

Guest editorial

Frank Kersnowski

The writers of these reminiscences, essays, and reviews, diverse in interests and talents, provide an exceptional view of the complex genius of Robert Graves. No one attempts a single summation of the man or the writer, but each cares for the part of the garden (to borrow from Voltaire) appropriate to what he or she knows best. Thus, what Graves knew is not presented through the limitations of a commentator who might be knowledgeable about World War I yet know little about Milton or Claudius or the myths of Greece. What could have been a collection of pieces related only by subject assumes a coherence and even a consistency of voice through the intimate involvement of the writers with their subjects and through the presence and influence of Beryl Graves. She touches all, if not directly then certainly from the benefits given by her firm, yet gentle, nurturing of the genius of Robert Graves and the commentaries occasioned by it. Though vanity restricts my hand, the honesty Beryl engendered forces me to mention, even if only the title, 'Ogres and Pygmies', though none of us in this issue feels the need to supplant Graves's understanding (often quirky) with our own quirky, though more limited, views. Instead, the writers have looked closely at what Graves wrote with admiration for his accomplishments, though at times with reasonable reservations.

As Paul O'Prey indicates in his obituary of Beryl Pritchard Hodge Graves, she was much more than a wife to Mr Graves. She was not only the helpmeet who kept order in a complex and difficult household, who gave generously of her intelligence to her husband, she was a muse to be compared only with Nancy Nicholson (his first wife) and with Laura Riding (the collaborator who facilitated the demise of his first marriage). As Paul O'Prey observed, we need only read the poems Beryl inspired to understand her immense importance. I might also mention that they were together at the time he wrote *The White Goddess* and the magical poems associated with it. Any who shared the table she set for Robert Graves can attest to her generosity, her kindness, and to her forceful presence. I remember well when I scrambled out of the kitchen where Robert and I were making jam because Beryl had asked me to carry in a case of wine; and I remember even better the faxes, letters and conversations with her about my book on Graves's early poetry. We agreed on much, though not on her high estimate of Riding's poetry or on her persistence in accepting only the last version of a poem by Graves as definitive. How predictably honest she was, though, in reviewing Griselda Jackson's remembrance of the time when her parents' marriage ended, when she quoted Ms Jackson: '... there was a touch of evil in the air and Laura was its source'.

Paul Hogarth's depictions of the Mediterranean recall another time, a time which not even the restoration of Canellun can bring back. A time William Graves, who wrote his obituary in this issue, must miss more than those of us

who only touched the end of Robert's life. William's review of Roger Horrocks's biography of the film-maker Len Lye is not only about the book but also about his own life, which was touched by the casual, everyday presence of genius. Reviews here of a new 'objective' biography of Wilfred Owen and a study of Siegfried Sassoon's poetry remind us that Graves lived his life, from his earliest days, among people of talent and frequently among people who now would be called 'celebrities'. John Presley's review of my study of *Robert Graves, Poet (1914–1926)* – which was my choice of title – is so incisive as to make me squirm. As he notes, I attribute greatness to much of the poetry of this time, a time Graves spent in the company of Sassoon, Marsh, Russell, and Sackville-West. Yet a photograph of Graves stopping under an olive tree to talk with a farmer tells us much about the man, who respected honesty and courtesy as much as genius.

Robert Creeley, whose recent death is recorded in an obituary by his friend and colleague Robert J. Bertholf, recalls Graves in Mallorca during the 1950s. Because of correspondence with Martin Seymour-Smith (he of the admirable *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, who in 1954 tutored William for entrance exams to an English school), Creeley went to Mallorca. The time with Graves made him aware of writers and writing other than American. During this time Alan Sillitoe also found his way to Graves, who so much admired *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* that he recommended it to Ken McCormick, editor-in-chief of Doubleday. Doubleday missed that publication as they had missed Graves's *The Greek Myths*, an error Graves reminded McCormick of frequently.

Deyá and Graves would continue to draw the talented, the wanderers, even the opportunists. In a letter to Graves in the early seventies, I mentioned an embarrassingly bad 'interview' with him I had read in an American magazine. Unintentionally, I started a storm that revealed how a visitor had taken advantage of Graves's openness and led to Graves's angry exchange with the magazine through his agent and his American publisher. This is but one of several examples of Graves's being hoisted by his openness: a trait that was a strength in his writing but a danger to him personally.

Graves trusted his instincts, both in forming friendships and in writing. That he made mistakes is clear from his troubled and ultimately hostile relationship with one of his muses, whom he told me 'behaved badly, very badly indeed'. But as we see from Julia Simonne's reminiscence, his instincts led him to associations that were rich and sustaining. With Juli he, and she, had a jumble of roles: muse and poet, teacher and student, among others. Her reminiscence of being with Graves, before, during, and after her time as muse, takes us close to the instinctive genius of the poet and reveals as well his vulnerability. We are all in her debt for the poems she brings to us and for her memories, though I must wonder how and why she stays in the aura of what she calls 'a private conversation'. Yet, as I found in talking with the 'muse poet' Bryce Milligan,

whose *Alms for Oblivion* I review here, the attractions in such a relationship can be so intricately and intimately binding of minds and spirits that terms such as the quick and the dead are inconsequential.

That the criticism of Graves's writing has not been subjected to deconstruction (or might not reconstruction be more apt?) remains curious to me. A poet devoted to a goddess and to a muse, he did at times arouse the ire of feminists. A chronicler of World War I, he was admonished for a lack of historical accuracy by colleagues and historians. An interpreter of Greek myth, he was pilloried by some other interpreters. And a publisher refused to continue to publish him after he wrote *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*. Perhaps the very force of Graves's personality and mind warded off miscreant readings, or perhaps one of many photographs of Graves, imperious and frowning, was too intimidating for mischievous critics. In any case, the critics whose essays appear here bring to their writing knowledge and understanding, as well as understandable moments of pique.

Collectively, they bring together man and writing, each illuminating the other and each equally captivating. Individually, each essay has a source larger and more complex than the essay itself. Grevel Lindop's essay on Graves and Charles Williams originated from research he did for his edition of *The White Goddess* as part of the collected works published by Carcanet. This admirable edition is blemished, in my perhaps too intransigent view, by his following the policy to publish the final version of a poem, for (like Robert Creeley) I am most partial to the version of 'In Dedication' in the first edition. Williams's admiration for Graves's poetry is evident in the story Grevel Lindop tells of Williams's being unable to publish *The White Goddess* at Oxford University Press. That the book would be published by another 'Christian apologist', T. S. Eliot, who was also a Modernist chum of Pound's, should serve as model of critical probity and intelligence for those unable to think outside the confines of definitions.

Williams does not seem to have continued to write about Graves's poetry after 1926, when he wrote outside England and under the attempted directive of Laura Riding, and the essays concerning Graves and Riding offer views that may explain why a gentlemanly scholar and writer would for twenty years be elsewhere occupied. Carla Billitteri, in examining the meaning of collaboration, with particular attention to Graves and Riding, offers more than textual analyses as she looks into the personality of each and the effect Riding had on the locale: 'The intellectual community of Deyá is in all respects a monologic oligarchy ruled by Laura Riding'. Dunstan Ward, careful scholar and editor that he is, offers up the vision of an electronic variorum that would include all drafts and Riding's annotations. Yet here, as well, Laura Riding herself appears when Dunstan Ward comments that *Antigua, Penny, Puce* sold 2,500 copies in one month, 'not, one imagines, to the elation of Riding'.

The two remaining critical essays offer not only information about Graves's

writing but insights into the way he thought, into the process of choice and creativity. Michel Pharand not only tells of the story of *The Greek Myths* but also illustrates how Graves developed a concept from a comment made by James Metcalf about working with metal. I, too, made a comment to Graves about what I believed to be the origin of the word 'testament' which he thought quite likely valid; alas, my view does not seem to have become part of his expression: the source is important, and Metcalf was a worthy source. As Roger Bourke tells us, Graves also made a choice about precedents for his goddess when he ignored the cult of Queen Elizabeth I, 'goddess of the moon' to her courtiers, while showing interest in 'The Song of Tom O'Bedlam', as illustrative of his own views. His goddess was much darker than the one in the poems celebrating Elizabeth. The notes to this essay must be read.

So here we are with Graves the multi-talented, quirky writer and thinker creating an œuvre and a persona that would arouse feelings of love, admiration, annoyance, and rejection. Never, though, would anyone who read or met him, ignore or forget him. And in our writings, Graves himself is an inescapable presence, caught as an image we remember from meeting him, or as he describes himself in 'The Face in the Mirror', looking at his own reflected visage, complex and a bit off-centre:

I pause with razor poised, scowling derision
 At the mirrored man whose beard needs my attention,
 And once more ask him why
 He still stands ready, with a boy's presumption,
 To court the queen in her high silk pavilion.

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