George A. Birmingham, *Hyacinth* (1906): What Turns a Patriot to an Exile

Masahiko Yahata

The May 1992 issue of *Fortnight* featured in its supplement, *Lost Fields*, six Ulster novelists which deserve wider recognition and more adequate discussion today. They were Michael McLaverty (1904-1991), Janet McNeill (1907-), Forrest Reid (1875-1947), Lynn C. Doyle (1873-1961), Shan F. Bullock(1865-1935) and George A. Birmingham (1865-1950). I am going to discuss Birmingham's life and work in this paper. Though many critics label him as a mere lightweight, comical fiction writer, I firmly believe that his novels have more serious implications and higher values, as is insisted by Brian Taylor and Tess Hurson in *Lost Fields*. [1]

The purpose of this paper is to reveal what serious and vivid descriptions Birmingham gives of the deep-rooted antagonism between Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Unionists, and to show that his writings including his novels are still worth reading today. His novels can be classified into two categories: serious political fiction and comical adventure fiction. In this paper, I am going to discuss his autobiography, *Pleasant Places* (1934), and his political fiction, *Hyacinth* (1908),with brief reference to his adventure fiction, *The Adventures of Dr.Whitty(* (1913).[2]

George A. Birmlngham was the pseudonym of Canon James Owen Hannay.[3] He was born in a fervent Protestant Unionist family in Belfast. After graduating from the Divinity School in Trinity College, Dublin, he served as a Church of Ireland clergyman in Delgany, County Wicklow, between 1888 and 1891. Then he moved to Westport, County Mayo, where he served for twenty-one years until 1913.

While he was in Westport, Birmingham came into connection with Irish politics "in a curious way." He gives a detailed account of his struggle in it in *Pleasant Places*.[4] He founded a little literary society in the town. His wife, Ada, was a distant cousin of the widow of Sir Samuel Ferguson, the Belfast-born poet who wrote about native Irish culture and heroic tales. Ada's association with Lady Ferguson brought her some knowledge of the Young Irish Movement of the middle of the 19th century. Then, at the literary society meeting, she spoke about some of the Young Irelanders with warm admiration, and Birmingham himself recited some of James Mangan's Nationalist poetry. This annoyed other members because they were Anglo-Irish gentry who resented any idea of Irish nationalism. They felt "something more than resentment" against him and were convinced that he was committing a sin as a Protestant clergyman.

Their burning resentment, however, had the unfortunate effect of driving Birmingham farther in the direction of nationalism. He became so deeply involved in the Gaelic League that an earlier writer on his life, R. D. B. French, called him "[Douglas] Hyde's lieutenant."[5] He tried to learn the Irish language and did his best to serve the League by writing and speaking in its defence. His hope was that "the men of [his] own race and creed might be induced to remember that their grandfathers were great Irishmen, filled with the spirit of nationalism; that their loyal reliance on England was a futile thing."

But Birmingham's novel-writing caused Catholic Nationalists' resentment against him as well. While he was in Westport, he published a series of political novels such as *The Seething Pot* (1905), *Hyacinth* (1906), *The Northern Iron* (1907), *The Bad Times* (1908), *The Red Hand of Ulster* (1912) and *General John Regan* (1913).

When *The Seething Pot* came out, a Roman Catholic priest in Westport conceived the idea that he was caricatured in the novel. The truth was that Birmingham did not have him in mind because the book was written a year or more before the priest came to Westport. This indignant priest, however, stirred up the people of Westport against Birmingham. Being convinced that they must rise in defence of their faith, they gathered outside his house to boo at him, burnt him in effigy, and tried to boycott him. Other Catholic priests refused to sit on committees of which he was a member and finally succeeded in driving him out of the Gaelic League. Moreover, when his play *General John Regan* was staged in Westport in 1914, the people thought erroneously that it was "slandering the priesthood and doubting the purity of Irish maidenhood,"[6] and they caused such a furious riot that the touring company had to seek refuge in their hotel.

After he left Westport, Birmingham went for an extended lecture tour in the United States in 1915. When he returned to Ireland, he was shocked to discover that the country was sharply divided between those who regarded the First World War as a just and righteous struggle against a threatened tyranny, and those who took the extreme Nationalist view that England's extremity was Ireland's opportunity. These extreme Nationalists hoped for an English defeat and a German victory. This time, he convinced himself that "England was right and Nationalist Ireland wrong" and volunteered to serve as a chaplain for the English force in France.

Thus Birmingham wavered between nationalism and unionism, became disenchanted with both principles, and finally turned exile. His struggle in Irish politics and the antagonism between the Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Unionists are vividly presented in his second novel *Hyacinth*, too. I would like to trace how and why the protagonist, Hyacinth, turned from an Irish patriot to an exile.

There was a missionary movement around 1850 in which England tried to convert Irish Catholics to the Protestant faith. Æneas Conneally was a convert to Protestantism and devoted himself to missionary activity as a curate in Carrowkeel in the west of Ireland. His efforts, however, resulted in failure and, in contrition for having forsaken his enthusiasm, he named his son Hyacinth after a great pioneer and leader of the mission work. But, like the author Birmingham, Hyacinth develops a sympathy with Irish Nationalists in spite of his Protestant background. He enters the Divinity School of Trinity College, Dublin, again like the author.

Soon after he arrives in Dublin, Hyacinth is invited to the students' prayer meeting. There he listens for the first time to the superlative Imperialism of the Protestant Unionist party "with surprise, almost with horror. A Unionist clergyman expresses his support for the English army in the Boer War and the English occupation of the Boers, declaring that England is the pioneer of civilization and the nursing-mother of missionary enterprise. The speech

bewilders Hyacinth because he has a strong sympathy with the Boers, who have been doomed to something like the treatment which Ireland has received from England. He tells the secretary of the meeting that he will never attend again because he does not hope for an English victory in the War. After they hear of his sympathy with Irish nationalism, the students avoid intercourse with Hyacinth and chant offensive songs at night outside his room. They knock and kick him down when he does not take off his hat to greet the Lord-Lieutenant who pays a visit to the College. This event keeps Hyacinth away from the College, and his solitariness leads him to deeper involvement in the Nationalist movement, exactly as the Unionists' resentment against Birmingham did. Hyacinth becomes a member of a secret Nationalist group organized by a militant lady, Augusta Goold, who is commonly called Finola.

His admission to this group, however, is the beginning of his disenchantment with patriotism and nationalism which will lead to his exile from Ireland in the end.

Finola has been recruiting volunteer soldiers who will fight for the Boers against the English force. Her wish is not to help the Boers but to hurt the English. She tries to turn down Hyacinth's application for the volunteers because the volunteers have to be more or less "blackguards" like their commander, Captain Albert Quinn. He is a swindler who has been selling worn-out horses instead of new ones and wants to escape from Ireland before his swindle is discovered. He points out to Hyacinth that, though his high motives can be admired, it would be impossible to enlist a corps of only Sundayschool teachers or earnest men like him. Hyacinth is disappointed with the fact that only blackguards would be useful as soldiers. After realizing his helplessness as a soldier and the degradation of his ideal, he gives up the idea of joining the volunteers and leaves Dublin.

Then Hyacinth tries to be of some use as a patriot in another way. He decides to work for a woolen factory run by the Captain's elder brother, James, in Ballymoy, County Mayo. Here he harbors ambitions to advance the industrial revival of Ireland by selling the produce of his factory, the Ballymoy Mill, as a commercial traveller. But his patriotism dwindles even more after he meets two hypocritical Irish drapers.

One of them, Mr. O'Reilly, displays patriotic advertisements saying, "The Irish House. Support Home Manufactures." and "Why curse England and support her manufactures?" When Hyacinth goes to sell his Irish-made goods, however, the draper ignores him by revealing the fact that he is getting cheaper goods from a certain English factory and selling them dishonestly as Irish goods. The other draper, Mr. Dowling, is the same kind of base hypocrite. He makes a patriotic speech at a meeting of the Gaelic League. In the speech, he blames a trade rival for his having advertised in a Scotch paper for a milliner, and emphasizes that the public should boycott shops which sell English goods or employ Scotch milliners to promote the employment of Irish girls. But Hyacinth is shocked to discover that Mr. Dowling's shop is stocked with goods which are obviously English. He shuns Hyacinth as a "dirty Protestant." Both O'Reilly and Dowling have a hypocritical view that politics is one thing and business is quite another.

Another blow to Hyacinth's patriotism is the brutal exploitation of girls in Mr. Quinn's rival firm which is run by a convent and funded by the

Government. He happens to meet two girls who have quit the firm and will eventually emigrate to the United States for better jobs. He knows that the firm could count on an unlimited supply of labor at starvation wages, while Mr. Quinn has to hire laborers at the market value.

Hyacinth can not find hope any longer. It seems to him that Irish patriotism is only a matter of words and fine phrases and no one really believes in it. What is worse, Mr. Quinn's factory goes into bankruptcy and Hyacinth loses his job. Ironically, a final death blow to his patriotism comes from his love for Marion, the daughter of a Protestant rector, Canon Beecher. When Hyacinth goes to ask the Canon's permission to marry Marion, he finds that the Canon's view of Irish politics and God is totally different from his own. For Hyacinth, it is hatred for England and everything English that has animated his work as an Irish Nationalist or patriot. But the Canon tells him that it would be impossible for anyone to accept hatred for the inspiration of his life and still be true to God. He also emphasizes that it would be necessary for a true Christian to love his enemy. Hyacinth is convinced of this truth and determines to work as a clergyman, not in Ireland, but in England. He suggests working in England because he wishes to forget his hopes and dreams for Ireland. He also regards this voluntary exile as "a kind of atonement for the betrayal of his old enthusiasm."

R. D. B. French remarked that this novel was "the work of a Christian moralist."[7] Certainly Birmingham can be called a Christian moralist because he made Hyacinth forsake his extreme Nationalist view and realize that the love of one's enemy was necessary to be true to God.

Birmingham seemed to have faith in "love." He wrote in *Pleasant Places* that, looking back on his days in Westport, he really loved the town and people in spite of their resentment against him. He departed from the town because it had become difficult for him to live there even though he loved it very much. And, concerning his connection with Irish politics from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, he related:

> 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.[8]

This "love" which he learned from his struggle in Irish politics is also expressed in comical adventure fiction such as *Spanish Gold* (1908) and *The Adventures of Dr. Whitty* (1913). The latter is comprised of fourteen short stories, and in each story Dr. Whitty gets over difficulties or solves intricate problems with his ingenious tricks. The first story, "The Deputation," reveals Birmingham's faith in love with his sincere wish for the peaceful union of all the people in Ireland. Its setting is a small County Donegal town, Ballintra. The Chief Secretary of Ireland is to visit the town. Dr. Whitty attempts to form a deputation to ask him for the construction of a pier. He thinks it inevitable to incorporate both a Catholic hotel owner and a Protestant colonel into the same deputation even though they have a furious dislike for each other. He succeeds in doing so through tactful lies, and the Chief Secretary who meets the

deputation promises the construction of the pier, saying that "nothing gratified him more than to observe the union of classes and creeds in Ireland."

Another proof of his faith in love is that, as his autobiography shows, he called the places where he lived "pleasant places" though he had a number of unpleasant or abominable experiences. The places where he lived as an exile after leaving France in 1917 were Carnalway in County Kildare, Budapest in Hungary, Mells in England and London, where he died in 1950 at the age of 85.

Birmingham was a tragic writer because, in spite of his faith in love and earnest hope for the union of all classes and creeds in Ireland, he was detested by the Protestant Unionists as a sympathizer with the Nationalist cause, and also detested by the Catholic Nationalists as his view seemed to be Unionist.

In *Hyacinth*, the Unionist Canon Beecher says to the Nationalist Hyacinth, "Will you be sure to know the good side from the bad, the Captain from the enemy?" As the Canon indicates, it is still impossible today to say definitely which is more legitimate, the Nationalist cause or the Unionist cause. In 1922, Ireland was split into two regions, the independent South and the British North. Since then, the greatest issue of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland has been the territorial attribution of the region. In the words of Hyacinth, England was a "pirate." And the English invasion caused the partition. From this point of view, Ireland should be reunified. But, as a prominent Unionist lawyer points out, unlike the South where Catholic doctrines are incorporated into the national constitution, the North can be a "pluralist state" because it belongs to Britain.[9] In addition to that, the economic situation in Ireland might have to be taken into consideration when we think of the territorial question of the North. As the case of the two hypocritical Irish drapers in *Hyacinth* shows, Ireland depends a great deal upon Britain economically. If the North, which is one of the poorest regions in Europe, is united with the South, it will become even poorer.

It is highly probable even today that a Christian moralist or patriot like Birmingham would be disenchanted with the troubled North and become an exile. But, if we read Birmingham's novels published after he left Ireland, it seems that he still loved Ireland and remained a patriot. It is without doubt that his faith in love and hope for the union which Birmingham continued to express in his novels is a clue to the solution of the conflict in the North.

NOTES

1. Brian Taylor, 'Hannay, humour and heresy," *Lost Fields*, a supplement to *Fortnight* May 1992 NO 306, pp. 16-18.
   Tess Hutson, "Lost tribes and Spanish gold," *Lost Fields*, pp. 18-20.
   Fortnight is an independent review of politics and the arts in Northern Ireland.
2. The texts which I referred to for this paper are *Pleasant Places* (London: William Heinemann, 1934, 1st edition), *Hyacinth* (London: Edward Arnold, 1906, 1st editions) and *The Adventures of Dr.Whitty* included in *The Birmingham Bus* (London: Methuen, 1934).

3. He explained how and why he chose "George A. Birmingham" for his pseudonym in *Pleasant Places,* p.162. He invented it when he wrote his first novel, *The Seething Pot.* He knew that the book would be traced to County Mayo and he wanted an ordinary local name. He chose the "Birmingham" because it was a common name in the County among educated, middle-class people. The "George" came because he knew no "Birmingham" with that Christian name. He added the "A" for the sake of euphony.
4. Chapter IX, *Pleasant Places*, pp. 177-194.
5. "Hannay, humour and heresy," p. 17.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *The Macmillan Dictionary of Irish Literature*, ed. Robert Hogan (London: Macmillan, 1979 rpt., 1985), p. 110.
8. *Pleasant Places*, p. 194.
9. Robert L. McCartney, *Liberty and Authority in Ireland*, Number 9 of *Field Day Pamphlets* (Londonderry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1985).