

### III Social Conviction

#### His Programme

Cunninghame Graham could not have been a genuine Socialist, it would appear. He remained a laird and landowner. He did not jettison the manner of living which belonged to his class. Either the description is mistaken, or it indicates a temporary diversion of interest which can be laid at the door of his eccentricity! So might a reader argue who has not thoroughly examined his social and political deliverances. We must turn to the latter to sort out various interpretations of his ultimate standing ground. To men who knew him, respected him, and worked with him, like Lord Provost Kerr<sup>1</sup> in Glasgow, and Dr John MacCormick, his outlook appeared basically conservative. To others of the same category, eg, Provost John Allan<sup>2</sup> of Dunfermline, he appeared a most convinced Socialist; and in obituaries in the "Manchester Guardian Weekly" and the "Times" he was so described. The difficulty of coming to an opinion about him may be indicated by the following criticism of A F Tschiffely's assessment of his position, made by Paul Bloomfield:

"It is, I think easy to form a just idea of his political position. He was not a politician at all. When Burns was in the dock after the Trafalgar Square incident, he spoke of himself as a Socialist, of Graham as "a Social Reformer". This was fair enough.....Graham in the eighties wanted (he would not have acknowledged this) a great discharge of evangelical loving-kindness at once.....I do not agree with Tschiffely that Graham was only a Socialist of sorts till he began to think the movement might after all succeed, and only because he liked lost causes; I think it was not till he foresaw the probable success of the Left that he fully realised the intractability of the psychological problem - the existence in all of us of that 'new presbyter' bidding his time"<sup>3</sup>.

The suggestion that he was no politician, that he was not committed to a genuinely Socialist but only to a reforming policy that it was only "evangelical loving-kindness" he was after and not a structural change in the social order, that he lacked realism in assessing the effects of success on the Left, have only in part been dealt with. His political-social outlook must be examined more thoroughly. Over against Bloomfield's judgement we must put that of Professor West:

"Though Cunninghame Graham has always been a Socialist, he has been a pure aristocrat in his thinking and his way of life"<sup>4</sup>.

In other words, we must examine also the possibility that his outlook that can be expressed only in terms of seeming contradiction.

Fresh ideas about society resulted in the formation of important new groups in the early 1880's.

Until then, Gladstonian Liberalism held the field unchallenged as the hope of the poorer classes. It may briefly be stated to have had a two-fold concern: to remove unfair advantages, social, political or racial from society, and to permit only that authority to

<sup>1</sup> As he was when interviewed by me in 1954.

<sup>2</sup> As he was in 1955.

<sup>3</sup> "The Essential R B Cunninghame Graham". Ed. Paul Bloomfield. Introduction, p.23.

<sup>4</sup> Professor West's Biography, p.20.

which the governed consented - through custom or articulate choice. It made no frontal attack upon economic inequality or upon the form of society which supported it.

The groups which challenged the character of society were often short-lived, and split up and amalgamated to form associations of different names. Some of their leaders were notoriously difficult to work with. Among these was H M Hyndman who in 1881 founded the Democratic Federation, later to become the Social Democratic Federation. Its doctrine was thoroughly Marxist. At first it was recognised as the horse which carried the colours of the workers; but its policies lost ground in the latter part of the century. When the Labour Representation Committee was formed, it stood out; and in the end became the Communist Party of Great Britain. The Fabians came into existence in 1883. They were, especially earlier on, optimistic about the power of reason to convince people about the need for change and to produce commensurate social results. They opposed the doctrines of laissez-faire economists, exposed the horrors of capitalist society, attacked the conception of a community of interest between employers and employed, and followed a successful policy of permeation of every vehicle of propaganda with their doctrines. They advocated municipal socialism, an eight-hour day, universal suffrage, higher education and the humanisation of legislation affecting the poor. It should be remembered that, without being conscious of the effects of what they were doing, the middle classes at this time were promoting municipal societies, to protect themselves from the ill effects of muddle and disease; that, after Gladstone's Franchise Bill of 1884, Labour representatives began to be elected to public boards; and that state intervention was becoming a more generally recognised possible way of dealing with national muddle and want. In 1888 the Scottish Parliamentary Labour Party came into being followed in 1890 by the Scottish Labour Party, and in 1893 by the Independent Labour Party. In 1900 the Labour Representation Committee was formed, and in 1906 its name was changed to the Labour Party.

Cunninghame Graham acknowledged a certain debt to Marxism; but I find no evidence that he was ever more than generally associated with the Social Democratic Federation in support of the working-class, and his name is never linked with Hyndman's. He had close links with some of the Fabians, with Sidney Webb and with George Bernard Shaw (who was more an admirer than admired), and included their programme within his own. But he was never a Fabian. His lot was thrown in most definitely with the workers' struggle for political power. It is regarding his part in helping the Labour Party to birth that some historical re-evaluation appears to me to be needed.

The programme he set before the electors may best be represented by a write-up of him, probably in "The Star"<sup>1</sup>. It has the advantage of comparing his commitment with that of the average Radical and of indicating how early was his antipathy to the current method of working the electoral system:

"When he first contested North-West Lanarkshire at the General Election of 1885, he put forth a programme which would make the average Radical stand aghast. Here are some of the items in it: Universal suffrage, payment of election expenses, payment of members, Triennial Parliaments, abolition of the House of Lords, free secular education with a free meal to scholars daily, a graduated income-tax, nationalisation of the land, Sunday opening of museums, abolition of mineral royalties, disestablishment, and direct

<sup>1</sup> Retained in a Scrap-Book. Internal evidence suggests "The Star" but it is not quite conclusive. Date probably 1887.

vote on the liquor traffic. ....He is strongly opposed to our present election system which he considers degrading to the candidate and demoralising to the electors. He would abolish all canvassing, and make it absolutely prohibitory for the candidate to subscribe to anything in the constituency".

Among the more important points of his general programme not included in this summary were the following: Self-government for the four nations in Britain, with an Imperial Parliament as the overall authority; nationalisation of the means of production; the exercise by Municipal and County Councils of powers to relieve want - such as the purchase and re-distribution of land at fair valuation; simplification of the existing land laws; the freeing for peoples' use of commons and traditional mountain grazing; a stop to the granting of perpetual pensions; public works to relieve unemployment; Free Trade; no further annexation abroad; the right of alien races to live in their own way. Three planks in his platform will require more specific attention. Chief of these is his advocacy of the Eight Hour Day. The others are the question of payment of MP's and the need for worker MP's.

The Liberal Radicals were the traditional enemies of the remnants in society of feudalism. Their enmity was directed against squires and parsons and the House of Lords. They wished to abolish the monarchy, disestablish the church of England, stop all indirect taxation and take education out of the hands of ecclesiastical bodies. In different degrees, individually, they adopted a few of the measures detailed above. But it is clear that the average Radical would "stand aghast" at Cunninghame Graham's Parliamentary aims.

When the Scottish Parliamentary Labour Party was formed in 1888 he became its first chairman. The neglect of the contribution to Socialism is partly due to the fact that it was taken he was a suitable figure-head, whose better known name and social rank would be useful in high office. But when we compare the programme of the Parliamentary Labour Party with his, we find that they coincide very closely. The items not found in his programme are: a Second Ballot; a State Insurance for sickness, accident and old age or death; arbitration courts; a minimum and weekly wage; no war without the consent of the House of Commons. With these I believe Cunninghame Graham was in agreement - his Chairmanship is probably a sufficient indication of this, and he would have had a hand in shaping the programme. Among the newspaper cuttings in one of the Scrap-Books are two programmes setting forth the Liberal-Labour policy as it was understood at this time. (One is a speech by a certain Daniel Irving on Labour representation). The elements which both miss out are the definitely socialist elements contained in the aims of the Parliamentary Labour Party and its Chairman. I think it is just to assert that Cunninghame Graham was breaking new ground in the socialistic characteristics of his own programme, which was first given articulation three years before the Parliamentary Labour Party was formed.

Not only so, but like his ancestor "Doughty Deeds" Graham he meant every word he said. "Doughty Deeds" had promised to resign in three years if he did not succeed in obtaining Triennial Parliaments - and he resigned. Cunninghame Graham knew no diplomatic hiatus between electoral promises and Parliamentary activity. He came into the House of Commons like a breath of God, a plumb line in his hand, his mind set on seeing everything put straight quickly. This explains his bruising of the House, and his

bruising at the hands of the House, the anger with which he viewed most MPs, and with which they viewed him. He was in earnest about every solitary point in his programme.

Agitation for the Eight-Hour Day and for the appointment of Worker MPs, with its concomitant, the payment of MP's was peculiarly Cunningham Graham's province.