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On this day: Fr. Finn, S.J.

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NCR Today

On this day in 1928, Father Francis J. Finn, S.J., died in Cincinnati. He was 70 years old.

Father Finn published 27 books, starting with *Percy Wynn, or Making a Boy of Him*, Benziger Brothers, 1890, and *Tom Playfair, or Making a Start*, Benziger Brothers, 1890.

Father Finn's obituary in the *New York Times* called him a "writer of many popular books for boys," but he wrote for both "boy and girl readers," as he made plain in the Preface to the second edition of *Percy Wynn*.

I loved Father Finn's books when I was a little girl. The public library by my house didn't have them, but every couple of weeks my dad would drive me over to the Catholic Community Library at 301 E. Armour Boulevard. (Two blocks from where NCR is now.) The beautiful stone house, built by the founder of the Jones Stores, had been the residence of Bishop Lillis and Bishop O'Hara, before it became a library. The librarians were Sisters of Social Service. Father Finn's books were in the children's room on the second floor.

Francis James Finn was born in St. Louis on the feast of St. Francis, October 4, 1858. He and his parents lived at Mrs. Cooney's boarding house on Clark Street. They moved to Gamble Street, then back to Clark Street, near St. Malachy's, where Frank went to school. Frank's father, John Finn, a successful contractor, built an \$80,000 house for his family at 2529 Pine. In 1870, when he was 12, Frank enrolled in the rudiments class at St. Louis University at 9th and Washington.

The 1870s were a good time to be young in St. Louis. Frank Finn loved the theater and saw the greats at Ben de Bar's theater at 5th and Market. His uncle, John Daly, owned a printing firm at 213 N. 3rd, where

Frank worked in 1874. At 17, Frank "was given the privilege of joining the Society of Jesus." He went to St. Stanislaus Seminary in Florissant, Missouri.

He left the novitiate for health reasons in 1878. His father was sheriff of St. Louis by then, and Frank worked in his office before returning to the seminary in 1879.

I made a pilgrimage to St Stanislaus Seminary before the Jesuits sold it. I saw the bedrooms, the ascetery, the parlor, the dining room. I walked in the cemetery where young Mr. Finn once walked among the graves, praying for the souls of the Jesuits buried there: Jacob van de Velde, second bishop of Chicago; Pierre de Smet, missionary to the Indians; Thomas J. Smith, a 19-year-old novice who died five weeks after Frank Finn joined him in the novitiate.

As a new scholastic, Frank Finn was sent out to St. Mary's College in St. Mary's, Kansas, a school that had started as a mission to the Potawatomie and was still pretty rough. In *Father Finn, S. J., The Story of His Life Told By Himself for His Friends Young and Old*, he describes the "halfbreeds, Mexicans, and a good number of American boys whose early education had been sadly neglected." The Jesuit school at Las Vegas, New Mexico, had closed, and several students from there had transferred to St. Mary's, including "eight or nine real Indians."

Among the "halfbreeds" were Bents from Colorado, and among the "real Indians" were Tafoyas from New Mexico. There were Jewish boys, including Nathan and Ferdinand Weil, and there was "a boy in my class with whom I could not get along." Gutzon Borglum. Forty years later the sculptor of Mount Rushmore called on Father Finn in Cincinnati: "The boy I did not understand had grown up a distinguished man . . . good to look upon, frank, bold, and honest as the sun."

The boys in Mr. Finn's preparatory class in 1881 ranged in age from 10 to 18, but some of the other young men at the college were older than Finn. There were rich boys who kept horses in the stables at St. Mary's, and there were "boys who were on the privilege list. They were the followers of Brother Goodwin, the Nimrod of St. Mary's . . . allowed to join in the hunt . . . only too glad to clean the guns . . ."

The names of the St. Mary's boys of long ago are listed in the college bulletins of the day, which were printed in St. Louis by John Daly, and which are preserved today in the Jesuit archives. Among them are the names of the boys on whom Father Finn modeled his famous characters: "The quartet was made up of Joe Garvy, George Kister, Tom Donnelly and Frank Conroy. You could trust those boys much farther than you see them. They were pure, truthful, and with a high sense of honor. But they were not prigs . . . unquestioned athletes of the younger set . . . loved and respected by every small boy without exception."

Kister and Garvy, like their fictional counterparts, Tom Playfair and Harry Quip, became Jesuits. The Reverend George Kister, S.J., would be rector of St. Mary's College fifty years after Father Finn admired his mastery of the small yard. Did Father Kister carry candy in his pockets as Tom Playfair always did? Was he quick to make a joke? Pious? Courageous? Determined? Did he excel at Latin? The Reverend Joseph Garvy, S.J., became a professor of literature "in the juniorate at Florissant, one of the most scholarly men in the province." Was he, like Harry Quip, Tom Playfair's first and best friend at St. Maure's, "mischievous," "easy of disposition," "firm as a rock?"

The books provide an interesting glimpse of boarding school life in the 1880s. In *Harry Dee*, Tom Playfair is in a bakery in the town, taking care of a boy who has fallen ill: "Bring in some wine, quick!"

"Startled by his tone, the shopman came hastening in with a bottle of wine. Tom very calmly knocked the

neck off the bottle and filled me a glass. As this was a prohibition town, the intelligent reader will understand how it was that wine was on sale in a bakery."

Tom Playfair wasn't much of a smoker, although his creator, Father Finn, was. Frank Finn started smoking at thirteen but gave it up when he entered the novitiate. After four months, he resumed smoking on a doctor's orders. In his memoirs, he tells of the smoking customs at St. Mary's College. A smoking room was established in 1881. Before that, the boys were permitted to smoke on walks to the Kaw River or Pawnee Creek.

Tom Playfair, in his first November at St. Maure's, "was made the happiest boy at college--and that is saying a good deal--by receiving from home a box containing, among other things, a rubber coat, a pair of Ice-King club skates, and a fine breech-loading shotgun for hunting purposes." Tom immediately goes out with several other little boys to shoot rabbits and quail. They roast a rabbit over an open fire, and they catch a villain. "'Raise your hands above your head, at once, or I fire,' continued Tom, in the same inflexible tones. The gun, pointed direct at the man's breast, was as steady in the child's hands as though it were held by a statue."

It is also in *Harry Dee* that Harry wins the gold medal for Latin and Tom and Percy take first places of honor. In the same book, Tom rescues children from drowning, gets out of dancing with girls at a party, and discovers a cheat at euchre. "'There!' said Tom sternly, pointing to the missing knaves upon which Gordon had been sitting . . . 'God bless me!' exclaimed Mr. Scarborough. 'I didn't know my son was a blackleg.'"

Tom and Harry avoid dancing, but "were not surprised on seeing Percy taking his place in the quadrille."

These scenes and many others in Father Finn's books stand up well today. The lightning strike which kills two boys in *Tom Playfair* is unforgettable. The Christmas scenes are wonderful. College boys in those days did not go home for Christmas, but their parents sent gifts to them at school. Father Finn describes Percy Wynn's box of "books in pretty holiday binding, magazines with colored engravings, exquisite Christmas-cards, gloves, shoes, a sealskin cap, ear-muffs, silk scarfs, neck-ties, boxes of fine French candy, the traditional turkey, cakes, fruit, nuts."

Tom Playfair appears as a boy in Father Finn's first three books and as a man, a Jesuit scholastic, in *Facing Danger*. In that book, published in 1919, he is in a South American country where Jesuits are not allowed. He is known only as Herr Professor to his young charge, but we guess his true identity early in the story when he brings out a chocolate caramel from his pocket.

Father Finn's books were translated into French, German, Flemish, Italian, Polish, Bohemian, Hungarian, Spanish, Caledonian, Portuguese, and Braille. The two linked above may be read free online, and the author's prefaces give an example of his personality. The autobiography, compiled by Father Daniel Lord, S.J., after Finn's death, is easily found in libraries.

Click here to see his picture.

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