

Appreciation and Thanksgiving

In his introduction to a biography of his friend William Morris, Cunninghame Graham observes "...to read Morris and never to have known the man is to lose half of him". Never to have known the man - that is my impoverishment in his own case. I hope there have been compensations. A dominating personal impression may obscure one's judgement and hide faults or graces of character. There are gains in my disadvantage. Here is one instance. I find people on encountering him, divided on the question whether his aloofness pointed to personal arrogance. A comprehensive study leaves no doubt on this matter. In different places he explicitly acknowledges the severe limitation of his artistic, literary and political judgements. His humility is a most striking characteristic of one who must have been a very cherished, though not always accessible, personality.

Striking, too, is his conclusion that living in the chief of art of existence. In his "Contemporary Scottish Studies" C M Grieve voices the opinion that a central tie-beam is wanting in his manifold thinking, writing and action. In one way this might be answered in terms of his intentional policy of diminishing in his social and political activity in order that working-class people might increase, or his reverence before genuine religious experiences which he could not share - he deliberately left ends loose.

But it might also be answered in terms of his approach to living. Hudson wrote to him (on November 28th, probably 1897): "To my sick soul your life seems almost too full, your activities too many and great, your range on this planet too wide". A man so various cannot easily be tied together. One of the reasons for the neglect of his life by encyclopaedias and similar books of reference was his unclassifiable character. He was too many things to be placed in any pigeonhole. The detriment is to our encyclopaedias. Is this large-handed squandering of life and gifts a defect? In the Introduction to his selection of Tennyson's poems, W H Auden writes: "...trash is the inevitable result whenever a person tries to do for himself by the writing of poetry what can only be in some other way, by action, or study, or prayer". What, in the end, should a man do with life if not live it to the full, nobly, generously? Cunninghame Graham's life is the sufficient tie-beam. He is like the person he envisages in this book "Hope" who, not in writing, neither in speaking, nor yet in his profession but in himself excels.

I can offer but thanksgiving for the man of the single eye, whose simplicity of vision has shed so much light; for this venturing being, who was so fearless in implementing his conviction, and for this humble child who took spontaneous delight in ordinary human beings as if he discerned that of such is the Kingdom.

Born out of due time? The phrase is the last refuge of the hackneyed mind. Such as he will always find time ripe for their advent.

To you, then R B Cunninghame Graham, Knight of the Spirit, I offer sincere gratitude. Los muertos abren los ojos a los que viven. I am pupil and debtor.