

The Machine Age

With his friend, William Morris, Cunninghame Graham shared the nostalgia for an age of spontaneity, beauty, craftsmanship and chivalrous fellowship which may never have existed, but was more to be identified with the Middle Ages than any other. This nostalgia was an ingredient in the thought of the second half of last century¹. Gabrielle had it in more extreme form than her husband. In an article on "Art and commercialism" she advocates something like a Gandhian "return to the spinning wheel", where each man would grind his own meal, shear his own sheep, dye his own wool, and make his own garments². She does not have the balance and realism of her husband, but they did share this backward-looking on a society which was more spontaneous and accorded people simple dignity.

With William Morris and with Rev Stewart Headlam, Cunninghame Graham's spirit was in revolt against the drabness and sordidness of life produced by industrialisation. Slums, overwork, tuberculosis, starvation, prostitution, drunkenness, the dreary treadmill of the caged human squirrel, grass and lungs blackened by soot and fumes - these were the gems in industry's crown. The world was a vast, noisy unloveliness wherever it reigned:

"....La Machina, with its corrugated iron roofs, its derricks and the appliance of commerce that have rendered all the world great, prosperous, and most uncomely to the eye"³.

Looking at a wild vista in Florida, he says:

"What can be better than a space left waste by the Creator of the world, who for some purpose of His own, jewelled His work with fragrant "weed prairies", and set His rhododendrons wild on the mountains, planting His Argentina on the river sides of oceans of green grass on the great pampas of the South. Of course, He did not know that we should find his work unfinished, till we had set it full of factory chimneys and the like, or maybe He had worked upon another plan and made it all a heap of scoria ready to our hand"⁴.

Our work - how often is his main charge reduced to this - is in its essence blasphemous. His main concern is with what industry was doing to people.

The railway was his bete noir. It has to bear the charge, which is really aimed at industry, of "levelling all mankind to the lowest common multiple⁵, of "....making the whole world but a replica of Leeds"⁶. Industry, when it dominated human society, produced a black sameness in individuals and in countries. It also upset the perspective of life. The one hope in this regard would appear to be the Iona magic - which can make fairies, martyrs and a steamer belong naturally to the same world - paralleled in Spain by the

¹ It is expressed in inverse form in Marxism, in the type of society imagined when the state has withered away.

² In "Today", February 1889.

³ "Cartagena and the Banks of the Sinu", p.127. So he speaks also in "Redeemed", pp. 31, 76 and "Hope", p.54, as in many other places.

⁴ "Hernando de Soto", p.50.

⁵ "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.116.

⁶ "Success", p.57.

railway, which far from bending people to its will, "puts on some of the graces of the bullock cart"¹. A Sheriff, who wonders at our ships, aeroplanes, cannons, microscopes, and who wonders yet more that we see them out of context, failing to appreciate God's power shown in them, and losing all sense of the other miracles of nature - the planets, the tides, the palm by the river², - represents Cunninghame Graham's own conviction. Industry needs to be set in the world like hewn stone in the living rock from which a lighthouse might rise. Human invention belongs with nature to one wonderful world.

But of yet greater concern to him was the enslavement of people to machines. Where this exists it makes the good news of God appear out of place. In "Charity" he writes: "Machines ran to and fro.....seeming somehow as if they were the masters, and the pale men who drove them only the slaves of the great forces which they had brought into their lives.men shrank into second place and seemed but to exist on sufferance, as tenders of machines. The glad tidings preached so long ago, so fitted for the quiet ways and pastoral existence of those who heard them first, so strangely incongruous with us of modern times"³. "The pawns are human lives"⁴, in industrial development as he knew it.

Industry is clearly anathema to him when it reduces the status of the creation and of humanity from that which God has afforded, to the dimension of man's grasping exploitation of nature and of fellow human beings.

The industrialisation of backward countries is viewed accordingly with the same misgiving as that which the whole civilising process arouses. He sees industry extending like a black smudge over the earth. Yet he knows there is a release, a boon which it brings. He is ground between the upper and nether millstones:

"At times in the East, the horror of the West, with all its factories, its hurry and its smoke, its frauds and charities, and life rendered so complex by infinities of nothingness, falls out of recollection at the actual horror of what is present. Before one's eyes appear the mud, the dust, the heaps of garbage rotting in the sun; the scrofulous and leprous folk seem, with the halt and the maimed, to comprise mankind.....

Then the thought arises if machinery were introduced, things might amend. At least the wretched mules and donkeys might find their hell a little cooler.....the woman turning the stones to crush the corn be not so old at twenty, and when one was taken, the other not be so much inclined to cry: "Why was I left to suffer"⁵?

He himself has no language but a cry. The worst features of industrialism seemed to be most prominent when it was exported. None seemed to regard or to care.

¹ "Success", p.74.

² "Brought Forward", pp. 160, 161.

³ pp. 76 and 77.

⁴ "Faith", p.146.

⁵ "Father Archangel of Scotland", pp. 131 and 132.