

## **Frost and Burton at Michigan**

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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 46, each had already achieved much, but each 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 President's vision "for keeping the creative and the erudite together in education where they belong; and [where we] would also like [the creative] to 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 for the student writers of Michigan's Literary Magazine, *Whimsies*. Frost shared his poems, and the students shared theirs. He welcomed students

into his bigger rental house on Washtenaw to say a poem, usually with Frost's encouragement "to keep it around for a while and deepen, deepen it." His favorite students were the women who wrote the better poems; with them he could be tougher. When one 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 a confection of ice cream encased in chocolate as 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 to 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 their 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, Frost’s secret place apart with the Whimsies 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. If Burton could find another donor, he asked Frost to be ready to return for the next school year or more, 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 at Cowden’s home and to arrange 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 this 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. Listen to its most quoted and fated poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening:”

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;

He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
BUT I HAVE PROMISES TO KEEP,  
AND MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

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 seminar for 15 students 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. Although he lingered bedridden for months, Burton died on February 18, 1925, age 50. 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 and "stuffer" student literary magazine *The Inlander*. Frost worked with Cowden to help his favorite women students—"The Three Graces"—and their more 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: the handsome white clapboard cottage with what Frost called "hen and chicken architecture, a large middle with two wings," warmly welcomed Frost, his family and their guests. And yes, Frost led a seminar for 15 students with the only requirement to write just one poem each "you care enough about to keep you'll 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 this Fellowship writing poems for yet another book, *West Running-Brook*.

To conclude, I want to share my favorite Frost poem, "The Silken Tent." Allow me to set one context for understanding this sonnet.

In my historical novel, *The Belle of Two Arbors*, the title character ventures south from Glen Arbor as an older student to Ann Arbor in 1921 to write poems at the University. Weaned by her invalid mother on Emily Dickinson's wildest verse, Belle carries with her the haunting "Goodbye" poem she composed eight years before when her mother drowned in a tragic natural disaster. Here, Belle becomes one of Frost's star-struck acolytes, serves as his typist and recites her wild poem for him. Stunned, Frost says, "It sounds a good song read aloud but like many of Miss Dickinson's, Good Lord, is it poetry?"

Not taken aback, Belle challenges Frost to write a better elegy for his mother, who shared the nickname "Belle." Over time, the two become friends, colleagues and correspondents, and exchange their several attempts to write better in-memory poems for

their mothers. Ten years later, when Belle finally meets Frost's challenge, he pays tribute to her "Goodbye to Mama" in the first Hopwood Awards. Seven years later when Frost includes "The Silken Tent" in a letter to Belle, she reads it as an even better elegy for his mother. Hear it now as the poem winds slowly through 14 lines in a single sentence:

She is as in a field a silken tent  
At midday when the sunny summer breeze  
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,  
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,  
And its supporting central cedar pole,  
That is its pinnacle to heavenward  
And signifies the sureness of the soul,  
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,  
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound  
By countless silken ties of love and thought  
To everything on earth the compass round,  
And only by one's going slightly taut  
In the capriciousness of summer air  
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

I like to think no poet could honor any woman more than Frost does when many years later he reads this poem at Belle's memorial service to remember his good friend.

Yet the greater magic of Frost's best poems is that they also can sound a different tune in other contexts. Indeed, after Frost's wife Elinor died, he shared this poem under the title "In Praise of You Poise" to woo the woman who would become his helpmate for the remaining 25 years of his life.

However said or heard, Frost's perfect sonnet of love still sings for the ages.

Thank you.

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From Frost's last semester here as a Permanent Fellow in Letters in the spring of 1926, please jump forward with me to October 2, 1960. The front door of this Michigan Union *is* open to women. On the front steps, we see the Junior Senator from Massachusetts in the wee hours of the morning. He challenges thousands of Michigan students to serve the country by joining what will become known as the Peace Corps. Only a few hours later, join me at the old train station on Depot Street. There, Jack

Kennedy begins a whistle-stop tour. He ends his stump speech exploring a New Frontier with his rallying cry, yes Frost's refrain, "But I have promises to keep,/ And miles to go before I sleep."

Now, please bear witness with me to a short video documentary of four historic moments over the next three years of Frost's life and death: the first reading ever by a poet for a new President's Inauguration on January 20, 1961; Frost's final encore at Michigan to say thank you and farewell in his 88<sup>th</sup> and last year in the spring of 1962 at Hill Auditorium and our other Big House, Michigan Stadium; and President Kennedy's fated, final address eulogizing Frost in the fall of 1963.

[Link to video inserted here]\*

[After screening] Forgive me being a bit emotional, but I was there, met him, shook his hand, and then he was gone... Going on 54 years later, I can still safely say: No President will ever again so honor a poet for his contributions to American life and democracy.

And, when all is said and done, I also submit that Robert Frost kept *all* his promises to another president, Michigan's Marion Leroy Burton.

[Pause]

Thank you.

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\*John Huberth (my classmate from Amherst College) and Natalie Condon (from the Communications Group of Michigan's College of Literature, Arts and Sciences) edited footage from these four events to make this extraordinary documentary.