

## Early Days of the Franciscan Nuns' Mission in Uganda

The article covers the beginnings of the Franciscan Nuns' mission to Uganda with extracts from the letters of Mother Kevin describing life on the mission and ends with two Mill Hill missionary descriptions of their ministry among sleeping sickness victims. There is a short biographical note on Mother Kevin, born Teresa Kearney in Arklow, Ireland, but known in Uganda as Mama Kevina.

These chapter excerpts come from the long out of print *The African Chronicles of Brother Giles*, by The Rev. F. M. Dreves, of St Joseph's Society, Mill Hill, London and author of *A Joyful Herald of the King of Kings* and *Our Pilgrimage in France*, etc., and published in 1929 by Sands & Co., London and Glasgow.

### Glimpse of the Past

In the year 1902 the Mother Abbess of the Franciscan Nuns at St. Mary's Abbey, Mill Hill, N.W.7 was approached by Cardinal Vaughan and Bishop Hanlon, Vicar Apostolic of the Upper Nile, British East Africa, with reference to sending out Sisters to help the Mill Hill Fathers in the Uganda Mission Field. After due consideration it was eventually decided by the Mother Abbess and her Council to undertake the missionary work suggested, and consequently a community of six sisters were chosen, and immediately arrangements were made that they should be ready to leave England and sail for Africa in December of the same year – 1902.

The immense Vicariate Apostolic of the Upper Nile in British East Africa had only been erected some eight years previously, and when, in 1894, Bishop Hanlon and his five gallant missionaries had landed at the East African port of Mombasa, it had taken him and his party some eight months of perilous journeying on foot to reach Uganda from the coast. Therefore it says much for the progress of civilisation in East Africa that to-day the same journey from Mombasa to Uganda, across the Victoria Nyanza, can be done almost in comfort in as many days!

And now, with regard to the progress of the Church in that portion of the Divine Vineyard. It is sufficient to add that whereas Bishop Hanlon, when he first arrived, hardly found more than two hundred neophytes in his immense Vicariate there are to-day, after thirty-eight years of apostolic labour, in that same Vicariate and in the Prefecture Apostolic of Kavirondo which was formed from it more than one hundred thousand Catholics and as many catechumens!

It came as a tremendous revelation to me to witness the virility and the fervour of those children of the Church of Christ when a little more than two years ago I visited each of the mission stations of Bishop

Campling's Apostolic Field. No wonder that Pope Benedict XV once said "The Uganda mission field is of a truth the most consoling of all mission fields."

Not in vain has the blood of the first martyrs of Uganda been shed, for from it there has sprung, and there is still springing, the most abundant harvest. And to say that the seminaries and the convents opened in recent years by the White Fathers and by our own Mill Hill missionaries, are filled with young and promising candidates, eager to devote their lives to God's service as Priests and Sisters, speaks eloquently enough of the way the natives have grasped the important value of the gift of true Faith; of their eagerness to retain it; and their fervent apostolic desire to spread it further amongst their own kith and kin.

Certainly the growth of the Catholic Church in Uganda is almost without parallel in history. But we must not forget that success, and especially success in the mission field, is never achieved without sufferings. In order to conquer the apostle must endure many things for Christ's sake. As I journeyed from mission to mission I was thrilled by what I heard and saw, and I listened everywhere to deeds of heroism, narrated to me by the heroes themselves – but with such unconscious simplicity – just as if to be a hero was an ordinary thing.

However, my immediate concern is not to narrate the valiant deeds of my Uganda brethren, though in my affection and admiration for them I had to salute them 'en passant'.

The fact that the splendid achievements of our Fathers have been made possible is due, in large measure, to the generous and devoted co-operation of Our Missionary Sisters, and by our Sisters, in this instance, I mean to refer to that noble little band of Franciscan nuns from St. Mary's Abbey, Mill Hill.

The storey of the Sister's journey and incidents connected with their arrival in Uganda had best be told by one of them. Only let me tell you the names of those first six sisters – Mother Paul, of Boston, U.S.A., Mother Kevin, of Co. Wicklow; Sister Marcella, of Glasgow; Sister Solano of Co. Waterford; Sister Andrea, from London and Sister Alexis from Co Tipperary. They were the first English-speaking Sisters to start missionary work in the Upper Nile Vicariate.

### The Daily Drudgery of Hard Work

When Mother Paul and her companions first arrived at Nsambya in January 1903, Kampala, the native capital of Uganda, was different from the prosperous little city it is to-day, with its banks, its public offices, its large shops and hotels, its law court, G.P.O., splendid European hospital, etc. It then could boast of only three European houses for officials and one Indian shop.

The house placed at the Sister's disposal by the Fathers consisted of a dormitory, a community room and another room which served as a chapel. It was built of sun-dried bricks and covered with grass, all native fashion. For breakfast the sisters had bananas; and twice a week the Fathers regularly sent them a scraggy and very bony leg of mutton. For three years their diet knew very little change, and all that time they never had a morsel of bread.

On visiting the sacristy the Sisters found the church vestments in a bad state. What could hardworking missionaries do towards keeping them neat and repaired? No woman's hand had been near during the past seven years, and therefore they found much to do in the repair line. The church was a wonderful construction of tall palm-pots and reeding – the reeds being plaited and worked into the best native specimens of their workmanship. The floor was the earth's own crust, strewn with dried grass, and as the grass was changed and the dirt swept away but thrice a year, the fleas, jiggers, cricket, etc., thrived to their own joy and everybody's else intense discomfort.

Now followed the daily drudgery of hard work. And at first a great obstacle had to be overcome, and that was the mastery of the native language, a masterpiece of the devil's own invention for the annoyance of the missionaries, to be sure! But one and all, with stout hearts and with many an amusing set-back through mistakes in pronunciation, settled down to learn it.

Several little girls were sent to the sisters from the mission, and from these they endeavoured to learn their first lessons. Thus old Sister Andrea, with handbook and pencil in hand, would point out a stone and get a child to tell her the Luganda word for it: Stone *jinja*, a tree *muti*, etc. Once the Sister tried to get the word for cabbage, but the name of that imported vegetable had, as yet, found no place in the child's vocabulary, so she replied *Simanyi*, which means 'I don't know'. She kept repeating it, and the sister faithfully wrote it down cabbage as *simanyi* and told the child to go to the garden and bring me some *simanyi*, but the result to the repeated order was a torrent of tears.

Whilst out visiting the neighbouring villages the children and women would run away in terror at the sight of the first white woman they had ever seen, but little by little they were coaxed round with a little present and a kindly smile, and then the natives would bring the Sisters eggs, sweet potatoes and bananas. Whilst one of the sisters would get busy with the frying pan the others would gather the folks round them, distribute medicine and teach the simple catechism. A table under a tree served as a dispensary at first. Later in the year a house was built, a poor sort of building, but at least it had four walls and one picture.

Gradually the natives began to draw nearer and nearer to the Sisters and to love them. On their part the Sisters, too, were gradually impressed by the simple faith of these poor people. Mothers were constantly

met on the way to the church with their twelve-hours old babies, sandwiched between banana leaves, weather permitting or not, that baptism might be administered without delay. One of the Sisters met one of these mothers going up towards the mission on a dreadfully windy and wet day, and as she ventured to express surprise at the risk both for the baby and the mother, the latter promptly said

“Would I not be taking a greater risk if I kept the child at home, where it might die without baptism?”

So the mother, in bare feet and bare head, with her baby lying on the cold banana leaf, continued on her way.

Within six months after their arrival the Sisters had gathered a sufficient working knowledge of the language to justify their opening a school at Nsambya. The building was of wattle and daub, the roof of grass. Through the open doorway and the gap between walls and roof quite sufficient light and air were supplied in two rooms – if they could be called rooms. The earthen floor was strewn with grass and the pupils squatted on it and tried to pay attention to the teachers. For both the experience was, indeed, a novel one, and the difficulty was great, trying to keep the pupils under some sort of control.

Unaccustomed as they hitherto been to any idea of discipline, the children at first behaved like wild birds, flying here, there and everywhere about the classroom. Soon, however, order was installed in class, and the word of the teacher became law.

Soon, too, old women – among those the surviving wives of the famous King Mutesa – swelled the ranks of the young scholars. They came with their mats and their servants and sat in state, their mats spread on the floor, eager to avail themselves of their first opportunity of learning to read and write. Patiently, and with much diligence, they laboured with pot-hooks and hangers, mastering the first steps in writing, their hoary heads bent over the slates, which were on the ground.

At first only primary and very elementary education was attempted, and the pupils' ages varied from babies three years old to old lassies well over 60 summers!

A good deal of the sisters' time, too, was taken with a catechism class, and in this work alone they were a great help to the overworked Fathers.

To try and have an idea of what the first Sisters must have endured in the way of privations and hardships, we have but to remember they were no richer than their neighbours, the Mill Hill Fathers. Then there was the climate, and to it, too, they had to pay tribute in shape of occasional attacks of fever. That they lived very poorly, and sometimes even went to bed hungry, I have often heard it said from the lips of the surviving pioneers. They had none of those comforts which to-day seem indispensable to the kit of the

outgoing missionary, such as mosquito curtain, etc. Each of the Sisters could but boast of possessing one needle each, and you could easily understand with what care that precious little object was looked after and what an amount of searching it entailed to recover it when it accidentally chanced to fall on the grass floor. For a couple of years they were without the luxury of a sewing machine.

Sister Marcella described to me the great stir created by the arrival of the first loaf of bread ever seen in Nsambya, and that was three years after the Sisters coming to Africa. That good sister worked for twenty years in Uganda, and was invalided home in 1921. She is now at St. Marys Abbey, Mill Hill.

An Indian baker had just settled at Entebbe, a town some twenty-five miles distant from Kampala, and had opened a baker's shop there. Well, as the Sisters were about to celebrate the profession day of one of the younger Sisters, Mother Paul thought to give her little community a pleasant surprise, and she had dispatched a special courier to Entebbe to fetch a loaf of white bread.

Proud of the commission entrusted to him, he had run all the way, looking neither to his left nor to his right until, bathed with perspiration, he actually reached the convent. When he found that everybody was in church he at once went there, shouting, "I want Mama Paul, quick, quick! Though the church was full to overflowing there was no denying him, and after a while Mother Paul was communicated with. She was at her place, near the alter rails. Thinking that the matter was an urgent one, she hurried through the crowd, but all the same it took her some ten minutes or more to reach the door. You can have no idea a what a Uganda church-crowd is like. Sardines in a tin is no adequate simile. On great occasions such as this one, when Bishop Hanlon was pontificating, the Nsambya church was packed to its utmost capacity and more, and, said Sister Marcella,

"Everyone in the congregation keenly watched each movement of his neighbour, and all were careful to rise together when rising was demanded, and when the time to sit down came the whole congregation sat down as one man and in one movement, just like a drill performance. Any one chancing to be out of time in the downward movement simply had to stand, for there was not an inch of space left unoccupied!"

Mother Paul had intended to give a surprise to her Sisters, but I think she was not a little surprised herself when she was met by the native runner she had sent to Entebbe. There he knelt before her, all perspiration and smiles. His very attitude and countenance seemed to say "Now, Mother, see how quick I have been, and how careful I have been too, you trusted me, and you were right. I would die for you!"

Then, before a word of remonstrance could rise to the good Mother's lips for making her come out of church on so trifling and unimportant an errand, still kneeling, the faithful servant was placing the precious parcel in her hands. Well, the loaf of bread may have looked normal when some hours

previously it had been entrusted to the care of the native, but now after a twenty-eight miles journey and the continuous perspiration caused by the heat during these long miles, the loaf looked anything but a loaf. The sweat and grease from the poor fellows head had permeated right through it; so much so, that when Mother Paul placed it before the community at lunch time it looked more like a shapeless mass of dough than a loaf of bread. Nevertheless, the said lump of dough was accepted as bread, and the newly professed Sister was given the honour of duly cutting it into as many parts as there were Sisters in the happy little community, and each and all agreed that for years they had never tasted anything nicer!

By and by flour was obtainable from the Indian shop, and then the sisters were able to make their own bread. The first attempts, made without proper yeast, were not very palatable, but necessity soon taught them to make yeast, and in time to become efficient bakers.

The community kept their provision of flour in a tea chest, and when the measure was getting lowere and lower and lower a medal of St Anthony was enclosed into what was left, and the Saint was told to keep an eye on it and see that the poor Sisters did not go starving. More than once I have heard it said that sure enough the tin was never found empty, and I, for one, would be last to laugh at the simple faith of these good Sisters, and to doubt that, at times, God answered their prayers and their trust in Him in ways that are a little short of miraculous.

### Continuing the Acts of the Apostles

In June 1906 Mother Paul sent Mother Kevin and two other sisters to Nagalama, a mission some thirty miles distant. Father Biermans, who later succeeded Bishop Hanlon as Vicar Apostolic of the Upper Nile was anxious to secure the help of the Sisters to look after the ever increasing needs of his large ad important mission.

For the first six months Mother Kevin and her sisters lived in a mud shed and in great poverty. Thy often went to bed hungry, too, and on many occasions, especially in the time of famine, they considered themselves lucky if they could secure two eggs and one potato for the principal meal of the day – and that for three of them! Yet their classes numbered some five hundred children in the morning and some two hundred adults in the afternoon. The poor daughters of St Francis, lost in the wilderness of Equatorial Africa, had but few friends in those days, and rare were the occasions when the post brought them money orders. However, on one occasion Mother Kevin received a letter from a benefactor, together with a gift of five pounds. She was so overjoyed at the munificent gift, that, to celebrate the arrival of this fortune, she allowed talking during supper!

On another occasion both Mother Kevin and Sister Alexis were taken to bed with a bad and prolonged attack of fever at the same time, so they were both brought in hammocks to Nsambya. During the journey Sister Alexis kept inquiring after Mother Kevin every two miles. The poor Mother was so ill that she feared she would die on the road. However, at every enquiry, "Is Mother Kevin still alive?" the answer came "She is still there!" meaning she was still in the land of the living.

In those days, some twenty years back, there were no motor transports or conveyances. Invalids were usually carried in hammocks or similar modes of transport. Thus, once, Sister Andreas and Sister Solano were also travelling towards Nsambya for treatment; fortunately they were not very bad. In the course of the journey, however, both Sisters were suddenly taken with unaccountable fits of sneezing until they arrived at their destination, and then discovered that their improvised hammock had been made out of sacks which had been used previously as pepper bags.

In spite of all the handicaps the work of the Sisters of Nagalama as at Nsambya prospered. To-day it is one of the most flourishing of missions of the Sisters, and has both a boarding and an elementary school, three hospitals and a very good out-door dispensary.

In 1908 three new recruits arrived from St Marys Abbey, but, sad to tell, two out of the three died within a short time, and the third had to go home for health.

True others were sent to replace them but at no time did the Sisters exceed the number of twenty-five! That, thus restricted in numbers, they should have accomplished so much, remains, indeed, the most eloquent testimony to these brave women's zeal and heroism.

In 1910 Mother Paul – Mama Paula, as she was affectionately called by all – had to return to America on account of her health. It was a great blow to the struggling community. Mother Kevin was left in charge, with a capital of two ponds ten shillings in cash, and numerous schools and hospitals and thousands of children and hundreds of poor sick people to look after. Under Mother Kevin's care the work continued to develop, and new foundations were in turn made at Kamali and Nkokonjeru, to say nothing of the founding of that important maternity hospital at Nsambya. The latter foundation was made possible by the generous co-operation rendered by Doctor Evelyn Connolly, a capable and zealous Dublin lady.

The following extracts from one of the Sister's letters to the Mother Abbess at Mill Hill will further initiate the reader into the life and work of the Uganda Sisters:

"Our native converts are wonderful. Every Sunday hundreds receive Holy Communion, and if you could only see their devotion! It carries one up to Heaven. Thousands are in the church on a feast day, and other thousands outside. There is nothing but religion to occupy their minds, but how the Fathers must have

worked to reap such glorious harvest! The sick and crippled are brought to the church porch, and the priest takes them Holy Communion.

“On Easter Sunday a row of little black boys were in from of me, about forty of them, who, whenever the grown-ups moved, took advantage of the opportunity to lie down and stretch their cramped legs. The *O Filii et Filiae* has been translated into the Luganda language, and the vigour of the three Alleluias from the little fellows at the end of each verse was delightful.

“We have morning school for the women, many of whom bring their babies, who roll contentedly about on the nice grass that covers the school floor. Human nature is alike everywhere, and so we get many of the experiences of olden days from both women and children. The women are the easier to manage.

“I wish you could see the children. They are simply little darlings, and as eager to learn as we are to teach them. They will not call us Sister; that is too much for them. Sometimes we can manage to get ‘Sissista’ so-and-so, but nearly always they use only our name without any prefix. Mother Mary Paul’s name ‘Mama Paolo’ is quite a familiar term to us. Even the Fathers, when they speak of her, always say ‘Mama Paolo’.

“Every Sunday, as soon as Holy Mass is finished, the same crowds that surrounded us during our first month here follow us from the church to our convent, and if we do not go and see them in the compound they enter (as many as can do so) to see us. Sometimes, when our talk is over, I show them your photo and they ask who it is. I told them you were our Mother at home, and they thought you were our real mother, so I tried to explain. One of the Fathers told me I should have said that you were our chief – that is what these people understand – and that Mama Paolo is your representative. The next Sunday I set right my mistake, and they were all delighted. Old Martina said *kale* (all right) “go and fetch the picture”; so I bought it out again to their great satisfaction.

“Of course we have our little difficulties, with red ants, white ants, occasional snakes, lizards, and many creeping and crawling nondescripts besides. On Monday night as we were shutting up, we saw the wall of the veranda covered with an army of white ants, which were making for our windows and doors. There were swarms and swarms of them. We tried every means to stop the ascent, and at last succeeded by pouring boiling water on them. They were seeking a new home, their hill having been disturbed by the Father who is chief builder and architect. He wanted some hard material to strengthen the walls of the school and decided to have the ant-hill in our compound cut down. We visited it the next day, and found it most interesting. The hard cement had been cut away, exposing the interior of the ants’ home – a large sponge-like (only very hard) heap, full of multitudinous passages through which even then millions of white ants were running, some trying to rebuild by bring fresh material, others hurrying off for safety with their eggs. After a while the natives found the queen ant, who was exactly like a writing lump of dough. We hear the barking of the hyenas occasionally at night as they roam about and yesterday we were sent for by the Bishop to see a leopard.

“You must know, Mother dear, that we are right away among the high grass, except for the clearing made for our compound and the road, so that on both sides of the road there is grass about six feet high.

“Soon we heard the drums beating and the funny Uganda flutes playing. We were all on alert, when out of the high grass stepped a man with a drum; then about fifty more men carrying large sticks, all shouting and yelling at the top of their voices. They surrounded a kind of wicker cage in which lay the leopard, alive, but safely bound. It was placed on the ground, and all crowded round to have a look at the enemy now that it could no longer hurt them. When the men saw that we wanted to look too, they dashed their sticks right and left to clear the way, and we went up to the cage. There lay the poor beast, tightly tied down, but its eyes fierce and revengeful and its great mouth open. It gave one a queer sensation to look at it! I put my hand between the bamboo framework to stroke its back, just to be able to tell you that I had touched a real live leopard! When our curiosity was satisfied, the men took the cage up again and began their march to Kampala. We thanked them for catching the leopard, and they were so pleased to be thanked. The Commissioner said the leopard was far too large and old to be sent to Europe so Mr Tomkins, the sub-Commissioner, shot it that night, and Apollo sent the men to catch a young one in a net.

“I think you would like to know how the Baganda set about catching a leopard.

“Supposing that one of the beasts has been stealing for a night or two, then the men make up a large party. Each man takes a long stick with a knob at the end; this is his sole weapon. They beat about the high grass till they get some kind of an idea of the whereabouts of the beast. Then they form a large circle and gradually close in till they know that the leopard is not far from them, when one half of their number stand perfectly still, while the others go on slowly advancing until the creature finds itself hemmed in by a circle of men. It makes a spring, and perhaps kills or wounds one or two, but the others beat it to death with their clubs. They love a leopard’s hunt, because it is exciting and are not a bit afraid, though they know some of them may be killed.

“Reverend Mother is having a fence made, and while we were there the men who were making it kept up a lively conversation with a man who was crushing coffee berries. The whole talk was of their food, the Fathers, and the Sisters. They have nothing else to talk about. We had not been there very long before a blind boy ran up to help the coffee crusher. “How do you do?” they said, “What’s the news?”

“I went round” he said, “to Kevina to get some medicine for my eyes. She said *Otyano* (how are you), and I said I was sick in the eyes;” and he went on telling them every word he had spoken and every word that Mother Kevin had answered. By and by a man came up selling *mubisse* (native beer), and he was told every word again. He went out and told his fellow-traveller at the gate of the compound, and so on, till everybody, I think, in Uganda, would know in about two hours.

“They had just finished this rich piece of news when a larger piece was forthcoming. Joanno, the man who was making the fence, asked if there was any news to be seen on the road. “Yes”, was the answer, “there

are five porters coming". Immediately all ran to see what the news was, even the blind boy. The others told him, thus: "Here come the men of Peri B (Father B). They tell me they are carrying his things to Bukeddi country. Oh, he has a table! A chair, etc." "What is that box you are carrying, Phillip?" "The garments of the Church." "*Kale!*" ('tis well).

"This only goes to show you how the people talk. They have absolutely no subjects of conversation but food, Fathers, and Sisters; and these are discussed most minutely and with evident relish.

"The other day, while we were working in our community room, we heard an old man calling out to another as loudly as he could that Mama Paolo and Kevina were cutting cloth in the room. They could only have known it by peeping through the cracks, and Reverend Mother was quite astonished when we told her we knew what she had been doing."

Here is another letter from Mother Kevin. It is written to a priest benefactor in U.S.A., and a few extracts I am quoting will, I am sure, add to the interest of this volume. Incidentally, too, it reveals the simple faith of the writer – a faith that overcomes all obstacles when it is a question of furthering God's sacred interests.

Nagalama Convent, via Kampala, B.E.A.

"Dear Reverend Father,

"Your two letters have just arrived, and really I feel like someone who has had a fortune left him. In the one dated November you said you were sending twenty-one dollars and in the one dated December I received a cheque for fifty-one dollars and thirty cents. Ever and ever so many thanks to you and your good friends who sent the money.

"As soon as we can get the little bunch of ten babies together I will send you their picture, and I am quite sure you will like them. Now, didn't I tell you that I thought St Joseph would manage that his dear Lady and her Son would have a roof over their heads in our convent for Christmas? Of course, he managed it. We got back to our convent on December 5<sup>th</sup> and on December 8<sup>th</sup> the dear Lord came. The convent isn't finished; we need a lot of cement yet, but that will come in time. We are in. and there is a tin roof, and altogether we have scarcely anything to wish for now, except to grow daily to love our dear Lord and his Mother more and more. Everything else is just an extra.

"The ants are determined that we won't sit down to much in our comparatively new house, for they keep making their appearance all over the walls. They are after the grass that is mixed with the mud to make the bricks.

"A long time ago we didn't really know what to do in order to get some help; so we started writing seven letters in honour of St Joseph to people whose names we had just come across. We had an old statue of St

Joseph that was very dilapidated. This we painted as well as we could, and we got a woollen knitting needle for a staff and put it in his hand. Then we begged him to go off to America and get some good friends for us, for it was not fair that we who are all dedicated to Our Lady, whose convent this is, should be in such a fix.

“Sure enough, since then that dear Saint has really worried himself about this mission, and is always sending us good friends, and now it looks as if you were sent in their place. That was such a grand donation you sent us, and such a lovely letter, so helpful and cheery. And we like the bit about your priestly blessing best of all.

“We are very, very busy here. We have the little huts filled with sick natives, and some of them have terrible sores! Their flesh seems to get slowly eaten away. Two boys have more than four inches of their bone exposed. It takes more than a week before we can get the sores and ulcers clean, and then we have to watch the owners of the ulcers well, or else they will pack up the holes with dirt from an ant hill or with black mud or worse.

“The work among the sick is really a grand work, and often we are able to get souls through it. Only last week, when Sister went down she saw sitting on the bare ground in one of the huts a man, a woman with a child on her back, and what looked like a corpse on the ground. They hadn’t heard of God, or baptism, but it was evident that the child was dying. There was no time to send for the priest, so Sister baptised her and she died right away. Now, what was it that brought that child to the mission to get baptism but the prayers of some dear Christians at home praying for the heathen?

“Sister ran up to try and find a piece of cloth in which to wrap the little body, for there are no such things as caskets here. When she came back the mother was wailing and banging her head on the floor, and many other women had joined her and seemed to be trying to show who could make the most noise. It certainly wasn’t grief, for they didn’t know the child; but we couldn’t help thinking of those mourners in the Gospel who “laughed him to scorn”. We tried to comfort the mother and get her to be quiet, but the other women told us indignantly that if she didn’t cry and wail well and loudly they would say she had bewitched the child. So we let them all go on. Two men went off to dig the grave and the little baptised child was buried right away.

“Now her people will mourn for a month. That means they will do no work, but simply sit in the bananerie all day long and eat and sleep. At the end of the month they will cook a great feast of bananas and native beer and then choose another girl to represent the dead one, and all who called the dead one their relation in any way will now transfer that relationship to the newly chosen one. They will all eat and drink till they become like beasts, and after that the dead child must never be mentioned again. If she is mentioned by name, her spirit, they say, will get into their bodies and bite them terribly. You know, every day we give out medicine, and whenever a native has indigestion or any pain they will declare it is someone’s spirit

biting them. We must try and get the relations of the little girl to listen to us and see if they can be persuaded to attend instructions for baptism.

“In our compound there is a nice large cast-oil tree, and I wish you could see the little darkies who are perched on it just now. They are yelling with joy because a fourth young man, aged about three, is trying to climb too and has many tumbles, which just delight the triumphant trio. They are all Christians but one, Joseph, Petero, Polikolipi (Polycarp), and Semfebwa. The heathen is the oldest. He has to learn the catechism before he is baptised.

“The Father’s compound is just two minutes away from ours. We would never be allowed to be here if there were no Fathers. The place is still very wild. We have the work with the sick and the women and children. This week the Fathers have had sick call after sick call, and they have to go miles and miles. It sometimes takes them from eight a.m. till four p.m. for one call. There is a swamp to cross in a dug-out, and that alone takes an hour and a half. I suppose it is really a lake...”

### A Short Biography of Mother Kevin

Maria Teresa Kearney was born and baptised on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1875; she was daughter of Michael Kearney and Teresa, nee Grannell of Knockinrahan; sponsors were Bernard and Teresa Granell, Knockinrahan.

Her parents married 17 January 1871, he was of ‘full age’ and she was 30, his father, James, was deceased and her father was James of Curranstown, still alive, both mothers were called Elizabeth but no maiden name was given for either in the church marriage register. The witnesses were James O’Brien, Arklow, and Rosanna Molloy, Barradona.

Michael died in an accident some months before the birth but there are no deaths registered for 1874-5 in the Arklow district but there is one aged 34 years from the neighbouring district of Rathdrum (1<sup>st</sup> quarter, 2/973). His widow remarried Patrick Byrne of Clogga in January 11<sup>th</sup> 1880; witnesses were Michael Byrne, Clogga, and Maria Granell, Curranstown Lower. She died in 17<sup>th</sup> March 1885 at Knockenrahan of ‘peritonitis 14 days, collapse 2 days, certified’; though her age was only given as 33. Her husband Patrick was present at her death.

He remarried; in the 1901 census, Clogga, he was 58 and married to a Catherine aged 28; they probably married c. 1894 as they had three children, the eldest was 6 years.

Not very much is known about Dr Evelyn Connolly, she graduated from University College, Dublin, in 1919 and was a co-founder of the nurses’ training college in Nsambya and served there for at least 35

years (*Irish Women in Medicine, 1880s-1920s: Origins, Education and Careers*, Laura Kelly, 2012). She later became a Franciscan nun and died 1966 aged 68 in Dublin. Her role was very important as, until 1936 through Mother Kevin's lobbying, the Vatican forbade obstetrical work by female missionaries, which put them at a disadvantage compared with the Church Missionary Society's employment of medical missionaries in Africa.

Deirdre Bryan published the following in *History Ireland*, issue 4, vol. 14, 2006

[\(https://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/from-the-files-of-the-dib-mama-kevina-flame-in-the-bush/\)](https://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/from-the-files-of-the-dib-mama-kevina-flame-in-the-bush/)

“After her mother's death in 1885 she was reared by her maternal grandmother in Curranstown, Arklow. She attended the local convent school in Arklow and in 1889 went to the Convent of Mercy at Rathdrum, where she trained as an assistant teacher. In 1893 she rejected a marriage proposal and moved to Essex to teach at a school run by the Sisters of Charity. After a dream of working in Africa, however, she entered the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Five Wounds at St Mary's Abbey, Mill Hill, London, in 1895. Upon her profession on 21 April 1898 she took the name Sister Mary Kevin of the Sacred Passion, and in 1902 she was sent with five others to establish a mission alongside the Mill Hill Fathers in Nsambya, Uganda.

“Upon their arrival on 15 January 1903, the sisters established a mission dispensary and school among the Baganda. By 1906 they had expanded to a second missionary station at Nagalama, some 23 miles away, of which Kearney became superior. Kearney returned to the Nsambya mission and assumed the leadership of both convents, taking the title Mother Kevin. In 1913, with the arrival of three more sisters, she established a third mission, this time in Kamuli, Busoga. The missions expanded quickly and encompassed both medical and educational work. During World War I, the convent hospital at Nsambya was used to treat the Native Carrier Corps, the porters for European troops. As many of the sisters had been sent to nurse at a military hospital in Kisumu, Mother Kevin and one other nun ran the hospital on their own. Her war work was recognised when she was awarded an MBE in 1918.

“Mother Kevin is credited with promoting higher education for Catholic African women, and with the help of Dr Evelyn Connolly, a lay missionary, she founded a nursing and midwifery school in Nsambya in 1924. Over the next 30 years she led the expansion of the mission throughout Uganda and Kenya, and founded numerous primary, secondary, teacher-training and nursing schools. Additionally, the sisters ran schools for the blind, orphanages, clinics, hospitals and two leprosaria. In May 1923 Mother Kevin oversaw the foundation of an ancillary African congregation, the Little Sisters of St Francis, when eight

African girls approached her with the wish to enter the religious life. In 1927 the congregation moved from Nsambya to its own headquarters in Nkokonjeru, and by 1948 had over 200 members.

“Despite the addition of the Little Sisters to aid the missionary effort, a chronic shortage of missionaries remained, and in 1928 Mother Kevin sought permission to establish a separate novitiate exclusively for the training of sisters for the African missions. She returned to England in September 1928 to pursue this goal and the novitiate was opened in 1929 at Holme Hall in Yorkshire. In 1935 the first Irish convent was founded at Mount Oliver, Dundalk, Co. Louth, and in 1937 this convent and Holme Hall, along with nineteen missions in Uganda and four in Kenya, became a separate African province of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters. Mother Kevin was elected as provincial superior and held this office until 1943. In June 1952 the province separated entirely from St Mary’s Abbey and became an independent congregation, the Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa, based at Mount Oliver with Mother Kevin as their superior-general. She continued in this office until she retired in 1955, aged 80.

“Even in retirement she remained active, and in 1955 she travelled to the United States, where the sisters had a convent in Brighton, near Boston, Massachusetts (1953), to raise funds. That same year she received the CBE for her service to the people of Africa. She remained in the United States until her death in Brighton on 17 October 1957, aged 82, and her remains were flown to Ireland and interred at Mount Oliver. Upon hearing of her death, Ugandan Catholics rallied to have their ‘flame in the bush’ or Mama Kevina, both names by which she was popularly known, returned to Uganda, and on 3 December 1957 she received a second burial in the cemetery at Nkokonjeru, the mother-house of the Little Sisters of St Francis. The influence of her 54 years as a missionary is reflected in the use of the word ‘Kevina’ to mean a hospital or charitable institute in Uganda.”

From *Bold, Brilliant and Bad, Irish Women from History*, Marian Broderick, 2018, quoting *Love is the Answer: the Story of Mother Kevin*, by Sr M Louis OSF, 1964: a description of their arrival in Uganda after train from Mombasa to Kisumu and boat to Uganda

“By the time we were exhausted and walking became a labour, Sister Kevin’s face was burned brick-red, but she kept cheerful, and valiantly encouraged us all. We reached Nsambya drenched in sweat, caked in red dust; our heads ached and our eyes smarted; the world was whirling around us. Here again we were given a rousing welcome.”

For attitudes to leprosy in Uganda see: *Discovering the ‘Leper’: Shifting Attitudes towards Leprosy in Twentieth-Century Uganda*, by Kathleen Vongsathorn in *A Medical History of Skin*, ed. K P Siena, 2013



Figure 1 Kampala Road, Kampala (photo taken 2018)