

The Owl: An Extended Bibliographic Note

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After his demobilization from the Army in 1918, Robert Graves and Nancy Nicholson lived in the Nicholson family's Harlech, Wales cottage. Here and later in their cottage on Boar's Hill near Oxford, Robert and Nancy and her father William worked on Graves' own poetry magazine, *The Owl*. They took advantage of the fact that Oxford and Boar's Hill placed them in the direct center of a constellation of poets—Masefield, whose cottage they rented, Edmund Blunden, Robert Nichols, Vachel Lindsay, Davies, De la Mare, Hardy—and non-poets like T. E. Lawrence and B. K. Mallick, and artists like the Nicholsons themselves.

The student of Graves' work and career—and in fact, students of many of the other poets, writers, and artists whose work appears in *The Owl*—can profit from seeing early versions of the poems here, and from seeing Graves' taste at work as he makes his selections from contributors (there is, be advised, some remarkably bad poetry among these contributions). Another reason to seek out *The Owl* is its very rarity. Only eight American libraries, and two British libraries, have the full set of three numbers of *The Owl*.

Surprisingly, *Owl* and *Winter Owl* are mentioned in F. H. Higginson's *A Bibliography of the Works of Robert Graves* only as a periodical where seven of his early poems were published—though a note to one of these seven items does indicate that Graves was literary editor of *Owl*. The revised edition of Higginson's *Bibliography* continues this method of dividing Graves' output, as well.

Hallman Bell Bryant provided an encyclopedia entry on *The Owl* for Alvin Sullivan's *British Literary Magazines* and, in a description constrained by the format, describes the contents of the magazine and the circumstances of its production. Bryant's explanation for the short run of *The Owl* is that "in a period when the trend was literary journals with definite ideological bents, Graves took no doctrinaire editorial stance" (333). Graves' eclectic editorial stance swept in an astonishing variety of material, but apparently none that engaged an audience large enough for success.

In fact, *The Owl* and *The Winter Owl* were beautifully produced volumes, with a variety of contributors ranging from Hardy and Masefield to John Crowe Ransom's first publication in England. The

artwork is reproduced, exquisitely, by old-fashioned stone lithography (the method was identified for me by Tomás Graves). A complete description of *Owl*, along with its contents, may amaze Graves scholars who have not had the chance to see these rare volumes.

Volume 1, no. 1 was published in May 1919, and Robert Graves is listed as its sole editor. It had a sewn binding and a cover of heavy paper, 10" x 13", in reddish-purple, or russet, and black. The cover of all three volumes featured a drawing by William Nicholson of an owl holding a mouse in its talons, six other owls and another bird circling it.

A list of contributors appears, centered at the bottom under the words "No. 1" in a white box and date, bordered in black:

Beerbohm	Galsworthy	Nichols
Belcher	Graves	Orpen
Bianco	Hardy	Sassoon
Caldecott	Kennington	Smith
Crawhall	Masefield	Squire
Davies	Nicholson (N)	Turner
	Nicholson	

At the bottom of the cover are the price, "10/6," the words "A Miscellany," and "London, Martin Secker."

The back cover featured another drawing of an owl, with a quatrain written in script on a scroll the owl holds:

Athenian fowl with feathered legs
 Stand emblem of our will
 To hunt the rat that sucks the eggs
 of virtue, joy, and skill.

One might keep in mind Graves' intention, during this period, of writing "true poetry" for its therapeutic value.

The contents page lists an amazing variety of contributors and materials (I have listed title and author as presented on the Contents page of *The Owl*, which does not list page numbers, and I've included for each item either the first line or a description):

The Master and the Leaves: by Thomas Hardy

We are budding, master, budding,
 (dated 1917)

Sonnet: by John Masefield

Forget all these, the barren fool in power

Spring: by Pamela Bianco

Lithograph drawing of head of young girl, "Vincent Brooks" lower right

Song: by J. C. Squire

You are my sky: beneath your circling kindness

Ghost-Raddled: by Robert Graves

"Come, surly fellows, come! A Song"

Fable, One

Lithograph, Fable. The Piano tuner and the Scorpions. [in script]

A Frosty Night: by Robert Graves

Mother. "Sweet, my dear, what ails you,"

Sporting Acquaintances: by Siegfried Sassoon

I watched old squatting chimpanzee: he traced

A Letter from William Orpen

Satirical lithograph of pool players, labelled Metropolitan

School of Art, 6 lines script, signature, "a postcard message-like" in Graves hand

What the Captain said at the Point-to-Point: by Siegfried

Sassoon

I've had a good bump round; my little horse

Love Impeached: by W. H. Davies

Listen for pity—I impeach

The Careless Lady: by Nancy Nicholso

Signed lithograph, dated 1918, of lady dancing in her door

way before a beggar who's stolen her child. Script quatrain signed, "R.G."

The Ape: by W. J. Turner

The trees dream all night on the tops of the hills

Three Songs of the Enigma: by Robert Nichols

How long I have wished for something I know well

Summer: by Pamela Bianco

Lithograph portrait, head and shoulders of girl, 2 trees in background

Love—A Dream: by W. J. Turner

In a deep mountain lake there sailed a swan,

"A Clergyman": by Max Beerbohm

Prose fragmentary, pale, momentary,—almost nothing—glimpsed

The Senior Service: by Randolph Caldecott

Lithograph drawing of 2 men in period clothes, with swords

trying to shake hands, but one right, one left hand are extended

Lottie's Daughter: by Eric Kennington

Lithograph, profile, black background

Mrs. Harris: by George Belcher

Lithograph, "Drawn and etched by George Belcher, May 1918

"Mrs. Harris/of/Follop Yard/taken from Life" caption

The Sun: by John Galsworthy (a play)

A girl sits crouched over her knees on a stile close to the river

The Indian: by Joseph Crawhall

Lithograph, Indian with pipe on horseback

To/Nancy/from J. Crawhall, signed, lower right

Trivia: by L. Pearsall Smith

Five short prose "epiphany-like pieces"

Cadogan Gardens, Faces, Misapprehension, Ask Me No More,

Latch Key

Fable, Two

Lithograph drawing of snake, with bonnet, gazing into a mirror

Fable/The Serpent and her Mother, 5 lines, script

Graves declares his eclectic approach to gathering material very explicitly in his forward to the first issue:

"All Owls are Satisfactory," Lewis Carroll begins his essay on these birds: we accept the omen gratefully.

It must be understood that "The Owl" has no politics, leads no new movement and is not even the organ of any particular generation—for that matter sixty-seven years separate the oldest and youngest contributors.

But we find in common a love of honest work well done, and a distaste for shortcuts to popular success.

"The Owl" will come out quarterly or whenever enough suitable material is in the hands of the Editors.

The second number of *The Owl* appeared in October 1919. Its cover art was identical to that of No. 1, but No. 2 was in hardback. Its layout was virtually identical, with the list of contributors boxed at the bottom of the front cover:

Baring

Beerbohm

Bianco

Blunder

de la Mare

Freeman

Graves

Lindsay

Lutyens

Nash

Nichols

Nicholson (N)

Nicholson

Shanks

Squire

Tomlinson

Griset
Kent

Rickword
Sassoon

Turner
Wood

The table of contents is equally impressive, with *Owl* No. 2 a more substantial 54 pages:

The Happy Night: by J. C. Squire

I have loved tonight; from love's last bordering steep

The Rabbit: by Walter de la Mare

Lithograph drawing of rabbit, s. PAMELA

As I was walking

Limitations: by Siegfried Sassoon

If you could crowd them into forty lines!

Eagles: by Ernest Griset

Lithograph and watercolor drawing of eagles, one grooming.

Everyone Sang: Siegfried Sassoon

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;

Alas: by Walter de la Mare

Lithograph drawing of woman's head, s. PAMELA, lower-left,

One moment take thy rest

Song from a Play: by Maurice Baring

FAME is a wanton breeze

Advice to Lovers: by Robert Graves

I KNEW an old man at a fair

Vain Man: by Nancy Nicholson

Lithograph drawing of man on stilts, script quatrain at top left

Song-One Hard Look: by Robert Graves

SMALL gnats that fly

Petunia: by W. J. Turner

WHEN I have a daughter I shall name her Petunia:

Fairyland: by Pamela Bianco

Lithograph, garden scene of women and children

title at bottom, s. Pamela Bianco/San Rimo

Maidens: by W. J. Turner

There is a hunger in their small white limbs,

The Flower of Flame: by Robert Nichols

AS round the cliff I came alone

Ecstasy: by Rockwell Kent

Lithograph drawing of sitting man, disrobed to waist, hair and beard flowing, titled Ecstasy [sic]/s, l.r, Rockwell Kent/Alaska 1919

A Country God: by Edmund Blunden

dated "on leaving France, Feb. 25th, 1918."

WHEN groping farms are lanterned up

The Picnic: by William Nicholson

Lithograph, labeled bottom and top right, The Picnic picnic scene, labeled in AMs, t.r., Harlech, May 1919 and figures labelled "German prisoner, Robert in khaki, SS, me, ED, BM, etc"

The Night: by Edward Shanks

ALL Day the cuckoo has sung his double cries

Study: by Derwent Wood

Lithograph of 2 female figures, dated FDW, 1912

Let Me In: by John Freeman

LET me in, let me in!

I am that Creature: by John Freeman

I AM that creature and creator who

Fable: by William Nicholson

Lithograph drawing of nun, 8 lines script, s. William Nicholson

The Golden Whales of California: by Vachel Lindsay

(After chanting instructions)

YES, I have walked in California

"Get Up": by Rockwell Kent

Lithograph, man with outstretched arms facing a window

s., l.r. Rockwell Kent/ Alaska, 1919

Something Defeasible: by Max Beerbohm

dated July 27th, 1919

The Cottage had a good trim garden in front of it and another

Sketch for Cenotaph No. 1: by Edwin Lutyens

Lithograph, sketch, monument for WWI dead, 3 views titled in AMs, l.r., and dated July 4th, 19__

The "Heart's Desire" by H. M. Tomlinson

If the evening was one of those which seem longer than. . .

Parish Council Meeting: by John Nash

Lithograph, men sleeping around a table—Ams. bottom center:

A Parish Council Meeting, Rectifying a Dangerous Roadway

The Cow: by Edgell Rickword

Simon lived in a white farm house on the edge of the forest. His...

In Number 1, the "Fables" underneath drawings are signed prose by William Nicholson, but similar texts in Numbers 1 or 2 are signed "R.G." And careful reading shows Graves developing drafts of "Vain and Careless" in what Bryant calls "a doggerel rime about a careless lady who gives her baby to a beggar man." This doggerel is actually a

5-line version of the first two stanzas of "Vain and Careless." Similarly, the doggerel accompanying Nancy Nicholson's drawing "Vain Man" is a version of stanzas 3 and 4 of "Vain and Careless," which first appeared as a whole poem in *Country Sentiment*. To the first four stanzas published in *The Owl* Graves added the following, proposing a failed union between the vain man and the careless lady:

"A splendid match surely,"
 Neighbors saw it plain,
 "Although she is so careless,
 Although he is so vain."

But the lady played bobcherry
 Did not see or care,
 As the vain man went by her
 Aloft in the air.

The gentle-born couple
 Lived and died apart
 Water will not mix with oil
 Nor vain with careless heart.

Fairly representative of a strain of children's songs, simple ballads, and the like in Graves' early work, "Vain and Careless" also appeared in *Poems 1914-1926* and, unlike many of Graves' simpler poems, survived in the canon, appearing in the 1977 *New Collected Poems*. The key to its deep resonance for Graves may lie in the illustrations of *The Owl*. Nancy Nicholson, the feminist for whom care of children was a theoretical social morality, drew Graves' face for the vain man on stilts.

Bryant attributes to F. Vincent Brooks "a series of full-page illustrations. . . done in a wryly humorous vein." In fact, as the printers note, p. 2 of No. 1 makes clear, F. Vincent Brooks printed the illustrations, Meynell the text:

The Printers
 The Illustrations by
 F. Vincent Brooks
 Parker Street, Kingsway
 The Letterpress by
 Gerard T. Meynell
 The Westminster Press
 11 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden
 1919

On page 2 of *The Winter Owl* (Number 3), a similar printer's notice makes it clear that Brooks was still engaged to reproduce the artwork (though a firm's name appears for the first time alongside that of Brooks), and the text was printed by the same firm in Covent Garden (though now Meynell's name appears above the name of the press).

THE PRINTERS

The Illustrations by
 Vincent Brooks, Day & Sons Ltd.
 Parker Street, Kingsway
 The Letterpress by
 The Westminster Press
 11 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden
 1923

Given this specification it is probably prudent to attribute the illustrations, signed or otherwise (some are titled in a generic script and some in a hand which seems to be Graves' own), as they are attributed in the table of contents for each number.

All four of Graves' poems which had their first appearance in Numbers 1 and 2 of *The Owl* were first collected in *Country Sentiment*—but not before appearing first in other periodicals such as *Living Age*. "Ghost Raddled" appeared in *Living Age* on 6 September 1919; "A Frosty Night" appeared two weeks later on 20 September. Clearly, one function of *The Owl* was to make Graves' poetry better known through one more outlet. It is, however, very interesting to note the revisions Graves made to these early poems, in which he worked what Douglas Day has called "the fear-theme" through Georgian styles and conventions.

Some of these revisions are meant to give the poems harder edges, and to generalize them. Some are mainly revisions of meter, and some simplify the text by deleting somewhat elaborate labels and typography. In "Advice to Lovers," for example, Graves places all the old man's remarks in italics for *Country Sentiment*. The "lovers" of the *Owl* version have become "yokels" in *Country Sentiment*. The earlier version has the old man addressing "lovers of all lands and all time"; the later version has him addressing "lovers today and for all time," which is both more unified and more interesting metrically. The comma in the last line is another revision, again creating a metrically interesting caesura before the last word. Similarly, in line 12 the early

"Speak, and he tells what he has heard" is revised in *Country Sentiment* to "Speak, he retells what he has heard."

By beginning with the earliest versions, one can watch Graves slowly putting aside some Georgian poetic elaborations. In the *Owl* version of "A Frosty Night" the labels for each speaker are placed in the left margin with periods after each. In *Poems 1914-1926* the labels remain, but are moved into the text, centered over the stanzas. In *New Collected Poems* (1977), the labels are dropped altogether. There are a number of minor changes in the text of this poem: the archaic/dialect "Nay" in line 10 becomes "No" for *Poems 1914-1926*, the semicolon and colon after lines 11 and 18 become dashes for *New Collected Poems*, and the "But" that begins line 15 becomes "Yet." However, again it is Graves' growing control of meter that is most interesting. Line 1 of the *Owl* version of "A Frosty Night" is "Sweet, my dear, what ails you." In *Poems 1914-1926* this is revised to the stronger "Alice, dear, what ails you," and for *New Collected Poems* the line is the much stronger, "Alice, what ails you."

For some of these poems, substantial revision came much later. "Song—One Hard Look" has the same text in *Poems 1914-1926* that it had in *Owl* No. 2. But by the time of *New Collected Poems*, lines 10-12 and 15-18 were deleted, the word "Song" deleted from the title, and lines 13 and 14, "One straw can crack/The camel's back;" had become, "A straw will crack/The camel's back" with the following line "There is no easier way" replacing all of lines 15 through 18.

Similarly, "Ghost-Raddled," one of Graves' most successful early poems, has essentially the same text in *The Owl* and in *Poems 1914-1926*—in line 20, "From breasts long rotten" is changed to "In breasts long rotten" for its later appearance. By 1938, its title had become "The Haunted House" and it opened that year's *Collected Poems*; it is the second poem in the 1966 *Collected Poems*. The only other changes to the text Graves made over the years were to change the first exclamation mark to a semicolon, to substitute the stronger "fools" for "madmen" in line 2, to change "glaring" in line 7 to "rabid," and most tellingly, by 1938 "Lust, frightful, past belief" had become "Lust filthy, past belief."

Graves' habit of constant, progressive revision is not shared by all the poets who published in *The Owl*. Sassoon's famous "Everyone Sang" is a good example. Though Sassoon grew to dislike the poem, with its fatuous optimism about mankind's Social Revolution sure to follow the World War, he continued to reprint the poem. (And though

Graves remarked that “‘Everyone’ did not include me,” he printed the poem in *Owl* No. 2). Even though it continued to represent, in anthologies and elsewhere, one branch of optimism among the war poets, Sassoon merely tinkered with the poem. *Poems Newly Selected 1916-1935* changes the dashes in line 5 of the *Owl* text of the poem to semicolons, and deletes the comma in line 9. The dashes reappeared in *Collected Poems* (1947) and *Collected Poems 1908-1956*. The only other revision in the text appeared in Rupert Hart-Davis’s 1983 edition of *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, in which line 3, “As prisoned birds might find in freedom” is changed to “As prisoned birds must find in freedom.”

Another reason for the failure of *The Owl* may have been its publishing schedule. Four years went by between *Owl* No. 2 and the appearance of No. 3 in November of 1923; in addition, the title was changed to *The Winter Owl*. Again in hardback, this time in blue and black covers with second versions of Nicholson’s owl drawings on the front and back covers, No. 3 was priced a bit higher, and now the back cover listed both Graves and William Nicholson as editors. The four-year hiatus had increased the value of No. 1 and No. 2; the University of Michigan copy of No. 1 has, in pencil inside the front cover, this notation: “Rare—offered for/£4.10s. in 1923.” However, rarity did not prove to be successful in luring buyers; *Winter Owl* was the last such collection. *The Winter Owl* even had a change of publishers, from Gerard T. Meynell (Westminster Press) for Numbers 1 and 2 to Cecil Palmer for No. 3.

Again, the most effective advertising was probably the boxed list of contributors:

Beerbohm	Doyle	Mallik
Bianco	Drury	Nicholson
Blunden	Garnett	Pelligrini
Burne Jones	Graves	Ransome [sic]
Caldecott	Guedalla	Rickword
Davies	Hardy	Sassoon
Dobson	Jekyll	Soames
	Lawrence	Turner

The table of contents is, again, stunning in its variety and in the representation of artists and writers:

- The Missed Train: by Thomas Hardy
- How I was caught
- Rogues: by W. H. Davies

- The nearer unto Nature's heart I moved,
 Swinburne on Blotting Paper: by Pellegrini
 Lithograph drawing of Swinburne, title in AMs, possibly Graves' hand
- Massacre: by T. E. Lawrence
 (September 1917: being a chapter from the history of the Arab revolt.)
- Winter Remembered: by J. C. Ransom
 Two evils, monstrous either one apart
- An Illustrated Letter: by Sir Edward Burne-Jones
 Lithograph, 5 line-drawings with 8 lines AMs
- Cascade: by E. Rickword
 Lovers may find similitudes
- The Lost Arrow: by David Garnett
 Is there a cave where the echoes go on sounding between the cliffs for
- The Safe: by John Doyle
 (Being a detailed Phantasmagorical Study of the Vicarious Existence)
- Mr. Belloe: by John Doyle
 Lithograph, caricature sketch
- Tracked—An unpublished Sonnet: by Enoch Soames
 [He raked the ashes from the rusty grate,]
 (Communicated by Max Beerbohm)
- Mr. William Nicholson (last century): by Max Beerbohm
 Lithograph, caricature drawing
- The Pietist: by Philip Guedalla
 It was one of those large rooms, all corners and chiaroscuro, which
- Mr. Eugene Goossens: by Frank Dobson
 Lithograph, charcoal sketch
- First Rhymes: by Edmund Blunden
 In the meadow by the mill
- "Gyp": by Elizabeth Drury
 Lithograph portrait
- Solar Eclipse: by Siegfried Sassoon
 Observe these blue solemnities of sky
- Interchange of Selves: by B. K. Mallik
 (An Indian Actionless Drama for three actors and a Moving Background)
- "Kitchen Life": by Pamela Bianco

Lithograph, still life, signed "P.B."

Full Moon: by Robert Graves

As I walked out one harvest night

An American Addresses Philomela: by J. C. Ransom

Procne, Philomela, and Itylus,

The Shire Horse (woodcut): by William Nicholson

Lithograph, drawing of large draft horse

The Mask of Michichiyo: by W. J. Turner

There lived in the year 1360 in the reign of the Shogun Moto-uji,

The Hunt: Unpublished Sketches for The Queen of Hearts: by

Randolph Caldecott

2 lithograph drawings, signed "RC"

Knowledge of God: by Robert Graves

So far from praising he blasphemes

"Alice": by Frank Dobson

Lithograph, figure drawing, signed

Lady Jekyll's Plum Pudding

The better the ingredients the better the result—practise no false...

(Actually, the Dobson drawing and "Knowledge of God" appear in the collection in reversed order.) And, of course, "John Doyle" is Graves' pseudonym; perhaps "The Safe" was a bit harsh—or a bit below his usual standard—for his audience.

By far the longest of the pieces here is Turner's, at 11 not-too-interesting pages, and Mallik's, at 16 very ponderous pages. Turner's might not be too surprising, since he and J. C. Squire helped Graves collect material and produce *The Owl*. Mallik had been studying at Oxford since 1912, and his strong influence on Graves eventually interested Graves in metaphysics and turned him away from the Freudian psychology he had pursued with Dr. Rivers. Mallik believed in "no hierarchy of human values," Graves said, nor "any unifying religion or ideology." His piece in *The Winter Owl*, Graves wrote in a letter to Edmund Blunden, presents "a new philosophic system in brief which is (by the way) going to have a shattering effect on the philosophic dove cotes." It did not, but as Richard Perceval Graves points out in *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic 1895-1926*, Basanta Mallik's emphasis on the probable falsehood of social moralities, on strict self-discipline, and (ironically) on vigilance about domination of or by others became some of the pillars of Graves' own efforts to overcome the lingering effects of the War.

"Interchange of Selves" in fact was published in Graves' 1924 collection, *Mock Beggar Hall*, as were the two Graves poems in *The Winter Owl*. "Knowledge of God" was virtually unrevised for its appearance in *Poems 1914-1926*, with only a comma added after line 6 (it was dropped from the canon by 1977). "Full Moon" was only slightly more heavily revised for *Poems 1914-1926*. In line 1, "harvest night" was changed to "sultry night," and a colon was substituted for the original period after line 4. Most intriguingly, the original line 29, "Each now cold earth was Arctic sea," was changed to "And now cold earth was Arctic sea," and the Georgian personification of "Love" in line 34 was deleted by substitution of a lower-case letter. More successful than "Knowledge of God," "Full Moon" remained in the canon. In *New Collected Poems*, line 1 has become "As I walked out that sultry night," dropping the ballad-esque diction a notch, "Halls of State" is no longer capitalized, a dash punctuates line 21, and line 29 is now "And now warm earth was Arctic sea," emphasizing the sudden epiphany like change in love. Finally, the comma is added to line 3, again creating a strong metrical break.

For the reasons advanced here, including early and weak versions of some of its selections, and many other reasons no doubt, *The Owl* and *The Winter Owl* failed for lack of sales. However, as Graves' letters of the 1919-1923 period show, and as even a quick glance at the tables of contents here shows, *The Owl* placed Robert Graves profitably at one of the centers of Georgian and post-Georgian poetry in England, and *The Owl* gave him access to many, if not literally most, of the finest writers in England from 1919 to 1923.

-UNIVERSITY OF DEARBORN, MICHIGAN

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