

## g. Imperialism

Cunninghame Graham believed that a country's patriots were those who were to the fore not only in appreciation of its life and defence of its interests, but in criticism - who stood as watchmen for its soul. Patriotism was a concomitant in his mind of internationalism. Each country had its demerits and its gifts. To him, imperialism meant the assertion of one nation's power and manner of life over others, without the imposed tradition compensating native peoples for the loss of their traditions, freedom and natural resources. We have already noted his attitude to some extent when discussing his assessment of civilisation.

An election of 1885<sup>1</sup> reveals the outlook which he held consistently all through his life. He stated then:

"I am opposed to an aggressive foreign policy, and am of the opinion that the interests as well as the dignity of the country will be better secured by exhibiting a consistent regard to the just rights of other nations than by assertion of lordly domination".

His early approval of Liberalism is partly accounted for by the conviction he then possessed that it sought to extend to the ends of the earth the blessings of civilisation. The Tories, contra, eased the passage of the speculator, and the ambitious soldier and diplomat<sup>2</sup>.

These are the charges he laid against imperialism:

i) It showed disregard for the lives of precious peoples. The Imperialist had a different moral code for dealing with natives and was merciless<sup>3</sup>.

ii) It showed disregard for previous custom and civilisation which would have added to the treasury of humankind:

"The world might have seen great Indian kingdoms in Peru and Mexico, gradually inducted into European ideas, but with their own strange customs and religions still preserved"<sup>4</sup>.

The English settler blindly set up his "Anglo-Saxon Eden" wherever he went<sup>5</sup>

iii) It showed disregard for human rights. Of Spilsbury's venture in the Sus, he writes: ".....England, once committed to interference in any country (said to be rich), must of necessity remain to restore order, introduce good government, and generally to further the cause of progress and mortality, which is specially her aim in every country peopled by an inferior race"<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> News cutting inserted in a Scrap-Book.

<sup>2</sup> Speech at Winchester on March 10<sup>th</sup> 1887, preserved in a Scrap-Book.

<sup>3</sup> "An Imperial Kailyard", pp. 5 and 6; "Progress", pp. 10 and 40; "Pedro de Valdivia", p.32.

<sup>4</sup> "The Conquest of New Granada", p.121.

<sup>5</sup> "Thirteen Stories", p.166.

<sup>6</sup> "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.319. cf. Preface to "The Truth about Morocco", by M Afals, where he defends native rights.

iv) It was sheer blatant robbery. "Our civilisation and commerce are murder and theft at home and murder and theft abroad"<sup>1</sup>. We covered over the ugly fact that we had stolen land by talking of the "rebellion" of the natives, and describing their resistance as "massacre" of whites<sup>2</sup>.

The association of religion and imperialism is ever to the forefront of Cunninghame Graham's mind. They were intertwined in a single impulse ".....we push the gospel truths, extend our trade, and bring the balance of the world under the shadow of our glorious flag"<sup>3</sup>. Christians seemed as unaware of their sins of omission and commission in regard to existing imperialism as were the Conquistadors to whose victims "the name of Christian meant robber, murderer and intruder on their land"<sup>4</sup>. They allowed native custom and cohesion to be disrupted, and self-seeking policies to take their ruthless courses. Only occasionally is a contrary view stated, and then almost solely of Jesuits and Franciscans in South America, who stood between the natives and the colonists<sup>5</sup>.

Where British influence and arms had penetrated he is not in favour of immediate withdrawal, which might bring chaos. He would stop annexation, and see that laws in colonies suited the natives and encouraged their own form of life<sup>6</sup>. At the end of "Mogreb-el-Acksa" he would seem to prefer (in what is a piece of confusing reasoning) British to any other imperialism, if choice has to be made between undesirables<sup>7</sup>.

He recognises the mixed motives with which men set out on their filibustering expeditions against other races and concludes:

"All, no doubt, thought they were serving God, for all men make their God in their own image"<sup>8</sup>. We are back on familiar ground. The implication runs through his reasoning like sinews, that imperialism is a slur on the very God whom the imperialist acknowledges in word, Who for His own purposes created different races and endowed them differently. With castigating scorn, Cunninghame Graham lashes this self-directed idolatry:

"The world, it would appear, is a vast classroom, and its creator but a professor of political economy, apparently unable to carry out his theories with effect. Therefore to us, the Western Europeans, he hastened for help, and upon us devolved the task of extirpating all those peoples on whom he tried his 'prentice hand. On us he laid injunctions to increase at home, and to the happier portions of the world to carry death under the guise of life unsuitable to those into whose lands we spread"<sup>9</sup>.

".....the heaven it tries vainly to deceive"<sup>10</sup>, offers mute condemnation.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor of "The People's Press" on Stanley and Barthelot's misdeeds: cf. "Hernando de Soto", Preface p.xii.

<sup>2</sup> "Hernando de Soto", Pref, pp. ix, x, p.245; "Bernal Diaz del Castillo", pp. 94 and 96, footnote.

<sup>3</sup> "The Ipana", p.123.

<sup>4</sup> "Success" p.13.

<sup>5</sup> "The Conquest of the River Plate", pp. 115, 178.

<sup>6</sup> An early address at Shettleston, as a political candidate.

<sup>7</sup> P.270; so in "The Imperial Kailyard", p.9.

<sup>8</sup> "Bernal Diaz del Castillo", p.247.

<sup>9</sup> "A Vanished Arcadia", p. 286.

<sup>10</sup> "Hernando de Soto", Preface, p. vii.

## h. Racial Superiority

For uncompromising, penetrating criticism of imperialism, few statements can match Cunninghame Graham's rare pamphlet, "The Imperial Kailyard", from which we have quoted in the preceding pages. For the rubbishing of the idea of a master race, will anything, I wonder, ever be written to match his sketch "Niggers", published in "The Ipane".

It is with preternatural weight of scorn that he deals with that assumption of superiority which is grounded in interest and prejudice<sup>1</sup>, and is expressed in "the Englishman's Jove-like attitude"<sup>2</sup>.

"Now, to the Briton, patronage is to the full as precious as to be on the visiting list of a rich peer. We like to go abroad diffusing, as it were light, might, and majesty on every side of us"<sup>3</sup>.

Nations must be wrong-headed if they do not think of things as we do<sup>4</sup>. Yet, he says, in the full flood of irony, "it might have been wise to leave other types, if only to remind us of our superiority"<sup>5</sup>.

Other races are treated as the Indians were by the conquistadors as "gente sin razon". From contemporary documents Cunninghame Graham quotes throughout his histories to show their leaders, were in fact "...refined, intelligent, and far more reasonable in controversy than were their conquerors"<sup>6</sup>. He frequently brings theological argument to bear in such terms as these:

"To the pious I put the question, if, as I suppose, these men had souls quite as immortal as your own, might it not have been better to preserve their bodies, those earthly envelopes without which no soul can live"<sup>7</sup>.

It would be appropriate to finish this whole section with comprehensive quotation from the sketch "Niggers", which in Edward Garnett's judgement, gives the keynote of Cunninghame Graham's genius, outlook and attitude to his fellows. He seems only half aware in it that his argument is based on radical theological grounds. Yet arrogance - political, economic, social, racial - keeps immediately relating itself in his mind to "man's first disobedience", to the usurping of God's rightful place in life. Here we see in his thinking the contradiction to that other emphasis where God is described as remote from human affairs. Where God is treated as the tool of human's interests God is not mocked.

"Jahve created all things, especially the world in which we live, and which is really the centre of the Universe, in the same way as England is the centre of the planet.....

That the first man in the fair garden by the Euphrates was white, I think we take for granted. True, we have no information on the subject, but in this matter of creation we

<sup>1</sup> e.g., in Preface to "Down the Orinoco in a Canoe", by S Perez Triana.

<sup>2</sup> Preface to "Head-hunters of the Amazon", by Up de Graff. He condemns equally the USA's "Good American" pattern for mankind. cf. "His People", p.242.

<sup>3</sup> Preface to "Companions in the Sierra" by Charles Rudy.

<sup>4</sup> Preface to "Father Archangel of Scotland".

<sup>5</sup> "A Vanished Arcadia", p.230.

<sup>6</sup> "The Conquest of New Granada", Preface, p. x.

<sup>7</sup> "Thirteen Stories", p.57.

have entered, so to speak, into a tacit compact with the creator, and it behoves us to concur with him and help him when a difficulty looms.

I take it that Jahve was little taken up with any of his creatures, except the people who inhabited the countries from which the Aryans came. (Other races).....were no doubt useful. (Of the Englishman) Much of the earth was his, and in the skies he had his mansion ready, well-aired..... islands, useful as coaling stations and depots where to stack his Bible for diffusion among the heathen..... No individual of their various nationalities by a whole life of grace was ever half so moral as the worst of us is born.

We are his people, and it is natural that he should give mankind into our hand. But yet it seemed that we had grown so godlike in ourselves that perhaps Jahve was waiting for us to indicate the way.

Oh, Africa, land created out of sheer spleen.....

The Ethiopian cannot change his skin, and therefore we are ready to possess his land and uproot him for the general welfare of mankind.

.....Niggers who have no cannons have no rights. (Their land, their cattle, possessions ours; their women ours to infect with syphilis, leave with child, outrage, torment, and make by contact with the vilest of the vile, more vile than beasts).

England's great heart is sound, it beats for all the sorrows of mankind; we must press on, we owe it to ourselves and to God, our God..... in case inferior, aping nations may forestall us, cut in between us and all those we burn to serve, and having done so, then shoot out their tongues and say "These were but weaklings, and their God made in their image, merely an Anglo-Saxon and anthropomorphic fool".

The words England, English, are not words of escape. He makes it clear that his condemnation refers to the "feelings of sublime contentment with ourselves", which characterises the whole "Celts-Saxon" race<sup>2</sup>.

"Niggers" was published in 1899.

<sup>1</sup> "Niggers" in "The Ipane", pp. 237 - 256; extracts.

<sup>2</sup> "His People", p.242.