Cunninghame Graham

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A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge
London New York Melbourne
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most of Part One was written by Laurence Davies, and the rest of this book was by Cedric Watts, who initiated the project. We, the authors, have collaborated amicably at every stage of the writing, and gladly accept joint responsibility for the whole.

We have been working on the subject of this biography for many years (intermittently since 1961, in the case of Cedric Watts, and since 1968, in the case of Laurence Davies), and during that time we have received unflagging encouragement and co-operation from R. B. Cunninghame Graham’s heir and nephew, Admiral Sir Angus Cunninghame Graham, K.B.E., C.B., who has hospitably allowed us to browse among the family papers and books at Ardoch and also among the manuscripts deposited at the National Library of Scotland. The Admiral’s son-in-law and daughter, Lord and Lady Polwarth, were similarly generous. We are also very grateful for the help given by Mrs Violet Tschiffely, the widow of Cunninghame Graham’s biographer Aimé Tschiffely, and by the late Herbert Faulkner West, author of A Modern Conquistador: Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham (1932). Thus a living continuity has extended from the only previous biographers, whose work appeared in the nineteen-thirties, to our present efforts.

In addition, the reminiscences by Joseph Conrad’s sons, Borys and John, were valuable, while Professor John Walker provided useful information. The late Mr Richard Curle and Mr R. E. Muirhead (former Secretary of the Scottish National Party) furnished correspondence and papers by and about Cunninghame Graham. Other assistance has been kindly given by the following: Mr David Garnett, Mr René MacColl, the late Mr Jocelyn Baines, Mr Michael Hawkins, Dr Eloise Knapp Hay, Professor Marysa Navarro, Professor F. R. Karl, Brother Alphonsus (of St Ninian’s School, Gartmore), Dr H. C. G. Matthew, Ms Shelly Weiss, Mr Gerald C. Mason, M.B.E., Mr Archie Lamont of the Scottish Secretariat, the Press Officers of the Scottish National Party, the Corporation of Lloyd’s, Mr Ian
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Robertson, Professor Norman Sherry, and Mr D. C. L. Holland (Librarian of the House of Commons).

For permission to use copyright material we are grateful to: Admiral Sir Angus Cunninghame Graham; Mr David Garnett; Professor Leon Edel; Sir John Rothenstein and Mr Michael Rothenstein; Messrs J. M. Dent and Sons and the Trustees of the Joseph Conrad Estate; Sir Rupert Hart-Davis; Laurence Pollinger, Ltd, and the Estate of the late Mrs Frieda Lawrence; the Society of Authors on behalf of the Bernard Shaw Estate; Mr John Johnson; David Higham Associates; Mrs Janice Biala; Editions Gallimard; Weidenfeld and Nicolson, Ltd; Victor Gollancz, Ltd; Hamish Hamilton, Ltd; Ernest Benn, Ltd; Jonathan Cape, Ltd; Faber and Faber, Ltd; George Allen and Unwin, Ltd; Constable & Co., Ltd; Cassell & Co., Ltd; Dartmouth College Library; the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin; the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland; the British Library; the London Library; the Bodleian Library; the London School of Economics and Political Science; the Houghton Library, Harvard University; the Keeper of the Records of Scotland; and the Society of Antiquaries of London.

The illustrations appear by courtesy of the following: T. & R. Annan & Sons, Ltd (frontispiece); the British Library Board (The Convict, ‘The Second Sally’); Dartmouth College Library and Admiral Sir Angus Cunninghame Graham (Gabriela writing at Gartmore); Glasgow Art Gallery and Anne, Lady Sempill (Lavery portrait: back of jacket); and Admiral Sir Angus Cunninghame Graham (all others).

The Clarendon Press, publishers of the Review of English Studies, the Editors of Conradiana, published at Texas Tech University, the Editors of the Yearbook of English Studies and the Editor of Studies in Scottish Literature kindly permitted us to use again some material which had first appeared in those periodicals.

For their shrewd and lively comments on the first part of this book, we thank: Professors Jeri Kroll, Mary Lamb, Sharon O’Brien, Richard Pearse; Dr Carole Ferrier, Ms Ellen Shoemaker and Ms Shelly Weiss.

Finally, we gratefully acknowledge contributions towards the cost of research from Dickinson College and the University of Sussex.
ABBREVIATIONS AND EDITORIAL NOTES

In the ensuing chapters we frequently refer to our subject as Graham. This, like CG in the notes, is to be understood as an abbreviation of (and not a discourtesy to) R. B. Cunninghame Graham. Other abbreviations are these:

Add. MSS. Additional Manuscripts, Manuscript Department of the British Library.


ASA The manuscript collection of Admiral Sir Angus Cunninghame Graham.

BL The British Library.

CS Court of Session Records, West Register House, Edinburgh.


DC H. F. West Collection, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

GD22 Cunninghame Graham Muniments, General Register House, Edinburgh.

Harden Graham family papers held by Lady Polwarth at Harden, Hawick, Roxburghshire, Scotland.


I.L.P. Independent Labour Party.

L.R.C. Labour Representation Committee.

NLS The National Library of Scotland.

NYPL Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

S.D.F. Social-Democratic Federation.
ABBREVIATIONS

SR  The Saturday Review (London).
UT  The Academic Center Library, University of Texas at Austin.

When, in the notes and bibliography, a book’s place of publication is omitted, that place is London. Dates are abbreviated in British and not American style: thus 3.5.1900 means 3 May 1900 and not 5 March 1900.

In quotations, a row of three dots (…) represents an ellipsis which was already present in the text that we are quoting, whereas a row of five dots represents an omission that the present writers have made.

Our general editorial policy has been to preserve without correction any errors or idiosyncrasies in the letters, documents and texts that we quote; but occasional emendations (enclosed in square brackets) have been made for clarity’s sake. In Cunninghame Graham’s letters the punctuation is frequently erratic; and of his published work he once remarked, late in life: 

But still I might have finished all those sentences; not broken off to moralize right in the middle of the tale; split less infinitives, and remembered those rules of grammar that I have disregarded, as freely as a democratic leader tramps on the rights of the poor taxables who put him into power. (Rodeo, 1936, p. xvi.)
PREFACE

A few years ago, the two writers of this book were shown the monument to R. B. Cunninghame Graham which stands on the outskirts of Dumbarton. It had been erected in 1937, a year after his death, and must then have been a quietly impressive and imaginatively memorial, standing in grassy open ground once belonging to his family, fashioned of Scottish stone but incorporating blocks from Uruguay and Argentina, and with a sculptured bas-relief of his bold profile surmounting an inscription proclaiming ‘A Master of Life – A King Among Men’. The monument that we saw, however, was in a public ground whose turf had here and there been trodden to dust; raucous children from the nearby council flats kicked a tin can round it; some of the stones had been wrenched away; green spray-paint liberally illuminated the profile of a Master of Life; and in place of the inscription was an empty socket.

Thus it had become a monument to time and oblivion: ironically appropriate, it seemed to us then, to Cunninghame Graham’s reputation since his death; and truly appropriate to one whose writings were so often preoccupied by the implications of crumbling memorials and by the irony of forgotten merit, time’s erosion and men’s neglect.

I checked my horse, and began moralizing on all kinds of things; upon tenacity of purpose, the futility of life, and the inexorable fate which mocks mankind, making all effort useless, whilst still urging us to strive.

‘Whilst still urging us to strive’: Cunninghame Graham’s striving took extraordinarily varied forms. To summarise his career is to strain syntax, imagination and credulity. With relish, therefore, the traditional summary proceeds.

R. B. Cunninghame Graham, 1852–1936. Alias Don Roberto, because of his Spanish blood. Alias the Uncrowned King of Scot-
PREFACE

land – for he was a Scottish aristocrat descended from King Robert II and the Earls of Menteith. Educated at Harrow and Brussels, he became a traveller and fortune-seeker in South and Central America, working as a cattle-rancher and horse-dealer among gauchos and llaneros. After returning to Britain he became one of the most mercurial, eloquent and radical political figures of the late nineteenth century. Elected to Parliament as a Liberal in 1886, during his stormy parliamentary career he became, in practice, the first socialist M.P., advocating free secular education, the eight-hour working day, and the nationalisation of industry and commerce; and he was jailed for six weeks at Pentonville for his part in the Bloody Sunday demonstration of 1887. He made his name as a courageous and uncompromising defender of the workers, of the poor and of the under-privileged; became a crucial figure in the emergence of the British Labour Party, after tireless campaigning with William Morris, Keir Hardie and others, yet became one of the most severe critics of the Labour Party as it grew in strength, numbers and respectability. In later years he was President of the National Party of Scotland, and of its successor, the Scottish National Party. Thus his political career alone is amply spectacular; and his literary career has its own distinctive richness.

He came late to writing, like Joseph Conrad, after the many years of travel; but soon acquired the reputation of a distinctively gifted ‘writer’s writer’, an idiosyncratically ironic essayist and story-teller. His works ranged from brief sketches and polemical articles to translations, biographies and histories, and earned the enthusiastic praise of Edward Garnett, Conrad, Ford Madox Ford and Bernard Shaw. He helped Conrad with Nostromo, and furnished Shaw with material for Captain Brassbound’s Conversion and Arms and the Man; and his literary correspondents included Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, Axel Munthe, W. H. Hudson and W. B. Yeats. In fact, one of the most concise ways of indicating the peculiar richness of his personality and the diversity of his interests is to extend that list of his correspondents, for it includes the artists William Rothenstein, John Lavery and Jacob Epstein; the Scottish Nationalists Compton Mackenzie and Hugh MacDiarmid; political campaigners such as Kropotkin, Roger Casement, Ben Tillett, Tom Mann; aesthetes, adventurers, scholars; Ramsay MacDonald and Lawrence of Arabia, Arab guides and the Rane of Sarawak.

‘What don’t you know!’ cried Conrad. ‘From the outside of a sail
PREFACE

to the inside of a prison! Cunninghame Graham moved confidently and knowledgeably among gauchos, diplomats, fencers; among Spaniards and Moors, painters and equestrians. He was a proud, elegant figure, yet tough and wiry; a dandy who prided himself on his ability as a horse-rider and his skill with the lasso and the pistol; a public orator who could bring an audience of working-men to its feet, roaring approval; an introspective, often elegiac writer, as familiar with the mists and drizzle of Scotland as with the blaze of the Moroccan sun; a mixture of Hamlet and Don Quixote, a sceptic and an idealist; a plenitude of paradoxes. ‘Cunninghame Graham’, said Chesterton, ‘achieved the adventure of being Cunninghame Graham.’

In the ensuing chapters we hope to describe that adventure. We follow the main trajectory of Cunninghame Graham’s life, pausing to analyse the most important phases in his political and literary careers. Without fanfares, we offer various discoveries and reappraisals, the consequences of fresh research on published and unpublished sources. We attempt to show a courageous consistency within Cunninghame Graham’s diversity, and, for all the necessary documentation and dissection of his theories and principles, we try to keep before our imagination his living figure; for his masterpiece, as John Lavery pointed out, was himself.

When the Master of Life and King among Men walked down the street, the children scampered behind him, mimicking his swagger. We will scamper with them, seeking to keep that swagger in sight.