



La casa de Robert Graves

Transcription of the script of *I, GRAVES*,
the introductory film covering the life and work of Robert
Graves.

Duration: 15 minutes

*Most of the text is read off screen by a professional
reader. The text highlighted in red is Robert Graves
speaking.*

I, Robert Ranke Graves, novelist, biographer, mythologist,
historian, classicist, but, above all, poet, arrived in Deia in
1929, having abandoned my friends, my family, and my
country, I had just said *Goodbye to All That*. My then
collaborator, Laura Riding, and I came here to start afresh,
and we built the house you are about to see. We chose the
plot because it was sunny, and would also be good for the
fruit trees we wanted to plant and the vegetables we
wanted to grow. We planned the house to suit our needs
and we ended up with an unusual design: a study for her, a
study for me, and a spare study for visiting friends, and a
room with plenty of light for our printing press. The set-up
was perfect for our work and our way of life. Little did I
know that, that to keep the house Can Alluny, I would
have to write *I, Claudius*.

I was born in Wimbledon in 1895 with siblings, two
girls and two boys. My father, Alfred, was Irish, my
mother, Amy, was German. I seem to have inherited my
poetic side from my father and my self discipline from my
mother. Perhaps my illusions of grandeur come from my

grand-uncle Leopold von Ranke the historian, and my early faith from my grandfather Charles Graves, who was the Anglican bishop of Limerick. After primary school I won a scholarship to Charterhouse. I felt unhappy away from my protective family and I started writing poetry. But in 1914, just before going to Oxford, the First World War broke out.

Like so many of my generation, I was patriotic, and enlisted in the summer of 1914. So instead of the cloisters of Oxford, I found myself in the horror of the trenches in France, with the bodies, the rats, and the stench. I'd had my first book of poems published in 1916 and when the battalion moved away from the front line I met other poets.

Some like my friend Siegfried Sassoon survived the war, others like Owen and Sorley were tragically killed. We are now collectively known as the War Poets. On my 21st birthday I was wounded by shrapnel in the Battle of the Somme and left for dead. My parents received the dreaded telegram and The Times of London announced my death to my friends. Fortunately I survived, but only just.

After the war I married Nancy Nicholson and we had four children. She was a feminist, and somewhat difficult. We moved to Oxford where I took my degree. But neither the marriage nor the degree was very successful.

I was severely shell shocked and fearful nightmares woke me up screaming. But I did not want to get cured because I feared my poetry would suffer. We had no money. But then Laura came along and things got better. We wrote a book together, and then another. They made

no money but people were interested. I fell in love with her, and my nightmares slowly receded.

Then my friend T.E. Lawrence asked that I write his biography and I finally made a little money. This allowed us to buy the hand printing press which Laura wanted and we began printing her necessary books. Meanwhile our menage-a-trois became a foursome with the incorporation of an Irish poet called Geoffrey Phibbs. Laura became infatuated with Phibbs, who was now after my wife Nancy. Sensing she was losing control, Laura said "Goodbye chaps," and jumped out of a fourth floor window. Miraculously she only broke her back. Phibbs went off with Nancy and the children while I stood at Laura's bedside, and I wrote Goodbye to All That, my first bestseller. When she was well enough we came here to start afresh.

In 1929 in Mallorca, town was still town and country, country, and the horse plough was not yet an anachronism. I found everything I wanted as a background to my work as a writer: sun, sea, mountains, spring-water, shady trees and few politics.

After we'd built the house, there were rumours in the village that other foreigners wanted to buy the land on the other side of the road. So we bought it. Then Laura bought some land down by the beach to set up a College of writing. I was infatuated with her, I got her everything she wanted, wrote the book she wanted me to write and manned the press for The Seizen Press books when necessary. She inspired my poetry. I gave her everything I wrote to read. The villagers took me for her man-servant. But then the money ran out and had to mortgage Can Alluny, I dropped everything and wrote *I, Claudius*. It was

my greatest seller ever. I paid off the mortgage, paid of the debts and could now afford a typist so we hired Karl Goldschmidt. Laura had her cats. I had a dog called Solomon. I worked better in the day, Laura worked better at night. The outside world did not exist. It was the end of History.

Meanwhile, the Spanish Second Republic was declared. Our friend Gelat was made socialist mayor of Deia. There was unrest in the big cities. We were arrested for having a printing press and not having the right papers and the guardia-civil kept us up all night. Then, in 1936, the Franco uprising occurred. We stayed on, following the conflict on the radio. Then one hot August afternoon, the consul sent word for us to leave. We thought it would be for a couple of weeks. It was ten years before I got back.

We went back to England and I saw my parents and my now teenage children again.

While I worked on a script for the film of *I, Claudius*, with Charles Laughton which was never finished. Laura was writing political manifestos. I then won a prize with *Count Belisarius*. She did not like being upstaged by my success. I pretended it bored me and I followed events in Spain on the radio, I missed Deia, I missed the peace of my whitewashed study.

I always wrote with pen and ink. My first draughts were full of crossings out which I did with a paint brush. **And there are versions too, well, here's what I am writing at the moment, I've got a sequence of about four stages, that's how it starts, that's how I'm breaking into the subject it's rather irregular, and here you see the writing is slightly**

more regular to show good intentions but the blotting out is much the same, then it goes to be typed, well now you can see it again clearly then it goes to another stage here, then it gets knocked about again and after that it settles down and the are minor emendations.

I found that when trying to solve a historical problem, I would resort to what I called analepsys, It is simply a matter of throwing myself back into the right period, and living very much in that period the whole time I am writing it. I find it a great help when I am writing these books to have some ancient evidence so these things are not stories I like to have a coin or a piece of statue, or an old tile or anything of that sort and I finger it and I think I get something out of it in an odd way.

Scholars thought me crazy, but I was often proved right.

In London we were working on Laura's dictionary of related meanings and her entourage of helpers grew day by day. Among them was a young Oxford historian with his wife Beryl, a brunette with blue eyes. After some time in England we went to Switzerland and then France. By 1939 Laura was becoming increasingly distant but when she saw that my poems were for Beryl, it hurt her. She decided that if we couldn't go back to Deia, we should all move to America. But there, Laura fell in love with our host, Schuyler Jackson. I was devastated and I sailed back to England. Beryl came to see me and she picked up the pieces.

The Second World War broke out. Beryl and I rented a house in Devon. She was now the object of my poems. We soon had three children. I wrote several books and in the

preface to my novel *The Golden Fleece* I fantasized about Deia. I longed to get back but the war made it impossible. David, my eldest son by Nancy, was fighting in Burma with my old regiment. We received a telegram that he was missing the uncertainty when I got the telegram, was much as my parents must have felt. He was also twenty-one, but this time it was true.

In May 1945 the war ended, and in May 1946 at last I returned to Deia with Beryl and the three young children and found Can Alluny just as I had left it. The fruit trees had grown. My desk and library were ready to get straight back to work. The children were thrilled. A new world of experiences opened up before them.

As for me I finally recovered my sense of peace.

I was in the middle of what was to become my most important work *The White Goddess*, which influenced many of the English poets of the 20th century. After that came many more books, some novels, but none which became best sellers. My publishers could not understand why I would not write the books which would make us all rich. But I never intentionally undertook any task which seemed inconsistent with poetic principles, and this sometimes won me the reputation of an eccentric.

In 1953 our fourth child was born. I gave lectures on poetry at Cambridge and the United States and later became Professor of Poetry at Oxford. I was now a public figure and everyone wanted to meet me. People from the literary, academic and film worlds. Even Premier Ben Gurion invited me to visit Israel. I turned down political decorations. But I was honoured by Queen Elizabeth and

received her medal for poetry. In 1968 Deia made me adoptive son which I am most proud of. My old friend Camilo Cela was at the ceremony.

By then I was having difficulty in remembering things. I could no longer write as I used to, and even poems were eluding me. I couldn't concentrate and looked for inspiration where I could, but senility caught up with me. Claudius, to whom I'd once given a voice, behaved well, and the BBC series brought in money for my nursing.

I am buried in a simple grave in the beautiful Deia cemetery. Come up to see me when you are in the village and if you read my poems and gaze out to sea perhaps you'll find yourself back in time with me and listening to my voice.