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HENRY HART

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The Life of Robert Frost

A Critical Biography

Henry Hart

WILEY Blackwell

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For Scott Donaldson

and

In memory of my brother Charlie

The intellect of man is forced to choose

Perfection of the life, or of the work.

W. B. Yeats, "The Choice"

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List of Abbreviations and Author's Note

Reference works are cited in the endnotes by author's name and short title or by an abbreviation. The bibliography contains full details of works cited. The following abbreviations are used in the notes.

CPP&P — *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*, eds Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1995.

EF — Sandra Katz, *Elinor Frost: A Poet's Wife*. Westfield: Institute for Massachusetts Studies, 1988.

ESS — Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.

ETSL — *Edward Thomas: Selected Letters*, ed. R. George Thomas. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

FL — *The Family Letters of Robert and Elinor Frost*, ed. Arnold Grade. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972.

IMO — John Walsh, *Into My Own: The English Years of Robert Frost, 1912–1915*. New York: Grove Press, 1988.

IRF — *Interviews with Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

JM — Jeffrey Meyers, *Robert Frost: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996.

LM — Louis Mertins, *Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965.

LRF — *The Letters of Robert Frost*, vol. 1, *1886–1920*, eds Donald Sheehy, Mark Richardson, and Robert Faggen. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

LT I — Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874–1915*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

LT II Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915–1938*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

LT III Lawrance Thompson and R. H. Winnick, *Robert Frost: The Later Years, 1938–1963*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976.

LU *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, ed. Louis Untermeyer. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963.

NRF *The Notebooks of Robert Frost*, ed. Robert Faggen. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

RFIC *Robert Frost in Context*, ed. Mark Richardson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

RFPC Kathleen Morrison, *Robert Frost: A Pictorial Chronicle*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston: 1974.

RN Robert Newdick, *Newdick's Season of Frost: An Interrupted Biography of Robert Frost*, ed. William Sutton. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976.

SL *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.

I have kept Frost's idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation in the quotations from his letters and his notebooks. Braces, or curly brackets, around a word or phrase indicate that it has been written above a line in his notebooks. Since Frost's poems can be easily located in the Library of America volume *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* (eds Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson), and since citing page numbers for all the quotations from Frost's poems would clutter the text, I have not noted the page numbers for quotations from the poems.

1

The New England Frosts

Robert Frost, that quintessential New England poet, was not always a New Englander. His father had an abiding dislike for the region and had no intention of raising his children there. Growing up about 30 miles north of Boston in the industrial city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, William (or Will, as he was nicknamed) complained that the region was still in the grip of the Puritans who had founded it. His most dramatic rebellion occurred around 1862 when he ran away from home to fight for Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Having recently defeated General McClellan in the Peninsular Campaign and General Pope at the Second Battle of Bull Run, General Lee was one of the most glamorous enemies of New England to whom Will could declare allegiance. While pro-Lincoln Bostonians such as Senator Charles Sumner fulminated against the institution of slavery and Colonel Robert Shaw led an African American regiment into battle against Confederates in South Carolina, Will sided with the "Copperheads," who were considered poisonous snakes by Boston abolitionists and other anti-Confederate New Englanders.

Although Will's attempt to join Lee's army proved futile (police apprehended him in Philadelphia and sent him home to Lawrence), a decade later he put New England behind him for good, this time by traveling to San Francisco, where he worked as a newspaper reporter. For the rest of his life, Will had little contact with his family in Massachusetts, remained stubbornly committed to the principles of the antebellum South, and continued to revere Robert E. Lee. Rather than name his son after a New England military hero or Frost ancestor, which was the family custom, Will named him Robert Lee Frost in homage to his Confederate idol. As a journalist with political ambitions, he criticized New Englanders for being idealistic killjoys, and he worked tirelessly for politicians opposed to Lincoln's Republican policies of racial integration. He kept an iconic picture of General Lee on his office desk and talked to his son about the possibility

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of a second civil war in which future generals like Lee might win a belated victory. With the boy looking over his shoulder, he pointed to several regions on a map of the United States that he thought could break away from the Union to form separate confederacies.

Listening to his father's stories about the early Frosts who had made their homes in New England, Rob, as he was often called by his parents, must have thought it strange that his father was the only member of the family to sever ties with New England. For seven generations, the Frosts had lived within a 25-mile radius of the spot north of Boston where the family patriarch, Nicholas Frost, had first settled in the seventeenth century. As a boy, Rob heard his father wax lyrical about Nicholas's family battling Native Americans in King Philip's War and King William's War. (Will admired his ancestors' military prowess while despising their Puritanism.) Rob later told a friend: "I was forever being told what a great ancestry I had come by – Indian fighters, some who had married into shavetail nobility [i.e., into the families of newly commissioned military officers] … till I found myself in distaste of them."[1] Like his father siding with New England's Confederate enemies, Rob sided with New England's other early enemies: the Native Americans. In one of the first stories he wrote as a boy in San Francisco, he recounted a dream that was uncannily similar to his father's account of running away from home to fight for General Lee, only Rob dreamed of running away to join a band of Native American warriors in California's Sierra Nevada. He idealized these renegades the way his father had idealized the Confederacy. He imagined them welcoming him as a hero, inflicting punishment on their enemies (white settlers like the Frosts) with impunity, and always returning unharmed to their utopian community in the mountains. Rob wrote in a notebook that "Civilization is the opposite of Utopia,"[2] and for much of his life he sought relief from civilization in sparsely populated communities in or near mountains like the ones that protected the Native Americans in his boyhood dream.

Rob's military-minded father showed a keen interest in family history as a young man, and as a father he passed that interest on to Rob. Several years after failing to get admitted to West Point (General Lee's alma mater), Will wrote a 10-page genealogical essay for his Harvard Class Book that focused on Frost ancestors who had established a tradition of soldiering. For two centuries, he noted, Frost men had fought with distinction in most of the country's major wars. Will's father, William Prescott Frost Sr, had encouraged his son's passion for all things military by giving him the name of their distant relative William Prescott, the legendary commander at the Battle of Bunker Hill who reputedly shouted to his troops as the British advanced: "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes!"[3] Acutely aware of the Frosts' warrior ethos, Will tried to show he was made of the same bellicose stuff as his ancestors by regularly engaging in street fights with immigrants who worked in Lawrence's textile mills. His father admired his feisty spirit, but eventually imposed a curfew and locked him in his room so he would refrain from fighting at night. Showing a characteristic mix of cunning and recklessness, Will climbed down a rope ladder to continue his combative ways in the city's dimly lit streets.

After inheriting a copy of his father's genealogical essay as an adult and receiving other accounts of ancestors from friends, Robert Frost reiterated his admiration for Native Americans and his distaste for New England precursors who fought them in "Genealogical," a poem written in 1908. Although he told a journal editor he aimed to present an "authentic bit of family history" about Charles Frost, his "bad ancestor the Indian Killer,"[4] his poem exaggerates Charles's life, lampoons his well-known military accomplishments, and admits to a "lifelong liking for [the] Indians" who had murdered him. Another poem written at about the same time, "The Generations of Men," gives another caustic assessment of Frost's New England heritage. While "Studying genealogy," one character in the poem (a member of the Stark family who resembles Frost) declares: "What will we come to/With all this pride of ancestry, we Yankees?/I think we're all mad." To Frost as a young poet, his Yankee past seemed more of a burden than a blessing. Some of his forebears even seemed "stark" mad. Convinced that Frost had inherited many "eccentric" family traits, his close high school friend Carl Burell told one biographer: "To understand ROB FROST you must know his ancestors."[5] His ancestors did, indeed, provide Rob with models he tried – with various degrees of success – to emulate and resist.

The earliest records reveal that the Frosts (or "Forsts," as the name was first spelled) were known for their military and civic activities. Some participated in the invasion of Britain by Anglo-Saxon warriors during the fifth century, while others fought for a foothold in Britain with the Danish Vikings during the ninth century. One ancestor, Henry, named his son Robert Frost and established the Hospital of the Brothers of St John the Evangelist in 1135, which in 1509 became St John's College, Cambridge. Once the Frosts immigrated to New England, they earned reputations as stolid Yankee farmers, merchants, soldiers, and public officials for the next two and a half centuries. The first English Frost to cross the Atlantic Ocean and settle in New England, however, was different. Court documents show that, shortly after Nicholas Frost arrived on the southern Maine coast, he was convicted of "thefte committed att Damerills Cove upon the Indeans, [and] for drunkenes and fornicacon." His crimes on Damariscove Island (a fishing and trading site about 30 miles northeast of present-day Portland) exacerbated the already tense relations between native and non-native communities. For the Puritan magistrates who heard his case, drunkenness and fornication were especially heinous crimes. As punishment, he was ordered to pay a fine of £5 to the magistrates and £11 to his employers. According to historian Wilbur Spencer, the magistrates also stipulated that Nicholas be "severely whipt, & branded in the hand with a hott iron, & after banished out of this pattent."[6] His banishment from the "patent" – the land in New England granted to the colonists by King James I – was supposed to be permanent. If Nicholas returned and was caught, he would be executed.

Whether or not Nicholas obeyed the court's order is uncertain. Spencer contends that Nicholas "went back to England in some fishing vessel" and "in June 1634 returned to New England with his family, sailing from Plymouth in the *Wulfrana*, which with a few passengers may have come on a fishing voyage to the Isles of Shoals [10 miles off the coast of New

Hampshire]."[7] By contrast, the historian Charles Libby suggests that Nicholas remained in New England, but fled the site of his crimes to avoid capture. After his 1632 appearance "in the Boston court for compromising the English by misusing the natives at Damariscove," Libby writes, Nicholas procured land in the Kittery area, started a successful farm, and on July 27, 1639, petitioned the Massachusetts governor to rescind his "decree of banishment," but had to send a second petition before he was granted amnesty. According to Libby, Nicholas was "an efficient and aggress[ive] man"[8] who, after sorting out his legal troubles, served his community as a constable, land commissioner, and first selectman. His volatile temperament, however, kept getting him into trouble. On October 14, 1651, having been charged with blasphemy and conspiracy to steal from a fellow Kittery selectman, he was hauled before the magistrates again. Rather than admit guilt, he acted like one of the mad Starks, shouting in court that "he hoped to live so long as to wet his bullets with the blood of the [Puritan] saints."[9] His violent outbursts and court battles notwithstanding, he continued to prosper, eventually amassing one of the largest estates in southern Maine.

To explain the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde aspects of Nicholas Frost's personality, some of his descendants argued that there were two Nicholas Frosts who landed in New England in the 1630s. Thomas and Edward Frost, for example, proposed in their book *The Frost Family in England and America* (1909) that the first Nicholas was the mad, bad, and dangerous lout who drank, fornicated, stole, and blasphemed; the second Nicholas, who "should not be confused with the [first],"[10] was the upright, civic-minded farmer who served his community nobly before dying a rich, respected man. Unlike the Starks in "The Generations of Men," these Frost genealogists refused to entertain the possibility that Nicholas, like many ambitious public officials before and after him, acted in contradictory ways. Robert Frost, who would have his own scrapes with the law, knew better. As he noted in his meditation on "beginnings" in "West-Running Brook," most lives "go by contraries." He agreed with William James, who observed in *Psychology: Briefer Course*, a book Frost read carefully as a student and teacher: "*A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him*," and these different selves sometimes lead to a "discordant splitting"[11] of the personality. Nicholas was the first American Frost to demonstrate a split personality, sometimes acting like an ignominious Mr Hyde and at other times like a proper Dr Jekyll. Or so Robert Frost came to believe. He once told a friend: "[My] first ancestor in America was banished from town for three years because of intimacy with an Indian girl. After the time was up he came back with an English wife and all was proper. *He should have stayed with the Indian girl*."[12] Rather than renounce the "discordant splitting" in Nicholas's personality, Frost sympathized with it. He even suggested that the family patriarch should have been more contrarian than he was.

Despite the mystery surrounding Nicholas's beginnings in New England, facts about his life are plentiful. He was born on April 25, 1585; lived for several decades in Tiverton, a town in southwest England made prosperous by the wool trade; and married Bertha Cadwalla on January 1, 1630, when he was 45 and she was only 20. Like other Puritans chafing under the yoke

of the Anglican Church, Nicholas hoped to find freedom and a simpler form of Christianity in New England. Nicholas may have found freedom, but he quickly upset the Puritans north of Boston with his licentious behavior. If he followed their disciplinary measures by returning to England in 1632, which is likely, he disobeyed them by sailing back to New England in April 1634 on the *Wulfrana* with his wife and two infant sons, Charles and John. Their ship anchored near Little Harbor, a small fishing and trading settlement not far from present-day Rye, New Hampshire. Thomas Wannerton, a local farmer whom Nicholas befriended, let the Frost family stay in his home while Nicholas built a house on a parcel of land at Leighton's Point near the source of Sturgeon Creek. Despite the harsh climate, marshy terrain, and persistent threat of attacks by Native Americans, Nicholas established a successful farm there. After his daughter Anna was born in 1635, he acquired an additional 400 acres on the northeast side of the Pascataqua River, an estuary rich in fish where the Cochecho and Salmon Falls rivers converged. Some historians believe that Nicholas's house was the first permanent one in the Pascataqua Plantation, an area which later grew into the town of Eliot, Maine. To pay tribute to the provenance of his enterprising ancestor, Robert Frost named his first son Elliott.

Like the other 1,400 colonists in the Maine wilderness, which in the mid-1630s was part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Nicholas depended on courage, self-reliance, hard work, and faith to survive – virtues that Robert Frost would esteem, as well. Nicholas also had a sense of civic responsibility. He blazed a road through the woods to Sturgeon Creek in 1637 to enhance fishing and trading opportunities for his neighbors. The governor in charge of the province rewarded him for his public service by appointing him constable in 1640. To demonstrate his new status as protector of the people and to accommodate his growing family (he would eventually have six children), he constructed a fortified, two-story log house in Eliot known as "Frost's Garrison." During a period when Native American attacks on settlers were frequent, the garrison became a convenient sanctuary. Out of respect for his good deeds, the citizens of Kittery – a nearby town affiliated with Eliot – elected him first selectman in 1648. As his income grew, he acquired more land and more farm animals. By the time he died on July 20, 1663, he owned a 1,042-acre estate that included 27 cattle, 19 pigs, four horses, and a servant boy. Despite the allegations of misconduct that dogged his career, he established the prototype of the rugged, down-to-earth, politically engaged farmer that guided future generations of Frosts.

Although Robert Frost's "Genealogical" ignores Nicholas and portrays his son Charles as a murderous brute, most seventeenth-century New Englanders regarded Nicholas as an eminent pioneer and Charles as a brave soldier who helped save the colonists from extermination. Frost was right, though, to emphasize Charles's murderousness. In 1646, at the age of 15, he shot and killed a friend, Warwick Heard, while hunting. Although he was exonerated, four years later he killed a Pennacook tribal chief and brave while searching for his 40-year-old mother Bertha and his 15-year-old sister Anna, whom the normally friendly Pennacooks had kidnapped. The murders ruined the possibility of a rescue and sealed the fate of Bertha

and Anna. To get revenge, the Pennacooks executed both women on July 4, 1650, leaving their mangled bodies in a camp by Sturgeon Creek. Incensed by these assaults on his family, Charles dedicated his life to being what his poetic descendant called a "bad … Indian Killer."

By the time King Philip's War broke out in 1675, Charles was a Maine militia captain in charge of all the garrisoned houses around Kittery. As Usher Parsons recounts in his *Memoir of Charles Frost,* the war was especially deadly around Frost's Garrison: "The Indians [allied with the Pokanoket chief King Philip] proceeded down the shore of the Pascataqua, and thence eastward through York, burning houses and killing people wherever they found them unguarded, so that in the short period of three months, eighty lives were taken, a great many houses plundered and burnt, and animals killed."[13] In the sparsely populated area, 80 dead was a significant number. Haunted by the deaths of his mother and sister, Captain Frost got a chance to settle scores in September 1676, a month after King Philip had been shot and decapitated in a Rhode Island swamp. Frost led his militia to Cochecho, a settlement governed by Major Walderne near present-day Dover, New Hampshire, where 400 Native Americans had gathered for a feast. Some were friendly Pennacooks who regularly mingled with the settlers at Walderne's trading post. Others, however, were renegades from battles in Massachusetts. Because Walderne wanted to remain on good terms with his Native American trading partners, he devised a scheme to protect the Pennacooks while rooting out the renegades. After two companies of Massachusetts soldiers arrived, Walderne convinced his allies to begin a mock battle. He then ordered the militiamen to round up all the Native Americans, free the Pennacooks, and send the others to Boston to be punished.

Some historians claim that Captain Frost was a reluctant participant in what became known as the "base Yankee Trick" at Walderne's Garrison. Nevertheless, he meted out rough justice to those he apprehended. According to Elizabeth Bartlett's account of the incident, after Walderne instructed the Pennacooks to start a "sham fight," Captain Frost's soldiers "surrounded and disarmed them, and took them all prisoners. Those who were known to be allies were dismissed. About three hundred strange Indians from the south and west were sent to Boston: seven or eight of these were known to be murderers, and they were hanged. The rest were sold into foreign slavery."[14] According to Robert Frost in "Genealogical":

> [Captain Frost] knew that the Indians were usually in a state of not having
> Eaten for several days and hungry accordingly.
> So he invited them to a barbecue …
> And then as they feasted he fell upon them with slaughter
> And all that he didn't slay he bound and sold
> Into slavery …

Charles Frost was a fierce soldier, but not the cartoonish character with no "Regard to the laws of civilized warfare," which is how "Genealogical" portrays him.

By the late 1600s, Charles had proved himself to be a political leader as well as an effective militia commander. When Maine's governor promoted him to commander-in-chief of all the province's militias, he served as a representative at Boston's General Court, the legislative and judicial institution that governed the Massachusetts Bay Colony. As Parsons observed in his *Memoir*, Charles was a stern judge. After an insubordinate soldier struck him during an altercation in 1674, he punished the offender with "twenty-five stripes on the bare skin."[15] Robert Frost's debates about Old Testament justice versus New Testament mercy, which informed his *Masque of Reason* and *Masque of Mercy* and many of his poems and lectures, can be traced back to the harsh practices of Puritan ancestors like Charles. Early on in his career, Robert Frost favored harsh justice, but exacted by Native Americans against the New England colonists rather than the other way around. That is why "Genealogical" expresses sympathy for the braves who killed Charles "with great barbarity" on Sunday, July 4, 1697, while Charles was walking home with friends from a Puritan meeting house. Frost the poet "vowed [to go on] a pilgrimage" to the "notable bowlder in Eliot, Maine" that marked the spot where Charles was buried. But in "Genealogical" he repeatedly suggests that his illustrious ancestor got what he deserved. As the poem points out, Charles's grave was desecrated by the Native Americans; after his corpse was exhumed and crucified on a large stake, Charles's "indefatigable sons cut him down and buried him again." Rather than lament such barbarity, Frost says in "Genealogical" that he will not visit his ancestor's grave "for grief," but only to bear witness to an act of punitive justice that he endorses.

Frost no doubt heard about the plan to celebrate the two-hundredth anniversary of Charles Frost's death in Eliot, Maine, on July 5, 1897. The Eliot Historical Society had invited many of Charles Frost's descendants to the day of commemorative prayers, patriotic songs, genealogical lectures, and poetry recitations. One of the invited guests was probably Robert Frost's grandfather, William Frost Sr, a well-known citizen of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Recently married and living close to his grandfather in Lawrence, Robert Frost was on vacation at the time with his wife and their 10-month-old son Elliott in Amesbury, Massachusetts, about 25 miles south of Eliot. If he missed the ceremony, he soon learned that a group of poets, historians, and ministers had gathered in Eliot to pay homage to Charles Frost as a Christ-like martyr, saint, and – in Eliot Historical Society president J. Willis's words – "the most venturesome and fearless spirit of his generation … to claim the wilderness for civilization."[16] Opposed to the sort of sanctimonious ancestor worship and New England patriotism on display at the anniversary (the Native Americans were denigrated as satanic "tawnies" in the poems eulogizing Charles), Frost presented his contrarian view in "Genealogical." By the time he wrote "The Gift Outright" for a Phi Beta Kappa ceremony in 1941 at the College of William and Mary (he also recited the poem at President Kennedy's inauguration in 1961), he had changed his tune. Still going "by contraries," he now implied that it was the destiny of white settlers like his ancestors to conquer Native Americans and take possession of their land.

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Rebel Sons and Punitive Fathers

Will Frost would have agreed with his son's endorsement of military might and manifest destiny in "The Gift Outright." Paradoxically, he also would have approved of his son's satirical attack on the Puritan Frosts – at least on their Puritan Christianity – in "Genealogical." At an early age, Will expressed a strong dislike for the Puritan ethos and for Christianity in general. Some of his animosity grew from his father's insistence that he attend Lawrence's Universalist Church every Sunday. To Will, his father was a religious hypocrite. Universalist Christians were supposed to differentiate themselves from other Protestants – especially from their Puritan forerunners – by emphasizing a New Testament God of love and mercy who granted universal salvation. Yet William Sr appeared to worship, and even emulate, the angry, jealous Jehovah of the Old Testament and the violently judgmental Christ of the book of Revelation. From Will's youthful point of view, his father's strong work ethic and penchant for strict discipline and corporal punishment had little to do with the Universalists' God of peace, love, and redemption for all. William Sr, it seemed, was a closet Puritan. Will resented his father's Puritan attributes and also the way he moved the family from place to place in New England to improve his financial status (Robert Frost's children would have similar resentments in the twentieth century). After Will was born on December 27, 1850, in Kingston, New Hampshire, his father changed residences in New Hampshire and Massachusetts every year or two. The uprootings, which ended in 1860 when William Sr bought a house in Lawrence, were disorienting for his temperamental son.

Will's discontent only intensified after his father became overseer of Lawrence's Pacific Mill, a large brick textile factory on the Merrimack River. Incorporated in 1853 and presided over by the city's namesake, Abbot Lawrence, the Pacific Mill originally produced wool and cotton clothing for women. At the end of the nineteenth century it expanded its product line to become one of the largest textile mills in the world. Will was unimpressed

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by his father's place of work and substantial salary, which allowed the family to live in a spacious house at 370 Haverhill Street near the attractive city green, and to mingle with Lawrence's upper class in the neighborhood. An only child, Will showed little interest in his father's mill job, which consisted of hiring and firing workers and making sure the mill turned a profit. He also showed little interest in following his New England ancestors into farming. About his life up to the age of 22, he wrote that he was "engaged in no occupation or business other than studying."[1] This was not quite true. Although he escaped the constraints of his puritanical household through reading, he also escaped in a more literal way by leaving his fashionable neighborhood to pick fights in the rougher sections of the city.

Will's madcap scheme to join the Confederacy betrayed his youthful fantasies of revenge against those at home who annoyed him. Although his parents were shocked when he ran away (he was about 12 at the time), Will was declaring solidarity with at least some of the mill bosses and mill workers who kept company with his father. To make a substantial profit in the textile mills, they depended on cheap cotton from Southern plantations. If slavery were abolished, cotton prices would rise and mill profits would fall. A surprising number of Northerners, as a result, sympathized with Southerners who fought to preserve slavery. Will came to despise his father and Lawrence's factories, but his journey south was inspired, at least in part, by his father's Confederate sympathies. According to Carl Burell, "W P Frost [Sr] was An OLD SCHOOL COPERHEAD [*sic*]."[2] Like most oedipal sons, Will absorbed almost as many of his father's traits as he repudiated.

One trait both father and son shared was a respect for the military. Not to be deterred from a military career after he failed to reach Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, Will set his sights on West Point when the Civil War ended in 1865, the year he turned 15. Although no Frost men in the past had attended college, many of them had trained to be soldiers and fought in the nation's wars. As Will wrote in his genealogical essay: "The only ones of my ancestors or relatives whom I know to have received a 'liberal [college] education' are of the Woodman family … [related to] my maternal grandmother, Mary Woodman."[3] The Woodmans had gone to civilian colleges like Dartmouth and Bowdoin, so when it came time for Will to apply to West Point, his family could give him little guidance. As he later learned, acceptance at the military academy depended on one's political connections; a politician had to sponsor an applicant. Will's parents failed to contact the right people, and as a result Will was rejected. His later study of politics and his campaigns for political office may be attributed in part to his realization that success came to those with political savvy.

Because Harvard College – his second choice – accepted him, Will packed his bags in the fall of 1868 and traveled the short distance from Lawrence to Cambridge. Harvard, as it turned out, was a better fit than West Point for the rambunctious, unconventional teenager. His time at Harvard coincided with the presidency of T. S. Eliot's cousin Charles Eliot, a progressive thinker who reformed the college's curriculum by allowing students to choose a multitude of "electives." The 35-year-old president was an advocate of what he called "the new education," and shifted the college

from its Christian foundation to a more secular one. This suited Will just fine. As an undergraduate, his animosity toward Christianity gained intellectual force, and so did his passion for the libertarian principles he associated with the antebellum South. When not studying, he gambled with friends, drank copious amounts of whiskey, and caroused in brothels. If he got into trouble, his family rescued him just as they had done when he ran off to join the Confederates. On one occasion, when he "impersonated an officer and tried to shake down the madam of a house of ill-fame, demanding $500 or $1,000 for protection,"[4] Boston police arrested him and threw him in jail. His mother's uncle Elihu Colcord kindly paid his bail. (In other versions of this incident, Robert Frost claimed that his father had been "taken into custody in L[awrence] by U.S. govt. officers for blackmailing [a] L[awrence] whorehouse-keeper," and that "his uncle, Colcord, a politician, had influence, and got him out of it."[5]) Appalled by the caper and increasingly alienated from his prodigal son, William Sr refused to intervene. Harvard was more lenient. Rather than expel Will after his arrest, the administration graciously allowed him to return to classes. Will studied hard in between partying. He possessed a clever, retentive mind, and gradually earned a reputation as an engaging writer and public speaker. He won scholarship prizes at the end of his sophomore and junior years, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa as a senior, and in 1872 graduated fifth in his class with honors.

Although Will claimed that his "plans in life" were still "unshaped"[6] when he left Harvard, as a student he had worked as a reporter for Boston's *Saturday Evening Gazette* and thought newspaper-writing might be good training for a political career. He had no intention of submitting to his father's wish that he go into the law. That would require additional schooling, and he had no desire to take any more classes after four years at Harvard. His plan to get a job as a reporter in San Francisco was another slap at his parents, who wanted him to stay in New England. For the puritanical Frosts and Woodmans (Will's mother was descended from a Puritan Englishman who had settled in the area north of Boston in 1635), San Francisco was as disreputable as the biblical Babylon.

San Francisco had grown almost overnight into a mythical destination for adventurers from around the world. A few years before Will was born, it did not exist. The small Spanish settlement called Yerba Buena ("good grass") inhabited by Franciscan monks and Mexicans had metamorphosed into a village in 1847, and a year later, after Mexico lost the Mexican–American War, it had joined the United States. At the time, fewer than 500 people lived there. Everything changed in 1849 when James Marshall found gold while building a saw mill for John Sutter by the American River east of Sacramento. During the subsequent Gold Rush, thousands of people flocked to San Francisco, using the city as a gateway to the Sierra Nevada, where they hoped to strike it rich. A decade later, a silver rush in the Comstock Lode close to the California–Nevada border brought more fortune seekers through the city. Writers and journalists followed in their wake. Bret Harte, who worked for newspapers before making a name for himself as a fiction writer, traveled to San Francisco in 1860. After failing as

a silver miner in the Comstock Lode, Mark Twain took a newspaper job in San Francisco in 1864. When the Irish writer Oscar Wilde visited the city, he found it intoxicating. “This is where I belong,” he exclaimed. “This is my atmosphere. I didn’t know such a place existed in the whole United States.”[7] For Wilde, San Francisco was a place where people could assume new identities and satisfy every desire. When he returned to England, where he was eventually jailed for a homosexual affair, he expressed his conviction that San Francisco was a paradise of unearthly delights through the persona of Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. “It’s an odd thing,” Wotton says in the novel, that “anyone who disappears is said to be seen in San Francisco. It must be a delightful city and possess all the attractions of the next world.”[8] Like Wilde and Wotton, Will Frost also wanted to disappear from the repressive morality at home and carry on as a swashbuckling bohemian in a new world.

William Sr, unsurprisingly, disapproved of his son’s career plans and refused to pay for his trip to the West Coast. Used to overcoming parental obstacles, Will consulted several Harvard professors about getting a job to pay his own way, and learned that Lewistown Academy, a small school founded in 1812 in the middle of Pennsylvania, needed a principal. Although the school had closed in 1871 because of financial problems, it planned to reopen in 1872. He applied for the job and got an offer (some biographers maintain that he was offered a job as teacher rather than principal). Near the end of the summer of 1872, he took a train to Lewistown with the idea that the school would be a stepping stone on the path to San Francisco.

Always on the prowl for attractive women, he quickly got to know one of the only teachers at the school, Isabelle Moodie. His initial overtures to her were chivalric but also pragmatic. Isabelle had advertised a 12-lesson course in Pitman-style “phonography,” a kind of shorthand that would be useful to Will as a San Francisco newspaper reporter. Tuition for the course was reasonable: only $10. According to Robert Frost’s official biographer, Lawrance Thompson, Will arranged a meeting with Isabelle (nicknamed Belle) to discuss shorthand tutorials, and immediately fell in love with her. Unlike the women he had consorted with in Boston’s brothels, she struck him as aristocratic, sensitive, and intelligent. A Scottish citizen when she arrived in the United States, she was “strong, tall, and graceful in her motions, [and] she expressed an extraordinary intensity of response to anything which attracted her attention. Her beautiful dark brown eyes were deep set beneath a high forehead; her mass of auburn hair, parted in the middle, was gathered loosely in a large roll at the back of her neck.”[9] With few other women at the school to distract him, the handsome, energetic Harvard graduate with thick sideburns, a neat mustache, and penetrating blue eyes set his mind on convincing his phonography tutor to marry him.

Will’s courtship in and around tutorials was ardent. Learning of Belle’s passion for Scottish poetry, he recited lines from one of the only Scottish poems he knew: “My Dear and Only Love” by the seventeenth-century marquis of Montrose, James Graham. An anti-democratic royalist who fought for King Charles I during England’s Civil War and who was hanged

and beheaded as a result, Graham in his poem compared himself to an emperor who was willing to sacrifice everything in pursuit of his goal. If his beloved agreed to be conquered and to serve him loyally, he would reciprocate: "I'll serve thee in such noble Ways/Was never heard before:/I'll crown and deck thee all with Bays,/And love thee evermore."[10] Will pursued Belle with similar extravagant declarations and promises.

Five months after their first encounter, unable to express his passionate feelings for Belle in person, he tried to express them in writing. "To say that I liked you at the very outset of our acquaintance would be superfluous," he declared in his best rhetorical style: "For who could do otherwise? Yes, I liked you. That was all. I have always thought that that was the only feeling I could have towards any woman. And I little dreamed that this sentiment, – if sentiment it can be called, – was to be supplanted by a passion whose hold upon me, oh! how dear a hold! has now for some time been stronger than any other tie that connects me with the world, and which makes my heart beat faster, faster, faster, as I write these lines. But I am anticipating. As I became better acquainted with you, I saw in you a nearer approach to my ideal of a true woman, joined with the native cultivation and refinement of a lady, than I had ever chanced upon among any of my lady friends."[11] In these words, which he composed on February 1, 1873, Will revealed his romantic – as well as his conventional – attitudes toward women. According to Will, women could be divided into two camps: one that contained his "lady friends" (presumably those he met in brothels) and the other that contained saintly beauties who approached his Platonic "ideal of a true woman."

Will confessed in his epistle that he knew little about Belle's early life. All he knew was that she was born in Scotland, she was older than him, and she was a devout Christian. Worried that the disparity in their ages, nationalities, and religious beliefs might prejudice her against marriage, he told her: "The difference in age is not very remarkable" (she was 28 and he was 22 when they met). As for her Scottish origin, in addition to making her exotic and alluring, it convinced Will that she knew how to adapt to new places such as San Francisco. With regard to her deeply held Christian beliefs, he bluntly admitted: "You are a Christian – I am not." Then he added in a more conciliatory tone: "How far that is an obstacle in your eyes, I know not. In mine it is none at all. I am always for allowing the widest liberty of opinion. And my unbelief has not a grain of obstinacy in it, so far as I am aware. It is rather lack of belief, than unbelief. This point, then, is one for you, and not me, to consider." Trying to be honest without scaring her off, Will did not parse the difference between "lack of belief" and "unbelief," and conveniently passed off his disillusionment with Christianity as her problem, not his. Like the sort of lawyer his father wanted him to be, Will addressed Belle as if presenting a case in court. Wrapping up his arguments, he tried to show sympathy by saying he understood her qualms about marriage (she had told him she "should never marry") and he felt sorry for her "past life" of "disappointments" and "troubles." He hoped that she would let bygones be bygones, and promised to respect her privacy: "Your secrets, I ought not, and I desire not, to pry into." In his final pitch, he assured her

that she could "rely upon [him] as a support in the rugged ways of life," and that she would never find a "more devoted [husband]."[12]

Belle did, in fact, keep many painful "secrets" about her background to herself, which is why her early life in Scotland remains shrouded in mystery. While most Frost chroniclers agree that she was born on September 16, 1844, and that her father died when she was young, there is no consensus about the "troubles" that prompted her grandparents to send her to the United States in 1856. Lawrance Thompson maintains that Belle's father was a sea captain who drowned in a shipwreck (Robert Frost referred to the drowning in letters), and that her mother was "a hussy who ran away from the arduous duties of motherhood."[13] Extrapolating from this, the biographer Jeffrey Meyers claims that "her parents had never … been married" and that her mother worked as a prostitute since "'hussy' (a lewd woman) was a euphemism for prostitute." According to Meyers, much of Belle's early life and personality can be explained by her mother's illicit vocation. He attributes Belle's religious convictions – what he calls her "fanatical piety"[14] – to shame over her illegitimate birth, and traces her reluctance to marry, her indifference to her Scottish relatives, her deportation to Ohio as an adolescent, and her strained relationship with her in-laws to her mother's "lewd" profession.

Historical records cast doubt on Meyers's allegation that Frost's grandmother was a prostitute. Prostitutes at the time were unlikely to baptize their children in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, and church documents show that Belle's parents had her baptized on October 13, 1844, and had her brother Thomas baptized in 1837. The Moodie children grew up in Alloa, a city on the River Forth about 30 miles northwest of Edinburgh (Thompson and Meyers claim that Belle grew up in Leith, a port city adjacent to Edinburgh). According to Scottish Church Session papers, Belle's father John Moodie (sometimes spelled "Mudie" or "Muddie") worked as a carpenter at the time he married Amelia Christie. He may have been a ship carpenter, since Alloa in the nineteenth century was one of the busiest shipping ports in Scotland, exporting products all around the world. Although both Thompson and Meyers follow Robert Frost in insisting that John Moodie drowned in a shipwreck, no evidence has been found in Scottish archives to support this claim.

What is known for certain about John Moodie is that he was born on January 17, 1811, in Newburn, Scotland, and grew up close to where the Firth of Forth joins the North Sea. After marrying Amelia in Dundee on November 4, 1836, he settled with his wife in Alloa, where they apparently raised four children. (Although Frost claimed his mother had only one brother, census records show that she had three: Thomas, born in 1837; John, born circa 1838; and Gordon, born circa 1839.) John Sr may have worked his way up from carpenter to ship captain; his grandson, a New Zealander also named John, referred to him as Captain John Moodie in correspondence with Frost. While not all Frost biographers believe that John died in a shipwreck, newspaper obituaries reveal that his son Thomas was a ship captain who drowned when his ship, the *Vixen*, sank off the New Zealand coast on August 1, 1867. Complicating the story of the Moodies,

at least one Frost scholar has claimed that John and Amelia "were both victims of a cholera epidemic, died at approximately the same time [circa 1850], and are buried at Land's End, Cornwall."[15] Outbreaks of cholera from contaminated drinking water were common during the nineteenth century; two such outbreaks occurred in Scotland in 1848 and 1853. A death notice in a Scottish Register House, however, states that Amelia died in a Dundee poorhouse on December 30, 1872.

Belle generally kept quiet about the misfortunes of her mother and father. She preferred talking about her paternal grandparents, Thomas and Mary Moodie, who adopted her when she was about six. An 1851 Scottish census has Belle and her brother Gordon living with their grandparents at 8 Castle Street in Alloa. Over the next few years, Belle's grandfather became the guiding figure in her life. Belle attributed her religious enthusiasm, which she would eventually channel into Swedenborgian mysticism, to her grandfather, whose devotion to the visionary and transcendental aspects of Presbyterianism strengthened as he approached death. Belle as an adult spoke passionately about the way her grandfather on his deathbed described angels ushering him through the gates of heaven. This sort of divine vision enchanted her for the rest of her life.

After the deaths of Belle's father and grandfather, her grandmother Mary Moodie decided the child would be happier if she lived with relatives in the United States, so she asked the brother of Belle's father – another Thomas – to adopt her. A University of Edinburgh graduate, Thomas had immigrated to the United States in 1836 and established himself as the cashier of the City Bank of Columbus, Ohio. When Thomas agreed to raise Belle, her grandmother bought tickets for the two of them to sail from Scotland to Philadelphia in 1856. Belle liked to tell how she felt apprehensive about going to a country on the verge of civil war, but how her mood changed when her ship dropped anchor in the Delaware River and a stranger gave her a "bonnie" peach from a pile of fruit he was loading onto the ship. Even though she was tempted to eat the fresh peach, she thought it was so magnificent that she kept it to show her uncle. It became a symbol of her fresh start in a new world.

Thomas Moodie met Belle and Mary on a Philadelphia pier, accompanied them by train to Columbus, and introduced them to his large family. Before long Belle was enrolled in school and having fun with her cousins (Thomas and his wife Jane Ashwell had eight children). Belle was closest in age and temperament to 11-year-old Jeannie. For years Belle thought of Jeannie as a confidant, and eventually would name her first and only daughter Jeanie after her cousin. Because her formative years in Alloa had been disheartening, Belle worked hard to put her past behind her. By all accounts, she succeeded. To reward her for her excellent academic record at Columbus High School, the faculty chose her to read an essay on chemistry during the commencement exercises in 1864. The audience responded with loud applause and a local newspaper said her speech was not "surpassed by any other effort of the evening."[16] Although many women at the time got married right after high school, had children, and became housewives, Belle followed a different path. She taught in a local primary school and

remained single. Over the next eight years, she rose in the public school ranks to the position of assistant principal. Belle's five different jobs during this period were a sign of her ambition as well as her restlessness. At the age of 28, after just one year in her assistant principal job, she moved to the financially strapped Lewistown Academy. The death of her uncle Thomas Moodie in 1864, and her painful break-up with a Presbyterian minister whom she had considered marrying, contributed to her decision to leave Columbus.

For the impetuous, sexually adventurous Will Frost, Belle's reticence and otherworldliness were merely obstacles to be overcome. As for her restlessness, he sympathized with it. What he really appreciated about her, though, was her compassion, which she demonstrated by nursing him back to health after he got typhoid fever in the winter of 1872–1873. During their intimate bedside chats, he repeatedly declared his love for her. Once he felt better, he wrote her: "My love pervaded my whole being. It has ennobled me, it has given me higher aspirations; it has almost seemed to me when we have been talking together on religious questions, my love for you drew me so close to you in spirit that I could believe with you in Christianity, in the love of God, in the divinity of Christ, – things which are to you precious truths, to me enigmas."[17] For Will, the love that made his "heart beat faster, faster, faster"[18] trumped whatever theological disagreements he had with Belle, at least for the moment.

Belle's love for Will was more subdued. Raised as a strict Scottish Presbyterian by her grandfather, she had disturbing visions of God's punishment when she contemplated marriage and sex. She also felt guilty about abandoning the Presbyterian clergyman who had pursued her in Columbus. "At the time she had felt she was not worthy of him," one biographer has claimed, and "repeatedly thereafter she had experienced mystical intuitions of divine punishment apparently visited on her as a consequence of her having rejected the noble man of God for whom she had been intended."[19] Will must have realized that Belle's Old Testament God was akin to the punitive God of his Puritan ancestors.

Belle felt pity for her normally athletic, strong-willed suitor when he was sick, and when he was back on his feet she agreed to marry him, even though she had known him for only half a year. Out of deference to his anti-Christian attitudes, she went along with his plan to get married in the home of a mutual friend in Lewistown, George Elder, on March 18, 1873. Although Reverend J. H. Brown presided, Will made sure there were few other Christian trappings. Apparently no members of the bride's or groom's families attended the ceremony. In a further show of submission to Will's demands, Belle said she would quit her teaching job, begin having children immediately (Rob was conceived around July 1, 1873), and move to San Francisco.

At the end of the school year in June, the newlyweds resigned from Lewistown Academy and traveled to Columbus, Ohio, to visit Belle's relatives. Impressed by Will's Harvard pedigree and considerable charm, the Moodies were glad to meet him, but Will had no interest in a prolonged stay. He convinced Belle to remain with her relatives while he went west by train to find a job and a place to live. If Belle was upset by the separation,

she was soon mollified by Will's good news from San Francisco. Not long after he arrived in the city on July 9, 1873, he submitted samples of his writing to several editors and received job offers from the two most prominent newspapers, the *Daily Evening Bulletin* and the *Chronicle*. Thrilled by his success, he notified Belle that he would work for the *Daily Evening Bulletin*. The fact that the paper represented the Democratic Party, which generally opposed Lincoln's anti-Confederate principles and legacy, made it especially appealing.

In his letters to Belle over the next four months, Will presented himself as a courtly lover pining for his distant beloved. "I sit in my nice room, which is a dismal prison to me, or walk out on the street, feeling as if I was divorced from all that can make me happy," he wrote on July 13. "I lie awake half the nights long, and my troubled sleep is crowded with all sorts of phantasms in which you figure chiefly." His romantic anguish, he confessed, had reduced him to a "perfect baby."[20] Perhaps thinking of the time when Belle had nursed him back to health, he pleaded for her to come to him as both mother and wife. He also played the rough-and-tumble bad boy, telling her gleefully of Wild West gun battles in the San Francisco streets. In one particularly dangerous fracas caused by a controversial newspaper report about silver-mining stocks, a mob had shot out the *Bulletin*'s office windows. Will's colleagues had drawn their guns to defend themselves, but in the end had allowed policemen to dispel the crowd before anybody got killed.

Battles involving the *Bulletin* in the past had not always ended so peacefully. In one incident, the corrupt politician James Casey, who had won election to the city's Board of Supervisors by stuffing ballot boxes, shot and killed *Bulletin* editor James King for printing an exposé of his misdeeds. The notorious Vigilance Committee – a group of vigilantes who maintained justice in the streets – pursued Casey after the murder and hanged him on the day of King's funeral. If he regretted his lost opportunity to fight for General Lee and to pursue a military career at West Point, Will enjoyed living in a place that at times resembled a combat zone. He found it intoxicating to wander through the Barbary Coast, the city's waterfront populated by heavy drinkers, high-stakes gamblers, flamboyant prostitutes, unscrupulous entrepreneurs, and bohemian writers. With violence a constant threat in the boomtown of 150,000 people, Will bought a pistol to defend himself.

Belle must have worried about what she was getting into when she boarded the train for California in November 1873. She was leaving behind the sanctuary of her well-to-do Unitarian relatives in Ohio for a notoriously rowdy city where she had no friends. Four months into her pregnancy, she had grown accustomed to a life of leisure and comfort. Like so many other Americans at the time, she now faced the economic insecurity caused by the "Panic of 1873" (sometimes called the "Great Depression"). Two months before she departed from Columbus, speculation by railroad financiers, a large trade deficit, and other economic problems had caused a series of bank crises. When Belle reached San Francisco at the end of 1873, Will did his best to soothe her anxieties. He rented an apartment at