Robert Frost at the height: 'Letters, 1920-1928'

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The Letters
of Robert Frost

*Volume 2: 1920-1928*

Edited by Donald Sheehy, Mark Richardson, Robert Bernard Hass, and Henry Atmore

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In the 1920s, Robert Frost was widely regarded as one of America’s greatest and most beloved poets. He won the first of four Pulitzer Prizes in 1924. Many of his poems, including “Mending Wall,” ”The Road Not Taken,” and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” had become
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This book, the second installment of a five-volume series, gathers Frost’s letters from 1921 to 1928. Meticulously annotated by professors Sheehy, Richardson, Hass, and Atmore, the book covers his appointments at the University of Michigan, Amherst College, and the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College; details his family difficulties; and provides fascinating insights into his philosophy, politics, and personality.

Frost, we learn, was afraid of too much structure, of systems and system-building. Wondering why “we should forever ask that everything come to something,” he preferred to dispense “pieces of wisdom like pieces of eight in a buckskin bag.” Encouraging everyone, including himself, to “enjoy ourselves as we go along,” Frost was also tough-minded. “With too many people literature remains a warm cloud in the breast,” he tells an aspiring poet. “It has got to be struck across with the chill of intellect to make it fall in showers of idea, metaphor, and phrase.”

Frost did just that, again and again, by deriving an often skeptical, sardonic, yet poignant significance from commonplace incidents. And he took great pride in what he had wrought. Taking to task a critic “who missed the reason for the repetend in ’Stopping by Woods,’ ” Frost proclaimed: “Take my word for it you wont often look on as flawless a piece of work.”

The letters make clear that Frost himself was anything but a flawless piece of work. When Carl Sandburg visited Ann Arbor, Frost sniffed that his rival, “the most artificial and studied ruffian the world has ever seen,” spent four hours in town, one of them washing his white hair and toughening his expression for a public appearance in which “his mandolin pleased some people, his poetry a very few, and his infantile talk none.”
Complex, cantankerous, brilliant, learned, and never dull, Frost once joked, with what could be the best characterization of him, that he was known as “the radiator of the poetic spirit ... who did his best work on a diet of soft coal or carbide and water.”

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