

Meeting Robert Graves, 1958

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Abstract: Personal impressions of a meeting with Robert Graves in 1958, with notes on Deià and Wales.

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I never considered myself to be a particularly lucky person until one day in the summer of 1958 when I got invited to stay in Deià, Mallorca as a guest of Robert Graves, the poet and his family.

At the time of the invitation, I had never met Robert Graves or anyone from his family. But a friend of mine had. Thus, it was that when the two of us berthed in the harbour at Palma, we were greeted by Beryl, Graves' second wife and, her first born son, by him, William. They drove us immediately to their home, Canellun in Deià to meet Robert and have lunch; they then took us down their road some fifty or so yards where they had the use of an old fisherman's cottage with a well at the front where we were to stay.

From then on Richard (my friend) and I got to know Robert and Beryl as well as might be expected in the circumstances. They were lovely hosts, kindness itself. Richard used to go swimming with Robert, often in the early morning and I had good conversations with him regarding the rigours of the writer's life. He was writing a short story for *The New Yorker* at the time, I remember, and I recall being shocked that he seemed so preoccupied with the rewards (or lack of them) for so much effort. Wasn't it good enough just to be a writer, was my thought at the time?

On the other hand, he certainly looked every inch the poet, tall with strong features and he seemed to transmit an intense inner calm, if I can call it that. Wherever he went, picnics on the other side of the island or to the terrace of the cafe on the other side of the road where he smoked his rough Spanish cigarettes, with the yellow covering paper; or just talking in their front room where we

ate, or out in their glorious garden where composting was a passion, I was struck by how contained and calm he was. Once when William bumped the kitchen door into him by accident, it was as if Robert awoke from a reverie. 'Sorry' was all he could think to say, as if it were all his fault.

Thus it was that I left Mallorca seven or eight days later in a mellow mood, impressed but not overawed, having tuned into a very different world which Robert and his family enjoyed, seemingly a long, long way from the Britain I was returning to. I probably hadn't got as much out of the experience as I might have done, but then I hadn't prepared for it very thoroughly in the first place. I'd only read one of his books, *Good-Bye to All That*, but I was off to Oxford in a few months' time to read English Literature and given the writers I was besotted with at the time – Camus and Kerouac and a few class war polemicists, some of whom I now shudder to recall – there was no place for Graves.

And so it was that as the years went by, Deià just seemed a pleasant memory but not one which had had any significant impact on my life. Then not so long ago came three major earthquakes in my understanding of Robert Graves.

First, I learnt about the role in his life played by Laura Riding, the American poet. This came about unexpectedly. My wife, knowing of my connection to Graves, spotted that there was a play on written by him which had never previously been performed, called *But It Still Goes On*. This was at a small attractive fringe venue called The Finborough in a pub on the edge of Chelsea (it had once been a billiard hall). When I heard of this, we had to go. There I learnt about the torrid breakdown of Graves's first marriage; also, of the extraordinary suicidal fall Laura Riding had from a fourth-floor window, followed by Robert from a third-floor window, which somehow, they both miraculously survived.

My next revelation with regard to Graves came when I learnt of the influence that North Wales had on his writing. This I'll explain in a moment.

Then almost simultaneously I heard about the library at St John's College, Oxford where a considerable Robert Graves

archive resides; and where I learnt that William was now Robert's literary executor and very active in the role.

My purpose for visiting St John's in the first place was simply to pursue some research Robert had done years ago concerning Tongan missionaries, which overlapped with something I'd just learnt about my own family's history. In the end, Robert never wrote his book but in the process of studying this work in progress, I was able to grasp just how seriously he took his research; also, it gave me the opportunity to get back in touch with William and also with the wider Graves' family, via the many books they had written.

From then on everything just developed for me quite naturally. My wife had become interested, too, in Graves and was already visiting North Wales, where she had an elder brother who was not well. She read *Good-Bye to All That* and learnt of the role Harlech and its surrounding countryside had played in the development of Robert's imagination. I responded by reading more widely around the subject, learning of the house his parents built for themselves and eventually retired to on the Harlech-Talsarnau road; of the cottages his mother bought in the nearby village of Llechwedd; also of the large expanse of wooded countryside – hundreds of acres according to one account, bought simply to protect it. I learnt also that the main house was named 'Erinfa' ('Facing Ireland'), a neat way for Robert's father to meld together his Irish birthright and his studies in the Welsh language, which had intensified after he was created a Welsh bard at the National Eisteddfod in Bangor. And finally, to my astonishment, I read that the landscape of North Wales, around the Aberglaslyn Pass, for example, played its part in attracting Robert to Deià in the first place.

Then a rather strange thing happened. It suddenly occurred to me that not only had I been lucky to have been asked to stay in Deià all those years ago, but also that I'd been even more lucky with the timing, which had been more or less at the centre point of Robert's adult life.

And what a life it was. Bullied at Charterhouse, traumatised in the trenches during the First World War, then married soon afterwards – unsatisfactorily. After that, he was dominated by Laura

Riding. Riding went to Mallorca with him in 1929 and left him a decade later, but she is still credited with having got much of his best work out of him. He was then forced back to Britain by a combination of two more wars – the Spanish Civil War and World War Two. Then he met Beryl, a wonderful calming influence, who bore him four more children. He'd had four already by his first wife, and his financial situation was so hand-to-mouth that he had to sell many of the rights to his work. He was also forced to move to Palma in 1951 to improve his children's educational prospects, and returned ultimately to Deià late in 1957, not that many months before we arrived.¹

What happened after Richard and I left is, if anything, even more strange than what had preceded our arrival. Though he never actually deserted the family (apart from a few crazy days in Mexico) Robert appears to have thrown away much of what I had personally admired about him, by which I mean a settled, harmonious and seemingly well-balanced life, within which he could work in an orderly and disciplined way. And he did all this, it is argued, in accordance with his own highly developed views on human relationships, best expressed by him in his influential work, *The White Goddess*.

But could it be that Robert's view of what was happening is only half the story? Looking back on those extremely hot days spent in Deià, I feel that all the ingredients for what was to come to pass, were already there.

In a sense, Deià was a place where 'The Sixties' arrived early ... by which I mean style over content, as opposed to Graves's hallmark: style emerging from content.

I remember vividly the first morning Richard and I walked down to the Cala, Deià's tiny beach, set within an entrancing cove. There weren't many people around, but there was a cohesive group which gathered in the one café, and which included several attractive women. Their attention, however, was quite evidently elsewhere.

I'd been on a Mediterranean beach the previous year in Italy – and, of course, since then I have experienced beach life in various Mediterranean countries – but never before or since have I been in

company so little interested in what was happening on the beach or in the water and so preoccupied with what was happening up the hill, where the village was.

There were curious undercurrents, too, to the conversations in the café, undercurrents which I was not yet skilled enough to pick up on. People were mentioned, but never explained. ‘Alastair’, I remember, was a name which was in the air. I got the impression he was important to Robert himself, perhaps an aide of some sort. His name reverberated with the regularity of a drumbeat. Had he arrived, yet? Would he come, at all? If so, when?

Alastair it turned out was Alastair Reid, the charismatic *New Yorker* writer of renown, and he did turn up and I got to know him a little.² But, in general, I was oblivious to the back stories, the undercurrents and the dramas which were beginning to occur under my very nose.

There was so much about life that I hadn’t grasped back then. It didn’t occur to me that the preoccupation with people like Alastair, was a preoccupation with Robert himself and that Robert’s increasing fame instantly made anyone close to him a source of curiosity and perhaps calculation. And it never crossed my mind that the destiny of a man like him could be driven off course by a young woman on a beach, which in those days he rarely deigned to visit except perhaps at quiet times, to swim.

That woman was (at that time) called Cindy Lee and she it was who was to become Robert’s most unruly ‘muse’, the one who was in 1965 to whisk him away to Mexico and gradually to poison his family relationships, especially with William.³ That was all to come, of course. When I stayed there, Robert seemed the perfect family man and Cindy was more cautious, but already showing her steely side.

I can testify to this with confidence because while I was there I committed some observations to a strange little exercise book I had bought at the *Placa de Catalunya* in Barcelona – I won’t dignify it with the term ‘diary’, it was much too haphazard for that – but extraordinarily, several comments referred to Cindy and not in an admiring way.

Robert, of course, justified his ‘muses’ of whom there were to be several by asserting that he needed them for his poetry. Others have found this difficult to accept.

On one level, this is a persuasive argument, but the man of the world is tempted to see things differently. Perhaps, both positions have merit. One day, hopefully a definitive judgement will form. For my part, all I can hope is that by trawling back through my memories of that absorbing moment in my early life, I have added a little texture and hopefully perspective to the controversies which still swirl around this most magnetic of men.

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NOTES

¹ Robert and his family returned from abroad in 1946. Although moving to Palma in 1951, the family spent all weekends and holidays in Deià. In 1957 Robert, Beryl and Tomás went back to living full time in Deià, while William, Juan and Lucia were abroad at school.

² Alastair Reid (1926–2014) was a Scottish poet, scholar, translator of Jorge Luis Borges and Pablo Neruda, and writer for *The New Yorker*.

³ Aemilia Laracuen (1925–2007), also known as Cindy Lee, was an American artist, and illustrator of Graves’s book of poems *Love Respelt* (London: Cassell, 1965).