

Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham was elected MP in the mid-1880s, a decade of land and labour agitation linked to demands for Irish Home Rule. He was 'politically radicalised' in South America. The plight of people at home and the oppressed abroad all gained his life-long sympathy. His inheritance of Gartmore aroused his humanitarian instincts triggered by the biggest Highland uprising since the Jacobite scare in the 18th century – the Crofters' War 1882 - 1888.

Robert's family connections, his estate management, his political allies and opponents were all involved in these Highland upheavals and Irish struggle presenting intriguing encounters in a hectic era that began to break the chains of feudalism and absolute landlord power.

He recalled prejudice against Highlanders

In 1883 as the 10th, and last, Graham laird of Gartmore he inherited 10,000 'rushy acres' abutting the geological Highland Boundary Fault. His ancestor Nicol Graham had hanged 'loose and broken men' after the 1745 Jacobite Rising as they raided farms south of the line. Robert heard stories from his uncle Captain Speirs - "As we passed three moss-grown lumps of pudding stone that marked the ancient gallows tree." Speirs went on, "when I was young, one day on Loch Ard-side, I met a Hieland-man, and when I spoke to him, he answered 'Cha neil [chan eil] Sassenach'; I felt inclined to lay my whip about his back."

In his youth Robert saw Highland drovers en route to the Falkirk Tryst. "Generally two or three accompanied the herd, dressed usually in homespun tweeds, which smelt of wool and peat smoke, and were so thick

that those who wore them looked like bears, as they lounged heavily along.”

But in the 1870s Scottish farming was in crisis due to cheap imports of grain, cattle and sheep from the New World, hitting subsistence crofters in the Highlands and Islands hardest. Another agrarian bonfire lit by imports hit Irish farmers demanding Irish Home Rule.

William Bontine, Robert’s father, died after sixteen years in confinement in 1883. A *Curator bonis*, George Aldjo Jamieson had managed the family estates encumbered by large debts incurred by Robert’s forebears, Jamieson ‘who was a devout Episcopalian, dour, and agonisingly earnest, was notorious for his lack of tact in dealing with his clients.’ These character traits clashed directly with Robert who had to live with this excess debts over income at Gartmore till 1900.

Highland crofters won allies across Irish Sea in 1880 where the Irish Land League championed peasant proprietorship. Charles Stewart Parnell’s Irish MPs backed land agitation but increasingly viewed Home Rule as the solution. Another Land Leaguer Michael Davitt called for land nationalisation with which Robert agreed. He began to believe parliaments for Ireland, Scotland and Wales would deliver land reform and fair employment conditions for industrial workers..

Gladstone sought to avoid another insurgency in the Highlands mirroring Ireland so ordered a Royal Commission in 1883 chaired by Lord Napier. This allowed Gaelic speakers and land agents to tell their stories.

Several of Cunninghame Graham's future parliamentary and business protagonists were directly involved in Highland landownership and estate management. Arthur J Balfour owned Strathconon deer forest in Ross-shire. William Ewart Gladstone was one of his political guests enjoying the 'splendid sporting facilities' there. Two others gave evidence to Napier. John Baird, the laird of Knoydart and George Aldjo Jamieson who not only managed Gartmore, but also Kilcoy, a Black Isle estate, near Dingwall in Easter Ross.

Baird gave evidence at Portree. He inherited Knoydart in 1876 from his uncle James but by 1883 his five huge sheep ranching lets to large non-resident graziers were reduced to three due sheep and wool prices collapsing.

He had no intention of helping crofters as his major profits would, he suggested, accrue from deer stalking rents. More crofters would be 'an injury to the property' he stated.

Jamieson had lectured the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1860, stating 'the contrast between the Saxon race of the Lowlands, he lauded as the land of independence and progress, as opposed to the Gaelic Highlands, inhabited by a Celtic race corrupted by dependence on charity and backwardness.'

He had long favoured commercial farming. An accountant and lawyer, coincidentally, he was involved in the westward US push to exploit its abundant mineral resources, becoming chairman of the Arizona Copper Company in 1886.

He gave evidence in Edinburgh to challenge Kenneth Davidson, a leading Highland Land Leaguer, that the estate factor's farm had once been twenty-one crofts.

“Whenever the crofters have succeeded in reclaiming the land, they were evicted to make way for big farmers. We were, in short, made to reclaim the land for the proprietor, free of charge. At one time our forefathers possessed the undisputed rights to graze cattle on the Mulbuie Common, which the landlords and clergy have recently arrogated and divided among themselves...We demand an equivalent to what has thus been stolen from us.”

In 1828 using old Scots law Black Isle lairds grabbed the boggy backbone of the Black Isle. This required heavy labour to bring Mulbuie to productive uses via improving leases to families cleared from neighbouring glens such as Strathconon. The 1881 census showed the resident population had dropped by a third.

Royal Commissioner Fraser-Mackintosh, the MP for Inverness, led Jamieson to debate the role of the proprietors on their responsibilities for all residents on their lands. Should the State not take some means to protect the people? Jamieson replied “I can see no such duty devolving to the State with reference to any part of its population”. “It seems to me to lead up to a system of direct communism – you have no halting place.”

Little wonder that Cunninghame Graham found arguments by Baird and Jamieson as repugnant as did the wider crofter and workers movements.

The electoral franchise was extended in 1884 leading to predictions of crofters' candidates success in Highland seats. Cunninghame Graham gave his support to both the Highland crofters and struggling Irish tenant farmers as Land League activist Michael Davitt sought to align the Celts divided by a short sea crossing, despite their exact cases being distinct.

The crofters were mainly pastoral farmers who claimed their land was held as an ancient right under the clan system. They sought security of tenure and the return of huge areas stolen by the lairds to create sheep ranches and deer forests.

Irish small tenants were arable farmers whose absentee landlords rack-rented and evicted them at a whim. But Irish tenant farmers were divided between small farmers mainly in the west and large graziers in the east. Parnell tried to focus both factions on Home Rule.

Into this rural political hotbed Cunninghame Graham, was selected North West Lanarkshire Liberal candidate. His radical manifesto sought abolition of the feudal system, the game laws and primogeniture and much more.

His Tory opponent was John Baird, the Knoydart laird. But a late intervention by Parnell in November 1885 let Baird gain the local Irish vote. Salisbury's Tories seemed more likely to promote an Irish Home Rule than Gladstone. Baird won by a majority of 1,103 votes.

Another Tory, George Aldjo Jamieson, lost to the Liberal Thomas Buchanan in West Edinburgh, but Liberal dominance in Scotland was

weakening. As predicted four Crofters became MPs. The Liberals held 319 MPs, the Irish Parliamentary Party 86 and the Tories 247.

The sole positive gain from Gladstone's short administration was the Crofters (Scotland) Act. The Bill modelled on the 1881 Irish Land Act, crucially added a Crofters Commission to adjudicate fair rents and dismiss uncollectable debt.

Parnell then changed tack to back Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bill which was defeated by Joseph Chamberlain's anti-Home Rule Liberals Unionists joining the Conservatives in the July 1886 election landslide.

In North West Lanarkshire, however, Cunninghame Graham beat his Tory opponent by 335 votes. The Crofters MPs added Angus Sutherland to their number but lost Inverness-shire as Fraser-MacKintosh joined the Liberal Unionists, while in Argyll, Donald McFarlane lost to the Torie

In October 1886 a prominent Easter Ross Land League organiser, the Alness school's head teacher, Donald Macrae, was sacked by the Rosskeen school board. Roderick Maclean, the factor of Ardross estate led the thinly-disguised revenge for the Highland Land League's success.

Parliament resumed in late autumn but Cunninghame Graham did not speak until early 1887. Coincidentally, Donald Macrae, the 'Alness Martyr', was appointed to teach at Balallan school on the Isle of Lewis, the chair of the Ross-shire County Land League remarking, 'pity the deer forests of Lewis.'

Over in Ireland that January a series of evictions of seventy families of small tenants were accomplished by roof burning and demolition in

Glenbeigh, County Kerry. This provoked wide sympathy for families ejected in the depths of winter. In Robert's maiden speech on 1st February 1887 he condemned these evictions with withering effect.

But there were Celtic disconnections.

Lachlan Munro, in his recent book on Cunninghame Graham, reflected that

'if the land issue and Irish home rule had been prominent in trying to win his seat, on entering the House, they became less so, being quickly overtaken by the labour question, and parliament's inability or unwillingness to tackle social issues.'

In the Highlands dual ownership was demanded and delivered. CG pointedly took his seat in the chamber in 1887 among the crofters MPs and the Irish members rather than alongside the mainstream Gladstonian opposition. In Scotland the unsolved issue of land for cottars would fester for decades. Four Crofters MPs represented few Scots while Ireland returned eighty-six Parnellite MPs out of one hundred Irish members. In Ireland no halfway house would do.

The new Crofters Commission reduced crofters' rents and cancelled large arrears. Average rent reductions for 1886-87 for 1,767 holdings were 30.8%. Crofters began to see the benefits quite quickly.

In 1887 Irish priorities for British politicians were centre stage. Joseph Chamberlain, the radical MP believed that Irish Home Rule would break up the Empire. Domestically, however, he had scant regard for aristocrats, so in attempting to wean crofters away from their Irish allies he toured the

Highlands in the early spring of 1887 but his offer of 'three acres and a cow' won little support. Davitt toured the Highlands in Chamberlain's wake.

As Cunningham Graham found his feet in Westminster he saw crofting tied into the wider struggle of mostly non-unionised piece workers and land and labour struggles as one. But Highland rent reductions reduced pressure there for radical change.

In 1887 the Tory government were looking for confrontation. Robert's lifelong joust with authoritarian power came to a head on 13th November in Trafalgar Square. John Burns and he attempted to break through but were badly beaten, arrested and bailed to attend court on serious charges of riot, unlawful assembly and assaulting the police.

Back to Scotland, Robert received a hero's welcome as did the sensational deer raid in the Isle of Lewis that November. It was the brain child of Donald Macrae, the Balallan school master. The near starvation of crofting families in the Lochs area targeted Pairc estate a huge area of rugged deer forest. The raiders shot and ate many deer and conveyed much meat to their families while their leaders gave themselves up to the authorities in Stornoway to avoid police action and brutality.

Robert fully supported the raiders. Writing from Gartmore he warned, "The unfortunate people starve, and the Tory government to their cry for meal, answer with bullets...Are deer game? Have crofters broken any laws? Have they injured any man? Have they destroyed the work of any man's hand? Scotland is a free country – quite, it appears for they crofter to starve in, or for the deer to eat his crops in..."

And later in December speaking in Glasgow,

“Do not women bear to the full every hardship of the crofter’s lot?... Do they not suffer when their fathers and their husbands are driven out by the pangs of hunger to the bare hillside to hunt for deer? When the meal is running low – when in the long winter nights she sits crouching by the embers listening to the howling of the wild wind down the glen, her heart burning with the bitter sense of injustice and wrong and her children crying to her for bread which she cannot give to them. “

Fortunately, in January 1888 the two MPs were sentenced to a mere six weeks in Pentonville without hard labour on the lesser and rarely used charge of unlawful assembly after the Trafalgar Square riots.

Two days later at a trial in Edinburgh Donald Macrae and five other raiders were found not guilty after a half an hour’s deliberation by the jury.

Robert and John Burns emerged from Pentonville as heroes of the radical left on 18th February. They and the Pairc Deer Raiders defied cruel laws which Cunninghame Graham would fight all his life.

Regarding these land justice campaigns, Prof. Ewen A Cameron noted “the stakes were so high in Ireland because the politics of the land question in the 1880s seemed to some politicians to hold the key the survival of the United Kingdom. In contrast,

“the Highland land question, for all its importance, did not have this significance. The agitation in Scotland was not connected to nationalist politics, in the same empowering and disturbing way.”

For all his solidarity with Highland land campaigns Robert rarely trod Highland soil.

He did travel to Glenfinnan in the rugged heart of the West Highlands as his 1905 book *Progress* shows. His poignant tale *The Laroach* tells of a cleared landscape that had, for decades, attracted tourists ‘waterproofed to the ears’ on a ‘steamboat puffing on the lake’.

The Highlander monument there , “set like a lighthouse on the shores of a dead sea” had been commissioned in 1820 by Alexander MacDonald of Glenaladale, a descendant of those who supported Charles Edward Stuart in 1745. His wealth was inherited from his father, Sandy MacDonald, who purchased the Glenaladale estate after making a fortune in Jamaica from the transatlantic slave trade.

We well know that the Grahams accreted their wealth from slavery and subsequent generations lived extravagantly and indulged in speculation which were common among the landed classes.

William Ewart Gladstone’s father John received one of the largest sums in compensation from the London government for freeing his slaves. He bought a Highland estate, Fasque in Kincardineshire.

The Balfours and Bairds won their fortunes from exploitative business deals. Each bought Highland estates as play things. The Balfour family fortune stemmed from lucrative contracts with the Royal Navy. John Baird’s uncle bought Knoydart in 1859.

Bloody Balfour along with those high church stalwarts, Gladstone and Jamieson, and the neo-Jacobite Alexander MacDonald all benefited from the British Empire’s economic reach. Don Roberto, a man of their class and

landed background would oppose, implacably, their selfish views of progress.

The Highland crofters dubbed their leaders , *caraid nan daoine bochda*. The poor man's friend. He may have visited Skye in the 1920s but in the 1880s Robert truly deserved to be recognised as the poor man's friend.

He spoke at the Temperance Hall, Shettleston on 30th October 1889:

. "The condition of the great residuum of unskilled labour in London, in Glasgow, and in the Black Country, as well as the condition of the crofters in the Highlands, and of the large proportion of the whole population of British India, calls for our earnest attention, because this condition does no credit to our civilisation."

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