
Introduction

This book derives from the conviction that Edwin Arlington Robinson was a great American poet and an exceptionally fine human being. The story of his life deserves telling and has not been told.

Robinson was born December 22, 1869, at Head Tide, Maine, and died in New York City on April 5, 1935. He grew up during the latter days of the Victorians—Tennyson, Browning, Arnold—in England and the Fireside Poets—Longfellow, Lowell, Bryant—in the United States. But the energy was waning, and by the turn of the century most poetry had degenerated into prettified evocations of the natural world. From the start, Robinson declared his independence from that genteel tradition. A few others joined him, among them in England A. E. Housman, whose *A Shropshire Lad* appeared in the same year—1896—as EAR’s first volume, *The Torrent and the Night Before*. Among the British poets Robinson most admired, Housman (1859–1935) was a decade older than he, Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) a generation his senior, and Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) his near contemporary. Robinson, who was to become our first truly modern poet, goes back a long way in time.

When he died in 1935, Robinson reigned as the nation’s leading poet. “With the death of Edwin Arlington Robinson,” the *New York Times* editorial declared, “America has lost not only one of the finest poets of our time, but one who ranked with the great poets of the past.” Robinson was the only poet of his time and place, the *Washington Evening Star* observed, whose name could “be associated with the very greatest names in the history of letters.” From newspapers around the country came similar encomiums reflecting patriotic pride in his accomplishment: he was the nation’s “preeminent poet,” our “most distinguished poet.”

That was 1935. Over the succeeding seventy years, Robinson’s reputation has declined. True, there was a flurry of attention during his centenary in 1969. Then three separate volumes of selections of his poems appeared in the 1990s, making his best work—the short- to medium-length poems—more easily available to the reading public than it had been for years. This state of affairs did not

last for long; only one of these collections remains in print. Hence it remains compelling to reiterate Donald Hall's plea in *The Essential Robinson* (1994), for restoration of EAR to the American pantheon. Robinson's reputation, it seems clear, declined in the wake of the triumph of such modernist poets as Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams. Unlike them, Robinson remained devoted all his life to traditional forms. His poetry on the page came to look almost old-fashioned in its use of meter and rhyme. Yet, as Hall pointed out, that twentieth century generation of great modern poets actually began with Robinson "in his realism or honesty, and his relentless care for the art of poetic language."

Robinson's strongest partisans still are found among fellow poets like Hall and Robert Mezey, editor of the Modern Library's 1999 volume of Robinson poems. One example: During a June 2003 heat wave in Paris, the poet W. S. Merwin, winner of both the Pulitzer and Bollingen prizes, read from his poems in a crowded upstairs room at the Village Voice bookshop in Saint Germain des Pres. With the windows open, Merwin had to compete with traffic noises, but the ease of his manner and the grace of his poetry commanded the attention of a sweaty audience. Afterwards, books were signed and questions asked.

"Were you influenced by Robinson?" someone asked Merwin. Without a second's hesitation, he began reciting "Reuben Bright," one of Robinson's best early sonnets.

Because he was a butcher, and thereby
 Did earn an honest living (and did right),
 I would not have you think that Reuben Bright
 Was any more a brute than you or I;
 For when they told him that his wife must die,
 He stared at them, and shook with grief and fright,
 And cried like a great baby half that night,
 And made the women cry to see him cry.
 And after she was dead, and he had paid
 The singers and the sexton and the rest,
 He packed . . .

Here Merwin stalled momentarily, looking for the rhyme, and the woman poet next in line to have her book signed spoke up to provide it.

. . . a lot of things that she had made . . .

That was all Merwin needed. He sailed on to the end, declaiming the final couplet in triumph.

Most mournfully away in an old chest

Of hers, and put some chopped-up cedar boughs
 In with them, and tore down the slaughter-house.

“Does that answer your question?” he said.

Great writers must find their distinctive voice, and you can hear Robinson’s in “Reuben Bright”(1897). He uses simple rhetoric, the emotion compressed in spare language. As the poet Winfield Townley Scott observed in his notebooks, there are basically two kinds of poetry. One is represented by Hart Crane’s line “The seal’s wide spindrift gaze toward paradise,” the other by Robinson’s “And he was all alone there when he died.” One is a magic gesture of language, the other “a commentary on human life so concentrated as to give off considerable pressure.” The greatest poets combine the two, Scott believed: Shakespeare often, Robinson himself now and then.

When Robinson wrote, it was in a way manifestly his own. His work is highly susceptible to parody, like that of most major writers. What was new about him, as Archibald MacLeish wrote in 1969, was the speaker, “the Voice” whose tone, touched by irony, suggests truths about his characters (and about ourselves) that we almost but don’t quite recognize. “We don’t despair—not quite—and neither does Robinson,” MacLeish commented. “His is the after voice, the evening voice, and . . . we know the thing it means.”

Robinson used that voice to present a new subject matter. He was the first of our poets to write about ordinary people and events. No one before his time would have thought it possible to write sonnets about an honest butcher consumed by grief, about a miser with “eyes like little dollars in the dark,” about ancient clerks in a dry goods store measuring out their days like bolts of cloth. When Robinson did so in his earliest book, he opened the door for other poets to follow. His best work looks closely at the people around him, exploring for secrets within. In 1926 Ben Ray Redman called him “a biographer of souls . . . bound to humanity by the dual bond of sympathy and humor.” Time and again, his poems insist that we cannot really know others, that we do not even know ourselves. Yet Robinson was uncannily perceptive, and we come away from regarding his portraits with a glimmer of understanding. As he himself put it, “poetry is a language that tells us, through a more or less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said.”

In “Calverly’s,” an elegiac 1907 poem, Robinson laments the passing of former companions at a New York City tavern. They had not amounted to much, as judged by worldly standards, yet he will not let them go unremarked.

No fame delays oblivion
 For them, but something yet survives:
 A record written fair, could we
 But read the book of scattered lives.

Usually he took for his subjects those who had failed in life and love. He wrote about the derelict and downtrodden, the old and bereft. Who wanted to read about successful aldermen, anyway? Those who led “scattered lives” interested him, not least because for a long time he thought of himself as one of them. Recognition came late to Robinson. He spent two decades struggling to get his poems published, surviving on the edge of poverty. Drink and depression dogged his days, yet he was sustained by a persistent belief in his calling—that he had been put on the earth to write poems. It was the only thing he could do, and he meant to do it, no matter how few seemed to notice.

In a 1952 libel on poets of his generation, Edmund Wilson maintained that they had too much time on their hands. As a consequence, they formed into groups to engage in “debates, practical jokes and fierce battles” that kept them in a state of excitement. Wilson had a point, for the physical and mental labor of setting poems down on paper hardly qualifies as a full-time occupation. When Teddy Roosevelt provided Robinson with a sinecure at the New York Custom House from 1905 to 1909, it was almost as if the free hours *prevented* him from getting poems written. “Work with me,” he said at the time, “means studying the ceiling and my navel for four hours and then writing down perhaps four lines—sometimes seven and then again none at all.” But Robinson did not use the time to join organizations, and he was never drawn into the squabbling of literary factions. All his life he remained very much his own man.

It was not that he didn’t care what others thought of his poetry. A bad review could summon despondency and a good one inspire him to make a friend of the reviewer. He felt a kinship for anyone who understood and liked what he had written. They had in common, after all, a mutual respect for the power and importance of language. For him, as for Henry in Tom Stoppard’s play *The Real Thing*, it was the words that mattered. Writers were not sacred, but words were. If you got the right ones in the right order, you could “make a poem which children will speak for you when you’re dead.”

That was what Robinson was after. Though utterly unwilling to indulge in advertisements for himself, he was tremendously ambitious about his poetry. “I don’t expect recognition while I live,” he said early in his career, “but if I thought I could write something that would go on living after I’m gone, I’d be satisfied with an attic and a crust all my life.” When critical and popular success finally did come his way, he was wary of the praise. Only time—perhaps a century—would determine whether his poems would survive. “If you will look in on me sometime in the summer of 2026,” he wrote a friend from the MacDowell Colony on August 20, 1926, “I may be able to tell you whether my things are going to last.”

Robinson also realized that there was no necessary connection between genius and character. In correspondence with older women such as Lilla Cabot Perry and Laura E. Richards, he found himself defending the behavior of great artists of the past. Lord Byron “was a bounder, no doubt, but his heritage

accounts for a good deal.” Richard Wagner “could not possibly have found the time to be so wicked as his enemies would have him.” Yet even if the enemies were right, what did it matter? Wagner “left the world a different place for his having lived in it—which is a good deal for one neurotic little man to do.”

What he could easily forgive in others, Robinson could not countenance in himself. Enough of his Puritan heritage remained to guide him both toward his calling and toward a life of kindness and charity. He cared deeply for his family and friends. As troubles threatened to overtake them, Robinson came to their aid with sympathy and understanding, money and counsel. He had a knack for anticipating and untangling the most intricate of emotional complications. Time and again he served as a *fixer*, one whose insights helped relieve those in distress. When Robinson died, a number of his friends insisted on his greatness as a man as well as a poet. “Most great artists are great only in their art,” as one of them observed. Another thought him the best man he had ever known.

A Man Almost Without Biography

Before her memoir about Robinson was published, Laura Richards—the other well-known writer from Gardiner, Maine—sent him the manuscript for comments. EAR had but one revision to propose. Richards had written that he was “shy,” and, he objected, “no man likes to be called shy.” The word carried connotations of weakness. He did not mind being called “reticent,” and many chose that adjective to describe his poetry and personality. In fact, Robinson was one of the most private persons who ever lived. With a secretiveness that went beyond the customary Yankee standard, he concealed himself behind barriers, and rarely spoke of the most important events of his life. “Now to one, and then to another, he vouchsafed an item,” as his friend Mowry Saben said, “but there was much that he never vouchsafed to anyone.”

Robinson’s reticence was strikingly apparent in his dealings with those seeking information for publication. As he admitted—with a touch of humor and a touch of pride—he resembled “some sort of a New England shellfish—probably a Maine clam.” He retreated into the shell when asked for personal details. “In looking over my life,” he told Amy Lowell, “I find that I have no life to speak of, much less to write about.” Newspaper reporters found him extremely difficult to interview, for he was reluctant to discuss himself or his way of life or his methods of work. Nor would he promote himself in public. No readings from the platform. No talks to college audiences or women’s groups. The poems would have to speak for themselves.

As the perceptive poet-critic J. V. Cunningham summed him up, “Robinson was a man almost without biography who became a legend to his friends.” Despite the silences and withdrawals, Robinson had a gift for friendship. At the same time, he was notorious for keeping his friends in separate compartments.

During his most productive years, he divided his time between New York City (from late fall to early spring), the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire (where he spent twenty-four successive summers and did almost all of his writing), and Boston (during a month or two in the spring and fall). He traveled light, a nomadic minstrel living out of two suitcases. In each place he put them down, he developed a separate cadre of friends that knew little or nothing about those who lived elsewhere. In New York itself, he segregated the bohemian companions of his struggling years from the well-to-do patrons who later came to his rescue. Rarely did any of the friends of his mature years, wherever they encountered Robinson, hear a whisper about his origins in Gardiner.

By any normal criterion, EAR led an undramatic life. He fell in love more than once, and once most permanently and painfully. But he never married, thus cutting himself off from the privileges and obligations of domesticity. This was hardly surprising, considering the catastrophes that befell his own family.

Behind the impressive facade of the Robinson home at 67 Lincoln Avenue in Gardiner, Maine, was enacted a tragedy of Gothic proportions. His parents, he once wrote, would have been among the happiest people on earth if they had not had children. EAR himself was the last and late-begotten child and was given less attention than his two older brothers. During the decade (1888–1898) between his graduation from high school and his departure from Maine for New York, “the town down the river,” the Robinson family disintegrated. Oldest brother Dean, a doctor, became a morphine addict and returned to the homestead to be cared for, a ghostly figure treading down the carpet as he shuffled through the night. Robinson’s once vigorous father went downhill precipitously in mind and body, taking up spiritualism and table rappings before his death in July 1892. Middle brother Herman, handsome and extroverted, married the girl EAR loved, lost the family fortune in the panic of 1893, and succumbed to drink.

It fell to impractical young Win Robinson, as he was then known, to function as the male bulwark of the family. As the townspeople in Gardiner were wondering when he would settle down and get a job, he did the chores around the house and grounds—planted the vegetables, picked the apples, painted the fences—and continued his efforts to become a published writer. In November 1896, a few days before he received the slim blue copies of his first book, *The Torrent and the Night Before*, his mother died suddenly of black diphtheria: so infectious a disease that the undertaker left the coffin on the porch, the minister intoned a few words from behind a handkerchief, and the sons had to attend to the burial themselves. Win wished his mother could have seen the book, which—subsidized though it was—offered testimony that he had not been wasting his time. Neither of his parents, he felt sure, could possibly have thought of him as in any way successful.

In the following summer, Robinson made a declaration of love to Rosalind Richards that ended in embarrassment to both parties. Daily, also, he saw his brother Herman’s beautiful wife Emma, the one lasting love of his life, and the

little nieces who disturbed his work and captured his affection. Finally there was a confrontation between the brothers, and Win Robinson was exiled to New York and a life of poetry.

No wonder, then, that he resisted attempts to draw him out about the circumstances of his life, even if they came from the most sympathetic and admiring of supporters. Edith Brower, a magazine writer from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, was captivated by the poetry in Robinson's first book and wrote to tell him so. The fledgling author was pleased, and an extensive and lively correspondence ensued. Early on, Brower asked him to tell her about himself, but he could do so only in part. "If I were to tell the whole story, it would make sorry reading indeed—so I won't tell it," Robinson wrote her in April 1897. Especially he would not speak about "family matters . . . of which the knowledge would only disturb" her. There were some things not worth looking into.

When he addressed those questions that mattered most to him—the judgment of posterity, for instance—he did so obliquely. In a 1918 letter to Laura Richards, Robinson imagined a one-paragraph summary of his life and career, as it might be written half a century later.

E. A. R., born, etc. He expected to die young, and should have done so. Owing, however, to some slight cosmic error, he was allowed to live beyond the logical time and to write divers books of verse, mostly about corpses and things, and lost illusions—never having had any of his own worth mentioning. For about ten years of his life he drank too much rum (chiefly as a more or less ingenious occupation for his idle hours, which began at noon and ended any time between two and five in the morning). He wrote some fairly good metres, at times, and he died owing money. When he was gone, his friends—of whom, for some altogether unexplained reason, he had several, in spite of the fact that he never said anything to them to let them know how much he liked them—all said, in a sort of hesitating unison: "Well," with a rising inflection. He was unpopular during his life, on account of his incurable optimism, which was always a source of wonder to those who did not know better. Many seemed to think he should have fussed and cussed more than he did for having been born to such an ornery lot as that of an "intellectual poet"—when, as a matter of fact, anything like a proper comprehension of his product was, and is—so far as it is at all—a matter of feeling, not of cerebration. It has taken a long time to find this out, and a few of the prodigiously faithful are still at it.

Here Robinson, forty-eight years old, regarded himself wryly, admitting from behind the humor to his long battle with the bottle, to his debts that were eventually repaid, and to his hapless incapacity to express emotions out loud, while repudiating the public misperception of him as a pessimistic and philosophical poet.

To date, there has been no thoroughly documented biography of Edwin Arlington Robinson. Hermann Hagedorn's 1938 book, while lively and not

without charm, was disadvantaged by emerging only three years after Robinson's death. Family members turned against the biographer, who refused to ignore the skeleton of Dean's addiction and cast a patronizing eye on the citizens of Gardiner. Then, too, Hagedorn was deprived of access to important caches of letters as a consequence of feuding cliques among Robinson's friends. He was seen as representing the respectable New York establishment, against whom was aligned a group of antagonists convinced that only they knew and properly valued Robinson. "How strange it is," the poet Ridgely Torrence observed at the time, "that a gentle, reasonable spirit like E.A. should have his afterglow clouded by a mist of hates, envies, selfish ambitions and blindnesses."

A decade later, Emery Neff wrote the Robinson volume in the American Men of Letters series. Neff unearthed only a few sources that had been unavailable to Hagedorn, and his book remains more valuable for its discussion of EAR's poetry than for any extensive exploration of his life. In 1965, Chard Powers Smith brought out *Where the Light Falls*, a memoir that rides its thesis—that EAR was in love with Emma—hard, discovering traces of the relationship in almost everything Robinson wrote. Smith, like Hagedorn, encountered resistance from family members and was able to tell only part of the story. Now, fortunately, enough time has passed so that it is possible to fill in the blanks that marred the work of previous biographers. Or most of the blanks, that is, for as Freud warned us, the entire truth about anyone is "inaccessible."

Louis Untermeyer, the poet, critic, and anthologist, knew Robinson fairly well and was a close friend of Robert Frost, the other great New England poet of Robinson's generation. In a harsh review, Untermeyer criticized Hagedorn's 1938 biography for its "failure to record, let alone reconcile, the contradictions of Robinson's mood and character." Despite hints about the poet's combination of evasiveness and candor, "his personality never really emerges." Too many things were left out, among them Robinson's relationships with other poets and particularly with Frost—a crucial one where the issue of reputation is concerned. "Some day," Untermeyer concluded, "a biographer will explore the depths beneath Robinson's deceptive surfaces, the intensity under the detachment, the anxiety manifest in the over-concern with his own work." Such a biographer "will explain the reasons back of [Robinson's] distrust of most men and his fear of almost all women, the causes of his limitations, and the desperate sublimation of the laconic, lonely man, a man obsessed with failure and in love with death." One does not have to agree entirely with Untermeyer's psychological assessments about EAR's "desperate sublimation" and his being "in love with death" to recognize that they carry partial validity. Untermeyer's charge—to dig deep beneath the surface for the reasons behind such behavior—sets the would-be biographer a well-nigh impossible task. But at least, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, he has substantially more information to build upon than has ever been available before.

New Resources

I was first smitten by the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson a fast sixty years ago, when Prescott C. Cleveland introduced his Blake School seniors—all boys, at the time—to the revelations of “Richard Cory” and “Miniver Cheevy.” Recently it had been brought home to me that not everything worked out for the best in these our lives, and the tale of Richard Cory undoubtedly appealed to a certain teenage tendency to court the melancholy. But Mr. Cleveland—only when not in his presence would we call him Cleve—also opened my eyes to the delightful fact that poems could be wonderfully funny and perceptive at the same time, as Miniver’s plight proved. And then, as always, I was moved by the poet’s obvious empathy for his characters. At Yale, Robinson was one of the very few twentieth-century writers taught by Stanley T. Williams and Norman Holmes Pearson in a large lecture course on American literature. A few years later, working toward a doctorate in American studies at Minnesota, I had the good fortune to study under, and read papers for, the brilliant J. C. Levenson. A paper I wrote under his direction, on characters in Robinson’s poetry, was converted into my first literary article, for the flagship journal *American Literature*.

So it was not at all unnatural that in 1977 I began assembling materials toward a biography of Edwin Arlington Robinson. I had just published *By Force of Will: The Life and Art of Ernest Hemingway* and was eager to write a book about Robinson. Malcolm Cowley, mentor and editor on the Hemingway book, discouraged me. Much as he admired Robinson, he doubted the commercial prospects for a biography. I was preparing to go ahead anyway—I had been teaching EAR’s work regularly to my students at the College of William and Mary—until his minuscule and idiosyncratic handwriting stopped me cold. During a summer research trip to the extensive Robinson collection at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, I read, or tried to read, a number of letters that Robinson had written. The scrawls on the page resembled hieroglyphics. It took an hour to decipher a single letter, and even then I could not be entirely sure of a word here or there. I knew, however, that Wallace L. Anderson, the author of the fine *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction* (1968), was in the process of locating and transcribing Robinson’s letters. In due course, the Robinson letters as edited by Anderson would be available. Meanwhile, I could work on other literary biographies.

So I committed books on F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Cheever and Archibald MacLeish and, most recently, the troubled friendship between Hemingway and Fitzgerald. After *Hemingway vs. Fitzgerald* was launched in the fall of 1999, I circled back to Robinson as a biographical subject. This looked no more financially feasible than it had twenty years earlier. Robinson, I knew, threatened to become a casualty in the shifting values of the literary marketplace. Yet I knew, too, that there was no adequate biography and that if there were it might help give his marvelous poetry the attention it deserved.

Above all, the poems continued to exert their appeal. I could not help admiring them, and I shared (or wanted to share) his admirable attitude of sympathy with the fellow mortals he wrote about and the misfortunes that beset them. I would write the biography, then, as a labor of love. Or at least I would try to, if only the letters could be deciphered. What had happened to the letters Anderson was working on? I made a couple of telephone calls and found out. Clifford A. Wood, chairman of the English Department at Bridgewater State College in Massachusetts, provided the unhappy news that Anderson, who had risen to become dean and vice president of the college, had died in 1984. Wood kindly put me in touch with Anderson's widow, Mary, who confirmed that her husband had finished transcribing the Robinson letters he painstakingly tracked down in libraries and in private hands—wonderful!—and that he had completed annotating perhaps three quarters of them.

Working with the aid of a Guggenheim grant, Anderson found about 4,000 letters, and nearly nine-tenths of them had never been printed. What's more, during the two decades devoted to his quest, Anderson acquired the Rosetta stone that enabled him to decode Robinson's handwriting. Here was an invaluable trove for anyone interested in Robinson's life and art, but the trove was languishing in a warehouse in Raynham, Mass.. Having discovered this fact, I urged Mary Anderson, and her son Hale, to transfer these papers to a research library where they could be safeguarded and processed so that students and scholars could read them. Because of its sizable Robinson holdings and its Maine location, Colby College seemed the ideal repository. Early in 2002, the cache of letters was delivered to Colby, where curator of special collections Patricia Burdick assembled them into an exemplary and well-organized archive.

In three separate visits to Colby's Miller library over the next eighteen months, each lasting a week or longer, I read all of these letters and made copies of a good many of them. The more time I spent consulting the archive at Colby, the more I came to admire Anderson's mastery in deciphering Robinson's letters and his professionalism in annotating them. He was so proficient a transcriber that he was able to correct many errors in three previously published volumes of Robinson's letters: the 1940 *Selected Letters* and those written to Harry deForest Smith (1947) and to Edith Brower (1968). Appearing only a few years after the poet died, the *Selected Letters* sanitized his image through a process of omission. When Robinson told a friend of his youth that he had quit chewing tobacco, *Selected Letters* cut the passage. It might be all right to stop chewing tobacco. Having to stop was not. Some wild misreadings were made by the editors and stenographers who did their best to figure out his handwriting. Where Robinson wrote "tadpole," *Selected Letters* rendered it "temple." And the book contained only 181 letters, none among them to Smith and Brower. Those letters, published somewhat later, provided valuable insights into Robinson's early manhood and career but also contained various misspellings and omissions that Anderson was able to put right.

The detailed notes Anderson wrote to accompany the letters demonstrate a wide-ranging knowledge not only of Robinson's life and work but also of the times and the culture. In them he presented capsule biographies of correspondents, information from historical and bibliographical sources, and references to relevant books and articles. It came as something of a blow to discover that the annotations ceased as of the letters of 1916. Still, what Anderson was able to accomplish in the time allotted to him represents a remarkable achievement. In presenting his work to the Colby College library—twelve boxes containing 200 linear feet of file folders—his family has made a major contribution to American literature in general and Robinson in particular.

The letters themselves are characteristically reticent and at the same time engagingly self-deprecatory. One sees Robinson in his embodiment as a practicing writer, deploring the cheapness and materialism around him, making witty comments, arranging for social engagements, giving advice and comfort and money to colleagues and friends. One does not see him announcing his love or campaigning for causes, except for doing away with Prohibition. The letters reflect the reserve and the dignity of the man who wrote them, and demonstrate the good nature with which he confronted his often difficult days. Sometimes, one can read between the lines for emotions concealed. What goes unsaid can say a lot.

In the forty years since the last biography was essayed by Chard Powers Smith, many other documents by or about Robinson have come to light. Smith, for example, was denied permission to quote from the letters Robinson wrote about his occasional visits to Boston's houses of prostitution during the two years (1891–1893) he studied at Harvard. Propriety ruled in this instance, but propriety run amok, for the letters reveal not a callous college youth but a sensitive observer appalled by the degradation of sexual commerce and intensely sympathetic to the women driven to engage in it. Other important, long-withheld material has become available through the generosity and thoughtfulness of the poet's grandnephews David and William Nivison and grandniece Elizabeth Calloway. Included are important and incisive comments on specific poems made by Emma Robinson and her daughter Ruth Nivison (the oldest of EAR's beloved nieces), extensive corrections of Hagedorn's biography made by Emma and Robinson's friend George Burnham, reminiscences of her youth by Ruth Nivison, and significant revelations about the injustice done to Win's brother Herman when he was accused of thievery and banished from the family.

Through the agency of Mrs. Eliot T. Putnam, Robinson's letters to Rosalind Richards were lifted from restricted status at Harvard, along with Rosalind's revealing correspondence with the college librarian. I was directed to Mrs. Putnam as to much else by Danny D. Smith, who knows more about the history and people of Gardiner, Maine, and about the Richards family than anyone else on the face of the earth, and whose willingness to share what he knows extends

well beyond the bounds of professional courtesy. During my several visits to Gardiner and environs over four years, Danny served as the most expert and helpful of guides. He also supplied voluminous information from his own files and from the holdings at the Gardiner Library Association.

Two memoirs about Robinson, both running to 150 pages, surfaced during 2003. The first was written by EAR's friend Carty Ranck, who Boswellized the poet over the course of two decades and was disappointed not to be chosen as official biographer. Through diligent digging, the scholar Arnold T. Schwab recovered this typescript from the office of Ranck's lawyer in Louisville, Kentucky, and kindly allowed me to make a copy. The second was the work of Mowry Saben, who met Robinson as a fellow student at Harvard and remained a lifelong friend. Saben's reminiscences were fetched down by Patricia Burdick from the attic at Colby's Miller library, where they reposed—uncatalogued—among the papers of Richard Cary, a Robinson expert and former professor at the college. In addition to these two long accounts, various libraries around the United States provided copies of briefer recollections that have only recently become available and of letters acquired since Anderson's death in 1984. I have been able to write Robinson's life story in the confidence that very little remains restricted or has been overlooked. The greatest resource of all, of course, is the poetry.

"Don't look for me in my writing," Robinson cautioned. Among poets he *was* unusual in that he avoided the presentation of self on the page as assiduously as he did in person. Still, the caveat cannot be taken literally. In a few poems he does portray himself, in disguise—as "Aunt Imogen" (Uncle Win), who gives so much of her love to the children of her sister, or as "Miniver Cheevy" himself. Usually, though, he remains in the wings, bringing other figures on stage. But the thoughts and emotions in the poems are ones he has experienced or can imagine experiencing. And the voice—even when someone else is speaking—is unmistakably his own. "Poets don't have biographies," Octavio Paz contended. "Their work is their biography." To know Robinson, we must let the poems bring his life into focus.

In an essay on literary biography, John Updike points out that most writers "lead quiet lives, or at least are of interest to us because of the words they set down in quiet moments." Only rarely does a writer make sensational news, like Byron in the nineteenth century or Hemingway and Mailer in the twentieth. Robinson's life was quiet enough; there are no scandals. Yet he was one of those marvelous human beings who made it his business to enrich the lives of others.

His closest friends thought of EAR as both a great poet and a great man, and after five years of reading and writing about him, I have come to share that view. This is my seventh literary biography, all dealing with twentieth-century American writers, beginning with the minor poet Winfield Townley Scott and going on to major figures such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Cheever, and

MacLeish. Obviously, I admired all of them as writers; otherwise, why undertake the task of telling the story of their life and work? But none of them rank alongside Edwin Arlington Robinson as a human being. In this book, I set out to convey a sense of that man—and through discussion of a number of his best poems, to stimulate a heightened understanding and appreciation of the work that makes him worth knowing about.