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John Walker

Cunninghame Graham and the Critics: A Reappraisal



In the last few years, if one is to go by the number of publications, there has been a growing interest in the life and works of Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham (1852-1936). Perhaps the interest in Graham's life has always been present, if less defined. I remember as a boy listening to stories about a picturesque man always known affectionately as Don Roberto or the "uncrowned King of Scotland." Although I must have absorbed early and unknowingly the inescapable ambience created by the Graham name and legend, it was not until my days as a student at the University of Glasgow that I occasionally came across the figure of Graham in the history and literature of the two countries that he knew and loved best--Scotland and Argentina.

In the last two decades I have come to recognize and appreciate even more his importance as a literary and artistic personality. In a sense I think my own personal experience with regard to Graham is a good indication of a general pattern in people's attitude to the man and his work. It seems to me that there is beginning to manifest itself a growing, maturing consciousness not only of the man but also his true position as a writer, in both English and Scottish literature, as well as his less obvious, but no less merited, reputation in the literature of the River Plate region, to which he dedicated so much energy with his evocative sketches and his un-

usual histories of Argentina, Paraguay and other Latin American countries.

Now it should not surprise us that people find so attractive this legend--or better still this myth--of Don Roberto, an eccentric, fantastic, incredible figure. Because of his quixotic attitude, his extravagant nature, and his larger-than-life adventures, Graham certainly deserves this reputation as a great "character" which he acquired over the years. Born in London of a Scottish soldier-father in 1852, by the time he was 17 he was off to the pampas of Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, where he got embroiled in the gaucho wars of the 1870s and other wild adventures, as well as becoming involved in harebrained commercial schemes--all failures, of course. During a visit home in 1878 he met Gabrielle de la Balmondière in Paris, married her quickly, and almost immediately set out for Texas, Mexico and the Southwestern United States. Home again in Europe in 1881, by 1886 he was not only Laird of Gartmore but also the radical Liberal MP for Lanark, who plagued Parliament until 1892 with his progressive ideas and fiery speeches. Not long after the end of his political career, the eccentric in him took him off on a fruitless gold hunt to Spain, based on a text of Pliny, and then on to North Africa, where he tried to reach the Forbidden City of Tarudant in Morocco, never before entered by a Christian. This was the basis of *Mogreb-el-Aksa* (London, 1898), one of the best travel stories ever written, and the inspiration for Bernard Shaw's *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*. With the beginning of the 1914-18 War, although aged 62, he offered his services as a Rough Rider. When he was turned down, he spent the war travelling back and forth to South America on horse-buying missions for the government. After the war in his seventies he set out on a long sentimental journey to Venezuela in 1925. At this same period he forged an emotional link with the cause of Scottish nationalism on whose behalf he spoke and travelled tirelessly. However in 1936 at the age of 83 he decided, although clearly unwell, to make a final pilgrimage to his first love, Argentina, where he died, not surprisingly, of pneumonia, honored by the whole nation, before being brought home to be buried in Scotland beside his wife on Inchmahome Island.

Even in this brief résumé of his life and adventures, it is not surprising that he should be considered a "Master of Life." and a "King amongst Men," as his epitaph reads. The fact is that he was a truly fascinating character--and herein lies the root of the problem. Because of his interesting life, one finds continually stressed, excessively in my opinion, the biographical to the detriment of the literary side of his career. What the brief outline of his life omits is the fact

that between 1896 and 1936 he also published over thirty books--collections of his impressionistic sketches (e.g. *Faith, Hope and Charity*, 1909, 1910, 1912), biographies (e.g. of his famous ancestor Robert Graham, *Doughty Deeds*, 1925, and of several Spanish conquistadores in the New World), travel books like *Mogreb-el-Aksa* and *Notes on the District of Menteith*, 1895), not to mention all the translations and pamphlets, and prefaces that he wrote for others (like Conrad and Hudson), plus hundreds of letters, book reviews and other miscellaneous pieces for magazines and newspapers--not bad for an "amateur of genius," as Frank Harris, Morley Roberts and others mistakenly labelled him.

The irony is, of course, that his life and literature are inextricably bound up, and one can appreciate better his writings by taking into account the biographical data from which the literature emanates--that is to say, according to the artistic credo of Graham himself, his life is interesting and valuable in the sense that his literature is an aesthetic manifestation of his vital conduct and sensibility. What matters most for Graham the writer is his artistic manner of concretizing events witnessed and experienced during an active life. In the *Apologia to His People* (1906) he describes the creative process thus: "Still I believe, that be it bad or good, all that a writer does is to dress up what he has seen, or felt, and nothing real is evolved from his own brain, except the words he uses, and the way in which he uses them. Therefore it follows that in writing he sets down (perhaps unwittingly) the story of his life."

In spite of this modest attempt to play down his own creative faculties, there is part truth in Graham's affirmation. But what one ought to underline is that without the aesthetic capacity to record what he had lived, the literature does not exist. Without the inspiration of the artistic element, his memories are no more than a collection of facts and data without soul. Thus the life is only the point of departure for his art. It is Graham's subjective way of treating the Scottish material, or the Argentine material, that raises his sketches to a rank superior to that of mere customs-painting--to which genre, we might add, he made a substantial contribution. Thus, if the life of Cunninghame Graham is fascinating, his literature possesses a spiritual quality which transcends the simple narrating of biographical facts.

One does not find so surprising, then, this past emphasis on Graham the man. Even in my own research I have developed two parallel strands in an effort to rehabilitate the neglected *writer*. Alongside a journalistic article like "Don Roberto in the New World" (*Scottish Field*, 1970), one has to place "Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham: Gaucho Apologist

and Costumbrist of the Pampa" (*Hispania*, 1970). To complement my "Voices of Socialism: Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham" (*Tribune*, 1966), one should read the political but literary oriented "Cunninghame Graham and *The Labour Elector*" (*The Bibliothek*, 1974). In the same way, my "Cunninghame Graham: A King amongst Men" (*Scotland's Magazine*, 1966) prepares the way for my monograph-length *Cunninghame Graham and Scotland: An Annotated Bibliography* (Dollar, 1980), and the long introductory essay, "Cunninghame Graham and Scotland," to my recent study of *The Scottish Sketches of Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham* (Edinburgh, 1982). Several years ago when I was beginning a critical study on Cunninghame Graham, a certain publisher was very enthusiastic about the project--provided that I stressed the biographical side. The same publisher hesitated about accepting my manuscript *The South American Sketches of R.B. Cunninghame Graham* (1978), because he considered Graham's literature less important (commercially) than his fascinating life. Fortunately, the University of Oklahoma Press saw the wisdom of publishing this book on Graham's writings, which will surely, in turn, give publicity to the man.

Although greatly admired, even idolized in Argentina, Graham scholars there have sinned excessively with respect to this Biography/Literature conflict. In my "Annotated Bibliography of Writings on Cunninghame Graham" (*English Literature in Transition*, 1979), there are barely two dozen, out of a total of 500 items, which are genuinely critical articles--and almost none of them from Argentine scholars. It is because of the particularly close human relationship between Graham and his Argentine admirers that one finds lacking a proper critical approach to Don Roberto. Argentine writers tend to be more a group of friends and admirers who write eulogies rather than analytical studies. Graham's death in Buenos Aires in 1936 produced a rash of articles in praise of the old master. The supreme example of this hero-worship phenomenon is the 1937 biography *Don Roberto* by the Anglo-Argentine-Swiss Aimé F. Tschiffely, who perpetuated most of the myths, and errors, still current about Cunninghame Graham. I must add, however, that young Tschiffely, like the other Graham protégé H.F. West, who wrote the 1932 biography, *A Modern Conquistador: Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham: His Life and Works* (London), produced his work with the approval and cooperation of Don Roberto and under his supervision. Clearly, he was almost in awe of him. I think that Graham probably helped to propagate some of the myths himself--by elaborating on his adventures, withholding certain information and letters, and sometimes being very vague and shadowy about dates, facts about his own life and travels. In my recently completed *The North American Sketches of Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham*, I have

demonstrated that the letters are very reticent about his activities, and especially about his wife Gabriela, whose whole background is very shadowy indeed.

Even when the Argentine scholars, for example, try to adopt a relatively critical perspective, it is always from the geographical or historical point of view. They have perpetuated this limiting tendency to read the sketches of Cunninghame Graham as sociological documents or textbooks, looking for errors of fact, topographical or ethnographical. They, like others, forget that Graham wrote these sketches thirty, forty, fifty, even sixty years after his experiences on the pampa. Surely the accuracy of the geographical names or the botanical specimens matter little compared to the impact of the work of art. I have often talked to Argentines and Anglo-Argentines who have not appreciated the work of W.H. Hudson, Graham's kindred spirit, for similar reasons. They do not seem to recognize that it is this spatial isolation and temporal absence which provide the special nostalgic element, which is the nucleus of the artistic skill of both writers in capturing the spirit of "far away and long ago." Here we have the very essence of the aesthetic distancing which characterizes the particular quality of both Hudson and Graham.

In Britain, and particularly in Scotland during the last decade, especially in the last three or four years, there has been, if not exactly a boom, at least a revival of interest in the work of Cunninghame Graham. My colleagues Cedric Watts in Sussex and Laurence Davies (now in Dartmouth College) have been contributing to the new critical method of looking at Graham's work. As a result of this *literary* emphasis Watts produced his careful, scholarly edition of *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham* (London, 1969) which highlights not only the moral and material support given by Graham to Conrad in his early days, but also underlines the philosophical influence of Graham on Conrad's fiction. Davies in his University of Sussex D.Phil. thesis (1972), "Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham and the Concept of Impressionism," underscores the role played by Graham in the evolution of that movement. Watts and Davies have recently collaborated to produce *Cunninghame Graham: A Critical Biography* (1979), which goes a long way to correcting many of the well-meaning errors and myths propagated by West and Tschiffely.

The point about this approach, as some of my other articles like "Bernard Shaw and Don Roberto" (*The Shaw Review*, 1972) and my "Oscar Wilde and Cunninghame Graham" (*Notes and Queries*, 1976) demonstrate, is, one would hope, that it contributes a fairer, more profound, and more important approximation to the literary production of R.B. Cunninghame Graham.

Another Grahamophile, Richard Haymaker in South Carolina, although of an older generation, sympathizes and identifies with the new method of approaching Graham. His *Prince Errant and Evocator of Horizons* (1969), a reading of the works of Cunninghamhame Graham, is one of the few studies up until the last decade, whose main aim is to highlight the artistic qualities of Graham.

It is interesting also to compare the impact made by Graham in other European countries. Because of his link with Conrad, scholars are beginning to appreciate his worth in Poland, not just because of his friendship with the Polish-born master. In their respective studies, both Jablowska (1961) and Kowalska (1973) penetrate beneath the surface of a mere personal friendship. In 1964 Jessie Kocmanová in Czechoslovakia wrote a eulogistic article on Graham as a writer of "realistic prose." The title, pregnant with political implications, rooted in the social and humanitarian activities of Graham, which were genuine and authentic, prompts a stereotyped denunciation of the evils of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism, whose abuses and vices Graham had attacked throughout his life.

As far as Spain is concerned, Graham, despite the Hispanic influence in his family heritage, education and temperament, has not been greatly appreciated in that country which he knew and loved so well. A great admirer of the Spanish Golden Age, especially the life and works of Cervantes, whose magnificent creation, Don Quixote, Graham resembled physically and spiritually (cf. my "Don Roberto and Cervantes" in *Anales Cervantinos*, 1972), and despite the lavish yet discriminating praise of Fitzmaurice Kelly, the most eminent Spanish professor of his time, Graham has not won the approval of Iberian scholars in general. Alberich (1968) considers him a "hispaniciser" and a mere tourist. Others, like Llorens Ebrat, scarcely go beyond the biographical type of criticism, on "the personality of the author" (1963). This cool reception is surprising, given Graham's solidarity with his Spanish contemporaries of the so-called Generation of '98, with whom Graham established a voluminous correspondence, long preserved in the National Library of Scotland, Dartmouth College, the University of Texas at Austin, and the Graham family home Ardoch, now transferred to Harden (the estate of Lord and Lady Polwarth). Despite his friendship with Blasco Ibáñez (the author of *Blood and Sand*), Pérez de Ayala, and others, there never has been demonstrated any warm appreciation of Graham in Spain. One hopes that this situation will be changed with the publication of my work in progress, *The Spanish Sketches of R.B. Cunninghamhame Graham*.

I should like to state that at least in Graham's homeland they have had a high regard for him. But that has not always been the case. During the 1970s, in the face of a growing wave of nationalism, and given the separatist tendencies of that decade (for reasons both political and economic), it looked as if there was going to be a rebirth of interest in Cunninghame Graham--not necessarily for literary reasons, however. Since several political groups were in the habit of using Graham throughout his life, perhaps for the nationalists Graham represented, and still represents, some kind of symbol of the new independent Scotland. I think there was something of that attitude in several pieces that emerged in the 70s. However, there are a few serious writers who have devoted at least some of their energy to Graham and his work--not least his grandniece Lady Polwarth (Jean Cunninghame Graham), who is writing a family-type biography, which should clear up some of the mysteries about her beloved Uncle Robert. Alanna Knight produced a radio version of "Don Roberto," based on the standard biographies of the 1930s, and there was also a theatrical presentation of the same name staged at the University of Stirling in 1974. Alexander Maitland, who has been working on a study of Graham and his wife from the focus of marriage and politics, edited Graham's *Tales of Horsemen* (Edinburgh, 1981) to follow Paul Harris's 1979 anthology entitled *Beattock for Moffat and the Best of R.B. Cunninghame Graham* (Edinburgh, 1979) and Nancy Curmé's 1979 University of Calgary thesis "R.B. Cunninghame Graham: The Neglected Scottish Writings."

I think it is significant that those Scots who have best and consistently appreciated the work of Cunninghame Graham are writers themselves, like Hugh MacDiarmid who admired Cunninghame Graham in the 1970s as he had done in the 1920s and 1930s. MacDiarmid often attacked the exploitation of Graham by his fellow-nationalists of that early period, when Don Roberto, in the autumn of his life, forged a sentimental relationship with the political nationalists. Only a few of his compatriots respected his qualities--Compton Mackenzie, William Power, Nigel Tranter, but especially Frederick Niven, and, above all, MacDiarmid (see his *Cunninghame Graham: A Centenary Study*, Glasgow, 1952). The greatest irony, however, is that those nationalist admirers of the 1930s and the 1970s did not recognize the special national ideal for which Graham was searching. His dreams were more of a non-historical, non-political Scotland--a Scotland that pre-dated both 1603 and 1707. The union, or communion, that the old man Graham longed for could be achieved only by a return to a distant, far-off Scotia, hidden in the mists of time immemorial, a long-lost, mythical paradise--that is, a remote Caledonia

situated in a Celtic Golden Age, which exists beyond the geographical and chronological frontiers--"a kingdom of the mind," as Frederick Niven has so felicitously described Scotland. Those nationalists of the 1930s, like today's breed, who looked for something more concrete, have tended to forget that in the early stages of his career, e.g. in the sketches from *The Ipané* (1899), Graham had treated with a vitriolic realism the defects of the Scottish character and the abuses and vices of the national way of life.

Thus it is perfectly clear that Cunninghame Graham represents different values in different times for different peoples, groups and nations. The high esteem in which he is held in the Argentine has already been mentioned. The fact that he went back in 1936, to die in the saddle, as it were, has added to the legend there. Although several critics like Emilio Carrilla, Guillermo Ara and Alicia Jurado have done some work on Graham, in general there has flourished for too long in that country a mythification of Don Roberto, without the solid base of research. The only full-length study of Graham, in spite of all the praise, is Alicia Jurado's 1978 biography in Spanish, *El escocés errante: R.B. Cunninghame Graham* [*The Wandering Scotsman: R.B. Cunninghame Graham*].

In my view, then, what is needed is a demythification of Graham the man and a rehabilitation of Graham the artist. Rather than looking at Graham's biography, or at his sketches as a mere realistic description of pampa life or Scottish customs, one ought to view them as a literary recreation in artistic terms of a heroic, or prosaic past, as the case may be. Only through a demythification of Graham the man will one be able to appreciate fully the artistic qualities of Graham the writer.

This can be very difficult, of course, if one does not have Graham's writings available for research by the scholars and for the reading pleasure of the general public. One of my aims over the years has been to make the works of Graham accessible again to all his various publics, since his books have been long out of print. To that end I have already published *The South American Sketches* and *The Scottish Sketches*, and have completed *The North American Sketches*. With *The Spanish Sketches* under way, there remains *The North African Sketches* collection, already promised. This does not take into account other miscellaneous sketches that cannot be categorized so easily by geographical division as the above, nor all the biographies, histories, travel books, etc. One would hope that if the Graham revival were to continue, the other works would follow as a matter of course.

Close to my old home in Dumbarton, and not far from the

Grahams' Ardoch estate, there used to stand a noble monument, partly constructed of stones transported from the Argentine and Uruguay, a fine homage dedicated to Graham in 1937, the year after his death. Over the last twenty years or so I watched sadly the desecration and destruction of this monument by vandals. In fact, only recently the Graham family removed the monument and had it re-erected in Gartmore, near the other old family estate, and close to the Lake of Menteith where Graham and his wife lie buried on the island of Inchmahome. In spite of the resistance of that solid construction, it was inevitable that the forces of vandalism and philistinism should triumph. They may do likewise even in the comparative quiet and solitude of Gartmore. But even if they do, they cannot eradicate the memory of R.B. Cunninghame Graham, because they cannot kill ideas or myths.

In this sense the monument serves as a symbol of the fate of the man, and of all mortal beings, in the face of posterity. Thus I reiterate that we ought not to glorify the man or material things which only crumble and disappear. Surely it is a far better thing to preserve the essence of Don Roberto distilled in his writings, a much more lasting monument. If Cunninghame Graham succeeds in gaining immortality, let it result not only from his active life and beneficent work, but also from the realization and concretization of his many-sided personality, reflected through the refining lens of Art, which is the only enduring form or medium. For only thus does the artist transcend frontiers and epochs. So let it be with Graham.

*Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario*