FROST AND BURTON AT MICHIGAN, 1921–26, THEN AND NOW

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At President Marion Leroy Burton's invitation, Robert Frost arrived in the fall of 1921 to serve a one-year stint as the first Creative Fellow at Michigan. The two men were kindred spirits: Both forty-six, each had already achieved much, but had much higher ambitions—Burton to build Michigan into a great national university, Frost to become America's greatest poet if not also a national institution. And each believed the other would help realize these ambitions.

In Burton's too-brief tenure he built a dozen great buildings, most of which still bless this magnificent campus. He also raised Michigan's sights. As he wrote to the funder of Frost's fellowship, "A real university should be a patron of art, literature and creative activity. We ought to have on campus [creative artists] who are actually producing the results which influence the thought of nations." Burton also wanted students to leaven their academic studies by learning from doing, making, and creating.

Frost, although as widely read as any academic in literature, never graduated from college. Worse, the good reviews of his third book of poems did not generate sales sufficient to support his family of six; and his full load teaching at Amherst for three years hadn't gone well: it consumed way too much of his time, and he fell out with the college's president. Unemployed, Frost needed a professor's salary and the freedom to compose poems and campaign around the country reading his poetry for a good fee. Burton's offer of $5,000 without any teaching responsibilities was therefore a godsend. More than that, as Frost replied in his acceptance letter, the poet embraced the university president's vision "for keeping the creative and the

erudite together in education where they belong; and [where the creative can also] make its demand on the young student."

And oh, did Frost make his mark at Michigan! He led the monthly meetings at Prof. Cowden's home on Olivia Avenue for the student writers of the literary magazine, *Whimsies*. Frost shared his poems, and the students shared theirs. He welcomed students into his bigger rental house on Washtenaw to recite their poems, and then Frost would encourage them "to keep it around for a while and deepen, deepen it." His favorite students were the women who wrote the better poems; he felt he could be toughest with them. When one young woman put highfalutin words in her verse, Frost tartly advised, "There *is* a difference between fetching and far-fetching."

Town and gown filled Hill Auditorium five times to hear Frost introduce and share the stage with five of his national poet peers. The Town also loved his round of civic talks and his celebrity: the favorite hang-out near campus sold an ice cream confection encased in chocolate called a "Frost-Bite." Not to be outdone, the bookstore next door advertised his books with a sign that read, "Frost-Bark: Very Little Worse than his Bite."

Burton often hosted Frost for dinner parties at the President's House. At one gathering, Burton remarked, "Robert Frost may be even more popular than Football Coach Fielding Yost." To which Frost replied, "Let's put that to the test: schedule a reading for me at the same time as a home football game. More than 30,000 will be cheering at Ferry Field, but Hill Auditorium will be empty since even I will be at the game."

The *Whimsies* honored Frost by dedicating the final issue of the magazine to him. The cover included the first verse from one of his earliest poems, "Revelation."

> We make ourselves a place apart
> Behind light words that tease and flout,
> —But, oh, the agitated heart
> Till some find us really out.

Revealed in this poem is the larger challenge that faced Frost and Burton. The English faculty was already divided, into two separate departments in two separate buildings. Many of the academics in Literature, housed on the main Quadrangle, objected to any creative writer being on the English

faculty, particularly a college drop-out who taught no classes but got paid as much as they did and stole the show. Such snobbery from pedants who created no new works of literature irked the poet. He also disliked the firetrap of his dilapidated office quarters on the "wrong" side of State Street reserved for the "non-academic" Rhetoric, Composition and Journalism instructors. Worse, the "place apart" Frost shared with the *Whimsies* writers and the other students who would neglect their academic studies for creative writing also left his wife Elinor and their four children scattered and much too apart from him.

At the June Commencement, Burton awarded the honorary degree of Master of Arts to Frost with the citation, "As a Fellow in Creative Arts, Mr. Frost has been a welcome sojourner in our academic community—wise, gracious and stimulating." So much did Burton prize his poet friend, he changed his mind about rotating creative fellowships every year. He asked Frost to be ready to return for the next school year or perhaps longer, if another donor could be found, with more time reserved for writing poems.

Unfortunately, Burton did not succeed in raising new funds for even one more year until October, 1922. By then, Frost had already agreed to a national tour with more than a dozen readings to secure alternative income. Laid low by flu much of the rest of the school year, Frost barely made time to meet with the *Whimsies* students at Cowden's home and arranged fewer guest lectures. Burton defended this diminished public role by noting the Creative Fellow's first duty: to write poems. The president assured restive regents and faculty that Frost's next book would soon bestow much honor on Michigan.

When Burton couldn't raise funds to bring Frost back on a more permanent basis, he asked the poet to recommend candidates for a one-year fellowship. Frost suggested the great American novelist Willa Cather, but the two separate English departments joined to reject the thought of adding any woman, no matter how acclaimed, to their all-male faculty. Not surprising, since the Michigan Union didn't then allow women in the front door either.

New Hampshire, published in November of 1923, more than justified Burton's defense of the great poet. Frost dedicated the book to Michigan, and it won the Pulitzer Prize, the first of four the poet won. Burton kept talking to Frost about returning to Michigan for life as a Permanent Fellow

in Letters. Unable to find donors willing to endow a chair, the president decided to re-engineer the Lit School's budget instead. In September 1924, the regents finally approved the offer of a permanent position to Frost at a starting salary of $6,000 per year "out of University Funds." Angell Hall now open, Burton also assured his now partner-for-life at Michigan a new office in the heart of the campus, with responsibility for leading only one poetry-writing seminar every other semester. Frost accepted, but delayed his start to the 1925 fall semester.

Alas, in October 1924, Burton was fatally stricken by the heart defect with which he had long struggled. He lingered bedridden for months and died on February 18, 1925, at age fifty. The president's public memorial service was delayed until May 28, so that the four thousand who filled Hill Auditorium could hear Frost's eulogy. The poet paid his kindred spirit the highest honor possible: he shared his views of learning by the creative acts and arts that had brought Burton and Frost together for one unique moment in time at Michigan.

Burton's passing sounded the death knell for the Permanent Fellowship in Letters at Michigan, even as Frost did his best to keep his promises to the fallen president, at least for the 1925–26 school year. The poet joined gatherings at Roy Cowden's house of the new student literary magazine, *The Inlander*. Frost also worked with Cowden to help his favorite women students—"The Three Graces"—and their adventurous boyfriends publish an alternative magazine, appropriately named *The Outlander*. Frost returned full-time spring semester: to the home on Pontiac Trail across the Huron River that he, his wife, and his two younger daughters came to love, a handsome white clapboard cottage with what Frost called "hen and chicken architecture, a large middle with two wings." And he led a seminar for twelve students with the only requirement to write just one poem each, just one "you care enough about to keep you will share it with me."

Frost ended his tenure at Michigan by welcoming his students and the contributors to both literary magazines to this Frost House (that now stands as a living memorial to honor the poet at The Henry Ford in Dearborn). In his folksy way, Frost awarded prizes for the best creative writing in several categories: not surprisingly, *The Outlanders* won most. Throughout the year as Burton had hoped, Frost spent most of his fellowship writing poems for yet another book, *West Running-Brook*.

In the fall of 1926, Frost returned to Amherst College as a tenured Professor of English, at full pay for ten weeks a year in residence, with no teaching responsibilities. At Amherst, Frost labored for the next twelve years to continue the grand experiment he and Burton had envisioned, creating many more poems, inspiring students to write, and campaigning for his poetry and ideas across the nation. Frost later secured similar arrangements at Harvard and Dartmouth, and then, once again, at his Amherst College home. Such non-teaching positions were the exceptions that proved the rule, but the Frost-Burton model did establish a precedent that enabled many other poets and creative writers to find positions on campuses as writers-in-residence, in addition to teaching classes, seminars, and workshops.

Frost and Burton also shared a vision for, as I cited earlier, "keeping the creative and the erudite together in education where they belong; and [where the creative can also] make its demand on the young student." Over the past two generations, this creative demand *on* students has grown instead into a rising demand *from* students to create, "to write, write, write" as Frost so often encouraged, to learn by doing. And this student demand has spread to other departments and colleges, from architecture to engineering, from music to the sciences, from business to medicine. The academics may still rule most faculty roosts, but the artists, creators, inventors, and discoverers now cut a wide swath on most campuses. Ironically, in the canon of literature in the academy, Robert Frost is the long-dead American poet most read, studied, and analyzed.

That leaves one final question: Did Frost "influence the thought of nations" as Burton had originally envisioned? President John F. Kennedy and the University of Michigan both answered this question at four major public events between 1961 and 1963.[1] On January 20, 1961, at President-elect Kennedy's request, Frost read the first ever poem as part of the official inauguration ceremony, entitled "The Gift Outright." Tens of thousands witnessed this event live on the Mall, while tens of millions more watched on black-and-white TVs around the world.

In the spring of 1962, U-M invited Frost back, for a final reading before a standing-room-only throng at Hill Auditorium, and for an honorary

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[1] My introduction to, and the twelve-minute documentary video I produced of, these four events for my presentation at the U-M Bicentennial Poetry Symposium can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLBlVMlrlE4&feature=youtu.be

degree before tens of thousands more at Michigan Stadium. His citation declared, "As a public personage and a statesman by virtue solely of the exercise of poetic genius . . . Robert Frost [is] our nation's poet laureate . . . . [T]he University happily acknowledges the public offices of this sometime poet-in-residence and frequent and most welcome guest in the degree now conferred upon him, *Doctor of Laws*."

Frost died on January 29, 1963, at age eighty-eight. President Kennedy appeared on October 26 for a convocation and formal groundbreaking for the new Robert Frost Memorial Library at Amherst College. In his final, fated address before being assassinated only a few weeks later, the president focused on the great poet as *the* exemplar to explore how poetry and the other creative arts influence the exercise of national power and enrich American life and democracy. The president began, "In America, our heroes have customarily run to men of large accomplishments. But today this College and country honors a man whose contribution was not to our size but to our spirit, not to our political beliefs but to our insight, not to our self-esteem, but to our self-comprehension. In honoring Robert Frost, we therefore can pay honor to the deepest sources of our national strength."

The president articulated how Frost (who so often encouraged his students to "deepen it, deepen it") exemplified the value of independent questioning:

> He brought an unsparing instinct for reality to bear on the platitudes and pieties of society. . . . [I]t's hardly an accident that Robert Frost coupled poetry and power, for he saw poetry as the means of saving power from itself. When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. For art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment.

Kennedy spoke about the artist as a "solitary figure," often standing in opposition to the views of "an intrusive society and an officious state." The artist has "as Frost said, a lover's quarrel with the world. In pursuing

his perceptions of reality, he must often sail against the currents of his time . . . . If Robert Frost was much honored during his lifetime, it was because a good many preferred to ignore his darker truths. Yet in retrospect, we see how the artist's fidelity has strengthened the fiber of our national life."

Kennedy honored a poet as no other president quite can again—not only by inviting him to give the first reading of a poem at a US presidential inauguration, but also in delivering his personal eulogy for the poet. Yes, Robert Frost had fulfilled the promise Michigan's President Burton had originally envisioned for him: the great poet had become that "rarest type of personality," a creative artist who "sees visions and dreams dreams, who . . . actually produces the results which influence the thought of nations."