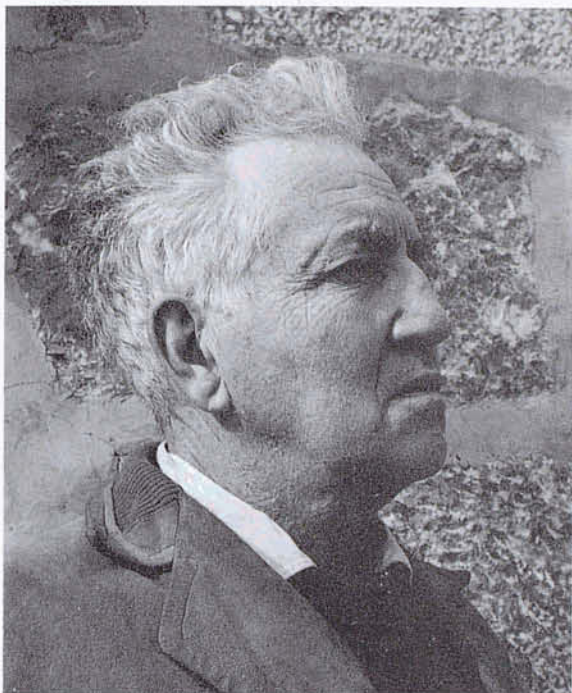


ROBERT GRAVES: A BRITISH POET IN THE MEDITERRANEAN



IN MAY 1946, AFTER AN ABSENCE OF TEN YEARS IMPOSED BY THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR, ROBERT GRAVES WAS ABLE TO RETURN TO DEIÀ, THE VILLAGE IN MALLORCA THE POET CONSIDERED HIS REAL HOME. SO HE RESUMED HIS STAY ON THE ISLAND WHERE HE DIED AT THE AGE OF NINETY, HAVING PUBLISHED ALMOST 150 BOOKS.

LUCIA GRAVES AUTHOR

In 1929, after completing his heart-felt autobiography *Goodbye to All That*, my father, Robert Graves, put his words into action and literally said goodbye to his homeland, intent on starting a new life. He was thirty-four years old.

"I came away from England after a painful domestic crisis. But that was merely the provocation—I had already decided against living permanently in England when it suddenly dawned on me that the country was grossly overcrowded, its optimum population being about eight million, as in Tudor times. [...] I wanted to go where town was still town; and country, country; and where the horse plough was not yet an anachronism. There were other desiderata, naturally, such as good wine, good neighbours, and not too great a distance from the Greenwich meridian."

All this he found in the village of Deià,

where in the company of the American poet Laura Riding he spent the next seven years writing—primarily poetry—intensely and obsessively. The commercial success of his autobiography allowed him to build a large stone house just beyond the village of Deià, with the Teix mountain looming behind and the sea visible in the distance below; but despite his wish to concentrate solely on his poetry, financial difficulties soon forced him to write a new best-seller: the result was *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, two novels which together with *Goodbye to All That* became his most widely read books.

In the summer of 1936, a few days after the outbreak of the Civil War, Robert Graves and Laura Riding were given only a few hours to abandon their home in Deià and join other British nationals who were being evacuated from Spain on board the battleship *H.M.S. Gren-*

ville. Then came World War II. Robert Graves, having parted from Laura Riding, established himself in Devonshire with his new family (which included me), and waited impatiently for the day when the Franco government would grant him the visas to return.

"The longer the war lasted, the more vivid grew my dreams of Mallorca. [...] My longings were also for the fruit in my garden; the smell of olive-wood fires; the chatter of the card players in the village café; the buoyant green waters of the cove; the sun-blistered rocks of the Teix mountain; my quiet white-washed study; the night noises of sheep-bells, owls, nightingales, frogs and distant surf..."

At last, in May 1946, my father was able to return to what he considered his real home. Everything in his house had been carefully looked after during his absence—linen, silver, documents—and the friends he had made in the village



THE NORTH COAST OF MALLORCA

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wept with joy. And so he resumed his life-long stay on the island where he died at the age of ninety, having published almost 150 books.

My father provided us children with a very British home life: bonfires on Guy Fawkes night (the "guy" was humorously described to his local friends as a Catholic martyr), a traditional English Christmas to the smallest detail, in-

cluding mince pies and listening to the Queen on the BBC World Service, afternoon tea all the year round and many a British meal. But at the same time we were totally integrated in the village life, and well aware of my father's deep attachment to Deià and his respect for the local people and their way of life. We also noticed how during the long Franco regime he kept discreetly out of

Spanish politics. He spoke Spanish well, but with a curious accent which he never lost, and his attempts at speaking Majorcan, though not very successful, were laudable —we children all spoke it fluently, much to his pleasure. His absences from the island were rare, and when he was away he was always homesick and eager to return. But to what extent was Deià and the



THE PORT AT SÖLLER



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Mediterranean present in his work? Though we do find references in his poetry to the beautiful landscape of Deià, there are far fewer than we might have at first expected from a poet who lived there for over fifty years. This is because Graves's poetic imagery is deeply rooted in the scenery of Harlech, a village in North Wales where as a young boy he received his first strong visual impressions of nature. His family had a holiday house there and he had spent the happiest times of his childhood roaming freely around the Welsh countryside with his brothers and sisters. Strangely enough, despite the obvious differences in vegetation, there is a certain similarity between Deià and Harlech. Both have the same rugged, primitive landscape of mountain and sea and it is my view that one of the reasons why he chose Deià in the first place was that he felt comfortable in that geographical setting. This is an important connection, because throughout his work his interest in Mediterranean and Celtic mythology became increasingly apparent, and the marriage of the two in his book *The White Goddess* (first published in 1948) was to have an extraordinary impact on all his future work. *The White Goddess* is basically a study of both Greek and Celtic myths

and conveys Graves's conviction that there existed throughout pre-classical Europe, North and South, a matriarchal society which was later supplanted by a patriarchal system, still in force today. This, according to Graves, upset the natural balance of the world by undermining the feminine forces of nature, instinct and magic which are also the essence of poetry.

After *The White Goddess*, Graves took a renewed interest in Greek mythology and his poetry from that time onwards is imbued with classical references. Much of the fifties and sixties were spent reinterpreting ancient myths in the light of his new matriarchal theories, both in novels and in scholarly studies, and there is no doubt that living on a Mediterranean island must have made him "connect" better with Greece. The link between Graves and Greek mythology became so strong that journalists, taking one look at his robust appearance and the Mediterranean landscape in which he lived, would often describe him as a Greek god and Deià as a Majorcan Delphi!

As with Greece, so with Rome. In the Claudius novels, written in the early days of his Mediterranean "self-exile", Graves shows such a strong connection with Imperial Rome, and describes it so

vividly, that he seems to eliminate all barriers between past and present, transporting his readers with him to a long-lost world. This is undoubtedly due to the force of his poetic imagination, but would Imperial Rome ever have been portrayed so convincingly had he remained in England? Was this poetic force enhanced by the fact that he lived in a Mediterranean setting? Whatever the answer to that question, the fact remains that being British, living on a Mediterranean island and writing masterfully on such subjects, Robert Graves has provided a natural link with the Classical world for the general Anglo-Saxon reader.

But however much, or however little, Deià –with its ancient olive trees, its terraced valley and its brilliant night sky– is visible in his work, its influence, in a less visible way, was profound; for this Mediterranean village was, above all, his shelter, the place he had originally chosen to isolate himself from the literary circles of his time and the growing mechanization of society. There he was able to live a simple, rural life, and in that respect his home was crucial to his work, for it supplied him with the necessary peace in which to create, to pursue his scholarly interests and discover his own poetic voice. ■