

Robert Frost

and AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

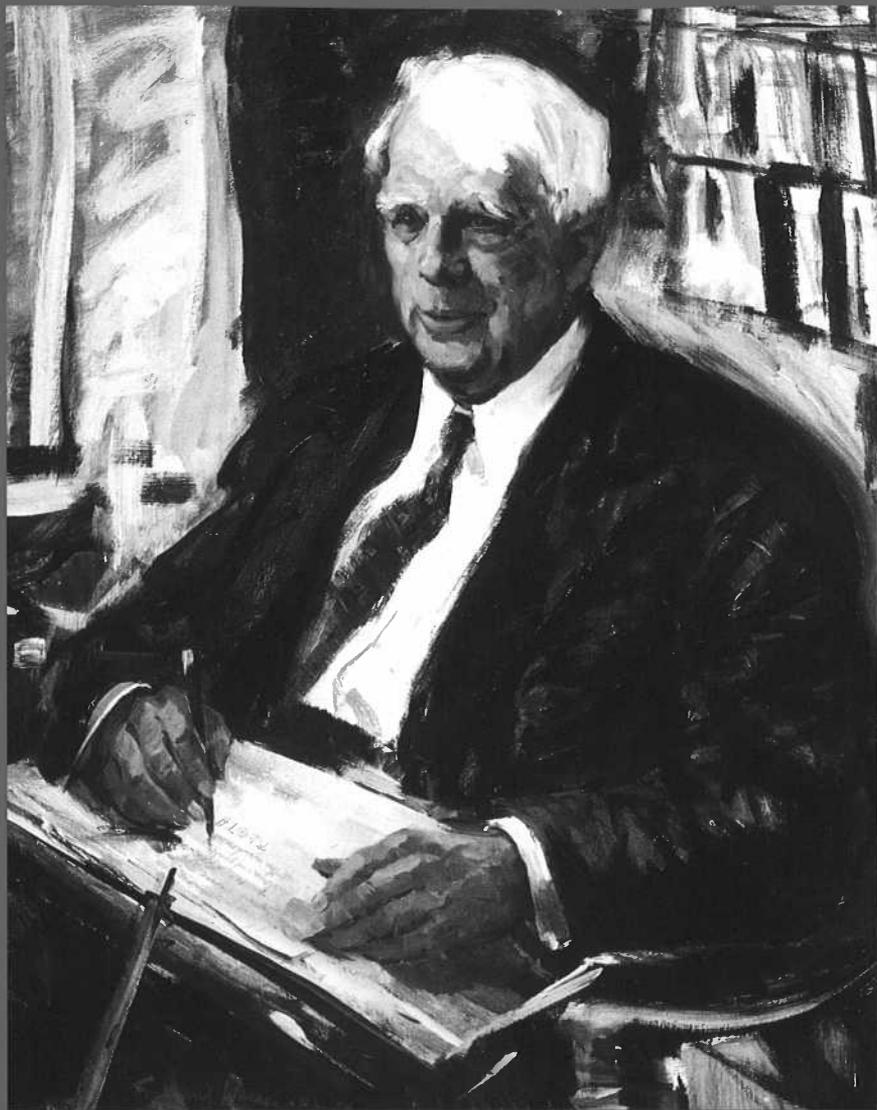
Robert Frost at Agnes Scott! As former President Wallace Alston noted, "This always meant telephone calls begging for tickets; an overflow crowd for the lecture; interviews to be arranged; faculty members in our home to welcome Robert Frost back to Agnes Scott and to listen while he talked on and on of poets, politics, trips that he had made since his last visit, funny little incidents or anecdotes that seemed worth telling."

Frost's relationship with Agnes Scott began in 1935 when he was invited to lecture at the College by Emma May Laney, associate professor of English. He returned in 1940 and 1945, and then every year until his death in 1963, which occurred during the very week reserved for his annual visit.

These visits took place during the last 10 days of January when Frost was on his way to Miami. He moved freely about the campus, becoming part of the academic rhythm of the College.

McCain Library houses what Frost called the best collection of "Frostiana" outside of Amherst College. This collection began under the direction of the librarian, Edna Byers, when Professor Laney donated autographed first editions sent her by Frost. Also in the library is the 1958 Frost portrait by Professor Ferdinand Warren, about which Frost told Warren, "You have more of me in that than there is of me in me."

This love affair between Robert Frost and Agnes Scott College established the foundation for challenging exchanges between the campus community and a host of visiting writers and scholars through the years. The Frost statue located in the Alumnae Garden and dedicated in April, 2001, symbolizes the poet's continuing presence at Agnes Scott College as well as the College's abiding emphasis on writing and the power of the word.



PORTRAIT BY FERDINAND WARREN

Not A Lovable Old New England Poet

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 back of his head.

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."

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.

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.

WALLACE M. ALSTON, PRESIDENT, 1951-1973



That Last Frost of '62

The craggy winter-locked old man loomed over the podium and cracked his crusty jokes with self-mocking (and self-congratulatory) gusto: "Better to go down dignified / With boughten friendship at your side / Than none at all. Provide, provide!" He paused and then added with a cackle and a bit of a snort, "Or somebody else will provide for ya!"

We veterans of these readings giggled dutifully; those who were hearing his tag line for the first time, grinned with the dis-ease the threat provoked. We responded to the old man's acerbic pontifications with affection, clapped warmly and laughed with the relief of living the rare evening that was more than well-spent.

Some of us, members of the graduating class of 1962, flushed with the pleasure of special relationship. We had enjoyed this occasion for four years, and we knew we were in the presence of poetry. We were proprietary—even smug! He was, in these moments, "Our Poet."

That was the last of these events, for in the winter of the next year, Robert Frost stopped in the snowy woods and stayed. I remember feeling bad for the senior class following mine—and for the College. That relationship with Frost was a defining characteristic of the College. It was in the very rhythms of the place.

Robert Frost energized Agnes Scott in perpetuity with his immense, earth-rich spirit. Doubtless, in 1962 and for all the years of his annual visits, he was the most evident reason that students and area residents alike recognized the College as a place that provided quality encounters with the great and the talented. In on-going tribute to Our Poet, it is similar experiences for students and friends—opportunities for living life with poetry—that the College continues to provide, provide.



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THE WORLD FOR WOMEN

141 East College Avenue, Atlanta/Decatur, GA 30030-3797

Conversations with Robert Frost

There was always a session with the students who came together, usually at the Alstons' home. They had been reading some of Frost's poems and brought questions about them. Most of all, they just wanted to hear him talk. Not infrequently he delighted in creating a little academic mischief by questioning some of the interpretations of his poems, which the students offered; he assumed they would take his remarks back to their English classes. They did. Some of their teachers used the occasion to remind that the poet is not always the best critic of his poems.

A special night was set aside for the faculty to meet with him, always at the Alstons'. Faculty members would gather in what was then the sunroom and take their seats in chairs arranged in circular fashion—almost no one missed those gatherings. Dr. Alston would bring in Frost, seat him in a chair of the circle, and turn to him with, "Mr. Frost, here is your faculty." These were always his words of introduction, and they carry their own force—affirming his academic connection to the College. These get-togethers were called "Conversations with Robert Frost," but that is a slight misnomer. Frost liked to do most of the talking.

MARGARET W. PEPPERDENE, PROFESSOR EMERITA OF ENGLISH



Memorable Evenings of Pedagogy and Poetry

The highlight of every Frost visit was the night of the public reading. The whole campus and the entire Decatur/Atlanta community were caught up in the occasion. Students would begin to line up outside Gaines (the line eventually winding through the campus) by 4 o'clock in the afternoon. They had all been issued tickets, but got in line early to get the best seats—middle section, down front, right under Frost's podium. By starting time, the hall was packed, the stage filled, even an auxiliary hall upstairs pressed into use.

Frost never gave a bad performance. At the start, he would adjust the lamp on the podium and fiddle with the microphone. He would talk for a while on any subject on his mind. During these opening remarks, which the students called "Mr. Frost's nuggets," he often made some of his most memorable comments on poetry or people or politics. Then, he would begin to "say" his poems—a mixture of the old and the familiar and the new, finished but not yet published, ones. About midway through the reading, he would lean out over the podium, telling students he was going to say a "new" poem for them, one he was in the act of making. He would instruct them to get out their pencils and paper, which they dutifully did—as they always came prepared for this moment. Still leaning over the podium as if watching their actions, he would say the poem carefully, pausing frequently, and slowly repeating the lines so that they could take them down.

That "lesson" of the night done, he returned to his reading. Through it all, he kept the beat of the poetry, making sure that his audience knew and felt the rhythm. Those were memorable evenings of pedagogy and poetry.



"Acquainted with the Night"

Inscribed on the Frost statue in Agnes Scott's Alumnae Garden is a poem particularly applicable to the poet's visits. President Alston noted: "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, the late show on television completed, several glasses of 7-Up™ consumed, our friend would put on his coat and hat and start out into the dark alone. He wanted it that way; he asked only for a key and to be let alone."

Frost introduced the poem in his 1962 lecture—his last at Agnes Scott—saying, ". . . it's about my being an endless walker."

Acquainted with the Night

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 on 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 earthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

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



ROBERT FROST STATUE
AGNES SCOTT ALUMNAE GARDEN
DEDICATED APRIL 2001

Benefactors

Robert Frost statue: Susan Gamble Smathers '75 and Bruce A. Smathers

About the sculptor

The Robert Frost sculpture in the Alumnae Garden is one of 21 such Frost sculptures created by George W. Lundeen. Lundeen received his B.A. from Hastings College and his M.F.A. from the University of Illinois and studied at the Academia de Belle Arte in Italy. The recipient of numerous awards and honors, he was named "Distinguished Nebraskan" in 1995. Two additional Lundeen sculptures reside in Decatur on the Courthouse Square.

About this brochure

The information and much of the wording in this brochure is taken from the writings and speeches of Wallace Alston, president of the College from 1951 to 1973; Edna Hanley Byers, librarian from 1932 to 1969; Margaret W. Pepperdene, professor emerita of English; and Linda Hubert '62, professor of English.

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