

HISTORY & HERITAGE

Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham (1852-1936) of Gartmore was called “Don Roberto” and “The Uncrowned King of the Scots”



FROM JIM NETHERY, FSAScot

ANAHEIM, CALIFORNIA

The son of Major William Bontine and Anne Elizabeth Elphinstone Fleeming, Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham was born in London on May 24, 1852. His mother was the daughter of a Scottish admiral and a Spanish aristocrat. A descendant of the Earl of Menteith, he was later known as “Don Roberto” and “The Uncrowned King of the Scots”.

He grew up at Gartmore and attended Harrow before moving to a family ranch in Argentina. He was kidnapped by rebel

gauchos while there and, as the result of that experience, took up the cause of the poor and oppressed. In Paris, he married Gabriela de la Belmondiere, a Chilean poetess and they traveled through Texas, Arizona and Mexico together.

Cunninghame Graham returned to Scotland in 1881 to manage the Graham estates of Gartmore. He was elected to Parliament, as a Liberal, and worked to improve working conditions for the coal miners. He was in a demonstration which became a riot and was arrested and jailed with the socialist, John Elliot Burns. In May 1888, with James Keir Hardie, he founded the Scottish Labour Party and became its first president. In 1892, Graham standing as a Scottish Labour candidate was defeated. With the demise

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Gartmore House is an 18th century country house and estate in the village of Gartmore, Stirling, Scotland, which was built for the Graham family on the site of an earlier house.

of his political career, his literary career was born.

He traveled to Morocco in 1897 and attempted to reach the forbidden city of Tarudant variously disguised as a Turkish physician and a sheikh from Fez. He was detained and held prisoner for four months in the medieval castle of Kintafi in the Atlas Mountains. Graham was eventually released and traveled to Marakesh before returning to Tangier. "Mogreb-el-Acksa: A Journey in Morocco," is his description of his adventures while traveling across a country that had no

roads or bridges, it was published in 1898.

Cunninghame Graham had a biting wit, speaking about Prime Minister Henry Campbell-Bannerman he once said, "He has all the qualifications for a great Liberal Prime Minister. He wears spats and he has a beautiful set of false teeth."

When asked if he had royal blood in his family he replied, "If I had my rights I should be king of England, and what a two weeks that would be!" At the funeral for Argentinean born

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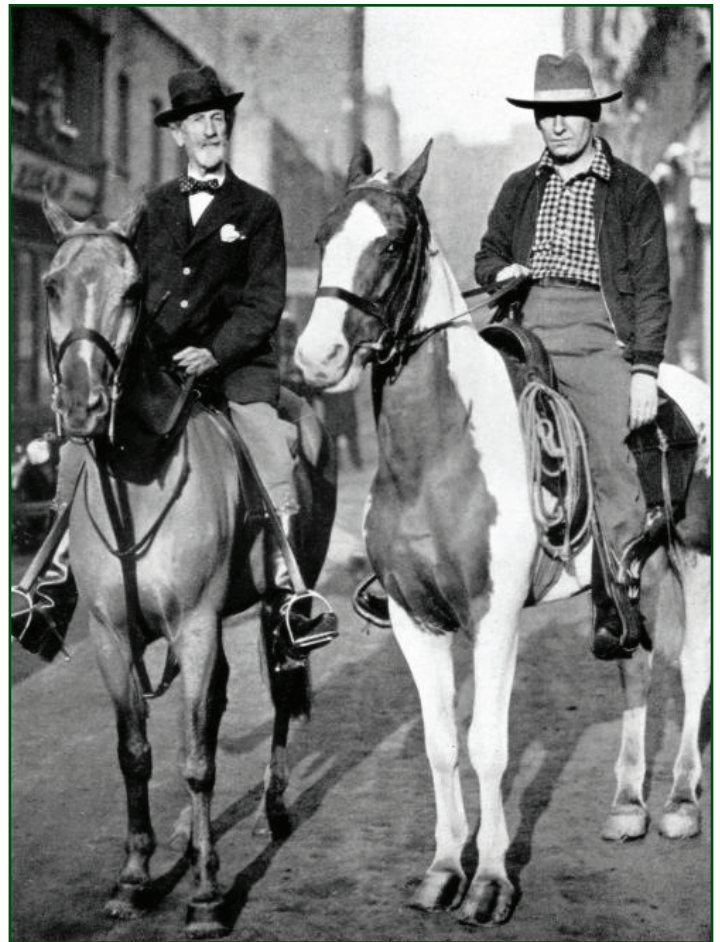
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naturalist, W.H. Hudson, Graham expressed his admiration for his literary friend with sarcasm, "When he was alive he asked for bread: now that he's dead, they give him a stone."

If a man can be measured by his friends, Cunninghame Graham was wealthy. George Bernard Shaw used him as a character in "Arms and the Man" (1898) and in "Captain Brassbound's Conversion" (1900). Joseph Epstein did a bronze bust of him in 1923. He was a friend of Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Buffalo Bill Cody.

He authored over 30 publications, which included essays, travel books and biographies, including one of his grandfather, Robert Graham, a seven-volume history of the Spanish conquest of South America and a large number of short stories. For most of his life he identified with the poor and the unemployed. He supported the working class while he was a member of the House of Commons and actively supported worker's strikes. Many of his publications related to the plight of the South American Indians and "Jose Antonio Paez" is the biography of a man from the working class who liberated Venezuela and became its first president. In "Vanished Arcadia" he contrasts the treatment of the Indians in Paraguay under the assertive Jesuits as opposed to the often cruel Spanish Governors and Viceroy.

Robert Cunninghame Graham died in Argentina on 20 March 1936, where he was mourned by the entire nation. He was returned to Scotland and his funeral was held in a church on the shore of the Lake of Menteith. The coffin, draped in the Saltire flag, was taken to the Isle of Inchmahome in a small boat, where His Grace, the 6th Duke of Montrose, buried him beside his

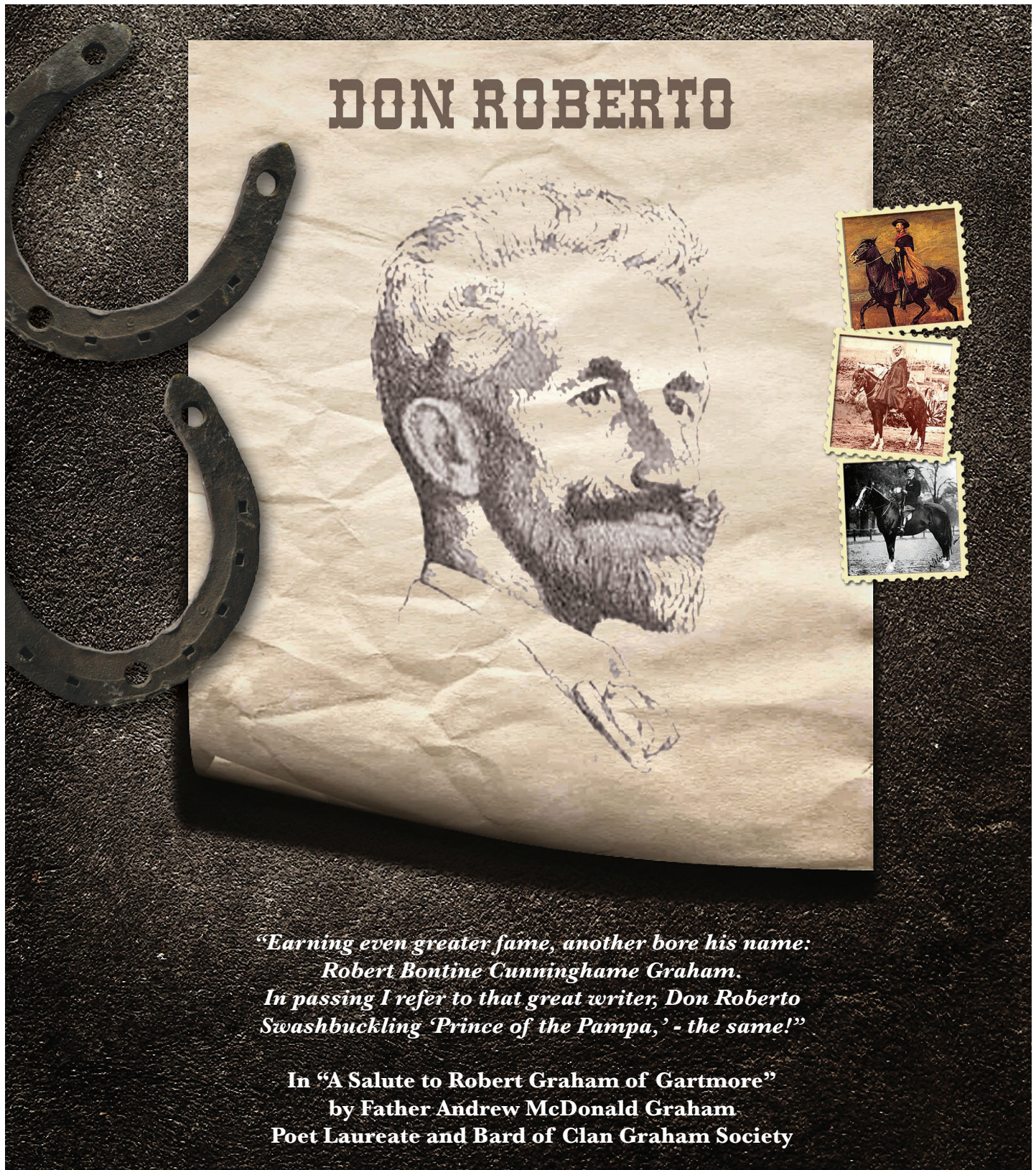


Don Roberto (left) is photographed with a fellow vaquero in South America.

wife Gabriela, in the ruins of a beautiful 13th century Augustine Abby.

On the occasion of a man's death, the Greeks had only one question. "Did he have passion?" Their answer for Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham would have been a resounding "YES!"

Note: This article by Jim Nethery serves as the basis of the original script for the DVDs that are available to see in the Graham Room at Mugdock Castle. Jim is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (FSA Scot).



*"Earning even greater fame, another bore his name:
Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham.
In passing I refer to that great writer, Don Roberto
Swashbuckling 'Prince of the Pampa,' - the same!"*

**In "A Salute to Robert Graham of Gartmore"
by Father Andrew McDonald Graham
Poet Laureate and Bard of Clan Graham Society**