

Copper and Communion in Shamrock City

by Marisa Thakady

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The immigrant experience in the United States is commonplace in American cultural life. Citizens find pride in knowing that somewhere in their lineage, whether it was their parent or an ancestor from generations ago, a family member made the trying journey in search of a more prosperous life. Each wave of immigrants carries with it a unique story of strife, and yet people continue to make the sacrifice to provide for themselves and their children. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish came in masses to the United States as part of the first wave of European refugees. A famine had struck the motherland, where the impoverished state of parishioners threatened the stability of the Catholic Church with a diaspora to America. Across the United States, "from Boston to Butte, Montana to San Francisco, Irish Catholics became the chief suppliers of unskilled labor for the rapidly expanding national economy" (Fisher 45). The legacy of this working class of immigrants would encompass both boom and bust in the New World.

Celtic-Americana folk band Solas reimagined the immigrants' trials in their 2012 album *Shamrock City*. The 16-track album tells the story of a young, brawling immigrant who failed to survive in one of the most prolific boomtowns of the early 20th century – Butte, Montana. Solas roots the album's style and lyrics in the Irish

appreciation of both family and work that stems from the ethnic solidarity found in the Catholic Church. Irish copper miners led a perilous life in Butte, where the Church was the cornerstone of the Irish community. The Church was necessary to relieve the emotional and psychological stress of mining and to stabilize and justify social class. However, it also provided a foundation of fraternity on which labor unions could thrive. While the songs of *Shamrock City* are not explicitly Catholic, they elucidate the source of the miners' never-say-die spirit.

The album opens with a farewell ballad that portrays the emotional importance of familial relationships. A mother expresses her mourning as her son journeys to the New World in the first track, "Far Americay." The layered instrumental aspects of the song – the use of fiddle, accordion, acoustic guitars, and the tender inflection of the woman's voice – all give the song a Celtic sound, recreating the ethos of this Irish Catholic copper camp nestled in the Rocky Mountains. The Irish-accented singer harmoniously conveys the grievance felt by a mother when her child leaves the safety of her home: "Oh my heart will surely break for you, / Sweet treasure of my womb." In a larger picture, though, the speaker is the motherland, and she is mourning as her offspring depart in search of a land that can provide for those in need. She is no longer fruitful. The Great



The Miners Union Local-1 building in Butte, MT.

Famine of the 1840s and 50s caused a mass exodus, and “those who managed to survive into the 1870s suffered, as the country as a whole did, from the effects of the Panic of 1873” (Meagher 85). Three times the speaker laments the transplantation of her “blood,” or bloodline: “Now my blood runs through the mountains... Now my blood sweats through the mountains... That blood ran down through those rivers.” Her bloodline—her son—has now become part of the geography of America. Ireland didn’t lose a single generation of men to the Rocky Mountains, she gave generations of hardworking and faithful people to the New World. This is similar to the way the mother of a groom might give her son to a bride—in this case, “Liberty,” whom the son claims (in a letter home) to have fallen in love with. The depth of mourning in this song, however, is suggestive of the traditional Irish Catholic wake, as the Irish placed great emphasis on grieving the departed. Lamenting lost loved ones is universal to religious experience; a common theme is that the soul of the departed is in a better place. This deftly-produced track contrasts the mother’s raw emotions with the son’s upbeat letters home to dramatize the fact that he is lost to a working life in America. The song’s mood demonstrates the feeling of losing a loved one as they pass into Heaven with its dark, drawn-out crescendo that suggests a looming heaviness of grief.

This practice of grieving was continued in Butte, a death-ridden mining town. The wake, which folklore tells us originated from a three-day observance of a body to make sure there were no signs of life before it was buried, became an opportunity for friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues to pray for their loved ones as they passed on into Heaven. William A. Burke, author of the Montana Writers’ Project volume *Copper Camp: Stories of the World’s Greatest Mining Town, Butte, Montana*, observed that since no other city in America had such a high percentage of Irish Catholics, in no other place “have people turned

up in such numbers to pay respect to the departed than in the copper camp [sic], nor has the custom been handed down so completely from the ‘old country’” (Burke 186). Not surprisingly, Solas features another wake-like song towards the finale of the album, entitled “Am I Born to Die?” The track is solemn, almost ceremonial. Wind instruments, along with a breathy, echoing voice, endow the song a hollow feeling, as if the tune were resonating from a graveside. This funeral dirge conveys the miners’ fate of working until spent and questions the purpose of life, which the Catholic Church teaches is to live well in order to gain eternity in Heaven:

Soon as from earth I go,
What will become of me?
Eternal happiness or woe
Must then my portion be;
Waked by the trumpet's sound,
I from my grave shall rise,
And see the Judge with glory crowned,
And see the flaming skies.

These lines unmistakably coincide with the Catholic profession of faith. During mass, parishioners recite the Nicene Creed, stating that they believe “He [Jesus] will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,” and that they “look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” As a result, the Church provided a source of hope for those who experienced maltreatment in the mines of Butte, promising that suffering here on Earth will be compensated with eternal happiness in the afterlife. Furthermore, it comforted those on Earth whose loved ones had died.

The strength of the Church’s power to solidify and console the masses through the tradition of the wake figure prominently in the history of Butte, as witnessed in the passing of its beloved Father Callaghan. He was a priest at one of the many Catholic Churches in the Butte area. Famous for his acts of charity, Father Callaghan “was a friend of the homeless, the sinner, the drifter and derelict.” When he passed away at the

ripe age of 38, the whole city of Butte attended his wake. Thousands of people observed from the streets as the procession of 18 special street cars passed, and "eight thousand people stood outside the cemetery gates while three thousand gathered around the grave" (Burke 191). The purpose of the wake was not only to respect the departed, but also to summon the masses into congregation for consultation. The traditions of the Catholic Church were so critical to the lives of the Irish Catholics that they became part of the culture of the mining town.

However, it is a different man with a similar last name who is mentioned in *Shamrock City's* 8th track, "Lay Your Money Down." Brawny drumbeats and high-pitch shrieks of the fiddle, combined with the jaunty swagger of the song, radiate the feeling of being whisked away into a vibrant nightlife. The characters of the song—Old Callahan the Bum (the town drunk), Bellowin' Shoestring Annie (a brutish town widow), Colonel Burnett (a.k.a. "Buckets," a notorious horse racing gambler)—were all historical figures whose legacy lives on in Butte. Old Callahan the Bum had a relationship with the Church that reflected its message of reconciliation and its place as the cornerstone of the Butte community. He was a gambler and a drunk who spent most of his nights in Butte's notorious Red Light District. The song's second stanza reads: "Matthew, Mark, Luke and John / Your belfry color fades / With each step down Wyoming Street / and down to Clipper Shades." The four men named are Jesus' disciples, authors of the four eponymous Gospels of the New Testament. The color of their clocktower, a classic part of the Church's architecture, fades as night arrives, referencing the Bible's recurring metaphor of light versus darkness: "...that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness" (1 John 1:5). And finally, Wyoming Street and Clipper Shades were the center of Butte's bar scene, where recreational activities such as drunkenness, gambling, and prostitution thrived. This part of the album,

focused on the alcoholism and gambling addictions that were a side-effect of harsh working conditions, reimagines the nocturnal habits of the "sinner" and the "drifter" who have fallen away from the Church. However, because the Church sought to save—and Irish miners needed saving in more ways than one—"the Catholic Church, and more precisely the local parish church, quickly became the most important resource for the... spiritual welfare of the famine Irish" (Fisher 47). An attractive feature of the Catholic Church is the teachings of God's mercy through the rite of reconciliation, which welcomes back the "drifter" with open arms.

Ironically, notwithstanding his "sinner" status, Old Callahan had an association with Father Callaghan. When fundraising for a new bell tower, Father Callaghan had come up two hundred dollars short. Old Callahan, with the help of the beggars of Butte, gathered money that would be otherwise used for sin, and donated it to the Church. So, while "Lay Your Money Down" serves as a tribute to the underlings of Butte, Montana, even this song demonstrates the significance of the Church in this Irish Catholic mining town. The Church's aim to bring "sinners" back into the parish by offering forgiveness through the rite of reconciliation is symbolized by the bell tower, which calls out to the town when mass begins. Everyone in the mining town—bum and deep pocket—had a place in the parish.

Church affiliation was indeed a mass phenomenon among Irish miners and their families. The vast numbers "reflected the Irish dominance of Butte Catholicism and the Catholic dominance of Butte... The four largest [parishes] had a combined membership of over 25,000. St. Patrick's alone claimed 10,000; no protestant denomination had more than 800" (Emmons 95). In other major American cities, the Irish used the Church as a haven in societies that oppressed them. In Butte, however, the Church *was* the core of the society as it was in the motherland. While

influenced by the wealthy, as most parishes are, the Catholic diocese of Butte depended on the poor. At the dedication of St. Lawrence O'Toole's Catholic Church in 1898, Bishop Brondel spoke of the Church as "a church of workingmen. There is not a rich man in the congregation. The church was paid for by the small contributions of the poor people," although the Butte and Boston Mining Company had donated the land to build the church. He later prayed at the dedication that "God would protect the miners in their hazardous work" (qtd. in Emmons 96). Because the majority of Irish Catholics in Butte were miners, homilies and prayers often reflected their needs. The Catholic sacrament of Holy Communion teaches that the breaking of the body and blood of Jesus brings people into the one body of the Church. Jesus provided a source of ethnic-religious solidarity for miners and their families who so desperately needed it.

In an apparent contradiction, the 4th track of *Shamrock City*, "Tell God and the Devil," seems to defy the power of the Church. The chorus reads, "So tell God and the Devil they can try / but today's not going to be the day we die." In an attempt to restore their dignity and boost their spirit, Solas insinuates that the miners needed to adopt the attitude that they were stronger than the force that is God. The miners were literally under the earth, as if the social oppression of Irish immigrants at the hands of a ruthless ruling class wasn't burden enough. This concept is enhanced by the worksong's 7th stanza: "God don't know you down here / And the Devil's lost your name." Doubt is a fundamental part of religious experience because it strengthens one's faith. The only way the miners could survive at times was by their own collective will and stubborn tenacity. Though at times they were uncertain of God's presence, the miners in the song are not defying their God, rather, they are recognizing his almighty strength. Nevertheless, because the majority of men working under hazardous conditions in the mines of Butte were Irish Catholic, they did not leave their faith behind

when they entered the tunnels. For the Irish, religious faith was an integral part of their national pride. In the mines they sang tunes with Celtic themes. As ballad scholar Wayland Hand and his colleagues reported in 1950, it was not uncommon to hear "the Sons of Erin singing 'The Wearing of Green,' 'God Save Ireland,' 'Ireland Boys, Hurray,' and many other patriotic songs... wherever the Irish miners worked" (7). Likewise, worker songs encompassed religious themes. One tune carols, "My father was a miner down below, / And little of him I ever seen; Give us this day our daily bread" (qtd in Hand 14). The last line is directly from the Lord's Prayer in which the parishioner asks God to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" and to "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." Miners were tempted by the psychologically straining conditions of the mines to respond with ill-behavior, such as those mentioned in "Lay Your Money Down." These tunes were used to "[combat] the demons underground with Irish and Catholic incantations," their ethnic solidarity heightened by their uncertain occupation (Emmons 155).

From birth to death, an Irishman respected nothing more than the Church and its teachings. Mines were named after Irish saints, just as churches are. St. Lawrence was namesake to a parish and a mine in town. A pair of brothers had named their mine St. Lawrence after their mother had prayed for his intercession in "guarding over her boys in the New World" (Burke 195). The Catholic practice of prayer to saints influenced the miners. The men were vulnerable in the mines and called upon their God in times of fear and celebration, and because these men were risking their lives together, a sense of brotherhood developed among them. Common religious beliefs and practices afforded ethnic solidarity.

The heightened sense of ethnic solidarity as a type of communal liberalism was critical for the labor union movement among the miners in Butte. Solas features professional musician and Scottish union leader Dick Gaughan in the 14th

track of *Shamrock City*, an exploration of the motivation of unions, "Labour Song." The pizzicato plucking of a banjo arouses the listener, and suggests falling in step with a protest march: "Together we must stand boys, / Divided we will fall / Our lives are worth far more than four lousy bucks a day." Laborers were tired of working hard without proper pay, but traditionally the Church disapproves of socialist parties for "philosophically, the Irish view of the human condition has been much closer to Burkean conservatism" (McCaffrey 136). Burkean conservatism depends on the natural law of hierarchy, which is displayed in the Church from God to the pope, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, deacons, and finally, parishioners. The song affirms, "So when you cry for justice, / let it be no surprise when they ground you all as traitors and commies in disguise." The political success of many leaders would not have been possible without the backing of unions. Labor unions were especially critical during an era of Butte's history known as the "The Wars of the Copper Kings," during which the streets were "their bribery-paved battleground" (Burke 32). Inspiration for the song came partly from politician Augustus Heinze, who proclaimed (as quoted in the liner notes for *Shamrock City*):

If they crush me today they will crush you tomorrow. They will cut your wages and raise the tariff in the company stores on every bite you eat and every rag you wear. They will force you to dwell in Standard Oil houses while you live and they will bury you in Standard Oil coffins when you die.

Irish Catholics in Butte were a paradox of traditional Catholic conservatism and the Irish approach to communal liberalism. Both in the motherland and in the United States, they have "blended the methodology and principles of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American Protestant liberal politics, a Catholic sense of community, and their own tolerant and gregarious personalities into a distinct yet regionally varied

brand of politics" (McCaffrey 137). The survival of this mining town's working class was dependent on Irish nationalism provided by the Church and enhanced by labor unions.

The album concludes by questioning the effectiveness of immigrating to America in "No Forgotten Man." The nostalgic ballad is saturated with the full harmonies of Winifred Horan's mournful violin. The lyrics follow the history of the Irish immigrant experience, each verse an ode to farming, mining, enlisting in the military, or the infamous alcoholism associated with Irishmen. It emphasizes the psychological pressure society placed on young men to grow up and provide for their families – pressure that labor and military recruiters could take advantage of. It questions whether their attempt to escape oppression was in vain – whether coming to America in search of "Liberty" resulted in the same abuse experienced in Ireland. The Irish laborers were kept down by the mine-owning Copper Kings for nearly two decades in Butte, but arguably the Church was also a culprit in their plight. In Marxist theory, the Church is the "opiate of the masses," quieting the discontent of the proletariat as "one man's chains become another's freedom" (stanza 15). In the song, however, the over-exploited, down-on-his-luck worker declares in the refrain, "I'll be no forgotten man." In defiance of the authorities that have oppressed him, his dedication to being unforgotten serves as the root of his inclination to bettering the lives of future laborers. The Church inspires such service as a way to help following generations.

The Irish were the backbone of a town dependent on copper and Catholicism. The copper mining itself was dependent on the Catholic faith because the lives of the Irish miners revolved around their Church. The stories of *Shamrock City* underline the importance of faith by invoking God's providence and by referencing stories of the town that are related, directly or indirectly, to religious faith. It was a principal part of life in the motherland, and it followed the

ethnic group transatlantically. The Irish population of Butte led a physically and mentally exhausting life that relied on Copper, an earthly good, as their source of affluence. But, religion is a necessary resource for the oppressed, and a source of hope and confederation—essentials for moral and psychological survival. Such a legacy of enduring faith is not soon forgotten.

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