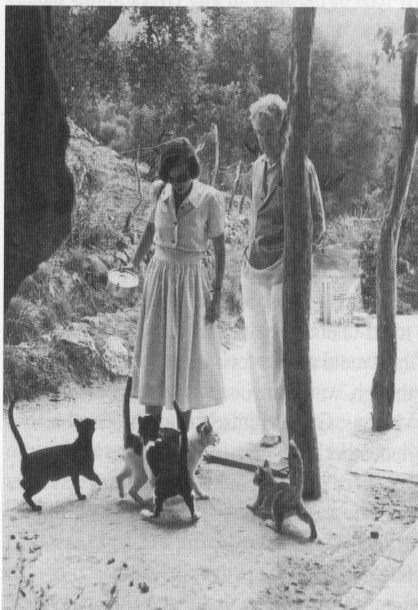


Beryl Graves (1915–2003)

The wife of Robert Graves, who inspired and edited his love poetry

Paul O'Prey



Beryl in Deyá with Robert and some of her cats, 1954

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Beryl Graves, who died aged 88 on 27 October 2003, inspired some of the finest English love poems of the twentieth century. Fifty years after most of them were written by her husband Robert, she produced (with Dunstan Ward) a scholarly edition of them that will stand as the authoritative text.

Beryl was born in Hampstead, London, the daughter of Sir Harry Pritchard, President of the Law Society, and educated at Queen's College, Harley St. In 1932, she won a place at Oxford to study politics, philosophy and economics, one of the first generation of women to be granted full membership of the university and to be awarded full degrees.

While at Oxford she developed a strong political intelligence and joined the university Labour club. On her 21st birthday she toasted the electoral victory of the revolutionary Popular Front in Spain, unaware that this would unleash a series of events that would lead her, a year later, to meet the poet and writer Robert Graves, who had also celebrated the Republican left's historical victory, but who was forced to abandon his home in Mallorca when the violence of the ensuing Civil War threatened to engulf him.

When she met him, Graves, 20 years her elder, had achieved international recognition through *Goodbye To All That* (1929) and the two Claudius novels (1934). He had moved to Mallorca in 1929, following the separation from his wife Nancy Nicholson and their four children, and the attempted suicide of his companion and literary partner, the American poet Laura Riding. He and Riding settled in the idyllic mountain village of Deyá, on the north-west coast of the island, where they created a small artistic community. By the time they left in 1936, Graves had recreated himself as a poet under Riding's stern influence, but their relationship had soured.

Beryl and Laura were alike in that each had a sharp intellect and formidable strength of character, but where Laura could be delusional and judgmental, Beryl was the embodiment of sanity and tolerance. She was also young, strikingly beautiful and had a playful sense of humour.

When Riding expelled Graves from her circle in 1938, he and Beryl were already in love. Graves's loves were never without complications, however. This time it was the fact that Beryl was already married to his friend Alan Hodge. Beryl and Alan settled matters quickly and without fuss and he and Graves went on to write two books together.

In the 1930s and 1940s Graves wrote the extraordinary group of love poems to Beryl which have established his poetic reputation. These poems celebrate a sense of liberation and hope, at having been rescued from personal destruction by love, as well as his deep admiration for Beryl's strength and self-containment:

In your sleepy eyes I read the journey
Of which disjointedly you tell; which stirs
My loving admiration, that you should travel
Through nightmare to a lost and moated land,
Who are timorous by nature.

There is also a playfulness, as in 'Despite and Still':

Have you not read
The words in my head,
And I made part
Of your own heart?
We have been such as draw
The losing straw –
You of your gentleness,
I of my rashness,

Both of despair –
 Yet still might share
 This happy will:
 To love despite and still.

After the war, Graves returned to Deyá, this time with Beryl and their three young children, William, Lucia and Juan. Their fourth child, Tomás, was born in Spain. Graves found Canelluñ, the house he had left at a few hours' notice in 1936, to be untouched by the war. Beryl created an atmosphere of friendship, fun and creativity around Canelluñ that had been missing in the ideologically driven and self-consciously artistic community established by Laura.

Whereas Laura had tried to create a community firmly in her own image, with herself as its centre, Beryl was unassuming, with a tendency to put others, and especially Robert, before herself. As Graves became increasingly famous, she welcomed endless visitors from around the world and presided with grace and wit over numerous dinners, picnics, parties and impromptu plays and readings. The important things of life became embedded in the daily rituals of playing with children, gardening, harvesting the olives, cooking for friends. She had a passion for keeping animals, from the pair of alligators she had raised as a child, to the Abyssinian cats she flew over from Harrods. She travelled widely, read voraciously in English, Spanish and Russian, and studied the night sky.

Graves's poetry, however, was fuelled by an emotional turmoil which a settled home did not provide. As he became older, he became more, rather than less, obsessed with achieving a body of poetry that he described as a pursuit of 'personal truth', and a resistance to the erosion of value in a society driven by money, power and technology. Such poetry came only when 'the emotions of love, fear, anger, or grief are profoundly engaged' and he orchestrated this by developing romantic attachments to a series of four young women who became known as his muses.

After the First World War he had resisted psychiatric treatment for his shell shock, because he feared that a cure would make him a less interesting writer. It was, he said, 'less important to be well than to be a good poet'. In a similar way, it now seemed less important to be happy, than to pursue his poetic vocation to what seemed its inevitable conclusion.

For the most part, the muse relationships were idealistic and platonic. Even so, Beryl's position was understandably difficult. She responded with characteristic strength of character. She shared Graves's vision of the importance and value of his work as a poet and maintained an unwavering belief in him and their pledge to love each other 'despite and still'.

The result was that their love endured, and all but one of the muses joined her own circle of close friends. In his last years Beryl nursed Robert through a form of Alzheimer's with compassion and devotion.

After his death in 1985, she edited, with Dunstan Ward, Graves's *Complete Poems* in three volumes (finished 1999), an outstanding scholarly achievement made all the more remarkable by the fact that she herself had inspired or enabled the best of those poems to be written.

She is survived by her four children.

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Beryl Graves, Editor, and Honorary President of the Robert Graves Society, born 22 February 1915, died 27 October 2003.

Paul O'Prey is Vice-Chancellor of Roehampton University.

Paul was born in Kendal, in what was then Lancashire, but his family moved to Manchester, where he attended St. Mary's School. He was a keen reader from his father's wrapping paper when still a schoolboy, and he collected modern paintings and drawings in the Manchester art galleries. After taking evening art classes, Paul was encouraged in 1933 to sit for a scholarship at the Manchester School of Art. He was awarded the scholarship and moved to St. Martin's School of Art. As a young man Paul joined the Communist Party and served in the International Brigade to fight Franco in the Spanish Civil War. When the Second World War broke out he worked in the Ministry of Information. In 1942 he married Doreen Constance, the first of his two children. During the war he received commissions to draw the front-line troops and to illustrate the early trips he accompanied his friend, the poet Robert Graves, to the Middle East. This was done for the *Collected Poems of Robert Graves* (1951) and *Robert Graves: A Biography* (1959). In 1945 he moved to the United States where he became disillusioned with Communism and dropped it completely when he saw the results of the Russian Revolution. He then lived in the States for several years, working for the *New York Times* and finishing *Graves' Complete Poems* in 1959. He then moved to London and worked for the *New York Times* and *The Guardian*. He included *Graham Greene Country* (1962) and *The Mediterranean Shore* (1963) in his more than twenty countries, and *The Mediterranean Shore* (1963) devoted to Lawrence Durrill's Provence.

In 1974 Paul was elected an associate member of the Royal Academy and