

IV Prophetic Criticism of Contemporaneity

An author may criticise the accepted standards and conventions of his time out of pique, from affectation, with a desire for the limelight and the reputation of being daring - from many unworthy motives. When we find an author who is able to look at his own nation and generation and by a movement of the imagination shuffle off the coil of his contemporaneity and speak as if he belonged to another race and age; when that author yet identifies himself with his people, bearing the burden of their impoverished perspective; when he cuts to the quick; and when his measuring-rod is unqualified righteousness: then may we justly call his criticism prophetic.

Throughout this book we have seen the prophetic insight of Cunninghame Graham exemplified in large challenges offered to social and religious custom. We are left with the need for a gathering chapter to focus attention on matters which have not been noted, or which have been inadequately noted, on which he called society to account in the name of truth and right.

a. Rank and Position

Who would be in a stronger position to prick the bubble of social pretension than a land-owning Scottish laird, the claimant to a dormant earldom, a figure at the court of Queen Victoria, a descendant of Scottish kings? I have noted only one occasion on which it has been suggested he coveted titles himself. In a review of "The Essential Cunninghame Graham", dated December 14th 1952, inserted in a Press Clippings Book in Dartmouth College Library, Harold Nicholson asserts he "spent much time and money striving to revive in his own favour a dormant Scottish earldom". Family tradition meant such to him. Should this contention be true, it is more likely that it was the living past which he wished to weave into the present, than that he cherished larger social ambitions. But the words he wrote in a letter to his mother fit better his outlook: "I care little about the Menteith peerage, as long as no one else gets it. (Than such a manner of life):I would rather share a handful of maize with my horse out on the plains"¹.

Cunninghame Graham carried off life with an aristocratic air and grace which was natural to him. But he believed that it was something in one's character which made a rank or a title fit, and the haphazard working of heredity, public opinion and royal favour rarely brought about a happy coincidence of status and appropriate merit. Public honour and traditional rank had nothing to do with the case. No weight should be laid on them. "...a title is but a word that stands between a man and his nobility", he says². Of statues and titles bestowed in memory of his admired Bolivar, he writes elsewhere: "A retrospective honour is, after all, that which does least damage to the receiver of it, for, being dead, only the givers of it bear the ridicule"³. He questions whether a king exists who is not made ridiculous by the very nature of his office⁴. Our fallible methods of bestowing recognition conceal from people the qualities which make for genuine eminence. "Most commonly, the world forgets or never knows its greatest men"⁵, he declares. In a way which must now be familiar to us, he lays this at the door of our inherently idolatrous nature, condemning the adoration of:

"Rank, wealth and state, science and progress and all the gods that we have made and worship, and to whom we call in our necessity, oblivious they are all our own creation"⁶.

True human stature he finds in simple, unpretentious folk, such as the old woman of whom he writes:

"Still there was something spiritual in her face, as if the world and all its trials, toils, and disappointments, and the cares of a large family had left no mark upon her soul, and as if the wrinkles on her brow were but the work of Time, and went no deeper than the skin"⁷.

¹ Quoted in Tschiffely's "Tornado Cavalier", p.59.

² "Bernal Diaz del Castillo", p.227. Footnote.

³ "Jose Antonio Diaz", p.265.

⁴ "Mirages", Preface, p. xi.

⁵ "A Vanished Arcadia", p.85. So in "Hope", p.217.

⁶ "Hope", p.80.

⁷ "Hope", p.6. cf. p.97; "Success", p.57 and "Mirages", p.81.

b. Success

Throughout his works we find evidence of Cunninghame Graham's preoccupation with the re-evaluation of success and failure in life. Generally, it appears to him, people:

".....look upon failure as a sort of minor crime, to be atoned for by humility, and to be reprobated, after the fashion of adultery, with a half-deprecating laugh"¹.

In magnifying success people revel in hollow achievement. It forms part of the sham of life. In the early pages of his book "Success", he concentrates his fire-power:

"We applaud the successful folk and straight forget them, as we do ballet-dancers, actors and orators. They strut their little hour, and then are relegated to peerages, to baronetcies, to books of landed gentry and the like"².

"Poverty many can endure with dignity. Success, how few can carry off, even with decency and without baring their innermost infirmities before the public's gaze"³

He speaks of "the odium of success", its reduction to "piecemeal at so many pounds an hour" of genuinely noble effort, its relationship to arrogance and patronage of others. But it is in another book that he most effectively expresses this continual concern and criticism, thus:

"The praise of men, the pettiness of greatness, and the attachment to the thousand nothings which ensure success, so cramp man that he is left without the leisure to enjoy his life.

Your true Nirvana can only be attained by those who, in the sun, the tides, the phases of the moon and the miracle of birds and flowers, green leaf and then dry boughs again, find happiness, and pass their lives in thinking without bitterness on that which might have been.....in every case the touchstone is the apparent failure of their lives"⁴.

He honours those who fail after a glorious fashion - Raleigh, Cervantes, Chatterton, Camoens, Blake, Claverhouse, Lovelace, Alcibiades, Parnell, and the last unknown deckhand who loses his life in the vain attempt to save a drowning comrade⁵. He appreciates sturdy failure⁶. But he also keeps a corner of the heart for those who have nothing noble or commendable about their failure - who just fail⁷.

Spain represented to him a nation which in his lifetime had had no success in life, and so had retained its soul⁸. Adverse fortune, the neglect of the high and mighty, deprivation of material rewards - these, he would seem to say, keep people's minds on the simple things which matter in life. Thus:

"If it is true that only simple folk should be the real inheritors of the earth, it may be said that those who fail possess it presently"⁹.

¹ "Thirteen Stories", p.51.

² see pp. 1, 2, 7 and 8 of the book.

³ "Progress", p.119.

⁴ "Thirteen Stories", p.6.

⁵ "Father Archangel of Scotland", p.27.

⁶ "Success", p.8.

⁷ See "Thirteen Stories", pp. 214 - 216.

⁸ "Progress", p.119.

On this subject he sets his face obstinately against the common tenor of life. He will not equate public recognition or achievement, in terms of accepted standards, with true accomplishment. He will not have the unsuccessful disregarded, as if no enrichment of society could be expected from them. But we must set a question mark against this conclusion. If failure is made absolute - if it is never to be justified in terms of the total purpose of life, if it is never given some final vindication - is it not as vain as success? Cunninghame Graham nowhere gives any indication that had he grounds to validate his choice: his was simply an intuitive judgement, a reaction against what he saw falsely adored and set on high.

c. Cant and Morals

The Victorian and Edwardian ages seemed to Cunninghame Graham to concentrate on the veneer of life, to pay chief homage to appearances. "It seems of all the forces which move mankind humbug is the strongest"¹, he writes, and the word "humbug" is a word of anathema to him. The bourgeois mind was stuffed with it:

"Above all things the bourgeois mind hates plain speaking.... Swindling becomes embezzlement. He² is the man who sits unmoved at the most disgusting details of the fashionable divorce case, and then goes out and sticks a fig leaf on a stucco statue....sanding his sugar in a grocer's shop of a weekday, and howling psalms in a conventicle on what he calls the Sabbath"³.

He prefers the Georgians to men of ".....our own days, when at the same time a pious profiteer makes a large fortune and talks of the mission of the Anglo-Saxon race"⁴. They were open and forthright for all their faults. The cant of the age contrasted strongly with his own openness and directness. In the introduction to his Bibliography, Leslie Chaundry says:

"Had he chosen to temper the hard facts of life which he has portrayed with a little leavening of improbable sentiment, his works might well have sold in really large numbers. He has been content to show us life exactly as he as seen it and as it really is; few know it better"⁵.

A contemporary said of him:

"He was no trimmer and had not set sail to catch the breeze of any little party, or to vary his movements or his words to suit the particular eddies of the day or hour"⁶.

W H Hudson was one of many who thought he was far too contemptuous of the conventions and assumptions of his day⁶.

What applied to politics and business applied equally to sexual morality. Victorian life was not at all what it appeared to be on the surface. Cunninghame Graham had great sympathy for prostitutes, perceiving probably more acutely than those who criticised him for falling over backwards in their protagonistism, that they were both the victims of society and the critics of its deceit and respectable dullness. Victorian society played a game of "Let's pretend" to avert its eyes from their existence, although:

".....trumps and prostitutes have each their proper place in the Chinese puzzle of society; and it is possible, were they but removed, that institutions people deem honourable might find themselves without a place"⁷.

Cunninghame Graham is clear that moral conventions varied in different ages and in different races⁸. He does not discriminate between them. But he does invariably state a

¹ "Mogreb-el-Aeksa", p.91.

² ie, the bourgeois.

³ Article "Utopia" in "The People's Press", 11th October 1890.

⁴ "Doughty Deeds", p.57.

⁵ The chairman, Baillie Crawford, at a Liberal demonstration in Coatbridge.

⁶ Letter written March 18th 1900.

⁷ "Success", p.112.

⁸ "A Vanished Arcadia", p.33; "The Conquest of New Granada", p.247.

preference for an un-hypocritical attitude, as evidenced in gaucho life¹, and in Latin countries. A fresh breeze seemed to blow abroad, where:

"...morality was looked on in the larger or Latin way, with the result that on the whole life was far cleaner than in Anglo-Saxon lands, where, nature being what it is, the same things happen, but are rendered meaner by concealment; the homage, as they say, that vice pays to virtue, but which makes virtuae, as it were, compound a felony and smirches both of them"².

Pretence he could not abide.

¹ "Father Archangel of Scotland", p.180.

² "Success", p.143.