

Book Reviews

Robert Graves: The Years with Laura, 1926-1940 by Richard Perceval Graves.
New York: Viking Press, \$24.95

Edmund Blunden: A Biography by Barry Webb. New Haven: Yale University
Press, \$35.00

The appearance of Richard Graves' and Barry Webb's biographies of Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden respectively are both welcome for the wealth of information both give about the lives of their subjects. Each book is scrupulously researched and well documented, and each supplies the answers to questions that students and scholars might have posed: why, for example, did Robert Graves leave his well-paid Cairo teaching position in 1926? How did Edmund and Mary Blunden discover each other during the war? Ironically, though, both biographers somehow introduce more questions into their books about their unconventional subjects than they ever answer. Both biographies also tend to lose touch with the personalities of their subjects amid the copious detailing of daily events that touched their lives externally; that is, both Graves and Blunden come across as pale shadows of their full-blooded selves. Even Graves' Claudius, as unhistorical as he might be, has more flesh on his Roman bones than either of these two vital poets of the Twentieth Century.

Richard Graves' study, his second of a proposed three-volume series about his uncle, covers Robert's fifteen year relationship with Laura Riding, the eccentric American poet whom Richard characterizes as Robert's muse, critic, and companion. The story that unfolds throughout the biography is not for the faint of heart; it is often incredible, often comic, and nearly always absorbing. Richard Graves never really discovers the core reason for Graves' willing submission to Riding, and his theories of Freudian mother-identification ring hollow.

Interestingly, Richard Graves' accounts of several events in Robert's life conflict with details in Martin Seymour-Smith's biography, *Robert Graves: His Life and Works* (1982). While Richard Graves has the good taste not to expose his fellow biographer's errors in the text (he uses the footnotes to point out discrepancies), he does not give the reader the benefit of an explanation for the discrepancies. Most of these discrepancies arise as a result of two different versions of the disintegration of the "four life." While Seymour-Smith claims that Geoffrey Phibbs visited Graves and Riding in London in October of 1928, Richard Graves denies this ever happened. Graves claims that Seymour-Smith had a "humorous prejudice against Phibbs" (343), but fails to explain his comment. Furthermore, Graves states that Seymour-Smith

tenure as Professor of Poetry at Oxford—and the low points—his tendency towards alcoholic violence and eventual loss of poetic vision. Claire's loyalty and understanding bring a vitality that is missing from the more stilted, earlier chapters.

But Webb's biography, like Richard Graves', fails to satisfy completely, fails to answer questions that the reader feels need to be addressed. Why, for example, did Blunden largely ignore Aki Hayashi after she had travelled to England, or how did the poet relate to his children by the first marriage? Blunden's affinities for Japan and Nazi Germany are rather weakly defended. His masterpiece *Undertones of War* certainly deserves fuller analysis.

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added new lines of reported dialogue to a recorded discussion between Robert, Nancy, Laura, and Geoffrey while Laura was recovering from her suicide attempt.

Richard Graves' complaint about Seymour-Smith's "fleshing out" the text seem to be a polite way of accusing the latter of fabricating details for dramatic effect (something Robert might have understood).

The biography moves along in choppy but relentless fashion and takes the reader to Mallorca, to the bizarre world of Laura Riding and the intellectual and artistic circle of disciples that pandered to her whims for various periods of time. Jacob Bronowski, Len Lye, John Aldridge, and countless others fell under Laura's spell; but somehow Richard Graves never manages to capture the lure of this imaginary kingdom. The biography slides over the surface of life at the Posada and Canellun, but never quite realizes the perversity of the situation that is captured so well in the late T.S. Matthews' *Under the Influence*. R.P. Graves is certainly willing to put his stick in the mud, but he is reluctant to stir it around: the price of strict objectivity—perhaps?

The biography is to be commended for its sympathetic handling of Alfred Graves, Beryl Pritchard, and perhaps Robert himself. Richard Graves' speculations are often thought-provoking, as when he suggests that Robert's largely subconscious resentment of Laura's manipulative treatment of him led to his writing the Claudius novels (330). And finally, the text is exceedingly readable and amply documented.

Blunden's life is also carefully documented by Barry Webb, but at times the flow of the narrative is stopped dead by the author's cataloguing of people and places. This is especially evident in the sections on Hong Kong and Oxford where page after page of Blunden's visitors stream past the reader's eyes like the catalogue of ships in the Iliad, and with as much relevance. Surely, a few significant anecdotes or memorable stories about the more important visits would serve to demonstrate Blunden's status both in Asia and in England.

Webb appears comfortable assessing Blunden's poetry and generally reinforces a mood or event by using an appropriate quotation that reflects Blunden's mood or thought at the time. When Blunden leaves Japan, Webb closes the chapter by quoting "The Author's Last Words To His Students," which aptly captures the poet's love and concern for his pupils of English literature. Also quoted is Blunden's "Report on Experience," which, the author states, is a pleasing mixture of "personal reference and literary allusion" (169), an outgrowth of Blunden's reflections on an already full life on his thirty-third birthday. Continually, Webb effectively counterpoints Blunden's poetry with personal analysis.

The biography does seem to flicker into life significantly after Blunden encounters Claire Poynting (later his third wife). The story of their meeting at Oxford and subsequent marriage might be the most illuminating section of the biography. The twenty-two year difference in age is seen as no barrier to their eventual consummation, and the reader feels the flow of destiny as strongly as Edmund must have himself. The unfolding of their love affair, which spanned the last thirty-four years of Blunden's life, is full of high points—the professorship at Hong Kong and later his