

Oxford and Mallorca, 1995: Two Milestones in Robert Graves Scholarship

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Nineteen ninety-five was the 100th anniversary of Robert Graves' birth and the 10th anniversary of his death. Among the most spectacular of

the memorial events and celebrations held in 1995 (more about some publishing activities related to the Centenary is included elsewhere in this issue) were two Centenary Conferences held in the very appropriate—and suitable!—venues of St. John's College, Oxford, and Palma de Mallorca. I was fortunate enough to attend both conferences and for someone who has studied Graves since 1972, these first opportunities to meet with other Graves scholars from around the world were among the highlights of my career in literary study, I must say. As far as I am aware, no previous conference had ever brought this many Graves scholars together for the purpose of study and celebration.

At the Oxford conference, registrants stayed in rooms, and attended lectures in, the more modern sections of St. John's, the college Graves attended after returning from the war. But the beautiful gardens led quickly to the other buildings of St. John's, some of which, like the library, dated from before the Civil Wars, (and the current college librarian remembers "Mr. Graves' visits" well); of course, the city of Oxford and Boar's Hill, with all their literary and educational fascinations, were just outside the gates. In November, Palma and Deya and the Mediterranean landscape of Mallorca were even more evocative of Graves' work and life: the rocky landscape, the wild olive, the oleander, and even the palm-lined streets of the capital city are constantly present in Graves' work.

The first of the two, the Robert Graves Centenary Conference, was held in Oxford, August 8 to 12. Over 40 papers were interspersed with varied Graves-linked entertainments, such as Jill Neville's play, "The Poet and the Goddess: The Robert Graves/Laura Riding Affair," and the radio play, "The Casualties of Friendship," along with more traditional lectures such as Honor Wyatt's "The Story I Shall Tell" and "Graves' White Goddess" by R. P. Graves. One memorable evening was devoted to a reading of Graves poems by Seamus Heaney, Donald Davie, and James Fenton, along with a selection of their own poetry. Though this was just before Heaney's own poetry received the Nobel Prize, and it was indeed intriguing to hear Fenton's distinctive, rap-derived rhythms, to my mind the highlight was Donald Davie's reading. In what I believe was his last public reading, Davie's wonderful, orotund, John Bull-esque delivery of the early poems reminded us that Graves is often satirical, and very funny—and academic critics *do* occasionally need such reminding.

While much else at the Oxford conference, including the Royal Welch Fusiliers' exhibit of Graves manuscripts and letters written

while he was on active duty and even the Seizin Press exhibit, tended to focus on biography, the scholarly papers at Oxford addressed a wide range of questions about Graves' work. Many of the papers and talks dealt with, necessarily, placing individual works or periods of Graves' work into various contexts. Paul O'Prey spoke of the "survivorship skills" that were developed by Graves and other surviving War Poets, and very perceptively remarked that Graves' career might be seen as a continuing and psychologically necessary re-invention of himself as a survivor of World War I. Another paper placed Graves' popular novels in the context of other historical novels, the great popular subgenre of the 1930's. In his paper "Alternatives to Modernism: Robert Graves and the Poetic Body," Patrick McGuinness even placed the criticisms of Modernism that were leveled by Graves and Riding into the context of the reactions of a later generation: "The Movement poets saw, or *needed* to see, Modernism as an interruption of . . . the main tradition of English poetry. . . Graves, having been 'formed' in a pre-Modernist climate, independently fostered throughout the Modernist 'period' and emerging more or less unscathed from its exhaustion, was claimed for a beacon in the Movement's anti-Modernist crusade—as, precisely, a solitary and uninterrupted link between a 'native tradition' and post-1945 poetry."

Some of the other presentations at Oxford included:

Andrew Painter, "The Function of Metaphor in the Early Poetry"

Patrick Campbell, "Sassoon and Graves"

Jean Moorcroft Wilson, "Graves' Triangles—Graves, Sorley, and Sassoon"

Candace Fertile, "Graves and Aldington: Women in their Fiction"

Kathleen Divine, "The Robert Graves and Alun Lewis Correspondence"

Miranda Seymour, "Riding and Graves: Who Influenced Whom?"

Ludmilla Volodarskaya, "Robert Graves in Russia: The Reputation and Translations"

Lucia Boldrini, "(Im)Proper Wife: Giving Voice to the Silent Woman in *Wife to Mr. Milton*"

Myron Simon, "In Search of a Theory of Poetry: Graves and Rivers"

Robert Davis, "The Pastoral Vision in Graves"

Michael Pharand, "Bumptiousness and Indiscretion: Graves and the Social Satire of *But It Still Goes On*"

Two very noteworthy presentations were those of Dunstan Ward and Bob Bertholf, both of whom dealt with the challenges of editorial work

with Graves texts. After first also establishing a larger context for this editorial enterprise, that of the major theories of bibliographic research to establish copy texts or editions, Bertholf argued that Graves' career can be seen most profitably as three periods, each demarcated by the publication date of *Collected Poems* volumes. He further pointed out the editorial challenge created by the fact that Graves is almost always a collaborative author, whether collaborating with a co-author, with Karl Gay, Beryl Graves, Laura Riding, or even himself. Dunstand Ward then spoke specifically about these challenges in his editing of the *Complete Poems*. Graves' writing process for his poetry extended from his first "inspiration" to "secondary elaboration" and then to revision, and his revisions might go on for 18 drafts, or even to several different versions of the poems in editions sometimes separated by decades. These work habits, combined with his "ruthless suppression" of his early poems as they came to displease him, make Graves' work the challenge of a lifetime for bibliographers and editors.

During the week of 7-11 November, over 50 people involved in the study of Graves' work gathered in Palma, Mallorca for the second event, "Robert Graves: A Centenary Celebration and International Congress." The presentations were held in the auditorium of La Caixa Cultural Centre, which was once the Gran Hotel, where Graves and Riding stayed their first three weeks upon arriving in Palma in 1929. The papers and sessions in Palma covered the Celtic background and the subsequent influence of *The White Goddess* on American poets such as Robert Duncan, Graves as a citizen of Mallorca, Graves' novels of the Mediterranean (including *King Jesus*), Graves and Modernism. Excellent sessions explored Graves' influence on Spanish poetry and on Catalan literature, and provided details of the difficulties of translating Graves' poems into Spanish. At this second conference, also directed by Patrick Quinn, there seemed a special focus on Graves' poetry. Simon Brittan provided a close reading of two Graves poems exploring "the mythology of desire" in "Love in Barrenness" ("The Ridge-Top"), "Pygmalion to Galatea," and other poems. Devindra Kohli, of the University of Bonn, spoke on "the peripatetic in Graves' poetry," how walking and climbing are used by Graves as sources of imagery or as fields of allusion, along with their use as methods and symbolic associations. Patrick Quinn provided convincing explanations of some seven poems from the *Welchman's Hose* period, rescuing them from the opinions of critics like Canary and Kirkham, who characterize Graves' work in these years as the products of a period of relativism, in which Graves, under B. K. Mallik's influence, was unable

to take sides or come to any conclusions in his poems.

Other papers presented in Palma included:

P. Louise Johnson, "The Mallorcan 'Colonia Extranjera'"

Ludmilla Volodarskaya, "King Jesus: Two Types of King Power"

Richard Schumaker, "Robert Graves and Europe, 1935-45"

and my own "Graves, Yeats, and Thomas."

Along with the work presented at the Oxford conference, these papers, I think, help sum up the state of Robert Graves' literary reputation ten years after his death.

Graves scholars who attended the Mallorca conference were able, on two different days, to travel across the island to Deya. On the first such trip, after a tour of the village, and a climb down to the cala and back (on the original path, crossing several times over the now paved road, originally built by Graves and Riding), we heard Alan Sillitoe and Ruth Fainlight read a selection of Graves' poetry along with some of their poems, in a touching memorial reception at La Residencia Remembrance Ceremony, on 11 November, at the Deya churchyard, where Graves is buried. The Royal Welch Fusiliers regiment sent a poppy wreath to the ceremony, in another gesture of their great respect for Robert Graves.

The Mallorca conference again featured, as at Oxford, Julian Glover's "An Evening with Robert Graves," this time in the nicely old-fashioned Teatro Principal in Palma. Mike Kelly's very beautiful and haunting paintings on Gravesian themes were exhibited at Casal Solleric; Sean O'Mordha's BBC documentary "I, Graves" was again available for viewing. The Robert Graves Centenary Exhibition "The Poet and the Muse" had its official opening at LaLonja in Palma. This was an extraordinary exhibition, even for those of us who have been reading and studying Graves' work for decades. Family photographs, objects and artifacts from Graves' study in Deya illustrated the sweep of Graves' long life, with a particular emphasis on his years in Mallorca. Dust jackets from his books were arranged chronologically on a single long shelf, emphasizing his enormous productivity. Among items probably new to most Graves scholars were a collection of press cuttings and correspondence which showed just how vicious—and how close to court actions—was the controversy caused by Graves' candid assessment of British military strategies in *Goodbye to All That*. A superb, bilingual 135-page catalog of this exhibition was prepared by its multiple sponsors, and the *Majorca Daily Bulletin* reported, "It is hoped that the exhibition will be staged in other

Spanish capitals." Graves scholars should hope the exhibition also travels to universities around the world; it is an important visual record of Graves' long career, from the 1910's to the 1980's. As such, it is a very important resource, indeed, with scores of letters and photographs from private collections, with an accurate reproduction of a World War I trench—with uniform, helmet, and gas mask—and with Graves' books, desk, chair, vest and hat, along with a selection of pens and the "talismanic" objects—boxes, carvings, coins, and rings—he constantly kept before him as he wrote.

This quick summary, of course, cannot begin to describe how many personal and professional connections were forged during the many coffees, teas, lunches, dinners, receptions, and evenings in the St. John's college pub and the tapas bars of Palma. It was a great stimulus to hear other people's readings of Graves, and to hear how their expertise and individual viewpoints are illuminating the really vast stretch of Robert Graves' work and ideas. I came away from these two conferences, as did many people to whom I spoke, invigorated and armed with pages of notes and ideas.

It is in fact very heartening to see how many scholars around the world are enthusiastically working on the Robert Graves canon. It is tempting to try a summing up, to say that we are busy doing this, say, understanding Graves' sources, before we move to technical assessments of his ideas or his style or assessments of his influence and reputation. But it is in fact a greater tribute to the energy of Graves scholars, I think, and a testament to the health of Graves studies that all these sorts of varied studies, and more besides—like ongoing editorial and bibliographic work and the reintroductions of earlier works—seem to be occurring all at the same time, judging from the presentations made at the two 1995 conferences. And that's all to the good.

I know I speak for the others in attendance when I extend my thanks to Patrick Quinn, William Graves, John Kelly, Richard Schumaker, Ian Firla and all the other organizers. "Only connect;" already the conferences are energizing the study of Robert Graves with new volumes, new projects, new collaborations. When will you organize the next conference, Patrick?

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