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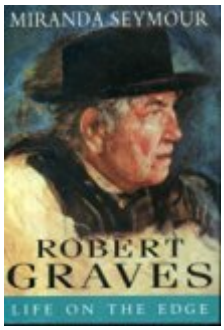
Miranda Seymour. *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge.* New York: Doubleday, 1995. xx + 523 pp. $37.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-385-40423-5.



Reviewed by John Woodrow Presley

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Miranda Seymour quite candidly admits that "Laura Riding's death in 1993 simplified my task" as a biographer. Free of the necessity to rewrite central sections of Graves' biography that dealt with this enigmatic woman, Seymour could examine Graves' relationship with Riding and with other women in greater detail than had any previous biographer. Writing ten years after Graves' death, she "had the goodwill of the family," as well as access to many previously unexamined letters held in both public and private collections. As a result Seymour is able to shed a great deal more light on the Graves- Nicholson-Riding-Phibbs "Holy Circle," the breakdown of which precipitated Graves' self-imposed exile from England for most of his life.

The difficulty is that the more one knows about Robert Graves' life and his relationships with women (of immense interest mainly because of Graves' theories of the muse and of matriarchal religions and because, as Seymour says, "in twentieth century poetry, Robert Graves is to love what Philip Larkin is to mortality") the less explanation seems possible. Or the more correct the perfectly obvious explanations seem.

Graves' career as a poet first flamed brightly as one of the War Poets of WWI. Left traumatized and neurasthenic by the war, Graves struggled first with poetry and then with poetic theory, as his collections seemed marginalized by his interests in ballads, nursery rhymes, and psychological terrors. As the marriage into which he'd fled began to disintegrate, he invited into his marriage, and into his poetic career, the American poet Laura Riding. Until 1939, she dominated his ideas about poetry and about virtually everything else, in a domination inexplicable to readers of the biographies, to people who knew them, and even to readers of Riding's dense, impenetrable, maddening prose.

Graves chose to support his poetry and his life in Mallorca first with Riding, and then with his second wife Beryl, by writing what he dismissed as popular prose. He is, of course, best known for the Claudius novels and *Goodbye to All That*, but he also wrote *Homer's Daughter*, *Wife to Mr. Milton*, *King Jesus*, *Seven Days in New Crete*, and *Antigua, Penny, Puce*, which has remained in print in a Penguin edition since 1937

and which Philip Larkin has called "unique among novels. . .for its variety of invention." In all, there were 20 volumes of fiction written to support Graves' 55 volumes of poetry, and this in addition to edited works and translations and works such as ***The White Goddess*** and ***The Nazarene Gospels Restored***, even a social history of England between the wars, ***The Long Weekend***--over 130 books in all. I doubt that it will shock readers to learn that Graves always hoped for a windfall in movies or the theater to solve his financial problems and allow him to focus even more consistently on his poetry. He was a man with maniacal work habits, even to the point of ignoring his family for the sake of his writing.

While consciously courting popularity in his prose, Graves never wavered from his mastery of traditional subjects and forms in his poetry. By the 1950's, as Seymour points out, Graves was no longer the outsider, but was The Old Master for English poets of The Movement and even younger poets. His critical reputation was secure. However, by the 1960's Graves had begun a series of attachments/infatuations/dedications to a series of at least four younger and younger women; the vicissitudes of his relationships with these "muses" spurred him to devote all his poetry to the single subject of love, only sometimes in the mythic dimension of a poet's devotion to the White (and later the Black) Goddess. Seymour clearly thinks most of this late poetry inferior, and just as clearly indicates that Graves took on too many prose projects, until he was in danger of becoming a hack. His last efforts are problematic: a translation of the "original" ***Rubaiyyat*** in 1967 was supposedly based on a twelfth century version of the masterpiece that has never been seen; the 1975 ***Collected Poems*** excised many wonderful poems from the early and middle periods of Graves' production, while almost two-thirds of the book was made up of the monotonous, if skilled, late muse-poetry.

Did Graves know what he was doing? "Not entirely," is Seymour's answer. The 1960's, she says, were the beginning of a long slide into senility, Graves' early personality changes masked by his famous eccentricity. "He became increasingly convinced that he was chosen to act, with the help of the muses, as the Goddess's human spokesman." His poetry became more one-dimensional, his prose, particularly his criticism, as idiosyncratic as his behavior. Finally, his physical health failed; Graves spent the last ten years of his life in virtually silent dementia.

1995 was the centenary anniversary of Graves' birth. In addition to Seymour's ***Robert Graves: Life on the Edge***, Graves' son William produced a memoir, ***Wild Olives: Life in Majorca with Robert Graves***; Graves' nephew, Richard Perceval Graves, published volume three of his own massive, and surprisingly lyrical, biography, ***Robert Graves and the White Goddess 1940-1985***, and Martin Seymour-Smith published a revised, second edition of his ***Robert Graves: His Life and Work***. Originally published in 1982, the first edition of this critical biography unfortunately identified Seymour-Smith as a Graves partisan. For the 1995 edition, Symour-Smith added some 30,000 words, mainly material "too sensitive to relate in 1982," three years before Graves' death, and material on the problematic Riding- Graves relationship. In the new introduction and in the notes (which might be read alone as a lesson in aggravated candor), Seymour- Smith's relief that he will--probably--not be hounded by Riding or her disciples is almost palpable. (In addition to this spate of biographies, 1995 saw two international Robert Graves scholarly congresses, and the Carcanet Press in England began its "Robert Graves Programme," which includes Graves' ***Collected Writings on Poetry***; ***Complete Poems***, volumes 1 and 2; the ***Centenary Selected Poems***; and the ***Collected Stories*** so far.)

Miranda Seymour is an accomplished novelist as well as a biographer. She tells a very com-

pelling, fast-paced life story here, filled with incident, puzzles, and enigmas. She presents much new information which will interest students of Graves. But, in her understandable focus on its subject, she has left many enigmas unresolved, particularly Graves' alternately monstrous and submissive relationships with women. For all Seymour's addition of detail and context, such as Graves' own mother's oppressive Victorian religion, Randall Jarrell may still have been correct in accusing Graves of "making the accidental circumstances of your life into the necessary conditions of all lives" and thus transforming himself "from an accident-prone analysand into an emblematic Oedipus." I do not find, in any of these biographies, details that negate Jarrell's original explanation, but rather many details that elaborate upon it.

Robert Graves biography is often as fascinating for what it can't tell us, as it is compelling for what it can tell us: the effects of fame and popularity on a writer who had once been forced to withdraw from the terrors of the modern world. Graves is almost alone in his ability to use virtually the same materials in the novels he derided as potboilers in some of the finest poetry written in this century and in books of discursive nonfiction that continue to raise controversy in fields as different as Biblical and Talmudic scholarship, mythography, and literary criticism. And he frequently wrote all three versions before breakfast.

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