Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham

Cunninghame Graham was born in London to Scottish parents on 24 May, 1852. He spent most of his childhood in Scotland and was greatly influenced by his maternal grandmother, a Spanish noblewoman who spoke to him in her mother tongue, so that he became bilingual.

He was educated in England and Belgium before he moved to Argentina in 1870 to make his fortune as a cattle rancher. Although his ranching venture failed, he became known as a great adventurer and 'Gaucho gringo' who loved horses and was affectionately called 'Don Roberto'. His adventures in the River Plate ended in 1878 and he was not to return until the First World War, on a mission to buy horses for the government (Cf. 'Bopicuá' in *Brought Forward*, 1916).

> The outbreak of the war in 1914 gave him the … opportunity to go back to Argentina which he found greatly changed since the halcyon days of his youth. The triple-headed monster, Civilisation/Commerce/Progress, in all the manifestations that he detested –telephones, telegraph wires, fenced trails, machinery– had almost rendered the Gaucho extinct and the pampa no more than 'a cultivated prairie cut into squares by barbed wire fences, riddled with railways and with the very sky shaped into patterns by the crossing lines of telegraphs' ('Un Angelito').
>
> (Walker 1992: 188 -189)

He also travelled in Morocco dressed as a Turkish sheikh, prospected for gold in Spain, is said to have befriended Buffalo Bill in Texas and to have taught fencing in Mexico City. Much of this may not be true, as he created his own legend by recording his adventures in books and articles that made him famous. He was a very prolific writer who was in contact with and respected by many of the men of letters of his time, such as Joseph Conrad and Bernard Shaw.

Graham also embarked on a political career. He advocated progressive reforms in Parliament and was imprisoned during the demonstration on Bloody Sunday, 1887. Graham

had a strong belief in Scottish home rule. He played an active part in the establishment of the National Party of Scotland (NPS) in 1928 and was elected the first president of the Scottish National Party in 1934.

His writing includes history, biography, poetry, essays, politics, travel and seventeen collections of short stories. His great-niece and biographer, Jean, Lady Polwarth , published a collection of his short stories (or sketches) entitled *Beattock for Moffatt and the Best of Cunninghame Graham* (1979) and Alexander Maitland added his selection under the title *Tales of Horsemen* (1981). Several titles have been reprinted in the last 30 years, including *A Vanished Arcadia* (1901), which was the inspiration for the film *The Mission*. Professor John Walker published collections of Cunninghame Graham's *South American Sketches* (1978), *Scottish Sketches* (1982) and *North American Sketches* (1986). Of the thirty sketches in the first collection, sixteen deal with Argentina. More recently, The Long Riders Guild Press have reprinted his equestrian travel works.

Cunninghame Graham rode daily even in his 80s.

> At the age of eighty-four, he decided to make the final, cyclical pilgrimage to his first love Argentina. In his last book *Mirages* he had narrated the story of the Englishman 'Charlie the Gaucho' who had returned to the Pampas to die with his boots on. As if impelled by his own creation, Graham set out for Buenos Aires on January 18 1936, carrying two bags of oats for the horses of his friend and biographer Aimé F. Tschiffely, whose famous horse trip from Buenos Aires to New York Graham had described in his sketch 'Tschiffely's Ride' (*Written in Sand*).
>
> (Walker 1992: 189)

He died from pneumonia on March 20, 1936 in the Plaza Hotel in Buenos Aires, after a visit to the birthplace of his friend William Henry Hudson. Tschiffely's horses Mancha and Gato followed the hearse, led by two gauchos (Walker 1992: 189).

According to Norma Sacks (1980: 68), 'Graham was a romantic and costumbrist, who filled his sketches with so many Spanish words that a glossary is needed'. In fact, those words may be obscure to Spanish speakers who are not acquainted with the River Plate dialect and with the lexical field connected with horses and Gaucho life. The titles of his Argentine sketches show the wide range of topics and interests related to Gauchesque 'costumbrismo' and Argentine life. These are just a few examples:

Argentine settings

- 'La Pulpería'' (*Thirteen Stories*, pp. 165 - 175)
- 'La Pampa' (*Charity*, pp. 227 - 239)
- 'San Andrés'(*Charity*, pp. 116 - 132)
- 'The Pass of the River' (*A Hatchment*, pp. 114 - 130)
- 'Bopicuá' (*Brought Forward*, pp. 185 - 205)

Gauchos, Indians and Captives

- 'Las Bolas' (which Walker (1992: 187) considers a literary essay rather than a sketch) (*The Ipané*, pp. 84 - 97)
- 'The Captive' (*Hope*, pp. 120 - 143)
- 'Los Indios' (*A Hatchment*, pp. 19 - 33)

Horses

- 'Calvary' (perhaps with a pun on 'cavalry', about a wild chestnut colt taken from Ibicuy in Entre Ríos, Argentina to serve as a cab horse) (*Thirteen Stories*, pp. 191 - 200)
- 'Los Seguidores' (*Success*, pp. 20 - 39)

- ‘El Rodeo’ (*A Hatchment*, pp. 50 - 68)
- ‘Los Pingos’ (*Brought Forward*, 11 - 29)
- ‘Tschiffely’s Ride’ (about the ride from Buenos Aires to New York referred to above) (*Writ in Sand*, pp. 39 - 77)

Legends

- ‘The Gualichu Tree’ (*Success*, pp. 10 - 19)

Tango

- ‘El Tango Argentino’ **(***Brought Forward*, pp. 81 - 96)

Graham’s depiction of the Argentine landscape does not differ from that of travel writers. ‘All grass and sky, and sky and grass, and still more grass and sky’ is the description that opens ‘La Pampa’ (*Charity*: 227) and he refers to the pampa as an ‘ocean of tall grass’ in ‘El Rodeo’ (*A Hatchment*: 50). His description of the delta though which horses are transported to and from Buenos Aires is filled with lexis which connotes the kind of excess found in Humboldt’s descriptions of the American landscape:

> Just where the River Plate, split by **a hundred islands,** forms a sort of delta, a tract of marshy land in Entre Ríos, known as the Rincones of the Ibicuy, spreads out flat, cut by **a thousand channels, heavily** timbered, shut in upon the landward side by a **long** range of hills of **dazzling** sand, and buried **everywhere** in waving **masses** of **tall** grass. […]
> A land of vegetation so intense as to bedwarf mankind almost as absolutely as we bedwarf ourselves with our machinery in a manufacturing town.
> (‘Cavalry’, *Thirteen Stories*, 191 - 192, my emphasis)

The binary ‘nature - industry’ is clearly established in the quotation above, and throughout Graham’s sketches nature is the positive term. ‘Progress’ is often seen as a loss, a fall from the primitive perfection of nature. In ‘Los Indios’, he describes the horrors of Indian

incursions, the risk of being taken captive, the savagery on Indian carnival celebrations and states that

> No one who has not lived upon the southern Pampa in the days when a staunch horse was of more value in time of trouble than all the prayers of all the good men of the world, can know how constantly the fear of Indians was ever present in men's minds.
>
> (*A Hatchment*: 19)

However, he can look back with nostalgia on the days when the white man had not yet pushed the original inhabitants towards the Andes and into oblivion:

> No longer, on a journey, will they, as it appeared without a cause, suddenly strike their hands upon their mouths and yell, and then when asked the reason, answer, "Huinca, he foolish; Auca do that because first see the sierra," as in the days of yore.
> Round the Gualichu tree, no longer bands from north and south will meet, and whilst within its influence forbear to fight; even refrain from stealing a fine horse during the time they celebrate their medicine dance. In separating, no Indian now will tear a piece from off his poncho and stick it on a thorn; the tree was a Chañar if I remember right.
>
> (*A Hatchment*: 31)

This nostalgia for the days gone by makes him miss the Buenos Aires he used to know when he was young in 'A Retrospect'. Like most travellers before him, he describes the disappointing welcome given to newcomers by the old muddy harbour in Buenos Aires and presents an insider's view of the old city, from dances to the price of meat, from its churches to its brothels ('Few towns could have been better kept supplied than was the city of good airs, with raw material' (47), where the 'raw material' are the girls of every nationality at the 'quilombos'). He looks back on that city and misses it, in spite of the advantages of progress:

> I know that it is great and prosperous, wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice; that the great liners all tie up at stone-built docks, and passengers step from them into their motor-cars. All this I know, and I am glad, for anche io fú pittore, that is, I used to ride along the streets of the old Buenos Aires generally upon a little *doradillo*, that I had, with the great silver spurs just hanging off

> my heels when I rode up to Claraz's Hotel, after delivering a troop of cattle at the *saladero* on the outskirts of the town. (*A Hatchment*: 48 - 49)

The reader feels he is being addressed by someone who has first-hand knowledge of the landscape and the culture, who is acquainted with the geography, the language, the myths, and has appropriated them. This is the case when he describes the gualichu tree in the story of that name, a tree that the original peoples considered sacred:

> You in the future who, starting from Bahía Blanca pass the Romero Grande, leave the Cabeza de Buey on the right hand, and at the Río Colorado exchange the grassy Pampa for the stony southern plains… coming to the tree neither cut branches from it to light your fire, or fasten horses to its trunk to rub the bark. Remember that it has been cathedral, church, town-hall, and centre of a religion and the lives of men now passed away; and, in remembering, reflect that from Bahía Blanca to El Carmen, it was once the solitary living thing which reared its head above the grass and the low thorny scrub. So let it stand upon its stony ridge, just where the Sierra de la Ventana fades out of sight, hard by the second well, right in the middle of the travesia –a solitary natural landmark if naught else, which once bore fruit ripened in the imagination of a wild race of men, who at the least had for their virtue constancy of faith, not shaken by unanswered prayer; a tombstone, set up by accident or nature, to mark the passing of light riding bands upon their journey towards Trapalanda; passing or passed; but all so silently, that their unshod horses' feet have scarcely left a trail upon the grass.
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> (*Success*: 18 - 19)

The proper nouns are landmarks that show the narrator is familiar with the geography, and his mention of 'Trapalanda' –described in 'Los Indios' (*A Hatchment*: 31) as 'the mysterious city in which no Christian ever breathes his horse'– shows he is acquainted with the beliefs of the original inhabitants. Instead of presenting a defamiliarising perspective, his gaze is that of a local rather than a visitor. His use of code-switching without glossing (as in 'in the middle of the travesia'), a feature that will become a common denominator among Anglo-Argentines, adds to this effect. He also uses the Anglo-Argentine word 'camp' when he refers to the country, to the estancias. In Pratt's terms (1993: 228), Graham's writing shows instances of *transculturation*.

The emblematic example of transculturation is the 'Gaucho gringo' the writer himself was, embodied in the characters of Charlie the Gaucho (*Mirage:* 11-45) and, above all, Facón Grande (Big Knife) and Facón Chico (Small Knife), 'based on the lives of Henry Edwards and John Taylor, settlers at the *Colonia Inglesa de Sauce Grande*, near Bahía Blanca' (Graham-Yooll 1999: 205). The sketch 'Facón Grande' (*Mirage* 169-182) is set in the days when the Southwestern frontier kept advancing against the original inhabitants, pushing them further and further towards the Andes. Colonists could lose all their property and their lives in the 'Indian raids'.

> Still there were some who, neither desperate nor outcasts, resolutely took up land and settled down. Of such the most remarkable was a tall Englishman whose name, I think, was Hawker, but better known as "Facón Grande", from the sword bayonet that he wore stuck through his belt and sticking out upon both sides. … Tall, dark and wiry, his hair that he wore long and ragged beard gave him the look of a stage desperado, but in reality he was a brave and prudent man who knew quite well the danger he lived in, but was determined to hang on, for he had faith in the country's future where he had made his home.
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> As he had lived for many years upon the frontier, he dressed in Gaucho fashion, with loose black merino trousers tucked into high boots. A white pleated shirt always left open at the neck, a short alpaca jacket, with a broad belt fastened by what was called a "rastra", composed of silver coins that served as buttons, and an Indian poncho, woven in red and black, completed what he called his "indumentary".
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> He spoke a strange phonetic Spanish, blameless of grammar and full of local words, as easily as English. A short half-league away, his cousin lived, one Ferguson, known to the Gauchos as "Facón Chico", from the smaller size of the yet formidable knife he carried. No greater contrast could be found than that between the cousins. "Facón Chico", was about middle height with sandy hair and a short well-cropped beard. His face was freckled and his hands, mottled like a trout, had once been white, of that unhealthy-looking hue that exposure to the sun often imparts to red-headed or to sandy-coloured men. For all his quiet appearance and meek ways till roused, he was perhaps the bolder and more daring of the two. The Gauchos said, although he looked like an archangel who had lost its wings, that in an Indian skirmish his porcelain coloured eyes shot fire and he became a perfect devil, the highest compliment in their vocabulary.
>
> Though he had lived for twenty years in the republic, he hardly knew more than a few coherent sentences in Spanish, and those so infamously pronounced that few could understand him.

> Curiously enough he spoke Pehuelche fairly fluently, for he had lived some years with an Indian woman, who, when she went back to the Tolderia, had left him a pledge of their love, or what you call it, a boy the Gaucho humorists had christened Cortaplumas [pen knife], to the delight, not only if his father, but the whole neighbourhood.
> The boy grew up amongst the peons neither exactly tame nor wild. Like other boys born in that outside "camp" upon the frontiers he ran about barefooted, lassoed the dogs and cats, and brought down birds with little "bolas" that he manufactured by himself out of old strops of hide and knuckle-bones. By the age of six or seven he, like all the other boys, was a good rider, climbing up on the saddle, using the horse's knees as a step-ladder for his bare little toes. (170 - 173)

The frontier is an ever-changing limit in these encounters between Gauchos and original inhabitants, where Gauchos can be Englishmen whose children are 'mestizos' (half-breeds), where the aboriginal languages, the languages brought from Europe and the peculiar Spanish of the River Plate all coexist. Graham describes life in the 'contact zone', full of conflicts that men face with a lance or a knife (facón) so that throat-cutting becomes a literary motif.

> "…I, Tio Cabrera, known also as el Cordero, tell you I know how to play the violin (a euphemism on the south pampas for cutting throats). In Rosas' time, Viva el General, I was his right-hand man, and have dispatched many a Unitario dog either to Trapalanda or to hell."
>
> (La Pulpería, *Thirteen Stories*: 174)

And through it all identities are built in contact with the other, identities which are fluid and permeable as the frontier, where one can escape into the tolderías or be dragged into them, where one can cross a river that leaves the Pampas behind and face the challenge of the Patagonian desert. Identities which are the product of processes of transculturation that construct cultural hybrids like Graham himself.

William Henry Hudson dedicated his *El Ombú and Other Stories* to Graham:

> To my friend
> R.S. Cunninghame Graham
> ('Singularísimo escritor inglés)
> [Extraordinary English writer]

> Who has lived with and knows (even to the marrow as they would themselves say) the horsemen of the Pampas, and who alone of European writers has rendered something of the vanishing colour of that remote life.

That an Argentine-born English writer should call Graham, a Scot, an 'English' writer in Spanish is evidence enough of the difficulty in using national labels when discussing the production and identity of these travelling writers.

For references, see the bibliography file.