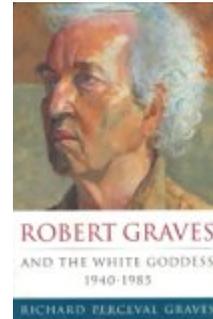


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Perceval Graves. *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*. London and North Pomfret, Vt.: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995. xxi + 618 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-297-81534-1.

Reviewed by John Woodrow Presley (University of Michigan, Dearborn)
Published on H-PCAACA (February, 1997)



Robert Graves: Religion, Myth, Literature

The third volume of Richard Perceval Graves's biography of his uncle, Robert Graves, was published in England in 1995, the centenary year of Robert Graves's birth. Of the biographies and memoirs published so far, R. P. Graves's will doubtless become the standard biography for scholars. Miranda Seymour's is an interpretive biography, focusing on the gender issues that preoccupied Graves in his life and work, but ignoring large sections of biographical detail on which R. P. Graves can afford to lavish attention and space. Martin Seymour-Smith's revision of his biography still suffers from the disadvantage of the early biography: it has become fashionable to dismiss his work as that of a disciple, and his 40,000 words of additions to his revised edition may not erase that perception—unfair as that may be. (But interested readers should not miss Seymour-Smith's preface to the new edition, in which he can at last address the character of Laura Riding—let's just say that this revised edition shows that Seymour-Smith can be as engaged as he is objective.)

R. P. Graves's third volume deals with the last third of Robert Graves's life, when Graves developed the theories that were to dominate both his poetry and the prose that he poured out. Working on *The Golden Fleece*, Graves became convinced of evidence for a matriarchal religion that had existed throughout Europe before it was supplanted by modern patriarchy. The research, in the Celtic *Mabinogion* and Druidic tree-alphabets and other arcane sources, came in a rush. *King Jesus*, written at the same time, extended the thesis. For Graves, Jesus' error was in denying the Female, in service to the patriarchal Jehovah

who had replaced Her. *Watch the North Wind Rise*, *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, *Adam's Rib*, *The Greek Myths*, *Jesus in Rome*, *The Anger of Achilles*, and dozens of other works produced in this period further argued Graves's Goddess theory.

As the White Goddess came to dominate Graves's poetry, so she dominated his prose: years were spent pursuing his thesis through various cultures, producing work confirming Graves's reputation as a popular novelist and as at best an idiosyncratic scholar, at worst a crank whose ideas were impossible to confirm. The biggest disappointment of this period was surely *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, consuming over a decade of scholarship, and not only not re-ordering Christianity as Graves had hoped, but selling only 5,000 copies. The biggest success might have been "iconotropy," Graves's technique of interpreting historical images according to the intent of their matriarchal creators—not the corrupt patriarchy that surrounded them. Thus did everything become grist for Graves's mill of reinterpretation.

Richard Perceval Graves's work is the clearest and most complete account of the development of these ideas. When Graves applied his theories to his private life, R. P. Graves does not allow the resulting minor stories to overshadow Graves's stature as poet, novelist, mythographer and, increasingly in the 1960s and 1970s, public man of letters. With his third volume, R. P. Graves has written the definitive biography, distinguished by thorough research, a readable style, and a sense of perspective on his uncle's achievements.

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Citation: John Woodrow Presley. Review of Graves, Richard Perceval, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.

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