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**A NEW STUDY OF  
R.B. CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM**

*Carla Sassi*

Lachlan Munro's *R. B. Cunninghame Graham and Scotland* is a timely and important study. However, it is possibly not entirely correct to claim, as Munro does in his introduction, that R. B. Cunninghame Graham's stunning intellectual and literary contribution has been almost entirely neglected since his death.<sup>1</sup> Since the pioneering 348-page Graham biography by Cedric Watts and Laurence Davies, published in 1979, a number of studies and initiatives have considerably expanded our understanding of Don Roberto, especially in the past decade or so.<sup>2</sup> The Scottish-based R.B. Cunninghame Graham Society, dedicated to the study and promotion of his works, was launched in 2013. The Association of Scottish Literary Studies held an international conference at Stirling in 2015 on "Empires and Revolutions: R. B. Cunninghame Graham and other Scottish writers on Globalisation and Democracy," and the proceedings from that conference, edited by Silke Stroh and myself, were published in

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<sup>1</sup> Lachlan Gow Munro, *R. B. Cunninghame Graham and Scotland Party, Prose, and Political Aesthetic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022). Pp. 336. Hardback, £85 [\$110]. ISBN 9781474498265.

<sup>2</sup> Cedric Watts and Laurence Davies, *Cunninghame Graham: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Setting aside earlier romantic treatments, biographical studies include: Alicia Jurado, *El Escocés Errante: R. B. Cunninghame Graham* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1978); Cedric Watts, *R. B. Cunninghame Graham* (Boston: Tawyne/G.K. Hall, 1983); Ian Fraser, *R. B. Cunninghame Graham Fighter For Justice* (2002); Jean Cunningham Graham, *Gaicho Laird: The Life of R. B. Don Roberto Cunninghame Graham* (2004); and Anne Taylor, *The People's Laird: A Life of Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham* (Edinburgh: Tobias Press, 2005). For Graham's continuing presence in Scottish literary awareness, see, e.g., Hugh MacDiarmid, *Cunninghame Graham: A Centenary Study* (Glasgow: Caledonian Press, 1952), and the enthusiastic response to the Billy Kauy radio series.

2017.<sup>3</sup> Reaching out to a wider public, Billy Kay's five-part BBC Radio Scotland series "Don Roberto" (2018), and the Kennedy and Boyd five-volume re-issue of Graham's major works, edited by Alan MacGillivray and John C. McIntyre (2011-12), also deserve a special mention.

Munro's book, then, is part of an ongoing, promising re-assessment of this difficult, kaleidoscopic and hugely interesting Scotsman. Munro indeed refers competently to a rich and exhaustive critical bibliography, beside drawing from several years of archival research and a wealth of primary sources.<sup>4</sup> He is, however, undoubtedly right when he claims that critics have so far failed to make sense of Graham's complex legacy—to "untangle" "the Graham legend" (xvi) as he puts it—and that even the authoritative study by Watts and Davies falls short of reconciling convincingly Graham's political vision with his aesthetic project.

Such reconciliation lies at the heart of Munro's investigation, which purposes to foreground a cohesive picture of Graham's intellectual contribution by interrogating and embracing the many "contradictions" that run through his life and *oeuvre*. The main lens through which Munro achieves this is the red thread of Graham's growing concern with Scotland's cultural and political destiny within the Union. Munro shows how as a writer Graham questioned and contributed to the renewal of Scotland's literary language. As a founder and eventually the president of the Scottish National Party Graham became one of the leading protagonists in the *fin-de-siècle* radical transformation of his country's political direction. Graham, however, was much more than a Scottish nationalist—a restless traveller, a border-crosser, a passionate and idealistic defender of human rights (be it those of colonised indigenous communities across the world, of disenfranchised women and of oppressed working classes at home, or of the Irish in quest for Home Rule), he was also eager to control his public image, and he did so, for example, by pruning the archive of his correspondence or by staging different personae. The construction and performance of his identities as a writer, adventurer, politician and activist should indeed be seen as an artistic expression in its own right, connecting and harmonising both his aesthetic and his political projects, as this study

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<sup>3</sup> Carla Sassi and Silke Stroh, eds, *Empires and Revolutions: Cunninghame Graham and His Contemporaries*, (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> For bibliographical material, cf. Lachlan Gow Munro, "R.B. Cunninghame Graham's Contribution to the Political and Literary Life of Scotland: Party, Prose, and the Political Aesthetic" (unpubl. Ph.D. in History, University of Glasgow, 2019), available at: <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.775962>. As well as listing material by and directly about Graham, the bibliography in the thesis (pp. 204-283, single-spaced) retains value as including a wide range of periodical and newspaper sources relating to Scottish politics.

suggests. As Munro aptly observes, “Graham preferred to oversee, agitate, inspire, and promote, a stance repeated throughout his life, that of the ‘insider outsider’” (94).

Munro’s study is divided into three parts chronologically arranged: “The Prentice Politician,” 1885-1892; “The Fountain of His Brain,” 1893-1913; “The Fleshly Tenement,” 1914 – 1936. It goes a long way to do justice to the many complexities of his subject, while keeping to its planned line of investigation. It provides a solid, well documented historical-political context that expands upon Watts and Davies, identifies a direct philosophical/political lineage that links Graham to Ruskin via William Morris (who had famously defined his political faith as “Socialism seen through the eye of an artist”), and engages in a discussion of Graham’s literary texts both in relation to his political-aesthetic project, and to his histrionic vocation. If a weakness may be found, it is in Graham’s contextualization in the turn-of-the-century Scottish revival; Michael Shaw’s 2019 monograph, published at a time when Munro’s monograph was in all probability already completed, would have helped the author chart the connections between Graham and other contemporary Scottish intellectuals more effectively.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, however, this is an inspiring and innovative investigation, which has the further merit of being written with great clarity and purpose. It will be of great interest to scholars who are not familiar with Graham’s works but also to specialists and fans of this growingly popular author.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Shaw, *The Fin-de-Siècle Scottish Revival. Romance, Decadence and Celtic Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).