

SHEEDY AWARD PRESENTATION
Kathleen Sprows Cummings
December 7, 2021



Rev. Edward Sorin, CSC (1814-1893) & Mother Mary Ascension (Mathurin) Salou, CSC (1826-1901).
Credit University of Notre Dame Archives/Sisters of the Holy Cross Archives

Thank you, Pam, so much, and congratulations *in person* as the 2020 Sheedy Award winner; today's reception is in your honor, too. I am delighted to be in your company, both as a Sheedy award winner and as a faculty member in Gender Studies. I can say the same about Jason Ruiz, the 2019 Sheedy awardee, who my colleague in both Gender and American Studies.

It is really gratifying to see how widely the publicity surrounding this honor has acclaimed my efforts to integrate women and gender into historical narratives. To be honest, this aspect of my teaching that has not always garnered universal praise. I think, for example, of a comment I received on one of my teaching evaluations when I first started teaching my "Catholics in America" class: "I know women were *important* in the history of the church, but Professor Cummings seems to think they have made up half the population!"

As you know, I was trained in the Department of History, tenured in the Department of American Studies, and now a Professor in both. I often am asked to explain the difference between the two disciplines, and I have found a few concrete ways to differentiate the two.

American studies is more visual, more consciously interdisciplinary, more explicit about positionality, more...well, just MORE.



Tellingly, the department uses this meme as a marketing tool; a copy hangs on the office door of Pete Cajka, our Director of Undergraduate Studies.

I love being part of both and would like everyone in the College of Arts and Letters to know the extent to which I embrace this duality.



Let me hasten to clarify that I never actually taught in a getup like this-- I wore it to an Oscar party the year Rocketman was nominated for best picture--but I show it today because it captures a principle that has long informed my teaching: I never mind looking foolish in the interest of getting a point across. Cultivating a sense of humor is particularly important for teaching history, a task that I believe is fundamentally dead-serious. This has never been more apparent than it is in today's America, when so many reduce the study of the past to the uncritical celebration of it.



This meme began circulating a few years ago, in response to fierce debates over the removal of statues depicting Confederate heroes. Those who suggest that the removal of monuments that reflect the biases of ages of ages past is tantamount to erasing history fail to understand that representations only tell part of a story; they always oversimplify, and they often distort or omit.

I have been fascinated by historical monuments since I was a child, in large part because I grew up not far from Philadelphia's Independence Hall and the other historical markers that

commemorate the founding of the United States. I am grateful to my parents for, among other things, taking them to see us very often. We were often accompanied by overseas visitors from our extended family. My maternal grandparents, Tom and Margaret Duffy, were born in Ireland, and because one of grandmother's sisters migrated from Derry to Manchester, I have a bunch of English cousins as well as Irish ones. The summer I was ten, the visit of two of the former overlapped with the Fourth of July. Caught up in a patriotic fervor, my siblings and I, in an admittedly juvenile way (we were juveniles, in our defense), began to tease them about how *our* scrappy founding fathers had trounced *their* stronger, richer, empire. My cousins, who were about a decade older than us, responded with genuine bewilderment. That's not the way the war ended at all, they said, going on to explain that, in essence, the King had decided to stop fighting the rebels because he realized that the American colonies were no longer of much financial or strategic use to Britain.

My ten-year old brain exploded.

Certainly there are more sophisticated debates to be had about the origins and meaning of the American Revolution. But the underlying lesson I learned that long ago day is delightfully while there are plenty of details about the past that can be verified—dates and names and battlee and treaties—interpretations of them vary according to who is telling the story and from what perspective. Studying history is an enormously complex endeavor that requires us to sift through tons of evidence and listen to as many voices as possible.

Professor Robert Kerby, a professor of History who won the Sheedy Award in 1994, accepted only reluctantly because he believed there was no way to calibrate good teaching or to compare teachers. "Insofar as teaching remains a human enterprise," he said in his Address,

“there as many ways to teach as there are humans beings to do it.” His technique was to “tell more stories and hurl out more details than students can possibly catch,” keeping in mind that he was preparing most of his students not for academic life, but for citizenship in the nation and the world. Maybe, he hoped, “the more History tells her stories about compromise and conflict, decency and fanaticism, politics and war, religion and economics, baseball and slaughter, the more her pupils may enjoy a chance to discover for themselves that choices exist – and that, if they are to be both moral human beings and virtuous citizens, they must, in the end, choose.”

Unlike Sheedy Award winners Gail Bederman, Tom Blantz and Bill Miscamble, who were my teachers long before they were my colleagues (and from whom I continue to learn), Robert Kerby was never a formal teacher of mine. Like many doctoral students in History, I occasionally sat in the back row of his lecture course on the Civil War, to learn and to marvel. Kerby’s precisely timed, extraordinary detailed lectures riveted his audiences. He arrived at the classroom hours early, so he could draw meticulous battlefield maps on the blackboard in colored chalk.

In fall 1994, my second year in the doctoral program and my first as a TA, Kerby visited our teaching seminar to speak on the art of lecturing. I sent him a thank you note. A few days later I received a two-page typewritten, heavily footnoted response, along with a copy of his Sheedy Award address, which he had delivered a few weeks before. Between what I can glean from his letter and my own memory, it is clear that my note had expressed a measure of discouragement at what I perceived as my failure to engage students in my discussion sections. I must have written something to the effect of: “Thank you for showing us how not to make

history boring,” because that’s what he latched onto, offering a decisive corrective. Actually, he wrote, studying the past was often very boring, and our responsibility was to educate, not to entertain. But I should not worry. As I learned more, and gained more experience, I’d find my own ways of engaging students. Meanwhile, closing with a piece of advice that heartens me to this day: “Don’t let yuppie homogenous macho ND adolescent ennui get you down.”

Those exchanges constituted the sum total of our epistolary relationship, and I never had a one-on-one conversation with him. I had not been in touch with Professor Kerby for many years when news of his death reached me last April. I did reach out to his wife Mary, to tell her how much Kerby’s Sheedy Address and his letter continue to influence me. It’s part of the reason I was so overwhelmed when Dean Mustillo called to tell me I was this year’s Sheedy Award winner. I hung up the phone with her emailed Mary right away, to tell her that Bob was the first person I thought of, and to share how humbled I was to share this honor with him. It wasn’t long before I received a gracious and wise reply. **“I am sure it is well merited and that Bob is delighted for you as well...What he would be saying is to trust your own gifts and skills. You have your unique way of teaching, just as valuable—he would say even more valuable-- than his. The context and students have changed in the last 25 years and you have met that challenge.”**

As her husband had done a quarter century ago, and as all good teachers do, Mary, who taught for many years at Saint Mary’s, reminded me that I had a voice and encouraged me to use it. She also prompted me to think very personally about change over time, which is, after all, the historian’s bread and butter. Notre Dame has changed since 1994—it *has* become less homogenous, for one thing, and also less macho (I often think how unfathomable it once would

have been to work under the leadership of History department chair Elisabeth Koll, Dean Mustillo and Provost Miranda). My approach to teaching does differ substantially from Bob Kerby's, both in content and in style. I couldn't draw a map of a Civil War battlefield to save my life, but I can tell lots of stories about the 600 Catholic sisters who served as army nurses throughout that conflict, and I love to explore with my students the ways memories of the Civil War shaped the American Catholic experience in the 1880s and 1890s, including right here on campus.



"Absolution Under Fire" was painted by Paul Wood in 1891, when he was a 19-year old student at Notre Dame. Featured is Rev. William Corby, CSC, future president of the University who served as a chaplain during the Civil War. The veracity of this representation is called into question in all sorts of ways. Civil War experts, for example, explain that the geography is all wrong; the boulder is an allusion to Little Round top but the actual position of the regiment was. It's likely that Corby had been wearing his army uniform, rather than his clerical habit. Like the work of his professor, Luigi Gregori, Wood's art reveals far more about the age in which it was created than it does about the moment it depicts. By imagining a pivotal moment in the

American past as a thoroughly Catholic story, Wood was claiming an American identity for Catholics in an age when many argued their religion disqualified them from U.S. citizenship. When my students and I view “Absolution under Fire” up close, we have wonderful discussions about the relationship between memory and history, and between religion and patriotism. The students really resonate when they learn the artist was about their age, and they are moved to find out he died in a tragic accident less than a year after he completed “Absolution under Fire.”

The fact that I have incorporated Wood’s painting, the Columbus murals, and other local sites into my classes for many years was the main reason I began to contemplate, a few years ago, developing a new course called Notre Dame and America. I thought it wouldn’t be all that difficult to do—which just goes to show that even Sheedy winners still make rookie mistakes. As you all know, it is never easy to create a new course, even on a subject you think you know well. I also do not have to tell you how gratifying it is to stretch yourself, and how much you learn about your subject and about the art of teaching.

“Notre Dame and America” is not structured as an internal history of the University as such but as the story of its evolving place in the United States, and particularly about the role played by Catholicism, which, as the reason for Notre Dame’s founding, was there from the beginning, unlike football, which entered the story much later. One of the many fun facts I learned from Father Blantz’ marvelous history of Notre Dame is that the most popular sport on campus in the 1880s was...marbles!¹²

¹ Thomas E. Blantz, CSC, *Notre Dame: A History* (Notre Dame, 2020), 168.

² Andrew Mach, “Paul Wood’s *Absolution Under Fire*: Remembering Gettysburg at the American Vatican,” *American Catholic Studies* 127: 1 (2016): 103-113.



"It was not considered a match contest, as the home team had been organized only a few weeks, and the Michigan boys, the champions of the West, came more to instruct them in the points of the Rugby game than to win fresh laurels... The proceedings began with a tutorial session in which players from both teams were divided irrespective of college."

"Football". *Scholastic*. November 1887. Final score: 8-0, Michigan

—FOOTBALL.—For some days previous to Wednesday great interest had been manifested by our students in the football game which had been arranged between the teams of the Universities of Michigan and Notre Dame. It was not considered a match contest, as the home team had been organized only a few weeks, and the Michigan boys, the champions of the West, came more to instruct them in the points of the Rugby game than to win fresh laurels. The visitors arrived over the Michigan Central R.R. Wednesday morning, and were at once taken in charge by a committee of students. After spending a few hours in "taking in" the surroundings, they donned their uniforms of spotless white and appeared upon the Seniors' campus. Owing to the recent thaw, the field was damp and muddy; but nothing daunted, the boys "went in," and soon Harless' new suit appeared as though it had imbibed some of its wearer's affinity for the soil of Notre Dame. At first, to render our players more familiar with the game, the teams were chosen irrespective of college. After some minutes' play, the game was called, and each took his position as follows:

USNA, or M.—Full Back: J. L. Duffy; Half Backs: J. E. Duff, E. McPherson; Quarter Back: R. T. Farland; Centre Back: W. W. Hanson; Rush Line: F. Townsend, E. M. Sprague, T. H. Casp, W. Young, G. W. De Haven, M. Walsh.

USNA, or N. D.—Full Back: H. J. Terry; Half Backs: J. Casack, H. Lubin; Quarter Back: G. Carlin; Centre Back: G. A. Hoack; Rush Line: F. Fehr, P. Nelson, B. Hawkins, W. Sprague, T. O'Brien, P. P. Maloney.

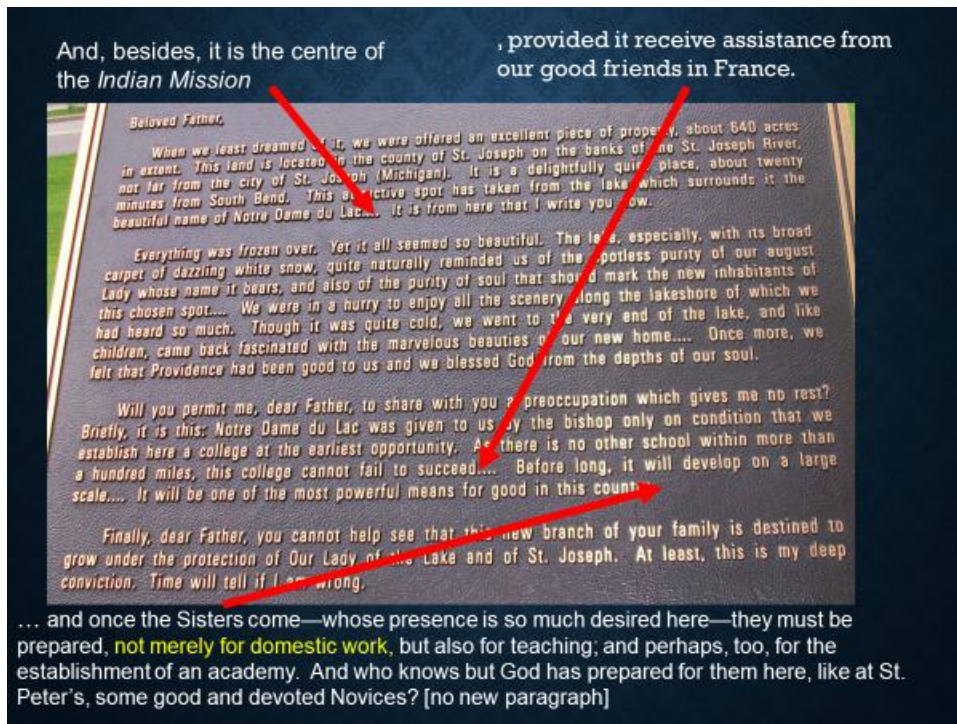
On account of time, only a part of one inning was played, and resulted in a score of 8 to 0 in favor of the visitors. The game was interesting, and, notwithstanding the slippery condition of the ground, the Ann Arbor boys gave a fine exhibition of skillful playing. This occasion has started an enthusiastic football boom, and it is hoped that coming years will witness a series of these contests. After a hearty dinner, Rev. President Walsh thanked the Ann Arbor team for their visit, and assured them of the cordial reception that would always await them at Notre Dame. At 1 o'clock carriages were taken for Niles, and amidst cheering cheers the University of Michigan football team departed, leaving behind them a most favorable impression.

I promise the students on the first day that we will, eventually, talk about football. I also tell them that I realize many of them enrolled in the course because they love Notre Dame—and that's terrific. But I also tell them that if they expect this course to be about great Notre Dame is, was, and always will be, this is not the place for them. This is a history course, I say, not a pep rally. Together, we will utilize as many sources as possible to think about how Notre Dame, not unlike America, is many things: a physical location and landscape; a community that both includes and excludes; an institution that has changed a great deal since its founding; a place that aspires to the highest of ideals, and as such has tremendous capacity to inspire, as well as a very real power to disappoint. I tell the students that approaching Notre Dame as scholars does not have to mean they will love it less. If anything, the desire to know a place better, and undertaking the necessary hard work to do so, are themselves expressions of love.

One of the assignments requires the students to research a place on campus. They learn so much from these assignments, especially when they choose a place that means a lot to them. Just like my students, teaching this course has helped me see spaces I love in a new way.



My favorite example of this is the Founders Plaque. Installed near the Log Chapel, overlooking St. Mary's Lake, the Plaque is inscribed with an excerpt from a letter Father Sorin wrote to Basil Moreau on December 5, 1842, soon after he arrived on campus after an arduous journey from southern Indiana. He predicts that that the University cannot fail to succeed and it will be one of the most powerful means for good in this country. It's no wonder that these words are so familiar to members of the Notre Dame family. I myself love to visit the Founder's Plaque, especially in winter, to marvel at the audacity of Sorin's vision. But again, monuments only tell part of the story, and because of my preparations for this class, I discovered the words behind the ellipses.



Published translations of Sorin’s original letter to Moreau reveal what words have been redacted from the monument. The first elision invites us to consider what happened before Notre Dame du lac, how conscious Notre Dame’s Founder was that he was living and learning on traditional homelands of indigenous people—and directs us to do the same. We can see that Sorin’s much vaunted optimism was qualified by the acknowledgement that the venture depended on near-constant flow of money and missionaries across the Atlantic—not only France, but also Ireland. The third elision omits the assumption that Sisters would be essential to Sorin’s project, as they would be. Four Holy Cross Sisters arrived from France in 1843, and the many more soon followed, including Mother Mary Ascension who came to become Father Sorin’s second hand. When she died in 1901, mourners eulogized Mother Ascension as “the last

of [Notre Dame's] pioneers" who had been second only to Sorin in "achieving the present greatness of Notre Dame."³

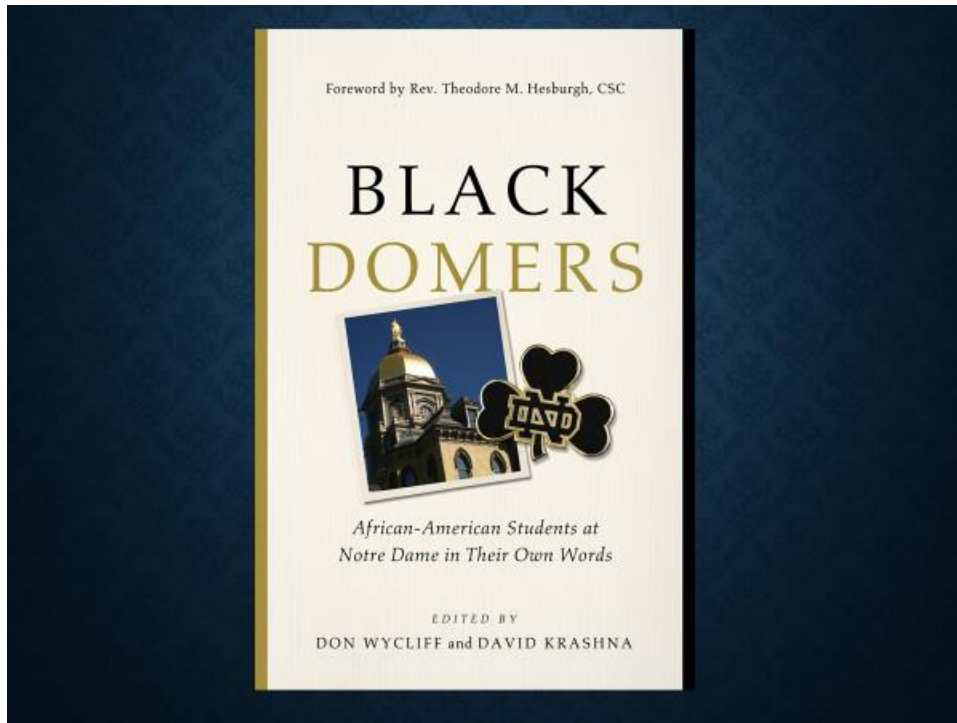
I had never heard of her, nor most of the sisters who lived and worked on the campus until 1958—and I say this as a person who has been writing about women's invisibility for twenty-five years.



The highlighted text foreshadows an epic conflict that ensued, not long after the Civil War, when Sorin pressured the sisters to abandon their educational initiatives in favor of focusing exclusively on serving Notre Dame's domestic needs. However much to admire about Sorin, he was subject to the dynamics of gender and power in church and society at the time.

³ "The Last of the Pioneers," *Notre Dame Scholastic*, May 1, 1901; See also "Sketch of Mother Ascension's Life," n.d. Box 1, Folder 15, Sisters of the Holy Cross Collection, University of Notre Dame Archives.

There is always more to learn. Pictured is a book I assigned last time I taught the course.



One of my go-to final exam questions (which, like so many other things that work well, I cribbed from teachers that I watched, in this case my friend Colleen Seguin at Valparaiso) is: write a letter to Professor Cummings advising her whether or not to assign this book the next time she teaches this course. When they hate a book, the letters are at least fun to read. In the case of *Black Domers*, however, they were profoundly moving. The students pleaded with me to keep assigning the book. Many students felt consolation in learning that others had shared the same experiences; others wrote that their eyes were opened to the ways race and racism shaped Notre Dame's story. The book helped teach them something that should be said more often: the iconic photograph of Father Hesburgh and Martin Luther King tells one story, and it's a good and important one. But there are other stories to tell about race at Notre Dame.

And yet, this book is not enough. All of its contributors, even with negative experience, felt themselves to be members of the Notre Dame family. How do you include the voices of those, for whatever reason, never felt themselves to be members of the Notre Dame family?

Another thing I obsess over is how to make my courses more accessible, and I am grateful to colleagues like Professor Katie Walden for sharing her expertise in digital technology.

Professor Kerby promised me 27 years ago that I'd get better at teaching, and apparently I have—as I accumulated more experience in the classroom. And I have. Even so, I believe that I learned my most valuable lesson about teaching college students outside of a classroom setting. Just over a year after Kerby and I exchanged letters, I found myself at a crossroads. I had lived for my first three years of graduate school with a friend who was in law school; she was graduating, and I was about to start my dissertation. While most the writers in the novels that I read thrived in their solitary apartments, I knew enough about myself that I would not. My solution was to live assistant rector in a residence hall on campus. In my letter of application, I couldn't very well say that I wanted to do this as a hedge against loneliness, so I wrote that I planned to spend a career teaching undergraduates, and maybe living with them would help me understand them better.

It certainly did, though not quite in the way I anticipated. Three weeks before I moved in Farley Hall, a rising senior named Patty Kwiat was a passenger on TWA 800 when it crashed into the ocean off the coast of Long Island. Patty's death cast a long shadow over the Farley community, especially the seniors, and accompanying in their grief was just the beginning of

two years spent walking with residents through sexual assault, through eating disorders, diagnoses, addiction. I also walked with them as they made lifelong friends, fell in love, discovered who they were and who they wanted to become. It was an enormous privilege, and in the long run it has helped me avoid what I see as an occupational hazard of college teaching: assuming that our classes are anywhere as close to the center of our students' lives as they are in ours. I worry far less today about adolescent ennui than I do about students' anxiety. I make clear to my students that while I have high expectations for them, nothing, including my class is more important than their mental health. Some days when I find myself taking things too seriously, I re-route myself to the west side of Farley Hall, where there is tree planted in Patty Kwiat's memory outside Farley Hall. Like the art student Paul Wood, Patty never received a Notre Dame degree. But like Wood, and like countless others whose names are forgotten to history, Patty was here, and her presence mattered. Humbling to the stories I will never know.

To my surprise, I fell in love when I lived in Farley—with the charming assistant rector of O'Neill Hall. Tom Cummings is sitting right over there, along with our son, TC, and our younger daughter, Annie. (Our oldest, Margaret, is a junior at Loyola University of Chicago). Thomas is the wisest and funniest person I know, and it's his wisdom and humor that to help me do everything, including teaching. He knows better than anyone how much time I put into teaching, and, with the possible exception of Kevin Barry from the Kaneb Center, how much I obsess over negative student comments on student evaluations.

Mentioning Kevin and the Kaneb center reminds me that any success I have had in the classroom is owed to a host of supporting actors: Jean McManus, Rachel Bohlmann, and everyone in University Libraries, Archives, and Special Collections; Bridget Hoyt of the Snite

Museum. Katie Schlotfelt and all the department administrators; Shane Ulbrich and MaDonna Noak of the Cushwa Center, who cheerfully accept that everything we do revolves around my teaching schedule, doctoral students who have served as teaching assistants for my larger classes; Holy Cross priests—list goes on and on. I am also so gratified to see so many of my students here today, including a group from Faith & Feminism, from that never-to-be-forgotten spring of 2020.

Finally, I am grateful to all my colleagues in the College of Arts and Letters, who take teaching so seriously and work so hard to do it well. Kerby promised me I'd get better at teaching, but neither he, nor anyone, ever promised me it would ever be easy. As we close a semester when we all walked into class every day and did our best, let's celebrate all we've accomplished together.