

George A. Birmingham, *Spanish Gold* (1908) and *A Sea Battle* (1948) :
What the Adventures of J.J. Meldon and Major Kent Mean

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George A. Birmingham, pseudonym of James Owen Hannay, published about sixty novels, most of which were comic novels. Though he had a wide readership while he was alive, he lost his popularity after his death. It seems that, today, Birmingham's comic novels are regarded as only light-hearted and lacking in deep insights and, as a dictionary of Irish Literature remarks, "he rates merely a sentence in the literary histories". But the same dictionary adds that "he is an immensely better writer than many with much more inflated reputations", to indicate that he should be given due evaluations.⁽¹⁾ Birmingham was a Church of Ireland clergyman throughout his life. R.B.D. French, pioneer of the studies of Birmingham, pointed out that his early political novels were the work of a Christian moralist.⁽²⁾ However no critics have ever mentioned the relationship of Birmingham's Christian faith with his later comic novels. The purpose of this paper is to explore how his Christian faith is expressed in his comic novels, *Spanish Gold* (1908) and *A Sea Battle* (1948), and, thereby, to reveal what significance both novels have. For this purpose it seems appropriate to look into Birmingham's clerical background first.

Birmingham was born to a Protestant or Anglican family of Scottish descent in Belfast in 1865. His maternal grandfather, William Henry Wynne, served as a rector of Moira, Co. Down, for thirty-seven years. Birmingham's father, Robert Hannay, was a vicar of Belfast and gave services at St. Anne's Church, which was to be given cathedral status later. Both Birmingham's grandfather and father had strong faiths in Protestantism and Unionism. Birmingham recounted in his autobiography, *Pleasant Places* (1934), an episode to show what a staunch Protestant and Unionist his father was. When Birmingham was still an infant, his father hired Dr. Thomas Drew, leader of the Northern Ireland Orangemen, as Birmingham's private tutor. The man put Birmingham on his knees and bade him to chant repeatedly, "No Pope, no Priest, no surrender, Hurrah!"⁽³⁾ Though Birmingham himself did not become an Orangeman and opposed Unionism, he expressed respect to both his grandfather and father for their self-discipline and devotion to Christianity. It is likely that Birmingham put them together as a model for Canon Hamilton in one of his political novels, *Benedict Kavanagh* (1907). After graduating the Divinity School of Trinity College, Dublin, in 1888, he started working as a curate of Delgany, Co. Wicklow. The next year he married Adelaide Susan Wynne, a daughter of a prominent clergyman Frederick Richards Wynne who would later become a bishop of Killaloe, Co. Clare. Birmingham wrote a biography of the bishop, which was published in 1897.⁽⁴⁾

Birmingham moved to Westport, Co. Mayo, in 1892 and served as a rector of the town until 1913. He published two books on Christianity. The first one was *The Spirit and Origin of Christian Monasticism* (1903), a work which was based on Donnellan lectures he gave at Trinity College in 1901 and 1902. The second one was *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1904), a study of hermits practicing Christianity in Egyptian and Palestinian deserts around the fourth and fifth century.

Though Birmingham was a Protestant clergyman, he sympathized with Irish Nationalism and wrote a number of articles and essays to defend the cause of the Gaelic League, which was founded by Douglas Hyde in 1893. In 1904, Birmingham joined the League by the request of Hyde and was elected to executive the same year. However his first two political novels, *The Seething Pot* (1905) and *Hyacinth* (1906), caused great controversies when the author's identity was revealed as Hannay, a Protestant Gaelic Leaguer. *The Seething Pot* depicted a Protestant-Nationalist youth who gave up his fight for an independent Ireland after it was suppressed by a dictatorial Catholic priest and his colleagues. The title hero of *Hyacinth* also endeavored to fight for Irish Nationalism, but got disappointed by the hypocrisy and arrogance of upper-class Nationalists. In the end he left Ireland for England to become a Protestant clergyman. Irish readers regarded both novels as severely critical of Nationalism and Catholicism. Birmingham was denounced at a Gaelic League meeting in 1906 and withdrew himself from the executive. However Birmingham's true message from both novels was how difficult it would be to achieve an independent Ireland though he loved Ireland and supported Nationalism. *Benedict Kavanagh* and *The Northern Iron* (1907) showed Birmingham's complex views of Ireland with more detached and impartial tones. Benedict's father was a Nationalist and Canon Hamilton was a Unionist. Benedict sympathized with them equally because he was convinced that both of them loved Ireland truly and worked hard for her better future. In *The Northern Iron* Birmingham praised the bravery and iron will of the Presbyterians in Ulster who fought against the British in the 1798 Rebellion. However, at the same time, Birmingham seemed to indicate that the Rebellion was useless because the British had such an overwhelming power that the defeat of the Irish was clear from the beginning.

Following another political novel *The Bad Times* (1908), Birmingham published the comic novel *Spanish Gold* the same year. The tone of the novel was totally different from those of his former political novels. The novel would later be regarded as his masterpiece.

The novel's protagonist, the Rev. Joseph John Meldon, was a curate of Ballymoy, a fictional town in the West of Ireland. He was soon to become twenty-seven years of age and had a sweetheart in Dublin. He had a close friend, Major Kent, though they had quite different dispositions. The Major retired from the British Army and just turned fifty years of age. He had a taste for discipline and dressed formally even for every dinner at his own house, whereas Meldon had "free-and-easy manners, habitual unpunctuality, and incurable untidiness". Birmingham seemed to represent Meldon as a typical Irishman and the Major as a typical Englishman.

The Major's grandfather, a naval soldier, fought for the British in the 1798 Rebellion. When the French landed to attack the British settlement in the West of Ireland, he helped a landowner escape to England. In return he was awarded the landowner's estate, which he named "Portsmouth Lodge". There the Major's father and the Major continued to live. When the landowner's

son died, his grandson, Sir Giles Buckley, who was stone-broke, wanted to sell Portsmouth Lodge. As the Major did not want to leave the Lodge, he was desperately searching for a legal contract stating the transfer of the land ownership. While Meldon was helping the Major find it, the curate came upon a diary of the Major's grandfather's. In the diary he read about a treasure-hunting trip which the Major's grandfather made with Buckley's grandfather to an island off the west coast of Ireland. On the island they attempted to discover gold coins which it was rumored that one of the wrecked ships of the Spanish Armada had left. The trip turned out to be unsuccessful. Then Meldon, believing that the gold coins were still buried on the island, tempted the Major to go out with him for the treasure-hunting. Meanwhile Sir Giles Buckley also read about the same trip in his own grandfather's diary and went out with another stone-broke Englishman, Euseby Langton, for the treasure-hunting. After a series of abortive attempts at discovery, Meldon found that an old man living on the island named Thomas O'Flaherty Pat got the treasure from a cave and hid it under the floor of his house. Though Meldon gave it up, Buckley and Langton tried to rob the old man of the treasure. They tied up Meldon and O'Flaherty Pat with a rope while collecting the coins. But, as the fearless curate disturbed them in their act of robbery, they threw him in a ditch outside. Meldon, pulling himself out of the ditch, rolled down the field and reached the house of O'Flaherty Pat's granddaughter, Mary Kate. The girl cut the rope and let Meldon free. He chased the two blackguards carrying loads of gold coins with them. Right before they sailed off in their yacht, Meldon's boat bumped its side. Father Mulcrone, a Catholic priest from the neighboring island, came with him on the same boat. They pulled Buckley and Langton out of their yacht and regained the treasure. The novel ended happily with the treasure being divided fairly by the people on the island and Meldon deciding to marry his sweetheart and become the vicar of a Nottinghamshire town.

After *Spanish Gold*, Birmingham continued to publish comic novels almost every year until his death in 1950. His last novel was a posthumous work *Two Scamps* (1950). Many of them came to happy endings with the protagonists' eager attempts at achieving their wishes and making other people happy as well.

In *General John Regan* (1913), Dr. O'Grady worked hard with people in Ballymoy to hoax an American millionaire and bring a large fortune to their town. When the identity of General Regan was disclosed by the aide-de-camp of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, it looked almost certain that their trick would end in failure. But the doctor continued to act tactfully and bravely without losing his confidence in success. At last the American was impressed so much by the unflinching energy of the doctor that he donated the money to the town as he had promised.

"The Deputation", the first chapter of *The Adventures of Dr. Whitty* (1913), was picked up as one of Birmingham's best short stories in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991).⁽⁵⁾ Dr. Whitty knew that the Chief Secretary of Ireland would visit a small town on the west coast of Ireland where the doctor lived. Then he contrived a plot to make the Chief Secretary offer a Government grant to his town for building a pier. There were two celebrities in the town, a Nationalist innkeeper and a Unionist landowner. Though they resented each other, the doctor thought it necessary to put them both in the deputation to meet the Chief Secretary. With the help of a building contractor, the doctor deceived them and succeeded in putting them in the deputation. The Chief Secretary, being impressed by "the union of classes and creeds" in the

town, promised to offer them the money to build a pier.

Birmingham's faith in Christianity, combined effectively with his comic spirit, is visible in J.J. Meldon, Dr. O'Grady, Dr. Whitty and other protagonists of his comic novels.

In his work on Christianity, *The Spirit and Origin of Christian Monasticism*, Birmingham presented his view of Protestantism. He remarked that "in making the most that he can, honestly, out of life's opportunities for gain and joy, a Protestant best shows his thankfulness to God". He continued to say, "The ideal Christian of Protestantism is brave and strong. He is one who fears God and no one except God."⁽⁶⁾

On the other hand, Birmingham emphasized the importance of comic spirits in his autobiography, *Pleasant Places*, recounting an episode about the Old Age Pensions. While he was in Westport, the Old Age Pensions Act passed in Ireland and it enabled the people to receive pensions when they came to a certain age. But, as there had been no compulsory registration of births for a long time in Ireland, committees to find people's exact ages were established and Birmingham was appointed as a committee member. When he interviewed people, they tried to deceive him so that they could receive pensions at earlier ages than the Act designated. Though the English appeared to get angry at them, Birmingham got a lot of fun from their amusing stories. He pointed out that it was a stupid thing to get angry and concluded this episode, saying, "Public business ought never to be taken seriously. It is always comic and should be treated as a joke."⁽⁷⁾ Birmingham might have attained this view due to the troubles which he was thrown into after the publications of his early political novels. He might have realized that conflicts would never be settled if people thought of them too seriously.

It seems that the protagonists of Birmingham's comic novels did not fear anyone except God and made the most of life's opportunities for gain and joy. At the same time, whenever they did something, they tried to do it in the spirit of a joke, never getting angry. Therefore they embodied the Christian or Protestant virtues which Birmingham indicated and the comic spirit together.

In *Spanish Gold*, there is a scene in which Meldon's comic spirit was displayed most vividly. Meldon's yacht and Sir Giles' yacht were off the shore facing each other. While Sir Giles and Langton were sound asleep on their yacht in the early morning, Meldon approached it, cut loose an attached punt, got in the punt with the Major and came on the shore. There Meldon found a curragh and four oars. There was a lodging house for Higginbotham, a Government official who was sent to the island for land-amelioration. Meldon decided to smash the windows with the oars to put them in the house, fearing that someone might row off the curragh with the oars to help Sir Giles and Langton come on the shore. The Major, who had "the true English respect for law", was shocked immensely by Meldon's act and accused it as theft. Then, Meldon, who had "nothing but Irish blood in his vein", replied:

I don't mind your being abusive, not the least bit. You've been calling me a liar and a burglar and other bad names since ever I brought you to this island. I haven't resented it a bit and I don't. But I tell you what I do dislike, and that's your abominable unreasonableness. I can't bear men who are carried away by mere words and don't stop to think about the meaning of what they say. What is burglary? Isn't it taking a man's own things out of his house when he's not looking? You agree that definition, I suppose. Very well. What am I

doing? I'm putting other people's things into a man's house when he's not looking. Now that's just the exact, bang opposite to what burgling is. Therefore, I'm not a burglar. In fact, I'm the very antithesis of a burglar. You may not know what an antithesis is, but—⁽⁸⁾

Though the Major interrupted to say that Meldon did not need to explain further, the curate continued his words and said:

Very well, I'll pursue my line of reasoning. Burglary is wrong. You hinted that yourself a minute ago. But the antithesis of wrong is right. What I'm doing is the antithesis of burglary. Therefore—⁽⁹⁾

He tried to say something to the effect that what he was doing was right. Then he was interrupted by the Major again.

Another scene representing Meldon's great comic spirit is that of his disturbing Sir Giles and Langton while they were stealing the gold coins in Thomas O'Flaherty Pat's house. Meldon was tied up with a rope and laid down on the floor. While Langton was collecting the coins in a bag, Meldon rolled himself, banged the man and pushed him down. Then Meldon was pulled out of the house and left in the grass outdoor. When the two blackguards came out of the house, he barred them again and the coins were scattered in the dark. Sir Giles kicked Meldon violently and threw him in a ditch. Instead of getting upset, however, Meldon thought that "he had got the better of the struggle and had annoyed Sir Giles more than Sir Giles had annoyed him". He showed his great comic spirit further:

He tried to give expression to his feelings by winking first with one eye and then with the other. But it was so dark that the winks could not be seen, and Sir Giles departed without knowing what Meldon thought of him.⁽¹⁰⁾

It seems that Meldon never lost his confidence in regaining the treasure and acted bravely without fearing anyone except God. It also seems that his act reflected Birmingham's faith in God. While continuing to write comic novels, Birmingham published other works on Christianity and expressed his devoted faith in God. One of them was *Isaiah* (1937), a biography of a prophet in *The Old Testament*. Birmingham admired him for his stern Puritanism and unfaltering faith in Jehovah, God of Israel. When the rumor of Assyria's invasion spread in Jerusalem and people were filled with panic, Isaiah gave them Jehovah's message with a strong confidence. Birmingham related it as follows:

"Be quiet. Fear not. Your strength is to sit still." And behind the advice was that faith which neither King nor people shared, the faith in Jehovah— "Let him be your fear" and you need fear no other. "Let him be your dread" and you need have no other dread.⁽¹¹⁾

Meldon's confidence in regaining the treasure was as strong as Isaiah's confidence in expelling the enemy from his country. The Chief Secretary of Ireland, who came to the island for inspect-

ing Higginbotham's job, got involved with Meldon's adventure and was very much impressed by his performance. A friend of the Chief Secretary's, who was a landlord of a Nottinghamshire town, was looking for an Irishman fit for the vicar of his town. Therefore the Chief Secretary recommended Meldon for the post, and he accepted it.

Forty years later Meldon tempted Major Kent to go out for another adventure in the same island in *A Sea Battle* (1948). When he wrote this novel, Birmingham might have forgotten their ages in their first adventure in *Spanish Gold*. Meldon would be nearly sixty-seven and Major Kent would be ninety in their second adventure. Meldon continued to be a close friend of the Major's, for he came to spend a month in Portsmouth Lodge every summer after he left Ireland for England. When Meldon arrived at Ballymoy one summer after World War II, a stranger in a Rolls Royce car came to stay at the town's hotel owned by "Poteen Doyle". The stranger wanted to hire a boat to get to the island which was the setting of Meldon's adventure in *Spanish Gold*. Meldon and the Major felt suspicious of him. He tried to deceive them but failed, saying that he would go to the island to make a film out of the novel. His boat sank while he was sailing off to the island. He was rescued from being drowned by Meldon and the Major who were chasing after him in their yacht. Then another two strangers came over to the island in a ketch steered by two Swedish sailors and joined the man. Meldon met again a Catholic priest, Father Mulcrone, who had helped him regain the treasure from the two blackguards in *Spanish Gold*. The priest had received a letter from his bishop telling him that German war criminals were escaping to the West of Ireland. He talked about the letter to Meldon, and it turned out that the three men were heads of the German Gestapo escaping from Sweden to hide themselves on the island. They tried to force Meldon to grant their stay on the island. But he refused and acted as bravely as he did in *Spanish Gold*, without fearing anyone except God. The following conversation between one of the Germans and Meldon showed explicitly his or Birmingham's devoted faith in God:

"We have business to discuss," said the German and he, too, seemed annoyed. "Serious business."

"Nothing," said Meldon, "can possibly be more serious than theology."¹²

Meldon withstood even when another German threatened to shoot him with a revolver. He did not fear it because he thought of his friend, Major Kent, a retired soldier and "simple-minded, trustful kind of man". He expressed to the German his whole-hearted trust of the Major,

And he (the Major) has no very high opinion of you, as I told you. He'll certainly make things unpleasant for you if you shoot me. And as for your living on this island, that was out of the question in any case, but if you shoot me or otherwise bully me and the Major hears of it, you won't live long anywhere. Here or anywhere else.¹³

This revealed the fact that Meldon actually had a deep respect for the Major though he often accused the Major of his serious character. They exchanged their roles in *Spanish Gold* and *A Sea Battle*. While Meldon played a central role in their adventure in *Spanish Gold*, the Major played an important role in *A Sea Battle*. The Major commanded the people on the island in their bat-

tle against the Germans, and succeeded in rescuing Meldon and expelling the Germans from the island.

Birmingham's faith in Christianity is also visible in his treatment of the Germans at the end of the novel. Meldon, the Major and Father Mulcrone decided to see the Germans leave the island in their ketch and go out of sight forever, instead of handing them over to the justice. This is a reminder of two virtues of the Christian hermits Birmingham praised in *The Wisdom of the Desert*: "returning good for evil" and "charity to sinners".

In *Spanish Gold* and *A Sea Battle*, the most remarkable description of Birmingham's faith in Christianity is that of the lasting friendship between Meldon and Major Kent. While Meldon was a happy-go-ucky Irishman with no political convictions, the Major was a conservative gentleman of English descent and a strong Unionist. Between the publications of the two novels, Ireland underwent the most troublesome or turbulent period in her history with events such as the Easter Rising, the Civil War following the division between the South and the North, and two World Wars. It was the period that the resentments deepened between Nationalists and Unionists, or between the Irish and the English. However Meldon and the Major never failed to keep their friendship. In *Pleasant Places*, Birmingham remarked, looking back to his connection with Irish politics in the early twentieth century:

It is not for me to write a history of that period of high hopes, shining enthusiasm and ghastly deeds. For me it is enough to have learned that greater than all these things is love⁽⁴⁾.

Spanish Gold and *A Sea Battle* are representations of Birmingham's love of people or his devoted faith in Christianity, and the adventures of J.J. Meldon and Major Kent are metaphors for Birmingham's hearty wish for people all over the world to overcome their resentments and achieve peaceful reconciliations.

Notes

- (1) Robert Hogan et al., eds, *Dictionary of Irish Literature: Revised and Expanded Edition A-L* (Westport: Greenwood, 1996), p.155.
- (2) R.B.D. French, "Introduction" to George A. Birmingham, *The Red hand of Ulster* (Shanon: Irish University Press, 1972), ix.
- (3) George A. Birmingham, *Pleasant Places* (London: Heinemann, 1934), pp.3-4.
- (4) James Owen Hannay, *The Life of Frederick Richards Wynne: Bishop of Killaloe* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1897)
- (5) Seamus Deane et al., eds., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. II (1991; rpt., Derry: Field Day Publication, 1992), p.1071-77.
- (6) James Owen Hannay, *The Spirit and Origin of Christian Monasticism* (1903; rpt., Whitefish: Kessinger, 2003), p.6.
- (7) *Pleasant Places*, p.149.
- (8) George A. Birmingham, *Spanish Gold* (1908; rpt., London: Hogarth, 1989), p.141.
- (9) *Ibid.*

- (10) *Ibid.*, p.219.
- (11) George A. Birmingham, *Isaiah* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1937), p.97.
- (12) George A. Birmingham, *A Sea Battle* (London: Methuen, 1948), p.188.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p.195.
- (14) *Pleasant Places*, p.194.

This paper is a result of my researches with the assistance of the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research which I received from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science in 2007.