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978-0-521-09009-4 - Cunninghame Graham: A Critical Biography

Cedric Watts and Laurence Davies

Excerpt

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PART ONE
THE EARLIER YEARS



Cunninghame Graham as a young man.

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II

1852–77

ORIGINS AND EARLY TRAVELS

FAMILY AND UPBRINGING

Three addresses always inspire confidence, even in tradesmen.

(Lady Bracknell.)

Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham was born in the wrong place. Even though he spent a good portion of his long life in London, and became in later years one of the town's more distinctive figures, it is not easy to think of him as a Londoner. He loved the Spanish word *querencia*: an animal's home territory, a stamping ground. In anything but the simplest literal sense, his *querencias*, for there were two of them, were the brown peat hags and cloudy hills of the District of Menteith, and the swamps and forests, mountains and plains of South America. Yet it was in London that he was born, on 24 May 1852, at 5 Cadogan Place, a rented house off Sloane Street. The twenty-seven-year-old father and twenty-four-year-old mother had been married all but a twelvemonth. The baby's eyes were bright and black.

The father, William, was already a landowner in one Scottish county and stood to inherit in two more. Landowning had its complications: he could not, during the lifetime of *his* father, another Robert Cunninghame Graham, bear the family name. As eldest son, William had succeeded to the estate of Ardoch in Dunbartonshire under the terms of an entail which made him take the surname Bontine. Strictly speaking, he should have become a Cunninghame Graham again in 1863 when he inherited the elder Robert's lands; in practice William Cunninghame Bontine continued to be known by his former name, while the younger Robert used one or the other as convenience, clarity or inclination dictated. In 1883, on succeeding in his turn, Robert Junior shuffled the Bontine to a permanent middle position, and the name so carefully preserved by eighteenth-century lawyers faded from public view forever.

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Generous, extravagant, restless and energetic, William Cunningham Bontine, with the interest of Lord Liverpool, bought a commission in 1845. After a brief period of fretting as an Ensign in the 15th Foot, he became a Cornet of Horse in the Second (North British) Dragoons, the regiment better known, in spite of its change to a red and blue uniform, as the Scots Greys. He was stationed in Munster and in Connaught, provinces desperately weakened by the famine, and turbulent in its aftermath. As a boy doing penance for a tantrum he had written: 'If in a few years I have not so far got the command of my temper as to remain cool when I am really provoked I will be insufferable in society, and will be a cause of great pain to my parents, & to my friends, and will be the cause of my own ruin.'¹ Fits of unmanageable rage were indeed his ruin and a great sorrow to family and friends, but they were to have a cause beyond his control. During the local uprisings of 1846 at Waterford, while attempting to defend a fellow-officer, he received a severe head-injury – his skull was fractured – at the hand of a rebellious Irishman wielding an iron-shod stick; and in subsequent years, as a consequence of this wound, he was tortured by bad headaches and subject increasingly to violent fits of rage.² In the 1860s he lost all control of an always mercurial temperament. For a good few years after his injury, however, he remained personable and outwardly normal. Before his marriage he was a cavalry officer who looked the part; subsequently he was the complete country gentleman who, though addicted to Radical politics and dramatic schemes for making quick money, took his expected place in the local hierarchy as a Major in the Renfrewshire Militia, a Deputy Lieutenant of Stirlingshire, and a Justice of the Peace.

In the eighteen-forties his future wife, Anne Elizabeth Elphinstone Fleeming ('Missy' to her family), a young woman of great intelligence and charm, was making her way as best she could with a father dead and a mother remarried. Tactfully limiting her visits to her stepfather's house at Harbledown, on the hills just outside Canterbury, she spent much time with a cousin active in French politics, Mme de Flahault, whose husband had been Napoleon's aide-de-camp. She spent time too with Mountstuart Elphinstone, a scholarly uncle, who had been among the most influential of administrators in India. In a letter to her uncle, with whom she kept up a bookish but sprightly correspondence, she regretted that 'Mme de Flahault has a propensity to sit behind doors which is rather against one's chance of being *found out* and asked to dance'.³ Thus checked in London, she had the

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good fortune, as it then seemed, to be 'found out' in Canterbury, now the posting of Cornet Bontine. They married at Harbledown on 12 June 1851. The honeymoon, which took them to whatever parts of Switzerland and Italy currently caught the rapidly changing enthusiasms of William Bontine, was characteristically lavish: it lasted nine months.⁴

The bride's father had been not only Scottish, but from much the same part of Scotland as the Cunninghame Grahams. Originally an Elphinstone, he had changed his surname to Fleeming in compliance with another irksome entail. The bride's mother was more exotic. Catalina Paulina Alessandro de Jiménez, of Italian stock grafted on Spanish, met and married Charles Elphinstone Fleeming in Cádiz when she was just fourteen.⁵ Photographs taken by her daughter, Clementina Hawarden, reveal the unmistakably Mediterranean features of the granddaughters, especially when they are indulging a family love of costume by posing as Neapolitans or *gitanas*.⁶ In their cousin, Robert Cunninghame Graham, the grandmother's legacy was twofold: an hidalgo-like bearing which made him look, as so many were to say, like a sitter for Velásquez, and an awareness of his ancestry that made him feel at home in the Spanish-speaking countries.

Admiral Fleeming had shown a taste for the Hispanic not only in his marriage with Doña Catalina and in his earlier marriage to a Spanish nun who, having eloped with him, allegedly died of fright at the sound of a naval broadside. Based in the Caribbean during the wars of liberation in Venezuela and Colombia, he sympathised, like many other British Whigs, with the insurgents. He knew Páez and Bolívar, on occasion mediating between them. From South America, so family tradition asserts, he introduced the dahlia and the water-proof coat. He also brought back a daughter, Anne Elizabeth. Like her father she had been born at sea – in his flagship, off La Guaira.⁷ In Britain the Admiral, distinguished by his sharp profile with its shock of fleece-white curls, returned to the Parliamentary seat he had occupied thirty years previously. A reformer, he was cheered on by cries from his Cumbernauld tenantry of 'The Admiral *yet!* The Admiral *yet!*' A few constituencies away and a year or two later, Robert Cunninghame Graham's grandfather and namesake was to stand as a Radical, 'a man of the people'.⁸ Both as Hispanophile and man of the political left, Robert followed family tradition.

Admiral Fleeming's last posting was to the command of the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich. Less than a year later, in 1840, he died

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at Leamington Spa, where he had gone for the hunting and the waters. In 1849 his widow married another sailor of thoroughly naval ancestry: Commander James Edward Katon, once Flag Lieutenant to her first husband. Commander, later Admiral, Katon retired in 1864, but his last few years in the service kept him in home waters with responsibility for a section of the coastguards. From Harbledown he moved to Ryde, Isle of Wight, a most suitable place for any shore-based naval officer placid enough to tolerate the spectacle of a new generation's seamanship, visible from its steeply-falling streets. Corston House, in Spencer Road on the western edge of the town, has three storeys and above them a kind of lantern-room – the Spaniards might call it a *mirador* – commanding Spithead and the great naval base of Portsmouth itself. As boys, Robert Cunninghame Graham and his brother Charles, younger by a year, spent winters in that house with its constantly changing vistas of shipping from all over the world. If the intention was to spare the boys the winds and damps of Scotland, the plan was sabotaged by the Admiral who, as Graham recalled in 'A Sailor (Old Style)' (*Hope*), could never resist the chance to take them for a bracing sail. Robert was always a bad sailor; even his brother, who later joined the Navy, was none too happy as they plunged and rolled across the Solent with their step-grandfather.

A kindly man, despite the thickness of his weather-beaten hide, he had stories to tell them of his voyages: to Mexico and Lisbon in the *Pyramus*, to India and Canada in the *Pallas*, to Syria and the blockade of Alexandria in the *Cambridge*, to the West Indies and the North American station in the *Illustrious*.⁹ There were other stories from their grandmother, of Spain and Latin America, told in never-perfect English with an accent which grew heavier with the years. And for Robert there were talks and lessons in her own language, giving his spoken Spanish an Andalusian cast that it never lost. In 1936, on his last visit to Buenos Aires, he still had the accent acquired on visits to Ryde and to relations in Cádiz in the eighteen-sixties.¹⁰

Summers were spent in Scotland; in the secluded woods and parkland of Gartmore, or among the high yews of Finlaystone, which look northward across the Clyde to Ardoch. Scotland also meant attendance at the Kirk Established, the language of whose theological debates left another indelible frank on Robert's turn of phrase. As the boys squirmed through the many-headed sermons of the Sabbath, the Kirk seemed a formidable institution indeed. Finlaystone itself was a

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Calvinist shrine, where John Knox had preached in the garden and given communion with the cup which was still kept as a reminder of his visit.¹¹

At Gartmore the paraphernalia of an extensive and widely-travelled family were strewn everywhere: books of Spanish heraldry and elephants' feet, dried flowers and tiger-rugs, whips and water-colours, Mary Stuart's portrait in a locket, and the ring of Pizarro. So far as the Cunninghame Grahams had a headquarters, it was there. The present vast house, dating from the late seventeenth century, dominates like a *château* one extremity of the semi-cultivated peat-lands of Flanders Moss. Menteith (of which district the Moss forms part), bounded by the Trossachs and the Campsie Fells, the burgh of Stirling and the Rob Roy hills east of Loch Lomond, is, in both a geographical and a political sense, the most northerly region of the Lowlands. In the grounds of Gartmore there still stood the three stones of the gallows-tree erected in the aftermath of the '45 by that uncompromising Whig, Nicol Graham, for the reception of cattle-thieves who had strayed too far beyond the Highland Line. Centuries of Grahams lay in the little private cemetery near the house, in the mausoleum put up at crippling expense in the kirkyard at Port of Menteith, or in the ruined Abbey among the ancient Spanish chestnuts of Inchmahome, the island on the Lake of Menteith where Robert himself and his wife lie buried.¹²

To the title of Menteith, an earldom dormant since the seventeenth century, the Cunninghame Grahams had a claim. It was a claim more honoured by the family in the neglect than the pursuit; none of them cared to pursue it, unless to block more active though more doubtful claimants. 'I care very little about it [the Menteith peerage] as long as no one else gets it,' wrote Robert from Paraguay in 1873 while the case was before a committee of the House of Lords.¹³ The ultimate in aristocratic pride was to scorn an aristocratic name. In any case, there was for this ironic socialist an even keener source of creative irritation than remembrance of the Menteith peerage. 'I ought, madam, if I had my rights,' he once remarked in Scotland, 'to be the king of this country.'¹⁴ Was he not, according to Andrew Lang, a direct and legitimate descendant of Robert II, with a greater right to the throne of Scotland than anyone else alive? Was he not, according to Morrison Davidson, the Uncrowned King – Robert IV of Scotland and Robert I of Great Britain and Ireland? But then the whole family history was a tale of what might have been, of battles lost and good

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hope frustrated: ‘the usual monotonous course of villainy’, wrote Graham in 1895, ‘which characterised all Scottish history’. In his ancestry there were enough ‘gallant Grahams’ to satisfy the most proudly bloodthirsty boy, enough gallant failures to satisfy the most melancholy grown-up.¹⁵

In photographs, Robert looks an assured boy, eyes fixed coolly on the lens, elbow jaunty on hips; as a baby he had bright red hair which later became muted to a rich auburn. The two brothers – Malise, the third, always more fragile, was born in 1860 – were high-spirited: ‘I hope you have all arrived in a satisfactory state at Gartmore,’ a brother-in-law wrote to Major Bontine, ‘& that Robt. & Charlie committed no very aggravated assaults upon any fellow passengers or Railway officials.’ To an elderly great-uncle they were more forbearing: ‘You may be quite at ease about the children who might be guests at La Trappe without disturbing the quiet of the place.’¹⁶ Robert evidently did not try out on Mountstuart Elphinstone his favourite parlour trick of jumping clean over a seated adult; it required a large parlour.

Mrs Bontine was a metropolitan, by nature if not by birth; for her, London meant good talk and good music, a relief from the dryness, the worthy heartiness of Scottish country society. Mr Bontine, unlike his canny father, was not content with simply being a landowner: he wanted to play the part as publicly and as lavishly as possible, and, for that, he preferred his northern stage, though London was made quite tolerable by frequent and convivial meetings with old military friends at Brooks’s. With many detours to Ryde, the family accordingly shuttled back and forth between England and Scotland: it was the done thing, of course, in the class to which they belonged by rank and by the wealth they over-spent; but in their case it was also the only thing to do.¹⁷ Foreshadowing his later life, Robert’s childhood was peripatetic, and in Scotland distinctly untrammelled, spent walking and riding over great distances. But the cage was ready to snap shut. At the age of eleven or so, he was sent to Budbrooke Park, not far from Leamington Spa, a resort much frequented by cousins and aunts. He was in the charge of the Reverend Charles Bickmore, incumbent of Christ Church, Leamington, a proprietary Anglican chapel where worshippers paid to sit in a building so squat and gloomy that even those authors whose task it was to boost the town in guidebooks felt a chill of depression when reluctantly they came to describe it. Robert’s tutor had views on education: he was the author of *A Course of*

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Historical and Chronological Instruction, with Tables; he was devoted to his sovereign: he marked her visit to Leamington with *Loyalty, Thankfulness, and Godly Fear*. When Britain had entered the Crimean War, Dr Bickmore had preached an impassioned sermon (later published as *The Turco-Russian War*, 1854), claiming that loyal subjects of 'our beloved, our brave, our tender-hearted Queen' should see the conflict as a Crusade 'to succour the injured Turks, and to resist the inroads of the Northern barbarians'. True, these Northern barbarians might be our fellow-Christians, but we must remember (declaimed the pious Bickmore) that our God is a murderous God: for '*by the MURDER of the incarnate Son of God He wrought out the salvation of mankind*' (his emphases). With piety like this, who needs atheism? The most important lesson that the Reverend Charles Bickmore taught Robert was probably the one he taught unwittingly: the full grimness of Victorian martial and theological patriotism – the foe that the later Robert would so often combat.

Nevertheless, Robert's schooling at Hill House, Leamington, had its compensations: swimming at Leamington Baths; visiting the College games; 'On Tuesday there was a panorama of the American war. It was very well painted'; 'I have begun Xenophon and Homer and Horace and like them pretty well'; 'I do a great many gymnastics now and I am improving I think'. Sometimes his letters home expressed anxiety about his father's health, while at other times the anxiety was for the wilds of Gartmore: 'I am sorry to hear the wood is all cut down. There will not be many roe left. Does not Papa say He intends to have the fir Hill cut down next year.'

To this period belongs Robert's earliest surviving essay. Though brief, it is prophetic of his later themes. In a laboured boyish hand, he has written:

Cruelty is a very demoralizing thing it is a sure sign that a nation is getting weak, when it delights in wild beast fights and gladiatorial combats like the ancient Romans. Cruelty and cowardice often go hand in hand together: thus the boy who delights in tormenting animals is almost [always] a coward Nothing is so hard to eradicate as cruelty

After the preparation at Leamington, he entered Harrow: the so-called 'public' school which, with Eton, was the joint bastion of educational privilege and exclusiveness. In autumn 1865 he donned its uniform of tall black hat and long tail-coat, and dined in the hall where once the young Byron had hobbled to the bench. Robert stayed only two years, during which he moved steadily from form to form,

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played cricket for his House, and won cups for running and jumping. Here is part of a representative early letter (undated) to his mother:

I have taken the fourth shell which is a very good place out of 16 boys who came to Dr. Butlers I and another fellow are equal being third Charlie [the brother] took the 3rd fourth which is not at all bad. I like Harrow very much. I was very stupid not to think I would if the only thing I do not like is that one day the work is very easy and short that a baby could do it and another day it is very long and hard. Charlie also likes it very much. We are both quite well. Of all the masters I like Hulton best and Butler worst

We play racquets a great deal. There is a very good place to swim.¹⁸

However, more than forty years later, in a letter to Edward Garnett of February 1906, Robert was to say: 'I was at Harrow, & thought the whole system a fraud & a snobbery, & more "plebeian" than hell.' This aloofness may account for a contemporary's recollection that 'no one would have foreseen the ultra-Socialist – the politician verging on the Anarchist – in the quiet, reserved, and rather exclusive boy of thirty years ago'. For at least one boy in the House of Matthew Arnold's donnish friend Dr Butler (the Head Master), the Barbarians apparently differed little from the Philistines. Yet, over the years, Robert was sometimes to be seen at Lords for the Eton match; he never brought himself to wear the appropriate tie, but he had one, folded neatly away in a drawer, ready perhaps for some emergency when a discreet tug at the old-boy network might help a friend without acquaintances in high places.¹⁹ His life at Harrow had been neither traumatic enough to make him shun all later connections, nor idyllic enough to make him regret having stayed so short a time. Besides, events more memorable than those of an orthodox school career were taking place in his family.

Soon after Robert went to Harrow, William Bontine admonished him with a family motto:

As to fencing of course learn it. It is the best exercise in the world & gives a man confidence

Don't forget in your zeal for fencing & racquets that the Eagle holds in his other claw a pen. Remember, 'Utrumque Paratus'. Give my love to Charley & tell him he has only one boy to beat as he is second. If second, why not first. Tell him I do not carry pistols in my pocket now that I am out of Croatia.²⁰

There would not be many more fatherly letters of this sort. Major Bontine's journey through the Balkans was made during a brief respite from insanity. He lost his reason in July 1864, recovered it in the spring of 1865, only to lose it again in 1866 – this time for ever. Given to fits of violence, he lived for nearly twenty years under a

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doctor's constant supervision in a secluded rented house near Dumfries – a town where, as the family solicitor pointed out, there were 'several Gentlemen of good rank and position labouring under peculiar delusions'.²¹ His wife, the Hon. Mrs Bontine (in 1860, when her brother had become the fourteenth Lord Elphinstone, she had taken by royal decree 'the rank and precedence of a Baron's daughter') was now free to spend as much time in London as she wanted.

On his wife's petition, Major Bontine's affairs were put in the charge of a *Curator Bonis* responsible to the Scottish Court of Session. The Curator, George Auldjo Jamieson, an Edinburgh accountant experienced in such cases, began the delicate and difficult task of unravelling the family finances in December 1867. His findings were depressing.²² In his last few years of sanity, Bontine, who was now quite incapable of helping to sort matters out, had speculated wildly and extravagantly. Whenever pressed by Arthur Campbell, the solicitor who had rescued the estate on an earlier occasion, to explain where the money was going, Bontine had talked mysteriously of great expectations.²³ These turned out to be utterly worthless shares in a company which, three-quarters of a century before its time, intended to reclaim thousands of acres of mosquito-ridden marshland in Majorca. William Hope, his brother-in-law, had interested him in this enterprise: 'I have got a scheme in hand out of which you can make a large profit with no risk and scarcely any trouble or inconvenience.' If Hope, an ex-soldier with a remarkable record of bravery in the Crimea, had any scruples about what was the equivalent of feeding gin to an alcoholic, he kept them well hidden. He was always ready to oblige. Did Major Bontine need ready money, fifty per cent on a thousand pounds in four months? Yes, this could be done, even on a basis of equal shares, but Bontine had to remember that Hope was a busy man, privy to many secrets: 'More I cannot tell you.'²⁴ The result was inevitable: the combination of long-standing family debts with Bontine's lavishness burdened the estates with heavy mortgages. Professional management was necessary; it was also costly and, because of strict legal controls, dilatory. William Bontine's legacy to Robert was a large, beautiful and encumbered area of Scotland.

In later life, Robert became increasingly bitter about the debts which hung about him like the old man of the sea. Falling agricultural prices made it more and more difficult for Gartmore to pay its way.²⁵ The sins of the fathers had, quite literally, to be paid for. Robert may have felt that there was curious symmetry in the family fortunes: two