

The Aristocrat-Democrat

My childhood's memory retains some phrases of a music-hall song, one verse of which concerned a negro child who was underweight. "How could he be so dark and yet so light?" asked one comedian of the other. Of Cunninghame Graham we may ask: "How could he possibly be such an aristocrat and such a democrat?". Encouraged by an aloofness of bearing interpreted as disdain, by the fact that among the proletariat he never looked one of them, and did not work comfortably with them¹, men have usually adjudged him simply an aristocrat. Whether he, an aristocrat, could be a democrat must yield to the evidence that I have tried to set forth. Cunninghame Graham does not fit tidy theories of humanity. He combines what is normally considered incongruities in a harmony of personality. It is significant that a contemporary newspaper which produced a series of "Comeos of the House" describes him thus:

"Mr Cunninghame Graham is at once the most Democratic and the most aristocratic member of the House of Commons..... He is probably ten times more in earnest than any other member of the House. This earnestness is resented, not only by his opponents, but by the Liberal members, as it makes their own duplicity and inaction obvious by comparison"².

"Out of aristocrats you can make the most dangerous revolutionaries", says Stephen Graham. "Their metal is better tempered"³.

It remains to make some attempt to explain Cunninghame Graham's preservation of the whole insignia of aristocracy when he flung himself into a revolutionary movement for the re-organisation of society in the interest of the masses. What did he hope to gain by retaining the graces, the manners, the culture of Grand Seigneur? Holbrook Jackson sees the question, and answers it with insight:

"The conventional aristocrat maintains his aristocratic qualities within the traditional limits of his class, and he believes that they belong to that class. Mr R B Cunninghame Graham takes his aristocracy into the world and would gladly bequeath it to the world.....would democratise his own distinction"⁴.

What he sought for people was not impoverishment of life, but enrichment. As a cultured aristocrat for whom tradition was a living thing, he was able to take a stand for the whole good of human life and the cherishing of that inheritance. His freedom from financial need and detachment from ambition made possible a wider outlook than that of those who thought everything would be gained if a particular freedom, of which they were deprived, were attained.

He treated people as having been created in the image of God and the fabric of society as a means towards freeing all to live according to this endowment. This is not the judgement of his works. I cannot remember his using the phrase "image of God" on even one occasion. But it appears to me to be the only just interpretation of his attitude and acts.

¹ Mr Thomas Kerr, ex-Lord Provost of Glasgow, Hugh McDiarmid, Stephen Graham, Holbrook Jackson in his sketch in "Today", and others, testify to this fact.

² Cutting preserved in a Scrap-Book.

³ In his sketch in "The Death of Yesterday".

⁴ Appreciation "Today", March 1920.