

# Alfred Perceval Graves and the Poetry of World War 1

*John Woodrow Presley*

Most casual readers of Robert Graves—possibly even many Graves scholars—know Alfred Perceval Graves only from the accounts in the biographies of his son. In these biographies, A. P. Graves is depicted as the stern Victorian father and as a would-be poet who settled for a lesser goal as a folklorist and antiquarian. Even his greatest fame, as the author of “Father O’Flynn,” an original song sung to the tune “The Top of the Cork Road,” came at a certain price, since he foolishly sold the rights to the song for a mere £80.

But he was a more formidable presence. As an Inspector of Schools, A. P. Graves collaborated on *The Elementary School Manager*, long the standard in this area. In 1873, his first book of poems, *Songs of Killarney*, was published. In 1880 he published *Irish Songs and Ballads*. In 1891, A. P. Graves “presided over the inaugural meeting” of the Irish Literary Society, and soon became its secretary; through the I.L.S. he met and became friends with many leading scholars, artists, and poets. In 1912 he published *Welsh Poetry Old and New in English Verse* and was “installed” as a Welsh Bard—Robert Graves’ first published poem appeared in *Welsh Poetry* as an illustration of the *englyn*, a Welsh form. In 1915, A. P. Graves published *The Book of Irish Poetry*, another very popular collection.

By 1916, Robert Graves was accustomed to seeing his “father at the centre of . . . adulation” when he gave lectures, even referred to as “the Irish Burns.” This was, according to R. P. Graves, “a forceful reminder not merely that his father was highly respected in his own field, but that ideas and sentiments and modes of expression which Robert felt were hopelessly out-of-date were still extremely popular”(166).

That the younger Graves was very aware of these ideas and sentiments and modes of expression was made obvious some year or so earlier, when Sir Edward Marsh told Robert Graves that his first poems submitted to Marsh were written using obsolete technique “written in the poetic diction of fifty years ago” and the young poet had reacted defensively and blamed his father’s influence for his poems’ shortcomings. In a letter to Marsh, he maintained that “his reading had been largely classical, and he had been too much influenced by the outworn poetic traditions of his father, ‘a dear old fellow who in young and vinous days used to write with some spirit and

very pleasantly; but now his inspiration has entirely petered out" (quoted in R. P. Graves, 121).

While Miranda Seymour sums up Robert's juvenile poetry with the remark that "he wrote poetry that could just as well have been penned by his jaunty, competitive father" (30), she gives very short shrift to A. P. Graves' standing in the literary world. She maintains that while his antiquarian work may have made him a man of some standing in Wales and Ireland, "in London he was laughed at behind his back for the zeal with which he pursued literary prestige" (13). R. P. Graves is much kinder in his biography of Robert: he characterizes A. P. Graves' early work as "gloriously light-hearted songs and ballads" and notes that *Songs of Killarney* was "well received, especially by the *Spectator*, to which Alfred Perceval Graves ... became a regular contributor" (14). Even later, when he may have been better known as an anthologist or antiquarian, A. P. Graves "continued to find a ready market in the press" for the original songs and poems he continued to produce (48).

One of these poems that found a ready market is to be found in J. W. Cunliffe's anthology, *Poems of the Great War*, published by Macmillan in 1916. (It is perhaps a high irony that his father's poetry appeared under this title in the same year that Robert Graves began to build his reputation as one of the War Poets with publication of his *Over the Brazier*.) Cunliffe was a professor of English and Associate Director of the School of Journalism at Columbia, and selected the poems, including A. P. Graves' "Brothers in Arms," "on behalf of the Belgian Scholarship Committee." This committee, with headquarters in Washington, D. C., had as its aims "to give to Belgian scholars, writers and artists a chance to resume their work" and "to raise a fund to assist in the reconstruction of a new and greater Belgium in the educational field, as soon as the war is over." Nevil Monroe Hopkins was chairman of the committee.

It was, of course, Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality which drew England into the war. On that day, Tuesday 4 August 1914, A. P. Graves was away in Dublin; by Thursday, when he joined his family in Wales and heard the news of exaggerated German atrocities, he and his brothers agreed that "Germany will have to be bled white. . . to have the Junker spirit crushed out of her" (A. P. Graves, 296). By that Friday, Robert had decided to enlist in the British Army.

The poems in *Poems of the Great War* are arranged alphabetically by their author's last name, though the table of contents lists the authors by nationality: Australia, Canada, India, United Kingdom and, oddly

for 1916, United States. A. P. Graves' poem, "Brothers in Arms," had already appeared in *The Contemporary Review*; in fact, most of the work in *Poems of the Great War* had appeared in magazines or collections before being "selected" by Cunliffe.

"Brothers in Arms" is written in quatrains of pentameter, mostly iambic, with an ABAB rhyme scheme; the A rhymes are generally two-syllable words and the B rhymes single-syllable:

When behind her violated border,  
     With unflinching bayonet and gun,  
 Belgium, in heroic battle order,  
     Met the savage onset of the Hun;  
 When o'er league on league of peaceful tillage  
     Under screaming showers of shot and shell,  
 Into open town, defenceless village,  
     He let loose his shameless hounds of Hell. . .

There is an unfortunate tendency, not always present, for the second and fourth line of each quatrain to hold only nine syllables, with of course a stress on the rhyme word; following, as it does, a 10-syllable line that ends in an unstressed rhyme syllable, reversing the iambic foot, the result is a sort of galumphing meter that stresses the finality of the couplet's syntax rather than that of the quatrain. The lines are almost all end-stopped, which further emphasizes the rhythm.

The first stanza continues, in a series of adverb clauses relating the personified Hun's early triumphs:

When Liège, henceforth a name immortal!  
     Perished, fighting at his cannons' mouth,  
 When he seized Namur, and through her portal,  
     Drunk with fury, still went surging south. . .

. . . When, outmarched before him, into distance,  
     Frank and Briton steadfastly withdrew,  
 Though he could not pierce our proud resistance,  
     Break our firm-linked, friendly phalanx through. . .

Stanzas two and three simplify, as of course patriotic poetry must, the pre-war debates and the entangling treaties that drew the great powers into the war between the Serbs and Austrians:

Then our country, roused to righteous reason  
 By the battle-thunder at her gate,  
 Flung abroad no foolish cry of treason  
 At the Rulers of her arms and State—  
 Pardoned those whose eyes were proven blinder  
 Than was Wisdom to the approach of war—  
 Put her unpreparedness behind her,  
 Only bade us look, henceforth, before.

Therefore, every cry of party faction  
 Into patriot silence fell away;  
 Britain summoned all her sons to action—  
 Suffering Britain—could we but obey?

The fourth stanza of "Brothers in Arms" describes the rallying of all the old British Empire to the cause, replete with classical allusions. It begins with the poem's most memorable metaphor and simile, the transatlantic cable as snake-like, but also, ambivalently, as a pipeline—one dare not, probably, push the metaphor so far as to suggest "umbilical cord." It ends in an equally memorable A rhyme:

Then the adamantine cable stretching,  
 Python-like across the ocean floor,  
 Aid on aid from her far children fetching,  
 Bade her heart with hope beat high once more;  
 Till the friends and foes whose fine derision  
 Long had flouted her Imperial dream,  
 Stood at gaze to mark the stately vision  
 Rise incarnate o'er the ocean stream;  
 Marvelling, while above the pine fringed waters,  
 While above the palm-set Austral earth  
 At their Mother's call, her mighty daughters,  
 Sprang, as Pallas sprang, full-armed to birth;  
 While, O proudest Page in all the story  
 Of Imperial India's book of life!  
 One by one each Princely Feudatory  
 In our service arms him for the strife.

The final stanza of A. P. Graves' poem is introduced with Biblical diction, and war was probably never described in more cliché; ironically, the British forces in this final stanza are now "we" and "us."

Our retreat is stayed, and Frank and Briton,  
 Reinforced, leap forth to the attack—  
 Now the smiter hip and thigh is smitten;  
 In defeat we roll him roughly back.  
 Now again in anger dour he rallies,  
 And again assaults us flank and front;  
 While his dead and ours o'er hills and valleys  
 Mix amid the dreadful battle brunt.  
 Up the slopes his batteries are crowning,  
 Foot by foot we dig our trenches in;  
 Rise and charge and seize his cannon frowning,  
 Though we fall in swaths one gun to win.  
 Trusting surely that how oft soever  
 Back and forth War's crimson waves may flow,  
 On our faithful, chivalrous endeavor  
 Victory's full-orbed sun at last shall glow.

A. P. Graves' poem is by no means the most egregiously patriotic or the most sentimental poem in this collection—on the facing page, in fact, is Gregg Goddard's "The Airman," the last stanza of which is typical of many poems by lesser known poets in this collection:

What of the Cross they brought to her—his Mother?  
 Wanly her dumb lips smiled,  
 Then whispered: "Give back *him*—I had no other—  
 My Son—my only child."

But in his preface to *Poems of the Great War*, J. W. Cunliffe explains these accessions to popular sentiment. "While poetic merit has been, of course the paramount consideration, I have endeavored to exercise a catholic judgment, and to give fair representation to various schools of thought and expression as well as to the various phases of the war." Cunliffe explicitly acknowledges that "if undue prominence seems to be given to what may be called its more personal aspects—the spirit of sacrifice and devotion which inspired men and women to give themselves and those dearest to them to a great cause" he was much influ-

enced by the loss of a close friend, Lieut. Col. G. H. Baker, who was killed during the third battle of Ypres in June of 1916.

It is therefore not surprising that *Poems of the Great War* contains poems such as Goddard's, or those of Florence Kiper Frank or Joyce Kilmer. What may surprise is that A. P. Graves' work appears alongside that of Aldington, Bridges, Brooke, Chesterton, de la Mare, Hardy, Masfield, Meynell, Noyes, Sorley, even Tagore, Lindsay, Lowell, Robinson, and Sandburg. In his selection of poems for *Poems of the Great War*, Cunliffe had been helped by Edward C. Marsh; Helen R. Keller and Professor A. H. Thorndike of Columbia; F. Madan of the Bodley; G. W. Wheeler and J. W. Smallwood of the Radcliffe Camera; and by Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Adolphus Ward.

By November of 1916, when Cunliffe's anthology was published (it proved so remarkably popular that it was reprinted less than a month later), Robert Graves was no longer the boy who had on impulse joined the Fusiliers. By November 1916 he had experienced the horrors of the Battle of Loos and his near fatal wounding at the Somme. In mid-November, the 17th, he had been found fit for service again by a Medical Board at Caxton.

While his father's verse was composed in "outmoded forms," it also proved very popular indeed, and espoused a grand patriotism and a romantic view of the war. But by November 1916, Robert Graves had begun to question, as did the enlisted men, the strategies and motives of the generals and politicians; he had begun to agree, with Sassoon, that their purpose once they returned to France was not to kill Germans but to make sure that the men under their commands lived; he had long since ceased to think that "France is the only place for a gentleman now."

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#### WORK CITED

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