

Political Allegiance

It would be possible for a politician, who was active at the time of Cunninghame Graham's membership of the House, to state a programme which was an amalgam of Liberalism and Socialism, and be one of several things - a Liberal; a Socialist; a Marxist; or an Individualist who took this and that from one group or the other, and remained aloof in commitment. It was a time of flux when the Labour Party was struggling to birth within the womb of Liberalism. Party allegiance could often be obscure and shifting. Where did Cunninghame Graham stand? Mr Thomas Kerr¹ has testified that he was not an easy man to work with, that he could make things as uncomfortable for supporters as for opponents. C M Grieve's judgement was that Socialism could not handle his abounding realism and imagination and kept its Jack Joneses for preference². A F Tschiffely in his posthumous biography concludes of him after his incursion into Parliamentary politics: "His enthusiasms for the Socialist Party began gradually to wane, but not his vehemence for its ideals and for the social reforms which he strove to bring about"³.

Did Cunninghame Graham call himself a Socialist? Did he really fit into a movement: did the wild stallion work in harness? What can we make of his Liberal candidature, not only early on but in 1918 - and of his trenchant criticism of Socialism, early and late? Is the key to the riddle to be found in his courtliness, in that - as Professor Herbert West has suggested to me - he wore his Socialism as a knight his lady's scarf, an expression of his championship of the weak, flaunted in the face of the oppressors who belonged to his own class?

We must take serious account of the impression he left on people of being an irreconcilable individualist, whose meat and drink was challenge, like Jean Paul Sartre's Boris, who believed:

".....the individual's duty is to do what he wants to do, to think whatever he likes, to be accountable to no one but himself, to challenge every idea and person"⁴.

W H Hudson may be taken to represent this interpretation of his political activity. In a letter dated 26th January 1906, replying to a communication not now extant, he writes: "I saw that you declined an invitation to come forward as a Labour candidate on this occasion, and I thought your reason was a good one - still, I'm sorry that you're not in the House to represent yourself"⁵.

In the House, as a Labour choice, to represent himself the apparent incongruity of party allegiance and his unique personality is expressed in the juxtaposition of these phrases.

It was as a convinced Liberal that Cunninghame Graham fought his first unsuccessful and his second successful contests. He saw in Liberal policy a hope for the oppressed throughout the world, and in Gladstone a brilliant guiding light. He was "that Homeric

¹ Ex-Lord Provost of Glasgow.

² In "Contemporary Scottish Studies" - First Series.

³ "Tomado Cavalier", p.98.

⁴ "The Age of Reason", Jean Paul Sartre, p.163.

⁵ The candidature may well have been for Edinburgh Central, mentioned by Tschiffely in his most recent book. If this is so, the reason given was his occupation with private affairs.

statesman, that magician of Midlothian.....on whom all Liberal eyes are fixed as on their Pole Star", "the commanding genius", "The only statesman worthy of the name" and so forth. The Liberalism he found in the House did not measure up to the conception of it which he himself cherished, and his description of it and its leader suffered a sea-change. A newspaper cutting dated April 26th 1889 inserted in a Scrap-Book, reports him in controversy with his caucus. The overt cause was the question of contributing to the expenses of the next election. But the report indicates that more lay underneath:

"He is not a likely man, however, to keep on good terms with the caucus. It requires rigorous compliance with party regulations and implicit obedience to Party Leaders. Mr Graham has had the audacity to call in question the angelic attributes of Mr Gladstone, the patriotism of Sir William Harcourt, and the consistency and disinterestedness of Mr Morley. To do this is heresy...although his attendance to his duties is unexceptionable and his votes emphatically Radical.....".

In 1892, it is still as a Liberal that he seeks re-election, and it is because the Liberals reject him that he stands as a Socialist (and loses his seat). His candidature in the Socialist cause is solicited on several occasions and refused. Then in 1918 he fights his last Parliamentary contest for Stirling and Clackmannan, without success, as a Liberal.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of his choice of Liberal banner rather than the Socialist in national elections, let us probe the source of the disaffection which marked his relationship to the Liberal Party. He suffered disillusionment about the integrity and imagination of the party leadership. Did a profound divergence regarding policy underlie this distrust?

From the time of his maiden speech in Parliament he appears to friend and foe alike to go beyond Liberalism. Scrap-Book insertions provide the following comments on it: "In politics he is a Radical of the Radicals, almost going so far as Socialism, with strong sympathies for the working classes.....", ".....the robustness of his Radicalism throws into the shade most of the men who consider themselves advanced.....". "The whole tone of his remarkable speech was thoroughly Socialistic.....".

Newspaper cuttings, undated, but apposite to the time of his early Parliamentary utterances, describe him as aiming ".....at creating and leading a Parliamentary Socialist Party"; and, tartly, say "he is a Socialist, but we have not heard that he has any thoughts of dividing his patrimony among his comrades of Trafalgar Square". He himself does not choose to declare himself openly at this stage. In connection with the Trafalgar Square incident, he writes to the editors of "The Christian Socialist": "I am a believer in the theories of Karl Marx to a great extent, but, both as regards Christianity and Socialism, I care more for works than mere faith"¹, and at Clerkenwell Green to the unemployed: "He would not tell them whether he was a Socialist or a Radical - they must find that out"².

In his utterances the characteristically Liberal elements of policy fall into the background, and Socialist policies occupy the foreground. He advocates the

¹ Autumn 1887.

² Autumn 1887.

nationalisation of the means of production¹. He becomes chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party². Yet the report of a conference in Hamilton after Keir Hardie's defeat³ which reveals clearly his conviction about the necessity of having a Labour Party, shows he understands the functions of this party as that of being a goad within Liberalism. The report goes on:

"He urged the workmen to organise and to fight every local, municipal and Parliamentary election until the power of the Labour⁴ party was finally established in Scotland.the workmen must make up their minds to compel the Liberal party to deal with the social and economic evils afflicting the working classes"⁵.

The conference unanimously decided to form Labour electoral associations throughout Lanarkshire, and made Cunninghame Graham president of the executive body, and Bob Smillie of Larkhall, chairman. While still a candidate, he declared that the ultimate object of every Liberal "worthy of the name" was to ameliorate the lives of the poor, to adjust the incidence of taxation, and to re-distribute wealth by reforming the social system⁶.

Some years later, he was to make clear the nature of his Liberalism by this reaction to a suggestion that Lord Rosebery be made leader of the Liberal Party:

"This man was absolutely unpledged.....they should know what he thought upon the land nationalisation, upon the nationalisation of the railways, upon the nationalisation of mines and machinery, upon the establishment of municipalities for London, upon the institution of public works for the unemployed"⁷.

If this is Liberalism "worthy of the name", what is Socialism?

His isolated position is made clear by the reminder he received in Parliament that his views about land nationalisation are not favoured by any party in the House⁸. On March 7th 1888, Mr Ritchie replying in the House to an exposition of the advantages of a shorter working day, declares that his suggestion would mean "a kind of State regulation of labour" and that this is "pure Socialism". Cunninghame Graham agrees, and maintains his argument from this standpoint. From this time he accepts the word "Socialist" as an apt personal designation, although he continues for some time to see the function of the Labour party as being within Liberalism, in the hope that that party will seek not just to ameliorate, but to change "the system which is both doomed and damned"⁹, "the base, vile, commercial system that sees God in gold"¹⁰.

¹ The first reference I can trace is in a speech after his release from prison, in 1888, following the Trafalgar Square incident. The Parliamentary Labour Party did not go so far.

² In the introduction to a Press interview in connection with the Mid-Lanark contest in 1888, he is described as being "a large part" of the Labour Party.

³ Unspecified, but almost certainly in the Mid-Lanark contest of 1888.

⁴ The query whether Labour can convert Liberalism, or must become a party on its own, is interestingly reproduced in the fluctuation between the capital and the small letter "L" in describing the group, at this stage.

⁵ Report preserved in a Scrap-Book.

⁶ Cutting in a Scrap-Book of a speech at Tollercross.

⁷ Cutting kept in a Scrap-Book: source unidentifiable.

⁸ November 23rd 1888. Hansard.

⁹ Re. Labourers' Allotments Bill, August 11th 1887. Hansard.

¹⁰ "The Bloody City", Article in "The People's Press", 16th August 1890.

A further change takes place in 1889. In a letter to "The Daily Chronicle" dated 12th February of that year, concerning John Morley's negative reaction to the argument of a deputation of working men on the question of an eight hour day, Cunninghame Graham wonders:

"....what difference they can see between a Liberal and a Tory....." and concludes:

"I fancy that neither Whig nor Tory will ever grant an Eight Hours' Bill, and that it will be necessary for the working classes to create a new party.....".

A newspaper article, preserved in a Scrap-Book, which is undated but is likely to come from the same approximate time, blames Liberals and Tories alike for their utter neglect of Labour questions, and rails at working men for trusting Liberals any more than Tories. In similar style he chides the Irish National League for deciding to support a Liberal rather than a Labour candidate in any nomination dispute, urging upon them that only the labouring classes would be worthy of their trust¹.

By 1890 his advocacy of a separate Labour Party is yet more explicit. Belief in party self-criticism has given way to a clear call for a new party. "Kick your friends" has become "Kick out the Liberals and Tories alike":

"Whom, therefore, shall we follow? Yourselves, of course. Each party, in turn, professes to be the friend of the people. Well, kick your friends; it is what they like best. The more you beat them, the better they will be.

Kick both, kick out the rascally knaves; form a Labour Party. Reform really means collective possession of the means of production. He who will not give that is the enemy of the people, the working classes, and doubly so if he calls himself Liberal"².

Writing of Gladstone's visit to Edinburgh, James Young writes in "The People's Press" about Cunninghame Graham:

"If at the General Election, the working class vote does not place Mr Cunninghame Graham at the head of a party able to compel immediate attention to their affairs, it will be hard to refrain from saying that they richly deserve to continue to wallow in the mire....."³.

A leader in the same paper is entirely devoted to Cunninghame Graham and gives this assessment of his position:

".....the best friend the workers have in the House of Commons..... Though he is himself a member of the Capitalist - or rather the land-owning classes - he has done more for the workers than most of the "Labour Members", one or two of whom have turned out downright reactionaries under the capitalist influence of the House of Commons..... Since 1886 he has become a more and more pronounced advocate of the labour movement, as distinct from mere political Radicalism, and is now the only member of Parliament who can really be called a Socialist....."⁴.

These words seem to describe best to me the graph of his rising Socialist conviction and definite Socialist commitment.

¹ Cutting in Scrap-Book from approximately this period.

² Letter to "The People's Press", May 31st 1890.

³ November 8th 1890.

⁴ Leader in "The People's Press", April 26th 1890.

In the same year, he twice rejects profit-sharing as an alternative to Socialism in the House, on the grounds that it divides up the workmen, and denies Labour...." the full share of that which Labour produces"¹. In an article written a few months later, he puts the choice before the readers in the terms in which he saw it:

"Briefly, the difference between Individualists and the Socialistic scheme of life is this. In one, hard work for millions, wealth for tens. For tens, the love of Art and pictures, fine clothes and well-bred horses. Dirt and rags and toil, no idea save gin and beer and fun, for millions. In the other, culture diffused throughout the population. Love of man placed before love of self, plenty of work for all; no idle drones, no machine slaves. Choose which you like. Either follow Morley, Bradlaugh, Balfour, Lord Wemyss, etc, or join hands with the workmen of the world; demand short hours, better pay, and finally take over what is yours, the land and wealth, and manage it yourselves"².

In February 1892, he stated in the House:

"Only through class warfare are real reforms accomplished. I am not here for the purpose of moderating class warfare but rather for the sake of exciting it"³.

Almost alone, often quite alone, he was "standing up for Socialism in the House"⁴: when Keir Hardie was elected to Parliament, he found a lonely path trodden out before him.

His personal allegiance, the allegiance of his programme was to Socialism. At first a Liberal, then a Lib-Lab, he became the advocate of the new party to carry the banner of the workers. Did he work with others within the movement, or did he keep his jacket on? Did he make it his responsibility to see that the course he advocated was followed, that the plans made worked: or did he assume as an aristocrat, that generalship would be enough?

He was, it must be said, unequally yoked in the movement with workmen. He treated them with a courtesy and humility which betokened the status which he believed them to have: but somehow he was not one of them - he remained an aristocrat in their company. So he appeared to fight for them rather than with them. Yet he was found continually among them, agitating the length and breadth of the country, seeking to shame them into responsibility and action, and forever at their side in encouragement. He did not avoid the organisational means of implementing his convictions. We have noted his chairmanship of the Parliamentary Labour Party, and his work in connection with labour electoral associations in Lanarkshire. He saw clearly that a new party could not be talked into being - it had to be brought into being. His whole temper was against advancing theories and leaving action to others. He was "a large part" of the Labour Party, as has been said. He kept continually before people the need for new organisation and used his gifts to bring the requisite organisation into being and to help it to function successfully.

The question of the use of the label "Liberal" at election times is perplexing. What light may be thrown upon it will not take long to detail. His criticism of Liberalism while he

¹ February 13th 1890 and April 22nd 1890. Hansard: the quotation is from the latter.

² Article "Individual Effort II" in "The People's Press", August 30th 1890.

³ February 18th 1892. Hansard.

⁴ His words. May 4th 1892. Hansard.

represented it in the House, was devastating. His rejection by Liberals was explicit. He promoted the separation of Labour from the Liberal Party. Yet, as we have noted, in 1892, it was as a Liberal that he sought re-election, and again in 1891 he flew the Liberal flag.

The explanation I would offer is this. Cunninghame Graham believed that it was his duty to help to birth a party more genuinely representative of working class interests. He could plead for the birth of such a party, watch over its growth, encourage and criticise it. But it had to be a child by adoption. By his blood, Cunninghame Graham could be a Liberal, a Tory or a Socialist, but not a Labour representative. He insisted on this inability, as we have seen. He saw the danger of the upper classes simply taking over the leadership of a new party on behalf of working people, instead of the working people themselves forming a party. He accepted "Liberal" as an official designation, as the only class and party possibility open to him; and at the same time advocated labour policies for all those who were the inheritors by birth and status of the new movement. He could work in their movement to this end. But their M P s would need to come from their own ranks if they were to be truly represented in Parliament.

This is a judgement made on his life rather than on particular expressions of conviction on his part. But it does seem to fit in with words uttered in 1888:

"Having been returned as a Liberal, I personally would take no money except from a Liberal source, but then I am not a working man and have means to express my opinions"¹.

Did he, later in life, grow tired of the political cause he espoused, or for some other reason lose interest in it? This is not simply a question of his withdrawal from national politics, his immersion in travel, writing and personal affairs², of a further re-orientation of his life akin to that which earlier landed him in the political arena. This there was. But, besides, there exists a considerable criticism of Socialism and the Labour Party which suggests repentance of his earlier affiliation, and which requires attention.

These two questions, thirty-six years apart, seem to express something approaching total disillusionment:

"It may be that my diagnosis of the disease is wrong and I am free to admit that the longer a man lives, the less he knows. Still, I diagnose the Labour or Socialist movement in England and Scotland to be very near collapse. The same vices, foibles and failings, which it has taken the Whigs and Tories many generations to become perfect in, the Labourists and Socialists have brought to perfection, and with apparent ease, in six years.

On all sides I see envy and uncharitableness, and I am choked with the stench of personal bickerings and petty malice.

¹ Written about money received from Keir Hardie in Mid-Lanark. Cutting in a Scrap-Book; dated June 20th, 1888.

² Eg, the struggle to save Gartmore.

There are amongst the poor.....as many men of genius per ratio of population as amongst the bourgeois. But there are no men of business"¹

This was written in 1894. In 1930, he says of the Labour Party, that each member of it is busy trying to tread on the hands of others slowly mounting the ladder, and that its total achievements were increased income-tax, mixed bathing in the Serpentine, and sleep, while the unemployed grew, like Jonah's gourd, continually. He then looks back on his own party in the Labour movement:

"In times gone by, with old Keir Hardie and others I was one of those who fought for the establishment of a Labour Party. I was young in those days and had my illusions thick upon me. I hoped the coming of the Labour Party would be the coming of the millennium in England and Scotland. I was disappointed. They have simply become a party struggling for office like any of the other parties"².

These were both written at times of economic and industrial depression. The second was also written under the influence of his new love, Scottish Nationalism. In it he is blatantly unfair to his past life, as is often the case with men who confess past follies. His earlier political life was marked by realism and restraint in his promotion of Labour interests. He knew well the kittle cattle that workers were, and expected no millennium. His disappointment is at the lack of integrity, vision and genuine sympathy found in all classes, even among workmen of whom he had hoped more. The judgement is not an isolated one. At the East Renfrew election, when he spoke in support of W Oliver Brown, the Scottish Nationalist, his contribution is reported thus in a Scrap-Book cutting:

"There was scorn in the distinguished, bearded face during a reference to the Government, which was welcomed by everyone two years ago, promising to make the world better. Now they were bankrupt, of promises, of fulfilment, and bankrupt, if the last elections were any indication, of the goodwill of the electorate".

This looks much like "Kick out....." than simply "Kick friends". Certain observations need to be made to put this kind of criticism into perspective:

1. He believes that allegiance to a party implies that obligation to be a sterner critic of it than outsiders are. He is incredulous that "The People's Press" should be averse to criticising Labour. "What, not pitch into a party, or into a man who belongs to a particular party, because that is your party? he says³. It is part of the privilege of membership. A good party member is one who works in the party and at the same time seeks to see that it pursues truth and right - not one who follows tamely at the beck and call of party whips, accepting a policy already concocted for him⁴. In a letter to Henry Arthur Jones⁵, Cunningham Graham was to write, much later: "Tell me, O social

¹ From a letter, preserved in a Scrap-Book, declining candidature for one of the Aberdeen divisions in 1894. It is difficult to see whether he means by "men of business", "resolute men" or "men who can reduce chaos to order".

² "Scotland's Day", June 21st 1930; supplement to the "Scots Independent".

³ Letter to "The People's Press", May 31st 1890.

⁴ In an article entitled "Notions" in "The People's Press" he quotes approvingly Ibsen's saying that party government in this sense "twists the necks of all living truths".

⁵ Written on December 11th 1919. Published in "The Life and Letters of Henry Arthur Jones".

reformer, why do you say 'feared to disturb your cherished principles'. If my principles are wrong, surely they want to be disturbed?" Such a man was not likely to be any less trenchant in criticism of Socialism as a Socialist than he was of Liberalism as a Liberal.

2. In the same letter, he gives some inkling of what Socialism meant to him. First he mentions "Morris, at whose feet I brought myself up, politically", indicating this stream of Socialist conviction at the one which bore him along. Then: "I had hoped in Socialism to find a gradual demise of selfishness and the gradual establishment of a better feeling between man and man. You may remember that then (28 years or more ago) the sweater was exceedingly aggressive, hours were long, and there was a brutal spirit of materialism about..... That I have been deceived, and that all the golden dreams of Morris have vanished in the nine bestial and inartistic years of the reign of King Edward, the war, and now in the increasing inartisticness of everything, the prostitution of the stage and literature, and now in the ever-increasing selfishness and lack of patriotism of the working class, have not been my fault. The ambition (I think) remains all right".

In a postscript he recounts days of misery and disenchantment which he has spent at sea, on horseback, in trucks, and proceeds:

".....I have thought - where are the dreams of Morris? But on arriving at the port or at the camp, they have come back, they always do. Let us, I say, cherish them.....".

".....they have come back; they always do". They never lost their grip on him, for all the fluctuation of alternating hope and despair he knew concerning the party which declared itself their inheritor and guardian.

3. In the "lost" political years, between the end of his Parliamentary career and his catching the public eye as a Scottish Nationalist, his political activity might have been nil as far as press publicity testifies. But conversation with people who served long in the Labour Movement has revealed to me a continuing implication of Cunninghame Graham in its policies. He was not at that time a national figure. He was not nationally reported. But he was always available for speaking at large and small meetings, indoors and in the open air, and still spent himself commending to groups, often quite small in number, the noble brand of Socialism he professed.

He remained a member of the Labour Party. Professor West, who first knew him towards the end of his life, found him a Socialist. The story of his Scottish Nationalism is a story of priorities. A report of his maiden speech in Parliament describes him as a "Scotch Home Rule Visionary". He saw Home Rule then, however, as a possible diversion from a larger job which would benefit all the nations of Britain. From 1928 on he reversed the order of priorities. It was of the greatest enlightenment to me to come across in a Scrap-Book the record of a meeting in which Cunninghame Graham was supporting John MacCormick's candidature for the Camlachie Division of Glasgow. In reply to a heckler, he said: "He had been asked why he left the Labour Party. His reason was because he thought that for the moment Scottish Home Rule was more important. Were Scottish Home Rule once granted, and had he at least one foot out of the grave, he would certainly join the party again".

These are the words of one who, however much he might have found all parties wanting in the utter commitment of truth, justice and beauty which was his measuring rod, found in the party which had claimed his membership for forty years a greater hope than in

any other - however much he might fling out at it at times in outraged condemnation. I am convinced that had he lived to see in action the Labour Government which took office in Britain in 1945, he would have discovered the realisation of much for which he fought and suffered and yearned during his life.

Look at this Socialist and you will discern the aristocrat. Yes, - but look at this aristocrat and you must discern the Socialist.