
A Short Biography of Robert Frost in England

Robert Frost is generally considered to be the premier American poet of his generation. He is identified almost exclusively with New England, for most of his poetry attempts to capture the essence of rural life in the New England states. He describes the new wilderness and the people of the region with great insight and wisdom. Frost is also praised for his use of New Englanders' dialogue and native wit. Frost has been described as quaint and old-fashioned (Cox 4), a true Yankee poet. However, critics such as Malcolm Cowley maintain that Frost should not be considered exclusively an American poet. Frost was virtually unknown before his three-year stay in England. This sojourn had a great influence on Frost's career, making him a sensation among literary circles abroad and ensuring his success in America (Cowley 3).

Frost's early life was unremarkable. He was born in San Francisco in 1874. At the age of ten, he moved to New England, which remained his true home for the rest of his life. He married Elinor, a high school classmate, and they had four children. Although Frost wrote poems, few were published. The Frost family settled down on a small farm in Derry, New Hampshire, where Robert taught in a local school. Although his chances of a promotion looked promising, Frost was not satisfied with the direction of his life. He wanted to write, and in 1912 he decided to abandon his teaching career for poetry.

Frost had a late beginning as a serious poet. At the age of 38 he was going nowhere as a poet, and he was forced to re-evaluate his life. He sent material to several magazines, only to have them rejected. One journal, to Frost's consternation, had held a poem unpublished for three years (Weintraub 301). He realized that he needed to leave Derry if he wanted to make a living as a writer, and he found he had the means to do so. His grandfather's will left him with an annuity of \$800, nearly the amount of Frost's yearly teaching salary. The Frost household, if it budgeted carefully, could attempt a move, at least on a temporary basis. The Frosts debated over a suitable location. Robert considered joining a friend in Vancouver, but Elinor preferred England. Robert is said to have flipped a coin for the final decision; the coin chose England (Thompson 388-390).

England turned out to be the logical choice. For many Americans aspiring to the arts, London was an excellent location. The area had "a sentimental allure, a psychic value, a professional practicality" (Weintraub 4). Frost could draw inspiration from the English surroundings, and he had a better chance at turning a profit abroad. London publishers often took risks on newcomers with potential. Until Frost could establish himself, he could manage to support his family without making great personal sacrifices. The cost of living in London was relatively low, and Frost's small income could be stretched out over several years (Weintraub 301). Although he regretted leaving New Hampshire, Frost wanted to sever his old ties and experience new things. Frost later wrote, "I had no letters of introduction; I knew not one soul in England. But I felt compelled to lose myself among strangers, to write poetry without further scandal to friends or family" (qtd in Gerber 26).

Frost's first house in England, "The Bungalow," was located in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. Frost spent much time exploring the pastoral outskirts of the area. He found the English countryside to be quite different than the familiar surroundings of New Hampshire. Frost

delighted in noticing those differences, and some of his poetry reflects his response to his new home, most notably "In England":

Alone in rain I sat today

On top of a gate beside the way,

And a bird came near with muted bill,

And a watery breeze kept blowing chill

From over the hill behind me...

For the breeze was a watery English breeze

Always fresh from one of the seas,

And the country life the English lead

In beechen wood and clover mead

Is never far from sailing.

The Bungalow's most important contribution to Frost's life was the reawakening of his interest in his earlier writings. Frost had taken a trunk of his old poems to his new house, and one night he decided to review them. At first he had no purpose in mind for the manuscripts, and "he was not sure he was doing more than playing a game" (Thompson 396). However, as Frost reread the poems, he began to see the possibility that certain grouped lyrics suggested the thoughts of a youth struggling to find his own direction (Thompson 396-397). The result was Frost's first volume of poetry, collected under the title of *A Boy's Will*. The book contained a sequence of 32 poems traversing the seasons and the moods from despair and withdrawal to aspiration. Frost wanted to establish certain relationships for the reader, so he placed a brief gloss under each title on the table of contents pages (Weintraub 303). Frost finally felt that he could launch his career in earnest when he beheld the final product.

Since Frost's home was only 21 miles away from London by train, he visited the city often. At this early point, however, he had no literary contacts. Not knowing where to take his volume for publishing, Frost approached his only friend in London, a policeman columnist. This friend led Frost to the offices of David Nutt, a small publisher. Frost learned upon arriving that David Nutt had passed away, but Nutt's widow offered to look at the manuscript. She accepted the volume. In his next visit to London, Frost agreed to the terms of his contract with the Nutt firm. Nutt was given the first option to publish Frost's next four books of poetry. Frost was encouraged by the long-term commitment; his future finally appeared more definite (Weintraub 304).

Frost's trips to London allowed him to meet several influential people. In America, he had seldom met others who considered poetry a serious vocation; but in London he was surrounded by them (Weintraub 230). At Harold Munro's Poetry Bookshop, Frost first chanced upon British poet F.S. Flint. Flint was impressed with *A Boy's Will* and encouraged Frost to arrange a meeting with Ezra Pound. Pound, also an American, had become the leader of a group of poets

known as Imagistes. Pound was known to have an eye for poetic expression, and he enjoyed introducing young poets to the literary world. Like Flint, Pound was pleased with *A Boy's Will*, and he promised to publish a favorable review of the volume in *Harriet Munro's Poetry* magazine (Thompson 410-411).

Pound lived up to his promise, and his review praised Frost for his simple, plain style. Pound wrote that Frost "has the good sense to speak naturally and to paint... the thing as he sees it... [H]e is without sham and without affectation" (qtd in Gerber 28). The review proceeded to denounce the American editors who had neglected Frost and repeated some statements Frost had related to Pound at their first meeting, including some things that Frost had exaggerated and did not expect - or wish - to see in print. Frost appreciated Pound's review, although he complained to a friend that Pound had overdone it (Weintraub 306-308).

The other early reviews of *A Boy's Will* were much less favorable. The book had been published on April 1, 1913, and the first notices followed quickly. On April 5, the *Athenaeum* published a guarded review, in effect stating that Frost's poems were nice but nothing extraordinary. Later that week the *Times Literary Supplement* approved of Frost's individuality but criticized his poems' obscure endings, especially singling out the last stanza of "The Trial by Existence" (Thompson 414-415). Frost was naturally disappointed.

Frost's luck changed, however. In September 1913, three new reviews of *A Boy's Will* were published, and one of these appeared in the *Chicago Dial*. These made up for the previous unfavorable reviews by praising Frost for his combination of observation, emotion, and the element of surprise. The latest critics also wrote about the simplicity and charm of the poems, which in their opinions surpassed most contemporary poetry (Thompson 425-426). Frost began to rise out of his obscurity in both England and America.

The positive reviews were a great relief to Frost, who had begun to compile a new volume. After he learned of the acceptance of his first manuscript in 1912, he had started to write dramatic narratives and dialogues. Most of these were studies in character, written in blank verse (Thompson 428). Others were meditative lyrics, inspired by a longing for his farm in Derry. Among the latter are examples of Frost's best writings: "Mending Wall", "Swinging Branches", and "After Apple-Picking" (Thompson 432-433).

Frost had never intended to live in England for more than a few years, and the title of his second book clearly demonstrates his intentions of returning to America. Frost believed that North of Boston had potential for success back home (Weintraub 315). His reputation as a poet depended upon critical opinion regarding his latest volume; this was the turning point when his career would be made or broken. Fortunately, Frost made some important friends before the book was published. His new acquaintances recognized the quality of Frost's poetry and did everything within their capacity to introduce the public to North of Boston.

Frost needed a new circle of friends at the time, for he was becoming gradually alienated from the Imagistes. Pound had reviewed Frost with fairness and enthusiasm, but the personal relationship between the two men was strained. Much of the trouble lay in Pound's haste to speak of Frost's poetry before anyone else and in Pound's attention toward certain younger poets. Frost felt alternately harassed and ignored. He also resisted Pound's attempts to mold him into an Imagiste, for Frost was trying to cultivate his own unique style. Frost resented Pound's bullying and realized that a lasting friendship was impossible under the circumstances

(Weintraub 311).

Frost eventually turned up on Wilson Gibson's doorstep with manuscripts of poems he intended to publish in North of Boston. Gibson liked them, and he introduced Frost to his friend Lascelles Abercrombie, a Georgian poet. Gibson and Abercrombie persuaded Frost to look for a cottage in Gloucestershire, where Abercrombie lived "under thatch" as Frost had dreamed of doing (Thompson 439-440). Frost agreed to join Abercrombie as soon as he could sublease his house. Frost had trouble finding a lessee throughout the fall and winter, but this additional stay in Beaconsfield and London proved fortunate (Weintraub 317). In February 1913, Frost met and befriended a man named Edward Thomas. Thomas was unknown as a poet but was considered a superior hack writer and poetry critic. Before meeting Frost, Thomas believed his life was going nowhere. Frost managed to pull Thomas out of his depression and encouraged him to write poetry. In following Frost's advice, Thomas soon became modestly successful as a poet. Thomas was often a guest in the Frosts' house, and the two men remained the best of friends throughout Frost's stay in England (Sergeant 107).

Not long after his introduction to Thomas, Frost bought "Little Iddens," a homely cottage in Herefordshire. Compared to The Bungalow, Little Iddens seemed like a "fairylane house" (Thompson 447). The cottage was primitive, but the idyllic scenery and Frost's friendships compensated for the austerities (Weintraub 319). The cottage was surrounded by orchards and sloping meadows, a lovely place in which to take long walks with Thomas and to gather ideas for future poems.

Reviews of North of Boston appeared throughout the summer of 1914, and they were consistent in their praise. Of course, Frost's friends had much to do with the early notices. Thomas wrote the first London notice for the English Review. Abercrombie reviewed the book in The Nation, while Gibson's review in The Bookman called North of Boston the "most challenging book of verse that has been published for some time" (qtd in Weintraub 321). Pound, who was not noticeably upset by Frost's rejection, made his own favorable comments in Poetry. Most importantly, American critics agreed with the British reviews. On both sides of the Atlantic, Frost was praised for his lyrical simplicity, his "sound of sense" (Thompson 457).

North of Boston won over one important American reader, Mrs. Florence Holt of New York. She convinced her husband to contact Mrs. Nutt and discuss publicity rights. After some hard bargaining, the Henry Holt firm became Frost's American publisher for the rest of his life. Frost's American foothold was secure (Weintraub 322).

The timing of Frost's success was critical. England had become involved in World War I, and Frost had major concerns about staying. On August 20, 1914, he wrote to a friend, "The war is an ill wind to me. It ends for the time being the thought of publishing any more books. Our game is up... So we may be coming home..." (qtd in Sergeant 139). Frost realized he could not remain in England much longer if he wanted to continue as a career poet. He and his family were invited to stay with the Abercrombies until Frost could earn enough to pay for the risky voyage back to the United States. The winter months at "The Gallows" were pleasant. There, Frost wrote "The Road Not Taken," which seems to describe the impulse that had led him to England:

I should be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

To earn money for his return trip, Frost sold several poems to *Monro for Poetry and Drama*, including "The Smile," "Putting in the Seed," and "The Cow in Apple Time." Another poem, "The Sound of Trees," was written at The Gallows and contained a reference to Abercrombie's elm trees. England had been good for Frost's writing, and he had a stack of masterful new verse to take home and publish in America. His growing income and reputation signaled that the time had come to leave and further his career in the States (Weintraub 361-362).

Despite his success, Frost returned to New England in 1915 with a few doubts about his abilities. Much of his reputation was built upon poems he had written nearly a decade before *A Boy's Will*. He feared that at the age of 41 he had exhausted his creative powers (Thompson 476). His experiences abroad also left him with a lingering sense of disloyalty to his native country. Frost wanted to be known as an American poet, not as a "devoted American Europeanist" like Ezra Pound (Poirer 94). Fortunately, Frost's concerns were overblown. Philip Gerber wrote, "When he returned from England, he was forty years old, mature, and fully formed as a writer" (69). Frost found that he was as well known as any other poet in America. His third book, *Mountain Interval*, which had been written in England, appeared the next year to great acclaim (Weintraub 363). He wrote several more volumes of poetry and supplemented his income with public lectures and readings. Long before his death in 1963, Frost had become an American legend.

Frost's sojourn in England was primarily responsible for his great success in America. He met - mostly by chance - the very people who had the ability to help him launch his career. He learned the art of literary politics and discovered how to orchestrate his reviews to project a favorable image (Weintraub 322-323). He found the time and the perfect atmosphere in which to concentrate fully on poetry. However, Frost developed his fresh, unique style by rejecting the new techniques and forms used in English circles. In his own words he "never saw New England as clearly as when he was in Old England" (qtd in Sergeant 116). Frost's years in England strengthened his commitment to America, and "that has made all the difference" in American poetry.

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