



**A Disposition to Be Rich: How a Small-Town  
Pastor's Son Ruined an American President,  
Brought on a Wall Street Crash, and Made  
Himself the Best-Hated Man in the United States**

*Geoffrey C. Ward*

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## **A Disposition to Be Rich: How a Small-Town Pastor's Son Ruined an American President, Brought on a Wall Street Crash, and Made Himself the Best-Hated Man in the United States** Geoffrey C. Ward

Ferdinand Ward was the greatest swindler of the Gilded Age. Through his unapologetic villainy, he bankrupted Ulysses S. Grant and ran roughshod over the entire world of finance. Now, his compelling, behind-the-scenes story is told—told by his great-grandson, award-winning historian Geoffrey C. Ward. Ward was the Bernie Madoff of his day, a supposed genius at making big money fast on Wall Street who turned out to have been running a giant pyramid scheme—one that ultimately collapsed in one of the greatest financial scandals in American history. The son of a Protestant missionary and small-town pastor with secrets of his own to keep, Ward came to New York at twenty-one and in less than a decade, armed with charm, energy, and a total lack of conscience, made himself the business partner of the former president of the United States and was widely hailed as the “Young Napoleon of Finance.” In truth, he turned out to be a complete fraud, his entire life marked by dishonesty, cowardice, and contempt for anything but his own interests.

Drawing from thousands of family documents never before examined, Geoffrey C. Ward traces his great-grandfather's rapid rise to riches and fame and his even more dizzying fall from grace. There are mistresses and mansions along the way; fast horses and crooked bankers and corrupt New York officials; courtroom confrontations and six years in Sing Sing; and Ferdinand's desperate scheme to kidnap his own son to get his hands on the estate his late wife had left the boy. Here is a great story about a classic American con artist, told with boundless charm and dry wit by one of our finest historians.

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# **From Reader Review A Disposition to Be Rich: How a Small-Town Pastor's Son Ruined an American President, Brought on a Wall Street Crash, and Made Himself the Best-Hated Man in the United States for online ebook**

## **Louise says**

Author Geoffrey Ward tells the reader from the start: "Ferdinand Ward was my great-grandfather". Usually books written about a forbear salute their great accomplishments. This is the only biography I know of, where the forbear is a scoundrel. These stories are usually left to someone else.

Many biographies begin with the subject's childhood. This one begins with the lives of the subject's parents (i.e. the author's great-great-grandparents) and something of their parents. This is significant because it builds on the author's introductory comment that Ferdinand Ward "tuned out eerily to mirror the distorted personalities of the missionary parents who raised him."

The subject's parents, Ferdinand Ward, Sr., and his wife Jane Shaw Ward, were insufferably self-righteous. While you might expect missionary life to be a perfect fit for their piety, it wasn't. While in India, the Wards continued to seek better housing than their peers. They tried to pick and choose their assignments. They shunned people for very petty reasons. They seemed to have no regard for the feelings or contributions of others. Back in the States, Ferdinand Ward, Sr. caused trouble wherever he went.

It is Jane Shaw Ward who gives the book its title. She says this of her son in one of her supremely out of touch letters. Jane Ward had a curious relationship with wealth. She inherited some (it doesn't say where it went - maybe bailing out her son - maybe it was preserved) which she hid from her husband's congregation. Her letters show not just dissatisfaction with her situation, but self-pitying envy of the life styles she attributes to others.

Perhaps it is because Ferdinand Ward, Sr. was shunned by his family for going to India instead of leading a church parish that his father preferred, that he continued to defend his own son whose life had little to do with the values he preached.

The reader benefits from the author's unique access to primary sources: his grandfather, Clarence Ward, who was kidnapped and hounded by his father for the small wealth his mother was able to shield on his behalf and a trunk that held significant documents regarding Geoffrey Ward's great-grandfather's dealings.

The Ferdinand Ward scandal is fascinating on its own, but the family context makes this book stand out. It may set a new standard for biographies because it demonstrates how generational linkage can be portrayed. I highly recommend this to general readers of history and biography.

Comment

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## **Donna Campbell says**

I really enjoyed this book.

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### **rmn says**

This is a phenomenally interesting read which is part biography, part character study, and part period piece of the US in the mid to late 1800s from the point of view of both a regular-ish family and rich New Yorkers on Wall Street.

The book tells the story of Ferdinand Ward who was the late 19th Century's Bernie Madoff, but not only did Ward bilk investors out of millions, he also somehow snookered former President Ulysses S. Grant in to being his business partner. So it's like if Bernie Madoff had gone in to business with Bill Clinton and used him to both help raise more money and to give his investing the air of legitimacy.

A really fascinating read, especially the realization that Wall Street hasn't changed one bit in over 120 years. People were just as greedy back then, looked for just as many get rich quick schemes, and suffered from the same incredible hubris that eventually led to their downfalls. The similarities with today are striking.

The story is rich (pun intended) and the writing is lively enough that it reads like fiction. And what makes it all the more interesting is that the book was written by Ferdinand's great grandson who had access to source documents and materials beyond what anyone else would have had.

Highly recommended.

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### **Leslie Rogers says**

#### **A sad story of deceit**

This is a fascinating story of a relatively smart person who lacked the confidence that on his own in an honest pursuit of an honest career was beyond his ability to survive as a middle class person.. He for some reason felt that without immense riches his family would reject him as having any value.. Indeed, his family was self centered and without values that they could pass along to him.

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### **Joy says**

Interesting social history. Due to Ron Chernow's new book, General Grant has become a focus of interest. While another member of my family is reading that book, I decided to mark my time by reading this one, made all the more interesting by the fact that the author is the great grandson of Ferd Ward.

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### **Teri says**

I really enjoyed this book. I learned so much about history and I was fascinated with the lives of all those

involved. Couldn't believe how loyal the Ward family was to their son/brother. People are crazy and some things never change. There's nothing new under the sun when it comes to deception and power. Different era, same problems today!

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### **Tom says**

Did we really need to find out about the author's missionary ancestors? Their tales could be edited out to focus on the main character.

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### **Nolan says**

What kind of power do you need to charm scores of people into giving up the equivalent of millions of dollars? What kind of lies would you have to tell to trick so many people and dupe a famous writer and a former president? To answer that, you need to look at the life of Ferdinand Ward, the small-town preacher's kid who swindled in grand style, even bringing down Wall Street.

One of the things that makes this book most interesting is that it is written by the great-grandson of the man who bankrupted a former president and probably hastened that president's death.

As you read this, you'll see it coming. Ward grew up in a hyper-religious home with parents who were strict and in many ways distant and disconnected. That said, the family constantly bailed Ward out of financial trouble as he grew up. But the guy was a pathological liar. He created a pyramid scheme that involved imaginary government contracts that seemed attractive to other investors since former President Grant's name was associated with the company.

But it all fell apart, as pyramid schemes will do, and a true American hero raced against time to pay off his bankruptcy bills and at least attempt to regain some of his honor and leave his wife in a situation where she wouldn't starve after his death.

Ward, on the other hand, lands only six years in prison. I was astounded at the light nature of his punishment. Granted, he lost all his personal holdings and his wife died while he was in prison, but he didn't seem to care for her anyway, since he had squandered her inheritance. He cared only for the son she bore him because the boy became the beneficiary of what was left of her inheritance. So twisted is this guy that he at one point kidnaps his son in a failed attempt to claim the inheritance.

This is the story of a sick twisted individual whose narcissism is eclipsed only by his ability to lie and cheat those in whom he gained trust. You will be both infuriated and fascinated as you read about Ferdinand Ward's behavior.

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## **Audrey says**

Geoffrey C. Ward, a well-renowned historian, (especially regarding the work he has completed with Ken Burns), painstakingly pieced together a magnificent retelling of his infamous great-grandpa, Ferd Ward. Ferd was a sociopath who would stop at nothing to cheat folks out of their money--even an ex-President/war hero U.S. Grant and his own flesh-n-blood son, Clarence! It is a wild ride to read this story, to say the least! I enjoyed how G.C. Ward started out by telling the tale of Ferd's parents and siblings--it really shed light on a lot of threads that could connect to create Ferd's personality.

It takes a brave person to shake out those skeletons in the closet and reveal them for all to witness. Not that Ferd was unknown for his financial infidelities in his day, but he is not a usual figure within the history textbooks.

I was dumbfounded and fascinated by this book. The research and detail was wonderful. I would recommend this book to not only history buffs, but to those who are curious about human nature in general, and the ??WHY??? behind how some people are driven to do the things they do.

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## **Charles Areson says**

It may seem strange to say but this book gave an interesting insight into human nature, even my own. Though I knew when Ferdinand was quoted he was lying about information he supposedly had, the audacity of them caused me to wonder for a second if he might have had. However, that is the power of someone who has no conscience over those who do, we can't imagine doing anything like that (unless you're watching politics a lot).

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## **Catherine Woodman says**

The subtitle of the book, which is a bit of a run on sentence, is like the executive summary for the book: How a Small-Town Pastor's Son Ruined an American President, Brought on a Wall Street Crash, and Made Himself the Best-Hated Man in the United States. I can't speak to the 'best-hated man' part, but the rest of it is not an exaggeration.

The book is about the life of Ferdinand Ward, and it was written by his great grandson, so there was excellent access to family records, as well as to people who knew the man himself. The book contains the usual stuff of biographies—an examination of the background and family that might have adversely influenced a man who grew up to be a successful con man and a sociopath to the end.

Whether or not Ferd had the makings of a man who wrecked havoc before the Civil War, the events of the war did nothing to improve his character. In 1863, the young Ferdinand Ward was alone with his mother in their parsonage in Geneseo, N.Y., his minister father and older brother both off to war and his older sister visiting relatives out of town. Diphtheria swept through the village, killing friends and neighbors, and each mail delivery carried the risk of disaster. Ferd was exposed to the quixotic nature of death, and that life contains no guarantees. And his mother didn't help any. She had a religious zealot's dour view of the secular world and of the wages of sin. Hers was not a reassuring presence during those fearful days, and under her tutelage, young Ferd absorbed a lesson that would mark the sweep of his adult life: "No one should expect

virtue, no matter how conspicuous, ever to be rewarded in this world."

That, combined with a narcissism that was truly impressive, became the calling card of his life. He deserved what he could beg, borrow, and steal from people. He married well, parlayed his wife's money and standing into an investment firm, an associated bank, and the influence of Ulysses S. Grant, the ex-President and Civil War hero. After the whole scam goes down the tubes, the Grant families lose everything. Ulysses lives in a house that he no longer owns, and occupies through the kindness of the new owner. His sons both lose their homes. Ferd, showing no remorse, starts to go after what money is left of his wife's estate, which she has wisely tied up in the hands of others. It is in some ways the tale of the classic con man. But in others, it is a reminder that we want to believe what is too good to be true, and that the greed of man is infinite. Our most recent brush with disaster was at the hands of men like Ferd, men who took everything they could get and had absolutely no regard for others. These sorts of men are alive and well.

As Shakespeare so aptly put it, hell is empty, all the devils' are here.

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### **Jason R. Gross says**

Geoffrey Ward great grandson of Ferdinand Ward is the author of this great book and he also does stuff with Ken Burns on PBS. Ferdinand Ward is just a sociopath of epic proportions in this book from James Fish to Will and Sarah and to his son Clarence it was all about Ferdinand and how poor he was all the time after the Grant and Ward collapsed. The author tells you in his book that Ferdinand was no good rotten guy. "Before Bernard Madoff ... There was Ferdinand Ward... A beguiling reminder that human nature doesn't change much from one gilded age to another" the Wall Street Journal and that is true in this book the greatest con artist of all time.

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### **Nicole Marble says**

Author Ward mines his own family for a fascinating story; it seems one of his ancestors was rather similar to Bernie Madoff.

It makes one wonder about genealogy - perhaps one might not want to know such things about one's ancestors. But, an excellent and long book. If you get tired of it, don't put it down without reading the last surprising chapter.

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### **Michael Kearney says**

Just an excellent tale of woe in the Victorian age. I thought the author (great grandson of the subject) was very objective and minimized any opinions that the current generations of Wards had. I tried to imagine my g-grandfather as a well known crook. A very interesting position. The book gives few details of the end of Ferd's life. I would have liked to see the entire picture. Also absent was over enthusiasm on all the potential openings for psycho analysis. I think that is the sign of a great piece of work. Let it speak for itself.

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## **Edward Frantz says**

An engrossing read; a truly amazing story. Academics might not find it analytical enough, but everyone else will just find themselves mesmerized by a tale that involves some of the biggest names in the Gilded Age, including President Grant. And, importantly, the book shows how pyramid schemes have been part of American life for longer than many realize.

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