so began the winter festival of lights. When Christianity came along it was looking for an appropriate time of year to celebrate the birth of Jesus. For Christians Jesus was very much the Light of The World who had overcome the darkness of sin and death. They borrowed the pagan concept of the struggle between light and darkness and light's ultimate triumph after December 21<sup>st</sup>. Christians settled on the date of December 25th to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, The Light of the world. Instead of the triumph of the SUN of God the Christians changed the vowel and it became the triumph of the SON of God. The Pagan Festival of Lights became the Christian Festival of Christmas.

For Ita Mahon, the struggle between light and darkness also came to an end just a few days beyond the 21<sup>st</sup> of December and the light and promise of new life and resurrection triumphed over the darkness of pain and suffering which she had so experienced in recent times. With St. Paul in the second reading today, Ita too can say *"the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness.*

I would like to finish today with some lines taken from John O' Donohue's beautiful poem; '*On the death of a Beloved*'.

"Though we need to weep your loss,  
You dwell in that safe place in our hearts,  
Where no storm or night or pain can reach you.....  
Though we cannot see you with outward eyes,  
We know our soul's gaze is upon your face,  
Smiling back at us from within everything  
To which we bring our best refinement.

Let us not look for you only in memory,  
Where we would grow lonely without you.  
You would want us to find you in presence,  
Beside us when beauty brightens,  
When kindness glows  
And music echoes eternal tones.

When orchids brighten the earth,  
Darkest winter has turned to spring;  
May this dark grief flower with hope  
In every heart that loves you.

So Ita

May you continue to inspire us:  
To enter each day with a generous heart.  
To serve the call of courage and love  
Until we see your beautiful face again  
In that land where there is no more separation,  
Where all tears will be wiped from our mind,  
And where we will never lose you again.

Ita. May your gentle soul rest in Peace

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