

An Unrecorded WWI Publication by Robert Graves

Eric Webb

Is my Team Ploughing . . . ?

PAS-DE-CALAIS.

September 15th.

I met the Daviesite¹ at the “Globe.” I’m afraid I mayn’t name the exact town in Northern France ornamented and refreshed by this glorious institution, but anyone who has been out any length of time with the First Army could tell you. Every officer’s charger in at least eight divisions knows the way to its doors: from early dawn to the curfew toll they are lined up in the sunny square outside, chestnut, black, roan, bay, sorrel and mouse-coloured, waiting for their masters that are drinking inside and rather resentful of the dirty little *gamins* who hold their heads, smoking cheap cigarettes and shouting obscene cosmopolitanisms at passers-by.

Nutshell novels of the dim golden future age known as *après la guerre* will never start with the conventional pre-war: “They were dining at the Ritz,” or, “They sat discussing quails and champagne at the Criterion,” but simply, “They walked into the Globe and called for cocktails.” Which was what we did.

The Daviesite said brusquely but not unfriendly, that he was condemned if he expected to meet me again. “Weren’t you killed at Hooge?” he asked, rather unreasonably. I suggested he was a little premature, but perhaps in view of immediate future military operations

“Going over the parapet?” his eyes asked. I answered him, perhaps next week: anyhow he’d have a cocktail with me?

“Chin-chin,” he said and drank. “Floreat² and all that,” said I. And then of course we started talking of Old Carthusians we’d

met and the casualty lists, and so on.

“Was down at Ch’ouse³ last week,” he said moodily, “on leave.”

“Why so sad?” I asked.

“Oh! because it was empty – holidays, of course – and people were building things all over Lessington,⁴ and at the top of the hill as you come up from Bridge,⁵ Gymnasia⁶ and Armouries⁷ and a new playroom for the Beaks.⁸ ... By the way, you had some connexion with the Maiden Aunt, didn’t you? Pink production,⁹ tizzy¹⁰ a month?”

“What, the *Car*.?¹¹ Yes, once. How’s she running now?”

“Spitting blood, I’m afraid. Mr. Lindsey¹² howling for copy, Editor for contributions: meteorological report¹³ only coming in regularly from Robinites,¹⁴ and joint-editor collecting Mr. Stokes’¹⁵ clippings from the Daily Press and pretending he cut them out himself. Fact is, everybody’s too busy becoming War-lords to care whether the number of pages in the current number is four or forty....”

The Daviesite and I parted most affectionately, and I smiled to remember how I had once loathed the man. Well, here was an excuse for writing to my dear old pink friend¹⁶ and unburdening my home-sick heart. Does she want contributions? She shall have one, by Jove! I’ll tell her of the weird hour in the early morning, which is known as “Stand-to,” and which, pray Heaven, after the war I may never, never meet again, when a weary night has worn to its close, all patrols have come in, and in case of an attack by the enemy in the half light every rifle available is ready at the parapet. A wholesome morning colour spreads in the East behind the German trenches, the stars go out one by one and great water-rats scamper back into the canal from their nightly scavenging operations in the trenches. Light broadens more and more, and soon the order comes down “From Captain Curse’em, day sentries”: then all but these unfortunates and the officer and N.C.O. on duty roll off into scrapen holes to sleep till breakfast. Absolutely nothing doing. No shelling, no “minnies,”¹⁷ no “torps,”¹⁸ no sniping even; only a couple of our aeroplanes¹⁹ high over the lines and little puffs of white shrapnel²⁰ marking their

course back for miles. We're sleepy, so's Fritz, and there's a lull in the Battle of Slime-pits.

So now the O.C. forgets the war for awhile and his mind inevitably turns to thoughts of Holy Charterhouse, and he asks questions like the anxious one put by a dead Shropshire lad,²¹ which serves as heading to this letter. O Holy Charterhouse, once alternately loved and loathed, and now only loved, and the whole tribe of Carthusians! Noble pagans these for the most part, whose heathen virtues on reconsideration seem always to have outweighed their more civilised vices. But there was and will always be a little rebellious section of classical scholars whose idealism is as laudable as their lack of prudence is regrettable.

Intellectual and Athletic prigs: do they still fight, or in these cranky times has an armistice sprung up between them sealed by the blood of the slain?

He wonders what the First Eleven is like now and whether they win matches. Have boxing and fencing stopped since the departure of Sergeant Jerry Singleton,²² little Tommy Wright²² and old fat Harris²² with his bland smile, tattooed arms, and the voluminous protective plating of "old iron."²³ What of little School Tennis so long trampled in the mud and only last year prodded and oxygenated into open revolt against Cricket, the tyrant? Has it drawn sword and fought manfully for its liberty like brave Belgium,²⁴ or has the poor little thing lost heart and relapsed into a last decline among the old broken asphalt and scraps of rusty wire netting, to become presently as extinct as the old school sport of hoop bowling?

He wonders whether his name is still bandied about in changing rooms, and who would say what if they saw his name in a casualty list, and how soon he'd be bunked²⁵ if he were back at Ch'ouse, and whether the C.O.T.C.²⁶ knows anything about bombs and m.g.²⁷ and where Fug Shop²⁸ and Stinks Buildings²⁹ are engaged in munition making; and so on, till the sun shines warmly and the hands of his wrist-watch point to five o'clock, and he thanks God and staggers off to Company H.Q. (a dry but somewhat verminous culvert in the canal bank), and having roused in his place the

junior subaltern who snores near the entrance in a fleece-lined Burberry and a waterproof sheet, he lies down himself, sleeps, and dreams it is Sunday morning before Chapel and he is walking arm-in-arm with someone round Cabbage Patch,³⁰ counter-clockwise, as usual, a pink carnation in his buttonhole³¹ and a red anthem book under his arm.

OLIM TOGATUS

Notes and Comments

The short article above was published in the October 1915 edition of *The Carthusian*, the magazine of Charterhouse public school: my own old school, on the outskirts of Godalming, near Guildford, Surrey. This is its first republication since.

Altogether some thirty ‘letters from the front’ from old boys serving in or alongside the armed forces appeared in *The Carthusian* during the war years, with a handful more in its sister publication, the school’s arts magazine *The Greyfriar*. Several of these were published pseudonymously, as here, or anonymously, so that their authors are now unguessable beyond a rather broad range of possibilities, but ‘Is my Team Ploughing ...?’ contains a number of internal clues to narrow the focus, and pointing very persuasively towards a particular individual: the future writer, academic and poet Robert Graves (24 July 1895–7 December 1985).

Graves entered Gownboys house at Charterhouse in the Oration Quarter³² 1909 as a Junior Foundation Scholar, leaving at the end of the Summer Quarter 1914 with an exhibition to St John’s College, Oxford. The Great War supervening, he then promptly took a commission in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Further biographical details are largely beyond the compass, or the purpose, of this paper.

The general tone suggests that the author and ‘the Daviesite’ are young men, and close contemporaries, who have left school only

recently. For the purposes of this letter at least, the author presents himself more as schoolboy than as soldier: a schoolboy albeit with a singularly quizzical view of his alma mater. He appears primarily to be addressing recent Old Carthusians, still familiar with the school's day-to-day life, and boys still there.

That in turn suggests that the two left in the summer of 1914, at the end of the SQ, immediately before the British Declaration of War on 4 August, or not more than a quarter or two before, and perhaps even a little later. The Daviesite may very well have left later than the author as he seems more up to date regarding some difficulties in running *The Carthusian* during wartime, but he could not have learnt of these on his recent visit, with the school empty during the holidays. He and the author show a joint interest in the magazine's production and a knowledge of the minutiae which argue for previous close involvement.

The author is clearly familiar with some recent Charterhouse 'issues': most especially the feud between the Sixth and the 'Bloods', the sporting elite, alluded to by Robert Graves in *Goodbye to All That*. With his reference to the 'lack of prudence' of some of the classical scholars he seems perhaps to hint too at the scandal of the acrostic poems linking two older Bloods' names to those of two younger boys, written by two sixth form members of Guy Kendall's³³ Poetry Society, whose publication in the July 1912 edition of *The Carthusian* led to the Headmaster Frank Fletcher's³⁴ suppression of the society that year. Graves, a keen member but innocent of any direct involvement in the scandal, was furiously upset.

He mentions too 'little School Tennis', a topic which particularly exercised Graves. As Graves tells us, in their last year at Charterhouse, seeking about for a stick with which to beat the school authorities, he and his co-editor of *The Carthusian* Nevill Barbour³⁵ hit on lawn-tennis, to which in reality they were not seriously devoted. They 'revealed the scandal that subscriptions to the two derelict tennis-courts had been, for several years, appropriated by the cricket committee'. Through their efforts these were renovated and a fund started which eventually provided

several more.

The author is also familiar with some recently departed 'characters' such as the school sergeant: 'stout Sergeant Harris the boxing instructor' as Graves describes him. It was with Harris's training and encouragement, and fortified by cherry whisky, that Graves won two cups in the school boxing competition in 1913. The author shows signs of a particular interest in boxing and fencing, which were far less regarded than football and cricket by the generality. Graves detested team sports; he appears to have concurred wholeheartedly with Kipling's jibe in 'The Islanders' at 'the flannelled fools at the wicket' and 'the muddied oafs at the goals'.

We deduce that the author was not a Daviesite himself, otherwise he would not have referred to his companion as such. Self-evidently, he writes excellently well, although his tone is not altogether attractive. There is an air of conceit, of studied insouciance, an undertow of almost psychopathic unconcern for the feelings of others. Will all his readers appreciate his not-quite-gentle mockery? Will the Daviesite like to read that the author once loathed him; will the Daviesite's friends and relations if he dies in the forthcoming battle, or if the author himself dies? Is this mere juvenile irony, wanting only greater maturity as a corrective, or does it bespeak some deeper character flaw? Is the author only 'playing at tigers', as Anthony Blanche accuses Charles Ryder in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, or is he out for blood?

As to his army service, we know, because he tells us, that he is serving with British First Army on the Western Front. We know that he is in the infantry, as opposed to, for example, the artillery or the Army Service Corps, because he tells us he is stationed in the trenches. He hints at soon 'going over the top', 'perhaps next week'. In First Army in September 1915 that can only mean that he is to fight in the forthcoming Battle of Loos.³⁶ The entire strength of First Army was to be thrown into this battle, even to the Corps' infantry reserves. We know too that his battalion is stationed near a canal; in the Loos sector that can only be the

La Bassée canal: a broad, industrial waterway which marked the northern limit of the battlefield proper. All of that places him firmly in Second Division, which was then stationed on the canal and, in the battle, tasked to attack along both banks.

That in turn convincingly identifies the nearby town in the Pas-de-Calais as Béthune, where there was a popular drinking place, the Café du Globe, reserved for officers and for French civilians. Dr Travis Hampson, an officer in the R.A.M.C.³⁷ who served for a period in the Loos sector, records in his war diary: ‘During quiet times when round about Béthune, the meeting place for officers was the Café du Globe in the square of the town. Here at about 11.00 am one generally drank champagne cocktails at one franc a time – 10d.’ The Prince of Wales, later briefly Edward VIII, then Duke of Windsor, was also a subaltern in this sector; but by intention at least he was kept well out of harm’s way on the Army Staff. As Graves tells us in *Goodbye to All That*, his ‘favourite rendezvous’ was the Café du Globe. Graves ‘once heard him complain indignantly that General French³⁸ had refused to let him go up into the line’.

Béthune was then a major hub of military activity, including what is today known as R & R. Bernard Adams³⁹ served at Loos in the First Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers. In his memoirs *Nothing of Importance* (1917) he writes: ‘During an afternoon in Béthune one could do all the shopping one required, and get a haircut and shampoo as well. Expensive cocktails were obtainable at the local bar; there was also a famous tea-shop’, with ‘dainty tables’. There were: ‘chemists flaunting auto-strop razors, stationers offering “Tommy’s writing-pad” and tailors showing English officers’ uniforms in their windows, besides all the goods of a large and populous town’: all of this a mere five to six miles as the crow flies from the front line.

The Daviesite remarks on our author’s supposed death at Hooge, suggesting, although by no means solidly confirming, that the author, or his unit, may formerly have served there. Hooge was to the north in the Ypres salient, which was Second Army’s sector. It was a frequent trouble-spot but earlier in 1915 it had seen four

particularly fierce actions: on 2 June, 19 and 30 July, and 9 August. Involved in these were Third, Sixth and Fourteenth Divisions, of which Third and Fourteenth were later to make subsidiary attacks at Bellewaarde in connection with the Battle of Loos. Units were commonly redeployed and/or reconstituted to meet the exigencies of warfare but no constituent brigade or battalion of any of these divisions transferred to First Army at this period.

However, as part of the general build-up of forces in advance of the forthcoming battle, on 19 August 1915 Nineteenth Brigade, formerly part of Twenty-seventh Division, part of Second Army, transferred to Second Division, hence to First Army. Whilst with Second Army the Brigade had certainly seen action around Ypres, in the Second Battle of Ypres that April–May and subsequently. It was therefore by no means unlikely that an officer in that brigade might have served near Hooge, or indeed have died thereabouts, if not in any noteworthy action then in a trench raid or somesuch, or as part of the incessant, random background death toll from shell and small-arms fire.

Nineteenth Brigade then comprised the following battalions:

Second Battalion the Royal Welch Fusiliers;

First Battalion the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles);

1/Fifth Battalion the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles);

First Battalion the Middlesex;

Second Battalion the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders.

Second Battalion the Royal Welch Fusiliers became Robert Graves's battalion during the summer of 1915. That spring, after kicking his heels in training for longer than he could have wished, he was at last drafted to join First Battalion the Royal Welch Fusiliers, which was part of Seventh Division, hence of First Army, but on his arrival in France he was one of six Royal Welch subalterns seconded to Second Battalion the Welsh Regiment, part of Third Brigade, First Division (also part of First Army) which was already holding trenches near Loos. After a spell, two of the seconded officers were transferred back to the Royal Welch, then at the end of July 1915 the other four: two to First Battalion,

Graves and another to Second Battalion. Anyone dimly aware of Graves as a subaltern in the Second Royal Welch, but knowing nothing of these transfers, might have supposed that he had been with that battalion throughout, hence that he must have seen action around Ypres.

By Graves's account, at the time he rejoined the Royal Welch in early August 1915, Nineteenth Brigade was regarded by another junior officer as 'the luckiest in France. It has not been permanently part of any division, but used as an army reserve [...]. So, except for the retreat,⁴⁰ where it lost about a company and Fromelles,⁴¹ where it lost half of what was left, it has been practically undamaged.'

There appears a close coincidence between the author's experiences and Graves's own. Whilst in the front line, the author inhabits a 'dry but somewhat verminous culvert in the canal bank'. Graves tells us that immediately after he transferred to Second Royal Welch, 'My dug-out at Cuinchy⁴² was a rat-riddled culvert beside the tow-path.' Also, 'Cuinchy bred rats. They came up from the canal, fed on the plentiful corpses and multiplied exceedingly.' However, 'When [...] back in reserve billets in Béthune, I had a beautiful Louis XVI bedroom at the Chateau Montmorency with mirrors and tapestries, found the bed too soft for comfort, and laid my mattress on the parquet floor.'

The 'scrapen holes' into which the night watch roll off to sleep until breakfast feel like a quotation, perhaps biblical, but 'scrapen' does not anywhere appear in the Authorised Version of the Bible. Apropos Robert Graves's part-German ancestry, nor is it German. It appears to be a simple archaism, from middle and old English *scrapian* = scrape. A poem of Graves's, 'To R. N' (Robert Nichols),⁴³ his friend and fellow-poet, written from Frise on the Somme in February 1917 and published in *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1918), commences:

Here by a snowbound river
In scrapen holes we shiver,
And like old bitterns we

Boom to you plaintively

Had this perhaps survived as a dialect word, still used by some of his troops? Might it then have been picked up and used by some other Old Carthusian officer serving with a unit from a similar background, writing from the same area of the front about the same time? That would be a striking coincidence.

Another of Graves's poems in *Fairies and Fusiliers*, 'Letter to S. S.'⁴⁴ from Mametz Wood', commences:

I never dreamed we'd meet that day
 In our old haunts down Fricourt way,
 Plotting such marvellous journeys there
 For jolly old "Après-la-guerre".

'Après la guerre', literally 'After the war' but bearing the interpretation 'sometime, never',⁴⁵ was a phrase in common use in the British Expeditionary Force at the time, but its employment as a noun, here as in the letter, is sufficiently unusual to suggest a link.

Again, on a quiet day, the author watches 'a couple of our aeroplanes high over the lines and little puffs of white shrapnel marking their course back for miles.' Somewhat earlier, on 23 May, hence before this period, Graves and a friend 'lay on the warm grass and watched aeroplanes flying above the trenches, pursued by a trail of white shrapnel puffs.'

At first blush, 'Battle of the Slime-pits' appears no more than an apt generic description, suiting many a muddy Western Front battlefield, but the Loos valley, on chalk subsoil, remained comfortably dry through the summer of 1915, although heavy thunderstorms flooded some trenches on the eve of the battle itself. Genesis 14. 10, Authorised Version, tells us that 'the Vale of Siddim was full of slimepits', with the Revised Version substituting 'bitumen' as the proper interpretation of 'slime'. In context, Genesis also describes the Vale as a major battlefield, and tells us that it is now the 'Salt Sea', i.e. the Dead Sea.

The Loos battlefield was a coal-mining area, dotted with pit shafts and spoil-heaps. Perhaps then, this reference is more pointed than first appears; but if so our author was a singular scholar in having anything quite so obscure at his fingertips. Genesis 14 is prescribed by the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England as the First Lesson at Evening Prayer on 10 January; otherwise it is well off the biblical beaten track. In *Goodbye to All That* Graves tells of an episode in Oxford in 1916, while he was there as an O.T.C. instructor, when he bested Augustine Birrell in a friendly disagreement over a similarly remote corner of the Old Testament. He was later to develop a particular interest in Hebrew mythology, on which he published scholarly papers and a book: *Hebrew Myths*, with Raphael Patai (1964).

Perhaps too, if his authorship is conceded, this is Graves, true to form, thumbing his nose at the army censor: telling those with eyes to see where he was.

At very least, the author was serving close by Graves himself, certainly in the same division, and very probably in the same brigade. With their battalions brigaded together they must surely have met, and if they did it is surprising indeed that the author makes no mention of this, although he finds his chance encounter with the Daviesite noteworthy. For his part too, Graves records no meeting with any other Old Carthusian at this period. They clearly had much in common. If they did not meet by chance, or on army business, they must surely at least have learnt of each other's existence during those last, precious weeks before the Battle of Loos, and have made time to enjoy a champagne cocktail or two together at the Café du Globe.

The suspicion grows to a near-certainty that the author is indeed Robert Graves himself: one-time co-editor of *The Carthusian*, noted school boxer, agitator on behalf of lawn-tennis, scholar, soldier, poet, gadfly. The style too is Graves's, including the careless infliction of hurt; or maybe deliberate? In *Goodbye to All That* Graves commits a far more heinous offence in this line than any throwaway expression of former loathing for an

ex-schoolmate. He describes an incident towards the end of his time at Charterhouse when he furiously confronted a master whom he accused of kissing his Platonic paramour,⁴⁶ a younger boy and fellow member of the school choir whom he names ‘Dick’.⁴⁷ The original allegation was made to Graves by another choirboy. When Dick confirmed the accusation the master ‘collapsed’, as well he might, undertaking to resign at the end of quarter on grounds of ill health. ‘That was in the summer of 1914; he went into the army and was killed the next year. I found out much later from Dick that he had not been kissed at all. It may have been some other boy.’

Three Charterhouse masters died in the war, all killed in action on the Western Front, of whom two resigned to take up army commissions over the summer of 1914; one of these died in 1917, the other in 1918. The third, who died in the summer of 1915,⁴⁸ had joined up earlier that year.⁴⁹ The curious may care to seek out their identities but it would be invidious to name them here. That Graves provided sufficient identification himself, thus besmirching the memories of three brave men, at least one of those unjustly, in a book first published only 15 years after the alleged event – while those memories were still fresh – was unforgivable.

As to ‘Is my Team Ploughing ...?’, clinching Graves’s authorship beyond reasonable doubt is surely the author’s arch sign-off, ‘*Olim Togatus*’. The Latin means simply ‘formerly a toga-wearer’, but in ancient Rome the toga was the badge of citizenship, hence a reasonable constructive interpretation might be ‘formerly a [Roman] citizen’, or here ‘formerly a member of the school’, i.e. Old Carthusian, which we already know. However, a toga is a kind of gown, suggesting ‘formerly a gown-wearer’, i.e. in context ‘former Gownboy’: Graves’s house, a house with a high opinion of itself. Lending weight to this supposition is a carved inscription still to be read in Gownboys, ‘*Floreat Togati*’, ‘May [the] Gownboys flourish’. There is every reason therefore to suppose that a prideful Gownboy with a classical bent might playfully style himself ‘*Togatus*’.

If this is Graves, as it surely must be, his chosen title, borrowed from A. E. Housman,⁵⁰ now takes on added significance. Housman's poem does indeed tell of 'a dead Shropshire lad' asking anxious questions of his best friend about his former sweetheart, who proves eventually, in a delicious last-line dénouement, to have taken up with that very friend. At this time Graves's sweetheart was still his schooldays' crush, 'Dick'. They still wrote to each other, regularly and often.

A little earlier that summer Graves received an unsettling letter from his cousin, still at Charterhouse: 'He said that Dick was not at all the innocent fellow I took him for, but as bad as anyone could be.' This took Graves aback: 'Dick's letters had been my greatest standby all those months whenever I felt low; he wrote every week, mostly about poetry. They were something solid and clean to set off against the impermanence of trench life and the sordidness of life in billets.' Graves was on poor terms with his cousin, whom he suspected of stirring up trouble: 'I had a more or less reassuring letter from Dick. He [...] admitted he had been ragging about in a silly way, but [said] that nothing bad had happened. He said he was very sorry, and would stop it for the sake of our friendship.'

Graves permitted himself to be reassured, for the time being, but the doubt must have lingered: if human love, that great false constant of the romantic imagination, could waver after mere months apart, what of the separation of death? If he died, as was all too likely, whose sweetheart might Dick then become?

A. E. Housman's ploughman, whose fate here excites Graves's anxious empathy, evidently finds himself not in a Christian heaven, nor in any other such imagined paradise, but in that Homeric Hades of which Achilles's shade tells Odysseus, 'Better to be alive once more and a serf to the poorest peasant than king of kings among the dead.' Very likely that is the image Housman himself, a formidable classicist, intended to convey; and the classical resonance cannot have been lost on Graves. Are we to infer that he anticipates an equally hollow, regretful existence *post mortem*, still somehow sentient but no longer with any direct

knowledge of nor influence over the living? But whether so or whether Swinburne's 'sleep eternal, in an eternal night', if we live on effectively only through *κλέος*⁵¹ and in the loving memory of our friends, as an influence, an inspiration, a source of comfort, what of Graves's own afterlife should even Dick prove untrue? Is this 'Letter from the Front' really a letter to Dick?

Adding further weight to that interpretation is his wistful concluding reference to his schooldays: his dream that 'it is Sunday morning before Chapel and he is walking arm-in-arm with someone around Cabbage Patch [...] a red anthem book under his arm'. Only boys in the school choir were likely to be carrying anthem books. With Graves and Dick both choir members, 'someone's' identity seems in little doubt.

If we are to believe Graves in *Goodbye to All That*, there was more ill-news, and this time much worse. 'A press cutting from *John Bull* reached me. Horatio Bottomley, the editor, was protesting against the unequal treatment for criminal offences meted out to commoners and aristocrats. [...] The article described in some detail how Dick, a sixteen-year-old boy, had made "a certain proposal" to a corporal in a Canadian regiment stationed near "Charterhouse College", and how the corporal had very properly given him in charge of the police.' He had 'merely been bound over and placed in the care of a physician – because he happened to be the grandson of an earl! [...] This news nearly finished me.'

But Graves is not to be believed, or at least his dating is the better part of two years out and it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that he has deliberately misplaced the episode for dramatic effect. In reality Dick's offence was committed aged seventeen, on the evening of Sunday 22 April 1917. He appeared in Godalming Magistrates Court on 27 April and the story eventually broke in *John Bull* on 2 June 1917. Graves appears to have received news of the affair only on 12 July 1917 during his convalescence from shell shock on the Isle of Wight, and about the same time as he also learnt of his friend Siegfried Sassoon's pacifist protest against the war: troubles enough.

Nonetheless Dick's standing vis-à-vis his schoolfellows in the autumn of 1915 was precarious, and at risk of further damage by the appearance of Graves's letter in *The Carthusian*. On his arrival at Charterhouse in LQ 1913, aged thirteen, only half out of childhood and with difficulties of his own, as he indicates in his memoirs, he had almost at once been taken up by this intense, unpopular young man, four years older, then a year later cast adrift on the stormy seas of adolescence when Graves went off to war. During the summer of 1915, as Graves's cousin hinted and as Dick himself later acknowledged, he had indeed been involved in a homosexual scandal, which saw him beaten by Frank Fletcher; he was fortunate not to have been expelled. Of that last, Graves was perhaps only half-aware; the rest he ought to have recognised.

Graves's authorship must surely have become an open secret; his original manuscript or a covering letter must have borne his name, and even for those not directly in the know, the code cannot have been hard to read. It is difficult to imagine that Dick escaped identification as the target of his closing remarks. As Graves tells us, their relationship had become sufficiently notorious within the school that it 'provoked a constant facetiousness', expressed against himself by his fellow-seniors; eventually in his last quarter this sparked a fracas which might have had him expelled, 'bunked'. That Dick was spared matching 'facetiousness' on the part of his own peers seems unlikely; adolescent boys in that closed world could be abominably cruel. It was one thing to maintain a private correspondence, which they appear both to have valued, quite another for Graves to publish an open reminder of their association a year on; which can scarcely have been guaranteed a welcome on 'Dick's' part.

In Graves's own estimation he was Dick's friend, mentor and protector; in *Goodbye to All That* he insists that his role in the relationship was sexually innocent. We have only his word for this, but given the customary nature and conduct of 'crushes' it is entirely plausible, and there is no evidence to the contrary. Nonetheless, some might view him less generously: as an emotional predator. Embarrassed? Proud? Confused? What did

Dick make of ‘Is my Team Ploughing ...?’ and of its sentimental sign-off, so obviously directed at himself?

And what of Charterhouse? What was the effect of this reopening of recent wounds, the more so with some of the former protagonists in these schooldays spats, like Graves himself, undoubtedly now serving in the war; some perhaps already fallen?

Did Graves trouble himself over any of this? Seemingly not. Whether by accident or by design, his letter is by no means the mere *jeu d’esprit* it first appears. The author of *Goodbye to All That*, with its uneasy shadows and its careless hurts so liberally bestowed, seems already present *in petto*.

In his published memoirs *After Many Days* (1937) Frank Fletcher, Graves’s headmaster at Charterhouse from 1911, provides a further perspective: ‘The VIth at that time [immediately pre-war] contained several clever boys [...] but they were a warped generation.’ In Fletcher’s view this was because under his predecessor the sportsmen, the ‘Bloods’, had been permitted to dominate the school, to the detriment of the scholars. Of these, some had been left ‘morbid and cynical’; others had been driven to assert themselves ‘by eccentricities and ill-timed violations of recognised conventions’, to become ‘intellectual rebels, with an exaggerated idea of their own intelligence and a prejudice against a society which seemed to have given them inadequate recognition’. A crisper description of Graves himself at the time, as one of those ‘others’, could not be penned.

This arch disengagement Fletcher particularly regretted. ‘It was no part of my purpose to replace the arrogance of an athleticocracy by the conceit of an intelligentsia. [...] [M]ere ostentatious unconventionality is provocative and useless.’ That he could write thus, a quarter-century on and after a lifetime’s experience as a schoolmaster, suggests that the school had been going through no ordinary difficulties.

Whilst he was still at Charterhouse, Graves seems to have formed a grudging respect for Fletcher, but no great liking: feelings which Fletcher perhaps reciprocated. It was Fletcher who, in bidding Graves farewell when he left, perceptively advised him

that his truest friend was his waste-paper basket: just advice to any writer but perhaps recalling specifically some of Graves's more outspoken sallies in *The Carthusian*.

Later there appears to have been a degree of *rapprochement*: 'It is pleasant to remember that the most antagonistic of this small band, after he had spent one year in the army, and before the grimmer experiences of the war had reawakened his bitterer feelings, came back to Charterhouse expressly to apologise to me for the line he had taken at school, and to assure me that if he had his time over again he would not be such a "rebel".'

Beyond reasonable doubt that former rebel was Graves. By his own account, at school he was one of the bitterest, one of the most antagonistic, seething with barely-suppressed fury. As he tells us in *Goodbye to All That*, he went on leave immediately before the Battle of Loos, from 9 September 1915; he spent time with his family in London before going to Harlech on a short walking holiday. As emerges from other sources, on Wednesday 15 September, his last full day of leave, he travelled down to Charterhouse where he visited Fletcher and took the opportunity to apologise for his former difficult behaviour; Fletcher subsequently wrote to his father, commenting on the favourable impression he had made. Quarter had not yet begun and so he had no opportunity to see Dick, but they had enjoyed a brief reunion earlier that year, in mid-March. He stayed the night in Godalming with his friends the Mallorys⁵² before returning to London the following morning; he caught the troop train to Folkestone en route for France that afternoon.

With battle shortly to be joined, and with who knew what personal outcome, he surely completed his manuscript before his departure, leaving it with Mallory to pass on to the editor of *The Carthusian*. He could scarcely count on an opportunity to work on it later, after his return to the front; then too it might be subject to the vagaries of the military censor. But the published letter is scarcely the work of a moment; it must have been complete, or all-but, before his potentially valedictory visit to Charterhouse and his interview with Fletcher, the entire scenario carefully planned.

‘Is my Team Ploughing ...?’ with its invocation of ‘Holy Charterhouse, once alternately loved and loathed, and now only loved’, teetering between the ironic and the irenic, now takes on yet another aspect: as a considered public peace offering, albeit a little way short of the private *mea culpa* he offered his Headmaster: a salute to Agapē, alongside a sly nod to Eros and a discreet genuflection to Thanatos; an *apologia pro vita sua* on the eve of battle. Under the influence of army life and despite his earlier self, his schooldays seem to be fast acquiring that nostalgic glow familiar to more ordinary ‘old boys’; with the bitterness largely gone, although there is still a distinctive residual piquancy. As further circumstantial evidence that Fletcher’s regretful visitor was indeed Graves: publicly at least, in *Goodbye to All That*, Graves alone later re-expressed bitter feelings of the type for which the visitor had earlier apologised.

Or at least, he seemed to do so, but was he frankly expressing his reawakened innermost self, or was that merely a further instance of his writing for effect, regardless? With Robert Graves, one can never be certain. Whether from carelessness, opportunism or pure devilment, he is never perfectly safe to take at face value.

Is my Team Ploughing?

‘Is my team ploughing,
That I was used to drive
And hear the harness jingle
When I was man alive?’

Ay, the horses trample,
The harness jingles now;
No change though you lie under
The land you used to plough.

‘Is football playing
Along the river shore,

With lads to chase the leather,
Now I stand up no more?’

Ay, the ball is flying,
The lads play heart and soul;
The goal stands up, the keeper
Stands up to keep the goal.

‘Is my girl happy,
That I thought hard to leave,
And has she tired of weeping
As she lies down at eve?’

Ay, she lies down lightly,
She lies not down to weep:
Your girl is well contented.
Be still, my lad, and sleep.

‘Is my friend hearty,
Now I am thin and pine,
And has he found to sleep in
A better bed than mine?’

Yes, lad, I lie easy,
I lie as lads would choose;
I cheer a dead man’s sweetheart,
Never ask me whose.

A. E. Housman (1859-1936), from *A Shropshire Lad*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My great thanks are due to Ann Wheeler, until last year Archivist at Charterhouse School: in general for her guidance around the archives, and for looking out for items of interest; in particular for

looking over the draft of this paper and identifying some School references which had escaped me; but most particularly for pointing out the true significance of ‘*Olim Togatus*’, which I had taken to indicate merely ‘Old Carthusian’ but which, properly interpreted as ‘Former Gownboy’, effectively clinches Graves’s authorship.

Eric Webb, a one-time pupil at Charterhouse School, is a medical doctor in clinical practice.

WORKS CITED

- Adams, Bernard, *Nothing of Importance* (London: Methuen, 1917; repr. Crawley: Strong Oak Press/Tom Donovan, 1988)
- Brophy, John and Eric Partridge, *Dictionary of Tommies’ Songs and Slang, 1914–18* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2008)
- The Charterhouse Register 1872–1931* (Guildford: Biddles, 1932)
- Edmonds, James Edward, *Military Operations France and Belgium, 1915, Battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert, and Loos* (London: Macmillan, 1928; repr. London: Imperial War Museum, 1995)
- Fletcher, Frank, *After Many Days* (London: Robert Hale, 1937)
- Graves, Richard Perceval, *Robert Graves, The Assault Heroic 1895–1926* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986)
- Graves, Robert, *Fairies and Fusiliers* (London: Heinemann, 1917; repr. North Hollywood: Aegypan, 2007)
- Graves, Robert, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Cape, 1929; rev. edn London: Cassell, 1957, Penguin, 2000)
- Graves, Robert, *Goodbye to All That and Other Great War Writings*, ed. by Steven Trout (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007)
- Graves, Robert and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths* (London: Cassell, 1964)
- Hampson, Travis, *A Medical Officer’s Diary and Narrative of the First World War*, ed. by Travis Philip Davies (2001)
- < <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/xenophon/contents.htm> >
- Housman, A. E., *A Shropshire Lad* (London: Harrap, 1977)
- O’Prey, Paul, ed., *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914–1946* (London: Hutchinson, 1982)
- Pharand, Michel W., *Robert Graves and the Post-Catastrophic Comedy*

of 'But It Still Goes On' (2005) <<http://libro.dobunkyodai.ac.jp/research/pdf/treatises06/04MichelA.pdf> >
 Vandon, George, *Return Ticket* (London: Heinemann, 1940)
The Long, Long Trail <<http://www.1914-1918.net>>

NOTES

¹ Daviesites, Robinites: some of the eleven Charterhouse School houses at that date.

² Floreat: the school's long-established if unofficial motto is '*Floreat aeternam Carthusiana domus!*', 'May our Carthusian home flourish forever!'

³ Ch'ouse: Charterhouse, a contraction still in common use.

⁴ Lessington: one of the school's sports grounds.

⁵ Bridge: the school's private bridge over Charterhouse Road.

⁶ Gymnasia: the plural is hyperbolic. 'Gym', housed in a large wooden hut, very temporary-looking, remained in daily use until the opening of the school's new sports centre in the 1990s.

⁷ Armouries: hyperbolic again, *The Carthusian* of July 1915 reports building of the new Armoury and of Brooke Hall (see note 8) in progress.

⁸ A new playroom for the Beaks (i.e. masters): the 'staff common room', known as Brooke Hall, in reality more akin to a small club, complete with sitting-room, dining-room and bar, whose building commenced early in 1915.

⁹ Maiden Aunt, Pink Production, *Car.*: the school magazine, *The Carthusian*. It had a pink cover and appeared monthly during Quarters, price sixpence.

¹⁰ Tizzy: sixpence (see note 9.)

¹¹ See note 9.

¹² Mr. A. Lindsey: the school printer.

¹³ Meteorological report: although at this time *The Carthusian* did indeed publish meteorological reports, the sense here suggests a colloquialism, perhaps for 'House News' or somesuch.

¹⁴ See note 1.

¹⁵ Mr. Stokes: John Laurence Stokes, the school librarian.

¹⁶ See note 9.

¹⁷ Minnies: German minenwerfer (trench mortar) shells.

¹⁸ Torps: torpedoes. The bomb fired by the German Krupp Trench Howitzer, another variety of mortar, like a 'Minnie' visible in flight, was sometimes referred to as a torpedo, recalling that this was once an alternative term for a sea-mine.

¹⁹ Aeroplanes: even so early in the war, aircraft were demonstrating their value in photo-reconnaissance and artillery spotting. For the time being the British Royal Flying Corps enjoyed a measure of air superiority, although that was soon to change.

²⁰ Shrapnel: shrapnel shells are burst by a pre-set time fuse, sending metal balls flying lethally in all directions. To have shot down an aircraft, even one of the slow-flying spotter aeroplanes of the day, using field artillery firing shrapnel, with aim, deflection, elevation and fuse-timing all constantly changing, would have required remarkable skill, or luck.

²¹ Dead Shropshire lad: referring of course to A. E. Housman's poem 'Is my Team Ploughing?', which supplies the author's title.

²² Harris, Singleton and Wright: all gym instructors and/or involved in the running of the O.T.C. (see note 26). *The Carthusian* in its editorial for October 1914 (the first edition published since the declaration of war) wishes Sergeants Singleton, Harris and Wright all success in their renewed activities at Aldershot. Presumably they were ex-regular army N.C.O.s, still on the reserve list, who had been promptly recalled to the colours on the declaration of war.

²³ Old iron: the meaning is obscure. Perhaps Harris habitually wore a large number of campaign medals, or badges, or a heavy iron watch-chain hung with various ornaments.

²⁴ Brave Belgium: in attacking France in August 1914, following her notorious Schlieffen Plan, drawn up long before with precisely this eventuality in view, Germany marched her northern armies through neutral Belgium. It was this violation of Belgian neutrality, of which Britain was one of the guarantors along with France and with Germany herself, which supplied the formal British *casus belli*.

²⁵ Bunked: expelled.

²⁶ C.O.T.C: Charterhouse Officers' Training Corps. On leaving school, boys who had been members of an O.T.C. were deemed to have received sufficient military training to be commissioned as officers forthwith.

²⁷ m.g: machine-gun, sometimes also known, using the signallers' phonetic alphabet of the time, as an 'Emma-G'; cf. Toc-H, Talbot House.

²⁸ Fug Shop: the carpenter's workshop.

²⁹ Stinks Building: Science Block, of course!

³⁰ Cabbage Patch: contemporary School vernacular now long-forgotten, probably the ground properly known as Green, the First Eleven cricket pitch, around which Carthusians still walk of a summer's Sunday evening before chapel, still counter-clockwise too but no longer arm in arm, unless perhaps in these co-educational latter days with Carthusiennes!

³¹ A pink carnation in his button-hole: a sixth form privilege. In *Goodbye to All That*, Graves describes the furore when at chapel one Sunday three members of the Sixth peremptorily assumed the privilege of wearing 'light grey flannel trousers, butterfly collars, jackets slit up the back, and the right of walking arm in arm', by long School tradition reserved to the 'Bloods'. Adding insult to injury, each also wore a pink carnation in his lapel.

³² Quarter: school term. The Charterhouse Quarters were then Oration Quarter, OQ (autumn) Long Quarter, LQ (Lent) and Summer Quarter, SQ, which is now known as Cricket Quarter, CQ. In reality LQ is the shortest, but formerly seemed the longest as it was not broken by an Exeat (half-term).

³³ Guy Kendall: then a form master at Charterhouse (a hash-beak in Carthusian patois), later headmaster of University College School, Hampstead.

³⁴ Frank Fletcher (1870–1954): headmaster of Charterhouse 1911–1935.

³⁵ Nevill Barbour: David Nevill Barbour entered Charterhouse OQ 1908, left SQ 1914. He too won a place at St John's College Oxford, and a scholarship, trumping Graves's exhibition. He served in the war, in the Ninth Royal Lancasters, and survived.

³⁶ The Battle of Loos: the Battle's initial assault, originally planned for 8 September, was progressively put back until 25 September, by which time the Germans were well aware of what was afoot. As eventually determined by the British Battle Nomenclature Committee it concluded on 8 October. However, there was a renewed British assault with further fierce fighting 13–14 October, for which Graves's battalion was hastily brought up in reserve, with further sporadic actions throughout that month. Only on 4 November 1915 did Sir Douglas Haig, First Army's commander, finally inform Sir John French, his C. in C., that he could do no more.

Loos was the largest British action in the war thus far; it also saw the first British use of poison gas: chlorine. Out of total engaged British forces of around 170,000, including the subsidiary attacks and reserves and reliefs brought in as the battle progressed, there were 60,000 casualties, of whom 24,000 died: 40 per cent. The Second Royal Welch, Graves's battalion, took 311 casualties, killed and wounded, officers and other ranks, out of an attacking strength of around 700. This was unexceptional; many other battalions lost more, with several reduced to mere handfuls of men left alive and unwounded by the time they were withdrawn from the line.

³⁷ R.A.M.C.: Royal Army Medical Corps.

³⁸ General French: in reality Field Marshal Sir John Denton Pinkstone French (1852–1925), C. in C. of the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front August 1914–December 1915. His refusal to permit the heir to the throne anywhere near the front line comes as no surprise.

³⁹ Lieutenant John Bernard Pye Adams (1890–1917): remarkably, Adams, Graves and Siegfried Sassoon all saw service together in First Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers. Adams had been with the battalion about six weeks when Graves and Sassoon arrived in late November 1915. *Nothing of Importance* was the first written of their three accounts of their war service, in 1916, and the first published, in September 1917, although by then Adams had been dead for six months: died of wounds. Both Sassoon and Graves regarded the book highly.

⁴⁰ The retreat: the original British Expeditionary Force's general retreat following the Battle of Mons on 23 August 1914.

⁴¹ Fromelles: there was heavy fighting around Fromelles in the course of the British attack on Aubers Ridge on 9 May 1915, which was repulsed with heavy losses, but Nineteenth Brigade was nowhere near; it was still with Second Army in the Ypres sector. However, Second Battalion the Welsh Regiment, to which Graves was later temporarily attached, was certainly involved, as part of Third Brigade. This appears to be one of Graves's multitudinous inaccuracies, which so infuriated knowledgeable readers on *Goodbye to All That*'s first publication. It is nonetheless instructive that with casualty figures of over 50 per cent since the outbreak of war just a year earlier Nineteenth Brigade was still regarded as relatively 'lucky'.

⁴² Cuinchy: a small village five miles east of Béthune, on the south bank of the La Bassée canal; opposite on the north bank stood another, Givenchy, but by now, as Bernard Adams records, 'Both [were] as completely reduced to ruins as villages can be, the firing line running just to the east of them.'

⁴³ Robert Nichols (1893–1944): another friend of Siegfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke. Nichols, like Graves, saw action at Loos, as an artillery officer. His war service ended when he was invalided home with shell shock in 1916.

⁴⁴ S.S.: Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967) and Graves were fellow-officers in the Royal Welch Fusiliers and, for a time, close friends. It was chiefly through Graves's persuasion that Sassoon accepted admission to Craiglockhart Hospital with 'shell shock' in 1917, and through that admission that these two met Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) who also became a patient there that year. Later the relationship cooled and the publication of *Goodbye to All That* supplied the *coup de grâce*. Sassoon was offended by Graves's treatment of him and by the book's many factual errors, but chiefly perhaps he was jealous of its success.

⁴⁵ *Après la Guerre*: according to Brophy and Partridge, 'A magical phrase used by soldiers jokingly for the indefinite and remote future, and as a depository of secret sentiment, longing for survival and for the return of peace.'

⁴⁶ Platonic paramour: in my own day at Charterhouse (the 1960s) known simply as a 'crush', a common enough public school phenomenon, in both boys' and girls' schools, until co-education swept all of this away.

⁴⁷ ‘Dick’: George Johnstone (1899–1949), often known by his family nickname as ‘Peter’ Johnstone, later third Baron Derwent. He entered Saunderites in LQ 1913, leaving at Easter 1917 immediately following his court appearance. (See above.)

⁴⁸ Died in 1915: not, as claimed by the error-prone *Charterhouse Register*, in 1916.

⁴⁹ Masters died: a fourth master who also joined up in 1914 survived.

⁵⁰ Alfred Edward Housman (1859–1936): poet and classical scholar.

⁵¹ κλέος: repute.

⁵² George Herbert Leigh Mallory (1886–1924): at Charterhouse, where he was appointed a master in 1910, Mallory introduced the young Robert Graves to rock climbing. From 1915 until the war’s end he served in the Royal Garrison Artillery. In 1924 with Andrew Irvine (1902–1924) he died climbing on Mt Everest.