



## Preface

MARK BUSBY AND TERRELL DIXON

THIS COLLECTION BEGAN converging as the result of several events. The Southwestern Writers Collection (SWWC) at Texas State University–San Marcos held a symposium called “The Writer John Graves” in September 2002, bringing together friends, acquaintances, and scholars of John Graves’ work. The next fall, when the Western History Association (WHA) met in Fort Worth, organizer Ron Tyler planned a session on Graves’ work that included Mark Busby, Terrell Dixon, Don Graham, and Stephen Harrigan, with Graves commenting on the discussion and announcing that his memoir would come out in 2004. As that session ended, Jim Lee, now of Texas Christian University Press and a longtime faculty member at the University of North Texas, joined us, as the idea for collecting essays on John Graves began to take shape. Mark Busby and Terrell Dixon agreed to begin the process, using the presentations at the San Marcos symposium and WHA as the beginnings of the collection. This book is the culmination of those events.

We decided early that we would not necessarily plan a *Festschrift*, which is usually a celebratory volume with contributions by an academic’s colleagues and former students. We wanted to have essays that celebrate Graves’ life and work, but we also planned to include other analytical essays that offer insight into his life and career by writers who may or may not have ever met John Graves but who

have examined his work carefully. And we believe that this collection fulfills our goals.

WE HAVE DIVIDED THE COLLECTION into three parts after our preface and coeditor Mark Busby's introduction. The first part includes the transcript of a session at the John Graves' symposium in San Marcos, with Sam Hynes, Graves' longtime friend, fellow student at Columbia, and a distinguished writer and scholar, and Dave Hickey, Graves' former student at TCU and later a MacArthur Fellowship winner for his art criticism. Graves commented on and responded to these two friends' observations about their experiences with him at two distinctly different periods in his life. The symposium commentary is followed by an interview by Dave Hamrick, the 2004–2006 president of the Texas Institute of Letters and editor of *John Graves and The Making of Goodbye to a River*.

Part 2 is perhaps the Festschrift portion of the book. Here six of John's friends provide personal responses to their close connection to John and his work. Bill Wittliff has had a long and close personal relationship with Graves for many years, back to the 1960s when Bill and Sally Wittliff ran Encino Press. Next, Rick Bass notes the strong influence that Graves has had on Texas literature and on his own work. Then Bill Broyles pays tribute to Graves' work. Broyles was the founding editor of *Texas Monthly* and enticed Graves to write a regular column for the magazine early in its existence, bringing literary prestige to *Texas Monthly* before it was the established publication that it has become. There is a strong connection between these two former Marines, one from World War II and the other from Vietnam. Next John Erickson tells of visiting Graves early in his writing career, before Erickson created the now-famous Hank the Cowdog series, and how the relationship he established with Graves helped him find his way as a writer. The next essay in this section is by Bill Harvey, who was drawn early to Graves' trip down the Brazos and sought his advice before setting out on his own canoe trip forty years after the classic journey. Finally, a seasoned observer of Texas letters and of Graves' work, James Ward Lee, examines Graves' career in light of the 2004 memoir *Myself and Strangers*. Lee gains insight into the importance of Graves' Fort Worth experiences in the making of

the writer, as well as the significance of rejection in his journey to becoming a writer.

Part 3 turns to specific examinations of Graves' work. Alex Hunt's essay explores how Graves' writing often has provoked discussion about the relationship of literary art with activism and about what properly constitutes the categories of "nature writing" and "environmentalism." He then argues for Graves' work as its own uniquely Texas hybrid. Terrell Dixon looks at the place of *Goodbye to a River* within American environmental literature; he observes how the sometimes misunderstood subtleties of Graves' style and structure develop the themes of the book and at how the book alternates between acceptance of and argument with some of Thoreau's beliefs.

James Langston and Betsy Berry treat one of the issues that always produces heated discussions among students—the question of gender in Graves' work. Langston argues that in *Goodbye to a River*, Graves presents a strong female character, Davis Birdsong's grandmother, Maw, whose strength provides the model for a kind of life that Graves himself later pursued. Berry approaches the issue by also demonstrating how Graves strongly influenced another Texas writer, Beverly Lowry. Berry evaluates the strong similarities between Lowry's character, Will Hand, in *The Perfect Sonya* and Graves and analyzes Lowry's critique of the Texas "masculine mystique." Dickie Maurice Heaberlin points to similarities between John Graves and E. B. White, particularly both men's attraction to dachshunds (often pronounced "dash hounds" in rural Texas) and the two writers' styles, especially their fondness for the em dash (—).

In her essay, Lisa Slappey looks at the writing of *Goodbye to a River* as both a rite of passage for its author and a study of how "an ethnocentric, aggressive, colonial culture" imposed itself on indigenous inhabitants. Barbara J. Cook demonstrates that Graves' initial three major works, *Goodbye to a River*, *Hard Scrabble*, and *From a Limestone Ledge*, constitute different aspects of a single, continuing narrative about our right, human relationship to the land. Graves' essays for *Texas Monthly*, the glossy magazine of an increasingly urbanized state, are the focus of Cory Lock's contribution. She explores the place that his Country Notes essays had in the magazine and how the successive editorships of Bill Broyles, Greg Curtis, and Evan Smith viewed the importance of Graves' writing about rural subjects.

Finally, Don Graham, who has long observed Texas literature, examines Graves' main body of work. Graham evaluates Graves' memoir, pointing out how Graves, unlike some other memoirists, chooses to concentrate on sketches of relatively unknown figures. He also points out the numerous literary insights the young Graves had during his writing apprenticeship. Graham links how Graves' return to Texas at the end of the memoir signaled the beginning of his real writing career, with the publication of what for Graves became "the book"—*Goodbye to a River*.

The three sections, we hope, offer a full picture of John Graves, writer. Our title echoes the symposium on Graves at Texas State University in 2002, and we would like to thank SWWC curator Connie Todd and her staff, especially Steve Davis, for the help and inspiration. Mark Busby acknowledges the help of his staff at the Southwest Regional Humanities Center, especially Sharon Pogue, Christopher "Twister" Marquiss, and Tammy Gonzales. Terrell Dixon also thanks the Martha Gano Houstoun Endowment in the English Department at the University of Houston. And, without doubt, we'd like to thank the *dos Lindas*, Linda Busby and Linda Walsh, for all their help in moving us on down the river. Finally we acknowledge John Graves, writer, for working with us on this project and for showing all of us the way.



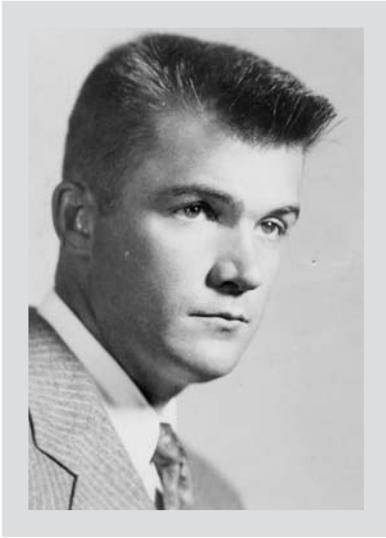
*As a young boy.*



*In the first grade.*



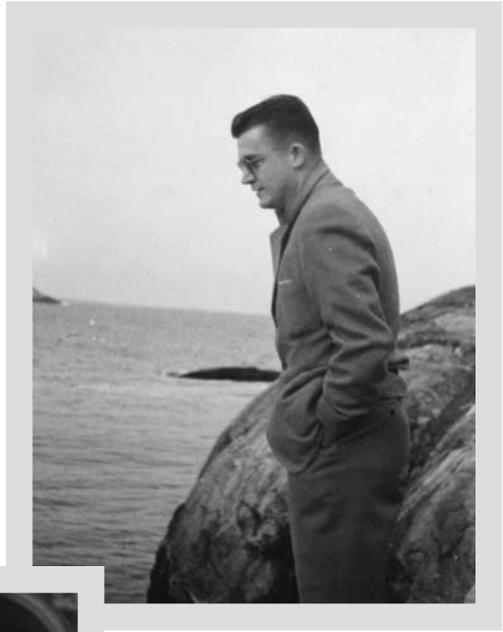
*With his father in Cuero, Texas, 1930s.*



*With a flattop haircut.*



*Relaxing with friends. Graves with his eye patch.*



*In Europe, 1949.*



*In a Madrid café, circa 1954.*



*In Europe.*



*With Watty in his canoe. Photograph by Jane Cole.*



*With his dog on the Brazos River at start of the Goodbye trip, 1957. Photograph by Jane Cole.*



*Fishing on the Trinity River, circa 1957 or 1958. Photograph by Jane Cole.*



*With his wife, Jane, 1960s.*



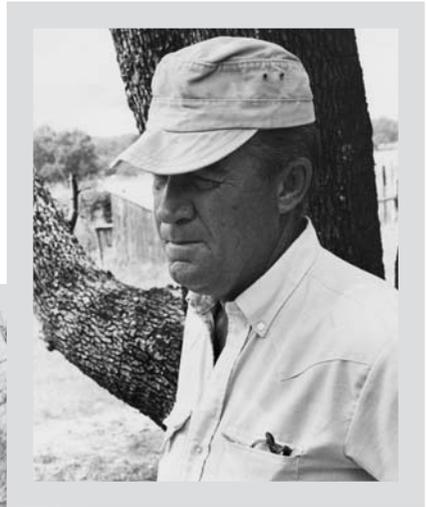
*At Hard Scrabble, 1960s.*



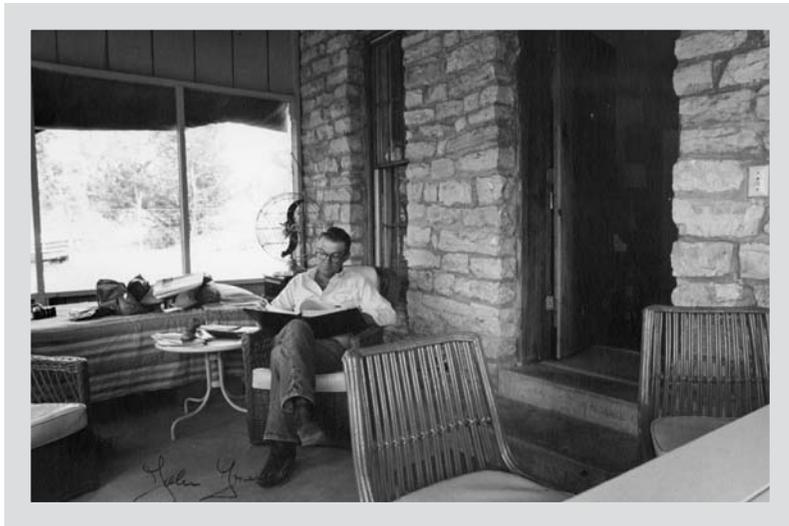
*As a mason, 1962.*



*Wearing his hat.*



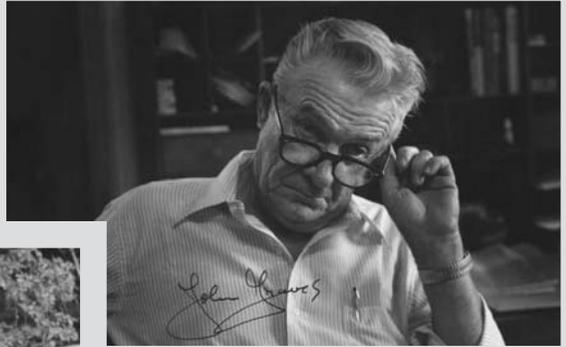
*On his hardscrabble ranch.  
Photograph by Bill Wittliff,  
© 1971.*



*On his porch. Photograph by Bill Wittliff, © 1971.*



*In his barn office.  
Photograph by Bill Wittliff,  
© 1977.*



*In 1986. Photograph by  
Bill Wittliff, © 1986.*



*Fishing on White Bluff Creek.*



*At home. Photograph by Bill Wittliff, © 1991.*



*John Graves Day, 1995.*



*At the dedication of a statue in his honor, 2004.*



John Graves, Writer

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