

CATHERINE DE VALERA

1856 — 1932

De Valera's Forgotten Mother

By Jack M. Tucker

Dublin — The intriguing name of De Valera still rings with a certain magic today in Eire. There are scads of his descendants scattered throughout the tight little isle, mainly in the Dublin sector.

Eamon De Valera, man of destiny, New York-born with the strange un-Irish name. A Spanish father.

But Wheelright? Katie Wheelright? A curious visitor from the states brings up the name at random in various pubs, St. Stephen's Green, hotels and O'Connell Square in Dublin. In Limerick (Eamon was raised as a child in nearby Bruree); in Galway City and Killarney and in Cobh, once Queenstown.

The visitor strikes up conversation with a friendly garda, then inquires if the name Wheelright means anything to him. "Wheelright, is it?" says the police officer. "Now that would be English, would it not? No, I recollect none of that family hereabouts."

One draws a blank also from a barman in the stately Shelbourne Hotel. "What about De Valera-Wheelright?" the barman is asked. He reacts incredulously, if not suspiciously. "It's pulling my leg a bit, sir," he responds. "Shure I was born and raised right here in Dublin, and I was long an admirer of Old Dev, but what has this Wheelright thing got to do with it anyway, sir?"

Ah, how the quick-passing years do indeed blight memories associated with our unobtrusive Mother Machrees, the forgotten kind who depart their native land and become expatriates.

One strolls along the north bank of the Liffey in downtown Dublin, glancing at the General Postoffice where Padraic Pearse and other patriots holed up back in 1916 during the abortive Easter Rising. Now surely a postal clerk would know about nomenclature. While buying stamps, I asked the elderly clerk if the name Wheelright meant something to him. He eyed me curiously, and I hastily announced that my grandparents came from Galway and Mayo. That made a difference. "Well now, you're one of us from the States," he conceded. "But Wheelright? 'Tis not familiar, that wan."

De Valera himself was not inside the postoffice when a British gunboat shelled the original building at pointblank range from the Liffey, set it afire and doomed the Irish volunteers inside. He was situated further east, commanding a tiny platoon in Boland's flour mill to repulse British troops marching in hurriedly from the port of Kingston.

Trapped by superior forces, De Valera and his men held out for a bloody week, the last to surrender. Katie Wheelright would have been proud of him, 'tho she was far away in America and knew nothing at the time of the rebellion. Technically, Eamon was a U.S. citizen, but the angered British were in no mood for international niceties. Arrested, De Valera was condemned to death. The British brass later became alarmed at outcries from other countries when news spread beyond Ireland; the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. And De Valera was to escape an English prison. Other insurgent leaders were summarily executed. When news of the unsuccessful rising reached the States, no one thought to comfort a certain aging lady, who said her beads and made novenas. Few knew her, or knew who she was.

Yet, were it not for Katie Wheelright, there would have been no Eamon De Valera — the Irish Republic's most controversial president, international statesman, military hero, canny politician, prison escapee and, above all, relentless revolutionary and foe of British masters who enslaved the Irish for more than 700 years.

In a remote portion of Rochester's Holy Sepulchre Cemetery sleeps this Limerick-born lady whose tragic life was interwoven with a turbulent history that she never quite comprehended, or possibly could anticipate.

Yet few people in Rochester ever heard of her, or associate anything historic with her name. Who was she?

Christened Catherine Coll in County Limerick where the Shannon flows, Katie became an attractive, strong-featured teenager in a Southern Ireland where any future for a young person was grim. A poor country of mostly indentured farmers, dependent on British whims and the basic potato crop whose failure ultimately reduced them to famine and mass death. Young men hesitated to marry, and if they did, it was later on, later on.

Katie said, "I will go to America — and strike out for myself."

Her family was aghast, but she was adamant, and somehow they dug up the steagery money. Katie was 19, equipped with no better than a clandestine hedgerow education, but she was young and strong and dreamed only of a better life in a star-spangled land of opportunity for all.

Katie Coll arrived at Ellis Island clutching her worn woolen

shawl and a suitcase containing meager possessions. She crossed herself on seeing the Statue of Liberty, and prayed. She was deeply religious, and remained that way until the day she died.

The only jobs that young Irishwomen could find in New York and Boston and Philadelphia at that time were as domestics in well-to-do households. Male Irish immigrants were even worse off, being greeted by factory signs that read: "No Irish Need Apply."

Katie landed one of those domestic jobs with a family in mid-Manhattan. Long hours, with a tiny stipend. But with a roof over her head, food to eat, and her dreams still crocheted of gossamer strands.

Somehow — and how this happened no one seems to know — she met a dashing young Spaniard named Vivion De Valera. Described variously as musician, artist, sculptor and poet, he was something of a mystery man. Like Katie, he was poor, but ambitious. They fell in love and were married Sept. 18, 1881, across the Hudson in Greenville, N.J.

The following year, on Oct. 14, Katie De Valera gave birth to a boy in Manhattan. The child was registered as George but christened Edward, or Eamon in Irish. They called him Eddie. Katie was ecstatic.

But the first of many blows that smote her came soon. Within two years Vivion De Valera was dead of pneumonia, leaving his young widow with little funds and no appreciable future; alone in an uncaring, still-strange city, with few friends and uncertain future.

To make matters more difficult, little Eddie was a sickly child; his very existence became endangered. In despair, Katie turned to a brother, Edward Coll, who was living in Pennsylvania and disillusioned with economic opportunity in a land where money did not, after all, grow on trees.

It was arranged for Uncle Edward to take the ailing child back to Ireland "for the time being" — until he became healthy and Katie could get back on her feet. But the "time being" grew into years in Bruree, County Limerick, where Eddie, now called Eamon, matured and was raised by his grandparents, Elizabeth and Patrick Coll. Educated well by the Christian Brothers and schooled in Irish lore by his grandparents, the young man went on to college, then post-graduate work. He was a brilliant student, although if anyone during those British-enslaved years had predicted that an American-born Irishman with the unlikely Spanish name of De Valera was marked for destiny, people would have scoffed.

Back in New York, Katie was restless, lonely, frustrated. It happened that she did know some Irish-Americans who had settled in Rochester, and there she went, hoping that somehow she would be able to bring her boy-child back to the States.

Enter Charles Wheelright, coachman for a wealthy Rochester family who lived on carriage-trade East Avenue. Charles fell in love with Katie, and she with him. But there was a catch. Charles was Protestant, Katie a devout Catholic. "No problem," Charles said gently. "I will turn." They married, living above his employers' coachhouse.

In time, Katie bore two more children, a boy and girl. The girl was not a well child, and died at age five. Katie prayed for solace. Then the boy, now grown and a Benedictine priest in Pennsylvania, was killed in a road crash. Then Charles Wheelright died.

And so the tragic wheel had turned full cycle on poor Katie. Widowed again, two of her children dead and Eamon thousands of miles away, she turned to domestic work and took a small house on Brighton Street in Rochester, near to Blessed Sacrament Church where she was a daily communicant.

The late Father James Connor, the beloved old fashioned pastor of Blessed Sacrament, knew Katie and often spoke of the indomitable, pious lady. Years later, this writer lived just around the corner from Brighton Street, visited her grave whose worn headstone gave the only evidence of a special Irish-American history.

Eamon De Valera never forgot Katie, but his love for Ireland and iron determination to help solve her troubles was overriding. He did visit his aging mother during fund-raising missions to the States, and brought her to Limerick for a visit he hoped would be permanent. It wasn't. Katie never lost faith in America.

Eamon De Valera, who survived desperate years through the Easter Rising and civil warfare, lived to become not only leader of the fledgling Irish Republic but an international figure in the eternal quest for freedom, president of the League of Nations, and dogged neutral in World Wars I and II. Align himself with the British? Never!

Although blind during his final years, "Old Dev" concealed the fact that he was plagued with a detached retina. Or thought he did. Finally he was forced to retire to a nursing



The grave can be found at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

home outside Dublin, along with his wife, Sinead Ni Fhlannagain. They spoke both in Gaelic and English to each other. On one wall of his room there hung a picture of John F. Kennedy, whom Dev admired greatly. The fact that JFK was Irish didn't hurt.

De Valera died in August 1975, his wife not long afterward. He was 93; she was two years older. His Irish-born mother, long buried in an American cemetery, would be 120.

Jack M. Tucker worked many years on Rochester newspapers before moving to Phoenix, Ariz. He also was a highly regarded amateur golfer who won more than his share of local tourneys.

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