

The Robert Graves Collections at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

The Robert Graves collections at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale are not only a largely undiscovered mother lode of material by, about and relating to Graves, but also a textbook introduction in the growth and development of "special collections," as defined by librarians and archivists. Consisting of a major collection of manuscripts, correspondence and miscellanea, purchased from the author himself, all Graves' published books in all important editions, and 26 smaller accessions of letters by Graves himself, ranging widely in date and subject, as well as material in other collections by Graves, broadsides and ephemera, the holdings illustrate the almost organic growth of an archival resource from first interest to fruition.

The primary Graves Collection at Southern Illinois University was purchased in 1970 from L.A. Wallrich, then a young London bookdealer, who assisted Graves in culling his manuscripts and letters for sale. (A similar transaction, primarily of poetry manuscripts, occurred between Graves and The State University of New York-Buffalo.) Now comprising 28 boxes, the collection contains correspondence received by Graves during the earliest part of his writing career, 1915-1928, and manuscripts from the middle period of his prolific prose writings, covering the years 1940-59.

Fortunately for future scholars, the collection was indexed and organized by an SIU graduate student, John Presley, whose labors served as his doctoral dissertation in 1974, and were later published by Whitston Press.¹ A brief glance at Presley's work, or a trial effort at using the collection at SIU will serve to explain the insertion of "fortunately." As all who may have worked with Graves' letters, manuscripts or typescripts will know, the author had two habits of writing which frustrate researchers. The major problem is Graves' cavalier or perhaps just ecologically sound attitude to a piece of paper. Having written a manuscript draft on one side of the page, the Germanic thriftiness he inherited from his von Ranke mother takes over, and those blank versos must be used. Apparently, Graves placed the superceded pages of manuscript and typed drafts haphazardly in a bin, and used the versos for manuscript drafts of a completely different work. Thus, the manuscript portion of the collection can have two completely different lists of contents, and does. The material which is complete consists of one, and the fragmentary drafts of other works on the versos form another. While Presley's work makes it possible to find material in SIU's collection, only a complete census of Graves' manuscripts will ever locate all the drafts of his work. In addition, Graves' handwriting, although not as unreadable as many other writers (Joyce and Yeats, for example), takes some decoding. The habits observed in his inevitably handwritten correspondence — strong slope of lines from left to right, many insertions, and general untidiness — are found in the manuscripts, and typescripts also are often heavily corrected in minimally readable fashion. Thrifty also in his choice of writing implements, Graves uses pencil,

fountain pen, ballpoint, and, in later years, felt-tip pens, paying little attention to the sharpness or flow of ink resulting.

For a most complete and thorough list, the researcher should consult Presley's book, but a few of the most complete manuscripts can be mentioned here.² A manuscript of Poetic Unreason is one of the earliest works included, along with both holograph and corrected typed versions of Contemporary Techniques of Poetry. Other books represented by multiple manuscripts in holograph and typed versions include The Anger of Achilles, Wife to Mr. Milton, The Golden Fleece, The Common Asphodel, Antigua, Penny, Puce, The Nazarene Gospel Restored and The Cross and the Sword. There are manuscripts in both holograph and typed states of Graves' work for Frank Richards on Old Soldier Sahib and Old Soldiers Never Die, as well as Sgt. Richards' own journal covering some of the events mentioned in the work, and Richards' letters to Graves during their collaboration. Reading the journal and letters, it is abundantly clear that Richards had both an interesting career and a flair for the vivid anecdote, but that the finished works are completely Gravesian in format, structure and some of the language. Other manuscripts which exist in extensive drafts include They Hanged My Sainly Billy, the Sergeant Lamb books, English and Scottish Ballads, and A Survey of Modernist Poetry.

Drafts of many of Graves' shorter fiction and prose works also appear, including "Old Papa Johnson," "Avocado Pears," "She Landed Yesterday," "Baraka," and a screenplay version of "Christmas Truce." At least one draft of much of Graves' prose writing of the forties and fifties, particularly the shorter works, seems to appear somewhere in this collection, with the exception of King Jesus, and The White Goddess, of which fragments occur.

The collection is also rich in materials which the endlessly creative Graves composed, but which have never been published, or which were revised into other works. There is a draft of "The Autobiography of Baal," much longer than the published version, a peculiarly un-Gravesian unpublished novel, heavily revised, which appears to deal with sophisticated, upper-class Londoners, and an untitled libretto for an operetta about smugglers, seemingly written for (to?) a Mrs. Knatchbull. "The Safe," a satirical poem in typescript, with the typed signature of Graves crossed out, and replaced in holograph by "John Doyle," was first published separately in 1922, and later formed the center piece for The Marmosite's Miscellany. "The Borley Knot," which Presley describes as an unpublished introduction to "The Whitaker Negroes,"³ is an interesting addition to that eerie story.

The correspondence in the collection is concentrated on the inter-war years, although the earliest letters include much of Graves' important war correspondence, primarily the letters of Siegfried Sassoon, and the famous death-wish poem, quoted in Good-bye To All That. Including other verse drafts by Sassoon as well, the correspondence ends before the break between the two men which Graves caused by

his use of Sassoon in that autobiography. Another poet of the Great War, Edmund Blunden, is represented by a long series of letters from 1919 through 1927, as well as by drafts of poetry sent for Graves' commentary. Much of the correspondence deals with Graves' writing and publishing efforts, including the kindest possible rejection letters from T.S. Eliot, some letters dealing with Graves' work on biographical treatments of his friend, T.E. Lawrence, including one each from General Allenby and Lawrence's mother, Sara Lawrence. There are letters of advice and chat from contemporaries such as Edith Sitwell, Peter Quennell, and Robert Nichols, as well as from mentors such as E.M. Forster, W.H. Rivers and Thomas Hardy.

Only portions of Graves' personal correspondence from his family are included, but the letters that appear have not been utilized by any of Graves' biographers, and constitute fascinating and sometimes touching glimpses into his personal life. There are early letters from Graves' mother, Amy, and his older sister Roz, as well as a number of letters from his father, Alfred Perceval Graves. There are letters of cheerful advice, birthday poems written to honor Robert's yearly celebration of both his birth in 1895 and his rescue from death in 1916, and sorrowful, angry letters following the break-up of Robert's marriage to Nancy Nicholson and on Laura Riding's attempted suicide in 1928. Among the most fascinating of the personal correspondence, in appearance if not always in content, is a long run of letters from Graves' father-in-law, the artist William Nicholson. Nearly all of these letters are illustrated to some degree with humorous and even satirical drawings, and a few include full-page works in colored pencil, apparently done on the spur of the moment. Oddly enough, there exists, on the verso of another manuscript sheet, a drawing said to be by Robert Graves himself, entitled "The meaning of dreams." Though amateurish and more symbolic than anything Nicholson ever did, it seems clearly inspired by the technique shown in the Nicholson letters.

There is some overlap in time between the periods covered in the correspondence and in the prose manuscripts, but these two portions of the collection cover essentially separate periods in Graves' creative life in very different ways. A further leap in time through Graves' long career is provided by a small section of poetry drafts from the middle 1960's, considered to be the height of Graves' poetic production. Heavily corrected, drafted and redrafted, they show the lengthy, often painful process by which Graves produced his precise, evocative masterworks. Included are drafts and late revision to "The White Goddess," revisions to "The Black Goddess," "She is No Liar," and "Stolen Jewel."

Within three years of receiving this huge and chaotic mass of material, and while John Presley and others were busily sorting and organizing what was to become Collection 64, Special Collections had begun to expand its Graves holdings in several different directions. In addition to the books described below, the department was able to acquire small lots of Graves' letters, primarily from his last productive years, 1960-73, and another corrected and revised manuscript, "The Green-Sailed Vessel."

Never published, the letters in these small collections are the true Graves voice, occasionally at its full power, sometimes distressingly weak and obsessed. By this point in his life, Graves apparently had so many correspondents that his letters are more like monologues on his current travels, health problems and work, often interspersed with typically epigrammatic and moving comments on his long life. To Spike Milligan, the British comedian, who had apparently visited the Graves' extended lodgings in Déyà, Graves writes compulsively of his involvement with Aemilia Laraçuen, sometimes referred to as Emile or Cindy, his willful and negligent muse of the moment, although it seems clear that his correspondents have not asked for these revelations. Yet, in spite of the pain he reveals, from both his health and his heart, Graves writes, "But with all that and this [i.e., illnesses] I still find life wonderful: by 'life' meaning 'love'."⁴ And, in an undated but probably contemporary letter, he tells Jones, "Life is in aid of loving, even if there's no necessary return."⁵

Yet he is always capable of besting much younger correspondents, and undertaking complicated new projects, at least in theory. Although he flatly states to Ian Nicola, who apparently wanted to produce a play based on a Graves work, "I'm oddly uninterested in these big show biz projects,"⁶ the correspondence continues for years until Nicola drops out. The Graves collection is liberally salted with unpublished screenplays, operas, librettos, plays and other commercially-oriented material, written probably not only for the money (a periennial necessity because of his large family), but possibly for the recognition that only the stage or screen can provide. He mentions frequently and regretfully to Nicola and others the failure of the first I. Claudius film in 1934, starring Charles Laughton and Merle Oberon, though he never realized its ultimate success in the late 1970's. In another letter, he consults Harold Freedman about a possible production of his Song for Sheba, a musical never produced.

His moods vary as widely as his expanding interests and his diminishing health preoccupy him. He is capable of being paranoid, in a letter to Sven Berlin, about the dangers of lecturing in America, and insightful, even to a total stranger, such as Donald Cooper, who has written to ask about his writings on love: "One lives on a great store of magical power when one really loves."⁷ He gives advice to a fellow poet, John Montague — ("It's always a problem how particular one can be in a poem ... But at least one must never cheat; as you have learned."⁸) — and comments constantly on the unreality of modern life, including the inflated prices paid for his work and that of his friends. Although always pedantic, he is mellowed by far than the early Graves, who responded to an autograph seeker in 1922, "Touched by your confidence in the value of my autograph at a time when my stock happens to be extremely low (my publisher finds it almost unquotable at present) ..."⁹

Varying from businesslike notes to long correspondences, these letters assembled singly and in small lots through the vicissitudes of auctions and dealers' sales, provide

an invaluable and little known picture of the sidelines of Graves' life, sidelines often more varied than many people's lives.

One of the longest and most interesting correspondences is with a Chinese writer, Chien Shui, whose very first letter in 1967 elicits a sporadic but prolonged correspondence that lasts until 1974. To this man, whom Graves may have met in person only once, Graves pours out the whole of his life, his philosophy and his current interests, in a manner even more candid than his usual frankness. "I feel a very strong affinity with the Chinese which I do not feel for any other European race except the Afghans ...,"¹⁰ he states in his first letter, and although he constantly makes remarks which seem rather racist to the modern eye (he often refers to Chien as "an educated Chinaman"), the friendship continues. It is in the letters to Chien that we hear of his new interest in translating The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (although we do not hear of the fiasco of its publication, based on a forged document, caused in 1969). His new muse, a sweet ballerina named Julie, is mentioned constantly, but in a less painfully obsessive tone than her predecessor elicited. The very late letters, although clearly written in Graves' now failing hand, mention his wife, Beryl, on whom Graves now had to rely even more for support and assistance.

Finally, in 1973, Graves' gradually failing health overcomes his constitution, and in a sad coda to his previous strength and generosity, he apparently picks a quarrel with L.A. Wallrich over the sale of the manuscript material in the sixties. Copies of the correspondence, provided by Wallrich to SIU, end with the prophetic and shakily-written apology, "I have suffered from a bad loss of memory the past six months."¹¹ It was among the last of the letters he was to write.

Although the assemblage of a manuscript collection late in the life of a world-famous writer is a costly and often impossible undertaking, the acquisition of the books and other material to complement the manuscripts is more attainable. Having already acquired a nucleus from the collections of Philip Kaplan and Clarence Laughlin, the eighteen years since the acquisition of the major manuscripts have been spent in development of an important and comprehensive collection of Graves' books. Although not complete, it contains all important and many obscure editions of all Graves' books, his translations, introductions, and rewriting efforts, as well as all the secondary monographs on him. Beginning with a second impression of Over the Brazier, with a handcolored cover, the collection includes all of the early works, contemporaneous with the letters of the 1915-1928 period, all of the editions of the Seizun Press, which Graves and Laura Riding produced in the twenties and thirties, and their translation of Almost Forgotten Germany, from the German of Georg Schwartz. All states of Good-bye to All That are represented, including the first, suppressed version, of which Higginson estimated that only 100 copies were produced, and a 1930 German translation which appears in neither Higginson nor Williams. The book collection is complete where the manuscripts and correspondence are sparse, with many editions of the Claudius books, including translations, and the

continually developing poetry. All of the works held in the manuscript collections are available in many editions, including page proofs to The Reader Over Your Shoulder, and translations of Antigua, Penny, Puce, The Golden Fleece, and Catacrok!

As Graves concentrated more on his conceptual work and poetry, following the revelations of The White Goddess, his current work was increasingly collectable and available, although often in limited editions with voluminous prices, and his earlier work was widely reprinted. From this period until Graves ceased writing in 1975, the book collection is extremely complete, including such comparative rarities as his Oratio Creweiana, a Latin address given during his honorary professorship at Oxford, Love Respelt, illustrated by Aemelia Laracuen, Colophon to Love Respelt, Seventeen Poems Missing from Love Respelt, At the Gate, Beyond Giving, and broadside editions of "In the Wilderness," and "Queen-Mother to New Queen." And, to neglect no side of Graves' work, the collection of his children's books is nearly complete, including a rare microfilm of a pirated Russian translation of The Penny Fiddle by Andrei Sergeev.

With his popularity following the television production of I, Claudius, it is now more difficult to keep up with reprints and translations of all of the Graves' canon, as he becomes, finally, increasingly known as a consummate poet, unorthodox scholar of myth and history, and even perhaps as the best historical novelist of the century. Although Graves had begun to be disgusted by the "hippy" following which he had attracted in the sixties, (and a hand-drawn sign, dated 1965, forbidding the smoking of pot in his home is in the collection), he would undoubtedly be happy at both the new avenues of scholarship his work has opened and the ubiquitousness of his work in both bookstores and libraries. Though he may have been somewhat mystified by the interest in his manuscripts, the pedagogue in Graves, always in evidence, should be pleased that so much evidence of his writing technique survives in collections such as the one at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

The Graves materials in Special Collections have no restrictions on usage, and are available to all scholars with a need to use Graves' manuscripts and correspondence in their research. For further information, contact Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL, 62901.

NOTES

¹Presley, John. The Robert Graves Manuscript and Letters At Southern Illinois University: An Inventory. (Troy, N.Y. : Whitston Publishing, 1976).

²See inventory for Collection 64, The Robert Graves Papers, for listings and locations.

³Presley, op. cit., item 668, p. 115.

⁴Letter of May 13, 1969, Case manuscript 15.

⁵Letter of June 8, year unknown, Case manuscript 15.

⁶Letter of January 15, 1966, VFM 1173.

⁷Letter of October 6, 1969, VFM 1450.

⁸Letter, date uncertain: either July 10, 1965 or October 9, 1965, VFM 1441.

⁹Letter of April 14, 1922, VFM 569.

¹⁰Letter of December 22, 1967, VFM 1451. The "Afghans" is a reference to his current deep friendship with Idries Shah.

¹¹Letter of July 6, 1973 (cataloged as 1974, but cover letter of transmittal written in 1973.) VFM 117.

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