

**ROBERT GRAVES  
AND  
THE MEDITERRANEAN**

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*Proceedings of the Tenth International Robert Graves Conference  
Palma and Deià, Mallorca, 6–10 July 2010  
organised by the Robert Graves Society  
with the St John's College Robert Graves Trust, Oxford*

**COL·LECCIÓ ESTUDIS ANGLÉSOS**  
**Universitat de les Illes Balears**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Dunstan Ward*

The Mediterranean world is central to the art and thought of Robert Graves, and the essays in this book testify to the range, originality, and imaginative power of its representation in his work.

The fourteen essays, a selection from the Tenth International Robert Graves Conference in Mallorca in 2010, are divided into three thematic sections. The first section, “Re(-)presenting the Past”, is devoted to classical Rome and Greece, and the biblical heritage of the Southern Mediterranean.

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill traces “the boundaries between history and fiction” in the Claudius novels.<sup>1</sup> In the light of the Pollio vs Livy, truth vs imagination debate in Chapter 9 of *I, Claudius*, he sets Graves’s view of Claudius against those of two brilliant Roman historians writing in the 1930s whose works can likewise be read – and contrasted – as “responses to fascism and dictatorship”. Graves’s “remarkable affinities” with Arnaldo Momigliano make their ideological differences “the more striking”. He is much closer to Sir Ronald Syme, who shares his admiration for the republican Pollio – and his fascination with Livia and court intrigue.

The paradox, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill points out, is that, for all his “learned and incredibly clever” use of his sources, Graves, the admirer of Pollio the truth-teller, “inescapably narrates like Livy”, the maker-up of history.

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

Imagination similarly vies with scholarship, according to Wang Shaohui, in Graves's handling of the Prometheus myth in *The Greek Myths* and in his poem "Prometheus". "[T]hough his approach to Greek myths is not considered sound scholarship by most classicists today", Graves's treatment "reminds us of that of Hesiod, whom in many ways he curiously resembles". As Muse-inspired poets, both "prefer artistic and creative interpretations of their own feelings to historical ones".

Some scholars were shocked, as Charles Ficat recounts, by the unconventionality of *The Anger of Achilles*, Graves's translation of the *Iliad*, with its satire, its modern accessible language, and its casting of Achilles as "the real villain of the piece". "Graves wanted to re-infuse life into the *Iliad*", "to offer [its] complexity to the general public".

Participation in "the rediscovery or indeed reconstruction of Goddess-worship for the modern age" links Sir Arthur Evans and Robert Graves: Grevel Lindop demonstrates how "their respective monuments of research and passionate imaginative restoration – Evans's Knossos and Graves's *The White Goddess* – have much in common in methods, conclusions, and influence". "The key ingredients in their process of recovery were an imaginative conviction so powerful that it forced the evidence to arrange itself into the pattern they knew they were going to find; and the benevolent presence of the Goddess. Confident that they were correct in what they first suspected, then discovered and finally reconstructed wholesale, the great works they created then fed back into the general culture and became mutually supportive."

John Woodrow Presley charts the publication and reception of another "monument of research and passionate imaginative restoration", *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*. Its critical reception was "as bad as Graves had come to fear", he records. "[F]iction masquerading as history with imagination substituted for evidence", accused the reviewer in the *Manchester Guardian*, which was forced, following legal action, to print an apology, as was the *TLS*, whose reviewer had charged Graves and Podro with unethical procedures. Yet a few critics were actually positive, like the American Rabbi who wrote in *Commentary*, "Graves shows [...] how much a real literary gift can make of the raw materials furnished the imaginative writer by ancient legend."

Marisa Saracino is “fascinated” by Graves’s “idiosyncratic experience of the past”. She sees *Claudius and the White Goddess* as “explorations into our own living experience of the past”; they alike “pose the problem of transformation and transmission, of how the story is told and how it is received”. In her estimation, “Measured against the other great Europeans of his age, [Graves] stands out as one of the most alert to the crucial importance of the uncertain transmission of culture.”

Graves’s “experience of the past” is at the heart of Gonçal López Nadal’s essay – the first of four in the section “Robert Graves and Mallorca” – on the *Xuetes* (the descendants of converted Jews in Mallorca) and Graves’s “A Dead Branch on the Tree of Israel”. Graves based his study of the *Xuetes* and their centuries-old stigma on conversations with well-known *Xuetes* in the 1950s, when social discrimination still afflicted them. For Graves, “the past is not to be seen as something distant from the present, but rather, at least in this matter, as the essential and true inner substance of the present, especially when that past, as I stress, was still alive”.

Gonçal López Nadal emphasises Graves’s “positive contribution” by making public, at that time, his opposition to injustice. William Graves gives, in a somewhat different sphere, another “glimpse of Graves the poet getting caught up in Mallorcan local affairs”, with his account of Graves’s reluctant involvement in “the first big get-together of Spanish poets in Spain since the Civil War”, Camilo José Cela’s 1959 *Conversaciones Poéticas de Formentor*. Robert Graves, who “did not care for the regime and tried not to let it intrude on his life”, was perhaps invited with other foreign poets “as a protection against Franco’s censors”. William Graves reports that there was “no political fallout” from the meeting but instead (he conjectures) “a new poem” – about interrupting a writer...

“No politics” is indeed one the prerequisites for his writing that Robert Graves lists – after “sun, sea, mountains, spring-water, shady trees” – in “Why I Live in Majorca”, which both Sarah Brierley and Julia Simonne quote in their respective essays on Graves the “avid gardener”. His 1935–1939 diary provides Sarah Brierley with “an opportunity for some horticultural archaeology”, as she examines its references to the Mediterranean garden, recently restored, that Graves and Laura Riding