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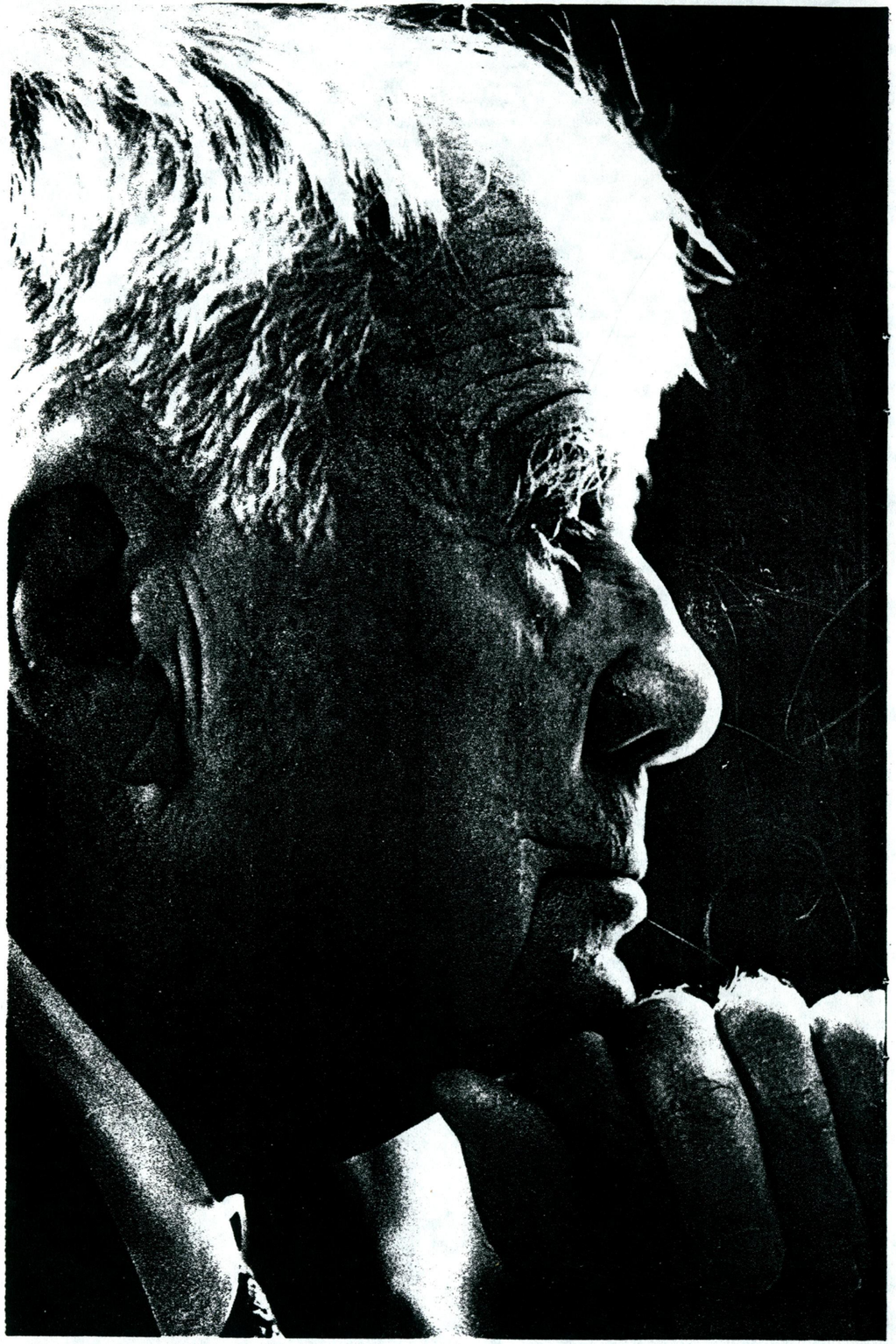
TUNNEL VISION

WHY AREN'T THERE ANY GREAT IDEAS FOR THE LAND ABOVE BOSTON'S BIG DIG?

BY ROBERT CAMPBELL



Artful revenge

ONE OF ROBERT FROST'S MOST CURIOUS CREATIONS WAS HIS OWN STUBBORNLY CONTRADICTORY PERSONA – PURPOSELY FASHIONED TO CONFOUND CRITICS AND SCHOLARS. **BY STEPHEN S. HOWIE**

IN THE FALL OF 1894, a 20-year-old Robert Frost, jilted by the woman who would later be his wife, ripped up his first, self-published book of poems that he had printed and bound to win her love. He ventured south from Lawrence, Massachusetts, on trains and steamers and then on foot into the Dismal Swamp, a 20-mile expanse of bogs, quicksand, and poisonous snakes along the Virginia-North Carolina border.

He was clad in street clothes and city shoes, and walked 10 miles through *Continued on Page 34*

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the briars and vines as day turned to night. The reckless adventure would become symbolic of the forlorn journeys at the heart of many of his poems, according to author Jay Parini, who has published three books on Frost in the last three years. In life and art, Frost ventured away from home, in Parini's words, "where he will either lose his soul or find that Gnostic spark of revelation."

As Frost would later write in the poem "Into My Own," inspired by his journey into the Dismal Swamp: "One of my wishes is that those dark trees,/So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,/Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,/But stretched away unto the edge of doom."

The lone figure of a city boy trudging into a Virginia swamp was one of the many contradictions that Frost would embody during his life, contradictions that now fuel debate among a new generation of biographers and scholars fascinated by the poet's slippery persona.

America's Yankee poet was in fact born in San Francisco and named after the Confederate general Robert E. Lee. His father, William Prescott Frost Jr., had embarked on a similar adventure during his youth, traveling south from Lawrence during the Civil War in a failed attempt to join the Confederate ranks under his hero, General Lee. When Robert Frost was 11, his family moved to Lawrence upon the death of his father.

Frost would one day take the podium before the entire nation during John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961. But as a boy, he was so shy that once, before taking the stage to deliver a valedictorian speech, he threw up in a parking lot.

Although his poems rooted in the New England landscape would win him four Pulitzer Prizes, he was restless, living in a total of 40 residences in his 88 years.

The man who would become arguably America's most popular poet initially became known in Great Britain, where his first two books of poetry were published. At the outset of World War I, he returned to the United States intent on growing, in his words, "Yankier and Yankier." While living on a farm in Derry, New Hampshire, he was known to listen in on the party line in hopes of picking up the nuances of Yankee speech that would later become the trademark of his poetry.

"Frost as a New England farmer is a self-invention," Parini says. "It's an act. He chose a mask for himself, and over seven decades, he became that mask. It stuck to his face. It became him."

With a life so full of contradiction and paradox, perhaps it should come as no surprise that Frost's legacy is also hotly disputed. Scholars question everything from where Frost did his best work to which of his many homesteads he and his family held most dear. In the past two years, what one critic called an "academic high tide" of writings on Frost has been published, questioning everything from the interpretation of Frost's life and poetry to whether he was a misogynist.

Frost cultivated this paradox during his lifetime. His poem "New Hampshire," about the virtue of that state, ends with the playfully ironic line "At present I am living in Vermont." To make matters worse, Frost dedicated the book *New Hampshire* to Vermont and Michigan. According to Lesley Lee Francis, Frost's granddaughter, Frost reveled in the idea that his legacy would be disputed well after his death.

As Frost wrote to literary critic Lionel Trilling: "No sweeter music can come to my ears than the clash of arms over my dead body when I am down."

Deep in the Virginia swamp in 1894, instead of a "Gnostic spark of revelation," Frost discovered a party. He came upon a group of duck hunters, celebrating with a night of revelry before their morning hunt. Frost joined them, later hitching a ride to North Carolina, and eventually wiring his mother for the train fare home.

Journeying into the wild and then returning home would become a central theme for Frost. He led a largely nomadic life, but home remained central, a stay against confusion or, as he called it, the place "where they have to take you in."

"Home is often talked about in Frost, but always in great jeopardy," explains Robert Faggen. "It is a fragile figure for order in an utterly chaotic universe."

Faggen is busy editing the first book of a seven-volume project called *The Complete Writings of Robert Frost,* to be published by Harvard University Press. The first volume, a collection of Frost's notebooks, will hit bookstores in 2003.

In 2000 and 2001, more books and articles about Frost were published than in any two-year period since the 1980s, according to Jonathan Barron, who edits the *Robert Frost Review* and heads the Robert Frost Society from the University of Southern Mississippi. Barron credits the trend to a new generation of scholars that has not been turned away by the cantankerous persona Frost cultivated.

"The man created an aura that he wanted to keep the academic hordes at bay, and it worked," Barron explains. "His gamble was one day it would pay off, and he would get the scholarly interest. It just wasn't going to happen in his lifetime, because he wasn't going to let it happen. He was too much the populist."

Forty years after Frost's death, a flood of dissertations, books, and critiques is circulating through the academic realm. Karen Kilcup published *Robert Frost and Feminine Literary Tradition,* a book documenting how Frost, traditionally thought of as chauvinistic, actually came from a tradition of women writers. Faggen, at work editing Frost's notebooks, has already published a book on Darwin's influence on Frost. In 2000, Parini published *Robert Frost: A Life,* a book that some say brings a sense of balance to Frost's legacy, casting him as neither a benevolent, white-haired grandfather poet nor a monster.

During his life, Frost always felt slightly outside the academic realm, "imperfectly academic," as he used to say. As a student, he had dropped out of both Dartmouth and Harvard and ended up largely educating himself. As a teacher, he was known for his unconventional style, showing up for class in rumpled clothes, his hair a windblown mess. He once gave an A to a student who wrote only his name on his final exam.

Frost felt an aversion for the poets who were in vogue in academia, such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, in part because they lacked the sense of place that so characterized and rooted his own work, according to Dartmouth professor and Frost scholar Donald Sheehan. "He felt increasingly that this was poetry broken from a sense of home," Sheehan says. "He saw the aesthetic of modern poetry as an aesthetic of homelessness."

Despite Frost's connection to home in his work, his homes in life were many and varied. He was said to always have his eye open for another farm to buy. In Vermont alone, he owned five farms and enjoyed bragging to listeners of having at least four residences at any one time.

Now that Frost is gone, the site where he might be most appropriately remembered is an open question. New Hampshire has two Frost homesteads, one in Derry, where Frost lived from 1900 to 1910, and a second farther north, in Franconia, where Frost stayed on and off from 1920 to 1938. In Vermont, the Ripton log cabin where Frost summered from 1938 until his death now houses summer faculty from Middlebury College. Farther south, Frost's stone house in South Shaftsbury is being purchased by a group called Friends of Frost, who hope to convert it into Vermont's first Robert Frost museum.

The debate over where Frost did his best work is equally divisive. Some point to his early years at Derry. Others say Frost did not come into his own until his Vermont years. Carole Thompson, who is spearheading the effort to buy the South Shaftsbury home, notes that Frost won three of his four Pulitzer Prizes while living there, although it is unclear how much of that work was completed in Vermont. Frost did write one of his best-known poems, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," in South Shaftsbury, the work composed, ironically, on a hot summer morning. His time there has been called his "years of triumph" by Frost's official biographer, Lawrance Thompson (no relation to Carole Thompson). Frost is buried in Bennington, Vermont, and Carole Thompson hopes to pull some of the 20,000 people who visit his gravesite every year to the South Shaftsbury museum, a few miles up the road.

But Gary Keating, a Frost historian in Lawrence, is quick to point out that five generations of the Frost family now occupy that city's cemetery. Lawrence, where Frost attended high school and was married, is also home to a Robert Frost Fountain and a Robert Frost Elementary School. The mill still stands where Frost is said to have retreated from his duties as a lamp repairer to read Shakespeare in the mill tower on sunny days.

Frost had a complex relationship to the places he lived, wanting to escape them but also understanding that freedom without boundaries was meaningless. "I think he felt the need to be rooted and at the same time always feared to be confined," explains Donald Sheehy, a leading Frost scholar who teaches at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania. "There is wildness, but without restraint, discipline, or measure to modulate that, one gets lost. And I think, for Frost, lost could also mean spiritually lost and emotionally and mentally lost." Indeed, Frost lived in fear of losing his sanity. His sister ended her life in a mental institution, as did one of his **daughters. In 1940, his son, racked by depression, killed himself in the South Shaftsbury home.**

Many Frost scholars see the tension between home and wildness as the archetypal theme for Frost. Parini, who teaches at Middlebury College, another of Frost's haunts, refers to it as the relationship between "rule and energy."

"The energy is the wildness of his verse. The rule is his sense of place," Parini says. "The work is grounded by New Hampshire and Vermont. It's bounded by stone walls and farms. His people are country people. By being rooted in a particular biosphere, he was able to spring wild."

Throughout his life, Frost was known for ma**nipulating opposites in both his poetry and his conversation. He once said that self-knowledge can come only through understanding opposites and that the most important part of poetry is what's left unsaid.**

Perhaps then it should come as no surprise that Frost's legacy is also filled with the paradoxes he enjoyed playing with in his life and work. Granddaughter Lesley Lee Francis only adds to the question when talking about the issue of who, in the end, can lay the greatest claim to the American poet, of California and New England descent, who lived for a time here and for a time there, and who is now memorialized from the northern tip of New Hampshire to the Deep South of Mississippi.

"When was he most at home?" Francis muses about her contradictory grandfather. "He was most at home when walking."

Perhaps Francis's memory of her grandfather lends more than simply another paradoxical layer. In the end, it is in the journey, his journey in life and the journey of his poems, that Frost is most located and where readers and critics alike will find his true character in motion. As Frost concludes in "Into My Own," the poem inspired by his journey into the Dismal Swamp:

"They would not find me changed from him they knew –/Only more sure of all I thought true." ▭