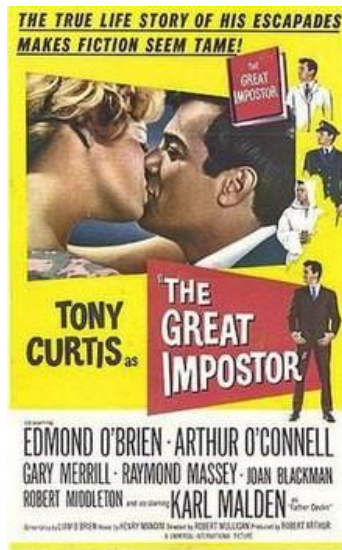


JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

The Great Impostor *Gannon College's Brush with Cinematic Fame*

By David Frew
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Local headlines from the 1950s revealed that Ferdinand Demara, the infamous “Great Impostor,” had been a faculty member at Gannon College. Demara’s exploits were legendary, even before a popular movie starring Tony Curtis was

released. He had crisscrossed the continent semi-successfully posing as a physician, dentist, prison warden, monk and college professor for decades. His M.O. was to quickly disappear as soon as he sensed that the people with whom he was working were growing suspicious of his authenticity. Then he would magically turn up at a different location with a new expertise and identity.

During the mid-1970s when I was a brand-new faculty member at Gannon, I chatted with Monsignor Wilfrid J. Nash about the Great Impostor's time at the college and President Nash revealed that it was he who had caused Demara to become suspicious and suddenly leave the college. Monsignor Nash chuckled as he noted that in an odd way it was his experience with Demara that had led to his becoming the college president.

Monsignor Nash explained that as a young faculty member, he had been called upon by Monsignor Joseph Wherle, Gannon's president at the time, to look into several rumors about a psychology professor: Dr. Fred French, the identity that Demara used while in Erie. Gannon was about to promote Professor French to the position of dean, but Wherle had some reservations. Wherle told Nash that while Dr. French was regarded as a talented professor by most of his students, several of the seminarians (who were attending Gannon and among the college's very best students), had reported that he did not seem able to answer questions that were beyond the surface-level of ongoing classes. The seminarians who spoke to Wherle reported that it seemed as though Professor French might have been staying just one chapter ahead in the textbooks he was teaching from. He seemed to lack professional experience or understanding beyond the level of the basic textbook.

Monsignor Nash began his investigation by chatting with all of the students and most told him that Dr. French was their favorite professor. They commended his classroom lectures, noting that while they seemed to drift off topic quite often, he dutifully made outlines of the textbooks that he was teaching from, shared them with the students and followed the logic of the books and lectures when he designed tests. Students loved the helpful study guide-outlines and as a result French had a reputation for being an easy grader during a pre-grade inflation era when it was common for students to flunk out of school. But Nash's concerns were raised when he spoke with the seminarians who had raised the issue with Wherle. They revealed several examples of Dr. French's inability to answer in-depth or complicated questions. The seminarians also admitted to playing a bit of a game with their professor by looking ahead in the textbook to find topics and issues that had not yet been covered in class and trying to stump him.



Monsignor Wilfrid J. Nash at his presidential office

But as Nash told me, faculty in those days were required to teach a wide array of courses, and it was entirely understandable that Professor French might not have been an expert at everything. When I asked how the investigation had turned out, Monsignor Nash laughed and told me that it ended by causing him a lot of extra work. Eventually, he began chatting with Professor French and that their discussions seemed to make the psychology faculty member very uncomfortable. As this was happening, Nash learned that Professor French had been accused of writing several bad checks. And then one day a message reached him that French had failed to show up for his scheduled classes. When college authorities visited his rented apartment, it became apparent that Dr. French had moved. It was the middle of the semester and Nash was recruited to take over several of Dr. French's classes for the remainder of the term.



Ferdinand Demara

Demara seemed to have an odd fascination with Roman Catholic monasteries, the military, and teaching. When he was 16 and his family began to experience hard economic times, he ran away from home and joined a Trappist monastery. He was eventually expelled by the Trappists for using a false name and lying about his

age. That was when he joined the Army. Military life did not appeal to him, however, so he went AWOL, changed his name again and appeared at a series of monasteries, until the Army eventually tracked him down (he was a deserter). Because of his youth, Demara was sent to a civilian jail where time in prison introduced him to a new set of skills. He was befriended by the warden and allowed to work as an administrative assistant.

Upon release from prison, he changed his name and joined another series of monasteries, each time finding himself “outed” since his credentials were inaccurate. At two of the monasteries, he was assigned to teach at the high school level, thus learning still another set of vocational skills. Demara joined the Navy and became a medical orderly, learning a lot about medicine. Eventually, he used both his prison and medical experiences to power two of his most famous scams.

He became the assistant warden of a prison where he was credited with establishing several highly effective rehabilitation programs. Soon, however, people in the prison system began to ask for proof of his previous accomplishments. So, in true Demara style, he disappeared. A few months later he took on the name of an existing Ontario physician and volunteered for the Royal Canadian Navy during the Korean Conflict. Posing as Dr. Lawrence Cyr, Ferdinand Demara served as an onboard physician and surgeon, which was a relatively simple task at first. He spent most of his time seeing sailors who were suffering from minor illnesses or routine injuries. Before long, however, a battle conflict sent four badly wounded patients to Cyr’s operating room where he was called upon to perform complicated surgeries.

All four patients recovered, but Dr Cyr’s behavior at the time of the surgeries raised suspicions and eventually the real Dr. Cyr learned of the scam and lodged a complaint. The RCN began court martial proceedings but the ship’s captain who had been operated on by Demara for a dental problem came to his defense as did an on-board nurse, who had fallen in love with him. He was summarily discharged with only a minor wrongdoing listed on his record. Demara then moved to the West Coast, where he alternated between selling stories of his exploits to anyone who would pay for them and seriously becoming a minister and hospital chaplain. He passed away in 1982.

Shortly after Demara left Gannon, Monsignor Nash was awarded the dean’s position that otherwise might have gone to “the Great Impostor.” A few years later, he was promoted to president of the college, a position that he held for almost three decades. Nash often said that the lessons he learned while investigating the infamous “Dr. French” helped to make him the best candidate to succeed Gannon’s first president, Dr. Wherle.

Amazingly, the case of Ferdinand Demara was not the final chapter in Gannon’s link to strange movie subjects. During the late 1960s, one of Gannon’s largest

graduate programs was its graduate-level counselor education program. And one of that program's most notable professors was a charismatic priest named Father Bernie Pagano. In 1970, Father Pagano left Gannon and moved to the Philadelphia region, where he began serving as an inner-city minister and social worker for several Catholic churches. After a few years, the national news media began to feature articles about Father Pagano, who was being accused of robbing banks. His alleged approach to each robbery was polite and gentle and after each bank job an envelope of cash would mysteriously appear at an inner-city mission or other place of need. Was Bernie Pagano playing Robin Hood?

After more than a year of robberies as well as publicity that featured security camera images of the alleged "gentlemen bank robber," a woman approached the district attorney to say that she recognized the subject. She alleged that it was Father Pagano, a man that she had been having a romantic affair with. The district attorney charged Father Pagano and a long and very public trial began during which the priest from Gannon seemed to scoff at the proceedings. Pagano's courtroom behavior irritated the judge. Eventually, however, another man came forward and was introduced at the trial by Pagano's legal defender.

The new man admitted to being the infamous gentleman bank robber and said that his conscience could not tolerate an "innocent Catholic priest" taking the blame for his crimes. Pagano's case was summarily dismissed, but the DA was not so sure. He later publicly stated the Pagano had been copycatting the exploits of a long-term gentleman bank robber and said that when questioned, the man who had come forward listed his actual bank jobs quite accurately but that they did not include several of the most recent heists. According to the DA, those were the robberies that Bernie Pagano had committed. The DA wanted to retry Pagano but could not gain the political traction needed to do so.

Several years later, a movie was made about the gentleman robber. The film, "Old Man and a Gun," was semi-successful at the box office and starred Robert Redford. There were references in the film to the copycat bank robbers who worked at the same time as the real gentleman bank robber. It was noted during the trial of the man who had admitted to being the infamous gentleman bank robber that a number of others may have used the same approach. This created doubt about how many robberies he truly committed. That confusion in combination with his gentlemanly persona helped him to get away with a relatively light sentence.



Robert Redford, playing the gentleman bank robber

A small part of me longs for the old days when crazy characters like Ferdinand Demara and Bernie Pagano populated the faculties of colleges and universities. A bigger part understands the need for academic institutions to be cautious and demand that modern faculty members possess proper credentials on their road toward tenure.

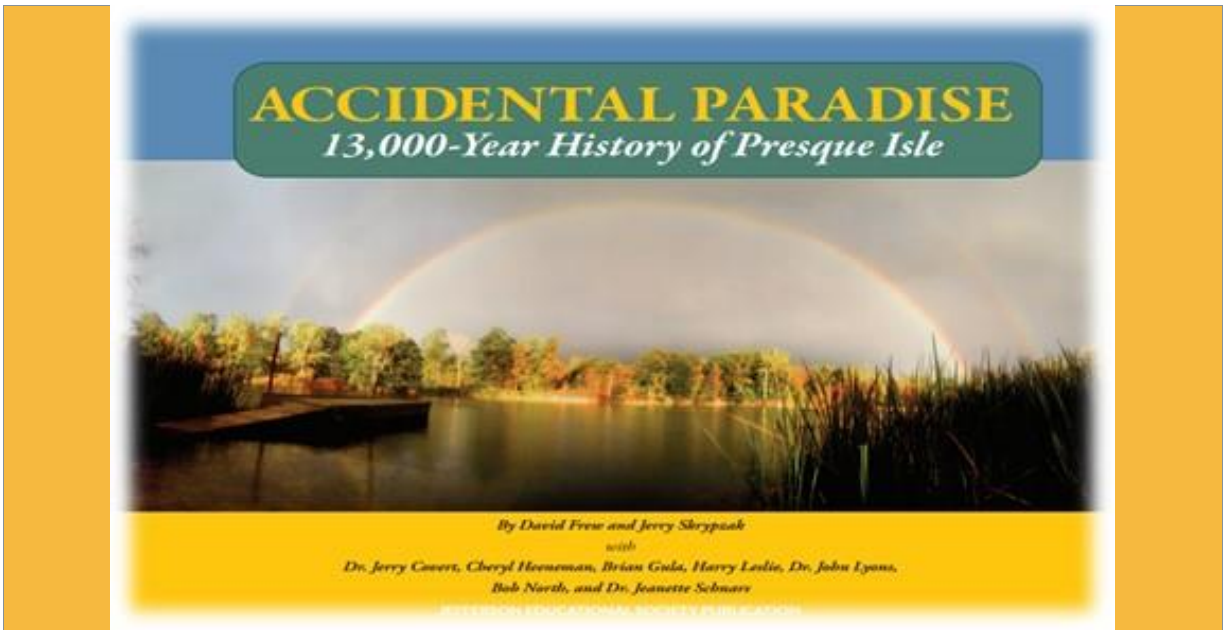
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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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