

Chapter 1

Life

Robert Frost became a legend in his own long lifetime and participated in the shaping of the legend of his life's story. In addition to the dozens of interviews conducted from his return to the United States in 1915, we have Robert Newdick's incomplete *Season of Frost* (1939; published in 1976) and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's *A Swinger of Birches* (1960), which was intended mostly as a critical study though Frost cooperated and provided a variety of information. Lawrance Thompson's official biography, begun in the 1940s and completed posthumously in the early 1970s, remains an invaluable source of information, if a troubling and self-consciously troubled interpretation of its subject and especially of the poetry. Thompson left more than 15,000 pages of notes for yet another book on the writing of a biography, which provide useful material for anyone wishing to delve deeply into the nuances of Frost's life. In more recent years, William Pritchard's *Robert Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* and Stanley Burnshaw's *Robert Frost Himself* have presented counters to some of the legends created by the Thompson biography. Pritchard's biography, in particular, has focused more on Frost's literary contexts. John Evangelist Walsh's *Into My Own: The English Years of Robert Frost* focused on that period in Frost's life, while Jay Parini's *Robert Frost* has also provided a balanced, comprehensive, one-volume study vision of the poet's working life.

More than almost any American poet of the twentieth century and even of the nineteenth century, Robert Frost became an icon in his own time, an almost granite-like figure worthy of a place on Rushmore or a similar pantheon of poets. To many he came to represent values of individualism, independence, agrarian New England, country values. The image of his reading a poem at John F. Kennedy's inauguration, the first poet in American history to do so, remains etched in the national imagination. However much John F. Kennedy or Lionel Trilling or Randall Jarrell alluded or flat out pointed to Frost's darker truths and terrors, Frost himself had managed very well to project an image of an avuncular, sometimes rambling and witty talker. But not the master of tragic fate, Sophocles, nor the continental intellectual and prophet of shattered sensibilities, T. S. Eliot. The deep thinking, the immense skill and thought of

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the poetry, and – above all – the tragedies of his life were matters he kept very close to himself and revealed only to a few friends.

When Thompson's biography started to appear in the 1970s and depicted Frost as an egotistical monster to his family and friends, many were either horrified or all too eager to see this sage of American letters knocked from his pedestal. Yet, Frost's moods, envies, jealousies in the end could be attributed to the tortured relationship his biographer had with him and in part to Thompson's inability to interpret Frost's tone and sense of irony. Frost would hardly be the first or the last artist to have been difficult, moody, or even depressed, and no doubt he was at times all of those. Sentimental expectations about his personal life or conduct probably went hand in hand with sentimental and naïve interpretations of his poetry, which persist miraculously despite years of finely tuned and attentive scholarship and criticism. Be that as may be, Frost's personal story was filled with what will appear to anyone to be a great number of hardships as well as triumphs, though it remains a risky enterprise to read any but a few of the poems biographically. By any measure Frost's biography embraces more than an ordinary share of horrors. He lived to see the deaths of four of his children; two suffered severely from mental illness, and one committed suicide. He long outlived his only wife, Elinor, whom he had met at high school, and then fell into an affair with a married woman who would not leave her husband. Through it all, Frost – wounded and no doubt tortured – remained by all accounts devoted to his family and to his art. One should not be surprised by the darker passions that suffused his life nor by his immense humor; both and much more are in the poetry as he seemed to face relentlessly the bleakest questions of existence.

The great farmer-poet of New England actually spent most of his childhood in two cities. Robert Lee Frost was born in San Francisco, on March 26, 1874, the first son of William Prescott Frost, Jr. and Isabelle Moodie. Frost's father had been born in Kingston, New Hampshire, the only son of an old New England farming family. His mother had been born in Scotland, the daughter of a sea captain, who died soon after her birth. Frost was named for Robert E. Lee, the Confederate general, because his father had run away as a teenager during the Civil War and joined the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia under Lee before he was sent home. Later, he attended Harvard University and was graduated Phi Beta Kappa. He married Belle Moodie in 1873 and for a while they were both school teachers in Lewiston, Pennsylvania, before moving to San Francisco. There he became city editor of the San Francisco *Daily Evening Post*, edited by the social reformer Henry George.

The first decade of Frost's life was in part a tempest created by his father and the extraordinary and eccentric teaching of his mother. His sister, Jeanie

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Florence, was born during a trip with his mother back east in 1876. Frost did not enjoy his early schooling, often complaining of nervous abdominal pain. His mother was a conscientious and forceful educational influence, and by second grade Frost was baptized into her Swedenborgian Church. She also read aloud to him from Emerson, Shakespeare, Poe, the Bible, classical myths, and romantic poetry. Soon after their return to California, Frost's father was diagnosed with consumption after being declared champion in a six-day walking race. He also challenged himself by swimming in San Francisco Bay while young Robert watched terrified. His father also became deeply involved in politics, first as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Cincinnati in 1880, and later in 1884 when he resigned his job on the newspaper to run for city tax collector on the Democratic ticket. Both times, he was on the losing side, and fell into depressions exacerbated by drinking. Often out of work and in rapidly declining health, he died of tuberculosis in 1885, leaving the family virtually broke.

Frost and his family would be bailed out by his paternal grandfather, William Prescott, Sr., a retired mill supervisor, who would continue to be a looming financial presence in his life for more than two decades. Frost's father was buried in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where Frost began to attend school commuting by train from nearby Salem, where his mother was teaching. Frost's graduating class consisted of only 32 students, though more than 70 had been members of his class freshman year. Some accounts of Frost's Lawrence years give the impression that his family suffered severe economic hardship. While it may be true that Belle Moodie was not wealthy, Frost never endured poverty while in Lawrence. He was also able to pursue his studies relatively free of external hardships.

The early 1890s saw important growth in both Frost's indoor and outdoor schooling. At the top of his class in 1889 and 1890, Frost studied algebra, Greek and Roman history, European history, Latin, and, of course, English literature. Befriending an older student named Carl Burrell, Frost developed a lifelong interest in botany, astronomy, and evolutionary theory. His favorite reading at the time included Prescott's *The Conquest of Mexico and Peru*, Jane Porter's *The Scottish Chiefs*, and Richard Proctor's *Our Place Among the Infinities*. In addition to learning haying on Loren Bailey's farm, Frost also earned enough money to buy his first telescope by selling subscriptions to *The Youth's Companion*.

A poem inspired by Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico*, entitled "La Noche Triste," became Frost's first published verse and appeared in the Lawrence High School *Bulletin* in April 1890. More poems followed, including "A Dream of Julius Caesar," and Frost became editor of the *Bulletin* as he prepared to graduate and enter Harvard. In his senior year he met and fell in love with his classmate

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Elinor Miriam White, beginning what would be a tempestuous courtship and the most important relationship of his life.

Elinor and Robert were co-valedictorians at their graduation; Robert's address was entitled "A Monument to After-Thought Unveiled" and Elinor's "Conversation as a Force in Life." After graduation, Robert worked as a clerical assistant in the Lawrence mill. He became engaged to Elinor in a private exchange of rings. Because he was dependent upon his paternal grandfather's support, Robert was persuaded to go to Dartmouth instead of Harvard. His grandfather argued that Dartmouth was both less expensive and less likely to do the kind of damage to him that he believed Harvard had done to his father. Bored, restless, and focused on Elinor, he left Dartmouth before the end of the first semester.

What happened to Frost after he returned to Salem, Massachusetts, in 1893 has become one of the most wild and mysterious episodes of his biography. He briefly helped his mother with unruly students at her school and then took a job in Arlington Woolen Mill in Lawrence changing carbon filaments in ceiling lamps and studying Shakespeare in his spare hours. Elinor had returned from studying at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, and Frost had asked her to marry him. But she would not leave college as he asked, and she returned in September. Frost quit his job in the mill in February 1893 and began teaching grade school in Salem. He also learned that *The Independent*, edited by Susan Hayes Ward, would be publishing his poem "My Butterfly: An Elegy," and paying him \$15 for it (the poem would later be collected in *A Boy's Will*). Frost again tried unsuccessfully to persuade Elinor to marry him, and prepared a privately printed selection of poems for her entitled *Twilight* ("My Butterfly: An Elegy," "Summering," "The Falls," and "An Unhistoric Spot"). He traveled to St. Lawrence to present her with a copy and, presumably, inspire her to elope. But her icy response sent him back to Salem. In a state of despair, he traveled to the Dismal Swamp in November by train and walked for miles into the swamp, presumably with the intention of drowning himself. Instead, he allowed a group of boatmen to take him to Nags Head on the Atlantic coast, where he jumped freight cars to Baltimore. His mother sent him the train fare that allowed him to return to Lawrence by the end of November.

Despite the near-tragic trip to Virginia, Elinor and Robert were married in Lawrence in December 1895 in a ceremony presided over by a Swedenborgian pastor. He and Elinor, who had graduated from St. Lawrence, lived with Frost's mother and sister. Both continued teaching school, Frost for a while at his mother's school house in Lawrence. His first child, a son, Elliot was born in September 1896. Though Frost was writing, he seemed to want to have the necessary credentials in classics to teach at a good school in order to earn a

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decent income. He passed the Harvard College entrance examinations in Latin, Greek, ancient history, and physical sciences, and with money borrowed from his grandfather entered Harvard as a freshman.

Frost studied at Harvard during its golden age of philosophy, and took courses with George Santayana, Josiah Royce, the classicist George Herbert Palmer, and Hugo Munsterberg. He had wanted to study with William James, who was on medical leave, but read his *Principles of Psychology* under the tutelage of Munsterberg. He also studied evolutionary geology under Nathaniel Southgate Shaler (the Steven Jay Gould of his era), and English literature as well as classics and the requisite German, with which he struggled slightly. An excellent student, he withdrew, after he felt he had enough, and as doctors warned him about concerns about too much sedentary work.

At the dawn of the century, Frost turned from the life of student-teacher to farmer-poet. He took up poultry farming early in 1899 with financial help from his grandfather, but family pressures began to change his life in drastic ways. His daughter Lesley was born in December 1899 but his mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer just a few months later. In July 1900 Elliot died of cholera, and Frost began to suffer symptoms of depression that would plague him for years. The family moved to a 30-acre farm in Derry, in southern New Hampshire, purchased by William Prescott Frost. Frost's mother died shortly thereafter.

Though not the most assiduous of farmers, Frost worked the Derry farm full time from 1901 to 1906. He also worked intensely on his poetry at night, filling his notebooks with drafts that would eventually become a number of the poems of his first four books. When his grandfather died in 1901, he willed him an annuity of \$500 and use of the farm for ten years, after which the annuity was to be increased to \$800 and Frost would have ownership of the farm. Frost was hardly wealthy but he was not pressed. He kept up his poultry business and published stories based on the poultry business in *Farm-Poultry* and *Poultryman* (the poem "The Housekeeper" and "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury" also reflect his experience with poultry breeders). The Frost family also grew in these years; his son Carol (b. 1902), Irma (b. 1903), and Marjorie (b. 1906).

From 1906 to 1911, Frost made a transition back from farming to teaching, while still working on his poetry. He assumed a post teaching English at the Pinkerton Academy in 1906, and he would develop a reputation for an innovative, conversational teaching style with an emphasis on "the influence of great books and the satisfactions of superior speech." Frost's teaching impressed the New Hampshire superintendent of schools sufficiently to invite him in 1909 to lecture before assemblies of New Hampshire state teachers. He did so but was

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so nervous that he put rocks in his shoes to create pain to distract him from the audience. Frost also directed students in plays by Marlowe, Sheridan, and Yeats. A particular favorite of his was a production of Milton's masque *Comus*.

By 1911, Frost had sold the rest of his poultry and moved the family from the Derry farm, first to nearby Derry Village and then to Plymouth. He began teaching psychology and education at the Plymouth State Normal School, assigning works by William James including *Psychology: Briefer Course* and *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. He also taught works by Herbert Spencer, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Plato. Though Frost had published several of his poems in *The Independent*, *New England Magazine*, and the Derry *Enterprise*, he had no success interesting New York or major American publishers in his poetry.

Elinor and Robert decided together that the family needed to move on from Derry in some kind of adventure. Frost wanted to devote himself entirely to writing and thought that getting away from Derry might be a good idea. The choice was between journeying out west or going to England, and they chose the latter. With the money from the sale of the farm, the Frosts planned to live modestly in England for a few years where Robert could write.

By 1911, Frost had decided to sell his farm in Derry and move away – somewhere, away. He later described the decision about where to go as a coin toss between Canada and England, with the latter winning. But there were probably a number of reasons for choosing England, including both its literary climate and relatively low cost of living. Sale of the farm in New Hampshire and an annual annuity of \$800 from his paternal grandfather would provide the funding for Robert and Elinor and the four children to live very modestly in England while Robert continued to write. Elinor was attracted to the romance of living in a thatched-roof English cottage. Frost hoped their money would last as long as four or five years but ultimately it did not. On the other hand, Frost's literary fortunes developed unexpectedly well within only a few years, enabling him to return to the United States with both publishing and teaching opportunities. They sailed from Boston in August 1912, stayed in London for a week, and rented a cottage in Beaconsfield, twenty miles north of London. Within a few months, Frost prepared the manuscript of his first book, *A Boy's Will*, and found a publisher, David Nutt, who accepted it. Robert Frost's first book was published on April 1, 1913 in London. He was thirty-eight years old. When he left for England he was a hard working but not particularly successful farmer and an unknown and virtually unpublished poet. When he returned, he was on his way to one of the most remarkable careers (if such a term can be used to describe Frost's remarkable life) in literary history.

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Whatever Frost's motives, he did not appear overeager to ingratiate himself in the London literary scene. Living in Beaconsfield, Frost focused on his writing but also sought out a publisher and managed to spend some time amongst the literary lions of modernism. Traveling into London, Frost met and sparred with W. B. Yeats, Ford Madox Ford, and Ezra Pound as well as Rupert Brooke, Jacob Epstein, T. E. Hulme, Laurence Binyon, Robert Bridges, Walter de la Mare, and Robert Graves. As his funds grew low and some of his and his family's patience with literary London wore thin, Frost eventually moved to rural Gloucestershire where he intensified his friendship with the Georgian poets, devoted more like himself to country things, Wilfred Gibson, Lascelles Abercrombie, and, perhaps most important, Edward Thomas. Thomas and Frost developed a deep friendship through which both men, especially Thomas, grew as poets. It ended, tragically, with Thomas's death in combat in 1917.

It would be wrong to simplify Frost's complex relationship with literary London. He spent time at Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop and with sculptor Jacob Epstein through whom he met the critic and philosopher T. E. Hulme.

Frost was conscious from the beginning of being an outsider to literary London. On January 8, 1913, Harold Monro, editor of *Poetry and Drama* and publisher of *Georgian Poetry*, opened his Poetry Bookshop in London. Frost was present at this literary event. On the occasion, poet Frank Flint asked Frost whether he was American. Surprised, Frost responded, "Yes, How'd you know?" Flint simply replied: "Shoes."¹ It was Flint who made the introduction between Pound and Frost and a number of the London literary elite. In an amusing way, Frost was first identified in London as an American by his square-toed shoes more suited to a New Englander.

Hulme and Frost had numerous fruitful conversations about a range of philosophical and aesthetic matters including Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* and imagism at Hulme's flat on Frith Street. He found an admirer in Robert Graves, who would later call Frost "one of the very few poets alive whom I respected and loved."² Through Pound, Frost met Yeats twice at his Bloomsbury apartment and discussed the Irish poet's plays he had put on with students while teaching at the Pinkerton Academy. But he also found Yeats to be a "false soul" (N, 457), engaged in too much of a masquerade in and out of his poetry. Yeats's holding forth seriously about leprechauns and fairies as well as treating Frost, as Pound did, with mild condescension also fueled Frost's animosity.

Frost's most complex relationship was with Pound, the Idaho-born poet who became a latter-day European troubadour and a father of literary high modernism. At the urging of his new London acquaintances, Frost came calling on Pound who quickly secured an advanced copy of the first edition of *A*

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Boy's Will, about to be published by David Nutt. Though Frost shared Pound's belief that poetry should be every bit as well written as prose (or, at least as prose could be), Frost came to have little patience for Pound's cosmopolitan championing of literary rebellion, the cult of making it new. Frost preferred "the old fashioned way to be new," a phrase Frost used in his remarkable appreciation of E. A. Robinson, his Introduction to *King Jasper*. Though Pound wrote two insightful and largely positive reviews of *A Boy's Will*, Frost also became sorely annoyed by Pound's patronizing and condescending attitude toward him. Pound, Frost's junior, had taken the attitude that he had virtually discovered this "VURRY Amur'k'n" writer,³ whom he once also went so far as to call a "backwoods, even a barnyard poet,"⁴ unfair indeed given Frost's dramatic and metric sophistication; his great knowledge of Roman and Greek poetry in the original was a classicism that Pound could at best only fake. Although *North of Boston* was largely assembled when Frost met him, Pound took enormous credit from friends for having encouraged Frost to publish this book of eclogues and georgics.

Frost's letters from late in 1913 indicate that though he was comfortable in England, money was running low. Beaconsfield had none of the appeal of rural England, and by March, the Frosts had decided to move to the village of Dymock in the heart of the Gloucestershire countryside to be near Wilfred Gibson, Lascelles Abercrombie and "those that spoke our language and understood our thoughts."⁵ Frost admired Gibson and described him in a letter to a friend back in the States as "my best friend. Probably you know his work. He much talked about in America at the present time. He's just one of the plain folks with none of the marks of the literary poseur about him – none of the wrongheadedness of the professional literary man."⁶ Surely he imagined Gibson in marked contrast to both Yeats and Pound.

In England, in the midst of conversations about poets with Hulme and Flint, Frost made his most pointed formulations about the sound of sense in letters to his friends and former students in America, John Bartlett and Sidney Cox.

The publication of *North of Boston* in 1915 by David Nutt was met by favorable reviews in *The Nation* (London), *The Outlook*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, *The English Review*, *The Bookman*, *The Daily News*, and other journals. Frost's literary reputation had now grown as his financial resources dwindled. He prepared to move back to the United States determined not to become part of the elite group of modernist literary ex-patriates writing for a limited audience. However much Frost insisted on his subtlety and integrity, he also disdained obscurity.

Frost returned to the United States in February 1915. Henry Holt published *North of Boston* in the same month, followed by *A Boy's Will* in April. Both

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received remarkably strong reviews. The Frosts settled on a farm in Franconia, New Hampshire. It was a moment in which Frost had to make choices among teaching, farming, and writing as he indicated to a bemused reporter who visited him at his farm:

You know, I like farming, but I'm not much of a success at it. Some day I'll have a big farm where I can do what I please and where I can divide my time between farming and writing . . . I always go to farming when I can. I always make a failure, and then I have to go to teaching. I'm a good teacher, but it doesn't allow me time to write. I must either teach or write: can't do both together. But I have to live, you see? (I, 12)

With growing fame from the reputation of his books, Frost began an on-and-off career of teaching and giving public talks that would continue for the rest of his life. In 1916, Henry Holt published his third book, *Mountain Interval*, and Frost read "The Bonfire" and "The Ax-Helve" at Harvard College and also gave readings in New York, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania. He also accepted an offer to teach at Amherst College for one semester per year, and began in the fall of 1917 with courses on poetry appreciation and pre-Shakespearean drama. The initial relationship with Amherst lasted only three years. Frost wanted to spend more time writing and less time teaching, and in 1920 he resigned. He also had a fallout with Amherst President Alexander Meiklejohn over personnel matters in the English department (Frost appeared to regard Meiklejohn as too morally permissive). He moved from Amherst and sold the Franconia property, buying an eighteenth-century stone farmhouse in South Shaftsbury, Vermont. Consulting for Henry Holt involved occasional trips to New York with Elinor, but he also continued public talks and readings, including an inaugural reading at the new Bread Loaf School of English in Ripton (near Middlebury College), with which he would have a life-long affiliation. Frost also planted an apple orchard and pine trees with his son Carol. His sister Jeanie, who was living in Maine, was suffering from mental illness, and needed hospitalization.

Frost could not keep himself completely out of academe for long. In 1921, he accepted a position as Fellow in Letters at the University of Michigan, a position that required advising students and giving talks for one semester but no teaching. He held the post for two years before returning to Amherst in 1923 after President Meiklejohn had been fired. Frost taught courses on literature and one on critical judgment. His discussions at Amherst on quantum mechanics with Danish physicist Niels Bohr became an important inspiration for "Education by Poetry" (1930), his essay on metaphor and belief.

New Hampshire, Frost's fourth book, published late in 1924, included the title poem, a long work with "notes and grace notes." Frost was awarded his

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first Pulitzer Prize for the volume, and he also received honorary doctorates from Middlebury and Yale. The tennis match between Amherst and Michigan continued when Frost accepted a lifetime appointment from the University of Michigan, with no teaching obligations, beginning in the fall of 1925. Frost left his family in New England while he taught in Michigan. His daughter Marjorie suffered from severe physical ailments, while her sister Irma's mental health also deteriorated. The strain of Frost's tenure in Michigan proved too great. When Amherst President George Wilson Olds visited Michigan and offered Frost a new position, he accepted and started teaching again in January 1927, along with his summer affiliation with the new Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

The next decade saw great professional triumph for Frost and deep personal loss. In 1928, *West-Running Brook* and an expanded edition of his *Selected Poems* were published by Holt, with whom Frost was now able to negotiate a higher percentage of both royalties and monthly payments. On a trip to Europe with Elinor, Frost traveled to Dublin to visit Yeats, Padraic Colum, and George Russell and also met T. S. Eliot for the first time in London. Frost was awarded his second Pulitzer Prize for his *Collected Poems* (1930), and he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. When Edwin Arlington Robinson died in 1936, Frost wrote a remarkable Introduction to his final book, *King Jasper*. In 1936, Harvard honored Frost with an appointment as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry, which required him to deliver a series of lectures. Frost's lectures focused on "The Renewal of Words," and were delivered to audiences of thousands at Memorial Hall. Although the lectures were intended for publication, no manuscript or transcription of them survives. *A Further Range* (1936) won Frost his third Pulitzer Prize in 1937.

Frost had kept a breakneck lecturing schedule during these years, very often to help pay for the medical expenses of his family. His sister Jeanie had been committed to a state mental hospital in Augusta, Maine, and died there in 1929. His daughter Marjorie suffered on and off from a variety of severe ailments including a pericardiac infection and pneumonia. After she married and had a daughter in 1934, she contracted puerperal fever and died, despite Frost's efforts to have her treated. Elinor underwent cancer surgery late in October 1937. The Frosts went to Florida for her recuperation but she died in Gainesville after a series of heart attacks in March 1938.

Frost resigned from his position at Amherst College. He had become close friends with Theodore Morrison, director of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and his wife, Kathleen, "Kay," Morrison, in 1936. In the turmoil after the death of his wife, Frost began a tumultuous relationship with Kay Morrison that started with a sudden marriage proposal and then settled into her becoming his professional assistant for the rest of his life. By 1939, Frost had