

**Some comments on *Prayer Against
Famine and Other Irish Poems*,
by John Knoepfle**

It has been four years now since BkMk Press brought out my *Prayer Against Famine and Other Irish Poems*. I had hoped that the book would do well, but as it turned out, aside from a number of positive reviews in local and regional papers and magazines, and friendly notices in the Irish-American press, little attention was paid to it. I understand that this is not a personal thing. Books of poetry are simply not being reviewed these days in American literary and small magazines. I had hoped for some attention in Ireland, also, but the silence there was deafening, a heavy disappointment for me. There was some notice in Germany, perhaps because my name is Swabian, although my grandfather was from the Canton of Zurich, Switzerland. My uncles agreed to alter the pronunciation to a simple disyllable, and it has remained so for our small clan ever since. There is, of course, a German interest in Ireland beyond this, as readers of the Nobel Laureate Heinrich Boll know well. But where were we?

Now when I go back and take a careful look at the book, I am surprised at how many are listed within its pages. Here are many of those named set in order from the beginning: the O'Briens, the LeClares, Soaper Synge—John Millington's uncle, my mother, three brothers, myself, Patrick Brickley, Hannah Brickley, Maggie Finn, McCarthy, Harrington, Driscoll, Daniel O'Connell, Oliver Cromwell, Mr. Burke, Al Smith, Father Murphy, Ferdowsi, Oswaldo Juarez, Cesar Vallejo, Scott Joplin, Flannery O'Connor, Jesus from Guatemala, his interpreter, brother, sister, mother, father, golden-haired Christ, Saint Matthew, Osiris, Seth, monk from Ireland, two guards, a frail and smiling pope, Justina, her interpreter, John of the Cross, Matthew Sugarman, Basho, Anton, St. Columcille, king of the island of Tory, McKenna, Meenan, Dochan, Diver, William Butler Yeats, George Yeats, Sean McBride, Heinrich Boll, Leni Pfeiffer, Leon Bloy, Patrick Kavanaugh, Jones, Crawford, Williams, Paul Claudel, great-uncle Middleman, the Morrigan, widow of Zarephath, the summer rector, Saint Brigid, Tommy Sands, the Inupiaq dancing on one foot, Mary Gauthier, Gill, Waupoose, Ribideaux, Schultz, Grignon, Ingrid Washinawatok, Terence Freitas, Lahe'ene'e Gay, Archbishop Kassab, Elisha, Saint John, my son,

my father, Abraham, Sarah, a priest at his sermon, my one-day-old granddaughter, her mother my daughter.

Oswaldo Juarez had come from Lima where he was a musician of stature and taken a job at a local Springfield inn. In time he brought his family. He enjoyed playing his guitar with local groups in Springfield and even made me feel that my untutored efforts on the harmonica were interesting. He was a modest, distinguished man, and his family continues to be so here in Springfield. Matt in "something to live by" was Matt Sugarman, head ranger at the Sutter's Mill State Park in California. He prevailed in determining how the state would mark its sesquicentennial, arguing that the anniversary could not be celebrated—so much genocide associated with the settlement of the state—but that it could be carefully commemorated. When the news of his death reached the state assembly, the lawmakers stood in silence in his honor. I read the contract for his marriage to Peg's sister Molly. He lived the high plains sign, left hand over the heart. My daughter, Molly Evans, has been more than fifteen years in Alaska and because of this, many of my poems have been set there. She works with abused and traumatized children. Her husband, Rodney, is a pipeline engineer. I have been on the high slopes of Denali and have been to Prudhoe Bay above the Arctic Circle where the pipelines begin and the tide is four inches. Alaska is a multiracial, multicultural country. It should not be a surprise to anyone that I can say that I danced with the Inupiaq there. But before leaving this paragraph, there is one poem that I should single out. This is "words in their lost meanings." The phrase "madda madda viera bemini madda aufera" in that poem is, to my knowledge, the only moment of actual speech that is known from slaves during the Atlantic crossing. It was copied down by an English surgeon who heard it aboard a slaver at the time. This was something that I marked so long ago that I no longer remember my source, but I have the sense that it was from a study of American music. The phrase "worked out" comes from Leslie Souther, a former steamboat roustabout, a man I tape-recorded in the early fifties, one of some forty or more men of the inland rivers, captains, boat owners, mates, lock masters, boat builders, among others, that I interviewed years ago in Cincinnati and along the Ohio River. He was explaining that if a man fell dead in line he was said to be worked out, but the reality was the man died of a heart

attack. Roustabouts were supposed to carry their own weight. Leslie's was above some two hundred twenty pounds.

Some of those spoken of in the book are there because of connections with Peggy Knoepfle. As a teenager she was a student at San Marcos, perhaps the oldest university in the Americas, in Lima, Peru. She has always maintained her Latin American interests, and in recent years has traveled to Nicaragua, Columbia, and Cuba. She introduced me to the work of Cesar Vallejo years ago. She had brought a copy of the Argentina edition of Vallejo's work with her from Lima. It is through her networking in recent years that Jesus and his interpreter came to Springfield and stayed with us in Auburn, a country town about twenty miles south of there. This is true also for Justina Tzoc and her interpreter.

I have corresponded with Tommy Sands and he has cited my book on his radio program in Belfast. A glance at his website is enough to show how important his presence has been to the peace process in Northern Ireland. It is a rare privilege to have spoken with him. And I have corresponded also with Bernard Meehan who is curator of manuscripts at Trinity College, Dublin, and author of a fine study of the Book of Kells with its very good color prints. And Elizabeth Groves of the Falls Church Community Council who is the subject of "belfast on the falls road." At the time that I met her she had recently returned from a visit to Washington, DC, where she was one of two women honored by WFPG (The Women's Foreign Policy Group) both of them for attempting to close wounds in Ulster that generations of anger had opened. The other woman was May Blood, of the Greater Shankill Development Agency in Belfast. Elizabeth told those of us who met her how difficult it was to cope with traditional, sometimes vicious, enemies at the same conference table.

As *Prayer Against Famine* neared completion, I added material to strengthen the copy. By that time the U.S. was at war in Iraq. The poem which speaks of Archbishop Kassab in Basrah derives from a conversation with Dominican sisters here in Springfield. Their order has been in Iraq since the 13th century. Muslim girls are educated in the Dominican convent school, or were until the war, a matter of profound sadness these days for the sisters. And

only this morning I read in the paper the angry denunciation of al-Quida by Sheik Mohammed Saleh al Dohan of Ramadi: "They made enemies between Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians who lived in peace for centuries."

The nine poems which precede the epilogue to the book constitute, as the title suggests, a novena. At the time that I was working on these poems, the Irish Jesuits in Dublin had added an International Peace Novena to their website, "Sacred Space." I was able to make use of the Sacred Space offering so that each of my nine poems contains a line or reference which derives from the prayers or statements from other cultures or major religions of the world. At this moment the novena is no longer on the Sacred Space site, but I still have a copy of the various prayers from which I derived many of the nouns or phrases that I have built into the poems. 1) Buddhist: "Evoking the presence of the great compassion, let us fill our hearts with our own compassion, all nourished from the same source of life." 2) Muslim: "Truth, justice, charity, freedom . . . The everlasting peace is from You and it returns to You." 3) John XXIII: "Share aspirations of peace everywhere to live in security, justice and hope in the future." 4) Jewish (but a line is used in the third poem, also): "Cause us, oh Father, to lie down in peace." 5) Jain: "Lead me from death to life, despair to hope." 6) Sikh: "Let there be good in all humanity" (a general theme for this sixth poem with the child portrayed in it as accepting and giving). 7) Prayer of an eleven-year-old boy from India regarding the Sino-Indian border strife: "Lord, make this world last as long as possible." 8) Baha'i: "Be eyes to the blind, be a guiding light to the blind." 9) Many readers will know that love, peace, pardon, faith, hope, light, and joy are all taken from the prayer of Saint Francis.

I would like to qualify some of the remarks made at the beginning of this note. *Prayer Against Famine* was not a totally ignored offering. I was also the featured Friday evening reader at the Quinnipiac University Irish Famine Conference in September, 2000. And the Yeats Society in New York staged a reading of the book at its conference that same year. And now, having said these things, I can leave my book with its six generations from my unknown great-grandmother to my beloved granddaughter, Slante.

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