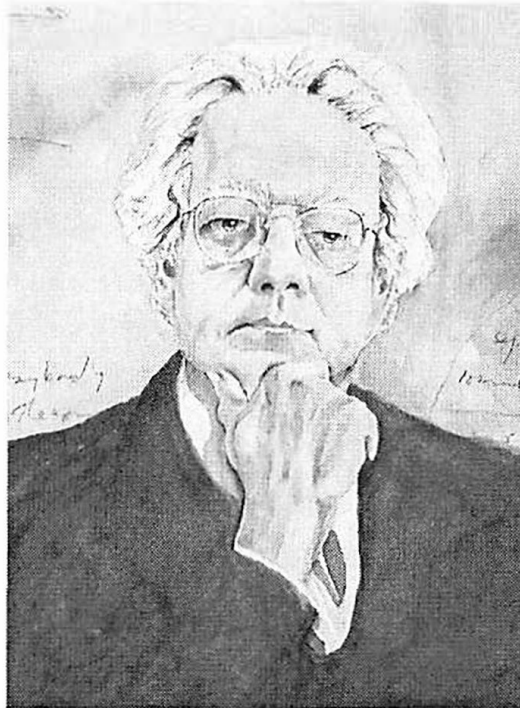


# Northrop Frye

1912 - 1991

**N**orthrop Frye is widely considered as one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's pre-eminent English scholars and literary critics. His reputation also as a commentator on Canadian society and culture remains secure. In his 40 years of teaching at Victoria College, University of Toronto, he inspired many young writers. As the first University Professor in 1967, he was allowed to teach anywhere in the university. Margaret Atwood once said his greatest influence was that he "treated writing as a serious occupation". He made his mark early (well, at 35) when he published *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947). His last book, *The Great Code*



(1982), was the culmination of his scholarship, circling from the Bible round to Blake, ever his prime subject of study. Yet he descended from the mountain, wrote for *Canadian Forum*, and was a declared supporter of the CCF and NDP.

Was he active in the areas that the Group of 78 founders made their prime objectives? One has to say he was a supporter more than an activist. David Cayley, who interviewed Frye for *CBC Ideas* and published a book of

their conversations, says his daily interests were “focused in Canada”. Dr Jean O’Grady, at the Northrop Frye Centre at Victoria College, is an expert on the Collected Works, which Dr Alvin A. Lee is editing in 31 volumes. She writes: “Strangely enough, Frye wrote no piece about foreign policy that I know of.” Yet she found to quote (from Volume 12) a speech of welcome he made on awarding an honorary degree to Lester Pearson and Frye seems to associate himself with Pearson’s vision for Canada as “in the international scene at least, a quiet and sensible country, with no interest in fighting or aggression, devoting itself to discouraging fighting and aggression among its more powerful neighbours.” He also suggested that Canada in its

post-nationalism might “serve as a pilot project for an emerging mode of human life.”

He traveled little. Born in Sherbrooke, Quebec, he first visited Toronto as a student for (of all things) a typing contest. He had a year at Merton College, Oxford, and spent a few months on pastoral work in Saskatchewan after ordination in the United Church. He also traveled to receive 38 honorary doctorates. But his long-time home was Toronto and the university. He married twice: Helen Kemp and, after her death, Elizabeth Eedy Brown. He had no children, beyond his students.