“Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham and Empire”

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Of all the distinguished speakers participating at the “Don Roberto & Scotland” conference in 2024, I was possibly the one who had done less research on Graham's kaleidoscopic life and career as an avid traveller, an indomitable adventurer and a passionate political actor. In fact, I have always been more fascinated by the literary quality and style of his writings, and by his intriguingly complex representations of the ‘Other’ – the two aspects of his polymathic career on which my brief presentation will focus.

It is useful to clarify what we mean today by ‘Other’, a term that commonly describes those peoples, countries, languages that between the 19th and the early 20th century were perceived as ‘exotic’ and thus classified as incompatibly different from Western metropolitan centres of imperial power. The fluid category of the Other could include, from a British perspective, incommensurably distant worlds — from Italy to the Celtic populations of Britain and Ireland, from ‘Moresque’ Spain to the infinite range of ‘Orientals’ (a stunningly vast category that extended from Morocco to the Far East, via Turkey and India and all that is in between). It included also all the indigenous populations across the world that were colonized, oppressed, enslaved, and decimated in silent genocides—invisible crimes that our history books still fail to fully acknowledge and account for. The 19th-century and early 20th-century British literary imagination was indeed permeated and haunted by representations of the Other, which sometimes undermined the then overarching imperial worldview, but most of the time colluded with it. From Gothic fiction to travel accounts, from memoirs to novels and even poems, the seductive lure of the exotic could morph into the repulsion for the irreconcilably different, or vice versa, subtly instilling in readers the tenets of imperialist ideology. The shifting visions of the Other – revolving around a rigid system of binary oppositions – indeed reverberated across genres and narratives and deeply defined and shaped a whole historical period.

It is arguably against this context that Graham’s work can be best understood — and it was indeed against this context that the collection of essays I co-edited with Silke Stroh — *Empires and Revolutions*, published by the Association for the Study of Scottish literature in 2017 — investigated Don Roberto's and other contemporary Scottish writers’ response to a global scenario characterized by instability and widespread political and cultural conflicts. The so-called Age of Empires, extending roughly between the 1850s and the end of the Second World War saw a world fractured and polarized by multiple competing projects of colonial expansion, not just British, but

also French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Belgian, German, Italian, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Russian, Chinese – and the list could be longer. A world dominated by the explicit logic of the strongest, where prevarication and exploitation were 'morally' justified by an invasive ideological system. Imperialism, however, obsessed as it was by notions of racial purity and by fixed social and cultural hierarchies by unsettling borders and triggering mass migrations across the globe, ironically also produced a global reality that undermined its own vision – a world of fluid and hybrid ethnic and cultural identities, of rapid change and transformation.

The contradictory pull of extreme authoritarianism embodied by empire on one side, and the anarchic freedom of cross-cultural encounters beyond Europe and traditional boundaries on the other, no doubt shaped Graham both as a writer and as a militant intellectual. In fact, as a polyglot, a highly educated person, an avid traveller, a keen and independent observer, Graham was in the privileged position not only to understand very well the complexity of the times he lived in, but was also able to thrive in them, honing his own distinctive, extraordinary literary voice. A unique voice, in many ways, but still part of a vast, multiform, transnational literary and artistic world that embraced and crossed borders. Indeed, as John McKenzie aptly observes, "if ever a life was conducted within diverse and multiple contexts, it will surely be that of Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham."[1]

Let's focus on Graham's largely neglected 'literariness'. Lachlan Munro, in an enlightening recent study on the Scottish writer, has observed how "Graham's name and reputation [have] stubbornly refused the rehabilitation, and his many literary awards which were never commercially popular in his lifetime, remain little read." As a direct consequence of this, Munro continues, "his champions have focused on the romantic aspects of his life."[2] I would like to suggest that we could usefully reverse this statement and claim that because many of his champions have scanned his works in search of 'factual truth', his more literary contributions have been sidelined as a mere reflection of an adventurous life. Arguably, not only has Graham's work remained unpublished for a long time but, until recently, it has not received the critical attention owed to its complexity and literary quality. I will contend that the main 'problem' with Graham's oeuvre is that it cannot be easily classified into ready-made categories – it is not simple to find an appropriate 'label' to contain its scope and ambition. His individual writings can be rarely described univocally as

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[1] McKenzie, John, "The Local and the Global: The Multiple Contexts of Cunninghame Graham", in Sassi, Carla and Silke Stroh eds, *Empires and Revolutions.Cunninghame Graham and his Contemporaries*, Glasgow: ASLS, 2017, p. 15.

[2] Munro, Lachlan, *R. B. Cunninghame Graham and Scotland. Party, Prose, and Political Aesthetic*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022, p. 1.

memoirs, travelogues, pure fiction, or essays. They are more often hybrid narratives, mixing different genres and characterised by a powerful literary rhetoric, even when they engage with political issues and historical events. For the sake of clarity, let me stress that by the term 'literariness' I do not merely refer to aesthetic quality (Graham is indeed a masterful writer), but to the fact that he opts for a more complex approach to writing than a merely factual one. Graham was not simply writing about the history and the countries he visited or contemporary politics, he was 'performing' his views and experiences, both as an actor/agent and as a story-teller, with consummate art. In his writings we encounter a textual projection of himself, the 'I' from whose perspective the stories are told or recorded, while in his activist's actions it is his physical body (for example when he joined protests or was arrested) that takes centre stage. Graham himself becomes a means of expression and the measure of the tumultuous times he lived in. One might of course detect an element of histrionic narcissism in the centrality that the Scottish writer takes in his own work/political action, but mostly we can look at this as a strategy – as a mirror that gathers and reflects not only the contradictions within the writer, but the contradictions and tensions of an age swept by change, endemic violence and cultural clashes. 'Self-representation' was then an instrument that allowed him to bestow cohesiveness on the dissonant world he inhabited.

This approach allows us to appreciate Graham as an innovative and complex writer. It also helps us make sense of his desire to control and shape the narrative of his life – the problematic 'lies' that emerge in his writings, including those concerning his wife's real identity, the suppression of documents and correspondence that did not fit in his imagined storyline, his kaleidoscopic impersonation of different roles and characters, and even his dandyesque attention to clothes and physical appearance, his wearing native costumes to identify himself with the locals and their custom, all fit in the same desire to shape and control a complex (and at times problematic) self-narrative.

Let us now briefly focus on Graham's engagement with the Other and his encounter with the colonial world of the 19th century, a topic which has indeed been dealt with by critics before, including a number of contributors to the above mentioned *Empire and Revolutions* collection of essays. As I have said, Graham was part of a vast array of British writers who accounted for the new worlds that colonialism had revealed and was shaping. We could describe this as an empire of the imagination, as many of these literary works have remained popular to the present day – among these, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, E.M. Forster's *Passage to India*, T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, R. L. Stevenson's South Sea writings, Joseph Conrad's

novels of the late Imperial age, to mention just a few. This is certainly another meaningful context against which Graham's work can be fruitfully reevaluated. I would argue that Graham stands out in many, if not all, ways from this rich and heterogenous tradition. There are a number of features of his style, for example, that are quite distinctive– his erudite approach; for example his accuracy in recording local names, historical details and foreign words; the wealth of citations from non-Anglophone languages and of references to foreign cultures and literatures. I believe all these choices imply a certain degree of respect for the different countries and regions he visited and described. Rather than 'taming' them into reassuring cliche representations, as it was quite common in Imperial literature, he focused on their specificity and complexity, on their dignified autonomy. I would imagine this had the effect of keeping the monoglot Anglophone readers in awe, possibly making them feel slightly inferior, rather than, as in most Imperial literary accounts, putting them at the centre of the world and in control of the narrative. I wonder if this distinctive feature may be seen as at least partly responsible for Graham's lack of recognition among his contemporaries.

Another feature that stands out as non-aligned with most contemporary Imperial narratives is the description of the 'Other' natural landscapes Graham encountered in his many travels. It is not just that the details of his descriptions that are powerful, vivid and memorable because they are firsthand, but arguably because most of them convey the author's genuine sense of interest and admiration, his effort to capture their specificity and value. In most of Graham's depictions of South American or Moroccan places and landscapes, I detect a stance of respectful distance and appreciation that differs substantially from most contemporary Imperial travelers, who would often subordinate the threatening and primitive quality of 'exotic' landscapes to the gentleness and tame beauty of British natural world. Think, for example, of Conrad's representation of the African landscape in his celebrated novella, *Heart of Darkness*. Here, Conrad indeed reduces "Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind",[3] as Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, whose grandfather had incidentally lived in the same region, put it. Unlike Conrad's vision of an irredeemably 'exotic' African landscape, Graham's representation of Argentinian nature conveys a genuine attempt at capturing the environment of the gauchos by someone who had shared and loved their nomadic lifestyle and that therefore had a strong bond with that territory.

Another interesting and distinctive feature of Graham's writings is his approach to the 'hybrid,' that is what is culturally-ethnically mixed, composed of two or more elements – a category that the literature of Empire often represented as threatening and monstrous (think of the many

[3] Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'" *Massachusetts Review*. 18. 1977

'Others' that feature in 18th and 19th-century Gothic novels). Graham, on the opposite, seems to revel in the borderless world of the Argentine Pampas, to fully enjoy the richness of a fluid, multifaceted and anarchic world against which the set social hierarchy of contemporary Britain appears distant and unattractive. In this sense, I would draw a quite clear distinction, for example, between Graham and T. E. Lawrence. The latter identified with the Arabs, whose world and culture he knew intimately, and could be thus compared to the Scottish writer, who embraced the gaucho way of life and wrote about it – both enjoyed being portrayed donning indigenous costumes. This comparison would require more time and attention than I will be able to devote to it, but I would still like to point out how Lawrence's interest in and admiration for the 'Other', while at least in part authentic, was also crucially instrumental to his service to the Empire. The same could be said of Kipling's admiration and knowledge of India's ancient culture – if his love for that country was authentic, his work remains inscribed in the British Empire's wider interest in native cultures and languages across the world as a tool to hone strategies of geopolitical control. Graham's aim was certainly not that of reinforcing or supporting the imperial policies – his was, on the whole, an independent, if only at times idiosyncratic, gaze.

A final set of observations pertains to Graham's "perennial sympathy with the underdog," as Cedric Watt's describes it[4]—in colonial terms, not just the mestizo, but also the indigenous populations of South America. He did not hesitate to condemn the repressive and exploitative politics of Empire and undoubtedly went a long way to disclose a colonial reality that has remained little visible to this day. While his commitment to an anticolonial agenda was unquestionable, however, his writings sometimes stumble upon colonial clichés – this is evident, for example, in the short story "The Gold Fish," in his *Thirteen Stories*, a fable set in an undefined Middle Eastern location. The main character, accepting to carry out an impossible mission to obey his master's request, and moved by nothing but blind loyalty, perpetuates the 'Orientalist' myth of Eastern despotism. More in general, even the myth of the solo, brave (male) adventurer – that sometimes Graham embodies – echoes a well-known theme of Imperial literature, reflecting the colonial and exploratory ethos of the time. Contradictions are possibly inevitable, and colonial discourse sometimes disguises itself as an artificial reality, and while Graham rebelled against the politics and the rhetoric of his troubled times, he did sometimes unwittingly reproduce them. I am pointing this out as it is important to remind us that we should embrace the complexity of the writers we engage

[4] Watts, Cedric, "R. B. Cunninghame Graham: Janiform Genius" in Sassi, Carla and Silke Stroh eds, *Empires and Revolutions.Cunninghame Graham and his Contemporaries*, Glasgow: ASLS, 2017, p. 3.

with, and not try to dismiss, suppress or inadequately justify the controversial aspects of their work. Imperfection is inevitable, and it should be honestly recorded and acknowledged.

By way of conclusion, let me quote an excerpt from Cedric Watts's essay, where the scholar memorably reminds us of the many tensions that run through Graham's life and work – his revelling in paradoxes:

> A foe of economic imperialism, he strove to become a trader in Morocco. An erudite scholar, he advocated cultural primitivism. […] He was a literary realist who was mythogenic; If he was Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, whose first name indicates royal descent, and whose last three names proclaim ownership of Scottish estates, he was also Mohammed el Fasi, who would be held captive in Morocco, and 'the Modern Don Quixote', and even 'the cow-boy dandy'. Conrad thought that Graham was an anachronism, a frondeur, maintaining chivalrous values in a materialistic age; yet, in letters to Garnett, Graham appears to be an existentialist before that term was invented. […] But, if Graham was a showman, he could also campaign long and hard in grim and depressing conditions. In fiery polemics, he urged people to act now on behalf of the downtrodden; yet repeatedly his writings sound the elegiac, depressive note of one who sees the folly and futility of human endeavours, and who, as an atheist and obsessive memorialist, believes that we are all defeated by death and oblivion.[5]

For Watts, there is an essential difference between 'contradiction' and 'paradox', insofar as the latter is "potentially resolvable."[6] I would like to conclude by expanding upon this interesting intuition. Graham indeed lived in an age of unsettling 'contradictions,' at a time when colonialism encouraged a starkly structured approach to the world, with differences between cultures structured as a system of binary oppositions – white/black, civilized/primitive, good/evil, human/bestial, colonizer/colonized. Proceeding by paradox, he went a long way to show with his shape-shifting life and writings how a different way to look at the world was possible. Where his contemporaries saw unsolvable conflicts, he demonstrated that borders are thin and porous, and that a whole world lies beyond and across them.

Graham is a complex and extremely interesting writer and intellectual, and he can still speak to us, at a time when the logic of imperialism is resurgent and threatening our communities and our environment. We need to interrogate his fascinatingly kaleidoscopic vision of the Age of Empires anew, without superimposing on it our pre-set categories, hopes and expectations.

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[5] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[6] Ibid. p. 3.