

The Civilising Mission

In all Cunninghame Graham's attacks on our civilisation, it should be noted that it is the callous, the self-seeking, thoughtless imposition of it upon the weak at home and abroad, which receives the lash of his irony. His attitude is closest to that of Burke and the early Victorians who believed civilisation had to be introduced to societies gradually, as and when it could be absorbed, with the concurrence and gradual adaptation of a people.

The charge is succinctly put in a study of the life of one of the conquistadors: "Progress and civilisation mis-applied, are the chief curses that Europeans have carried to the remotest corners of the earth, slaying, enslaving, and conquering in their name"¹.

For all our industrial development, our sanitation, our inventions, our commercial supremacy, our art, science, and literature - our civilisation denied its name. It was barbarous. It was no fit export.

a) It was reared on the misery of the poor. While he was imprisoned in the fortress of the Kaid of Kintafi, Cunninghame Graham debated life with a Persian go-between. The Persian made the point that whatever a Mohammedan might have to suffer at the hands of autocrats, he was never allowed to starve². This realisation, and the fact that in the rough life of the pampas the poorest had never known hunger, goaded Cunninghame Graham to vitriolic denunciation of the Western civilisation which could be so self-satisfied about its accomplishment and yet not house and feed its poor.

Two questions, with more than a quarter of a century between them, appear appropriate to illustrate his attitude. The first comes from an article on the Liverpool Dock Strike of 1890:

"Let there be docks; let rivers be dammed back, let waters be confined in their channels; let ships securely anchor against tall warehouses, fortunes be made, the trade of Britain spread around the world; let there be dockers, ragged uncared-for men, employed by no man twice, the very prey and sport of middlemen; let those dockers be driven like dumb cattle, let them work at dangerous employments, live hard, sleep little, waking through the night; let ship-owners grow rich upon their toil; all this shall constitute a well-ordered Christian state..... We must maintain civilisation, even if it is reared and founded on the misery of the poor"³.

The second occurs in his book "Brought Forward", where he describes civilised cities as:

"Cities of vain endeavour in which men pass their lives thinking of the condition of their poorer brethren, but never making any move to get down off their backs..... (He thinks of) the vast sums bestowed to forward arts and sciences, and on the poor who shiver in their streets and cower under railway arches in the dark winter nights"⁴.

¹ "Bernal Diaz del Castillo", p.106.

² "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.194.

³ "People's Press", April 5th 1890.

⁴ p.155.

Prostitution and drunkenness, the scourges which stimulated to ameliorative action the Non-Conformist conscience, were believed by him to be the accompaniments of poverty and hopelessness, and to indicate that our way of life had a rottenness at its heart.

b) It was a Vanity Fair, at least among the privileged, where spurious values dominated, and hypocrisy and empty show flourished. Society women filled their day with visits to those whom they detested and by whom they were detested in return. Rich men and demi-mondaines ministered to one another's empty vanity¹. After one of Cunninghame Graham's horse-buying expeditions, the thought of returning to Britain brings a sigh - to confront again:

".....all the cares of life called civilised, with all its littleness, its newspapers all full of nothing, its sordid aims disguised under high-sounding nicknames, its hideous riches and its sordid poverty....."².

How much better the wild open life of Bopicua - free of pretence.

c) War and force were needed as accomplices of our power. Our civilisation could exist only because it was ".....cemented well with blood and sustained precariously on the points of bayonets....."³. The superiority shown in its impact on other civilisations rested in those things which mattered least - as fire-power, air raids and poison gas⁴: and yet by this means we left our rude mark all over the world. The Great War revealed our real state of barbarity⁵.

Our civilisation's achievement, shot through and through with bitter loss, is illustrated in the possible future of Magazan. This African port:

".....may be destined some day to a glorious commercial future, with railways, docks, smoke, pauperism, prostitution in the streets, twenty five faiths instead of one, drunkards, cabs, bicycles, and all our vices"⁶.

The Oriental way of life, which appears to him to have existed since the world was young, now at the mercy of Western superiority in arms, would be better left to outlast by centuries this "shoddy paradise" which we sought to impose⁷.

It could have been a great contribution to the handling of international relationships, though it was one little valued in his day, that Cunninghame Graham noted the ill-effects of extending Western influence on indigenous societies with the eye of a foreigner, and spoke about these to British people as a British citizen. Much that he says is still thoroughly relevant, probably even more so to the expanding USA economy than to our own.

He saw the vacuum left in national life in the East, wherever the presence of Europeans forced prices up, unsettled people, and yet offered no compensation for disrupted

¹ "Hope", p.232.

² "Brought Forward", p.201.

³ "Mirages", his last book: Preface xi.

⁴ "Cartagena and the Banks of the Sinu". Preface, p. xi and p.34.

⁵ "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.137.

⁶ "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.30; See also "Redeemed", p. 19, and "Thirteen Stories", p.179.

⁷ "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.137.

standards¹. In more primitive communities, he described the "solidarity", the "clinging kinship" which bound the tribe, and showed how if this were subjected to intruding foreign influence, the whole pattern of life was broken, and the people simply decayed into oblivion². Natives fell heir to our peculiar diseases, in some cases finding it impossible to survive them³, in others finding their life made miserable and short⁴. To me, the unforgettable account of the impact of a foreign civilisation upon a native society is contained in a sketch in "Thirteen Stories" entitled "Higgenson's Dream". In New Caledonia, the French island in the South Pacific Ocean, Higgenson had spent some part of his youth living with a native tribe, swimming, taking part in their sports. Later, he grew rich, developed the island, furnished it with harbours, roads, mines, and brought it to considerable commercial prosperity. One day, haunted by the memory of his youthful life, he took his schooner and sought the tribe. He found the beach all overgrown, the huts derelict, except that in one lay Tean, the friend of his youth, wasted and dying. His words remained with Higgenson ever after:

".....black man all die, black woman no catch baby, tribe only fifty 'stead of five hundred. We all go out, all the same smoke..... Black man and white men he no can live"⁵.

Cunninghame Graham, in the same story, puts his finger on the spot where the hurt lay: the callous pressure on natives to bridge at one bound a gap which it took us centuries to bridge. His attitude to commercial imperialism (and his understanding that this is not malevolently intended) is as adequately expressed in terms of this story as in any of his other writings. He declares:

"But it needs nothing but the presence of the conquering white man, decked in his shoddy clothes, armed with his gas-pipe gun, his Bible in his hand, schemes of benevolence deep-rooted in his heart, his merchandise (that is, his whisky, gin and cotton cloths) securely stowed in his corrugated iron-roofed sheds, and he himself as active and persevering as a beaver or red ant, to bring about a sickness, which, like the "modorra", exterminates the people whom he came to benefit.

.....Curious, and yet apparently inevitable, that our customs seem designed to carry death to all the so-called inferior races, whom at a bound we force to bridge a period which it has taken us a thousand years to pass"⁶.

"Curious, and yet apparently inevitable.....". Part of the significance of "Higgenson's Dream" is that it reveals the dilemma in which men of good will and men of self-will were alike placed. Higgenson had grown up free of the prejudices and formalities of civilisation, learning to value the natives' way of life⁷. He had shown enterprise, it seemed, both on his own and on the island's behalf⁸. Yet to wake up to the effects was a nightmare. Higgenson's despair is really Cunninghame Graham's. He cannot see how

¹ "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.171.

² So he writes about all primitive peoples, when speaking of the Guarani Indians in "A Vanished Arcadia", p.188.

³ eg, the bushmen in South Africa.

⁴ So of the wandering forest Indians: "Jose Antonio Paez", p.88.

⁵ p.186.

⁶ "Thirteen Stories", p.181.

⁷ Ibid, p.180.

⁸ Ibid, p.179.

the extension of our civilisation can be halted or made kindly¹. His thought was shaped at a time of the naked impact of civilisation on civilisation, especially in Africa. It did seem that the weakest would simply go to the wall. The hope of gradual adaptation, with respect shown for native customs and rights appeared a pipe-dream. What he could do was to reveal in stark clarity the ill that men thought good, and the dilemma posed to the British public by their manifold imperialism.

In his book "The Conquest of the River Plate", he recognises that it is no good dwelling on might-have-beens. The Spanish conquistadors would have been better to stay at home and civilise themselves rather than embark on their adventures in the New World; but since they had taken another course, the only thing left was to soften the blow, as Nunez and La Gasca attempted to do². Increase of trade and commerce he counted necessary for the health of a country, if it were judiciously introduced. In "A Retrospect" he can express his love for the prospect of the old Buenos Aires - and at the same time rejoice in the docks, cars, etc, which evidenced development of the country's life³.

A fermenting Western industrial civilisation was bursting the wineskins of earlier social forms in the world. The cult of progress was an accessory in the process, heralding all change as good, rationalising the effects on native peoples into the bearing of the white man's burden. Societies were sustaining the shock of naked impact, were being undermined, evacuated of their identity, pushed out of existence. Cunningham Graham's attitude is consistent with that given in his view of democracy. Societies, like individuals in society, had a peculiar gift to bring to the richness of the world. Their identity was precious. When it was usurped, the world became drab and impoverished. He fronted advancing civilisation on this score. He challenged besides its quality, all devoid as it seemed of grace, of "clinging kinship" between man and man, ruthless as it appeared in its treatment of its own slaves and in its imposition of slavery on others. Much of what he detested in it stemmed from the pattern dictated by industrial development. To the industrialisation of society he gave full attention.

¹ He makes this explicit in "A Vanished Arcadia", p.287, and "Mirages", Preface, p. xii.

² p.177.

³ Sketch included in "A Hatchment". The point made is borne out in judgements in "Cartagena and the Banks of the Sinu", pp. 102, 114, 121.