

Letters to Ken (1917-1961) from Robert Graves.

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Robert Graves. Harvey Sarnier, editor. Cathedral City, CA: Brunswick Press, 1997. 54 + v pages, illustrations.

A slim little volume with gilt lettering, *Letters to Ken* makes available to Robert Graves scholars a remarkable cache of 37 letters written by Graves to Kenyon Barrett. Make no mistake here: these are important letters, adding a great deal to our knowledge of Graves' life, and it is remarkable that such a find would emerge from a desk drawer in Oxfordshire—and in July, 1995, after the publication of the two most recent biographies of Graves.

Most importantly, these letters identify for the first time a very close friend of Graves whom he met as a fellow patient at Somerville College, when the College served as a military hospital. Wilfred Kenyon Tufnell Barrett was a fellow officer, in the Dorset Regiment, slightly younger than Graves. The early letters in this collection illustrate many of the characteristics of Graves' other correspondence. He refers frequently to "ghosts" and to "magic." He attempts to talk Ken Barrett into letting him arrange training officer assignments so his younger friend can avoid returning to France. Since Barrett had aspirations as a poet and essayist, Graves both criticizes Barrett's poetry—rather brutally, in fact, but with some passing remarks on meter, rhythm and phonology that are remarkable—and offers advice, even his own contacts, to help Barrett effect an entrance to the literary world. Barrett must have been a disappointment to Graves, since he never took advantage of Graves' offers to arrange easy assignments; in fact, he returned to France and then remained in the army for a career, except for the years 1933-1939. In 1933, Graves was suggesting to Barrett that he consider writing a book to be called "I Stayed in the Army." "You have only to do it simply and autobiographically to make several hundreds out of it," Graves writes, and goes on to suggest seeing F. V. Morley at Faber and Faber, even providing tips on

salesmanship: "First writing a few incidents of it simply to show you have the stuff: but conversation is best." As far as we know, Ken Barrett never published any of his work.

Sarner cautions that "RG used the phrase 'best friend' so often that it can be described as a class of people rather than an individual," yet Graves "confided in him [Barrett] as he did no other." Perhaps youth and the shared experience of military hospital explain the remarkable familiarity and openness of these letters; perhaps the eighty-plus years that have passed are responsible for making the frank language in which Graves describes his own romantic experiences—and his advice to Barrett about his friend's romances, as well—seem so insensitive, if boyishly enthusiastic.

"Actually," Graves advises, "I believe that a man can always get a girl if he wants to by taking a firm line." (He then quotes 14 lines by the Earl of Montrose.)

It is in these descriptions of romance that we discover the other great addition to the Graves biography that *Letters to Ken* offers. In the same 5 August 1917 letter, Graves fully describes his first early love:

The Machin girl is a good girl but proves to love another . . . I decide not to pursue the matter further. I am quite satisfied to find that I have the power of falling in love with a girl.

In a later letter, Graves refers to "Mlle. Machin" as "bespoke," and adds "I had been clever enough to forget all about her & anyhow I never discovered whether she was suitable in other ways; she probably wasn't."

Sarner's commentary is very useful in contrasting the chronology of these letters with the chronology in *Goodbye to All That*, and in emphasizing "how anxious RG was to get married." On December 22, 1917, Graves wrote to Ken

I fixed up to get married next month with a girl called Nancy Nicholson. You are the only person who knows about the Machin girl."

That Barrett kept his secret is evident. (Information about Machin was so sketchy that Miranda Seymour doubted that Graves' first love even existed.) There is some evidence in the letters that Graves' affection for "my Marjorie" may have been deeper than his affection for Nancy

Nicholson—at least until the two had been married for quite some time—so Graves' implied admonition to keep his secret is not without some gravity.

Marjorie Machin, according to Caroline Gascoigne's article "Letters unlock love secret of Robert Graves" (*London Times*, 23 July 1995), was an auxiliary nurse working in the military hospitals of Oxford. She grew up in Charing, Kent, and returned there after the war. She served in the Auxiliary Territorial Service in World War II, then "lived quietly on her own. She never married." A friend who had known Machin from 1938 until her death in 1978 said, "We had a feeling that there had been a special man in her life, but she never mentioned Graves."

Identification of Machin may, as Patrick Quinn has suggested, open new possibilities for interpreting the early poems, some of which, it has been supposed, may have been inspired by what the *Times* calls "a schoolboy crush." But though Graves scholars are now assured that Marjorie Machin, and Graves' relationship with her in 1917, is real, those facts and these letters will probably actually do little to diminish the questions about the ambiguous sexuality of the young Robert Graves during the war. Without quoting far too much from *Letters to Ken*, let me point out that these letters show a young man in a rush to be married—"I want someone very badly"—and that language such as "Now I can safely and happily return unto my friends of my own sex and be happy" will continue to be ambiguous, I fear.

These letters add many other details both major and minor to Graves' biography. The letters richly illustrate the early years of the Graves-Nicholson marriage, including the years attempting to establish the shop on Boar's Hill, and domestic details of the growing family. There is a great deal of information here about the mechanics and the finances of Graves' early career, from "squaring the critics," to the calculations of income, to the very calculated observation that reviewers treat a poet differently once a "Complete Poems" is produced—possibly explaining Graves' hubristic early preparation of his own such volume. The letters in addition lay out the financial and climatic calculations which preceded Graves' and Riding's decision to move to Majorca.

One of the most interesting letters is a 1922 reply to Barrett, who had apparently been misinformed about the status of T. E. Lawrence:

"About Lawrence being a civilian the man lies: he is a buck private in the R. A. F. at Farnborough. He joined because it hurt him to think and he wanted a corporal to do it for him—I heard from him yesterday: bless his little heart. His book about the Arab Revolt comes out this year in a very limited edition at 15 guineas. It is enough to turn a man's stomach, what I've seen of it . . .

To protect Graves from a "charge of hypocrisy," since his public statements about Lawrence's *from Seven Pillars* are diametrically opposite (and Lawrence's gifts of manuscript pages of *Seven Pillars* had kept Graves afloat financially), Sarner takes pains to point out that "the book had been substantially revised from what RG had been shown in 1922."

In a letter of 25 July 1934, Graves warns Ken that "Laura will write to you soon." It is probably not surprising to anyone familiar with Riding's habit in the 1930's of writing "on Robert's behalf" that the next letter to Ken is dated 20 February 1960. (Until the 37 letters to Barrett were sold by Gay Doggart, Barrett's daughter, in 1995, a footnote reference to two such letters to "Ken" in Deborah Baker's Riding biography were the only hint of any of this correspondence.) That after what must have been the usual Riding fusillade, the Graves-Barrett correspondence would eventually resume and continue through the 1960's indicates the regard these two men held for each other. Martin Seymour-Smith told Caroline Gascoigne that when he first met Graves in 1943, "he would never hear a word against the "ordinary soldier" because of a soldier he knew called Ken Barrett, whom he called a sensitive soul."

Harvey Sarner does "not purport," he says, "to be a Graves scholar." He is, as Graves scholars know, a "book collector who specializes" in Graves letters, manuscripts and editions. Sarner's *Letters to Ken* is the work of an amateur, in the best sense of that word: one who loves the thing being done. Sarner has done us an immense favor by obtaining and editing these letters.