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The conscious genius

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A review of *Robert Graves: From Great War Poet to Good-bye to All That (1895-1929)* by Jean Moorcroft Wilson

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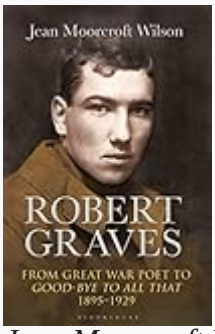

Jean Moorcroft Wilson
Robert Graves: From Great War Poet to Good-bye to All That (1895-1929)

Bloomsbury Continuum, 480 pages, $35.00

One of the oddest episodes in the early life of Robert Graves—a career not exactly short on incident—took place on April 27, 1929. At this point Graves, then in his mid-thirties, was embroiled in a kind of ménage à quatre, involving him, his wife Nancy, the poet Laura Riding, and a young Irishman called Geoffrey Phibbs. There was lofty talk of "the four" and "the Holy Family," but the scent of proto-hippie idealism wafting above the commune's nerve-center at St Peter's Square, West London, was swiftly undermined by jealousy and resentment. Matters came to a head when Phibbs, divining that he had been taken advantage of, declared that he was "not . . . going to live with or near Laura." A grievously affronted Riding, having first pretended to have taken poison, then gave a cry of "Goodbye chaps" and threw herself out of a fourth-floor window onto the flagstones below.

In *14A*, Riding's fictionalized treatment of the jump, a lightly disguised version of Laura describes herself, without obvious irony, as a kind of moral stimulant who "in sufficient doses . . . might cause the people around her to become either very, very good (like herself) or absolutely horrid."

In real life, desperate to follow her into the "strange region" advertised by her "doom-echoing shout," Graves tore down half a flight of stairs in pursuit and then, finding no exit to the back part of the house, hurled his six-foot-two-inch frame out of a window one floor below. His own injuries were negligible, but the moral stimulant had cracked her skull open and sustained multiple fractures of the pelvis. Her unexpected recovery, deftly engineered by a surgeon named Lake, who managed to repair her shattered vertebrae, was attributed (at least by Graves) to sheer force of will.

Quite a lot of Graves, you suspect, is bound up in this imbroglio: his impulsiveness; his attachment to grand, symbolic ideals of White Goddesses in perilous descent; his disregard for what might be called the processes of ordinary life; and above all his rebarbativeness. One of the subtexts of Jean Moorcroft Wilson's exceedingly thorough treatment of his first three-and-a-half decades on the planet is his complete lack of interest in what other people thought of him.[1] From his schooldays at Charterhouse to his valiant wartime service in the Welch Regiment and his first skirmishes in the London literary world of the 1920s, the trail is full of friends left sprawling by the wayside, disillusioned by his want of tact, brought down by his self-centeredness—his absolute determination to preserve his autonomy at all costs. He "fairly got on peoples' nerves with his hot air," a fellow officer recalled: "The Blighter's never satisfied unless he's turning something upside down."

It is tempting to see the Blighter's combative self-sufficiency as a reaction to an over-populated upbringing. The Graveses were one of those huge, sprawling Victorian families in which the philoprogenitive urge repeats itself over two marriages (the first Mrs. Graves died in 1886). Graves senior, the proud father of ten children, was a schools inspector—Moorcroft Wilson is duly excited by his nodding acquaintance with Matthew Arnold—and a minor poet-cum-anthologist. Something of his wife's peculiarities may be detected in an episode when, some visiting friends having left half a sandwich behind, she conscientiously returned it to them. There were German and Irish connections (the former increasingly problematic in the run-up to war), and, in early adulthood, a rather self-conscious repudiation of paternal influence which led the author of *Goodbye to All That* (1929) to claim that the most useful trick his father had taught him was "the ability to masquerade as a gentleman."

In terms of defining Graves's social position, this is the reddest of red herrings. The Graveses were solid upper-bourgeoisie. Charterhouse, to which he proceeded at the age of fourteen, was a leading English public school, and if there were occasional money worries—Moorcroft Wilson notes the significance of Robert's £95 senior scholarship—then these were comfortably redeemed by the webs of connection and influence that hung over his early life. In fact, Graves's career is a kind of object lesson in the value of having powerful friends. His uncle Charles is a fixture of the weekly magazines. His Charterhouse schoolmaster George Mallory introduces him to Edward Marsh, the editor of the *Georgian Poetry* anthologies. When the Great War subaltern needs an operation on his nose, the surgery is finessed by way of a personal appeal by his father to the Director General of the Army Medical Service.

There are times—particularly in the post-war period—when the procession of celebrities anxious to put themselves at Graves's disposal becomes faintly surreal. Should he apply for an academic job in the United States, the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University and a former Prime Minister can be found offering references. Should he and his wife decide to open a village shop, it scarcely needs adding that one of their first customers should turn out to be the Poet Laureate. One makes this point not to convict Graves of taking advantage of that concatenation of wire-pulling and quiet words known to Englishmen as the Old Boy Network, but to establish that the outsider status he sometimes seems to be canvassing in his pronouncements about art and literature, let alone in his personal relationships, is largely bogus. Like most bad boys in the Georgian nursery (to borrow Alec Waugh's description of Gilbert Cannan), he was nearly always careful to keep on the right side of Nurse.

The Great War—indisputably the defining event of his early life—offers another slant on the curious obliqueness of Graves's approach to the world that had nurtured him, and his thoroughgoing ability to hover halfway in and halfway out of any society of which he became a part. Feeling a sense of "relief and adventure," he enlisted a day or so after the war broke out (the customary family friend was on hand to telephone the adjutant of the Welch Regiment), served at the front for nearly three years, and was so badly wounded that telegrams were sent to his parents informing them of his death. As the biographer of Siegfried Sassoon, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Isaac Rosenberg, and Edward Thomas, Moorcroft Wilson is sensitive to the motivation that led so many of his contemporaries to their deaths. In the heightened atmosphere of August 1914, "there was no real alternative" to military service: a firebrand like Graves would have been ashamed to settle for conscientious objector farm work or a Quaker ambulance unit.

As for the poetry that this experience threw up, much of which he excluded from the Collected Poems of 1938 and the following decade's Collected Poems (1914–1947), there is, again, a faint sense of detachment, a feeling that Graves, though up to his neck in the horror of Flanders, is, as it were, standing at the roadside as the tanks roll by rather than leading the procession on his charger. Moorcroft Wilson quotes his highly astute analysis of the psychology of Great War poetry: "I have definite evidence for saying that much of the trench poetry written during the late war was the work of men not otherwise poetically inclined and that it was very frequently due to an insupportable conflict between suppressed instincts of love and fear." If Georgian verse can, reductively, be divided into poetry that satirically exposes war's horror and poetry that ignores it altogether, then Graves's sits halfway between, the stark realism of "Limbo," with its gruesome details of corpse-stacked parapets, contrasting with the "Nursery Memories" of Over the Brazier (1916), where warfare and children's games come deviously commingled.

British literary history is full of demobilized Great War veterans anxiously readjusting themselves to civilian life. Graves, suffering from what would now be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder and briskly exchanging the platonic homosexual tendencies of his early twenties for marriage to a child-hungry feminist, was clearly storing up trouble for himself. Whether at Oxford, where he took up the place at St John's College that had been waiting for him since 1914, or the

nearby village of Islip, where he and Nancy established themselves with their flourishing brood (four children in five years), one is struck by the artificiality of a lifestyle that was mostly underwritten by parental subsidy. Though featured in the national press ("Shop-keeping on Parnassus" ran a headline in the *Daily Mirror*), the "adventure in trade" was a commercial disaster, leaving them several hundred pounds in debt.

As for the literary career that fizzed alongside, Graves's undoubted versatility—nine poetry collections in as many years, not to mention five books of prose—was matched by a now-trademarked propensity to lose friends easily. Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Edmund Blunden, T. E. Lawrence (whose friendship made possible a lucrative piece of hackwork entitled *Lawrence and the Arabs*), Edith Sitwell: each of them eventually receded from view, wounded by Graves's off-handedness, his patronizing airs, or something that can look very like vanity. "The poor boy is all emphasis protestation & pose," Virginia Woolf decided after attending one of his tea party monologues. "But the consciousness of genius is bad for people." The enemies made in this formative period would come back to haunt him, and the double suicide attempt of 1926 brought a delighted letter from Sitwell to Sassoon about the "Mormon Father of Islip" and his "Concubine."

A cynic would probably declare that Graves and the mercurial Laura, whose *Contemporaries and Snobs* (1928) Moorcroft Wilson neatly characterizes as "an attempt to prove herself right and the rest of the literary world wrong," were made for each other. An attentive reader of Moorcroft Wilson's last hundred or so pages might, alternatively, suspect that he was scarcely up to his inamorata's fighting weight. As the chronicler of this rich, erratic, and highly exasperating life, Moorcroft Wilson is as old-school as they come. The life-into-art nexus beguiles her. Detail absorbs her, and if it can be proved that her pre-teen subject liked nursery rhymes, she will list a dozen of them. She also has an occasional habit of seeming to drain a situation of its drama, as in the paragraphs describing the arrest of Graves's Charterhouse friend Peter Johnstone for soliciting, where the emotional consequences—Graves falling in love with a woman for the first time—are skipped over in the opening line.

Where Robert Graves really succeeds is in its portrait of the Georgian literary scene, all too easy to regard as a succession of binary opposites but in Moorcroft Wilson's hands an immensely complex landscape full of shifting alliances and suspect harmonizing. If Carol Z. Rothkopf's edition of the Selected Letters of Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden (2012) showed quite how fractured were some of the allegiances between the great mass of broadly anti-Modernist writers, then Moorcroft Wilson takes their exposure a step or two further. On this evidence, the "traditional" and "dissenting" corners of 1920s literature were always capable of bleeding into each other, often with unexpected results.

Moorcroft Wilson leaves her subject in 1929, newly established on the island of Majorca with his ladylove ("the Muse, the Goddess") and with *Goodbye to All That* (deplored by Sassoon and Blunden) marching up the bestseller lists. Of the family left behind, he remarked to Nancy, "The children are yours; you are their mother. I am their father, but they are not my charges, I feel, only

my friends." The "all that" being grandly waved away may be interpreted as the world of his youth and early manhood, not to mention the expectations that this world had of him, but such things are not generally given up without a struggle. An Oxford don once described to me the spectacle of Graves returning to St John's in the 1960s: half a mage and half an old collegian back for the beano. Expect Moorcroft Wilson's next volume on Graves to be as much a study in continuity as the record of an irretrievable break.

1. _ *Robert Graves: From Great War Poet to Goodbye to All That: 1895–1929*, by Jean Moorcroft Wilson; Blooms- bury, 461 pages, $35.

D. J. Taylor's *Orwell: The New Life* (Pegasus) is out in May 2023.

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