

A BRAZILIAN MYSTIC

A Brazilian Mystic, being the Life and Miracles of Antonio Conselheiro, Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, 1920

La Guerra del fin del mundo (The War of the End of the World), Mario Vargas Llosa, 1981, translated 1984.

For many years I have been an admirer of the novels of the distinguished Peruvian writer and Nobel Prizewinner, Mario Vargas Llosa. Recently I bought from Amazon a novel which I mistakenly thought was his latest publication, “The War of the End of the World”. When I received it, I was surprised to find firstly that it was in fact a novel first published back in 1981, forty years ago, and secondly that it was a story with which I was familiar. A cursory flip through the 750 (exactly) pages of the English translation revealed that it was the story of the life and death of the late nineteenth-century Brazilian religious leader and dissident, Antônio Mendes Maciel, known as Antônio Conselheiro (Counsellor), who disturbed the authorities of the newly-established Brazilian Republic in the 1890s so much that they had to mount four military expeditions into the north-eastern province of Bahia before he could finally be defeated. How had I come to be already familiar with this figure of the past in a far-distant land?

Some years ago, when I was working with several other enthusiasts on the editing and republication of the Stories and Sketches of Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, I rapidly read several of his longer prose works, mainly histories and biographies relating to South America. One of them was a biography of Antonio Conselheiro, “A Brazilian Mystic”, written just after the First World War and published in 1920. (In this essay, I am following Graham in omitting the circumflex from ‘Antonio’) The circumstances of its choice as a subject by Graham and the influences upon him at the time which probably coloured his treatment are matters which I shall explore in this essay. When I realised what I was revisiting, I decided to go back to Graham’s own treatment, which I knew was considerably shorter than Vargas Llosa’s novel. The copy that I had read years ago was no longer available, being a first edition, now located in the Cunninghame Graham archive in the Stirling Smith Museum. Accordingly I ordered a reprint copy from Amazon, which appeared as an attractive black and gold paperback photographic reproduction, a mere 238 pages. It did not take me long to read, this time more attentively, and the experience was a pleasurable one, harrowing though the subject is at times. Graham writes a direct and straightforward narrative of events, sprinkled with personal allusions from his own knowledge of South America, Scottish references and evocative descriptions of the landscape and way of life.

The book is made up of nineteen chapters, with an elegant personal Preface and an informative Introduction to the topographical, historical and religious background. The main body of the book treats the early life and career of Antonio Maciel; how he became an itinerant and supposedly miracle-working preacher who found a mission as the leader of a cult promoting a new society in opposition to the Brazilian Republic; and how his ‘revolt’ ended in bloody defeat and repression. It is not a pretty story and Graham writes it realistically without sentiment but also without recourse to sensationalism. The reader can feel that, despite Graham’s

characteristically bleak awareness of human cruelty and suffering, there is a basic deep sympathy for the poor and deluded inhabitants of a harsh undeveloped natural environment.

Brazil is an immense country embracing within its boundaries a multitude of different terrains and habitats, from the greatest river system on earth to barren and semi-arid regions. In the North-East of the country, south of the Amazon, lies the province of Bahia, which, in the late nineteenth century, was a poor rural region with a subsistence economy, populated mainly by people of mixed origin, mainly Indians and African former slaves (freed in Brazil by a law of 1888). A significant area of the region was known as 'O Sertão', the 'backland', of which the nearest equivalent in English would be the 'outback', as in Australia. It was a perfect breeding ground for extremism, notably in religion, and it was here that Antonio Mendes Maciel found his vocation as wandering preacher and prophet, gaining an increasing following of oppressed and hopeless people, some of them armed and violent, lawless in nature. Now known as 'Conselheiro', Antonio moved about constantly, rebuilding churches, seeming to work miracles, and preaching about the coming end of the existing order of society. His teachings took on an increasingly Messianic quality, influenced by the widespread belief in millenarian cults and superstitions about an end-of-century apocalypse. As Antonio's following and fame grew, he determined to establish his base of operations at a spot far from other settlements, where he could build a new Zion. In 1893 he arrived at Canudos, far in the interior of Bahia. Canudos was an old ruined 'fazenda', or ranch, surrounded by a collection of huts. Here he began to build a new settlement. His village of Bello Monte was conceived as a free commune outside the State laws and the moral conventions of society. It grew rapidly, attracting poor people from far and wide, so that within a couple of years Canudos had a population of more than 30,000. Many of the new residents were armed men (Jagunços) with a tendency to violence. Other inhabitants of the region began to feel fear and alarm and looked to the Government for support. It was inevitable that there would be a violent armed clash between Antonio's visionary rabble and the forces of the recently established and insecure Republic of Brazil.

In writing about this, Graham was operating on relatively familiar territory. He had visited Brazil as a young man when, in partnership with a friend, George Mansel, he had undertaken a venture to sell horses bought in Uruguay to the Brazilian Army. This had proved to be uneconomic and they got no further than Cruz Alta in the extreme south of Brazil, before returning by way of Paraguay. Graham's long sketch, "Cruz Alta" ("Thirteen Stories", 1900) is a later account of the venture. Graham maintained an interest in Brazil and Portugal in the years that followed. He was aware of their history and was fluent in Portuguese. In his 1910 story collection, "Hope", he has a story, "A Sebastianist", which deals with the continuing popular belief in Portugal (and also Brazil) that the lost king, Dom Sebastian, killed in battle against the Moors in North Africa ((1578) would return to save Portugal in its hour of need. This is a common folk belief in different countries: its parallel in Britain is the myth that King Arthur is not dead and will return in the future. Sebastianism was an important element in the mission of Antonio Conselheiro, and Graham brings it out strongly in his biography. It certainly rattled the new Republican Government in Rio de Janeiro. In 1889, the Emperor of Brazil, Dom Pedro de Alcantara, had been deposed in a military-led coup, and a republic had been proclaimed. Dom Pedro had retired to exile in Lisbon, and Graham saw him there on his arrival from Brazil in the Clyde-built steamer, "Alagoas" (as he recounts in an article contributed to 'The Labour Elector' in December, 1889, mentioning also that he had seen Dom Pedro some years earlier in Rio de Janeiro). In a sense, therefore, it was fitting that Graham should have found the story of Antonio Conselheiro to be a congenial subject for his pen thirty years later. But how did it come about?

At the beginning of his Preface to "A Brazilian Mystic", Graham indulges in a spectacular piece of name-dropping, when he says that it was President Theodore Roosevelt who first suggested in a letter that he should write about Brazil and its frontiersmen in the same way as he had already written about the Argentine gauchos. Graham had then failed to follow up on the suggestion for several years until he was sailing to Uruguay in 1915 on his wartime mission to buy horses for the British Army. His ship happened to call in at the port of Bahia (Salvador) and while he was admiring the view, a Brazilian friend of his told him about the Conselheiro tragedy, which had happened hardly two hundred miles inland a couple of decades before. Graham's interest was aroused and he later bought the Portuguese books on which he relied while writing his account four or five years later. The most important of these sources was "Os Sertões" (1902) by Euclides da Cunha (later translated as "Rebellion in the Backlands", 1944). Graham's connection with Theodore Roosevelt was, however, not at an end, because Graham wrote to the ex-President in 1917 from Colombia, making a contribution to Roosevelt's fund for a memorial to Buffalo Bill Cody and commenting on their shared interest in the Native American peoples. Teddy Roosevelt died in 1919 and that may have been a spur to Graham to get down to the writing of "A Brazilian Mystic". The book, nevertheless, is dedicated to the friend who had told him about Antonio Conselheiro, Don José Maria Braceras.

The tragedy of the Conselheiro movement was worked out over the years 1895-97 in a series of brutal episodes, marked by cruelty and incompetence of a kind that Graham was aware of from his experience and observation long years before in Argentina and Paraguay. The War of Canudos might be said to have begun in May 1895 when a diplomatic mission of three unarmed clergy entered the town to persuade Antonio Conselheiro to give up his opposition to the State and the Church. Although they spoke with him and were allowed to preach to his followers, they were intimidated by the large number of armed men and had to leave Canudos in failure. The authorities both locally and nationally now had no option but to send in the troops. They totally underestimated their opponents' strength and determination. Canudos was strongly fortified and the Jagunços built up a large supply of arms. During 1896 and 1897, three expeditions were sent over the harsh terrain, with inadequate numbers and supplies, under poor and irresolute leadership. In the fighting that took place, although both sides took heavy losses, the Government forces had to retreat in disgrace twice and were bogged down in stalemate on the third attempt. It was only after large reinforcements with proper artillery arrived that Canudos was stormed and captured street by street. The inhabitants who resisted to the end were brutally slaughtered. Antonio Conselheiro did not live to see the end of his dream. As the town crumbled around him, he refused all food and was found dead by one of his closest friends. On the 5th November 1897, all fighting ended. The victorious soldiers found Antonio's body in a shallow grave and exposed it for all to see. A photograph was taken. Graham ends his narrative on a downbeat and poignant note:

"Dressed in his long, blue tunic, his hands crossed piously, clasping a crucifix against his breast, he lay, waiting the coming of the King, that Don Sebastian who he believed should come to rule the world in glory, blot out injustice, cast down the mighty, and exalt the poor in spirit, giving them the world as their inheritance.

Some of the faithful had placed some withered flowers upon his breast. His body lay upon a ragged piece of matting, and both his eyes were full of sand."

Postscript.

Through the 1920s and early 1930s, R.B. Cunningham Graham continued to write prolifically: two collections of stories and sketches, and seven histories and biographies, mainly on South American subjects. As the Thirties darkened under the shadows of Fascism and Nazism, He wrote his last book, "Portrait of a Dictator: Francisco Solano López (Paraguay, 1865-70)", published in 1933. In it he recounted another grim chapter of South American history, the Triple Alliance War, which had devastated the land and people of Paraguay only a few years before his youthful travels there in a fruitless quest for *yerba mate* concessions. Yet even so Graham was not finished with South American violence and cruelty. There is an eerie correspondence between the events of "A Brazilian Mystic" and the short sketch, "Casas Viejas, 1933" (*Mirages*, 1936). Casas Viejas was a small village in Andalusia in the south of Spain. In the last years of the Spanish Republic, its life was dominated by a strong local boss, or *cacique*, known as Seis Dedos (Six Fingers), and his Communist ideology. He fomented a spirit of political dissension and revolt among the villagers, many of whom were armed with pistols and antique rifles. There was a deep feeling of discontent and anger with the social conditions of the region, with an almost Sebastianist belief that a great change would come about to create a better life for all. The pattern of events closely resembles what had happened to Canudos in Brazil more than thirty years before. Conflict with the authorities, too few soldiers drafted in to keep order, the outbreak of fighting, the arrival of heavy army reinforcements, a battle for the village, the killing and capture of all who resisted, and the summary execution of all men who remained alive. Graham ends his account:

"Their bodies lie, in a long line of graves, in the village cemetery, and the lone village in the Gaditanian plain has had its martyrs.

As the Moors say, may God have pardoned them!"

Alan MacGillivray

2209 words.