

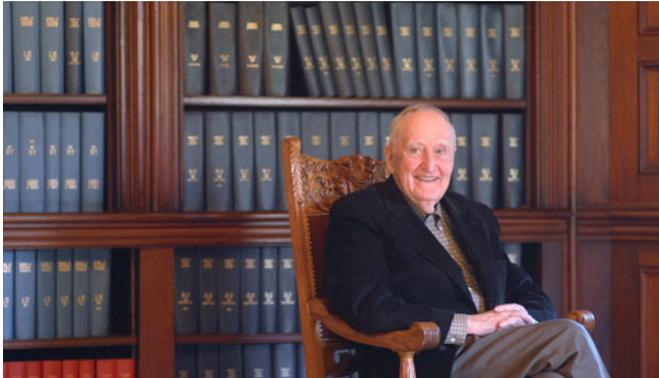


**Mount Saint Mary College**  
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## FEATURES

### James Finn Cotter: Accomplished scholar and professor



It's impossible to spend time with James Finn (Francis) Cotter without sensing that one is in the presence of a person. Like a millennial Renaissance man, Cotter has navigated his life with his senses fully engaged, and his intellectual, natural and spiritual influences.

Cotter is a scholarly gem, and has been an invaluable resource at Mount Saint Mary College since 1963. He's chaired the Divisions of Humanities, Arts and Letters, and Religious Studies and Philosophy over the course of the college.

As scholar, poet, author, critic, professor, philosopher, translator, mentor, seminarian, world traveler, father, husband, grandfather – Cotter's many roles converge in a life and person full of substance and achievement. It's clear over the years, Mount students have felt themselves lucky to study under his tutelage.

#### James Finn Cotter

What is Cotter like? In manner and mien, he's gentlemanly, dignified and tweedy. It's obvious how and why he earns the respect and admiration of his students, perhaps tinged with a wee streak of healthy fear. He has a charming, engaging smile that reveals a wealth of Irish charm.

He's wry and witty; perceptive and vastly intellectual, and meticulous with his words. His memory is astounding. If he seems a bit impatient at times, it's probably because he's usually several leaps ahead in the conversation.

He is also consistently and unfailingly busy. This past summer, Cotter celebrated his 81st birthday as he flew to Spokane, Washington to preside over the International Hopkins Association conference. He then traveled to Los Angeles to meet his new grandson. Cotter flew back to New York to participate as lecturer in the Road Scholars program at the Mount. He also published a dozen theater reviews this summer.



No wonder Ann Damiano, the former director of outcomes assessment at the Mount and a friend of Cotter's, says "I was just listening to his plans for the weekend."

#### Work and family

Cotter is the author of *Inscape: The Christology and Poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins*; *Beginnings: the First Twenty Years of Mount Saint Mary College*; and *A New Life: Learning the Way of Omega*. As a scholar, he has penned on Hopkins, Dante, Geoffrey Chaucer, Sir Philip Sidney, and J.D. Salinger. As poet and literary critic, he's been published in *America*, *Commonweal*, *The Hudson Review*, *The Nation*, *The New York Times*, *Sparrow*, *Spirit*, *Thought* and various periodicals.

Cotter is a celebrated translator of Dante's *Commedia*, a seasoned theater and arts reviewer, a Fulbright-Hays recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, and the president of the International Hopkins Association for 30 years. He's also been the mace bearer at the Mount's Commencement for as long as anyone can recall.

Somewhere in his remaining capacious free time, Cotter found time to teach literature and philosophy full-time at Mount's alma mater (1964), capture the first 25 years of the Mount's history in the book *Beginnings* (1975), teach in Algeria as a Fulbright scholar (1970), inspire any number of students and professors (since 1963), write literature, edit *The Hudson Review* and *America*, and raise three children (Anne, James and John) with his wife Emily.

He also found time to become an experienced and enthusiastic hiker, drawing on his outdoor experiences by exploring natural and spiritual themes in his poetry.

### Literary influences

It's interesting to note that the impetus for two of his major works: *Inscape* and the translation of Dante's *Commedia*, were born of Cotter's scholarly desire to clarify the authors' intents. As a student of Hopkins, Cotter thought that the prevailing literature about Hopkins missed some of his most primary gifts and influences.

Cotter's translation of Dante's *Commedia* began early Christmas morning in 1983.

*The Divine Comedy* was published in 1987 by Element Books, a translation free of rhyme. "I believed that translating without the need to rhyme allowed more of Dante's original meaning to resonate," said Cotter.

Critics and students agreed, and today Cotter's translation remains one of the most respected. The revised edition of the translation was published in 2000 by Forum Italicum Books.

Cotter's literary influences include, in addition to Hopkins and Dante, Sir Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare, and J.D. Salinger.

### From whence he came

Cotter hails from the Dorchester area of Boston, where his parents James B. Cotter and Catherine (Kitty) Finn Cotter settled after emigrating from Ireland in the mid-1920s. Cotter's father had seen enough political unrest and violence during the "troubles" in Ireland after the Free State Treaty was enacted, and brought his fiancée Kitty to Boston, where they married. (For you students of Irish history, Cotter's father met both Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera during his service as an Irish soldier.)

Cotter was born in 1929, the year that the stock market collapsed, ushering in the Great Depression. As the eldest of 4 children, Cotter was raised in a close, warm family environment that prized religion and education. Not surprisingly, he was an excellent student who made his parents very proud (particularly his mother.)

Cotter's life as a Jesuit seminarian began at Shadowbrook in 1948, in the Berkshires of Massachusetts. Later, he studied with the Jesuits in Belgium and Italy. He said that "the Jesuits introduced me to a love for enjoying life in its many forms: intellectually, spiritually and naturally."

Cotter received his bachelor of arts from Weston College in 1954, and a master of arts in philosophy in 1955. In 1958, he received a master of arts in English from Fordham University and a doctorate in 1963. His doctoral dissertation was "A Glass of Reason: Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*."

### The Mount Era

Nineteen-Hundred and Sixty ushered in a sea change in Cotter's life. The 31-year old man left the seminary and began teaching in the English department at Fordham University. Later that year, he married Emily Kerrick and their daughter Anne Seton Cotter was born in 1963. The young family lived in the Bronx while Cotter taught at Fordham.

Cotter was introduced to the Mount in 1963 through Dr. George Sommer, then an English professor at Marist College. Dr. Sommer accepted the position at the Mount, and the Cotters bought their home in Newburgh in 1963. Cotter began teaching English and philosophy at the Mount.

Cotter accelerated both his academic and publishing careers in earnest throughout the 1960s, writing and publishing poems and critical essays. Sons James and John joined Anne in the Cotter household in the 1960s.

In 1970, Cotter was awarded a Fulbright-Hays Lectureship at the University of Oran in Algeria, where he taught English and the Modern American Novel. Cotter packed up his young family to head to Algeria for 10 months. He enjoyed traveling through France, Spain, Morocco, and Tunisia while overseas, and spent a summer in Paris.

Cotter also earned a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to spend a summer working on Hopkins' *Inscape*. On this project, the manuscript for his book *Inscape* was born. Published by the Pittsburgh Press in 1972, the book received mixed reviews by critics.

Cotter continued writing and publishing poems and critical essays throughout the 1980s, and soon took on a new moniker as a performing arts reviewer in New York and Connecticut. (As of 2010, he still has as many as 1-2 reviews published per week in newspapers.)

Throughout the 1990s, Cotter and wife Emily traveled abroad each year, often attending Dante and Hopkins conferences. Cotter taught classes for the Elderhostel group at the Mount each summer. He also focused on a new edition of the Dante translation while teaching, reviewing, and writing and publishing poetry, critical essays, and articles on Medieval Illumination. The revised edition of Dante's *Commedia* was published in 2000.



In 2009, Cotter published the book *A New Life: Learning the Way of Omega*. The Curtin Memorial Library at th reading in September of 2009, at which Cotter discussed his influences for the book, and read from the text.

How does Cotter do all this, at a time in life when many in his position would rest on a wealth of laurels? Cotte admirable zest and energy for life, and for his work, to being Irish. "We never sit still, never are satisfied. There's always something more to do, more to learn."

Carry on, Dr. Cotter. We'll do our best to keep up with you.

