

The Oral Evidence on the Author of *The White Goddess*

Juana-Maria Segui

Up to now, the life of Robert Graves has mainly been told by his British biographers. With the exception of William Graves, the biographers usually refer to the Majorcan surroundings only as a geographically exotic background to the central story of Robert Graves' life. Presumably the biographers do not want to get very involved in the subject, as their lack of knowledge of the language prevents them from having more direct access to its people. Therefore, and this is not chauvinism on my part, I do think that the relationship between the writer and his Majorcan environment has been, to a certain point, avoided or seen anecdotally and rather remotely. In fact, the relationship between Graves and Majorca was far more important than his biographers might make it seem. Much as we all do, Robert Graves was very attached to the place in which he lived.

It is true that his reasons for choosing the island were mostly practical: it has a good climate, it was cheap, and sufficiently large so as not to feel claustrophobic. The village gave him what he needed in order to carry out his work as a writer: sun, sea, water springs, shady trees, no politics, electric light and a bus service which took him to Palma, the capital.

But when he had to leave, due to the Spanish Civil War, all those years wandering around Europe and America felt like an enforced exile for him. It was an exile that was accompanied by nostalgic and heartrending feelings of being away from home, which did not calm down until he arrived in Son Bonet, Palma's airport, in the first plane that was allowed to land there after the war. He was welcomed by his friend, *Gelat*, with tears in his eyes. *Gelat* took Robert and his family back to his house, Canellún, in the only taxi that the village had. With this, he renewed a relationship with a place which had started from a casual remark made by Gertrude Stein. Robert found that his house had been kept much as he had left it in 1936. From then on, he would never leave it again except for brief work and

family related reasons. It was a relationship between a real place and an author searching for his paradise. It lasted more than 40 years.

Starting from reliable written sources I have obtained and a taped series of interviews with people who had met and known Robert Graves during his stay in Deià, I have reconstructed a portrait of the poet through each individual account. These oral sources, I think, are fundamental to outlining some aspects of the personality of the writer which, up until now, may have been left aside or hidden or not been given a special importance by critics less-able to communicate with the Deià villagers.

My research has consisted in examining the oral memories of 17 witnesses, chosen from different levels of society from the fisherman of the Cala, to an ex-minister. The memories cover a period which lasts from 1929 to 1985. Of the 17 people interviewed, 12 are men and 5 women, between 58 and 90 years old. Due to the many years that have passed since Graves's first stay (1929-1936) the number of possible candidates to be interviewed was significantly reduced. Some were already dead and others were in very poor state of health. Therefore the majority belong to the second part of his stay on the island, from 1946 to 1985.

The hardest part of the conversations was listening to the long list of the family illnesses and misfortunes of the interviewed peasants. This had to be gone through in order to break the ice and go on to the subject. But once this was overcome, communication with them was very fluid.

I have grouped those who knew Robert Graves into three different groups:

1. First from those who saw him as "the father of my friend", where, undoubtedly, the important person was William Graves, not Robert.
2. Those for whom he was just another neighbour, practically part of the landscape, therefore passing totally unnoticed as a famous writer, at least until the seventies when *I Claudius* was shown on Spanish TV.

3. As an important figure for reporters, politicians and writers.

The first of these three points of observation leads us to see him in his family environment and the first thing that surprises us is the affirmation that Robert Graves was like a god for his family. For them, he was more than just a simple father. He seemed to be above good and evil. However, the family spirit seemed to be relaxed without any apparent norms. The relationship of the writer and his children was very different from those maintained in Majorcan families. An example of this is the following anecdote: One day when Juan was sitting with one of his friend he said to his father:

(J) *Hey, look father: look under there*

(R) *Under where?*

And Juan started laughing: (J) *he has said "underwear."*

Juan liked this type of joke with his father. But such banter was totally unheard of in Spanish families where fathers usually remained rather aloof figures.

Robert was interested in what his children's friends thought about him and he used to ask them their opinion. This made them feel quite embarrassed about giving the proper answer. His house, Canellún, was a focus of attention for all kinds of people and so, the Graves' did not need to go out, others went in. They lived in a very English, self-contained, way. Their English habits extended to their diet which was a small inconvenience for the Majorcan appetite. Meals were frugal, and their Deià visitors could feel even hungry compared with the rich and heavy Spanish meals to which they were accustomed. It was also surprising to them how little Robert ate, considering his size.

The muses were so integrated in the family that they could even be a subject of jokes: *look, my father's muse*. It was evident to the Deiàns that the muses went after his fame and he, after their energy, vitality and youth. Anyway, it was difficult to understand how all of this did not upset the family. I suppose that the fact that it did not was due entirely to Beryl's balanced attitude.

The way he dressed was also completely different to that of the

other fathers. He did not wear a "mil rayas" suit (in Majorca in the 40's during the summer the typical suit of a gentleman was made of light cotton with very thin vertical white and blue stripes), neither in black or in navy blue or even with a tie. His clothes were creased (as though a precursor of Adolfo Dominguez (a well-known Spanish fashion designer whose advertising slogan is "The crease is beautiful")), the top did not match the trousers and the colours seemed quite unusual. He used to go, even to weddings, dressed in his unconventional clothes, with a stripped waistcoat and wearing a typical Majorcan espadrilles.

Regarding his character, he was known as a real friend to his friends and that he had a Midas touch for everything: people, books, authors, things, became the best in the world only because they had been chosen by him.

It was noticeable that he did not like wasting things. For example, he shaved—when he cared to shave, that is—with the little pieces of soap, which he kept together in a bowl, that were left over from larger bars. But he was also unselfish and generous as he also gave pocket money, to whichever of William's friends happened to be in the house at the time. I would even say that there were some people who tried to take advantage of his generosity and openness. When Graves arrived in Deià, his neighbours remember him as a very tall man, elegant in spite of the eccentric way he dressed, and accompanied by a rather ugly woman dressed in green velvet. They were the first foreigners who stayed to live in the village and aroused curiosity not only because of their appearance, but also because of the things they had with them, like a typewriter, which was an unheard-of gadget for the locals.

They did not yet know that he was important. They saw him as a special and daring man because he paid his bills and bought land with *Gelat*, the "cacique" of the village and one of his first and close friends in Deià. The fact he had money was a point in his favour in the eyes of the village. However, they did not understand that eccentric and slovenly way of dressing because it didn't fit in with the idea of gentry and formality that the local people had. That's why they were surprised by the interest that he aroused among the tourists—English and Spanish—who came to the village asking for his autograph. And

that the British consul in Palma—who, after all, dressed in blue and with a tie like everyone else—was extremely respectful to him when he went to the consulate in Palma, while in the village, he was considered like any one else.

His behaviour was also surprising, for example, when he received one of Franco's ministers at the gate of the house, dressed in his usual way. The only explanation that he gave was that it was the minister who came to see him, not the other way around, so he didn't see any cause to change his clothes. Or another time, when he took his children and two friends, aged 4 to 6 years old to the circus. To solve the problem of going to the toilette, he had the great idea of taking a potty with them, putting it into a bag over his shoulder. As they were in a box he put it under a seat and every time there was an emergency, he pulled it out and that was that. Or the whole question of the muses, something easily understood in the machista context of the time in which men from certain level could have a mistress. But the way he did it so openly misled them, because in Spain, the concept is to deceive one's wife and not do it with her consent and approval as it was in his case.

Everybody in the village knew about his women friends although nobody talked much about them. They thought they had a lack of class and that, generally, they were not real ladies. This was especially true for Cindy, also known due to phonetical deformation as "Sindri", which in Catalan means watermelon, who was seen as a devil because she took drugs.

The people from Deià saw all this as oddities of el senyor de Canellún. But he also provided support to his neighbours in family affairs and to the village. When the belfry was damaged by lightening, for example, he was the first one to go to the priest and give him money to repair it. Or when thanks to his influence, electricity came to the village. He was also able to keep Deià safe from the building boom of the sixties. Though with regard to this conservationist spirit, not everybody was in agreement with him. Some people thought that Graves obstructed the economic growth of the village.

Another point of controversy was that some people considered him responsible for the coming of the hippies and drugs to Deià. Perhaps not directly because of him, but because of his friends. In fact, they

expected him to speak out against it but he never did and they were a disappointed.

Ultimately, with Robert Graves, as with Archduke Luis Salvador of Austria, what remains in the collective historical memory of the people from the village are the small things like the anecdotes and the malicious gossiping more than his great work.

The fact that he was buying houses in the village for all his family was seen by the neighbours as an unmistakable sign that he wanted to stay in Deià forever. The villagers were afraid that when he died "los ingleses se lo llevarían", the English, would take him away. The fear that he could be buried far from there, seems to prove how deeply they considered him one of them. This became clear the day he died. All the men of the village took turns to carry his coffin from Canellún to the church, as a custom from the Mediterranean fishing and mountain villages. It is a custom which shows that death makes all men equal.


His image as writer in the geographically small world in which he lived, was changing and evolving according to who the observer was. As soon as Robert and Laura arrived at the village, people thought that the important writer was Laura and that Robert was her servant because he was always seen doing the shopping and looking after the house. Later on, they came to think that he had overtaken Laura in literary merit. But his status as a famous writer was not really recognised by his neighbours until *I, Claudius* was shown on the Spanish TV. With the established Majorcan "intelligentsia", the mutual disregard and lack of interest for both literary worlds kept them totally apart and separate. Furthermore, we have to take into account that Robert Graves did not have any political significance. During the Spanish civil war he was abroad most of the time and he never manifest his feelings in favour or against either of the factions.

However, those intellectuals who, for whatever reason, knew him and his work thought that basically he always wanted to excel and to stand out. They felt that more than being original he had a strong personality and this is reflected in his work. They saw him as an unequalled scholar in certain fields. At the same time, they saw that he wove a series of theories and that this totally theoretical structure, which often did not lead anywhere, was of great value as a work

of imagination. Graves devoted most of his adult life to breaking free from the mould of his strict, Victorian, education and to discover his inner essence which was that of a poet. He was known, as, above all, a man who had a poetic attitude to life.

I cannot finish without mentioning Deià once more. First, Deià is a place where nature exists in extremes—the massive mountains with their changes of colour, are welcoming and overpowering at the same time. The sea that can be very rough or calm, is ambivalent as with everything else there. The feeling that Deià provokes in people is said to accentuates the feelings already inside of you. Some people experience a sense of claustrophobia whereas others feel magnetised by the place.

Deià along with Camp de Mar and Andraitx, two neighbouring villages on the west-coast, are places where the moon is said to have a special influence, and where there are special tellurian forces too. So Deià was *the* place for a person such as Robert Graves to live his life. Not only for the practical reasons I have already mentioned but also because of these forces which are impossible to explain rationally but which exist from the moment a person feels attracted and captivated by Deià. Not everything in life can be explained, especially if one is a poet.



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