

than a letter for an aunt in Brooklyn. Her father, Patrick Coll, a farm labourer, had died five years earlier when Catherine, or Kate as she was generally known, was eighteen. After her in the family were two brothers, Patrick and Edward, and a sister, Hannah (Hannie). Catherine worked as a maidservant for a local farmer, which later helped to give rise to various versions of a rumour that the reason she sailed for New York was not poverty but pregnancy. An embroidered version of this story is contained in a memoir drafted by a contemporary of de Valera's, Dick Kennedy:<sup>7</sup>

The Colls were never troubled with principle to hinder their advancement . . . they transmitted that ability to Dev. . . . Pat Coll never married but he had nine Chirpauns [children of love]. Dev's mother was the first. She went as a maid to Tom Aitkinson of Glenwilliam at 17 years.

The Sailor Coll [Pat Junior] told me that Tom was Dev.'s father. When she was going to have the child Tom sent her to America. The Sailor said Dev was born in New York Harbour just before the boat landed. She went to a friend in Brooklyn and there was a Mexican waiter who died of galloping consumption at the age of twenty-two years in same lodging so they decided to say that she was married to this waiter and called the child de Valera.

When I first read the foregoing I was strongly inclined to doubt its veracity. Apart from the obviously hostile tone of the memoir, I then had other reasons for questioning the illegitimacy story. Before going into these, let us look at the arguments advanced in its favour. An obvious one was de Valera's height and general appearance, which made him appear older than his stated age. Another was the fact that, though his mother married again and had other children, she did not extend the benefits of her new home to her first child. The Kennedy memoir states that this was because the man she subsequently married did not want the boy. And further plausibility is given to the illegitimacy theory by local<sup>8</sup> gossip: it was commonly said that a daughter of Atkinson's, Mrs Sybil Wortledge, 'always greeted Dev as her half-brother and boasted that he was such'.<sup>9</sup> Certainly de Valera had to deal with such rumours (and more besides) from his earliest days in party politics. During his first by-election campaign, in June 1917, he wrote to his wife:<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately it is no longer the preaching of ideals here but the practical work of defeating the enemy's misrepresentation - one of which is that I am a Jacobin another a letter from the Lewes Chaplain [while in Lewes Jail in England after the Easter Rising, de Valera, as part of a prison protest, had ordered his comrades not to obey an order to go to Mass, but instead to remain in their cells saying the rosary], one I haven't unfortunately been able to get a copy so far, making it appear that I was responsible for sacrilege, a third that I am illegitimate. By the way isn't 'lawful wife' in Baptism certificate. I think it is - that would be sufficient to prove the lie. . . .

It is, of course, possible that Kate could have conceived a child before emigrating. But if she did, that child could hardly have been Eamon de