The Dr. Simon, My Father, the Man Who Befriended Robert Graves

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My parents' first sighting of Robert Graves was on a small beach near Brixham in Devon in 1942. Robert was ankle-deep in the shallow swell, his trousers rolled up and his young son clasped to his neck. It was an image they were never to forget. And that same evening, by extraordinary chance, they found themselves being introduced to him at a party hosted by Desmond Flowers, a literary director at Cassell's, Robert's publisher. My father and Robert Graves immediately recognised each other as like minds and spirits and forged a remarkable and life-long friendship.

Knowing the background of both men, it has always struck me as quite extraordinary that their two paths had not collided at an earlier stage. There were certainly strong enough links in place to occasion an earlier encounter.

Though outwardly appearing two complete opposites—my father, a doctor, short and introvert and Robert, a poet and writer, tall and extrovert—the two men had much in common. They came from similar middle class backgrounds and educations. Their families most certainly must have moved in the same type of social circles. Both men spent happy holidays in Wales as youngsters—Robert in the family house in Harlech where he loved to walk and my father, only forty miles north, in Penmaenmawr, where his family took annual lodging in a guest house in sight of the railway on the Conway road. George's happiest hours were spent train-watching with his elder brother, Herbert. He especially loved watching the mailbags being skilfully dropped into a net on the Travelling Post Office wagon from rail-side poles swung over the lines. *The Colonel*, as my father was endearingly nicknamed by his brother on account of his bravery and enterprise, was the one to mastermind the train-watching activities. It was he who kept an eye out for the postman with his leather mail pouches and he who skipped his blancmange in favour of a line-side view of the 13:15 exchange of mail bags; it was he who was fearless enough to strike up conversation with the postman and cross examine him on

the activities of the mail train (Horizon, 399-403).

My father, George Simon, was born in Sale near Manchester in 1902. He was a small, sensitive, dark-eyed boy of German-Jewish extraction and was easy bait for schoolboy taunts and unrelenting bullying. In the spring of 1916 he was sent to Charterhouse, narrowly missing Robert by two years to the term, though Robert, using poetic licence in the latter years of his life, always insisted their Charterhouse days somehow overlapped. Robert was by then in his seventies and engrossed in his theories on fourth and fifth dimensional thinking, defying space and time—so who was to argue?!

George's Charterhouse years, like Robert's, were spent in utter misery. In George's case, the misery was exacerbated by the knowledge that he didn't even have the safe haven of a healing family environment to flee to during the holidays. There were two devastating events which blighted his adolescence and deprived him of much needed parental care and affection. The first of these was the abrupt and ignoble internment of his father, Louis—on the Isle of Man at the outbreak of the Great War in 1914—on the grounds he had refused to give up his German citizenship and was therefore considered an enemy alien. This inhumane action came about despite Louis having lived in England since he was eighteen and having raised a family of four as British citizens and, most insultingly, despite the fact that his two eldest sons, Oliver and Herbert, were in the British Army. The second event was the death of George's beloved mother, Louisa, in April 1918, of cancer, when George was just fifteen and a half. Thus, he had to start his first day at Charterhouse with the stigma of his father's internment and, two years later, when he was at his most sensitive and vulnerable, face the tragedy of his mother's death. It was learning to cope with these trials that made him so stoical, and he was always forgiving by nature. He, like Robert, was a born survivor against multiple odds. However, while Robert famously publicised his struggles in his autobiography, *Goodbye to All That*, George barely expressed his, either in conversation or letter.

About a year before the death of George's mother, Robert married Nancy Nicholson, the daughter of the painter, William Nicholson, whose great friend was fellow painter, William Rothenstein. Rothenstein happened to be George's uncle on his mother's side; the

Graves/Simon paths were starting to interweave.

George left Charterhouse in 1920 and, the following year, went up to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, to study medicine, something he'd dreamed of doing ever since, at fourteen, he'd had his tonsils out and decided, there and then, he was going to be a doctor. In Cambridge, however, another setback awaited him. A couple of years or so into his medical studies, he began to go deaf—very likely the result of complications arising from a particularly virulent flu which was going around at the time—and was forced to abandon his course. When he had sufficiently recovered his health, he chose King's College, London, to resume his studies, specialising in radiology after being advised that general medicine would be out of the question because of the severity of his deafness. George put his whole heart and soul into his work despite (or perhaps because of) his affliction and, by 1925, had become a member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians. In that same year, George's eldest brother, Oliver, who worked for the Curwen Press but who, at this time, also ran his own specialist press, *The Fleuron*, published a collection of Robert's poems, *Welchman's Hose*. Another link in the chain of coincidences was left open. But this didn't prompt a meeting between George and Robert.

By 1927, George had a Diploma of Medical Radiology and Electrolysis and, having been accepted back into Emmanuel College, had completed his MB thesis, gaining a Bachelor of Surgery diploma. In 1930, he married a Dutch painter, Charlotte Houthuesen who, three years later, bore him a daughter, Elizabeth. Their marriage was not to last. Charlotte fell in love with a tall, strikingly good-looking painter, Desmond MacCarthy, by whom she had a son, Francis. George, in his characteristic way, did all he could to be understanding and helpful in the circumstances. He gave his name to legitimise the new child, moved out of the London flat and gave financial support to the impoverished artistic couple and both children—a gesture he chose to continue, voluntarily, long after his and Charlotte's eventual divorce in 1943. George, never one to lay blame or dwell on misfortune, once again sought refuge in his work and by 1938, had got his MD degree.

Robert, meanwhile, during this same period of time, had brought the American poet, Laura Riding, into his and Nancy's life

and after a volatile period as a threesome (and later, in 1929, with the arrival of Irish poet Geoffrey Phibbs, a foursome), abruptly turned his back on Nancy, England and *All That* and went with Laura to settle in Majorca. This move could easily have put a halt to further Simon/Graves links had the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 not forced Laura and Robert's return to England. From there they moved to Brittany, accompanied by their friends, Beryl and Allan Hodge, and in 1939, on to America, where Laura attached herself to the American farmer/writer, Schuyler Jackson and stayed, while the others returned, once again, to England. By now Robert's affections were focussed on Beryl, who parted amicably from Alan and went with Robert to Great Bardfield, Essex, where they stayed for a few months as guests of painter, John Aldrige and his wife, Lucy. Here they befriended the Aldriges' artist neighbours, Michael and Duffy Rothenstein. Michael, the son of William Nicholson's friend, William Rothenstein, was George's first cousin.

It still took a further two years before George and Robert met. In the interim, Robert and Beryl (who was pregnant with her first son, William) left Essex for Devon and settled in a spacious house in Galmpton about an hour's walk from Brixham harbour. George, meanwhile, having separated from Charlotte, had met and fallen in love with my mother, Joanna Shuckburgh, whom he later married, in 1944.

Soon after the outbreak of the Second War, Charlotte and the children were evacuated to Brixham where Desmond's stepfather had a house. It was not long before Charlotte met and befriended Robert and Beryl and it was this friendship that was to be the catalyst for the George/Robert introduction in 1942. It was Charlotte who persuaded George and Joanna to take a short break from war-torn London and visit her in Brixham and who took them to a Desmond Flowers party.

Once the George/Robert meeting had occurred, Robert lost no time in quizzing his new friend on medical possibilities in connection with his research for his book, *The Golden Fleece*. George who, like Robert, loved pushing boundaries and discovering the possible in the seemingly impossible while "getting things right", was only too happy to help in any way he could. The correspondence between the two

men is littered with medical references, both in connection with Robert's work and with is personal well-being and that of his family. George questioned Robert on mythology. He found *The Golden Fleece* deeply engrossing and the myths and tribal origins of the inhabitants of Greece "admirably explained", but had also found some "unexplained things" regarding the Nymphs (In letter 6.12.44; Beryl Graves, private collection). George became increasingly fascinated by Greek mythology but the more he got involved with the complexities surrounding these myths, the more frustrated he became. One day, he asked Robert if there was a book to be found explaining the Greek myths and Robert had to admit there wasn't, so he wrote one! "You did me a good turn, George", Robert wrote in a letter to George in 1957, "in asking me one day, years ago, what the *Greek Myths* were all about. That book is now selling like anything" (In letter 20.12.57; Simon family, private collection).

In 1946, Robert took Beryl and his new family (a daughter, Lucia, had followed William in 1943 and another son, Juan, in 1944) to settle in Ca N'Alluny, the Majorcan house in Deià which he had previously shared with Laura. Within a few months Robert and Beryl received a joint letter from my parents; George apologising for the delay in "reciprocating news" because, "for a long stretch it seemed all bad", and Joanna more expansively describing how George had been "elected unanimously by the doctors at Bart's (St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London) to be director of his department, and then having the recommendation reversed by the Lay Committee". There is a poignant reference from George pointing out, in his general frustration with life, that it seemed "rather reminiscent of Charterhouse; the same sort of pattern at St. Bart's as at school, where my inferior was promoted over my head for no obvious reason except my small stature" (In letter undated, 1946 to Beryl Graves, private collection).

Another of George's (and Joanna's) frustrations was echoed in the same news bulletin; "still no sign of a child for Joanna", he briefed, (my mother had had several miscarriages and had all but given up on the longed-for family). Robert was swift to supply a remedy. He was working on *The White Goddess* at the time and advised, that "George should wear a thumb-ring (if permitted by professional etiquette), a sil-

ver one" as a propitiation of Venus, and "Joanna should bow nine times to the next silver fir that she sees and utter a silent wish," adding, "this is to propitiate the birth goddess Artemis" (In an addendum written by Robert on a letter from Beryl to George and Joanna Simon, June or July,1946). Nine months later my sister was born. I followed in quick succession and my brother, six years later.

My father's "small stature" and his deafness which, in those days, was impossible to disguise, must have made his life unbearably hard, yet he never showed any signs of self pity or prolonged bitterness and by assuming nobody would be interested in him, interested himself in others.

As a child, in the Fifties, I clearly remember my father's cumbersome hearing-aid equipment. He would sit at the supper table with a pair of large, Bakelite headphones over his ears, his usual sweet smile spread across his face as if to reassure everyone that all was well. But it wasn't. The unpredictable volume control on the large brown amplification box, the size of a portable radio, which was placed on the table in front of him, had to be constantly adjusted and the box turned directly towards whoever he was in conversation with. For a philosophic man with tremendous intellectual diversity, conducting conversations under such frustrating conditions was an act of courage. It would have been so easy to give up on anything but the least taxing of topics.

In the Sixties, electronics bore the fruits of post-war technology, reducing everything to a personally manageable size. My father's hearing aid was transformed overnight. He was able to buy himself a small metal box, the size of a cigarette packet, which clipped to a breast-pocket and had a neat ear-plug wired to it. He was finally free to carry on conversations on his coveted walks which he'd regularly take when "feeling liverish".

After supper, he liked to go for what he called, a *dog's run*, a fifteen minute, pre-bedtime walk, so named because, generally, the only other souls encountered, especially on cold, dank winter nights, were pet owner's walking their dogs. He used to go on these with Robert when he was staying in our London house. I loved these walks too, because it was a time when I had my father's undivided attention. He'd switch on his box and, for fifteen or so glorious minutes, we'd put the world to rights. It was also a time when I could divulge to

him some seemingly monumental mishap in my private or working life and he, with his wonderful, philosophic approach to all things negative, would guide me out of my doldrums and onto a firm footing again. He never gave a paternal pat on the shoulder and proverbial, "don't worry, everything will be all right". He knew life didn't work on platitudes.

Although Robert and Beryl had made frequent visits to our home over the years, it was not until 1966, that George finally accepted their long-standing invitation and took us all to stay with them in Deià. It was the first of many visits and was to have a profound effect on me. While there, the seeds were sown for my eventual step into Robert's poetical world as his last muse.

George intuitively understood Robert's inspirational needs. As far back as 1952, he had written to him describing a young Canadian friend who he knew was the sort of person he thought Robert would find inspiring: "Dark, sensitive, unhappy and then, like quicksilver, a flow of words all in *your* language. She is, indeed, visited, perhaps one should say, inhabited, by the White Goddess" (In letter 20.1.52; Beryl Graves, private collection). The girl in question never did become one of Robert's muses but, nonetheless, George both recognised and admired such qualities in her.

I was fascinated by George's and Robert's ability to shut out the wild, exotic, hedonistic world of Sixties Deià—so appealing to me as a teenager seeking release from a taxing ballet training—and bury themselves in work. During that first visit George worked away on his proofs for his latest book on radiology and Robert, on his collection of poetry, *Colophon To Love Respelt*. Because my father had always been able to 'switch-off' (his hearing-aid) for instant silence in any environment, he had never needed a work sanctuary; a quiet, sacred area forbidden to all save the selectively invited. I felt, therefore, very privileged to be given *carte blanche* by Robert to enter his workroom at will. His study was crammed with books, artefacts and amulets and his table was strewn with manuscripts in what seemed to me a terrifying chaos. My father, on the other hand, whose reference material was housed in hospitals, had always had a mobile work area, though he was mostly to be found beavering away at his upright desk in the family sitting room. His work space, whether a desk or a table in sitting room, kitchen, garden or hospital, was always dominated by

sheets of vivid yellow photographic paper. Never a man to waste resources, he used the virgin yellow paper in which his X-ray films came individually wrapped, to write notes and rough drafts for his numerous articles and books. It became his trademark. "George," Robert touchingly wrote in a letter to me prior to a visit we were to make in July 1974, "will find his yellow paper spread out waiting on a table" (In letter 23.7.74; author, private collection). Nobody dared touch the wads left in out-of-the-way nooks except, it seems, Robert. His hand-written verse on the occasional tell-tale scrap of yellow paper has a knack of surprising one in archives.

Sometimes, between dance engagements, I would work the rickety slide projector at the evening lectures which George gave at the Brompton Hospital in London. I knew nothing about radiology but I was always riveted by what he was saying. George was a wonderful lecturer with humour and impeccable timing. He knew just when to 'wake-up' the tired, overworked, young housemen, as I was to learn at my expense. "Now, here's a nice healthy chest" he announced one evening as I innocently brought up a disease-free chest X-ray onto the screen. "That's my daughter's!". An audible snigger went round the hushed hall which held my father in such esteem and I felt stricken with embarrassment. It did not matter that the chest on display was merely a ribcage and that the initial before the 'Simon', boldly written on the top right-hand corner for all to see, belonged to my sister!

George's willingness to perform and his wonderful sense of timing made him a much appreciated participant in the annual plays that were held to celebrate Robert's birthday, and put on in the small amphitheatre, in the olive groves below the Graves' house. Both Graves and Simon families have touching memories of him in the plays. My memory is of him the year he was a butterfly collector. He walked onto the stage donning cloth cap and butterfly net looking every bit the part and said his line, "got you", with such conviction as he slammed the net onto a stage-side rock, that the butterfly stayed caught in the imagination for ever. Beryl remembers him in another scene and will endearingly quote his lines, "What with the screaming of the child and the shrieks of the nurse, I am quite out of temper!".

In September 1967, I received a letter from a very humbled

Robert. He had just met a young South African doctor and his wife who had studied under George at Bart's. "When I casually mentioned George", Robert wrote, "the young doctor replied, "What, THE Dr. Simon? He's a genius and has done more for the reading of X-rays than anyone else in the world! Are you really a friend of HIS?". "My goodness", Robert continued, "how I rose in his estimation—at least a hundred points or more" (In letter 23.9.67 to the author, private collection). This letter put a whole new angle on the Robert/George hierarchy for me. When you grow up under 'genius', you take it for granted. To me, George was simply my father, whereas Robert was a huge creative force in the public domain, proud of his reputation and stature, who had chosen me as a creative partner in his search for new horizons in poetic truth. That both men could bow to each other, showing their mutual respect and admiration, threw an unexpected spotlight on my father.

Mention George and Robert and one immediate image comes to my mind. The two men are striding along the middle of the Deià road, deep in conversation and oblivious to the rest of the world. Their backs are turned on Ca N'Alluny and their two figures—Robert's six-foot-plus frame towering over George's diminutive five and a half—start to diminish with distance. Both men wear light, loose-fitting trousers and short-sleeved airtex shirts. George walks on Robert's right, his hearing-aid clipped to his left breast pocket. He wears a small-rimmed cotton hat and tough leather sandals. Robert wears a large-brimmed, straw hat and fraying, rope-soled, canvass shoes. He has a long-handled, straw basket slung over his shoulder. George has a khaki canvass satchel slung across his body. In both carriers, there's a pair of reading glasses, a pen, proofs and half-written bits of inspired writing. I watch the figures, in my mind's eye, become two almost indistinguishable dots and am left bathed in the kind of aura you know exists only after you've crossed the path of remarkable men.

Works Cited

Simon, Herbert. *Horizon* Vol. X. No 60, 1944: 399-403.
Details from George's family background researched by Christopher Simon, PhD, from notes and correspondence in the Simon family archives.