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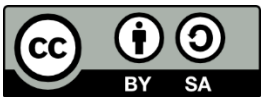

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The Robert Graves Review

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Editor's Introduction, with Orthographic Note
Michael Joseph

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The 2023 issue of *The Robert Graves Review* (1.3) consists of four compact sections: Critical Studies, Bibliography, Notes, and Poetry, and concludes with an obituary of Margot Callas, the inspiration for many of Graves's most passionate and anguished poems of the early sixties. Margot is known as Robert's second muse, but we are inclined to think denoting women as muses is an arcane habit and subject to misinterpretation. As scholars, we might usefully abandon it (even while we remember this is a term Robert himself preferred) for more precise definitions.

The Critical Studies section begins with a wonderful essay by Judith Woolf, making her debut appearance in our journal. Her article 'A Hatful of Larks' examines one of Graves's most enduring early poems, 'Love Without Hope', against various backgrounds: the social history of the skylark, the blasted battleground of the Somme, the disreputable trade of bird-catching, and the world of opera – Mozart's beloved *vogelfänger,* Papageno. As Gregory Leadbetter does in his article 'The Reserve of Superstition' (*Gravesiana* 2021), Judith enriches her analysis with an original poem, 'A Hatful of Larks', and she concludes with a *sombre envoi*, glancing at the battlefield by way of Ralph Vaughan Williams's piercing *The Lark Ascending*. Vaughan Williams was inspired to write *The Lark* by a poem by William Meredith, and yet, after reading Woolf's commentary, it will be impossible to hear it without thinking of the lives lost in the War. It will be possible to think of Graves's 'young bird-catcher' as a soldier.

The two following essays by Christopher G. Simon and Anett K. Jessop (two of our 2022 MLA cohort) shift the focus to prose,

drama and film. Complementing Alicja Bemben's theoretical, historiographical explorations of recent years, Simon's consideration of the *Claudius* novels is a polished narrative that begins in 1929, with research and writing and concludes in 1976, with Graves's appearance on the set of the BBC production. Among the many values of Chris's meticulous synthesis is a discussion of Graves's respect for scholarship, his apprehension that he lacked academic qualifications to write history, and his firm belief that, even in fiction, one must be historically circumspect.

Michael Korda's ill-starred effort to film *I Claudius* appears in Jessop's essay as well, along with Graves's other frustrating attempts to make books into movies. What is most newsworthy in her essay is her discussion of 'Greeks and Trojans' (*c.* 1937), an adaptation Graves made of Laura Riding's historical novel *A Trojan Ending* (1937). The adaptation was never filmed, but the manuscript survives on the versos of other unrelated manuscripts in the Special Collections Research Center at Southern Illinois University, a page of which prefaces this article.

Turning from Claudius, *The Review* heads into less chartered waters with Grevel Lindop's '"Good Luck ... and Blessed Be": Robert Graves and F. A. C. Boothby', an essay about Graves's relationship to various male witches (and the duplicitous Idries Shah). Lindop's masterful discussion greatly extends and complicates the portrait of Boothby presented in the last year's *Review* by Steven Michael Stroud, taking a deeper dive into the Graves-Boothby correspondence, and presenting him as a more roguish figure. If Boothby is roguish (and somewhat seedy), Idries Shah comes off as downright villainous: 'systematically poisoning Graves's mind against [Gerald] Gardner', the founder of Gardenerian Wicca, to manoeuvre Graves's into supporting his book on Sufism. (Boothby, perhaps also out of self-interest, puts in a knife in 'Old Gardner' as well.) Here Lindop expands on his

essay 'From Witchcraft to the *Rubaiyyat*: Robert Graves and the Shah Brothers' (*The Art of Collaboration: Essays on Robert Graves and his Contemporaries,* ed. by Dunstan Ward). One beholds Graves at sixty-five at his most impressionable and trusting, almost credulous, an easy mark for charlatans and obsessives. We should remember, however, as Sara Greaves told us in the last year's *Review,* in 'Robert Graves's Mythopoetic Hospitality', Graves never abandoned his own interests and ends. His letters appear to show that what preoccupied Graves was mushroom lore and the experience of ingesting psychotropic mushrooms. In 'Poetry and the Olympic' (*Robert Graves Review,* 2022), Vivian Holzer Rosenthal demonstrates that Graves's preoccupation with mushrooms flourished well past the end of the decade.) It is notable that Graves induced Boothby and his coven to experiment with the *psilocybin* mushroom, in the consumption of which by August 1960 he seems to have been an expert

Graves's influence on witches forms the basis for Steven Michael Stroud's essay, which follows up his Boothby essay in the last year's *Review* (and Lindop's Boothby essay in this year's) with a report on how various witches, covens, and traditions integrated *The White Goddess* into their rituals and practices. Stroud's lively and insightful report of his interviews with witches informs us that the Celtic Tree Calendar developed in *TWG* became a mainstay among witches. Stroud touches on reading history here, an area of scholarly research not often treated in Graves scholarship. As Robert A. Gross notes, 'reading history is women's history'.[1] Although Professor Gross is referring to the limited context of U. S. historiography, we can draw on his observation to propose that, by recording the reading habits of female witches, Stroud offers us a feminine perspective on reading Robert Graves, if narrowly confined to *TWG.*

Dunstan Ward anchors the critical studies section with an essay on the literary correspondence between Graves and Siegfried

Sassoon, based on a paper he delivered at the 2022 Graves conference. Ward's crisp and penetrating exegesis of the epistolary poem, 'A Letter from Wales', is uppermost among this essay's considerable charms. His discovery of a continuing impression of Christianity and Christian symbolism in Graves's 1916 poems is also of the essence: we may well have Graves's testimony that he abandoned his faith before then, yet here is evidence that Graves's faith didn't abandon him, at least as a source for poetic imagery and meaning.

In his encore appearance in *The Review* (2023), Ward presents us with two unpublished Graves poems, which turned up in the sale of Margot Callas's Graves archive to St John's, Oxford, completed shortly before her death. In his definitive overview, Ward gives us not only his article and the poems' transcriptions but also images of the manuscripts (one of which appears with the article and one at the end of the journal, eventually to face the obituary William Graves wrote for Margot).

Two notes follow these delicacies. In 'Authorial Error in *Wife to Mr Milton*', the novelist John Leonard (returning to our journal after a twenty-two-year absence) notes that Graves wrote the phrase 'blinding of Lear' when he must have intended Gloster (the quarto spelling). The blinding of Lear is axiomatic but, of course, refers to Lear's refusal to see life as it really is or to register that Regan and Goneril are manipulating him for loveless ends. Of course, Lear's metaphorical blinding corresponds to Gloucester's physical blinding, but Leonard points out that, while she prepares herself to meet the unsavoury 'John Milton' by thinking of all the terrible things she can remember, Marie Powell must be thinking of a literal and not figurative blinding. Thus, it would have been unlikely for her to refer to the blinding of Lear.

The second note, 'A Matter of Interpretation', concerns two lines that appear in the manuscript version of Graves's letter to Sassoon, 'To S. S.': 'This Peter still may win a part | Of David's

corner in your heart'. These lines have been understood to refer exclusively to Graves's Charterhouse friend, Peter Johnstone, and to David Thomas, a fellow Fusilier and close friend of Graves and Sassoon. But this note suggests a second, implicit meaning that refers to the Sassoon family's claim to be of the Davidic line. 'David's part' may also refer to Sassoon's Jewishness. This reading was proposed by the Jewish Museum (Manhattan) in its signage for the recent exhibition, 'The Sassoons'. It is a common-sense reading made by two accomplished scholars and has considerable merit, instancing once again the complexity of Graves's poetry *qua* poetry.

Reviews were a mainstay of *The Review*'s forerunner journal, *Gravesiana,* and we hope to continue this tradition. We are delighted to present three book reviews. Mick Gowar, a widely recognized author and editor of children's books and a scholar of Ted Hughes, sounds the third note in our witch's triplet with 'Pagan Survivals or Surviving Paganism', his review of Ronald Hutton's *Queens of the Wild: Pagan Goddess in Christian Europe: An Investigation.* John Leonard returns with his review of Neil McLennan's *Owen and Sassoon: The Edinburgh Poems,* alerting us to the presence of an intimate selection of familiar poems by Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfrid Owen made more interesting by each other's presence. Poet and scholar Joseph T. Thomas Jr. brings *The Review's* Review section to what I hope you will agree is a rousing conclusion with 'Please Read Carefully', in his review of *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*, edited by Craig Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod. Thomas opines:

> The map of American poetry offered by *The Bloomsbury* is a palimpsest of the traditional and the oddball, as if a map highlighting all the expected (and culturally sanctioned) tourist attractions were printed atop a map of offbeat

> freakshows and roadside oddities: The Museum of Jurassic Technology overlaid by the Griffith Observatory; the Watts Towers just visible below The Walt Disney Concert Hall. That is, it is a distinctly American book, an intersection of conservative and radical, somehow both deeply individualistic yet beguilingly faddish and hip.

The 'intersection of conservative and radical', seems as apt and concise a description of Graves's poetry as any I've seen.

The Poetry section of the journal includes two unpublished poems by Robert Graves, a poem by Judith Woolf within her critical text, three unpublished poems by Sean O'Brien, and six more poems by the poets O'Brien recommends: Tamar Yoseloff and Peter Armstrong.

The journal concludes this year with William Graves's obituary of Margot Callas. For an extended discussion of the relationship between Robert Graves and Callas, and her importance to his work, readers should see Richard Perceval Graves's *Robert Graves and the White Goddess* and*,* 'Margot and "Inexorable Need", 1960-63'. Readers may also be interested to learn that The Robert Graves Correspondence Database will soon include approximately 140 of Graves's letters to Margot.

An Orthographic Note on Deià

The policy that we inherited in 2017 and which we have followed until now prefers Deyá as the spelling of Graves's adopted village. In this and in future issues, it will appear as Deià. The world seems to have settled on Deià as the correct spelling. It is the spelling preferred by the redoubtable Library of Congress authority files and the *Fundació* Robert Graves. Changing the spelling in our journal will not hinder word / name searches.

Searches for either Deyá, Deià, or Deya will find all the articles using any of these spellings.

Finally, my personal thanks go to our editorial crew, Alicja Bemben, Lucia Graves, and Patrick J. Villa (Associate Editors), Fran Brearton, Dunstan Ward (Poetry Associate Editors), and Carl Hahn (Bibliography Editor), and to William Graves for advice and wise counsel, and to Philip for technical problem-solving and handholding. Among the many pleasures of editing *The Robert Graves Review* is working with these amazing scholars and writers.

NOTES

[1] Robert A. Gross, 'Reading Culture, Reading Books', *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 106, 1 (1996), 59-78 (p. 66).

CRITICAL STUDIES

A Hatful of Larks: Reimagining Robert Graves's 'Love Without Hope'

Judith Woolf

Abstract: The article looks at critical responses to 'Love Without Hope', using Mozart's *Magic Flute* to weigh up the arguments for and against reading the poem in the light of Graves's White Goddess; explores its illustration history, starting with the William Nicholson sketch which introduced Graves to the idea of a fowler in love; and considers how class difference in the poem relates to the social history of the skylark, from the nineteenth century songbird trade to the battlefield larks of the Western Front. The article is bookended by poems which span the period covered by the argument: a reimagined Regency version of 'Love Without Hope' and a memorial to the soldier poets of the Somme.

Keywords: 'Love Without Hope'; the White Goddess; *The Magic Flute*; illustrations; the songbird trade; World War One.

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A Hatful of Larks

that love-lorn Papageno
the young bird-catcher
sweeps off his tall hat
to the Squire's equestrian daughter
instead of just touching the brim
an impulsive gesture
which costs him in an instant
a whole day's labour

and causes a sudden explosion
of upwardly spiralling
larks which she rides through
hardly noticing
her mind on her flageolet
with its tricky cross-fingering
and the tune she is trying to teach
her caged bullfinch to sing

what was once called courtly love
in an earlier century
is love without hope now
though the larks fly free
while the stable lad grooms
the guano from the pony
the boy with his empty hat
will go home hungry

Reimagining Robert Graves's 'Love Without Hope'

The starting point, both for my own poem and for this accompanying article, was Neil Corcoran's detailed and insightful close reading of 'Love Without Hope' in the chapter on 'Robert Graves and Modern Poetry' in his recent book, *Negotiations: Poems in their Contexts*.[1] Although rightly described by Patrick Keane as '"minor" poetry only in length',[2] 'Love Without Hope' has seldom been accorded this kind of serious critical attention. Given its self-contained brevity, it has been only too easy for critics simply to quote it in its entirety, leaving it to make its own case; written, as it was, in 1925, just at the point when the tectonic plates of Graves's life were about shift with the imminent arrival of Laura Riding, critics have tended to see it in terms either of what preceded or what followed it. Randall Jarrell, though praising its beauty, includes it among the last of the 'early

poems that disappear as soon as Graves can afford to leave "what I may call the folk-song period of my life," the time when "country sentiment," childlike romance, were a refuge from "my shellshocked condition."'[3] D. N. G. Carter, by contrast, sees it as 'a perfect Edwardian motto to an emblem of the poet's worship of the Goddess':

> It will become the poet's 'privilege and fate' thus to record the Goddess's triumphant progress, singing her praises in spite of his own pain. Nor is it 'to consider too curiously' to consider Graves's late poems as so many 'larks' set free.[4]

While Corcoran is doubtless right to suggest that 'Graves himself may well have been happy to have had these lines glossed with the final stanza of 'The White Goddess', in which song-birds in Spring are recalled celebrating 'the mountain Mother',[5] he also points out that as readers we are free not to follow suit. There is little that overtly suggests the hidden presence of the Goddess in the thirty-five pellucid words that make up the poem,

> Love without hope, as when the young bird-catcher
> Swept off his tall hat to the Squire's own daughter,
> So let the imprisoned larks escape and fly
> Singing about her head, as she rode by.

Yet, it is easy to see why Graves might have sensed a connection between this early poem and the 'sudden overwhelming obsession'[6] which was to possess him nineteen years later. That most famous of all young bird-catchers in love, Mozart's Papageno in *The Magic Flute*, is a character in an opera featuring a monstrous mother figure with dark magical powers, ruling over the mysterious night world, who tries to bind an impressionable young man to her service,

though Tamino is won over in the end by the Apollonian wisdom of Sarastro.

However, the problem with Carter's reading of the poem as an allegory about 'the poet's worship of the Goddess' is not simply that a country Squire's presumably unmarried daughter (though we might perhaps see her as Pamina) shares none of the roles or attributes of 'the capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess … mother, bride and layer-out'.[7] Once we have also translated the poem's protagonist into 'Graves the bird-catcher',[8] and persuaded ourselves that it is not 'to consider too curiously' to see the larks of 1925 as representing poems such as 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' (1944) and 'The White Goddess' (1951), we will find that there is nothing left of the original vivid little scene, which Graves himself called a 'Motto to a Picture',[9] except for a hat. Hold onto the hat, because it will lead us back to the genesis of the poem, which did in fact begin with a picture, the first of a series of illustrations which have accompanied its publishing history.

Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, in the notes to their edition of Graves's *Complete Poems*, tell us that:

> In a letter to Graves in May 1921, William Nicholson suggested 'The Bird-catcher in Love' as the subject for a rhyme which he thought would be 'just the thing' for Nancy to illustrate: 'One Spring time, a certain Birdcatcher wishing to attract the attention of a beautiful Lady with whom he had fallen in love, concealed several larks in his hat, in order that when he made his bow to her the birds should fly away.'[10]

Nicholson accompanied this suggestion with a sketch which he later worked up into a finished pen and wash drawing,[11] one of the illustrations for his own projected children's book, *The Fowler in Love*, which was sadly never published. The

comic little scene is lively and full of swirling movement. The fowler, bald and plump and middle-aged, is bowing like an unsuccessful showman to the lady, whose dress, with its trailing train, seems to have been piped from whipped cream. She is trying to fend him off with her parasol, while her small dog, at the end of its leash, rushes at him fiercely, and the disregarded larks stream diagonally skyward from the hat in his outstretched left hand.

Although Nicholson's suggested theme was to lead to Graves's very different interpretation, his sketch of the fowler was clearly not the picture to which 'Love Without Hope' is a motto. Instead, and surprisingly, when the poem was first published it was illustrated by a striking Paul Nash wood engraving,[12] the stylized head of a young woman, seen in profile, in a modernist version of a quattrocento Florentine portrait convention. If this is the Squire's daughter, she is keeping her own counsel. Her face is sad and withdrawn, and the brim of a hat like a shining helmet conceals her eyes.

Nash's engraving may well have influenced Geoffrey Grigson's choice of a fifteenth century Florentine portrait of a lady to illustrate a section of his anthology for young readers, *The Cherry Tree*,[13] which opens with 'Love Without Hope':

> Then the Grief of Love; for which the image I have chosen is not, for example, the moon by itself in the sky … but the proud cold girl in a head-dress, with jewels around her neck.[14]

Graves's poem, which I immediately knew off by heart without having to memorize it, and the lovely profile of the young woman in the jewelled head-dress, which I took to be the authentic face of grief proudly concealed, have lain side by side in my mind since I was given *The Cherry Tree* as a Christmas present at the age of thirteen. It was only on returning to the anthology when researching this article that I

realized that Grigson saw the proud cold girl not as an embodiment of grief but as the cause of it, a charge which by implication he extends to the Squire's daughter.

Patrick Keane shares this view, seeing the poem as 'a typically Gravesian celebration of doomed love', with the Squire's daughter as a 'disdainful aristocrat,' who offers a foretaste of 'the imperious female later to be worshipped as the Triple Goddess' as she haughtily rides by 'her subservient worshipper'.[15] Yet there is nothing in the poem to suggest that the Squire's daughter is arrogantly demanding a tribute of larks from a humble suppliant whose love for her is doomed by her pride, and Graves would never have mistaken a daughter of the landed gentry for an aristocrat, disdainful or otherwise. He was educated at Charterhouse with the sons of country squires, and served with them as a junior officer in France. Corcoran, by contrast, sees 'Love Without Hope' as

> a poem about oppositions of English social rank – 'bird-catcher' and 'Squire' – and of English patriarchal authority: 'the Squire's own daughter', where the adjective makes her his *owned* daughter too, his possession, and the 'young bird-catcher'; 'young', and so doubly without rights in this kingdom of the mature.'[16]

Tessa Boase, in *Etta Lemon: The Woman Who Saved the Birds*, shows us the extent of the social gulf between real-life bird-catchers and those who unhesitatingly considered themselves their betters:

> Bird catchers were 'rough-looking' men, the 'idle loafers' you would 'instinctively avoid on country lanes and commons', wrote Mrs Lemon. They set to work with their 'miserable little decoys': the linnets with bleeding legs, the yellowhammer with a broken back.

> Using nets and lines they caught birds by the hundred, wringing the necks of females, 'the cocks thrust into cages or boxes' and despatched by rail to some 'foul' Paradise Court or Petticoat Lane seller, to be bought by other members of the working class.[17]

It is worth pointing out that Grigson's supposedly cold proud girl (if she is what she seems, and not a 'Victorian pretender')[18] was probably also an 'owned daughter', like Mozart's Pamina, whose all-powerful mother claims the right to give away her heart. 'In Renaissance "display culture" oligarchic women were signs of an exchange between lineages',[19] and fifteenth century Florentine profile portraits show young girls decked out in their fathers' or husbands' wealth on the eve of arranged marriages, their averted gaze signifying unblemished virtue in refusing to meet a male viewer's eye. The pensive averted gaze of Nash's Squire's daughter suggests that, unlike Keane's 'disdainful aristocrat', she is not aware that she figures in the fantasy life of the rough-looking boy she passes in the lane. Indeed, the class difference that Corcoran spells out forbids that she should be. Like the 'expensive delicate ship' in Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts',[20] she has somewhere to get to and rides calmly on. The singing larks which express the bird-catcher's love are meaningful only to him and the delighted reader.

Although the poem hinges on class difference, it does not simply offer us a glimpse of social history. Graves's 'as when' tells us that the bird-catcher's encounter with the Squire's daughter, like Shelley's 'desire of the moth for the star',[21] is an analogy for the common experience of loving without hope. It is not surprising, then, that critics, even when they do not equate them with Graves's later poems, see the larks themselves as a 'halo' made from 'live and longing gold',[22] utterly divorced from the reality of the nineteenth century songbird trade, and unthinkingly assume the reason the bird-

catcher keeps birds in his hat to be the fairy-tale one: because the story demands it. Unlike Nicholson's fowler, he cannot have put them there to attract the attention of a love object met by chance and hopelessly above him. However, Corcoran's final point brings the larks too into the remit of social history. When the love-struck boy doffs his hat, 'the sweeping gesture reveals him as a bird-catcher, a poacher, a criminal; and this will almost certainly have consequences for him.'[23] Curiously, this suggestion of a practical reason why the catcher might conceal his catch raises problems about the date of Graves's apparently timeless little scene, and will require us to consider one final illustration as not entirely trustworthy evidence to the contrary.

For Victorians of every social class, caged wild birds were part of the furnishings of the home, although this did not necessarily mean they were unaware of the cruelty involved. Mrs Jane Loudon, in her 1851 book on the care of domestic pets, tells her middle-class readers:

> Various kinds of LARKS are kept in cages; though it appears very cruel to confine birds which, in a state of nature, delight in soaring as high as they possibly can, before they begin to sing. The SKYLARK, in a state of nature, never sings on the ground, and even in a cage, the poor bird generally attempts to rise as far as the wires will permit him, before he begins to sing.[24]

She then goes on to explain exactly how to look after these unfortunate captives, which should be 'kept in a large cage, and … supplied with a turf of fresh grass three times a week.' Needless to say, the dwellers in city slums, who cherished the pet birds which brought the sounds of the countryside to their crowded streets, had no access to fresh turf and could not afford spacious aviaries. Dealers assured them, 'It's kinder to

give 'em small cages; they'd beat themselves to death in bigger ones.'[25]

Although game birds had always been the exclusive property of the landowners who bred and shot them, songbirds only began to be legally protected, at least during the breeding season, by the Wild Birds Preservation Act of 1872, leading to complaints that 'the swells … aint satisfied with nobblin' the game birds. No: they must keep poor men from 'avin' singin' birds, and other poor men from makin' their livin' by ketchin' on 'em.'[26] Skylarks, which were seen by farmers as a pest, were not among the species covered by the act. However, 'the skylark trade aroused high passions in Victorian England, and saving the skylark became an early and totemic campaign of the Society for the Protection of Birds, founded in Didsbury in 1891, and granted a Royal Charter in 1904.'[27]

The male birds sing most sweetly, so they were the ones which ended up in cages, while vast numbers of larks of both sexes met a different fate. If a director of *The Magic Flute* were to answer the fairy-tale question of what use the nocturnal Queen of the Night makes of Papageno's captured songbirds by revealing that she eats them, a present-day audience would think this barbaric, and might even complain that the theatre of cruelty had gone too far. But as John Lewis-Stempel tells us:

> The eating of larks in Britain reached its apogee in the Victorian century, when the lark became a culinary vogue among the rich, while still being consumed in appreciable numbers by the middle and lower classes. The Victorian lark was roasted, baked, put in a pie, entombed in aspic, turned into *mauviettes en surprise aux truffes* in St James's clubs […] By the 1890s as many as 40,000 skylarks were sold in London markets per day.[28]

Lewis-Stempel even gives us recipes for larks in aspic and lark pudding. This latter dish was sampled in 1891, under the misleading name of beefsteak pudding, at London's Cheshire Cheese inn by the American journalist Sarah Morton, the first woman in its 200-year history to do so:

> There is my big dinner plate piled high with – what on earth! Birds – yes, tiny bits of birds – skylarks, kidneys, strips of beef just smothered in pastry, like sea-foam, and dark brown gravy, steaming with fragrance, as seasoning.[29]

Despite the fact that by the end of the century the Society for the Protection of Birds was actively campaigning against the songbird trade, and itinerant bird-catchers like the boy in Graves's poem had indeed started to fear prosecution, the Cheshire Cheese inn went on serving lark and beefsteak pudding until the eve of the Second World War.

While Corcoran's implied late Victorian date is not contradicted by anything in the poem, and Graves himself might not originally have felt the need to pin down an incident which could have happened at any time during the previous couple of centuries, his decision to revive *The Penny Fiddle*, 'the book which, when he was young and poor, he had tried to sell as a children's book of nursery rhymes to keep the creditors at bay',[30] in collaboration with the well-known illustrator Edward Ardizzone meant that a historical period for the characters' costumes had to be established. Graves described the whole collection as 'mostly romantic 1820-ish pieces, with more salt than honey in them',[31] and told Ardizzone 'The atmosphere with few exceptions (such as "The Lift Boy") is 1820 – 1850-ish, but please yourself about costume. If you find any of them unillustratable cut them out.'[32] *The Penny Fiddle* was published in 1960, a year after Grigson's anthology, and 'some 20,000 copies were sold'.[33]

Ardizzone settled for the earlier of Graves's dates, and his illustration for 'Love Without Hope' shows the Squire's daughter sitting side-saddle on a little white horse, wearing a modest riding habit and a cap with a feather, while the bird-catcher's neat coat and knee breeches make him seem like her social equal. The image has all of Ardizzone's customary sweetness, but there is no chemistry between the pair. She is looking away at the growing flock of birds, which are fluttering upwards, making no attempt to sing around her head, and he is gazing into the hat from which he appears to be conjuring them. It is a charming illustration, all honey and no salt, but quite devoid of the grief of love, and it cannot really be taken as establishing a fixed date for the encounter in the poem.

In my own poem, I have chosen to contrast Corcoran's late Victorian setting with a Regency one, and to shift the focus from the bird-catcher himself by reimagining the little episode from the point of view of all its participants. This has forced me to cast a cold eye on Graves's exaltation of larks by considering how they would really react to being suddenly released from a dark, confined space. Larks sing at a height of between fifty and one hundred metres, not at little more than the height of a girl on horseback. Shakespeare tells us they sing 'at heaven's gate',[34] while that experienced bird-watcher John Clare describes a singing lark as 'a dust spot in the sunny skies'.[35] And, of course, birds sing to establish their territory or to attract a mate, not from delight at being set free from a hat. Yet this realism melts away when we return to the original poem, which creates its own Mozartian space for the lark music to fill.

Setting the scene in the Regency period enables my Squire's daughter to take part in a forgotten aspect of the songbird trade by playing the flageolet to a bullfinch. While young ladies of marriageable age in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were encouraged to play keyboard

instruments, enabling them to show off their musical talents while maintaining the straight back and averted gaze which, as in a quattrocento Florentine profile portrait, still signalled virtue to potential suitors, they were warned against playing instruments 'which are really unbecoming to the Fair Sex; as the *Flute*, *Violin* and *Hautboy*; the last of which is too Manlike and would look indecent in a Woman's mouth'.[36] However, though larger wind instruments were seen as unacceptably phallic, an exception was made for the little flageolet, and its even smaller version the bird flageolet, which was used to turn caged songbirds into living musical boxes by repeatedly playing them tunes such as those collected in *The Bird Fancyer's Delight*, first published in 1717. Stanley Godman, who edited a twentieth century version, tells us that

> the popularity of teaching birds is also indicated by the publication in 1714 of a quite separate treatise (without tunes) entitled *The Bird Fancyer's Delight: or choice observations and directions concerning the feeding, breeding and teaching of all sorts of singing birds*, which ran through many editions of which the last appeared as late as 1830.[37]

Many different species of bird could be trained in this way, though it is unclear with what success, but the bullfinch was regarded as an especially apt pupil. However, my Squire's daughter is struggling with her own progress on an instrument which was marketed as especially easy for an amateur to play. Rehearsing in her mind the technical challenges of the little piece from *The Bird Fancyer's Delight*, she entirely fails to notice the boy with his hatful of larks.

The sad failure of my bird-catcher's romantic gesture highlights the fact that in Graves's poem the grief of love is mingled with a kind of heart-stopping *dolce stil novo* joy.

Although the Squire's daughter will never return his feelings, Graves's bird-catcher, who stands for all those who love without hope, has witnessed an apotheosis which reminds Corcoran of Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna of the Red Cherubims*. In my version of the poem, only the larks – the cock birds which would have gone to the bird dealer's cage and the hen birds which would have ended up in the cooking pot – are given a happy ending. The boy, in every sense, goes home hungry.

Whether we think of it as being set at the beginning or the end of the nineteenth century, or even in the timeless 'green land of wonder' which Graves associates with Mozart's music in 'The Corner Knot',[38] 'Love Without Hope' seems to belong to a more innocent past. There may indeed have been a self-protective reason why the Graves of 1925, still living with the long-term effects of shell shock, might have wanted to limit the pain and loss connected with the song of the skylark to a bitter-sweet evocation of unrequited love. With the outbreak of war, that much exploited bird had been redefined as a symbol of pastoral England, most famously by Ralph Vaughan Williams, though his decision to join up at the age of forty-two meant that *The Lark Ascending,* composed in the summer of 1914, was not performed until 1920. More importantly for serving soldiers, the song of the skylark was, in Lewis-Stempel's words, 'the musical background to the war on the Western Front,'[39] where 'the bird even stayed put on day one of the Somme … the bloodiest day in British military history, with its 58,000 British casualties'. [40]

Though poets of all ranks wrote about those battlefield larks, it was young officers of Graves's own class who were ironically nearest to 'heaven's gate' as they did so. Graves tells us, in an essay written fifty years after the end of the war, that 'a soldier who had the honour to serve' in one of the better divisions 'could count on no more than three months' trench service before being wounded and killed; a junior

officer, on a mere six weeks.'[41] His description in the same essay of the changes brought about by the war to the lives of the landed classes firmly places the poem in a pre-war rural world, in which the unbridgeable social gulf between bird-catcher and Squire's daughter was a fact of nature.

> Rationing, for the first time in history: unbuttered muffins, wedding cakes without sugar. Golf links commandeered as drill grounds. Country houses turned into hospitals. Servant girls deserting ducal kitchens for the munitions factory. Class distinctions disappearing, as when wounded officers promoted from the ranks fell in love with aristocratic V. A. D. nurses. (Ibid., p. 9)

If this impending social change might seem to suggest a Lawrentian narrative arc, the poem itself refutes it. Since love without hope has no future, the single moment of the poem is safe from the onward march of history, just as the unimprisoned larks defy ornithology as they crown the beloved's head with song.

Having started this article with a glimpse of a Regency period Squire's daughter, I should like to end it with a memorial to the Squires' sons who, a century later, fought alongside Graves on the Somme and, unlike him, never came home.

Envoi

over the Western Front the skylarks singing
despite the shell bursts
were captured in verse by doomed young officers
whose patriot fathers
dined in their London clubs before the war
on lark and beefsteak pudding

remember those birds and boys
next time you listen to *The Lark Ascending*

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NOTES

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[18] Colin Eisler, 'Berlin's puzzling "Princess" – quattrocento "profile" or Victorian pretender?', *Print Collector's Newsletter*, 27, 1 (March – April 1996) 1–10 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24555752 > [accessed 26 June 2023]
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[22] Jarrell, p. 81.
[23] Corcoran, p. 45.
[24] Mrs. Loudon, *Domestic Pets: Their Habits and Management; with Illustrative Anecdotes* (London: Grant and Griffith, 1851), pp. 111-12.
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[33] Seymour, p. 396.
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[35] John Clare, 'The Sky Lark', *Major Works*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2004), p. 216.
[36] John Essex, *The Young Ladies Conduct*, 1722, qtd. in Douglas Middleton MacMillan, *Octave Flutes in England*, DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2017, p. 238 <https://ora.ox.ac.uk> [accessed 27 June 2023]
[37] Stanley Godman, ed., *The Bird Fancyer's Delight* (London: Schott, 1954), p. v.
[38] *Complete Poems* vol. I, p. 310.
[39] Lewis-Stempel, p. 54.
[40] Ibid., p. 52.
[41] Robert Graves, 'The Kaiser's War: A British Point of View', in *Promise of Greatness: The War of 1914-1918*, ed. by George A. Panichas (New York: The John Day Company, 1968), p. 10.

Robert Graves and the Emperor Claudius

Christopher G. Simon

Abstract: Discussion of Robert Graves's two historical novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* and their subsequent treatment in other media, film, theatre and television.

Keywords: translation, media adaptations, Roman history, collaboration, Robert Graves, Deià, Laura Riding, John Mortimer

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Robert Graves began researching Claudius in 1929, but put aside the project shortly thereafter. He began writing *I, Claudius* in 1932 and the book was published in May 1934. *Claudius the God* followed just six months later. The narrative device is that the books are Claudius's secret history of his life, written entirely by himself in Greek (not Latin). At the beginning, Claudius/Graves writes 'in the present work, I swear by all the Gods, I am my own mere secretary, and my own official annalist'. In contrast, Graves himself did not work alone.

The novels were written when he and Laura Riding were living in Mallorca on the edge of the village of Deià. During the 1930s, a steady stream of interesting people came to stay with Graves and Riding. One young woman, Mary Ellidge arrived in Deià at the time Graves began working on the books. Graves induced her to type the manuscript in return for finding her housing in the village.[1] Other visitors included Eirlys Roberts and her partner Jacob Bronowski. Eirlys Roberts, who had studied classics at Cambridge, ended up carefully proofreading the manuscript of *I, Claudius*. She found few corrections were needed and was astonished by

Graves's knowledge of ancient Rome.[2] Graves was also assisted by his brother John who provided a translation of a surviving Claudian edict for *Claudius the God*.[3] Laura Riding is thanked in the introduction to both books for her suggestions on the congruity of the English.

The Claudius books were immediately successful. They helped Graves deal with his dire financial problems and they saved his home, Canellun. The novels are remarkable works of historical fiction, which, in addition to describing the machinations of the Imperial court, include detailed accounts of adventures throughout the far-reaching Roman empire. Graves, not surprisingly, showed himself very familiar with military history with a clear anti-German bias. He has Claudius's brother, the general Germanicus, write in a letter that 'The Germans … are the most insolent and boastful nation in the world when things go well with them, but once they are defeated they are the most cowardly and abject'.[4] In addition, the books cover Roman education, the different approaches of the Roman historians Livy and Pollio, the administration of the empire, the detailed workings of the senate, and a thorough account of the career of Herod Agrippa.

Graves identified strongly with Claudius. In a 1969 interview for *The Paris Review*, he explained:

> I didn't think I was writing a novel. I was trying to find out the truth about Claudius. And there was some strange confluent feeling between Claudius and myself. I found out that I was able to know a lot of things that happened without having any basis except that I knew that they were true.[5]

The Claudius books were then an early example of what Graves later called the 'analeptic method', 'the intuitive

discovery of forgotten events by a deliberate suspension of time'.[6]

Laura Riding didn't like the books and Graves himself, in a 1935 letter to his friends Tom and Julie Matthews, insisted that 'neither of them is of any real worth. How can the reviving of anyone as dead as Claudius be justified except as a literary conjuring trick'.[7] Despite this, Graves was sensitive to comments about the accuracy of the books. In the introduction to Claudius the God, he wrote:

> Some reviewers of *I, Claudius,* the prefatory volume to *Claudius the God,* suggested that in writing it I had merely consulted Tacitus's *Annals* and Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars*, run them together, and expanded the result with my own 'vigorous fancy'. This was not so; nor is it the case here.

He then lists a large number of ancient sources, some quite obscure, to demonstrate his thorough research.[8]

In reality, Graves always had a complex and uneasy relationship with academe and was not fully confident in his scholarship. In May 1934, Graves wrote to Tom Matthews, pointing out:

> Needless to say I'm not a Classical scholar or anything of that sort but there is a story somewhere hidden in that confused and rather dreary history and I have tried to dig it out. If I had been a Classical scholar my historical conscious would not have let me invent a thing.[9]

When Edward Marsh wrote to say how much he liked the second book, Graves wrote back in November 1934:

> I am so glad that you liked *Claudius the God*: it meant a lot of work for me because I was never a Classical

> scholar of any distinction and stopped dead off when the war broke out; and you know how careful one has to be even in fiction.[10]

The success of the Claudius books owes most to its dramatic portraits of the Imperial family, especially the women – Augustus's wife the scheming Livia and his errant daughter Julia, Claudius's cold mother Antonia, and his difficult wives Messalina and Agrippina. The imperial women in the book are ambitious, scheming, murderous and fond of the use of poison and witchcraft. One of the few sympathetic women in the books is Calpurnia, Claudius's faithful prostitute, although she does not come to life as a fully realized character. This complex presentation of challenging and unusual women has been fodder for commentators and biographers. One may note particularly Livia's refusal to sleep with Augustus, and Messalina's contrivances to avoid sharing a bed with Claudius. The biographers have all been quick to compare this with the strange realities of Graves's apparently sexless life with Laura Riding at the time the books were written.[11] In the collection of autobiographies of living authors *Authors Today and Yesterday*, published in 1934, Riding wrote 'I like men to be men and women to be women but I think that bodies have had their day'.[12] This is in line with an earlier condemnation of sexual relations in her essay 'The Damned Thing' in her 1928 book *Anarchism is not Enough*. To quote one striking sentence from that essay: 'Woman, to save herself from boredom, is obliged to enliven the scene with a few gratuitous falsetto turns which he interprets as co-operation'.[13]

Not long after their publication, there was hope of more success for the stories with a filmed version of the Claudius novels. Graves had sold the film rights to Alexander Korda who, with Josef von Sternberg as his director, planned a very ambitious cinematization of the story with an illustrious cast

of British actors, including Charles Laughton as Claudius, Flora Robson as Livia, and Merle Oberon as Messalina. Rushes from this doomed project are all that survive but provide tantalizing glimpses of a remarkable performance by Laughton, and indicate that the film would have been a striking visual spectacle.[14] However, the production was beset with difficulties, including challenges with Laughton's performance. He clearly had great difficulty getting into the part and became obsessed with modeling his performance on the abdicated King, Edward VIII. When Merle Oberon was injured in a car accident in March of 1937, it was decided to abandon the film. The book prepared by Graves to go along with the film, *The Fool of Rome*, was discarded. This was the point when Graves probably formed his idea of a Claudian curse on attempts to film or stage these novels.

Twenty years later, in 1957, Graves returned to the world of the Roman Emperors when he translated Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* (*The Twelve Caesars*) from Latin to English for Penguin. Again, Graves had no shortage of helpers. His faithful secretary, Karl Goldschmidt (who had anglicized his name to Kenneth Gay) helped him with the book. Also, Alastair Reed, a classical scholar, did a rough first translation of the Latin for Graves to revise. In a fascinating memoir of his at times difficult relationship with Graves in the New Yorker in 1995, Reed describes Graves's pencil corrections all of which Reed considered improvements. Graves apparently didn't focus on the Latin, but gave Reed a master class in writing. Reed writes 'He became for me the reader over my shoulder'.[15] *The Twelve Caesars* was one of a flurry of translations that Graves worked on in the 1950s. The art of translation is, of course, a complex one. In his introduction to one of his most successful translations, *The Golden Ass*, published in 1950, Graves wrote about translation that it is 'essentially a moral problem: how much is owed to the letter, and how much to the spirit'.[16] Graves was not a literal

translator and there are examples where he departs from, or modifies, the original.[17]

The idea of filming the Claudius books persisted. Korda's younger brother, Vincent, started a project in 1956 which would have starred Alec Guinness in a script written by Graves. This project came to nothing. In 1971, John Mortimer, the barrister and author, wrote a screenplay for a proposed Claudius movie to be directed by Tony Richardson.[18] Unfortunately, no one had told Graves about this project, and he wrote an angry public letter to the *London Evening Standard* stating he was surprised he hadn't been consulted. He reminds readers that no film has been completed yet 'due to the emperor's objection to having his unfortunate physical disabilities paraded on the screen'. He continues in his letter: 'I sincerely hope that Tony Richardson's version will not once more draw down Claudius's divine anger, and much regret that my advice on this matter has not been asked.' The letters editor of the *Evening Standard* must have been delighted and added the bold headline to the letter section 'Claudius' wrath by Robert Graves'.[19] Richardson could not raise the funds and so this project too was abandoned. Mortimer then produced a new script for the stage in lieu of a film script.

The staged version, directed by Tony Richardson, opened at the Queen's theater in London on 11 July 1972. Despite an appreciation for the work of the actor, David Warner, who played Claudius, the reviews were terrible and still today are difficult to read. In *The Listener* magazine, the reviewer Aidan Higgins mocked the dialogue: 'You don't miss the brothel, do you, Calpurnia?'[20]. Calpurnia also played a prominent part in Mortimer's screenplay for the unmade film. It may have been a mistake to dwell so much on Calpurnia who is not a particularly believable character in the books. The play closed two months after it opened.

Graves himself enjoyed the play and wrote to a friend who was surprised by its abrupt closure: 'The gallery and upper circles loved "Claudius", the stalls (who pay the most) liked it the least. I hope it goes to the USA where they would not make the same mistakes'.[21] Graves attended a party before the opening of the play with Mortimer, Richardson and the liberal party leader Jo Grimond where Graves announced: 'Of course Jesus Christ lived to the age of eighty, went to China, and discovered spaghetti.[22] Graves was now seventy-seven and age was beginning to take a toll.

Finally, the 1976 television adaption of *I, Claudius* broke, or almost broke, the curse of Claudius. Two of the key creators of the BBC series, the producer Martin Lisemore and the writer Jack Pulman died within a year of the series ending. Also, Brian Blessed (who played Augustus) recalled one of the extras choking on his food and dying at an 'I, Claudius' party.[23]

The television series was remarkably lacking in the striking visual scenes Korda was aiming for in his version. Entirely filmed on the BBC set at the Television Center near Shepherd's Bush, London, the series avoided spectacular imagery. Games in the Colosseum just showed the imperial family's box with loud sound effects to suggest the unseen crowds and the gladiatorial events. The television series focuses on the Imperial family; the scheming women and their husbands, sons, and lovers, and pays less attention than the books to the wider Roman Empire.[24]

Graves visited the set in July 1976, aged eighty-one. There he met the actors and saw some of the filming. Derek Jacobi (Claudius in the series) later revealed he was shocked by Graves mental deterioration – at lunch, Graves announced he was one hundred and forty years old.[25]

Graves would never have watched the television series – he did not watch television, nor did he have one. The success

of the series led to increased sales of the books, which helped pay for Graves's care in his last years.[26]

Some elements of the television production would have shocked him. Half-naked African dancers appear in the opening scene. Graves's inherent modesty meant that he avoided using the most salacious details from Suetonius in the novels, omitting, for example, the graphic details of Tiberius's sexual appetites. One of the most unforgettable images in the television series was Caligula appearing after having apparently cut open his own sister to remove their unborn incestuous child from the womb. This gruesome event is a creation of Jack Pulman's and is not in any ancient sources or in the Claudius books.[27]

The regeneration of the Claudius books continues. A BBC Radio 4 adaptation appeared in 2010 and in 2011 HBO was said to be considering a remake (which has not yet appeared). The afterlife of the 1930s' 'potboilers' has indeed been remarkable although none of the adaptations have truly captured the quality and charm of the original books. The continued attempts show how strongly the books impact those who read them. From the beginning, as we have seen, Graves was conflicted about the success of these books. In a 1969 interview, he stated: 'I am a poet and I put very little value on my prose work'.[28] However, he was also pleased with the recognition the books received, and not just because their success helped solve his financial difficulties. We have seen how he was both proud and insecure about his scholarship. His work, especially his interpretation of the Greek Myths, has been criticized by some classical scholars but, nevertheless, one of his dearest friends was the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones, who appreciated Graves searching and poetic mind.[29] Graves saw himself as an outsider, especially after he felt forced to leave England for Mallorca in 1929. This may help explain his sympathy for the stammering, limping, unlikely emperor

Claudius. Graves encouraged and, in some cases, was directly involved in, many of the Claudius film and theater projects. He also became more and more deeply invested in his own myth of Claudius; Claudius who cursed attempts to film his works and at the same time Claudius who always seemed to provide Graves with funding when he needed it. His real work on Claudius however was completed in 1934. After that point, he worked tirelessly on countless other projects while always prioritizing his poetry. His tombstone in Deià simply reads *Robert Graves Poeta*.[30]

Christopher G. Simon is an independent scholar with a background in classics and classical archaeology. His parents met Robert Graves and his family in Devon, England during World War II in the summer of 1942, became family friends: Robert visiting the Simons in London and the Simons frequently visiting Deià. His sister, Julia Simonne, became Graves's last muse in October 1966. The author may be contacted by email at cgsimon@berkeley.edu.

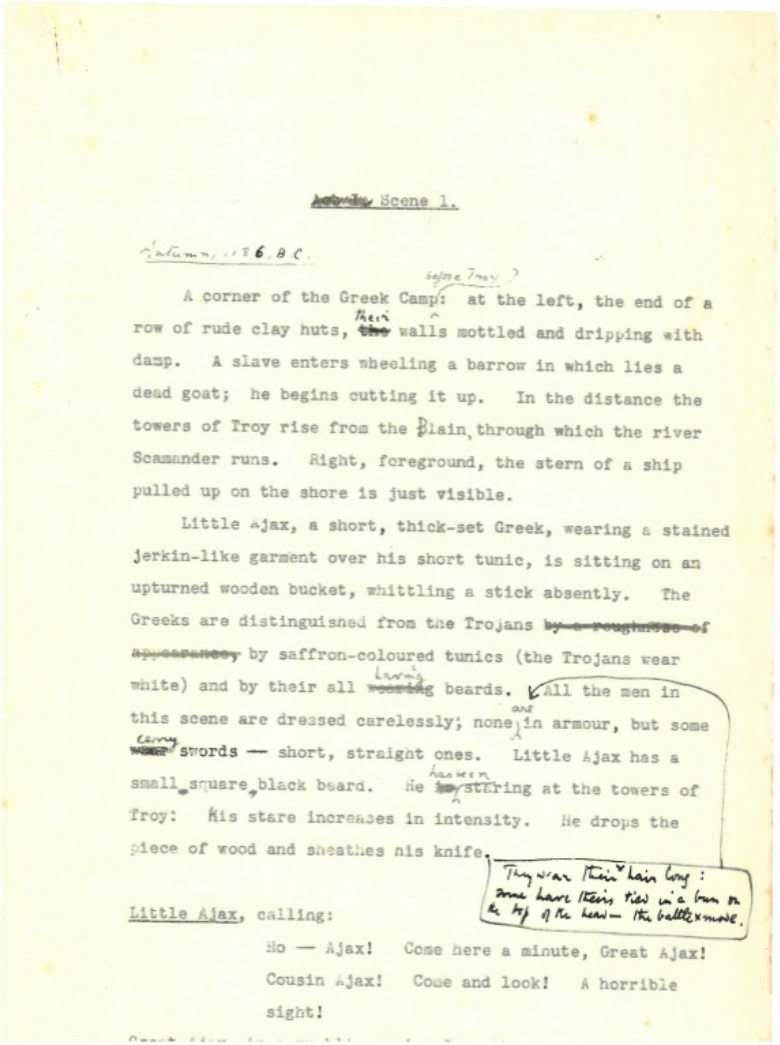
NOTES

[1] Richard P. Graves, *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura 1926-1940* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London, 1990), pp. 188-89.
[2] *Years with Laura,* p. 207; Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (Doubleday, London, 1995), pp. 214-15. See also 'A Recollection', by *Eirlys Roberts,* c1998 <https://drbronowski.com/eirlys.htm> [accessed 10 August 2023]
[3] *Years with Laura,* pp. 216, 218. Two surviving edicts are included in
Claudius the God (1934 UK, 1935 US, Vintage International, New York, 1989), pp. 435-39 in an unusual page where Graves breaks the first-person narrative for the only time until the peritextual collection of translations of ancient sources at the very end of *Claudius the God*.

[4] Robert Graves, *I, Claudius* (1934, Vintage International, New York, 1989) Chapter 19, p. 249.
[5] *Conversations with Robert Graves*, ed. Frank L, Kersnowski (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson and London, 1989), p. 100.
[6] Robert Graves, *King Jesus* (Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1946),
p. 421. Note also Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (Creative Age Press, New York, 1948) Chapter 19, p. 280.
[7] Robert Graves, *In Broken Images; Selected Correspondence* ed. Paul O'Prey (New York: Moyer Bell, 1988), p. 242. Graves was also disparaging of the books as early as December 1933 in correspondence with T. E. Lawrence. See Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1982), p. 256 ('Claudius is only the most stupid side-activity').
[8] In the Author's Note to *Claudius the God*, Graves also thanks Aircraftsman T. E. Shaw (T. E. Lawrence), and the distinguished classicists Jocelyn Toynbee and Signor Arnaldo Momigliano (whose study of Claudius, recently published in an English translation by Oxford University Press, Graves used when writing the second Claudius book). The references to these scholars provide further evidence that Graves was sensitive to his books' scholarly reception. See note 3 above which references Graves's insertion of translations of surviving Claudian edicts in the second book. Also, *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura* p. 218.
[9] *In Broken Images,* p. 349.
[10] Ibid.*,* p. 240.
[11] *The Years with Laura.* pp. 216-17.
[12] *Authors Today and Yesterday,* ed. Stanley Kunitz (The H. W. Wilson Company, New York, 1934), p. 565. See Deborah Baker, *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (Grove Press, New York, 1993), p. 238.
[13] Laura Riding, *Anarchism is Not Enough,* ed. by Lisa Samuels (Jonathan Cape, 1928, UC Press, 2001), p. 208.
[14] Surviving scenes from the film were included in the 1965 documentary *The Epic that Never Was* (BBC 1965, director and writer Bill Duncalf). See Anett K. Jessop's article 'Collaboration &

Adaptation: Laura Riding & Robert Graves's "Greeks and Trojans"'
in this issue.
[15] Alistair Reed, 'Remembering Robert Graves', *New Yorker,* 4 September 1995, p. 77.
[16] See Philip Burton, '"Essentially a Moral Problem": Robert Graves and the Politics of the Plain Prose Translation' in *Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition*, ed. A. G. G. Gibson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 143-63.
[17] *Robert Graves: Translating Rome*. ed. by Robert Cummings (Manchester, England: Carcanet, 2010), pp. xvi-xx. I am also grateful to Leanna Boychenko for sharing her paper based on her talk to the Classical Association of the Middle West and South (CAMWS) on 28 March 2015, 'An Emperor in Translation: Suetonius, Claudius, and Robert Graves', in which she demonstrates how, in some cases, the translation from the Latin of Suetonius was more accurate in the novels than in the official translation.
[18] A copy of the screenplay is in the collection of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Copies of Mortimer's screenplay and his stage play script are in The Personal Papers of Robert Graves held at St. John's College, Oxford.
[19] *Evening Standard,* 24 August 1971, p. 7. See A. G. G. Gibson, 'Josef von Sternberg and the Cinematizing of *I, Claudius*' in *Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition,* pp. 289-90.
[20] Aidan Higgins, 'High Old Times', *The Listener* 20 July 1972, pp 93-5. Other reviews noted by Gibson in *Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition,* pp. 290-91, notes 71-3.
[21] Richard P. Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess 1940-1985* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1995), p. 478.
[22] Mary Beard, *Confronting the Classics: Traditions, Adventures, and Innovations* (Liveright Publishing Company, New York, 2013) pp. 131-32 (review of *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture',* eds. Sandra B. Joshel, Margaret Malamud and Donald McGuire Jr. (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2005)). See also John Mortimer, *Murderers and Other Friends* (Viking, London, 1994), pp. 27-30.

[23] '*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic', BBC, directed by Paul Vanezis, 2002.
[24] For a thorough discussion of the television series, see , Sandra Joshel '*I, Claudius*: Projection and Imperial Soap Opera', in *Imperial Projections,* pp. 119-61. Digressions into the further parts of the Roman Empire are a feature of Graves's books which is shared with the works of the ancient historians Tacitus and Suetonius.
[25] Seymour, p. 458.
[26] Graves had sold the production rights of *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* to London Films long ago. *Robert Graves and the White Goddess 1940-1985,* p. 496.
[27] Beard, p. 137 (review of Aloys Winterling, *Caligula: A Biography*, trans. by Deborah Lucas Schneider, Glenn Most and Paul Psoinos (University of California Press, Berkeley 2011)).
[28] *Conversations with Robert Graves,* p. 78 (see also p. 71). Note also Andrew Bennett, '"It's readable all right but it's not history": Robert Graves's *Claudius* novels and the Impossibility of Historical Fiction' in *Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition,* pp. 39-40, and above note 7.
[29] Seymour, pp. 431-32.
[30] An earlier version of this paper, entitled 'Creation and Translation: Robert Graves, Suetonius, and the Julio-Claudian Dynasty', was presented on January 6, 2023, at the Annual Convention of the Modern Languages Association in San Francisco as part of a panel on *Regenerating Graves: Media Adaptations of the Work and Thought of Robert Graves*. I am grateful to Annett Jessop of the University of Texas at Tyler for inviting me to participate on that panel.



~~Actually~~ Scene 1.

~~Autumn~~, 1186 B.C.

A corner of the Greek Camp before Troy: at the left, the end of a row of rude clay huts, their ~~the~~ walls mottled and dripping with damp. A slave enters wheeling a barrow in which lies a dead goat; he begins cutting it up. In the distance the towers of Troy rise from the Plain, through which the river Scamander runs. Right, foreground, the stern of a ship pulled up on the shore is just visible.

Little Ajax, a short, thick-set Greek, wearing a stained jerkin-like garment over his short tunic, is sitting on an upturned wooden bucket, whittling a stick absently. The Greeks are distinguished from the Trojans ~~by a roughness of appearance~~ by saffron-coloured tunics (the Trojans wear white) and by their all having beards. All the men in this scene are dressed carelessly; none are in armour, but some carry ~~wear~~ swords — short, straight ones. Little Ajax has a small square black beard. He has been staring at the towers of Troy: his stare increases in intensity. He drops the piece of wood and sheathes his knife.

They wear their hair long: some have theirs tied in a bun on the top of the head — the ballet-master.

Little Ajax, calling:

Ho — Ajax! Come here a minute, Great Ajax! Cousin Ajax! Come and look! A horrible sight!

Riding's edits note the scene's season and date and appear fainter While Graves's appear in a boxed insertion and are more darkly inked.

Collaboration & Adaptation: Laura Riding & Robert Graves's 'Greeks and Trojans'

Anett K. Jessop

> The problem of determining the true story of Troy is not one for the scholar at all. It is a poet's problem, requiring a delicate balance between a sense of the past and a sense of the present—since a story of past events must include the present from which they are viewed.
>
> Riding, *A Trojan Ending* (1937)[1]

Abstract: This article reports on the recent recovery of a screenplay, 'Greeks and Trojans' (*c.* 1937), which is based on Laura Riding's historical novel *A Trojan Ending* (1937), adapted for film by Robert Graves, and which enlarges the corpora of both Riding and Graves. Background is given on Graves's commercial venture with London Film Productions founder and producer Alexander Korda, the aborted filming of *I Claudius* in the 1930s, as well as Korda's interest in the 'Greeks and Trojans' project. The essay gestures to continued contemporary public interest in Graves, Riding, and the Trojan cycles.

Keywords: classical revisionist studies, literary adaptations, cinema studies, Trojan War

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The colorful history of the literary partnership of Robert Graves and Laura Riding has, of late, become something of a screen sensation. William Nunez's 2021 biopic *The Laureate* won Film of the Festival at the 2021 Oxford International Film Awards as well as Best Feature, Best Director (Nunez), and Best Actor (Tom Hughes). *The Laureate* dramatizes an early period in the Graves-Riding relationship, during the mid- to later-1920s, through the depiction of an often-

tumultuous love triangle entangling Nancy Nicholson, Graves, and Riding – then, later, Irish poet Geoffrey Phibbs. Graves's literary legacy has, more importantly, found its way to film through other genres as in the highly successful 1976 BBC Television adaptation of his historical novel *I Claudius* (1934), with its all-star cast to include Sir Derek Jacobi as Claudius, Dame Siân Phillips as Livia, George Baker as Tiberius, Sir John Hurt as Caligula, Sir Patrick Stewart as Sejanus, and many other now notable British talents.

As it happened, the *I Claudius* film had been slated for a much earlier staging under contract with Alexander Korda, the Hungarian-British film director, producer, and founder of London Film Productions (1932) and Denham Film Studios (1935/6-1952). Graves's enormously successful *Claudius* books had unsurprisingly attracted Korda's attention, as he had been successful with a run of historical re-enactments, including *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), *The Rise of Catherine the Great* (1934), and he was busy filming *Rembrandt* (1936) during this period in the mid-Thirties. Korda visited Graves in Deià in January 1935 to discuss a contract for the film rights to *I, Claudius.* He planned for the Austrian American filmmaker Josef von Sternberg to direct the film and to cast Charles Laughton as Claudius, Merle Oberon (Korda's wife) as Messalina, Emlyn Williams as Caligula, and Flora Robson as Livia. Graves's March 1935 diary records the projected filming timeline, the signing of the contract, and Korda's interest in other projects including Graves's and Riding's collaborative novel *No Decency Left* (1932) and a screenplay based on T. E. Lawrence's life.

Following their evacuation from Mallorca on 2 August 1936, at the start of the Spanish Civil War, and while in London, Graves (and sometimes Riding) visited with Korda at the Denham Studios where Korda expressed interest in additional projects, including a Graves-Riding sketch about Spanish refugees. According to Richard Perceval Graves,

Elizabeth Freidmann, and others, the notion for a dramatization of Riding's soon-to-be-published historical fiction, *A Trojan Ending* (1937), was Graves's idea and Korda was receptive to the proposal. Korda's interest in Riding's novel's subject is not surprising as, while working in Hollywood, he had directed the 1927 black-and-white silent film *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, an historical romance that made his reputation in the American film industry. Graves soon shouldered the task of adapting her novel to dramatic form.

Filming of *I Claudius* began in February 1937. Unfortunately, after one month, on 18 March, Merle Oberon was injured in a car accident and the shooting was soon stopped. Many film scholars have lamented this thwarted project, even though there were problems with Charles Laughton's handling of the role of Claudius. Critic Warren Clements of *The Globe and Mail* remarked: 'A truly wrenching what-if was the loss of the 1937 version of *I, Claudius*, with Charles Laughton as the limping, stuttering, intensely admirable soon-to-be-Roman-emperor Claudius.'[2] Footage from Korda's abandoned filming of *I Claudius* surfaced in a 1965 BBC-TV documentary, *The Epic That Never Was*, hosted by Dirk Bogarde.[3] The documentary is shot in the crumbling remains of Denham Studios and offers footage of the extraordinary sets, brief cameos of the actors speaking lines, and interviews with Graves, Merle Oberon, Flora Robson, Josef von Sternberg, and others.

Collaboration & Adaptation

'Greeks and Trojans: A Play in Six Scenes' is Graves's adaptation of *A Trojan Ending*, Riding's extensive rewriting of the last year of the legendary battle between Troy and Greece, including the sacking of the Trojan stronghold. In particular, Riding works to redress the infamous or damaged

reputations of her chosen subjects: Helen of Troy, Cressida, Cassandra, and even the Trojan army legendarily defeated by the Greeks. Scenes unfold almost entirely in domestic spaces, rather than battlefields, as sites for dramatic action – the palace bedrooms and the viewing tower, presented as alternative seats of power where women might be present and able to speak. Just as Graves reanimated Roman and Byzantine emperors in *I, Claudius* (1934), *Claudius the God* (1935), and *Count Belisarius* (1938) with distinctly modern pathologies, so, too, did Riding imbue her legendary women with contemporary complexities and ambitions in both *A Trojan Ending* and her other historical novel *Lives of Wives* (1939).

Riding's recovery of historical women in her novels as well as in the screenplay adaptation offers an example of feminist re-envisioning of the classical past concurrent with variations proposed by other modernist-period women writers, to include Mary Butts, Naomi Mitchison, Mary Renault (Eileen Mary Challans), Virginia Woolf, and the notable classicist Jane Ellen Harrison, to name but a few examples. These authors ventured creative refigurations and variations on historical narratives – what Riding would later term 'suppositious histories' or, as more recently proposed by Saidiya Hartman, 'critical fabulations'.[4] Such assays provide exemplars for the now robust academic fields of classical reception and classical revisionist studies, as well as Mediterranean modernisms.[5]

Across the period of their working partnership (1926 through 1940) Graves and Riding collaborated on projects and consulted with one another during the writing process for works in draft. Both writers did considerable research for their history projects and Graves provided background notes for both of Riding's historical novels. Their collaborative spirit extended to the many initiatives that attracted and engaged writers, artists, and intellectuals arriving in Deià to

contribute to the dictionary projects, Seizin Press publications, as well as to work on their own books and art ventures.[6] In his screenplay adaptation of *A Trojan Ending*, Graves animates key scenes and dramatic exchanges among the principal Trojan and Greek players and he continued to work on the script following the couple's removal from Mallorca and as they lead a somewhat itinerate life across Europe and to the United States. Following their breakup in 1940, Riding gave Graves control over the 'Greeks and Trojans' play project and permission to proceed with it under his own name as an adaptation of her novel. Apparently, Graves was reluctant to do so, and he abandoned the script as he moved forward after the war with a growing family. In the end, the 'Greeks and Trojans' screenplay project was never finalized, published or produced.

William Graves, Robert's oldest surviving son and his literary executor, informed me about the unfinished screenplay now housed in the Special Collections Research Center at Southern Illinois University (USA).[7] In June 2022, I spent a week reading through the university's Graves's collection with hopes that I would successfully locate a complete script, which was complicated by its dispersed placements across the collection files and the presence of two (possibly three) parallel manuscripts: one version with handwritten edits by both Graves and Riding and then several retyped revisions. Graves was a commendable paper recycler and so many of the 'Greeks and Trojans' script pages are on the reverse sides of Graves's drafts in progress, most often projects from the 1940s and 50s. As such, the script pages were often out of sequence, in verso, and dispersed across multiple files and folders in the collection. I identified 300 separate pages and had them scanned and subsequently printed out. I have since assembled the several versions in proper order and now have a full and complete transcription of the screenplay which is currently under review at an

academic press.

The Afterlife of Scripts

Invasions, wars, conflicts are still much with us and the classical period, including the Trojan War, distinctively, continues to occupy contemporary cultural space. The 2018 BBC/Netflix collaboration *Troy: Fall of a City* is case in point and already it has generated scholarly discussion: as in the 2022 collection *Screening Love and War in Troy: Fall of a City*.[8] As to the afterlife of Graves and Riding's screenplay? 'Greeks and Trojans', because of the continued attention being paid to Graves and Riding, in part springing from the efforts of The Robert Graves Society, The *Fundació* Robert Graves, and related organizations, it may yet receive a first-time staging, as did Graves's *But Still It Goes On: A Play* (1929), which was finally performed at Finborough Theatre, London, in 2018.[9] Thus*,* [with some luck] may *it still go on: an adaptation.*[10]

Author's note: A version of this paper was delivered at the Fifteenth International Robert Graves Conference in Palma, Mallorca, Spain, 12-16 July 2022.

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NOTES

[1] Laura Riding, *A Trojan Ending* (London: Seizin/Constable and New York: Random House, 1937), p. xxvi.
[2] Warren Clements, 'A boxed set of virtual Marilyn: A new DVD package contains one of film history's great what-ifs.' *The Globe and Mail*, 26 May 2001 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/a-boxed-set-of-virtual-marilyn/article1338231/> [accessed 8 May 2023]
[3] 'The Epic That Never Was', BBC, 1965. Currently available on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUbt0sweIjI > [accessed 8 May 2023]
[4] In the Afterword to *Lives of Wives*, written in 1988, Riding claims that her stories are 'suppositious histories, but the foundations are factual. Fancy, in them, imitates knowledge, and delineation, truth' (*Lives of Wives*, London: Cassell and New York: Random House, 1939), pp. 327-28. Cultural historian Saidiya Hartman outlines her notion of 'critical fabulations' as narrative theory in her essay 'Venus in Two Acts' (*Small Axe*, 12, 2 (2008), pp. 1-14) <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/3/article/241115 N1 - Number 26 [accessed 9 August 2023]
[5] For an analysis of Riding's classical revisions, see Ruth Hoberman's *Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Twentieth-Century Women's Historical Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). I have also addressed this subject in several articles: '"Untranslatable" women: Laura Riding's classical modernist fiction', in *The Classics in Modernist Translation*, eds. Miranda Hickman and Lynn Kozak (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019): 131-41; n. 228-30; 'The Classical Past and "the history of ourselves": Laura Riding's Trojan Woman', in *Brill's Companion to Classical Receptions: International Modernism and the Avant-Garde*, eds. Adam J. Goldwyn and James Nikopoulos (Brill, 2017): 182-98; 'Geopoetics and Historical Modernism: Gertrude Stein, Laura Riding and Robert Graves in Mallorca, 1912–1936', in *Mediterranean Modernism; Intercultural Exchange and Aesthetic Development, 1880-1945*, eds. Adam J. Goldwyn and Renée M. Silverman (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2016): 123-48.

[6] While researching in the Special Collections Research Center at Southern Illinois University (SIU), I found several pages of evidence related to the dictionary projects. Extant markers of the collaborations taking place in Deià include the extensive handwritten marginalia by Graves, Riding, Alan Hodge, and others on manuscript pages in the SIU Graves collection.

[7] For those interested in the Southern Illinois University special collection archives: it holds a sizeable repository of Graves's handwritten and typed drafts from significant publications across his career, including fiction, essay collections, translations, plays, poetry, as well as correspondence from the 1920s onward. Of particular interest are the nearly 100 letters Graves received from Siegfried Sassoon, as well as correspondence with T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, Wyndham Lewis, Graves family members and many others. There is also a beautiful full-size poster for *Claudius the God* and accompanying drawing by John Aldridge. I am happy to email the Graves collection inventory to anyone interested: contact me at <ajessop@uttyler.edu>.

[8] See *Screening Love and War in Troy: Fall of a City*, eds. Antony Augoustakis and Monica Cyrino (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022).

[9] For information on the 2018 Finborough Theatre production of *But Still It Goes On: A Play*, see <https://finboroughtheatre.co.uk/production/but-it-still-goes-on/?archive=2018> [accessed 9 August 2023]

[10] Most of my readers will recognize that this essay's last line is an echo of Robert Graves's *But It Still Goes On: An Accumulation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930).

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

Grevel Lindop

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

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.[1]

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.[2]

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.[3]

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

> 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.[4]

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');[5] 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.[6]

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

> 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!).[7]

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'.[8]

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.[9] 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:

> 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.[10]

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'.[11] 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.

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 Siegried von Wistershelm-Kramstra.[12] 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.[13]

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'.[14] 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

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.[15] 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.[16]

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

> 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.[17]

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,[18] 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.'[19] 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*.) [20]

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

the only person who gave it a decent review; she is very old and makes errors in places – and often her case is stronger that [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.[21]

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.'[22]

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.'[23] 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')

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.[24]

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.'[25]

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)....

> Most interesting, clinically, will be an examination of the urine afterwards by a skilled analyst.[26]

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'.[27] (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.'[28] 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'.[29]

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'[30] – 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'.[31] 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.'[32] 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.[33]

By now the letters were being addressed to 'Dear Robert' and 'Dear Derick' ('tail end of Frederick', as Boothby breezily explained).[34] 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.'[35] 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

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 difficult 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.[36] 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.[37]

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.[38]

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.[39]

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.'[40] 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.

> Idries is a splendid man, and I have learned a lot from him.[41]

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

Gardner 'a nice old boy', 'woolly', but a bit of a Victorian do-gooder. 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).[42] 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.[43]

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

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.'[44] 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

> 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*:[45] 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)[46] comes from the Arabic, and can therefore be Sufi. Nor is there any 'threefold Muse' in Ibn Arabi.

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'.[47] (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.'[48] 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.'[49] 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,[50] and by August 1962, Boothby

was working as a 'Regional Organiser' for the Scottish National Party.[51]

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.[52]

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

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'.[53] 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.'[54] His thoughts on the Black Goddess had already formed the substance of his lectures as Oxford Professor of Poetry in 1963.[55]

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.[56]

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.'[57] He takes this up again in August 1971, writing, 'I agree wholeheartedly about

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.'[58] 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'.[59]

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.'[60]

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'[61] – 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'.[62]

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.[63]

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.

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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

[1] F. A. C. Boothby to Robert Graves, 20 January 1960.
[2] Ibid, p. 1.
[3] My thanks to Andrew Tullis, who supplied a photograph of the relevant page in Boothby's *Book of Shadows*.
[4] Boothby to Robert Graves, 20 January 1960, p. 2.
[5] Ibid, p. 2.
[6] Ibid, p. 2.
[7] Ibid p. 2.
[8] Graves to Boothby, 10 February 1960.
[9] Eddy Greenfield, *A-Z of Horsham: Places–People–History* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2019), p. 46.
[10] 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.

[11] The National Archives. *The National Archives Catalogue*. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C13372882> [accessed 24 July 2023]
[12] 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]
[13] Boothby to Lethbridge, 18 February 1960, Cambridge University Library, Add. 9258/85.
[14] Graves to Boothby, 19 February 1960.
[15] 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).
[16] Graves to Boothby, 19 February 1960.
[17] Boothby to Graves, 23 February 1960.
[18] 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.
[19] Graves to Boothby, 1 March 1960.
[20] 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]
[21] Graves to Boothby, 3 April 1960.
[22] Graves to Boothby, 8 April 1960.
[23] Graves to Boothby, 17 April 1960.
[24] Graves to Boothby, 10 June 1960.
[25] Graves to Boothby, 12 July 1960.
[26] Graves to Boothby, 13 August 1960.
[27] Boothby to Graves, 21 September 1960.
[28] Graves to Boothby; date uncertain, but September or October 1960.
[29] 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.

[29] Boothby to Graves, 5 November 1960.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Boothby to Graves, 16 November 1960.
[32] Graves to Boothby, undated: September or October 1960?
[33] Boothby to Graves, 21 November 1960.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Graves to Boothby, 11 January 1961.
[36] 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 Contemporarie*s (Palma: Collectió Estudis Anglesos, Universitat de les Iles Balears, 2008), pp. 187-205.
[37] Boothby to Graves, 16 January 1961.
[38] Graves to Boothby, 18 January 1961.
[39] 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, 29th 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].
[40] Graves to Rosalie Loveday Boothby, 22 January 1961.
[41] Graves to Boothby, 2 June 1961. [March?]
[42] 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]
[43] Boothby to Graves, 29 March 1961.
[44] Graves to Boothby, 14 July 1961.
[45] The image appeared as frontispiece to 'Eliphas Lévi' (Alphonse Lopuis Constant), *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, Paris: Germer Baillière, 2 vols, 1855–1856; it has been endlessly reproduced ever since.
[46] 'The name Robin is almost a generic name for the Devil, either as a man or as his substitute the familiar.' Margaret Murray, *The*

Witch Cult in Western Europe (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1921), p. 238.
[47] Graves to Boothby, 31 January 1962.
[48] Graves to Boothby, 3 April 1962.
[49] Graves to Boothby, 18 August 1962.
[50] Boothby to Graves, 28 March 1962.
[51] Boothby to Graves, 13 August 1962.
[52] 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).
[53] Boothby to Graves, 11 February 1969.
[54] Graves to Boothby, 15 February 1969.
[55] Robert Graves, 'Intimations of the Black Goddess', *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (London: Cassell, 1965), pp. 141-65.
[56] Boothby to Graves, 3 May 1970.
[57] Graves to Boothby, 12 May 1970.
[58] Graves to Boothby, 29 August 1971.
[59] 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*.
[60] Graves to Boothby, 28 November 1971.
[61] Boothby to Graves, 7 July 1963.
[62] Wikipedia contributors, '1320 Club', *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,* 2 February 2022, 15:12 UTC, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1320_Club> [accessed 24 July 2023]
[63] *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]

Wicca Reading *The White Goddess*

Steven Michael Stroud

Abstract: This essay explores the influence Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* has had on people practicing witchcraft, from the 1960s to present and suggests that for segments of this community, *The White Goddess* was a consequential book. It also points out that Graves had an interest in witchcraft prior to publication of *The White Goddess* (1948) and respected it as a legitimate religious practice.

Keywords: Witches, Witchcraft, Ogham BLN Tree Calendar, *The White Goddess*

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Few readers of Robert Graves's many works have been as heavily influenced as the witchcraft counterculture has been by *The White Goddess*, whose legacy, begun in the early 1960s, continues to the present day.[1]

By 1960, Graves was aware of the nascent witchcraft movement,[2] and believed that witches had everything to do with the preservation of Goddess worship. When there was a plan afoot to make a movie of *The White Goddess,*[3] he explained to Dereck Boothby:

> I wrote to my millionaire producer and said that certain witch friends of mine would help if called upon and he answered wanting to know where witches came into the story so I said that they kept the goddess religion alive throughout the Middle ages in most historic style. He got that point.[4]

The thirteen lunar month Beth-Luis-Nion tree calendar (BLN) became a touchstone of the witchcraft community, as it continues to be to this day. A letter to Graves from Dr Margaret Alice Murray in 1946,[5] written in response to an inquiry of his (in a letter as yet not located), indicates that Graves was well into the process of constructing or refining the BLN. He appears to have expressed an interest in how witches used trees and shrubs and the specific months these were planted, as well as in the initiation of witches.

In her reply, Murray discusses initiation and provides a short list of known witches, including both their real names and adopted names, or craft monikers, but, disappointingly, admits she knows very little of Graves wanted most keenly to know about, the ritual use of plants and herbs.

The BLN Thirteen Month Lunar Tree Calendar

Graves states, in the opening pages of *The White Goddess,* that the language of poetry descends from ancient rituals in honour of the Moon-Goddess, which is squarely based on tree-lore and seasonal observations. In the second chapter, 'The Battle of the Trees', he discovers its historical trace within a Welsh poem composed of riddles, 'Câd Goddeau', or 'The Battle of the Trees', which involves a calendar used by the Celts. Graves demonstrates that the 'Câd Goddeu' represents an intellectual combat between druidic colleges, an idea he had adopted from Edward Davies:

> The reverend Edward Davies, a brilliant but hopelessly erratic Welsh scholar of the early 19th century, first noted in his Celtic researches 1809, the battle described by Gwion is not a frivolous battle or a battle physically fought but a battle fought intellectually in the heads and with the tongues of the learned. Davies also noted that in all Celtic languages trees means letters and that the

> druidic colleges were founded in woods or Groves that a great part of the bulk of druidic mysteries was concerned with twigs of different sorts and the most ancient Irish alphabet the BLN.[6]

He expands on the 'brilliant but hopelessly erratic' Davies, reconstructing the BLN tree language and corresponding calendar. It's possible that Graves was influenced by the *Auraicept na n-éces: The Scholars' Primer,* edited by George Calder (1917).[7] While no copy of it appears in his library collection at St John's, perhaps he was alerted to its existence many years earlier by his father, the folklorist Alfred Perceval Graves.[8]

Witchcraft, Graves, and the BLN Tree Calendar

A decade or so after Graves published the Ogham BLN calendar in *The White Goddess,* it was embraced by witches as a sacred calendar, in alternative to the ubiquitous twelve-month calendar. I am grateful to historian Ronald Hutton for directions in seeking out its influence:

> Graves's Tree Calendar was never formally added to Gardnerian Wicca as a component: it is not included in any of the main lineages of Books of Shadows, for example. Nor did *The White Goddess* become as foundational to Wiccan thinking as it did for example, to that of Robert Cochrane and his network. However, it clearly did make a considerable impact on individual Wiccans [... and] did so mostly in the mid to late 1960s. The reason it is not in Alexandrian Wicca is that it split off from the Gardnerian in the early 1960s, and so it's book of shadows contains none of the material which came into Gardnerian books after that period.[9]

As Hutton indicates, there are numerous witchcraft traditions, under those traditions are individual covens, and, lastly, solitary practitioners. Among the numerous traditions, those focused on in this article are the Gardnerian Wicca (founded by Gerald B. Gardner, also known as 'Scire': (1884-1964);[10] The McFarland Dianic Tradition (Co-founded by Morgan McFarland (1944-2015);[11] and The Clan of Tubal Cain (founded by Roy Bowers, also known as Robert Cochrane (1931-1966).[12] This is far from an exhaustive list of witchcraft traditions influenced by Robert Graves and *The White Goddess*. At this point it is impossible to provide such a list, as many practitioners of witchcraft and many individual covens prefer to remain out of the spotlight. The air of secrecy with which they choose to cloak their craft extends to the publication of their beliefs and practices. However, following are some traditions, covens, and practitioners who have reported their influence by *The White Goddess.*

Gardnerian Wicca and *The White Goddess*

One of the Gardnerian Witches so influenced was Major Frederick 'Derick or Derek' Boothby. In the introduction to the Graves-Boothby correspondence (1960-1969) held in the Ellsworth Mason Collection in the University of Tulsa, Boothby is characterized '[a]t the time of the beginning of the correspondence [... as] the head of an organization of a group of covens in the British witch cult and a practicing witch.' Within their correspondence, Boothby attempts to reconcile the thirteen-month Ogham BLN calendar with the twelve-month calendar he had learned from Gerald Gardner. Until 1960, Boothby was a part of Gardner's first Wiccan Coven, The Bricket Wood Coven. Writing to Graves about the BLN Tree Calendar, he states:

> I have been doing a job on the allocation of which festivals to the 13-month calendar, using the vowels for the festivals and placing the intercalary day at Midsummer, with no greater authority than *Midsummer Night's Dream.* It seems to me to work out rather well.[13]

How much progress, if any, Boothby made in his efforts is unknown.

In 1964, Celia Penney (1930-2008), known in the craft as either Francesca or Floranis, one of Gerald Gardner's last high priestesses,[14] chose to use the BLN calendar for her practices. It is possible that she may have passed this tradition on down her coven line. In Penney's notebook is a page entitled 'The Craft'. Among her notes on the craft, is a reference to Robert Graves. 'Witchcraft is a moon cult. The year has 13 moons, with 13 weeks to each quarter. I myself have chosen to use the Ogham tree calendar that Robert Graves posits with the 13 trees as it makes the greatest sense to me.'[15]

The daughter of Celia Penney, Tanith Burcombe (b. 1975) had access to an almost exact copy of Graves's calendar in her mother's notebooks. Burcombe chooses to use the calendar herself to this day. 'My mother felt that Graves's calendar most closely represented how the wheel of the year turn[s]. Each Gardnerian chooses which calendar they choose to employ. Graves, BLN Calendar was hers (and subsequently mine).' (Ibid)

Burcombe has been a solitary Gardnerian Wiccan Tradition practitioner (by choice) since 1991. She was initiated at her request on Beltane (01 February 1991). She states: 'My lineage comes from Gerald B Gardner, through Celia Penney (Francesca) as my mentor, and my mother. I was initiated in 1991 by my parents at my request, and have been practicing Gardnerian [witchcraft] ever since. Each

month I celebrate the full moon based on associations, symbols and intentions that these trees carry.' (Ibid)

Burcombe demonstrates the persistent, ongoing appeal of Graves's calendar, even in the absence of institutional dogma. Its intellectual or aesthetic appeal is noted by Christina Oakley Harrington, author of *Dreams of Witches*:[16] 'many witches love toying with [the 13 month and tree calendar] as a personal choice to adopt into their own practice.'[17]

The trees Graves assigned to each month are important to Burcombe since they are not just a symbol of nature and the seasons but a symbol of the Goddess as she passes through the wheel of time. Each and every tree Graves assigned to each month holds importance. 'Each month I celebrate the full moon based on the associations, symbols and intentions that these trees carry. There are many different associations based upon each tree. It is important to observe such detail in my blessings.' (Burcombe)

Burcombe's specificity suggests she has studied the text of *The White Goddess:*

> I tailor the intentions specific to the tree for all my magical workings around the full or new moon. This way I feel I am honoring the nature of that tree i.e., using rowan to bless the wolf moon (beginning of the year) or the cold moon (end of the year), honing my protection or healing for a friend or family member.' (Ibid)

The McFarland Dianic Tradition

What is now known as the McFarland Dianic tradition (a tradition named after the Roman goddess, Diana) is another form of witchcraft, co-founded by its namesake Morgan McFarland (1941-2015) in 1971. *The White Goddess* has had a greater lasting impact on this tradition than many others.

Silver Moon Withers, who has been involved with the McFarland Dianic tradition since 1990, asserts:

> The Celtic tree calendar as written by Robert Graves has had the most impact on the McFarland tradition. I knew Morgan McFarland in my youth. The BLN Celtic tree calendar is a centerpiece of the tradition. How it is used is secret however, and discussing such would be breaking an oath.[18]

The importance of The White Goddess in the McFarland Tradition is concisely explained by Karen Perry, also known as Kalisha Kfp. Perry is a high priestess in several traditions, a second-generation High Priestess in the McFarland Dianic, and a long-time friend of Morgan McFarland. Because of its wealth of information, which includes an assertion that *The White Goddess* created space for the masculine principle in the McFarland Dianic cult, I am quoting extensively from her letter of 22 July 2023.

> McFarland Dianic Mysteries are almost entirely founded from *The White Goddess*, although not exclusively. Morgan McFarland used other sources in her research and studies. The tradition most likely would have simply developed in different ways had she never used *The White Goddess,* developing with different Mysteries, as women needed something that addressed their individual spirituality and needs at the time. Morgan started to grow her vision of a feminist / goddess based religion. Growth over time became inevitable with or without *The White Goddess.*
>
> Using *The White Goddess* also opened the doors to men becoming involved as well, unlike the other feminist Dianics that excluded anything masculine. In my

opinion, two things define McFarland Dianics as the tradition has developed and grown over the decades: 1) The use of Graves's *White Goddess*, and 2) including men and a masculine principle. [These] became the two most [...] important common denominators that separate the McFarland Dianic cult tradition from their feminist Dianic traditions that exist today.

The McFarland tradition usually utilizes some of Graves's methods in deducing poetry and myth as well as the tree calendar; however that [...] information [...] is oath bound and for initiates only.
It took me over five years to even start to truly begin to understand the complexities of *The White Goddess.* Every year since I was first introduced around 1983 to *The White Goddess,* that understanding grows and multiplies. Studying *The White Goddess* has been a life changer as each Riddle, each lap wing, began to unfold and reveal a totally different way of seeing, of comprehending myth, symbolic metaphor and symbol, and how we can use those lessons to have a better quality of life. That awakening changes and evolves every year as I travel the lunar calendar of the Ogham tree alphabet and related stories.

This book has had a major influence on the other traditions I am a part of, except one: Garderian Wicca; and even then, Gerald Gardner used *The White Goddess* in recreating a revival of the old religion [in] the UK. The original Artemesian Tradition founded in 1978 in Dallas, Texas is a sister tradition to Morgan McFarland Dianic, and the lotus branch of the Isian tradition (Grand Prairie, Texas). Unlike the other two branches, West Coast Isian (California) and American Isian (Florida) started to incorporate *The White Goddess* in

> 1982. So, yes Robert Graves has had a tremendous influence in the shaping of my journey through the craft and in life.[19]

The Clan of Tubal Cain

Much has been written about Robert Cochrane (Roy Bowers), Founder of The Clan of Tubal Cain in 1966, and currently active in the UK. Cochrane was one of the more enigmatic and dedicated individuals inspired by Graves. In the early 1960s, he placed an ad in a local newspaper, *The Manchester Guardian,* seeking to contact anyone who had read *The White Goddess*.[20] Shani Oates, Maid of The Clan of Tubal Cain discusses Cochrane's commitment to Graves's poetic orientation to myth.

> There is no doubt that Cochrane was intrigued and inspired by Graves's *poesis,* though this certainly influenced his own approach to his craft as a process in itself, rather than [focusing on] the actual content of Graves's writings. By that I mean that Cochrane seized upon the methodology of how to approach her (The Goddess) through a living muse, and how lateral thinking, intuition and a poetic vision can be applied as a valid practice within craft for gathering personal *gnosis*.[21]

Oates emphasizes that *The White Goddess* should be used for valuing Graves's methodology 'as a tool of poesis'. Cochrane perceived in Graves's intuitive work, a perennial philosophy that appealed to his own assertion that truth (neither male nor female) is the absolute godhead. Cochrane declared that until others embraced this principle: 'we are all still babes sucking at the breast of poison' (ibid).

Graves published an article on contemporary witches titled, 'Witches in 1964' in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Fall 1964 issue), the year that Gerald Gardner died. He ended the article with this rather prophetic statement:

> Yet the craft seems healthy enough in 1964, and growing fast, though torn by schisms and Dr. Gardner's. death. It now only needs some gifted Mystic to come forward, reunite, and decently reclothe it, and restore its original hunger for wisdom. Fun and games are insufficient.[22]

Little did Graves realize that he would be one of those figures 'to come forward and reunite and decently reclothe the craft', though he may have suspected The White Goddess herself might do so without his intention.

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NOTES

[1] The editions most influential in the modern witchcraft movement were the first edition (1948), the revised ed. (1952), and the enlarged and expanded edition (1961), appearing at a time the movement was in a formative stage.
[2] See for example Grevel Lindop's article, 'Good Luck ... and Blessed Be': Robert Graves and F. A. C. Boothby', in this issue of *The Robert Graves Review.*
[3] Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (New York: Holt,), pp. 390, 392.
[4] Graves to Boothby, 12 July 1960, St John's College, Oxford.
[5] Murray to Graves, 3 April 1946, St Johns College, Oxford.
[6] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historic Grammar of Poetic Myth* (Manchester, England: Carcanet, 1997), repr. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2013), p. 97
[7] *Auraicept Na n-éces: The Scholars' Primer: Being the Texts of the Ogham Tract from the Book of Ballymote and the Yellow book of Lecan, and the Text of the Trefhocul from the Book of Leinster,* ed. by George Calder (Edinburg: J. Grant, 1917)
[8] Offered in the purest spirit of speculation.
[9] Email from Ronald Hutton to author, 02 January 2023.
[10] Gerald B. Gardner was prominent in bringing the contemporary pagan religion of Wicca to public attention. A plaque attached to his grave describes him as the 'father of modern Wicca. Beloved of the Great Goddess'. For more on Gardner, see Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of The Moon; A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New York: Oxford university press, 1999), pp. 205-39.
[11] Morgan McFarland and The McFarland Dianic Tradition have existed from 1971 to the present. There are no reliable published sources of information. For information I have relied on personal contact through email.
[12] The Clan of Tubal Cain was founded by Robert Cochrane, also known as Roy Bowers. Cochrane founded The Clan of Tubal Cain as his second coven in the early 1960s. Cochrane wrote to Graves twice in the 1960s, but unfortunately did not date his letters. He

was one of Robert Graves's biggest fans among the witchcraft community, though also one of his more vocal critics.
[13] Boothby to Graves, 3 March 1960, St John's College, Oxford.
[14] Michael Howard, *Modern Wicca* (Minnesota: Llewellyn, 2021), p. 4.
[15] Email from Tanith Burcombe to author, 12 June 2023.
[16] Christina Oakley Harrington, *Dreams of Witches* (Black Letter Press: Obernkirchen, Germany, 2022).
[17] Facebook Messenger Chat Text, Christina Oakley Harrington to author, 06 November 2022.
[18] Phone conversation with Silver Moon Rivers, 16 July 2023. Rivers is a member of The Administrative Counsel for the Tradition.
[19] Email from Karen Perry (Kalish Kfp) to author, 22 July 2023. Kalisha is a second-generation High Priestess in McFarland Dianic, and longtime friend of Morgan McFarland, Current Matriarch Original Artemisian Tradition of Witchcraft, High Priestess third degree Grdnerian Wicca, High Priestess third degree Lotus branch and West Coast Isian.
[20] Michael Howard, *The Roebuck in The Thicket: An Anthology of The Robert Cochrane Witchcraft Tradition* (Milverton, England: Capall Bann, 2022), p. 43.
[21] Email from Shani Oates to author 23 May 2023. For more on The Clan of Tubal Cain see Shani Oates, *Tubal's Mill: The Round of Life* (Creative Space IndependentPlatform, 2016).
[22] Robert Graves, 'Witches in 1964', *Virginia Quarterly Review,* 40 (Autumn, 1964), p. 550.

Poetic Correspondence: The Verse Letters of Robert Graves

Dunstan Ward

Abstract: Through the series of verse letters that they exchanged, this article traces the intense relationship between Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon during the First World War, and its decline after Sassoon learnt that Graves was marrying Nancy Nicholson; Graves's 'A Letter from Wales' is examined in detail.

Keywords: verse letters, friendship, love, homosexuality, marriage, war, battle, death, identity, memory, trauma.

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Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon first met at the front in northern France on 28 November 1915, in the village of Festubert in the Pas-de-Calais. Graves was twenty; Sassoon was almost nine years older. Over the next three years they exchanged a series of verse letters which reveal the strength and intensity of the relationship between the two Royal Welch Fusiliers. Graves's war poems, Michael Longley affirms, 'are love poems in their way',[1] and this is nowhere truer than in these verse letters to Sassoon. Then, six years later, Graves wrote his last and longest in the series, 'A Letter from Wales', looking back over their 'lovely friendship'[2] and asking why it failed.

Graves posted Sassoon a typescript of the poem, a carbon copy emended in ink,[3] on 13 September 1924, while he and his wife Nancy Nicholson were staying with his parents and relatives at the Graves holiday house near Harlech. Below the text on the fifth and last page of the typescript, evidently produced for publication, 'ROBERT GRAVES' is typed in capital letters; Graves has enclosed his name in a rectangle and

written 'With affection | from' above it. In the remaining space on the page, he has written 'We return on the 28th | Have you any objection to above on personal or | poetical grounds?' In the event, they returned to their cottage at Islip, outside Oxford, on the 20th.[4] The poem appeared in the first issue of a new literary journal, *The Calendar of Modern Letters*, in March 1925 (there was also a poem by Sassoon), and Graves included it in his next collection, *Welchman's Hose*, which was published by the Fleuron Press in September that year, one of Graves's most elegant volumes, with wood engravings by Paul Nash.

'A Letter from Wales' has not attracted much critical attention; D. N. G. Carter doesn't mention it in the most substantial study of the poetry, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (1989). And yet it is, as Michael Longley characterises it in the Introduction to his Faber *Selected*, 'a rich, complex' poem, an 'informally cadenced meditation on war and friendship, on death, identity and poetry'.[5]

For the verse letter genre, two of Graves's most obvious models were Pope, whose 'Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot' is an anthology standard, and Pope's model, Horace, endlessly translated at public schools like Charterhouse (Graves quotes a line from one of his *Epistles* in an early poem, 'Marigolds').[6]

Below the title of 'A Letter from Wales' – just 'A Letter' on the typescript – is the headnote, 'Richard Rolls to his friend, Captain Abel Wright.' This has a footnote: 'The characters are fictitious; the setting is unhistorical.' It is revised in *Welchman's Hose* as 'The characters and incidents are unhistorical', and omitted in Graves's 1926/27 *Collected Poems*, maybe because it begs key questions in the text. Graves then dropped the poem altogether from the canon.

The pseudonyms 'Richard Rolls' and 'Abel Wright' are evocative. 'Richard' neatly matches 'Robert', and Richard is one of the characters in *The Shout* (also 1924), while 'Dick' is

the name Graves gives in *Good-bye to All That* to 'Peter' Johnstone, the Charterhouse pupil four years younger that he was in love with. Sassoon, in *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man* (1928), calls David Thomas, the young lieutenant they both loved, 'Dick Tiltwood'; and in Graves's 1930 play *But It Still Goes On* Dick Tompion is the Graves-like character to whom the Sassoon-like homosexual David Casselis's attitude is 'repressedly romantic'.[7] That of course is in the future. Rolls may allude ironically to the Rolls-Royce that Sassoon offered as a wedding present to Graves and Nancy; he kept well away from the actual wedding ceremony. 'Abel' indicates Sassoon's Jewish origins; Saul Kane (spelt with a 'K') is Sassoon's pen-name and the narrator's in *The Daffodil Murderer*, his 1913 pastiche of John Masefield. And, of course, in the Book of Genesis Abel is killed by his brother, Cain .... 'Wright' (as in 'playwright') means 'maker', and 'makar' is a Scottish word for a poet. Could there even be a hint that in the end Sassoon was 'right'?

Sassoon started the poetic correspondence with 'A Letter Home', written while he was on a course at the Flixécourt army school some thirty miles from the front.[8] Dated 'May 1916', its tone is intimate:

> Robert, when I drowse to-night,
> Skirting lawns of sleep to chase
> Shifting dreams in mazy light,
> Somewhere then I'll see your face
> Turning back to bid me follow. (sect. 2 ll. 1–5)

The poem then invokes David Thomas, who was killed a month before, yet now 'sings in every place / Where we're thinking of his face' (sect. 4 ll. 13–14). The imagery of oaks and brooks and blossoms recalls Graves's similar but more subtle use of it in his poignant poem 'Not Dead' (*Goliath and David* (1916)), written the day after Thomas's death and

doubtless read by Sassoon: 'Caressingly I stroke | Rough bark of the friendly oak. [...] Over the whole wood in a little while | Breaks his slow smile' (ll. 4–5, 10 –11). In Sassoon's 'Shifting dreams' Thomas's face is subsumed into Graves's face, with its 'Crooked smile'. The poem concludes (sect. 5 ll. 15 –16): 'War's a joke for me and you | While we know such dreams are true!'

'A Letter from Wales' begins:[9]

> This is a question of identity
> Which I can't answer. Abel, I'll presume
> On your good-nature, asking you to help me.
> I hope you will, since you too are involved
> As deeply in the problem as myself.
> *Who are we?* (ll. 1–6)

Richard Rolls expounds to Abel Wright his 'view' that their former 'selves' were 'lost' during the war, and replaced by 'substitutes' – twice. A 'question of identity' also arises for Graves's critics and biographers. As Dominic Hibberd demonstrated in a paper at the Oxford centenary conference in 1995, Graves replaced his wartime self, the Graves of *Over the Brazier* (1916), *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917), the wartime letters and his unpublished 1918 book 'The Patchwork Flag', with the Graves of *Good-bye to All That* (1929). [...] The character many readers saw, and some still see, in *Good-bye* was even further from his younger self than he'd intended. Commentators on his work usually understand this in theory, but in practice they tend to treat the book as reliable. One has to go back to the wartime poems and letters to find the wartime Graves.[10]

And this is in effect what Richard Rolls asks Abel Wright to do:

> Take down your old diary, please,
> The one you kept in France, if you are you
> Who served in the Black Fusiliers with me.
> That is, again, of course, if I am I –
> [...]
> Turn up the date,
> July the twenty-fourth, nineteen-sixteen,
> And read the entry there:
>
> *'To-day I met*
> *Meredith, transport-sergeant of the Second.*
> *He told me that Dick Rolls had died of wounds.*
> *I found out Doctor Dunn, and he confirms it;*
> *Dunn says he wasn't in much pain, he thinks.'*
> (ll. 6–9, 12–18)

Richard claims to be trying to distinguish 'facts' from what he terms 'romance' (ll. 25, 68). If we try to do this too, we find that the poem itself reproduces and reinforces the 'substitution' process it ostensibly is examining.

It is the entry for 21 July 1916 in Sassoon's diary that in fact records: 'And now I've heard that Robert died of wounds yesterday, in an attack on High Wood.' Graves was near-fatally injured on the 20th, not the 24th, but for symbolic effect the poem advances the date to 'the day he came of age' (l. 23). Sassoon continues:

> And I've got to go on as if there were nothing wrong. So he and Tommie are together, & perhaps I'll join them soon. [...] And only two days ago I was copying his last poem into my notebook – a poem full of his best qualities of sweetness & sincerity, full of heart-breaking gaiety & hope. So all our travels to 'the great, greasy Caucasus' are quelled. And someone called Peter will be as sad as I am. Robert might have been a great poet;

> he could never have been a dull one. In him I thought I had found a lifelong friend to work with.[11]

What Sassoon believed to be Graves's 'last poem' was 'To S.S.', a manuscript version of 'Letter to S.S. from Mametz Wood' (*Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917)), his response to Sassoon's 'A Letter Home', and written after their encounter near Fricourt on the Somme on 14 July. Dated the 17th, it is an exuberant fantasy about their future travels together in 'jolly old "après la guerre"', first to Robert's 'country seat', his cottage in Wales, and then to more distant places, notably Bagdad, to visit the Sassoon 'ancestral vault'. Both Peter Johnstone and David Thomas were originally mentioned at the end:[12]

> (This Peter still may win a part
> Of David's corner in your heart.
> I hope so.) & one day we three
> Shall sail together on the sea
> For adventure & quest & fight
> And God! what Poetry we'll write!

As foreseen in the poem, Graves and Sassoon actually went up to Harlech in August 1916, while Graves was recovering from his wounds, Sassoon having been sent home too with suspected lung troubles. These weeks in Harlech were undoubtedly the period in their relationship when Graves and Sassoon were closest. They even planned to publish a joint collection of poems, to be titled *Two Fusiliers*, like the love lyric Graves wrote at this time, which declares, that 'there's no need for pledge or oath | To bind our lovely friendship fast' (st.1 ll. 3–4), and 'Show me the two so closely bound | As we, by the wet bond of blood.' (st. 3 ll. 1–2)

'But Sassons, I *did* die' Graves insists in another verse letter dating from 9 August, an illustrated version of his poem

'Escape' (*Goliath and David* (1916)); in 'A Letter from Wales', Richard's 'view', forced on him by 'the facts', is that it was 'a second Richard Rolls' who was there at Harlech (ll. 24 –25), and that with him was with his friend's 'substitute' (l. 44), since the first Abel had been 'killed the same month at the Rectangle' (l. 33), 'the Quadrangle' in *Good-bye to All That*, where the poem's colourful account of his exploit is rather toned down.[13]

Richard Rolls asserts that 'the I now talking' – the 'letter' resembles a dramatic monologue –

> is an honest I,
> Independent of the I's now lost.
> And a live dog's as good as a dead lion' (ll. 50 –52)[14]

He recalls how

> These two friends, the second of the series,
> Came up to Wales pretending a wild joy
> That they had cheated Death: they stayed together
> At the same house and ate and drank and laughed
> And wrote each other's poems, much too lazy
> To write their own, and sat up every night
> Talking and smoking almost until dawn.
> Yes, they enjoyed life, but unless I now
> Confound my present feeling, with the past,†
> They felt a sense of unreality
> In the proceedings – stop! that's good, *proceedings*,
> It suggests ghosts. (ll. 53–64)

Crucial to the entire text is that 'reminiscence from Wordsworth's "Nutting"' (footnote), 'Unless I now | Confound my present feeling, with the past'. It raises the problem of the reliability of memory, the way memory reconstructs the past, inventing and suppressing; the way the

present self tells the story of former selves, revising with hindsight and wish-fulfilment and, perhaps, self-deception.

Likewise crucial is the phrase 'a sense of unreality', with the suggestion of 'ghosts'. As Hugh Haughton comments,

> this is true of the whole poem, with its baffling sense of heightened circumstantial reality as well as 'sense of unreality' [...]. Its dizzying play on the multiple, interchangeable identities of the two soldiers generates a sense of multiple haunting. We could attribute this to Graves's 'war neurosis' (or that of 'Richard Rolls' the letter-writer), but also to a larger post-traumatic sense of identity after the war.[15]

With regard to trauma, in an article on 'Responses to Wounds in the First World War' Chris Nicholson provides valuable insights into the narrative mode and structure of 'A Letter from Wales' (though he doesn't discuss the poem itself). 'Writers who fought in the First World War often use narrative methods that reflect the divisions, existential confusions and conflicts enforced by the war.' He makes the further point that

> for those who suffer traumatic wounding, whether physical, psychological or both, the experience comes to be seen as a pronounced dividing line in their lives marking an irreversible change, a change which structures future experience. In an attempt to heal this fracture such a writer may be unconsciously compelled to repeat their wounding until they can find a way in which it can be assimilated. Those repetitions can be internally held and projected into poetry or prose [...]. In reference to the 'repetition compulsion', the psychiatrist Paul Russell writes that it 'becomes a disorder in which memory is confused with perception. To whatever

> degree there has been a trauma, it is inappropriately over-remembered and rendered as present experience. Trauma *is* that which gets compulsively repeated'.[16]

'A Letter to Wales' strikingly manifests these patterns of fracture, of compulsive repetition, and the confusion of memory and perception. 'Repetition compulsion' aptly applies to the manner in which Richard shapes his narrative of the two friends' traumatic woundings, first his own and Abel's in July 1916 on the Somme, then that of Abel's 'substitute's,

> Shot through the throat while bombing up a trench
> At Bullecourt; if not there, then at least
> On the thirteenth of July, nineteen eighteen,
> Somewhere in the neighbourhood of Albert,
> When you took a rifle bullet through the skull
> Just after breakfast on a mad patrol. (ll. 144– 49)

The 'second Richard', after the Armistice, dies of pneumonia at Hove (where Graves kept himself from succumbing to 'Spanish influenza' in February 1919 by taking his ingenious sonnet 'The Troll's Nosegay' through thirty-five drafts).[17]

Memory and perception are interfused as Richard attempts to isolate 'one thing' that 'really happened' in Wales, something that seems 'too circumstantial for romance' (ll. 65–68). A 'sense of unreality' nevertheless pervades his description:

> Listen, it was a sunset. We were out
> Climbing the mountain, eating blackberries
> [...]
> By a wide field of tumbled boulderstones
> Hedged with oaks and nut-trees. Gradually
> A glamour spread about us, the low sun
> Making the field unreal as a stage,

> Gilding our faces with heroic light;
> Then oaks and nut-boughs caught this golden flood,
> Sending it back in a warm flare of green ...[.] (ll. 71–72, 82–88)

Richard is in effect staging the scene. 'Gilding' has noble or quasi-saintly connotations, while 'heroic light' ('angelic' in the typescript) is evocative of the war, as is that 'flare of green'.

> There was a mountain-ash among the boulders,
> But too full-clustered and symmetrical
> And highly coloured to convince as real. (ll. 89–91)

This is presumably Yggdrasil, the sacred ash tree at the centre of the world in Norse mythology; some scholars take its name to signify 'gallows'.

> We stopped blackberrying and someone said
> (Was it I or you?) 'It is good for us to be here.'
> The other said, 'Let us build Tabernacles'
> (In honour of a new Transfiguration;
> It was that sort of moment); but instead
> I climbed up on the massive pulpit stone,
> An old friend, but unreal with the rest,
> And prophesied – not indeed of the future,
> But declaimed poetry, and you climbed up too
> And prophesied. The next thing I remember
> Was a dragon scaly with fine-weather clouds
> Poised high above the sun, and the sun dwindling
> And then the second glory. (ll. 92–104)

The passage is an extraordinary re-enactment and transposition of the event in the New Testament when Jesus took three of his apostles up a 'high mountain' and 'was

transfigured before them, and his face did shine as the sun'.[18] The Fusiliers are cast as apostles, repeating the same words that St Peter spoke to Christ, and from the pulpit of nature they declaim sacred texts of 'the god called Poetry' (*Country Sentiment* (1920)).

The 'dragon', emblem of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, may be a reminder of the war (though it could be the malignant dragon in 'Vanity' (*Welchman's Hose*), first published with this poem as 'Essay on Knowledge': 'Be assured, the Dragon is not dead').

In the slang of the First World War, a battle was a 'show': Graves exploits this oddly unreal, anaesthetising term in the lines that follow, with their grimly ironic detachment:

> You'll remember
> That we were not then easily impressed
> With pyrotechnics, whether God's or Man's.
> We had seen the sun rise daily, weeks on end,
> And watched the nightly rocket-shooting, varied
> With red and green, and livened with gun-fire
> And the loud single-bursting overgrown squib
> Thrown from the minen-werfer: and one night
> From a billet-window some ten miles away
> We had watched the French making a mass-attack
> At Notre Dame de Lorette, in a thunderstorm.
> That was a grand display of all the Arts,
> God's, Man's, the Devil's: in the course of which,
> So lavishly the piece had been stage-managed,
> A Frenchman was struck dead by a meteorite,
> That was the sort of gala-show it was! (ll. 104–119)

Here, 'a sense of unreality' is created by dismissing the sunrise and the night flares alike as 'pyrotechnics', a mere fireworks display, with the German mortar shell reduced to an 'overgrown squib'; and viewing the French mass-attack (also

in *Good-Bye to All That*, pp. 142–43) just as a 'spectacle', a lavishly stage-managed 'gala-show'.

> But this Welsh sunset, what shall I say of it?
> It ended not at all as it began,
> An influence rather than a spectacle
> Raised to a strange degree beyond all wonder.
> And I remember that we looked and found
> A region of the sky below the dragon
> Where we could gaze behind all time and space
> And see as it were the colour of pure thought,
> The texture of emptiness, and at that sight
> We came away, not daring to see more:
> Death was the price, we knew, of such perfection.
> (ll. 120–30)

On the personal level, the sunset is the culmination of their 'lovely friendship', and the climax of their Harlech idyll. In the context of scripture, after the Transfiguration Jesus commands the apostles to tell no one of the vision until the Son of Man has risen again from the dead.[19] And on the poetic and psychological level, Chris Nicholson argues that Graves, 'an extremely religious man', utilising his reading of pre-Christian history, religion and myth, transformed his wartime wounding 'into a transfiguration, death and rebirth. The notion of transfiguration and the imagery of being struck or pierced which is a clear reverberation of his war wounds, is evident throughout his poetry'.[20]

The unearthly, oxymoronic lines where the pair 'gaze behind all time and space | And see as it were the colour of pure thought,' (ll. 126–27) evokes a state not unlike nirvana. Or is it an intimation of the 'unknowable deity' that has been Graves's philosophical preoccupation in the books immediately preceding *Welchman's Hose*?[21] Is it akin to a

near-death experience, and, as such part of the post-trauma pattern?

On their way home they 'fall in', as if inevitably, with the very person from the Harlech Golf Club who back in July 1914 arranged for Robert Graves to join the Royal Welch Fusiliers; here his name is Todd, an anglicising pronunciation of the German word for death.[22] Captain Todd wonders, 'What writer could have done real justice' to 'that splendid sunset' – 'Except, of course, my old friend Walter Pater? | Ruskin perhaps? Yes, Ruskin might have done it' (ll. 134–37). And so the most intense experience is aestheticized, reduced to a display of fine writing – like, for that matter, Richard's (or Graves's) own lines above ...

'Well, *did* that happen, or am I just romancing?' (l. 138) Richard asks ('romancing' in more than one sense of the word). After the loss of these second selves, at Arras and at Hove,

> I think the I and you who then took over
> Rather forgot the part we used to play;
> We wrote and saw each other often enough[23]
> And sent each other copies of new poems,
> But there was a constraint in all our dealings,
> A doubt, unformulated, but quite heavy
> And not too well disguised. Something we guessed
> Arising from the War, and yet the War
> Was a forbidden ground of conversation.
> Now *why*, can you say *why*, short of accepting
> My substitution view? (ll. 157–167)

The 'constraint' and 'doubt' are surely not unconnected to the suppression, in their conversation and in this 'letter', of painful wartime episodes affecting their 'lovely friendship'. The first was Sassoon's public protest in July 1917 against the continuation of the war, and Graves's central role in saving

him from a court-martial and having him sent instead to the war hospital at Craiglockhart near Edinburgh (where they met Wilfred Owen). Graves wrote to Eddie Marsh on 12 July that he personally thought Sassoon was 'quite right in his views but absolutely wrong in his action'.[24] And he told Sassoon that 'the exact people' that he wished to influence and save, officers like 'Tommie', would be offended by breaking his contract: 'they'll only think it "bad form" and that you're not acting like a gentleman'. Sassoon accused him of lacking 'real courage'.[25] In Max Egremont's judgement, 'Sassoon may never have forgiven his rescuer'.[26]

'This S. S. business has taken me at a very bad time', Graves admits in the same 12 July 1917 letter to Marsh: he had received that day 'the worst possible news about my friend Peter'. Johnstone had been accused in a Surrey magistrate's court of inciting a military police corporal to 'commit an act of gross indecency with him'. The case was eventually dismissed, with Johnstone placed in medical care, but it was reported indignantly in the popular weekly *John Bull* and Graves was sent a cutting.[27] 'This news was nearly the end of me,' he wrote twelve years later in *Good-Bye to All That.* 'It would be easy to think of him as dead.'[28]

Graves's romantic vision of Johnstone and their love relationship had sustained him through all the wartime horrors: 'Dear, you've been everything that I most lack | In these soul-deadening trenches', he wrote in his poem '1915' (*Over the Brazier* (1916)). In October 1915 he had described him to Marsh in idealistic terms as 'my best friend, a poet long before I'll ever be one, a radiant & unusual creature' [...], 'and tho' now in the first half-dozen of VIth Form at Ch'house he's still whole-some minded and clean-living.'[29]

Good-Bye to All That states that 'In English preparatory and public schools romance is necessarily homo-sexual. The opposite sex is despised and hated, treated a something obscene. Many boys never recover from this perversion. I

only recovered by a shock at the age of twenty-one.'[30] This 'cataclysm'[31] brought into question Graves's love for Johnstone, and his principal friendships in his homosexual literary circle – with Ross, with Marsh, and above all with Sassoon.

In *Good-Bye to All That* Graves moved the Johnstone episode back from July 1917 to late October 1915 (despite that previous reference to being twenty-one when it happened). Jean Moorcroft Wilson has suggested that he may have done so to prevent readers from linking it with his abrupt switch to heterosexual attachments, first, briefly, with a nurse at Somerville College Hospital, and then, after he learnt she was 'fond of someone else', with Nancy Nicholson.[32] A previous biographer, his nephew Richard Perceval Graves, explains that this part of *Good-Bye* is 'clearly written from memory.'[33] One does not exclude the other.

After weighing up the various 'possible reasons' for his involvement with Nancy Nicholson, Jean Moorcroft Wilson concludes, 'But perhaps the strongest, though most hidden reason of all for this sudden romantic attachment to a woman was Graves's need to dissociate himself from Johnstone and any connection with homosexuality.'[34]

Graves's courtship of Nancy Nicholson from October 1917 and their marriage in January 1918 constituted a turning point in his relationship with Sassoon. At the last minute he changed the dedication of *Fairies and Fusiliers* to the Royal Welch Fusiliers instead of Sassoon, supposedly 'for fear of jealousy' among his '"friends and lovers"'.[35] In her biography of Sassoon, Jean Moorcroft Wilson contends that learning from Graves about his forthcoming marriage may have been partly responsible for Sassoon's going before a medical board and returning to the front, even if his main motive was to rejoin his men.[36] Sassoon wrote to Graves on 21 November 1917 that he no longer cared whether he lived or died.[37]

Six months later Graves sent a piercing verse letter to Sassoon from Bryn-y-Pin, the farmhouse in North Wales where he and Nancy were lodging above the Royal Welch Fusiliers camp while he was training officer cadets. As I suggested to Dominic Hibberd, 'The deep feeling in this poem partly comes from [Graves's] recognition that his friendship with Sassoon can never regain its former intimacy'.[38] It was Dominic Hibberd who discovered 'A Letter from Wales' together with other unpublished wartime poems in the typescript of 'The Patchwork Flag' in the New York Public Library's Berg Collection, and gave them their first printing in a ground-breaking article in 1990.[39]

'Letter to S.S. from Bryn-y-Pin' was provoked by a letter from Sassoon at the end of June 1918, complaining angrily about Graves's long silence; Graves detected 'jealousy'. He included ten lines of an initial version of the poem in a letter dated 16 July, but Sassoon had already been invalided out after taking that 'rifle bullet through the skull' ('A Letter from Wales', l. 148) three days before; it was exactly two years, Graves pointed out, since he wrote his 'Letter to S.S. from Mametz Wood'.

Graves sees Sassoon as

> aggrieved with fate
> That lets you lag in France so late,
> When all our friends of two years past
> Are free of trench and wire at last
> [...]
> Where you, linger, lone and drear,
> Last of the flock, poor Fusilier. (ll. 1–4, 9–10)

Sassoon protested, 'I *wasn't* lone and drear'. I was filled with a deeper passion than ever before; & *much better* at the job of soldiering. [...] I would like you to wash out the impression of a disconsolate survivor, because it isn't true at all.'[40] Did

Graves *want* Sassoon to be feeling 'lone and drear' without him?

In the poem, Sassoon's 'brief letters home pretend | Anger and scorn that this false friend | This fickle Robert [...]

> Now snugly lurks at home to nurse
> His wounds without complaint, and worse
> Preaches 'The Bayonet' to Cadets
> On a Welsh hill-side, grins, forgets.
> That now he rhymes of trivial things
> Children, true love and robins' wings
> [...]
> '*Guilty*' I plead, and by that token
> Confess my haughty spirit broken
> And my pride gone. (ll. 11–13, 17–22, 27–29)

This contrasts sharply with 'Lucasta he's a Fusilier | And his pride keeps him here'.[41] The proud mask has dropped, exposing the survivor's post-traumatic torment:

> now the least chance
> Of backward thought begins a dance
> Of marionettes that jerk cold fear
> Against my sick mind: either ear
> Rings with dark cries, my frightened nose
> Smells gas in scent of hay or rose,
> I quake dumb horror, till again
> I view that dread La Bassée plain
> Drifted with smoke and groaning under
> The echoing strokes of rival thunder
> That crush surrender from me now. (ll. 29–39)

Twelve months before, after his wounding at Mametz Wood, his prayer to Mars the god of war was 'Let me forget' (l. 46); but if the war has become 'forbidden ground' in 'A Letter

from Wales' (l. 165), here the trauma is 'compulsively repeated'.[42]

Within the logic of the poem's argument, these lines offer an explanation, and some mitigation, for the neglect of his 'lone' friend: he seldom dares

> search behind
> In those back cupboards of [his] mind
> Where lurk the bogeys of old fear' (ll. 51–53).

Yet they don't quite show how this makes him 'false' and 'fickle' (ll. 12–13). Hence, perhaps, his admission:

> *Guilty!* I've no excuse to give
> While in such cushioned ease I live
> With Nancy. (ll. 47–49)

To name her, at last, is surely to offer another explanation for his reluctance, 'To think of you, to feel you near | By our old bond, poor Fusilier' (ll. 54–55). Those ruefully tender concluding lines are to remind them both of those 'Two Fusiliers', 'so closely bound | By the wet bond of blood'.

From his London hospital bed on 24 July 1918, Sassoon wrote Graves a final verse letter. It begins: 'Dear Roberto, | I'd timed my death in action to the minute'. In *Good-Bye to All That* Graves calls it 'the most terrible of his war-poems'.[43] It is certainly the most radical in technique and inventive in use of language. It is also doubtless the most honest, an unsparing portrait of his conflicting selves – romantic poet, sardonic satirist, would-be hero, death-driven homosexual.... Referring to yet another request by Graves for financial help, he replies: 'Yes, you can touch my banker when you need him. | Why keep a Jewish friend unless you bleed him?'[44] The letter finishes: 'Does this break your heart? What do I care? Sassons' [sic]. It is so devastatingly revealing that one can

only wonder at Graves's motives in reproducing it without permission in *Good-Bye to All That*, all the more in view of the note below 'A Letter from Wales' asking if he has 'any objection'. Unsurprisingly, this time Sassoon did object, and obliged Graves and his publisher to remove it from the book.

'A Letter from Wales' is reaching towards a conclusion when the third Richard Rolls finds a 'relic' of the second one, 'A pack-valise marked with his name and rank' (ll. 169–70). This is something more 'circumstantial' than that Welsh sunset, whose 'romance' (l. 68) is emphasised by the lustreless sunset that now starts,

> most unlike the other,
> A pink-and-black depressing sort of show
> Influenced by the Glasgow School of Art.
> It sent me off on a long train of thought
> And I began to feel badly confused,
> Being accustomed to this newer self;
> I wondered whether you could reassure me. (ll. 171–77)

The poem's opening is then recapitulated (ll. 178 –182), and it ends with what Michael Longley hears as a *cri de cœur*:

> Now I have asked you, do you see my point?
> What I'm asking really isn't 'Who am I?'
> Or 'Who are you?' (you see my difficulty?)
> But a stage before that, *'How am I to put*
> *The question that I'm asking you to answer?'*

One way to put it might have been, quite simply, 'Are you still fond of me?'

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NOTES

[1] *Robert Graves: Selected Poems*, ed. by Michael Longley (London: Faber, 2013), p. xx.
[2] 'Two Fusiliers' (*Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917)), st. 1 l. 4.
[3] In the Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
[4] See Richard Perceval Graves's meticulous reconstruction of their visit in *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic 1895–1926* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), pp. 300–02.
[5] *Robert Graves: Selected Poems*, ed. by Michael Longley, p. xix.
[6] 'Marigolds' (*Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917)), st. 1 ll. 1–2: 'With a fork drive Nature out, / She will ever yet return' ('*Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret'*, Horace, *Epistles*, I. 10, 24.)
[7] *But It Still Goes On: An Accumulation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p. 213.
[8] Siegfried Sassoon, *Collected Poems 1908-1956* (London: Faber, 1961), pp. 40–43.
[9] Unless stated otherwise, quotations from 'A Letter from Wales' are from the text in *Poems (1914-26)* (London: Heinemann, 1927), reprinted (with four editorial emendations to spelling and punctuation) in *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, vol. 1 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995) and *Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).
[10] Dominic Hibberd, 'A "Spirit Above Wars": Robert Graves's Self-Portrait as Soldier and Poet, 1915–29', *Gravesiana*, 3 (Summer 2010), pp. 290–91.
[11] University of Cambridge: Cambridge Digital Library, Sassoon Journals, Journal 26 June 1916–12 Aug. 1916 (MS Add.9852/1/7,

folio 34[r]) <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-09852-00001-00007/69> [accessed 30 July 2023]

[12] Sassoon Journals, 20 May 1916–31 Oct. 1916 (MS Add.9852/1/6 enc.) <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-09852-00001-00006/123> (Cited in *Robert Graves: War Poems*, ed. by Charles Mundye (Bridgend, Wales: 2016), pp. 305–06).

[13] Robert Graves, *Good-Bye to All That* (1929), ed. by Fran Brearton (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 262–63.

[14] Ecclesiastes 9. 4: 'For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion.'

[15] Hugh Haughton, 'Graves and Ghosts', *Gravesiana*, 3 (Summer 2012), pp. 438–71.

[16] Chris Nicholson, 'Repetition or Containment? Responses to Wounds in the First World War: Robert Graves, Ernest Hemingway and Wilfred Bion', *Gravesiana*, 4 (Summer 2018), pp. 514–37.

[17] See *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 395; the note on 'The Troll's Nosegay' in *Complete Poems,* vol. 1, pp. 364–65; and Paul O'Prey, 'Robert Graves's Favourite Poem? The One that Saved his Life', *Robert Graves Review*, 1 (Summer 2021), pp. 51–58.

[18] Matthew 17. 1–8.

[19] Matthew 17. 9.

[20] Chris Nicholson, 'Repetition or Containment?', p. 522.

[21] J. M. Cohen, *Robert Graves*, Writers and Critics (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 40.

[22] *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 97.

[23] Rarely, in actual fact: see *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914 –1946*, ed. by Paul O'Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 126.

[24] *In Broken Images*, p. 77.

[25] *In Broken Images*, p. 85.

[26] Max Egremont, 'Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon', in *The Art of Collaboration: Essays on Robert Graves and his Contemporaries*, ed. by Dunstan Ward, Joan Miquel Fiol and Juana María Seguí (Palma, Mallorca: Universitat de les Illes Balears, 2008), pp. 29–43 (p. 34).

[27] For a full account of the case, see Eric J. Webb, '"An Indecent Proposal"', *Gravesiana*, 4 (Summer 2018), pp. 462–73.

[28] *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 217.
[29] *In Broken Images*, p. 35.
[30] *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 33.
[31] Graves to Robert Nichols, no date [November 1917], *In Broken Images*, p. 89.
[32] Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Robert Graves: From Great War Poet to* Good-bye to All That *(1895–1929)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 193–95.
[33] *The Assault Heroic*, p. 351, n. 252.
[34] Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Robert Graves*, p. 208.
[35] Graves to Sassoon, 13 September 1917, *In Broken Images*, p. 82.
[36] Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Making of a War Poet: A Biography 1886 –1918* (London: Duckworth, 1998), pp. 425, 431.
[37] Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p. 425.
[38] Dominic Hibberd, 'A "Spirit Above Wars"', p. 308, n. 30.
[39] Dominic Hibberd, '"The Patchwork Flag" (1918): An Unrecorded Book by Robert Graves', *Review of English Studies*, new series, XLI, 164 (1990), pp. 521–32. The poem is reprinted in *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, pp. 392–93, and the Penguin Classics edition, pp. 810–11.
[40] Ms. with ts. (Berg); reproduced in *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, p. 550.
[41] 'To Lucasta on Going to the Wars – for the Fourth Time' (*Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917)).
[42] Chris Nicholson, 'Repetition or Containment?', p. 521.
[43] *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 343. The complete text appears on pp. 343–46; for details of the 'garbled' version Graves originally reproduced but was obliged to remove, see p. 466, notes 11–16.
[44] *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 344 (p. 466, n. 12: 'Graves omitted this couplet.').

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Two Unpublished Robert Graves Muse Poems

Dunstan Ward

Abstract: An overview of 'I am Your Poet' and 'The Mead-Vat', two unpublished poems, found among in Margot Callas's manuscript archive, sold to St John's College, Oxford in April 2023.

Keywords: letters, Margot Callas, Robert Graves, muse poetry

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'I am Your Poet' and 'The Mead-Vat', two unpublished poems, were among the manuscripts together with letters from Robert Graves which Margot Callas, his 'muse' in 1960–63, sold to St John's College, Oxford, the year before her death in April 2023.

The remarkable outpouring of poems in the last fifteen years of Graves's life – almost half as many as in all his previous books – began when he met Margot Callas in Mallorca, on 10 June 1960. She was twenty-four, he nearly sixty-five; both were married. Graves published a total of sixty-seven poems arising from their relationship in his next three books: *More Poems 1961* (1961), section XI; *New Poems 1962* (1962), section XIII; and *Man Does, Woman Is* (1964), section XV. These form a sequence in which Graves 'ventured to dramatize, truthfully and factually, the vicissitudes of a poet's dealings with the White Goddess, the Muse, the perpetual Other Woman'.[1]

The 'Margot sequence' (to call it that) is predicated on Graves's theory of 'a personal Muse', as expounded in his 'Postscript 1960' to *The White Goddess*:[2]

> By ancient tradition, the White Goddess becomes one with her human representative [...]. No 'Muse' poet grows conscious of the Muse except by experience of a woman in whom the Goddess is to some degree resident [...]. A Muse-poet falls in love, absolutely, and his true love is for him the embodiment of the Muse. [...] But the real, perpetually obsessed Muse-poet distinguishes between the Goddess as manifest in the supreme power, glory, wisdom and love of woman, and the individual woman whom the Goddess may make her instrument for a month, a year, seven years, or even more. The Goddess abides; and perhaps he will again have knowledge of her through his experience of another woman.

Graves added this postscript when he was preparing the third edition of *The White Goddess*, from 24 March to 17 June 1960:[3] by the latter date, 'his experience of another woman' – Margot Callas – had already started.

'I am Your Poet' is dated 'Aug 12, 1960', two months after they met. Written in ink on a sheet of the thin paper Graves often used for his drafts, it appears to be a fair copy, without emendations, and carefully punctuated. The poem is itself one of the 'songs' that the Muse has 'ordained'. Addressing her directly, the poet 'blurt[s] out' ('spell[s] out' in a preceding draft with the same date) traditional 'attributes' of the White Goddess. The imagery in the last two lines, the 'lily-of-the-valley shoots | That track the forest where you tread', anticipates 'The headlong power that whitened all her way | With a broad track of trefoil', in 'In Her Praise' (*New Poems 1962*), ll. 6–7, and the Queen's 'lilies-of-the-valley' that 'shone' from her lover Oisín's 'helm' in 'The Broken Girth' (*New Poems 1962*). 'The stars that aureole your head' recall the hero's 'starry crown' in 'The Sirens' Welcome to Cronos'

(*Collected Poems 1914 –1947*) (1948)), and ironically presage the 'deathless crown' with which the poet will in the end punish the 'Queen of ingratitude' for her betrayal ('The Wreath' (*New Poems 1962*)). As for those 'spotted serpents' and 'Phrygian flutes', they would certainly have enlivened the 'Margot sequence' ....

'The Mead-Vat', dated 'Jan 7, 1961', was written five months after 'I am Your Poet', while Margot Callas was back in New York. Graves penned it on the back of a compliments slip from his literary agents, A. P. Watt & Son. He made several emendations, and his handwriting has more impetus than in the earlier manuscript. (The transcription has three editorial emendations: in the title, a hyphen in 'Mead-Vat, which is how Graves spells it in st. 3 l. 2, and in other poems quoted below; a comma after 'beauty' in st. 2 l. 6; and the ampersand in st. 3 l. 4 replaced by 'and'.) Graves's diary records that the poems in section XI of *More Poems 1962* were written in June–November 1960, so 'I am Your Poet' would presumably have appeared there, and 'The Mead-Vat' in *New Poems 1962*, section XIII.

The first and second stanzas of 'The Mead-Vat' elaborate on the claim in 'I am Your Poet' that the Muse 'ordained' all his poetry: Graves's once bare study in his Deià house is now crammed with books, testifying to his dedication to the 'Queen of the Grove'. The third stanza envisions his reward, a mythic immortality, as promised in 'The Sirens' Welcome to Cronos': on 'Silver Island':

> A starry crown awaits your head,
> A hero feast is spread for you:
> Swineflesh, milk and mead.

'This prince's immortality' is 'confirmed' in 'The Hero' (*Poems 1953*): he voyages to 'that island paradise' where 'thrice three damsels in a tall house | Tend the mead-vat of

inspiration'. And thus, in his turn, the poet himself may hope to go 'To where her mead-vat smokes in the crystal hall'. Yet the last line in the poem seems to put the reward in question: 'Will she forget my studiousness and love?'

If it is a rhetorical question, it is a question nonetheless, one that raises a doubt about the outcome of the entire 'headstrong and heroic' venture.[4] Perhaps this is one reason why Graves omitted 'The Mead-Vat' from the 'Margo sequence'. Later, however, in 'A Last Poem' (*Man Does, Woman Is* (1964)), he reformulates the question: when will he

> Sit well wrapped in a many-coloured cloak
> Where the moon shines new through Castle Crystal?
> Shall I never hear her whisper softly:
> 'But this is truth written by you only,
> And for me only; therefore, love, have done'?

The first two lines above come from a superseded version of 'New Moon Through Glass' published in the magazine *Atlantic* in October 1963, which continues: 'And if the Queen walks quietly in to greet him | Beside the bubbling vat of her wide hall' . . .[5] Though 'The Mead-Vat' had been discarded, its symbolism simmered on in Graves's creative imagination.

The effect of the 'Margot sequence' is blurred by its sections being dispersed, with sections of unrelated poems intervening, and by running on to the poems about Graves's next 'muse', without a clear division. Doubtless its overall coherence and the inner logic of its organisation would be brought out if it were printed separately, with 'Unposted Letter (1963)' (*Poems 1970-1972* (1972)) as a coda, and 'I am Your Poet' and 'The Mead-Vat', plus 'Never Yet', an unpublished 1962 poem,[6] in an appendix.

Dunstan Ward is the co-editor of the *Complete Poems* of Robert Graves, and the author of two volumes of poems, *Beyond Puketapu* (2015) and *At This Distance* (2019).

NOTES

[1] 'Intimations of the Black Goddess' (1963), *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (London: Cassell, 1965), p. 151.
[2] *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, third edition (London: Faber, 1961), revised edition, ed. by Grevel Lindop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997; London: Faber, 1999), pp. 490/481.
[3] Graves's diary. See Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, vol. 3 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 442.
[4] 'The White Goddess' (*Poems and Satires 1951* (1951)).
[5] *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, 'Uncollected Poems', pp. 368, 537; *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 789.
[6] *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, 'Unpublished and Posthumously Published Poems', pp. 409–10, 558; Penguin Classics, p. 827.

Two Unpublished Muse Poems

Robert Graves

I AM YOUR POET

I am your poet, you the Muse
    Who all these songs of mine ordained;
And though no news I bring is news
    You laugh as at a victory gained

When I blurt out your attributes:
    The stars that aureole your head,
The spotted serpents, Phrygian flutes,
    Sad conjurations of the dead,
And lily-of-the-valley shoots
    That track the forest where you tread.

THE MEAD-VAT

Though once the cell was furnished only
With oak table and chair,
Two pegs in the wall, a goatskin rug, an inkwell,
A copper brazier and an empty chest,
Now large dun tomes and their gay-jacketed children
Mount to the rafters on all sides of him
And lurk on window ledges.
But let none quarrel with this innovation:
The Queen of the Grove has visited him here
Has ruffled his thick hair
Has drawn the pen from his hand to blot
A verse, or half a page, demanding
Livelier disquisitions of her beauty.
And if one day he goes, penless and bookless,
To where her mead-vat smokes in the crystal hall,
Where the tall elect foregather
Royally shod, his blood brothers and sisters
Under the chieftain trees, where wild birds call
And salmon leap the weir,
Will she forget such love and studiousness?

NOTES

Authorial Error in *Wife to Mr Milton*

John Leonard

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In chapter nineteen of his novel *Wife to Mr Milton* (1943) when Robert Graves has Marie Powell trying to make herself cry preparatory to meeting Milton again, her writes (in her voice), 'I dwelt in my mind upon all the saddest things that I could recall from histories and plays, as the death of Hector and the blinding of King Lear ...'. Graves obviously meant to write 'the blinding of Gloster in the play of King Lear'.[1]

This error was not picked up in Penguin editions of the novel from 1954 onwards, including the Penguin Classics edition of 2012.[2] The Carcanet edition of the novel (2003) also did not change or comment on the passage.

It is very unlikely that this passage is a deliberate error put into the mouth of the narrator. Graves's technique in his historical novels is often to make the narrator, although located in the historical period in question and given the appropriate historical embednessness the plot requires, the mouthpiece for views and opinions similar to his own. Throughout *Wife to Mr Milton,* Marie Powell sets out views on Milton's personality and poetry that are similar to those expressed by Graves in his criticism, or passes on similar opinions of other characters in the novel. Putting an obvious error in her mouth would serve no purpose when nothing else in the narrative induces the reader to mistrust her account. Graves's novels with male narrators, such as the Claudius novels, do allow the narrator to be unreliable, but there are no other textual clues that we should doubt Marie Powell's knowledge or motives. Her views and judgement are the basis for Graves's treatment of Milton in the novel.

If this novel is edited or reprinted in the future the editor should simply emend this passage as suggested with a note for the reasons given.

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NOTES

[1] 'Gloster' is the Quarto spelling, which Marie Powell is more likely to have than the First or Second Folio, in which 'Gloucester' appears.

[2] The typescript at Southern Illinois University have includes 'blinding of King Lear'. Graves's revision is simply to insert 'King' in front of 'Lear'.

A Matter of Interpretation

Michael Joseph

The recent Jewish Museum (Manhattan) exhibition 'The Sassoons', included Robert Graves's verse letter to Siegfried Sassoon entitled 'To S. S.'[1] The curators made an interesting observation pertaining to the following lines (original capitalization and punctuation preserved): [2]

> And I'll be happier than the Pope
> For Peter will be there I hope
> (This Peter still may win a part
> Of David's corner in your heart
> I hope so.) And one day we three
> Shall sail together on the sea
> For adventure and quest and fight –
> And God! What Poetry we'll write.

They interpreted the parenthetical ('This [...] so.) to be 'overtly expressing [Graves's] wish that Siegfried would convert to Christianity'. When I posted this note accompanying a photograph of the letter to a public discussion list, it elicited the reasonable response that there is no record of Graves attempting to convert Sassoon and that scholars have interpreted the lines to mean only one thing: Graves is asking Sassoon to befriend Peter Johnstone, Graves's younger Charterhouse friend and subject of the poem '1915'[3] with the same affection he felt for David Thomas, a friend and fellow soldier, recently killed in action.[4] In all honesty, I had noticed the familiar names but failed to consider that Graves had intended that meaning. For one thing, it seemed insensitive to David Thomas's memory and to Sassoon's feelings for him. And the jocular reference to 'the Pope' immediately preceding influenced me toward the

curators' conversion interpretation. Although he never mentions he 'wished' Sassoon would convert in *Good-Bye to All That* or afterward, nor do any of his biographers mention it, I readily accepted that Graves may have harboured such a wish, because that seemed a reasonable interpretation of the lines and the characteristic wordplay/nameplay seemed compatible.

The idiom 'happier than the Pope' originates in the French expression, *Heureux comme un pape,* literally 'Happy as a Pope.' I don't know if the expression was current in Northern France or among the British troops, in the original French or English translation, or whether Graves and Sassoon were both familiar with it. Perhaps the line referenced a discussion they'd had or a shared experience. At the very least, writing it into the poem, Graves would seem to be stepping outside classic poetic conventions (displaying his intent to write poems such as 'In Spite' rather than 'In Limbo'), and perhaps urging by example Sassoon to do likewise.

The reference to "The Pope" resonates within the lines, 'This Peter may still win a part | Of David's corner in your heart'. I have been persuaded that 'This Peter' is Peter Johnstone (and [this] David, David Thomas), but the implied *that* Peter, is St Peter, the first Pope. Graves economically introduces the second reading of these lines (the deprecated conversion reading) just as he introduces the first.

In the manuscript, "This" is written in darker ink, perhaps covering over another word, and perhaps reasserting the double meaning. 'This' is reminiscent of Yeats's 'that' in the first line of 'Sailing to Byzantium'. 'That is no country for old men' invites us to ask, what country is Yeats now inhabiting? What is not 'that' but 'this' country and how is it different from 'that'?

One may argue that the curators have overread the reference, and Graves isn't expressing a full-blown wish that Sassoon convert *per se*, because conversion implies a more

serious level of recommitment than the rhymed lines allow. And lacking additional documentation, that Graves wished Sassoon to convert can't be asserted. The seriousness of Graves's interest in Sassoon's faith is hard to determine. But, having introduced the Pope, and specifically evoked St Peter by interjecting the otherwise superfluous demonstrative pronoun, it's easier to believe that Graves had something like the conversion meaning in mind than that he was oblivious to the implication of the names, particularly since the Sassoons claimed to be of the Davidic line.

How else might one interpret Graves's intent? Could he be asking Sassoon just to appreciate his clever name play? He certainly is doing that, but surely that depends on Sassoon seeing the double meaning. While the poem is joyful and high-spirited, death was everywhere (referencing David Thomas reinforces that point); at every hand they were reminded of their own mortality. If Graves still embraced the Christian faith, what could be more reasonable than inviting Sassoon to consider faith and the consolation it might provide at this sad, stressful time?[5] In the presence of a more profound, spiritual request, the mundane, personal request that Sassoon embrace Peter Johnstone takes on a new poignancy. 'In light of David's death, and the likelihood of ours, and in light of this affinity between the personal and the mythic, won't you open your heart to someone else I love?'

The typescript poem ends with Graves evoking a kind of childlike 'Owl and the Pussycat' imagery, with the three of them – Sassoon, Peter Johnstone, and Graves – 'sailing together on the sea'.[6] And like Lear's companions who sail for the sheer joy of it, to 'dance by the light of the moon', the purpose Graves envisions for his company cruise is 'adventure and quest and fight – | And God! What Poetry we'll write.'

Placing 'fight' in a triplet with 'adventure' and 'quest' Graves poeticizes battle with a naivete that the war poems in

Over the Brasier suggest he had already outgrown. Perhaps he is writing about fight ironically, with tongue in cheek. One might reasonably argue the exclamation 'And God!' is similarly ironic or merely a vernacular expression. (Perhaps in 500 years when some enterprising PhD. candidate translates Graves's poems into contemporary Amer-English, this exclamation will be rewritten as 'OMIGOD!') But there is also a layer of sobriety and sincerity here. If we heuristically erase the em dash, we extend the sequence 'For adventure and quest and fight [...] And God!' 'God!' thus does double duty, just as Peter and David do. The merry trio is sailing together for adventure, quest, fight, and God – a trope signifying unreasonable but unshakable faith that perhaps nobody needs to be reminded will recur in the opening lines of 'The White Goddess'. Even when we readmit the em dash, the emphasis capital for Poetry asks us to see God and Poetry as somehow conjoined, or to adopt a point of view in which Poetry and God (or faith), appear to be founded on a revelation of the Real, on what is enduring. I am suggesting that even if Graves's faith had been shaken, there is an ontological hunger that is finding expression in Christian tropes, and these continue to be of solace.

Yet, that may not be all these lines intend. 'At Carnoy', a poem Sassoon had recently written (dated July 3rd, 1916) concludes 'To take some cursed Wood.... O world God made!'[7] Graves surely knew this poem and may have meant his exclamation to correct Sassoon's mordant o altitudo. 'God is not to be abused for the troubles of the world; God is to be praised and (invoked) for the power resident in Poetry to make sense of and transcend those troubles'.

So, the modified 'conversion' reading that I am considering would be summarized as, 'Siegfried, please think about accepting Christianity or at least allowing Christianity a space beside your Jewish beliefs and identity and see how

God cannot be meaningfully separated from Poetry or our reverence for Poetry.'

Sassoon's 1917 poem, 'Attack' concludes with a quatrain that might refer back to these lines.

> They leave their trenches, going over the top,
> While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
> And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
> Flounders in mud. O Jesu, make it stop.[8]

Sassoon may be speaking in the voice of an anonymous soldier and the invocation may merely be a coincidental echo, but the ambiguity in this invocation, even pervaded with desperation, is notably different from the utter acidity of the earlier one. Perhaps Sassoon is still arguing with Graves – or the Graves of 1916.

Lastly, I would suggest the lines are ultimately about neither conversion nor friendship. Dunstan Ward insightful reference to Alexander Pope's epistolary verse sheds light here. 'Happier than the Pope' may be an implicit reference to Alexander Pope (though, I wish Graves had retained the original idiom, 'As happy as [A] Pope'). The literary allusion calls attention to Graves's poetic ingenuity in the immediately succeeding lines that will express two different meanings at once. I imagine him in nervous, high spirits, celebrating their friendship and their project to compose poems in concert, intwining them in epistolary form. Love, friendship, death, and God are magnified in importance in these lines, but it is Poetry that is the indispensable thing. 'And God! What poetry we'll write', completing the fourth couplet in this passage, is Janus-like in that it looks ahead at poems yet to be created, and at the poem just completed, particularly the preceding three couplets with their double and triple meanings: 'And God! What poetry we'll write' (like *this* poem!).

The final exclamation also issues what we might describe as a friendly challenge, poet to poet. 'Siegfried, I've just written a personal, impersonal, complicated, high-spirited, passionate, expressive, deeply faithful, honest, technically accomplished, tossed-off poem. Let's see what *you* can do.' As sincere as he is that Sassoon accept his friend and consider his consolation, Graves has joined these wishes together for the express purpose of demonstrating poetic economy, and his own extraordinary facility to communicate and express himself honestly, elegantly, originally, and boldly through poetry.

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NOTES

[1] First published as 'Letter to S. S. from Mametz Wood' in *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917).
[2] Esther da Costa Meyer, a Princeton emerita, and Claudia Nahson, Morris and Eva Feld, Senior Curator are eminent scholars of art history and architecture.
[3] '1915' is a tender poem published in *Over the* Brasier. Graves subsequently omitted it from later collections.
[4] For more about David Thomas and his relationships with Graves and Sassoon, see Anne Marsh Penton, '"Over the Whole Wood": Robert Graves and the Significance of David Thomas', *Gravesiana,* 4 (Summer 2018) <https://www.robertgravesreview.org/essay.php?essay=378&tab=6> [accessed 12 August 2023]

[5] Dunstan Ward's analysis in this issue of Graves's 'A Letter from Wales', written in September 1924, points out the significance of faith to Graves and reinforces my belief that the question of faith is alive for Graves at this time.
[6] Edward Lear, 'The Owl and the Pussycat' in *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany, and Alphabets* (London: Robert John Bushy,1871), pp. [unnumbered]
[7] Siegfried Sassoon, 'At Carnoy' in *The Old Huntsman.* New American Ed. (New York: Dutton, 1918), p. 32. Internet Archive <https://archive.org/details/oldhuntsmanother00sass/page/32/mode/2up> [accessed 14 August 2023]
[8] Siegfried Sassoon, 'Attack' in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London: Heinemann, 1918).

REVIEWS

Pagan Survivals or Surviving Paganism?

Mick Gowar

Queens of The Wild: Pagan Goddess in Christian Europe: An Investigation.
Ronald Hutton.
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Over the past thirty years, Ronald Hutton has established himself through numerous articles and a number highly praised books as a leading British scholar of early modern British political and military history[1]. He is now also widely accepted to be the foremost authority in the more controversial area of the history of modern paganism, and in particular the still much contested subjects of the survival of paganism into the early modern period and the prehistoric monotheistic worship of a Great Goddess.

As with his previous books on esoteric and occult subjects *Queens of the Wild: Pagan Goddesses in Christian Europe* presents exemplary archival historical research and literary scholarship in clear and readable prose with the aim of engaging both the scholar and general reader. In previous books Hutton has tended to concentrate on historical, re-imagined or revived forms of pagan worship and the gods and goddesses of past and present paganism;[2] *Queens of the Wild* examines instead four female figures and one male figure who, despite their apparent antiquity and supernatural aspects, have no discernible roots in either Christianity nor any form of pagan worship. As Hutton explained in a recent *BBC History Extra* podcast:

> I decided to write this book, because I spotted a problem with our attitude to the question of pagan survival in the Middle Ages. And that was that there are a number of figures rather goddess like figures around in medieval culture, who didn't seem to me to be surviving from the pagan ancient world. But there was absolutely nothing Christian about them. And so they didn't fit into the idea that either something had to be Christian, or it had to be a survival from ancient Paganism. It raised the possibility that medieval Christian Europeans were capable of encountering or imagining entities, beings that were utterly unChristian, that looked fairly pagan, but were actually encountered or imagined by them.[3]

The four beings are Mother Earth or Mother Nature; the Fairy Queen; The Lady of the Night; the Cailleach, or ogress of mountains and wild places; and in an epilogue, The Green Man, an entity of apparent antiquity which can be shown to have been created in the twentieth century. Hutton devotes a chapter to each, in which he investigates their various possible origins: in the case of Mother Earth the Greek Gaia and Roman Natura (although neither were actually worshipped as goddesses in classical times); the Fairy Queen in the malevolent elves of the Anglo-Saxons; the Lady of the Night from tales of a night riding spirit and her retinue dating from the tenth and eleventh centuries; and the *Cailleach* or *Cailliach* from Gaelic personifications of mountains and winter as a gigantic hag-like woman of great age. Hutton then traces the development of each figure, and the nature of belief in each, and how they evolved as their deeds were recounted, retold and reimagined in folk tales, elite literature – and eventually analysed and deconstructed in anthropological articles and books.

What Hutton reveals, through the accumulation of his observations and readings, is neither evidence of surviving pagan worship in these figures, nor that they were part of a form of popular or rural Christianity as some younger historians have suggested. Instead, he proposes a process of literary composition revealing the potential for the dynamic creativity of popular culture which was unthinkable to the scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who promoted the theories of pagan survival. In *Queens of The Wild* Hutton cites in particular the opinions of the most influential scholar who promoted the thesis of serving paganism in folk culture, J. G. Frazer, and quotes Frazer's comments in *Baldur the Beautiful*:

> The truth seems to be that to this day the peasant remains a pagan and savage at heart; his civilisation is merely a thin veneer which the hard knocks of life soon abrade, exposing the solid core of paganism and savagery below. The danger created by a bottomless layer of ignorance and superstition under the crust of civilised society is lessened, not only by the natural torpidity and inertia of the bucolic mind, but also by the progressive decrease of the rural as compared with the urban population in modern states.[4]

One of the highlights of *Queens of the Wild* is the concise account of the development of 'pagan survival' in the introductory chapter titled 'What Is Pagan Survival?'. Up until the 1970s there had been a widely held belief among scholars, folklorists, novelists, poets and many others that a Europe-wide pagan cult had persisted from pre-Christian times, through the Middle Ages and into the early modern period. Furthermore, according to this thesis the 60,000 women and men who were put to death as witches during the notorious period of witch-hunting and witch trials which

reached their peak between 1560 and 1670 was an eventually successful attempt to eradicate this surviving paganism. Hutton locates the development of this belief in Germany between 1825 and 1840, during the time of high Romanticism and emerging nationalism, eventually spreading to France where Jules Michelet published his highly influential and highly imaginative book on witchcraft, *La Sorciere.* This in turn influenced Anglophone writers including the American feminist Matilda Joslyn Gage, and the folklorist Charles G. Leland whose *Aradia* or *The Gospel of The Witches* is still in print and available in several paper and digital editions. But the most influential contribution to the idea of the survival of paganism, from a British perspective, was surely made by the Egyptologist Margaret Murray during the first half of the twentieth century. Using as proof her interpretations of the records of mostly Scottish witch trials, Murray set out in two books, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of The Witches* (1933) and a number of articles, what appeared to be an unimpeachable scholarly argument for a witch religion which Hutton describes as:

> the cult of a horned god representing the generative powers of nature, organised in Groups of thirteen run by women or men which met to transact business and celebrate festivals with feasting, animal and human sacrifice and ritualised sex. She came to refer to it simply as 'the Old Religion' and to characterise it as one of joy and affirmation of life, contrasted with the gloom off Christianity. As such, [Murray] suggested, it retained the allegiance of the bulk of the population until the end of the Middle Ages.[5]

This belief that an 'old religion' survived in rural communities throughout the Middle Ages will undoubtedly be

familiar to many readers, and still has considerable popularity today even though, as Hutton ruefully notes:

> [Murray's] work was immediately and consistently rejected by historians familiar with the evidence for early modern witchcraft beliefs and trials, who judged at once that she had misused it. These were, however, very few in number, and it won rapid acceptance among respected historians expert in other subjects, novelists […] occultists and mystical Celticists, and authors of popular books on witchcraft. Some folklorists also rapidly adopted it. Murray was invited to write the entry on witchcraft in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* and used it to state her own theory as proven fact, so taking it to a much wider public. (Ibid, p. 12)

Historians as respected as Sir George Clark, Christopher Hill and Sir Stephen Runciman in the UK, Carlo Ginzberg in Italy and Emmanuel Le Ropy Ladurie in France supported Murray's thesis, and the final accolade came when Mircea Elide the Rumanian born doyen of comparative religion gave it his endorsement. But, as Hutton observes, it was uniquely in Britain that the belief in a surviving pagan cult, and an ancient matriarchal, matrilineal society throughout Europe in the mesolithic and neolithic periods based on the worship of a single Great Goddess, was accepted by the academic establishment and became the scholarly consensus for almost a century, despite a striking absence of any firm evidence.

However, as Hutton recounts, in the late twentieth century:

> The belief that people prosecuted for the alleged crime of witchcraft in early modern Europe were practitioners of a surviving pagan religion collapsed completely among professional historians. From 1970 onwards a

> steady process of systematic and detailed research began into the trial records and associated documents and published literature, in one region or another, and it revealed absolutely no evidence for the belief [….] The witch hunts between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries were generated by an unhappy combination of general fear and anguish produced by uncanny misfortune, blamed on malicious magic, and a new elite belief in a satanic conspiracy to subvert Christianity. The worship of old deities played no part in it. This shift of scholarly perspective was the more final in that it was brought about not by a few iconoclasts but by studies produced by scores of academics covering in the end every part of Europe. (*Queens,* pp. 27-28)

This collapse of what had been the scholarly consensus naturally caused much distress to the growing numbers of modern pagans who described themselves as Wiccans, and who practiced a form of spirituality which had drawn on symbols and practices from what they had hitherto believed to be a coherent system of ancient beliefs for which so many of their precursors had been martyred. However, contrary to what has been widely assumed – particularly among practicing modern pagans in the USA, Canada and Australia – Hutton was not, and is not, an iconoclast whose objective is to undermine modern pagan practice. The believe in surviving paganism had collapsed as a result of the historical research of a the generation of scholars preceding Hutton's, and it has been an important part of Hutton's objectives in publishing both the first and second editions of his major *The Triumph of The Moon* to provide modern practicing pagans (a number of whom he considered to be close and valued personal friends) with a true history to their religious beliefs and rites of which they could be proud.[6]

Another highlight is the epilogue in which Hutton explores the phenomenon of The Green Man, which as a distinct supernatural entity is indisputably a twentieth century creation. Images of a man with foliage forming his hair and beard, or flowing from his mouth, nose or eyes is a familiar one, carved in the stonework and woodwork of numerous medieval cathedrals and churches. This image, like the female entities investigated in previous chapters of *Queens of The Wild*, appeared to have nothing of Christian belief to explain its popularity as a decorative motif. The colour green and the foliage particularly suggested a figure associated with the fertility of the land, the rhythm of the seasons and in particular the reappearance of the green shoots of spring after the 'death' of winter. When considered alongside the presence of Jack-in-the-Green, a foliage covered figure central to many traditional British May Day celebrations, and the apparently ancient legends of the green clad, woodland dwelling outlaw Robin Hood, there seemed only one conclusion to be drawn by any early twentieth century folklorist steeped in the theories of J. G. Frazer, Margaret Murray or Jessie Westo: it must be a pagan survival. And that was the conclusion to which Julia Somerset, Lady Raglan, came in her influential article 'The Green Man in Church Architecture' which was published in *Folk-Lore,* the journal of the Folk-Lore (later Folklore) Society in 1939. However, as Hutton shows, Lady Raglan was 'simply wrong': the decorative motif of heads sprouting vegetation has no connection with British May Day customs, or other European customs of greeting summer such as the creation of the *Johanniskrone*, or British figures from popular ballads and chapbooks like Robin Hood. However, with his customary generosity Hutton allows that:

> It is perfectly legitimate to pick foliate or woodland figures from all over European and Near Eastern art, folklore and literature, across the ages, and group them

> together now as expressions of the human relationship with green and fertile nature. Such figures are indeed found in many different religions and ethnicities, and there is no reason why the foliate heads in churches, the Jack-in-the-Green, Robin Hood and the Green Knight should not be included among them. (p. 190)

But he warns that:

> The trouble only starts if those who embrace such beliefs back project them upon the past and declare they are revealing an ancient mystery, or an eternal and universal archetype which once underpinned a global – or even just continent-wide – belief system, or else the truth about ancient or medieval religion. (p. 191)

By which of course he means the early twentieth century theories of surviving paganism in the 'old religion' of early modern witches, and the belief in a Great Goddess and a peaceful, creative and nurturing matriarchal Golden Age of pre-Indo-European Europe. However, his conclusion is not to ridicule or dismiss these hypotheses as of no significance or interest, but to hope for some rapprochement between the opposing groups who respond so vigorously to the dismantling of the established certainties about pagan survival in the 1970s and 1980s.

> One concentrated, among those concerned with sustained research into the past, was to examine and deconstruct them, and reject them if they were not found to match up to the apparent evidence. The other, concentrated among those concerned with responses to the problems of late modernity, and especially with those associated with counter-cultures, has been to appropriate the figures and beliefs embodied in those

> hypotheses and to remodel them for a new set of causes. Both have their value as reactions to a changing world, and it would be a very positive achievement they could be diverted from each other. (p. 191)

For although the Green Man may appear to have been invented from nothing by Lady Raglan and quickly taken up by believers in pagan survival, and subsequently rejected by the rationalist iconoclasts of the 1970s, as Hutton concludes:

> In essence, however, he belongs to neither, but is an effective enough representation of a divinity-like being who has appeared in response to modern needs and within a Post-Christian society. (p. 192)

In many respects *Queens of The Wild* is an ideal introduction to Ronald Hutton's researches in the field of the history of pagan beliefs, practices and possible survivals. Particularly commendable is his decision to focus not on obscure gods and goddesses but on figures familiar through popular folk and fairy tales, 'high' culture such as Shakespeare's plays, Spenser's epic verses, and the folk songs recorded and sometimes composed by contemporary performers such as Fairport Convention, Steeley Span, Martin Carthy, Karine Polwart and Ninebarrow. Many readers may be content to stop at *Queens of The Wild,* but I hope not. As Francis Young, a younger scholar of folklore, paganism and medieval Christianity notes in a generally highly supportive review of *Queens of the Wild*:

> Hutton has always balanced his scrupulously polite eviscerations of neopagan wishful thinking with an insistence that the history of paganism nevertheless matters, even if the real history is not the one many of us expected.[7]

And he concludes his review with a very fitting commendation:

> In the end, Prof. Hutton is left posing the question of whether the binary categories of 'pagan' and 'Christian' are adequate or useful at all for fully understanding the past or the present. This is not to say that the categories are meaningless, but cultural artefacts exist that cannot be fitted adequately into either. The polemical approach of contemporary pagans intent on discrediting Christianity and portraying the medieval world as pagan at heart does little to advance our ability to reconstruct the thought-world of the past. That thought-world, we must surely conclude, allowed for rather more subtle distinctions than ours does and transcended some of the more simplistic binary oppositions of modernity. (Young)

Mick Gowar is a widely published author of children's books and a teacher of creative writing. Since 1980 he has written or edited over one hundred books for children and young people, including books of poetry, novels, short stories and non-fiction books for educational series including Oxford University Press's Treetops and Project X. He has visited schools, libraries, colleges and festivals throughout the United Kingdom and abroad to give readings, performances and lead workshops and has undertaken educational projects for, among others, the Philharmonia Orchestra, the Britten Sinfonia, Scottish Chamber Orchestra and the Fitzwilliam Museum and Kettles Yard Gallery in Cambridge. He has tutored the Arvon Foundation and Taliesin Trust and was a member of the judging panel for the W. H. Smith Young Writers' Competition. Before retiring he was senior lecturer and university teaching fellow at the Cambridge School of

Art, Anglia Ruskin University. He is currently editor of *Book 2.0* and secretary of the Ted Hughes Society.

NOTES

[1] Ronald Hutton has written extensively on the English Civil Wars, the Protectorate and the Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II. He is presently working on a multi-volume biography of Oliver Cromwell, the first volume of which, *The Making of Oliver Cromwell,* was published by Yale University Press in 2021.
[2] See especially *The Triumph of The Moon.* 2nd edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); and *The Witch: A History of Fear from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
[3] Ronald Hutton, 'Fairy Queens & Giantesses: Pagan Goddesses in Christian Europe,' History Extra Podcast, 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/49jQWzvINFgB9cJCA7K3Ql?si=ca55e861edda4bb1> [accessed 6 August 2023]
[4] Ronald Hutton, 'Fairy Queens & Giantesses: Pagan Goddesses in Christian Europe,' History Extra Podcast, 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/49jQWzvINFgB9cJCA7K3Ql?si=ca55e861edda4bb1> [accessed 6 August 2023]
[5] Ronald Hutton, *Queens of The Wild: Pagan Goddess in Christian Europe: An Investigation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), p. 12.
[6] As Hutton has pointed out on numerous occasions, the fact that Wicca has drawn on symbols and practices from a past with which there was little evidence of direct continuity, did not invalidate it. In fact such searching back in the past for practices or principles through which to give momentum to a religious revival was in no way unusual. The Christian reformers of the sixteenth century had similarly drawn from what they believed to be the spirit and practices of the church as it had been in the first century, which they believed had been forgotten or deliberately rejected by the controlling hierarchy of the early modern Roman Catholic church.
[7] Francis Young, 'The Real History of Paganism' in *First Things* (1 June 2022).

Owen and Sassoon at Craiglockhart

John Leonard

Owen and Sassoon: The Edinburgh Poems
Ed. and intro. by Neil McLennan
Edinburgh: Polygon, 2022, 112 pages
ISBN: 9781846976209

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Neil McLennan, the Senior Lecturer and Director of Leadership Programmes at University of Aberdeen, has assembled the poems written by Owen and Sassoon at Craiglockhart War Hospital during their respective stays there in the second half of 1917. In the introduction McLennan argues strongly that the humane treatment that both poets received there sparked in them some of their greatest poetry. The shell-shocked Owen was assigned to Dr Arthur Brock for treatment. Brock's 'ergotherapy' involved contact with nature and social activities such as, in Owen's case, teaching at a local high school. The less-traumatised Sassoon, who had been sent to Craiglockhart at the instigation of Robert Graves and other friends as an alternative to being court martialled for the expression of his anti-war views, was assigned to Dr William Rivers. Rivers's therapy has often been ascribed to the influence of Freud, given that it was based on an idea of repression and therapy allowing what was repressed to be released. However, Rivers's basic idea was that, especially in the context of experience of combat, the repression was not of early sexual urges, but of urges connected with self-preservation. But there is no doubt that Sassoon appreciated the opportunities to discuss his feelings and experiences with the sympathetic Rivers. (Graves was never a patient at Craiglockhart, but visited Sassoon and Owen there and spoke

with Rivers – River's thought and practice was an influence on him during the early 1920s).[1]

McLennan prints twenty poems from Sassoon and forty-two from Owen that can be assigned to their times at Craiglockhart. Sassoon, who of course survived the war and lived long after, was able to control the publication of his poetry, so the poems printed in this volume are taken from his *Collected Poems*, in which volume are they are printed in the different collections in which they first appeared. With Owen, however, McLennan prints all the poems that were either finished at Craiglockhart, or begun there – though in this latter case he prints the final versions of these poems that were arrived at during 1918. It is clear that for Owen the months he spent there allowed him to revise many early poems and to draft, at least, most of the poems on which his reputation now rests – by my count there are only another ten or so poems in Owen's *oeuvre* which were begun after leaving the hospital, in the months before Owen's death in early November 1918.

However, it is not quite clear what the function of this volume is. McLennan argues in his introduction that the poems contained here were strongly influenced by Edinburgh and environs, and it is well known that, in close contact with Owen, Sassoon had the opportunity to provide much advice and many suggestions to Owen for his poetry. It is obvious reading the introduction that local patriotism is a strong incentive for the volume, and there is nothing wrong with this. However, the Edinburgh influence as documented in the introduction is no more than a few points and suggestions, and there is no commentary on the poems, or any documentation of Sassoon's suggestions or edits to Owen's poems. I suspect that this is because the evidence for this lies in various other publications, such as biographies of Sassoon and Owen, editions of their letters, and Owen's *Poems and Fragments* edited by Jon Stallworthy, material which could

not be reproduced in bulk because of copyright. McLennan's volume doesn't include a bibliography so readers who want to study the poems Sassoon and Owen wrote at Craiglockhart in 1917, or their interactions, in more detail will have to rely on these other volumes. The value of the collection lies in the readability of the poems and the memory of the friendship of the poets.

John Leonard is an Australian writer and poet born in the UK and now living in Canberra. He has several volumes of poetry published and has written articles on Robert Graves's work for *Gravesiana* and other publications. www.jleonard.net.

NOTES

[1] See McLennan's essay on Graves, Sassoon and Owen meet at Craiglockhart in Where Graves, Sassoon and Owen Met in *Gravesiana,* 4 (Summer 2018), pp. 490-502 <https://www.robertgravesreview.org/essay.php?essay=379&tab=6> [accessed 12 August 2023]

Please Read Carefully

Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry edited by Craig Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod. Bloomsbury, London, 2023. 535 pp. £150.00
ISBN 978-135006-250-4

The cover art – a painting by Laura Eve Borenstein – is a queer morass of browns and muddled magenta. A smudge of green draws one's attention to the upper right quadrant, hemmed in by a border of brownish black: the whole canvas an earthy colour field evocative of an abstract topographic map overlaid by a rhizomatic graticule, its constituent lines thicker here, narrower there, adventitious shoots tendrilling from them like trails of spilled coffee. The painting could be an artifact from a parallel world in which Mark Rothko was an action painter trying his hand at psychogeographical cartography. It's a mess, really, but an arresting one, the paint thick and textured, sculptured, chthonic. It's called, 'Paintings in Browns and Rusts and Reds' (although its title, like so much in this strange collection of essay, interview, and colloquy, is the brainchild of Craig Svonkin: originally, the painting was untitled). The piece is photographed beautifully by Karla Castañeda, who skilfully captures the topographical nature of the work.

As a kind of metaphor – or sigil – 'Paintings in Browns and Rusts and Reds' correlates evocatively with the book it covers, an idiosyncratic literary/historical map describing the contours of American poetry. Saddled with the workaday title, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*, the collection is as self-consciously peculiar as its cover art; here is a book one *can* judge by its cover, if not by its title. There's nothing boring or workaday about this hefty

volume. Ably edited by Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod, it stands about twenty-six centimetres tall, eighteen centimetres wide, and nearly four centimetres thick. It's a big book filled with big ideas articulated by big players in a big field: Rae Armantrout, Stephanie Burt, Terence Diggory, Richard Flynn, Jeffrey Gray, Michael Heyman, Bethany Hicok, Michael Joseph, Cary Nelson, Lissa Paul, and Marjorie Perloff are some of the more familiar writers whose work appears in *The Bloomsbury*, an impressive array of critics, scholars, and poets whose scholarship and criticism over the decades has helped map the complex terrain of contemporary American poetry. And yet, the collection never loses the whiff of the counter-cultural. The map of American poetry offered by *The Bloomsbury* is a palimpsest of the traditional and the oddball, as if a map highlighting all the expected (and culturally sanctioned) tourist attractions were printed atop a map of offbeat freakshows and roadside oddities: The Museum of Jurassic Technology overlaid by the Griffith Observatory; the Watts Towers just visible below The Walt Disney Concert Hall. That is, it is a distinctly American book, an intersection of conservative and radical, somehow both deeply individualistic yet beguilingly faddish and hip.

The editors note that they 'wanted a handbook that was more rhizomatic than genealogical', for they were aiming at a 'rhizome, not a family tree of a *Handbook'*, were shooting at a collection of commentaries more 'heterogeneous' and 'multiple' than 'unidirectional' (p. 2). Their aim was true. 'If the essays here explore what is valuable in contemporary American poetics', Svonkin and Axelrod explain,

> they do so in a pluralistic, multicultural, multi-perspectival context. And while we are interested in a more pluralistic aesthetics, we do not want to privilege aesthetics over history and culture, for doing so ignores the mutual entanglement of all three. (p. 2)

Heady stuff, but the handbook remains surprisingly approachable, nonetheless, engaging poetry and poetics, yes, but also – in a move I'm sure will appeal to most readers of *The Robert Graves Review* – poems and poets.

The book is comfortably tripartite in structure: Part One ('Roots and Branches of the Contemporary') contains fifteen chapters, among them essays exploring feminist poetry, Asian American poetry, queer poetry, post-war prose poetry, the Beats (through Bob Kaufman!), the New York School, and, of course, the obligatory (though, in this case, both novel and engaging) treatment of the mid-century Anthology Wars (*New Poets of England and America* [1957] v. *The New American Poetry* [1960]), a discussion inflected by a host of lesser-known West Coast anthologies that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, anthologies that actively 'refused a subordinate position frequently imposed on the West Coast due to its relative lack of cultural capital' (p. 153). Part Three ('The Contemporary Moment') wraps the book up with thirteen chapters treating a range of subjects including ecopoetics, multilingual poetry, Arab American poetry and poetics, the fourth wave in Native American poetics, twenty-first century Jewish American poetry, the poetry of disability, online poetry (taken on by Jeffrey Gray in his wonderfully titled essay, 'Data Dump'), and a provocative exploration of 'the proliferation of award-winning Black poets in the twenty-first century' ('The Rise of Award-Winning Black Poets,' by Howard Rambsy II) (p. 391).

In addition to these more conventional essays, some taking a more expansive, top-down perspective (Cary Nelson's 'American Poetry and War,' for instance) and others adopting a more narrowly-focused, bottom-up point of view (Stephanie Burt's 'Lowell's Turtles'), we find in Part Two an entire section devoted to 'Interviews with Poets'. Part One and Part Three both begin with an interview, anticipating and echoing Part Two. The handbook's first piece: 'A Conversation with

Marjorie Perloff,' is an engaging roundtable featuring Perloff ('one of the most distinguished and prolific scholars of modern and contemporary American poetry in the world' [p. 7]), Susan McCabe, Brain Reed, and co-editor Axelrod. In Part Three's interview, Svonkin joins Axelrod in an absolute stunner of a conversation with Stephanie Burt ('a distinguished scholar and an influential critic of contemporary poetry as well as being a notable poet herself' [p. 299]). The three poetry lovers wend around and drill deeply into a rattle bag of topics and concerns. It's a truly joyful performance.

The poets in Part Two are largely interviewed by the editors, but a few other voices find their way into the mix. Andrew Lyndon Knighton interviews poet, essayist, and playwright Claudia Rankine (whose work is also treated in Axelrod's essay, 'The Black Art of Confession', in which he argues that Rankine's work 'brilliantly reshapes the post-confessional poem as a fundamentally African American, communitarian text' [p. 172]). Traise Yamamoto, author of *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body* (1999), joins Svonkin and Axelrod in interviewing poet, essayist, and activist Mitsuye Yamada. I am the last of the non-editorial interviewers, poising questions to innovative poet and intermedial artist Geof Huth, whose iconoclastic, often genre-bending work includes 'handwritten or typed pieces, sewn collages, sculptures, paintings, and poems written into sand, snow, accumulated pollen, and the condensation on bathroom mirrors' (p. 255). Huth's interview, uniquely, is illustrated by reproductions of four of his provocative visual poems: 'jHegaf:' 'Stoen 87: u u,' 'Anatomy. Myology. Plate XV', and 'The Weight of Thinking'.

The rest of the interviews, ten in all, are handled by the editors, Svonkin and Axelrod, sometimes working together, sometimes solo. The interview section comprises an aesthetically diverse crew: Marilyn Nelson, acclaimed poet,

memoirist, and writer for children and young adults, sits comfortably alongside Pulitzer-Prize-winning co-founder of Language poetry, Rae Armantrout. Lorna Dee Cervantes, Marilyn Chin, Juan Delgado, Crisosto Apache, and Joshua Jennifer Espinoza round out the eighty-four-page section. Understand, handbooks of this kind rarely – if ever – give the poets themselves the microphone. I wish more would follow *The Bloomsbury*'s example. The questions poised are provocative and the answers illuminating (and sometimes suggestively elusive).

The interviews are lively, reminding readers that poetry can be a joy to make, read, and talk about, and this lively joyfulness suffuses the collection, a leitmotif heard throughout its pages. In Marilyn Chin's interview, for example, Chin asks Svonkin, 'Do you notice that most poets take themselves too seriously?' She adds, 'A good poem and a good joke need perfect timing' (p. 247). Her gentle needling resonates with an exchange found in the Marjorie Perloff roundtable. Brian Reed quotes from Perloff's piece, 'Take Five', a list of five bits of advice for poets (published in 2013 in *Poetry* magazine, 'Take Five' riffs on Ezra Pound's 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', which appeared in *Poetry* a century earlier). Reed quotes from 'take' number two:

> Don't take yourself so seriously. In the age of social networks, of endless information and misinformation, 'sensitivity' and the 'true voice of feeling' have become the most available of commodities. Remember that, as Wallace Stevens put it, 'Life is a bitter aspic. We are not | at the center of a diamond.' (p. 8)

This quotation inspires Perloff to reflect on emotion in poetry – even in poetry that may seem, on its face, coldly intellectual and remote. However, she suggests that humour – at the nexus of surprise and joy – is an emotion too often overlooked or

dismissed by both poets and critics in favour of the high-minded and serious. Thus, Perloff's advice (for poets, scholars, and critics): 'don't take yourself so seriously, have a sense of humor' (p. 8).

Humour, of course, is also a key feature in children's poetry (although not a necessary one), and *The Bloomsbury*, in its drive for the 'heterogeneous' and 'multiple', does not ignore poetry for young folks, as all too many literary handbooks do. In a collaborative piece called 'Contemporary Children's Poetry: A Colloquy' (in Part Three), *The Bloomsbury* brings together eight major scholars and critics (and several writers) of children's poetry, each responding to various prompts put to them by Svonkin (a critic of children's poetry himself). Humour and play are evoked more than a few times in this colloquy, notably by poet JonArno Lawson (whom readers of *The Robert Graves Review* might remember from the summer, 2020 issue of *Gravesiana*, *The Review*'s antecedent, in which four of his poems were published). Lawson (who, alongside Marilyn Nelson, remains one of the most aesthetically accomplished and exciting American children's poets writing today) discusses the joy that comes from playing with 'errors' or 'slip-ups (Freudian and otherwise)', lamenting that 'we tend not to pay attention to them. They're often wasted by those who discover them, because they're treated as errors, corrected, and/or dismissed'. The humorous oddities of language, he continues, 'spring naturally out of life', and the trick is to recognize them, to use them, to resist the impulse to revise the strangeness and novelty out of them while leaving oneself open to 'encounter[s] [with] something entirely new, or something old through new eyes' (p. 349).

Joy and playfulness abound throughout *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*. It's marked by a hip kind of New York Schoolish teasing subversion, making for a delightful read (it modulates into more overtly serious

topics too, of course, and even play is taken seriously – or maybe 'rigorously' would be the more appropriate word). But as I suggested earlier, it doesn't forget *poems* in its attention to literary history, poetics, and poets. One of the best parts of the book (also in the children's poetry colloquy), is by our fellow Gravesian Michael Joseph, the editor of *The Robert Graves Review* and a poet himself. His piece concludes the colloquy, and while it is an extended response to Svonkin's question, *What advice might you offer scholars wanting to join the discussion of North American children's poetry?* (p. 351), it functions equally well as advice for any scholar choosing 'to join the discussion' surrounding poetry of any kind. It also captures the canny wit and subversive charm of *The Bloomsbury* itself.

Joseph's answer is simple and direct: 'I think reading poems carefully would not be time badly spent' (p. 354), but he doesn't stop there, choosing to map (a fortuitous expression given the cartographic metaphor I've been circling throughout this review) the reading process 'to the scientific method of inquiry',

> a method described by science writer Samantha Jones in the April 10, 2021, issue of *Quillette* as a system 'guided by intellectual humility, skepticism, careful observation, questioning, hypothesis formulation, prediction, and experimentation'. (p. 354)

I hesitate to suggest that Joseph's contribution to this colloquy is worth the price of admission – 150 pounds sterling is nothing to sneeze at – but I will say that since my first encounter with the piece, Joseph's five-page discourse on engaging poetry has been required reading in every one of my university courses in which poetry plays a part. Nevertheless, I haven't the space to unpack the entire piece, so I'll simply point to a few highlights. The most beautiful (and useful)

section chooses as its subject the much-maligned poem, 'Trees,' by Joyce Kilmer. Joseph writes,

> So, let me begin the inevitable parade of corny examples: let's say the poem we are reading happens to be Joyce Kilmer's 'Trees,' a poem my colleague Rachel Hadas has been immortalized by the Wikipedia for having once called 'rather slight'.

The choice is, of course, strategic. 'Trees' first appeared in *Poetry* magazine in 1913 (the same year as Pound's 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste,' *supra*), and while it is beloved (or at least known) by more readers than just about any poem not concerning roads (taken or otherwise) or catted hats, it often functions as a punchline by those of us who supposedly know better (folks like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, for example, and, famously, Conrad Aiken, Kilmer's grouchy contemporary – although their reputations aren't exactly at their zenith these days). And yet Michael Joseph's charming attention to the textures of language seduces us, as does his willingness to follow his own advice: 'to doubt one's impressions, to test their logic and consistency as one proceeds' (p. 355), to 'be skeptical', to 'doubt your interpretation – but also doubt your doubts: what is to say that your oddball, counterintuitive reading is wrong?' And soon we find ourselves as beguiled by Kilmer's 'Trees' as we are by Joseph's virtuoso performance.

Now, Joseph doesn't offer us a definitive reading of 'Trees' (he reminds, 'William Blake wrote, 'Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps', and asks, 'Was [Blake] preaching moderation or was he extolling the inexhaustibility of feeling in the inexhaustible medium of poetry?' So don't expect Joseph to venture a definitive, exhaustive reading of any poem [p. 356]); instead, he models the playful spirit necessary to make poems and make poems mean (he writes, 'poetry's

playground is criticism, is close reading' [p. 357]). It really is a *tour de force* performance, one designed 'to demonstrate, with intellectual humility and inappropriate humor, [that] close reading can and should encourage creative nonsense, or creative hermeneutics, or poetic nonsense' (p. 358).

And in that respect, Michael Joseph's piece really is a lovely synecdoche for *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*, for Michael's words, like *The Bloomsbury*, engenders in its readers an excitement about poetry and poems, encourages in us a desire both to return to the poems that led us here in the first place and to discover new poems, as yet unread (and perhaps as yet unwritten); but more than that, it reminds us all that in order to 'broaden, deepen, and diversify the discourse' surrounding contemporary American poetry – for children or adults –'one has to read [some poems] first.' And lucky for us, we have Craig Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod's *Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*, a charming, idiosyncratic, and weirdly seductive map to a whole lot of poems. However, as you begin tracking them down, be sure to remember Michael Joseph's admonition: if you're going to take the time to read, 'please read carefully' (p. 359).

POETRY

Three Poems

Sean O'Brien

THE WORKS

When I look up from reading, the back gate has vanished.
In a skip in the lane stands a Christmas tree,
bare and brown. This is July, in howling sunshine,
a gale of light and dust when people are afraid
and call it anger. Marcus and Willa have sized up the space
and come tenderly bearing the new gate, a pale one
that if it had arms would cover its modesty.
They have a drill. The skip is fuming like a censer.
In Sciascia's *The Council of Egypt*, Gilermo di Blasi
is brought, after torture, out through the sunblind yard.
His hair is white. His bare feet leak a greenish slime.
He is assisted to a waiting coach, and then to death.
On the final night, De Blasi turned to poetry
'because he felt he could not, should not, write
the true and profound things stirring within him.
The concept of poetry then prevalent held
that poetry is lies. This is no longer true,
though poetry itself may have to disagree.'

When Willa pauses for a smoke, Marcus plays water
over the flagstones. Now they gleam. The two men laugh.
The rose has its sights on the trellis; the new arch
anticipates jasmine. Summer is passing again.
Gilermo di Blasi is dead and forgotten. Sciascia too
is gone, but not the book I opened many years ago
beside a fountain, sunstruck and baroque
and half in shade - a property from fiction
waiting for events to whisper evil from afar

or from a chamber just around that corner,
where the executioners assured De Blasio
that God hears every word including those of sparrows
as they fall like smuts of ash to drift across the square
and for a moment rise again on the impenitent sirocco.
There is no fountain here, but I can see
how water hangs like smoke above itself, then plunges
through the shade to drench the ardent mermaids
who are waiting, slick with life, or what resembles it.

BLACKTHORN BLOSSOM

March wind and rain, the sea all storm, and yet
Behind the dunes at Druridge Bay,
Star-white blossom on the blackthorn bush,
The Queen of Elfland's lingerie.

THE SHORTEST DAY

Adrift in cloud, the moon
expands its cataract:

in this late world, darkness
is the rule. Remember

how when we were young
the task was inescapable:

to get the proper names by heart,
including all the goddesses

disposed of in the emptiness
where light had been and gone

and kept on going? After that
let strong despair usurp

a planetary chill, absolved
from love and death, the better

to possess you. See,
I've sat my life like Finals

set by monsters so the living
cannot pass, and when today

I summon you I find
you're further off than memory,

your mind elsewhere, the smile
I saw as whimsical
unearthly now. Star-garlanded
for winter, Aphrodite sails

the frozen gulf of night, no more
attentive to my blinded stare

than any of her sisters
in the heavens care to be.

Poems by Tamar Yoseloff and Peter Armstrong

Sean O'Brien

—

As Gregory Leadbeater observed in the previous issue of the *Robert Graves Review*, poetry is a more various world than is sometimes alleged. Fashion and careerism tend to narrow the aperture. Over the years, I've encountered and enjoyed the work of quite a few poets who might seem to have little in common. If they are 'grouped', they're in different groups. They may not – and I agree with them – care to be grouped at all. They write poems. Let's read them.

Tamar Yoseloff is an American poet, teacher and publisher, long resident in London, the author of several collections, most recently *The Black Place* (2019). Her next collection will be *Belief Systems* (2024). Her long-standing and wide-ranging interest in painting and visual art is reflected in the distinctive design of the chapbooks published by Hercules Editions, which she runs with Andrew Lindesay, as well in her own work. 'The Painter in His Prime' wittily evokes the dark-toned and strangely voluptuous seascapes of the Belgian Symbolist Leon Spilliaert, whose work is now deservedly becoming better known here. With 'Levee', Yoseloff reads one of Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*, not, as the work's imagery might suggest, with reference to the French *ancien régime*, but to the earthwork raised against floods along the Mississippi, which in turn has taken on an ominous and almost supernatural significance in the Blues. The third poem, 'Bearskull', reveals a vein of sardonic humour in its novelistic depiction of a mismarriage.

Peter Armstrong has published several collections, including *Risings* and *The Red-Funnelled Boat*. A poet of North-East England, he has a powerful sense of landscape and

history, inwoven with an abiding interest in Christianity. The pilgrim road to Santiago de Compostella figures prominently in his work, as here in the strange, visionary 'Edward Thomas on the Camino Frances'. Armstrong's ear is both just and surprising: listen to the sure-footed central passage of 'From the Outlying Islands', and then to the chiselled line of his elegy for William Beveridge, to whom Britain's Welfare State owes its existence – a future undergoing cancellation day by day, 'a turning you would miss | if you weren't looking for it'.

Three Poems

Tamar Yoseloff

THE PAINTER IN HIS PRIME

i.m. Léon Spilliaert, 1881-1946
(for Sean O'Brien)

The painter has been dead more years
than he lived, which suits his disposition
he found the corpse within when young

and carried it through brooding boulevards
until it was dark enough to begin
then he climbed inside the night,

the city his sick bed, its patients turned out
to wander under sulphurous lamps,
mourners at their own wakes.

A couple of wars, an epidemic; he's seen it all,
his bulbous eye like a periscope
rising from a dim sea.

LEVEE

I brood inside my boudoir, skin like
a chalk cross on the plague house door.
This is the grave talking, where I've been
holed up, feels like years. Once I was in
the pink, but all flesh stinks when it goes bad,
king and clown alike.
If it keeps on rainin,
levee's goin to break, says the ol blues tune,
been raining all afternoon, and no let up.
A fine day for suicide, in my Sunday suit,
fancy tie my handy noose, if I wasn't lately
expired. No light through the trees,
just more damn trees.
There's always work
for the cold cook, whistling while he digs
that ol blues tune, *when the levee breaks,*
mama, you got to move, that's what he sings,
loud and clear from the field of bones,
thinkin bout my baby and my happy home.
But the light's gone out.
No body's home.

(Preceding poems from *Belief Systems,* forthcoming 2024)

BEARSKULL

My uncle was a recreational hunter.
His house was crammed with the skins and skulls
of his kills. Jackrabbits, bighorn sheep, wild cats,
black bears. He fashioned ashtrays out of hooves.
All his rugs had heads.

There's a photo of his wife, her pale hair
falling over her face, a hint of a smile,
with a grizzly stuck in mock attack behind her.
The bear reaches out as if to hold her close
in his furry paws.

She couldn't stand all those glass eyes staring:
it's either me or them.

I lift the skull from the box with both hands:
did the bear rear when the shot hit, his huge head
swaying side to side, dead brush crushed
as he fell? Did my uncle feel the chamber's release,
the bullet forced towards the bear's heart?

The sky closed around them, bear and man;
the air sang with the stink of meat.

My uncle never thought his wife would go first;
she was so much younger. He paced the bare rooms
she'd redecorated in French Provincial style
with swirls of flowers and fruit,
lost in his own house.

(from *The Black Place*, 2019)

Three Poems

Peter Armstrong

EDWARD THOMAS ON THE CAMINO FRANCES

Let's suppose you came this way, or your ghost,
to walk beneath the milky way a ghost
among ghosts, the Meseta your Downs writ large;
this via Trajana for your Sarn Helen,
this chalk for your Icknield chalk and Arras chalk
on which your body, still perfect, would be lying,
more beautiful than all the reredos saints
punctuating your way to Santiago.
The war would go on around it, and then the peace;
with April, seed would spring beneath,
and think what Jesse tree would grow,
what progeny inhabit its branches
as you slept on, or walked on past Hornillos,
past Castrojeriz, Calzada del Coto
and lonely Calzadilla; how its leaves'
wave-song would carry to this treeless plain.
Or would you leave all that, tramping westwards
with your hurts left at the roadside crosses
like pebbles picked from one, and left
a fraction lighter for the carrying
at the next? – making sorrow that sand-grain
to set down at Finisterre
unsure by then what part was yours
and what share was another's.
Meanwhile you're pointing into shadow,
the first for miles, where the spring rises,
Look you say *Honeysuckle, Forget-me-not,*
and the ghosts sing back *Madreselva,*

Nomeolvides; and so, trading name for name,
stripping back the prose to poetry, coining
as the need arises *Bloodless Thistle,*
Cardo Palido, Estella del Rey, Fantasma

AT THE GRAVE OF BEVERIDGE

What foresight or what irony
settled you on this high plot,
barely soil for burial,
barely place enough for name?

The story is
some sailor brought home cholera
and brought the place to this:
ghost-crofts, graves of houses,

all that makes for civil life
reduced to this green archive.
You've chosen well:
all four quarters' weather serves

to show there is no covenant
time or else rapine
will not prove void.
Here's fitting monument

to great dreams and their fall:
an open secret,
a turning you would miss
if you weren't looking for it

FROM THE OUTLYING ISLANDS

They end up at Torcello,
leaving everything behind
-Baedeker, Hemingway,
the ways they now saw
flooding over;
and it's less
the spectacle of judgement
(that glorious damnation,
the endless glamour of the saved)
than, turning east,
the mother's infinite
knowing grief
that sends them back
comforted, or something close
to lose themselves
where the land is just a sliver
and the world is nine tenths blue

Poets in this Issue

Sean O'Brien's eleventh collection of poems, *Embark*, was published by Picador in 2022. His chapbook *Impasse: for Jules Maigret* appeared from Hercules Editions in May 2023 and his pamphlet *Otherwise* is due from Dare-Gale this autumn. His work has received various awards, including the T. S. Eliot, Forward and E. M. Forster Prizes. His other work includes fiction, plays, criticism and translation. His translation of Dante's *Inferno* appeared in 2006, and the *Collected Poems* of Abai Kunanbayuli in 2021. In 2017 he was Weidenfeld Visiting Professor at St Anne's College Oxford. He is Emeritus Professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Peter Armstrong was born 1957 on Tyneside and has lived all his life in North East England. He read Philosophy and English at Sunderland, and has published collections with Enitharmon, Picador & Shoestring. He worked in the NHS as a mental health nurse and in Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy as a therapist, supervisor, teacher and author. He has described himself as an 'Anglo-Catholic agnostic' but isn't so sure now.

Tamar Yoseloff's seventh collection, *Belief Systems*, is due from Nine Arches in Summer 2024. She's also the author of *Formerly* (with photographs by Vici MacDonald), shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Award, and collaborative editions with artists Linda Karshan and Charlotte Harker respectively. She has been a lecturer on the Poetry School / Newcastle University MA in Writing Poetry and has led writing workshops in galleries including the Hayward and the Royal Academy. She won a Cholmondeley Award in 2023

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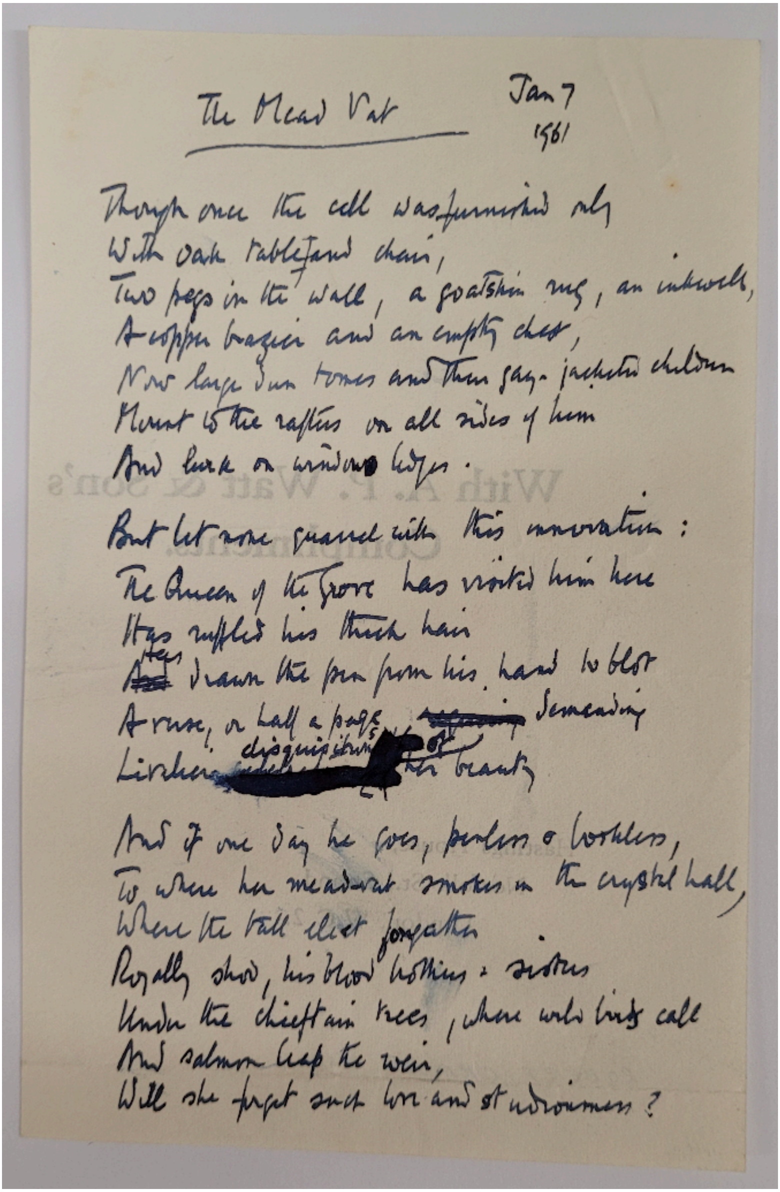
OBITUARIES



The Mead Vat

Jan 7
1961

Though once the cell was furnished only
With oak table and chair,
Two pegs in the wall, a goatskin rug, an inkwell,
A copper brazier and an empty chest,
Now large dun tomes and their gay-jacketed children
Mount to the rafters on all sides of him
And lurk on window ledges.

But let none quarrel with this innovation:
The Queen of the Grove has visited him here
Has ruffled his thick hair
~~And~~ Has drawn the pen from his hand to blot
A verse, or half a page, ~~[illegible]~~ demeaning
Livelier [illegible] disguisings of her beauty

And if one day he goes, penless or bookless,
To where her mead-vat smokes in the crystal hall,
Where the tall elect foregather
Royally shod, his blood brothers & sisters
Under the chieftain trees, where wild birds call
And salmon leap the weir,
Will she forget such love and studiousness?

Margot Callas

William Graves

—

Margot was born in Vancouver on 10 September 1935, of Greek father and Irish mother. She died in her cottage in the South of France, where she lived most of her last years on 15 April 2023.

She was married twice, her second husband being the comedian and later film director Mike Nichols. Their daughter is Daisy Gabriella Nichols.

Of great beauty, Margot was supremely independent. She came to Deià from Ibiza in 1959. Robert Graves met her when performing in an amateur theatrical in 1960 and soon after, she became his muse. Robert's love and adoration of Margot produced some of his best love poetry. She caused him great anguish when she went off with his then best friend Alastair Reid. Much has been written about the relationship in biographies and elsewhere.

Margot ceded her musedom to Aemilia Laracuen (literally on request) but kept in touch with Beryl Graves and the family and went with her to Russia. (Beryl even translated letters to Margot from a Russian beau she met there). Later Margot accompanied Robert and Beryl to Hungary. Reid remained friends with the rest of the family and wrote a moving obituary of Graves in the New Yorker.

Margot lived many unconnected lives, taking up carpentry, or acting (one night) in *Hair*. Robert wanted her to be the 'White Goddess' in a film that never was.

In her later years she lived in the South of France keeping very much to herself and though not even wanting to see Daisy in her old age, she kept in contact with her for thirteen years until the end. However, I saw her several times

in her London apartment, and spent many an enjoyable afternoon on the phone remembering old times.

Shortly before she died Margot sold Robert's letters to her to St John's College, where they are in safe keeping. Margot's letters to Robert were returned to her by Beryl Graves and presumably destroyed.

She will be long remembered by her friends as a very special person.

William Graves MBE was born in Devon England, 1940. He is the oldest son of Robert Graves and Beryl Graves. As well as being Robert Graves's literary executor, he is the honorary president of the Robert Graves Society, a founding member and unpaid elected director of the *Fundació* Robert Graves (a public entity), and the author of *Wild Olives: Life in Mallorca with Robert Graves* (1995). He has translated/edited Graves's *The White Goddess* into Spanish. Among many other projects aimed at perpetuating the legacy of his father, he is currently organizing transcriptions to his voluminous and wide-ranging correspondence, comprising over 9,000 separate letters.

Submissions:

The editors of *The Robert Graves Review* will consider scholarly articles on all aspects of the work and life of Robert Graves, as well as original poetry, and book reviews. Article lengths vary and should be appropriate to the topic. *The Review* will also publish short notes highlighting some area of interest at the sole discretion of the editor and are not peer reviewed. We will not consider work that is under submission elsewhere or that has been published previously. *The Robert Graves Review* uses a double-anonymous evaluation system: we will not share the identity of the author with the readers, nor the readers' identities with the author. The journal charges no fees for the authors. Please send completed essays by e-mail attachment in Microsoft Word or Rich Text Format to: Michael Joseph (mjoseph@emeritus.rutgers.edu).

Requirements:
Articles submitted for publication should be a reasonable length. Articles and book reviews should conform to the Modern Humanities Research Association's *Style Guide: A Handbook for Authors and Editors*, available at http://www.mhra.org.uk/style/. Please consult current and past issues for guidance.

All the issues of the journal and its forerunners as well as more information can be found at: *The Robert Graves Review* website.

The Robert Graves Society, 2023