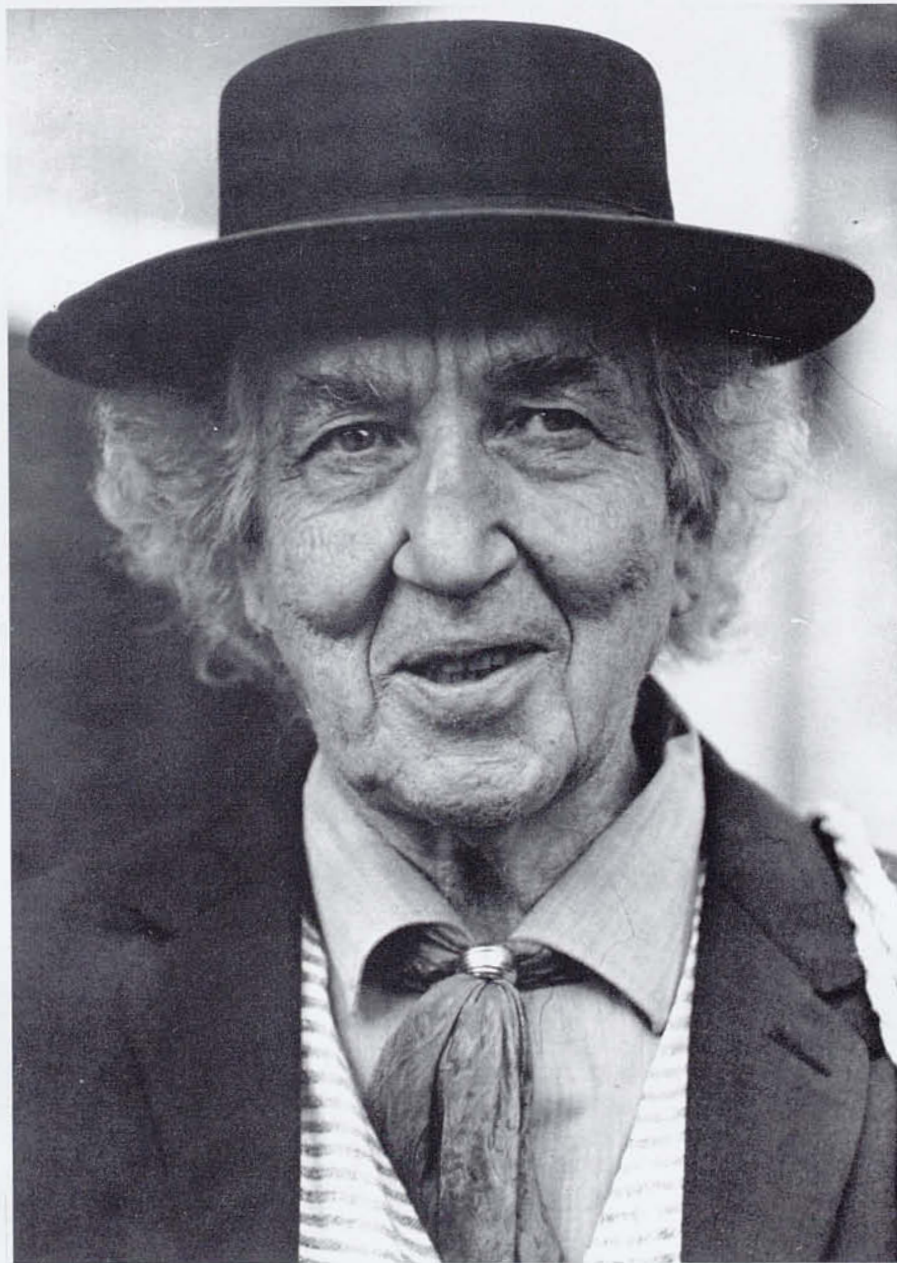


# ROBERT GRAVES'S ISLAND

GRAVES SAID GOODBYE TO THE WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER AND—EXCEPT FOR THE BREAK DURING THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR— RARELY LEFT THE VILLAGE OF DEIÀ.

VALENTÍ PUIG AUTHOR



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**F**rom the terraces of the houses of the village of Deià—in the cosmic world of the north coast of the island of Majorca—the twilight stretches out over the olive groves towards the sea. Deià, twenty-seven kilometres from the city of Palma—the capital of the island—is a village perched on a hill overlooking the fertile valley of orange and lemon trees among plots of land and streams that spring from the mountain. In winter, the murmur of the river comes down the side of the solemn, majestic mountains.

In his poetry, Robert Graves spoke of war and death, but more than anything, he spoke of the White Goddess because “the test of vision of the real poet is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess and the island she rules”. During the First World War, Graves fought in France, and on his twenty-first birthday he was reported dead, but luckily *The Times* was able to correct the inaccurate obituary. Later, at the age of thirty-three, he wrote his autobiography *Goodbye to All That*—the following year, his father, a patrician poet of the Irish renaissance, wrote *Return to All That*—thus turning his back on a past of war and horror in the trenches. Ten years after the end of the war—terrible years for the young poet, with death appearing before him every night along the tunnels of psychiatric therapy—Gertrude Stein urged him to go and visit the island of Majorca. She and her friend, Alice B. Toklas, had lived on the island in 1915 and they were appalled to hear the locals discussing the money that the war was costing—Spain was neutral in the Great War. Graves then said goodbye to the white cliffs of Dover and—except for the break during the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, rarely left the village of Deià: he had discovered its hallucinatory power, an obvious demonstration of the lunar divinity: nowhere else in Europe—he wrote in *Majorca*

*Observed*—is the moon as intense as in Deià.

Deià, a tiny village whose inhabitants had always shown a tendency to emigrate to South America, had a population of five hundred when Robert Graves arrived there. Someone had written that if Giotto had wanted to paint a nativity scene, he would have painted a village like Deià. Painters had always gone there to paint the mountains, the dark green of the olive trees and the endless blue of the sea, the bluest that D. H. Lawrence had ever seen. Deià is close to Miramar, the large estate belonging to the Archduke Lluís Salvador of Austria, a man with blue eyes and enormous build, so passionately in love with the Mediterranean island that he wrote an encyclopaedic study of the life and customs of Majorca: he would not have the trees on his land cut down and he banned hunting. In the thirteenth century, there was a school of oriental languages at Miramar founded by Ramon Llull, a great figure of mystic thought and ecumenical tolerance, the origin of Catalan literature; this was the first missionary school established in the Christian world. There, looking at the breadth of the sea that Graves, centuries later, was to contemplate each day, Llull wrote: “The sea, current of the world...”. Graves built his house in Deià where he discovered that the vibrations of the stones and the sea make people more what they really are: better or worse. The magnetism of the mountains encouraged his relationship with poetry and life. He knew that very few poets have written poems in cities, probably because the ancient poetic tradition is firmly attached to trees, fruits, flowers and stars. But the great thing—for Graves, a great poet of the English language—was not only the sight of sensuality torn from the twilight at Deià; there is also the pregnant, tangible, presence that makes us feel like intruders in the land of the enigma. From then on,

that land became home for Graves as much as the language he cultivated in the form of poems with a high emotional charge, sharp, dry, with an almost cold and always ingenious surface, but with still waters that fill the depths with anxiety and joy. Through the intensity of that moon he understood that the subject of poetry is none other than love and the fear the poet feels before the muse. Nothing is possible without the help of the White Goddess—threefold goddess; mother, lover and destroyer of men—and of those women possessed by the *belle dame sans merci*, and with whom we must fall in love whatever the cost. Graves maintained that in the grounds of the church and the cemetery of Deià, there had in ancient times been an Iberian shrine devoted to the Moon Goddess.

Graves walked around the streets of Deià with a basket and a straw or Cordovan hat, greeting the colony of artists and writers he had involuntarily attracted and who sought a transformation of city life and the distance of silence. The poet went down to the little cove to swim and then—armed with atlases, dictionaries and mythological collections—, wrote and re-wrote poems or planned novels in which the argonauts went to seek the golden fleece across that ancient sea or Nausicaa revealed ancient enigmas. From 1929 to 1936 he never left the island: in August of 1936—the Spanish Civil War had started the month before—he left on a British destroyer that evacuated the British residents and he returned in May 1946. He lived there, glad that nothing had led him to write a second part of his autobiography, remembering stories of lovers—“innocent, gentle, daring, lasting, proud” beneath the olive trees, on the Island of the Apple with its dangerously clear moon—, magnetized by the mountains, following the annual farming cycle, holding off death with poetry—until death finally arrived. ●

