



Robert Graves

(1895–1985)

Robert Graves was a prolific writer. In 1916, while in action in WWI, He published his first volume of poems. His most well-known works include *Lawrence and the Arabs*, a biography of T. E. Lawrence, whom he knew well, published (1927), the autobiographical *Good-bye To All That* (1929), which recounted his wartime experiences, and his most commercially successful work, *I, Claudius*, published in 1934. Using classical sources, he constructed a complex and compelling tale of the life of the Roman emperor Claudius, a tale extended in the sequel *Claudius the God* (1935). The books were turned into the very popular television series in the 1970s starring Derek Jacobi.

Graves' youth was turbulent, contracting measles then double pneumonia. As a captain in the war, Graves caught shrapnel in his lung and initially reported dead, recuperated with Siegfried Sassoon, who introduced him to Wilfred Owen. Shell-shock also blighted Graves life for many years. In 1918, he survived Spanish 'flu.

Graves lived his life from thereon in a series of heterosexual relationships. He married painter Nancy Nicholson in 1919. After that he had a relationship with US author Laura Riding, a bizarre period during which the ménage à trois between Robert, Nancy, and Laura became a ménage à quatre with Irish poet Geoffrey Phibbs, which ended only when Laura attempted suicide by hurling herself from a window, apparently followed by Graves himself from a lower floor. Laura rescued Graves from his failing marriage. Later he formed a relationship with Beryl, wife of his colleague Alan Hodges. They married in 1950 and she out-survived him. He fathered eight children.

In his youth, Graves had more Uranian tastes. He was hauled over the coals at Charterhouse for a relationship with a fellow pupil. He had 'platonic' crushes on men in his youth. However there is no evidence that he formed a relationship with Sassoon, Owen or T E Lawrence. This is not surprising, given that homosexuality was illegal at the time.

Graves wrote: "In English preparatory and public schools romance is necessarily homosexual. The opposite sex is despised and treated as something obscene. Many boys never recover from this perversion. For every one born homosexual, at least ten permanent pseudo-homosexuals are made by the public school system: nine of these ten as honourably chaste and sentimental as I was."

Graves, who took up boxing as a defence against bullying, is scathing about the public school system regarding its tacit acceptance of male homosexuality as a perversion of its own creation. But the question is whether the 'normal channels' were the heteronormative values and norms imposed by a proscriptive legislature and a proscriptive society which he came to accept and adopt as his own, or whether he rejected his other self – his bisexuality or pansexuality (neither of which were recognised in his younger days) because of the trauma of Charterhouse.

Either way, Robert Graves was throughout his life an enigma. *Goodbye to All That* was a Foxtrot Oscar to England in which he rejected all its values and forswear never to set foot in it again. His account of WWI events was fiercely contested by Sassoon and his own father, both of who put pen to paper to make amendments. Following the war, Graves said he would never again take orders from another. At times he embraced socialism and feminism and was a committed atheist. In his later years he corresponded regularly with Spike Milligan.

Sources - The Guardian, Spartacus Educational and Wikipedia

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