

Missing in Action

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‘The Cool Web’ is missing, though I know it is churlish to even mention its absence in the context of Charles Mundy’s comprehensive new edition of the war poems by Robert Graves. From *Over the Brazier* (1916), to manuscript poems published for the first time in Mundy’s 2016 volume, Graves’s poems stand with monumental authority on a century of reading, writing and interpreting the entire history of First World War. Still, it was the unprecedented experience of reading Graves’s war poems in chronological order of their publication history in the volume that led me to the peculiar sense of missing ‘The Cool Web’. One of Graves’s most famous poems, published first in 1927, it concentrates images of childhood and death, winding up in ‘the cool web of language,’ ‘the tall soldiers drumming by’ and ‘[c]hildren . . . dumb to say how hot the sun is’. That convergence of childhood, death and the language of poetry struck me as a perfect gloss on the entire volume. Graves’s war poems are poems of childhood, and that perhaps goes a long way to explaining the characteristic forms of the genre of children’s poetry: the nursery verse, the ballad as well as echoes of William Blake and Christina Rossetti.

My rereading of *Good-bye to All That* turned up the confirmation of the root of the war poems being in childhood. In describing his 1916 conversations with Siegfried Sassoon about the publication of their respective collections of war poems, Graves writes: ‘We defined the war in our poems by making

contrasted definitions of peace. With Siegfried it was hunting, nature, music and pastoral scenes; with me, chiefly children'. The context in which Graves places the comment offers additional confirmation of the link between childhood and war. 'In France,' he writes, 'I used to spend much of my spare time playing with the French children' (p. 191). The entire sequence about the pre-publication history of *Over the Brazier* in 1916, does, not by chance, I think, follow Graves's ironic inclusion of the complete reprint of a full-blown patriotic newspaper essay that had recently been published, fueling the pro-war propaganda: 'A Mother's Answer to 'A Common Soldier,' by 'A Little Mother'. In reading the chapter of *Good-bye to All That* in the context of Mundy's collection of the war poems, Graves's sharp critique of the rhetoric of war in the context of childhood and death suddenly appeared more clearly delineated than I'd previously understood it.

Graves's war poems are redolent with a persistent feeling that the war is child's nightmare come to life. Mundy recognises the feeling too and so begins his introduction to the volume with an account of the defining moment that marked the collision for Graves of childhood and death. The poem in which Graves records the moment, 'Died of Wounds,' though written in 1916 – around the time he was badly wounded on 20 July and counted as dead, just four days before his twenty-first birthday on 24 July – was not published until 1988, so after Graves had actually died in 1985 at the age of ninety. The poem, composed to echo the seventeenth-century funeral urn poems of George Herbert, ends:

You'll never make a man of me
For I lie dead in Picardy,
Rather than grow to man
Oh that was the right day to die.
The twenty-fourth of July!
God smiled
Beguiled

By a wish so wild,
And let me always stay a child.

The last line, ‘And let me always stay a child’ is an eerie echo of Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up. Given the dating of the composition of the poem, the coincidence is hard to ignore. J. M. Barrie’s play *Peter Pan*, first performed in 1904 (when Graves was a child) had already embedded itself in the popular imagination. And it was George Llewelyn Davies, one of the five young brothers, all wards of Barrie after their parents died, who is credited with the famous line spoken by Peter Pan, ‘To die will be an awfully big adventure’. George, who died in the early stages of the First World War, on 15 March 1915, had been born on 20 July 1893, and so was just two years older than Robert Graves. While George became the boy who never grew up, Robert Graves lived to write war poems, entwining death with endless childhood. And in his introduction to Graves’s war poems, Mundy explicitly names the ‘the increasingly realist-grotesque style of the fusilier poems,’ in *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917), rubbing ‘side by side with poems which evoke in either simple or complex ways the imaginative possibilities of childhood experience, nursery rhyme and nursery mythologies’ (p. 25).

Siegfried Sassoon, responding to the manuscript of *The Patchwork Flag* that Graves had sent him in the summer 1918, was not keen on the conflation of war poems and the nursery. Mundy quotes Sassoon’s dislike of ‘the few grim war things mixed up with all the irresistible nursery and semi-serious verses’ (p. 32). Graves didn’t publish the collection, and so it is that it appears for the first time in Mundy’s volume, complete, and as planned in that summer of 1918, a few months before the war ended. One of the poems that likely made Sassoon flinch was ‘The Next War’, an eerie prediction of a war yet to come while the one still being fought had not yet ended. It’s the sort of verse that would not have been out of place in Robert Louis Stevenson’s

1885, *A Child's Garden of Verses*. 'The Next War' ends prophetically:

By the millions men will dies
In some new horrible agony;
And children here will thrust and poke,
Shoot and die, laugh at the joke,
With bows and arrows and wooden spears,
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers.

It is impossible to know, of course, but in *Good-bye to All That*, Graves records his 1917 meeting with the woman who would be his wife, Nancy Nicholson, then just seventeen. He recalled that she had shown him her paintings, 'illustrations to Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses*'. Graves then comments on the encounter, saying, 'my child-sentiment and hers answered each other' (p. 231). Their own son David, in a sad twist of fate, was declared 'missing in action' presumed dead in 1943, while fighting in Arakan, Burma with the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

It is with *The Patchwork Flag* (1918) – following *Over the Brazier* (1916) and *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917) – that Graves's three volumes of war poems produced during the war years come to an end in Mundy's volume. In keeping with Mundy's editorial plan to keep each volume as it was intended for its first publication, there are repetitions, carefully discussed in the endnotes. Altogether, the three 1916-18 collections make up about two-thirds of the two-hundred-and-ninety-six pages of the volume. The rest speaks to the way the war and the perceptions of the war continued through the remaining decades of Graves's life, the links between childhood, death and nursery verse still resonating clearly. In 'Recalling War,' for example, published in 1938, so just prior to the start of the Second World War, Graves writes:

And we recall the merry ways of guns –
 Nibbling the walls of factory and church
 Like a child, piecrust; felling groves of trees
 Like a child, dandelions with a switch!
 Machine-guns rattle toy-like from a hill,
 Down in a row the brave tin-soldiers fall:
 A sight to be recalled in elder days
 When learnedly the future we devote
 To yet more boastful visions of despair.

Graves's 1938 'Recalling War,' with 'the brave tin-soldiers' falling in a row reads as a kind of grim response to his answer to his 1918 'The Next War,' with its dark allusion to children playing at 'Royal Welch Fusiliers'.

The poems that Graves produced in the middle of the twentieth century tend to conflate his experiences of the two world wars. In 'Is it Peace?' he simply points to the hard facts of the deaths of the two German cousins of about his own age who were killed in the First World War and his own son, in the Second: 'Two wars, world wars. I lost in one | My cousins; in the next, a son –' (p. 282). Graves's memory of his son David turns up in another poem 'A Ghost from Arakan,' written in 1956, As Graves says in the first line, the magical news was that, '*He was not killed*'. But David was killed through the dream reads, of course, as a sad inversion of the inaccurate news of his own death forty years earlier in 1916. Graves ends the poem with the ghost image of his son:

His ghost, be sure, is watching here
 To count each liberated tear
 And smile a crooked smile:
 Still proud, still only twenty-four
 Stranded in his green jungle-war
 That's lasted all this while.

David Graves, stranded dead in the green jungles of Burma (now Myanmar) would have been wearing the green-gray khaki wool Royal Welch Fusiliers not too unlike the one Robert Graves had worn in the First World War, the uniform he wears in the photograph reproduced on the book jacket. In the picture, Robert Graves in his clean and pressed photo-ready uniform, highly polished shoes and face so smooth it looks as if it had not yet been introduced to a razor, looks directly at the camera and ‘smiles a crooked smile,’ perhaps remembering the nursery rhyme echoed in the 1956 poem: ‘There was a crooked man | who walked a crooked mile’.

In Mundy’s volume, the sense that Graves’s war poems were rooted in childhood seems inescapable, as if both the wish-fulfillment dream and anxiety dream had come to life, concentrated in images of war. I kept coming back to the first poem in the collection, ‘The Poet in the Nursery,’ about finding poetry inside ‘the bright green cover | Of a thin pretty book’. It is there that he finds both ‘lovely song’ and ‘monstrous phrases | Knotted with rhymes like a slave-driver’s thong’. In a later poem, ‘The Picture Book’, Graves creates a five-year old persona being forced to hear the stories in a German picture book, read to him by the witch/nurse Fraulein Spitzenburger, who begins by (mis) leading him to a ‘back-garden broad and green’ with rabbits peacefully nibbling the grass. But the poem then records the turn of the page where ‘the gardener fired his gun| From the low hedge: he lay unseen | Behind: oh, it was mean!’ The stanzas unfold in a series of increasingly horrible images resolving in the child protagonist crying, finding ‘A stretch of barren years in sight | Where right is wrong, but strength is right’ (pp. 156-157). It was in his work for children, largely published in the 1960s, so forty years after the war poems, that Graves did eventually find correctives for the nightmare injustices of his first volumes of poetry.

The Big Green Book, published in 1962 for the anthologist Louis Untermeyer, offers a nod in the title to the imagined ‘bright green

cover' of the 'pretty book' that heralded 'The Poet in the Nursery', the poem Mundy sets at the very beginning of Graves's war poems, as Graves had himself done at the beginning of *Over the Brazier*. In *The Big Green Book*, a child, Jack, magically morphs into an old man who can control the spells of the big green book he has found hidden in the attic. The scene parallels one in 'The Poet in the Nursery', in which the narrator finds the green book 'just behind the chair' in a 'dim library' where he encounters 'the ancient poet' who 'was mum-mumbling | A song,' while 'Pulling his long white beard and gently grumbling | That rhymes were beastly things and never there'. In *The Big Green Book*, the boy Jack spells himself as 'an old man with a long beard'. The story resolves in a restored world, a green world. There is even a response to the rabbit killed in the nightmare blue book, in Graves's 'The Picture Book'. In *The Big Green Book*, the rabbit, who had been chased by the dog in the story, fights back and wins. There is one more subtle connection – identified by Mundy in his introduction – between Graves's war poems and *The Big Green Book*. The cover image for Graves's first book, *Over the Brazier* had been made the artist Claud Lovat Fraser. Fraser, as it happens, also illustrated a volume of nursery rhymes that had influenced the young Maurice Sendak. And it was Sendak, early in his career, at thirty-four in 1962, who illustrated *The Big Green Book*. When the book was first published, Graves was a successful author. The children of his first marriage to Nancy Nicholson were grown and his son David had died. But the children of Graves's marriage to Beryl Hodge were young in the 1960s, and Graves was the Oxford Poetry Professor (1961-66). If the war poems Graves wrote and published marked the 'goodbye' to his own childhood, the children's books he published in the 1960s, including *The Penny Fiddle* (1960) and *Ann at Highwood Hall* (1964), marked a kind of redemptive 'hello'. And it is in the photograph of the young Robert Graves in his Royal Welch Fusiliers uniform smiling into the future on the cover of Mundy's

volume of war poetry that speaks to the enduring possibilities of childhood held in the verse.

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