WORLD WAR I IN THE LIFE AND POETRY

OF ROBERT GRAVES

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WORLD WAR I IN THE LIFE AND POETRY
OF ROBERT GRAVES

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Robert Graves has been one of the most prolific and most versatile British writers of this century. He began writing, mostly poetry, while in preparatory school; and his earliest published works date from 1910, when he was fifteen years old. Graves considers himself primarily a poet; he has been widely quoted as saying that he writes prose for money and poetry for love. In addition to poetry, Graves's works include biography, autobiography, essays, short stories, plays, novels, reviews, criticism, translations (from Greek, Latin, Spanish, and German), and studies in mythology and religion. Yet, after terminating an early and brief affiliation with the Georgians, Graves has, throughout his long career, avoided any association with readily-identifiable groups or movements. His works, therefore, highly personal and often eccentric, lie outside what is generally referred to as "the mainstream of English literature."

Although Graves has been well known in England for more than fifty years, until the sixties little had been written about him and his works other than brief articles and
reviews. In the past decade, however, several full-scale studies have been made. Chief among these studies are J. M. Cohen's *Robert Graves* (1960), a general survey of Graves's works; Douglas Day's *Swifter Than Reason* (1963), a study of Graves's poetry and criticism; Daniel Hoffman's *Barbarous Knowledge* (1967), a study of myth in the poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir; and Michael Kirkman's *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (1969), a study of Graves's poetry.

It was as a soldier-poet of World War I that Graves first gained public recognition. He served in the Royal Welch Fusiliers from 1914 to 1919; and during that time he published two volumes of poetry, *Over the Brazier* and *Fairies and Fusiliers*. Both volumes were well received by a public which was eager to read poetry about the war, especially that which had been written by soldiers actually involved in the fighting. More than ten years after the war had ended, Graves added a prose account of his war experiences. In his autobiography, *Good-bye to All That*, Graves told of his childhood, his war-time experiences, and his post-war struggle to overcome neurasthenia.

Graves's critics have expressed varied opinions concerning his war poetry and his autobiography. In general they praise the autobiography; but, while not denying Graves's
present stature as a poet, they find little to commend in his war poetry. In *Robert Graves* J. M. Cohen says that although his experiences qualified him to write about the war, Graves's war poems "arouse no deep feeling."\(^1\) It is *Good-bye to All That*, Cohen says, which gives the real picture of Graves's experiences in France.\(^2\) However, in an article published five years later, Cohen's comments are somewhat different. In "The Earth Is Hungry" Cohen groups Graves with Blunden, Owen, Sassoon, and others; and he says that these poets "bear true witness" concerning the war.\(^3\)

Douglas Day, on the other hand, expresses the opinion that most of Graves's early poems "suffer from the vagueness, whimsy, and self-conscious quaintness that marked the low point of the romantic movement in England."\(^4\) He notes, however, that though the poems are essentially banal, "they are nonetheless touching reminders of the pathetically childlike innocence of Graves's generation."\(^5\) Graves, says Day, "had

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no time for growing up; he was little more than a boy when he went into combat, and his responses to war could not help being boyish."⁶

Daniel Hoffman dismisses Graves's early poetry as simple, sweet, and typically Georgian; but he expresses more respect for Graves's autobiography. *Good-bye to All That*, he says, has much in common with *Red Badge of Courage* and *A Farewell to Arms*, and it is "one of the greatest descriptions of war in the twentieth century."⁷

Michael Kirkham comments that Graves in his early poetry contrived "to escape from conflict into the folk world of pastoral and simplified emotion"⁸ and that all his early poems are on "themes permitting the simplest kind of responses and treatment."⁹ Kirkham concludes that although the war matured certain other soldier-poets, "in some respects it had the opposite effect on Graves: It did much to retard his development."¹⁰

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⁶Ibid.
⁹Ibid., p. 21.
¹⁰Ibid., p. 22.
The consensus of Graves's critics, with the possible exception of Cohen, is that his poetry does not give a true indication of the war's effect upon him. In general they imply that Graves wrote his war poems primarily as an anodyne for his experiences and that the poems are largely regressive, being imbued with the out-moded spirit of nineteenth century romanticism. The first implication is undoubtedly true. Even before the war Graves wrote poetry in an attempt to make his experiences more bearable, and he continued that practice both during and after the war. The second implication is not, however, entirely true. There is a discernible difference between Graves's earlier war poems and his later ones. A number of his earlier poems are sentimental and romantic, but a number of his later ones are harsh and realistic.

When his war poems and his autobiography are considered together, it becomes apparent that Graves's poetry does indeed indicate how the war affected him. Both his poetry and his autobiography reveal that Graves was unprepared for the experiences of war and that he tried to come to terms with war's reality in a variety of ways. When his efforts were not successful, he became hopeless and bitter. During his long years of war service he developed neurasthenia, which continued to plague him long after the war was over.
The purpose of this thesis is to explore in depth the effect which World War I had on the life and early poetry of Robert Graves, primarily by tracing his involvement in the war as revealed directly in his autobiography and by examining his responses to that involvement as revealed indirectly in the two volumes of poetry which he wrote during the war. Chapter I presents an overview of Graves's career as a writer and notes the opinions expressed by some of Graves's critics concerning his autobiography and his early poetry. Chapter II makes a brief sketch of British soldier-poets of World War I and their war poetry in order to clarify Graves's place in his artistic environment. Chapter III traces Graves's life through his first year and a half of war service and examines his early poetic responses to the war. Chapter IV traces Graves's last three years of war service and examines his later poetic responses to the war. Chapter V briefly traces Graves's post-war struggle against neurasthenia and makes a comment on his post-war poetry. Chapter VI concludes that World War I greatly affected the life and poetry of Robert Graves and that his poetry is as precise a record of the war's effect as is his autobiography.
CHAPTER II

BRITISH SOLDIER-POETS OF WORLD WAR I

Poetry, just prior to World War I, was somewhat out of fashion in England. Thomas Hardy was widely respected, and Rudyard Kipling, John Masefield, and Robert Bridges had many admirers; but literary interest was concentrated more on the novel and the play than on poetry.\(^1\) The war, however, changed all that. The emotional upheaval caused by the war stimulated a vast outpouring of poetic expression. The result was a plethora of war poetry, much of it written by young soldier-poets. Although a great deal of this war poetry was of little value, being "as eager and burning as young hearts could make it," still "all found a ready market because parents and friends wished a record of their endangered boys, and--by some extension of sentiment--of the endangered boys of others."\(^2\)

At first much war poetry was romantic in tone, but after a brief time this attitude changed. Those poets who were

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\(^{2}\)Ibid., p. 319.
involved in the fighting began to view the war more realistically. They "looked upon everything as if for the last time, which for many it was." They felt alone and isolated in a brotherhood of war, apart from women, home, civilians, and politicians. As the war wore on year after year and the number of casualties soared, they lost faith in their military leaders and became disillusioned with the professed aims of the war. Often they directed their bitterness toward those politicians whom they blamed for starting and prolonging the war through political error and deceit. And when, after four long years, the end of the war did finally come, it brought peace but not peace of mind. Those poets who survived could not easily forget what they had endured. Long after the war was over, many "lived under a heavy fog" of neurasthenia.

Rupert Brooke was the first soldier-poet to attract widespread attention; and it was he, more than anyone else, who aroused renewed interest in poetry at the beginning of the war. Brooke was handsome and charming, and he had a

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5Swinnerton, p. 274.
wide circle of friends. Furthermore, he had already established himself as a promising young poet before the war began. A friend of Edward Marsh, Brooke had been instrumental in the preparation of *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912*; and, along with three other poets, he had published a quarterly anthology called *New Numbers*. The fourth and final edition of the quarterly, published just as England entered the war, contained a number of Brooke's patriotic sonnets which excited great interest and approval. Brooke enlisted immediately and obtained a commission in the Royal Naval Division. After serving in the Antwerp engagement, he was sent to the Dardanelles; but he saw no action there. En route to Gallipoli he contracted a lip infection which resulted in blood-poisoning. In April, 1915, Brooke died and was buried on the island of Skyros. His death shocked and grieved not only his many friends but also thousands who had read and admired his poetry. Although most critics agree that his poetic talents were not great, Brooke's striking physical appearance, his graceful manners, his facile, easily-appreciated verse, and his tragic, untimely death epitomized the romantic image of the British soldier-poet.

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Charles Sorley was another personable, promising young poet who died early in the war. Sorley was visiting in Germany when the war broke out. Although he had many friends in Germany and felt that the war was fratricidal, Sorley returned to England immediately and dutifully enlisted. He was commissioned in the Suffolk Regiment and was sent to France in May, 1915. The following October he was shot in the head by a sniper as his company was moving into the battle of Loos. Sorley was only twenty when he was killed, and his war experience had been short; yet his poems reveal remarkable maturity. In the opinion of at least one critic, J. M. Cohen, Sorley "had probably greater promise as a poet than any other British casualty of his generation."  

The poetic reputation of Julian Grenfell rests on one poem which he wrote only a few weeks before his death. Grenfell was a professional soldier, eldest son and heir of Lord Desborough. After leaving Oxford, where he "seems to have excelled at everything," Grenfell entered the army and served a number of years in South Africa. When the war began,  

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8Ibid., p. 753.
his regiment was immediately transferred to France. There Grenfell served meritoriously and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. Early in May, 1915, he sent home his poem "Into Battle." Soon afterward he was struck by a shell-splinter, and he died of blood-poisoning two weeks later. "Into Battle," which has been widely anthologized, is one of the few poems by an amateur to have stood the test of time.  

These poets--Brooke, Sorley, and Grenfell--generally expressed the mood of optimism which was prevalent at the beginning of the war. "This was the period of euphoria, when it was still possible to believe that war was a tolerably chivalrous affair, offering welcome opportunities for heroism and self-sacrifice, and to hope that this particular war would be over in six months." But the war did not prove to be a chivalrous affair, and it was not over in six months. Those soldier-poets who either died late in the war or else survived it came to view the war quite differently, and among these was Robert Graves.

Issac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen were both killed in the last year of the war. Both men were physically unfit for

10I. M. Parsons, Men Who March Away: Poems of the First World War (New York, 1965), p. 188.
11Ibid., p. 16.
military service, yet both enlisted. Art was Rosenberg's chosen career; he attended Slade School for three years and had an exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery before the war. He wrote poetry too, however, and published a volume of poems called Night and Day in 1912. He enlisted in 1915 and served in the King's Own Royal Lancasters until he was killed in April, 1918. His "Trench Poems," which constitute only about ten per cent of his total collected works, "have an originality of approach, a richness of imagery, and a control of tone as exceptional as they are individual."\(^{12}\)

Wilfred Owen was a dreamy, precocious youth who loved poetry from an early age and was a great admirer of Keats. He matriculated at London University and later worked in France as a tutor for two years. He returned to England in 1915, enlisted immediately, and was sent back to France the following year. After spending many months in the trenches, Owen developed neurasthenia and was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh, Scotland. While recuperating there, he made friends with Siegfried Sassoon, who gave him advice and much-needed encouragement. In August, 1917, Owen returned to France, where he engaged in front-line service and was awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous bravery. On

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 22.
November 4, 1918, just one week before the Armistice, Owen was killed while leading his company across the Sambre Canal. Although a few of his poems had been published in magazines, Owen was virtually unknown at the time of his death. In 1920 Siegfried Sassoon collected Owen's poems into a volume, and in 1931 a larger edition of his poems was published. Owen wrote vividly and realistically about the war; moods of anger and pity are predominant in his poetry. Owen's reputation as a soldier-poet has grown steadily, and he is "now almost universally recognized as the most original and important poet of the period."13

Soldier-poets like Rosenberg and Owen who continued to live and to fight almost to the end wrote not about their visions of glory but about the realities of war. They wrote about the casualties, the wounded and the dead. They wrote about the horror and the tragedy of war. To these soldier-poets the war ceased to be a glorious adventure and became instead a deadly ordeal.

Robert Nichols, Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves survived the war, but all four were profoundly affected by their war experiences and all suffered the effects of neurasthenia for many years after the war ended. Nichols,

13Ibid., p. 190.
after a year at Oxford, enlisted and was commissioned in the Royal Field Artillery. He served briefly on the Belgian-French front; but after the battle of the Somme he was invalided with neurasthenia, spent five months in the hospital, and saw no more active duty. Late in the war he held a desk job in the Ministry of Labor; and, still later, he served with the British Mission in New York. He returned to Oxford after the war, and from 1921 to 1924 he was Professor of English Literature at the University of Tokyo.

Edmund Blunden entered the army in 1916 and was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Royal Sussex Regiment. He served almost throughout the war as an infantryman and was awarded the Military Cross. Like his friends Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, Blunden wrote poetry that was critical of the war; but his criticism was not so bitter as theirs. Although plagued by neurasthenia, he completed his education at Oxford after the war; and from 1924 to 1927 he was Professor of English Literature at the University of Tokyo, following in Robert Nichols' footsteps. In 1928 he published *Undertones of War*, an autobiographical account of his war experiences.

Siegfried Sassoon had been graduated from Cambridge and was living the life of a dilettante in London when the war
began. In 1915 he joined the Royal Welch Fusiliers. He entered the war fired with patriotic zeal, and his daring exploits soon won for him the Military Cross. His experiences, however, filled him with horror; and he became more and more convinced that the war was senseless and evil. After recuperating from a wound in the neck, received while fighting on the Hindenburg Line, Sassoon publicly declared himself finished with war and refused to return to service. Instead of being court-martialled, he was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital to be treated for neurasthenia. After his release from Craiglockhart, he served briefly in Palestine before returning to France, where he was again wounded. Throughout the last years of the war Sassoon steadfastly maintained his pacifistic views. During this time he wrote "some of the most savagely satirical anti-war poems ever written."¹⁴ His poetry became quite popular after the war, as the climate of literary opinion also turned pacifistic.¹⁵ When the war was over, Sassoon became a journalist. He toured the United States reading his poetry and talking about the war. He also collected, edited, and published the works of other soldier-poets. In the late twenties he began writing a

¹⁴Ibid., p. 191.


Robert Graves's experiences in World War I paralleled closely those of Nichols, Blunden, and Sassoon. He was preparing to enter Oxford when the war began. He joined up immediately and was commissioned in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. He was sent to France early in 1915 and participated in the La Bassée offensive later that year. In July, 1916, Graves was seriously wounded in the Somme offensive. After recovering from his wounds, he again returned to duty and served until after the war was over. All in all, Graves spent more time on active duty than any other British soldier-poet.¹⁶

Like other soldier-poets, Graves was greatly affected by the war. He entered the war with illusions which he soon lost, he endured physical and mental anguish during the war, and he suffered from neurasthenia long after the war was over. Like other soldier-poets, he recorded his responses to the war at first in poetry and later in prose. These

¹⁶ Parsons, p. 188.
works together, the war poetry and the autobiography, are the primary sources of support for the opinions advanced at the close of the preceding chapter.
CHAPTER III

GRAVES'S EARLIER RESPONSES TO THE WAR

Robert Graves wrote and published two volumes of poetry during World War I. The war poems in *Over the Brazier* (1916) concern his entry into the service and his participation in the La Bassee offensive. The war poems in *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917) concern his participation in the Somme offensive and his subsequent service through most of 1917.

Graves wrote and published his autobiography, *Good-bye to All That*, in 1929. The book was written at a turning point in Graves's life; therefore the title is both appropriate and significant. In 1929 Graves ended his marriage to Nancy Nicholson, left his family and friends, and went to live in self-imposed exile on the island of Majorca. Thus, he was literally saying good-bye to his old life before beginning his new one. *Good-bye to All That* is not "a shapely book";¹ it was written hurriedly, in just two months, and the prose is not always of the high quality one expects from Graves judging by his later works. It is, however, a powerful book, candid, objective, and harshly real. Throughout

most of the book Graves speaks openly and freely about the events of his life. In the last chapters, however, those chapters covering the events from 1926 to 1929, he becomes reticent and obviously reluctant to reveal personal matters. He "leads up to a moment of unexplained crisis," and suddenly the book ends. Since the publication of Good-bye to All That, Graves has consistently kept his private life private.

Although it covers the events of Graves's life from his babyhood to the day he wrote the final paragraphs, his thirty-fourth birthday, Good-bye to All That is primarily a book about the war. All but the first few and the last few chapters concern Graves's war experiences and his post-war struggle to overcome neurasthenia. The book graphically recaptures "the quality of life" at that time and shows that the war "gave Graves a deep personal shock, from which, at some level, he perhaps never quite recovered." Graves's father wrote about his son in his own autobiography, To Return to All That, which was, Douglas Day says, "in part a genial chastisement of his son for having written Good-bye to All That." And Siegfried Sassoon included information

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2Ibid., p. 71. 
3Ibid., p. 15. 
5Day, p. 42.
about Graves in his own autobiographical writings. Still, Good-bye to All That is the key source-book for understanding the effect which World War I had on the life of Robert Graves.

In the opening chapters of his autobiography Graves tells of his family background, his childhood, and his schooling. His father, Albert Percival Graves, came to England from Ireland, where he had been a minor figure in the Irish literary renaissance. His mother, whose maiden name was Von Ranke, had been born in England but reared in Germany, where her father was a well-known children's doctor in Munich. His mother was thirty-five when she married A. P. Graves, a widower with five children. In Good-bye to All That Graves said, "My mother married my father largely, it seems, to help him out with his five motherless children. Having any herself was a secondary consideration." Nevertheless, she bore five children: the first two were girls and the last three were boys. Robert Graves was her third child, the eldest of her sons. She was forty when Robert was born; her husband was forty-nine. Graves commented, "The gap of two generations between my parents and me was easier in a way to bridge than a single generation gap. Children seldom quarrel

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6 Hoffman, p. 149.
7 Robert Graves, Good-bye to All That (New York, 1930), p. 15.
with their grandparents, and I have been able to think of my mother and father as grandparents."\textsuperscript{8} A. P. Graves, an extremely busy inspector of schools for the Southwark district in London, saw "practically nothing" of his children "except during the holidays."\textsuperscript{9} Mrs. Graves ran the large household and conscientiously carried out her social obligations. Both parents took an active part in various literary societies.

Mr. Graves's chief part in the education of his children was to see that they spoke properly and to administer mild corporal punishment such as spanking them with a slipper. It was Mrs. Graves's duty to provide religious instruction and to mete out mild punishment such as sending them to bed early or standing them in the corner. Graves said of himself and his sisters and brothers, "We learned to be strong moralists and spent a great deal of our time on self-examination and good resolutions."\textsuperscript{10}

Graves attended six preparatory schools before going to Charterhouse, a public school attended by about six hundred boys. The chief interests of the Charterhouse boys were "games and romantic friendships," and "schoolwork was despised by everyone."\textsuperscript{11} Graves was unhappy and unpopular at

\textsuperscript{8}\textit{Ibid.} \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{9}\textit{Ibid.} \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{10}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 16. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 52.
Charterhouse for a number of reasons. Besides being a scholar and not outstandingly good at games, he was always short of pocket money, his ready-made clothes were all wrong, and he talked too much. Furthermore, he was prudish about sex. He said, "I knew nothing about simple sex, let alone the many refinements of sex constantly referred to in school conversation. My immediate reaction was one of disgust. I wanted to run away."\(^{12}\) But the most unfortunate disability of all, Graves felt, was the inclusion of his middle name, Von Ranke, on the school list. Anti-German feeling ran high at Charterhouse, where most of the boys were sons of businessmen apprehensive of a trade war with Germany. At Charterhouse "'German' meant 'dirty German,'" and because of his name Graves had to endure many cruel pranks.\(^ {13}\)

In his second year at Charterhouse Graves, showing signs of being near to a nervous breakdown, wrote his parents that he could no longer endure life there. His parents complained to the headmaster but did not withdraw him from the school. Thereafter, Graves bore the additional burden of being treated as an informer by classmates and masters alike. His last resort, he decided, was to sham insanity. He began to write poetry and to wear straws in his hair. He joined the

\(^{12}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 53.}\) \(^{13}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 54.}\)
school Poetry Society, "a most anomalous organization for Charterhouse,"¹⁴ and found sympathetic friends. One friend suggested that he take up boxing as a means both of protecting himself and of winning a measure of respect. Graves followed that suggestion and soon became an excellent boxer. From that time on, Graves's life at school, though not happy, was at least bearable. While at Charterhouse Graves won two silver cups for boxing and was both welter- and middle-weight champion.

During his last two years at Charterhouse, Graves became friends with George Mallory, who, though he was a master at the school and Graves was a student, always treated Graves as an equal. It was Mallory, Graves said, who "told me of the existence of modern authors... I had never heard of people like Shaw, Samuel Butler, Rupert Brooke, Wells, Flecker or Masefield, and I was greatly interested in them."¹⁵ Besides being his friend and lending him books, Mallory included Graves in mountain climbing expeditions made during school holidays. Graves got great satisfaction out of climbing and called it "a sport that made all others seem trivial."¹⁶ Graves concluded that Mallory "was wasted at

¹⁴Ibid., p. 58. ¹⁵Ibid., p. 69.
¹⁶Ibid., p. 84.
He was disliked both by the students and by the masters because he broke the tradition "of concealed warfare between the boys and the masters" and "tried to treat his classes in a friendly way."

In the spring of 1914, Graves's last term at Charterhouse, England's entry into the war became imminent. Just before his graduation Graves took part in a debate in which the motion was 'this House is in favor of compulsory military service.' Graves, "a strong anti-militarist," was the principal speaker against the motion. When the vote came, there were one hundred and thirteen votes for and six against the motion. Graves, of course, cast one of the dissenting votes.

Graves was vacationing at Harlech in North Wales when war was declared. Despite his earlier pacifistic leanings, Graves enlisted just a few days afterwards. Although his secondary motivation seems to have been a patriotic desire to serve his country, Graves's primary motivation was a desire to postpone the unpleasantness which he had always associated with going to school. He explained it this way:

In the first place, though only a very short war was expected--two or three short months at the very outside--I thought that it might last just long enough to delay

17 Ibid., p. 81.  
18 Ibid.  
19 Ibid., p. 77.
my going to Oxford in October, which I dreaded. I did not work out the possibility of being actively engaged in the war. I thought that it would mean garrison service at home while regular forces were away. In the second place, I entirely believed that France and England had been drawn into a war which they had never contemplated and for which they were entirely unprepared. It never occurred to me that newspapers and statesmen could lie. I forgot my pacifism—I was ready to believe the worst of the Germans. 20

The nearest regimental depot was at Wrexham, and there Graves joined the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Since he had been in the Officers' Training Corps at Charterhouse, Graves was given a commission. He began his training on August 11, 1914. Immediately upon entering the service he became a hero to his family. His mother, who felt that her German race had "gone mad," looked upon his going as a religious act; his father was proud that Graves had "done the right thing." 21

Graves's immediate response to becoming a soldier was to write a number of poems anticipating what lay ahead of him in the war. Two typical examples of Graves's earliest war poems are "On Finding Myself a Soldier" and "The Shadow of Death." In "On Finding Myself a Soldier" Graves suggests a comparison between the unfolding of a rosebud and the unfolding of his young life. He describes his creamy rosebud "Caught in a clasp of green" and says he never doubted that

20Ibid., p. 88. 21Ibid., p. 91.
its heart would be "Like the Flush of dawn on snow." However, when the bud opened, he was "aghast" to find "A heart more red than blood." The apparent implication of the poem is that Graves feels it is his fate to die in the war.

That implication becomes an explicit statement in "The Shadow of Death." In this poem Graves says that the war will mean an end to his art, which he refers to as "The baby I nursed." He laments that he because he "must die" he "may father no longer." That which he was destined to write will never be written:

Oh my songs never sung,
And my plays to darkness blown!
I am still so young, so young,
And life was my own.

Both "On Finding Myself a Soldier" and "The Shadow of Death" are short, simple, and excessively sentimental; and both are typical of the over-emotional lyrics written by Graves and almost all other poets early in the war.

Graves underwent brief basic training; then he served several months' duty at an internment camp for enemy aliens. That he was trying to prepare himself psychologically for combat is evidenced in two slightly less sentimental poems

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23 Ibid., p. 19.
written while Graves was still in England. "A Renascence" describes the "rebirth" of soldiers who have been trained for war. Their bodies have changed from "White flabbiness" to "brown and lean." More importantly, the soldiers have

. . . steeled a tender, girlish heart,
Tempered it with a man's pride,
Learning to play the butcher's part
Though the woman screams inside--

"It's a Queer Time" conveys the impression that Graves had already experienced front-line service though, in reality, he is only anticipating how it will be. The poem begins with an introductory statement:

It's hard to know if you're alive or dead
When steel and fire go roaring through your head.

Then, in each of the four remaining stanzas, a scene of war is followed immediately by a contrasting scene of peace:

One moment you'll be crouching at your gun
Traversing, mowing heaps down half in fun:
The next, you choke and clutch at your right breast--
No time to think--leave all--and off you go . . .
To Treasure Island where the Spice winds blow,
To lovely groves of mango, quince and lime--
Breathe no goodbye, but ho, for the Red West!
It's a queer time.

You're charging madly at them yelling "Fag!"
When somehow something gives your feet drag.
You fall and strike your head: yet feel no pain
And find . . . you're digging tunnels through the hay
In the Big Barn, 'cause it's a rainy day.

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24 Ibid., p. 20.
Oh springy hay, and lovely beams to climb!
You're back in the old sailor suit again.
It's a queer time. 25

The abrupt change from a real scene of war to an imagined or remembered scene of peace both supports and illustrates the introductory statement. Bernard Bergonzi comments that the title and refrain, "It's a Queer Time," "indicates the habitual stance that Graves adopted, or tried to adopt, to the realities of war: basically, an attitude of 'stiff upper-lip' reserve, lightened with gaiety and backed by the always-possible retreat into myth." 26

Early in 1915 Graves requested and received orders to go to France. When he arrived at the base-camp near Havre, Graves was assigned a platoon of forty men. The soldiers were a mixed group: at least fourteen men were over forty, and five were under eighteen. After getting organized, Graves and his men boarded a troop-train and were taken to Bethune. There they were met by a guide who led their march to the Cambrin trenches about ten kilometers away. Graves expected Captain Dunn, his company commander, to be a stuffy middle-aged army regular with a breastful of medals. Instead, he proved to be younger even than Graves, disarmingly informal, and quite talkative. Dunn introduced Graves to the other

25 Ibid., p. 20 26 Bergonzi, p. 67.
officers, showed him around, and explained to him how things were done in the trenches.

Except during major offensive pushes, life in the trenches followed a fairly regular routine. Work went on all the time, both for safety and for health. Fire-steps, traverses, and communication trenches were constantly being dug; existing trenches, shelters, and dug-outs were kept cleared and clean; and rifles and other equipment were checked regularly. Work went on day and night; but at night sentries were doubled, and working parties were smaller. Everyone had to "stand-to" for an hour at dusk and an hour just before dawn. In "The Trenches" Graves describes the trenches and the fate of the men in them this way:

Scratches in the dirt?
No, that sounds much too nice.
Oh, far too nice.
Seams, rather, of a Greyback Shirt,
And we're the lice
Wriggling about in them a week or two.
Till one day, suddenly, from the blue
Something bloody and big will come
Like--watch this fingernail and thumb!--
Squash! and he needs no twice. 27

Day by day and night by night casualties resulted from German bombs, artillery shells, and sniper bullets; but the one thing most dreaded by everyone was gas. Graves said,

27 Graves, Over the Brazier, p.23
Gas was a nightmare. Nobody believed in the efficacy of the respirators, though we were told that they were proof against any gas the enemy could send over. Pink army forms marked "urgent" were constantly arriving from headquarters to explain how to use these contrivances. They were all contradictory. First the respirators were to be kept soaking wet, then they were to be kept dry, then they were to be worn in a satchel, then again, the satchel was not to be used.

When not in the trenches, the troops were billeted in neighboring villages. In billets life took on a semblance of normalcy. Often there were shops, theaters, comfortable beds, good meals, and available French girls. If not all that, at least there were civilian surroundings: homes, families, men, women, and children. Graves made friends with many of the French civilians whom he met while in billets, and he especially enjoyed being with the children. Graves included a number of poems written for and about children in his second volume of poetry, *Fairies and Fusiliers*. The word *fairies* in the title makes reference to the poems concerning children; and the word *fusiliers*, of course, refers to the poems concerning war.

Graves went home on leave early in September, 1915. His family was living in London, in the house formerly occupied by Graves's uncle, Robert von Ranke. Von Ranke, the German consul, had, of course, left England when war was declared;

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28Graves, *Good-bye to All That*, pp. 133-134.
and Mrs. Graves was taking care of the house in his absence. Although Graves's family was very much aware that a war was going on, most of the people in London seemed to be oblivious of that fact. To Graves, "London seemed unreality itself. In spite of the number of men in uniform in the streets, the general indifference to and ignorance about the war was remarkable. Enlistment was still voluntary. The Universal catchword was 'Business as usual.'"

Graves returned to France in time to take part in the La Bassee offensive. In "The Morning Before the Battle" Graves again expresses his fear that he will die in the battle. In this poem Graves says that he was eating cherries in a deserted rose garden when suddenly he felt Death's "chill breath." Then, he says,

\[
\text{I looked, and ah, my wraith before me stood,} \\
\text{His head all battered in by violent blows:} \\
\text{The fruit between my lips to clotted blood} \\
\text{Was transubstantiate, and the pale rose} \\
\text{Smelt sickly, till it seemed through a swift tear-flood} \\
\text{That dead men blossomed in the garden-close.} \]

Having seen his own ghost among the dead, he feels certain that he will soon die.

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\[29\text{ibid., p. 176.}\]

\[30\text{Graves, }\text{Over the Brazier}, \text{ p. 21.}\]
The La Bassee offensive, which began on September 25, 1916, was disastrous from the start. The attack was supposed to be carried out in three stages. First, gas would be discharged for forty minutes, next the German lines would be bombarded heavily, and then the men would be ordered to charge. However, no wind was blowing that night; and the gas, instead of going into the German trenches, spread backward into the British trenches. Since communication with battalion headquarters had been disrupted—a shell had exploded in the signals dug-out—the officers in the front trenches were forced to decide on immediate action. Instead of waiting for the bombardment, two companies charged the German lines and were shot down at the German wire. Two other companies, rushing out of the front trenches and back to the British support line, were caught on the British wire and machine-gunned. The Royal Welch Fusiliers, moving up in support of the remaining front-line troops, found the trenches "a nightmare."

The Germans were shelling them, and the air was filled with smoke and gas. There was "a continual scramble backwards and forwards." There were cries of "Come on!" and counter-cries of "Get back, you

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31 Graves, Good-bye to All That, p. 189.

32 Ibid., p. 190.
Reinforcements were moving forward; wounded men and stretcher-bearers were moving backward. When Graves's company reached the front line, the gas had been cut off and sprayers had cleared out most of the gas. The bombardment began at last. When it ended, the men prepared to charge; but no order came. They waited for hours; then finally they received word that the attack was off for the present. The next two days were spent getting the wounded to the dressing station, carrying away the dead, and clearing the trenches. On September 27 another attack was begun. This time there was a strong wind which carried the gas into the German trenches. After the bombardment a "feeling patrol" was sent out. When the patrol reached the German wire, "there was a burst of machine-gun and rifle fire and only two wounded men regained the trench." Again Graves's company awaited the order to attack, and again the attack was called off. No more attacks were planned after that. Graves spent the next week supervising the removal of the dead:

From the morning of September 24th to the night of October 3rd I had in all eight hours of sleep. I kept myself awake and alive by drinking about a bottle of whisky a day. I had never drunk it before and have seldom drunk it since; it certainly was good then. . . . Every night we went out to get in the dead of the other battalions. . . . After the first day or two the bodies

33Ibid. 34Ibid., p. 199.
swelled and stank. I vomited more than once while superintending the carrying. The ones that we could not get in from the German wire continued to swell until the wall of the stomach collapsed, either naturally or punctured by a bullet; a disgusting smell would float across. The colour of the dead faces changed from white to yellow-grey, to red, to purple, to green, to black, to slimy.35

On October 3 Graves's unit was relieved, and the men withdrew to billets in the village of Annezin, near Bethune. While there, Graves heard news of the fighting going on around Loos. He said, "It had been another dud show, chiefly to be remembered for the death of Charles Sorley, a captain in the Suffolks, one of the three poets of importance killed in the war. (The other two were Issac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen.)"36

In Over the Brazier there are, included in the "La Bassee" poems, three poems with the special heading of "Nursery Memories." It seems, at first glance, that these poems are misplaced, that they belong in the first half of the book along with Graves's schoolboy verse. Each poem recounts a childhood experience, and none of the poems seems to have any connection with the war. However, to each poem Graves has added, in parentheses, a comment connecting it to a real incident which occurred during the La Bassee offensive. Each

"nursery memory" thus becomes a war poem. "The First Funeral" tells of children finding a dead dog, swollen and smelly, and burying it. Graves's comment on this poem is "The first corpse I saw was on the German wires, and couldn't be buried." Michael Kirkham's comment on the poem is that it is "a sick joke" and that Graves's concealed motivation in writing it was to compensate for his own distress by deliberately offending "the moral and physical sensibilities of respectable people." "The Adventure" is a dramatic monologue in which a child tells of killing a terrible, fearsome tiger. However, when the child brings his brother to view the dead tiger, it is gone. They search and search, but a bloody rock is all that they can find. Graves's comment on this poem is "Suggested by the claim of a machine-gun team to have annihilated an enemy wire party: no bodies were found however." The third "nursery memory" is entitled "I Hate the Moon." The child speaker says that he hates the moon because it "drives people mad" and because he fears that it will do "some dreadful thing" to him. Graves's comment on this poem

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37 Graves, Over the Brazier, pp. 23-24.
38 Kirkham, p. 18.
39 Graves, Over the Brazier, p. 25.
is "After a moonlight patrol near the Brickstacks." By paralleling war experiences with childhood experiences, Graves apparently hoped to reduce the horror and fear which he felt. War experiences, he tries to convince himself, are just like childhood experiences, only worse.

"The Dead Fox Hunter," though not one of the "nursery memories," is also connected to a real incident which occurred during the La Bassee offensive. The poem, narrated by a member of the crew sent out to bring in the wounded and the dead, begins:

We found the little captain at the head;  
His men lay well aligned.  
We touched his hand--stone-cold--and he was dead,  
And they, all dead behind,  
Had never reached their goal, but they died well;  
They charged in line, and in the same line fell.

It is obvious to those who find him that the captain had died heroically. He led his men in the charge; then, when mortally wounded, he kept himself from crying out and bringing other soldiers to his aid and to their deaths:

We saw that, dying and in hopeless case,  
For others' sake that day  
He'd smothered all rebellious groans: in death  
His fingers were tight clenched between his teeth.

The "little captain" of the poem was, in fact, a real soldier. He was nicknamed "Samson" because of his small size and he

died in the manner described in the poem. In Good-bye to All That, telling of bringing in the casualties, Graves said, "The first dead body I came upon was Samson's. I found that he had forced his knuckles into his mouth to stop himself crying out and attracting any more men to their deaths." Obviously Graves was moved by Samson's exceptional bravery, because in the last two stanzas of "The Dead Fox Hunter" he says,

For those who live uprightly and die true
   Heaven has no bars or locks,
   And serves all taste . . .

In Heaven the little captain will lead the hunt,

   And the whole host of Seraphim complete
   Must jog in scarlet to his opening Meet.

In this poem, as in the "nursery memories" and others, Graves attempts to soften the impact of his war experiences. By finding heroic meaning in death, Graves renders death less fearsome and more bearable.

The poem "Limbo" is also directly related to the events of the La Bassee offensive. In the first part of this poem Graves describes the ordeal of the battle in detail:

41Graves, Good-bye to All That, p. 194.

42Graves, Over the Brazier, p. 28.
After a week spent under raining skies,
    In horror, mud and sleeplessness, a week
Of bursting shells, of blood and hideous cries
    And the ever-watchful sniper: where the reek
Of death offends the living . . . but poor dead
    Can't sleep, must lie awake with the horrid sound
That roars and whirs and rattles overhead
    All day, all night, and jars and tears the ground;
And the dying whisper: "Parapet's too low,
    Collect those bodies . . . quick . . build them up there!"

Then the poem ends exactly as the real offensive ended for
Graves:

And then one night relief comes, and we go
    Miles back into the sunny cornland where
Babies like tickling, and where tall white horses
    Draw the plough leisurely in quiet courses.43

Again in this poem as in "It's a Queer Time," Graves juxta-
poses a scene of war next to a scene of peace; and again the
device is effective. Implicit in these sharply contrasting
scenes is Graves's desire to escape from the war. In a num-
ber of his later war poems Graves expresses that desire more
explicitly.

Two poems at the end of Over the Brazier reveal the
despair that Graves was beginning to feel. In "Big Words" a
youthful soldier tries to convince himself and others that
he is prepared to die in battle. The soldier, though ad-
mitting that he is "still a boy if years are counted," says,

43 Ibid., p. 22.
"I've lived those years from roof to cellar-floor,  
And feel, like grey-beards touching their fourscore,  
Ready, so soon as the need comes, to die:  
And I'm satisfied."

In war the youth has gained greater confidence in himself,  
has found faith in God, and has come to know abiding love;  
thus he is able to say,

"... oh! my cup of praise  
Brims over, and I know I'll feel small sorrow,  
Confess no sins and make no weak delays  
If death ends all and I must die tomorrow."

The poem, had it ended at this point, would have been typical of the visions-of-glory poems written early in the war. Fortunately, however, the last two lines take the poem out of the ordinary vein and make it both more realistic and more effective. The soldier had spoken the "big words" to prove that he was ready to die,

But on the firestep, waiting to attack,  
He cursed, prayed, sweated, wished the proud words back.\textsuperscript{44}

Bernard Bergonzi comments that in this poem Graves loses his customary detachment and drops the "Brooke-Grenfell attitude" which he had tried to assume.\textsuperscript{45}

In "Over the Brazier," the concluding and title poem of his first volume of poetry, Graves recalls a scene familiar in trench-warfare--soldiers warming themselves over a

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., p. 27.  \hspace{1cm}  \textsuperscript{45}Bergonzi, p. 67.
brazier. He remembers that the soldiers talked, as they often had before, of

What life to lead and where to go
After the War, after the War?

Each soldier had in mind a certain place where he would go when there was peace again. Graves thought of a cottage in Northern Wales, Willy made plans to go to Canada with his "wee wife," and Mac expressed a desire to live on a South Sea island. The poem then ends pessimistically. Graves says that the war has now wrecked the dreams of both Willy and Mac, and he asks,

... what
Better hopes has my little cottage got?46

After entering the service totally unprepared for war, Graves had tried, his poetry reveals, to cope with his situation in various ways. Before he had actually experienced combat, he assumed a sentimental and romantic attitude toward the war. After being in combat, he tried to soften the impact of the death and destruction which surrounded him by paralleling war experiences with childhood experiences and by finding heroic meaning in death. His efforts, however, were not successful. He realized he was only saying "big words," and he began to feel despair. When the La Bassee offensive was over, Graves had been in and out of the trenches

46Graves, Over the Brazier, pp. 31-32.
for five months and felt that he was past his prime. Fortunately, operations for 1915 soon ended; and Graves spent the rest of the winter training recruits and receiving additional training himself while billeted in various French villages. He prepared his poems for publication in *Over the Brazier*, and he prepared himself for his inevitable return to the trenches.
CHAPTER IV

GRAVES'S LATER RESPONSES TO THE WAR

During the winter of 1915-1916 Graves was able to relax somewhat, to regroup his emotional defenses against the war, and to enjoy the company of his fellow Fusiliers. As he was growing up, Graves had found few friends; but among the Royal Welch Fusiliers he found many. Graves had joined the Royal Welch Fusiliers by chance, simply because it happened to be the nearest regiment when he decided to enlist. However, it was, for him, a most fortunate chance. The Royal Welch Fusiliers was an ancient regiment of the line, a regiment with an unblemished history, a regiment high in standards and rich in traditions; and Graves was proud to be a part of it.

Graves's two closest friends during the war, Siegfried Sassoon and David Thomas, were both Royal Welch Fusiliers. Graves met Sassoon at Lacon shortly after the La Bassee offensive was over. He described their meeting this way:

A day or two after I arrived I went to visit C Company, where a Third Battalion officer whom I knew was commanding. The C's greeted me in a friendly way. As we were talking I noticed a book lying on the table. It was the first book (except my Keats and Blake) that I had seen since I came to France that was not either a military text-book or a rubbish novel. It was the Essays of Lionel Johnson. When I had a chance I stole a look
at the fly-leaf, and the name was Siegfried Sassoon. I looked round to see who could possibly be called Siegfried Sassoon and bring Lionel Johnson with him to the First Battalion. He was obvious, so I got into conversation with him, and a few minutes later we were walking to Bethune, being off duty until that night, and talking about poetry.¹

Graves, Sassoon, and Thomas, whom Graves described as "a simple, gentle fellow . . . fond of reading,"² were together most of the winter. The following spring, however, as preparations were being made for the Somme offensive, David Thomas was killed. He was shot in the neck while working with a company putting sandbags into position on the front trenches. At first his wound was not considered to be serious, but suddenly he began to choke. He died in the dressing station despite the surgeon's attempt to save him by performing a tracheotomy.

About his friend Graves said, "I felt David's death worse than any other death since I had been in France. It did not anger me as it did Siegfried. . . . It just made me feel empty and lost."³ Graves wrote two poems concerning the death of David Thomas. "Not Dead" is a conventional, though brief, pastoral elegy in which Graves expresses the feeling that his friend lives on in spirit. Graves says that as he

¹Graves, Good-bye to All That, p. 213.
²Ibid., p. 218.
³Ibid., p. 240.
walks through a wood he senses David's presence everywhere, in the "rough bark of the friendly oak," in the brook that "goes bubbling by," and in the sun rising at dawn. However, the feeling that Graves expresses in "Goliath and David" is not one of consolation; it is, instead, one of bitterness. In this poem Graves reverses the Biblical story: David does not kill Goliath; Goliath kills David. In the poem Graves says,

. . . the historian of that fight
Had not the heart to tell it right.

David, a "Goodly-faced boy so proud of strength," at first hurls pebble after pebble at the scornful giant; but "Goliath's shield parries every cast." The giant, "six cubits high," laughs horribly,

. . . but David, calm and brave,
Holds his ground, for God will save.

However, God does not save:

(God's eyes are dim, His ears are shut.)

"Steel crosses wood," and

"I'm hit! I'm killed!" young David cries,
Throws blindly forward, chokes . . . and dies.
And look, spike-helmeted, grey, grim,
Goliath straddles over him.5


5 Ibid., pp. 23-25.
It is obvious that in David's youthful faith and optimism Graves is bitterly satirizing the attitudes which he and other soldiers held early in the war. Although he says that "Not Dead" is "regressive," Michael Kirkham considers "Goliath and David" to be one of Graves's best war poems. The use of allegory, Kirkham says, gives "a certain sophistication" to Graves's feelings about his friend's death.

Thomas' death plunged Graves back into the despair which had engulfed him at the end of the La Bassee offensive. He said, "I knew my breaking point was near now, unless something happened to stave it off." Fortunately, something did happen to stave it off: in April, 1916, Graves was sent back to England. New gas helmets had recently been issued, and in order to use these helmets it was necessary to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. Graves, because of a boxing injury, had a displaced septum and could not breathe through his nose. He was sent to a military hospital in London to have his nose operated on.

On leave after his operation, Graves bought a little two-roomed cottage in Northern Wales like the one he had daydreamed about in "Over the Brazier." He whitewashed the

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6 Kirkham, p. 22.  
7 Ibid., p. 24.  
8 Graves, Good-bye to All That, p. 241.
cottage, furnished it sparsely, and put in a big window so that he could look over the woods and across to the sea. While there, he wrote "two or three poems . . . as a foretaste of the good life coming after the war"; and it is likely that "The Cottage" was one of those poems. In the first stanza, after speaking briefly of the previous owners of the cottage, Graves says proudly,

Now somehow it's come to me  
To light the fire and hold the key,  
Here in Heaven to reign alone.

He describes in detail the cottage and the peaceful countryside which surrounds it. Then he says, with the same pessimism he had expressed in "Over the Brazier,"

But old Death, who can't forget,  
Waits his time and watches yet,  
Waits and watches by the door.  
Look, he's got a great new net,  
And when my fighting starts afresh  
Stouter cord and smaller mesh  
Won't be cheated as before.

Nor can kindliness of Spring,  
Flowers that smile nor birds that sing,  
Bumble-bee nor butterfly,  
Nor grassy hill nor anything  
Of magic keep me safe to rhyme  
In this Heaven beyond my time.  
No! for Death is waiting by.

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9Ibid., p. 242.

10Graves, Fairies and Fusiliers, pp. 37-38.
Obviously Graves was keenly aware that his stay in the cottage was only a brief moment of peace and that his return to war would renew the possibility of his being killed. He was, in fact, almost fatalistic in his despair.

On July 1, 1916, when the Somme offensive began, Graves was immediately returned to France. As the battalions moved into position, Graves found his unit bivouacked close to Sassoon's. He asked about Sassoon and was told that he "had been doing heroic things," that he had been nicknamed 'Mad Jack' because of the reckless abandon with which he fought, and that he had been awarded a Military Cross "for bringing in a wounded lance-corporal from a mine-crater close to the German lines, under heavy fire."\[^{11}\] Graves did not get to see Sassoon because "he was down with the transport having a rest,"\[^{12}\] but he sent him a rhyming letter. While preparing to take part in another offensive push, Graves sought to escape from his fear of death by spinning fanciful daydreams about the things that he and Sassoon would do when the war was over. In "Letter to S. S. from Mametz Wood" Graves says,

\[\text{Well, when it's over, first we'll meet}\\\text{At Gweithgy Bach, my county seat}\\\text{In Wales . . .}\]

\[^{11}\]Graves, *Good-bye to All That*, pp. 251-252.\\
\[^{12}\]Ibid., p. 252.
His house there is small, only "two rooms and a roof on top,"

But oh! the country round about!
The sort of view that makes you shout
For want of any better way
Of praising God . . .

In that rugged country, he says,

... we'll rest awhile,
We'll dress our wounds and learn to smile
With easier lips; we'll stretch our legs,
And live on bilberry tart and eggs,
And store up solar energy
Basking in sunshine by the sea,
Until we feel a match once more
For anything but another war.

Then, physically and mentally restored, they will kiss their families and travel to far-away lands, "To the great hills of Caucasus," to "old Bagdad," even perhaps to "Thibet." Together they will do

... wild, tremendous things
In free adventure, quest and fight,
And God! what poetry we'll write! \(^{13}\)

The mood of optimism, obviously feigned optimism, which Graves expressed in this poem was short-lived. Before the letter could be sent, an incident occurred which jolted Graves out of his world of fantasy back into the world of reality. Although it was mid-summer, the nights were wet and cold; and Graves decided to go into Mametz Wood, which was full of dead men, to find German overcoats that he and his

\(^{13}\)Graves, *Fairies and Fusiliers*, pp. 41-44.
men could use for blankets. In *Good-bye to All That* he wrote,

I got my greatcoats and came away as quickly as I could, climbing over the wreckage of green branches. Going and coming, by the only possible route, I had to pass by the corpse of a German with his back propped against a tree. He had a green face, spectacles, close shaven black hair; black blood was dripping from the nose and beard. He had been there for some days and was bloated and stinking.*

Graves, though he had seen hundreds of corpses, was affected by the sight and added to his letter a rhymed description of the dead German. The postscript, harsh and realistic, contrasted sharply with the letter to which it was attached. Later, Graves separated it from the letter and published it under the title of "A Dead Boche." In the first stanza Graves clearly states that his objective is to dispel romantic notions about war:

To you who'd read my songs of War
And only hear of blood and fame,
I'll say (you've heard it said before)
"War's Hell!" and if you doubt the same,
Today I found in Mametz Wood
A certain cure for lust of blood:

In the second stanza he describes the dead German in starkly realistic terms:

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Where, propped against a shattered trunk
In a great mess of things unclean,
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
With clothes and face a sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard. 15

G. S. Frazer comments, and Graves's other critics agree, that in this poem Graves "presents unpleasant raw material, too close to him to be art." 16 Furthermore, he points out technical reasons for the poem's failure. First, Graves "has one terribly feeble inversion" in "things unclean," and then "he makes his main descriptive effect ..., in the weakest way, by piling up adjectives." 17 Whatever its shortcomings, the poem achieves its purpose, which is to cure blood lust and to make the reader aware that war is indeed Hell.

Only a few days after writing this poem about a dead German soldier, Graves himself was officially reported to be dead. He was one of the casualties in the attack on High Wood, which began on the morning of July 20, 1916. He described it this way:

15 Graves, Fairies and Fusiliers, p. 45.
17 Ibid.
The Germans put down a barrage along the ridge where we were lying.

It was heavy stuff, six and eight inch. There was so much of it that we decided to move back fifty yards; it was when I was running that an eight-inch shell burst about three paces behind me. I heard the explosion and felt as though I had been punched rather hard between the shoulder blades, but had no sensation of pain. I thought that the punch was merely the shock of the explosion; then blood started trickling into my eye and I felt faint and called to Moodie: "I've been hit." Then I fell down.\footnote{Graves, \textit{Good-bye to All That}, p. 261.}

His main wound was made by a piece of shell which entered his back and came out about two inches above his right nipple. Another piece of shell went through his left thigh. A bone was split in his finger, and he had a slight wound above his eye.

At the dressing station Graves was put in a corner where he remained unconscious for more than twenty-four hours. When the colonel came into the station late that night, he was told that Graves "was done for."\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 262.} The next morning, writing his usual letters of condolence, the colonel sent a letter to Graves's mother, saying in part: "... your son has died of wounds. He was very gallant, and was doing well and is a great loss."\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 263.} When the colonel made out the casualty list, he reported that Graves had died of wounds. The
casualty list was long, because only eighty men were left in the battalion which, on the night before the battle, had been about four hundred strong.

As the dead were being taken out of the dressing station on the morning of July 21, Graves was found to be breathing. He was loaded on an ambulance and taken to Heilly, the nearest field hospital. Graves was semi-conscious while at Heilly but remembered the tents as being unbearably hot. On his third day there every case in the hospital was evacuated to make room for a new wave of casualties, and Graves was sent on a hospital train to Rouen. He said, "I remember the journey only as a nightmare."\(^{21}\) In the poem "A Child's Nightmare" Graves tells of the journey and the nightmare. The poem begins with a description of the old nightmare which had haunted him in his childhood:

Through long nursery nights he stood
By my bed unwearyingly.
Loomed gigantic, formless, queer,
Purring in my haunted ear
That same hideous nightmare thing,
Talking, as he lapped my blood,
In a voice cruel and flat,
Saying for ever, "Cat! . . . Cat! . . .
Cat! . . . ."

As Graves grew up, the nightmare "faded" and "was gone."

Then, while Graves was sleeping on the hospital train, it

\(^{21}\text{Ibid., p. 265.}\)
returned to haunt him:

Morphia drowsed, again I lay
In a crater by High Wood:
He was there with straddling legs,
Staring eyes as big as eggs,
Purring as he lapped my blood,
His black bulk darkening the day,
With a voice cruel and flat,
"Cat! . . . Cat! . . . Cat! . . ." he said,
"Cat! . . . Cat! . . ." 22

The nightmare described in this poem foreshadows the terrifying hallucinations and nightmares which haunted Graves awake and asleep at the close of the war and for many years thereafter.

Shortly after Graves arrived at Rouen, an aunt of his, visiting another patient in the hospital, saw his name on a ward-door list and wrote his mother a reassuring letter. Graves was soon returned to England by hospital ship and was given a private room at Queen Alexandra's Hospital, Highgate. There Graves heard for the first time that he was supposed to be dead. "The joke," he said, "greatly contributed to my recovery." 23

The idea that his escape from death was a sort of joke is expressed in the poem "Escape." In this poem Graves describes his close brush with death, relating the experience in

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22 Graves, Fairies and Fusiliers, pp. 74-75.
23 Graves, Good-bye to All That, p. 269.
terms of Greco-Roman mythology. The poem begins with the assertion "... But I was dead, an hour or more"; then Graves tells of his journey into the Underworld:

I woke when I'd already passed the door
That Cerberus guards, and half-way down the road
To Lethe, as an old Greek signpost showed.

He saw above his swinging stretcher "the subterrene sky," and he "felt the vapours of forgetfulness" in his nostrils. But he was saved just in time by Proserpine,

... who saw me wake,
And, stooping over me, for Henna's sake
Cleared my poor buzzing head and sent me back
Breathless, with leaping heart along the track.

"Angry hosts" roared and clattered after him, but to them he shouted,

"Life! life! I can't be dead! I won't be dead!
Damned if I'll die for anyone! . . ."

Graves's tone in the last stanza is especially jocular. He reaches the doorway of the Underworld only to find it blocked by three-headed Cerberus. With his revolver gone, "no bombs . . . no knife," and the furious crowd still coming toward him, he suddenly has "A great luminous thought":

... swiftly Cerberus' wide mouths I cram
With army biscuits smeared with ration jam;

That does the trick. The beast, with a crash, falls down asleep, his carcase blocking the corridor. For the fearsome, pursuing ghosts, Graves says, it is
Too late; for I've sped through.
O Life! O Sun!24

Michael Kirkham cites this poem and others to prove his contention that Graves "avoided any deep commitment of his feelings to the theme of war."25 He says, "The poem expresses Graves's natural optimism, but at the same time betrays his inability to face either the objective horror of war or his deepest feelings about it."26 Perhaps, on the other hand, the poem shows not that Graves was unable to face his experience but rather that, by injecting humor into his situation, he was able, even in his weakened physical and mental condition, to face the fact that he had almost died.

While Graves was recuperating in London, he received a letter from Siegfried Sassoon, who was also in England with suspected lung trouble. The two agreed to take their leaves together when they were well again. In late September Graves and Sassoon met at Harlech, where they spent the time relaxing and writing poetry. "Bough of Nonsense" was apparently written at that time. This poem, like the earlier "Letter to S. S. from Manetz Wood," expresses Graves's desire to escape from reality. In this poem, as in the earlier one, Graves

24Graves, *Fairies and Fusiliers*, pp. 76-77.
25Kirkham, p. 15.  
26Ibid., p. 16.
uses his imagination to transport himself out of the real war-
torn world into a fanciful, carefree, and much more desirable world. "Bough of Nonsense" consists largely of a nonsense dialogue between two war-weary fusiliers, "R" and "S," who are "back from the Somme." "S" says,

"Robert, I've lived three thousand years
This Summer, and I'm nine parts dead."

"R" replies,

"But if that's so . . . quick, now,
Through these great oaks and see the famous bough

Where once a nonsense built her nest
With skulls and flowers and all things queer,
In an old boot, with patient breast
Hatching three eggs; and the next year . . ."

"S" responds to the jest, saying,

"Before this quaint mood fails,
We'll sit and weave a nonsense hymn,"

Alternately, they tell each other fantastic tales praising nonsense and damning sense. As they do so, their cares seem to be forgotten:

The hymn swells; on a bough above us sings
A row of bright pink birds, flapping their wings. 27

Both Graves and Sassoon were beginning to wonder if the war should be continued, though Sassoon was more vehement on the subject than was Graves. They discussed the matter often

27 Graves, Fairies and Fusiliers, pp. 78-79.
while at Harlech; and in November, when Graves returned to active duty at Litherland, near Liverpool, they talked more. Graves said,

We decided that it was no use making a protest against the war. Everyone was mad; we were hardly sane ourselves... The best place for us was back in France away from the shameful madness of home service. Our function there was not to kill Germans, though that might happen, but to make things easier for the men under our command. For them the difference between being under someone who they could count as a friend, someone who protected them as much as he could from the grosser indignities of the military system and having to study the whims of any thoughtless, petty tyrant in an officer's tunic, was all the difference in the world.²⁸

In December Graves requested to be passed as fit for service overseas; and in January he went to France again, for the fourth and last time. The bitterness he felt is reflected in the poem "To Lucasta on Going to War—for the Fourth Time." In this poem Graves makes it clear that he has absolutely no illusions about the aims of the war:

It doesn't matter what's the cause,  
What wrong they say we're righting, 
A curse for treaties, bonds and laws, 
When we're to do the fighting!

He also makes it clear that he has nothing but contempt for politicians who stay at home and talk about the war while soldiers go to the Front to fight and perhaps to die:

²⁸Graves, Good-bye to All That, p. 278.
Let statesmen bluster, bark and bray,
And so decide who started
This bloody war, and who's to pay,
But he must be stout-hearted,
Must sit and stake with quiet breath,
Playing at cards with Death.29

According to Michael Kirkham, the attitudes of contempt and
cynical indifference which Graves expresses in this poem are
feigned and "are struck merely for the heroic swagger they
permit."30 Considering, however, Graves's physical and men-
tal condition and all that he had endured in the war, it seems
more probable that Graves is sincere in the criticism which
he expresses.

Upon his arrival in France, Graves was assigned to the
headquarters company of the Second Battalion. The battalion
was positioned on the Somme, and the weather was bitterly
cold. In Good-bye to All That Graves said, "We were in dug-
outs close to the river, which was frozen completely over
except for a narrow stretch of fast water in the middle. I
had never been so cold in my life; it made me shudder to
think what the trenches must be like."31 While he was there,
Graves received a letter from Robert Nichols saying that he

29 Graves, Fairies and Fusiliers, pp. 17-18.
30 Kirkham, p. 12.
31 Graves, Good-bye to All That, p. 284.
had just finished writing his "Faun's Holiday" and he wished that Graves were there to feed the faun with cherries. In reply, Graves, filled with despair, wrote Nichols a rhymed letter, entitled "To Robert Nichols." Contrasting his own icy surroundings with the "hot sun and gentle breeze" of the setting of Nichols' poem, Graves asks "plaintively":

... how can I rhyme
Verses for your desire--

Here "in this cold and rime / ... even to dream is pain."

And here

Cherries are not of season,
Ice grips at branch and root,
And singing birds are mute.32

Presumably, "singing birds" is a metaphorical reference to poets, and Graves is implying that poets such as himself are mute in such frozen surroundings.

Graves soon became ill with bronchitis, and he was taken once more to Rouen. From there he was returned to England, to Somerville College, Oxford, which had been converted into a hospital. After recuperating, Graves stayed on at Oxford as an instructor for one of the cadet battalions quartered there. However, he collapsed again and, after another stay at Somerville, was sent to Osborne, a convalescent home for officers on the Isle of Wight.

Siegfried Sassoon had gone back to France shortly after Graves's return there in December and had been shot in the neck while fighting on the Hindenburg Line. He was back in England and had recovered from his wound, but he was physically weak and emotionally shaky. He wrote Graves that "the thought of all that happened in France nearly drove him dotty sometimes . . . he didn't know whether he wanted to rush back and die with the First Battalion or stay in England and do what he could to prevent the war going on." 33

While still at Osborne, Graves received a letter which contained only a newspaper clipping. It was a formal statement made by Siegfried Sassoon to his commanding officer explaining his grounds for refusing to continue serving in the army. Sassoon stated that he believed that the war had become "a war of aggression and conquest" and that it was being "deliberately prolonged" by those who had the power to end it. 34 Protesting against "the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed," Sassoon declared, "I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust." 35

33 Graves, Good-bye to All That, p. 307.
34 Ibid., p. 308.
35 Ibid., 309.
Although he agreed with Sassoon and thought that he had acted courageously, Graves was convinced that making the statement was unwise and that Sassoon was not physically or mentally well enough to endure the possible consequences of his act of defiance. Fearing that Sassoon would be court-martialled, cashiered, and imprisoned, Graves obtained his release from Osborne and began making contact with influential people that he knew. As a result of Graves's efforts, Sassoon's letter was suppressed, the War Office was persuaded not to press the matter as a disciplinary case, and Sassoon was given a medical board examination.

Graves gave evidence to the board on behalf of his friend. He said in Good-bye to All That, "I had to appear in the role of a patriot distressed by the mental collapse of a brother-at-arms, a collapse directly due to his magnificent exploits in the trenches. . . . The irony of having to argue to those mad old men that Siegfried was not sane! It was a betrayal of truth . . ." Graves, whose mental condition was almost as bad as Sassoon's, burst into tears three times in the course of his statement. Nevertheless, his plea won over the members of the board; and Sassoon was sent, with Graves as his escort, to Craiglockhart, a convalescent home.

36 Ibid., p. 312.
for neurasthenics near Edinburgh. There Sassoon was placed under the care of W. H. R. Rivers, a famous neurologist, ethnologist, and psychologist. Graves said, "Siegfried and Rivers soon became friends. Siegfried was interested in Rivers' diagnostic methods and Rivers in Siegfried's poems."37

Wilfred Owen was also a patient at Craiglockhart. Graves described him as "a quiet, round-faced little man" who was "in a very shaky condition."38 Owen "had had a bad time with the Manchester Regiment in France; and, further, it had preyed on his mind that he had been accused of cowardice by his commanding officer. . . . It was meeting Siegfried here that set him writing his war-poems."39 Owen returned to active duty after leaving Craiglockhart; and until his death in November, 1918, he wrote to Graves frequently and sent poems to him.

Graves returned to duty at Litherland, even though his mental condition was now extremely bad. He said, "Since 1916 the fear of gas had been an obsession; in any unusual smell that I met I smelt gas--even a sudden scent of flowers in the gardens was enough to set me trembling."40 Noise, too, unnerved him: "The noise of a motor-tyre exploding behind me

37Ibid., p. 313.  
38Ibid., p. 314.  
39Ibid.  
40Ibid., p. 318.
would send me flat on my face or running for cover." Knowing that when winter came the weather at Litherland would put an additional strain on his physical condition, Graves got himself sent to Oswestry in Wales.

At Oswestry Graves had little to do, and he was able to prepare the poems in *Fairies and Fusiliers* for publication. Three of his later war poems reveal the bitterness that Graves had come to feel toward the war. "The Assault Heroic" is deliberately and strongly anti-heroic. In this poem Graves implies that romantic notions about the glory of war are only childish dreams. The poem begins as the weary soldier-poet falls down exhausted in the trenches:

> Down in the mud I lay,  
> Tired out by my long day  
> Of five damned days and nights,  
> Five sleepless days and nights, . . .

He falls asleep and dreams that he stands before a sinister castle. His foes within the castle taunt him mercilessly; but, in story-book fashion, he is undaunted:

> . . . with my spear of Faith,  
> Stout as an oaken rafter,  
> With my round shield of laughter,  
> With my sharp, tongue-like sword  
> That speaks a bitter word,  
> I stood beneath the wall  
> And there defied them all.

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The stones they cast are transformed into gold; the boiling oil they throw becomes a refreshing shower; the spears they toss strike the ground, take root, and bear him "instant fruit." His foes, seeing all this, are "astounded, / Dumb-stricken and confounded." Triumphantly he climbs a buttress and wins the keep. As he proudly blows his horn, he is awakened by the cry

"Stand to! Stand to!  
Wake up, sir! Here's a new Attack! Stand to! Stand to!"

Another attack, a real one, has begun. In this poem Graves is saying that although war, in dreams, may be faith and valor and easily-attained victories; war, in reality, is mud, weariness, restless sleep, and harsh awakenings.

"Dead Cow Farm," quoted here in its entirety, forecasts Graves's later interest in myth and expresses precisely and powerfully the complete hopelessness that he felt as the war wore on:

An ancient sage tells us how  
In the beginning the First Cow  
(For nothing living yet had birth  
But Elemental Cow on earth)  
Began to lick cold stones and mud:  
Under her warm tongue flesh and blood  
Blossomed, a miracle to believe:  
And so was Adam born, and Eve.  
Here now is chaos once again,

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Primeval mud, cold stones and rain.  
Here flesh decays and blood drips red,  
And the Cow's dead, the old Cow's dead.  

The chaos Graves describes in the poem--mud, cold stones, rain, decaying flesh, and dripping blood--is the chaos that he had come to know so well in France. Having been in the trenches month after month, in the midst of disorder, death, and decay, Graves had come to feel that life had ceased and that the giver of life was dead.

The most satirical and most bitter of all Graves's war poems is "The Next War." Graves never believed, even at the outset, that he was fighting in the war that would put an end to war. What illusions he had when he joined the service were soon dispelled, and he came eventually to feel that war was not only evil but also inevitable. Nations, he felt, either could not or would not live together in peace. War, therefore, would continually recur, an eternal, ever-worsening scourge coming again and again to plague each succeeding generation. In "The Next War" Graves, in a tone which Michael Kirkham describes as "sneering" and "sadistic," speaks to young boys at play:

43Ibid., p. 22.  
44Kirkham, p. 18.
You young friskies who today
Jump and fight in Father's hay
With bows and arrows and wooden spears,
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers,

After asking if they have been warned how such games end, he
tells them what they can expect to happen:

Another war soon gets begun,
A dirtier, a more glorious one;
Then, boys, you'll have to play, all in;
It's the cruellest team will win.

Then, Graves says, as the next war is being fought, the cycle
will begin all over again:

By the millions men will die
In some new horrible agony;
And children here will thrust and poke,
Shoot and die, and laugh at the joke,
With bows and arrows and wooden spears,
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers.45

The next war did soon come, and it added a cruel personal
irony to this poem. Graves's eldest son, David, was killed
in World War II while serving in the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

While he was at Oswestry, Graves renewed his acquaintance
with Nancy Nicholson, whom he had first met at Harlech while
he was recuperating from the operation on his nose. Her
father, mother, and brother were all painters; and Nancy her-
self drew illustrations. Graves wrote to Nancy asking her to
illustrate some of his children's rhymes. They began

45 Graves, Fairies and Fusiliers, pp. 63-64.
corresponding regularly, and Graves soon found himself in love with her. He visited her while on leave in October and again in December. In January, 1918, they were married in St. James's Church, Piccadilly. George Mallory served as best man.

Graves returned to duty in Wales and remained there until after the Armistice in November, 1918. Nancy found a job near the camp and joined him there. Their first child, Jenny, was born the following January. With the war over and himself now a family man, Graves decided to resign his commission. Just as he completed his demobilization procedures, Graves was felled by influenza. The doctor who attended him offered no hope for his recovery, but Graves had a strong will to live. Having survived the war, he "would not allow" himself to die. In a few weeks he was up and about.

The last three years of the war were especially hard on Graves. From the time of David Thomas' death in the spring of 1916 until the time of his own discharge in the spring of 1919, Graves was engaged in an unceasing struggle to maintain his sanity. The physical disabilities which resulted from his near-death during the Somme offensive made his struggle all the more difficult. As the war wore on and on, he was

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46 Graves, Good-bye to All That, p. 338.
almost overcome by despair. In his efforts to cope with his experiences, Graves alternated between trying to accept the senseless world around him and trying to escape from it. His efforts were as unsuccessful as they had been earlier in the war, and he became progressively more hopeless and more deeply embittered. Finally the war ended, but peace was a long time coming to Robert Graves.
CHAPTER V

THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

England's struggle with Germany was over, but Graves's struggle with his many disabilities continued. During the post-war years Graves slowly absorbed the war's violent impact upon him, and he was eventually able to overcome his neurasthenia. He continued to write poetry; and, as it had during the war, his poetry continued to mirror his experiences.

When he was well enough to travel, Graves, Nancy, and the baby went to live at Harlech, in a house which belonged to Nancy's father. Both his physical and his mental condition had been considerably worsened by his bout with influenza. Having known nothing but war for four and a half years, Graves found it difficult to realize that the war was really over. He was "still mentally and nervously organized for war."\(^1\) Shells came bursting into his bedroom at midnight, and in the daytime strangers assumed the faces of his dead friends. When he walked on the hills of Harlech, he saw the countryside as a battlefield and carefully worked out

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 340.
tactical problems such as where to place the Lewis-gun or where to position the rifle-grenade section. He "was very thin, very nervous, and had about four years' loss of sleep to make up for."\(^2\) He "was suffering from a large sort of intestinal worm which came from drinking bad water in France,"\(^3\) he could not use a telephone, he became sick whenever he travelled on a train, and he could not sleep at night if he had seen more than two new people in a single day.

The Graveses lived a quiet, secluded life at Harlech while Graves tried to overcome his neurasthenia. Nancy, having a nurse to care for the baby and a servant to do the housework, spent her time drawing. Graves wrote reviews and prepared *Country Sentiment* for publication. It was Siegfried Sassoon who kept Graves supplied with books to review. Sassoon, after being at Oxford for a term after the war, had become literary editor of the London *Daily Herald*. Graves decided that he, too, would go to Oxford with the government educational grant as soon as he was well enough. He said, "... it seemed the easiest thing to do. I knew that it would be years before I was fit for anything besides a quiet country life. There was no profession that I wished to

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 340. \(^3\)Ibid.
take up, though for a while I considered school mastering.\(^4\)

In October of that year, 1919, Graves entered Oxford. Because of his health, Graves got permission to live five miles from the school, in a cottage at Boar's Hill which he rented from John Masefield. There, in March, 1920, his second child, David, was born. Boar's Hill "had become almost a tourist centre"\(^5\) because of the many poets living there. Besides Masefield and Graves, there were the Poet Laureate Robert Bridges, Gilbert Murray, Edmund Blunden, and Robert Nichols. Although Graves had corresponded with Robert Nichols during the war, their relationship had apparently soured. His description of Nichols at Boar's Hill is an unflattering one:

Another poet on Boar's Hill was Robert Nichols, still another neurasthenic ex-soldier, with his fire-opal ring, his wide-brimmed hat, his flapping arms and a "mournful grandeur" in repose (the phrase is from a review by Sir Edmund Gosse). Nichols served only three weeks in France, in the gunners, and was in no show; but he was highly strung and the three weeks affected him more than twelve months affected some people. He was invalided out of the army and went to lecture in America for the Ministry of Information on British war poets. He read Siegfried's and my poetry, and apparently gave some account of us. A legend was started of Siegfried, Robert, and myself as the new Three Musketeers. Not only was Robert not in the Royal Welch Fusiliers with Siegfried and myself, but the three of us have never been together in the same room in our lives.\(^6\)

\(^{4}\)Ibid.  
\(^{5}\)Ibid., p. 350.  
\(^{6}\)Ibid., p. 352.
Graves seemed to resent the fact that Nichols had made so little of being a soldier and so much of being a soldier-poet.

Graves's closest friend at Boar's Hill was Edmund Blunden. Each morning the two rode their bicycles to Oxford, where they were attending the same course. Blunden had been gassed in the war and was as neurasthenic as Graves. Neither could forget the war. Graves said, "... we would talk each other into an almost hysterical state about the trenches. We agreed that we would not be right until we got all that talk on to paper." Many times, even while listening to lectures, Graves had hallucinations of his experiences in France; he saw the sights, heard the sounds, and smelled the stench of war. He said, "These day-dreams persisted like an alternate life. Indeed they did not leave me until well on in 1928."

The Graveses had been at Boar's Hill about a year when Nancy decided that they should open a shop there. So long as she and Graves tended the shop, their business thrived. Before long, however, Nancy returned to her household duties; and Graves, trying to keep up his writing and his university work while running the shop, became ill again with influenza

7Ibid., p. 347.  8Ibid., p. 349.
and was again overcome by neurasthenia. A manager was found for the shop; but sales declined rapidly, and they were soon bankrupt. The shop had lasted six months and had put them five hundred pounds in debt. A lawyer managed to reduce the debt to three hundred pounds; Nancy's father gave them a hundred pounds; and T. E. Lawrence, who had befriended Graves, contributed the rest of the money to get them out of debt.

It was a difficult time for Graves. He said,

I thought that perhaps I owed it to Nancy to go to a psychiatrist to be cured; yet I was not sure. Somehow I thought that the power of writing poetry, which was more important to me than anything else I did, would disappear if I allowed myself to get cured; my . . . haunting would end and I would become merely a dull easy writer.  

And yet Graves knew that he had to do something about his neurasthenia. He decided that he would try to cure himself. He would see as few people as possible, stop all outside work, read books on modern psychology, and apply what he learned to his own case. Graves did not sit for his finals at Oxford. In June, 1921, he, Nancy, and the children left Boar's Hill and moved to the quiet village of Islip.

The Graveses lived at Islip until 1925, and in those four years two more children were born to them, Catherine in 1922 and Sam in 1924. With four children under the age of

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9Ibid., p. 369.
six, they lived "in an atmosphere of teething, minor accidents, epidemics, and perpetual washing of children's napkins." Although they shared the work, Nancy's health began to fail. She was frequently ill, and often Graves had to take charge of everything. Still he continued to write, not only because he felt responsible for making their living but also because nothing could stop him when he had something to write.

The lack of money was an unrelenting problem. The disability pension which Graves received for neurasthenia was their only certain source of income. Graves wrote reviews and contributed poems to periodicals, but his volumes of poetry simply did not sell. The public which had acclaimed him in war-time had apparently forgotten him in peacetime. Country Sentiment, written at Harlech after the war, was "hardly noticed"; and The Pier-Glass, written at Boar's Hill, was "also a failure." The three volumes of poetry which Graves published while living at Islip, Whipperginny, Mock-Beggar Hall, and Welchman's Hose were also financially unsuccessful.

The public's indifference to his poetry affected not only Graves's financial condition but also his attitude toward the writing of poetry. He said,

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10Ibid., p. 376. 11Ibid., p. 382.
I published a volume of poems every year between 1920 and 1925; after *The Pier-Glass*, published in 1921, I made no attempt to write for the ordinary reading public, and no longer regarded my work as being of public utility. I did not even flatter myself that I was conferring benefits on posterity; there was no reason to suppose that posterity would be more appreciative than my contemporaries. I only wrote when and because there was a poem pressing to be written.\(^{12}\)

The poems which Graves wrote while living at Islip prove that Graves meant what he said. The poems seem to have been written solely as therapy for his neurasthenia, and they clearly indicate Graves's absorption with the study of psychology and philosophy.

The latter years at Islip were, for Graves, clouded by "many deaths and a feeling of bad luck."\(^{13}\) He no longer saw any of his army friends except Sassoon, whom he saw only occasionally. Edmund Blunden was in Tokyo, and T. E. Lawrence was away in the Royal Tank Corps. Sir Walter Raleigh, Graves's friend and tutor at Oxford, died; W. H. R. Rivers died; George Mallory died; and Sam Harries, Graves's closest friend at that time, died. Graves said, "... it seemed as though the death of my friends was following me in peacetime as relentlessly as in war."\(^{14}\)

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 389.  
\(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 393.  
\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 392.
As Nancy's health continued to worsen, Graves came to a decision. Their struggling existence was bad for everyone concerned: for Nancy, for himself, and for the children. He would have to get a job. Teaching was the only job that Graves would consider, and in order to teach he needed his degree. He completed his thesis; and after it was published, under the title of Poetic Unreason, he submitted it to the examining board. They accepted it, and he was awarded his degree. He applied for the post of Professor of English Literature at the newly-formed Egyptian University at Cairo and was hired at a salary of fourteen hundred pounds a year.

The Graveses spent a leisurely year in Egypt. Graves had little to do at the university, and Nancy had servants to perform the household duties and to care for the children. When they returned to England, Nancy's health was much improved, but they had saved none of Graves's salary and were soon again in financial straits. Graves's parents, who had hoped that their son had at last settled down and become self-supporting, were greatly disappointed in him.

In 1927 Graves began to reorder his life. He published a collection of his previous poems, omitting about half of all he had written. He stopped submitting new poems to periodicals and let his critical works go out of print. In
May, 1929, he and Nancy separated and were soon divorced. After writing and publishing his autobiography, in which he rejected all the first thirty-four years of his life: his Victorian upbringing, his unhappy school years, his war-time experiences, his unsatisfactory marriage, and his lingering neurasthenia, Graves severed all ties with England and went to live on the island of Majorca.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

World War I, like all major wars, affected the lives of millions of people. Those most affected were the men like Robert Graves who actually participated in the fighting. Born and nurtured in a world of relative peace and prosperity, many young men joined up thinking that war would be an heroic adventure; some even had idealistic illusions that they were fighting the war to end all war. For these young men disillusionment came quickly. The degrading experience of living in trenches, the soul-sickening sight and smell of corpses, and the ever-present threat of mutilation or death soon dispelled their visions of glory. On a larger scale, poorly-planned and poorly-executed major offensives, which resulted in staggering numbers of casualties, and ineffectual political maneuvering, which resulted in the seemingly-endless continuation of the war, added bitterness to their disillusionment. Thousands upon thousands died; and of the survivors few, if any, escaped completely unharmed. Some suffered physical wounds; some suffered deeper, far more serious mental wounds. Some suffered both.
Robert Graves was one of the fortunate ones who survived the war, but he was one of the unfortunate ones who suffered both physical and mental injuries. From the physical wounds which he received in the Somme offensive he recovered rather quickly. But from the mental wounds which he received in four and a half years of active service he recovered much more slowly. Long after the war was over, Graves was plagued by hallucinations, nightmares, irrational feelings of fear and guilt, and unexplainable psychological peculiarities; and his neurasthenia hampered his efforts to continue his education and to continue his development as a poet.

It was in the violent milieu of war that Graves began not only his adult life but also his adult career as a poet. Like many other young soldiers, Graves was totally unprepared for the traumatic experiences of war. At first he attempted to cope with the reality of war by expressing romantic sentiments in poems such as "On Finding Myself a Soldier" and "The Shadow of Death," by equating his war experiences with childhood experiences in poems such as "The First Funeral" and "The Adventure," and by trying to find heroic meaning in death in poems such as "The Dead Fox Hunter." However, his efforts to make the war more bearable were not successful, as poems such as "Big Words" and "Over the Brazier" indicate.
Five months' existence in the trenches and participation in the La Bassée offensive left Graves in despair. He, like many other young soldiers, lost all his romantic illusions and became disillusioned and bitter. As the war wore on, he attempted to cope with his experiences by expressing his acceptance of death in poems such as "Not Dead" and "The Cottage," by temporarily escaping into a world of fantasy in poems such as "Letter to S. S. from Mametz Wood" and "Bough of Nonsense," and by injecting humor into his experiences in poems such as "Escape." However, in the course of the war Graves saw too much and endured too much not to become hopeless and embittered, as poems such as "Dead Cow Farm" and "The Next War" indicate. Then, when the war ended, he continued, in the post-war years, to suffer from the after-effects of his war-time experiences.

Evidence from his two war-time volumes of poetry and from his autobiography point to the conclusion that World War I had a profound effect on the life and poetry of Robert Graves. The war had for many years a deleterious effect on his life, but its effect on his poetry was not necessarily bad. Largely because of his active participation in the war, Graves soon abandoned the decadent romanticism which marred his earliest poetry. Graves found, as did many other
soldier-poets, that what he was experiencing and feeling could not be given poetic expression in the techniques and practices of that out-worn tradition. The war changed Graves, and it changed his poetry. He survived the war with his talents enlarged, not diminished. Despite his post-war neurasthenia, he pursued persistently, at times almost doggedly, his calling as a poet. At seventy-five Robert Graves is one of the major poets of his generation.
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