James Robertson ~ Don Roberto: a personal response

Let me start with three statements about the subject of our conference today.

Hugh MacDiarmid: 'I valued Cunninghame Graham like rubies. We'll never see his like again.'

Joseph Conrad: 'When I think of you I feel as if I have lived all my life in a dark hole without seeing or knowing anything.'

George Bernard Shaw: 'There are moments when I do not myself believe in his existence. And yet he must be real; for I have seen him with these eyes; and I am one of the few men living who can decipher the curious alphabet in which he writes his private letters.'

Given such praise from such men, why has Robert Bontine Cunninghame-Graham been so neglected in historical memory? That's a question that keeps being asked, most recently by Alan Riach in an article in The National about this conference. Is it because, as his great-great-nephew Jamie Jauncey suggests, Don Roberto's life was 'too rich, too multifarious to be grasped in the round by a 21st-century society focused on careerism and narrow specialisms'? That may be one reason, but the amnesia set in decades ago, in the middle of the last century when plenty of other 'characters' of his kind, who had done many remarkable and adventurous things, including living through a couple of world wars, were thick on the ground.

I think RBCG became forgotten because, despite his aristocratic heritage and the social connections that came with it, he was always an outsider, a misfit, a spurner of convention, a troublemaker. Difficult to ignore when he was alive, it was convenient to bury him as an irritant, a wayward eccentric, once he was dead. One reason for this was, I think, political. Of all the cranky, absurd principles he refused to renounce, his belief that Scotland should once again be an independent country was, for many, the crankiest and most absurd, especially in the three decades between his death in 1936 and Winnie Ewing's by-election victory at Hamilton in 1967 for the SNP (the party whose first President was CG). That was a period which saw both the dismantling of the British Empire and the highpoint of Unionism. The imperial sunset faded slowly, sometimes with violent bursts of colour, but the vivid, recent memory

of a country united in the battle to defeat Nazi Germany, together with the present reality of the establishment of the welfare state, to a great extent compensated for the Empire's end. To bang the drum for the cause of Scottish independence in those decades was to proclaim yourself a kind of political lunatic, and if you were already dead, then no matter how charismatic you had been in life your reputation was unlikely to escape the taint of this particular strand of insanity.

And furthermore, in the years after the Second World War much of the welfare state and nationalised infrastructure that a socialist and democrat like RBCG had campaigned and argued for was established by Attlee's Labour Government. Keynesian economic intervention, decent council housing, workers' rights, the National Health Service − all these were tolerated, sustained and even expanded upon by the Conservative governments that followed. The so-called one-nation Conservatism espoused by Tory leaders Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan and Ted Heath would not be overturned until the Thatcherite revolution in the party from the mid-70s onward. In these circumstances, it's hardly surprising that Scottish nationalism seemed to most people a slightly charming but fundamentally nostalgic and impractical character flaw, and attached to it was a simple, rhetorical question, 'Why?'

So, largely forgotten as he was, for many of us our first encounter with Don Roberto was probably by chance. The first time I came upon him was in the 1980s, through a much-anthologised short story of his. This story regularly appeared in those mid-20th century selections of Scottish stories from which, often enough, women writers were largely, sometimes entirely, absent, much as they were not supposed to be found in pubs: times do change, thank goodness. It's called 'Beattock for Moffat', and it made me uncomfortable, and still does, despite some fine observations and passages. The Borderer dying of consumption is on the train from London, where he has lived for years, desperate to get back to his own Moffat hills. He is accompanied by his Cockney wife, and by his brother who has had to leave off important farming tasks to come south for him. But the brother is something of a stereotype, all dour Calvinism, sentimental patriotism and hammed-up Scots language; and the wife, well, RBCG is quite dismissive of her thinness of mind and of body: 'Her heaven a music-'all, her paradise to see the King drive through the streets, her literary pleasure to read lies in newspapers, or pore on novelettes'; she is tearful and helpless and has probably been bullied by the invalid,

Andra, all through their marriage. And yet, even as he swats at her, CG can't help being sorry for her, acknowledging her loyalty and love for the dying man; and when she tries to cheer him up with thoughts of paradise, 'which she conceived as a sort of music-hall where angels sat with their wings folded, listening to sentimental songs', and Jock, the brother, eyes her 'with great disfavour, as a terrier eyes a rat imprisoned in a cage', and has a go at her for her lack of good religion, Andra intervenes. 'Dae ye no ken,' he tells them both, 'that the Odium-Theologicum is just a curse − pairadise − set ye baith up − pairadise. I dinna even richtly ken if I can last as far as Beattock.'

And so my first experience of RBCG was through reading this story, what one critic described as his 'famous trip into the Clan McCabre country', and my understanding was therefore that he must be primarily a writer of short fiction. How little did I know! Fiction was almost an afterthought in the crowded and physically active outdoor life he lived.

My second, more extended encounter with CG came in the mid-1990s when I was co-compiling a *Dictionary of Scottish Quotations*. I realised that CG was a rich source for such a book: not only had he made comments and speeches on a very wide range of topics but he was also a master of rhetorical style, the flamboyance of some of his utterances and writings easily matching his romantic, dashing appearance. Here are a few of his pithier remarks, some of them captured secondhand by his friend and biographer, the almost equally dashing and not always entirely reliable A. F. Tschiffley:

Of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, MP for this constituency of Stirling for nearly forty years and Prime Minister for two and a bit, CG said: 'He has all the qualifications for a great Liberal Prime Minister. He wears spats and he has a beautiful set of false teeth.'

'God forbid,' he wrote to former U.S. president Teddy Roosevelt in 1917, 'that I should go to any heaven in which there are no horses.'

'The strife of parties means nothing but the rotation of rascals in office.'

In a similar vein:

'There are only two classes, the genuine and the humbug.'

'The proletarian has no country; all are equally prisons to him alike.'

'Intense vitality is of itself a sort of genius. Genius I mean for life, for most men hardly ever are alive, passing from golf to tennis, and ending up with bridge, till they ascend to join in singing Rule Britannia in the heavenly choirs.'

And here is something slightly longer, which gives an indication of what a forward-thinker CG could be, at a time when many men were absolutely convinced of the superiority of their sex to women. This is from an article he wrote in *The New Age* in 1908:

'My real sympathy is with their social and economic freedom. Almost every institution, economic, social, political and religious (especially religious) is designed, or has become without designing, a means to keep women dependent upon men. A woman will be truly emancipated when she can look a man squarely in the eye and say, "I have done this because it was my pleasure," and the man, looking back at her, will see she is an equal, for in the freedom of the will lies true equality.'

On this and other subjects such as racism, colonialism and imperialism, he was in the vanguard not just of thinkers but of activists.

In 2014, I contributed to a project at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery called *Dear Scotland*, in which writers were invited to compose a letter to present-day Scotland (in the run-up to the referendum of that year) in the guise of somebody represented in the gallery. I chose RBCG, in the form of the bronze of him made by Jacob Epstein in 1923 and purchased by the Gallery in 1938, two years after CG's death. This is part of what I wrote:

> I speak to you not as an aristocrat nor as a socialist nor as a democrat, although I am all three. God forbid that I should rank myself above anyone because of the chance circumstances of my birth and lineage. As for my political ideals, I did not inherit them but fashioned them from observation and experience. It is as a human being that I address you. And as a Scot – it is possible to be both. You may suspect me of being an

impostor – too quixotic, too lean, brown and foreign-looking to be truly Scottish – but I am as true as we come: I am thrawn, romantic, disputatious and energetic, but more than these I suffer from an incurable addiction to fair play. And so, I am sure, despite your suspicions, do you.

My life has been one continuous adventure, usually on horseback, from the pampas of Argentina to the deserts of Morocco. I have been a rancher, horse-breaker, fencing master, had my head broken by a policeman in Trafalgar Square, and spent six weeks in prison for the crime of protesting against unemployment. I was a Liberal Member of Parliament but left that party to help found the Scottish Labour Party. Years later I helped found the Scottish National Party and was its first ever president. These were not the flittings of an unprincipled opportunist. Yes, I moved with the times, but my principles did not change. I have always opposed the forces of big money and imperialism, and argued for freedom, fair wages and an eight-hour working day. My belief in Scottish independence stems not from anti-English sentiment, but from a desire to see the true potential of my country realised.

Progress was not something welcomed uncritically by CG. As so often in his thinking, it depended what kind of progress you meant. Back to my impersonation of him:

Long ago, my ranch in Texas was attacked by Apaches. They drove off my entire stock and burnt the place to the ground. Ruinous though this was to me, my sympathies lay with the Indians. They were defending their way of life. They mistrusted and resisted progress, and with good reason, for progress, whatever humbug its lawyers and ministers preached, always meant to destroy them. *Conform or die* has ever been the byword of progress.

To justify this vicious creed we, the civilised white folks of the world, developed a special way of looking at inferior races. Apaches, Malays, Japanese, Chinese, Turks, and all the peoples of the continent of Africa – we had the arrogance to grade them according to our own scale of

> merit, but the one chief characteristic they shared was their difference from ourselves. To some we might grant rights, if they accepted our ideas of faith, matrimony and property – if they were rich, and washed, rode bicycles, and gambled on the Stock Exchange. If they were poor, or ventured to object to progress, then they had no rights, and everything they thought was theirs was forfeited and became ours.

That last part I lifted, in slightly altered form from Don Roberto's excoriating satire of 1899, in which he blasts the self-righteous, ignorant, entitled, barbaric version of civilisation which he believed was the signature of imperialism in general and of the British Empire in particular. The epithet he chose for the title of that piece is *Niggers*, and he chose it because, offensive then as it is now, it was a word then widely used, usually without incurring censure. With wicked irony he turns it as a weapon against the perpetrators and oppressors: it turns out that by a process of Christian/Darwinian evolution the only race not included in that term is 'the Celto-Saxon race' which 'through the mist of time 'emerged from heathendom and woad, and in the fulness of the Creator's pleasure, became the tweed-clad Englishman'. 'Much of the earth was his, and in the skies he had his mansion ready, well aired, with every appliance known to modern sanitary science waiting for him, and a large Bible on the chest of drawers in every room.…Races, as different from his own as a rabbit from an elephant, were ruled by tweed-clad satraps expedited from the public schools, the universities, or were administered by the dried fruits culled from the Imperial Bar.'

Again, so much of what CG had to say still has relevance to where we are today.

I want to turn now to another aspect, already hinted at, of his appeal to me. When I was growing up I developed a massive interest, you could call it an infatuation, with the culture and history of North American Indians or native or first-nation people according to more recent terminology. I had a particular interest, fed no doubt by the comics, movies and TV series of my childhood, in the fate of the tribes of the Great Plains in the second half of the 19th century as their way of life was destroyed by the arrival of millions of white settlers, ranchers, farmers and migrants heading for the west coast. The dreadful last act of this clash between two cultures took place at Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge Sioux reservation in South Dakota on 29th December 1890,

when the U.S. 7th Cavalry surrounded a camp of Miniconjou Sioux and opened fire on them, killing as many as 300 men, women and children of a total of 350. For a while this event was called a battle, but is now referred to, correctly, as a massacre.

In the build-up to this awful event there was much anxiety among the local white population on account of the Ghost Dance religion which had swept through many reservations across the Western United States, and which was said to be a prelude to a general Indian uprising. The Indians were dancing to raise the ghosts of their ancestors, who would return from the dead, as would the buffalo and other game on which tribal life depended, and which had been slaughtered almost to extinction by the whites. One Sioux interpretation of what the Ghost Dance signified went as follows:

> The people [were told] they could dance a new world into being. There would be landslides, earthquakes, and big winds. Hills would pile up on each other. The earth would roll up like a carpet with all the white man's ugly things – the stinking new animals, sheep and pigs, the fences, the telegraph poles, the mines and factories. Underneath would be the wonderful old-new world as it had been before the white fat-takers came. ...The white men will be rolled up, disappear, go back to their own continent.

You can see how such a desperate, hopeful − if ultimately impossible − vision could spread through a population that had been so utterly reduced by the overwhelming numbers and power of the invaders.

The horror and tragedy of this whole genocidal episode, which brought to an end the violent conquest of North America although not the continued destruction of its first peoples by other means, had long fascinated me. It was therefore amazing to come across three letters, written by CG and published in the Daily Graphic on 29th November 1890, 22nd December 1890 and 5th January 1891, in which he keeps up a running commentary on the events happening five thousand miles away in South Dakota. To read these letters, written in real time as CG digested the news brought by telegraph, was an extraordinary experience to me. He was not an eye witness but he knew enough of what he was writing about to give trenchant commentary. 'I speak,' he says in the second letter, 'not as a sentimentalist… but as one who has

passed many a night staring into the darkness watching his horses when Indians were about.' A few brief excerpts:

1. I wonder if the British public realises that it is the Sioux themselves who are the ghosts dancing. Ghosts of a primeval race. Ghosts of ghosts who for three hundred years, through no crimes committed by themselves (except that of being born) … have suffered their long purgatory. The Messiah these poor people are waiting for, our poor people here in London also look for. But both will look in vain. Justice will not come either to Cherry Creek, no, nor yet to Whitechapel. The buffalo have gone first, their bones whitening in long lines upon the prairies, the elk have retired into the extreme deserts of Oregon, the beaver is exterminated to make jackets for the sweater's wife, and the Indians must go next, and why not, pray? Is he not of less value than the other three?
2. This I want the world to recognise, that even Indians do not contemplate their own extermination without centuries of suffering. We might have taught them something, they might have taught us much, soon they will be forgotten, and the lying telegrams will speak of 'glorious victories by our troops'. Once more sin will be committed in the name of progress.
3. Those who are loudest now (the settlers in Dakota) for the final extermination of the Sioux fail to grasp that, when Dakota is all settled, they themselves will in the main become as dependent on the capitalists as the Indians now are on the United States Government, and that the precedent of rigorous measures with the starving Indians will be used against themselves.

In the last letter, written a week after the events at Wounded Knee, CG opens with an ironic discussion wondering why Indian attacks are called 'bloody massacres' or 'treacherous ambuscades' whilst the assaults of white troops are invariably described as 'glorious victories'. He then moves on to assess what really happened on the Pine Ridge Reservation. And he concludes with these words, which regrettably are absolutely relevant to what we read and see in the news every day, whether the news comes from Ukraine, Sudan or Gaza:

> Soon, I suppose, we shall hear of some more glorious victories of the same kind, and then the ghost dancers can all dance together in some

other world, where we may hope there may be neither Gatlings nor any other of the pillars of civilisation to annoy them.

Don Roberto came back to the issue of the plight of native Americans in a short story published ten years later, in 1899. Called 'A Hegira', it tells of a group of eight Apaches, held prisoner in Mexico City, who break out and begin the long trek back to their home hundreds of miles to the north. In case you haven't read this powerful story, I won't tell you if they make it. But if you haven't, please search it out. It is easily accessible online on the ASL website, in 'Three Stories' edited by Jenni Calder which also contains 'Beattock for Moffat' and 'The Gold Fish'.

I talked earlier about Don Roberto being touched by the lunacy of being in favour of Scotland's independence at a time when almost nobody else was, and that this may have been one powerful reason for his fall from public view. He fell into that early grouping of Scottish Eccentrics, Uncanny Scots or Drunk Men Looking at Thistles (I am adapting the titles of three of Hugh MacDiarmid's books here, to illustrate the point) who, as John MacCormick once observed of MacDiarmid, might have been great eccentrics, poets, drinkers, idealists or wild adventurers, but could also be seen as 'the greatest handicaps with which any national movement could have been burdened' and 'sufficient excuse to condemn the whole case for Home Rule out of hand'.

CG was nobody's idea of what a Scottish Nationalist should look like or how one should behave. A 'narrow nationalist' he was not. He was the very antithesis of those overcooked Scotsmen he depicts in the railway carriage in 'Beattock for Moffat'; the very antithesis of the kind of unreal Scot he derided in his story of 1899, 'A Survival', as the product of the Kailyard school of Scottish writing of the late 19th century:

> Today a Scotchman stands confessed a sentimental fool, a canting cheat, a grave, sententious man, dressed in a 'stan o' black', oppressed with the tremendous difficulties of the jargon he is bound to speak, and above all being weighed down with the responsibility of being Scotch. I know he prays to Gladstone and to Jehovah turn about, finds his amusement in comparing preachers, can read and write and cypher, buys newspapers, tells stories about ministers, fornicates gravely, but without conviction, and generally disports himself after a fashion which would land a more

imaginative and less practically constituted man within the precincts of a lunatic asylum before a week was out.

There is the lunatic asylum looming again − and let's not forget that Robert's own father Willy had been declared insane, when Robert was only 15, and had spent the last 16 years of his life effectively incarcerated. But one of the fascinating things about Robert's writing is that it is layered in irony, so that one is not always quite sure, especially when he turns to fiction, what he is mocking and where his sympathies truly lie. Despite this, a vein of honesty runs unbroken through everything he writes. If he disliked humbug in others, he certainly didn't tolerate it in himself, which sometimes got him into trouble: more than once he spoke or acted before he thought, and then would not or could not retreat. Yet Jamie Jauncey has written that one of the reasons why he came to admire him was his essential kindness, and that is a quality beyond measure. Here is what another writer recorded of him on meeting him in 1931:

> 'White hair, striking profile, thin face, beautiful hands forever moving, a neat braced figure, courteous, charming − or, rather, an aristocratic grace, taut, ever ready. One can see the horseman, the head up, the eyes to the plain − like a seaman's. And the free gesture − adequate and unconscious.'

That writer was Neil Gunn, then deeply involved in the National Party of Scotland, and beginning to make a name for himself as a writer. There was another pro-independence party then too, the Scottish Party. The two parties would combine in1934 to form the SNP, but before that happened there was rivalry between them and it became necessary, in May 1933, for a meeting to be held to sort things out. So let me read to you, in conclusion for now, what happened, because I think it is a story that tells us much about the kind of man RBCG was. Remember, in May 1933 Don Roberto turned 81, while Neil Gunn was half his age at 41, very shy and not fond of being in the spotlight. This is what happened.

> A strong, disinterested and symbolic figure was needed to chair the meeting. Neil the diplomat was sent to ask Cunninghame Graham to serve. 'He had a big house on the Clyde,' reminisced Neil to Pick and

Hart [his biographers]. 'I went to the door and a maid came. She asked me name and went away. When she came back she asked, 'What is it about?' I gave a brief message and eventually I was asked in. Cunninghame Graham had someone with him, and they were sitting by the fire. He gestured me to a chair by the door. Then evidently he thought about my name, for he asked, 'Are you by any chance related to Neil Gunn the writer?' 'Yes, I am Neil Gunn.' He jumped up, shook hands and showed me to his chair by the fire. I delivered myself quite simply and clearly of an account of our situation…As we talked, Graham poked a leaf with his stick, elegantly like a dueller. He agreed to chair the meeting and walked back with me to my car.'

Caught in traffic, Neil arrived late for the meeting at the St Enoch's hotel in Glasgow. He was upset and nervous. Graham took him to an ante-room. 'Now don't worry,' he said, 'everything will go smoothly. Here. Can you do this?' and he seized a straight chair and by his powerful wrists brought it up at arm's length with its back parallel to the floor.' Neil did the same. 'Keir Hardie couldn't do that,' said Graham. And the shy diplomat was ready.'
(From *Neil M. Gunn, A Highland Life* by J.B. Pick & F.R. Hart)