

Conor Mark Jameson – RBCG's friendship with William Henry Hudson (transcript)

I'll crack on about Graham and Hudson, for all your radical solutions. Just a quick bit about me. You'll hopefully tell from my accent that I've retained, that I'm from these parts. In fact, I studied here and lived here one time but now I'm an economic migrant, so for my sins, I live in Norfolk and as fate would have it, this is the view from the window of my home and this is the church in which Jamie's great grandfather [RBCG's brother] was married to the vicar's daughter!

So, why am I here? Well, I think it's because I've written this biography [Finding W. H. Hudson]. There's a few copies here. It was through Mr Hudson that I came to know Cunningham Graham.

How I met Mr Hudson: for 25 years I worked at the RSPB's headquarters at Sandy in Bedfordshire, in this late Victorian house that it's occupied since the early 1960s. In the main meeting room there, above the fireplace, is a portrait of the man, Mr Hudson. He had always been there, like a sort of ancestor, this family member about whom very little is ever really said. I was never sure whether there might be a skeleton in the closet and it was better not to go there. But I found myself getting to know him through researching one of my other books and as tends to be the way, the more you find out about somebody, the more fascinated you become.

Why don't I know more about this guy, why is he forgotten? Particularly in the context of conservation, given the importance of his contribution to the modern conservation movement. I got very embroiled in his letters in particular, many of which ended up in America and were very helpfully transcribed a few years ago meaning I didn't have to decode his scrawls. The letters are held in Texas. But he also had many of his letters published – letters that he wrote to his friends – immediately after he died. Cunningham Graham kept his letters and these were published five years after Cunningham Graham passed away in 1936, so that's been a rich source. Only 250 copies of this book were produced in America, so they're not well known and it's expensive to buy them. Luckily, I was able to borrow one from Joe Farrell, he bought his for \$175 in Australia a few years ago. I saw one online for £150, I bid 10. But anyway, that's a wee background on the long running friendship between these two men. *There are these nice sketches as well as a wee sample of Hudson's writing.*

They met around 1890, a very pivotal time in the life of Cunningham Graham, all sorts of things going on then, that we've just heard about. He was in the middle of his time as an MP, starting to think about forming the Liberal Party and all these things going on in America that we heard about from James, when he was about 28. It was around this time that Hudson was trying to break through as an author with a sort of biographical novel based on his adventures in South America. Graham

picked up on Hudson's writing, as he would do, with anyone who interested him. He wrote to Hudson, and was very pleased to immediately get a reply.

I'll tell you a bit about Hudson's background and why these two men became so close. You might imagine, as I had for years, that this portrait of this chap in his wool suit in a Hampshire woodland was probably a typical collector naturalist of that era. Probably the owner of a big house like The Lodge, but nothing could be farther from the truth. *Hudson was actually born here*, in what looks like a derelict farm outbuilding. And what's more, it's not here, it's on the Pampas of South America. Immediately the plot thickens and I was drawn in, intrigued. As his dear friend, the young World War One poet, Edward Thomas, very neatly put it, 'Mr Hudson began by doing a very eccentric thing for an English naturalist – he was born in South America'.

I studied ecology for a time at the uni just up the road here and then I switched to film, media, English and education, in order I guess to become a science communicator. I'm a bit of a frustrated filmmaker, and it always intrigued me so I was pleased that this theme came up this morning already, about how we tell these stories to engage more people. We're really great at telling the stories of baddies and outlaws like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, for example, but we're not so great at telling the stories of heroes, both male and female. *What would Hollywood do...?* Pale Rider anyone?

This fits for me because this is what Hudson did. In a sense he rides out on the western horizon on a mission to right some wrongs, much like Eastwood does in many of his movies, as *The Man with No Name*. But not only in this movie that he himself produced, but also across the classic spaghetti westerns. And who would play Don Roberto? I've been toying with a few ways of how we might frame this whole thing – *High Plains Twitcher*, anyone? We have to think about how we tell these stories. It's not enough to just have someone's great life in which loads of interesting things happened and they were a nice person. Where's the drama?

Hudson was a great storyteller too in a more traditional, classical long form style. One of his early novels was long forgotten, not helped by the fact he published it anonymously. A futuristic dystopian vision of the world, called *A Crystal Age*. It's worth looking out for, but a bit weird. Like Don Roberto, Hudson remains revered, and renowned and famous in Argentina. This is actually a still from a movie made in 1978, in Argentina, about his boyhood. A momentous year in Argentina, and not just because Scotland went there to win the World Cup! But that's another story...

Hudson had this kind of idyllic childhood – imagine *Little House on the Prairie* meets the *Waltons*. He was a middle child of six siblings and never had to go to school and never once had formal schooling. But he was by no means illiterate. His North American parents had a very well stocked bookcase so his young

imagination was fed by poets like James Thompson, and the naturalist Gilbert White. But then as a young adult, he lived a gaucho life. There's a bit of a gap in the fossil record of Hudson's life, there's quite a lot of mystery surrounding exactly what he was up to during these years. But getting to know Cunningham Graham in the early 1890s, they would have compared notes on their backgrounds. There's a nice overlapping of their lives in terms of location. Hudson was in Argentina until he was nearly 33. And then obviously Graham was there, doing his adventuring as a young man over a period of years.

Hudson arrived in Britain in 1874, on this little boat, to seek his fortune in a sense. In his ancestral homeland, he had English and Irish ancestry via North America so he tells a great story of global migration coming full circle and he comes back to London. Just incidentally, because we're in Scotland, I'll mention that soon after he got to Britain, he made an excursion North to stay at Lamington House, in Lanarkshire. The house is long gone now, but he went there, for some reason. He didn't have an awful lot to say about why he went but I suspect he arrived during the grouse shooting season in August, the guest of the organisers, and didn't have a great time. That wasn't really his thing.

He had to get down to business. For a long time, he was collaborating by letter with the Zoological Society of London. *This is its head Philip Sclater*, a very eminent and important ornithologist, and they were collaborating on a two volume Argentine ornithology. Hudson had provided all the new specimens, knowledge and descriptions. He was an incredible observer of nature, and a describer of nature: birdsongs, behaviour etc. And so they collaborated over the years on this project but didn't get on at all well. Hudson didn't suffer fools gladly and quickly realised that he was a bit of a fish out of water. He had no education and these guys basically looked down their noses at him. *But they did eventually produce this*, around the time he was meeting Don Roberto. But by this time, he'd already fallen out with Darwin calling him out over mistakes that he had made about bird behaviour in *The Origin of Species*.

Hudson wasn't a great networker and his conservation career didn't get off to a great start. The tin lid was put on it when he fell out with bird artist John Gould, who just wanted to show him his prized collection of 5000 stuffed and mounted hummingbirds dangling on wires. Hudson was revolted by this and stormed out. He'd known these birds, of course, in all their living glory, this is what made Hudson tick. *He arrived here*, an outsider and he was able to see us for what we are. He didn't like it and he wasn't afraid to say so as he had no position or reputation to defend. He was countercultural. This is the thing that's fascinating about how he then went on to achieve what he achieved.

He had to get a job as he was running out of money and took an office job, which didn't go well as he nearly throttled the fella he was employed by because he didn't

have any money to pay him. He ends up sleeping rough in Hyde Park – hello, Hollywood. Actually, that sounds pretty bad. But he was so used to sleeping out under the stars with his head on a saddle that it was probably no big deal to him. But you would probably have had to end his adventure here prematurely, had he not met Emily Wingrave, the woman he married. A much older lady who was running boarding houses, *this isn't her, don't get too attached*. There is no surviving photograph of her. This is Adelina Patti, a famous opera singer. I show you this because Emily had been an opera singer in an earlier life but was now teaching music as well as running boarding houses. They would sing songs around the piano in their various houses in southwest London. *That's not them either, it does look a bit like Morley Roberts, and has mutual friends with Don Roberto*. They really struggled for 10 years. Difficult, impoverished, grinding years that again, he didn't have much to say about, and didn't like to be reminded of. But they were saved when she inherited the house.

The big turning point for Hudson is when he meets the women who go on to found the RSPB, and he's the only man in the room. This really is Emily Williamson, the founder of the Society for the Protection of Birds. And that's Etta Lemon, another founder. I'm sorry I've not got time to tell you more about them. The Duchess of Portland here was the president and she had the ear of Princess Alexandra and therefore the ability to get stuff done in high places. The main focus of the organisation is to end the vast global multimillion dollar plumage industry. These women are taking on the world, while the men in their clubs are twiddling their moustaches and admiring their egg collections.

I think it's absolutely fascinating that Hudson was the only man in this context. To have been a fly on the wall while this six foot three, hairy gaucho fella is sitting there... That he'd want to be there, but that they'd also like to have him there, is absolutely fascinating. They put him to good use writing the brochures and pamphlets, such as *Lost British Birds*. I discovered that for all his bravery and ruggedness, Hudson had what today we might call social anxiety. They made him the chairman but it quickly becomes apparent that that wasn't a good idea. He can't do the fine dining thing nor can he speak on a public platform and he never once does. He resigns that position to concentrate on his books, but he remains involved with the campaigns to the end of his life.

He becomes great friends with Missy Bontine, Don Roberto's mother, who obviously takes a shine to him as well, as people who he allowed to get to know him invariably did. He was always very resistant to that sort of thing and took time to overcome his shyness. He would meet Don Roberto and George Bernard Shaw, and Morley Roberts at the Cafe Royal – that's *recorded through these letters*. And this is *HH Champion*, and *Shaw at that time*. Morley Roberts published the first biography of Hudson immediately after his death, and again, was a mutual friend with Don Roberto. In the mid-1890s, Don Roberto and Gabriela were inviting Hudson to

come up to Gartmore. I'd love to think that Hudson went, but I don't think he did. Even though they were trying to lure him with the promise of Capercaillies there, and he was *really* tempted. He was ten years older than Don Roberto.

Don Roberto was ending his active political career, as an MP certainly, in helping and getting involved with more of the writing and Hudson was really helping and encouraging him. Hudson could always be relied on for a candid, unvarnished view. And I think that's one of the things his friends really valued about him, his dead honesty. Which brings us back to that thing about veracity. I love discovering that the two of them spearheaded a campaign to save albatrosses at the turn of the century. *And I brought a couple of magazines if you want to read the whole piece.* Hudson was brilliant at writing stinging letters that The Times were only too happy to publish and would cause a great deal of ripples. He was an earlier user of the media to follow the causes that they were pursuing.

We've heard about the literary group too. At the turn of the century, Hudson, despite himself, gets drawn into the literary circle. *This is a precious rare photograph of him on a Soho street outside the Mont Blanc restaurant where these guys would meet. That's Morley Roberts.* I think occasionally Graham was there which is mentioned in letters. but I think he was just *too busy to be a regular.* And this is, of course, Garnet, who we'll hear more about from Helen. Garnet is the literary genius who could hone and mentor writers and he drew Hudson into his orbit. There's a quote - he basically describes how he knew all these people, but it was Hudson's personality that fascinated him the most. "No man's personality ever intrigued me more than Hudson." There's something about Hudson, I can't claim that I've quite put my finger on it. Here's Conrad, who we're obviously going to hear more about as well and there's oft repeated quotes in which Hudson said, that Conrad said of Hudson's writing. "it's like how the good Lord made the grass to grow." I'm not a literary critic but the genius of Hudson's writing was its simplicity. It's just very seductive. But his real forte was nature writing. He and Don Roberto dedicated books to each other.

Hudson was adopted by Sir Edward Grey and his wife Lady Dorothy Grey, rising liberal politician. Grey thought the world of him as a man and as an author. Hudson was invited to William Rothenstein's Hampstead studio where Graham also sat for portraits. They also both befriended T.E. Lawrence and Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet. Hudson continued to turn out books about his Argentine past. *That's the plaque on the wall in Soho.* Neither Graham nor Hudson make it to the final cut and in 1904 Hudson's money shows up with his best selling novel Green Mansions. Gabriella wrote this amazing review of it in the Saturday Review, which really helped it along. He must have met Gabriela? He describes how that portrait didn't capture the inner sadness of her. *We know all about this. So I haven't time to dwell on the quotes.* But you know, I picked out some of the nice selected quotes from letters. Hudson became very close friends with Edward Thomas, the young, rising writer.

World War One came, *here's Sir Edward Graham in thick of it as Foreign Secretary. He announced it to the nation.* Thomas was lost in 1917 on the Western Front. Hudson became ill and had visions of his childhood during a fever in hospital and wrote his memoir of childhood, *Far away and Long Ago*. A beautiful book, which is where I would start with Hudson if anybody wants to follow up on this. *That's Sir Edward Grey at the funeral of Roosevelt*, who was a big fan of both Graham and Hudson. Hudson wanted everything burned at the end of his life and urged his friends to burn his letters which they mostly ignored, thankfully. He lived just long enough to see the plumage trade banned, which is a good Hollywood ending, and just long enough to see conservationists get together from around the world in London to form an International Alliance.

One of his last letters written was to Don Roberto, sending his love to Missy. And one of the last things he did was write a dedication to a collected anthology of Edward Thomas's poems and met Helen Thomas, the day before he died alone. He'd been on his feet to the end, he lived to 81 when he thought he'd die young as the doctors told him his heart was wrecked.

That's Hudson and his importance to Graham. Graham organised the Hudson memorial in Hyde Park at the end of his life. A massive three year project for which they raised a lot of money. Epstein did the sculpture and the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin came to unveil it in May 1925, so the centenary is next spring. There's a lovely story about how he pulled the sheet off this massive Portland stone sculpture and I think Don Roberto may have been wondering how the Prime Minister might react, we can't be sure, but he probably at least had a grin on his face, because there was a great collective gasp as the sheet fell off and Baldwin did a double take. Epstein had depicted Rima, the heroine from *Green Mansions*, semi naked. Polite society wasn't quite ready for this! A whole campaign (let by the *Daily Mail*) raged for six months to have it removed and Graham defended it to the last and it's still there to this day, so you can have fun finding it as I did. Another Hudson shrine was made by Graham's friend, Daisy Greville, Countess of Warwick, a socialist.

Hudson had published twenty-four volumes by the end of his life from that standing start. He hadn't published anything till he was about 50, so there's some encouragement to those of us in later life, when most people are thinking about retiring... I've been to Argentina, to the Hudson library of Aves Argentina, the BirdLife partner organisation. They took me out of Buenos Aires to Hudson's family home which is beautifully restored and now runs as a wonderful outdoor education centre and a museum with all these wonderful tributes. This is a photo of Tschiffely and Don Roberto. And of course the last thing Don Roberto did was go to find Hudson's boyhood home, which is a wonderful Hollywood, rounded, romantic, touching ending. He wrote that he was coming back on that ship, but when he came back he was of course to be buried at the place where we're going tomorrow. And it's a place I've known and loved since I was a student. You can see

the priory behind and of course the Ospreys are back which Hudson would have loved. . I got married there without even knowing anything about Don Roberto. And that's me as a student looking back, way across the campus, so it's my old stamping ground and it's nice to be here. My nan was actually a Graham so I may be something in line to the Scottish throne, still looking into. What I'll do with it when I get it, I'm not sure, but I'm open to ideas.

Conor Mark Jameson [auto-transcribed from a recording]