GEORGE A. BIRMINGHAM, THE NORTHERN IRON *(1907) AND THE 1798 REBELLION*

Masahiko Yahata

The year 1998 marked the 200th anniversary of the United Irishmen's Uprising, commonly known as the 1798 Rebellion. A variety of events commemorating the Rebellion took place throughout Ireland, one of which was the IASIL Conference at the University of Limerick with a theme of "1798/1998 – Forward to the Past/Back to the Present."[1] There are a large number of literary works dealing with the 1798 Rebellion. Among fiction are often-quoted works such as Maria Edgeworth's *Ennui* (1809) and *Ormond* (1817), Charles Robert Maturin's *The Milesian Chief* (1812), Lady Morgan's *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (1827), John and Michael Banim's *The Denounced* (1830), Sam Hanna Bell's *A Man Flourishing* (1973), Thomas Flanagan's *The Year of the French* (1979) and Colm Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* (1992). Yet there is also another important work of fiction describing the 1798 Rebellion. It is George A. Birmingham's *The Northern Iron* (1907).

George A. Birmingham is the pen name of James Owen Hannay. He was born in a Protestant Unionist family in Belfast in 1865. His parents tried to educate him with the family's traditional views and imbue his mind with fixed allegiance to Britain.[2] But, ironically, what attracted him in his later life were the Gaelic League and Irish Nationalism. Although he became a Protestant clergyman of the Church of Ireland, he joined in the Gaelic League and openly expressed his support for the cause of an independent Ireland. Furthermore, he started writing novels when he was nearly at the age of forty and tried to assert his Nationalist views through descriptions of the heroes' struggles for an independent Ireland.

Birmingham's essay, *Irishmen All* (1913), also reveals that the ideal Ireland which he conceived of was an independent nation where the Anglo-Irish gentry would recover their lost power, take the leadership of all Ireland and bring about a peaceful union, as shown in the next paragraph:

> It is perhaps not altogether vain to look forward to a time when Irish farmers, tired of the cant of political publicans, will seek for disinterested leaders from a class which they have no longer any reason to distrust when the Irish gentleman, tired of sulking in his tent, realising again his capacity for public work, will accept the new conditions and be ready to be greatest among us because he is one that serveth, not his own interest only, but those of others.[3]

However, Birmigham never wanted Ireland to be ruled by the Catholic Church. Birmingham was a Protestant Nationalist and tried to break the formula of the Protestant being Unionist and the Catholic being Nationalist. But his political views caused controversies and furor among both Unionists and Nationalists.

Birmingham's debut novel, *The Seething Pot* (1905) described the struggle of an Anglo-Irish hero who was born in Australia and came over to Ireland, where his father had been born, to fight for its independence. He

gives up his fight, however, as he is discouraged by a tyrannical Catholic priest who rules every aspect of people's lives. Then he declares that Ireland would rather be ruled by Britain than by Catholic priests.

In his second novel, *Hyacinth*, published the following year, the eponymous hero is enraged with the arrogant Protestant Unionists who justify the British military force in the Boer War as well as their invasion into Ireland. Hyacinth then resolves to commit himself to the cause of Irish Nationalism. But he is dejected by a government-funded, Catholic convent's woollen factory which brutally exploits their employees and bankrupts the private factory for which Hyacinth works. Being disillusioned with Nationalism, too, he gives up his fight for an independent Ireland and goes over to Britain to become a Protestant clergyman.

Both novels made Nationalists believe mistakenly that Birmingham was a Unionist, and at last he made a decision to withdraw from the Gaelic League. Indeed it might be difficult for a common reader to grasp Birmingham's Nationalist views from both novels because his accounts of both heroes' defeats are extremely depressing, and also because his portrayals of the Catholic Nationalists' upper-class seem to be heartily resentful. The following paragraph from *The Seething Pot* is the most vivid representation of the hero's, or Birmingham's, resentment against them:

> The Irish priests have schemed and lied, have blustered and bullied, have levied taxes beyond belief upon the poorest of the poor; but they have taught the people a religion which penetrates their lives, and which, in its essential features, is not far from the Spirit of Christ. Such religion is not to be taught by words. The man who imparts it must first undestand it and possess it in his own soul. This is the most wonderful puzzle in Irish life.[4]

In *The Seething Pot*, Birmingham's positive message as a Nationalist is only visible in the final chapter. There the editor of a Nationalist newspaper compares Ireland to a "seething pot," which is boiling and too hot to touch. Then he tells the hero that he must not keep himself from the seething pot but go on fighting for an independent Ireland.[5] In *Hyacinth*, the author's Nationalist message looks even more vague. It seems that, in this partly autobiographical novel, Birmingham only implied how difficult the achievement of an independent Ireland would be.

It is suspected from both novels that Birmingham could not be a devoted Nationalist, even though he publicized his Nationalist views as a Gaelic Leaguer. It seems that his attitude towards Nationalism was somewhat ambivalent and he had mixed or contradictory feelings about Nationalism, which means that he had both sympathies and doubts about Nationalism. And it might be assumed that his family background prevented him from being a devoted Nationalist.

Birmingham's ambivalent attitude towards Nationalism caused a furious controversy after the publication of both novels and, after a lapse of more than half a century, it was rekindled by the publication of Roy Foster's memorable work of Irish historical revisionism, *Modern Ireland*

1600-1972 (1988). The first controversy was, as mentioned above, over Birmingham's view of Nationalism and led to his withdrawal from the Gaelic League. The second controversy which Foster caused was over the Gaelic League's attitude around the turn of the century and its relation to Birmingham's withdrawal from the League. Foster alleged that one of the actual and undeserving victims of the Gaelic League's "fundamentally sectarian and even racist"attitude was "the acute Shavian novelist 'George A. Birmingham', triumphantly unmasked as a Church of Ireland clergyman in 1906 and repudiated by his colleagues in the Gaelic League."[6]

Foster accuses the Gaelic League of their "exclusivist attitudes"[7] and claims that there have been "varieties of peoples" in Ireland since 1600 who can define their own Irishness:

> In 1600, *as later*, Ireland was characterised by a fragmented polity: varieties of peoples, defining their 'Irishness' differently, many of whom denied the legitimacy of the official state apparatus and lived indifferently outside its writ.[8] (Emphasis added)

This is the reason why Foster and other historical revisionists justify the existence of today's Northern Ireland. On the other hand, Nationalists are opposed to their views and maintain that the Gaelic League was far from sectarian at that time. For instance, Brian Murhpy points out that Birmingham was known for some time to have been a Church of Ireland clergyman in 1906 and elected to the Gaelic League executive even after the publication of both novels.[9] Birmingham left the Gaelic League in 1907. Murphy also insists that it is "important, very important" to have a correct understanding of these controversial events surrounding the case of Birmingham's withdrawal from the League, for it is closely connected with the problem of the validity of the existence of Northern Ireland.[10] He then concludes:

> Respect for the two races, the two cultures and the two religions that existed on the island of Ireland would be matched by a recognition that these differences were best reconciled within the parameters of one country.[11]

These controversies seem to imply the historical importance of Birmingham and his novels.

Birmingham's fourth novel, *The Northern Iron*, appeared in 1907. Brian Taylor claims in his critical biography of Birmingham that the value of this novel lies in the fact that "[it] was, in 1907, the story of a less well-known part of the history of Ireland and [Birmingham] tells it well, almost as a boy's adventure story."[12] Yet this novel can be regarded as valuable from another perspective, too. It reveals Birmingham's mixed feelings about Nationalism as much as *The Seething Pot* and *Hyacinth*, and can be referred to, together with both works, for the controversy over the problem of the validity of the existence of Northern Ireland.

The novel's setting is a coastal town in County Antrim in the late 18th

century. The hero, Neal Ward, is the son of a Presbyterian minister who has been fighting for an independent Ireland. Living next door is the family of Lord Dunseveric, an Anglo-Irish aristocrat who is content with Ireland under British rule. His son, Maurice, and his daughter, Una, are close friends of Neal's, even though their fathers hold opposing political views. When Neal, Maurice and Una go out fishing to the Antrim coast, they happen to meet Neal's uncle, Donald Ward, who has just returned home from America. He is one of those Ulster Presbyterians who suffered British oppression under the Penal Law and emigrated to America. There he fought against Britain for America's independence and won. His purpose in coming home is to fight against Britain again, and, this time, for an independent Ireland. Neal is excited with Donald's story about what a great part Ulstermen of Presbyterian faith played in the American War of Independence.

Donald says, "There is no breaking our people ... men of iron, men of steel." Neal's father agrees with him and says,"Shall iron break the northern iron, and the steel?"[13] The novel's title *The Northern Iron* derives from their conversation. The title stands for those determined Ulstermen like Neal Ward, Neal's father and Donald Ward who fight for an independent Ireland in the 1798 Rebellion.

But Lord Dunseveric advises Neal and his father not to join in the rebellion because their names have already been put on the list of suspected persons. The Lord has a dispute with Neal's father and Donald Ward over their political views. Since Lord Dunseveric regards the Ireland of his day as being an independent nation, he warns them not to attempt any rebellion because, if they do so, Ireland's commerce and industry, reviving under the care of its own parliament will be destroyed and the country will be fouled with the people's dead bodies. He says to them:

> If you fail – and you must fail – you will fling the country into the arms of England. Our gentry will be terrified, our commons will be cowed. Designing Englishmen will make an easy prey of us. They will take from us even the hard-earned measure of independence we already possess. We shall become, and we shall remain, a contemptible province of their Empire instead of a sovereign and independent nation.[14]

Brian Taylor, in his biography of Birmingham, alleges that Lord Dunseveric is clearly Birmingham's ideal of the Anglo-Irishman and that he reveals Birmingham's own political beliefs.[15] Certainly Lord Dunseveric seems to represent the Anglo-Irish gentry whom Birmingham wants eagerly to take the leadership of an independent Ireland. However, the independent Ireland which Lord Dunseveric conceives of does not satisfy the conditions of the independent Ireland which Birmingham conceives of. Even though the Ireland of Lord Dunseveric's day has its own parliament, the so-called "Grattan's Parliament" which came into being in 1782, many Irish were not granted the same political rights as the Protestant ascendancy, and they were still poor. It is Neal's father rather than Lord Dunseveric that reveals Birmingham's political beliefs more correctly. He says to the Lord:

> You care for Ireland, and you mean by Ireland the powers and previleges of a class. I care for Ireland, but I mean Ireland, not for certain noblemen and gentlemen, but Ireland for the Irish people, for the poor as well as the rich, for the Protestant, Dissenter, and Roman Catholic alike.[16]

Birmingham also seems to voice his own polititical beliefs through the mouth of Donald Ward. Referring to the American War of Independence which he fought in and the French Revolution, Donald emphasizes that it was the people that brought liberty to both countries. He says with strong emotion:

> It was the people that carried the day in America. They carried the day in France. What's to hinder us from carrying the day in Ireland?[17]

In fact, it was "the fragile unity of the United Irishmen," to use the word of Máire and Conor Cruise O'Brien, that hindered the Irish from carrying the day. They point out that the rebellion was "spasmodic" and "without a central plan." They show the fact that, while it was "almost an entirely Protestant(Presbyterian) movement" in the North, it was "Catholic and took on some of the character of a religious war against Protestants" in the South.[18]

Even though Birmingham reveals his preference for a united Ireland through Neal's father and Donald Ward, he also portrays Lord Dunseveric as a favorable, respectable and thoughtful gentleman. His advice to Neal's father sounds partly like Birmingham's own voice

> I have never denied, nor do I wish to deny, the need of reform .... but I see before all the necessity of loyalty to the constitution.[19]

In *Hyacinth*, Birmingham expresses almost the same view through a Protestant clergyman, Canon Beecher. The Canon says that he does not care what earthly government will rule the Irish because it is impossible to tell which is the more legitimate ideology, Nationalism or Unionism.

Moreover, Lord Dunseveric's warning that their rebellion must fail and Ireland will be degraded to a mere province of the British Empire sounds more convincing and even more reasonable than the fanatic desire for the rebellion expressed by Neal's father and Donald. Brian Taylor is correct in pointing out that, while celebrating the spirit of the 1798 Rebellion, Birmingham shows clearly that its failure has served only to store up trouble for the future of Ireland.[20]

This is where Birmingham's ambivalent attitude towards Nationalism and his mixed feeling about it can be perceived. That is to say, he seemed to have both sympathies and doubts about Nationalism.

In the controversy over the involvement of Birmingham's novels with his withdrawal from the Gaelic League, Brian Murphy insists that the Gaelic

League was "not sectarian in origin" and Birmingham's novels were not the cause of his withdrawal from the League.[21] Murphy is correct in denying its sectarianism at its initial stage, judging from the statement by Douglas Hyde, the Gaelic League's president. Hyde proclaimed in 1892:

> When we speak of 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising the Irish Nation', we mean it, *not as a protest against imitating what is best in the English people*, for that would be absurd, but rather to show the folly of neglecting what is Irish, and hastening to adopt, pell-mell, and indiscriminately, everything that is English.
>
> This is a question which most Irishmen will naturally look at from a National point of view, but it is *one which ought also to claim the sympathies of every intelligent Unionist*, and which, as I know, does claim the sympathy of many.[22](Emphasis added)

However, against Hyde's intention, the Gaelic League abandoned its non-sectarianism as the members "took a prominent part" in the Easter Rising in 1916 and contributed to the growth of Sinn Féin and the IRA.[23] It seems that Peter Murray, another disputer who is opposed to both Foster and Murphy, holds the most accurate view. He criticizes Foster for asserting that the Gaelic League has always been sectarian since its foundation, and also criticizes Murphy for maintaining that it has never failed to be non-sectarian. Murray implies that the Gaelic League could not adhere to its initial non-sectarianism, pointing out "the difficulty of sustaining non-sectarian action in a country where politico-religious division runs as deep as it does in Ireland."[24] In the case of Birmingham, it is suspected that he could not become a devoted Nationalist, even though he tried to, because he came from a Unionist background and witnessed political and religious division running so deep in Ireland. *The Seething Pot*, *Hyacinth* and *The Northern Iron* are the expresssions of his mixed and contradictory feelings about Nationalism.

If Ireland is regarded as a monolithic state that was established by the Gaels, which seems to be the more common view worldwide, Nationalism will be the more legitimate aspiration. But A.T.Q.Stewart reveals a Unionist logic and claims the validity of the existence of Northern Ireland in *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster 1609-1969*, emphasizing that "the Irish are a mixture of many European strains" and "the Gaels, too, were invaders, a military caste ruling the native population every bit as much as the later Normans or English."[25] Roy Foster alludes to Stewart's work to reinforce his revisionist theory and to justify the existence of Northern Ireland.[26]

In Birmingham's *Hyacinth*, Canon Beecher asks Hyacinth in a controversy over Nationalism and Unionism, "Will you be sure to know the good side from the bad, the Captain from the enemy?"[27] He means that either aspiration can be legitimate. In The Northern Iron, Birmingham also seems to show the legitimacies of both aspirations through the characters of the Nationalist Ward family and the Unionist Lord Dunseveric.

Birmingham soon realized that the Irish problem can not be solved if one makes serious committments on both sides, Nationalists and Unionists, and turned to writing comic fiction, through which he tried to send his message to all Irish: "Don't take things too seriously."[28] In 1908, his

masterpiece, Spanish Gold, came out.

Birmingham's novels reveal that today's Northern Irish problem is difficult to settle because either aspiration can be legitimate. At the same time, his novels lead one to realize that the only way out of "the Troubles" is a tolerant attitude of both sides towards the other.

It is possible for one to look "back to the present" which one lives in, by looking "forward to the past" which was described in Birmingham's novels.

NOTES

[1] The conference was held from July 20 to 25 in 1998.

[2] In his autobiography, *Pleasant Places* (1934), Birmingham recalled the eduction which he had received in his infancy:

"One of my earliest recollections is of a lesson I received from a very aged but still indomitable clergyman, Dr. Drew, who in his day was the leader of the North of Ireland Orangemen. He was in my father's study when I was brought to him, a tiny boy with long yellow curls, ... Dr. Drew took me on his knee and taught me to say over and over again: 'No Pope, no Priest, no surrender, Hurrah.' My infant lips, so my father used to tell me, could get no nearer to pronouncing the words than 'Peest' and 'Hender,' but I seem to have imbibed the spirit." (pp. 3-4)

[3] "From George A. Birmingham, *Irishmen All* (1913)," Seamus Deane et al. eds., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol.3 (1991; rpt., Derry: Field Day, 1992), p. 416.

[4] George A. Birmingham, *The Seething Pot* (1905; rpt., London: Edward Arnold, 1932), pp. 186-187.

[5] Desmond O'Hara, the editor of a Nationalist newspaper, *The Critic*, answered the private letter from the hero, Gerald Geoghegan, in a certain column of the paper:

".... Far better it is to be sitting beside a seething pot than a stagnant pool. Dear G.G., let us keep the pot seething if we can. Let us do our little part in this dear Ireland of ours to stir men into the activities of thought and ambition. If we get our toes burnt and our fingers grimy, let us put up with it bravely. If there is a nasty smell, we shall remember that there is good food in the caldron." (pp. 297-298)

[6] Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1988), pp.453-454. After its publication Foster might have noticed his error in relating that Birmingham was "triumphantly unmasked as a Church of Ireland clergyman in 1906." In the Penguin edition published the following year, he deleted the paragraph and rewrote: "anathematized as an anti-national influence in 1906."

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 454.

[8] "Prologue: Varieties of Irishness," *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 3.

[9] Brian Murphy, "Birmingham and the League," 'Letter to the Editor', *Irish Times*, 8 December, 1994.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Brian Murphy, "Who fears to speak of an Irish nation?" *The Sunday Tribune*, 30 August, 1992.

[12] Brian Taylor, *The Life and Writings of James Owen Hannay (George A. Birmingham) 1865-1950* (Lewinston: Edwin Mellen, 1995), p. 75.

[13] George A. Birmingham, *The Northern Iron* (1907; rpt., London: George Newnes, 1919), p. 29.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

[15] Brian Taylor, p. 74.

[16] *The Northern Iron*, p. 68.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

[18] Máire and Conor Cruise O'Brien, *A Concise History of Ireland* (1972; rpt., London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 91.

[19] *The Northern Iron*, p. 68.

[20] Brian Taylor, p. 77.

[21] Brian Murphy, "Revisionism," 'Letter to the Editor' , *Irish Times*, 19 October, 1992.

[22] "From Douglas Hyde, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland (1892)'", *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol.2, p. 527.

[23] S.J. Connolly, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998), p. 215. The entry "Gaelic League" explains how it turned from a non-political movement to a political one. But the entry includes an error in relating that Birmingham was expelled from the Gaelic League in 1914. Actually he left it in 1907, and 1914 was the year he resigned his position as Rector of Westport after his play General John Regan (1913) caused a furious riot.

[24] Peter Murray, "A Sectarian Skeleton in the Gaelic League's Cupboard? Roy Foster, Brian Murphy and the Case of George A. Birmingham," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review of Letters, Philosophy and Science*, Vol. 82, No. 318, Winter 1993, p. 485.

[25] A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster 1609–1969* (1977; rpt., Belfast: Blackstaff, 1997), pp. 28-29.

[26] "Bibliographical Essay," *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (Penguin, 1989), p.643.

[27] George A. Birmingham, *Hyacinth* (London: Edward Arnold, 1906), p. 265.

[28] In *Pleasant Places*, Birmingham remarks: "Public business ought never to be taken seriously. It is always comic and should be treated as a joke." (p. 149)