

a. An Expanding Economy

The Cult of Progress

That progress was a term of dubious repute to Cunninghame Graham all his days, can be traced to one principal source - the arrogation to it of absolute status, a status skin to that of divinity. Again and again he puts his finger on this spot as the crucial one. Progress is ".....that goddess born of hurry and noise....."¹; "the self-created goddess"²; ".....the Goddess Progress, who from the horse-dung of the streets ascended up on high, and sits enthroned within the hearts of all her votaries"³

And her worship is a sign of the industrial age:

"A vast and tin-roofed 'terminus', in which engines scream and whistle all the night, is the chief lab-arum of progress, and all who see it, with the smoke from its workshops hung across the sky, bow and adore it, and are satisfied"⁴.

He challenges the assumption that material progress implies moral progress in any sense. The agreement of Morillo and Bolivar in 1820 to exchange prisoners, respect the lives and property of people in occupied towns, and let deserters live, is an indication to him that we have retrogressed since then, not progressed⁵. He instances a man travelling at eighty miles per hour in a well-heated, comfortable machine, his mind a blank or occupied with plans of self-interest and trickery. This, he says, is no significant advance upon transport by bullock cart in the days of Pericles⁶. His mind on the matter is given in the words: ".....material progress often leaves a man a mere barbarian, self-satisfied and dull"⁷.

Progress robbed men of primitive joys which were inestimably precious:

"So does our progress make commercial travellers of us all, and take away the primeval joy in sun, in wind, in divine idleness....."⁸.

He felt the world was losing a sense of the mystery of things⁹, blinded by smoke, and unbalanced by hurry and noise. He hated to see the pampas and prairies of America fenced and criss-crossed with telephone wires¹⁰.

He mourned the death of primitive peoples - and of a primitive, unsophisticated type of rectitude¹¹ - before the all-devouring monster. With insight, he noted how progress coming to a village could disrupt its traditions and replace its wholesome ways with shabby counterfeits. This he graphically illustrates in a sketch which describes the erection of an hotel in a backward Alpine village. Planned to bring prosperity to the

¹ "Writ on Sand", p.101.

² "A Vanished Arcadia", p.286.

³ Progress, preface p.vii

⁴ "His People" p.148

⁵ "Jose Antonio Paez", p.170

⁶ Preface to "The Canon".

⁷ "A Brazilian Mystic", p.69.

⁸ "Success", p.58.

⁹ "Cartagena and the Banks of the Sinu", p.28.

¹⁰ eg, "Thirteen Stories", Preface, p. x; "The Ipané", p.65; "Faith", pp.139 and 140.

¹¹ He makes the point regarding the life left and anticipated by emigres in "Faith", p.155.

village, it cheapens the people. They become parasites on the tourists, lose their self-respect and abandon their morality. Blind, culpable approval of the innovation is represented in the person of:

".....the bishop of the diocese, who prayed to the Almighty to ward off lightning or inundations from it, to make the hotel the focus of true Christian progress and prosper it financially"¹.

On an odd occasion, Cunninghame Graham can be unfair, in his detestation of the worship of the new. In his book "Brought Forward" he decries "fat fields tilled by machinery"; and speaks of a man's ".....little holding, an oasis in the waste of modern scientific farming"². This is but reactionary. It is really untypical. He knew a change had to come³. But so identified was he with people who were to become guinea-pigs of progress mis-applied or pestilential, that he could both appreciate their mystified yearning for it, as the bearer of an unspecified good:

"So distant are the Llanos from our vain-glorious, noisy and evil-smelling civilisation, as to be almost unaware that such a thing exists. They await the coming of the thing called progress, just as a girl may dream about her marriage night without exactly knowing what it means"⁴ and their disenchantment.

Ours was the fault for exporting:

".....the thing that we call progress, and pride ourselves upon, as justly as a man might pride himself upon an ulcer in his leg, or fine hare-lip, or any other malformation"⁵.

He refuses to allow to Progress the title of divinity. He challenges its connotation of automatic blessing. Good. Does he face squarely, anywhere, the alternative to progress?

In one of his short stories, he tells of a Highland crofter family brought South, and set down on a farm with good land, to test their capacity to make use of a fresh opportunity. Before very long, the farmstead was falling to pieces. The husband did nothing, the wife very little. "Lazy-bed" potato growing was their greatest accomplishment; the children were infested and unkempt. Just when we expect him to condemn this alternative of unprepossessing backwardness, he says:

".....a picture of the old-world Scotland, which has almost disappeared. Sloth was not altogether lovely, but prating progress worse"⁶.

He has no alternative to offer.

Cunninghame Graham was a strange mixture. He saw and derided the cult of progress. He faced its ill consequences and regretfully accepted its necessity. Yet his lingering, romantic love for the past appears at times merely reactionary. The fact was that he stood between two worlds and was not sure that the new could be made as good as the

¹ "Redeemed", p.21.

² pp. 31 and 98.

³ He says so clearly in "A Vanished Arcadia", p.287.

⁴ "Redeemed", p.32.

⁵ Preface to "Adventures in Bolivia", by C H Producers.

⁶ "The Ipane", p.172. The underlining is mine.

old¹. What he did know was that there was much in a slower, smokeless more gracious past which was to be treasured; that the present had to be made gracious wherever that was possible, and that this could not be done automatically; that people should take time to savour life, and not to be forever "getting on". The redeeming feature of his reactionary tendency was that the love of the past was not an indulgence and an escape. It was a means of getting the present into proportion and preserving what was worthy in our inheritance.

His romantic temperament responded to "the enthralling beauty of decay"², to the disorder of age over against the trimness of modernity³. For Gabrielle the past lived even more vividly⁴. Both had a great capacity of imagination which enabled them to get under the skin of other civilisations, and to relive the past. Probably the true perspective for this love of the past is to be found in a most sensitive sketch of Iona which appears in "Hope". The restoration of the Abbey offends. Loving ruins redolent of the past, he writes of ".....the cathedral, now being killed with care"⁵. But his real complaint is that so few people have ears and eyes open to the past, so few realise how the island is peopled:

".....it is all made up of saints and stones..... (Thus).....does the past so dwarf the present, that things which happened when the world was young seem just as probable as the incredible events we see before our eyes"⁶. He goes on:

"Fairies and martyrs both seem as natural as does the steamer"⁷.

There we have it. When a steamer becomes as natural to the world as are fairies and martyrs, then our civilisation can have a sense of achievement.

¹ George Eliot was in the same cleft stick, as her attitude to the restoration of Shepperton Church shows: ".....imagination does a little Toryism on the sly, revelling in regret that dear, old, brown, crumbling, picturesque, inefficiency is everywhere giving place to.....new-varnished efficiency".

² "Charity", p.135.

³ "His People", p.248.

⁴ See "Father Archangel of Scotland", p.198. Gabrielle probably lived four-fifths in the past and the future, and only one intense fifth in the present.

⁵ p.57.

⁶ p.56.

⁷ op. cit, p.57.