Goodbye to Christmas Truces

We have recently passed the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, which has occasioned a fair amount of press coverage looking back at the so-called (and ill-named) “Great War” or “War to End all Wars”. I intend to join this chorus with some of my own thoughts. For many people interested in history, the Second World War is the more interesting one due to its grander scale and its relatively clearly-defined moral force. For me, the First World War holds more interest since it was what I consider a “highly preventable” war that preceded and directly led to the next “necessary” or “just” war (if such a thing does exist, per Saint Augustine, then World War II is surely its closest reification in modern history). To be honest, I would rather consider both wars merely two parts of the same dance of death, punctuated by a short interval of instability (not unlike a modern and truly global version of that first “world war” reported by Thucydides – the Peloponnesian War). In any case, the causes and aftermath of the First World War would be laughingly stupid and unbelievable if they were not already tragically stupid and unbelievable. I am reminded of a quote by Jorge Luis Borges about the 1982 Falklands War, “It is a fight between two bald men over a comb.” In a similar way, we could say that the First World War was a fight between a bunch of spoiled children over who got to use the playroom. Though they all had their own toys, sharing and cooperation were unlearned traits. There is something profoundly important to remember about this tragedy, though sometimes the easiest way to deal with tragedy, if not outrage, stoicism, or escapism, involves a disarming sense of humor and irreverence. All four issues will be dealt with in this essay, in which I will focus on Robert Graves’ *Goodbye to All That,* his memoirs of early life in England up to and after his participation in the trenches of WWI. Graves was a highly prolific poet and author most famous for his fictional rendering of the Julio-Claudian

dynasty in *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. He was born in 1895, making him 19 years old when the war began—a typical age for new officer and soldier recruits. His mother was German and his middle name was von Ranke, which was no small problem considering the bullying nationalistic anti-German hysteria before, during, and after the war, and was one that caused suspicion from bullying schoolmates and later even from fellow soldiers despite his proven competence in battle. This was a smaller version of the same problem faced by fellow writer D.H. Lawrence, a pacifist married to a German who was under de facto house arrest for the entire war.

Goodbye to All That, published 11 years after the Armistice in 1929, was Graves' second work of non-fiction after a biography of his friend T.E. Lawrence called *Lawrence and the Arabs*. By this time, Graves had already published many poetry collections, including poems written before and during the war. The publication of his memoirs came at a time in which the young author had apparently only recently recovered from years of emotional trauma that today we would call PTSD (often called "shell shock"), and the title references what he calls his "bitter leave-taking of England", including its war, its politics, its society and education, and even many of his own family and friends. Here is a representative quote about his post-war experience: "Very thin, very nervous, and with about four years' loss of sleep to make up, I was waiting until I got well enough to go to Oxford on the Government educational grant. I knew that it would be years before I could face anything but a quiet country life. My disabilities were many: I could not use a telephone, I felt sick every time I travelled by train, and to see more than two new people in a single day prevented me from sleeping. I felt ashamed of myself as a drag on Nancy, but had sworn on the very day of my demobilization never to be under anyone's orders for the rest of my life. Somehow I must live by writing." After publication of *Goodbye to All That*, Graves moved to the Spanish island of Majorca were he remained for the rest of his life, except for

a long stay in America to escape the Spanish civil war.

The book is important for its ability to capture, from the point of view of a single individual rather than a comprehensive historian, the passing of one epoch to another that occurred with the First World War—from what has been called the "long 19th century" (or the "belle epoque" if you like) to the "modern age" of which we are still living (or transitioning out of to a still-undefined age). These are mere historical categories, but they tend to capture the turbulence that saw many of the changes to an old world system dating from the French Revolution, or the Middle Ages in some cases, to a new world where possibilities for progress and destruction both expanded exponentially. Graves serves as a paradigm of a certain type of young person (by definition well-educated and middle-class), especially in England but also throughout the West, after the First World War who saw personal shifts in thinking towards more radical ideas like socialism, atheism, feminism, and pacifism based on their first-hand experiences in the trenches, as well as in their jaded view of a society which they discovered to be neither as civilized nor as progressive as they had thought (I think Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, for example, captures this sense from the German perspective).

Graves opens with an account of his family history and early years, with the first line stating his acceptance of the autobiographical convention of starting with earliest memories: witnessing Queen Victoria's 1897 Jubilee, in his case. He spends some time in these chapters detailing his visits to his aristocratic German relatives in their Bavarian castles and against whom he would later take arms.

He attended many public schools (what Americans would call private or prep schools), with the longest tenure at one called Charterhouse. Several anecdotes are given regarding the severity and hypocrisy of the education system he went through. Outdated but still powerful Victorian standards of

morality accomplished little more than to stifle emotional development and foster “immorality”. One such case is his description of the rampant homosexuality in these types of all-boys boarding schools, going so far as to detail his own platonic infatuation with a younger schoolmate. He dwells on his friendship with George Mallory, the famous alpinist who was an older mentor at Charterhouse and later best man at Graves’ wedding. Mallory, who died on Mount Everest in 1924 after possibly being the first person to reach the summit, was mentioned as one of the only people who treated students like humans, which puzzled everyone according to Graves. Also at this time Graves took up boxing as much to defend against bullies as to keep fit, and would later prove useful in proving his manliness (and, thus, his worth) in front of soldiers and superiors alike.

The heart of the book comes in the middle chapters detailing Graves’ time spent on the Western Front. At the outbreak of war, he deferred his matriculation to Oxford University in order to join the army. He was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Welsh Regiment since his family home was in Harlech in northwest Wales. Like so many other young men, he was eager to join in the fighting before the war ended (how many times it is said at the beginning of every war that it will be over “by Christmas”). While the war obviously did not end by December 25, 1914, Graves witnessed the famous Christmas Day truce soon after joining his regiment on the Western Front (he refers to it as the Christmas 1914 fraternization, of which his regiment was among the first to participate). This event, the likes of which are rare in the annals of war, saw the belligerents, German, French, and British, come out of their trenches and join in an unarmed singing of carols and exchange of greetings and gifts. More than anything else, this short-lived sense of shared humanity and brotherhood can be interpreted as soldiers losing the martial spirit and wanting to take back control of some part of their lives, however small or temporary. I spent two Christmases in Afghanistan and well understand the

sentiment of soldiers that comes at times like Christmas in which all that is desired is a temporary break from the stress and trauma of war. Even in 1914, the truce was obviously resented by the generals and politicians, who ensured there would not be a repeat of such non-warlike sentiment the next Easter or following Christmases, as well as by the Press in the involved countries, where no mention was made for at least a week after the event that hundreds of thousands laid down their arms to hobnob with the enemy. The press coverage also distorted and minimized the truce in order to make it seem more freakish and less peaceful than it actually was. The Christmas Day truce lives on in popular memory and culture, however, and this year the British supermarket Sainsbury's went so far as to make a television commercial reenactment of it in which a German and British soldier swap chocolate and biscuits.

One of the central events in the book is the Battle of Loos, a British and French attack on German lines in September 1915 in which a few kilometers of ground changed hands and almost 100,000 men died. It was the first use of poison gas by the British, and also the battle in which Kipling's son went permanently missing in action, prompting that writer of *The Jungle Book* to write the sad poem "My Boy Jack." Graves describes how the gas was euphemistically referred to "the accessory", and how everyone was highly skeptical of its efficacy because its supervisors were university chemistry professors brought in to administer it. Sure enough, "the accessory" was deployed with a headwind coming into the Allied lines, causing the gas to harm the British more than the Germans it was intended for. The battle itself was also an all-around disaster. Graves mentions how, much later in the war when he had been sent home to recover from his wounds, he was asked to give a speech to 3000 incoming Canadian soldiers. "They were Canadians, so instead of giving my usual semi-facetious lecture on 'How to be Happy, Though in the Trenches', I paid them the compliment of telling the real

story of Loos, and what a balls-up it had been, and why – more or less as it has been given here. This was the only audience I have ever held for an hour with real attention. I expected Major Currie to be furious, because the principal object of the Bull Ring was to inculcate the offensive spirit; but he took it well and put several other concert-hall lectures on me after this."

A key feature of *Goodbye to All That* is the farcical and probably invented dialogue, which reads like short theatrical set-pieces. It seems like almost every occasion of reported speech involves a back-and-forth rhythmic dialogue that ends in someone laying a punch-line. Along with the stock characters, this shows the fictionalized nature of Graves' memoirs (a feature which recalls Hemingway's memoir *A Moveable Feast*, or Robert Byron's travel writing masterpiece *The Road to Oxiana*).

One of the most important characters in Graves' book is Siegfried Sassoon, a fellow "war poet" who joined Graves' Royal Welch Fusiliers regiment in 1916 and struck up an immediate friendship. Sassoon published his own three-part fictionalized autobiography in the 1930's with the middle book, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, covering the war. Like Graves, Sassoon had not published any poetry when they met, and Graves' realistic (as opposed to romantic) style influenced his friend. They both published collections before the end of the war. Sassoon was described by Graves as being one of the most courageous men he had ever seen or heard about in his time in the trenches. He tells one story in particular about how Sassoon single-handedly attacked and took control of a German observation trench, then enraged his superiors by not telling anyone about it. He was found two hours later sitting in the German trench reading a book of poetry. Sassoon, like Graves, later suffered a type of nervous breakdown and wrote his famous 1917 "Soldier's Declaration" denouncing the war and the government's incompetent prosecution of it. In this, he

was encouraged by anti-war activists like Bertrand Russell and Ottoline Morrell. Sassoon threw his Military Cross for bravery into a river, though he escaped a court-martial, with Graves' help, and was sent to a hospital to recover from "shell shock". There he met Wilfred Owen, another war poet hugely influenced and encouraged by Sassoon, and who was himself killed on the Western Front one week before the Armistice. I find it worth mentioning that Sassoon and Owen were both gay. Another gay soldier was the Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein who, like Sassoon, volunteered for service at the outbreak of war and demonstrated repeated bravery in battle on the Russian Front to the point of being thought suicidal (which he also was). Such examples make one wonder why gay soldiers in the American military have until recently been considered unfit for service.

One of the most tragic, and understated, events of the book is when three officers of Graves' battalion, and three of his closest friends, were all killed in the same day by shelling and sniper fire. David Thomas, the third member of the trio of poet friends in the battalion, was among the dead. Graves states: "I felt David's death worse than any other since I had been in France, but it did not anger me as it did Siegfried. He was acting transport-officer and every evening now, when he came up with the rations, went out on patrol looking for Germans to kill. I just felt empty and lost." Soon thereafter, he writes: "My breaking-point was near now, unless something happened to stave it off. Not that I felt frightened. I had never yet lost my head and turned tail through fright, and knew that I never would. Nor would the breakdown come as insanity; I did not have it in me. It would be a general nervous collapse, with tears and twitchings and dirtied trousers; I had seen cases like that."

Graves finished his time in the trenches during the 1916 Battle of the Somme, being injured so gravely as to be reported dead. He spent the rest of the war convalescing in

hospitals, helping train new volunteers to his unit, and even being posted to Ireland where the English garrison was trying to stop (unsuccessfully, it turned out) the burgeoning Irish uprising. The rest of the book talks about his marriage to a feminist activist, their move to the country near Oxford, setting up house, opening a general store ("The moral problems of trade interested me. Nancy and I both found it very difficult at this time of fluctuating prices to be really honest; we could not resist the temptation of under-charging the poor villagers of Wootton, who were frequent customers, and recovering our money from the richer residents. Playing at Robin Hood came easily to me. Nobody ever detected the fraud"), and having four children in eight years (possibly the most amazing fact of the autobiography; he mentions at this point how sometimes he would only scrape out half an hour or so of writing a day in between his fatherly and household care taking duties—we can well imagine).

In this later part he also deals at length with his friendship with T.E. Lawrence, whose biography he wrote just before *Goodbye to All That*. Here are, in my opinion, two of the most important quotes from that chapter: "I knew nothing definite of Lawrence's wartime activities, though my brother Philip had been with him in the Intelligence Department at Cairo in 1915, making out the Turkish Order of Battle. I did not question him about the Revolt, partly because he seemed to dislike the subject – Lowell Thomas was now lecturing in the United States on 'Lawrence of Arabia' – and partly because of a convention between him and me that the war should not be mentioned: we were both suffering from its effects and enjoying Oxford as a too-good-to-be-true relaxation. Thus, though the long, closely-written foolscap sheets of *The Seven Pillars* were always stacked in a neat pile on his living-room table, I restrained my curiosity. He occasionally spoke of his archaeological work in Mesopotamia before the war; but poetry, especially modern poetry, was what we discussed most." And the other: "Lawrence's rooms were dark and oak-panelled, with a

large table and a desk as the principal furniture. There were also two heavy leather chairs, simply acquired. An American oil-financier had come in suddenly one day when I was there and said: ‘I am here from the States, Colonel Lawrence, to ask a single question. You are the only man who will answer it honestly. Do Middle-Eastern conditions justify my putting any money in South Arabian oil?’ Lawrence, without rising, quietly answered: ‘No.’ ‘That’s all I wanted to know; it was worth coming for. Thank you, and good day!’ In his brief glance about the room he missed something and, on his way home through London, chose the chairs and had them sent to Lawrence with his card.” I find these scenes moving and relevant.

The book ends in 1929, though shortly after he divorced his first wife, and got married and had four more children with his poetic muse, Laura Riding, with whom he established a publishing company at their base on Majorca. He was runner-up to the Nobel Prize in Literature won by Steinbeck, and he died at the age of 90 with 140 published works.

The whole of Graves’ memoirs is filled with stories of understated and cynical humor, and pathos. In one case, he describes the last time he attended church which was during his Easter 1916 visit home. He tells a story of having to push his mother uphill in an heavy bath chair, since the only available wheelchair in town was taken by “Countess of-I-forget-what”, and then sit through a three-hour service despite being ill himself. About the ordeal he writes: “I forgot my father’s gout, and also forgot that passage in Herodotus about the two dutiful sons who yoked themselves to an ox-cart to pull their mother, the priestess, to the Temple and were oddly used by Solon, in a conversation with King Croesus, as a symbol of ultimate happiness.” During the sermon the “strapping” young curate, one of four men present—compared with 75 women—was “bellowing about the Glurious Performances of our Sums and Brethren in Frurnce today. I decided to ask him afterwards why, if he felt like that, he wasn’t himself

either in Frurnce or in khurki." His father then took him to meet War Secretary (and future Prime Minister) David Lloyd-George, who Graves says "was up in the air on one of his 'glory of the Welsh hills' speeches. The power of his rhetoric amazed me. The substance of the speech might be commonplace, idle, and false, but I had to fight hard against abandoning myself with the rest of his authence. He sucked power from his listeners and spurted it back at them. Afterwards, my father introduced me to Lloyd George, and when I looked closely at his eyes they seemed like those of a sleep-walker." It is worth mentioning that Graves' book angered so many people that even his father, one of the offended, felt it necessary to write his own memoirs as a rebuttal to his son's entitled *To Return to All That*.

While I have enjoyed and profited from reading "big" history, *Goodbye to All That* is a great example of the importance and edification of reading individual accounts of history. I always find autobiographies of great and famous people illuminating for the perspective it helps give to their time period. Though I have studied history and literature, I am no scholar and seek mostly entertainment and self-improvement in my reading. I will leave it to others to argue more convincingly the faults or short-comings of books like Graves' or Sassoon's memoirs (Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* comes to mind, which Mike Carson has already discussed at length on this website here), but I personally find such personal accounts interesting and instructive.

Regarding a sense of humor towards destructive war declared by elites and suffered by the common man, I think it is not only in bad taste but can do more harm than good by normalizing the illegality and immorality of the war. Thus, I agree with this quote by Bertrand Russell, a pacifist who spent the last year of World War One in prison for speaking against involuntary military service for conscientious objectors: "Alas, I am that extremely rare being, a man without a sense of humour. I had

not suspected this painful fact until the middle of the Great War, when the British War Office sent for me and officially informed me of it. I gathered that if I had had my proper share of a sense of the ludicrous, I should have been highly diverted at the thought of several thousand young men a day being blown into tiny little bits, which, I confess to my shame, never once caused me to smile. I am reminded of a Chinese emperor, who long ago constructed a lake made entirely of wine, and then drove his peasants into it only to amuse his wife with the struggles of their drunken drownings. Now he had a sense of humor."

Regarding a sense of humor, which can only be “dark” or cynical, by veterans against their war which may be a way to ease the personal trauma and represent, even fictionalized, the collective tragedy in which they played a part, I look up to Graves and his successors such as Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, who have highly influenced the field of war literature.

Regarding the causes of destructive (and self-destructive) wars like WWI, I will leave it once more with the wise and quotable Bertrand Russell, writing here in his book *Education and the Social Order* about the innate violent sense of retributive justice that is easily awakened in humans: “I found one day in school a boy of medium size ill-treating a smaller boy. I expostulated, but he replied: ‘The bigs hit me, so I hit the babies; that’s fair.’ In these words he epitomised the history of the human race.” One of the things that makes us human is the ability to laugh in the face of the tragically absurd, and continue living in spite of it. Graves in this book has done just that, making his book a classic not only in the genre of war literature but in modern literature as a whole.