

The man behind the myth

UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR Emeritus Northrop Frye is the fourth most cited 20th-century thinker, after Freud, Lenin and Roland Barthes. Marshall McLuhan, himself no cultural slouch, pronounces on the dust jacket of *Northrop Frye: A Biography*: "Norrie is not struggling for his place in the sun. He is the sun."

Perhaps because he has been a familiar presence on this campus since the 1930s, perhaps because he does not actively seek the limelight, it is often difficult to remember that as literary critics go Frye is deified around the world.

He wears his international fame lightly. He often takes the bus to and from his Massey College office and calmly accepts the stream of fans who come by to pay their respects.

Until this book, relatively little of Frye's personal life has been generally known. He has remained mysteriously quiet, while the thoughts he unleashed spawned articles, theses and books. This recent biography, published by Random House in 1989, will not help scholars better understand his arcane and systematic intelligence, but it will help flesh out the man behind the myth. If you want to understand Frye's concept of mythic

forms or his explanation of biblical typologies, you won't find much help here. What you will find is a wealth of biographical minutiae, a personality profile to complement the over 20 scholarly books he has published.

The first half of the book is particularly informative as it traces the idiosyncracies behind this most original of imaginations. It is here that the book is strongest.

The second half can't help but become more a recitation of Frye's many conferences, publications and honours.

Herman Northrop Frye was born in 1912 in Sherbrooke, Quebec. Ten years earlier his parents had a son who was either stillborn or died soon after birth, and who was to be called Northrop. The name originated

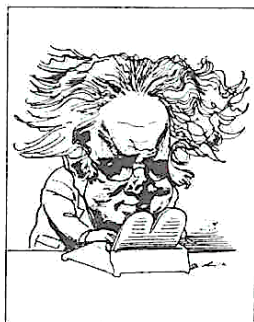
from the paternal side of the family — Joseph Northrup, a Puritan who had emigrated from England in 1637.

Soon after Frye's birth the family moved to Moncton, New Brunswick, where his father became a travelling hardware salesman.

Formative years

His early life was marked by a restive imagination and a fascination with books and music. Although the family was poor, Frye's mother insisted on strong Methodist, musical and academic training for her son. At the age of four "he awoke one night with a searing image from an illustration in ... *Pilgrim's Progress* of Faithful being burned at the stake."

As a boy he was an obsessive collector. He kept a list of different types and species of trees, a list that eventually ran to over 600 names. He also collected chocolate bar wrappers and stamps. Even his eating habits provided insight into the future cataloguer of myths: "[he] would cut up his food and eat each particular item entirely before trying something else."



DAVID LEVINE

Frye as Moses. This caricature appeared in an 1982 edition of the *New York Review of Books*. From *Northrop Frye: A Biography*

His early education had traces of both brilliance and impetuosity. He considered these years "a form of penal servitude." While he was receiving marks of 98 in history and 92 in literature, there was also a 47 in arithmetic and a 33 in geometry. His friends called him "the professor" because of his bookish nature, but he was not above grabbing the hair of the girl in front of him and dunking it into his inkwell.

One of the results of his high marks in English was a scholarship in stenographic training: "if all else failed ... he could provide for himself and his parents with a well-paid job. Male secretaries were still the most highly valued executive assistants." He became a fast typist almost immediately, a talent that would lead to several typing awards in Moncton and Toronto.

Frye enrolled at Victoria College in 1929 at the age of 17. Because of the limited opportunities in Moncton (to enter U of T's honours stream he would have needed two more years than his high school offered) he could only enter the "pass course." His lecture card was marked "ON PROBATION as if to remind him daily of his shaky credentials."

Despite these difficult beginnings his academic life prospered. Frye was a brilliant student and, after graduate work at Oxford, returned to Vic where he would remain for the rest of his academic career.

Celebrity status

His first years were taken up primarily by Blake and show Frye with an almost frightening intellect: "My ideas are expanding and taking shape so quickly that they frighten me."

Of his study of Blake he said: "If it's no good, I am no good. There isn't a sentence, and there won't be a sentence in the whole work that hasn't gone through purgatory. Christ! Why was I born with brains?"

After the book on Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*, was published, Frye became an instant celebrity. He travelled extensively to give lectures, edited and wrote books on Shakespeare, education and T.S. Eliot,



PHILIP STREET

Frye as Yoda, taken from a 1982 cartoon in the newspaper. Reprinted in *Northrop Frye: A Biography*

all the while taking on more and more administrative duties at Vic. He was chair of the English department, then principal, then chancellor.

He also kept up his teaching, lecturing to enthralled audiences both at U of T and around the world. One of his habits was to pause for as long as two

minutes "gloomily scanning the class to see if there were questions One student became so concerned with his silences, he raised the question with one of Frye's colleagues, David Blotstein. Blotstein advised the student not to worry because Frye wrote his books in those silences."

Among his many students who have gone on to significant careers in literature are Harold Bloom, Hugh Kenner and Margaret Atwood. Some of his early fans were known, not very kindly, as "Fryedolators."

'Communion of wisdom'

Among Frye's continuing passions has been the role of education and the importance of universities. In his speech when he became principal of Victoria College he stated that the university carries a "weight of authority far greater than the authority of state or government or even social custom. It derives this authority, not from itself, but from its cloud of witnesses, the communion of wisdom, of the thinkers, artists and statesmen whose work it studies and carries on."

Within these pages are many anecdotes about Frye's work on *Acta Victoriana*; his intellectual battles with T.S. Eliot and Irving Layton, and his stature in the literary world — in some circles he became known as the "Wizard of the North" and at editorial meetings to discuss an anthology that publisher Harcourt Brace was planning "Frye sat at the head of the table with corporate secretaries scribbling down his golden words."

Jane Widdicombe, his secretary since 1967, has had to become a buffer against the onslaught of requests for his time. Frye once quipped: "It's all very well to have a yes-man, but a no-woman is much more useful."

In the course of the dizzying array of honours and publications, Frye has remained an intellect of uncompromising intelligence and strength.

Even now, at the age of 77, he remains a monumental influence in the world of literature. His new volume on the Bible, due out sometime over the next year, will only add to his pre-eminence and influence.

This book, surely not the last to be written on Frye, provides an intimate look at this shy but towering figure. As a young student he stated: "My head is spinning trying to figure out a phonetic alphabet for the symbolic figures I'm pretty sure exist." Very few thinkers would have the intellectual strength to follow that path. Frye not only developed his own alphabet of symbols, he went on to tell the world about his discovery.

Influential works

ALTHOUGH HE has written more than 20 books, Northrop Frye is known primarily for three that have changed the way critics and readers understand literature.

His pioneering study of William Blake, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), gave readers for the first time a systematic accounting of Blake's arcane symbolism. His *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) argued that literary criticism is not secondary to philosophy and aesthetics but is a valuable and intricate discipline in its own right. (According to a study done in 1979 by the Institute of Scientific Study in Philadelphia, *Anatomy of Criticism* ranked first among the most cited works by authors born in the 20th century.) Most recently, his

study of the Bible and literature, *The Great Code* (1982, volume two forthcoming), has shown the Bible to be the single most important influence on western literature.

Among Frye's many honours: the Royal Society of Canada's Lorne Pierce Medal; the Canada Council Medal; the Toronto Arts Lifetime Achievement Award; the Royal Bank Award; and the Governor-General's Award for Non-Fiction, for *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*.

He has received honorary degrees from over 30 universities, including Oxford, Princeton, Harvard, Columbia and U of T and he has lectured at universities in Canada, the United States, Ireland, Japan, Israel and elsewhere.

'Condominium mentality' in CanLit

An interview

What is your response to the biography?

I suppose you always have to read a biography of yourself as though it were about somebody else It's very painstaking I think it's quite a respectable book and it seems to have done quite well.

What about all the idiosyncratic, personal details in it?

There's not much you can do about them if you're going to write a biography. I suppose some of them have to go in.

What are you working on now?

I'm in the last stages of a sequel to *The Great Code*, a sequel that I promised in the introduction to that book. I feel I'm pretty well through with it. There may be some minor revisions ... there's still the footnotes. I have a reputation for not taking footnotes very seriously. John Ayre says that's an irritating habit of mine. I'm collecting material for the footnotes now.

Is it possible to produce a book like that and abandon footnotes altogether?

No, not altogether. If you put the footnotes all at the end of the book you don't have to worry about the bloody things until you get to page proofs ... doing footnotes is just donkey work.

Is there any book or writer that you regret not having worked on?

I don't know that there is. I have written at least essays on most of the people that really interested me. If I were starting over again I would perhaps do more work on the Old and Middle English period. That's a period that's always fascinated me. I can't say that there's a great deal that I've left untouched that I very much wanted to do, except perhaps Dante.

You're known to have somewhat ambiguous enthusiasm for Canadian literature. What are your current thoughts?

I'm enthusiastic about it in its totality. Since about 1960 it has been incredible how much has come out of Canada and how much of it has been respected and admired all over the world. I would have thought that French Canadian literature would have been appealing to other countries, but back in 1960 I would have said that English Canadian literature didn't have much of a future.

Which Canadian writers are you most enthusiastic about?

The obvious people: Peggy Atwood, Robertson Davies, Alice Munro, Timothy Findlay, Mordecai Richler, ... especially Alice Munro, who seems to me a 20th-century Jane Austen In Quebec literature, Marie-Claire Blais, Yves Thériault Of the younger generation: Barry Cal-

laghan, Roo Borson, Peter Van Toorn.

Do you think Canadian writers still have a "garrison mentality" in which they isolate themselves from the cold, barren wilderness and from each other?

"Garrison mentality" was a phrase I invented to cover the after-effects of not having had an 18th century, and the sort of small-town pressures of the kind that have been described in 19th-century Canadian literature. Canada now of course is the most highly urbanized country in the world The garrison mentality has been replaced by the condominium mentality, which means that writers have to fight just as hard against an anti-cultural environment, but in a different context: I mean a somewhat introverted big city living that makes the kind of human conflict that writers need more difficult than ever to identify.

What are your thoughts on recent critical methods, such as deconstruction?

I've always been trying to put things together rather than take them apart. I think that what I've seen over the course of my literary career is a number of analytic and to some extent disintegrating techniques of criticism, one after the other. I think you have it that way because each one tends to run out of material sooner or later. I think the deconstructionist movement has done some remarkable work. I think it's also coming close to the end of its act. There's a limit to what you can do with those logical supplement techniques.

What do you think the next stage of literary criticism might be?

I would like to see a more comprehensive view among critics. I'd like to feel that they weren't really fudging what seems to me a very central part of their work: avoiding the overview that I've been struggling for and that some of the mythological people have been struggling for as well Critics find it much easier if they can get hold of an ideology and twist everything into that shape. It's relatively easy to be a Marxist or a Freudian or a Jungian critic.

Among the first-rate critics there's an underlying consensus which the [other] critics are unwilling to face. I'd have to recite a long book to give this consensus in detail, but I keep reading critiques and keep seeing in there a kind of coincidence of perspective which the individual critics seem to be carefully keeping out. It's

a deliberate self-limiting perspective. From the point of view of prudence and caution I suppose they're right but I like taking risks myself.

Has U of T treated you well?

Oh yes. Both Victoria and Massey are very congenial environments.

Do you come to the office every day?

Not every day. In the last year or so, with the new marriage and new family and so forth, I've come less regularly than I used to, but I still keep in as close touch as I can.

*Is there another book in the works after the second volume of *The Great Code* comes out?*

There may be but it's not in the works yet. I wrote *The Great Code*, which was the Bible in literature, and this would be a follow-up on that. That's a subject that is in itself inexhaustible. I could go on to study things like Utopian literature in relation to the Bible's New Jerusalem, but that's in the future.

What about your legendary talent for typing? What if you weren't such a great typist?

I would view with more alarm the prospect of rewriting and revising. I never compose on a typewriter. I start out with handwritten copies and when they get so written-over that I can hardly read them myself, I type them out; then when that gets so written-over I can hardly make out the typing, I retype it. After about five or six rewritings it begins to look the way it's going to look. Because I can type fast, retyping a page doesn't have any terrors for me.

Do you use a computer?

The mechanical age stopped with the selectric typewriter, as far as I'm concerned.

Is there anything in the biography that you regret not seeing? Any nugget that was missed?

There are always things to add. I have a great admiration for people who write biographies because I never know how they can tell that they're finished. The last thing I would want to do is badger John Ayre by suggesting things that he's left out.

The only point about his book is that it is of necessity unfinished because I'm still alive. Perhaps the last couple of years have had incidents that he would have put in if I had been dead. But I can't help that.

Presumably you have a few more books in you yet.

I don't know. That's "on the knees of the gods." That's a Homeric phrase.