5. Searching for America

Graham’s travels throughout Europe in the early 1920s were interspersed with a series of lengthy trips across the Atlantic. From 1919 to 1923 he travelled extensively throughout North America, from the East Coast to the Rockies, and Canada to Mexico, revelling in the sights and sounds of a continent that seemed, at least for a time, to offer the “wide open spaces” that helped to inspire his love of Russia so many years before. When Graham first encountered the United States during his 1913 trip, he was appalled at the social consequences of the country’s rapid industrialisation. The grandeur of the landscape he saw on his long tramp through the rural parts of the North East did not compensate for the memory of the slums of New York and Chicago. Graham acknowledged that the United States represented the apogee of humanity’s quest for material and scientific advance, but he made no secret of his belief that such progress had been purchased at the cost of huge spiritual disfigurement and human misery. The country nevertheless made a deep enough impression for him to return there six years later following the turmoil of war and revolution. The “other America” that Graham had glimpsed in the rural areas of the northeast persuaded him that the USA could not simply be dismissed as the apotheosis of rapacious commercialism. He expected to find this new America – a place both geographical and spiritual – beyond the great cities of the East Coast and the Midwest. In the post-war period Graham was searching for a new idyll, somewhere that could replace Russia in his imagination, and he hoped for a time that America could come to fill this void. His decision to return there had a kind of logic, even if at first glance it seems surprising that a man consumed by a fear of modernity should immerse himself in a country rapidly coming to define the world’s understanding of the modern.

http://dx.doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0040.05
Graham wrote in his autobiography that his experiences of the trenches in 1918 meant that “I was no longer visionary and imaginative [and had become] less concerned with religion and more with social problems”. As was seen in the previous chapter, this shift in focus was less clear-cut than he later claimed, although it helps to explain why he returned to the United States in 1919 with the intention of studying “the colour question”.\(^1\) Graham had been struck during his time in the trenches by the poor treatment of black troops in US divisions posted to France, and he was intrigued to see how they would be affected by their experiences once they returned home. His first trip to the United States in 1913 made him intensely aware of the country’s racial divisions, even in the North, and he was repeatedly struck by the tension between the egalitarian rhetoric and grim reality of life in modern America. His new voyage across the Atlantic in 1919 proved difficult to organise, since civilian passengers were still a low priority at a time when US soldiers were being shipped back home. Graham eventually had to take passage via Denmark, arriving in New York in late summer. He was accompanied by Rose – for some reason the name ‘Rosa’ was by now giving way to ‘Rose’ – who was determined to see the New World with her own eyes. There are also hints that she may have been increasingly unwilling to continue playing the role of Solveig, content to remain at home in Frith Street whilst her husband travelled the world. She went with Graham on most of his trips during the first half of the 1920s – illness forced her to remain at home when he hiked in the Rockies in 1921 – only parting from him when he headed out into the countryside on lengthy tramps which would have been too exhausting for her. Although the strains in their marriage only erupted fully a few years later, there were signs of tension between the Grahams as early as 1918.

Graham planned to use his 1919 trip across the Atlantic to follow in the footsteps of the journalist and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, whose book, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, aroused enormous interest and controversy when it was first published a few years before the Civil War.\(^2\) Graham’s *modus operandi* varied from the one he had previously used in his travels, since he could hardly pass unnoticed amongst the


people he planned to write about, as had been possible in his encounters with pilgrims and peasants during his long tramps across Russia. He was systematic when sketching out his journey through the southern United States. Graham planned to start with a brief stay north of the Mason-Dixon line, before going south to Virginia and the Carolinas, after which he intended to head for Georgia and Louisiana. He also planned to make most of the journey by train rather than foot, not surprisingly given that he was for much of the time with Rose, although the Grahams did separate at one point so that Stephen could tramp through Georgia, following the path taken by General Sherman and his troops to the coast following the burning of Atlanta. Once he arrived in America, Graham covered the ground comparatively slowly, stopping in some places for two weeks or more, which provided him with an opportunity to conduct numerous interviews with both black and white Americans. He also visited black schools and churches, answering questions from audiences about his trip, and giving his reactions to the things he had seen and heard. Graham also made detailed notes in his journal, in order to make sure he had the material he needed to write his book.³

Graham began his book *Children of the Slaves* by highlighting the familiar paradox that a country committed to “the development of free democracy” had tolerated slavery for so long and, since abolition, had struggled to manage the bitter divisions that it fostered in American society. In his introduction he made no effort to hide the horrors of the slave era, which he believed provided a graphic manifestation of “the devil in man”, and proved that “no man is good enough to have complete control over any other man”.⁴ His principal focus was not, though, on the moral and material character of slavery as it existed in the years before the Civil War. Graham instead provided his readers with a picture of black America at the start of the third decade of the twentieth century. The discussion in the first few pages showed Graham’s penchant for an essentialism that was both patronising and banal (attitudes that can be seen even more strongly in his journal of the time). He suggested that most black Americans had arrived in the United States “more morally pure than they are today”, but had since “learned more about sin, and sin is written in most of their bodies”. He also believed that many blacks wanted “revenge” for the wrongs that had

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³ Graham Papers (FSU), Box 578, 18-19 (Journal of trip to USA 1919).
been done to their race (in the unpublished version of his memoirs, written many years later, he was sharply critical of those who campaigned for civil rights). Graham was nevertheless insistent that most of the failings that supposedly characterised black Americans could be traced back to the evils of slavery rather than to colour. This somewhat reductionist approach ran through his book and, at times, sat unhappily with its numerous anecdotes and vignettes, which taken together appeared to show precisely how difficult it was to generalise about the experience of the people he wrote about. Graham was never entirely successful in *The Children of the Slaves* at reconciling his twin roles of artist and sociologist, a flaw that had been evident in many of his earlier writings on Russia.

Graham was well aware that the legacy of slavery was intimately bound up with the identity of the American South. Whilst he did not address the whole question directly, the phenomenon posed a particular challenge for him given that he was, like so many travellers, bewitched by the region’s subtle blend of culture and climate. He recalled how as he made his journey southward:

Crossing the Mason-Dixon line was rather a magical and wonderful event for me. After all, the North, with its mighty cities and industrialised populations, is merely prose to one who comes from England. Pennsylvania is a projection of Lancashire and Yorkshire, New York is a projection of London, and massive Washington has something of the oppressiveness of English park drives and Wellingtonias. But Southward one divines another and a better country. It has a glamour; it lures.

Graham went on to remember how:

I journeyed on a white-painted steamer in the evening down the Potomac to Old Point Comfort, leaving behind me the noise and glare of Washington and the hustle of Northern American civilisation. It was the crossing of a frontier without show of passports or examination of trunks – the passing to a new country, with a different language and different ways. The utter silence of the river was a great contrast to the clangour of the streets of Philadelphia and Baltimore and the string of towns I had been passing through on my way South. Sunset was reflected deep in the stream, and mists crept over the surface of the water. Then the moon silvered down on our course; my cabin-window was full open and the moon looked in. I lay in a capacious sort of cottage bed and was enchanted by the idea of going to “Dixie”.  

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Graham skirted round the obvious paradox that it was precisely the soulless North which had fought for the end of slavery during the Civil War, and, even in the 1920s, provided a far more congenial home for the ‘Children of the Slaves’ than the former slave states. He did not, however, make any attempt to minimise the problems faced by the black population in the Southern states. Some of these were comparatively petty but still imposed harsh indignities on those who suffered them. Graham recalled how in Virginia some car dealers would not sell their more expensive models to black customers for fear that it would contaminate the brand. Nor did he shrink from discussing darker aspects of Southern culture, including the whole question of lynching. Graham also recalled that whilst staying in Georgia there were three reported lynchings in the state, including that of Paul Brooker, who was accused of sexually molesting a white woman. Brooker was attacked by a large crowd, who threw him to the ground, where he lay “maltreated but living; gasoline was poured over him, a lighted match was applied, and he was burned to death”. In a letter to a friend in New York, Graham noted how he feared “mob violence” was likely to grow still worse in the future. He spoke to many Southern whites throughout his long journey, making no effort to hide their vitriolic racism from his readers, even though he acknowledged that most of the people he spoke to were polite if deeply suspicious of outsiders. Nor could Graham understand the mentality of whites “who boasted of having taken part in a lynching”, adding that he had met “those who possessed gruesome mementoes in the shape of charred bones and grey dry Negro skin”.

Graham’s attitude towards black Americans in the South exhibited many of the contradictions and prejudices typical of a British traveller of the period. He was happy to speak without any awkwardness of “the terrible odour of the blacks” that he first encountered in Norfolk Virginia. He also wrote about the black population in patronising terms as “a friendly, easy-going fond-to-foolish folk by nature”, suggesting at one point that it was not yet clear whether most had sufficient education to justify receiving the vote. Graham offered countless sweeping generalisations, such as his claim that black culture became more “stagnant” the further south he

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7 Ibid, p. 161.
8 Vachel Lindsay Papers (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library), SC926A, Folder 1, Graham to Charlotte Hallowell, 26 November 1919.
went (he was particularly disappointed by New Orleans, which he found a ramshackle and run-down place, rather than the city he had imagined of “wide open streets” and men dressed “all in white”).

His portrayal of many of the individuals he met was, though, both sympathetic and vivid. He wrote movingly of a sermon given by a black woman in a chapel in Virginia that was “so rousing […] that I had to do everything in my power to avoid breaking down under the influence and sobbing like a child”.

He was also repeatedly struck by the intelligence and intellectual curiosity of the students he met in black schools and colleges, as well as the energy of a new class of black entrepreneurs who were determined to use their businesses to promote the welfare of the black community. Graham’s journal notes also show that he was impressed by the civil rights leader William Dubois whom he interviewed at some length (Dubois provided him with introductions to many of the people he interviewed).

Although *Children of the Slaves* undoubtedly perpetuated many stereotypes, it made a genuine attempt to provide readers with an understanding of the complex situation faced by black Americans in the South in the years after the First World War, recording with sympathy their efforts to develop richer personal and community lives in the face of immense historic prejudice. The reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* even suggested that Graham was, if anything, “over-tender to the weaknesses of the negro”.

The anonymous reviewer in the *Athenaeum* took a rather different line, suggesting that “Mr Graham’s observations are more valuable than his reflections”, in effect suggesting that his gifts as a writer lay in reportage and anecdote rather than in his more formal reflections on the things he had seen and done. Graham’s ideas also found an American audience through the pages of *Harper’s Magazine*, which serialised at length his account of his tramp across Georgia following the footsteps of General Sherman, although the US edition of his book received surprisingly few reviews. It may be that the whole question of race remained a deeply sensitive one even for the denizens of the East Coast literary establishment. Graham recalled many years later that *Harper’s* had stopped running his articles following threats of a boycott by Southern advertisers.

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11 Graham Papers (FSU), Box 578, 18 (Journal of trip to USA 1919).
12 Graham, *Children of the Slaves*, pp. 82-3.
14 *Athenaeum*, 5 November 1920.
16 Graham Papers (FSU), Box 573, 7, Graham to Hay, 18 November 1950.
was by contrast widely advertised in the black press (including *The Crisis*, the journal produced by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

Although Graham never again wrote at length on the treatment of black Americans, his interest in the subject continued for some time to come, and he gave several lectures on the topic following his return to Britain in March 1920. He also offered help and support to the young black singer Roland Hayes during his first visit to London.\(^{17}\) Despite Graham’s claim that the war had changed his outlook on life, by making him more “critical and objective”, his journey through the Southern states provided him with an opportunity to return to some of the questions that had preoccupied him in the years before 1917: the potential for the natural world to provide insights into the nature of existence; the devastating effect of industrialisation on traditional communities; and so forth. Whilst Graham was ambivalent about the “spiritual atmosphere” which he found in black chapels and churches, he believed that the black population was, like his beloved Russian peasantry, “very thirsty for religion”.\(^{18}\) He was also deeply sensitive to the charms of the Southern landscape, finding in it “an assurance of some new refreshment of spirit”,\(^{19}\) although the exuberantly pantheistic ethos of his earlier work had by now begun to fade. Much of Graham’s interest in the South rested above all on his awareness that it provided a contrast to the commercial and industrial society of the North. Although he was far too aware of the harsh character of Southern culture to suggest that the Civil War had resulted in the wrong outcome – such an argument would have run counter to the whole tenet of *The Children of the Slaves* – he was still determined to show his readers that cities like New York and Chicago did not represent the best aspect of modern America. *The New York Times* journalist who suggested in 1913 that Graham was captivated by the wide open spaces of America precisely because they reminded him of Russia was, in a very real sense, correct. Graham’s fascination with the United States was conditioned in large part by his desire to find a new place where he could feel at home.

Graham left New Orleans with his wife late in 1919, heading up the eastern seaboard by boat to New York, where they spent the following weeks in an apartment located across the street from Grand Central Station.

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18 Graham, *Children of the Slaves*, p. 15.
19 Ibid, p. 27.
Graham was not at first enamoured by the city’s literary scene, writing many years later that everyone he met was obsessed with politics rather than “the religious idealism in which I was most interested”.\(^{20}\) He did, however, meet a number of people who were interested in Theosophy, spending time in the Catskill Mountains at the home of one wealthy devotee, who surprised him with her eccentric insistence that the Holy Grail could be found in a New York church where it had been taken from its original home in Antioch.\(^{21}\) He met the American Slavic scholar Charles Crane, whose daughter was married to Jan Masaryk, son of the new President of Czechoslovakia, and gave numerous lectures including one to an audience of 3,000 women at Carnegie Hall (a striking testimony to Graham’s growing reputation in the USA). Graham also travelled to Boston and Philadelphia, speaking both on Russia and his recent trip through the South, in some cases displaying an entrepreneurial spirit by organising the hire of the hall himself.\(^{22}\) Despite his initial dislike of the New York literary scene, he was extremely successful in meeting some of the city’s most influential editors and publishers. Graham stayed with Ellery Sedgwick, editor of the \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, and through him met the architect Ralph Cram, who had played an enormous role in the American gothic revival (“a fine architect, placing beautiful edifices among the wildernesses of the commercial buildings in modern America”).\(^{23}\) He also made the acquaintance of younger writers and journalists, including Christopher (‘Kit’) Morley, who were later to become prominent figures in their own right. Graham came to like New York, despite his periodic diatribes against the city’s lack of soul. Its literary elite provided him with a welcome that he could only dream about back in London, whilst his lectures there and in other cities on the eastern seaboard provided him with a useful additional income. When his personal life began to disintegrate during the second half of the 1920s, it was to New York that Graham travelled, secure in the knowledge that he had as many friends there as he did back home in Britain.

Although Graham was delighted to find in the Southern states of America a lifestyle that seemed largely free from the taint of materialism, the bleak legacy of slavery made it impossible for him to celebrate the region as the


\(^{21}\) Graham Papers (HRC), \textit{Wonderful Scene} (typescript), pp. 175-76.

\(^{22}\) For an account of Graham’s almost frantic activities in this period, see Vachel Lindsay Letters (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library), SC926A, Folder 1, Rosa Graham to Charlotte Hallowell, 10 February 1920.

\(^{23}\) Graham Papers (HRC), \textit{Wonderful Scene} (typescript), p. 182.
'real' America, spared from the commercialism that dominated life in the great cities of the North. He was nevertheless reluctant to give up entirely on the idea of finding a place in the United States free from the scars of racism and commercialism. Graham was confirmed in his view by the unlikely figure of the self-proclaimed ‘Prairie Troubador’, Vachel Lindsay, whom he first saw perform in New York at the home of the political reformer Charles Burlingham, before welcoming him a few months later in Britain when Lindsay visited London and Oxford on a recital tour. Lindsay had in his youth made a number of tramps across America as a kind of eccentric vagabond-poet, earning his food and lodging by giving impromptu recitals of his poems (‘Rhymes Traded for Bread’), whilst promoting his idiosyncratic Gospel of Beauty to the bemused farmers of the Mid West. He subsequently acquired considerable fame with poems such as *The Congo* and *General William Booth Enters the Kingdom of Heaven*, which were composed to be read (or sung) aloud, and toured widely throughout the United States reciting his work to audiences that sometimes numbered in the thousands.

By the time the First World War ended, Lindsay had established himself as a central figure in the Chicago literary renaissance, along with his fellow Illinois poets Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg. It is not surprising that he quickly struck up a rapport with Graham, for Lindsay’s *credo*, which he had previously set down in such books as *A Handy Guide for Beggars* (1916), closely resembled that of his new friend. Lindsay was sharply critical of the commercial and industrial character of America’s great cities, describing himself as a “peddler of dreams” and “Troubador”, who toured his country seeking “lodging in exchange for repeating verses and fairy tales”. He also shared Graham’s instinctive nature-mysticism, describing

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24 On Lindsay see Edgar Lee Masters, *Vachel Lindsay: A Poet in America* (New York: Scribners, 1935); Eleanor Ruggles, *The West-Going Heart: A Life of Vachel Lindsay* (New York: Norton, 1959); Dennis Camp, *Uncle-Boy* (unfinished biography available at http://www.vachellindsayhome.org/#!uncle-boy). For details of Lindsay’s tour in Britain, see the notebook by his mother in Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library (Springfield), Catherine Blair Collection, Box 2, Folder 1.


in his book how, when bathing in the Falls of Tallulah in North Georgia, the water flowed “like a sacerdotal robe [...] over my shoulders and I thought myself the priest of solitude”. Lindsay believed that Nature could serve as a kind of balm “to those crushed by the inventions of cities”, providing them with a sense of the ineffable that had been lost in the rhythms of industrial society. Whilst Lindsay was, like Graham, a practising Christian – he belonged to The Disciples of Christ sect – he was convinced that a sense of the Divine presence was best sought not “in temples made with man’s hands” but, rather, in the by-ways of “the infinite earth”. He also believed, like Graham, that beauty in both the natural world and in art represented a way of knowing God (“Let me give thanks to God for my artist friends, those who have given their hearts to the Christ of beauty, though they may not call on his name”). And, again like Graham, Lindsay believed that the visible world was in some sense merely a series of signs pointing towards another invisible universe (he was fascinated by Egyptian hieroglyphics, which he interpreted as symbolic texts, capable of yielding up their meaning only to those initiated in their mysteries). Lindsay proclaimed his ideas with an extravagance and missionary zeal bordering on eccentricity: “For good or ill I have eaten of the flower of the Holy Spirit, the most dangerous bloom of the Universe. There are days when visions come in cataracts. With these pictures burning heart and conscience away, I would compass Heaven and Earth to make one proselytise. I would go through smoke and flame to prove that these my visitations come to me”.

Lindsay was not only interested in these questions from a narrowly aesthetic point of view. He also believed that he was destined to play a role in transforming America by encouraging the revival of local communities where art and education would be valued more than money and industry. In Adventures Whilst Preaching The Gospel of Beauty (1914), he described his conviction that:

The things most worthwhile are one’s own hearth and neighbourhood. We should make our own home and neighbourhood the most democratic, the most beautiful and the holiest in the world. The children now growing up

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28 Ibid, pp. 39, 45.
29 Ibid, p. 132.
31 Masters, Vachel Lindsay, p. 273; Camp, Prose of Vachel Lindsay, p. 109. Lindsay’s longest statement about his attitudes towards hieroglyphics can be found in Vachel Lindsay, The Art of the Moving Picture (New York: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 171-88.
32 Quoted in Camp, Prose of Vachel Lindsay, p. 107.
should become devout gardeners or architects or park architects or teachers of dancing in the Greek spirit or musicians or novelists or poets or storytellers or craftsmen or wood-carvers or dramatists or actors or singers.  

In his fantasy *The Golden Book of Springfield* (1920), Lindsay imagined how his home town in Illinois might look in a hundred years’ time, describing how the utopian Springfield of 2018 would boast a vibrant artists’ colony but few bankers or businessmen. The town of his vision was also a place that prompted a passionate loyalty amongst its citizens (Lindsay had from a young age proclaimed the value of what he called “The New Localism”).  

The book represented a kind of sustained critique of East Coast America. Lindsay was increasingly convinced that the United States was a country of regions – and that the regions had to assert themselves in order not to be swamped by the tide of materialism flowing out from cities like New York and Chicago. The real America, for Lindsay, was to be found in the farms and small towns rather than the urban conglomerations. It was a philosophy guaranteed to appeal to Stephen Graham.

When Lindsay met Graham during his trip to London in 1920, the two men spent a good deal of time planning a long tramp together through some of the remotest areas of America. Graham was at first somewhat cautious about the prospect (he usually preferred to tramp alone). Lindsay was increasingly tired of reciting his poems to large audiences, even though it brought him considerable popular acclaim, telling his fellow poet Sara Teasdale that he “would give almost anything to escape forever from the reciting and chanting Vachel [...] My whole heart is set on escaping my old self”. He was also increasingly disillusioned by his failure to persuade his fellow Americans about the value of his idiosyncratic vision of their country’s future (*The Golden Book of Springfield* made almost no impression when it appeared in 1920). Lindsay was therefore ready to embark upon a new adventure which, he hoped, would provide a catalyst for transforming his life. He discussed with Graham the possibility of walking the US-Canadian border from east to west, or crossing the ice-bound Bering Straits that separated America and Russia, although his friend was not sure

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35 Vachel Lindsay Papers (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library), SC926A, Folder 1, Graham to Charlotte Hallowell, 31 December 1920.  
“if it could be done”. The two men were joined on occasion by Wilfrid Ewart, who also hoped to travel to the United States, a country he had never visited before. The three men wandered through the grim streets of the East End, making travel plans, and imagining vast and remote landscapes against the backdrop of urban noise and squalor.

Both Lindsay and Graham were determined that their putative American tramp should be something more than a simple hike. Lindsay was entranced by the prospect that “a great English writer” like Graham would be able to describe “the America I see [which] never gets written down by anyone, least of all by me”. He was also convinced that he shared a particular vision of the world with his new friend, writing to Graham that “You and I are the only two men writing I know of who have the same general habits and moods of obedience [...] we are destined to see chunks of the world together”. The prospect of the tramp became for Lindsay something like a pilgrimage, particularly in the early months of 1921, when in a flurry of correspondence it was agreed that he and Graham should meet in Springfield in the summer before heading west to tramp through Glacier Park in the Rocky Mountains. Lindsay was, in all respects, a thoroughly other-worldly character given to fits of rapture and excess. Graham shared much of his friend’s enthusiasm – he was eager to see the American West with his own eyes – but he was also much more attuned to the commercial possibilities of his forthcoming tramp. On his arrival in New York, equipped with little more than a capacious knapsack and a tweed hat, accoutrements that made him look decidedly eccentric in the heat of summer, he went to see Christopher Morley at the New York Evening Post. Morley, in turn, persuaded the paper’s editor to commission a series of sketches from Graham detailing his experiences in Glacier Park. Graham was “thrilled” to imagine that he would “be read by the New York crowds streaming homeward on elevated trains” (he hoped his column would win new readers for his books). Lindsay and Graham’s trip also attracted coverage in the pages of American provincial papers ranging from the Miami Herald to The Oregonian.

38 Vachel Lindsay Papers (HRC), Letters file, Lindsay to Graham, 9 February 1921.
39 Ibid, Lindsay to Graham, 11 February 1921.
40 Graham Papers (HRC), Wonderful Scene (typescript), p. 212.
41 Miami Herald, 26 July 1921; The Oregonian, 9 October 1921.
Both Graham and Lindsay published books about their tramp through Glacier National Park in the late summer of 1921. Graham’s contribution took the form of a travelogue, published under the less-than-original title of *Tramping with a Poet in the Rockies*, which contained a series of striking illustrations by the sculptor and illustrator Vernon Hill, who was paid a princely £25 for his work.

Lindsay, for his part, published a long poem cycle, *Going-to-the-Sun*, named after one of the peaks in the area. The six-week hike was valued by both men as much for the chance it gave them to discuss topics ranging from politics to literature as for the opportunity to engage with the wilderness first-hand. Lindsay ruefully noted that his friend was much fitter than he was, which meant that he spent much of his time “trying to keep Graham in sight when he was a quarter of a mile ahead of me climbing mountains absolute perpendicular”. He was nevertheless exhilarated at the beauty and isolation of the mountains.

Graham’s published account of his experiences was, as so often, a fusion of the descriptive and the philosophical. He praised Lindsay as a man “who is something more than an entertainer. He has a spiritual message to the world and is deeply in earnest [...] I have rarely met such a rebel against vulgarity, materialism and the modern way of life”. He went on to note that he had undertaken the trip with his friend to escape for a time from the world of European cities and instead be able:

42 For a review complaining that Graham should in fact have made his book less of a travelogue and more a literary biography of Lindsay, see *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 January 1922.
To sleep under the stars, to live with the river that sings as it flows, to sit by the embers of morning or evening fire and just dream away time and earnestness, to gather sticks to keep the old pot aboiling, to laze into the company of strangers and slip out of their company in time, to make friends with bird and beast, and watch insects and grubs – to relax and to be; that’s my idea of tramping.  

Although both men were disappointed to discover when they arrived at Glacier Park station that the local hotel was full of tourists, interested only in pleasant views and gentle walks, within an hour of leaving they found themselves “in the deep silence of the mountains encompassed on both sides by exuberant pink larkspurs and blanket flowers and red paintbrush”. Lindsay was as ever wildly enthusiastic about their adventure, “roaring hurrah and making the mountains echo with his roar”, whilst the more restrained Graham looked forward to nights spent relishing “the stars and moon and stillness”. As the two men hiked on into the wilderness they felt like “Wagnerian pilgrims, toiling upwards in the ecstasy of mystical opera”. They walked by compass, leaving the trails behind, scrambling instead up the mountain-sides and through dense forests that filled the valleys below.

Graham was deeply impressed by the sheer scale of Glacier National Park, which was in turn just one of a number of national parks in the American West, together making up tens of thousands of square miles of wilderness. Although *Tramping with a Poet* was surprisingly sparse in its description of the Park, Graham left his readers in no doubt of the importance of wild landscapes to humanity, looking forward to a time “when national wildernesses will have an acknowledged significance in our public life, when men and women of all classes of life will naturally retire to them for recreation – as naturally as people used to go to church on Sundays and for a similar reason”. Nor did he believe that mountains and wild landscape existed only in the far reaches of countries like Russia and America:

> The spiritual background of Great Britain is in the mountains of the North, among the Cumberland lakes and on the wild border. Or it is in the obscure grandeur of the Sussex Downs or on Dartmoor, or on the Welsh hills. Small  

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46 Graham Papers (FSU), 578, 33 (Journal for 1921, entry dated 28 July 1921).  
47 Catherine Blair Collection (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library), Box 3, Folder 13, Lindsay to Mother, 3 July 1921.  
48 Graham, *Tramping with a Poet*, p. 73.
though the mountains may be, they are continually in the minds of the English people. The way of escape is clear. And many of the bright spirits of England and Scotland have derived their strength direct from the hills.\textsuperscript{49}

Lindsay and Graham both believed that the real heart of America was to be found in places like Glacier Park, away from the urban centres of the East. In their fireside conversations, “discussing everything”,\textsuperscript{50} Lindsay expressed his belief in “the war of the mountains and the desert against the town. Only the deserts and mountains of America can break the business-hardened skulls of the West”. He also raged against “the praise of dollars and the implication that everything in the world has a commercial value or it has no value”.\textsuperscript{51} Graham, for his part, revelled in a world where “American and European civilisation ceased to fill the mind”. He also made clear his belief – albeit in rather cod-religious terms – that life in the mountains offered insights into the mysteries of the universe that could seldom be found in the cities. The wilderness acquired for both men a distinctive status as a place of authenticity, a natural world in which it was possible to understand humanity’s place in a world alive with religious and metaphysical meanings.

Graham’s book was not only given over to rarefied reflections on the significance of landscape. It also contained humorous accounts of Lindsay’s strong stone-ground coffee, with “a kick like a mule”,\textsuperscript{52} and the constant challenges involved in ensuring that the local bear population did not steal their food supplies. Graham also provided a series of rather arch (if affectionate) pen-pictures of his friend, with his “curious old-man of the woods appearance”.\textsuperscript{53} The presence of these lighter elements in the book was partly rooted in the commercial realities of publishing. Graham kept up a surprisingly detailed correspondence with Christopher Morley during his time out-west, sending him numerous pieces for the \textit{Evening Post}. In order to appeal to the paper’s readership he had to make sure his sketches were light and humorous.\textsuperscript{54} When he came to write his book, though, he was still determined to regale his audience with his distinctive

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid, p. 72.
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Christopher Morley Papers (Haverford College), Collection 810, Graham to Morley, August 1921.
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Graham, \textit{Tramping with a Poet}, p. 129. Lindsay noted in his introduction in \textit{Going-to-the-Sun} that he did not always recognise himself in the portrait painted by Graham, although in this case the views ascribed to him are consistent with everything else he believed.
  \item \textsuperscript{52} Graham, \textit{Tramping with a Poet}, p. 112.
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid, p. 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} For details see the various letters from Graham to Morley in Christopher Morley Papers (Haverford College).
\end{itemize}
life-philosophy. The more reflective passages in *Tramping with a Poet* were not only designed to persuade his readers that the American West was in some sense superior to the urban conglomerations of the East Coast; they were also designed to show how modern industrial civilisation invariably made it difficult to live what a later generation would call an authentic existence.

Graham was nevertheless still determined to portray the American West in a realistic manner, as one distinctive aspect of the manifold complexity of the modern United States, rather than a semi-mythical place detached from the challenges of the modern world. Lindsay repeatedly sought to persuade his friend to “disassociate America from the dollar, from the noisy business rampage, and from all that was unworthy”. Graham was reluctant to do so, both because he feared that it would make people suspicious of the accuracy of his work, and because he recognised that the ethos of modern America was increasingly governed by the *mores* and practices of the East Coast.\(^55\) Despite these disagreements, Lindsay believed that he and Graham were “natural allies” in the fight for a spiritual vision of life against the materialism of the modern age.\(^56\) He also believed that he was himself beginning to shed the “dust and ashes” of his old life and establish a “great overhauling” that would in time allow him to return refreshed and invigorated to his work.\(^57\)

One subject that preoccupied both Lindsay and Graham during their tramp was the relationship between the USA and the British Empire. In the early 1920s, following the return of US troops from the battlefields of Europe, many Americans viewed Britain with distrust as an imperial nation that had helped to drag the world into war. Lindsay was not one of them. Although his trip to London had not been an altogether happy experience, despite his warm reception at recitals in London and Oxford, England was to him “something that forever was – beautiful, the substance of poetry, the evidence of things not seen”. Whilst he was ill-disposed to the idea of monarchy, as something radically at odds with his instinctively democratic outlook on life, he was convinced that the United States and Britain were united by ties that went beyond mere politics. When he walked with Graham to the Canadian border, north of Glacier Park, both men rejoiced.

**55** Graham, *Tramping with a Poet*, p. 244.

**56** Catherine Blair Papers (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library), Box 3, Folder 13, Lindsay to Mother, 3 July 1921.

**57** Harriet Moody Papers (University of Chicago Library), Box 1, Folder 19, Lindsay to Moody, 7 August, 1921; Catherine Blair Papers (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library), Box 3, Folder 13, Lindsay to Mother, 7 August 1921.
at finding “an unguarded line” where there were “no patrols, no excise or passport officers”. They stood either side of one of the posts that marked the frontier and “put our wrists together on the top [...] As we two had become friends and learned to live together without quarrelling, so might our nations”.

After this brief moment of stylised Anglo-American bonding – which seems characteristic of both men – they walked northwards into the Alberta plains which Graham found “much wilder than the Wild West”. He was delighted to find living in one valley a group of Dukhobors, a primitive Christian sect, whose members had emigrated from Russia in the late nineteenth century. Graham was instinctively sympathetic to a religious group that believed in the principle of universal brotherhood, but he was overjoyed above all to find “a bit of old Russia” living on in the unexpected setting of the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

In his introduction to Going-to-the-Sun, Lindsay described Graham as a “lifetime friend”, even though they had only first met eighteen months or so before venturing into the mountains, evidence of his belief that the Briton was a true fellow spirit. Whilst they were still in Glacier Park, he wrote to the poet Alice Corbin Henderson, telling her that his tramping partner was “permanently enthused over the Western idea”, adding that he believed his friend could become an important figure in persuading Americans to develop a new vision of their homeland.

Graham also appears in person in some of Lindsay’s poems in Going-to-the-Sun, which began with a piece ‘We Start West to the Waterfalls’, and combined a longing for the wilderness with a sense that the natural world was able to provide an insight into the numinous. Some of Lindsay’s poems were set, imaginatively at least, in Glacier Park. ‘The Mystic Unicorn of the Montana Sunset’ tells how “the Unicorn-No-Storm-Can-Tame” materialised on the mountainside above “Stephen’s campfire in the rocks”, and sat down to discuss the Himalayas with him, an image designed like so many of Lindsay’s poems in Going-to-the-Sun to show the porosity of the boundary between the real and the imaginary. Lindsay’s poems were accompanied by dozens of illustrations that he penned himself, echoing his interest in the symbolism of hieroglyphics, for they were designed to convey meanings that even the elaborate metaphors of the poems could not achieve. Going-to-the-Sun mountain is depicted in the opening illustration as a hollow rock with fairy-like creatures flying about inside. The Mystic Unicorn is

58 Graham, Tramping with a Poet, pp. 226-27.
59 Alice Corbin Henderson Papers (Harry Ransom Center), Box 4, Folder 13, Lindsay to Henderson, 18 August 1921.
embedded in a background of leaves. The bird described in the poem ‘The Pheasant Speaks of his Birthdays’ is shown sitting by a branch set against the background of a mountain illuminated by the rays of the sun. Both poems and illustrations were inspired by their author’s desire to import fantasy into the everyday world, to shake up settled ideas of landscape, and hint at ideas that Lindsay found difficult to articulate in discursive language. Reviewers did not altogether know what to make of the book. The critic in the *New York Times* described Lindsay as “the modern Mark Twain” whose best friends were the Mad Hatter and the March Hare. The review ended with a shrewd observation that the poet wanted to show how “beauty, humour and truth are one”. The critic for *Time* assured his readers that Lindsay was not “crazy”, although they acknowledged there was a kind of madness in “the very excited intensity of his sanity”. Even the most generous critics nevertheless failed to get to the heart of the poet’s elusive and allusive “message”.

![Press photograph of Vachel Lindsay and Stephen Graham (on the right) in 1921.](image)

Figure 7: Press photograph of Vachel Lindsay and Stephen Graham (on the right) in 1921.

Graham was in private unimpressed by *Going-to-the-Sun* when it first appeared at the start of 1923, believing that the talent which had distinguished its author’s earlier verse was beginning to fade, although he only expressed such a view long after Lindsay’s suicide in 1931. He was

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61 *Time*, 3 October 1923.
62 Margaret Haley Carpenter Papers (University of Virginia), 10, 18, Graham to Carpenter,
nevertheless inspired enough by their hike through Glacier Park to discuss the possibility of repeating the experience the following year, and although the project was scuppered by the death of Lindsay’s mother, the prospect of a new tramp became a staple of the two men’s correspondence. Vachel returned to Glacier Park on a number of occasions by himself, as well as travelling there with his new wife in 1925, showing her the places that he had visited with Graham.63 He also moved for a time to Spokane to be closer to the Rocky Mountains (the city for a time replaced Springfield in his imagination as a Holy City capable of serving as the foundation for an American aesthetic and spiritual renaissance).

There was in truth always a marked difference between Lindsay’s view of the world and that of his friend. Graham’s interest in “vagabondage” was never rooted so much in a radical rejection of civilised society as in a belief that an outsider was best-placed to understand the world in which he found himself. There was, by contrast, something more hobo about Lindsay’s view of the world (although one columnist in The Oregonian did question whether “such a pleasant-mannered youth could really be kin to society’s derelicts”).64 Although less of an outsider than he sometimes painted himself, Lindsay was an uneasy figure when he found himself in the world of polite society, at least as it existed in the major cities and university campuses where he sometimes lectured or recited. Graham was by contrast always comfortable in the literary and social world of London and New York. For all his undoubted love of travel and tramping, he looked at the landscape with the eyes of a writer, ruminating on how he might make use of it in his books and articles. Lindsay was by contrast more of a true poet, who was like “all poets [...] mad, or, to be gentler, estranged, alienated, perceiving too much, feeling too much, ranging too far, lingering too long at the poles of exaltation and morbidity”.65

After finishing their tramp through Glacier Park, Lindsay returned with Graham to Springfield, where they gave lectures to local schoolchildren and church groups about their adventures. The two of them then went on to Chicago, where Lindsay introduced Graham to Harriet Moody, a leading figure in the city’s cultural scene (by the early 1920s Chicago had become a rival to New York for the title of America’s leading literary centre). He

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1 February 1961.
64 The Oregonian, 9 October 1921.
65 Mark Harris, City of Discontent (New York: Boobs Merril, 1952), Preface.
remained there for a week where, in Moody’s words, “he endeared himself
to us all”\textsuperscript{66} before heading home to Britain via New York in the middle
of October on the White Star Line’s ‘Olympic’\textsuperscript{67}. Graham’s enthusiasm for
America meant that he was determined to return there as soon as possible,
writing to Moody early in 1922 that he hoped to be back in North America
within a few months, in order to climb the Peak of Darien in Panama,
before heading northwards again to the United States. He was in the event
delayed in London for a number of reasons (it was during this period that
he wrote his esoteric \textit{Credo} for \textit{The Beacon} and attended Haldane’s lectures
on biological materialism). He also used the time to make a brief visit
back to the Essex suburbs where he was brought up, in order to provide
inspiration for his autobiographical novel \textit{Under-London}. Graham also
seems to have hoped that he might be given a visa by the Soviet authorities
to visit the country,\textsuperscript{68} noting many years later that it was blocked by the
personal intervention of Trotsky, although it is not clear how he could have
known this was the case.\textsuperscript{69}

In early April Graham and Rose finally closed up Frith Street, and
departed for central America via Spain, with just a couple of rucksacks,
hoping to find there “fun and adventure and poetry and sunburn”.\textsuperscript{70}
Graham took a strong dislike to Spain more or less from the moment he
arrived there – his first visit to the country – freely acknowledging his
dislike of the “bull-like heads” and “sombre eyes” of the Spaniards he met
in Madrid.\textsuperscript{71} He was also appalled at the cruelty he witnessed at a bullfight
in the city. The Spanish themselves lacked “discipline and order”.\textsuperscript{72} From
Madrid he travelled southwards via Cordoba to Cadiz, one of the few
places he liked, praising its “solidly-built houses” and “beautiful iron work
gates”.\textsuperscript{73} He was not, however, smitten by the Spanish ship that he boarded
for Puerto Rico, which reeked of onions and was infested by rats, although

\textsuperscript{67} See, too, Harriet Moody Papers (University of Chicago Library), Box 1, Folder 14, Graham to Moody 14 October 1921.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, Graham to Moody, 31 December 1921.
\textsuperscript{69} Montreal Gazette, 1 December 1930.
\textsuperscript{70} Harriet Moody Papers (University of Chicago Library), Box 1, Folder 14, Graham to Moody, 23 March 1922.
\textsuperscript{72} Graham Papers (FSU), 578, 34 (Journal for 1922, entry dated 10 April).
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid (Journal for 1922, entry dated 20 April).
the journey itself passed smoothly enough. By the time the ship approached
the New World, Graham and Rose were starting to adjust to the rhythms
of the tropical climate, sleeping in the hottest part of the day, before going
up on deck to enjoy “the freshness of afternoon breezes”. On their arrival at
San Juan they were met by US immigration officers – Puerto Rico was a US
possession – who subjected them to the usual barrage of absurd questions
including “are you a polygamist” and “do you believe in subverting an
existing government by force”? Graham resisted the temptation to reply in
the affirmative.74

Graham had a number of objectives in making his third trip to North
America in as many years. He was in the first place planning to follow in
the footsteps of the Spanish conquistadores of the sixteenth century – men
such as Herman Cortes and Francesco Vásquez de Coronado – who had
travelled to the New World in search of gold and other riches. He also
wanted to trace the route taken by the explorer Vasco Nunez de Balboa,
who had in 1513 led an expedition to the Pacific from the eastern seaboard
of America, catching his first glimpse of the ocean from the Peak of Darien,
which rises out of the jungle of modern-day Panama. Graham also planned
to spend some months in Santa Fé, in New Mexico, where he had been
advised to go the previous year by Vachel Lindsay, who himself had
numerous contacts with members of the burgeoning artists’ colony that
had grown up there over the previous few years. Lindsay hoped that
Graham’s residence in the town would make him still more enthusiastic
over “the Western idea”. He wrote to Alice Corbin Henderson, a member
of the literary colony, expressing his hope that Graham would confirm
Lindsay’s own (as ever eccentrically enthusiastic) view that “Santa Fé is
[...] the psychic centre of America [...] Stephen is just the man I want to go
there and confirm my suspicion”.75 To Graham, Lindsay described Santa
Fé as “a holy city to me”.76 In another letter he told his friend that “with a
horse and a house you have every chance to build a city of the soul and I
have every hope you will build it [...] you can make Santa Fé a Mecca for
many believers”. He went on to add that “I think it possible to maintain
all the richness of medieval times, and yet burn every book on Theology

74 Graham, In Quest of El Dorado p. 38.
75 Alice Corbin Henderson Papers (HRC), Box 4, Folder 13, Lindsay to Henderson, 18
August 1921.
76 Vachel Lindsay Papers (HRC), Letters file, Lindsay to Stephen and Rose Graham, 11 July
1922.
and Dogma, burn every creed, abolish every priesthood and every caste”.

Graham was for his part curious to see parts of America that he had never seen before. Whilst he was not convinced by Lindsay’s enthusiasm about the possibility of creating a “holy city”, capable of serving as a beacon for a new vision of life, he still had hopes of finding a place spared the materialism and commercialism of the East Coast. He also had plans to write a book about his experiences in the New World, encouraged by the success of *Tramping with a Poet in the Rockies*, which had reassured him that he could establish himself in the public mind as something more than a propagandist for the old Russia.

Graham used the opening section of *In Quest of El Dorado* to describe the first stages of his journey from Puerto Rico via Haiti to Cuba (the chapters were, as was the case with *Tramping with a Poet*, originally serialised by Christopher Morley in the *New York Evening Post*). He not only regaled his readers with descriptions of the people and places he encountered *en route*, but also described the history of the region, including the legacies of conquest and slavery that had shaped the area’s racial composition (he always had a keen, and to modern eyes somewhat unhealthy, interest in the nuances of colour and race). Graham devoted a good deal of space to discussing the impact of the influence of the United States in the region in the wake of the 1898 US-Spanish war (which, amongst other things, led to the end of Spanish rule in Cuba and Puerto Rico). He regarded the extension of the US presence with a marked degree of ambivalence. Graham seems to have accepted as inevitable a process in which “The dominant spirit of the Anglo-Saxon has overcome the gentle, sluggish conservatism of the old Spain”, tacitly recognising the legitimacy of imperial expansion by a more “advanced” race at the cost of one that was less energetic. He was nevertheless distinctly grudging in his description of the way in which US business and businessmen operated in the area. His perplexity echoed the contradiction that characterised his views on Russian imperialism in the years before 1917. Whilst he acknowledged the right of more advanced countries to extend their power over the “backward”, he was not convinced that such a development was always of benefit to the recipients, who faced the prospect of losing important aspects of their heritage. The virtues of imperialism were, for Graham, at best ambiguous.

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77 Ibid, Lindsay to Stephen and Rose Graham, 14 July 1922.
78 Graham, *In Quest of El Dorado*, p. 49.
Graham had originally intended to head to Mexico from his tour of the Caribbean islands, in order to follow Balboa’s footsteps across the isthmus to the Pacific, but the weather by the end of May was so hot that he decided to postpone the trip. He and Rose took a boat to New Orleans, which they had visited three years earlier during their trip through the South, and from there travelled by train to Houston, El Paso and on to the desert city of Santa Fé, located seven thousand feet up in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. The city had over the previous twenty years become a focus for writers and artists, who were drawn there not only by the magnificent scenery, but also by distaste for “a modern world [...] marred by excessive materialism, greed, corruption, and mechanization”. They hoped, in the words of one of the recent chroniclers of the Santa Fé colony, to find in the remote countryside of northern New Mexico “an antidote to America’s focus on urbanization, industrialization and preoccupation with military power”. Many of the writers and artists who flocked to the region were also attracted by the dry climate, ideal for those who suffered from tuberculosis and could find no relief for their condition in the polluted cities of the north. Others relished the prospect of living close to the Pueblo Indians, studying their folk-lore and myths, which attributed an almost divine significance to the local landscape and the creatures that populated it. The artistic colony at Santa Fé was certainly not unique in America – others were formed in places like Woodstock in New York and Carmel in California – but it was, by the 1920s, the best-known. It is easy to understand why Graham was happy to respond to Lindsay’s advice to visit the town. The love of nature and suspicion of urban civilisation that was a hallmark of many members of the colony, along with a somewhat diffuse emphasis on the importance of a spirituality that transcended any particular doctrine or church, had clear similarities to his long-established vision of life.

After a few days in Santa Fé, Stephen and Rose arranged to rent a small mud-built house of three rooms, complete with a porch and a large corral. They also bought two horses, ‘Billy’ and ‘Buckskin’, for use on their expeditions through the nearby desert (Graham told Christopher Morley in New York that they planned “to ride far and wide across the mountains”).

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80 For Graham’s first impressions of Santa Fé see Harriet Moody Papers (University of Chicago), Box 1, Folder 14, Graham to Moody, 15 June 1922.
81 Christopher Morley Papers (Haverford College), Graham to Morley, n.d.
Vachel Lindsay had provided the Grahams with an introduction to Alice Corbin Henderson, who had previously worked with Harriet Monroe at *Poetry Magazine* in Chicago, before moving to Santa Fé, where she spent much of her time collecting material about the folklore and poetry of New Mexico.\(^{82}\) They also met the writer Elizabeth Sergeant, the politician-journalist William Allen White, and the cowboy-poet Jack Thorp,\(^ {83}\) whose poems such as ‘Little Joe the Wrangler’ had already played a significant role in shaping popular images of the West. Graham renewed his acquaintance with the poet Witter Bynner whom he had first met in New York, although he had little time for Bynner’s friend D.H. Lawrence, “a wicked fellow” in Graham’s view, who was at the time living across the mountains in Taos with his wife Frieda.\(^ {84}\) Bynner himself was a great admirer of Graham, and had previously written a short poem about his travels through Russia, which appeared in his 1920 collection *A Canticle of Pan*.\(^ {85}\)

Graham found the literary milieu of Santa Fé congenial, although he got into trouble amongst some of his neighbours for supposedly describing the place itself as “a shabby little town”. He was in reality both enthralled and disappointed by his first encounter with a part of America situated so far from the soulless cities of the North, writing in *El Dorado* that Santa Fé’s:

> sun and air, its mountains, its horses, give it a marvellous possibility. The shabbiness lies in certain little things such as the mean commercialisation of the shops and the absence of a popular market for dairy products, fruit and vegetables. This is an Americanisation of life … [the population] lives on canned milk, canned tomatoes, dried fruit, storage meat, coffee ground years ago in Chicago, eggs of uncertain age and origin. Fruit falls to the ground and rots because they are plenty and stores do not want the price reduced. There is something artificial and unpleasant in living in New Mexico on rations from Chicago. It militates against simple living, and it should be the essence of a literary colony in the mountains to live simply. And it raises a problem for Americans – how to escape from the American standardisation of life.\(^ {86}\)

Graham had come to accept – even in the face of protests from Vachel Lindsay – that the pattern of life in the United States was largely moulded

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\(^{82}\) See, for example, A.C. Henderson (ed.), *The Turquoise Trail: An Anthology of New Mexico Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928).

\(^{83}\) On the tradition of cowboy poetry see David Stanley and Elaine Fletcher (eds.), *Cowboy Poets and Cowboy Poetry* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

\(^{84}\) Christopher Morley Papers (HRC), Graham to Morley, 18 October 1922.


\(^{86}\) Graham, *In Quest of El Dorado*, p. 93.
by the conventions and culture of the industrial North and East. Its tentacles spread far from the great urban centres to influence life even in the remote vastness of New Mexico. Whilst Graham relished the dramatic scenery of New Mexico, he never for a moment shared Lindsay’s hope that it could become the new spiritual heart of an alternative America.

During the summer of 1922, Graham sat in the shade in the front of his adobe house working on the manuscript of his novel *Under-London*, as well as preparing articles for the unlikely setting of the *American Legion Weekly*. He and Rose also spent a good deal of time exploring the deserts and mountains of the South-West. Graham was introduced to the world of the cowboy by Jack Thorp, accompanying him on some of his rides into “the greener heights of the mountains”, when he took horses up to pasture there. He was convinced that the figure of the cowboy retained a vital place in the American imagination, since “A great nation entirely composed of clerks is unthinkable. It must have peasants, or high-landers, or cowboys, behind it; something of the wild and primitive, something of romance. Therefore it is that America clings to her conception of a glorious Wild West behind her drab clerical East”.

Graham’s views may have partly been shaped by the romanticised view of the West that ran through Thorp’s songs and poems, although he travelled extensively himself in order to gain a deeper understanding of cowboy life, including a trip to the annual Las Vegas Reunion. In *El Dorado* he described for his readers the carnival atmosphere of the rodeo, where cowboys competed with each other at breaking-in horses. He provided a vivid account of the chuck-wagon races in which competitors vied with one another to steer their vehicles through a complex obstacle course in the shortest possible time. Silent western films were just becoming popular in Britain around the time Graham wrote his book, and he seems to have portrayed cowboy life in a way calculated to correspond to the expectations of his readers, but there is no doubt that he was genuinely enthralled by Western culture. His descriptions of the Native American settlements he visited were also rather stylised, complete with descriptions of tent settlements and ritual dances, in which the men were “all painted” and the women were “beautiful […] with long hair hanging down their backs”. Graham’s discussion of the plight of the Indians was nevertheless more subtle than such simple stereotyping might suggest. He acknowledged the

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87 Ibid, p. 98.
88 Ibid, p. 110.
brutality with which the native population had been treated in the past, attacking those who had crushed their way of life in the name of progress, and suggested that the recent tendency to romanticise Indian culture was a sign that it was now regarded as little more than a quaint souvenir of a vanished past. Although Graham valued the world of Cowboys and Indians, he was painfully aware that the rituals and customs of the Wild West were becoming a form of ritualised museum theatre, rather than evidence of a living culture strong enough to resist the increasingly homogenised life of the contemporary United States.

At the end of July, Graham headed south once again, leaving Rose behind in Santa Fé, in order to tramp across Panama and see the Pacific from the Peak of Darien, as Balboa had done some 400 years before. He took a boat from New Orleans to Colon, which was filled with Americans heading back to Panama from their vacations back home (the Canal Zone had some years earlier become US territory, and thousands of engineers and other workers subsequently moved there to help develop the region). The trek from the east of the isthmus to Darien proved tiring even to a seasoned walker like Graham. He and his two guides – one carried his pack and gun, whilst the other used a machete to hack through the jungle growth – made slow progress through a “dank and steaming” world where the ground was covered with “mud and slime”. They spent their nights in villages where the impoverished locals provided them with meals of “oil and rice and bits of fat pork”, or under “the scantiest shelter”, surrounded by “thousands of flaming fire flies [that] lit the floating mists which along the edge of a jungle clearing looked like phantoms living in dark houses”. The days were spent trekking under a canopy of trees filled with howling monkeys and squawking parrots. The going became a little easier when Graham and his companions were able to follow the Camino Real, a rough track carved out through the jungle centuries before, which led them to “the scarp of a commanding” ridge where the Pacific could be glimpsed “far away [...] beyond the hills and forests and the ridges”. Graham was exhilarated by his first sight of the Pacific Ocean, and he later recalled in El Dorado how “a warm current ran through my veins and something seemed to lighten heavy boots”. His guides barely paused at the sight and could not understand his excitement (“Grande Oceano” muttered one of them reflectively). Together they marched on for many hours to the shoreline, where like Balboa they stared through the twilight at “the many colours of glory sinking towards oblivion”.89

Graham began the description of his trek to the Peak of Darien with for him an unusually detailed meditation on travel and place. He told his readers that:

Religious geography is part of the art of living. To come to each new place on the chart called Earth, not in a spirit of mere jollity but with some reverence, gives a richness to life. Whilst some seek gold, others seek spiritual gold, the soul’s possession, which is neither sentimental nor unreal but is indeed the one substance out of which in the beginning all things were made.

He went on to add (rather ungrammatically) that:

The apology of a world-traveller that he did not see the Pacific before, from the heights of Tehuantepec, from the Golden Gate of San Francisco, from the stone eminence of the new city of Panama – he preferred to see it with Balboa’s eyes, climbing a peak out of the jungle and looking also and in like manner for the first time, in that way to perform a geographical rite in the world-temple.90

Such words sat rather oddly with the tone of the rest of *El Dorado*, which consisted mostly of a mixture of anecdote and narrative history, echoing instead the pilgrim motifs that had run through so much of his earlier writing. Graham’s 1922 journal certainly shows that many of his esoteric concerns continued to preoccupy him. Although many of his earliest meditations on landscape had concerned the Russian landscape, he still believed that the natural world could offer insights into alternative forms of reality. In his writings on America, throughout the early 1920s, he displayed an on-going interest in what would today be called sacred geography. Whilst his main task in *El Dorado* was to show his readers how the past continued to shape the present in central America, he had not altogether lost his desire to hint at the metaphysical foundations of the material world, suggesting that it could still be interrogated to provide a richer set of meanings than a more cursory examination might at first suggest.

After spending a few days in Panama City, where he praised the US administration for turning “one of the most pestilential swamps in the world [into] something like a health resort”,91 Graham headed by boat from Colon up the east coast to New York. He arrived there at the end of September, planning to meet his old friend Wilfrid Ewart, who was travelling to America in the hope of recovering from a severe mental and physical collapse that had followed his completion of *The Way of Revelation*. Graham also planned to meet Vachel Lindsay, who was in New York at the time, although Lindsay

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90 Ibid, p. 152.
too had fallen victim to a nervous breakdown following the death of his mother a few months earlier. Lindsay and Graham wandered the New York streets together, finding themselves both repelled and fascinated by the city. Although they were appalled by the power of Wall Street, dismissing its denizens as so many “Babbits”, the two men were mesmerised by New York’s raw energy and power. They immersed themselves once again in the city’s literary scene, and were amongst those who signed the door to Frank Shay’s bookshop in Greenwich Village, adding their signatures to a list which included names ranging from Christopher Morley and Sherwood Anderson to Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis. Graham was impressed by the decline in poverty since he first visited the city ten years earlier, later writing that the majority of its residents, like most Americans, had come to regard themselves as middle class. He offered a paean of praise for Prohibition, suggesting that the city had improved greatly since his first visit, when he had been appalled by “the huge gin-palaces” and the night-courts that met to process the large number of prostitutes arrested on the streets. Lindsay and Graham toured some of the old bars of New York, finding that many had been converted into shops or restaurants, whilst others remained surreptitiously in business, posting look-outs to warn of a possible raid by the police. They were joined on some of their expeditions by Ewart, although he preferred to spend his time touring Broadway or walking through Central Park, sketching out in his head a new novel that was partly to be set in the city. Although Lindsay and Ewart seem to have got on reasonably well, both in New York and during their earlier meeting in London, the exuberant Prairie Troubador and the reserved British army officer always found one another distinctly enigmatic. Graham himself acknowledged that his friendship with the two men was the only thing they had in common.

Ewart had come to North America hoping that his trip would provide new material for his writing, and he was eager to see both the big cities of the East and the remote deserts of the South West. After a few days in New York, he travelled with Graham to Chicago (Lindsay remained in New York before travelling south to Gulf Port College in Mississippi where he taught

92 On the literary scene in Greenwich Village in the 1920s, see Carolyn F. Ware, Greenwich Village: 1920-1930 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1935). The original bookshop door signed by Graham and Lindsay is held by the Harry Ransom Centre (University of Texas).

English for a time). In Chicago, Graham and Ewart visited Marshall Fields Department Store, and sampled the local hot dogs, before taking a train southwards to Kansas. From there they travelled to Santa Fé, arriving in a dust storm in the second half of October. Ewart rented a small adobe house from the artist Gerald Cassidy, located a few yards from the Grahams’ home, and bought a horse from a member of the literary colony who was heading back East to finish their University degree. The horse was too small for Ewart – who was well over six-feet tall – and proved remarkably stubborn. “George” nevertheless proved sturdy enough to allow his new owner to ride out into the desert, either on his own, or in the company of the Grahams.

Ewart was quickly riveted by the landscape of the Southwest, writing in awe how “the spirit of the mountain and desert, its sorrow and majesty, its profound mystery and unhappiness, steals out again, as if, before the year should die or before we two should part for ever, it pleaded to be known, to be understood”. In December he and Graham drove by car to the Grand Canyon in Arizona, a five-day trip, much of it through a “blinding snowstorm”, but the experience proved worthwhile “for the sake of seeing what is unique in the world”. The two scrambled down the side of the Canyon, almost falling at one point, following an old Indian trail that had been widened to make it safer for visitors. Nor was Ewart only enthralled by the natural landscape. He accompanied Graham on a 150 mile round trip to watch the celebrated ritual dance of the Jemez Indians, a sight that made a huge impression on him, although the Mexican and Indian houses in which the two men stayed were “infernally cold and uncomfortable”.

Ewart made a considerable impression on the Santa Fé colony. Although he was, in Graham’s words, a “reserved [and] almost inarticulate Guards officer”, whose fastidiousness at times blended into a snobbish disdain for others, he proudly sent back home to his parents various newspaper...
cuttings showing “how fashionable I am here”. Ewart had spent the post-war years determined to become a successful writer – and he had made a real impression with Way of Revelation – but there was always something rather tortured about him. There is a sad irony in the fact that, within a few weeks of boasting about how “fashionable” he had become, he was laid to rest in a cemetery in Mexico City, the victim of a bizarre shooting incident in the early hours of the first day of 1923.

Ewart had originally intended to stay in Santa Fé until January, in order to finish a history of the Scots Guards he had been commissioned to write, the notes for which were contained in a large metal trunk that followed him around America. His plans changed in December, though, in part because he found it difficult to tolerate the bitter cold of the desert in winter. He may also have been influenced by the Grahams’ decision to leave Santa Fé, in order to head southwards to Mexico, so that Stephen could continue his journey in the footsteps of the conquistadores. Ewart’s original intention was, by contrast, to head eastwards to New Orleans, a city he had never visited, but which had long grabbed his imagination. Graham and Rose left Santa Fé on 17 December heading for El Paso on the Texas-Mexico border, a city that made a surprisingly positive impression on them, at least when compared with the poverty of La Ciudad de Juarez on the opposite side of the Rio Grande. A few days later, on 21 December, they were in Chihuahua, where Stephen was by now feeling “relief” that “America is off my back”.

The Grahams had learned the surprising news from a journalist in El Paso that Ewart had abandoned his original plan to head to New Orleans, and was now bound for Mexico City, and they half-expected to meet him en route. Wilfrid was, however, several days ahead of them, and he arrived in the Mexican capital before Christmas, celebrating the festive season by feasting on “strawberries and cream every day”. His private correspondence does not cast much light on why he abandoned his earlier plans to go direct to New Orleans from Santa Fé (a postcard sent to his parents in the middle of December said that he definitely planned to go to Louisiana before heading on for “old Mexico”). His decision is all the more surprising given that he had already sent his metal trunk – complete with his treasured notes – on to New Orleans. What is clear is that Ewart had

101 Ewart Papers (HRC), Letters, Ewart to Father, 19 November 1922.
102 Graham Papers (FSU), Box 578, 34 (Journal for 1922, entry dated 21 December 1922).
103 Ewart Papers (HRC), Letters, Ewart to parents, 12 December 1922.
quickly fallen in love with Mexico, even though Graham had previously warned him that he would find life there difficult, given both his lack of Spanish and the perennial instability of a country that had a well-earned reputation for violence. Ewart was by 27 December eulogising the city in a postcard to his parents as a place of “oranges, apricots, figs, bananas, roses, geraniums – gardens and suburbs marvellous”. He was also enthralled by the views of the surrounding mountains. Nevertheless, at this stage he told his family that he planned to head on to New Orleans by 31 December “as my baggage and mail are there”\(^\text{104}\) – even though on the same day he had written to the carriers asking them to forward his possessions from America to Mexico.\(^\text{105}\) Whatever his intentions, he was never reunited with his baggage. Nor did he ever leave the city with which he had so quickly fallen in love.

The Grahams seem to have arrived in Mexico City on the 27 December, checking into the Hotel Cosmos for a night, before transferring to the Hotel Iturbide, “a fine old structure built round stone courts and a garden of palm trees and flowering shrubs”\(^\text{106}\). It also had the added advantage of being a “moderate price” (both Graham and Ewart commented in their letters and diaries about the high cost of living in Mexico). The Grahams toured the major hotels of the capital trying to find out where Ewart was staying, in between visiting the magnificent cathedral of Our Lady of Guadeloupe, where they admired the grand series of pictures depicting the Revelation of the Virgin. Stephen and Rose eventually ran across Ewart on 30 December. He was, as usual, cutting a somewhat incongruous figure, standing “in riding breeches and puttees” on the street corner of St John of Latran, staring up into the sky. The three of them headed for a nearby restaurant, where Ewart enthused about Mexico, telling his friends that he had “been looking for a place like this all my life”. Graham could not understand this fascination for a place “without culture and without comfort”,\(^\text{107}\) but Ewart had fallen in love with the climate and the parks, which he seemed to prefer even to the wild grandeur of the New Mexico desert. The company parted after dinner, meeting up again the following day around noon in order to take a tram out to San Angel, a distant suburb.

\(^{104}\) Ibid, Ewart to parents, 27 December 1922
\(^{105}\) Ibid, Ewart to Messrs Camphuis and Co, 27 December 1922.
\(^{106}\) Graham, In Quest of El Dorado, p. 291.
\(^{107}\) Graham, Life and Last Words of Ewart, p. 247.
which Ewart had already visited, admiring it for its stunning views of the two great volcanoes that dominated the horizon. They had lunch on the patio of an old inn, where Ewart discussed his plans for the future, telling Graham that he was considering whether to abandon fiction in order to try to establish himself as a foreign correspondent.

A few hours later the Grahams and Ewart returned to the city centre, arriving around tea-time, and that evening the three of them attended a revue at the *Teatro Lirico* celebrating the end of the old year. They then went on to the Hotel Cosmos for supper, pushing their way through streets filled with New Year revellers, some of whom were already firing guns indiscriminately into the air. In his published accounts of these events, Graham described how he and Rose said good night to Ewart around 11.30pm, before heading off through the crowds to the Hotel Iturbide. In his journal he recorded their parting rather differently, noting that he and Ewart would have liked to stay out on the street to soak up the atmosphere, but abandoned their plan when Rose “nudged” her husband and asked to be taken home: “she was tired of the noise and a little nervous of the incessant firing of guns, and the scene did not mean as much to her as it did to us”. Graham also noted that his wife was “perhaps [...] a little possessive”. His words suggest that Rose did not always find Ewart such good company as her husband did. What is certain – or at least seems certain – is that an hour or so after their parting, Ewart was shot through the eye by a stray bullet whilst standing on his hotel balcony, surveying the New Year celebrations below. According to a Mexican newspaper that reported his death, Ewart’s body was found late on the morning of 1 January by a hotel chambermaid, who went into the bedroom and saw his corpse on the balcony covered in coagulated blood.

In his novel *The Dark Back of Time*, which weaves Ewart’s last hours in Mexico City into a dense tapestry of historical narrative and meditation on the fragility of human experience, the Spanish novelist Javier Marias reflects at length on the random circumstances that led up to Ewart’s death. Ewart had only come to Mexico on a whim – and he only decided on a whim to stay in the country rather than head back north in pursuit of his missing luggage. The hotel he was staying in was located some distance from the main tourist areas, and he only found it as a result of a chance
recommendation by a passing stranger. Ewart had also for some reason changed accommodation twice at his hotel, and the night of 31 December was the first time he had entered the room where he met his death (he never even had the chance to turn down the bed sheets). And, as Graham’s journal shows, if Rose had not wanted to return back to the Hotel Iturbide, then he and Ewart would have remained on the streets, and his friend would not have been on his hotel balcony at the time the fatal shot was fired.

The bizarre nature of Ewart’s death inevitably aroused a brief flurry of interest in both the Mexican and British press (the reporting in some cases became confused with accounts of the death of another Briton who was shot a few days later when caught in the cross-fire between two marauding gangs). Graham identified the body together with a young British clerk named Hollands, who had befriended Ewart when he first arrived in Mexico City a few days earlier. An autopsy had been carried out, and when the two men saw the body in the hospital, it was lying exposed on the dissecting table, amongst “an incredible stench of blood and decay”.\(^\text{109}\) Graham issued a statement to the press, relating the random set of circumstances that had brought his friend to Mexico, whilst the newspaper \textit{Excelsior} printed some words about Ewart from Rose who spoke of his “pleasant personality” and lack of enemies. Ewart was buried shortly afterwards in the British cemetery, his funeral attended by Graham and Hollands, along with a few other members of the British colony in Mexico City. His coffin was interred with a bunch of white roses dropped into the grave by Rose.

Graham’s journal shows how difficult he found it coming to terms with the bizarre death of his friend. On 1 January he jotted down in his journal the dry fact that “Wilfrid Ewart was killed last night within an hour of parting from him”. Two days later he wrote that he could feel Ewart’s “stupefied” spirit watching events, and comforted the unseen ghost by reassuring him that although “you feel lost [...] you will find your way”. On 5\(^\text{th}\) January Graham noted in his diary that “Ewart has gone back to look at his grave. He feels homeless and restless and rather lonely and disconsolate”.\(^\text{110}\) Graham’s sense of his friend’s lingering presence was doubtless fuelled by the shocking nature of Ewart’s death. Such thoughts


\(^{110}\) Graham Papers (FSU), Box 578, 35 (Journal for 1923, entries dated 1 January 1923, 3 January 1923, 5 January 1923).
nevertheless came easily to a man who had since adolescence believed in the existence of a spiritual dimension that lay beyond the carapace of the material world. The obituaries in the British press contented themselves with lamenting how a “literary career of great promise” had been tragically cut short, whilst pointing to the irony that a man who had survived three years in the trenches should meet his death in such an unexpected and violent fashion.111

In The Dark Back of Time, Marias describes in some detail the investigation into Ewart’s death, highlighting a number of contradictions in the statements made to the police by hotel staff. He also points out how Graham took a good deal of artistic licence when he later described Ewart’s precise movements once he had returned to his hotel room. Despite speculation at the time and since, there is no real evidence that Ewart’s death was anything other than what it appeared to be: a tragic accident. The police enquiries certainly threw up little of interest. Several other people were killed in shooting accidents in Mexico City on the same night. Nor is there any implication that Graham knew more than he was letting on. A close reading of his books and diaries hints that he was, on occasion, frustrated by Ewart’s reluctance to settle down and complete his various writing projects (an accusation that could never be directed against Graham). There are also hints that Ewart’s mixture of reserve and snobbishness occasionally grated on his friend. Graham’s sadness at Ewart’s death was nevertheless very deep.112 The Grahams soon found that Mexico City was so “haunted” by his memory that they were forced to move on to complete their journey through Mexico.113

Graham was fascinated by Aztec civilisation, and insisted on visiting various sites of human sacrifice, which he later described at some length in In Quest of El Dorado. He also visited a number of cities including Vera Cruz and Jalap. When he came to write up his material, he ruminated at some length on the hopeless quest of the Spanish adventurers who had, hundreds of years earlier, incurred hardship and death in their search for gold. In words that could have reflected his own philosophy of travel – or

111 The Times, 5 January 1923; Daily Express, 5 February 1923.
112 Graham’s despair did not however prevent him from seeking new commissions within a few days of Ewart’s Death. See Van Wyck Brook Papers (University of Pennsylvania, Rare Book and Manuscript Library), MS Coll. 650, Box 17, Folder 1149, Graham to Brooks, 11 January 1923.
indeed served as an epitaph for Wilfrid Ewart himself – he wrote that “If ever in life you find what you are seeking you have gone wrong. Finding you lose. The whole of life is balanced betwixt the aching heart and the golden dream”.114 There is a pathetic sadness in the fact that Ewart died within days of finding a place that seemed to encapsulate so many of the things for which he had been searching.

114 Ibid, p. 344.