

c. The Bible

Biblical sinews run through Cunninghame Graham's utterances and writings. References and allusions proved too numerous to record. The Bible was almost the only reading allowed him in prison in 1888. Tschiffely tells us that the book of Ecclesiastes was his favourite book; its astringent pessimism touched sounding strings in his own being which gave an answering note.

In the Bible he finds forthright and relevant speech. Of Sir Thomas More, whom he admired, he said "He was almost as uncompromising as the Holy Scriptures....."¹. The Bible spoke for justice towards all. In a letter to the Winchester electors in support of a Liberal candidate, he wrote:

".....vote for those who endeavour to act up to the spirit contained in the Bible - to protect the oppressed, to shield the down-trodden, to make this world of ours merely a preparation for heaven and not a foretaste of hell"².

Flinging out at theories of political economy during a meeting in Glasgow while he was on bail as a result of the Trafalgar Square incident, he said:

"What he would say was - Burn political economy and buy a Bible.....they would find in the Bible not perhaps better political economy, but more humanity"³.

The Old Testament seemed to him to be a true record of a form of life in the East: ".....the whole scheme of Arab life was photographed for us by the writers of the Pentateuch"⁴.

From time to time he shows discernment in eliciting the very flavour of Biblical situations. Of an uncouth character in the East, he says:

".....he broke again into his monologue, almost against his will, just as the prophets sometimes seemed to speak in the Old Testament"⁵.

Surveying Bahia from the ship on which he was sailing, he discerned:

"A land so peaceful that it was quite impossible there could exist in it evil or malice, hatred or envy, or any of the vices or the crimes that curse humanity. One understood the feelings of the apostles when they wished to build their tabernacles;"⁶.

Of the institution of the Scapegoat he said: "Nothing showed more clearly the profound knowledge of the human heart" (though this latter could also mean that it provided an easy way out for sinners)⁷.

He does not seem to be bothered about discrepancies in the text, saying of the jumbling up of inches and feet, hundreds and thousands in Hulderico Schmidel's chronicles of the Spanish Conquest of South America, that this happens "in even more important scriptures"⁸. He is quite conservative in his appreciation of the Bible as he has it,

¹ Article "Utopia" in "The People's Press", October 11th 1890.

² Letter preserved in a Scrap-Book.

³ Speech preserved in a Scrap-Book.

⁴ "Thirteen Stories", p.115.

⁵ "Faith", p.163.

⁶ "A Brazilian Mystic", Preface, p. viii.

⁷ "Father Archangel of Scotland", p.80.

⁸ "His People", p.114.

disliking modern translations¹, detesting peoples use of it as "a sacred lucky-bag, accepting parts and utterly rejecting others that clashed with their ideals"². He seems to conclude that the new Biblical Criticism opened the way to another form of subjectivism. Yet he clearly soes and jibs at the old form of subjectivism, which came from accepting the Bible whole from the hand of none other than God, whilst in fact making one's own canon from it for reading and conduct. So Calvinists knew the Bible for their own use ".....as a stockbroker knows his share list or the mariner his compass....."³. The missionary Macrae "passed his time looking up texts wherewith to pulverise.....the infidel....."⁴. Bilson, the "Bristol Fashion" skipper, took the Bible for a fetish, which brought some obscure good unrelated to daily conduct. He read a chapter to his own crew on Sundays, just as he "took in top-gallant sails at night, or purged his crew on entering low latitudes, from sheer routine"⁵.

Parsons featured those parts of the Bible in which people were exhorted to work and to be obedient, neglecting other counter-balancing parts⁶.

".....let poor Labour lift its head, down comes the brass-bound Bible smack upon it"⁷.

Of the characters in the New Testament he likes Peter for his human loveliness and for his venturesomeness⁸. Yet strangely - for the cry of the narrow Protestant religion he detested was "Name o' your Peters, gie me Paul"⁹ - it is "the sarcastic, witty apostle to the Gentiles"¹⁰ who "cast the spell of his keen, humouristic speech upon the Greeks"¹¹ who won him. He found Paul patient and generous in character¹², loveable too, and when he mentions him, mentions him with admiration.

Allusions to the birth of Christ, and the Cross, are to be found here and there in Cunninghame Graham's works. But I can recollect no mention of the Resurrection and the Ascension. The Cross is a memorial to the inevitable way in which people deal with the truth. It is as if Cunninghame Graham had never found in the Bible the claim that a work had been done for humanity by the Cross and Resurrection of Christ which affected human history directly and for ever; or as if he had already made up his mind about human life before he read, and so dismissed as incredible the saving work of the Cross and the reality of Resurrection.

¹ "A Hatchment", p.212.

² "Doughty Deeds", p.37.

³ "Father Archangel of Scotland", p.60.

⁴ "Progress", p.221.

⁵ "The Iphine", p.127.

⁶ Editorial on Dockers' Demonstration in "The People's Press", August 16th 1890.

⁷ Leader in "The People's Press", July 5th 1890.

⁸ "Writ on Sand", pp. 105 and 108.

⁹ See the sketch "Selvagin".

¹⁰ "Writ on Sand", p.106.

¹¹ "Brought Forward", p.147.

¹² "Redeemed", p. 65.