

doi:[10.1017/S0956793315000217](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956793315000217)George Monteiro, *Robert Frost's Poetry of Rural Life*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2014. 183 pp. £29.70. 9780786497898

In his 1962 collection *In the Clearing*, Robert Frost writes: 'It takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling/To get adapted to my kind of fooling'. Here, in the penultimate poem in his final collection, Frost suggests that he was educated not only during his relatively brief stints at Dartmouth and Harvard but also during his decade on a small farm in Derry, New Hampshire. George Monteiro, Professor Emeritus at Brown University, takes this couplet seriously. Monteiro's 1988 study *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance* discussed Frost's relationship to Emerson, Thoreau, and Dickinson. This new volume situates Frost's poetry within New England farming culture. It distinguishes itself from similar inquiries by making a persuasive case that some of Frost's best known poetry may have been influenced by a popular farm journal of his day.

Frost's literary fame was still a long way off when he moved his young family to Derry in the fall of 1900. A doctor had suggested that farming would be good for his health, and he had spent the past year keeping poultry on a rented farm. He and his wife Elinor were poor and had to rely on his grandfather to purchase the property. They arrived at the thirty-acre farm with a flock of 300 white wyandottes and plenty of heartache; their young son Elliott had recently died, and Frost's mother was dying. Frost would later claim that he enjoyed sleeping in too much to be a good farmer. In short, life at Derry was no simple idyll. But Frost's time as a farmer paid rich poetic dividends. In his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost* (2001), Lawrence Buell writes that Frost's important early collection *North of Boston* 'provides a kind of anthology of familiar upcountry New England workways, landforms, and psychographs. Wall-building, blueberrying, apple-picking, haymaking' (p. 106). Frost wrote steadily and surely at Derry, drafting many of the poems that eventually appeared in his first three collections, but he had little publishing success. Indeed, perhaps his most significant publications in his time at Derry were a series of stories for the trade journals *Farm-Poultry* and *The Eastern Poultryman* which combined humor and advice on poultry keeping.

Monteiro makes the case that Frost was probably reading another popular farming journal during his Derry years, *The New-England Homestead*. He identifies similarities between a number of pieces in this publication and early poems by Frost. For instance, the narrator of a 1901 *Homestead* poem decides to leave some flowers untouched, 'To bear, perchance, a heavenly message/Of peace and love, to those who pass that way' (p. 9). Frost's 1906 poem 'The Tuft of Flowers' uses a similar conceit. The poem's narrator arrives to 'turn the grass' of a freshly mowed field. The mower has already departed, leading the narrator to the rather melancholy thought that all are essentially alone, 'Whether they work together or apart'. But then the narrator discovers that the mower has spared a 'tuft of flowers' in the field, and this results in a change of heart and a new conclusion about the human condition: "'Men work together", I told him from the heart,/ "Whether they work together or apart"'.

As this example suggests, Frost crafted more formally accomplished and philosophically textured poems than his *Homestead* counterparts. And while 'The Tuft of Flowers' can ultimately be read as uplifting, Frost's poems were often starker or more ambiguous than the *Homestead*'s usually sentimental fare. Monteiro says, 'There is no challenge to Frost's preeminence here. There are only markers and materials in a landscape shared and somewhat surprisingly reflected in some of the greatest American poems of the twentieth century.' (p. 6) Monteiro is confident that Frost was familiar with *The New-England Homestead*, but he leaves open the question of whether he is uncovering source material or analogues. He certainly concurs with Buell that Frost's own farming experiences and observations informed many of these same poems. Still, he uncovers some substantial similarities. Monteiro covers parallels between Frost's work and a number of *Homestead* poems, but he also points to how a rather passionate exchange in the journal about the merits of stone fences calls to mind 'Mending Wall' and, less compellingly given the ubiquity of New England apple orchards, to how the journal's annual spread on the apple harvest resonates with 'After Apple-Picking'.

Monteiro devotes the first and most developed chapter of *Robert Frost's Poetry of Rural Life* to these parallels, and he revisits *The New-England Homestead* at several points later in the volume. This gives some coherence to what is ultimately more of a collection of Monteiro's essays on Frost than a sustained study. Other early chapters fit well with the title and the volume's stated purpose of considering Frost as a 'poet-farmer' (p. 1). Monteiro, for instance, provides an interesting discussion of how the 'outdoor schooling' of the young Frost failed him in one of his pieces for *Farm-Poultry*. Frost claimed that his friend John Hall's geese roosted in trees, leading to some incredulous letters to the editor. Frost's response to these criticisms only got him into more trouble, since he claimed that Hall's geese were at least interesting in that they wintered outdoors. This led the editor to respond, in print, that 'geese generally remain out of doors by choice practically all the time' (p. 43). Frost would in turn basically write his own letter of defense under Hall's name. Monteiro concludes from this exchange that Frost wanted to get the 'facts' right in his writing, but 'in a pinch about the "truth", when he got his facts wrong, he was not beyond resorting to deviousness' (p. 43). He uses this early incident as a frame for a later case of Frost getting the facts wrong, when he titled an early version of a poem 'The Quest of the Orchis' but later realized that he was actually describing a gentian. Instead of overtly signaling this mistake by changing the name of the flower in the poem's title, Frost made a more subtle correction by changing the title to 'The Quest of the Purple-Fringed'.

Other chapters range farther afield but still share rural concerns. Monteiro offers a brief consideration, for instance, of how John Crowe Ransom's early poetry of rural life resonates with Frost's own. Another chapter details Frost's goodwill tour of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1962 and his perhaps surprising affinity for Nikita Khrushchev, who shared the American poet's penchant for gritty proverbs. Still other chapters, such as the one on Frost's relationship with *New Republic* editor Ridgely Torrence or the closing chapter on professional baseball, seem to have little connection to the volume's title. Nonetheless, there is much in this volume to interest

readers who want to get better 'adapted' to the 'in and outdoor schooling' of Robert Frost.

Steven Knepper  
Virginia Military Institute

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Jane Platt, ed., *The Diocese of Carlisle, 1814–1855: Chancellor Walter Fletcher's 'Diocesan Book', with additional material from Bishop Percy's parish notebooks*. Woodbridge, Boydell for the Surtees Society and Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, CCXIX, 2015. lii + 466 pp. £50. 9780854440740.

Diocesan records can yield a wealth of information about life within the parish, including the financial resources available to the parish incumbent. Particularly valuable in this respect are records relating to the bishop's visitation, which include details about the character and value of tithe obligations and the glebe. The variety of material contained in this type of record is demonstrated by Jane Platt's meticulous transcription of recently rediscovered notebooks compiled by Walter Fletcher, who was chancellor of Carlisle diocese from 1814 until his death in 1846, and by Hugh Percy, bishop of Carlisle from 1827 to 1856. The significance of these manuscripts is all the greater given the loss of the original visitation records and articles of enquiry. Combining the notebooks together, this volume provides a snapshot of Carlisle diocese in the decades after the Napoleonic wars. This was a period of social unrest, brought on by agricultural and industrial depression. As a magistrate, Fletcher was himself involved in ending the Dalston cotton workers' strike in 1830.

The excellent editorial introduction provides an outline of the historical context and a useful biography of Chancellor Fletcher, who is otherwise a largely unknown figure. The eyes and ears of the bishop, he comes across as a very strong minded and industrious character, who on one occasion visited twenty-eight churches in five days. A scrupulous record keeper, Fletcher's 'Diocesan Book' contains details of 130 churches and chapels within four deaneries, beginning with Dalston parish, near the city of Carlisle, where Fletcher had been vicar since 1793. Fletcher was determined to uphold the rights of the church. Indeed, he was so dogged in pursuing his tithes that he became embroiled in several lawsuits and some of his parishioners refused to attend church.

The content of these notebooks is in many ways typical of original visitation records, with comments on local schools, charities and the number of dissenters in each parish. Details about the state of the church fabric are often followed by orders for whitewashing, cleaning and re-flooring. Yet it is this standardisation that helps to make this volume of more than purely local interest. There are opportunities for comparison with other regions and a substantial amount of data that could be subject to statistical analysis. For example, Fletcher records the rise and fall in the value of land during and after the Napoleonic wars and there are frequent references to the augmentation of livings through Queen Anne's Bounty. These increases were much needed in Cumbria. Although pluralism was common, with Fletcher himself having four livings, the county's Anglican clergy had an