

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Robert Graves

World War I (or The Great War, as it was first called) not only brought new freedom and opportunity for British women, as Virginia Woolf wrote, it was a watershed event for the whole country, and Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* is the literary testimonial that shows why. His gruesome descriptions of the trenches, poison gas, military arrogance and bungling, atrocities, and occasional heroism and sacrifice, preceded by his critical descriptions of Charterhouse, his boarding school, and upperclass snobbery, gave English readers a new image of the war and the moral failures of the dominant Edwardian culture. It has been called one of the 100 most important non-fiction books of the Twentieth Century.

But it is also unusual for many more reasons. Graves's mother was German, and his memories of his five summers with her relatives in Bavaria are sensuous and colorful. His German ancestry did not make him sympathetic to the German enemy, but it did make him sometimes an outsider at Charterhouse School, and make some people suspicious of his loyalty. He was also an outsider because of his interest in poetry and literature and because he did not play football or rugby, the most popular sports. Instead, he became a skilled boxer. But a source of relief from school was mountain climbing in Wales, with his teacher George Mallory, who later died climbing Mt. Everest. (By Graves' time mountaineering had become more of a dangerous and challenging upperclass sport than the spiritual experience it was for Wordsworth.)

His love of Wales and the Welsh continued with his volunteering in the summer of 1914 for the Royal Welch Fusiliers, and he became very proud of the regiment's traditions (expressed even in the distinctive spelling of the name). But how ironic it was, he notes at the end of chapter eleven, that the men knew more about regimental history "then they did about the fighting on the other fronts or the official causes of the war." (p. 89) They were therefore unprepared for the horrors of the front. The heart of the book is Graves' stories of battles, deaths, suicides, desertion, pettiness, lying, shooting of prisoners, and wounds, ending with Graves' own last wound in 1917, when a piece of shrapnel penetrated his lung. He was hospitalized in England, and in January, 1918, he was married to Nancy Nicholson, the daughter of a painter.

He did not go back to the war. But he remained haunted by it. On Armistice night in 1918 he did not join the hysterical celebrations but went "walking alone along the dyke above the marshes of Rhuddlan (an ancient battlefield, the Flodden of Wales) cursing and sobbing and thinking of the dead." For years he could not use a telephone because of an electric shock he had had from a trench phone. The smell of flowers could bring back his fears of poison gas. He also had difficulties adjusting to postwar university life (difficulties that he shared with his new friend T.E. Lawrence and his fellow war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen) and supporting his wife and family. When he gave a reading of his and their war poetry at a village church near Oxford, poems that were not about "the glorious dead" but "about men dying of gas-poisoning and about buttocks of corpses bulging from the mud," the villagers were "scandalized." (pp. 289-90)

His "war horror" continued all through the 1920s, though he tried to cure himself by studying psychology and in many kinds of writing. Finally, he and his wife were divorced, and he began an affair with the American poet Laura Riding. He also wrote a popular biography of T.E. Lawrence.

Readers should also know a little of the publishing history of *Goodbye to All That*. The first edition came out in 1929 and became an instant success. In April, 1929, Laura Riding had tried to commit suicide, and Graves wrote the book in only three months, hoping to earn enough money for them to move to Majorca, Spain, which they did. He then began a successful literary career, writing the historical novel *I, Claudius* (1934), *The White Goddess* (1948), and over a hundred other books. But having been written so hastily, *Goodbye to All That* had many inaccuracies which he tried to correct in a second edition published in 1957. That edition so softened his criticisms of the war and British society, however, that the book lost the qualities that had made the 1929 edition so powerful. Therefore his grandson, Richard Percival Graves published a third edition in 1995, using the 1929 text but with 56 pages of annotations that note its errors and many of the differences between it and the 1957 text. Reading all the annotations

and the text at the same time is complicated and, for most people, not necessary. But reading some of them is instructive. It is rare for some one to write an autobiography when he is only age 34, as Graves was in 1929. It is also rare, but understandable, for some one to then “correct” it at age 62. But his grandson gives readers to opportunity to study the results.

Questions for Further Study:

1. Graves returned from World War I with what was then called “shell-shock.” Veterans of World War II were said to suffer from “battle fatigue.” Today the more scientific-sounding term is “post traumatic stress syndrome.” The condition is not easy to diagnose precisely and treat. How would you describe Graves’ condition?
2. On p. 172 (ch. 17), Graves says, “There was no patriotism in the trenches.” Earlier, however, in chapter 11 and elsewhere, he describes soldiers’ great pride in their regiments. What is the difference? How does Graves himself show his own regimental pride and scorn for patriotism?
3. Graves’ portrait of Charterhouse school and his fellow students must have been especially shocking to his British readers in 1929 because it was so different from the images of British schools that they knew from books like *Tom Brown’s School Days*. (Americans of the 1920s and ‘30s had blythely acquired comparable positive images from books like *Dink Stover at Yale*.) Contrast Graves’ “school days” with what you know or can imagine are the opposite.
4. Despite Graves’ rejection of schoolboy snobbery and upperclass elitism, he still has many upperclass traits and manners. What are they and how do you sense them in him?