

Book Review

Robert Frost, *Stories for Lesley*. Ed. Roger D. Sell. Illustrated by Warren Chappell. University Press of Virginia. 1984. 77 pp.

When Lawrance Thompson published his exhaustive biography of Robert Frost in the late sixties and early seventies, his unflattering image of the poet as basically mean, selfish, and manipulative seemed too well documented to be seriously challenged. Yet even in Thompson's own account, there are sometimes strong suggestions that Frost's reserves of love and tenderness were more real and characteristic than would seem consistent with such a negative depiction. The portrait of the father as dedicated educator of his four young children that emerges from chapter 24 of *Robert Frost The Early Years* is indeed a striking account of parental concern and solicitude. Granted that Frost was also capable of cruel and ill-considered histrionics in the presence of his children, such as the much-publicized episode when he called his young daughter Lesley down in the middle of the night, brandishing a gun and wildly demanding that she choose between her mother and father, since surely one of them would be dead the next morning. But as so often in a consideration of Frost the man and poet, this would seem to be only one side of a "contrariety" that included loving concern as well.

In a footnote to Thompson's biography, the reader is told that "among his many literary projects, R F may have planned to make a book out of the stories he told or wrote out and read to his children." Thanks to the efforts of Roger D. Sell of Abo Academy, this project, never finished by the poet, has now been realized, so as to have given us both a charming children's book and a privileged glimpse into the other side of Frost's complex personality. As Sell makes clear in his "Editorial Notes," the eighteen stories (some of them so short as to be little more than vignettes) were probably written between November 1906 and March/April 1907, while Frost was living at his farm in Derry, N.H. and teaching English at Pinkerton Academy. They thus belong to a period subsequent to Frost's contributions to the New England poultry magazines and coincide with the time of composition of many of the poems that were later to appear in *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*. At the time, his children, Lesley, Carol, Marjorie, and Irma were seven, four, three, and almost two years old. The stories have survived in a notebook that is today part of the Robert Frost Collection at the Clifton Waller Barrett Library at the University of Virginia.

Taken at their face value as stories designed to appeal to young children in a rural environment, it would seem that Frost has succeeded very well in adapting both the subject matter and its presentation to the level of his audience. As we would expect, most of the stories are populated by squirrels and woodchucks and frogs and cows and birds (more surprisingly, we also find a lion, a donkey, and a rhinoceros!). The family's collie dog, Schneider (a bit unfairly designated by the editor as the stories' "canine anti-hero"), is the most frequent protagonist. The children also appear by name at the center of many of the stories, usually only one at a time, as in "Lesley and the Squirrel." Elves and fairies are a natural part of this universe ("Fairies live in juniper bushes -

you have to believe that." Thus opens "The Last Fall Apple"). And in one of the most remarkable stories in the collection, "The Wise Men," there is a quality of eerie dreamlike supernaturalness that invests the whole world with its haunting strangeness. Richly stimulating and imaginative, as well as homely and down-to-earth, these stories would indeed seem to possess qualities that might make them lastingly valuable in their own right, not just as literary curiosities.

However, since the author of these stories is Robert Frost, an adult reader familiar with the poet's work will inevitably look for clues and evidence to describe the emerging artist. And as Sell shows in his judicious comments on Frost's alterations in the manuscript, there are many signs here that Frost is feeling his way towards the kind of directness of observation and "sound of sense" that are such typical features of his poetic art. Many of the changes can obviously be explained as attempts to achieve a simplicity and an idiomatic style suited to his audience, but to a reader familiar with the poetry it is hard not to detect a concern even here for elements of his poetic program. Or maybe the development of his esthetic theories can be seen as owing something to these experiments in writing for children? In any case it would seem that Frost was already at this time developing a style that was much closer to the "voice ways" of *North & Boston* than some of the late Romantic characteristics of many of the poems of *A Boy's Will*.

In the most important book on Frost to appear in the eighties, William H. Pritchard argues in *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* that Thompson's biographical portrait of Frost is far too negative and one-sided, at least partly as a result of Thompson's inability to understand the subtle playfulness of a poet who himself always cautioned that he was seldom undesigning. *Stories for Lesley* would seem to corroborate this more balanced view of Frost's personality, and is for this reason also a welcome addition to the canon. Printed in large type, and delightfully illustrated by Warren Chappell, this book is obviously a labor of love on many counts, and children and adults alike owe Roger D. Sell a debt of gratitude for resurrecting the stories for a contemporary audience.

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