

II An Industrialised Society

The Backcloth

In his "Three Plays for Puritans", George Bernard Shaw writes of Cunninghame Graham's part in the Trafalgar Square incident¹: "On that occasion civilisation, qualitatively his inferior, was quantitatively so hugely in excess of him that it put him in prison, but hadn't enough sense to keep him there". The explicit suggestion of antagonism to the form of civilisation he found represented as British after his wanderings in many airts, is apt. He was to couch his lance at it many a time.

Some knowledge of the constituent elements which made up the late Victorian conception of civilisation - in particular, the cult of progress, the power of science, the mills "dark, Satanic", the idea of empire, is necessary that we may understand the butt at which Cunninghame Graham aimed his "magnanimous indignations"².

I believe Canon Demant lays his finger on the pulse of later Victorianism when he says³ it assumed that whatever direction our civilisation took was a direction of nature. This once granted, growth of industry, wealth and empire, achievements of science and arms, became self-justifying.

It is by no means easy to give a succinct account of so various a background as that of Queen Victoria's reign. Enterprise and initiative were abundantly in evidence. Yet at their root lay a firm belief in progress as something indigenous to our state, the assertion of determinism. The parallel may be found in Scotland's past, where men cherished a very real freedom against a thorough-going belief in a rigid form of predestination. It was probably the hope for the world expressed in Christian faith, even when covert and denied, which saved people of this age from fatalism.

Darwin was not the originator of the current idea of progress, though he gave it a powerful impetus. The Newtonian conception of mathematical law governing throughout, of a world to be understood in terms of masses in motion, linked to the arrival of the Industrial Revolution and the Railway Age, goes far to sketch its outline. Life became a pair of railway lines, whose end was lost over the horizon, on which the engine of man's achievement moved irresistibly at gathering speed to some good but unspecified destination, to the accompaniment of nature's agreement and encouragement. Darwin's part in fostering the idea of progress is illustrated by the words with which he concludes his "Origin of Species":

"As natural selection works solely for the good of each being, all corporal and mental environment will tend to progress toward perfection".

The words "and mental" and "toward perfection" form significant assumptions.

Life was evacuated of God by a new awareness of the age of the earth and human descent in it; and by the German Biblical Criticism which shattered people's accepted religious context for life. Moral ideals were domesticated in the ongoing process.

¹ Detailed in Appendix I.

² As Conrad called them in a letter after Gabrielle's death.

³ In a broadcast printed in "Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians", p.237.

Heaven was believed in desperately, irrationally, as a supernatural realm, dis-related from the earth, promised to those who lived by faith alone and abjured sight; or it became the earthly hope which lay just over the horizon. In the march of history itself, our ends were shaped for good, without divinity.

To many, thus, the idea of progress became a religion of compensation for an older, lost faith. Progress was authoritative, self-authenticating. Science could be content with producing marvels of invention and discovery, without the conscious concern of Francis Bacon for the glory of God and the relief of man's estate. Industry could ally with it in a self-justifying, continual expansion, leaving to the automatic adjustment of nature the cost involved in human life¹. The theory which Malthus propounded in 1798, in his "Essay on the Principle of Population", far from arousing the middle and upper classes to action, could be reduced to the comfortable assumption that a certain sub-stratum of unemployment and poverty was natural to human life. "Laissez-faire" had this basis, and this wide frame of reference.

The effect of this popular philosophical outlook deserves special attention as it impinges on other civilisations, in trade, in colonisation, in the "civilising mission" of the white race; for it was where civilisations came in conflict that Cunninghame Graham discovered the torture and enlightenment of his cosmopolitan sympathies.

The influence of Edmund Burke was still writ large over the first half of the Victorian age. The idea of empire then was based on the belief that the traditions and environments of other races were important for their organic development: that the intrusion of alien ways could strike at the social cohesion of a race and disrupt entirely its moral code. The spread of Western civilisation was thought to be important; but it was to be introduced gradually as it could be assimilated: and, to begin with, it was not the twin brother of political imperialism. Something more like Commonwealth as we know it, with independent colonies tied to the mother country by friendship, was advocated by Charles Dilke and Goldwin Smith. It is in the light of this conception of international relationships that we are to interpret David Livingstone's famous words: ".....those two pioneers of civilisation - Christianity and commerce....."². These words are not spoken by one who was a blind tool of commercialism, and thence of political imperialism. Rather, trade was seen by him to be a means whereby the adaptation to another civilisation (which he saw would have come in any case) might be made gradual and timely: a means of intercourse between nations and the exchange of benefits.

But there arose kings over Egypt who knew not Joseph. The change was not sudden or universal. Before it came, it had been found necessary to annex territories for the sake of internal law and order, or for their protection, eg, from slave-traders. These were added to dependencies which were already directly ruled, and they posed the separate question - whether, when and how native peoples should be prepared for self-government if they did not already have some adequate form of administration native to their traditions. After the change of policy, there were still those who adopted an enlightened outlook

¹ Cunninghame Graham protested in the Commons: "Machinery, through the action of the capitalist class, has been made rather a wage-saving appliance than a labour-saving appliance". April 22nd 1890. Hansard.

² From his lectures delivered at Oxford and Cambridge in 1857.

which avoided both the imposition of Western institutions, regardless of indigenous traditions, and despotism¹. Gladstone and the Liberals opposed the new attitude, holding it as their watchword that self-government is better than good government. But in 1872 Disraeli committed the Conservative government to an imperialistic policy, and in 1876 had the Queen entitled "Empress of India". Stanley and Rhodes stepped into Livingstone's shoes, and Africa became a happy hunting ground for all but Africans. Trade and philosophy aided and abetted. In the last quarter of the century, other countries were challenging our industrial supremacy, and the pressure for new sources of raw materials and new markets was felt. Darwinian theories were interpreted in terms of necessary racial conflict and the elimination of the less fit²; and the whole idea of progress favoured the assertion of the inevitable domination of the British race. Force and fraud could now discard their prison garb, wear a frock-coat, and appear oftener in public.

This turn of policy was to be reversed in the next century, and the earlier view win its way back to favour. After the imperial picnics of the Afghan and Zulu wars, the resistance of the Boers was to give an abrupt shock to jingoism. But it was by the mood of the last quarter of the nineteenth century that Cunninghame Graham's view of the effects of an industrialised civilisation on other nations was to be moulded. It was a view he held consistently throughout his life. He knew the Indians and the gauchos and the vanishing life of the pampas as probably none but W H Hudson ever did besides. He had a way, like Livingstone's, of "thinking native", of understanding African tribal life as if he had been brought up in it. He studied conditions in India, in the South Seas, in Jamaica. He lived, with an acute awareness and insight, in open country whose only walls were mountains and whose roof the sky, and in over-populated heavily industrialised towns. He had taken time to evaluate many civilisations of the past. He came, fully fitted out, to a task of sympathy and judgement.

¹ Notably Sir Arthur Gordon in his governorship of Fiji. His address to the Royal Colonial Institute in 1879 is one excellent expression of the concept of imaginative trusteeship.

² Cunninghame Graham explicitly recognises this in a letter to the Press on an American punitive expedition on the Sioux, quoted in Professor West's Biography, p.89: "The Majesty of civilisation will be vindicated.....and the Darwinian theory of the weakest to the wall have received another confirmation to strengthen those who want to use it against the weakest here in Europe".