

2004 International Robert Graves Conference in Paris

With a direct view over the treetops of the Esplanade des Invalides to the Eiffel Tower, the Paris location of the Sixth International Robert Graves Conference was hard to beat, and the conference itself was generally rated as a real success.

'Robert Graves and the Experience of War' was the theme of the conference, held by the Robert Graves Society and the St John's College, Oxford, Robert Graves Trust from 6–10 July 2004. It was hosted by the British Council, France, and the University of London Institute in Paris, in their elegant early nineteenth century mansion in the Faubourg Saint-Germain district.

The conference theme was eloquently established in the opening key address, 'The Great War and Graves's Memory', by Nicholas (D. N. G.) Carter (University of Trieste), author of what many regard as the finest study of Graves's poetic *œuvre*, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (Macmillan, 1989). The primacy of the poetry was affirmed in his moving meditation on the theme of time and the place of war in Graves's life and work, evoked through luminous interpretations of, in particular, 'The Last Day of Leave' and 'Recalling War'.

Three further key addresses included 'The Literary Ramifications of the Great War on Robert Graves: Good-bye to What Still Goes On', by the founding president of the Robert Graves Society, Patrick Quinn (Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, Mass.); 'Poetry and Experience in the Great War', by Dominic Hibberd, author of *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002); and 'The Eagle of the Twentieth': The Experience of War in *I, Claudius* and *Count Belisarius*', by Colin Wells (Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas).

In a 'first' for a Robert Graves conference, a live videoconference link with the USA, organised and sponsored by the British Council and Illinois State University, enabled the Society's Vice-President for the Americas, John Woodrow Presley (Illinois State University), to give a special talk on *The Anger of Achilles*; other special talks were 'Actuality and Imagination: The Poet as Eye-Witness', by Helen McPhail (Wilfred Owen and War Poets Association), a foretaste of the Somme (see below), and 'Artistic Truth and *Good-bye to All That*', by Richard Perceval Graves, one of the biographers of Robert Graves.

There were also special presentations on the *Fundació Robert Graves*, Mallorca, by William Graves; the Robert Graves Diary Project, by Elizabeth Grove-White and Chris Petter (University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada); and the Robert Graves Trust website, by Ian Firla (St John's College Robert Graves Trust).

A highlight of the conference was a day in the Somme, authoritatively guided

by Helen McPhail, co-author (with Philip Guest) of *Graves and Sassoon* (Battleground Europe Series, Pen and Sword, 2002). After a visit to the World War I museum in Péronne, 'l'Historial de la Grande Guerre', there was a tour of battle sites where Graves, Sassoon and other writers served, including Mametz Wood and High Wood, the tomb of their friend David Thomas at Fricourt, and Bazentin cemetery, in which Graves was hit by shell splinters on 20 July 1916, nearly dying of his wounds.

Another notable conference event was a poetry reading by Ruth Fainlight, Alan Sillitoe, Jon Stallworthy, Grevel Lindop and Stephen Romer. The poets first read poems by Robert Graves which had a particular appeal to them personally, and spoke of their relationship with him; and then read a selection of their own work. The reading was followed by a *vin d'honneur* and dinner with the poets at a nearby *brasserie*.

During the conference two events were attended by the British Ambassador, Sir John Holmes: the opening reception and address (which was followed by a welcoming dinner at the Esplanade restaurant *Chez Françoise*); and the launch, attended by some 150 guests, of the War Poets Association at the British Ambassador's residence, the splendid former home of Napoleon's favourite sister, Pauline. This opening event organized by the new Association featured a memorable reading of poems by an impressive number of close relatives of the major First World War poets, among them Margi Blunden (daughter of Edmund Blunden); Lucia Graves and William Graves (daughter and son of Robert Graves); Richard Perceval Graves (Robert Graves's nephew and biographer); Peter Owen (nephew of Wilfred Owen); and Isaac Horvitch (Isaac Rosenberg's nephew). Poems by Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg were read by these members of their families and Richard Perceval Graves read poems by Siegfried Sassoon. Dr Dominic Hibberd, writer, critic and biographer of Wilfred Owen (who, with the UK's Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, is one of the first two Honorary Fellows of the War Poets Association) inspired the audience with an opening address on the place of war poetry in history and society.

There were more than 50 registered conference participants, with special guests taking numbers at some events over 60. The participants included the provost of an American University, a British vice-chancellor, and eight other professors, representing universities in the United States (nine), Canada, England, Northern Ireland, France, Italy, Spain, Cyprus, Israel, Australia and New Zealand. Among the independent scholars were the critics and biographers Dominic Hibberd and Richard Perceval Graves (as noted above), and the critic and novelist Clive Sinclair.

In all, twenty-six papers were given at the conference. The broader context was examined in the first session, with three papers on the Great War and its representation: Tom Quinn (Queen's University, Belfast), 'Robert Graves and the Writers of Modern Memory of the Great War'; Dawn B. Caplinger

(Sam Houston State University, Texas), 'He Said? She Said? Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That* versus Evadne Price's *Not So Quiet....*: A Study of the Gendering Discourse of War'; and Elizabeth Prelinger (Georgetown University, Washington), 'Brushes with Death: Images of World War I'.

'War and the Goddess' was the title of two sessions grouping papers by Chris Nicholson (University College Northampton), 'From All That to All This: Trauma, Repressions and Integration'; Maria Palaska (University of Essex), 'The Ultimate Trench: Poetic Consciousness and the Experience of War'; Andrew Painter (independent scholar), 'The Goddess with Trench Feet'; Fran Brearton (Queen's University, Belfast), 'Revising the Revival: Graves's *The White Goddess*'; Nancy Rosenfeld (University of Haifa & Jezreel Valley College), 'The Wars of the Trees: Robert Graves's Battle of the Trees and Jotham's Fable of the Trees'; and Selma Karayalçın (Girne American University, Cyprus, and University College Northampton), 'Graves's Heroic Death: An Exploration of the Significance of Robert Graves's War Experience in *The Golden Fleece*'.

Two sessions were devoted to Robert Graves's poetry: Frank Kersnowski (Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas), 'The Pier-Glass: Visions and Revisions'; Matthew Betts (University of York), 'What Venus Did with Mars': 'Lost Love' and the Memory of War'; Julia Simonne (dancer and former 'muse'), 'The Love that We Contest': Conflict in Graves's Late Love Poetry'; Paul O'Prey (Roehampton University), 'Robert Graves, the Great War and Literary Survival'; and Dunstan Ward (University of London Institute in Paris), 'Posthumous Poet: Unpublished War Poems of Robert Graves'.

The literary scope of the conference was extended by a group of papers on contemporaries of Robert Graves and their response to the Great War: Yeats, by John Kelly (St John's College, Oxford), Honorary Vice-President of the Robert Graves Society and editor of Yeats's correspondence; American poets, by Robert J. Bertholf (State University of New York at Buffalo); and French poets, by Anne Mounic (University of Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle.) In a parallel session Charles Ferrall (Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand) spoke on 'Early Twentieth Century Literature and 'The Great Sacrifice', Clive Sinclair (novelist and critic) on Isaac Rosenberg, and Adrian Grafe (University of Paris IV Sorbonne) on Edward Thomas.

Many Graves scholars and enthusiasts, together with family members, contributed to the success of the conference, which was organised by Dunstan Ward, President of the Robert Graves Society, and Patrick Villa, Secretary/Treasurer.

DW/PV/LG