

Robert Frost

Read and Remembered

His Centennial Celebration at

Agnes Scott College

Edited by

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AGNES SCOTT'S FRIENDSHIP WITH ROBERT FROST

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The last week in January, 1963, had been designated on the Agnes Scott College calendar as the time for Robert Frost's twenty-first visit. After his operation and several heart attacks, it was recognized that it would be some time before he could fulfill the engagement. Even so, we were not prepared for the news announcement that Robert Frost had traveled his last mile and kept his last promises at Agnes Scott. He had gone to sleep in the early morning of January 29, 1963.

In a brief release to the press, we said simply that we had lost a great friend whom we valued for his poetry, for his wisdom and wit, but most of all for himself; that through more than twenty years, Robert Frost had built himself into the structure of things at Agnes Scott; that our affection for our friend was deep and sincere; and that we who knew him in this unusual relationship would miss him in a very unique and special sense.

The friendship between Agnes Scott and Robert Frost began in November, 1935, when he came to the campus for the first time upon the invitation of Miss Emma May Laney, then Associate Professor of English and Lecture Association Chairman. Miss Laney had heard Mr. Frost lecture at Columbia University and had written that she was "impressed with his stalwart integrity, his courage, and his humor." She continued: "I was especially struck by his reading of 'The Code' and his comment that college students are like the hired man in the poem: you can tell them what to do but not how or how much. I felt that we must have him for a lecture at Agnes Scott."

Frost's first public lecture here on November 7, 1935, was highly successful. He arrived in the early morning and left after the lecture that night. One of the students who met him

at the railroad station was Sara Catherine Wood, who later became Mrs. Peter Marshall (now Mrs. Leonard Le Sourd, a valued member of the Agnes Scott Board of Trustees).

Robert Frost visited Agnes Scott for the second time in May of 1940. From 1945 until his death, he came each year, usually in late January, for visits varying in length from three days to a week.

In the course of his last engagement on this campus in January, 1962, Robert Frost made the statement that, so far as he knew, the Agnes Scott collection of Frostiana in balance and value is one of the finest in existence. Beginning in 1944, Miss Laney and Mrs. Edna Hanley Byers, Agnes Scott's librarian, initiated and developed plans for the Frost collection in the library. Mr. Frost, from the first, was interested in this project and contributed generously to it. Miss Laney gave to the library the first editions that Mr. Frost had sent to her, as well as complete sets of Christmas cards and other valuable additions to the Agnes Scott collection. After Miss Laney's retirement, Mrs. Byers continued aggressively to build the Frost collection. His own appreciation for her is shown in an inscription that he wrote in 1960: "For Edna Byers, my faithful friend and indefatigable collector." This college has its own portrait of Robert Frost here on the campus. Mr. Frost gladly consented to sit for the portrait, painted by Ferdinand Warren, in the course of his visit in 1958. Mr. Warren, now Professor Emeritus of Art, was one of the people at Agnes Scott whom Mr. Frost particularly liked. While posing, he wrote from memory the little poem, "Questioning Faces," inscribed it and presented it to Mr. Warren. The portrait was unveiled on the occasion of Mr. Frost's lecture in January, 1959, while Mr. Warren and Mr. Frost stood together beside it on the platform.

When the College entered upon the intensive phase of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary Development Program in the winter of 1960, Robert Frost was asked to serve as Honorary National

Chairman. He accepted without a moment's hesitation, saying that he was honored to associate himself with the plans and purposes of this college. This brief note came on February 16, 1960: "Thank you for the opportunity to take any part you will permit me in the campaign to make your great college greater. As you know I have had a growing affection for you through the years. My heart's with you."

May I be permitted now to share with you some personal impressions of Robert Frost and to cite some incidents that illustrate these impressions. I had the privilege of being on hand for fourteen of the twenty visits that he made to Agnes Scott. He was our house guest ten times. Madelaine and I spent many hours with him and had the opportunity of hearing him express himself on nearly every imaginable topic and of observing him in many different situations.

Well built, big chested, rugged looking, with white tousled hair and blue eyes, our friend would arrive wearing blue canvas rubber-soled shoes, a suit that he didn't bother to press (and who cared!), an overcoat much too heavy for Georgia on ordinary winter days, and a soft hat that usually sat puckishly on the side or the back of his head. With a friendly greeting to each of us, he got acquainted again with our dog and settled in for his visit.

Robert Frost was at his social best in a small group of people with whom he was at ease. He was a remarkable conversationalist. Of course, he did most of the talking. His interests were diverse, his memory inexhaustible, his allusions and analogies both pertinent and puzzling, his phrasing homely and often cryptic, and his wit sometimes sly, often subtle, sometimes delightfully corny. We have sat together for hour upon hour, talking about everything under heaven! The later (or earlier) the hour, the more relaxed and enjoyable Frost became as a conversationalist (really, a monologist).

If you took this man for a kindly, lovable old New England poet whose charm lay in his simplicity, you were in for a

shock. His mind was subtle, nimble, and resilient, and his personality as complex as any I have ever known. You could not pin him down against his will, try as you might. If he wanted to take a position, he made the fact known openly. If he preferred to tease, to toy with you, to be tentative and noncommittal, you had as well let him have his way. He *would*, at any rate. His conversation was often quixotic, paradoxical, and enigmatic. He was independent in his judgments, quick in repartee, and impatient with questions that he regarded as silly or impertinent.

There was one question that Robert Frost consistently refused to answer—a question that I have heard people put to him scores of times in the years that I have known him: “What did you mean in this poem?” His usual answer was to freeze up (as, believe me, he could do) and to say, “You don’t want me to tell you in other and worse language, do you?” His real reason for responding to this type of question was found in a preface that he wrote to *Aforesaid*, a published selection of poems distributed to his guests at his eightieth birthday dinner: “The heart sinks when robbed of the chance to see for itself what a poem is all about Being taught poems reduces them to the rank of mere information.”¹

No one ever doubted that Robert Frost’s art was the central passion of his life. He liked to say that literature is “a performance in words.” For him, poetry was a performance in words without footnotes and without quoted authorities to back him up. I have heard him turn the full impact of his satirical capacity upon T. S. Eliot because of the numerous quotations in such works as *The Waste Land*. One of Robert Frost’s favorite phrases in describing his art was “the renewal of words.” I have heard him say more than once that in a laboratory we sometimes see a crucible of quicksilver upon which gathers a leaden scum; we notice that when it is shaken it crackles like lightning. That is what happens, he would add, when the words in a poem come alive. They

crackle like lightning. Frost lingered lovingly over words, pored over them, dug at them, cared about them.

How many times I have heard Robert Frost toss off a definition, or, more accurately, a description of what a poem is! Here are a few:

A poem is "an arrest of disorder."

A poem is "a momentary stay against confusion."

Every poem is "an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements."

A poem is "a thought-felt thing."

"Like a piece of ice on a hot stove, the poem must ride on its own melting."

Referring to the way a poet takes a thought and releases it in form, he used a familiar figure--"Like a napkin we fold the thought, squeeze it through the ring, and it expands once more."

He referred to the beauty of word and sentence that one gets in the great poets, when every line "pops like popcorn; turns white on you."

"Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another."

When asked on one occasion whether he would define poetry as "escape," Frost replied, "No. Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat."

"A poem," he said, "is never a put-up job It begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness."

Robert Frost at Agnes Scott! Always this meant telephone calls begging for tickets for the lecture in Gaines Chapel; an overflow crowd for the lecture, with many disappointed alumnae and friends turned away; the late dinner at the Dieckmanns' following the lecture; reporters to be scheduled;

radio and television interviews to be arranged; faculty members in our home to welcome Robert Frost back to Agnes Scott and to listen while he talked on and on of poets and their poetry, politics, trips that he had made since his last visit, funny little incidents or anecdotes that seemed worth telling. Each year some one interest seemed to overshadow the rest and to color the monologues. One year it was the trip to South America for the State Department; another year it was Ezra Pound's release, in which Robert Frost shared significantly; again it was the inauguration of Mr. Kennedy; on his last visit in January, 1962, the trend in international affairs, particularly as seen in the United Nations, seemed to us to concern our friend unduly.

When Miss Laney was at Agnes Scott, Robert Frost received extraordinary attention and care beyond the call of duty. Bless her heart, she seemed to feel personally responsible for his health and welfare. Miss Laney was always the first to come by our home to welcome Mr. Frost. She would check and double check meticulously on every detail of his visit. She did not hesitate to make suggestions about his schedule, his diet, his need for rest between engagements, and the importance of wearing his overshoes and scarf if the weather was bad. "She tries to mother me," he would say as soon as she had left. Then, with that wonderful twinkle in his eyes, he would add, "But she's a nice girl. I like her."

One of the unforgettable recollections of Robert Frost's visits to our home was his habit of going alone for night walks. When the conversation in the library had run its course, the members of the family had retired, with the late show on television completed and several glasses of Seven Up consumed, our friend would put on his coat and hat and start out into the dark alone. We discovered years ago that he wanted it that way; he asked only for a key and to be let alone. His little poem, "Acquainted with the Night," written in 1928, is based on the habit of a lifetime (and, I confess, I

find in it more than meets the eye or the ear):

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain--and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;
And further still at an unearthly height
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night. ²

Let me offer an example of the poet's remarkable capacity for observation which he knew how to use in his art. In 1957, Robert Frost was requested to write the introduction to an anthology of *New Poets of England and America*, poets under forty who showed promise. The title that he gave his introduction was "Maturity No Object." He made the point that young poets have their place and should not be too much intimidated by their lack of maturity. Then he wrote this interesting paragraph:

Maturity will come. We mature. But the point is that it is at best irrelevant. Young poetry is the breath of parted lips. For the spirit to survive, the mouth must find how to firm and not harden. I saw it in two faces in the same drawing room--one youth in Greek sculpture, the other manhood in modern painting. They were both noble. The man was no better than

the boy nor worse because he was older. The poets of this group, many of them my friends and already known to many of us, need live to write no better, need only wait to be better know for what they have written. ³

The drawing room to which Frost referred was in our home. The man whose portrait hung over the fireplace is my great-great-grandfather. The sculptured head of the youth is one that has been in our family for some years. Robert Frost observed the two representations when he visited us in January of 1957; the contrast between the firm lips of maturity and the parted lips of youth became the recurring theme of his days with us during that visit.

Frost's sense of humor was one of the personal qualities that gave charm and effectiveness to his public appearances and heightened pleasure to personal conversation with him. I have watched him on the platform as he would tinker with the reading lamp and the loudspeaker equipment. I soon learned that this was a little device of his that helped him get started. After a few asides, he would get his hold on the audience with a mellow, droll humor, often brought about through the inflection of his voice. He could feel the pulse of an audience as readily as any person I have ever known. He knew how to set up the laughs. As one observer put it, "He doubles as his own straight man." Sometimes he was hilariously funny. Many times we have seen him josh an audience, say some rather odd things, talk flippantly about education, politics, or religion, pun a little, perhaps, and then break in suddenly with this:

It takes all kinds of in and outdoor schooling
To get adapted to my kind of fooling. ⁴

Let me recount one amusing anecdote that Robert Frost told us in January, 1958, after returning from his trip to

England where he received the honorary degrees from Oxford, Cambridge, and other universities. Prior to receiving the Cambridge degree, Frost gave a public lecture at the University, holding a vast British audience spellbound. He began by saying: "I'd rather receive an honorary degree from your university than be educated here." Then he discussed poetry. When he came to free verse, he told the audience that writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down. Then he said: "It's like this [counting the fingers of one hand], one, two, three, four, five. And then you play a tune on top of that, see?" With laughter that crackled, he completed his story by quoting the report of his lecture that appeared in the Cambridge press: "Mr. Frost discussed the manner in which speech rhythms could be superimposed contrapuntally upon a basic metrical pattern." ⁵

The Robert Frost whom we have known was by no means a kindly, mild-mannered, grandfatherly figure. He was on occasions tempestuous, high-spirited, always a complex individual--difficult and often unpredictable. His mind and heart seemed often to be tension-ridden, divided, turbulent. It was Lawrance Thompson, Frost's biographer and long-time friend, who called my attention to the fact that the dramatic dialogue that Frost entitled "West-Running Brook" offers imagery that helps in understanding the poet's life and art. A farmer and his wife are discussing a small New England stream that obviously must turn eastward somewhere to flow into the Atlantic but which seems to take a contrary course. It persists in flowing westward. The husband says to his wife,

Speaking of contraries, see how the brook
In that white wave runs counter to itself. ⁶

Lawrance Thompson is right, I think, in his judgment that Robert Frost's personality evidenced "contraries," tensions, inner pulls and tugs. In this man the course of things so often

"runs counter to itself." He is both the reckless, hotblooded father and the gentle Scotch Presbyterian mother; he is both puritan and scoffer at ethical norms, agnostic and believer, liberal and conservative, gentle companion and irate and unreasonable stranger.

I have on a number of occasions heard Robert Frost asked to name some of his favorite authors and books. Two that always came among the first in his list were Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Thoreau's *Walden*. He wrote of them:

Robinson Crusoe is never quite out of my mind. I never tire of being shown how the limited can make snug in the limitless.

Walden has something of the same fascination. *Crusoe* was cast away; Thoreau was self-cast away. Both found themselves sufficient. No prose writer has ever been more fortunate in subject than these two. ⁷

I am not saying that Frost complained about his personal troubles--and he experienced many throughout his life--or that he dramatized in his poetry hardships and disappointments that he had experienced, but I came gradually to understand that there was deep existential apprehensiveness in Robert Frost's life. No biography that omits this fact will ever, in my judgment, prove acceptable to those who have known the man or who have closely read his poems. He found some small relief in his friends, some in his success, more in his art. But there was an unassuaged residue that went with him to his death.

What of Robert Frost's religion? Was he a theist? Was he a churchman? What of his view of Christ? I do not pretend to have any information that is withheld from others. I will simply tell you what I know.

For one thing, this man carried his Bible around in his suitcase and read it. More than once, I have seen him throw open his big suitcase that he had lifted to his bed upon arrival,

to have a well-worn Bible tumble out ahead of shirts, socks, and shaving paraphernalia. Frost knew his Bible; he quoted it and obviously felt at home in its language and its ideas.

My second observation is that Robert Frost, in public discussion and in private conversation, was much concerned, I would say almost obsessed, with matters of religion--the ways of God with men, the place of faith in life, and especially the conflict of spirit and matter. We have talked of these things late into the night. He was always guarded, did not want to be labeled, made many off-the-cuff statements about the Church and aspects of religious living--but it seems to me that religious concern was always close to the center of his being.

Another conclusion is that Robert Frost believed firmly in God. I have never had serious reason to doubt it. He professed that he knew little of what God is like, but he insisted that there is Something or Somebody to be dealt with. I agree with Reginald Cook's statement about Frost's belief in God: "There is genuine humility in his attitude, which consists in respecting God's purposes and in being worthy of His respect Frost keeps well on this side of humility in identifying God's purposes." ⁸

So far as the Church is concerned, obviously Frost had little place for it in his life. He often poked a bit of fun at churches and preachers, but it was harmless enough. He said in January of 1962: "Eliot is more churchy than I am, but I am more religious than Eliot."

The late Edwin Mims said in one of his books that Robert Frost wrote as if no Christ had ever lived. This shocks me, but I have some difficulty answering it. Frost called himself an Old Testament Christian. He has few references to Christ in his poems. He did, I think, exemplify and reflect many qualities derived from Christ, though he probably would not have thought it important or proper to give Christ credit for them. In his preoccupation with the spirit-matter conflict, Frost

said this in 1958 when presented with a medal by the Poetry Society: "We have to duff into the material at the risk of the spirit Our religion, our country, God himself by descending into the flesh showed this duffing into the material" ⁹ I wager that you have never heard anybody in your whole life describe the Incarnation as God "duffing into the material"!

At his eighty-eighth birthday party in Washington in March, 1962, Frost recited the poem that is used as the preface of his volume, *In the Clearing*. The poet calls God's "duffing into the material" a "derring-do"—which means a "daring action." The first lines of the poem constitute a great affirmation of this "duffing into the material":

But God's own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation. ¹⁰

My conclusion is that Frost was a deeply religious man who thought constantly about God and the deep things in human experience—but who was by no means an adequate or competent Christian theologian.

When I shook hands with Robert Frost on his eighty-eighth birthday, he said to me that he had been so ill in Miami after leaving Agnes Scott that he had peeped in to see what it looks like in the "great Beyond." Then he added in characteristic fashion, "I like it better here; I turned around and decided to come back." In the early morning of Tuesday, January 29, 1963, I think Someone very important to Robert Frost took him by the arm, told him authentically that his lover's quarrel with the world had gone long enough, and led him through a door into a place where, for all his protesting,

“it is likely to go better.”

Let me conclude with this observation: Agnes Scott's friendship with Robert Frost has been an intangible possession of such intrinsic worth that, with the passing of time, every appropriate means should be used to enhance and interpret it. Of such experiences a college's quality of mind and spirit consists.