

## Reviews

new details or unorthodox viewpoints. Such questionable facts as whether Palmerston ever did really say the famous line about the Schleswig-Holstein question (the earliest sources crediting it to him came after his death) are presented as if definitely true. But this is the conventional wisdom of such political history being presented, so it would be unduly harsh to call it wrong. Rather, it is just that the truth, on

both electoral numbers and that quote, is less certain than most readers will think from the book.

However, the book is nicely rounded off by a concluding chapter on how campaigning has changed in recent general elections, providing a handy summary of the changing realities and political science theories and showing the continued importance of some – though only

some – of the traditional election campaign techniques that would have been familiar to those standing in the very first election in this volume.

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For a reader offer for *British General Elections 1830–2019*, see page 2 of this Journal.

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## Forgotten Scot

Lachlan Munro, *R. B. Cunninghame Graham and Scotland: Party, Prose and Political Aesthetic* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022)

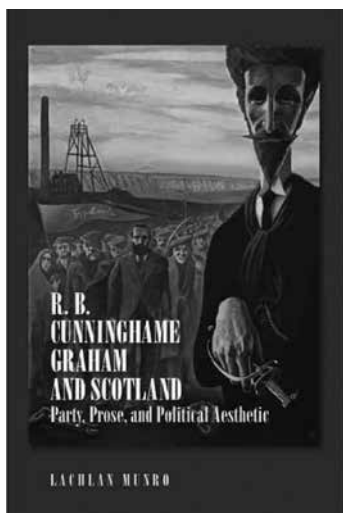
Review by Ian Cawood

In 1927, at the height of his fame, an article in the *Sunday Post* noted that ‘there are few men nowadays so well known as Mr R. B. Cunninghame Graham’, yet on the anniversary of his birth in 1952, the Scottish poet and songwriter Hamish Henderson asked, ‘Who remembers Cunninghame Graham?’ Lachlan Munro’s new biographical study, the tenth written (so far), attempts to explain why the man, known variously as ‘Don Roberto’, ‘King Robert IV’ (he claimed descent from Robert II) and ‘the modern Don Quixote’, was so famous in his age, drawing on a political and professional life of dizzying activity, but who seems to have been forgotten within a decade of his death

in 1936. He attributes Cunninghame Graham’s current obscurity to the contradictory nature of his various careers – a romantic adventurer who was also a fire-brand socialist (he was jailed for his involvement in the Trafalgar Square riot in 1887), a committed internationalist who co-founded the Scottish National Party.

Munro’s study is divided into three parts: his first career as a radical Liberal under the Conservative minority government of Lord Salisbury; the literary career that he forged after failing to be re-elected in 1892; and finally, the impact of the First World War on his subsequent campaign for Scottish home rule. Within this structure,

certain themes are brought out – Cunninghame Graham’s attitude towards the working class, towards the British empire (then at its peak of popularity in Britain), and towards Scotland as it entered the twentieth century. Sadly, the result is sometimes highly frustrating. Many of the chapters are less than ten pages in length and feature digressions into the literary and political context of the age, rather than focusing on Cunninghame Graham’s significance. For example, there are two chapters each in parts one and two on ‘Empire’ and ‘Colonialism’, when it would have been far more advisable to have one single substantial chapter. Part three does have a chapter on ‘Empire and Colonialism’, but



it is barely over four pages long. The result is a highly disjointed and often distracted study of Cunninghame Graham's political outlook, which renders his unique journey from aristocracy, through Marxism, to nationalism as puzzling to us as it was to his contemporaries.

Munro's study does succeed in his analysis of the genesis of Cunninghame Graham's Scottish Nationalism where, thankfully, the chapters are long enough to enable context, analysis and explanation of a greater depth than he manages elsewhere. Here, Munro explains that many of the Scottish Labour politicians were increasingly frustrated by their own leadership and the sidelining of Scottish issues in the years after the First World War and that this was the cause of the rise of Scottish nationalism – not a nostalgic, blood-and-soil romanticism, which is how it is usually described in the post-war

years. This explanation of Scottish nationalism as a product of the frustration of left-wing politicians with the centrism of the Westminster system was mirrored, of course, in the rise of the SNP in Scotland after 2005, whose politics offered a locally focused, more communitarian approach than the technocracy of New Labour, with considerable political success (at least until 2024).

Munro makes a valiant effort to justify Cunninghame Graham as a heroic figure, worthy of reappraisal, through an analysis of Cunninghame Graham's vast literary outpouring (he produced nearly forty books of stories, essays, sketches, travelogues, biographies and history), but, having read John Walker's 1982 edited collection of Cunninghame Graham's Scottish sketches, I felt that Munro was excessively cherry-picking his evidence to suit his argument. Most of Cunninghame Graham's Scottish writings are elegiac, melancholic and evocative of place and the national character, but they are hardly ever political or polemical. Most typical is the story of a consumptive Scot, travelling back to Dumfriesshire, who dies on the platform, 'Beattock for Moffat', three miles from home. Full of longing for home, full of pathos and very maudlin, it reproduces the Scots dialect with great skill, but reveals nothing about the author's ideology.

Munro would have been much better advised to have spent longer on Cunninghame Graham's political writings and especially on his relations with Ramsay MacDonald, James Maxton and Tom Johnston, all of whom shared Cunninghame Graham's approach of combining socialism with Scottish nationalism, even though, as members of the Labour Party, they were barred from membership of the National Party of Scotland (NPS) when it was formed in 1928. This was especially needed in the case of Johnston, whose role as editor of the Independent Labour Party journal, *Forward*, and whose later role in the Scottish Socialist Party helped to bring nationalists and socialists together in Scotland in the 1930s while NPS failed even to come second in any of the parliamentary election they contested.

Ultimately, despite his best efforts, Munro's study fails to shift the lingering impression of Cunninghame Graham as an aristocratic flaneur, flirting with radical ideas, including women's suffrage, abolition of the House of Lords, land nationalisation and animal rights but never committing himself for long. Munro admits to this when he describes Cunninghame Graham as a 'dilettante' and 'politically promiscuous'. His half-hearted attempt to be elected for West Stirlingshire in 1918 as a Liberal (without a coupon) and in opposition to

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Johnston (standing for Labour), which resulted in Cunninghame Graham coming a poor third, certainly does seem to be the act of man who lacked conviction. His failure to speak out after the riot in George Square in Glasgow in January 1919 appears to confirm this impression. He appeared to fall into Scottish nationalist politics, prompted by others who saw him as a useful figurehead, at a time when most of his family were dead and he

was in his seventies. Although Cunninghame Graham was the first president of the NPS, he only attended two executive meetings in six years and only played a peripheral role when the NPS amalgamated with the right-wing Scotland's Party to form the Scottish National Party in April 1934. Cunninghame Graham ultimately emerges in Munro's book as a flamboyant, but marginal figure in political history, whose time in both the socialist and

Scottish home rule movements produced little electoral success but who was, almost accidentally, present at the birth of the Scottish Labour and Scottish National Parties, both of which other, less amateur figures would develop to greater significance.

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## Churchill at the Home Office

Duncan Marlor, *Churchill the Liberal Reformer: The struggle for a modern Home Office* (Pen & Sword History, 2024)

Review by Iain Sharpe

Winston Churchill may have started and finished his political life as a Conservative but his near two decades in Liberal ranks after his defection over free trade in 1904, mark a significant part of his career, including his first experience of ministerial office and his rapid rise to be appointed to the cabinet at the age of just 33. His reputation as a Liberal reformer rather than a mere opportunist rests primarily on his period as a minister covering domestic portfolios, as president of the Board of Trade (1908–10) and home secretary (1910–11) when he played a part in creating the foundations of the welfare state and

was responsible for substantial prison reform.

It is on this latter period that Duncan Marlor focuses in this volume, and he has provided a very readable book, whose thirty chapters are essentially short essays on aspects of Churchill's tenure of the Home Office, each covering a different theme or episode and loosely organised in chronological order. It makes some use of archival material, but is mainly based on secondary and published primary sources. Therefore, it does not break much new ground, but provides an interesting summary of a period in Churchill's career that, while hardly ignored by his many

biographers, should be better known.

Marlor makes a strong case for Churchill as a humanitarian prison reformer, his concern for the wellbeing of prisoners perhaps stemming from his own experience as a prisoner of war in South Africa just a few years earlier. Among the changes he effected were reducing the use of solitary confinement, ensuring that entertainment such as lectures and concerts were provided in prisons, creating a distinction between criminal and political prisoners, ending automatic sentences for non-payment of fines, reducing the use of prisons for young people and