

“A Great Deal to be Grateful For”: Robert Graves and Edward Marsh

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Edward Marsh, September 1912

Although Robert Graves and Edward Marsh (1872-1953) trace their lineage to Spencer Perceval, the Prime Minister assassinated in the lobby of the House of Commons in 1812 (O'Prey 27), their friendship is a case of attracting opposites. When they first met, independently wealthy Marsh (later Sir Edward) was a prominent art collector and “the doyen of an elite artistic and literary circle in London” (O'Prey 28), private secretary to the then First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, and forty-one years old. Graves was a sixteen-year-old unknown aspiring poet of as-yet unproved talents whose living was destined to be financially precarious, whose varied literary output was almost always challenged by the critics, and whose later notoriety as an eccentric exile often overshadowed the true quality of his work.

Nonetheless, these two literary men with completely different careers and personalities managed to remain close friends for decades.

In fact Graves claimed in *Good-bye to All That* that Marsh was "almost unique among my pre-War friends" in that he and Graves had never quarrelled (*Good-bye* 51). With the notable exception of Marsh, Graves was to alienate many of his friends—Blunden, Sitwell, and Sassoon, to name a few—during the course of a very long life beset by personal, literary and financial trials, many of them quelled thanks to Marsh's generosity and influence.

Graves was introduced to Marsh in 1912 by George Mallory, Graves's mountaineering companion (fated to die on Everest in 1923), in Mallory's rooms at Charterhouse. It was in fact the young Carthusian master who had first shown Graves's poems to Marsh. According to Graves, Marsh liked his poems but found that "they were written in the poetic diction of fifty years ago," which he thought would prejudice many readers "against work written in 1913 according to the fashions of 1863" (*Good-bye* 51-52). But Graves, certain of his desire to become a poet, found in the first volume (1911-1912) of *Georgian Poetry*, the popular anthology edited by Marsh, not a few models to emulate: Brooke, De la Mare, Davies, among others. Thanks to Marsh, Graves's reputation as a poet was enhanced, through the Great War and beyond, by his contributions to volumes III, IV and V. There he joined the ranks of a rather distinguished band of "Georgians" that included Brooke, Chesterton, Housman, Lawrence, Masfield, Owen, and Sassoon.

One should note that literary critics were often less well disposed toward "Georgian" poetry—a reference to the reign of George V (1910-1936)—than was a reading public that seemed to enjoy its realistic detail, colloquial language, and pastoral setting and subject matter, as well as what some have called a prevailing mood of "unobtrusive decorum" (Koike-Ferrick 18) and "simple bucolic joy" (O'Prey 116). But Graves's support for Marsh's work was unwavering, and when writing to him after reading an unfavourable review of volume IV, Graves called Marsh—and with no discernible facetiousness—"the Father of modern English Poetry" (29 Dec 1917).

When in November 1915 Marsh sent Graves—stationed in France—a copy of *Georgian Poetry 1913-1915*, Graves wrote Marsh an eight-page letter in which he praises the volume; unfortunately, Marsh never received it. "And I'll never be able to recapture my first fine, careless rapture after the first reading of that splendid book," Graves wrote three months later, "which is perhaps the most treasured possession I have out here" (24 Feb 1916). When Marsh decided to publish a fifth

volume even after volume IV had been harshly criticized, Graves sent him suggestions as to whom to include and exclude (cf. undated, June 1922, in O'Prey 135-136), as well as a list of some of his own poems for inclusion (cf. undated, June 1922, in O'Prey 137-138). When *Georgian Poetry 1920-1922* appeared, Graves was very pleased with it and told Marsh that it contained "at least half a dozen memorable poems; which is greatly in excess of the complement of usual anthologies" (undated, in O'Prey 146).

Despite his sincere enthusiasm for Marsh's anthologies, eventually Graves distanced himself from the "Georgian" movement which, in any case, had outlived its purpose. He went so far as to satirize some of his fellow anthologists in *The Marmosite's Miscellany* (1925), concluding that they had "nothing to say to an audience of readers who are spiritually exhausted from the war and its aftermath" (Quinn 120). In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), he would recall Georgianism as "pantheistic rather than atheistic; and as simple as a child's reading book" (*Survey* 119). And in a letter to Marsh about "The Illogical Element in Poetry", he pointed out that "[a] hostile attitude to the analytic method and a contentment with what is labelled Georgianism stultifies my present poetry for the reader" (undated, early July 1922). Clearly Graves had moved on to a different writing style and poetic ideology. But whatever Graves's later opinions about Georgianism, there is no doubt that Marsh's anthologies served an important purpose in getting the young Graves into print.

Not only did Marsh provide Graves with a forum for his early verse; he also acted as long-distance advisor and editor of Graves's work in progress. Very early in their correspondence, Graves sought Marsh's opinion on whatever he was writing, addressing Marsh—twenty-five years his senior—as "Dear Eddie." His often very long letters sometimes included poems in progress and apologies for "inflicting" them (Graves's term) upon Marsh (cf. O'Prey 32-33, 36, and 351 n. 10). In one instance he calls his poems "crude miscarriages" (10 Dec 1915), and to Marsh's comments upon reading the manuscript of his third collection, *Fairies and Fusiliers*, Graves replied using a similar metaphor: "I welcome a friend who tells me that I may strangle my offsprings at birth when they are obviously abortions" (12 July 1917). The critics were often hard on Graves, but Graves the inveterate reviser and rewriter could be even harsher with himself.

Graves's war-time letters to Marsh also reveal a rather charming kind of stoic humour under adversity. On life in the trenches: "I like

feeling really frightened and if happiness consists in being miserable in a good cause, why then I'm doubly happy" (15 March 1916). A mere six days after his infamous near-fatal injury, Graves made light of his serious wound: "the old Bosche has punctured me" (26 July 1916), he declared. Later, on being reported 'died of wounds', Graves joked that "old Rhadamanthus introduced himself as my judge but I refused to accept his jurisdiction" (7 Aug 1916). The banter is doubly ironic in light of the resulting "neurasthenia" or shell-shock from which Graves suffered to varying degrees of severity for the remainder of his life.

After the war came the problem of earning a living. In October 1919, Graves and his wife Nancy Nicholson moved into Dingle Cottage at the foot of John Masefield's garden in Boar's Hill, near St. John's College, Oxford. Early the next year Graves published *Country Sentiment* written, he admitted, "to escape from a painful war neurosis into an Arcadia of amatory fancy" (Quinn 57). One of the poems is dedicated to Marsh: "To E.M.—A Ballad of Nursery Rhyme." In it, "pure" poetry (such as the rather unsophisticated nursery rhyme) is compared to a wild strawberry tastier and more pungent than the "academic" poetry cultivated in well-manicured English gardens: the latter's more doctrinaire stance (expressing ideas rather than emotions) makes it ephemeral. One can see this idea at work in "The Voice of Beauty Drowned," whose last stanza, Graves explained at length to Marsh, absolutely had to be cut: "I am so terrified of being didactic" (undated, ca. Oct 1919), he wrote, which is amusing in light of his later and more controversial pronouncements on everything from mythology to mushrooms.

According to O'Prey, Marsh's taste in poetry was "notoriously conservative" and he disliked "the modern taste towards obscurity" (130). This is evidenced in a long letter from Graves written after Marsh had (presumably, for the letter is lost) rejected or ignored Graves's offer to dedicate a volume of poems to him: "I feel as if I had given an inappropriate wedding gift" (17 Dec 1921), he wrote, and went on to explicate *The Feather Bed* at some length. "You know, Eddie, that one can only write a poem *one way* if it worries to be written and I have done this as conscientiously as I could. You say my style is a wonderful instrument but that I am not, you think, putting it to its best use. The best use is *surely* to write the necessary poems, and I assure you I haven't a moment to waste on the unnecessary." He closed with a request ("quite seriously and without any breach of friendship") for

Marsh to accept a dedication to a subsequent volume "of the best of my early work from *Over the Brazier* to *The Pier-Glass*" and assured him that "I am not in the slightest hurt by your attitude if you are not hurt by this" (17 Dec 1921). It is interesting how careful Graves always was to remain on intimate terms with Marsh, who eventually accepted the dedication.

These were difficult times for Graves, who was barely surviving on the *Georgian Poetry* royalties that Marsh would send him periodically. Though always welcome—and often mentioned by Graves in letters to Marsh—the cheques were hardly enough to keep the Graves family afloat for very long, especially with the birth of one child after another. Moreover, the general shop that he and Nancy had opened on Boar's Hill had left them deeply in debt when it collapsed after six months. Nevertheless, despite his ongoing financial problems, Graves was busy and content. After a visit to Islip, where he and Nancy had relocated, Marsh found Graves "radiantly happy.... His combined jobs as Poet and maid-of-all-work suit him curiously well—and I was greatly struck with his beauty" (O'Prey 157). Nonetheless, this lifestyle—much maligned by Sassoon—left Graves with little time to write.

Moreover, with the arrival in his life of Laura Riding some years later came a major influence on his work and a major geographical relocation. Marsh was to prove invaluable to keeping Graves and Riding together when, following Riding's notorious leap of 27 April 1929, Graves asked the distinguished civil servant to use his influence in Whitehall to avert a police inquiry and thus prevent Riding's deportation for attempted suicide. To assist Marsh, Graves outlined the details surrounding what he called the "accident" in a long letter of 16 June—a ten-point memorandum, actually—in which he reviews the evidence and discusses the facts as he knew them. "Laura is now as sane and far from violence as you or me," he wrote, concluding that the police were "behaving in the usual bullying way." Marsh intervened with the Director of Public Prosecutions and shortly afterwards police involvement ceased. How very different would have been Graves's literary history had Marsh failed to use his government connections!

With his move to Mallorca, Graves distanced himself from England—both psychologically and physically—and so there were bound to be misunderstandings between the exile and his friends. Some of the earliest conflicts revolved around the publication in 1929 of *Good-bye to All That*. When Sassoon and Marsh received their

advance copies, they demanded that Jonathan Cape alter the references to them before publication. In one of Marsh's very few extant letters, in which he writes firmly but without anger, he corrects Graves's claim that he was the administrator of a "Rupert Brooke Fund" for "needy poets with families". "I may be bombarded with applications which it will be distressing to refuse," he wrote, fearing an avalanche of requests if this "Fund" became public knowledge (6 Nov 1929). He was also concerned that the Inland Revenue would begin to investigate him. With his usual tact when dealing with Marsh, Graves wrote from Mallorca as soon as he heard from Cape (and before receiving Marsh's letter), assuring him that the error would be excised and apologizing profusely for having upset him. "The book was written in a great hurry and I didn't have time to check references" (12 Nov 1929). On the other hand, Sassoon's grievances were not so easily assuaged.

It took some years for the upheavals caused by *Good-bye to All That* to subside, and eventually, when Graves reached the apex of his popularity with *I, Claudius*, Marsh was there to crown the novel's success as one of the judges who awarded the book the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Hawthornden Prize. But for Graves, ensconced on his island retreat far from the madding crowd, England was now a different world, and so he explained at length to Marsh his reasons for not travelling to London. "The idea of a ceremony with lots of people about all talking English," he wrote, "is most horrible to me." Moreover, Graves thought of the Hawthornden award "as a personal expression on your part . . . that you enjoyed the book; and as you are my friend that gives me real pleasure" (12 May 1935). Though this may have been Graves's way of graciously declining Marsh's invitation, one can see that public acclaim was less important to him—at least at this period—than the respect and admiration of a long-time friend.

A few years later it was Graves's turn to congratulate his old mentor, now sixty-five. When Marsh was knighted by George VI and, the very next day, retired after forty years in the Civil Service, Graves wrote to him from Lugano: "Thinking it all over, I have a *great deal* to be grateful for to you over a very long stretch of years, and especially during the War and on a certain occasion in 1929" (25 Feb 1937). What Graves had to be "grateful for" was constant moral and practical support, wise literary advice, and a friendship that endured the vicissitudes of a hectic and often traumatic life. That both men remained so

close for so long is a tribute to Graves's often-overlooked humanity as well as to Eddie Marsh's selfless devotion to one artist and his talents.

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