

'IT SEEMS THE CASE THAT NEITHER HUDSON, CONRAD OR MYSELF CAN DO ANYTHING WITHOUT YOUR ADVICE': EDWARD GARNETT AND R B CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM

'It seems the case that neither Hudson, Conrad or myself can do anything without your advice'¹, so wrote Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham to Edward Garnett in October 1909. W H Hudson, Joseph Conrad and Don Roberto: an illustrious trio indeed, but who was the man upon whom, if Graham is to be believed, they all so depended?

Edward William Garnett was born in January 1868. His father, Dr Richard Garnett was Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum. It was from his mother, Olivia Narney Singleton, that Garnett traced the Anglo-Irish ancestry he was so proud of. Temperamentally Garnett felt much closer to the Irish than the English – 'so heavy and matter of face in comparison' he once declared.² When Garnett left the City of London school at the age of seventeen he had no prospects in view at all. Eventually, in 1887 his father arranged for him to enter the office of the publisher T Fisher Unwin as a packer of books. It soon became apparent that the shapely fingers of Unwin's newest employee were hopelessly inept when it came to packing parcels and he rapidly slipped into the position of publisher's reader, which as Garnett's wife Constance remarked was 'of all callings the one he was fitted for by character, tastes & habits.'³ Garnett spent thirteen years with Unwin after which he joined Heinemann for a short time and then spent fifteen years with Duckworth. The First World War effectively put paid to his job there and after a brief spell with John Lane Garnett found his final perch with Jonathan Cape.

Being a publisher's reader was not a glamorous or well-paid job. Reading piles of manuscripts, solicited or otherwise, could be extremely tedious, but it avoided an inflexible office routine, which appealed to Garnett. Like most readers, he took manuscripts home to read and write reports, only going into the office to bring them back and attend meetings in which decisions were taken as to what to publish. The vast majority of manuscripts were destined to be returned, accompanied by a polite (or occasionally not so polite) letter. Over the years, Garnett got the nuance of refusal down to a fine art: depending on his mood his stark instruction - 'Reject' – could be followed by 'with sweetness', 'kindly', 'with thanks', 'emphatically', 'and advise burial' and when his patience had been particularly tried, 'insultingly'.

¹ R B Cunninghame Graham to Edward Garnett, 27th October 1909, (HRC).

² Edward Garnett to Natalie Duddington, 'Tuesday' [2 June 1925] (Sebastian Garett).

³ Constance Garnett, Memoir (Northwestern).

Garnett married Constance Black in 1889 and three years' later she gave birth to their only child, David, known universally as 'Bunny'. It was during her pregnancy that Constance began to learn Russian and she became a prodigious translator of Russian literature, eventually producing over 70 volumes. Garnett himself tirelessly promoted the work of the great Russian novelists throughout his life and espoused the Russian example to his proteges – including Graham (who did not always share his enthusiasm). Part of the reason why Garnett so revered the Russians lay in the importance the nation attached to literature – as one commentator has put it, the political, cultural and spiritual traditions of Russia made it 'unthinkable that the novel would become merely a source of entertainment; Russians have always been much too conscious of the symbolic value of the word'.⁴ Garnett believed that literature had the capacity to change the world but he had little faith in the reading public's readiness to acknowledge that idea, rather he believed that the finest talents were doomed to remain unrecognised, although that did not stop him from doing his best to ensure that didn't happen.

By the time Garnett first contacted Don Roberto in 1898 he had been reading for Fisher Unwin for ten years and had already developed something of a reputation in his field. W B Yeats, Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad were just some of the authors who had benefited from Garnett's advice and encouragement – Conrad later insisted that it was Garnett who had convinced him to take up authorship as a career:

If [Edward] had said to me 'Why not go on writing? I should have been paralysed. I could not have done it. But he said to me 'You have written one book. It is very good. Why not *write another?*' Do you see what a difference that made? Another? Yes, I would do that. I *could* do that. Many others I could not. Another, I could. That is how Edward made me go on writing. That is what made me an author.⁵

This is an excellent example of Garnett at work, acutely sensitive to the personality of the writer and judging the approach most likely to achieve the desired outcome. In a career spanning forty years Garnett advised a great range of authors whose characters were as diverse as their work – amongst them E M Forster, John Galsworthy, Sean O'Faolain, Liam O'Flaherty, Stephen Crane, Henry Green, May Sinclair, Naomi Mitchison, Dorothy Richardson and

⁴ John Garrard (ed.), *The Russian Novel from Pushkin to Pasternak* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1983) pp. 15-16.

⁵ Gertrude Bone account enclosed in undated letter to Edward Garnett (HRC).

those two very tricky Lawrences – D H and T E. He instinctively knew who responded to kindness, who needed hectoring and when the only solution was simply to bellow. He and Graham immediately got on, sharing a sardonic sense of humour, a strong streak of melancholy and a love of the underdog. 'My view of life is almost the same as yours' Graham told Garnett, 'It is a joke, a black joke of course, but we must laugh at our own efforts.'⁶

What did Garnett look for in a writer? 'Veracity' was one of Garnett's favourite words; he constantly sought work that illuminated the relationship between literature and life. He hated writing he described as 'brain spun' (Samuel Beckett's first novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* received short shrift). What arrested his attention was a writer's ability to suggest the intangible from the palpable; a willingness to shake the reader out of his or her settled perceptions, and the facility to make a small, apparently insignificant detail reveal the depths of a situation. '...art's primary purpose is to *reveal*' he wrote, 'and by reflecting back the stream of life, by creating new valuations, strange new effects, and by showing all forces at work equally, art unsettles by its revelations'⁷ The problem, as Garnett saw it, was that the average English reader 'does not want to be unsettled, to be made uneasy in his convictions about life, he wants to be optimistic, to make things go better, to be made more *certain*' and 'if art cannot use life for special (English) purposes, the English mind prefers not to know the life, not to admit the art.'⁸ Writing in 1929, Garnett laments the fact that Cunninghame Graham's work has made no impression on the reading public for many years: 'feeding gregariously' he comments 'the British public long eyed his sketches much as a rhinoceros might eye a stag.'⁹

Graham first encountered Garnett through their mutual friend Joseph Conrad. In the middle of May 1898 Graham received a thick envelope from Conrad. Inside were two letters, a longish one in an unfamiliar hand, and Conrad's shorter note in which he explains:

'Heer's [sic] Garnett's letter. I've looked in of course because he told me I may. I've heard all this said with greater warmth of appreciation, since You have been (in Your work) a subject of long discussions between us.'¹⁰

⁶ R B Cunninghame Graham to Edward Garnett, 1 March 1899 (HRC).

⁷ Edward Garnett, 'Ibsen and the English' in *Friday Nights* (London: Cape 1922), p.76.

⁸ Edward Garnett, 'Ibsen and the English', p.78.

⁹ Edward Garnett, introduction to *Thirty Tales and Sketches* by R B Cunninghame Graham (London: Duckworth 1929), vi.

¹⁰ Joseph Conrad to R B Cunninghame Graham, 17 May 1898. *Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* (Vol. 2), p.61.

Garnett had had his eye on Graham's work from the moment he read his account of William Morris's funeral in 1896, which he had cut out and kept in his pocketbook, and he had read Don Roberto's subsequent contributions to the *Saturday Review* with pleasure and appreciation as his first letter to Graham makes clear:

I have read your work as it appeared in "The Saturday" & admired it so, familiarized myself with it so, & carried such a keen memory of ... "The North West Wind" & "Un Pelado" along with me, that in writing to the author I have remembered only that his figure is very familiar to me & that his writings free me from constraint.¹¹

Garnett declared some of the sketches to be '*absolutely* the thing'¹² he wanted for a new book series he was proposing and suggested that 'with some strokes of the pen – an addition here, a deletion there' others could also be included.

This new series was originally conceived of as the 'Colonial Series' but eventually launched as The Overseas Library. Garnett found his employer, T Fisher Unwin, chilly, humourless and mercenary, yet for all his faults, Unwin was prepared to invest in unproven writers and open to Garnett's suggestions for possible new series of books he could launch. Garnett had already inaugurated one such series – The Pseudonym Library in 1890 – and in 1898 he was on the lookout for books for his latest venture. The prospectus left little doubt as to the ambitions of the new series:

'The Over-Seas Library' makes no pretence at Imperial drum-beating, or putting English before Colonial opinion. It aims, instead, at getting the atmosphere and outlook of the new peoples recorded, if such is possible. It aims at being an Interchange between all parts of the Empire without favour, an Interchange of records of the life of the English-speaking peoples, and of the Englishmen beyond seas, however imperfect, fragmentary and modest such records or accounts may be.¹³

¹¹ Edward Garnett to R.B Cunningham Graham, 16 May 1898 (HRC).

¹² Edward Garnett to R B Cunningham Graham, 16 May 1898 (HRC).

¹³ Edward Garnett, prospectus for The Overseas Library, reprinted in Vol. 8 of the Library, John Gaggin, *Among the Man-Eaters* (London: Unwin, 1900).

It is not hard to see why Garnett felt Graham's work fitted the bill perfectly. Yet much as he admired Graham's writing, in that first letter Garnett also pointed out what he felt to be a weakness in some of the sketches, encouraging Graham to add 'a living figure or two' in 'The Evolution of a Village' so that 'the whole thing might have the effect of art & not of argument.'¹⁴ This was to be an oft repeated criticism, as was Graham's tendency to digress: 'I think that where your work succeeds is where *everything* converges to a centre & where your work sometimes is unsatisfactory in form is where you have turned & shot arrows at many targets' Garnett told Graham in 1901.¹⁵ Much as Garnett delighted in Graham as a personality, he sometimes regretted the dominance of that personality on the page, believing that the aesthetic integrity of the writing suffered as a result.

Garnett believed that great art required the abandonment of the self and this was something that Graham apparently could not or would not countenance. The correspondence between the two men is vast and eclectic and some of Graham's letters to Garnett contain examples of just that sort of writing Garnett was urging Graham to produce for publication. In 1900 Graham finally gave up the struggle to hang on to Gartmore and confessed that leaving the place was a bitter wrench. Five years' later he wrote to Garnett describing his return to some of his old haunts:

In the autumn, I went to the Lake of Menteith to get some things I left there to look at the graves of many of my people in [sic] an island there. By the side of the lake, there lived two old sisters, ancient retainers of my family their people had been. The last had died not long ago. The cottage was shut and the garden deserted. I sat down on the doorstep in the evening, and smoked a cigarette. The tobacco was too bitter. I am trying to write about it and cannot.¹⁶

Garnett's response was swift and unequivocal:

Your words about Gartmore, and that island burying place give me all that feeling of the things inside you which you find it so impossible to express ... *Write it*, my dear Amigo, in a journal, as though you were communing with yourself... Cast it in that loose

¹⁴ Edward Garnett to R B Cunninghame Graham, 16 May 1898 (HRC).

¹⁵ Edward Garnett to R B Cunninghame Graham 16 May 1901 (National Library of Scotland).

¹⁶ R B Cunninghame Graham to Edward Garnett, 26 December 1905 (HRC)

and fluid form, and write it, so that something beautiful and tender may live for others out of all this passing away and coming to nothingness You have a great deal in you which as yet you have not fully expressed. I mean – in your books. The most *personal* and in that sense most *preciously direct* from your life... It is an instinct in you perhaps not to express those depths... I want you to think over what there is in yourself and life which you have shrunk from writing.¹⁷

Despite Garnett's promptings, Graham continued to find it extraordinarily difficult to 'give himself away' in his published work – 'I see I have not done what I feel' he confessed to Garnett in 1906, 'but that of course is impossible.'¹⁸ Arguably his most moving and powerful writing is to be found in the letters. Consider, for example, his description of another occasion when he returned to Menteith in 1902:

I have just been to see an old friend who was my nearest neighbour. I found him quite in his second childhood; as we say here "doited". It was one those bright starry cold October evenings (common here) when the hills seem to be cut out of purple cardboard, not a leaf stirring, & a little burn singing away over the stones. It made me think of other burns, that I shall not hear sing again, & looking over the well remembered hill road ... I saw a spectral procession of horses. I had ridden over it many times formerly, with a little cream-coloured pony I used to ride as a boy. The same (or apparently the same) old Highlanders were droving sheep on the road, cursing their dogs (the same dogs) in Gaelic.¹⁹

Years later, when Garnett was thinking about publishing their correspondence, he sent Graham back some of his letters to re-read, including those he had written about the loss of Gartmore and the death of Gabrielle. '... only to you and my mother did I ever write in that style'²⁰ Graham commented.

Garnett and Graham corresponded for nearly forty years; the majority of the letters are from Graham and their tone and range of subjects is extraordinarily various. Unsurprisingly Graham's work and Garnett's

¹⁷ Edward Garnett to R B Cunninghame Graham, 28 December 1905 (National Library of Scotland)

¹⁸ R B Cunninghame Graham to Edward Garnett, 9 January 1906 (HRC).

¹⁹ R B Cunninghame Graham to Edward Garnett, 7 October 1902 (HRC).

²⁰ R B Cunninghame Graham to Edward Garnett 20 September 1931 (HRC).

response to it features strongly, but they also frequently discuss other writers, sometimes admiringly, at others disparagingly. Rudyard Kipling is a particular target: 'As for Kipling' writes Garnett in 1899 'as I think I've re-iterated to you Kipling is *the* enemy... He is a creator; & he is *the* genius of all we detest. ... I hate his essence.'²¹ Graham agreed with Garnett's assessment, but they did not always see eye to eye over a writer's merits. The Welsh poet W H Davies, another Garnett protégé, was deemed 'artificial' and 'insincere' by Graham, and the Norfolk writer Mary Mann, highly rated by Garnett, was summarily dismissed: 'There is talent of course, but, to my mind, marred by the grossest affectation in almost every line.'²²

Several of the letters between Graham and Garnett concern Graham's relationship with publishers, and in particular T Fisher Unwin's miserliness, with Garnett instructing Graham to challenge TFU, as he was always known, on the percentage of royalties he was offering Graham. When TFU suggested giving Graham six presentation copies of *The Ipané* Garnett was outraged: 'Six is very stingy. You will want twenty copies at least'.²³ Here, as so often in his career, Garnett was acting for the author against his employer's best interests, more in the manner of a literary agent today. Eventually Unwin, whom Garnett and Conrad sarcastically christened 'The Enlightened Patron of Letters', tired of Garnett's maverick tendencies and sacked him – 'Le Patron must have been awful to put up with' commented Graham.²⁴

Unlike some of his other proteges, Garnett's close friendship with Graham endured. In 1906 Graham dedicated *His People* to Garnett and for nearly forty years Garnett offered literary advice and a willing and sympathetic ear to Graham on matters literary, political and personal. When Graham died in March 1936, Garnett published an appreciation – 'R B Cunninghame Graham: Man and Writer' in the *London Mercury*. 'English literature has lost "a most singular writer", a man of unique personality' writes Garnett. 'Authors possess their niche through their original qualities, and Graham's is secured, I believe, by his trenchant philosophy and his pulverizing contempt for worldly humbug.' Later he

²¹ Edward Garnett to R B Cunninghame Graham, 26 January 1899 (National Library of Scotland)

²² R B Cunninghame Graham to Edward Garnett, 13 December 1902 (HRC).

²³ Edward Garnett to R B Cunninghame Graham, 11 July 1898 (National Library of Scotland).

²⁴ R B Cunninghame Graham to Edward Garnett, 26 January 1900 (HRC).

praises Graham's 'extraordinarily keen eye for detail, ... with sharp, unerring touches he could conjure up the living scene.'²⁵

Less than a year after writing this article Garnett himself was dead. He was sixty-nine and died suddenly of a cerebral haemorrhage. Hamish Miles, his colleague at Jonathan Cape wrote that he should be remembered as 'a unique personality in the literary life of England during at least two generations and as a man with an exacting but singularly charming and animating faculty for friendship.'²⁶ That faculty for friendship is singularly evident in his relationship with Graham and it seems fitting to give Garnett himself the last word on Graham's qualities:

His detestation of society's collective hypocrisy, whether of privileged classes or of masses of men, and of the cant of "civilisation", brought him to shiver many a lance against the triple brass of British industrialism, commercialism and Imperialism. ... A more gallant spirit, one of higher courage than Cunninghame Graham, has not fought in the arena in my day.²⁷

Not just in Garnett's day, but in our day too.

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²⁵ Edward Garnett, 'R B Cunninghame Graham: Man and Writer', *London Mercury* XXXIV, No. 200, June 1936, pp. 125-129.

²⁶ Hamish Miles, 'Edward Garnett', *New Statesman and Nation*, 27 February 1937, p. 327.

²⁷ Edward Garnett, Introduction to *Thirty Tales and Sketches* by R B Cunninghame Graham (London: Duckworth, 1929) ix.