

# **A World of Story Rediscovered: R.B. Cunninghame Graham, Scotland's Forgotten Writer**

**By Alan MacGillivray**

## **Questions?**

What Scotsman was caught up in a civil war before the age of twenty? Wrote a book that became the inspiration for an Oscar-winning film? Met a runaway teenager in Paris and married her against the wishes of his family? Lost his ranch to raiding Apaches? Went into Parliament as a Liberal and came out as a Socialist? Assaulted a policeman in defence of free speech and was sent to prison? Travelled in disguise in Morocco trying to reach a forbidden city? Was a founder of both the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party? Was a ferocious critic of imperialism, racism and cruelty to any human or animal? Bought his favourite horse from the Glasgow Tramway Company and rode it for twenty years? Rounded up horses at the age of sixty-two for use by the Army? Wrote nearly thirty books, including 200 short stories and sketches? Knew nearly all the great writers and artists of his day? Had a funeral attended by the President of a republic and the two most famous horses in the world? Is buried in a neglected grave beside his wife on a small lake-island not far from Glasgow? Has, surprisingly, been almost totally ignored, even almost forgotten, as a personality and politician and writer by recent generations?

Only a few of the questions that could be asked. And only one answer. These are all just parts of one man's life, experience, adventure, legacy, whatever you care to call it. One of his contemporaries, G.K. Chesterton, remarked that Robert Cunninghame Graham had "achieved the adventure of being Cunninghame Graham." Graham's image has followed a perhaps sadly familiar trajectory: from being a very high-profile politician, esteemed writer and traveller, a flamboyant anti-Establishment public figure, known by his exotic nickname of "Don Roberto" in tribute to his passionate Hispanic attachments, to being a dimly-recognised name from the past, one of the great neglected band to be found within any literary tradition. Many specialist students of Scottish Literature have never

heard of him. In the seventy-five years since his death, there have been only one or two reprints of any of his books and a handful of selections of his many short stories and sketches. The reasons for this are well worth exploring, and await the scholarly efforts of aspiring post-graduates. However, a renewed and long overdue interest in Cunninghame Graham's literary work must be based on easily-accessible editions, and it is to provide these both for the scholar and the general reader that a major new initiative is well under way. A group of Cunninghame Graham enthusiasts (of whom there are a surprising number dotted about Scotland and the world at large) have been busy over the last two years editing and issuing the first volumes in a new Cunninghame Graham Collection. The first stage has been completed in the form of five volumes of the *Collected Stories and Sketches\**, published by Kennedy & Boyd and available through the usual outlets. Now, for the first time, it is possible to assess and, more importantly, enjoy the remarkable range of this significant Scottish writer.

The impulses that drove Robert Cunninghame Graham to set sail for South America in 1870, a few days before his eighteenth birthday, had been developing both internally and externally through all his life hitherto. A father whose erratic behaviour and descent into madness had encumbered the family with enormous debts; a half-Spanish mother whose father and step-father had served as senior naval officers in South American waters during the Wars of Liberation; an education that had, fortunately for the young Graham, early on diverged from the Victorian aristocratic norm and given him a passion for and experience with horses, a fluency in Spanish and a knowledge of Spain, and a preference for freedom of movement and physical activity over a regulated life of discipline and order. So, from the age of fifteen, formal schooling was left behind and the family options of the Army, the Navy, or India, were rejected. He set his sights on South America, with the primary purpose of making good financially for the family's sake; an endeavour at which he failed totally. Ranching, cattle-droving, horse-trading, planting, mule-breeding, cotton-dealing, first with different partners and latterly with a young adventurous wife — all came to nothing and he returned to Britain with debts of his own. Within a couple of years he had to take on a greater burden, inheriting the family estate of Gartmore with its accumulated encumbrances. Yet it was his time in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay during these eleven years from 1870 to 1881 that gave him a far greater benefit than mere financial security.

These were his horseback years *par excellence*. They coloured his imagination for the next sixty years and fuelled his creative impulses through fourteen collections of stories and sketches, making them

...a sort of record of a dream, dreamed upon pampas and on prairies, sleeping upon a saddle under the southern stars, or galloping across the plains in the hot sun, photographed in youth upon the writer's brain.

(“The Lazo”, *The Ipané*)

Out of them came the stories of the pulperías (the little trading posts on the pampas) with their passing trade of gauchos and ranchers, their resident store-keepers and ‘china’ girls, or prostitutes, their guitar sessions and dances and drunken knife-fights (sometimes fatal); the glimpses of the casual violence and disregard for life among the gauchos at a time of civil war and anarchy, observed at first hand by Graham and recalled by him in later life as things “I dinna care to mind”; the detailed descriptions of the features and activities of gaucho life at a time when that life was being transformed by the advance of civilisation across the pampas; and above all the sense of freedom and boundless space on the great spread of “*paja y cielo*” (grass and sky). Many of Graham’s best stories inhabit this region and evoke a world that was beginning to pass away even as he was revelling in it. A sense of its transience is always present and sets the characteristic elegiac tone of Graham’s factual fiction.

Graham’s return to Britain in 1877 after three unsuccessful ventures in South America initiated a new period in his life when he entered society and began to develop an astonishingly wide circle of friends and acquaintances in the world of literature and art through frequenting his mother’s artistic salon in London. This was a crucial development for a young man still in his twenties, being undoubtedly the start of his orientation towards a later literary life instead of the traditional life-style of a Victorian gentleman. It took him, over the years that followed, into the cultural mainstream of his time, giving him ultimately more of a European than a British sensibility, aided as he was by a fluency in French and Spanish and an expanding personal acquaintanceship with the leading writers of his time. Possibly it was his knowledge of and admiration for the writings of contemporaries like Guy de Maupassant and Ivan Turgenev that nudged him towards the use of the short story/sketch form for his own writing later on.

Paris, indeed, became his home for a time, and it was there that he met and

speedily married the runaway girl who shared his life for the next twenty-eight years. Just what Carrie Horsfall, the daughter of a Yorkshire surgeon, was doing in Paris under the name of Gabriela de la Balmondière, still remains a mystery; for the rest of her life she was passed off by Graham and his family as a half-French, half-Chilean poetess, and it was not until the 1980s that her true identity was made generally public. Nevertheless, she and Graham, though childless, were happy together and shared their travels, their writing and many other interests. Their first venture as a married couple took them to the USA and Mexico, where they tried successively the businesses of mule-breeding, cotton-dealing and ranching. Their lack of success forced them to take up incidentally other pursuits, such as teaching by Gabriela and fencing by Graham himself. They had some brushes with Apaches, which led to one of Graham's best stories of later years, "A Hegira", about an attempt at escape from the Mexican authorities by a small group of Mescaleros, and also to the destruction of their ranch by an Apache raiding party. Back home, their partnership took other forms. Gabriela had her own literary ambitions and Graham's first book of sketches and essays, , was a collaborative publication with her. However, what she had to share most closely was Graham's life as a Scottish laird and later as a Member of Parliament and political activist.

Graham's inheritance of the crumbling debt-ridden family estate of Gartmore near the Lake of Menteith, his struggles to keep it going, his election to Parliament as a Liberal and his espousal of the causes of Socialism and Scottish Home Rule provided the impetus for another main strand of his literary output. Many stories about aspects of Scottish, and more widely London and British, life illustrate Graham's ambiguous attitude towards his fellow-Scots, his negative feelings about the British Empire and the popular obsession with it, and his strong feelings about social injustice, racism and cruelty to animals and humans alike. As regards Scots and Scotland, he favoured the traditional rural way of life over city existence, yet he spoke out strongly about living and working conditions in both; his strongest criticism and satire, however, are reserved for the features that he felt were enfeebling and demeaning to Scotland, notably narrow religion, excessive drink, and a coarse, insensitive and mean-spirited outlook in several quarters. His knowledge of Scottish literature was considerable, and he felt quite confident, despite his upper-class origins and education, about using Lowland Scots for dialogue in a significant number of his stories. (About Gaelic he was less certain, and he tended to make errors in his transcriptions of Highland names and

phrases.)

Graham's beginnings as a writer can be traced back to his first years in South America and his later American travels with Gabriela. He wrote many long letters home, particularly to his mother, describing his experiences and concerns. These letters deserve to be collected and published, if anyone can undertake to decipher Graham's execrable hand-writing. Later on, he had to write many speeches and articles as a Member of Parliament with a strong commitment to several causes. Yet it was in the years following his final Parliamentary defeat in 1892 as a Labour candidate for the Glasgow Camlachie constituency that he turned to writing as a major, and ultimately main, preoccupation. There are virtually no stories or sketches that deal with his own Parliamentary experiences, fertile though that would surely have been as a source of inspiration. His writing interests lay more with the major issues behind the political structures, and his Radical and Socialist concerns are illustrated from the real lives and incidents to be observed in the city streets. Exceptions to this are the appreciations that he wrote of personal friends and associates, sometimes on the occasion of their funerals. Some of his best pieces are those on William Morris, Charles Stewart Parnell, Keir Hardie, Joseph Conrad, the artist Joseph Crawhall, and the Spanish Anarchist leader, Fermin Salvochea y Alvarez.

Another result of Graham's Parliamentary defeat in 1892 was that he and his wife were free again to travel widely. It was to the South that their attention turned, frequently with an (always unsuccessful) intention of finding opportunities of making enough money to solve their estate-related financial problems. Yet, in addition, they found inspiration for their developing literary ambitions. Gabriela pursued her researches into the life of St Teresa of Ávila, which came to fruition in a two-volume biography. Graham found fertile subjects for his pen in Spain and, increasingly, Morocco. His first knowledge of these countries actually went back many years. As a boy he had visited his Spanish grandmother's family near Cadiz in Andalusia, perfecting his Spanish and his skill with horses. And in 1875, after his second South American venture, he had sailed in a tramp steamer down Morocco's Atlantic coast and on to Equatorial West Africa. His first real book, *Mogreb-el-Aksa: A Journey in Morocco* (1898), describes an attempt he made to travel, in Arab disguise, to the holy city of Tarudant, forbidden to Christians. After South America and Scotland, Spain and Morocco are the main locations for his stories. Morocco was of especial interest to him. He found

Tangier a congenial place to visit and revisit from the 1890s onwards, a place where he was likely to meet a host of fellow sun-seekers, from Spanish dukes to artists of the Glasgow Boys school, like Lavery and Crawhall. In the first decade of the twentieth century, when the right to control Morocco was being disputed by the European Great Powers, Graham, as a fervent anti-Imperialist, was strongly involved emotionally and wrote several stories about the land and its people, set against this political backdrop of looming change to the old semi-anarchic way of life. Although not a religious man himself, Graham noticeably wrote sympathetically about the Muslim ethos, and, without being sentimental or glossing over unpleasant issues of violence or killing, imparted a sense of the dignity and honour to be found in the tribal society. It was, of course, a straight carry-over from his attitudes to the gaucho culture he had known a quarter of a century earlier in South America.

Curiously, it is in his stories and sketches set in Spain that we find Graham to be at his least forthcoming about what he sees directly as an observer. He had much to say about Scotland, and Britain, of his own time: strong criticism of hypocrisy and poverty and inequality; keen colourful observation of the London streets, with their squalor and suffering, both human and animal; ironical comment on social foibles. About Spain, which could be said to be his second homeland, he had much less to say. There are many stories with Spanish settings, and he dealt with different parts of Spain; Galicia and the North-West, where he lived for a short time; Madrid, of course, as the capital; and Andalusia in the south, with its family connections; and other parts, Toledo, Burgos, even over the water in the Spanish enclaves in Morocco. Yet what he wrote was very often filtered through secondary experience, not what he saw with his own eyes primarily, but coming from books or drama or concerned with a past Spain, the wars against the Moors, the Reconquista, or with the Church and its rituals. Was the reality of early twentieth-century Spain too painful a subject, with its glaring social inequalities held under a king's or a dictator's repression; a time of revolutions and transient republics? It was only near the end of his life in the 1930s, when the old Cunninghame Graham saw the ogre of Fascism coming out of Italy and Germany and Japan, with massacre and destruction of old societies in Manchuria and Abyssinia (Ethiopia), that he wrote a story about the dark side of Spain. "Casas Viejas, 1933" is the true story of the official extinction of a minuscule anarchist revolt in a tiny Spanish village. A few social idealists armed with out-of-date weapons are crushed by a disproportionate weight of military force, and executed summarily

afterwards. Graham's decades-old sympathy with Socialism and the Spanish Anarchists comes through strongly in this late piece, published in his last collection, *Mirages*, in the year of his death. Graham died in Buenos Aires on the 20th March, 1936. Exactly four months later, General Franco crossed with his troops from Morocco into Spain and began the assault against the Spanish Republic. The Spanish Civil War had begun. It would have broken Graham's heart.

The note of melancholy is never far away from Graham's writing. He alludes to sadness and loss frequently in the Prefaces to his story collections. In the Preface to *Thirteen Stories* (1900), he speaks of himself as

a man who has not only seen, but lived with ghosts. In this phantasmagoria we call the world most things and men are ghosts, or at the best but ghosts of ghosts, so vaporous and unsubstantial that they scarcely cast a shadow on the grass.

By this time he was aware that the open pampas world he had known in his twenties had largely passed away, that the freedom of the gauchos had been curtailed, that his old horsemen friends, men like Exaltación Medina and Raimundo Barragán and others, whose names drop musically into so many of his stories, were old or dead, their riding days past. The act of writing about them, while artistically satisfying, brought no consolation:

All writing brings sorrow in its train....To record, even to record emotions, is to store up a fund of sadness, and that is why all writing is a sort of icehouse of the mind.

(Preface, *Faith*)

In the course of a long life, of course he had his own sorrows to seek. The loss in 1900 of the ancestral home of Gartmore, enforced by insurmountable debts, was felt deeply by him, and it is said that he ever after went by roundabout routes to avoid looking on it in the hands of strangers. The story, "A Braw Day", is a moving account of his last day in the house before having to move out for ever. The cruellest blow to him in middle age was the death of Gabriela. She had never been strong and was prone to pleurisy, not helped by her habit of chain-smoking. In 1906, at the age of forty-five, she died in France on her way back from one of her frequent trips to the drier warmth of Spain. She was buried on Inchmahome on the Lake of Menteith, where thirty years later her husband was to join her.

Horses were always very dear to Graham and he often wrote with passion and anger about their treatment at the hands of humans. He owned many horses throughout his life, but his favourite was undoubtedly Pampa, an Argentine stallion that he saw in Glasgow one day pulling a tram-car. He bought the horse from the Glasgow Tramway Company and rode it for many years until its death in 1911. In the early years of the First World War, Graham was commissioned to go to Uruguay and purchase horses for the British Army to use on the Western Front. The physical activity and the opportunity to ride the pampas again thrilled him, but he was filled with intense sadness at the thought of the fate awaiting the horses on the fields of Flanders. A story he wrote describing the round-up and selection of horses, "Bopicuá", ends with words spoken by one of his helpers:

I think it was Arena, or perhaps Pablo Suarez, spoke their elegy: 'Eat well,' he said; 'there is no grass like that of La Pileta, to where you go across the sea. The grass in Europe all must smell of blood.'

One of Graham's very last stories, "Inmarcesible" (Undying), pays tribute to a Jewish lady who caused a monument to be erected to the horses who had suffered and died in the Boer Wars in South Africa.

In a sense, his last thoughts were of horses. In early 1936, on his last visit to Argentina, only a few days before he died, he visited the two famous horses of his friend, Aimé Tschiffely, who had ridden them in an epic journey through the Americas. He fed Mancho and Gato some oats that he had brought specially for them across the Atlantic. At his funeral in Buenos Aires, the two horses followed the bier with Cunninghame Graham's boots reversed in the stirrups. The last words of the last story in his last collection, *Mirages*, (the proofs of which he corrected in his last days) evoke the memories of riding across the plain with good companions. Perhaps this was how he envisioned how he would meet Death in his imagination. A recurrent image in Graham's South American sketches is of Trapalanda, the lost city of the pampas, existing in Indian lore, a haven and heaven for horses. And the image so often is of the act of riding towards it, wherever it may be, across the seas of grass on the unshod horses of the Indians and the gauchos. The horses tread lightly over the grass and their hooves leave no prints; transient and unsubstantial, the riders pass like ghosts, and Don Roberto rides with them into legend under the illimitable sky.



# References & Further Information

## [\\*The Cunninghame Graham Collection Series](#)

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*Volume One: Photographed on the Brain*

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