

CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM SOCIETY.

“DOUGHTY DEEDS”

(Robert Graham of Gartmore, 1735-1797)

Biography written by Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham

Robert Graham, the ancestor of R.B. Cunninghame Graham, was the second son of Nicol Graham of Gartmore and Margaret Cunninghame, the daughter of the Earl of Glencairn. For most of his life he was known simply as Robert Graham, and only adopted the name, Cunninghame Graham, near the end of his life when he inherited the estate of Finlaystoun from his uncle. For some years, he used the name of Robert Bontine, when he lived at Ardoch, before the deaths of his elder brother William in 1774 and his father in 1775. RBCG speculates about his boyhood years at Gartmore, but little is in fact known about them, other than he attended Glasgow University, along with William, from the age of fourteen. In 1752, at the age of seventeen, he sailed for Jamaica, where within a year, through family influence, he quickly found a good position as Receiver-General of Taxes, a post he held until 1764. Later he acquired the profitable estate and plantation of Roaring Rock, which laid the foundation of his great fortune. In 1765 he was elected to the Assembly of the Island of Jamaica. In 1764 he married Annie Taylor, from a Scottish family resident in Jamaica, by whom he had about four children, who are hardly mentioned by RBCG in the book. Annie suffered from poor health in Jamaica and in 1770 Robert and his family of wife, one baby daughter and servant Tom, one of his slaves, sailed back to Britain. Robert had spent eighteen years in Jamaica and was still only about thirty-six years of age. He never returned to the West Indies, living in Scotland for the rest of his life.

(Points for possible discussion: (a) similarities between Robert Graham and his descendant, RBCG; (b) Did the fact that he was a young man in Jamaica colour his attitude to slavery and sex?)

Jamaica had been an English colony since the seventeenth century. Before the Treaty of Union, and the Acts of the English and Scots Parliaments that confirmed it, Scottish merchants had been excluded from trade to it and other Caribbean islands. However, after 1707, with the ‘Equivalent’ compensation (bribe) for their losses incurred in the Darien disaster, the Scottish noble and mercantile families, particularly in the West of Scotland, operating out of the Clyde, were able to settle and invest in trading ventures and plantations in such numbers as to make up fully one-third of the (British) inhabitants of the colony. RBCG quotes from Long’s 1774 ‘History of Jamaica’ the fact that there were about 100 Scotsmen bearing the name of Campbell and claiming kinship with the family of Argyll. RB expands extensively upon the impressions that Jamaica should have made upon the young Robert Graham, but unlike his descendant, he seems to have been quite unreceptive to the sights, sounds and smells of Port Royal, the capital. He very soon had a responsible job to do, supervising the taxes and investing in a privateering ship which captured several French vessels and netted Graham some profit. He also witnessed some of the cruelties of a major slave uprising in 1760, when atrocities were committed upon both sides. Robert Graham wrote home to his father, without any noticeable emotion or sentiment, about the burning,

hanging and gibbeting (hanging alive in chains) of the prisoners who were captured in the suppression of the rising. RB himself writes about the episode without any sentiment, but without excusing it or his ancestor's attitude. Indeed, he makes a telling comparison with a contemporary Imperial event, the massacre of the Matabele people carried out in support of Cecil Rhodes' activities in what became Rhodesia ('Fraudesia', as RB called it elsewhere in his writing). The slaves in Jamaica who rebelled were from the group known then as Coromantins, having been shipped from the West African fortress of Fort Koromante, coming from the Ashanti people of what is now Ghana, and being more warlike than some of their African neighbours. It appears that Graham himself was not personally involved in the violence, having been appointed as a aide-de-camp to the Governor. However, he certainly witnessed the punishments that were inflicted.

(Points for discussion: A lot has been written about how Scots, being in some people's eyes historical co-victims of slavery and bondage through the centuries, as enslaved colliers, female farm bondagers, tied cottars, and transported indentured labourers after the Jacobite risings, should be seen as less blameworthy in the vile practices of the African slave trade. Is there any merit in this argument, given the attachment of eighteenth-century Scottish aristocratic and bourgeois families to the Whig Establishment and the Hanoverian succession, and the massive profits they made in the century between the Forty-Five and the abolition of slavery in the Empire? Robert Graham was reckoned to be one of the wealthiest men in Britain. Not that his descendant, RB, saw much of it, as the fortune was largely dissipated by his lifetime.)

RBCG devotes a lot of space in the biography to the question of slavery in Jamaica. He refers to and quotes at some length from Long's "History of Jamaica" about how it was organised and how it was regarded as just another side to the business of making a living. Yet, in fact, RB has comparatively little to say about Graham's own dealings in slaves through buying and selling them and working his plantation at Roaring Rock. The estate papers and correspondence on which so much of the detail in the biography is based must have revealed a lot more than he actually uses and quotes. The main personal involvements of Graham with slaves that RB mentions are to do with individuals, such as Mary, of whose qualities he speaks favourably, other than that she talked too much. Probably this was why he disposed of her by sale to a friend. This suggests that their relationship was closer than with the usual kind of servant. He admits in another letter of 1760 (before his marriage) to "a dissipated train of whoring, the consequence of which is I now daily see before me in a motley variegated race of different complexions." So he clearly had sexual relations with both slaves and white women and fathered several children. However, the only such child he acknowledges is "a Younker by the white girl, who formerly lived with me", whose education and upbringing in Britain he took pains to arrange, without ever mentioning his name. He mentions other slaves by name, especially when he was disposing of personal servants on the eve of his return to Britain, giving them good references to future employers. RB speculates that, like other Britons in Jamaica, he may have manumitted them from slave status. One servant, Tom, accompanied the Graham family back to Britain, lived the rest of his life at Gartmore and is buried in the family graveyard. However, in references to his slave-owning activities, Graham is more interested in their monetary value and whether he was making a profit. Thus he was practically concerned about their health and basic humane treatment. It is legitimate to speculate whether RB was seeking to present his ancestor in a good light while still operating within an inhumane and exploitative environment. My own feeling is that if Robert Graham had been a cruel or heartless slave-owner, RB's radical and socialist principles would have driven him to signal it in some way. The worst he says about his ancestor is that he lived within a less sentimental and hypocritical age and never sought to be at odds with his fellow-planters.

(In the light of current controversy about Scottish involvement in the slave trade, and in particular the reputation of Viscount Dundas, with whom Graham was later associated in Parliament, to what extent do we feel inclined to blame Robert Graham as a slave-owning planter who set up his family with great wealth from the profits in sugar and rum earned by forced African labour? RBCG himself never expresses any family guilt, despite his political stance.)

On his return from Jamaica, Robert Graham's personal and family life followed a typical pattern for a wealthy Scottish landowner, even including a fondness for dabbling in the writing of verse. He wrote quite a lot of poetry, the most famous example of which was "If doughty deeds my ladye please". This was the poem, written in a rather archaic Scottish Cavalier style, reminiscent of the Marquis of Montrose, another Graham, which gave him his (perhaps ironical) nickname, "Doughty Deeds". His verse was praised by Robert Burns himself, but Burns was perhaps not totally impartial since he owed much to the patronage and support of Robert Graham's uncle, James, Earl of Glencairn. Doughty deeds were not ever part of Graham's life, either in Jamaica or back home in Scotland. He maintained an interest in politics, and advocated reform and civil liberties, but he entered Parliament as MP for Stirling only in 1795, late in his life, losing his seat a year later. He was Rector of Glasgow University from 1785-87 and instituted the Gartmore Gold Medal to encourage the study and knowledge of 'Political Liberty'. Most of his time was spent in the affairs of his estates, improving the houses of Ardoch and Gartmore, and nursing his increasing poor health, including gout. In 1780, his wife Annie died, after years of ill health. She had borne him three more children. In 1786, Robert Graham, at the age of 50, ventured upon a second marriage, to a woman half his age, but it was a disaster, resulting in separation and divorce after only a year. RB does not even mention her name in the biography. After the death in 1796 of John, Earl of Glencairn, another of his mother's brothers, he inherited Finlaystoun and became a Cunninghame Graham. Robert Cunninghame Graham died in 1797 and is buried at Gartmore.

(What is our opinion of Robert Graham of Gartmore? Does his life really merit a full biography, or is it the Jamaica and slavery connections that give it its only interest?)

In his Preface to "Doughty Deeds", which he wrote at Ardoch, after losing the house of Gartmore, RBCG refers to the similarities he perceived between himself and his ancestor, Robert Graham, in their experiences both in the New World and in the District of Menteith. Perhaps this was one of his reasons for writing the biography. Whether he thought he was fulfilling a family duty in the task is rather doubtful, since there were probably more ancestors with more interesting lives to choose from. Certainly he had the necessary source material ready to hand, in the Cunninghame Graham estate papers and the letters of his ancestor. Probably RB saw "Doughty Deeds" as an easy task, compared with one of his Latin American histories or biographies, something that would not entail much travel or research in distant archives. There is an impression, however, of a rather hasty and slapdash approach to the topic. There is a lot of padding in the book: lengthy quotation and reference using letters and Long's "History of Jamaica", appendices not directly relevant to Robert Graham's life, and colourful background writing about life in the Highlands and evocative descriptions of landscape in Scotland and Jamaica. RB's characteristic fragmentary paragraph construction is much in evidence. Overall, the book is a bit of a curate's egg, good in parts. Whether it would have any significance as a work reprinted on its own within a Cunninghame Graham series is doubtful. I feel it is not to be regarded as one of RBCG's major works.

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