

The Unknown Press and Siegfried Sassoon's 'Dear Roberto'

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The Background to the Debate

In the Spring, 1994, issue of *Focus on Robert Graves and His Contemporaries*, I published an article on "Dear Roberto", the verse letter that Siegfried Sassoon sent to Graves from his Lancaster Gate hos

pital bed, eleven days after a "bloody bullet" had ended Sassoon's war in July, 1918. This self-lacerating poem, written during a bout of "sleepless exasperucide", made its first public and unauthorised appearance eleven years later in Graves's autobiography *Goodbye To All That*, and with a number of editorial emendations that Sassoon knew nothing about (My article considered these changes in some detail). As a consequence of Sassoon's strongly worded objections to the memoir, and, in particular, Graves's "journalistic" and "perfunctory" treatment of his comrade in arms (Sassoon to Graves, Feb. 7, 1930), Jonathan Cape hastily excised two offending passages, one a reference to Sassoon's mother, and the other, the aforementioned poem, though not before a few copies of the book had got into circulation. Not to be denied, "Dear Roberto", made another unscheduled appearance in print some weeks later, published by the "The Unknown Press" in a limited edition of 500. Now entitled "A Suppressed Poem", it again incorporated Graves's substantial changes, including a cryptic epigraph - "Saul Kain says...Goodbye To All That ...gravely".

It was my contention in the article that the re-publication of "Dear Roberto" in "The Unknown Press" version was certainly instigated, if not seen through by Graves, who felt it his duty to publish what he regarded as "the most terrible of his [Sassoon's] war poems" (*Goodbye*, 227), while cocking a snook at Sassoon's suppression. Beryl Graves's reply, in the Spring, 1995 issue of *Focus*, questioned this assumption of implication on the grounds that Robert Graves was already living in Mallorca when the poem was first printed in *Goodbye to All That*, [November 18, 1929], and that Sassoon "never accused" Graves of involvement in the subsequent re-publication by "The Unknown Press". Her view is that "someone who knew them both and who knew what was going on behind the scenes at Cape was 'responsible' for the 'pirated' edition of 'Dear Roberto' " (*Focus* 2.3, 55).

A Reply to Beryl Graves.

Beryl Graves wags an admonitory finger in my direction as a consequence of the suggestion that Robert Graves was responsible for the printing of "Dear Roberto" by "The Unknown Press". For my part I tender two apologies: one, for the unavoidable delay in replying; two, for my failure to uncover any incontrovertible proof of Graves's direct involvement in the second instalment of the "Dear Roberto" affair. Those who might have been in a position to help cannot: neither Sir

Rupert Hart-Davis nor the archives of Jonathan Cape can shed any light on Graves's role in the incident.

Yet this very lack of hard evidence does not mean that Roberto's involvement in some shape or form can be ruled out. Indeed circumstantial factors seem to point unequivocally to a Gravesian role. Consider, for example, Sassoon's crucial letter of March 2, 1930 [referred to by Beryl Graves] in which the poet, after exonerating his correspondent — "Your printing of my verse letter without my permission was excusable. You could not have known that I should be shamed by its emotional exhibitionism" — parenthetically reminds Graves that "I tried to get it [the verse letter] back from you some years ago and you evaded me by sending a copy of it" (Sassoon to Graves, March 2, 1930). This passage is revealing in two ways: First, it makes it abundantly clear that Sassoon was now anxious to play down his earlier embargo. Indeed, in a letter to Graves three weeks earlier, Sassoon had dwelt at length on the "Zeppelin bomb" effect of *Goodbye To All That* without once mentioning the offending poem (Sassoon to Graves, February 7, 1930). More important, it reveals that Graves was so keen to hang on to the original copy of the "most terrible of his [Sassoon's] war poems" that he was prepared to resort to subterfuge to achieve that end. Graves, not allowed to include "Dear Roberto" in *Goodbye To All That*, had made no bones about his disappointment when in the subsequent version of his memoir he pointedly made reference to a poem "which I cannot quote though I should like to do so" (*Goodbye*, 227). Clearly one way to "quote" it was by ensuring the verse letter remained in his possession; it could then be re-published anonymously at a later date. In that way the poem would reach an audience — however limited. And hadn't Sassoon already declared the suppressed poem's initial and unauthorised appearance in *Goodbye To All That* to be "excusable"? His letter also reinforced Graves's conviction "that what had really upset Sassoon at the time was the the fact that Graves had written about him at all ("Writing about a person, without his knowledge, is a serious matter especially when that person dislikes being written about as much as I do") (Sassoon to Graves, February 7, 1930).

So what harm would there be in cocking a snook at what Graves had always regarded as a censorious and high-handed reaction, stage managed by a jealous Edmund Blunden? Could not the surprise re-surfacing in print of "Dear Roberto", again with Graves's coded allusions, private marginalia and cosmetic textual emendations, have been the

final joke in the affair? Relations between the two poets might be strained but Graves was, as ever, determined not to be browbeaten by the older man. Here was a way, and not for the first time, of asserting his intellectual independence and having a bit of fun at the same time.

One other important aspect of the affair requires further clarification: Beryl Graves points out that when *Goodbye To All That* was published, Robert was "already living in Mallorca". She claims that this asserts that he knew nothing about "the suppression of 'Dear Roberto' at the time", and questions how he could have "arranged for the printing and distribution of 'A Suppressed Poem' later the same year or why he should have done so..." (*Focus* 2.3, 55). It is, of course, true that Graves was now living in Deia, but he was still in close touch with literary London. Significantly, Cape had written to him at some length only six days before the publication date of his memoir with the precise intention of alerting him to the problems caused by Sassoon's outburst, remarking that he was "so wrought up about the whole thing I felt he would not hesitate to take drastic steps and it was quite necessary to pacify him" (Seymour-Smith, 196). For his part, Graves had, according to his biographer Martin Seymour-Smith, "readily endorsed Cape's changes though he was bemused as to why Sassoon should want one of his best poems cut out of it" (196). Graves then clearly did know what was going on. As for the question as to "why" Graves resurrected the poem, I have already offered some explanations. In the light of these, I think it probable that "Dear Roberto's" subsequent appearance under the imprint of "The Unknown Press" was an enterprise not "unknown" to Graves but a stratagem in which he was implicated. Part practical joke, part self-assertive gesture, its serious and laudable intention was to give the verse letter a readership it had been promised and then denied in *Goodbye To All That*, a readership that the "most terrible" of Sassoon's war poems richly deserved.

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