

c. Social Aspiration

Trade Unions

That the degrading, impoverished condition of Britain's working class was not exaggerated by Cunninghame Graham's imagination, was made clear in Charles Booth's famous survey, which appeared between 1899 and 1891, "Labour and Life of the People". It afforded unimpeachable evidence that 32 per cent of London's population was living below subsistence level with the figure in the East end (the focus of Cunninghame Graham's concern) 60 per cent. From this survey, the working class gained allies among the middle classes. But the change towards justice would have been immeasurably slower and more difficult, had it not been for the emergence of the new Unionism.

When Cunninghame Graham began his political life, the trade unions then in existence covered only some 10 per cent of the working population. As has been indicated earlier, they were part union, part Friendly Society, and inclined to husband their funds. They believed in direct negotiation with employers. They distrusted legislation and action through parliamentary power. Year after year they opposed the Eight-hour Day proposed in the Trade Union Congress. They held a traditional monopoly and did not want to see it usurped by the inclusion of masses of semi-skilled and unskilled workers under one umbrella¹. The one exception to this was the miners organisations.

The result was that those workers who were unorganised by and large all existed in a sweated condition. The notorious example was Cradley Heath, where a young man and a young woman earned 5/- and 4/- per week respectively, and those who were not so strong less. The strike that took place there in the Autumn of 1886 was one of desperation - of those who were starving in any case, and thought they may as well starve protesting as starve overworking. The strikers' demands tell their own tale. For an agreed 60 hour week, they merely asked for a wage of 13/- for men and 8/6d. for women. They had come to the pass in which they found themselves, simply by the reason of their unprotected state. The employer had introduced women's labour, thus cutting wages. Fierce competition made the selling price of the products very low. Helpless in the grip of the manoeuvring of employers and inflexible law of the market, the workers suffered till they could suffer no more and came out on strike².

Many of the strikes in the last twenty years of the 19th Century ended miserably, as the sight of emaciated children forced people back to work on the same old terms, or worse. But increasingly better weapons of representation and pressure were forged; and successes here and there gave impetus to the new Trade Unionism. One of the most

¹ In the 1884 annual report of the Parliamentary Committee of Trade Union congress, the possibility of a international conference of Trade unions was turned down in these terms: "the position we assumed is that we are all so well organised, so far ahead of foreign workmen, that little can be done until we are more on a level with the skilled workers of Britain". No better instance of unconscious assumption of privilege could have been made by employers.

² Among Cunninghame Graham's papers we have noted a contemporary account of the situation, in pamphlet form, by a "Sunday Chronicle" investigator. The information here is culled principally from this document, checked against other accounts. Matchbox makers and hook-and-eye carders were at least as poorly paid.

difficult things to deal with during this period was the sweating of home workers. Home shirt-makers, for instance, received 8½p. per dozen shirts¹.

The first Dock strike, led by Ben Tillett in 1886, was a failure. Then came the greatest encouragement of this decade. Bryant and May's match-girls, without organisation or much premeditation, struck out against their conditions, and with the aid of Mrs Annie Besant's impassioned pleading won their battle. The next advance was the achievement of an eight-hour day with increased wages for strikers in the London Gas Industry, and there followed the successful London Dock Strike of 1889. There was an immense spurt in Trade Union membership throughout the country (which, among Cunninghame Graham's reports and papers, is witnessed by the increase in number and voice of unions adopting "The People's Press" as their organ)². The depression of the early 1890's provided a severe test, and witnessed many set-backs to the new trade unions. But they survived and offered to the next century the possibility of a complete organisation of the workers of this country in all trades.

The achievement of John Burns, Ben Tillett, Thomas Mann, Will Thorne and other working class leaders in promoting the extension of unionism to unskilled and semi-skilled workers, is well-known and rightly appreciated. But the part of Cunninghame Graham, in the House, and in the encouragement of strikers in the open air and with the pen, is neglected and has been forgotten.

In the material which has come to my hands he makes two principal assertions:

- a. trade unions have a necessary place in the structure of industry for all classes of workers, and
- b. they must get Parliamentary backing.

a. Cradley Heath may once more testify to his realism, in this case regarding the need for organisation of the poor. How long are women to work at the anvil, at work for which they are unfitted, and neglect their domestic duties? "So long, probably", he answers, "as workers for a want of union, leave themselves at the mercy of the heartless and selfish capitalist"³.

He implores workers of all kinds and in all situations not to neglect organisation. Visiting Kirriemuir⁴ he finds relatively good terms existing between employers and employed: but he reminds them that conditions may change and wages be reduced, that trade unionism means a countrywide backing for just demands, and steady improvement in social conditions - which they could not afford to be without; and urges the necessity of union membership upon them. He puts the point succinctly in an article⁵ on the Liverpool Dock Strike: "...labour must combine or else it will be crushed".

In Parliament he was alert to any unjust hindrances to trade union activity, especially acting as the advocate of postmen and policemen, who were being fined and demoted

¹ "Fifty Years' March." by F. Williams, p. 38.

² Cunninghame Graham preserved copies from 1890-1 in bound form.

³ From a newspaper cutting contained in a Scrap-Book, giving a Press Interview.

⁴ A report appears in "The People's Press", October 25th 1889.

⁵ In "The People's Press", April 5th 1890.

for attending trade union meetings; or attempting to improve their wages and conditions through some form of organisation¹.

In an article in "The People's Press" entitled "Ca' Canny", he deals with the principle involved in the possession of negotiating machinery:²

"Trade Unionism lays down as a principle that a man (even if he can) should not do double the work of his fellows, or set the price too much, because that lowers wages. Every serious union insists most strongly on limiting the output. Commercial men never dream of flooding the market with too great quantities of a commodity at a given time". Men should treat their labour in the same way, so that its true value might be seen.

In an article a fortnight later he says that the reduction of overtime is a principal plank in trade unionism. Otherwise employers take the opportunity to reduce wages and extend the working day. A shorter working day would help the unemployed to find work. All men, the unemployed included, were to benefit by the power of trade unionism. There was to be no new privileged class, no artisan aristocracy.

State legislation was needed to supplement Trade Unionism. He puts the point quite early in his political career:

"Far be it from him to attack Trade Unions; but he wished to supplement trade unionism. Where trade unionism was too weak to support the working classes he wished Parliament to step in and give them that protection by giving them an eight hour day"³.

In an article written three years later, he makes the point that trade unions could raise wages only in reference to the existing economic conditions, whereas an eight hour working day supplementing union efforts would do much to alter these conditions themselves⁴. In Parliament a great part of the battle was to be fought. Parliament could be altered, so could the TUC - let the workers alter both, have their own mind expressed through them, take hold of the legislative centres of their weal or woe⁵. Let his own words bear him witness:

"It appears to me that all a Trade Union is capable of achieving is to prevent for a little the fall of wages in the face of a falling market, or raise them a little in the face of rising prices.I have always thought that it is futile in the extreme to attempt to reform the condition of a people without first reforming the Government. Surely the Government is the fountain and source of the national life.government may make combination impossible, if the working classes neglect to avail themselves of the opportunity to return members to Parliament. (He urges this).in order that Parliament, as at present, may not be hostile to the interests of the working classes, but gradually become permeated by them."⁶.

One of the most interesting things about this period is the insight and unselfishness of the new trade unions. We find them prepared to push their own interests more quietly,

¹ A Speech on June 6th 1890 in Hansard, best represents this concern.

² Issue of November 29th 1890.

³ September 3rd 1887. Hansard.

⁴ "The People's Press", December 13th 1890.

⁵ "The People's Press", August 16th 1890.

⁶ "The People's Press", July 26th 1890.

that they may give priority to the achievement of Parliamentary legislation for an eight-hour day, in the belief that that would help the whole working class. When the TUC was captured¹ by them (at Cunninghame Graham's insistent instigation) and became a platform for their policies, the eight-hour day became one of their chief demands.

Where there was a trouble spot, there very often was Cunninghame Graham to be found², agitating for the assumption of power by the workers in negotiation and legislation, fostering the growth of trade unionism. Yet he was no one-track-mind protagonist. He was always ready to criticise his own cherished convictions wherever he saw their shortcomings in practice. Many years later, of the King Vulture, he wrote: "The king adopts the air as of a Czar of Russia, or a Trade Union leader, aloof and quite oblivious of the wishes of his subjects"³.

This is part of the singular value of his contribution - the largeness of his vision. He was also able to see that there were societies where trade unionism did not fit, and merely interfered with more fundamental, healthy relationships⁴.

At the particular time in history when his influence was felt in national politics, Cunninghame Graham's championship of the new unionism counted for a very great deal. That someone who was aristocratic by birth, a landowner, a far travelled and cultured man, should join forces with working class agitators, strengthened the appeal of right in their case. An election leaflet of the time puts it:

"Graham of Gartmore and such men, taking part with the people and thinking their thoughts, are the indication of a peaceful and ordered reform rapidly drawing nigh.....The Scottish people gladly welcome refined and cultured men as leaders. They can march on without them, but they can march on better with them"⁵.

Cunninghame Graham was among the principal midwives who brought the new unionism to birth, and he helped to preside over its early growth.

More clearly than most of the leaders, he saw the necessity of trade unionism going hand in hand with Parliamentary power. H H Champion was an ally in some of his pleading⁶. But in crucial matters - the condition of the poor, the rights of free speech evidenced in the Trafalgar Square riot, the passing of an Eight Hours' Bill - he seems among MP's to have had a monopoly of prophetic righteousness. It is his continual plea that workers get legislative power into their own hands by the appointment of representatives from among their own ranks, as MPs, and that they alter the economic structure of the state and not simply gain better terms for themselves in relation to society as it stands.

¹ In 1890.

² There is extant notice of a Memorial of Glasgow shipowners to the Home Secretary asking for protection of life and property by restraining Cunninghame Graham and Keir Hardie from making inflammatory speeches.

³ "Jose Antonio Paex", p.12.

⁴ "Success", p.20.

⁵ Undated among Cunninghame Graham's papers.

⁶ He appealed publicly for information to support Cunninghame Graham's revelations on poverty, when the latter was in prison.

The Strike Weapon

The election leaflet referred to earlier speaks of "a peaceful and ordered reform rapidly drawing nigh". It was this kind of reform that Cunninghame Graham sought.

He is in two minds about the value to the workers of the strike weapon. They have the ultimate argument in their capacity to bring the State to a standstill¹. In a letter to the Labour Tribune² he urges miners to make their mind known in Parliament, and if they will not be heard, to "paralyse the industries of the world" by universal use of the strike weapon. He believed the time might come when the deprived would show their strength.

But this was a last resort, and a bad resort. Cunninghame Graham could look at the effects with the eyes of the sufferers, weary of:

".....seeing their women and children starve during strikes and of being beaten as regularly as the money fails....."³.

and with the eyes of the capitalist in the same article:

".....the smug, sweating Christian.....does not care a dump for strikes, as a general rule, knowing that he will have no suffering to endure, but, on the contrary, will see his goods get dearer every day the strike continues".

He adds that what the employer fears is reduction in the hours of labour.

Hear him again:

"It is I think, a vulgar error to suppose that all employers of labour necessarily fear a strike. To some of them a strike is as welcome as flowers in spring.....(the capitalist uses it).....to restrict output, and enable him to get rid of surplus stock"⁴.

Speaking in the House, he states as his reason for pleading with them to come to people's aid by favourable legislation:

".....the extreme undesirability of strikes.....enormous waste of energy and capital and danger of social turmoil"⁵.

He advocates "Ca' Canny" as a preferable alternative in the article of that name:

".....the 'hands' by limiting their 'labour force' have in their power a more potent weapon than all the strikes imaginable".

The judicious, organised offering or withdrawal of effort seems to him to be the most potent weapon the workers have.

¹ "People's Press", Article on "The State", October 18th 1890.

² An undated Cutting in a Scrap-Book..

³ "People's Press", Article on "Ca' Canny", November 29th 1890.

⁴ In a contribution to "The People's Press", July 26th 1890.

⁵ February 24th 1890.

Constitutional Change

However much he may on occasion give support to the more violent remedies, his final hope is in constitutional change. He is called an anarchist in a Spanish paper (but then, in the USA Socialists were "Reds"!); and in a Preface he says "the man of Christ's kingdom upon earth should be an anarchist" since there would need to be such a holocaust of conventions to initiate it¹. This remark stands alone and unsupported - there was too strong a conservative strain in his make-up for the word "anarchist" to fit him at all. With his knowledge of the uncertain gain of revolutions in South America, and his realistic assessment of the power held by those who benefit from the status quo in Britain, he vividly realised the delicate nature of reform, the careful handling it required. He characterises it:

"Reform, that little heifer always apt to overkick the stool and leave the milker in the dust, with his cans clattering about his ears....."².

In a "People's Press" article he speaks of the two ways of change: violent revolution "which is alien to the spirit and tradition of your race", or legal action³. Though the working man is determined to be free, even if that means puling the social fabric about the ears⁴, he will direct him into the latter of the two courses. A more lengthy quotation from an article entitled "Individual Effort" will best represent the neat balance of his opinion:

"Revolution simply means change, whether accompanied by force or not. I contend that, should the occasion arise, it would be both foolish and cowardly to shrink from using force against those who, for 300 years, have never scrupled to use force against the working classes, when occasion seems to require, or when corrupt or partial judges (and we have plenty such) would justify it. However, as I have no love for needless bloodshed, and little faith in the durability of social (not political) changes brought about by sudden effort.....a sudden, violent change, even though it might abolish follies, like the Throne and the Lords, still would leave the word the thrall of money-bags and competition....."⁵.

So he expressed his own hope that:

".....we may see our scheme of life transformed by slow degrees before our eyes.....and this without a single massacre of innocent men"⁶.

I believe that the attitude of mind represented by Cunninghame Graham in these quotations about trade unionism and strikes, expresses exactly the outlook which made constitutional change possible in this country, and which offered an example to the world of his sounder method of the achievement of justice⁷. We find in him the conviction that the workers must be up and doing, learning a new solidarity and responsibility and exercising it themselves - and the conviction that they need the help of Parliamentary legislation to gain and maintain their freedom. We find a strong sense of human rights and of the need for change towards justice - and a strong sense of the

¹ Preface to "Revolutionary Types", by I A Taylor.

² Preface to "The Truth About Morocco", by M Aflale.

³ Article titled "The Bloody City" in "People's Press", 16th August 1890.

⁴ "Lessons of the Congress", "People's Press", September 20th 1890.

⁵ "The People's Press", August 30th 1890.

⁶ "The People's Press", August 30th 1890.

⁷ Its tradition is Bentham's gradualness as against Marx's trust in social explosion.

value to society of order and stability. We find him ready to judge a time apt for bloody revolution - and determined to do all he can in order that the dire consequences of bloody revolution might not have to be risked. In the Continental tradition, the forces which stood for change became extremist and faced one another across barricades. The coherence of societies was jeopardised. It is well that we remember that our different social tradition was not achieved or preserved automatically, but through the courage and wisdom of prophets such as he. In him the God who brought order out of chaos, Who offers order in society as a good gift to human beings, and the God Who holds a plumb-line against existing societies, was one God, honoured in action, even though only dimly perceived in His essential being.