Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham

Every great library is a collection of collections. A great library is like a palace, imposing as a whole and also containing many splendid rooms that are beautiful in their own right. Thus, the Clements Library, in addition to covering vast subject-matter, is distinguished by possessing major collections of works by authors who have written on America. One of these is the Cunningham Graham Collection, presented by George Matthew Adams, author and discriminating collector of great books.

Cunninghame Graham was that sort of paradoxical creature that only Great Britain seems to produce. He was a Scotch laird, a descendant of the earls of Menteith. He was also a Spanish hidalgo, his grandfather, an English admiral, having married in South America a Spanish lady of high birth. His portraits show a typical aristocrat, of proud bearing, with bright penetrating eyes, moustaches fiercely pointed, a figure slim and elegant but at the same time wiry and very powerful. When an artist having to paint a picture representing the Elizabethan age, for the Houses of Parliament, wanted a model for Sir Walter Raleigh, the only man that satisfied his idea of the character was Cunningham Graham. Yet, this Scotch nobleman, Spanish hidalgo, and Elizabethan adventurer was also a red-hot reformer who was sent to prison for rioting in Trafalgar Square, who for six years was the most outrageous and extreme champion of the working man in a stormy Parliament, who shocked the composure of the House of Commons, and who harried with bitter sarcasm the class of which he was so bright an ornament.

Graham's works are as varied as his life. He tried his fortunes in Texas and lived for many years in South America, besides making adventurous journeys in North Africa. He was important, perhaps, as the interpreter of the Spanish spirit, especially that of South America. Some of his books relate the adventures of the conquistadores. Others carry on the story of Spanish rule or deal with great mystics.

These Spanish books display an extraordinary mixture of qualities. They are lively, exciting, vivid in seizing character or landscape, and salted with the dry and cynical wit of a man who has no illusions about human nature. Adventure in perhaps the most adventurous age of mankind flowers in them. At the same time Graham is thrilled by great achievements, his chief subject being greatness of character. He always responds to Spanish idealism, and he is penetrated by the beauty of Spanish mysticism.

There is a great deal of the poet in Cunningham Graham, and the following passage, from Mogreb-el-AkROT, illustrates his power:

As the sun sank, ochre-coloured earth began to glow, each stunted bush stood out and became magnified, the rose and purple streams of light shifted and ran into each other; then faded into violet and salmon-colour haze and falling on the snow-capped hills lighted them up, making them reverberate the light upon the rose-red walls and yellow towers, so that the castle seemed to burn, and the muezzin upon his tower appeared to call the faithful to their prayers from a red stalk of flame.

Cunninghame Graham's other claims to distinction are based upon his many volumes of short stories. They deal with Scotch or Spanish subjects. Most of them have an ironic twist, some are vivid sketches of strange lives, others plead for the underdog. All the qualities which distinguish the books of travel are found here too, especially the zest for life and the eye for greatness in unexpected circumstances.

It is impossible to overrate the importance of having the complete work of such a man brought together. Graham has been described as the most picturesque figure in the English literature of his day. But he was far more than that. He had a daring mind together with great versatility and a poet's feeling for beauty, not only in landscape, but in human action and character. In spite of his occasional cynical pose he never wrote anything mean or base. He opens up for English readers the Spanish world when Spain was at her greatest. He had a noble scorn for tyranny and injustice and an unfailing sympathy for the oppressed. It is an incalculable benefit that scholars are now able to study the entire life's work of this great writer. Students of literature owe an immense debt to George Matthew Adams for placing this collection at their disposal.

Hereward T. Price
A Note on the George Matthew Adams Collection of Cunningham Graham

The works of Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham, here gathered in their first and in their finest forms by a scholarly and careful collector, are a clear reflection of one of the most versatile lives and talents of our times.

Equally at home in the steaming souk of Fez and the rimless pampa of the Argentine, at the council fire of the Sioux and in the Halls of Parliament, Cunningham Graham with his pen as with his person pursued diverse ends and subjects. The Scots laird and gaucho horseman found four continents barely sufficient for a wide-ranging talent that could dwell reflectively and philosophically upon some scene of natural grandeur and turn on the instant to withering and slashing satire.

Cunningham Graham had no bounds to his interests, but like his great friend W. H. Hudson, he turned often and effectively to the Americas for his scene, and never more effectively than when dealing with the people of the southern America. The George Matthew Adams collection of first and fine editions of his writings stands next to the Hudson collection, also the gift of Mr. Adams to the Clements Library.

And both are, in the wider sense, Americana, not only for the frequent choice of subject but for the interests and concerns of the two authors.

With Cunningham Graham, as with Hudson, the titles and contents of his works present a wide ranging mind. The collection begins with a scarce and much sought little pamphlet, Economic Evolution, that was his first published writing and that was to point the way for many another biting essay on the politics and economics of his times.

The first book in the group is Notes on the District of Menteith, and here again the coming works of the writer are foreshadowed. The Graham of Gartmore and Menteith had a task to his liking and one for which he was, perhaps, better prepared than any other individual. The result is this beautifully executed description of the country where his family had lived for centuries. While subtitled "For Tourists and Others," the book is no casual collection of antiquities and scenery. And the author's concern with Scotland is a continuing thing in his life. Always a partisan of lost causes and doubtful hopes, he was to head the Nationalist movement in Scotland and to plead for a restoration of the Scots Parliament.

With Father Archangel of Scotland, a microcosm of much of Cunningham Graham's future is presented. In these acute essays is the continuing philosophy that is hardly further developed in his latest work. The title story is that of a Catholic missionary to Calvinistic Scotland and, like his later Success, indicates his fascination with noble failure. There is, too, the story of a Jesuit missionary from the back country of Paraguay, another favorite theme.

The rare little pamphlet Aurora la Cuiñini finds the author as much at home in the life of Spain as in that of Scotland. It is overshadowed, however, by a major work, Mogreb-el-Acks, considered by some critics as one of the great travel books of all time. It is the journal of the writer's fantastic essay at penetrating the fastnesses of then independent and barbaric Morocco to the forbidden city of Tarudant. And rarer even in his time than now, it is a brilliant and sympathetic picture of an alien way of life; alien, that is, to the high complacency of the time. Sympathy and irony combine with an awareness of living, nature, and philosophy to produce a book that partakes of the timeless.

The stories gathered under the title of The Ipané include one of Cunningham Graham's most famous essays, Niggers. This biting attack on the contemporary mores of the imperialistic Nordic will have current interest while a shadow of race prejudice remains in the world. Herbert Faulkner West and Edward Garnett alike agree in citing this, with his Success, published a few years later, as alone sufficient to "confer immortality on him." The other pieces range from one about an Icelandic horseman to a story of Texas.

Thirteen Stories continues in the same general vein, the locale varying but the stories ever concerned with triumphant failure, whether the specific subject be the Spanish-American War or the Apaches of Mexico and the western United States.

A Vanished Arcadia is an account of the unique civilization established by the Jesuits among the Indians of Paraguay. It was followed closely by Success, a definitive statement of Cunningham Graham's personal philosophy and a deeply cogent attack on the rampant materialistic imperialism of his day.

With Hernando de Soto, Cunningham Graham turned the focus of his attention upon the Black Legend of the old Spanish Empire. Part Spanish by descent and in his thinking highly sympathetic with the conquistadores, he struck out against the glaze of glory which had surrounded the English pirates and freebooters, leaving the magnificent exploits of the Spanish conquerors enmeshed in a dismal atmosphere of blood and greed.

Of course he was not unique in his reversal of the contemporary attitude, but he brought a powerful pen and highly competent scholarship to the aid of those historians who had become conscious of the wider horizons of American history. His later works examine carefully...
the careers of such diverse Ibero-Americans as Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the soldier of the Conquest of Mexico; Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, the explorer of Colombia; the men who conquered the country of the Rio de la Plata, to become modern Argentina; and Pedro de Valdivia, settler of Chile who first met and defeated, but failed to conquer, the hardest fighting Indians of the Americas, the Araucanians. In somewhat the same vein are his Horses of the Conquest, a labor of love on the part of a man who was a master horseman to the day of his death, and the other works on the early Spaniards. With this group should fall, too, his biography of José Antonio Páez, first president of Venezuela.

His later works represent a mature talent that shows no sign of flagging with advancing age. While not a practicing member of any church, he was ever and again concerned with the bright spirits who illumine the sometimes shadowy record of Christian missions. The mysticism of a man like Antonio Conselheiro, whose strange little sect successfully defied the military force of the great nation of Brazil for months on end is masterfully recorded in A Brazilian Mystic. Here he shows the influence of his lovely Chilean wife, Gabriela, whose several works are also in the Adams collection, including her important two volume set, Santa Teresa: Her Life and Times.

Throughout his life, Cunninghame Graham was continually concerned with the economic and political events of Great Britain. As a Member of Parliament and as a writer, he took an active part in affairs. He was, certainly, forty years out of time, for his ideas and beliefs, scorned as fantastically visionary at the turn of the century, are the commonplace of Britain today. These concerns are reflected in the collection.

Another facet of the man was his influence upon other writers of the period. The field remains wide open to investigators, and the materials are here. No less a literary luminary than George Bernard Shaw, self appointed and publicly accepted as leading literary genius of our time, acknowledges his debt to Cunninghame Graham in Captain Brassbound's Conversion, based on Mogreb-el-Acks. As a close friend of Hudson and Joseph Conrad, among others, that influence is no small thing.

Finally, the collection concludes with a selection of Cunninghame Graham's prefaces to works by other authors, and a representation of the growing group of books about the artist himself, providing a fitting and utilitarian climax to a major collection of the writings of one of the most singular auctorial figures in English literature.

Hildegardt Braun

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A Checklist of the Collection


Works of R. B. Cunninghame Graham
31. Same. Inscribed by the author in Portuguese to William E. Henley, with bookplate. With Paul Lemperly’s bookplate and manuscript note.
35. The District of Menteith. Stirling: MacKay [1930]. Limited to 250 copies, with signed original etching by D. Y. Cameron. Signed by the author and by Cameron.
41. Same. Binding variant.
44. Same. New York: Viking, 1929.
50. ROBERTS, MORLEY. The Western Avernus. London: Smith, Elder, 1887.
55. TSCHIFFELY, AIME FELIX. Don Roberto. London: Heinemann [1937].
58. WEST, HERBERT F. Don Roberto. [Hanover, N.H.] Privately Printed, 1936. Limited to 100 copies, signed.