

REVIEWS

William Graves' *Wild Olives*

John Kelly

Wild Olives: Life in Majorca with Robert Graves by William Graves.
Pimlico Press, 288 pp., £10

On 16 May 1946 William Graves dropped out of the sky into a new life. On that day he landed on the first civilian flight from Europe to Majorca since the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War ten years before. For the Islanders, although they could not know it then, this aeroplane was the first of millions that would transform utterly a way of life which had hardly altered in centuries. For William, although he could not know it then, it marked the beginning of a voyage of self-discovery that would be for him—as the son of a famous father, and caught between two cultures—more problematic than for most young men setting out on life. This vivid, witty, and engagingly honest biography is not only the story of that quest for self-definition (and at the same time a candid but affectionate portrait of his father), but also a wonderfully evocative account of the old Deya and the changes in Majorcan life that by the end of the book have left the village of his childhood existing only in the memory of its older inhabitants.

Nearly six years old and as yet without a word of Spanish, he found himself plunged into a world that was not merely Spanish but Majorcan, and not merely Majorcan but Deya. To get to know any small village is difficult, but Deya, with a population of five-hundred, was particularly close-knit, cut off as it was by the mountains and the sea, and schooled to secrecy by its smuggling and black-market trade in olive oil. It was an entirely Catholic village under the eye of a stern parish priest, whereas the Graves children were not only not Catholics, but not Protestants either, having never been baptised. Indeed their religious beliefs, influenced by Robert's faith in the White Goddess and the Nazarene Gospels, would in earlier years have delivered them into the hands of the Holy Inquisition. In a fascist authoritarian state, William's mother Beryl, a graduate in Politics, sympathised with the effected Republicans, and in a village whose washerwomen, gossiping at the public *rentaderos*, were alert to the slightest breath of scandal, the Graves children were illegitimate.

By beginning at the age of six, the book takes on a double perspective: the older William can fit his childhood perceptions into a wider

social and psychological landscape, but the sharpness of the childhood memories give *Wild Olives* the tang of freshness and flavour its title suggests. The new home, Canellun, the sights and sounds of Deya, the beach, cars powered by gasogenos which would occasionally explode, the pig-killing at the marazana, the children, the neighbours, and the toys (especially a new Raleigh bicycle with Sturmy-Archer gears and Brook saddle) are so lovingly and graphically recalled that they fix at once in the imagination.

Enrolment at the village school made him increasingly aware of his divided life. Friday the 13th was an unlucky day at Canellun; Tuesday the 13th in Deya. Christmas was celebrated with a tree and turkey at Canellun; with models of Bethlehem and suckling pig in the village, where presents arrived not on Christmas eve but the eve of 5th January. Robert built a bonfire at Canellun on 5th November, but the villagers made their fires on January 16th. The British connection was re-enforced by annual trips to London, where William met his grandmother, Amy, and, more improbably, played the parlour game "Photo-Finish" with T.S. Eliot, but already he felt out of place there, and pined for Majorca.

The Graves family were affectionate but not intimate, and William found it difficult to talk things over with his parents. His mother "was so very private I could never get through to her on any but a superficial level", while his father's mind was always on his work. But an important period of bonding came about literally by accident when he was knocked off his bike by a car. His injuries, aggravated by incompetence at a Palma hospital, seemed likely to result in the amputation of his leg, but he was taken to Barcelona where the first skin graft ever performed in Spain saved him. The month in the clinic had an emotional as well as a physiological value; he recalls it as "perhaps the only time in my life I could count on Father's undivided attention", and the relationship established by Robert's endless stories, songs and rhymes helped to sustain William in later and darker years.

Secondary school in Palma brought new and more sophisticated friends. He attended bull fights, made regular visits to the fun-fair, and wisely neglected schoolwork for the pleasures of the city. Nevertheless—and rather to his surprise—he managed to pass the entrance examination to Oundle, an English public school. If Majorca in 1946 had been a culture shock, Oundle in 1954 was far worse. He found himself in a living nightmare of bad school food, communal living, ice in the wash basins and a schoolboy argot from which he was

excluded. His attempts to expound his father's ideas on the White Goddess to his perplexed dormitory did little to improve the situation, and he came 29th out of a class of 30. Sunny and relaxed Deya seemed a distant Eden, but he persevered gamely and gradually things improved: although he failed an important English Literature examination (which Robert thought a huge joke), he finally got a record five 'A' levels, and swept into Imperial College, London, to read for a degree in Geology.

School holidays in Deya brought home how much the place was changing, transforming into an artist's colony with his father at the centre. Tourists soon followed, and guided tours trundled through Deya: "At your left is olive tree of one thousand years old, at your right is house of famous English writer, Mister Robertson, who wrote *Me, Claudio*." The extended family helped to keep things in perspective (at a Foyle's luncheon in honour of Robert his cousin Diana asked in a rasping bronchial stage whisper: "Darling William, isn't this a fucking bore!"), but his father's fame began to exert a double-edged effect. On the one hand it enabled William to meet such luminaries as Ralph Vaughan Williams, James Reeves (and his stunningly beautiful daughter, Stella), Alec Guinness, Alan Sillitoe and Kingsley Amis, as well as to fulfil the wildest fantasy of every pubescent boy of the time by dining ‡ deux with Ava Gardner. On the other hand, Robert's fame cast a long shadow, which at times threatened to eclipse his son's individuality. William began to notice that "people I met expected some of Father's aura to cling to me." He would be presented as Robert Graves' son", or, even worse, introduced with the flourish "Meet Robert!" When *The Times* published his photographs of the Sahara the caption announced them as by "William Graves, 22, third son of Robert Graves the poet".

A career in the oil business had brought William to the Sahara, but his interest in archaeology soon persuaded him to exchange rigs for digs, and he set up the Archaeological Study Centre in Deya with Bill Waldren. On his return to the village he found everything in process of change, and not all for the better. Connection to the Island's electricity grid took away the uncertainty of Gelat's erratic generator, but also the romance of the candlelight its failures frequently required, while the chorus of washerwomen deserted the communal rentaderos for the silent solitude of washing machines. Worse, the mid-sixties saw an invasion of would-be artists, lightweight hippies, high on drugs and self-pretension, and intent on manipulating any acquain-

tanceship with Robert. In his wiser moments Robert could precisely assess their value, an assessment brilliantly registered in his sarcastic poem "Wigs and Beards". But to William's alarm, Robert's wiser moments seemed to grow rarer, and he was obliged to look on helplessly as his father yielded to exploitation and allowed himself to be compromised by worthless hangers-on. This unhappy time was epitomised by Robert's infatuation with Cindy Lee, whom William found 'a loud-mouthed, unattractive character', but whom his father elevated to the status of Muse. That Robert "believed in the magical powers he attributed to her" was not in doubt, but as William shrewdly reminds us, Robert once confessed that he could "will himself to be in love with his own big toe."

Fortunately for William, he met Elena Lambea during this difficult period, and, after a whirlwind romance, proposed marriage. His attempt to tell his mother of their intentions ran against her cool reserve in an almost Wodehousean exchange: "'Mother,' I finally stammered, 'Elena and I have decided to get married.' ... 'Oh, have you? How nice' A tense silence followed. '... As soon as we can arrange it.' I persisted. 'Catch, Jotie, good dog!' cried Mother, changing the conversation." "Though I was used to this," William observes, "it did not make talking to her any easier." A telegram to Robert in Mexico (where he was in disastrous pursuit of Cindy), asking for the use of one of Robert's houses, elicited an even more terse response: "I cabled: 'MARRYING SOON STOP IS POSADA AVAILABLE STOP LOVE WILLIAM.' He cabled back: 'WHOM TO STOP CERTAINLY STOP FATHER.'" "It is hard to know", William adds, "whether the concision or the scrupulous grammar is the more impressive."

At first they planned to marry in England, but in Madrid Nini Mantian, an ex-actress and splendidly resourceful society hostess, advised a Spanish wedding. This meant a hasty christening for William in the British Embassy: "If they make a fuss, we can always make you a Catholic," the admirably ecumenical Nini assured him, "I've friends in the cloth". The Embassy Chaplain was less open-minded. He officiously insisted that lengthy preparation would be necessary before any baptism, until William hinted that although he didn't want to become a Catholic, he had a priest standing by, whereupon the Chaplain acquiesced at once. But another problem, far more serious than any mere theological scruple, obtruded: he was too busy repainting the church to conduct a christening. Nevertheless, when William called the following day, he obligingly descended from his

ladder, paintbrush in hand, and performed the baptism with water from a pyrex dish. The wedding was small but, thanks to Nini, not without social distinction. She called in a promise from Irakly of Bragation, 13th Prince of Georgia, to act as best man (explaining prudently that this would make any annulment much easier), and the British Consul General attended in a morning coat and carnation.

The happiness of the marriage and the opportunity it gave William to share his emotional burdens with a sympathetic partner were to be crucial in the following years as Robert's behaviour grew more unpredictable and wounding. At Cindy's behest he summarily sacked Karl Gay, his efficient and faithful secretary of thirty-five year's standing. William discovered that in asking for Posada he too had unwittingly incurred Cindy's anger, since his father had also promised the house to her. Robert suggested that she should be given the house, with the newly-weds lodging there as her guests, and when they sensibly refused, stormed round in a dawn raid to claim a painting and a table he said were hers. A undignified squabble dragged on, culminating in Cindy swearing at William in public.

William and Elena began turning Ca'n Quet into a modern hotel, and soon found themselves working sixteen hours a day. As if this were not enough, Robert's attitude towards them became openly hostile, and his hippy friends sent their children to smoke pot on the terrace, knowing that William would be legally accountable. Even more irresponsibly, Robert suborned a guest to plant a stash of marijuana in the hotel for a 'joke', but she handed it to Elena who managed to burn it shortly before the police came snooping. Nor were his family the only ones to suffer from this perverse behaviour: the villagers were confused and distressed by the drug culture and associated its coming with Robert, while a friendly policeman warned William that his father was in danger of becoming implicated in a public scandal.

This was the lowest point in William's relationship with his father. Although he was later to realise that Robert's behaviour was caused by incipient senile dementia, this was not apparent at the time and his actions were worrying and hurtful. But if the decline in Robert's mental faculties drove them temporarily apart, his absent mindedness also helped to bring them together. When Ca'n Quet was closed for the winter, and William and Beryl away, Elena moved into Canellun to look after her increasingly amnesiac father-in-law, and the two became friends. A little later the benign influence of Juli Simon displaced Cindy's unsettling effect on Robert. He did little new work after

Karl's departure, although his penchant for sweeping declarations unencumbered by factual proof (e.g. that homosexuality is caused by drinking too much milk) showed that he was as incorrigible as ever. But the deterioration was irreversible: he failed to recognise William on a visit to Canellun, took to calling on friends in the middle of the night, and suffered a recurrence of long-repressed war neurosis and shell shock.

Then, on 7 December 1985, he died. William, summoned back from Tunisia, arrived in time to be present at his death. The funeral was a village affair, with a coffin made by one of William's old school-fellows, and other friends acting as pall-bearers. Not until he got home after the service did William discover that his father had appointed him his executor, and that a new chapter in his life had opened.