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## ‘Good Luck ... and Blessed Be’: Robert Graves and F. A. C. Boothby

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**Abstract:** A discussion of Graves relationship with Frederick. A. C. Boothby, Gerald Gardner and Idries Shah, arguing that Shah attempted to manipulate Graves’s feelings for Gardner with the design of securing Graves’s endorsement of his work on the Sufi.

**Keywords:** Idries Shah, Frederick A. C. Boothby, witches, mushrooms

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In late January 1960, Robert Graves was about to begin work on a thorough revision of *The White Goddess*. It was now almost twelve years since his ground-breaking and deeply idiosyncratic study of Goddess-worship and poetic inspiration had first appeared. In the intervening years the book had attracted much controversy and had been widely read by poets, as well as by people interested in mythology and paganism; but it had not been a best seller.

Just as Graves was about to begin the work of revision, he received an unexpected letter. It came from a certain F. A. C. Boothby, who described himself as ‘the Priest’ of a Witch Coven. Boothby explained that he was a friend of one Anthony Melachrino, who had apparently written to Graves ‘[a] couple of years ago’, at a time of trouble, and had received from Graves ‘a kind and understanding reply’. Melachrino, it appeared, was now a member of Boothby’s coven. But Melachrino, though providing an opening gambit for Boothby’s letter, was not its main concern. Rather, Boothby wanted to put Graves right on the subject of modern witchcraft. ‘In the course of a recent lecture in Chicago, or

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rather at the end of that lecture’, he wrote, ‘you told a woman that you did not think that there were any genuine Covens left in Britain, though you had heard of what you thought was an attempted reconstruction in the St Albans area’.

The St Albans Coven in fact springs from a Coven which operated in the New Forest up to this last war, but is now defunct. That New Forest Coven was in direct descent from ancient times. My own Coven springs from an overflow from St Albans, which is over strength. There are other covens we know of operating in the area of Long Compton (using the Rollright stones), another at Preston, Lancs, and another in Cumberland. I suspect there are others.<sup>1</sup>

What Boothby seems to mean – for his account is not altogether clear – is that there had once been an ancient New Forest Coven, which died out around the time of the Second World War; from that ancient New Forest Coven came the St Albans Coven; Boothby’s own coven ‘springs from’ (or rather, he seems to mean, *is*), an overflow from the St Albans group.

Boothby went on to tell Graves that

In our lower grade we worship the Goddess and the God in the names of Aradia and Cernunnos; later as Gwern and Arianrod [*sic*]. There is also mention and use of the Cauldron of Cerridwen in the Rites. There are three grades. There is also allowance for the attendance of the Outer Folk at Sabbats, but this was discontinued hundreds of years ago for obvious reasons. It may be resumed in modified form this year.<sup>2</sup>

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Boothby adds that ‘from Hallowe’en to May Eve the God is the Hunter-God and for the rest of the time, naturally, he is the solar aspect of the vegetation of which the Goddess is the embodiment (is that the right word?)’. In other words, during the dark half of the year the God is a hunter; in the bright half of the year, he is as a vegetation God – ruling the crops, and the fertility of the land. Boothby explains that his coven celebrated five festivals, which he lists as ‘Yule/Candlemas, Beltane, Midsummer, Lammas, and Halloween’, adding that he ‘cannot work up any enthusiasm for the mathematical Solstices and Equinoxes’, and that his coven has ‘a dim tradition of a ten-month year’, with the five festivals at two-month intervals.

A curious feature of this is that Boothby’s system appears to bring Yule and Candlemas together: he writes of ‘Yule/Candlemas’. Indeed, he goes on to tell Graves that there are ‘five intercalary days between Yule and Candlemas’. Since Candlemas is 2 February, falling five weeks after Yule or Christmas, it is hard to see how the two festivals could be regarded as one, even if the five ‘intercalary days’ are viewed as somehow not counting. Boothby’s calendar is perplexing. Some light is shed by Boothby’s manuscript *Book of Shadows*, the handwritten book of rituals and magical practice kept by all witches in the tradition established by Gerald Gardner. ‘Yule, the Winter Solstice, about December 21st’ and ‘Candlemas, about February 2nd’ are listed separately but then bracketed together; additionally, ‘Spring Equinox’ and ‘Autumn Equinox’ have been deleted. Boothby’s foot-of-page note reads ‘These are the [eight *deleted*] five ritual occasions’. It appears that for some reason Boothby wished to bring the number of festivals down to five, and was somewhat ruthless in doing so.<sup>3</sup>

The address at the head of Boothby’s letter is ‘The Spinney, Sarratt, Nr. Rickmansworth, Herts.’ He goes on to tell Graves,

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I live in utter content in a hut in the bottom of a dell, without any ‘services’, and surrounded with green things. I am only eighteen miles from Hyde Park Corner, yet the sound of engines is distant and dim and people come down to see me for the peace they find here.<sup>4</sup>

Sarratt is near Chorleywood, just north-west of today’s M25 motorway, some twenty miles (as the crow flies) from central London. It is still a rural area, with a good deal of woodland.

Boothby’s letter soon turns to a long list of questions which he wishes to ask Graves: first about the meaning of the song ‘Green Grow the Rushes O’ (which he believes to be ‘a pagan hymn’);<sup>5</sup> then about the Tassili frescoes (where he believes the so-called ‘White Lady’ is a Libyan priestess with a ‘vulture emblem on her head’); and then about a spell beginning ‘*In domo mamosin ichorna meoti*’, which members of his coven are attempting to reconstruct. Finally, he gives Graves a spell for ‘curing all disease’ by means of the first anemone of the year:

Pick ye first anemone ye see in ye year. Say ‘Anemone I greet ye in ye name of ye Great Goddess as a cure for all disease’. Wrap it up in fair linen or parchment. Keep hidden till needed. Kiss your thumb held between two fingers in honour of ye Goddess before and after doing this. Give to a sick person saying “I give you this years anemone to cure you in ye name of ye Great Goddess”. Then kiss your thumb and make ye sick person do likewise. ‘Tis well to be purified and better to partake of ye cakes and ale before using.<sup>6</sup>

A little disturbingly, perhaps, though possibly emulating Graves’s known views on poetic inspiration, Boothby asks,

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Do you ever find, on rereading what you have written on these subjects, that you have written in a sort of trance? I sometimes wonder that it could have been me who have [sic] written certain things. I am intrigued to notice that I am developing, quite involuntarily, a second hand-writing. I now have one for sacred matters and another for writing to the bank! (Far from sacred!).<sup>7</sup>

Graves replied to this, and to another letter from Boothby, now lost. Regarding the survival of the witch cult, Graves remarks ‘Well, so it still goes on? Good.’ He tells Boothby that ‘The Green Grow the Rushes O Song is Christian, I’m afraid’ and dates from the reign of Edward VI; and adds that in the Tassili frescoes, ‘The “White Lady” seems to be a man, my anthropological friends tell me; a pity’.<sup>8</sup>

This is perhaps the place to pause and ask an obvious question: who was F. A. C. Boothby? The answers are less straightforward than one might expect. Born in 1909, Frederick Alexander Colquhoun Boothby was the son of Captain Frederick Lewis Maitland Boothby; his mother, Lady May Katherine Leila Pery, was a daughter of the Third Earl of Limerick. Boothby was thus a scion of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy and of a military family. In 1933 he had been in Horsham, Surrey, working with one Arnold Lancaster to establish a branch of the British Union of Fascists, which became the centre of many Blackshirt activities. The branch operated until 1938, when it folded.<sup>9</sup> When war broke out, Boothby joined the army. He would tell Graves, in a letter of 19 July 1969,

I know as much about the desert between Alexandria and Tripoli as any other European, for from 1943-46 I was military adviser to the Egyptian Frontiers Brigade in the Western Desert, and from 1951-53 I was admin:

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officer to No 1 GHQ Recce Team, which covered the coast from the Tripolitanian Border to Tripoli city.

The letter does indeed go on to show a detailed knowledge of the region. However, one observes a gap in the dates. What is not mentioned is that from early 1946 and for at least a year thereafter, Boothby was involved in a disastrous programme undertaken by the Allies to deport some three million German speakers into Germany, from territories formerly occupied by Germany but now, under the Potsdam Agreement, becoming part of Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia. These included not only Germans who had moved to these regions after the Nazi conquest, but also German-speakers (including Jews) who were part of communities that had lived there for centuries. Stationed at Kaławsk (present day Węgliniec in Silesia, Western Poland) Boothby had done his best to handle his small part of an impossible situation in which social breakdown, cold weather, food shortages and inadequate transport combined with lawlessness and official corruption to create a chaos in which at least half a million people, many of them women and children, died. Boothby seems not to have been especially culpable: a well-disposed administrator, he was unable to do much to improve a situation which may have been traumatic to him as to others.<sup>10</sup>

After returning to North Africa and serving until 1953, Boothby left the regular army and transferred to the Army Reserve with the rank of Major. Meanwhile, other surprising things had been happening, probably arising from his time in Silesia. The National Archives at Kew contain 'Registry Number: C 1461/32. Correspondence about a claim by Captain F A C Boothby relating to property in the Eastern zone, dated August 1952'.<sup>11</sup> The claim is to 'certain lands in Eastern Germany [Silesia] near the Polish border. No reference to cultural property.' One might wonder how Boothby came to have a claim on 'lands' in East Germany.

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The answer lies in his second marriage; for by the time he contacted Graves, Boothby had two marriages behind him. In 1937 he had married one Pamela Kathleen Nainby; they divorced in 1948. The same year, Boothby married the Baroness Siegfried von Wistershelm-Kramstra.<sup>12</sup> The National Archive correspondence makes it clear that the East German lands belonged, or had belonged, to Boothby's recently acquired father-in-law. Inevitably, however, this bid to secure a share in the former possessions of the German aristocracy failed, meeting the obduracy of the new, Moscow-aligned East German government. Five years later, in 1957, Boothby and the Baroness divorced.

One would like to know how he then made the transition from aspiring Silesian landowner to High Priest of a coven, living in a 'hut' at Rickmansworth. Possibly the Baroness's legal advisors had some share in determining his new choice of domicile. As for his esoteric interests, a letter from Boothby to the Cambridge archaeologist T. C. Lethbridge, dated 22 April 1960, goes some way to indicate their origin. Learning that Lethbridge was pursuing his search for lost hill figures by dowsing, Boothby responded:

My father was one of the founders of the British Society of Dowsers. We used to dowse for the skeletons of dead soldiers at Maiden Castle. He got his best results with plastic knitting needles, bound together at the top! ... He found that different coloured knitting needles gave reactions for different objects. Green = good water, black = bad water as far as I can remember. He could also find gold, oil (copper rod), and coal etc.... I have no doubt that if you were to get in touch with the British Society of Dowsers you would get most enthusiastic cooperation from them.<sup>13</sup>

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If Boothby's father had pursued his archaeological interests by methods verging on the paranormal, Boothby himself might be viewed as following a similar path with somewhat greater intensity. Be that as it may, we now return to the correspondence with Robert Graves.

Undeterred by the poet's scepticism regarding the Tassili frescoes and other matters, Boothby wrote back on 18 February 1960, asking him about the meaning of some words 'chanted,' he says, 'around the Hallowe'en fires':

Bazabi lacha bachaba  
Lamach cahi achaba  
Karrelos  
[...]

This lyric was an invocation often used by witches in the Gardnerian tradition at Samhain and for summoning purposes. (I use the term 'Gardnerian' for convenience, to refer to ritual practices used in the traditions stimulated directly by Gardner's 1954 book, *Witchcraft Today*. Originally coined by a rival occultist, 'Robert Cochrane' – pseudonym of Roy Bowers (1931-66) – it is now generally used without derogatory implications.) Graves was unable to help with the 'Bazabi' formula, merely suggesting that it resembled 'a Macaronic mixture of Latin and Middle English, written in the Middle Ages. Apparently a formal opening of a Sabbath by the "ealdor", or witch, and the appointment of officers. But it's very garbled'.<sup>14</sup> He did not recognise, what is now widely accepted, that the invocation (properly beginning '*Bagahi laca bachahé*') derives from *Le Miracle de Théophile*, a play by the thirteenth-century *trouvère* Rutebeuf (1245-1285), in which a character uses the words to summon the devil.

But Graves naturally had questions of his own, and now that he found himself in contact with a real witch, he was eager to ask them. He had recently been in New York with the



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mushroom experts R. Gordon Wasson and his wife Valentina. Together they had eaten Mexican sacred mushrooms, accompanied by a Wasson's sound recording of a Mexican shaman invoking the god Tlaloc.<sup>15</sup> Graves had experienced beautiful visions, and had become convinced that in prehistoric Europe, mushrooms – probably *Amanita muscaria*, the common fly agaric, what we think of as a red spotted toadstool – had been used similarly in religious rites. As a result, he now wanted to introduce material about mushrooms into the new edition of *The White Goddess*. Unexpectedly finding himself in touch with a real British witch, in the person of Boothby, he was keen to ask questions.

If you know anything about the witch use of toadstools, please tell me: the Portuguese witches produce visions with the *panaeolus Papilonaceus*, a small brownish dung-toadstool. My friends and I are having the whole range of *paneolus* tested by Sandoz A. G. in Basel for *psilocybin* the hallucinogenic drug got from Mexican toadstools. (I have tried it. You go straight *alli donde hay Dios*.) I am convinced that this and the *amanita [sic] muscaria* (spotted death-cap) were once very important in the witch cult. *Muscaria*, eaten raw, does not kill but sends you berserk. It grows under birches.<sup>16</sup>

It was in fact Wasson (who as a banker was not short of money) who was having Sandoz do the tests. And Graves adds – no doubt recalling the length of Boothby's first letter – 'When I get too busy I'll not answer your letters unless they're very important. O.K.?'

Boothby was only too happy to respond. On 23 February, he told Graves,

Now as to toadstools, and other stimuli. I am most interested and am engaged on research, too. Our

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limitations are that no doctor would dare to help us, and that as no drug has the same effect on any two people, we are faced with the danger of someone being taken ill. If that happened, the uproar would be terrific. They don't burn us at the moment, but they still harry us whenever they have the chance. Anamita [*sic*] Muscaria (Fly Agaric) is known to us. It is out of use, for reasons I have just told you. However, I am prepared to have a go as soon as I can arrange to be properly observed, and crowned if I go wild. How berserk does one get and what form does it take? The chewing of ivy, bay and laurel are known to us too, though we burn them with the incense.<sup>17</sup>

And he adds a few pieces of herb lore: 'Chevril [*sic*] is said to make people see double ... If a smooth shining piece of steel be smeared over with the herb Mugwort and made to fume, it will cause invoked spirits to appear' – and so on. This may or may not have been part of his coven's repertoire, but the passage about Mugwort is an almost *verbatim* quotation from Cornelius Agrippa,<sup>18</sup> so at this point Boothby appears to be pretending to special knowledge which he does not possess.

Graves replied that 'Nobody in good health has ever, so far as is known died of *muscaria*. I don't know the dosage. It is very hot to the taste and seems to have been washed down by the Maenads etc with ivy ale and, later, wine.'<sup>19</sup> He adds that the mushroom which the caterpillar tells Alice to eat in *Alice in Wonderland* is *Amanita muscaria*, and identifies the Victorian book on fungi from which Lewis Carroll took his information, Mordecai Cooke's Plain and Easy Account of British Fungi (1862). (Graves's source, though he does not say so, is the Wassons' *Russia, Mushrooms and History*.)<sup>20</sup>

But Graves has other interesting things to say about witchcraft. He asks Boothby 'Did you read dear old Margaret Murray's latest book: *The Divine King in England*?... I was

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the only person who gave it a decent review; she is very old and makes errors in places – and often her case is stronger than [for ‘than’] she has presented it.’ Graves knew Margaret Murray slightly because he had consulted her about herbs and witch names back in the 1940s whilst writing the first version of *The White Goddess*. He adds a very sound piece of advice:

One thing I am sure of is that no new rite or belief should be imposed on a coven or covens by the leader; nor should it be voted upon. Voting disturbs unanimity. In primitive societies, decisions are arrived at by a general feeling that they are right, after full discussion. Minorities will wreck any society, because minorities are always right.<sup>21</sup>

Five days later Graves wrote again, to report that ‘The Mexican *curandera* presented with the crystalline *psilocybe* tablets found them delightfully potent and useful’. He also shared another opinion about witches: ‘One trouble about the witch cult as I understand it historically was that so much energy went into fighting the church, instead of constructively improving human relationships, from the 14th c. onward.’<sup>22</sup>

And again, on 17 April 1960: ‘I am busy relating the Greek, Jewish, Babylonian & Aztec heavens. They all seem based on mushroom visions; with the toad and serpent as the emblems. The toad is the one that interests me most, and was prominent in the Elizabethan witch-cult.’<sup>23</sup> This is typical of how Graves’s mind works: the enormous energy and learning connecting diverse things – ‘Greek, Jewish, Babylonian & Aztec’ – and then the leap that links the Central American image of the toad (symbol of the god Tlaloc) with the Elizabethan idea of the toad as witch’s familiar.

But the creativity was working in other directions as well, and by June Graves was telling Boothby (now addressing him simply as ‘Dear Boothby’, rather than ‘Dear Mr Boothby’)

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that ‘a millionaire\* [*a footnote adds ‘\*Multi’*] named Wm. Morris has gone crazy about the White Goddess – he lives in some woods in N. Y. State – and wants to do a film on the subject which will make all scalps crawl’. This was because of Margot Callas, who had arrived in Mallorca not long before and had starred in an 8mm short film made by a friend of Graves. Graves had fallen in love with her and decided (with her encouragement) that she was his new Muse and incarnation of the White Goddess. He added,

Alastair Reid and I will be responsible for the script, Jerome Robbins will direct... When the project is properly contracted for, maybe Alastair and I can enlist your help in a witch sequence, which would not of course involve you in any breach of faith or even publicity. But these are early times.<sup>24</sup>

Not surprisingly, a little over a month later Graves was telling Boothby that the film’s financial backer wanted to know ‘where witches came into the story: so I said that they had kept the Goddess religion alive throughout the Middle Ages in the most heroic style. He got the point.’<sup>25</sup>

Boothby’s reply has been lost, but evidently the coven had been busy because on 13 August Graves writes:

Dear Boothby,  
Your mistake was to eat the mushroom on a full stomach. With *psilocybin*, one fasts at least 24 hours beforehand, abstains from carnality for 3 days, and makes one’s peace with one’s conscience & mankind in general. I should think young specimens are better. They can be washed down with cider or beer. Nobody must laugh at the mushrooms, or eat them as anything but divine food, or the devils come. (So they say)....

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Most interesting, clinically, will be an examination of the urine afterwards by a skilled analyst.<sup>26</sup>

In September 1960 Boothby was filmed for a television programme about witchcraft. Writing from Brighton, where he was now living, he told Graves on 21 September that the programme was going to be filmed by the BBC, and that ‘The meeting place will be shown, rigged for a meeting, with all except ‘Top Secret’ articles on view’.<sup>27</sup> (What the ‘top secret’ items were is unknown.) Graves, who was now on one of his annual visits to London and staying in Kensington, told Boothby, ‘I’ll be watching you on TV, and if you could come and see us, however briefly,... I should like it very much.’<sup>28</sup> Boothby told Graves that the ‘TV witch show’ would be broadcast on 24 October, and would be ‘a 3 or four-minute programme’ – surely briefer than he had expected. He also notified Graves that he had recently remarried; his wife Rosalie, an artist, ‘is’, he writes, ‘not yet a member of the Witch Cult. She is reading *Seven Days in New Crete*, which is a “Set Piece” as far as my coven is concerned.’ He hopes that Rosalie will feel ‘moved to do some painting inspired by the Wild Women chapter’.<sup>29</sup>

By 5 November a visit had taken place: Boothby wrote to say that he and Rosalie had enjoyed meeting Graves and his family, and also that he had ‘been dodging reporters from the yellow press’<sup>30</sup> – presumably as a result of the TV broadcast: the brief feature had formed part of *Wednesday Magazine*, presented by David Jacobs and broadcast on 26 October. Trouble escalated, and on 16 November, Boothby complained, ‘We have had an appalling time with the gutter press and hope to secure some form of rebuttal from the News of the World, after a session in my lawyers’ office with one of their reporters’.<sup>31</sup> There had also been ‘a particularly nauseating article in a rag called *The People*.’ In addition, Boothby sends the address of Ruth Cameron, who he says

was ‘the girl with me in the TV show,’ and adds that ‘she would be prepared to cooperate should you want her for your film’.

Graves replied sympathetically. ‘I knew you’d have trouble with the gutter press’, he wrote: ‘The News of the World is notable for being the most anthropologically minded of the lot.’<sup>32</sup> He added that his son, William, who was reading geology at university, had asked ‘Do you know any witches?’ because ‘My tutor’s wife wants to join a coven’. Graves proposed that the lady (‘Mrs Professor’) should meet Ruth Cameron, to be ‘vetted’; but in reply, Boothby suggested that instead she should meet ‘my Priestess, Mrs Woodburn’, who lives at Red Lion Cottage, Saratt, Rickmansworth.<sup>33</sup>

By now the letters were being addressed to ‘Dear Robert’ and ‘Dear Derick’ (‘tail end of Frederick’, as Boothby breezily explained).<sup>34</sup> Sympathizing with Boothby over the recent burning of his hut at Sarratt by vandals, he agreed that Boothby shouldn’t curse the perpetrators. ‘Me,’ says Graves, ‘I have stopped putting personal hoodoos on people: it is a bit scary and, if one’s heart and conscience aren’t quite clean, may boomerang back.’

It was on 11 January 1961 that Graves announced what, in retrospect, appears momentous news. Half way through a letter about nothing in particular, he told Boothby, ‘Idries Shah & Dr Gardner are in Palma and we are to meet soon; I hope that I’ll find them *sympathique*, but will not expect from them what I expected and found in you.’<sup>35</sup> The letter is signed, ‘Blessings Be’ – for, in response to Boothby’s use of the Wiccan salutation ‘Blessed Be’ (first used by Boothby on 30 December), Graves was now, rather touchingly, attempting the same idiom.

The visit of Gardner and Shah was to be of considerable importance. Born in India and educated in England, Idries Shah (1924-96) had published in 1956 a book on *Oriental Magic*, and was now employed as secretary and companion to

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the seventy-five-year-old Gardner. The visit to Graves in Mallorca was probably his idea. Gardner suffered from chronic respiratory problems and liked to spend his winters in the Mediterranean: there would have been little difficulty in persuading him to include a meeting with the author of *The White Goddess* in his itinerary. For Shah there was much potential benefit in making contact with Graves. Gardner's witch cult held little attraction for him, and as a decentralised and spontaneous movement it offered no possible power base. Graves, on the other hand, was a world-class author and celebrity from whom great things might be expected.<sup>36</sup> Whether or not he planned it from the start, Shah would soon be working to detach himself from Gardner, and to attach himself to Graves.

From England, Boothby was noncommittal about the prospects for Gardner's visit. He replied,

Gerald Gardner is a woolly old boy and I've never been able to sort out what lies behind the wooliness. He's travelled and seen a lot, but I sometimes think that all he has taken away is a mental photograph. Idries [Shah] is a pleasant fellow, a Sufi, who does a lot of 'ghost writing', and some on his own.<sup>37</sup>

Graves lost no time in reporting back on the encounter, in neutral terms – though the comparison to Carpenter, with whom Graves had corresponded in early youth, is fascinating:

I had tea yesterday in Palma with Dr Gardner & Idries Shah. Yes: woolly and oddly like Edward Carpenter & other aged Victorian do-good rebels. But a nice old boy. I don't think he really knows what it's all about. Shah's all right in a quiet way.<sup>38</sup>

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And for the first time, Graves signs his letter, ‘Blessed be, Robert’.

On 22 January, Graves wrote a note to Rosalie, asking her for some card reproductions of her paintings. For Rosalie Loveday was a fairly successful artist, who had exhibited in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibitions of 1946, 1947, 1948, 1953, 1959 and 1960. Her fine portrait of the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, now in the Biggar and Upper Clydesdale Museum, is well known, and served as the frontispiece for the 1970 edition of his *Selected Essays*. Samples of her work – flower paintings and landscapes in an attractive ‘post-Impressionist’ manner – still occasionally feature on gallery websites.<sup>39</sup>

At the end of his note to Rosalie, Graves added some deeply significant words: ‘Idries Shah is a very good man indeed I find – I never met an Afghan before. Old Gardner’s sweet, and a good figure for the show window.’<sup>40</sup> Brief as they are, with hindsight the words contain two most significant implications. Writing ‘Idries Shah is a very good man indeed *I find*’ [emphasis added] implies that by 22 January Graves and Shah have continued to meet: ‘I find’ are words that imply a deepening acquaintance. And calling Gardner ‘a good figure for the show window’ tells us that Shah has presented himself as the real power, with Gardner a mere figurehead. This is confirmed by Graves’s letter of 2 March 1961:

Old Gardner is, I have discovered, not a real Dr at all: but has a ‘Doctorate’ bought from a basement university phoney in Notting Hill Gate. He is now importing a High Priestess who has asked to have ‘hot Spanish men’ laid on for her. I am busy avoiding both, and have officially gone to Madrid. He is disgracefully advertising his magic here among the foolish gin-drinking women who abound, and is in his Doatage.



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Idries is a splendid man, and I have learned a lot from him.<sup>41</sup>

It is hard to avoid the impression that Idries Shah is systematically poisoning Graves's mind against Gardner. How else could he, for example, have learned about the dubious nature of Gardner's doctorate? It appears that whilst Gardner is relaxing in Palma, Shah in Deià is busy (to put it bluntly) dishing the dirt on the former benefactor (who had of course financed the trip to Mallorca).

Inevitably, from Graves's point of view, as Gardner's stock fell so Shah's rose. Ever prone to acquiring sudden enthusiasms and protégés, Graves had taken Shah to his heart. On 14 March 1961, he told Boothby,

Idries was more than a little embarrassed by visiting me in company of old G. and took care to protect me against him; ... G. was selling witch secrets here to the idle and debauched, and seems senile. Idries is a student of human nature and G. is a most interestingly awful subject of study: ... He's now in Madrid, and Margot [Callas], I hear, has been giving him Greek fire\* [footnote: \*whisky plus harmless ingredients] to cure his cold. She skilfully also borrowed a mummy-head from a church vault in Toledo but I don't think that she should let Gardner have it, and I don't think she will... Idries was pleased to find that I can claim descent from the Prophet, though by an inferior Moorish line from Cordoba. We had lots of fun here.

Good luck to you both – blessed be!  
Robert.

It is clear that by now Shah had completely altered Graves's view of Gardner. On first meeting, Graves had thought

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Gardner ‘a nice old boy’, ‘woolly’, but a bit of a Victorian dogooder. Now, he sees him as a fraud, ‘senile’, ‘interestingly awful’; someone against whom Shah needs to ‘protect’ him. Meanwhile Shah, who was previously ‘all right in a quiet way’, could now do no wrong. Shah’s pleasing discovery that Graves could ‘claim descent from the Prophet’ is, in retrospect, no great surprise. It was a compliment that Shah produced for a number of people, and which in due course infected Graves himself (in 1965 he would tell Queen Elizabeth II, when she gave him her Gold Medal for Poetry, that she was similarly descended).<sup>42</sup> It is clear that besides ingratiating himself with Graves, Shah’s other priority was to prevent Graves and Gardner from communicating. Given their similar ages, wealth of eccentric knowledge and shared interest in Goddess-worship, there must have been some risk that they would form a friendship which might exclude Shah. He was successful in achieving this. The last mention of Gardner in Graves’s letters comes on 29 September 1961: ‘Gardner is really a — but he can be left to his own fate.’

It has to be admitted that Boothby shared Shah’s disdain for Gardner. In March 1961 he told Graves,

Gardner has produced an appalling article in ‘Men Only’. No matter how hard I, and others try to present the Witch Cult in a rational manner, that old idiot comes along and scuppers the lot. He’ll live for years, damn it. He is, and always has been a pervert and, even in his dotage, he tries to attract his like. I would rather the Craft had died out than that such as he should be deemed to represent it. He besmirches everything that’s beautiful.<sup>43</sup>

Graves and Gardner never met again, and within three years Gardner would be dead.

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Meanwhile, the poet's friendship with Shah became ever closer. In the summer of 1961 Shah was back in Mallorca again, Graves telling Boothby, 'Idries Shah is here: one of the best intelligences I have ever met, and the kindest hearted.'<sup>44</sup> The next phase of Shah's strategy was to convince Graves that everything valuable in European culture came from Sufi sources. Reading Graves's letters to Boothby, we find Shah feeding him supposedly esoteric information, all of it about Sufism. This was not disinterested, for Shah was writing a book on Sufism, and was determined that Graves should launch it for him. On 14 January 1962, Graves writes,

Am writing the Introduction to Idries Shah's *Sufi* book. He has convinced me that the English witch cult was transformed in the thirteenth or fourteenth century by the grafting on the native witch stock of a Saracenic cult of Divine Wisdom, which came in by way of Spain. The fraternity was called 'The Two Horned' which derived from the 'Ariza' school of Sufism. It was under protection of the Kings of Aragon, and its symbol was a candle between two goats' horns, meaning 'Illumination from the head of Ariza' (Ariza is a tribe, means 'Goat') and the instructor dressed in black ('black' means 'wise' in Sufi language) was called 'Rahbin' ('He who follows the Road' [of Wisdom]).

The Saracen Muse (wholly unorthodox by Islamic tenets) was threefold too, according to the poet Ibn Arabi...

I have been asked to write a piece on modern witches for an American magazine & have done so with the utmost discretion; but end up with the view that the sort of folksy fun-and-games which old Gardner preaches is not enough. The real object of the witch cult is wisdom

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through ecstasy which is generated by love and right living and honour.

I say that most witches of my acquaintance – I met a very good one from Glastonbury – are honest and good people, but that the press-excitement that Gardner stirred up has attracted a great many hysterical and perverse types, and that for want of a real Grandmaster, the covens are in a bit of a mess.

*The Sufis*, with Graves's Introduction, was the book in which Shah would announce himself to the world as a Sufi, and an expert on Sufism. But in the process of cultivating the relationship and impressing Graves with his knowledge, Shah was feeding the poet a mass of misinformation about Sufism. The most egregious piece of fantasy is the idea that a candle between two goats' horns is a Sufi symbol. What Shah describes is in fact the well-known image of 'Baphomet' from Eliphas Lévi's *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*:<sup>45</sup> he must have been relying very heavily on Graves's lack of knowledge about modern occultism even to attempt such a blatant misattribution.

To tabulate Shah's other misstatements as innocently reported in this letter by Graves, there is indeed a single reference to a 'Two-Horned Man', in Arabic 'Dhul-Qarnayn', who builds a wall to keep out the giants Gog and Magog; but he has nothing to do with Sufism and nothing to do with goats. There is no Ariza school of Sufism, Ariza does not mean Goat, and 'Rahbin' does not mean 'he who follows the road': the name is chosen by Shah simply to imply that the common name 'Robin' (identified by Margret Murray as a standard name for the 'Devil' or male leader of a coven)<sup>46</sup> comes from the Arabic, and can therefore be Sufi. Nor is there any 'threefold Muse' in Ibn Arabi.

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Shah had detected one of the few chinks in Graves's armour of erudition – namely the fact that despite his Spanish domicile, the poet knew little about Islam. He exploited this opening with enthusiasm, and had no hesitation in drawing English institutions into his fabric of fantasies. 'What interests me most at the moment,' Graves wrote to Boothby in January 1962, 'is the connexion of the Witch Cult, and the Garter Order, with Islam!' And he adds, "'Free Masonry" is pure Saracenic, I find'.<sup>47</sup> (The idea that the Order of the Garter was an indication of witchcraft practised at the level of the monarchy had first been proposed in 1954 by Margaret Murray in *The Divine King in England*, and given further currency by Gerald Gardner in *Witchcraft Today*.)

Meanwhile Shah availed himself of Graves's hospitality in Deià: in April 1962, Graves told Boothby, 'Idries Shah is coming here this month to work on a book. He has made strange discoveries of the connexion between Islam and the English secret societies... Idries is a really good man.'<sup>48</sup> In August of the same year, Shah spent another month as Graves's guest. 'Idries Shah has spent a month here: he gets better & better on acquaintance. Good all through and with fantastic intuitions.'<sup>49</sup> In due course the result of all this would be the *Rubaiyyat* scandal, when Idries Shah and his brother Omar Ali Shah convinced Graves, without proof, that they possessed a hitherto unknown manuscript of the poems of Omar Khayyam and induced Graves to publish a new translation made with their help. Graves, a profoundly honest man, was unable ever to accept that he had been deceived by his 'friend'. The episode significantly damaged Graves's reputation for scholarship.

Meanwhile, Derick Boothby had not been idle. Leaving Rickmansworth in September 1960, he had handed his coven over to Anthony Melachrino. After brief spells in Brighton and Pembrokeshire, he and his wife moved to a smallholding in Wigtownshire in Scotland,<sup>50</sup> and by August 1962, Boothby

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was working as a ‘Regional Organiser’ for the Scottish National Party.<sup>51</sup>

Back in Surrey, meanwhile, Anthony Melachrino, was taking Boothby’s former coven in a new direction. There was apparently a correspondence between Melachrino and Graves, most of which has been lost; but what survives is of interest. In 1965 Graves apparently asked some questions about mushrooms, which Melachrino answered with the information that his coven used three kinds of mushrooms:

the red muscaria with white spots, ... a little dung hill mushroom and one of the boletus. The latter ... has no effect on me at all, but the former makes me roaring drunk in the sense that inhibitions are gone completely and my brain seems to be clearer than it has ever been before.<sup>52</sup>

He also explains that the coven is practising a tradition of witchcraft in which there are ‘seven great rituals’, one of which involves ‘the creation of Caer Ochlen’. The rites involve, he says, ‘none of the round dancing that Gardnerian witches insist on. Rather there is a slow pacing to a set pattern, “treading the mill” as it is called.’ From all this it is clear that Melachrino’s coven is now following the practices of the ‘Clan of Tubal Cain’, the magical tradition established by Robert Cochrane (and heavily influenced by *The White Goddess*).

Boothby and Graves continued to correspond, at gradually increasing intervals, as Graves developed his concept of the Black Goddess – an idea planted in his mind by Idries Shah, who had told him about the positive value attached to the colour black in Islam. Graves’s magnificently creative mind turned even this scrap of nonsense into something beautiful, as he began imaginatively to discover that the White Goddess had a black sister, a Black Goddess who was loving and

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compassionate and who would console those who had first suffered at the hands of the White Goddess. Graves linked the Black Goddess to the Black Madonnas of southern Europe and Latin America. Ex-Blackshirt Boothby, however, had something of a racist aversion to the idea of a Black Goddess. 'I have tried extremely hard,' he wrote, 'but cannot find the idea appealing, or sense any such existence.... Practically without exception, the idea of a deity everywhere has been the lightest shade that people have been able to conceive of, and it was this concept that helped the Spanish conquest of South America'.<sup>53</sup> But Graves emphatically put him right: 'Black is the colour of woman and of wisdom in China; and the Black Goddess in Orphic mysticism ... was Wisdom. In the East the 'black arts' are the wise, and therefore good, arts.... The White Goddess puts us through ordeals, the Black Goddess gives us rest.'<sup>54</sup> His thoughts on the Black Goddess had already formed the substance of his lectures as Oxford Professor of Poetry in 1963.<sup>55</sup>

The last significant exchanges between Graves and Boothby had an unexpected topic. In 1970, just after the near-disaster of the Apollo 13 lunar mission, when an oxygen-tank exploded and the astronauts had to be brought home with great difficulty, Boothby wrote,

While the astronauts were receiving their warning you were much in my mind, as I wondered what you thought. The moon may be made of cheese, or of gold for that matter, but it is the faith and love of millions down the scores of thousands of years that really matter. I cannot rid myself of the horror of the desecration.<sup>56</sup>

Graves responded, 'Yes, the Americans are paying heavily & will pay still more heavily for their lunar madness; you are among the few who feel as I do about it.'<sup>57</sup> He takes this up again in August 1971, writing, 'I agree wholeheartedly about

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the Moon: the Americans have brought an [in]eradicable curse on themselves and we are watching the preliminary results. I think that you, I & the Sioux Indians (who protested in a pow-wow) were the only outsiders who agreed on this.’<sup>58</sup> And later the same year he returned to the theme once more: ‘Yes, the Moon is certainly going to pay the Americans for their insulting lack of manners, and it won’t be long. “*Quos Luna occidere vult, prius insanat*” and they are already showing evident signs of their preliminary madness’.<sup>59</sup>

By now Graves was finding it increasingly hard to write, and was moving towards silence. Boothby had raised the question of what he called ‘pre-incarnation’ – was it possible that we might be reborn in an era of the past rather than the future? Graves rejects this idea in one final burst of his old eloquence: ‘Me, I don’t believe in preincarnation; only I believe in travelling about in the fifth dimension which enables one to visit the past and the future in search of wisdom. Necessary for poets and most useful to painters.’<sup>60</sup>

And he ends with a last rather touching valediction:

Blessed be she –  
Yours ever  
Robert.

Boothby’s story, however, was far from over. Besides his work for the Scottish Nationalist party, in 1963 he told Graves he was ‘trying to instil the idea and ideal of unpaid service into lumps of Scottish youth’<sup>61</sup> – by which he meant that he was involved with a youth volunteer scheme for the National Trust for Scotland. This may not have been quite what it seemed, for what he did not tell Graves was that he was also helping to found the ‘1320 Club’, an unauthorised militant wing of the Scottish National Party, popularly known as ‘the Tartan Army’. The Club was expelled from the SNP in 1968 ‘amid claims that the group incorporated fascist ideology’.<sup>62</sup>



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Going further, Boothby secretly formed a paramilitary group, the 'Army of the Provisional Government'. According to the Scottish *Herald* newspaper,

Boothby published a magazine which contained instructions for bomb-making, set up his 'Army of Provisional Government' on a cellular basis, and gave himself the number 01 and the *nom de guerre* Clydesdale. With this alluring prospect of excitement, he recruited bored young men and they carried out a number of bank raids with notable incompetence.<sup>63</sup>

There was also, it seems, an attempted bombing. In 1975, four years after writing his last letter to Graves, Boothby was convicted of conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism. Sentenced to three years' imprisonment, he is said to have received 'unusually favourable treatment' and spent less than a year in prison. He had already been suspected within the SNP of being a police spy, and the mildness of his treatment strengthened rumours that he was an *agent provocateur* employed by MI5. Had he, one wonders, been a government agent as far back as his Blackshirt days?

Boothby remains an enigma. According to the *Herald* newspaper, he died in 1979, in a 'lonely and rather squalid cottage' near Broughton in Peeblesshire in the Scottish Borders. Robert Graves died six years later. Their strange friendship, conducted largely on paper, had given rise to one of the more remarkable of Graves's correspondences, and to a significant record of an early phase in the modern witchcraft revival.

**Author's Note:** I am grateful to Andrew Tullis, who generously shared his research on Boothby, and who read and commented on this article in draft. Letters from Robert Graves are held in the Ellsworth Mason Collection in the

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Special Collections of the Library of the University of Tulsa. My thanks to Molly McVey for her help in accessing them. They are quoted here by kind permission of William Graves. Letters of F. A. C. Boothby are held in the Robert Graves Collection of St John's College, Oxford. My thanks also to Petra Hofman, Librarian and Mohamed-Salah Omri, Fellow Librarian at St John's for their generous assistance. It has proved impossible to locate the holders of Boothby's copyrights, and the author would be glad to hear from them.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> F. A. C. Boothby to Robert Graves, 20 January 1960.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Andrew Tullis, who supplied a photograph of the relevant page in Boothby's *Book of Shadows*.

<sup>4</sup> Boothby to Robert Graves, 20 January 1960, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Graves to Boothby, 10 February 1960.

<sup>9</sup> Eddy Greenfield, *A-Z of Horsham: Places–People–History* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2019), p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> See R. M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (Yale University Press, 2012), in which Boothby appears *passim*, though not with any detail.

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- <sup>11</sup> The National Archives. *The National Archives Catalogue*. <<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C13372882>> [accessed 24 July 2023]
- <sup>12</sup> Darryl Lundy, *The Peerage: A Genealogical Survey of the Peerage of Britain as well as the Royal Families of Europe*, Person page 73170, c2019. <<https://www.thepeerage.com/p73170.htm#i731696>> [accessed 24 July 2023]
- <sup>13</sup> Boothby to Lethbridge, 18 February 1960, Cambridge University Library, Add. 9258/85.
- <sup>14</sup> Graves to Boothby, 19 February 1960.
- <sup>15</sup> For Graves's account of the experience, see 'The Poet's Paradise', *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (London: Cassell, 1962), pp. 111- 29 (pp. 122-26).
- <sup>16</sup> Graves to Boothby, 19 February 1960.
- <sup>17</sup> Boothby to Graves, 23 February 1960.
- <sup>18</sup> The ultimate source is Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. J. F., London, 1651, Chapter XLV. A couple of small literal errors may be the result of Boothby's copying, or of an unidentified reprint.
- <sup>19</sup> Graves to Boothby, 1 March 1960.
- <sup>20</sup> See Terence McKenna, 'Wasson's Literary Precursors' in *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson*, ed. by Thomas J. Riedlinger (Portland, OR: Dioscorides Press, 1990). <<https://transcendentalobject.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/wasson.pdf>> [accessed 24 July 2023]
- <sup>21</sup> Graves to Boothby, 3 April 1960.
- <sup>22</sup> Graves to Boothby, 8 April 1960.
- <sup>23</sup> Graves to Boothby, 17 April 1960.
- <sup>24</sup> Graves to Boothby, 10 June 1960.
- <sup>25</sup> Graves to Boothby, 12 July 1960.
- <sup>26</sup> Graves to Boothby, 13 August 1960.
- <sup>27</sup> Boothby to Graves, 21 September 1960.
- <sup>28</sup> Graves to Boothby; date uncertain, but September or October 1960.
- <sup>29</sup> Boothby to Graves, 2 October 1960. Boothby and Loveday may not in fact have been married as yet: Andrew Tullis informs me that at this date she had not yet divorced her previous husband.

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<sup>29</sup> Boothby to Graves, 5 November 1960.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Boothby to Graves, 16 November 1960.

<sup>32</sup> Graves to Boothby, undated: September or October 1960?

<sup>33</sup> Boothby to Graves, 21 November 1960.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Graves to Boothby, 11 January 1961.

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed account of the relationship between Graves and Idries and Omar Ali Shah, see Grevel Lindop, 'From Witchcraft to the *Rubaiyyat*: Robert Graves and the Shah Brothers', in Dunstan Ward, ed., *The Art of Collaboration: Essays on Robert Graves and his Contemporaries* (Palma: Col·lecció Estudis Anglesos, Universitat de les Illes Balears, 2008), pp. 187-205.

<sup>37</sup> Boothby to Graves, 16 January 1961.

<sup>38</sup> Graves to Boothby, 18 January 1961.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Bonhams, Art and Antiques, *Rosalie Loveday*. 2011 <<https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/18934/lot/149/>> [accessed 24 July 2023]; and Art UK. *Rosalie Mary Julia Loveday* <https://artuk.org/discover/artists/loveday-rosalie-mary-julia-b-1915> [accessed 24 July 2023] and mctears 1842, 29<sup>th</sup> Jun, 2018 10:30, Antiques & Interiors, Lot 198, 2018 <<https://www.mctears.co.uk/auction/lot/198--rosalie-loveday-sweet-peas-in-a-vase/?lot=105892&sd=1>> [accessed 24 July 2023].

<sup>40</sup> Graves to Rosalie Loveday Boothby, 22 January 1961.

<sup>41</sup> Graves to Boothby, 2 June 1961. [March?]

<sup>42</sup> Craig Brown, 'Sealed with a fish, Larkin's royal insult'. *Daily Mail.com*, 22 May 2012

<<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2147740/Sealed-fish-Larkins-royal-insult.html>> [accessed 24 July 2023]

<sup>43</sup> Boothby to Graves, 29 March 1961.

<sup>44</sup> Graves to Boothby, 14 July 1961.

<sup>45</sup> The image appeared as frontispiece to 'Eliphaz Lévi' (Alphonse Lopuis Constant), *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, Paris: Germer Baillièrre, 2 vols, 1855–1856; it has been endlessly reproduced ever since.

<sup>46</sup> 'The name Robin is almost a generic name for the Devil, either as a man or as his substitute the familiar.' Margaret Murray, *The*

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*Witch Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1921), p. 238.

<sup>47</sup> Graves to Boothby, 31 January 1962.

<sup>48</sup> Graves to Boothby, 3 April 1962.

<sup>49</sup> Graves to Boothby, 18 August 1962.

<sup>50</sup> Boothby to Graves, 28 March 1962.

<sup>51</sup> Boothby to Graves, 13 August 1962.

<sup>52</sup> Anthony Melachrino to Graves, 18 June 1965. For information regarding the Clan of Tubal Cain and its practices, see Evan John Jones and Robert Cochrane, *The Roebuck in the Thicket: An Anthology of the Robert Cochrane Witchcraft Tradition*, ed. Michael Howard (Milverton, Somerset: Capel Bann, 2001), and Robert Cochrane with Evan John Jones, *The Robert Cochrane Letters: An Insight into Modern Traditional Witchcraft*, ed. Michael Howard (Milverton, Somerset: Capall Bann, 2002).

<sup>53</sup> Boothby to Graves, 11 February 1969.

<sup>54</sup> Graves to Boothby, 15 February 1969.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Graves, 'Intimations of the Black Goddess', *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (London: Cassell, 1965), pp. 141-65.

<sup>56</sup> Boothby to Graves, 3 May 1970.

<sup>57</sup> Graves to Boothby, 12 May 1970.

<sup>58</sup> Graves to Boothby, 29 August 1971.

<sup>59</sup> Graves to Boothby, 28 November 1971. The Latin translates as 'Those whom the Moon wishes to kill, she first makes mad' – an original variation on 'Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad', not (despite appearances) a classical aphorism but dating from the seventeenth century and popularised by Longfellow in *The Masque of Pandora*.

<sup>60</sup> Graves to Boothby, 28 November 1971.

<sup>61</sup> Boothby to Graves, 7 July 1963.

<sup>62</sup> Wikipedia contributors, '1320 Club', *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 2 February 2022, 15:12 UTC, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1320\\_Club](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1320_Club)> [accessed 24 July 2023]

<sup>63</sup> *The Herald*, 'Last Flight to Bleak Exile', 8 June 1993 <<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12742533.last-flight-to-bleak-exile/>> [accessed 24 July 2023]