

Photo: Gary Wayne Gilbert



A Conversation with Fr. Jim Skehan, SJ

by Grace Regan

A citation is prominently displayed behind Fr. Jim Skehan's desk at the Weston Observatory. It reads: *This is to certify that: Father James W. Skehan, Grand Man of Science, Honored Teacher, Faithful Man of God, and Beloved Friend, is hereby and forthwith in addition A Fictional Character in the Antarctic mystery novel In Cold Pursuit, scribed by Sarah Andrews and published August 2007 by St. Martin's Minotaur, NY. As fictional Fr. Skehan the glaciologist, you are entitled, each time you or anyone else reads said tome, to travel to the great continent of Antarctica, do great science, right wrongs and perform sacred rites on the fabled ice and landforms thereof.*



Fr. Skehan standing next to his geological collection at Weston Observatory. The close-up shot is of the model of the middle Cambrian trilobite genus that lived 505 million years ago, named for Fr. Skehan

Fr. Jim Skehan spends his days and nights at the Boston College Weston Observatory located on the grounds of Campion Center. I had an opportunity to spend the afternoon with adventurer Fr. Skehan and his team of scientists, present and past; the spirit of the pioneers who began the work in seismic research can be felt and seen due to the reverence of Fr. Skehan and his team to those who came before them. A portrait of the Jesuit adventurer Fr. Daniel Linehan, SJ, is prominently displayed with a dedication plaque as you enter the observatory. Fr. Skehan immediately guided me to a map on the wall and pointed out the placement and the photos of the Linehan glacier in Antarctica, which is in peril of melting with the changes in the global climate.

The depth and breadth of Fr. Skehan's work is overwhelming. He is a scientist, a geologist, a theologian and a seismologist. He is a spiritual mentor and author of countless works on Ignatian spirituality and on one of his

mentors, Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ. He describes Teilhard as an attractive spiritual companion and guide in this created universe in which we live, because of his biblically based perspective on the Christ of the Universe. Fr. Skehan says, "as a scientist of distinction, Teilhard brought the awe and wonder inherent in geology to where science, religion and mystical spirituality come together in Christ."

Fr. Skehan is a warm and gracious Jesuit who has served as a spiritual director and founder of "Ignatian Spirituality in Every Day Life" at Boston College. His book and companion guide were made possible by the generosity of the Jesuit Community at Boston College. The program is based on the Spiritual Exercises arranged as a 24-week retreat in four phases according to the 19th Annotation.

One of his greatest joys is that a Mount Holyoke paleontologist, Mark A.S. McMenamin, named a half-billion-year-old genus of trilobite *skehanos quadrangularis* to honor Fr. Skehan's contributions to the study of geology. Fr. Skehan has also contributed to the geological literature of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut with his Roadside Geology series.

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the founding of Weston Observatory in November of 2005, Fr. Skehan offered the following invocation:

"God, Creator of our Earth and Universe, we invoke your blessing on our lives and our work: past, present and future. We pray, as Solomon did, for wisdom as we work to unravel the secrets of Nature still locked up in tectonic plates and in super continents. Our God, Creator of Earth and Universe, we thank you for those gifts and blessings that are now ours because of the life and wisdom of St. Ignatius."



Snapshot of Fr. Skehan saying the first Mass on the newly surfaced volcanic island of Surtsey, south of Iceland in 1970. (Courtesy of Alice Howe, Curator of Collections, New England Jesuit Archives at the College of the Holy Cross)



To learn more about Weston Observatory visit the website at www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/geo/Faculty/Skehan.html. To read more about Fr. Skehan's story, visit www.jesuitorallhistory.org