

## Biographical Outline

G K Chesterton in his Autobiography says: "Cunninghame Graham achieved the adventure of being Cunninghame Graham." This comment is apt. His thought and life are intimately interdependent, and neither ran slow. In his published material, he asserts, he reveals all of himself which is for the public eye. It tells of places he has visited, of people with whom he mixed, and nearly always of events, which he has seen or in which he has been embroiled. His outlook is redolent of the distilled essence of reflection on many abrupt encounters with nature and man. The past lived for him. His ears were as attuned to dead footfalls as to the intrusive, rumbustious presence of the living. To understand his outlook we have to know his family history, and catch a scent of the tradition of those places which influenced his outlook from the misty borderland of Menteith to the hot pampas of South America.

His family had royalty and adventure in its blood, and though it was stoutly Scottish, it was not parochially so. Spain especially mingled its blood and tradition.

Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham was born on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 1852, the eldest of a family of three, and, as eldest, the claimant to the Earldom of Strathearn, Menteith and Airth on the side of his father, William Cunninghame Graham Bontine of Ardoch and Gartmore. His mother was the Hon. Anne Elphinstone Fleeming. Through her, he inherited his Spanish blood, her mother being Spanish. His grandfather on his mother's side was Admiral Elphinstone Fleeming, friend of Bolivar. Cunninghame Graham was by birth a Scottish nobleman, the descendant of kings<sup>1</sup>. Of this he was neither proud nor ashamed, but always simply conscious. It was as a natural aristocrat, who looked and lived the part, that he made his mark in those spheres that claimed his attention.

Among his ancestors were men who brought past times and far places into his family heritage. His great-great-grandfather, Nicol Graham of Gartmore, not only refused Rob Roy blackmail, but captured him, and would have hanged him out of hand, had Rob not escaped. To Cunninghame Graham's imagination, in the borderland of Menteith between Highlands and Lowlands, the clash of reivers and defenders still sounded through the swirling mist. Nicol Graham's son had sought his fortune in Jamaica, and then returned to play a notable part in the passing of the Reform Bill. He is the "Doughty Deeds" Graham of the famous poem. Cunninghame Graham admired this forbear's forthrightness (though he did not condone his treatment of coloured peoples) the man-to-man attitude of his letters to superiors who might have expected greater obsequiousness, and his social policy (his election programme is still preserved in a family Scrap Book.) Cunninghame Graham's far-travelled grandfather, Admiral Elphinstone Fleeming, when challenged about an alteration made to his ship without due authorisation, calmly asked for all his back pay (which had gone unclaimed), and heard no more of the matter! He was a man of swift and firm decision allied with daring and resource. An uncle, Major Douglass Cunninghame Graham, had spent some time resident in Ankober, and his tales further stimulated in the young Cunninghame Graham a longing for adventure abroad.

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<sup>1</sup> His descent was from Robert II, through the King's second wife, Euphemia Rose. The Stewart line derived from the first marriage to Elizabeth Mure.

A dominant influence in his early life came from his Spanish grandmother, who lived at Ryde. From her he learned to *lisp* Castilian. Occasionally he visited Spain, but his perfect knowledge of the Spanish language derived principally from subsequent travels and concentrated application<sup>1</sup>. To some he appeared to have an air more Spanish than Scottish. He loved Spain for its Latinity (rarely appreciated by Teutons), its courtesy of manner, its sense of social equality, its backwardness, the art of its people taking the sun as if it shone for them alone. His later education was at Harrow, where he excelled at athletics, and Brussels where he learned French and fencing.

His introduction to South America came through the insight of a mother who was to prove an understanding companion to him throughout most of his life. She died in 1925, at the age of 96. His father was determined that he should be a soldier-and, through a fall from a horse which had injured his brain and unbalanced his temperament, he was an ill man to oppose. Robert was as determined that he would not follow the profession of arms. The family fortune had suffered greatly through Major Bontine's injury, which occasioned recklessness in spending. His mother urged on her husband the one point against soldiering which was likely to tell-that their elder son might recoup their fortune by ranching in South America. Robert went, and so became the Don Roberto of history-the daring horseman, the man of quick decision and action, the champion of neglected and ill-treated races, the protagonist of right as he saw it, wherever he saw it.

The years 1870 to 1878 were spent, except for short re-visits, in South America. He tried his hand at ranching and cattle and horse dealing. He attempted to float a company to trade in Yerba mate<sup>2</sup>. He was an unwilling conscript in a Civil War. The only fortune which he improved was that which is told in knowledge of the ways of Gaucho and Indian, of the lore of the pampas<sup>3</sup>, and of how to face adversity.

In 1879 he married Gabrielle, a Chilean, the daughter of a French father, Don Francisco Jose de la Balmondiere, and a Spanish mother. She is usually described as a Roman Catholic, although some Roman Catholic reviewers of her permanent claim to memory, a loving work on St Teresa, disown her. He was the kind of person only too readily dismissed as a "gifted eccentric". She was certainly gifted in an unusual and varied fashion. She was a poet, an artist of quality in watercolours, an authoress and sensitive translator<sup>3</sup>; a teacher of French, painting and the guitar; a botanist, who left to Stirling Museum a notable collection of Scottish mosses; a good businesswoman, an excellent billiard player, an excellent shot, a hardy traveller under the most primitive conditions. An eccentric? It is eccentric to smoke yourself to death. It is eccentric to be absorbed in the past; and obsessed with the desire to become the heir, through death, of the only true, lovely, just world, which lies beyond. But the word is too much a word of dismissal in terms of standards which we take from our "normality", to which we arrogate authority. She was a mystic, whose spirit seemed more attuned to another plane of reality than this, and who judged, realistically, this world according to that secret insight. She hated the drabness and uniformity of an industrialised civilisation, and this played its part in throwing her back into the spontaneous and chivalric past, and in stimulating her longing

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<sup>1</sup> According to the testimony of his nephew, Admiral Sir Angus Cunninghame Graham, recorded during a Scottish Chapbooks broadcast on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1952.

<sup>2</sup> His wide ranging activities gave him knowledge of the pampas which could not be matched by the natives.

<sup>3</sup> Of "The Dark Night of the Soul", by St John of the Cross.

for an order of glory and justice beyond the power of this earth to furnish. She had a great compassion for the poor, and indeed for all underprivileged creatures. She was a fierce critic of the social order - not in acute analysis or constructive suggestions - but in denunciation of injustice and misery. The husband, to whom she was an intelligent and understanding companion (Tschiffely's judgement) had his artistic sensibility sharpened by her, had the lance with which he drove at social wrongs steel-tipped by her kindred compassion, had his understanding of life in different times as seen through the eyes of different races enlarged by her. Her business capacity (surely it is a most rare mystic who excels at keeping accounts) was a great asset to him in the struggle to save the Gartmore estate. Before her mysticism, and her confidence about life after death he bowed his head, uncomprehending but reverent. When he speaks of death and of the interior vision, he speaks as one who knows some have a key to which he has not been made heir, and the world to which it opens may be the world on genuine reality, though he cannot perceive it.

He met Gabrielle in France, when he was called back from South America because of his father's serious illness. He eloped with her, finding her lonely and unhappy. In the year of his marriage, he brought his bride to Texas to engage in the hard life of ranching<sup>1</sup>. They conceived the plan of taking a wagon train of cotton to Mexico City and selling it at a substantial profit. Among the many hazards, especially of Indians, they achieved the journey, but when they reached their objective had to sell the cotton on a falling market. When they returned to Texas, an Indian raid had wrecked their ranch. In straits, they undertook any kind of work which was offered, Gabrielle usually teaching art and the guitar, and Don Roberto horse breaker, becoming Professor Bontini, fencing master in Mexico city, acting as Spanish interpreter on a buffalo-hunting expedition. In this period, his social outlook began to be expressed in letters. The equality of men, the rights of native races occupied his mind. This was to become typical of him- this distaste for most social expressions of religion, (he had begun to inveigh against institutional religion), combined with an intense concern for the vindication of good and the exposure of evil.

In 1883 his father died, and he returned to inherit Gartmore and debts of £100,000. It was heartbreak to both Gabrielle and himself and a blow to his family consciousness that Gartmore had to be sold some twenty years later, in spite of the hard work they undertook to put the estate on a sound financial basis. Cunninghame Graham never revisited Gartmore, the wrench was so great.

We find him making his political debut in 1885, when he unsuccessfully stood as a Liberal candidate for the North-West Division of Lanarkshire. In 1886 he was returned for this constituency, and was a colourful member of a colourless House until 1892. In that year the Liberal Party refused him because of his trenchant criticism of Gladstone, and he stood as a Socialist in the Camlachie Division of Glasgow, coming third in the voting, and never returning to a seat in Parliament. Among the stormy distinctions of this time are his suspensions from the House of Commons, his imprisonment for his part in the "Battle of Trafalgar Square" and his expulsion from France following an uncompromising denunciation of the killing of fifteen people by troops in a May Day

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that his mother had a reserved attitude to the marriage is indicated by the absence of any reference to Gabrielle's existence, in Cunninghame Graham's letters, except for one headed "With Gabrielle and "Jack". Jack was his dog.

demonstration. He was surely among the most uncompromising persons the House has ever known.

The years, which followed, were quieter in their public impact; they form a hinge in his life. His political incursions hereafter, though notable, were mainly local, until in 1928 he turned his full attention to the demand for Home Rule for Scotland. In 1895 he began to write, and he continued travelling. It is significant of the genuine scholarship and mutual adventurousness of Gabrielle and himself that they worked out from Pliny's writings the possible site of a gold mine in Spain, went prospecting and found the workings<sup>1</sup>. But they found no gold of easy access. In 1897 Cunninghame Graham, without Gabrielle, went in disguise to Morocco, to attempt to reach Tarident, a forbidden city in the Sus. Again he failed. This time his failure succeeded unusually. Not only did it further temper his own character and widen his experience and sympathy, but it produced an acknowledged masterpiece in the literature of travel, "Mogreb-el-Acks" (The Far West). Once again, he had been made a prisoner, this time by the Kaid of Kintafi in his castle in Thelata-el-Jacoub. He escaped death by answering stoutly, when challenged concerning his being a Christian, that he was a U. P. by religion (this sufficiently baffled the Kaid to make him stay his hand) and by getting a message secretly, in time, to the British authorities. Gabrielle had produced the first edition of "Santa Teresa" in 1894, after many journeys in Spain in which she devotedly followed in the footsteps of the Saint.

In 1906, Gabrielle died. Whether they were together, or whether their different interests had led to separate journeying, a strong bond of mutual understanding had bound them. They had no children. The literary works which immediately followed were probably written partly to appease a husband's loneliness and sorrow. Don Roberto dug his wife's grave with his own hands in the old priory on the island of Inchmahome in the Lake of Menteith, and would often return to smoke a cigarette and meditate by her burial place.

After this he was much at Ardoch or travelling with his mother. He had a large number of friends who were glad to give him their company.

At the outbreak of the Great War, he (who had been pro-Boer in an earlier war), after a fierce outburst in Trafalgar Square on the iniquity of going to war, unsuccessfully tried to persuade the army to accept him as a Rough Rider. Instead, he spent most of the war years in the Argentine and Columbia, tapping the horse and cattle resources of these countries for the British Government. Once again his appetite for South American life and history was whetted. His experiences provided further grist to the literary mill. In 1918, half-heartedly, I feel, for elections had become an "infernal folly"<sup>2</sup> to him, he stood as a Liberal for Stirling and Clackmannan and was defeated. In 1925, at the age of 73, he made the first of two journeys to Venezuela, and set out to explore the llanos (the plains) alone. These excursions led to further historical writings.

Home Rule for Scotland had been one of the earliest planks of his platform. To this he was to give primacy in the political interest of his last years. Dr John McCormack has described to me Cunninghame Graham's first contact with the few adventurous spirits who nominated him candidate for the Lord Rectorship of Glasgow University in 1928. He met them in a room lit by candles – all the lighting that they could afford. Their

<sup>1</sup> In 1894.

<sup>2</sup> 'He describes them thus in a letter to Neil Munro on the eve of the poll'

eagerness and impecuniousness appealed to his romantic love of challenge. Their conviction was already his. He was an ally from that moment. He surprised even his supporters by losing to Stanley Baldwin by the narrow margin of only 66 votes. In 1928 he became the first president of the National Party of Scotland. He helped to cement the alliance of the National Party with the Scottish party in 1934, and became Honorary President of the Scottish National Party. He was also made Honorary President of the P.E.N., and presided at the International Congress in Edinburgh in 1934, recognised widely by this time, as a literary artist of merit.

He died in 1936, on a visit to the Argentine, and is buried beside his wife in Inchmahome.

Not only for the convenience of the writer, but also for reasons adduced, a fairly clear line of demarcation can be drawn between the main expressions of his social and of his religious outlook. Apart from letters to friends, which had a wider scope, his public utterances up till the mid-1890s - speeches from platforms and in Parliament, articles and letters in newspapers - all had a direct social and political bearing. True, the judgements made then were confirmed in later life. He continued to speak from public platform and in the open air. He turned aside, whenever he cared (for he wrote not to please his audience, but to please himself) to make observations on social and political life, in his sketches and histories. But his activity was not so continuous or so intensive - he had acquired a "scunner" at politics. Nor did he catch the public eye as he had previously. Even when resurgent Scottish Nationalism was capturing the imagination of his compatriots, very few of his speeches were recorded. We depend very much on declarations made up till 1892, and for confirmation or adjustment of his outlook, and in some cases for more general social theory, on the many asides thrown off later in his books. On the other hand, it was not till he began writing that he put into some coherent form the expression of his philosophy of life. That outlook which comes generally under the heading "religious" is found principally in his public and private writings from about 1895 on.

He had friends with whom he kept in touch all over the world. They included John Galsworthy, George Bernard Shaw, Olive Schreiner, Oscar Wilde, Whistler, Max Beerbohm, William Morris, Keir Hardie, John Burns Parnell - but these are only the better-known names of a great host. With three he maintained a very special friendship: W. H. Hudson, Wilfred Scawen Blunt and Joseph Conrad. His friendship meant more than that of any other to Conrad, who wrote in sensitive appreciation of his person and works.

Cunninghame Graham was never the member of any particular artistic or literary clique. In conversation, in literary output, in scholarship, he could hold his own with any of the bright lights of his day. He held no academic degree. Yet his scholarship, though it was not formal, was wide-ranging and profound. He read much in Scottish, English, Spanish and Latin literature and history. His learning is never made obtrusive, and would go unnoticed if the reader were not attentive. He had a large, well-used library, the books copiously marked, his memory of their contents so exact that he could turn up a reference without delay, even should it be twenty years since he last read it. In his writing we have the free-flowing communication of a well-read, free-coursing mind, rich in experience of life.