

# My Summer With Poets – including Robert Graves

*Frank Kersnowski*

‘Come in’, said Robert Graves. ‘Anyone who has anything to say is always welcome in my house’. Holy mother of god(s), I thought as I stepped into his study, ‘What do I have to say to Robert Graves?’ But I’ve gotten ahead of myself. I actually began my homage when I first read his *Collected Poems*. My homage occurred most recently when I was reading contemporary Irish poetry at The Library of Congress with funding from a summer grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1968. I had chosen about thirty poets, mostly living, to be included in my critical study *The Outsiders: Poets of Contemporary Ireland*. My selection was based on their repeated inclusion in collections. The surprise came when I found that few of them were subjects of critical reviews. To quote from an old song: ‘Lawdy, lawdy, Miss Claudy, what do I do now?’

I read throughout the summer and began to find clusters of poets who had something in common, locale place of publication. And I enjoyed the quiet of the great library, lunches in the cafeteria of The Rayburn Building. Though the cafeteria is intended for members of Congress, citizens, or even visitors from this side of the Atlantic, are entitled to be there – or were. Security being what it is now, accommodation may have changed. I could easily walk from my rooming house on East Capitol to the Library, local restaurants, and even a cinema. I saw Bergman’s *Hour of the Wolf* there in early August, an event I’ll treat later.

My readings undirected by other scholars soon led me to realise that nothing I had learned in graduate school was to be of any use to me. I had always relied on *The Cambridge Bibliography of*

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*English Literature* and the annual bibliography of literature in *PMLA* for guidance in finding material relating to a topic of my research. In 1968, not even Seamus Heaney was to be found in either. I had to devise another approach, so I decided to take my research out of the library and my poets out of their books. I would go see them where they lived and talk with them about the what, why, and how of their writing. If anyone else in literary study was also doing this, they escaped my search. But I did find some scholars who could provide guidance: folklorists; and I used *The Folklorists Guide to Field Work* as I toddled my early steps. Use a voice recorder, prepare a script but do not be bound by it, identify myself as an observer or another practitioner. Though I had stumbled my way through a few poems, I chose to be honest and did not call myself a poet. (Forgive me, Robert, for this reference; but I agree with Pound that no one should be called a poet until they are dead.) At that time I could not imagine the heavy stone that would be placed on my grave to keep my soul from wandering. During my summer, a comment by John Messenger, who studied contemporary cultures, would occur to me often: ‘When in the land of the pygmy, stoop’.

With the inkling of a plan, I had only to find out if any of the poets I had chosen would talk with me. After all, a letter coming out of the blue skies of south Texas might well seem at best spurious and more likely a humorous intrusion. I wrote to places the poets published, asking that my letters be forwarded. Everyone to whom I wrote replied they were quite willing to talk with me. Apparently, someone interested in living Irish writers was at least a novelty. After all, serious attention had only been given to the big three: Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett. With tape recorder, tapes, and spare batteries, I left for London, bearing as well a large suitcase with too many clothes and a tennis racket. I met with a few poets in England and went to Dublin. There my real research began.

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I still thought of the poets in terms of where they published and would retain that structure in the book. But taking the poets out of the library and into the streets and pubs gave them lives only intimated by their poems. I quickly was told that two factions existed: writers who frequented The Bailey and writers who frequented McDaid's. The Bailey was owned by John Ryan. When he was only nineteen, he had edited and published *Envoy*, the first really international literary magazine in Ireland. At that time, he was to be found at McDaid's with some of his favourite writers: Patrick Kavanaugh and Pearse Hutchinson. Valentin Iremonger was also published in *Envoy*, but he was not a frequenter of McDaid's. Being in the Irish diplomatic corps, as was Denis Devlin, he was not at home enough to have a local. But Kavanaugh was there and would so remain, as would Pearse Hutchinson, as would Brendan Behan. John Jordan would be there and, except for Pearse, these were men with serious drinking problems. I remember talking with John at McDaid's and saying I hadn't seen him in quite a while. He had been in St. Pat's for six weeks getting dried out. He said: 'I'm sorry to say this, Frank, but if you'd been here you would have seen m'. He was a good poet and a man with a finely discriminating critical mind who had to use two hands to get a pint to his mouth.

I started to say the McDaid's of the past was much the same even when I was there. But, then, much of the old Dublin literary life had been in place since at least the forties. Except for its writers, Ireland was still a poor country, a place where one spent time, not money. A lean Saturday morning it was when one did not greet at least ten poets on Grafton Street and even more in the pubs.

The hard-drinking disreputable life in McDaid's was less evident in The Bailey, which John Ryan had bought by accident. There I met with John Montague, who on a venture to McDaid's had the typescript of a new volume of poetry stolen. When the manuscript was returned to him, the pages were, shall we say, besmirched. At

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the Bailey as well would be Benedict Kiely, a fine fiction writer. Ben first published a novel, then short stories:

FK: For god's sake, Ben, even Joyce started with short stories.

BK: Ah well, I was a bit full of myself then.

And there, too, I met with Richard Ryan. Richie was an accomplished young poet who grew up to be Ireland's Permanent Ambassador to the United Nations. When we were sitting in the Bailey one evening, he identified the man snarling at me from the other side of the U-shaped bar: 'That's Sean O'Faolain. He doesn't like Americans'. I don't mean to suggest the lot in The Bailey were tamer than other residents of the alligator pond that was literary Dublin: just a bit different, a bit smoothed out by more restrained even civil patrons. For this was a very democratic literary society, which included a fire brigade captain named Austin, a contractor named Denny: 'Ah, Denny's a bogman; he'll use his feet on you'. There's a story that Behan and Denny walked across Ringsend when the tide was out to visit with some of Denny's extended family and had to run for their lives through the rising tide, causing Behan to say: 'There's a fucking lot of mean bastards in Ringsend'. He made a similar exclamation when he was staying with Val and Sheila Iremonger when *The Hostage* opened in the West End. Coming back from the news agent and waving papers with rave reviews, Behan shouted at some navvies working on the street: 'I'm fucking famous, you know. Fucking famous'. There, too, was Gareth Brown, Lord de Brun, who owned Claddagh Records. This enterprise was managed at the time by one of Ireland's great pipers, Paddy Moloney, founder and leader of the Chieftains. Claddagh Records concerned itself mainly with contemporary Irish poetry and traditional Irish music. Once Gareth came from the café on the second floor of The Bailey to the bar where John Ryan and I were talking to have us come

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upstairs where he was having lunch with John Montague and three of Ireland's great pipers: Paddy Moloney, Seamus Ennis. And Seamus Toal. Paddy played the tin whistle while the other two sang, usually in Irish. Gareth wanted me to experience the language.

When I wove this bit of pub culture into *The Outsiders*, John Jordan seems to have accepted the task of reply. His review began: 'One doesn't expect much when Americans and other foreigners . . .'. He went on to censure me for claiming Irish poets frequented pubs as part of their literary life. By then John had been banned from McDaid's, a considerable achievement, and had taken up residence in another pub. My reply with a comment and a pound note suggesting he buy himself and any other poet in his pub a pint was well received. At least, the pound note wasn't returned. The Irish had treated me like one of their own. An interesting side note: my book had been turned down by an Irish publisher on the grounds that 'it would cause further literary quarrels'.

Of course, literary life existed outside the pubs. I met Austin Clarke at his home, Richard Murphy in the West, Richard Weber to the south of Dublin, and Tom Kinsella wherever he wished. Tom is a fine poet and translator of Irish literature. His translation of the Irish epic *The Tain* is masterful. He is very assured and self-contained. I was with John Montague when he received a letter from Kinsella, to whom he had sent one of his own poems. Kinsella corrected it and sent it back. Tom Kinsella is so good that he received the usual Dublin accolade: 'Tom's a fine poet, but he'll never again be the poet he was when he was a poor civil servant riding his bike through the streets of Dublin'.

FK: Your poetry seems to me to be colloquial rather than traditionally poetic, more concerned with personal life than historical, and though Irish not nationalistic, as was the case in the Irish Literary Renaissance.

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TK: Yes. Do you see any of the other poets of whom that is true.

FK: Every one.

And I did, which led me to distinguish between the time of Yeats and what we must now call the time of Heaney. For what Seamus Heaney did with exquisitely muted compassion, all the others did according to their way. Once when I was talking with John Montague a few years later, he said a bit nervously: 'How good do you think Heaney is.' This was not a question. John knew how good Seamus was. Saying *was* is all I can say to indicate the great loss we share without him. But when I wrote *The Outsiders*, Yeats was still a living memory, and Seamus Heaney had not reached full poetic maturity. I met Seamus a few years later.

FK: When I finished *The Outsiders*, I said to myself that I did not do justice to you.

SH: Ah well. I only had the two small books out then.

Two small books, indeed! I missed the boat.

I remember well the last time I saw Seamus. Here in 1995 when this Society was born. A former Oxford Professor of Poetry, as was Graves, he was invited to read his poems. I went into the pub later to speak with him. Though startled to see me, he quickly recovered:

FK: Frank Kersnowski, Seamus.

SH. Yes, I remember. Trinity University.

But not all the poets and literary folks were drawn to the creative and destructive lights of the pub. Outstandingly so is Liam Miller, editor of The Dolmen Press. Without Liam Miller, the shape of contemporary Irish poetry would probably be quite different. He nurtured the good in poetry, cajoled second volumes from poets,

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and did what could be done to get international attention for the poets of Ireland, mainly those of the Republic. Published by Faber, Seamus Heaney did not need his help. He and Liam Miller, though, shared the same goals for Irish poetry.

Then there is the pub writer and editor of *Arena*, Brian Lynch, who caused me to write Robert Graves when he referred to Graves as ‘the last of the Anglo-Irish poets’. Now, such a term would not carry the air of approbation it did earlier. Walking past The Shelbourne once with Alf McLachlan, director of the National Library, during Horse Show Week, he commented on seeing a derby hatted, spats wearing, broad plaid suited man: ‘There he goes the last of the Anglo-Irish gentlemen’. The comment was not simply an observation. Lynch’s provocative statement may have come from the depths of McDaid’s where *Arena* was reputedly edited in a carefree manner. Yet the concern of the editors to continue to open up Irish writers and readers to internationalism was their obvious guiding principle. I had written to Graves asking if he considered himself ‘the last of the Anglo-Irish poets’ and if I might come visit. He replied on Easter Sunday 1969:

I will be here all summer as far as I know.

Am I the last of the Anglo-Irish poets? Well maybe. Our family went to Ireland in 1575 and I still retain the family’s respect for ‘English as they speak it in Ireland’ which means with correctness and love.

He did not associate the term ‘Anglo-Irish’ with the Ascendancy but with the English language as spoken in Ireland.

Some weeks later, I left Dublin for Deià, Graves’s home village, with several stopovers. To rest up, though dry out is more accurate, from my research with the poets, I spent two weeks at St. Peter’s College. My friend Francis Warner had arranged a room and a seat at high table for me. In Blackwell’s I bought *Poems 1965-1968*. In London I saw Neil Armstrong walk on the moon. The date was 20 July 1969. I was walking down Savile Row on my way to Bertram Rota Booksellers and saw the event

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on a television set in a shop window. I stopped in Paris to talk with John Montague and stopped in Barcelona because I had never been there and then I flew to Mallorca and took the bus to Deià.

At the time, William Graves was the Nicky Hilton of Deià, being proprietor of a bit lavish hotel just outside Deià and a modest pension in the heart of Deià. I had a room at the latter with several other academics. William charged \$2.50 a day for a room and three meals. Lest you think he was charitably supporting poor academics, I must tell you that the noon meal on Sunday was *always* baked fish and paella, and wine in the dining room was 60 cents a bottle. The same wine could be bought across the street at a shop that also housed the post office for 20 cents a bottle. The boutiques and cute shops that now line the street weren't there. Instead there were private residences. There were no streetlights, so the sky was deep and dark. For the first time, I saw that great gash of light that is the Milky Way. At one of the two cafes the favourite drink that summer was the Lumumba: a highball glass with ice cubes, a shot of brandy, and chocolate milk.

After I settled in for a couple of days, I asked William if I should telephone Robert to see if I could go by. William laughed and told me Robert did not have a telephone. I then recalled his being shocked by a trench phone in World War 1 and thought that experience might have affected him the way the nightmarish train ride did when he was wounded. Boarding a train was very difficult for him for quite a while. So, unannounced I walked to Canelluñ. I was greeted at the back door by a stunning young woman, whom I soon found out was Graves's daughter Lucia. She told me:

LG: Robert's working now.

FK: I'll come back later.

LG: No, wait. He may want to see you.

[Pause]

LG: Yes, come in. Robert wants to see you.

Later she told me that I looked intelligent and interesting. By then I was a vagabond scholar, travelling with my recording equipment and a change of clothes in a shoulder bag that had a pair of sandals hanging from the straps.

And so, here we are, back to where I began this narrative with me walking through the house with Lucia, and Graves inviting me into his study. When I told my stepson Thomas Goodwin this story, he might as well have been reading my mind: ‘Good lord, what in the world did you say?’ Graves seated me next to a steamer trunk with hand-woven saddlebags, so I said:

FK: This comes from up towards the Urals?

RG: You’re not far wrong.

Of all the things to talk about with Robert Graves, the provenance oriental rugs was by far at the bottom of my and anyone else’s list, but I needed a starter. Though kindly, Graves took over the conversation. He picked up various items on shelves and his table, asking me if I knew what they were. I did not. He was probably trying to find out who I was and what was my reason for being there. Finally, he picked up a dark grey flat stone with Arabic writing on it:

RG: Do you know what this says?

FK: No.

RG: Neither do I. Someone gave it to me. Since I couldn’t read the language, I took it to a professor of languages at Oxford. He looked at it and told me he wouldn’t translate it for me: ‘It’s about Robert Graves and very personal’.

FK: I understand.

RG: Do things like this happen to you?

FK: Yes. They do.

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Two years later I was in Paris to talk with John Montague about a book he had asked me to write about him for the Irish Series at Bucknell University. He invited me to dinner at a Vietnamese restaurant with him and the woman who would be his second wife. Dinner was difficult: he was nervous and she was surly. I talked about whatever came into my head: *The Hour of the Wolf*. This got their attention:

JM: When did you see the film?

FK: Two years ago, about this time of year. Could actually have been this very day.

JM: We met on this day two years ago when we went with mutual friends to see that film and have dinner here afterwards. We celebrate our meeting with dinner here.

Graves and I chatted about this and that until I asked him about a poem in *Poems 1965-1968*:

FK: I think one of the poems in this volume is about the Goddess.

RG: Quite possibly. Which one?

FK: "Dancing Flame".

RG: Oh, no. That is about a Mexican woman who behaved very badly, very badly indeed.

I see no reason to drag out her misdeeds. Enough to say that Graves behaved much better than she did. He even arranged for her to get a commission from Doubleday for a line drawing of him. Although I had brought up an unpleasantness, he offered to sign the volume: 'Frank Kersnowski | with the close understanding | of | Robert Graves | 1969'.

I went back to my pension to be quizzed by the other guests as to what was he like? What did you talk about? On another occasion Graves talked about Nancy, his first wife, Laura Riding,

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and Geoffrey Phibbs: ‘My wife left with that man, and I left with his wife’. So were they in his understanding. When I spoke with Larry Wallrich, a mutual friend, about Graves’s being so forthcoming about his personal life, my friend said: ‘Robert is a village dweller. He has no secrets’. Graves was a trusting man who made up his mind about people quickly. Larry, a bookseller, had lived in Deià at one time. When he left for London, he had an uncatalogued collection of manuscripts and books Graves asked him to sell for him. He might have done well to be more cautious in telling what some would consider secrets. I later wrote him about an essay in *Esquire* that assumed knowledge based on a formal interview, an essay stupid and insulting. Graves replied that he had given no such interview and certainly would have been paid for it if he had.

Once when I visited, Graves asked me to go with him to get the mail and to look in on a house he owned and had let friends from Paris use. His wife Beryl talked with him as we left, asking where he might leave the mail: ‘At William’s? At the Café?’ Graves smirked and left. Years later when Beryl and I talked about this exchange, she observed that Robert had already begun to slip some. The friends from Paris were still in the house when we stopped by. I could follow the conversation in French after I was introduced:

FK: Frank is a friend of William’s is he?

RG: No Frank is a friend of mine, (tapping his forehead) a friend of mine with a very fine intelligence.

I can’t remember what we did with the mail.

On another visit, Graves said about the moon landing:

RG: It’s the greatest crime in the last two thousand years. Being an American, you probably don’t think so.

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FK: I, too, think it's a crime, but our reasons probably differ.

Graves, I'm sure, was concerned with the violation of traditional religion. I objected to our spreading human contagion to outer space. On my last visit, Graves was making berry preserves. I offered to help, saying: 'I helped my grandmother make jam,' only to be told: 'Your granny never made jam like this.'

In the taxi to the airport, I felt as if I were leaving home, but I did not find my way back there for many years. I went to see Beryl who had read my typescript of *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves*. Beryl had read and commented, and her comments gave depth and intimacy to my book.

Having a few days in London, I got in touch with David Jones, whom Montague called 'the greatest living ENGLISH poet'. With some reluctance, Jones invited me to visit him at the middle-class hotel where he had rooms. He was a small and wrinkled man, except for large feet and hands, the hands as smooth as those of a baby. At the time I knew more about his paintings than his life or his poetry, which was a shame. He had been an enlisted man in the Royal Welch Fusiliers and had written a very good long poem, *In Parenthesis*, about his service and the war, quite different from *Good-Bye to All That*. He clearly wanted me to leave as quickly as possible, but did offer tea and biscuits. That changed when he plugged in his teakettle and a three-foot long yellow flame spurted up the wall. His response was unexpected. He waved those large hands and kicked at the wall plug with those large feet while shouting: 'What the hell, shit, goddamn'. When he and the flame abated, I offered to repair the line and won his friendship, for the moment at least. I repaired. We had tea and biscuits. He told me about his paintings and his fondness for lettering. Far from being quickly dismissed, I was kept there so long I almost missed dinner with friends from Deia.

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When I wrote *The Outsiders*, I realised I could no longer pretend to be Emerson's 'transparent eyeball', someone absorbed by the experience, a nothing. I would be present intentionally in everything I wrote. That understanding was liberating. And here it is in what may well be my swan song. I have but one more reflection on what I have written: 'Golden lads and girls must | As chimney-sweepers come to dust'.

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Lynn Belisle gave of her time and expertise to make the video presentation possible.

Carol Reposa's editing saved me from making several gaffs.

And then there is Dunstan Ward. The idea for this presentation was Dunstan's. I thank you doing so, I think.

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*Editor's note: The author recorded a version of this essay, which is available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/qYVlmsri7qk>.*