

THE ADVENTURES OF DON ROBERTO

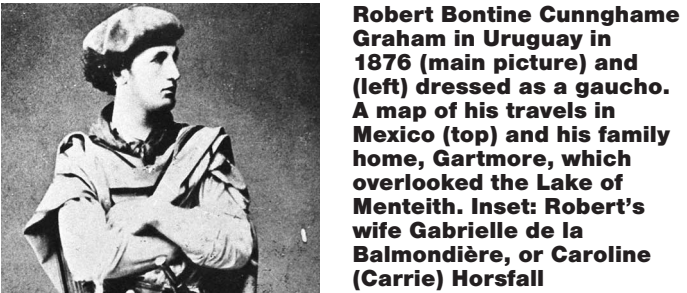
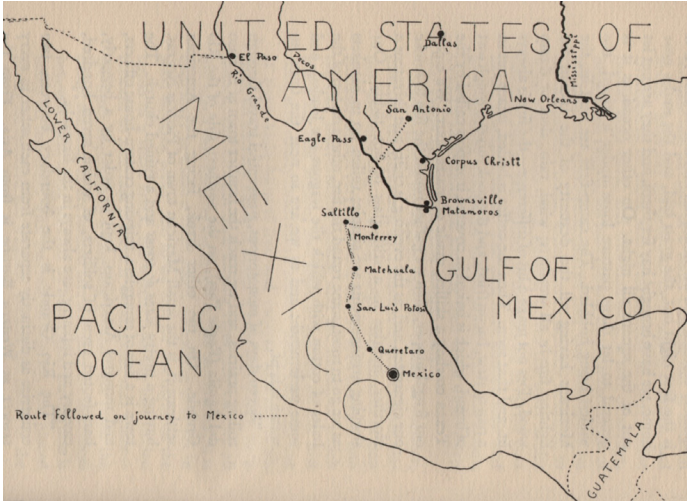
‘A COPA do mundo é nossa” sang the Brazilian poet, diplomat and nine-times-married composer Vinicius de Moraes in 1970. The Argentine audience laughed along good-naturedly. Brazil had just won the World Cup and De Moraes, along with singer Maria Creuza and guitarist Toquinho, were appearing at the opening of La Fusa, a new arts centre in Buenos Aires. The recording of that evening, Vinicius de Moraes en La Fusa, is one of the most electrifying of all live recordings of Brazilian music. I wasn’t there – how I wish I had been – but two years later, in November 1972, the record was constantly on my hosts’ turntable when I arrived in Buenos Aires, aged 23, a bossa nova masterpiece welcoming me to South America. I bought it the following year on my return to Scotland and have listened to it ever since. More than 50 years later it still makes my heart race and looses a torrent of memories. I was in Argentina at the start of a 10-month journey through South, Central and North America. I had signed up for the Latin American pilot trip of an English travel company Encounter Overland, which for several years previously had run trucks full of hippies from London to Kabul. The itinerary for this new trip was ambitious – Buenos Aires to Los Angeles in five months – and our departure was already delayed by a couple of weeks as the trucks were detained by Argentine customs. While we waited for their release, I had one duty to perform in Buenos Aires. At that time, in an ante-room to the president’s office in the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace, hung a large portrait of a dashing, black-clad rider, staring out at the immensity of the pampa from his seat on a fine black stallion. The man was my great-great-uncle, Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham, known as Don Roberto and revered in Argentina principally as the chronicler of the gauchos in the last days of their pre-industrial way of life. The portrait, by his friend and Glasgow Boy John Lavery, has since been moved to the nearby Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes where, I imagine, anyone can see it. But at that time access required much pulling of strings. My mother, an expert in such matters, having duly pulled them, it was my duty to attend the private viewing. To say I was disinterested would not be entirely true. I knew about him. Indeed, I knew more about him than I might have cared to, having heard my mother speak of him incessantly, so it seemed, since my early childhood. I certainly felt some



In the first instalment of a two-part essay, James Jauncey introduces Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham, who helped found the original Labour Party and the National Party of Scotland. Jauncey is author of Don Roberto, The Adventure of Being Cunningham Graham and the great-great-nephew of a man from whom we have so much more to learn

dim sense of familial connection as I stared at the horseman with the red neckerchief and broad-brimmed black hat and distant gaze. But as an act of ancestor worship this ranked low on the scale. I had other fish to fry, or rather trails to blaze, and my interest in the man would not be properly aroused for another 40 years. A century earlier, in May 1870, Robert had also arrived in Argentina, a few weeks after his 18 birthday. His destination was an up-country estancia in the province of Corrientes where he was to work and whose managers, two young Scots brothers, he soon discovered had taken to the bottle. The place had gone to ruin. Worse still, the country was in the grip of both a severe drought and a savage civil war, the latter largely an excuse for opposing factions of gauchos to settle old scores, ransack the countryside and terrorise the locals. This set the scene for the following eight years, six of which Robert was to spend in the saddle, the only means of conveyance at the time, ranging through Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and Paraguay. With his Spanish blood roused in the southern hemisphere sun – his maternal grandmother came from Cadiz – he quickly went native, becoming an expert horseman, adopting gaucho dress, and receiving from the gauchos with whom he rode his lifelong nickname, Don Roberto. A natural linguist, he mastered Spanish, Portuguese and even Guarani, the indigenous language of Paraguay, unknown to almost any other European. In principle he was attempting to restore the family fortune. His father had become insane and spent most of what remained of the great wealth amassed in the West Indies by a previous, late 18th-century Robert Cunningham Graham. In practice he was adventuring, pursuing improbable money-making schemes, and unwittingly storing away a treasure trove of material for the stories and sketches he would later write. It was his unusual ability to immerse himself, wholly and without judgement, in local customs and cultures, along with the gift of acute observation, which set him apart from fellow European travellers and furnished the unique lens through which he would later describe those experiences. At the same time he

was discovering a fierce indignation at the treatment by their European masters of ethnic minorities and other underclasses, the gauchos being just one. These experiences would shape his political thinking in years to come. Compared to Robert’s, my own Latin American meanderings were tame, though they seemed adventurous enough at the time as we changed dollars down dark alleys in Santiago a few weeks before the Chilean generals moved against Salvador Allende; crossed Bolivia’s vast and then almost unknown, high-altitude Salar de Uyuni with only a Russian map and a local on a bicycle to guide us; braved landslides to drive out of the Andes into Amazonia in the rains; and travelled deck class on a cargo boat to the Galapagos Islands. For his part, Robert endured illness – a midnight dash with medicine for a neighbouring rancher left him racked with typhoid; frequent kicks and falls from horses; conscription by revolutionaries; constant danger from jaguars and feral cattle, bandits and local Indians, even from the gauchos with whom he rode, who were quick with their knives. Where my travels left me directionless and confused, Robert’s toughened him as if in unconscious preparation for the next chapter in his life, politics. Returning to Scotland in his late 20s, his South American experiences still fresh, and by now an admirer of the American campaigner for a universal land tax, Henry George, Robert was at once struck by the plight of those closer to home – the Highland crofters, whose lack of rights left them little more than serfs, and the tenantry of Ireland, whose similar lack of rights was giving rise to widespread unrest and a brutal response from the British authorities. Heir to a long family tradition of political radicalism, he stood as Liberal candidate for the Scottish constituency of North West Lanarkshire in the General Election of 1886 – an elegant, eloquent descendant of Scottish kings among the mine and steel-workers, whose working and living conditions in the industrial inferno he deplored. They adored him for it, recognising in him a man who, for all his elevated status, truly espoused their cause. An eight-hour working day, abolition of the House of Lords (“would you care to visit an



Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham in Uruguay in 1876 (main picture) and (left) dressed as a gaucho. A map of his travels in Mexico (top) and his family home, Gartmore, which overlooked the Lake of Menteith. Inset: Robert's wife Gabrielle de la Balmondière, or Caroline (Carrie) Horsfall



‘Are you thinking where to put your guillotine?’, the prime minister asked

hereditary dentist?” he asked), free school meals, votes for women, nationalisation of land, the establishment of national parks and even holidays for pit ponies, his was an election ticket to strike terror in the hearts of the establishment. Six tumultuous years followed his election. From the outset – his maiden speech caused a sensation: the royal family were “parasites”, he declared – he ruffled feathers at every turn. Three times suspended for unparliamentary conduct, in 1887 he was arrested and imprisoned for six weeks in Pentonville for

rioting in Trafalgar Square during the “Bloody Sunday” protests in support of Irish home rule and freedom of assembly. Robert became disillusioned with the Liberals, embodied by the newly wealthy factory and mine owners whom he saw as exploiters of labour. With some encouragement from William Morris, to whose circle he now peripherally belonged, Robert declared himself a socialist, the first in the history of the British Parliament. Soon afterwards he met the prime minister, Lord Salisbury, in the House of Commons lobby.

home rule for Scotland a key policy. Central to Robert’s vision of a better life for the working classes was the eight-hour day. By this means, he reasoned, they would have the leisure time in which to educate themselves and, ultimately, to represent themselves in Parliament. This duly came to pass, although by that time he had left the front line of politics. When it did he found, to his intense disappointment, that the newly elected working men were quick to fall in with the behaviour of their fellow members of Parliament, whom he mostly held in contempt. During six furious years at Westminster, Robert championed the oppressed wherever he found them. These included the chain makers of Cradley Heath, who endured the very worst of Victorian working conditions; the striking dockers of east London; the Bryant and May match girls who were being steadily poisoned by the phosphorus they handled; and, of course, the miners and iron workers in his own constituency, centred on Coatbridge, the pounding heart of the west of Scotland’s industrial inferno. By now, he had married a young woman whom, so the story goes, he had met in Paris and who purported to be a half-French, half-Chilean actress named Gabrielle de la Balmondière. In fact, she was Caroline (Carrie) Horsfall, the daughter of a Yorkshire medical officer, who had, again so the story went, run away to join the stage. Their marriage, and the deception at its heart – which, to the last, their glittering circle of friends either colluded with or were taken in by – endured until her death aged 48 from diabetes, hastened by her vast daily consumption of cigarettes. This habit she had acquired during their nine-month honeymoon in Texas and Mexico, when the smoking of rough, black tobacco was the only way to keep insects at bay while riding the trail with the wagon train to which they had attached themselves. Other perils included



bandits and hostile Indians, against whom they circled the wagons every night and slept, armed, with their heads to the fire. Having survived the honeymoon, they returned to the UK and eventually, on Robert’s father’s death, to Gartmore, the large but by now extremely run-down Adam mansion overlooking the Lake of Menteith, which had been the Graham family seat for three centuries. Fortunately for Robert, Carrie (or Gabriela as she was known in the family) was to prove an able businesswoman who shrewdly managed the family affairs in face of the crippling liabilities incurred by Robert’s father – debts amounting to some £10 million in today’s terms. She also turned to political activism alongside her husband, and travelled to forgotten corners of Spain to research and write a two-volume, 800-page biography of the medieval Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Avila. This was promptly banned by the Spanish authorities for its suggestion that the saint’s visions had been sexual in nature. There is much about Gabriela’s life that is unknown. How did she, as a young, single woman without any means of support, survive the three years between running away from home and meeting Robert, purportedly in Paris? Why did she feel that she required a false name (and why such a theatrical one)? And why did she and Robert choose to maintain the deception throughout her life? Although they spent much time apart, each pursuing his or her own research, they were deeply attached to each other. Robert was grief stricken when, in 1906, Gabriela died, aged only 48, at Hendaye on the French-Spanish border, on her return from a visit to Spain. She was laid to rest in the family burial plot in the ruined Augustinian priory on the island of Inchmahome, in the Lake of Menteith. Robert is said to have dug the grave himself and smoked a final cigarette at the graveside, the night before her interment. Gabriela was without doubt a profound, often steady, influence in Robert’s life. One day her story, almost as extraordinary as his, will be fully told. Above her grave, in the wall of the ruined priory, he placed a plaque containing a Spanish proverb: Los muertos abren los ojos a los que viven. The dead open the eyes of the living.

To be continued ...