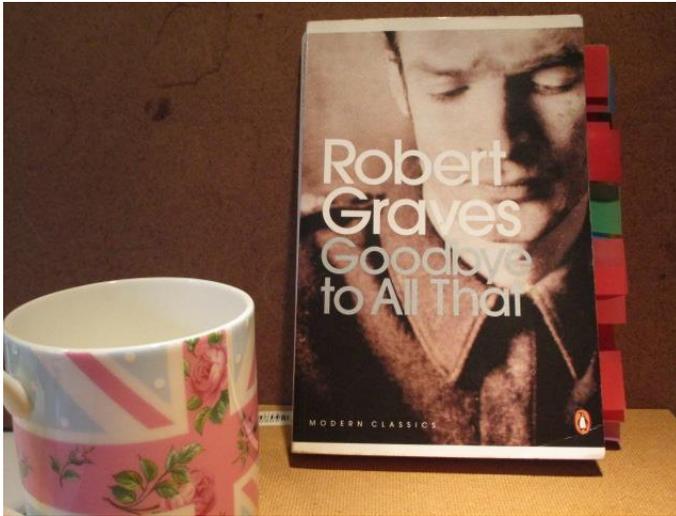


Goodbye to All That

By Rod Fraser



ROBERT GRAVES, a well-known British writer and a Captain in *The Royal Welch Fusiliers* during World War One, once mentioned wryly that the only entry under his name in *Bartlett's Dictionary of Familiar Quotations* was the title of his memoir, *Goodbye to All That*.

I found his observation both amusing and untrue. There are a few entries under his name in *Bartlett's*, but none with the punch of the above title. It is simply a great catchphrase. It is also very

descriptive of Graves' life—after the publication of his memoir in 1929.

As he put it: The title reflects "my bitter leave taking of England, where I ... quarreled with, or had been disowned by, most of my friends; ... and ceased to care what anyone thought of me."

In short, Graves said goodbye to his wife (Nancy Nicholson), four children, home, family and country. He left for Majorca, Spain with his mistress, Laura Riding, where he made his home for the rest of his life (with sojourns to England, America or Europe in times of international trouble.)

His relationship with Ms. Riding ended around 1940 and he subsequently married Beryl Hodge in 1950, with whom he had an additional four children. They lived in Majorca.

Goodbye to All That is largely a war memoir, although it describes Grave's early years and much of the decade following the First World War. I became interested in him, while reviewing Pat Barker's novel, *Regeneration*, where he played a small but vital part in the story of Siegfried Sassoon.

When I researched Graves' life story, I found he wrote approximately 140 works (including some poetry). These include *Goodbye to All That*, as well

as *King Jesus* and *I Claudius*, the latter of which was made into a BBC television series in 1976.

Goodbye to All That has remained in print to this day, after being revised in 1957, when Graves was 62 years of age.

THE FIRST FEW chapters of Graves' memoir contain details of his early life, schooling and so on. There was nothing extraordinary to his childhood, but one small incident. He came close to losing his life at age seven, after a serious bout of measles, followed by double pneumonia. This was the first of three times when he was close to death as a result of afflictions of the lungs.

I should note that Graves' father was an Irish school inspector, and his mother came from a respectable German family. This latter fact caused Graves some difficulty in life, in that he was accused of being a German spy on more than one occasion. In 1916, for example, an officer who disliked him claimed he was the brother of a captured German spy, who had taken on the name Carl Graves.

Graves (Robert, not Carl) attended a variety of preparatory schools during his childhood, finally winning a scholarship to Charterhouse and from there to St. John's College at Oxford. The war

intervened and Graves did not take up his place at Oxford until after the war.

One of the interesting observations made by Graves had to do with writing. During his years at Charterhouse, a teacher "taught [him] how to write English by eliminating all phrases that could be done without, and by using verbs and nouns instead of adjectives and adverbs wherever possible.... [This teacher told Graves], 'remember that your best friend is the wastepaper basket'". I expect this explains why Graves' writing style is so clear and readable.

IN MY OPINION, the main value of *Goodbye to All That* is Graves' reminiscences of his war years. He has a writer's instinct for remembering key anecdotes and happenings—those things that we might like to know about the war.

For example, in a final comment about his early schooling at Charterhouse, Graves sadly noted:

"At least one in three of my generation at school died; because they all took commissions as soon as they could, most of them in the infantry"

"The average life expectancy of an infantry subaltern on the Western Front was, at some stages

of the war, only about three months, by which time he had been wounded or killed.”

“The proportions worked out to about four wounded to every one killed. Of these four, one was wounded seriously and the remaining three, more or less lightly. The three lightly wounded returned to the front after a few weeks or months and again faced the same odds.”

PERHAPS I SHOULD tell just one more Graves’ story (one with a lighter touch), before I move on to my review of this book:

Lice were the source of many a joke in the trenches. Young Bumford, with a twinkle in his eye, posed a question about this one morning: “We were just having an argument as to whether it’s best to kill the old ones or the young ones, sir. Morgan here says that if you kill the old ones, the young ones die of grief.”

“But Parry here, sir. He says the young ones are easier to kill and you can catch the old ones when they go to the funeral.”

“He appealed to me as an arbiter, ‘You’ve been to college, sir, haven’t you?’”

“Yes, I have. But then, so has Crawshay Bailey’s

brother." The platoon laughed, considering this a very witty answer. Cranshay Bailey is considered one of the lighter, sillier folk songs in Wales.

It tells the story of a family who are full of inadequacies and shortcomings. They seem to get everything wrong. In one of the verses,

Crawshay Bailey's brother, Norwich, was said to be fond of porridge. "He was sent to Cardiff College, for to get a bit of knowledge."

Graves added that his familiarity with this ditty proved very helpful. "After that, I had no trouble with the platoon."

AT THE START of Chapter 10, a young, unformed nineteen year old Robert Graves tells us, "I had just finished with Charterhouse ... when England declared war on Germany. A day or two later, I decided to enlist."

A family friend suggested to Graves that he consider applying for a commission rather than enlisting. On Graves' behalf, "he rang up the nearest regimental depot—*The Royal Welch Fusiliers* at Wrexham—and told the adjutant I had served in the Officers' Training Corps at Charterhouse. The adjutant said, 'Send him right along.' On August 11, 1914, I began my training."

After three weeks of “learning to drill and be drilled” and a further number of months guarding an internment camp for enemy aliens, Graves was back at the Wrexham training depot, to learn more about soldiering, waiting for deployment to France.

Soon enough his orders came through and Graves was dispatched to the front. He recalls this time as follows, “Those were the early days of trench warfare ... when we were still innocent of the Lewis and Stokes guns, steel helmets, telescopic rifle-sights, gas-shells, pill-boxes, tanks, well-organized trench raids or many of the later refinements of trench warfare.”

On October 15, 1915, Graves was promoted to Captain at the age of twenty. Soon after, he joined ‘A’ Company of the First Battalion of *The Royal Welch Fusiliers*, who were reorganizing at Cambrin after the Loos fighting. ‘A’ Company was a first-rate outfit. The men were largely Welshmen from the 1915 enlistment.

It was here that he first met Siegfried Sassoon and they became fast friends. Since both were war poets of a sort, they had much in common. Graves noted, “We set out for B ethune, being off duty until dusk, and talked about poetry.... At this time, I was getting my first book of poems, *Over the Brazier*, ready for publication. I had one or two drafts in my

pocket-book and showed them to Siegfried."

SHORTLY AFTER JOINING 'A' Company, Graves discusses his reasons for being willing to go out on patrol in 'No-Man's Land' at night:

"... I went out on patrol fairly often, finding that the only thing respected in young officers was personal courage. Besides, I had cannily worked it out like this. My best way of lasting through to the end of the war would be to get wounded."

"The best time to get wounded would be at night and in the open, with rifle fire, more or less unaimed and my entire body exposed. Best, also, to get wounded when there was no rush at the dressing station and while the back areas were not being heavily shelled. Best to get wounded, therefore, on a night patrol in a quiet sector. One could usually manage to crawl into a shell hole until help arrived."

On July 1, 1916, the Battle of the Somme began and all available trained men and officers were sent to replace casualties. Graves was part of this major offensive and was wounded by shell fire on the 19th of July. He suffered multiple wounds, the most serious being a chest wound. Although thought dead by most of his battalion, he sailed back to England a week later by hospital ship.

Siegfried was also in England recovering from lung trouble and "felt nine parts dead from the horror of the Somme fighting." He wrote to Graves and the two of them took leave together when Graves was well enough to travel.

IN JANUARY OF 1917, Graves returned to France, but his time there was short. Within months, Graves collapsed from exhaustion, with severe bronchitis. He was sent back to England once again. This time he convalesced at Somerville College, Oxford where "the sun shone and the discipline was easy."

Siegfried was shot through the throat in March of 1917 and also returned to England to convalesce. He wrote Graves, claiming "that when he went for a walk he saw corpses lying about on the pavement." Perhaps indicative of his depression and rage with the war, Siegfried penned a letter to his commanding officer, a letter that was subsequently leaked to the press and read out in Parliament. Here is the first sentence which gives you the gist of the message.

"I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of the military authority, because I believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it."

When Graves read the letter, he thought it "magnificently courageous", but felt Siegfried was in "no proper physical condition to suffer the penalty which the letter invited: namely to be court-marshalled, cashiered and imprisoned."

Graves used his influence to get Siegfried to a 'medical board' where he argued that the letter at issue was not written by someone with a sound mind. Graves mentioned Sassoon's hallucinations and frail physical condition. The board agreed and sent Sassoon to a convalescent home for neurasthenics at Craiglockhart, near Edinburgh with Graves as his escort.

For those interested in the outcome of this interesting matter, I refer you to my book review of *Regeneration* also included on this website.

Although Graves remained in the army on home service, he was not fit for active duty. One day, he reported that while marching down the street on a battalion march, he "saw three workman with gas masks beside an open manhole, bending over a corpse they had just hauled up from a sewer." This was not a good sign of mental health, but Graves kept it to himself and carried on.

In January 1918, Graves married Nancy Nicholson, eighteen years of age, after a courtship

of some six months. He remained on garrison duty and was ordered to Limerick in early 1919, after the war in Europe ended.

Planning to resign his commission and take up his studies at Oxford, he woke up one morning with a high fever, a sure symptom of the Spanish Flu. Graves reported, "I did not intend to have influenza in an Irish hospital with my lungs in their present condition." He decided "to make a run for it."

Graves traveled to England to receive care in an English hospital. Fortunately, he met an officer on the trip home who signed his demobilization papers; otherwise he might have been charged with desertion.

In the years following the war, Graves and his wife, Nancy, had four children, he received a degree from Oxford and they traveled to Egypt where he took up a teaching appointment. During these years, Graves earned his living largely from writing.

In the late 1920s, Graves and his family returned to England, and he published *Goodbye to All That*. It was written in four months and was well received by the public, selling over 30,000 copies in the first month. Even today, *The Guardian* newspaper ranks it as 44th in a list of the greatest nonfiction books written.

Unfortunately many of his friends, particularly Sassoon, felt it was full of inaccuracies. Graves tried to explain to them that everyone sees major life experiences differently. He felt he wrote things in keeping with his version of the truth and refused to apologize.

As Graves put it in his 1957 revised edition:

"The remainder of this story from 1926 until ... [1929] ... is dramatic, but unpublishable. Health and money both improved, marriage wore thin."

" New characters appeared on the stage. Nancy and I said unforgivable things to each other. We parted on May 6, 1929. She, of course, insisted on keeping the children. So I went abroad, resolved never to make England my home again; which explains the 'Goodbye to All That' of this title.

August 31, 2018