

Biography, Professional Integrity and 'Life on the Edge'.

Richard Perceval Graves

A) Introduction

1. This is intended as the first of a series of occasional papers which will, I hope, launch a long-overdue debate about professional integrity, behaviour and good manners among literary biographers. And since of my seven published volumes of biography three have concerned the life of my late uncle Robert von Ranke Graves, and I may therefore be presumed to have at least a passing acquaintance with the subject, I propose to concern myself (in this instance at least) chiefly with the introduction and first chapter of a volume by Miranda Seymour entitled *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (Doubleday 1995) [LOTE]

2. Clearly it is a matter not only of professional good manners but also of professional integrity for a biographer fully to acknowledge the work of those who came before him, and to distinguish most clearly between material which he has inherited from earlier biographers, and material which he has either found for himself, or at least used in print for the first time.

3. This is a question both of providing a fair general estimate in the introduction or in an appendix of the reliance the new biographer places upon the work of his predecessors, and of clearly indicating in the reference notes where he is using material which has already appeared in print, and where he is drawing upon fresh material.

4. Without such an indication, the prospective purchaser, the reviewer and even the scholar may find it extremely difficult to judge the originality and worth of the new volume.

B) Five Sets of Suggestions to my Fellow-Biographers

1) On the Content of an Introduction

a) Some General Points

1. It is understood that any biographer has a vested interest in expos-

ing the weaknesses (as he sees them) in the works of his predecessors, and in proposing his own work as the first really worthwhile book on his subject. It would be naive to pretend otherwise, and of course it is perfectly acceptable for the biographer to argue his case, and even to dismiss preceding biographies with contempt, if he can adduce good reasons for so doing.

2. However, I believe that biographers should be prepared to acknowledge the use they have made of earlier works, and should avoid (directly or indirectly) telling lies about the nature of those works.

3. It may also be considered polite to acknowledge any personal help which earlier biographers may have given.

b) Examples taken from LOTE

1. When Miranda Seymour began writing *LOTE*, the principal published biographical works on Robert Graves were a) Martin Seymour-Smith's *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (Bloomsbury 1982) [HLAW]; and Richard Perceval Graves's two volumes *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic (1895-1926)* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1986) [TAH] and *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura (1926-1940)* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1990) [TYWL].

2. The first of these, though containing many errors of fact, was a pioneering work written by someone who knew Robert extremely well for many years. The second and third were written by a member of his family (his nephew) who had spent many years in the most painstaking research which in *TAH* (for example) had substantially sorted out fact from fiction in Robert Graves's brilliantly impressionistic autobiography *Goodbye to All That* (Jonathan Cape 1929, revised 1957).

3. Quite extraordinarily, no *direct* mention is made of any of the three volumes of biography in Miranda Seymour's introduction. This is despite the fact that (as we shall see) there are paragraphs in her work which clearly derive from one or other of these volumes not only in their factual content but also in their observations or conclusions.

4. *Indirectly*, we are told on *LOTE* pp. xviii-xix that:

Previous biographers, of both Graves and Riding, had the painful experience of being compelled by her to rewrite their accounts in order to fit in with Riding's own view of events. This, happily, was not a problem which confronted me. The view expressed here, based on documentary evidence, are my own.

In the absence of any qualification, we must clearly deduce that 'Previous biographers' means 'All previous biographers'.

Yet could anyone reading *HRAW* possibly believe that Martin Seymour-Smith had been compelled by Laura Riding to rewrite a single sentence of his book, which was generally hostile to Riding though recognising her genius?

In my own case, I did indeed alter a few minor details towards the end of *TAH* in the light of my correspondence with Laura Riding. However not one sentence of *TYWL* was either written or rewritten at Riding's request. Indeed, I specifically recall telling Miranda Seymour that Riding had wanted to take control of *TYWL*, and that it was when I had refused to allow Riding to see a word of what I was writing that she broke off her correspondence with me, and (as I afterwards learned) proceeded to do her best to prevent publication. To suggest that *TYWL* (which may well be flawed for other reasons) is flawed as a result of Riding's interference, and that any views expressed were not my own, not only leads potential readers to doubt the wisdom of turning its pages, but is also monstrously untrue.

5. We are also told on *LOTE* p.xviii that 'nobody had yet examined his [Robert Graves's] relationships with women in any detail', a claim which Professor John Carey in his review in the *Sunday Times* singled out as being extraordinarily unfair. I leave others to make their own judgment.

6. Another example in this section: we are told on *LOTE* p. xix that:

There has been a growing inclination to accept Laura Riding's claim to have given Graves the ideas for *The White Goddess*. I have shown that the Goddess was present in Graves's mind long before he met her and that Riding is more likely to have been influenced by his knowledgeable accounts of an early matriarchal civilisation,

and by his belief that certain women were possessed of a magical power.

If her second sentence had begun 'I have followed my predecessor Richard Perceval Graves in believing that the Goddess was present in Graves's mind long before he met her', would it have been both more accurate and less self-serving? Look for example at *TAH* p.249. We are in 1921, discussing a poem written by Robert Graves a year or two earlier:

In another poem, 'Unicorn and the White Doe', ... Graves had written a striking parable about the poetic life. The poet is seen as a Unicorn, and his muse is described as the White Doe: perhaps the first description by Graves of the magical source of inspiration to which he later referred as the 'White Goddess'.

See also *TAH* p.298, where I refer to the writing in 1924 of Graves's little-known novel *My Head, My Head!*, which I describe as:

...one of Graves's first steps upon a path which later led to such major works as *I, Claudius* and *The White Goddess*; and indeed it is in *My Head, My Head!* that he first outlines one of the central tenets of his later poetic creed, that society was once matriarchal, and that 'the beginning of our present misery' dates from the time when 'the mother lost her rule'.

7. Finally, in this section, we can reflect upon the matter of whether or not it is polite to acknowledge help given directly by a previous biographer. I have of course no reason to doubt Miranda Seymour's assertion on p.497 that

MY LARGEST DEBT OF GRATITUDE IS DUE TO THE GRAVES FAMILY AND, in particular, to Beryl, Elena and William...

Certainly, I did personally give Miranda Seymour a small amount of help, not only in terms of answering a number of factual enquiries from her relating to the years between 1895 and 1940, but also in terms of telling her of my relations with Laura Riding (though see above at B 1 b 4), and in terms of commenting on the reliability of the various sources. But perhaps it was unreasonable of me to expect that my help should have been directly acknowledged.

2) *That Published Sources should have Precedence over Unpublished*

a) *Some General Points*

I suggest that when in a biography a quotation or some other material is followed by a reference note, that note should refer the reader either to a source in which that quotation or material first appeared in print, or it should refer to the original source from which it is derived. Most important of all, *published sources should have precedence over unpublished.*

b) *Examples taken from LOTE*

1. This general rule (if we may accept it as such) is broken by Miranda Seymour on a number of occasions.

At page 7, for example, of *LOTE* there is a 7-line quotation from Amy Graves's autobiography / memoir. This had already appeared in full on page 22 of *TAH*; yet in the reference notes on p.463 of *LOTE*, the attribution is to Amy Graves, 'Memoir'.

2. Again, much later in the book on *LOTE* p.167 there is a 7-line quotation from a letter by Norah McGuinness to T. S. Matthews. This quotation had appeared (all but two or three paraphrased words) in *TYWL* p.76; yet the attribution is given to the original source and not to the published source.

3) *That the use of material from a published source should be adequately acknowledged even when it is not directly quoted.*

a) *Some General Comments*

In a scholarly work, paraphrasing published material does not in my view give one an excuse for not acknowledging its source. There are three principal ways of dealing with this.

1. If in any given chapter there are only a few paragraphs evidently deriving from a published work rather than from original research, then those individual paragraphs should be properly attributed.

2. If in any given chapter a great deal of information evidently derives from a published work or works rather than from original research, and the publishers are jibbing at a potentially vast number of reference notes, then it may be acceptable to say at the start of the reference notes for that particular chapter something like: 'The bulk of the information in this chapter is derived from', followed by a mention of the published works upon which the author has relied.

3. Should the new author's debt to published works be still greater than envisaged in B 3 a 2 immediately above, then it could be considered reasonable to state prominently in an introduction something along these lines: 'For the first [so many] chapters of this work I am very much indebted throughout to [the published source or sources in question].'

b) Examples taken from LOTE

1. Bearing in mind the general principles established at B 3 a 1-3 immediately above, any reader who examines the first chapter of *LOTE*, pages 3-19, and compares it with the relevant pages 5-59 of *TAH*, may decide for himself which method could have been adopted. In practice, there is no mention of any debt whatever.

2. Yet compare for example *LOTE* p. 8 lines 1-6, which has:

Pregnant in the first year of her marriage, Amy hoped for a boy: she wanted, she told the old Bishop of Limerick, to produce a grandson worthy of his name. But her first two children were daughters and Clarissa, the oldest and most sensitive, suffered for it. Rosaleen, born in 1894 and treated with a good deal more affection, became a more assertive character.

with *TAH* the final paragraph on p. 26 which runs onto p.27, and reads (in part):

Before long, Amy was expecting a child of her own; and in November, writing to congratulate the Bishop on his eightieth birthday, she told him how much she wished to become 'the mother of another grandson to you, to carry on your name worthily'.⁵³ In the event [she]... was a girl. She was named Clarissa...[But Amy was]

worried that her stepchildren would be jealous if she gave too much particular attention to Clarissa, and she, therefore, made the mistake of 'kiss[ing] my beautiful baby very little ... But they were all so sweet to little Clarissa that I felt they loved her too.'⁵⁵ Possibly this lack of a really warm, loving relationship with her mother at such a crucial stage contributed to the severe emotional problems which beset Clarissa in later life.

53 AUTHOR Amy to Charles Graves, Bishop of Limerick, 7 November 1892

55 AMY

Further down p. 27, the sentences about Rosaleen's birth include the following:

Although Amy was still hoping for a son, she was no longer so worried about making her stepchildren jealous, and was much warmer towards Rosaleen than she had been towards Clarissa. In her own words, 'I gave my love a freer rein.'⁵⁶

56 AMY

Does it not appear that the passage is *LOTE* relies upon the passages in *TAH* (in which original authorities were cited); the only difference being that *TAH*'s original but tentatively expressed insight into the origin of Clarissa's mental sufferings is flatteringly adopted as fact?

3. Again, on p.15 lines 9-11 *LOTE* has:

by the age of six, he knew his Bible well enough to compare banishment from a hymn session to exile in the tents of ungodliness.

This information is unattributed. A reference note a few lines on refers us to APG's autobiography, but that is another story. This information is actually taken from a letter written by Clarissa to Robert in September 1953, and was first recounted in *TAH* pp 46-47.

4) *That new assertions should be substantiated*

a) *Some General Points*

1. When an entirely new assertion purporting to be a statement of fact is presented to the reader, then I believe that either a) the source should be revealed in a reference note or b) the arguments behind this assertion should be carefully presented. Otherwise the biography will have slipped across that narrow dividing line which separates all biographies from historical romance.

2. While Hollywood or the theatre are generally allowed artistic licence to tamper with the truth, the biographer is not.

3. It is of course arguable that the truth is unknowable; and sadly in recent years many respected biographers have used this as an excuse for such practices as

- i) elaborating upon known facts, for example by 'improving' a brief record of a conversation into a detailed and lengthy exchange; and
- ii) inventing facts - or, to put it another way, writing fiction.

4. Perhaps the biographer has a particular duty to the truth when stating as fact something both new and unpleasant about a person who is either still living or who is dead but has close relatives still living.

b) *Examples taken from LOTE*

1. Page 10 lines 20-24 of *LOTE* reads:

But Robert did not go out to the heath only to play. Repressed at home, he vented his frustration on any small child who crossed his path while he was out of sight of his good-hearted but stern nanny. In the house he was a model of good behaviour; locally he was regarded as moody and rough.

There is certainly evidence (adduced in *TAH* pp 55-56) that during a period of great unhappiness between the autumn of 1906 and the autumn of 1908 Robert became something of a bully to his younger brother Charles. [The origins of RG's dislike of Charles are further discussed on *TAH* p.44, in an analysis with which *LOTE* pp.9-10 appears to be in full though unacknowledged agreement.] However, although my memory may be faulty, I certainly don't recall seeing any evidence

that when Robert went out onto the heath he 'vented his frustration on any small child who crossed his path while he was out of sight of his good-hearted but stern nanny', or that 'locally he was regarded as moody and rough.' Does this not need a reference note explaining the source?

2. The final sentence of *LOTE* reads:

Extreme sensitivity was apparent from an early age in Clarissa, Robert and the youngest boy, John, all of whom suffered forms of mental breakdown before the age of thirty.

The mental sufferings of both Clarissa and Robert are well-known in the family, and were described in great detail in *TAH*; but having read through thousands of family letters covering the 1903-1933 period, I found not a shred of evidence that my late father John suffered a form of mental breakdown at this (or indeed at any other) stage of his life. This assertion, completely unsupported, has given great offence both to John's widow and to many other members of his family; and it would be interesting to know whether or not Miranda Seymour could produce any hard evidence.

5) *That any good work done by one's predecessors should be thoroughly assimilated.*

a) *A General Comment*

The biographer's regard for the truth imposes upon him a duty to read and learn from his predecessors. It is sheer carelessness to make statements, however relatively unimportant, which contradict what has already been shown to be the truth.

b) *Examples from LOTE*

1. *LOTE* p.7 lines 17-19 has:

It was only after she [Amy] had been introduced to his motherless children, Philip, Molly, Richard, Perceval and Susan, that she began to see a role for herself.

Yet it is clear from *TAH* pp. 20-23 that although Amy had seen photographs of all Alfred's children, she had only been introduced to

Philip and Molly before her wedding. She was not introduced to Susan until February 1892; or to Richard and Perceval until the start of the Easter holidays, 1892.

2. Again, *LOTE* p.11 11e-10e has

Amy, who had not been charmed by Ireland on her one visit to Alfred's relations...

Yet it is perfectly clear from *TAH* that Amy had visited Ireland twice. The first occasion, described in *TAH* pp 24-25 was during her honeymoon in January 1892, when she met Robert Perceval Graves and the Bishop of Limerick. The second occasion, described in *TAH* p 32 was in the summer of 1896, when she met Arnold Graves.

Richard Perceval Graves, Somerset