The SHADOWBROOK FIRE

F. X. Shea

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in the days after the fire, and contributed these letters to a volume of reminiscences for a reunion of Shadowbrook alumni fifty years later.

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EDITOR’S NOTE

On a cold, cloudy night in March 1956, fire destroyed Shadowbrook, the Jesuit novitiate at Stockbridge in the Berkshire hills of western Massachusetts. At the other end of the state, Frank Shea, a young Jesuit about to turn thirty, was studying theology in preparation for ordination to the priesthood the following June. A gifted and aspiring writer, who had already completed a full-length play about the life of Ignatius Loyola, he saw a compelling subject in the events of that night at Shadowbrook. He spent the summer after his ordination and parts of the following year—while he was finishing his theology studies—interviewing the survivors of the fire as well as the Lenox and Stockbridge neighbors who played significant roles in the events surrounding the fire. He turned the accounts into a vivid narrative that is all the more remarkable in that it was written, in effect, in his spare time.

Shea told friends that he modeled his approach and the book’s structure on A Night to Remember, Walter Lord’s best-selling account of the sinking of the Titanic, published the previous year, which Lord had based on interviews with some 70 survivors. Whatever his template, Shea produced a manuscript that is far more than an exciting disaster story. In its account of the fashionable resort life of the Berkshires in the 19th century and of the somewhat fabled lives of the builders and later owners of Shadowbrook, it offers an entertaining slice of American social history. And, from the viewpoint of fifty years later, it is clear that Shea’s manuscript also provides an unusually well filled-in picture of one
part of a vanished era in the life of the U.S. Catholic community and of the Jesuit order.

For several reasons, then, it seems appropriate to rescue the manuscript from the files and archives where it has lain all these years. It is not clear why it was never published when it was written. In the fifties there was little precedent for Jesuits publishing books that weren’t of a scholarly or devout nature. And perhaps no one thought there was a market for a book about a relatively local event. Shea himself told Jesuit friends that province administrators thought the book was too frank and didn’t reflect well on the Shadowbrook community. Whatever the reason, the manuscript lay in Shea’s files for years. In 1973-74, some of the chapters were printed in SJNews, a sort of newsletter for Jesuits of the New England Province published in tabloid newsprint format in the early seventies. But the whole manuscript has not been available until now.

Frank Shea went on to many accomplishments after he was ordained. Born in Dorchester in 1926, he attended the old Boston College High School in the South End of the city, and entered the Jesuits after graduation, in July of 1943. After two years of novitiate and two years of college-level studies in the juniorate at Shadowbrook he did philosophy studies at Weston and, following the typical pattern of Jesuit training, was sent in 1950 to test his vocation teaching high-school students at St. George’s College in Jamaica, in the West Indies, where Jesuits of the New England Province had worked since 1929 running parishes, social agencies, and the two best secondary schools on the island. He returned to Weston for theology studies in 1953. After being ordained in 1956, and completing the final year of formation Jesuits call tertianship—repeating the Spiritual Exercises, studying the Constitutions of the order, and developing pastoral skills giving retreats and working in parishes and hospitals—he and his superiors agreed, in 1958, that he would begin graduate studies in English literature at the University of Minnesota.

When he finished doctoral studies, in 1961, he was assigned again to teach at St. George’s in Jamaica. There were close to 100 Jesuits working in various institutions in the country at this time and they constituted a large intellectual presence
in the island’s culture. Shea involved himself in public issues, sending a number of articles to the local press about educational reform and other matters. The dramatic productions he and his students presented attracted wide attention. In 1963, however, province superiors wanted to provide someone to teach 19th and 20th century literature at Boston College, and Shea was assigned there.

At B.C. he quickly became a magnetic figure on campus, a popular teacher, an eloquent and witty preacher, and in the eyes of some a too eager supporter of educational reform and change. He marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., in Selma and was in the middle of efforts to bring more black students into B.C.’s student body and provide them with the support they needed to graduate. His creativity went in diverse directions. The Boston Theological Institute, a consortium of nine graduate theological schools and seminaries of different faith traditions, came into existence in 1967 as a result of a chance conversation on a plane trip, between Shea and the dean of the Episcopal Divinity School, about how their institutions could respond to the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II.

In 1968, the new president of Boston College, W. Seavey Joyce, S.J., asked Shea to become the university’s first executive vice-president. It was a tumultuous time in America and in higher education. An unpopular war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, and the spirit of the counterculture resonated on even relatively conservative campuses like Boston College’s. The new administration commissioned a financial audit and discovered a serious deficit. Tuition hadn’t been increased for several years and when it was a four-week student strike resulted. Students occupied several buildings protesting different issues and their own voicelessness in settling them. By temperament and by his position, Shea was the focal point of many of the controversies and inclined to see merit in the students’ view of some of them. He restructured the school’s financial administration and was instrumental in hiring the treasurer who would bring the institution out of its financial problems. But his critics were numerous and he knew that his own position had gradually become untenable and in 1971 he resigned from Boston College.

He became president of St. Scholastica College in Duluth,
then a small liberal arts college for women, whose previous presidents had all been Benedictine nuns. A friend from those days said that he descended on the college and Duluth “like a Cape Cod nor’easter.” The college had just decided to admit men and Shea calculated that a sports program would attract more of them, so he created a men’s hockey team, which in its first season won the league championship. He invited the whole college community to fish fries at his lakeside house when the seasonal smelt run occurred. He built residence halls and promoted curricular reform, developing programs in Indian studies and in media studies. His interests were not limited to the Scholastica campus. He led the establishment of the Lake Superior Association of Colleges and Universities, joined the local Rotary Club, headed the citizens’ lobby that brought a medical school to the University of Minnesota Duluth, and helped establish a Duluth public radio station.

Then, in 1974, he surprised everyone with three momentous decisions: he resigned the presidency of St. Scholastica, went through the canonical process of leaving the Jesuits and the priesthood, and married Susan Gussenhoven, a research physicist on the Boston College faculty, whom he had met at the Newman Club at the University of Minnesota when both were graduate students. That fall he took on a new challenge as chancellor of Antioch College’s original campus in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Antioch has a storied history in American education. Its first president was Horace Mann. It was one of the first colleges to admit women, to pay its female faculty the same as men earned, and to admit black students. It was also born in controversy—two different Christian denominations supported its establishment and contended over its early policies—and controversies have periodically marked its history. The central issue that dominated Shea’s years as chancellor (and arguably led to the demise of Antioch thirty years later) was whether the resources of the Yellow Springs campus were being drained to support the growth of a “greater Antioch” that offered law degrees and other professional graduate programs in store-front facilities across the country. Shea sided with those who thought Antioch’s main business was the liberal
arts college in Ohio. A showdown ensued. The visionary president of greater Antioch fired Shea. The trustees restored him and fired the president. But it was a no-win situation and on June 30th, 1977 Shea resigned as chancellor, saying he would rather quit than stay on in an unworkable administrative structure. On July 9th, he died of a massive heart attack. For the determinedly secular institution Antioch had become, the funeral Mass celebrated in the school’s open-air amphitheater was a whole-hearted and beautifully executed ceremony attended by some 500 members of the Antioch community. A few days later another funeral Mass was celebrated at Boston College.

Frank Shea wrote voluminously—about education, literature, current events, the Jesuits, and the Catholic Church. His mind roamed across wide spaces. An early set of lectures was delivered in Trinidad on “Student Revolt and Black Power,” a later talk on “Higher Education and the Duluth Economy.” But most of what he wrote was tailored to occasions and audiences, and published if at all in out of the way journals and proceedings. Other than a book he jointly authored in 1967, The Role of Theology in the University, and an unpublished collection of essays about education, his account of the Shadowbrook fire, though youthful work, is the only book-length project he finished.

In the questions he wrestled with and in the resolutions he arrived at Frank Shea lived a life not unlike those of many of the young men who passed through Shadowbrook in the years after World War II and then faced the challenges of the sixties and the seventies. In this respect his account of the fire and of the world in which it occurred preserves a valuable picture of a significant moment in the history of American Jesuits, and of the U.S. Catholic church, when the changes to come had not even been imagined but the foundations were being laid for all the different ways Jesuits would respond to them when they did.

~ J. A. Appleyard, S.J.