

## b. Missions

In his travels, Cunninghame Graham came across missionaries of many different denominations and sects. In South America he found the relics of the Jesuit missionaries and traced their history<sup>1</sup>. In his reading he lighted on many quaint and crude attempts at proselytism<sup>2</sup>.

He does appear to be influenced by the charges, derived from Marxism, which lumped missionary activity with British imperialism as a mode of exploitation and oppression. His observations are direct. They do not appear to be related to church accounts of missionary work except by occasional contrast of judgement, and are too individual in character to belong to any political or economic party line. The background against which his personal observations may be set is best represented by a comment (probably editorial) in "The People's Press". It relates to Cunninghame Graham's notice of question in Parliament, regarding inspection and restriction of hours of labour in the cotton mills of India (where children of seven to ten years of age worked ten to twelve hours per day). It says:

"Truly if those persons who prate so much of the 'poor heathen' when a mission collection is on, would only put half the energy thus wasted into stopping or hindering the raids of the Christian sweater upon the helpless natives of every land he can reach, they would be doing more good. But by doing so they offend their wealthy congregations and they dare not risk it"<sup>3</sup>.

In other words, the large economic implication in missionary work has been neglected. Missionary departments and societies in our own day would acknowledge the criticism to be a valid one. In the great missionary expansion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was insufficient sense (there was a real sense in places) of the economic and political freedom required by the gospel and insufficient sense of Christ's Lordship over His manifold creation. Before the missionary came, God was working with all races. The meaning of this was not understood. Various forms of slavery needed to be broken - not just one. Inadequate justice is done in Cunninghame Graham's account to the great number who did go out humbly, to deliver out of the hands of moneylenders, to learn as well as to teach, not to abolish but to fulfil native ways and insights, to rid people of superstition and fear, to broaden their minds with education, to commend to them the gospel of redemption in its universal validity as no foreign faith. He concentrates on judgements which yet were valid. Some missionaries were so keen on "head-hunting" that they missed justice and mercy. Some, inadvertently, were the means of opening a very Pandora's box of various ills upon the people to whom they came to minister.

The missionary is often depicted "Bible and gun in hand" in Cunninghame Graham's writings. The image suggests both a leaning upon Western material superiority, identification with an imperialistic civilisation; and at the same time some lack of courage and faith. The modern missionary (late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) is contrasted with:

<sup>1</sup> In "A Vanished Arcadia".

<sup>2</sup> One of the earliest was a "find" in Spain, which contained the record of Father Archangel's mission to preach Roman Catholicism in Scotland, "one of the most desperate of these theological filibustering expeditions".

<sup>3</sup> "The People's Press", November 29<sup>th</sup> 1890.

"....some Jesuit in the days gone by, when missionaries stood up before their catechumens unsustained by Gatling guns, sheltered but by a rude cross in their hands and their meek lives"<sup>1</sup>.

About Arabs and Berbers in their imperviousness to Christian persuasion, he writes: "A day will come, no doubt, when their hearts will prove more malleable; but I fear that before that time their bodies will have to be much wrought upon by rifles, revolvers and other civilising agents which commonly precede the introduction of our faith"<sup>2</sup>.

The missionary is not depicted as the spearhead of imperialism but rather as its parasitical ally.

However, a charge more seriously pressed home is that the missionary is just one more influence upsetting native life. So much is he the ally of commercial interests and the bearer of Western diseases that he is accounted directly responsible for the dual process of saving the natives' souls and delivering up their bodies to consumption and drink<sup>3</sup>. Western clothes, allied with the puritanical outlook of the missionary, robbed the native of the grace of his traditional life<sup>4</sup>. Cunningham Graham brings all his guns to bear when he speaks of the keeping secret, unmapped, of a newly-discovered archipelago, lest the islanders suffer:

"....the introduction of corruption, gin and syphilis and all the thousand woes that islanders endure from the misguided zeal of honest missionaries. Who does not feel as if a slug were crawling on his soul in reading some missionary report of all their misdirected labours and their sufferings, and of the perils that they have endured to turn some fine, free race of savages, interesting to us by their customs and their relation to ourselves, into bad copies of our lowest class, waddling about in ill-made clothes and claiming kindred with us as brother 'Klistians' in the Lord?"<sup>5</sup>.

The arrogance of treating native life as valueless, expendable, shapeless material on which to impose a Western pattern always raised his ire. One of his gravest charges against missionaries is their (often unconscious) racial arrogance. The act of "....forcing his own mode of life and faith on those who live a happier, freer life" is laid at the door of the missionary's "ignorance born of self-conceit"<sup>6</sup>. He believes missionaries consider any outrages involved in their coming incidental and atoned for by the introduction of the true faith (and as was the case with the Conquistadors):

"Now missionaries and conquerors are men, on the whole, more imbued with their own importance and sanctity, and less disposed to consider consequences than almost any other classes of mankind"<sup>7</sup>, he writes.

The result is that they cause irreparable damage not only to their victims but to the repute of their faith<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> "Thirteen Stories", p.33. cf. "A Vanished Arcadia", p.224.

<sup>2</sup> "Mogreb-el-Acksa", pp. 126 and 127.

<sup>3</sup> "Faith", p.196.

<sup>4</sup> "Charity", pp. 202 and 204; "Father Archangel of Scotland", p.95.

<sup>5</sup> "Progress", pp. 4 and 5.

<sup>6</sup> "A Vanished Arcadia", p.178.

<sup>7</sup> "A Vanished Arcadia" p.11.

<sup>8</sup> See "Progress", p.219, re Rev Archibald Macne.

This repute, he believes, is also assaulted by the methods they employ. It is not things scriptural but material which are real attraction: "guns, cotton, cloth, rum, tea"<sup>1</sup>, "glass beads and looking glasses"<sup>2</sup> - those are the "potent factors in conversion"<sup>3</sup>.

As a persuasion in itself, the gospel would be a more creditable export were it not for East London and "the types which haunt the streets of manufacturing towns"<sup>4</sup>.

He feels the gospel should show the power to deliver at home before being launched abroad. He believes, in the end, I think, that all missionaries should stay at home, and leave natives to their happier, primitive state; "let others follow their destiny as best pleases them without officious interference" - let proselytisers stop "gadding to the desert places of the earth, seeking to remedy the errors of their God by their exertions"<sup>5</sup>.

I find Cunninghame Graham's sketches of missionaries extremely interesting. In some there stand out clear those features which he condemned, in others he expresses his puzzlement at a phenomenon which cannot be exhausted by any terms which he can employ. A picture of a group of missionaries on a boat is redolent of judgement, yet not without pity:

"Gaunt-featured girls, removed by physical conditions from all temptation.....they formed a crushing argument in themselves against polygamy. Still, in the main, all kindly souls, and some with a twinkle in their white-lashed, steel-grey eyes.....which showed you they would gladly suffer martyrdom without due cause, or push themselves into great danger, out of their ignorance and want of knowledge of mankind.... carefully educated to the ashamed of any womanhood they might possess. Still, they were sympathetic, for sympathy is near akin to tears.....(the men)....seemed as if they had been chosen, after much cogitation, by some unskilled commission, for their unfitness for their task.

They, too, dogged and narrow-minded as they were, were yet pathetic when one thought upon their lives. No hope of converts or of advancement in the least degree, stuck down upon the coast, far off from Dorcas meetings, school feasts or anything which in more favoured countries whiles away the Scripture reader's time, they hammered at their self-appointed business day by day and preached unceasingly, apparently indifferent to anything that passed, so that they got off their due quantity of words a day"<sup>6</sup>.

A sketch follows of McKerrocher, a "professional Scottish religionist", "a last relic of a disappearing type", who preached Hell-fire and Paradise as uncompromising alternatives, the jealous Scottish God, and a Mosaic dispensation accepted whole: who, "Wrong-headed as befits his calling", "led a joyless, stirring life", and neglected entirely "the more human qualities of courtesy and love". This is the condemnation.

Read, in Cunninghame Graham's words, any adverse judgement on real people<sup>7</sup> which is blistering in its assault, and then re-read the passage. You will find him more just and

<sup>1</sup> "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.123.

<sup>2</sup> "A Vanished Arcadia", p.232.

<sup>3</sup> "A Vanished Arcadia", p.232.

<sup>4</sup> "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.23, 69.

<sup>5</sup> "A Vanished Arcadia", p.225.

<sup>6</sup> "Thirteen Stories", pp. 93 - 96.

<sup>7</sup> Types, such as the Capitalist, the Nonconformist, may be damned with a judgement unrelieved.

merciful than the large condemnation would suggest. The fact is, he is a fair observer, noting too, those things which do not fit his own estimate of missions. So he draws a very different picture of Nairn, the missionary, in "Mogreb-el-Acksa". After meeting him, he writes:

"and, as I rode, I mused upon the mystery of faith and marvelled still to see the honest, single-hearted missionary ploughing the stony vineyard of the Moorish heart, quite as contentedly and just as hopefully as four years ago.....without a convert or the chance of making one.....".

He goes on to more general comment:

"Not that I mean to undervalue missionaries, they have their uses, but in a different way from that which, perchance, they think themselves. What they can do is to set forth in countries like Morocco, that they are not mere merchants trying to deceive all those with whom they deal.....purity of their life and their untiring kindness to the poor.....their minds are fixed not upon gain but prayer"<sup>1</sup>.

There is a characteristic bafflement expressed here; and the impression that there are less stony vineyards on which time would be better spent<sup>2</sup> which underlines the feeling that there is some source of conviction in honest missionary work which he cannot fathom. It is characteristic of his attitude that good is considered, as is evil, as an incidental and often unconscious product of missionary work, as if the foetid ulcers and sores were dealt with of necessity, and self-denial were an unintentional by-product; while what the missionary would really like is ".....a crowd of dusky catechumens, dressed in white, with flowers in their hair and innocence in their every heart"<sup>3</sup>. He does not seem to see that missionaries may go out, with no romantic notions in their minds, to offer the humble testimony of self-denial and healing as the most apt expression of their faith. It is not to their faith that he ascribes sympathy, compassion, deliverance from different yokes, but to the overcoming of their faith by their humanity. Of one he writes:

"Like Moffat and like Livingstone, he burned with zeal to change the faith of men who had done him no previous injury, and like them having begun his labours, his humanity rose superior to his dogma"<sup>4</sup>.

His fairness struggles with his heartsickness. So much is he hurt by the destruction of native ways of life, the intrusion of shoddy Western influences, the introduction of diseases and debasing habits which accompany missionary "filibustering"; so unimpressed is he with the uncomely and hard dogmatic lives of the narrower types of missionaries; that he does not bring into focus the fear, disease and bondage in which natives had lived their lives, which cried out for their deliverance. Yet he will not give a one-sided picture. When he approves of humanity rising superior to dogma he comes as near as he can to recognise the indwelling love of Christ, without which he can offer no adequate explanation of his missionary's motive.

He was always a realist. He never dealt much with "if onlys". Missionaries are to be found in many lands. What sort of good is to be found from acceptance of this fact?

<sup>1</sup> "Mogreb-el-Acksa", pp. 286 and 287.

<sup>2</sup> "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.73.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.24.

<sup>4</sup> "Father Archangel of Scotland".

One of his most illuminating stories, to me, is found in his book "Progress". It is entitled, "A Convert" and concerns the labours of a detested, tactless, honest, aggressive missionary, Mr Macrae. His standing ground was 'Ye see, I hae the word of God, and if the heathen dinna come to listen to it, they wull all burn'. Monday Flatface, a native chief, resisted all his arguments: and there grew up a certain irritated respect between them for each other. One day, Flatface came, anxious and drawn. His wife was gravely ill. If Mr Macrae would pray and recover her, he would offer himself for baptism. Mr Macrae went to the village where much sacrifice and ceremonial noise met eye and ear. He administered quinine and prayer. The wife got worse. Monday Flatface cut off one of his fingers as a sacrificial offering; then, when he saw no improvement, another. This touched Mr Macrae deeply. As he put it:

"Ma heart just yearned to him and I yokit prayin' as if I had been asking for my ain soul's grace, and syne, our prayers were heard".

The wife recovered, and the relationship between Mr Macrae and the chief was on a new footing. ".....whiles I think his God and mine are no' so far apart, as I since thocht", was the astonishing verdict of this "professional religionist".

The title of the sketch was "A Convert". Who was the convert? In the story the missionary and the chief were converted to each other, had their eyes opened to one another's real being. This, it would appear, to me, is considered by him to be the one valid expression of missionary enterprise - that people should become converted to each other, and learn to understand and appreciate one another's being. It is a view which could fit in with a humanitarian philosophy. We, bound in a commonality with all others, might at least extend our sympathy to our fellow human beings. It is a view which could fit in with a Christian outlook. Christ already reigns and makes his influence felt, even where He is not recognised, even among those who worship other gods; no one possesses Christ and can deal with another as would a monopolist with a bankrupt: therefore the two, proselytiser and would-be proselyte, from the same standing ground of contribution and need, should seek to know Christ together. Thus real conversion is possible.

But there is no sign in Cunningham Graham of any Christian philosophy which would give missionary work a status and rationale, and his personal outlook revealed no great sympathy for "bishops and missionaries" - as he declared himself in the House of Commons<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> On 27<sup>th</sup> May 1892. Hansard.