

An Estimation

Two pictures come to my mind. The first is the only image of Cunninghame Graham which I possessed during my youth - a "Daily Record" cartoon of an impossible kilted lamp-post of a man riding a shaggy pony much too small for him. I wonder to how many people this impression remained an historical evaluation, the note of sheer eccentricity predominating. The other is of a figure entitled "The Cause of the People" on the cover of Keir Hardie's "Labour Leader". The Shield of Truth, upheld, has trapped the arrows of Privilege, Prejudice and Ignorance. This picture seems to me fairly adequately to represent Cunninghame Graham's social outlook and achievement.

I have been able to find no other equally detailed examination of Cunninghame Graham's social outlook. When reference is made to it, more impressionistically, as in the works of Tschiffely, West and Bloomfield, the estimations suffer from dearth of detailed knowledge of his formative social-political period¹; and the fact that a bridge is blown between this and later activity.

In a brief estimate of the importance of Cunninghame Graham's social outlook, I would give prominence to these features:

1. His uncompromising, outrageous love of truth as he saw it. The fact that so much of what he stood for has become part of our social structure points the moral that achievement may not, after all, be in the hands of judicious compromisers, but may be wrested from the defeat of those who hold absolute allegiances.
2. The unusual quality of detachment and involvement which W H Hudson noted. By means of it, he was able to stand aside from the national, social and class prejudice which he inherited, and see the other side of the coin. He could give whole-hearted support to a movement and still see its faults. He could condemn virulently, and still do justice to redeeming features. Truth, for him, had to be lived and to be sought, at the same time.
3. His unerring recognition of idolatry. Society continually turned to false gods. If he could not worship, he could at least destroy false worship. He was in one way like a prophet and judge from the Old Testament, set on truth and substantial deliverance, iconoclastic; yet somehow without a God to proclaim. A favourite comparison made of him to Don Quixote, tilting at windmills, is all awry in terms of the seriousness of his challenge to society as he found it.
4. The discrimination of his judgement and wisdom of his guidance concerning the use of new social instruments. His views on state intervention; on the development, extension and protection of Trade Unions; on the use of the strike weapon; on the need for a working-class party and the means of getting one - at a time when working-class aspiration might have been directed into unhealthy channels.

¹ Again I must acknowledge my immense debt to Admiral Sir Angus Cunninghame Graham, for the material he provided, especially the Scrap-Books.

5.His capacity as a Socialist in the tradition of Owen and Morris. The realism of his programme and down-to-earthness of his agitation and organisation; at the same time, his concern for beauty and for freedom. His part, with Keir Hardie, in weaving what became the typically British brand of Socialism.

6.His conservatism, his love of the past, the constitutionalism which channelled his revolutionary fire. Such men as he saved Socialism from cutting itself off from past traditions, good as well as bad, and from losing the graces of past societies which could make present ones more endurable¹.

7.The status and dignity he afforded human beings. His rich conception of democracy, with its ultimate constituent - the quality of free personal relationships in society. His understanding of political activity as aimed at removing stumbling blocks from the path to this inheritance. His concern for the whole good of human life. His love for deprived human beings.

8.His lively call to people to be up and doing, shaping society.

9.His personal being. The distinctive contribution he was to society. The embodying in his life and action of what he thought. His unqualified aristocracy – a reminder that radical social thinking and action have never been the prerogative of one class in this country. His property-owning status - the unanswerable argument to support theories like that of nationalisation of the land, against property-owners.

¹ The value of this contribution is underlined by the destruction of quality and taste which marked a large part of Victorian age, which derived from inability to assess the true place of tradition in a society. The Great Exhibition sums up both real achievement and this loss.