

Robert Graves Trusts and Related

William Graves, MBE

Abstract: The following essay traces the author's efforts over more than thirty-five years to preserve and make accessible for research and general knowledge the writings of his father, Robert Graves. It provides summary histories of the major institutions devoted to that cause: The Robert Graves Copyright Trust, St John's College Robert Graves Trust, The Robert Graves Society, and the *Fundació* Robert Graves, identifies milestones in their histories and provides related events of importance.

Keywords: cultural preservation, literary societies, literary journals, Robert Graves

—

The Will

Poet and writer Robert Graves died in 1985. I am his eldest son by his second marriage, one of the two executors named in his Will, and the executor who saw it through probate. The Will was simple: a third went to my mother, Robert's wife Beryl, and the remaining two thirds were divided equally among his six surviving children. (On Beryl's death her third was added to the others, so that all assets from the will would then be shared equally by Robert's six surviving children or, on their deaths, his grandchildren.)

I first looked to Selwyn Jepson for advice. Selwyn was Robert's friend and, in his later years, his trusted advisor. He was an English mystery and detective story and screen writer, who had served as recruiting officer with F Section, Special Operations Executive during the war. Selwyn had collected a set of inscribed first editions of virtually all of Robert's books and these he gave me. The books have been invaluable in the developments I describe below. Selwyn not only gave me excellent advice in those early days: he told me

‘You must build Robert into a Shakespeare, which is how he deserves to be remembered’.

The Robert Graves Copyright Trust

As a geologist (Imperial College, London, 1961), I wanted to continue my professional consulting work, which I enjoyed, and which suited my way of life. After obtaining probate for the Will, I followed Selwyn’s suggestion that, in order to save me headaches and family quarrels, I should set up a Robert Graves Copyright Trust to look after the distribution of royalties from books, and other potential issues. This I did. The Will instructed me as executor to continue using A. P. Watt Ltd as his literary agents, so they now became the Trustees’ agents. Nevertheless, it soon became obvious that literary agents prefer having someone from whom they can seek advice regarding copyrights, problems with publishers, permissions to use poems, and so on, and for which the Trustees did not have the background. So, in my spare time from my geological consulting, I became Robert Graves’s *de facto* literary executor advising both the literary agents (now merged into United Agents LLP), and the Trustees of the Robert Graves Copyright Trust (now Accuro Trustees Jersey Ltd). I have been pro-active as Robert’s literary executor ever since.

St John’s College Robert Graves Trust

As a geologist, and with my somewhat limited literary background, I felt the need for help from academia. St John’s College, Oxford, seemed an obvious choice. Robert had been an undergraduate here after WWI and was later associated with the college when elected Oxford Professor of Poetry (1961-1966). My friend, John Kelly, was Senior Fellow of English at St John’s and was working on Yeats’ letters. And I am an alumnus of the college (after a brief foray into archaeology). With John Kelly’s help, it was agreed that

I could be settlor of the St John's College Robert Graves Trust (SJCRGT). The Trust was duly settled in 1993. Its aims were:

1. To promote the Study of Robert Graves's work;
2. To locate, catalogue and preserve Graves's books, manuscripts;
3. To collect copies of Robert Graves manuscripts in private hands for the sake of safety and preservation;
4. To act as a repository for books, manuscripts, letters and other Gravesiana that might be donated to the Trust;
5. To record publications relating to the life and works of Robert Graves;
6. To help organize and coordinate, from time to time, conferences and events pertaining to the life and work of Robert Graves;
7. To advise the Robert Graves Copyright Trust as and when the situation may arise.

Over time all these aims have directly or indirectly been accomplished by the SJCRGT. The Trust's first move was to offer itself to Robert's friends as a safe home for posterity for their letters from Robert Graves. (Actress Ava Gardner was keeping her letters in a shoe box). As a specifically Robert Graves institution, the Trust soon received some 600 of Graves's letters which now form important and valuable and collection.

Proactive in the early days were Dr Patrick Quinn, a Graves scholar, and his then Ph. D. student Ian Firla, who was writing his thesis on Graves. We consulted the University of Reading's recently published (1988) *Location Register of 20th Century English Literary Manuscripts and Letters* to locate Robert's material in various institutions in the UK. However, this was limited in that the major Robert Graves collections were in the USA and Canada. We decided that the Trust's initial project should be to generate a single author world-wide register for Graves, a *Location Register of Robert Graves Manuscripts and Letters*, to include all Graves material world-wide. This would form a starting point for researchers

on Graves and help locate material for theses and also to put together a Complete Letters from Robert Graves, in line with John Kelly's Yeats letters. The only published source of Graves letters at the time was the two-volume *Selected Letters of Robert Graves* edited by Paul O'Prey.

Robert Graves's letters are unique, not only for their time span – 1910 to 1975 – but also for their literary significance. They contain his WWI experiences, his somewhat chequered love life, his influence on many other twentieth-century poets (both through his poetry and through his seminal *The White Goddess*), and running commentaries on his historical novels, translations, and other investigations he had in hand. Robert led a fairly isolated life in Mallorca and virtually all his communication was by letter: these are therefore an excellent record of his life and work. And, because he was a literary figure from his early days in WWI, his recipients tended to keep his letters. The Trust applied for a Leverhulme Grant in 1993 to develop the Location Register of Graves manuscripts and letters but perhaps the time was not right. Unfortunately, the application was turned down and the thrust of interest in Graves went into the Society and Conferences.

Robert Graves Conferences

In July 1995, St John's Robert Graves Trust organized the Robert Graves Centennial Conference, held at the college. This was a celebratory affair, with family and friends. A second conference was organized on a fully academic footing and was held in Palma that November. To coincide with it, I organized an exhibition of Robert's life and work entitled "El Poeta y la Musa" in La Lonja, a spectacular 15th-century gothic civil building on the Palma sea front.

It was during the Palma conference that the delegates decided to set up the Robert Graves Society through which to organise future conferences. These are now generally five-day affairs. 'Special speakers' are invited from among established poets and writers.

The Robert Graves Society celebrated its Fourteenth International Conference in 2018. Conferences occur every two years, now alternating between St John's College and Graves's Mallorca. The 15th conference, which was to have been at St John's in September 2020, was unfortunately cancelled due to Covid-19 and replaced by a Zoom event. The next one will be in Palma in 2022. Other shorter events are also organized.

A. P. Watt Ltd / United Agents LLP, the Carcanet 'Robert Graves Programme', and subsequent Publications

A. P. Watt Ltd had been Robert's literary agents since the 1930s, and I was fortunate in having Linda Shaughnessy looking after the Graves portfolio. With Linda's help, a 'Robert Graves Programme' was started by Michael Schmidt at Carcanet for the Centenary, under the general editorship of Patrick Quinn, with the aim of publishing Robert's complete works. The first titles appeared in 1995 and the last in 2010 in twenty-two double volumes: poetry, novels, essays, mythology, theology, history, and so on. The Programme brought several books back into print as for example, *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* and its short sequel *Jesus in Rome*. The most important addition to the Graves corpus in this Programme was Dunstan Ward and Beryl Graves's exhaustive compilation of *The Complete Poems of Robert Graves* in three volumes, with extensive notes. Penguin Books' *Complete Poems of Robert Graves* is a paperback version of the Carcanet edition, incorporating all three volumes in one, but excluding the notes. Some 1200 poems are collected.

Today, most new editions of Robert's works are now based on the Carcanet texts. Most of his books are now also in e-book form. In the USA, Rosetta Books have some twenty-five e-titles online, and Seven Stories print these in high quality paperbacks. Almost all of Robert's work is in print.

Robert Graves Bibliography

The first bibliography of Robert Graves was published in 1966 by F. H. Higginson, and later updated in 1987 with W. P. Williams. Carl Hahn, one of the early members of the Robert Graves Society, has been a major collector of Graves's published works: there is little which has escaped. His exhaustive collection was offered to St John's but was turned down for lack of space. It now has a special home in the new Roehampton University library. With his extensive familiarity with the publications, Carl has for years been updating the Graves bibliography, including all minor items published in magazines, literary reviews, newspapers, and the like. These minor items have all been scanned and hopefully will be available online one day. The new bibliography, following the Higginson conventions, is planned to be published online by Roehampton University. Higginson's heirs transferred the copyright of the bibliography to The Robert Graves Copyright Trust.

Robert Graves Society and Journal

The Robert Graves Society has had four presidents. Patrick Quinn was the first president; he was followed by Dunstan Ward, Fran Brearton and now Charles Mundy. The first treasurer was Michel Pharand. Patrick Villa, a former member of the British Council, succeeded him in 1998, becoming secretary / treasurer. At the November 1995 Palma centenary conference, it was decided that the Society would publish a journal. *Gravesiana: The Journal of the Robert Graves Society*, appeared in June 1996. Patrick Quinn, who in 1988 had taken over the editorship of *Focus on Robert Graves* (the first journal dedicated to Graves) from Ellsworth Mason, the journal's founder, and enlarged the title to *Focus on Robert Graves and his Contemporaries*, became the first editor of *Gravesiana*. Quinn retired his editorship in 1998, replaced by Ian Firla, who had been the journal's deputy editor. Firla edited the journal from 1998 to 2001, producing the *Millennial Double*

Issue published in that year. John Woodrow Presley then took over as editor, to be succeeded in 2004 by Patrick Villa who produced the next issue of *Gravesiana*, the last to date to be published both in print and online, in Summer 2007. A gap of six years fell between the last issue of volume 2 (2.4) and the first issue of volume 3. Following Villa, Dunstan Ward, then the Society's president assumed editorship in 2008, producing an issue in 2010 and taking the journal online. He served as editor until 2016. Since then, the editor of the journal has been Michael Joseph. In 2020, as noted in the introduction (p. i), *Gravesiana* was renamed *The Robert Graves Review*.

My Other Involvements

On taking on the task of literary executor, I reread almost all of Robert works to get up to speed. I signed book and the occasional film agreements and helped sort out copyright issues on behalf of the Trustees of the Copyright Trust. On the 'literary' side, I published *About War* (1988), a volume of Robert's war poems: poems which he had allowed to go out of print because he could no longer relate to them. Nevertheless, these formed part of his biography as a war-poet and were much read and praised at the time. I felt they should be required reading next to Sassoon, Owen, and the other WWI poets. My compilation of *Poems About War* was not fully satisfactory and has today been replaced by the excellent *Robert Graves, War Poems* edited by Charles Mundy. Three major biographies had already been written or were being completed, and I found that all missed out part of the Mallorca side of the story. So, I wrote *Wild Olives, Life in Majorca with Robert Graves* to set the record straight. It took me a while as I had to learn to write prose rather than geology reports. Published in 1995, it is still in print with over 10,000 copies sold. Beryl read it and approved: 'Yes, that's how it was', she said with a sigh. Some twenty years later, when a good translator could not be found for the new Spanish edition of *The White Goddess*, based on the recently edited version

by Grevel Lindop for the Carcanet Robert Graves Programme, I undertook the translation myself with my wife Elena's help. It has sold over 6000 copies in hardback.

The Beryl Graves Bequest

Beryl died in 2003 bequeathing Robert's 'work library', his manuscripts and his letters to St John's College Library. The bequest, together with the material belonging to the St John's College Robert Graves Trust and several more boxes of later accessions to the collections, gives St John's College the largest (by a factor of ten) and most varied collection of Robert Graves material anywhere. It holds over 15,000 Graves-related items. (The only comparably large collections are housed at the Lilly Library in Southern Illinois, with some 1300 items, and the University of Victoria B. C., with about the same amount.)

Both the Robert Graves 'work-library' and the manuscripts, papers and letters in the 'Beryl Graves Bequest' have been professionally archived by the St John's College Library. These are on-line respectively at <http://www.lib.ox.ac.uk/olis> and <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/>. Unfortunately, the SJCRGT collection of letters, which were archived by the researchers, is not on the Archives hub and neither are the accessions received after the Bequest. However, everything is recoded and searchable on the websites mentioned below.

The *Fundació* Robert Graves

On Beryl's death in 2003, Robert's house had to be sold. Again, I was involved as executor. I had been considering for some time how to set up a Trust or Foundation to open the La Casa de Robert Graves to the public when Beryl was no longer with us. Fortunately, the Balearic Government jumped in and asked to buy it. They set up The *Fundació* Robert Graves (the Foundation) and took out a loan

to buy the house (now repaid). I am on the board of trustees. The primary aim of the foundation was to open Robert's house to the public. When in 2008 I retired from my geological consulting, the Trustees voted me to be unpaid director. We are now receiving some 6000 visitors a year including some local schools. (When schools visit, I try to be present and welcome them.) In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic considerably suppressed attendance, but visits will build up again when things get back to normal.

Another aim of the Foundation is to raise the Robert Graves profile on the island. So, I ensure that the Foundation helps to host and finance the Robert Graves International Conferences. As mentioned above, these are now celebrated biannually, alternatively in Mallorca and Oxford. The first one hosted by the Foundation coincided with the opening of the house in 2006. Other minor events are also organized by the Foundation. With the loan now repaid, it now rests on a fairly firm financial footing.

The Robert Graves Location Register of Manuscripts and Letters

The STJCRG aims have remained in my mind. So, regarding the Location Register of Manuscripts and Letters, I have presently located and been in touch with some eighty institutions holding Graves material, I have lists of their holdings, and have made good progress with the Register. Recorded on a searchable database are now the locations some 9000 of Robert's letters and some 14,000 letters sent to him, together with the myriad of drafts and final copies of his poems and prose manuscripts. Even his agents' records have been uploaded.

I have been using a pseudo relational-database generated from Excel worksheets, which were then uploaded to the website. However, the data is increasing all the time, so a bespoke online database is now available and being refined to allow easy data input and organisation, and a simple output interface to locate letters, poems, articles, and so on.

Robert Graves Letters Online

With 9000 or so letters from Robert or so presently on the Location Register and only 600 or so published in Paul O'Prey's *Selected Letters*, I was encouraged to post 270 of Robert's WWI letters, on a password protected website. The transcription of each letter is shown together with its present library location and details. No images or comments are added. The Robert Graves Copyright Trust owns the copyright to the text of his letters, so we can make them available for research. Researchers can perform digital searches on them and locate the original documents held by the libraries. This database is now being upgraded to take all of Robert's extant letters.

Other Interests in Robert Graves

Not mentioned above are various Robert Graves related events which reflect the work that the Trust, the Robert Graves Society, and the conferences have done in raising Robert's profile. The most important 'profile raiser' was the BBC's *I, Claudius*. Options are taken and a new series is about to be made. Of recent events, I personally found the most moving to be the three performances of Jools Scott and Sue Curtis's *The Cool Web Oratorio*, based on Robert's war poems, perfumed first in Bath Abbey, then at the Wimbledon Music Festival, and finally as part of the Centenary Armistice Remembrance program at St. Paul's Cathedral, London. The Robert Graves film *The Laureate* filmed early in 2020 is still to be premiered. All these activities help to keep interest in the work and life of Robert Graves very much alive.

Websites

It will be appreciated that the work by the St John's College Robert Graves Trust, the Robert Graves Society, the *Fundació* Robert Graves, the Robert Graves Review publications, and my searchable

databases provide much information on Robert Graves, and that these all have a web presence. The original St John's Robert Graves Trust website was housed on a server with the researchers in college and was rather a simple affair. It was updated in around 2006 as *robertgraves.org* with Ian Firla the webmaster. The site, *robertgraves.org*, consists of three sections: Resources, Robert Graves Society, and the Robert Graves Review. Resources deals with the Trust and its work, the finding page for the location register, searchable tables of books, TV, recordings, etc.

When the Foundation was set up in Mallorca, the following two sites were published: *fundaciourobertgraves.org*, a trilingual site (Spanish, Catalan and English) with biography, bibliography and links; and *lacasaderobertgraves.org*. This site simply describes the house and garden and allows visitors to make bookings. The Robert Graves Society has recently decided to upgrade *robertgraves.org* which has become obsolete and incompatible with notepads and smart phones. It is planned that the new site will have news, biography, music, recordings, photographs, teaching resources, Facebook, etc., and a search-engine page to the Robert Graves Location Register. It will have links to the Society and to *The Robert Graves Review*. The Location Register database and the many related tables would be held on a separate site together with the Robert Graves Letters database but accessible through *robertgraves.org*. There will also be an easy access to the Foundation sites.

End Note

As can be appreciated above, virtually all of the objectives of the St John's College Robert Graves Trust have been carried forward. In a future phase, I suggest that a researcher or perhaps two will needed to carry forward my work on the Location Register of Robert Graves manuscripts and letters, and to ensure that the database is as complete as possible. As literary executor, I receive many requests for help, and the Register leads me to easy answers for most queries.

The Robert Graves Letters transcription is a major undertaking. Even before institutions are approached for copies of Robert Graves letters for transcription, there are over a thousand letters in the St John's College collection which require attention. The transcriptions to date (now approaching 1000), reveal one of the most versatile, well-connected, knowledgeable and fascinating poets of the twentieth-century. *Robertgraves.org* is a one-stop site for research into this fascinating and little studied figure.

New biographies are being written, films and TV shows are in the making, all of which raise Robert Graves's profile. Will he become Selwyn Jepson's Shakespeare? Perhaps: they have a lot in common. Time will tell.

William Graves is an author, translator, and geologist. He is the oldest son of Robert Graves and his wife Beryl (Pritchard) Graves, author of *Wild Olives*, *Life in Majorca with Robert Graves*, and translator of *La Diosa Blanco* [*The White Goddess*].