

His Championship of the Poor

What roused Cunninghame Graham's ire in Parliament was the callous indifference shown on both sides of the House; or the subjection of the under-privileged to party manoeuvres. Because their case was not taken seriously, he considered the whole system of Parliamentary government to be on trial. Up until then it did not justify itself¹. He would have liked to see the Galleries of the House larger, so that people might be able to see the difference between platform promises and the actual attention they received from representatives².

He was especially hard on the Liberals, his own party, who were so ready to make capital out of oppression in Ireland, but because oppression in Britain was tied up with their own financial interests, stayed dumb.³ In a letter to the Dundee Radical Association, thanking them for their response to his invitation to support Keir Hardie's nomination in Mid-Lanark, he states his attitude briefly:

"Tories are Land-owners, Liberals Capitalists in Parliament; the division lists tell their tale, neither are real friends of the working classes".

They are "two licensed hordes of plunderers" who avoided "the essential question - the question of the poor"⁴. Their popular cries were stalking horses under cover of which to crawl into Downing Street⁵. Liberals in power were as oppressive as Tories, and as neglectful of the rights of the poor - witness the breaking up of meetings and processions on the very first day of the Asquith-Gladstone-Morley regime⁶, and Gladstone's compassion for the oppressed in Ireland, Italy and Bulgaria, but not for those at home⁷. Working people should keep aloof and seek to hold the balance of power so as to bring pressure to bear on both⁸. This he maintained from a very early point in his Parliamentary career. Until his candidature was successful he believed that the Liberals were genuinely concerned with victims of the economic system, and was as loud in his praise of Gladstone as any of his party. But his tune changed once he was able to compare reality in the House with pretensions outside. There can be few parallels in the Parliamentary history to such trenchant criticism of a party to which one belongs as that which Cunninghame Graham levelled at Liberalism.

What then was to be done? The remedy lay in constitutional assertion of the rights and interests of the underprivileged. The appropriate method was agitation. Within the House he agitated for those measures which would encourage people to gain a new sense of responsibility, which would give enough freedom to foster revolt against their condition⁹. He agitated outside, pleading with other working class leaders to have

¹ Letter to Dundee Radical Association, probably about 1888, contained in a Scrap-Book.

² In the House, 15th November 1888. Hansard.

³ So he takes John Morley to task in "Latitudinal Influence", an article in "The People's Press", October 4th 1889.

⁴ Stated in an address to the Junior Liberal Association in Aberdeen, probably in 1888.

⁵ Stated in a letter to "Commonweal", preserved in a Scrap-Book.

⁶ Noted in a letter to the "Daily Sketch", preserved in a Scrap-Book.

⁷ Stated in a letter to a Govan candidate, dated December 28th 1888, preserved in a Scrap-Book.

⁸ Stated in a Press interview about the contest in Mid-Lanark, probably 1888.

⁹ Speaking on Cradley Heath, March 7th 1889, Hansard; also on March 5th and 6th on the general question of the poor; and frequently elsewhere.

patience and to understand how difficult it was to rid people of the slave mentality,¹ (Abraham Lincoln had once said the biggest part of the struggle would be with the slaves themselves); and roundly berating the poor themselves for putting to little pressure on their representatives and making so little use of the power to vote. In the House he not only made an issue of conditions at Cradley Heath: he described the sufferers as "guilty of culpable negligence" in not laying their case openly before the public.² Speaking to a great crowd of "the landless and the labourless", who cheered him to the echo at an open-air meeting on Clerkenwell Green in November 1887³; he firmly asserted: "...they must wake up, not only to a sense of their own wrongs, which was easy enough, but also to their duties and power.....", and pleaded for an intelligent use of this new political power. An outside observer, one James Young, who wrote an article on Gladstone's visit to Edinburgh, noted Cunninghame Graham's lonely championship of the worker in the House, and pressed this same point home: "That the case of the worker does not occupy its proper place in the forefront of Parliamentary business is altogether the fault of the worker himself. One may do much, but why place on the necessarily inadequate shoulders of one man a burden which could easily be placed upon a parliamentary majority?....."⁴.

A majority in the House was the ultimate answer. But meantime? The constituencies only needed to show themselves in earnest:

"Every politician, Liberal and Tory alike, is a squeezable animal. Why not squeeze him?"⁵.

He leaves no doubt in the minds of the under-privileged whom he addressed that they must be up and doing. They had their part to play in bringing new economic ways of thinking into operation. They were being hindered by the same selfishness and indolence which marked the outlook of merchant and landowner⁶.

The methods advocated are always constitutional. Speaking in Glasgow, while on bail for his part in the Trafalgar Square incident, he advocates "making the country unendurable to the ruling classes". But immediately he adds "now that was not sedition.....". At a welcome meeting in Glasgow about the same time he asserted his aim was to:

".....teach the people the constitutional and therefore the strongest method by which they could bring pressure to bear upon the tyrants who cheated them and hated them".

His belief that economic laws are not outwith human control lies at the foundation of his confidence that constitutional change will open the way to the relief of "man's whole estate"

How truly did he represent the under-privileged? What truly was his motive?

¹ H.M. Hyndman had a very low view of the working-class mentality. Sidney Webb tended to be impatient - so Cunninghame Graham protests in "The People's Press" of July 5th 1890.

² March 7th 1889, Hansard.

³ Report of speech preserved in Scrap-Book.

⁴ "The People's Press", November 8th 1889.

⁵ An article on Parliament and Miners" preserved in a Scrap-Book. Cunninghame Graham consistently urges men to see that their representatives do represent them.

⁶ Stated in a speech, contained in Scrap-Book, given at an unidentified place and time.

To some, to whom he is little more than a name, his defence of the poor appears mere personal eccentricity. If this were true, his interest in their lot would be dilettante, his protagonism a means of ministering to his own self. He would be like Mathieu in "The Age of Reason" when he said:

"I enjoy railing against capitalism, and I don't want it suppressed, because I should no longer have any reasons for so doing. I enjoy feeling fastidious and aloof. I enjoy saying no. always no, and I should be afraid of any attempt to construct a finally habitable world, because I should merely have to say - yes: and act like other people"¹.

When I discover this attitude², I find it depends on ignorance of the earlier period of his life, (up to 1895) and his later life too.

A contemporary estimate of his Parliamentary contribution is probably a sufficient rebuttal of his point of view, which would seem to take account not of facts but simply of mannerisms. It appeared in "The Scottish Leader" and is preserved in a Scrap-Book: "Many critics set him down as an eccentric, and so he is, if originality and fancifulness can be so represented. It is, however, more accurate to describe Mr Cunninghame Graham as unconventional; certainly if he is eccentric, as the Tory critics insist, his eccentricity is of a very practical kind, as can be testified by political organisers in Scotland, by the agricultural labourers whom he has assisted, and by the miners he has served with an assiduity and a degree of usefulness not exceeded by the more direct representatives of the working man".

By others his concern is attributed partly to an aristocratic disdain of riches, and of those who are bent on acquiring or keeping them. Among these are Frank Harris, in his "Contemporary Portraits", and Stephen Graham, in "The Death of Yesterday". Was he, like Tolstoy, the aristocratic enemy of the nouveaux riches, prepared to overturn society rather than see them prosper?

Cunninghame Graham condemned Tories and Liberals alike. He spoke much more for the poor than against the rich. He levelled exactly this charge at the Communists - they were inspired not so much by love of the poor as by hatred of the rich³. He did not simply speak for the poor - he was found among them, organising, acting on their behalf in a costly way. He was known as the "Miners' MP", the only man in the House to be trusted by the workers.

It is clear that he had no political ambition. He wanted to hand the torch to representatives of the working-classes as soon as they came forward⁴. He was not long in Parliament when he was tipped as the leader of a new Socialist party. But he constantly insisted it was other people, from among the ranks of the workers themselves, who must take the lead. In an article on "Parliament and the Miners"⁵, he says he wants to make it clear that no man like himself, however much he may sympathise, can ever properly

¹ "The Age of Reason". Jean Paul Sartre. Hamish Hamilton, p. 147.

² In interviewing people prominent in the Labour Movement; in social histories where passing reference is made to Cunninghame Graham.

³ In a speech at Coatbridge, preserved in a Scrap-Book, as a 'prentice politician.

⁴ See re Worker MPs, under the heading "Socialism".

⁵ Cutting preserved in a Scrap-Book.

represent them. He was actually not happy in the game of politics. Some greater object made him put up with it.

I can come to no other conclusion that that it was a sense of justice which induced him to enter the political arena, and a genuine concern for those deprived of it which kept him there. A hostile comment in a Scrap-Book says:

"His sympathy for the working man is not believed to be very great, as working men are likely to discover when they have served his purpose".

It is true that he fitted awkwardly into their society. He remained an aristocrat. Yet whereas the first representatives of the workers in Parliament were very much overborne and proved generally ineffective for their cause; whereas there were many who were not sure where they stood in regard to Liberalism and Labour¹; Cunninghame Graham had the welfare of the under-privileged and the political and economic means of reinstating them in society right at the forefront of his mind from first to last. Let a newspaper cutting of a meeting of the Kirkintilloch Miners' Association tell of the miners' regard for him:

"It was a long time since the miners of this country had such a friend as Mr Cunninghame Graham had proved himself to be (Hear, hear). In season and out of season he was being spent in the miners' cause, both on the floor of the House and elsewhere. He had seen Mr Graham many a time stand in the open air, amid pelting rain, urging the men in eloquent and earnest tones on to noble deeds. His advocacy of the miners' cause was an unselfish act for he had no need to put himself in the forefront of such a fray, being in an independent position....."²

When the sentence in the "Trafalgar Square" trial became known, the Scottish Miners' National Federation meeting in Glasgow decided to call a national strike until Cunninghame Graham was released (this plan was evidently not realised). On September 3rd 1887, Cunninghame Graham claimed he was the spokesman of miners' unity on the Eight Hour question, and later revealed that he had spoken recently at 63 or 66 meetings in every mining district in Scotland³. All the evidence points to his being the miners' trusted man. And not theirs only. The friendly relationship with tenants on his own estate is given sufficient testimony at different times - and it is on his home wicket that a man's larger pretensions often fail.

He was in real measure, the people's champion. Reynolds News has it:

"There is no man in the House who has an honester sympathy with the people.....
.....the gallant Graham, so fearless in the open, and so much at home among the people..... He speaks as the delegate of hundreds of thousands of our countrymen. Let him be fearless in the discharge of his vast responsibility".

The incongruity is congruous in him: he was at one and the same time....."defenseur des opprimes, des malheureux, des vaincus/dandy et grand seigneur"⁴. It was for love of them that he faced "hostile colleagues on both sides of the House"⁵.

¹ Eg. John Burns, who ended up as a Liberal and a Right Honorable.

² Preserved in a Scrap-book.

³ Speech in Hansard.

⁴ "Don Roberto, Coureur D'Aventures".

⁵ August 11th 1888. Hansard.

At the root of an outraged sense of justice¹, there lay, I believe, his particular conception of equality and interdependence. He is conscious of the importance of the working man in the life of society. "I plead", he says....

"I please on behalf of those who provide us with our hats, our hosen, our food, and even our seats in Parliament"².

.....and again he speaks of the hardship of "poor men by whose labour we are all sustained"³. Stephen Graham is to be thanked for preserving in his book "The Death of Yesterday", a short essay by Cunninghame Graham which I would not otherwise have been able to trace. The theme is the contribution to the life of Britain of "Smith" and "Smythe". Both the spirit of the writing and the essential theme are reproduced in the following extract:

"Out of Smith came London. He dug the clay; he burnt the bricks; he built the palaces; he made the drains and the Houses of Parliament. Smythe, of course, refrained from ennobling toil....What Smith most wants, one might suppose, are shorter hours of work, more food of better quality, and, above all, to get Smythe off his back".

Cunninghame Graham was not prepared to allow economic theory to be the domain of schoolmen, while actual power was left where it was⁴, with those who wanted to open the world like an oyster⁵. He was not prepared to use different words for theft and cheating, when he met them in business and industry, from those customary for the poor crimes of the dispossessed. He was to warn honorary members in the House, that if the rage of the unemployed ever burst the floodgates:

".....should one of them try to disperse the hungry men by force, it would be better that a millstone be hung round his neck and that he be cast into the sea"⁶.

What better indication do we need than the underprivileged were to be treated as God's "little ones"?

What better testimony that his own rage was the Christian rage of love?

¹ In his maiden speech in the House, he described our society as one "in which the capitalist makes Heaven for 30,000 and Hell for 30,000,000".

² February 24th 1890. Hansard.

³ March 5th 1889. Hansard. The underlining is mine. After the manner of Ecclesiasticus, he speaks of Smiths and Artificers sustaining life, in "Progress", p..141; and similarly of the mill-hand in "Bernal Diaz del Castillo", p.185.

⁴ He iterates and reiterates this point of view in an article "Odium Theologicum" in "The People's Press", December 13th 1890.

⁵ "Portrait of a Dictator", p.22.

⁶ March 6th 1889. Hansard.