

Introduction

Robert Frost: A New England Life



IF YOU WALK DOWN A ROAD IN VERMONT IN MID-WINTER, UNDER A bright blue sky with the air so cold it seems to thaw only as you breathe it in, you see mountains piled up against each other, stone fences stretching across fields of dried cornstalks, and white birches with crackling black branches. Your feet crunch against the dry snow, while a crow caws, caws, caws about the cold.

This is the world of Robert Frost's poetry—snow and crows and birches, as well as brooks and asters and hayfields and autumn leaves. Seldom has a poet been so identified with a region as Robert Frost has with New England, though he himself would not have claimed this. His poems have the feel of sudden lines that surprised him. You catch a poem just as it comes, he once said. What he caught were poems about New England—and about life.

On March 26, 1874, Frost was born in San Francisco, which is about as far as you can get from New England and still be in the continental United States. Frost's father was a journalist who edited a city newspaper, and his mother was a teacher. Frost eventually tried his hand at both professions.

His father was born in the South but moved to New Hampshire to become a journalist. He left the region during the Civil War (perhaps because he did not want to be seen as a Yankee) and moved to California. As if to tweak the nose of New England, he named his son after the South's most famous general, Robert E. Lee. But after his father's death in 1885, eleven-year-old Robert, his sister Jeanie, and their mother returned to New England. The family had no money, so they lived with Robert's grandfather in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

It is never easy to return home, though. Frost hated his work as a bobbin boy in his grandfather's mills. He disliked his grandfather's strictness and the way he made Frost's mother feel responsible for his father's death. Soon his mother could stand it no longer. She went a few miles south to Salem, New Hampshire, to teach, settling herself and her family with a nearby farmwife. The pay was poor, so Frost took a job as a cobbler, nailing heels to boots, to help pay the rent.

Frost did well at the village school in Salem. During the next three years, Frost's grandfather offered to pay for the train fare that would allow him to attend Lawrence High School. Frost was elated and soon became the top student in his class.

When Frost was sixteen, he began to write poetry, jotting down words that seemed to just come into his mind. But he was not yet thinking of becoming a poet. Perhaps he was thinking more about Elinor White, with whom he had shared the highest honors in his school when they graduated in 1892.

The years after his graduation were frustrating for Frost. His grandfather demanded that he go on to Dartmouth, but Frost wasn't interested in college. He was interested in poetry, however, and soon all he was doing was wandering through the woods reading a collection of British poems, so he left Dartmouth and returned to Lawrence. He worked in the mills again and kept reading and writing. When he was nineteen, he sent his first poem to a magazine called *The Independent*. It was accepted, and Robert Frost knew he wanted to be a poet.

Even a poet needs income, so he tried his father's profession—writing for a weekly newspaper called *The Sentinel*. He liked the writing, but hated prying into things he thought were none of his business. He quit after only a few months, then taught school with his mother and sister. In 1895, Elinor White came to teach with them, and soon afterward, in December, she and Frost were married. But Frost did not enjoy teaching young children, and there was little money coming in.

The following year, the Frosts had a son. To earn more money the new father decided that he would be a college teacher, but first he had to finish college himself. With help from his grandfather, he began studies at New England's most prestigious university, Harvard, but the courses bored him. He became sick; but even worse, his son Eliot also grew ill, and then died.

There seemed no reason to stay at Harvard. Frost left without finishing, which meant he could not teach college. Elinor begged Frost's grandfather to help them buy a farm.

Grandfather was reluctant, but willing. If Frost would commit himself to working the farm for ten years, his grandfather would pay for it. Frost agreed, and in 1900, he, Elinor, and their new baby daughter settled into a dairy farm in Derry, New Hampshire. During the day, he did all the chores to keep the farm going; at night, when the house was completely still, he wrote poetry. Those were the years when he wrote such poems as "Mending Wall" and "October."

It was hard for Frost to make a go of his rocky farm, especially since he had three more children over the next five years. Money was scarce, but when the director of the Pinkerton Academy heard Frost read one of his poems, he was impressed. He asked Frost to teach an English class two days each week, and Frost agreed. He needed the money for food.

Frost stayed for the ten years he promised his grandfather, and then sold the farm. He had never liked the busy schedule of a farmer, and he suffered from hay fever, so he couldn't cut his own hay. Although editors rejected his poems over the years because they seemed too modern, Frost knew he had to keep trying. The family had to find a place where they could live on little money and where Frost would be free to write his poetry. Perhaps thinking of the British poets he had read at Dartmouth, Frost decided to go to England.

In the autumn of 1912, Frost and his family settled into a small country farmhouse thatched with thick straw. Ignoring the pile of rejection letters that he had received from editors in the U.S., Frost brought thirty of his poems to a publisher in London. Three days later, he heard that they had been accepted for a book. Within a year, this New England poet's life as a professional began: *A Boy's Will* was published in 1913, followed by *North of Boston* the next year. When the books were reprinted in America, Frost said to Elinor, "My book has gone home; we must go too," and so the Frost family returned to New England in 1914.

Frost came back to a country with arms open wide to receive him. Editors who had earlier rejected his poems were anxious to publish them. But his poetry was still not making much money, and his first two books earned him only two hundred dollars.

As the family settled in, Frost looked about his world for inspiration. He saw birches and fields and mountains, and those are what he wrote about. He walked across upland pastures and wrote "The Vantage Point." He explored a forest whose leaves had turned golden in the autumn chill and wrote "The Road Not Taken." He watched cows munching on apples and wrote "The Cow in Apple Time." He saw boys climbing birch trees and wrote "Birches."

The years after his return from England were busy. His poems were praised by critics, and people came to New England to meet him. They also asked him to read at colleges such as Amherst, Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, and Michigan. The trips interrupted his writing, and he always seemed to come back with a cold, but he went, because the reading brought in money.

As he became better known, Frost was asked to teach—first at Amherst, then at other universities—and his dream of becoming a college teacher finally came true. In fact, in 1920 he even helped to start a college—the Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont. He was a challenging, witty, and sometimes grouchy teacher, once throwing away a whole pile of compositions his students had written. But his students loved him, for he made them think.

In 1923 Frost published *New Hampshire*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, one of the country's most prestigious awards. Seven years later, he won his second Pulitzer for his *Collected Poems*, and then, astonishingly, a third Pulitzer in 1936 for *A Further Range*. No one was surprised when he won his fourth Pulitzer Prize in 1942. These books, together with his teaching and many speaking tours, finally earned him the money that had previously eluded him.

In 1957, Frost attended a dinner in England held in his honor. T.S. Eliot, the greatest English poet then living, gave the toast. He also had lived in New England, and he knew what Frost was writing about. Frost, he said, was writing about the whole world, about feelings and ideas that everyone, everywhere, understood. Those who were there saw that Frost nearly began to weep.

The next year, Frost spoke at Bread Loaf, thinking of that toast by T.S. Eliot. "There ought to be in everything you write some sign that you come from almost anywhere," he said. Perhaps that is what keeps Robert Frost so alive today, even to people who have never set foot in Vermont. In writing about New England, Frost was also writing about everywhere.

Frost became the country's most beloved poet. He received the formal congratulations of the United States Senate when he turned seventy-five, and again a decade later. The next year, he read his poem "The Gift Outright" at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy. When he died three years later, people around the world mourned, many remembering him for what he was—a great poet.