Notes by
ROBERT FROST
on His Life
and Early Writings
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AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS
The Friends of The Amherst College Library
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Frost wrote this brief sketch of his life and literary career sometime in the early 1920s and before publication of *New Hampshire* (1923), his fourth book of poems. He begins things by getting the year of his birth wrong (it was actually 1874—the misapprehension was eventually corrected). The ways in which he proceeds to characterize himself he would more than once repeat. For example, there is his evident pride in the Latin and Greek he studied at Lawrence High School and Harvard College. Or his insistence that, although he never took a course with the psychologist and philosopher William James (James was on leave when Frost studied at Harvard from 1897 to 1899), it was James of all teachers who influenced him most.

Evident also is a mischievous delight in putting facts together arrestingly: as with the never-studied-under teacher who most influenced him, so the claim that—since the first novel he finished reading closely preceded the first poem he wrote—“I began to read just one year before I began to write.”

Frost emphasizes that he is both a rhymer and a writer of blank verse. (His first book, *A Boy’s Will*, was mostly in rhyme; his second, *North of Boston*, mostly blank verse.) But the graduate school “girl” who asked him about his
relation to the free-verse movement may not have noticed that Frost’s verse medium, rhymed or unrhymed, was “perfectly regular iambic”—nothing “free” about that. One of his most famous and repeated sayings was that he’d as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down.

Finally there is his state-pride in New Hampshire at the expense of California. But by the time New Hampshire was published Frost had left Franconia and the state behind. As the last line from the volume’s title poem informs us, “At present I am living in Vermont.”

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

To John Gallishaw:
A Letter from Robert Frost
with Notes on His Life
and Early Writings
Dear Gallishaw:

There’s no one I’d rather do this for than you. If I’ve been slow, it’s not from indifference but downright sickness. I have been in bed with influenza. I’m really not up to the job now. But what I can do, that I hasten along. I promise to follow with a little more in a few days. How much more fun it would be to see you for a talk than to have to write to you.

More presently sure.

Our very best to you both. We’re your friends forever for the nice things you said against California as compared with New Hampshire.

Ever yours

Robert Frost

John Gallishaw, the recipient of this autobiographical note, was a Harvard graduate (class of 1916) and an author, who founded a school for writers in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the 1920s. He married Eleanor Browne, the daughter of George Browne (a friend of Frost and a founder of the Browne and Nichols School in Cambridge). She was the first mother-in-law of James J. Faran, Jr., who donated the manuscript to Amherst College in 1989.

I was born on Washington St, San Francisco Cal. on March 26 1875.

My father William Prescott Frost born at Kingston N.H. was the eighth in descent from Nicholas Frost who settled at Kittery Maine in 1636. My father was editor and managing editor of the San Francisco Bulletin and San Francisco Post from just after his graduation at Harvard in 1872 till his death in 1885. He managed the city campaign for the Democratic party in 1884 when Cleveland was elected President.

My mother Belle Moody was born in Edinborough, Scotland. Her father and brother were both sea captains and were both drowned at sea. She came to Columbus Ohio at the age of 16 to live with an uncle. She taught in the High School at Columbus before her marriage.

In graduating from the High School at Lawrence Mass. after four solid years of Latin and Greek and not much else I shared first honors with the girl I afterward married, Elinor White. I had some Dartmouth and more Harvard. I spent most of my two
years at Harvard on Latin Greek and philosophy. I had Santayana, Royer and Munsterburg but missed James whom I admired most and have been most influenced by.

I read my first book through at the age of 14. It was Scottish Chiefs. I wrote my first poem at the age of 15. That is to say I began to read just one year before I began to write. My first poem was a ballad, a long narrative about the expulsion of the Spaniards from Tenochtitlan. My second was a lyric about waves as I remembered them at the Cliff House (San Francisco), my third was a piece of blank verse about Julius Caesar. They were all published in the Lawrence (Mass) High School Bulletin. (I mean to look the one about the waves up some time.) As I began so I have continued about equally divided in interest between lyric and narrative in blank verse. I sold my first poem (My Butterfly in A Boy's Will) to The New York Independent when I was 18.


My next book will probably be called New Hampshire. So it's just as well you didn't say anything disloyal to the old state.

I published a one-act play called A Way Out in The Seven Arts Magazine. It should have been called the Changeling. It would help you to my philosophy of attachment as opposed to detachment if you could find it in the library.

I have published perhaps a half dozen sonnets such as Into My Own and The Vantage Point in A Boy's Will and Putting in the Seed and Range Finding (written years before the war and only published at last to please a friend at the front) in Mountain Interval. I have written very little except in perfectly regular iambic. About half my verse is rhymed and half unrhymed. A girl in some graduate-school recently wrote to ask whom I considered the chief representatives of the free-verse movement and what was my part in it. I replied that this was
the first I had heard of my having had any part in it. The chief representatives of the free-verse movement I had been most influenced by were Shakespere (in the later plays) Milton (in Samson Agonistes) John Donne and some others (not excluding Horace) in their satires. I didn’t think she meant any harm, but I must say education plays queer pranks with the intellect.
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