

The Art of Collaboration:

Essays on Robert Graves and his Contemporaries

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INTRODUCTION

Dunstan Ward

The essays in this book explore the phenomenon of creative collaboration, through some of the many remarkable instances which Robert Graves's work provides. While his partnership with Laura Riding is undoubtedly the most celebrated – and controversial – of these, Graves formed numerous other artistic and intellectual alliances. His collaborators included Siegfried Sassoon (early poetry), Nancy Nicholson (*Treasure Box*), William Nicholson (*The Owl*), T. E. Lawrence (*Lawrence and the Arabs*), Basanta Mallik (*Mock Beggar Hall*), John Crowe Ransom (*Grace After Meat*), Frank Richards (*Old Soldiers Never Die*), Alan Hodge (*The Long Week-End*, *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*), his secretary Karl Gay (prose works), Lynette Roberts (*The White Goddess*), Joshua Podro (*The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, *Jesus in Rome*), Beryl Graves (*The Infant with the Globe*), James Metcalf (*Adam's Rib*), Janet de Glanville (*The Greek Myths*), Alastair Reid (*The Twelve Caesars*, *Nausicaa*), Edward Ardizzone (*The Penny Fiddle*, *Ann at Highwood Hall*), Raphael Patai (*Hebrew Myths*), Paul Hogarth (*Majorca Observed*), Idries Shah and Omar Ali-Shah (*The Sufis*, *The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyām*). Then there were others whom he consulted: solicitors, stamp collectors, archaeologists, linguists, classicists . . . All, in their diverse ways, were involved with Graves in producing a substantial proportion of his 140 books – poetry, novels, biography, criticism, anthropology, social history, mythology, Biblical studies, translation, and children's books.

As Fran Brearton observes, "It is hardly possible in the scope of this book even to exhaust personnel, let alone exhaust theories of

collaboration in relation to his *œuvre*.”¹ Nevertheless, these fourteen essays, originating from the Seventh International Robert Graves Conference in Mallorca in 2006, present a considerable range of collaborators and of types of collaboration.

Graves’s influence on his fellow-Fusilier friends Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen was of vital importance. Max Egremont, in his account of their “troubled friendship”, quotes Sassoon’s acknowledgement that, during the months after Graves met him in France in November 1915, “He taught me to be natural and idiomatic.” Graves’s help to Owen was given “at exactly the right moment”, Dominic Hibberd argues. It had “three main elements: technical advice, a useful steer away from Sassoon’s overpowering influence, and, above all, strong encouragement”.

Technical advice from Graves was less welcome to another friend, T. E. Lawrence, when it came in the form of rewriting his five-stanza, twenty-two-line dedicatory poem for *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as a single six-line stanza. Lawrence rejected it, as Georgianne Ensign Kent recounts, but Graves published it himself and persisted with his theory that the dedicatee was a woman.

“A sense of kinship with poets of an earlier age can be as strong as any contemporary bond”, Robert Graves believed. Michael Irwin traces aspects of the “kinship” between Graves and Thomas Hardy, who was eighty when they met in 1920, and in particular a clear prefiguring, in poetry and fiction, of *The White Goddess*.

“The American poet with whom he felt the most kinship was John Crowe Ransom.” This (reported by Robert Creeley) is the starting point for Matthew Betts’s analysis of the Graves-Ransom collaboration on *Grace After Meat*, in the light of Graves’s concept of “a multiple poetic self” as expounded in *On English Poetry* (1922).

It was Ransom who brought Robert Graves and Laura Riding together – a notable consequence of the network of alliances that interconnect these essays. Ransom favourably reviewed *On English Poetry* in the first issue of his magazine *The Fugitive*, published poems in it by Graves and Riding – including “The Quids”, which Graves

1. Quotations are from the essays or from works cited in them.

admired – and sent him Riding's poems in manuscript. Thus began what Fran Brearton describes as one of the twentieth century's "most significant instances" of "the collaboration between an established writer with an intellectual partner who is also spouse/lover". Karen R. Daubert studies the earliest, "transitional" period of their collaboration through close readings of their 1925–1927 poetry, noting "significant thematic strata that attest indirectly to an ongoing conversation". Another perspective on the Graves-Riding partnership is provided by Candida Ridler's essay, which views it in relation to their friendship with Len Lye, the New Zealand artist who designed books for their Seizin Press and the dust jacket for *Good-bye to All That*; her illustrations bring an added dimension to *The Art of Collaboration*.²

Extraordinarily prolific in his correspondence as in everything else,³ Graves conducted much of his collaboration through letters. Selma Karayalçın affirms that the "intense and esoteric" correspondence between Graves and the poet Lynette Roberts is the key to understanding "the evolution of Graves's thought processes as he came to write *King Jesus* and *The White Goddess*"; and John W. Presley finds that the "mix of argument, scholarship, and mutual respect makes the Graves-Podro letters fascinating", even if the reception of *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* was to be "a huge disappointment".

Graves brought both poetic insight and his own erudition to bear on the collaboration with Roberts, who was steeped in early Welsh language, poetry and folklore, and with Joshua Podro, "a wonderful Hebrew and Aramaic scholar". Another such combination of rigour and intuition is examined in Nancy Rosenfeld's essay on Graves's collaboration with the Jewish ethnologist Raphael Patai on *Hebrew*

2. For further essays on the Graves-Riding alliance, see Carla Billitteri, "Riding-Graves: The Meaning of Collaboration", and Dunstan Ward, "Laura Riding's Role in the Poetry of Robert Graves: A Case of 'Multiple Authorship'?", *Gravesiana*, 3, no. 1, 2007, 86–100 and 101–117.

3. The archive from Graves's home in Mallorca at St John's College, Oxford, contains over 10,000 letters; there are many more in other collections.