

Social Outlook

The Setting of the Stage

The context in which Cunninghame Graham lived his life must be known in order that his social outlook may be appreciated. This is not because the times which knew him largely shaped that life. Though no man, whether his voice be that of assent or dissent, can strip himself of his contemporaneity, to a remarkable extent Cunninghame Graham stood outside his times. He had an Elizabethan love of action, a medieval love of contemplation, and a twentieth century social consciousness. Rather it is because he seized hold of life. His thought and experience make up one life, as blood and muscle make one body.

We remember, then, that he was an aristocrat and yet knew what it was to live the hard way. He had learned to appreciate the outlook of other people early, and had personal knowledge of many forms of society in different parts of the world. He was able to compare the "glories" of Victorian industrial society with the "backwardness" of Arab, African and Indian, and Western civilisation with other civilisations. He had a spur to his love of the beautiful and detestation of the sordid and unjust in his wife's artistic sensitiveness and social concern. He was a politician and agitator. He was continually in touch with other choice and courageous minds, and throughout his life, with ordinary people in many countries.

He came to grips with Victorian society when some of the fruits of the bleak austerity the workers knew in early Victorianism had been mitigated. Usually, the extent of this mitigation is exaggerated. Men were still working 18 hours per day on the railways, earning but five shillings per week chainmaking in Cradley Heath, starving in the streets of London. The unemployed, victims of sweated labour, prostitutes - cast off and denied any alternative life by the society whose fastidious lust had brought them to this pass - formed a swarming underworld of misery in London. In the Highlands of Scotland the crofters were deprived of their most elementary rights, and in the mines and factories of the Lowlands, hours were long and wages minute. If men did not have money and status - if they belonged to the real proletariat - the business of staying alive absorbed almost all their forces and set boundaries to imagination and protest.

But the opportunity for fresh criticism and re-organisation of society existed. In some trades, especially those attached to the older craft unions, conditions had improved; and though such agencies as Mechanics Institutes, workmen had gained some technical and cultural education (they still accepted, on the whole, the political and economic beliefs of their employers). The attitude to education had altered. Distrust of the mob, which had produced strong pressure in earlier Victorianism against the education of the masses, had waned, although it could still be brought to life by riots. In 1870 appointment to the Civil Service was made open to those who qualified by examination. Although the advantage of this seemed very limited at first, the long-term effect was to clear the way to high offices in the land for any intelligent child, irrespective of class or influence. Industry itself had lost the more ruthless, self-made industrialists. They were being replaced by Limited

Liability Companies and third generation proprietors, who were more amenable to negotiation, and more prepared to work to customary accepted standards. New ideas burst old wineskins. Marx and the Fabians¹ challenged the recognised political and economic theories of their time. Shaw was beginning to put dynamite in the cracks of the old society. Webb was initiating the policy of permeation which made almost every institution and newspaper the servant of a new conception of social life. State intervention, accepted by the early Victorians, rejected by the mid-Victorians, was now becoming recognised as a necessary means for clearing up the muddle of disease, dirt, death and despair which a laissez-faire policy had encouraged. In 1885 the franchise was extended to resident ratepayers and certain classes of servants. The door was open to a politically enfranchised democracy to become socially and economically enfranchised. The long-standing Victorian trinity of power, Crown, Lords and Commons, trembled for its continuing dominance.

All this was potentiality and hope. In 1885, when Cunninghame Graham undertook his first incursion into party politics, this hope had to be set against a very real despair among the masses. The craft unions, which were to some extent Friendly Societies, were careful of their funds, and chary of risking battle with the capitalists. Moreover they opposed the new stirrings towards the extension of trade unionism among the semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Speeches in Hansard make it clear that confidence that the economic system was self-regulating still ruled in higher entrenched circles of thought. The Liberals, the hope of the proletariat, began to appear as "old priest writ large"; they were more fervent champions of the new wealthy merchant class over against the old land-owning class, than liberators of the poor.

¹ Except for Hyndman (whom Marx himself disclaimed) and a few others, Marx is not regarded at this time as the protagonist of a philosophy, which must be accepted or rejected in toto. Much is firmly accepted, much is firmly rejected. The Fabians, for instance, acknowledged their debt, but they quite rejected his theory of surplus value, his impersonal rigidity and dogmatism, his inhuman logic of ends and means.