

From Soldier Poet to Major Poet: Robert Graves Exhibited

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'I have never been able to understand the contention', Robert Graves wrote in *The Crowning Privilege*, 'that a poet's life is irrelevant to his work'. In Graves's own case, certainly, they seem inextricably inter-connected, as was vividly illustrated by two major exhibitions in London and Madrid of books, manuscripts, letters, diaries, photographs, personal effects and memorabilia.

Graves was one of the 'Twelve Soldier Poets of the First World War' in the exhibition 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' which opened at the Imperial War Museum, London, on 31 October 2002 and ran until 27 April 2003. There was a separate section for each of the twelve poets. Of these, seven died in the war: Rupert Brooke (1887–1915, aged 27), Julian Grenfell (1888–1915, aged 27), Francis Ledwidge (1887–1917, aged 29), Wilfred Owen (1893–1918, aged 25), Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918, aged 27), Charles Sorley (1895–1915, aged 20), and Edward Thomas (1878–1917, aged 39). Ivor Gurney (1890–1937) died at the age of 47, after spending the last fifteen years in an asylum; Edmund Blunden (1896–1974, aged 77), David Jones (1895–1974, aged 79) and Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967, aged 81) were severely affected by their war experience, as was of course Robert Graves (1895–1985, aged 90), who outlived them all.

In Graves's section of the exhibition, manuscript drafts of his wartime poems included that moving tribute to his friendship with Sassoon, 'Two Fusiliers'; 'A Dead Boche', with Sassoon's pencilled emendations; and an early (and illustrated) version of 'Escape', mythologizing, by no means just facetiously, his 'death' of wounds in the Battle of the Somme ('But I *was* dead, an hour or more') and his fateful survival. There was also a page (claimed to be the only one extant) of the 1916 novel based on his first months in France, which Graves had to 'retranslate [...] into history' in 1929 for *Good-bye to All That* (p. 127).

The interest of such documents was enhanced by their being placed in the historical and literary context. Contemporary photographs conveyed Graves's formidable physical presence, as did, most strikingly, an Eric Kennington pastel drawing of him in uniform, reproduced (p. 82) in the poet and critic Jon Stallworthy's superb book published for the exhibition. Graves's knapsack was there, and the volume of Keats given by his father which he carried with him in the trenches, with drafts of poems for *Over the Brazier* on the inside front cover and the first six leaves. Among the letters on display was one he wrote to his Charterhouse friend Cyril Hartmann at Oxford on 25 October 1914: 'I can't imagine why I joined: not for sentiment or patriotism certainly & I am violating all my most cherished anti-war principles but as D. N. B. [Nevill Barbour, another school friend] says "France is the only place for a gentleman now,"

principles or no principles.’ And there was this letter to Graves’s mother from Colonel C. H. R. (‘Tibs’) Crawshay:

Dear M^{rs} Graves,

I very much regret to have to write, and tell you your Son has died of wounds. He was very gallant, & was doing so well, and is a great loss.

He was hit by a shell & very badly wounded, & died on the way down to the base I believe.

[...]

To see Crawshay’s actual handwriting was to recapture something of the immediacy of the occasion, its urgency indicated by the way, in a formal letter of condolence, he at times makes do with a plus sign (ampersand above), and links some words to the following one. Crawshay had to write to the next-of-kin of ‘the six or seven officers who had been killed. [...] Later he made out the official casualty list and reported me died of wounds. It was a long casualty list, because only eighty men were left in the battalion’ (*Good-bye to All That*, p. 274).

Interestingly, the original letter is dated ‘20. 7. 16’ – i.e. the same day that Graves was wounded – and not ‘22 / 7 / 16’, the date of the letter as printed in *Good-bye to All That*, though a few lines above Graves says it was written on the morning of 21 July. (Graves’s biographers do not mention the discrepancy. Richard Perceval Graves takes 21 July as the date of composition, Miranda Seymour 22 July; Martin Seymour-Smith gives no date.)

This was just one of the connections between the work and the life illuminated by this outstanding exhibition. What made it so memorable was the sheer quality of the exhibits, and the flair and taste with which they were presented. For each of the twelve, the selection of manuscripts and typescripts included key poems: Brooke’s ‘The Soldier’, of course, and Grenfell’s ‘Into Battle’; Sassoon’s ‘The General’, ‘“They”’, ‘Base Details’; Rosenberg’s ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’ and ‘Dead Man’s Dump’; Thomas’s ‘Rain’, ‘As the team’s head-brass’, ‘Lights Out’; Owen’s ‘Insensibility’, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, ‘Strange Meeting’, and, of necessity, ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, with emendations by Sassoon. The personal effects, too, were evocative: Edward Thomas’s pocket watch, stopped at the instant of his death at 7.36 a.m. in the first hour of the Battle of Arras on 9 April 1917, and his diary, creased by the impact of the shell that killed him; the Browning revolver used by Sassoon (‘Mad Jack’); Julian Grenfell’s ‘Game Book’, recording pigs, partridges and ‘Pomeranians’ with apparently equal satisfaction.

The physical reality of the battlefield was brought closer by paintings and sketches – Paul Nash, Isaac Rosenberg, David Jones – and by emblems and relics – ears of wheat and red poppies, bits of rusty barbed wire, a trench shovel, a battered helmet only recently dug up The subtle lighting and the back-

ground music of Gurney's nocturnes added to the poignant atmosphere.

Through the courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, and in particular two of the staff responsible for the exhibition, Angela Godwin and Sophie Bonner, members of the Robert Graves Society enjoyed a private viewing on the evening of Saturday 8 February 2003. Among those who attended were Professor John Kelly, the Society's Honorary Vice-President, and Christine Kelly, and Robert Graves's daughters Lucia Graves and Catherine Dalton. Lucia Graves read some of Graves's posthumously published wartime poems – 'The Patchwork Flag', 'Night March', 'The Survivor Comes Home' – and 'To Lucia at Birth' ('Then reckon time by what you are or do, / Not by the epochs of the war they spread'). Her selection pointed both to what Graves shared with the other eleven poets, and to how he differed from all of them. That his youth, too, was in a sense 'doomed' by the war is evident in 'The Survivor Comes Home', a poem with an almost Macbeth-like horror at blood and death, anticipating the suffocating nightmare of 'The Pier-Glass' and 'The Castle'. But the masterly poise of 'To Lucia at Birth', written in 1943, testifies to the fact that Graves did survive, not only physically but poetically. Unlike Blunden and Sassoon, he was able to move on after the conflict ended: the 'soldier poet' re-shaped himself psychologically, spiritually, artistically, during the 1920s, making himself into a major poet whose war poems are only one part of a vast and varied oeuvre. The finest poems about war were to emerge long afterwards: 'Recalling War' (an emended typescript was on display) was written in 1935, while 'The Last Day of Leave' appeared in November 1947.

Graves regarded himself as one of a select few, the *deuteropotmoi* or 'The Second-Fated', as he titled an even later poem about war, also among the exhibition's manuscripts. His escape from the Underworld confirmed his destiny: to serve the Muse. His lifelong commitment to the poet's vocation was evoked by the title of the Madrid exhibition, 'Robert Graves. Una vida de poeta', on one of a pair of tall banners suspended from columns in the imposing art deco foyer at the Círculo de Bellas Artes (near the Prado and Thyssen museums). On the banner opposite was Daniel Farson's 1954 photograph of Graves strolling past the terrace of the Bar Bosch in downtown Palma, dressed in crumpled summer cottons, wide-brimmed straw hat in hand, a striped silk scarf, pinned at the throat, adding a characteristic dandyish touch; but it is the frown and the preoccupied gaze away from the camera ('Grey haunted eyes, absent-mindedly glaring') that unmistakably mark out the poet.

Looking the part, and dressing for it, was not the least manifestation of that poetic single-mindedness, just as it was for Graves's *bête noire* Yeats; and like Yeats, Graves was superbly photogenic. 'Una vida de poeta' featured a series of huge blow-ups, accompanied by quotations in large print; linking these, and running right round the Sala Goya, was a series of smaller photographs, forming a pictorial biography. Ranging from family snaps to studies by Bill Brandt, Daniel Farson, Tom Weedon, Ward Hutchinson, Rab Shiell, Tom Blau, they

traced the poet's evolution from the vulnerable schoolboy to the seer-cum-Roman emperor of old age. Among them were some of the favourite items in the Graves iconography, but unfamiliar images too. Perhaps Bill Brandt's were the most telling: 'What I Believe About Ghosts', that strange 1941 Devon portrait of Graves and Beryl Hodge with their Jewish refugee friend Marion McFadyen; or a disquieting shot, again in 1941, of Graves climbing up steps from the fishing port at Brixham, sombre and stylish in his black Spanish hat, looking utterly at odds with the picturesque scene behind him: a revenant ...

The viewer wishing to document these photographs could turn to the exhibits in the display cases that filled the room. There was, for instance, Graves's letter of 25 February 1937 to Edward Marsh, referring to Laura Riding's attempted suicide: 'Thinking it all over, I have a *great deal* to be grateful for to you over a very long stretch of years, and especially during the War and on a certain occasion in 1929'; diary entries for 3 August 1936, recording his departure from Mallorca with Riding at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, and for 10 February 1939: 'A walk with Beryl to the Lake after dark. [...] Feeling thoroughly happy, somehow'; the manuscript of 'The Moon Ends in Nightmare', written several months later, in which he has changed the penultimate line from 'And there I drowned, and left my corpse in mud' to 'And did I drown, leaving my corpse in mud?'; and a draft of one of the most beautiful of the 1940s love poems, 'She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep'.

The manuscripts and typescripts lent by the Poetry/Rare Book Collection at the State University of New York at Buffalo (sadly, an accident prevented Dr Robert Bertholf, the curator, from attending) spanned some sixty years, from 'The First Poem' (January 1910) – 'No, not for me the lute or lyre!' – to 'Arrow on the Vane' – 'I more than love, / As when you drew me bodily from the dead', from *The Green-Sailed Vessel* (1971); while the first editions of Graves's poetry began with *Over the Brazier* (1916) and ended with the Carcanet *Complete Poems in One Volume* (2000), plus a preview of the Penguin Classics version (April 2003) – the cover, with another Bill Brandt portrait on the front.

While this impressively mounted exhibition focussed on Robert Graves the poet, the work of the classical and biblical scholar, the historical novelist, the critic and essayist, was amply represented too. Films on Graves's life were screened in a room adjoining the Sala Goya.

The exhibition was curated for the Círculo de Bellas Artes by Aurora Sotelo, who also edited the handsome catalogue. It was sponsored by the British Council, the Fundación Sa Nostra, the Ayuntamiento de Deyá, the Consell Insular de Mallorca, the Ayuntamiento de Palma, the Govern Balear and the Grupo Serra. Exhibits were lent by SUNY at Buffalo, the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, and St John's College, Oxford.

Through the generous support of the Círculo de Bellas Artes and its Director, César Antonio Molina, the Robert Graves Society held its second annual luncheon on the opening day of the exhibition, 5 December 2002, in the centre's

elegant Sala de Juntas. The guests of honour were the Director of the British Council in Spain, Peter Sandiford, the Cultural Attaché at the Irish Embassy, Pádraig Mac Coscair, and Ann Mac Coscair; Professor John Kelly and Christine Kelly; and Alan Sillitoe and Ruth Fainlight, both of whom gave readings at the centre later in the week. Members of the Graves family who attended the luncheon were Sam and Anneliese Graves; Georgina Manuela Graves; Lucia Graves and Frank Riess; and Natalia Farran Graves, who read a selection of Graves's poetry; William Graves was at another lunch for the Spanish dignitaries. The late Beryl Graves, the first Honorary President of the Robert Graves Society, who was unable to attend, sent a message of greetings and good wishes by phone during the luncheon.

'Robert Graves. Una vida de poeta' was given substantial media coverage and attracted large crowds. It continued in Madrid until the end of the month, and was then shown in Palma and in provincial centres on the mainland.

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NOTES

1. *Anthem for Doomed Youth: Twelve Soldier Poets of the First World War* (London: Constable, in association with the Imperial War Museum, 2002).