



# Limerick



The Graves family have a pedigree that goes back to a French knight who landed with Henry VII at Millford Haven in 1485. Colonel Graves the Roundhead is claimed as the founder of the Irish branch of the family. He was once wounded and left for dead in the market-place at Thame, afterwards had charge of King Charles I's person at Carisbrooke Castle, and later turned Royalist. Limerick was the centre of this branch. The occasional soldiers and doctors in it were mainly collateral; the direct male line had a sequence of rectors, deans, and bishops, apart from my great-grandfather John Crosbie Graves, who was Chief Police Magistrate of Dublin. The Limerick Graves's have no 'hands' or mechanical sense; but a wide reputation as conversationalists...

My paternal grandfather, the Protestant Bishop of Limerick, had eight children. He was a remarkable mathematician - he first formulated some theory or other of spherical conics - and also the leading authority on the Irish Brehon Laws and Ogham script, but by reputation, far from generous. He and O'Dwyer, the Catholic Bishop, lived on the very best of terms. They cracked Latin jokes at each other, discussed fine points of scholarship, and were unclerical enough not to take their religious differences too seriously.

While in Limerick as a soldier of the garrison, some nineteen years after my grandfather's death, I heard stories about him from the townsfolk. Bishop O'Dwyer had once rallied him on the size of his family, and my grandfather had retorted warmly with the text about the blessedness of the man who has his quiver full of arrows; to which O'Dwyer answered briefly: 'The ancient Jewish quiver only held six'. My grandfather's wake, they said, was the longest ever seen in the town of Limerick: it stretched from the Cathedral right down O'Connell Street and over Sarsfield Bridge, and I do not know how many miles Irish beyond. He had blessed me as a child, but I do not remember that.

My father met my mother some time in the early nineties. He had previously married one of the Irish Cooper's, of Cooper's Hill, near Limerick. The Coopers were an even more Irish family than the Graves's. The story goes that when Cromwell came to Ireland and ravaged the country, Moira O'Brien, the last surviving member of the great clan O'Brien, who were the paramount chiefs of the country around Limerick, came to him one day with: 'General, you have killed my father and my uncles, my husband and my brothers. I am left as the sole heiress of these lands. Do you intend to confiscate them?' Cromwell is said to have been struck by her magnificent presence, and to have answered that this certainly had been his intention. But that she could keep her lands, or a part of them, on condition that she married one of his officers.

The Graves family were thin-nosed and inclined to petulance, but never depraved, cruel, or hysterical. A persistent literary tradition: of Richard, a minor poet and a friend of Shenstone; and John Thomas, who was a mathematician and contributed to Sir William Rowan Hamilton's discovery of quaternions; and Richard, a divine and regius Professor of Greek; and James, an archaeologist; and Robert; who invented the disease called after him and was a friend of Turner's; and Robert, classicist, and theologian, and a friend of Wordsworth's; and Richard, another divine; and Robert, another divine; and various Roberts, Jameses, Thomases, and Richards; and Clarissa, one of the toasts of Ireland, who married Leopold von Ranke (at Windermere church), and linked the Graves and von Ranke families a couple of generations before my father and mother married. (See the **British Museum Catalogue** for an eighteen-and nineteenth-century record of Graves' literary history).

It was through this Clarissa-Leopold relationship that my father met my mother. My mother told him at once that she

by Robert Graves

liked **Father O'Flynn**, the song for writing which my father will be chiefly remembered. He had put the words to a traditional jig tune of **The Top of Cork Road**, which he remembered from his boyhood. Sir Charles Stanford supplied a few chords for the setting. My father sold the complete rights for one guinea. Boosey, the publisher, made thousands. Sir Charles Stanford, who drew a royalty as the composer, also collected a very large sum. Recently my father has been sent a few pounds from gramophone rights. He is not bitter about all this, but has more than once impressed upon me almost religiously never to sell for a sum down the complete rights of any work of mine whatsoever.

That my father is a poet has, at least, saved me from any false reverence for poets. I am even delighted when I meet people who know of him and not me. I sing some of his songs while washing up after meals, or shelling peas, or on similar occasions. He never tried to teach me how to write, or showed any understanding of my serious poetry; being always more ready to ask advice about his own. Nor did he ever try to stop me writing. His light-hearted early work is the best. His **Invention of Wine**, for instance, which begins:

**Ere Bacchus could talk  
Or dacently walk  
Down Olympus he jumped  
From the arms of his nurse  
And though ten years in all  
Were consumed by the fall,  
He might have failed further  
And fared a dale worse...**

After marrying my mother and turning teetotaller, he is said to have lost something of his playfulness.

My father resisted the family temptation to take holy orders, never rising higher than lay-reader; and he broke the geographical connexion with Ireland, for which I cannot be too grateful to him. Though much harder on my relatives, and much more careful of associating with them than I am with strangers, I can admire my father and mother: my father for his simplicity and persistence, and my mother for her seriousness and strength. Both for their generosity. They never bullied me, and were grieved rather than angered by my default from formal religion. In physique and general characteristics my mother's side is, on the whole, stronger in me. But I have many habits of speech and movements peculiar to the Graves's, most of them eccentric. Such as finding it difficult to walk straight down a street; fidgeting with bits of bread at table; getting tired of sentences when half-way through and leaving them in the air; walking with the hands folded in a particular way behind the back; and being subject to sudden and most disconcerting spells of complete amnesia. These fits, so far as I can discover, serve no useful purpose, and tend to produce in the victim the same sort of dishonesty that afflicts deaf people who miss the thread of conversation - they hate to be left behind and rely on intuition and bluff to get them through. This disability is most marked in very cold weather. I do not now talk too much, except when I have been drinking, or when I meet someone who fought with me in France. The Graves's have good minds for such purposes as examinations, writing graceful Latin verse, filling in forms, and solving puzzles (when invited, as children, to parties where guessing games and brain-tests were played, we never failed to win). They have a good eye for ball games, and a graceful style. I inherited the eye, but not the style; my

mother's family are entirely without style. I have an ugly but secure seat on a horse. There is a coldness in the Graves's which is anti-sentimental to the point of insolence, a necessary check to the goodness of heart from which my mother's family suffers. The Graves's, it is fair to generalize, though loyal to the British governing class to which they belong, and so to the Constitution, are individualists...

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I went to several preparatory schools, beginning at the age of six... I had just finished with Charterhouse and gone up to Harlech, when England declared war on Germany. A day or two later I decided to enlist... and was in the trenches a few months later...

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In the middle of December the cadet battalions were wound up, and the officers, after a few days' leave, sent back to their units. I had orders to rejoin the Royal Welch Third Battalion, now at the Castle Barracks, Limerick, but decided to overstay my leave until the baby was born. Nancy expected it early in January 1919, and her father took a house at Hove for the occasion. Jenny, born on Twelfth Night, was neither coal-black nor affected by the shocks of the previous months. Nancy had no foreknowledge of the experience — I assumed that she must have been given some sort of warning — and it took her years to recover from it. I went over to Limerick, and there lied my way out of the overstaying of leave.

Limerick being a Sinn Fein stronghold, constant clashes occurred between the troops and the young men of the town, yet little ill-feeling; Welsh and Irish always got on well together, just as Welsh and Scottish were sure to disagree. The Royal Welch had the situation comfortably in hand; they made a joke of politics and turned their entrenching-tool handles into shillelaghs. Limerick looked like a war-ravaged town. The main streets were pitted with holes like shell-craters and many of the bigger houses seemed on the point of collapse. Old Reilly at the antique shop, who remembered my grandfather well, told me nobody built new houses at Limerick now; the birth-rate was

declining and when one fell down the survivors moved into another. He also said that everyone died of drink in Limerick except the Plymouth Brethren, who died of religious melancholia.

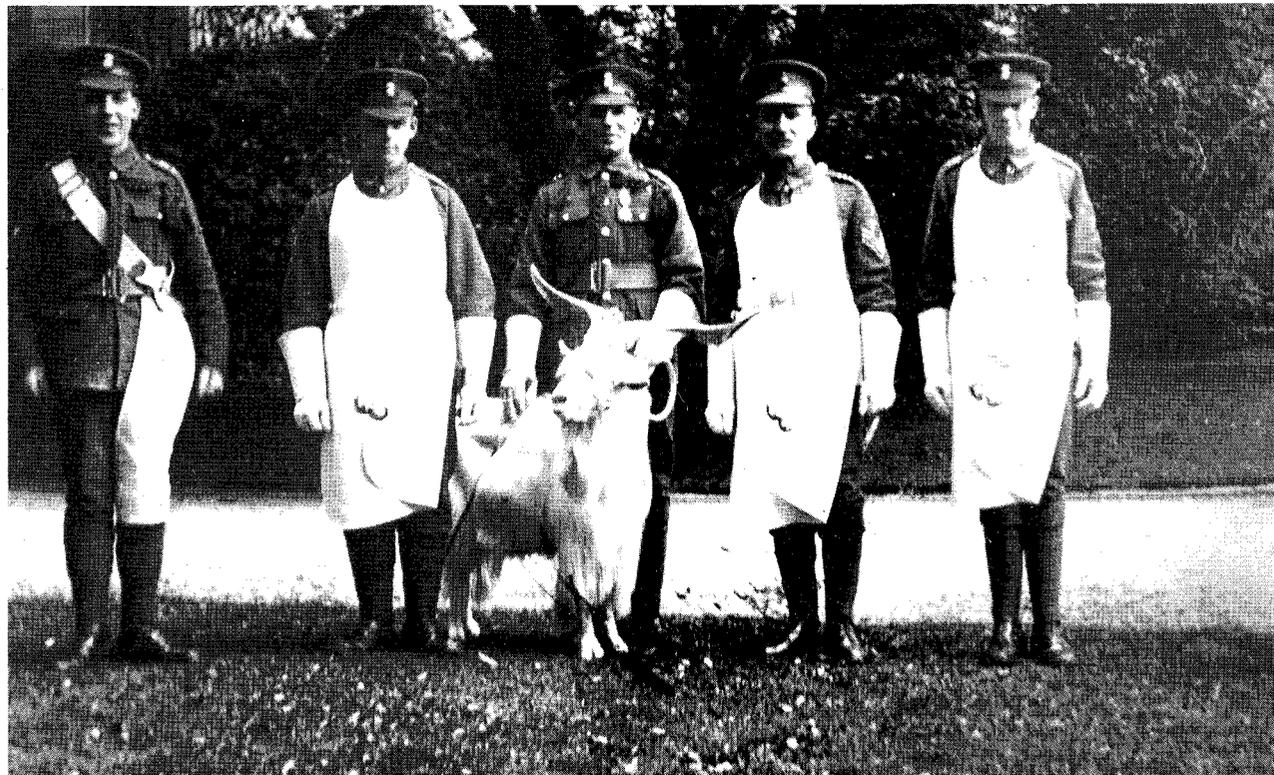
Life did not start in the town before nine in the morning. Once, at about that time, I walked down O'Connell Street, formerly King George Street, and found it deserted. When the hour chimed, the door of a magnificent Georgian house flew open and out came, first a shower of slops, which just missed me, then a dog, which lifted up its leg against a lamp-post, then a nearly naked girl-child, who sat down in the gutter and rummaged in a heap of refuse for filthy pieces of bread; finally a donkey, which began to bray. I had pictured Ireland exactly so, and felt its charm as dangerous. When detailed to search for concealed rifles at the head of a task force, in a neighbouring village, I asked Attwater, then still adjutant, to find a substitute; explaining that as an Irishman I did not care to be mixed up in Irish politics. That January I played my last game of rugger: as full-back for the battalion against Limerick City. We were all crocks and our opponents seemed bent on showing what fine fighting material England had lost by withholding Home Rule. How jovially they jumped on me, and rubbed my face in the mud!

My new loyalty to Nancy and Jenny tended to overshadow regimental loyalty, now that the war seemed to be over. Once I began writing a rhymed nonsense letter to them in my quarters overlooking the barrack square:

**Is there any song sweet enough  
For Nancy or for Jenny?  
Said Simple Simon to the Pieman;  
'Indeed, I know not any.**

**I have counted the miles to Babylon,  
I have flown the earth like a bird,  
I have ridden cock-horse to Banbury Cross,  
But no such song have I heard.**

At that moment some companies of the battalion returned to barracks from a route-march; the drums and fifes drew up un-



The Royal Welch Fusiliers at St. Mary's Cathedral, September, 1920; from a photograph taken by W.F. Mitchell.

der my window, making the panes rattle with **The British Grenadiers**. The insistent repetition of the tune and the hoarse words of command as the parade formed up in the square, company by company, challenged Banbury Cross and Babylon. **The British Grenadiers** succeeded for a moment in forcing their way into the poem:

**Some speak of Alexander,  
And some of Hercules,**

and then were repulsed:

**But where are there any like Nancy and Jenny,  
Where are there any like these?**

Had I ceased to be a British Grenadier?

I decided to resign my commission at once. Consulting the priority list of trades for demobilization, I found that agricultural workers and students were among the first classes to go. I did not particularly want to be a student again and I would rather have been an agricultural worker - Nancy and I had spoken of farming when the war ended - but where was my agricultural background? And I could take a two years' course at Oxford with a Government grant of two hundred pounds a year, and be excused the intermediate examination (Mods.) on account of war-service. The preliminary examination I had already been excused because of a 'higher certificate examination' passed at Charterhouse; so there remained only the finals. The grant would be increased by a children's allowance. It seemed absurd at the time to suppose that university degrees would count for anything in a regenerated post-war England; but Oxford offered itself as a convenient place to mark time until I felt more like earning a livelihood. We were all accustomed to the war-time view, that the sole qualification for peace-time employment would be a good record of service in the field, that we expected our scars and our commanding officers' testimonials to get us whatever we wanted. A few of my fellow-officers did manage, as a matter of fact, to take advantage of the employers'

patriotic spirit before it cooled again; sliding into jobs for which they were not properly qualified.

I wrote to a friend in the War Office Demobilization Department, asking him to hurry through my release. He wrote back that he would do his best, but that I must not have had charge of Government moneys for the past six months. As it happened, I had not at the time; but Attwater suddenly decided to put me in command of a company. He complained of being disastrously short of officers who could be trusted with company accounts. The latest arrivals from the New Army battalions were a constant shame to the senior officers. Paternity-orders, stumer cheques, and drunkenness on parade grew frequent; not to mention table manners at which Sergeant Malley stood aghast. We now had two mess ante-rooms, the junior and the senior; yet if a junior officer happened to be regimentally a gentleman (belonged, that is, to the North Wales landed gentry, or came from Sandhurst) the colonel invited him to use the senior ante-room and mix with his own class. The situation must have seemed very strange to the three line-battalion second-lieutenants captured at Mons in 1914, now promoted captains by the death of most of their contemporaries and set free by the terms of the Armistice.

Attwater cancelled the intended appointment only when I promised to help him with the battalion theatricals now being arranged for St. David's Day; I undertook to play Cinna in **Julius Caesar**. His change of mind saved me over two hundred pounds, because next day the senior lieutenant of the company which I was to have taken over went off with the cash-box, and I should have been legally responsible for its loss. Before the war he used to give displays on Blackpool Pier as 'The Handcuff King'. He got away safely to the United States.

I rode out a few miles from Limerick to visit my uncle, Robert Cooper, at Cooper's Hill. He was a farmer, a retired naval commander, and the Sinn Feiners had begun burning his ricks and driving his cattle. Through the window he showed me distant herds grazing beside the Shannon. 'They have been there all winter', he said despondently, 'but I haven't had the heart to take a look at them these three months'. I spent the night at Cooper's Hill, and woke up with a sudden chill, which I recognized as the first symptoms of Spanish influenza.

Back at the barracks, I found that a War Office telegram had come



The ruin of Cooper Hill



The Munster Fusiliers at Ennis, 1914.

through for my demobilization, but that all demobilization among troops in Ireland was to be stopped on the following day for an indefinite period because of the Troubles. Attwater, showing me the telegram, said: 'We're not going to let you go. You promised to help me with those theatricals'. I protested; he stood firm; but I did not intend to have influenza at an Irish military hospital with my lungs in their present condition.

I decided to make a run for it. The orderly-room sergeant had made out my papers on receipt of the telegram; all my kit lay ready packed. There remained only two things to get: the commanding officer's signature to the statement that I had handled no company moneys, and the secret code-marks which the battalion demobilization officer alone could supply — but he was hand-in-glove with Attwater, so I dared not ask him for them. The last train before demobilization ended would be the six-fifteen from Limerick that same evening, February 13th. My one hope was to wait until Attwater left the orderly-room and then casually ask the commanding officer to sign the statement, without mentioning Attwater's objection to my going. Attwater remained in the orderly-room until five minutes past six. As soon as he was out of sight I hurried in, saluted, got the necessary signature — fortunately my old friend Macartney-Filgate was now in command, saluted again, and hurried away to collect my baggage. I had counted on a jaunting-car at the barrack gates but found none. About five minutes left, and the station a good distance away! A First Battalion corporal passed. I shouted to him: 'Corporal Summers, quick! Get a squad of men! I've **got my ticket** and must catch the last train home'. Summers promptly called four men; they picked up my stuff and doubled off with it, left, right, left, to the station. I tumbled into the train as it moved slowly out and threw a pound-note to Corporal Summers. 'Goodbye, corporal, drink my health!'

Yet still I had not got my code-marks, and knew that when I reached the demobilization centre at Wimbledon the officers there would

refuse to let me go. Not that I cared very much. I should at least have my influenza in an English, and not an Irish, hospital. My temperature was running high, and my mind working clearly, as it always does in fever, with its visual imagery, which is cloudy and partial at ordinary times, defined and complete. We reached Fishguard after a rough crossing. I bought a copy of the **South Wales Echo** and read that a strike of London Electric Railwaymen would take place the next day, February 14th, unless the railway directors met the union's demands. So as the train steamed into Paddington, I jumped out, fell down, picked myself up, and ran across to the station entrance where, in spite of competition from porters — a feeble crew at this period — I seized the only taxi in sight as its occupant paid the fare. I had foreseen the taxi-shortage and could afford to waste no time. I brought my taxi back to the train, where scores of stranded officers eyed me with envy. One, a fellow-traveller in my compartment, had been met by his wife. 'Excuse me', I said, 'but would you like to share my taxi anywhere? (I have influenza, I warn you) I'm going down to Wimbledon, so I shall be getting out at Waterloo; the steam-trains are still running'. That delighted them, because they lived at Ealing and had no idea how to get home except by taxi.

On the way to Waterloo he said: 'I wish there were some way of showing our gratitude — something we could do for you'.

'Well, there's only one thing in the world that I want at the moment. But you can't give it to me, I'm afraid. And that's the set of secret code-marks to complete my demobilization papers. I've bolted from Ireland without them, and there'll be hell to pay if the Wimbledon people send me back'.

He rapped on the glass of the taxi, told the driver to stop, got down his bag, opened it, and produced a satchel of army forms. 'Well', he said, 'I happen to be the Cork District Demobilization officer, and here's the whole bag of tricks'.

**Then he filled in my papers.**