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BROTHER ERNEST RYAN, C.S.C.: FOUNDER OF DUJARIE PRESS

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by
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He was an energetic little man with rimless glasses, a brilliant mind, profound faith, a sharp tongue and the stubborn tenacity to achieve whatever he set his mind to do. His life-span extended from the end of the 19th century through more than one half of the 20th century, ending in 1963 with his death at age 65. He was Brother Ernest Ryan, C.S.C.--Brother of Holy Cross, teacher, writer, editor and publisher who pioneered many innovations in Holy Cross community life, education and publication.

John Dominic Ryan was born on August 4, 1897, in Elyria, then a small thriving town in northern Ohio. His mother was Mary Smith Ryan who came to America with her parents as a child of one year. His father was John M. Ryan, a native-born American. The seventh of ten children, John grew up healthy and happy in a devout Irish household. He remembered that his mother lost both of her parents when she was only 13 years old and she had to work hard to support herself. She married when she was 21. "I entered St. Mary's Parochial school at the age of seven years," John wrote in his autobiography, "under the venerable Sister M. Loretta, a Sister of Notre Dame. It was under her vigilant eye that I received the rudiments of an education, both in intellectual and spiritual matters." (1)

"Long before I started to school," he wrote for *The Book of Catholic Authors*, "I could read and write, but as I look back over the years, it seems to me that my desire to write is older than my craving to read. I cannot recall the titles of any of my early literary attempts, but I can still see my mother softly crying over Father Finn's *Claude Lightfoot*. When she put the book down, I picked it up to try to find what it was that made her cry over a book! I don't think I found it, but so interested did I become in that story that I read every Father Finn book I could get my hands on. And of the hundreds of reviews I have seen of my books, none of them pleased me more than the one in the 'Messenger of the Sacred Heart' which referred to me as the 'modern Father Finn.'

"During my grade school years in St. Mary's in Elyria, Ohio, I was always more interested in English than in anything else. When I entered high school I began to send little articles to the diocesan Catholic paper under a penname. I was indeed proud when I saw my first efforts in print." (2)

VOCATION

On April 18, 1920, after a retreat and a general confession of his entire life, John Dominic Ryan made his first vows of poverty, chastity and obedience as a Brother of Holy Cross. His new name was Brother Ernest. "I was in the first group of Brothers to get the cord before taking final vows," he wrote. "Before that time, no one wore the cord except finally professed Brothers even when they went out to teach." (3)

Autumn of 1920 found Brother Ernest in Evansville, Indiana, beginning his first year of teaching in Boys' Catholic High School, a relic built during the Civil War. During that same year, he wrote his first book. "I think it odd," he conceded, "that I received no inspiration to write from any of my English teachers on the high school or college level. Some of them knew their English well, and I always got good marks, but no inspiration. Only one of them, at that time, had published anything. That might be the reason why I was not encouraged or inspired. When I was still in grade school I planned books and even wrote several chapters. It was not until I went to teach that I seriously thought of writing for publication. During my first year of teaching I wrote the book now known as *Eddie of Jackson's Gang*. Father Charles O'Donnell, then the Provincial, gave me permission to have it published in book form." (4)

Responding to criticism that his books were too moralistic, Brother Ernest countered with: "I've been told I have too much holy water between the pages of my novels. I don't think so. I wanted my main characters to be people whose whole lives were the living of our religion. We often tell our students that Catholics should live their religion. Why not, then, have the characters in our stories live out their religion and thus become models to our young readers?"

"I never get upset about the criticisms of my books. I write them in the manner that best brings out the lessons I want to teach. After that, let the critics produce better stories--if they can. I (waited) long enough for the type of stories I wanted and when I didn't get them, I wrote them myself." (5)

While teaching in Oregon, Brother Ernest served as chairman of the Portland unit of the Catholic Library Association. In the late 1930's the St. Anthony Guild Press of Paterson, New Jersey, agreed to publish at their own expense and risk three of Brother Ernest's novels: *The Adventures of Tommy Blake*, *Dick of Copper Gap* and *Eddie of Jackson's Gang*. (6) These would sell for \$1 apiece and Brother would collect a 10% royalty from the sale of each.

Encouraged by such published success, Ernest contemplated a more expansive project. "For several years," he wrote, "I had the idea that there should be lives of the saints written and illustrated for young readers. Finally in 1940 I wrote *That Boy!*, the story of St. Gabriel Possenti, C.P., and got Brother Hilarion (Brezik) interested in making the illustrations. The book came through in time for fall sales in 1940." Brothers studying in Dujarie Hall were put in charge of packing and mailing the books. Brother Ernest in Portland promoted sales. "Everyone thought we did very well, but I felt a real business should be made of the affair, and Father Steiner (the Provincial) asked me if I would come to Notre Dame and handle the whole thing from there. This was finally the way it worked out. I taught some morning classes (at Central Catholic High School) in South Bend and spent the afternoons writing and mailing. When Brother Ephrem became Provincial (in 1945) he gave me an Obedience: 'to continue literary work.' That year I spent my full time developing Dujarie Press." (7)

While in Oregon, Ernest's *Boys of the Covered Wagons* was placed on the State List of Books for School Libraries. He was made an Honorary Member of the Eugene Field Society, named for a poet-journalist, (8) and in 1945 became an Honorary Member of the International Mark Twain Society. The certificate states that it is a Society whose Province is to Unite the Whole World in Bonds of Cultured Peace." That prestigious Society listed Booth Tarkington as its American Representative and the Right Honorable Winston Churchill its English Representative. The little Holy Cross Brother suddenly found himself in rarified literary company! (9)

BEGINNINGS

At Notre Dame, Brother Ernest lived in the Community House, later named Columba Hall in honor of the saintly Brother who promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Dujarie Press began in a single room and later expanded to two rooms in the Annex of Columba Hall. In the beginning it was a one-man operation which would expand with time and during its 25 years of existence would sell and send some 500,000 copies of books for young readers.

Ernest named the Press for Father James Dujarie. After the French Revolution, Dujarie had founded the Brothers of St. Joseph who later became the Brothers of Holy Cross. In 1948, Ernest asked the artist, Eugene Kormendi, to mold a bust of Father Dujarie. Several copies were made and distributed to Holy Cross houses. "I think Father Dujarie had much to do with the success of the work carried on through Dujarie Press," Ernest explained, "and I am glad I was able to get his statues made." (10)

Ernest always claimed there were not enough books for young readers on the lives of the saints and good Christians. That was his motivation for writing novels and for founding Dujarie Press which by 1964 would provide some 350 fictionalized biographies of saints, artists, scientists, statesmen, explorers and musicians to fill the void. "For years," he claimed, "I had wanted to write biographies of the saints in such a way as to appeal to readers up through the high school (years). I insisted that these stories must be told in fictional style, and be illustrated in the most modern manner. Conservative publishers could not be interested. But I went ahead, secured Brother Hilarion (Brezil), a student of the famous Emil Jacques, and finally brought out *That Boy*, a story of St. Gabriel, C.P. As I had thought, the first printing sold in less than a year. It was followed by *The Giant Saint*, a legend of St. Christopher, with drawings by Herbert Heywood, head of the Art Department in the University of Portland. I am very pleased with the reception given these books. I have in my possession more than a dozen letters from bishops and archbishops in praise of these books." (11) New York's Cardinal Spellman, a novelist himself, was one such admirer.

An article written by Lawrence Brehl explained: "Long before he started the Press, Brother Ernest felt a need for good books for young readers. He saw that much of the good accomplished in religion classes was lost because the children read poor books.

He began writing novels as a Brother-student at Notre Dame in 1919, and continued while teaching in colleges and high schools... Brother Ernest changed from writing fiction when he observed the enthusiasm among young readers for comics and stories about supermen. He decided to write about real supermen, the saints, in a way more interesting than the lives of the saints then available. Using the facts, but making up conversations and the details of situations, he fictionalized them. Many appeared first in 'The Annals of Our Lady of Lourdes' magazine, and then in permanent books when the Dujarie Press got underway.

"Though Brother Ernest wrote all of the early books of Dujarie Press, more than twenty other Brothers have joined him... Most of the Brothers began to write in 1950 after a conference held at Notre Dame at which Brother Ernest urged their 'joining up.' This followed the inclusion of the Apostolate of the Press as one of the special ends of the Congregation.... Though Brother doesn't advertise much, no book has yet been a dud; many have sold out their original edition (of 1000 copies) and have been reprinted one or more times.

"Brother Ernest says that 'good books sell without a lot of advertising; it's the ones that aren't much good that need to be pushed vigorously.' Without any advertising in foreign countries, orders have come from Canada, New Zealand, Germany, Ireland, England, Holland, Java, India, Italy, South Africa and Belgium." (12) The article was published in 1954, some seventeen years before the demise of the Press in 1971.

SALES

One Sunday afternoon each summer, Brother Ernest invited Sisters taking classes at Notre Dame University to the east lawn of Columba Hall's Annex that housed Dujarie Press. He provided cookies, lemonade and ice cream as a lure for his sale's pitch. Brother Flavius Ellison remembers these "Book Fairs" well: Ernest "had different big long tables out on the side yard, each manned by a Brother. On each table there was a complete set of Dujarie Press books which the Sisters could look through and stand there and read some of them. There was a stack of order blanks on each table and the Sisters could order whatever they wanted." Asked if Brother Ernest made money from these affairs, Brother Flavius affirmed: "You bet your boots he did!" Flavius served for two years as Ernest's business manager and wrote sixteen books for the Press, one of which was recently translated into Spanish by some Sisters in Ecuador. Asked what it was like working with the publisher, Flavius was candid: "Ernest was very exacting. You had to do things right and you had to do them his way. He was very helpful. He'd show you what he wanted. He was a very practical person. I enjoyed working with him." (13) He added, "He used to make little badges of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and he'd crochet them like a Sacred Heart badge. It would say on the bottom: 'Dujarie Press'. He gave them to people he thought would like them--friends." (14)

CO-WORKERS

Although Brother Ernest had been given the obedience to do only literary work as early as 1945, he did not expand his "stable" of writers until after an educational conference, when he invited some twenty Brothers to begin submitting manuscripts on the lives of saints and outstanding Catholics. "In July of 1951," he wrote, "we really got started to write... Brother Lawrence Fitch was the first to respond to my appeal. He chose to write on Blessed Pius X and within a few days turned in the first chapter of his book--*The Song of the Shoemaker's Son*. He was a wonderful pupil. He welcomed all of the suggestions I gave him. The second to begin but the first to finish was Brother Genard Greene. He chose to write on St. Cecilia. Brother is a musician and the subject appealed to him. He too was a very apt pupil and really enjoyed his work. Next was Brother Evan Schmid, who at the time was sick in the infirmary. He chose to write on St. Thomas More, a saint in whom he was greatly interested. In spite of the fact that he had to write in bed, he really worked hard on his story.

"November 14, 1951, will always be remembered...in the life of Dujarie Press. On that day there arrived the shipment of books that put the names of six more Brothers of Holy Cross before the literary world. For some months the books had been in process. As soon as they arrived, I hurried copies on to the authors... Brother Genard Greene's book was rushed to him in New York where he was waiting to sail for South America" (with the first missionaries to Brazil--writer's note). "All of the new authors were well-pleased with their books and we are now waiting to see how they will sell." (15)

Editor-publisher Ernest soon learned that the books would sell well and quickly. During the last four months of 1951, 3251 copies were sold and shipped--the same number as the entire previous year's sales. (16) From 1951 to 1952 total sales increased to 8664. That same year the first book NOT written by a Holy Cross Brother was published: *Christmas Forever*, written by Sister Mary Henrica, P.C.J. Two thousand copies of this story of Mother Mary Clare Fey, foundress of the Sisters of the Poor Child Jesus, sold well. (17) Yearly sales of all Dujarie books increased dramatically:

August 1, 1952 to August 1, 1953.....	14,885
1954.....	19,501
1955.....	19,301
1957.....	29,351

Two new categories of Dujarie Press books were added in 1956 with titles for children in grades 1 to 3 and several others for high school readers. Brothers writing in the early 1950's had to supply their own illustrations for each manuscript. High school students and friends were enlisted for this purpose with mixed results in the final analysis. Brother Ernest decided the topic and the page on which a picture would appear in the printed volume. Later, at the suggestion of Sister Mary Edna, art teacher

at St. Mary's College, Brother Ernest paid her student, Carolyn Lee Jagodits, to create illustrations for each new book. She was given (what was for Ernest) the handsome fee of \$1 for each picture! And \$25 for designing each two-color dust jacket with hand-lettered titles. He insisted that each illustration be drawn to the exact size it would appear in the book thus adding difficulty to the illustrator's task and strain to her eyes. For the youngest readers, Ms Jagodits had to create as many as 20 pictures for each text: half a page was devoted to a picture and the other half to big print.

Ernest was sometimes criticised for using too large a print in all of the Dujarie books, forcing his writers to follow a formula--no more than a set number of characters per line and only so many lines of text per page--and limiting a book's size to 96 pages for readers in grades 4 to 7. Reviews said his vocabulary for primary readers (grades 1-3) was too difficult. He did not write well for young children probably because he had never taught them. All of his experience was with high school and college students.

The first illustrations Ernest used left much to be desired, but Carolyn Jagodits credits her present status as a nationally-known working artist to her first professional work for Dujarie Press. After all she was paid! What did she think of Brother Ernest? "I thought he was a wonderful person," she reminisced. "He always had a story or a joke--always glad to see us (Ms Jagodits and her mother). It was kind of strange at first when we first met because Sister (Mary Edna) said, 'Oh, you don't go there (Columba Hall)'. But Brother Ernest said: 'Come over!' so we met for the first time and after that I'd deliver the pictures to him instead of send them (by mail). He'd go over them excitedly... He was totally happy with what he got." (18). Brother allowed Carolyn to try new ideas and textures as time passed and eventually she illustrated some 150 volumes for him. "Had it not been for the Press, I don't know what direction my art would have gone," she has said. "I started with Brother Ernest and he gave me the opportunity to develop my talent and I went on from there. Now... I have been offered a job of a life-time--to do religious art for a big company in New York." Her artistic life has come full circle. "I was asked by God to give back what I had been given. That's how I feel about it." (19)

TRAVELING SALESMEN

The huge volume of sales of Dujarie Press books would have been impossible without a number of Brothers on the road. They traveled hundreds of miles by car, spoke to numerous Mother Superiors and hawked their wares with enthusiasm. It was a hard, tiring, nomadic life. One Brother found it so exhausting, he lasted exactly two days on the job! Dispensed from Dujarie Press, he found less taxing work elsewhere. Other Brothers proved more persevering and their results were astonishing. Due to illness, Brother Ernest was unable to lift the heavy cartons of new books as they came in so Brother Lionel Light was appointed to help him. He wasn't long in the lifting business, however, before Ernest sent him on the road. He proved to be a superb salesman. In just two years of travel he had sold 18,146 books! Brother Francis Johnson was the second Brother on the road. During his first day in Chicago, he sold

206 books with only four orders. He then drove on to Monroe, Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Elyria and a blur of other cities. Other salesmen included Brother Vitus Schwartz and Brother Fernand Hickey. Thanks to their hard work the Press ended its 1958 fiscal year with sales of 46,106 books and the following year's total was 44,231.

From the beginning, Brother Ernest's goal in founding Dujmarie Press was not to make money but to use it as an outreach for the Apostolate of the Press that had been mandated by a Brothers' Provincial Chapter. Sales of the many books did pay printing costs and the living expenses of Brothers working for the Press, but there were no large financial profits for the Community. The suggestion that Brother Ernest was allowed to found the Press simply to pacify his whim is manifestly false. His intention was always to provide stories of saints and heroes for the edification of youngsters whom he hoped would live better Christian lives.

By 1959 Dujarie Press boasted 110 titles. Each year "Catholic Trade Books" listed the names of companies that had produced the most new books that year. These had to be written by Catholic authors on Catholic subjects. In 1960 Dujarie Press placed fourth with 45 new volumes published in a single year--after Bruce Publishing Company, Newman Press and Doubleday. By that same year, Brother Ernest had written 124 books: novels, biographies, poetry and textbooks on methodology.

REVIEWS

"The Brother-authors have done a great job in presenting this worthwhile reading to our Catholic youth," Sister M. Donelda Wilhelm, C.S.A., claimed after doing a study of 117 books with her students. "They have made new and wonderful friendships with many of the readers of the Dujarie Books... The thoughts of the authors conveyed through the pages of their books are a stimulation to the readers for a richer life and noble deeds." (20)

Not all the reviews and critiques were so positive. Some writers were convinced that the books were not first-rate and could never compete on the open market. Canvassers were credited, as they should have been, with multiple sales of the books, but the books were considered too short and too simple by some standards. The formulas set by Brother Ernest were felt to be too confining and limiting and the literary style of some of the authors lacked imagination and descriptive beauty. Only in the final years of the Press, after Brother Ernest's passing, were writers allowed to break out of the restricting formula-patterns and write in their own way to the lengths they chose.

CLOSURE

As early as May 11, 1958, Brother Ernest had written to Brother Roberto: "The situation is this: I am not well. Don't know what it is but I have my own ideas. The

doctor said he was quite satisfied and that I should come back September 23. Seven dollars, please!... In the meantime, I'm trying to keep going. Have been doing some writing and seeing the Fall books through the press... Both the man on the road and the Provincial's attitude worry me. Just can't see the way things are going." (21) Brother Ernest's health was failing and for the next five years it would continue to deteriorate. He suffered from stomach ulcers, heart problems and angina pains. The tumor on his brain that was found only after his death increased in size and yet he continued his rigorous work for the Press.

After months of suffering Brother Ernest finally died of a massive stroke early in the morning of March 4, 1963. Two days later his funeral Mass was celebrated in Sacred Heart church and he was buried in the Community cemetery up the hill from Columba Hall that had housed his Press for so many years.

"When Brother Ernest became ill," Brother Sigismund Danielski once explained, "Brother Donatus Schmitz, Provincial, appointed Brother Charles Rymarowicz to direct the Press. An advisory board to the Press, consisting of Brothers, was also formed. Brother Charles held this position for a year or so and then Brother Sigismund was named director, which position he held up to its closing. The new director did not insist that the authors use Brother Ernest's formula, but he did re-employ Miss Carolyn Jagodits, a brilliant artist.... who had illustrated several Dujarie Press books under Brother Ernest's cramping restrictions. Now, however, she was permitted to create in her own way. Large detailed illustrations would be reduced to fit the printed page. Several of the most popular titles, out of print for years, were re-edited and printed, and Brother Gerald Muller's *Theresa Martin* and *Father Pro* and Chet Grant's *Before Rockne at Notre Dame* were among several new titles produced. None of the above three titles used Brother Ernest's formula... Costs were rising and other publishing houses were producing beautiful titles with illustrations in color. Other than having attractive paper jackets in two or three colors, the Press could never afford to use color elsewhere.

"And so at the final meeting of the advisory board (in 1968), Brother Sigismund suggested that the Province close Dujarie Press. All agreed. Afterwards, Brother Fernand Hickey, stalwart canvasser for the Press, said, 'I think we made the right decision in closing down when we did.'

"Though some of the criticism of Dujarie Press might be justified--the formula method... the lack of dramatic detail, the use of over-large type--the enterprise must have helped stimulate young people to virtue and to read more. In this field, Brother Ernest was a pioneer, but it could have succeeded financially only because of the work of Brother authors, Brother typists such as Finbarr Buckley, the other office workers and the devoted Brother canvassers on the road." (22)

With a letter to Brother Romard Barthel, Provincial of the South-West Province of Brothers, and a check for \$418.60 in royalties, Brother Sigismund wrote: "This is the final check you will receive since we ceased operations as of June 30th (1971). During the past few years we have found less and less of a market for the kind of book we publish and are therefore liquidating our inventory and will receive no income from this. The remaining titles will be distributed gratis to charitable institutions." (23) So ended with a whimper the work of a twenty-five year apostolate. So rare are the books today that recently one that originally sold for \$2. was fetching \$22. to a used-book store proprietor. Only a few complete sets are still in existence and there seems little likelihood that these will ever be reprinted.

The End

Endnotes of Works Cited

1. Autobiography of Brother Ernest Ryan, C.S.C., "Written at request of Brother Alphonsus as an exercise in an English class taught by him while I was in the Novitiate 1918-1919 with some later notes." p. 3. Original manuscript in the Archives of the Brothers of Holy Cross, Midwest Province at Notre Dame, Indiana.
2. *The Book of Catholic Authors* (third series) by Walter Romig. Walter Romig & Company, 14 National Bank Bldg., Detroit, 1944. pp. 125-126.
3. "Chats with an Old Account Book" by Brother Ernest Ryan, C.S.C., p. 103. "This is made up of odds and ends of things I wrote from time to time in various places, but brought together into this book for future use." Original manuscript in the Archives of the Brothers of Holy Cross, Midwest Province at Notre Dame, Indiana.
4. Autobiography, op. cit. pp. 123-126.
5. Chats. Op. cit. p. 4.
6. Copy of contract with St. Anthony Guild Press and Brother Ernest for the publication of three books: *The Adventures of Tommy Blake*, *Dick of Copper Gap* and *Eddie of Jackson's Gang*. No date on the copy.
7. Chats. Op.cit. pp. 269-270.
8. Copy of certificate of Honorary Membership for Brother Ernest, C.S.C. by the Eugene Field Society: National Association of Authors and Journalists. April 22, 1940, in the Archives of the Midwest Province of Brothers, Notre Dame, Indiana.
9. Copy of certificate of Honorary Membership for Brother Ernest, C.S.C. by the International Mark Twain Society, 1945, in the Archives of the Midwest Province of Brothers, Notre Dame, Indiana.
10. Autobiography, p. 109.
11. *The Book of Catholic Authors* , op. cit. p. 28.
12. "The Saints--True Supermen" by Lawrence Brehl. *The Associate of St. Joseph*, Notre Dame, Indiana. June, 1954. pp. 11-12.
13. Taped interview by the writer with Brother Flavius Ellison, C.S.C., May 13, 1999, in Schubert Villa, Holy Cross College, Notre Dame, Indiana.
14. Ibid.

15. Record Book: "This I Can't Forget", p. 26. Random journal notes made over a period of many years by Brother Ernest Ryan, C.S.C. Hand-written notes in the Archives of the Brothers of Holy Cross, Midwest Province, Notre Dame, Indiana.

16. Ibid. p. 28.

17. Ibid. p. 37.

18. Taped interview by the writer with Carolyn Lee Jagodits, May 15, 1999, at Holy Cross College, Notre Dame, Indiana.

19. Ibid.

20. Copy of "A descriptive Investigation of the Dujarie Press Books," by Sister M. Donelda Wilhelm, C.S.A.: a research paper for the graduate school of Marquette University. pp. 24-26.

21. Letter from Brother Ernest, C.S.C., to Brother Roberto, C.S.C., May 11, 1958.

22. Copy of "Dujarie Press": unpublished article by Brother Sigismund Danielski, C.S.C., in the Archives of the Midwest Province of Brothers, Notre Dame, Indiana.

23. Copy of letter from Brother Sigismund Danielski, C.S.C., to Brother Romard Barthel, C.S.C., September 1, 1971.