

## Good Intentions Prevailing Over Antagonism: George A. Birmingham's Political Fiction and Humorous Fiction

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The purpose of this article is to explore “good intentions” represented in George A. Birmingham's political fiction and humorous fiction. Some works of his fiction were denounced because people mistakenly regarded them as critical of Catholicism and Nationalism in Ireland. Through analyses of two political novels, *The Seething Pot* (1905) and *Hyacinth* (1906), and two humorous novels, *General John Regan* (1913), which was originally published as a play, and *Good Intentions* (1945), the article aims to make clear that Birmingham intended to express through these works his genuine wish that people would overcome antagonism against others and achieve a happy union.

George A. Birmingham is the pseudonym of James Owen Hannay (1865-1950). He was born into a Protestant family in Belfast, which had strong allegiance to Britain. In his autobiography, *Pleasant Places* (1934), Birmingham related an episode which showed how strong his family's allegiance to Britain was. When Birmingham was still an infant, his father hired as his private tutor a clergyman who had been the leader of Northern Ireland's Orangemen. The man, called Dr. Drew, took Birmingham on his knee and taught him to say repeatedly, “No Pope, no Priest, no surrender, Hurrah”.<sup>1)</sup> Birmingham mentioned that, though he did not become an Orangeman himself and opposed the political views held by his fellow Protestants, “the spirit of defiance and detestation of authority” remained with him. One can see its evidence in Birmingham's later life; for instance, in his defense of the Gaelic League in *The Church of Ireland Gazette*, his accusation of upper-class Nationalists and Unionists in his political fiction, and his mockery of law-abiding government officials in his humorous fiction.

After graduating from the Divinity School of Trinity College, Dublin, Birmingham became a clergyman of the Church of Ireland. While he served as a rector in Westport, County Mayo, there was an incident which made a Nationalist out of him. He founded a little literary society in the town. Many members of it belonged to the class of Anglo-Irish gentry who were “distrustful of anything Irish”.<sup>2)</sup> Birmingham's wife, Ada, was a distant cousin of Samuel Ferguson's wife. Through her association with Lady Ferguson, Ada

acquired some knowledge of the Young Irish Movement in the mid-19th century. At one of the society's meetings, she spoke admiringly about the Young Irelanders' poetry. There happened to be a strong Nationalist of Fenian sympathies at the meeting, and he supported her view vehemently. Consequently a feeling of uneasiness and annoyance arose among the other members. Then Birmingham, with "very little thought of politics", recited some of Clarence Mangan's Nationalist poetry, expecting that the exquisite music of the verse would soothe their savage spirit. However it produced an opposite effect. His fellow Protestants harbored "something more than the feeling of resentment" against Birmingham and were convinced that he was committing a sin as a Protestant rector. Their resentment against Birmingham inclined him farther towards Nationalism. He started reading Irish history and associating with people whom his fellow Protestants regarded as "blackguards".

Birmingham sympathized with the Gaelic League and joined it in 1904. But his connection with it was "brief and ill-starred", to use his own words. His debut novel *The Seething Pot* and second novel *Hyacinth*, published in 1905 and 1906 respectively, caused great controversies. Due to his hostile descriptions of Catholic priests and Nationalist business owners, many readers thought mistakenly that Birmingham was criticizing Catholicism and Nationalism.

The protagonist of *The Seething Pot* is a young man called Gerald Geoghegan. His father, though a Protestant who owned much land in the West of Ireland, was a sympathizer with the Nationalist cause. He raised a rebellion with farmers against the British force at the time of the Young Irish Movement. It ended in failure and he was deported to Australia.

Gerald is born in Australia and, after his father's death, migrates to Ireland to inherit his land and fight for the Nationalist cause. But Gerald soon faces a difficulty. He becomes at odds with a Catholic priest, Father Fahy, who demands that he should grant the tenancy of his land to poor farmers for unduly low rents. Gerald rejects Fahy's demand. He joins a Nationalist party of which the leader is a Protestant man, John O'Neill, and decides to stand for Parliament on O'Neill's request. But vengeful Fahy and his fellow priests block his electoral campaign with the assistance of the police force. Gerald realizes the overwhelming power of Catholic priests who control and rule Irish people. He regards them as hypocrites as well as tyrants, and says:

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 understand it and possess it in his own soul. This is the most wonderful puzzle in Irish life.<sup>3)</sup>

This paragraph, which shows Birmingham's antagonism against Catholic priests *at that*

time, seems to also represent “the spirit of defiance and detestation of authority” deeply rooted in his mind since his infancy. Birmingham recounted in *Pleasant Places* what happened after the publications of *The Seething Pot* and *Hyacinth*. A Catholic Priest in Westport suspected that he was a model for Father Fahy, though Birmingham denied it, and stirred up the people of Westport against him. They gathered outside his house at night and booed at him. They burned him in effigy. Other Catholic priests refused to sit on committees of which Birmingham was a member in the Gaelic League. Going through these embarrassing incidents, Birmingham at last withdrew himself from the Gaelic League in 1906.

However, closer readings of *The Seething Pot* and *Hyacinth* will reveal that Birmingham’s true intentions in both novels were something other than criticizing Catholicism and Nationalism.

In *The Seething Pot*, Gerald Geoghegan wonders if he should keep on with his struggle for an independent Ireland, and appeals for advice to Desmond O’Hara, editor of a newspaper *The Critic*. A model for O’Hara was Standish O’Grady(1846–1928), whom Birmingham called with admiration, “the father of all who wrote in Ireland at that time”.<sup>4</sup> O’Grady was a Church of Ireland clergyman like Birmingham, and the editor of a newspaper *All Ireland Review*. O’Hara answers to Gerald by quoting a passage from *The Bible*: “I see a seething pot, and the face of it is towards the north”.<sup>5</sup> O’Hara means to say that Ireland is in a turbulent state, which would be likened to “a seething pot”, and that the conflict is especially violent in the North. With further metaphors he tries to convince Gerald of the necessity of keeping on with his struggle until an independent Ireland is achieved:

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 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.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that Birmingham’s true intention in this novel was to encourage Irish people to fight for the Nationalist cause with the expectation that it might make an independent Ireland come true.

In *Hyacinth* Birmingham described another hero who fought for an independent Ireland. In the mid-19th century England started a missionary movement in the West of Ireland attempting to convert local Catholics to Protestantism. Æneas Conneally was one of the converts to Protestantism and devoted himself to the mission work as a curate in a small village, Carrowkeel. However his effort turned out to be fruitless and he withdrew himself from the work. In contrition for having forsaken his enthusiasm, he named his son after a great pioneer and leader of the missionary movement.

But his son, Hyacinth, develops a sympathy with Nationalism. Soon after he enrolls in the Divinity School of Trinity College, Dublin, there is an incident that inclines him

farther towards Nationalism. He attends the students' prayer meeting and is horror-struck when he encounters the blatant imperialism of Protestant Unionists. A Unionist clergyman gives a speech to express his support for the English army fighting in the Boer War. Regarding England as the pioneer of civilization, the clergyman justifies the English occupation of the Boers' country. The speech bewilders Hyacinth because he sympathizes with the Boers who suffer from the English rule exactly as much as the Irish do. Hyacinth declines to attend the meeting again. After hearing of his sympathy with Nationalism, other students avoid associating with Hyacinth and chant offensive songs outside his room at night. They kick him down when he refuses to take off his hat to greet the Lord Lieutenant who pays a visit to the College. This incident isolates him from the College and he joins an underground Nationalist organization, of which the leader is a militant lady commonly known as Finola. As she is recruiting soldiers who will fight against England in the Boer War, Hyacinth volunteers. But she rejects him because she assumes he is too naive and feeble to be a soldier.

Though discouraged, Hyacinth is still eager to contribute to the Nationalist movement in another way. With the intention of helping the industrial revival of Ireland, he starts working as a wholesale dealer of a woolen factory and endeavors to promote the sale of Irish-made goods. His intention is thwarted, however, by two hypocritical Nationalist drapers and a rival woolen factory run by a Catholic convent. Mr. O'Reilly, owner of "The Irish House", is obtaining cheaper goods from an English factory and labeling them falsely as "Irish-made" to sell them to local customers. The other draper, Mr. Dowling, is a Gaelic Leaguer, and gives a patriotic speech at a League meeting. He insists people should boycott factories employing Scotch workers and shops selling English-made goods. But Hyacinth is shocked when he finds Dowling's shop stocked with goods which are obviously English. Both O'Reilly and Dowling have a hypocritical view that politics is one thing and business is quite another. Hyacinth's patriotism suffers another blow from the rival factory, Robeen Convent Mill. Despite the fact that the factory is funded by the Government, it hires a large number of girls at starvation wages. Consequently, as Robeen can sell its goods at cheaper prices, Hyacinth's factory goes into bankruptcy and he loses his job.

A fatal blow is given to Hyacinth's faith in Nationalism by his association with a Protestant clergyman, Canon Beecher. Hyacinth falls in love with the Canon's daughter, Marion. When he visits the Canon to ask for permission to marry Marion, they discuss Irish politics and Hyacinth finds that the Canon's view is entirely different from his own. Hyacinth declares that his work as a Nationalist is motivated by his hatred for England and everything English. On the other hand, the Canon says that he does not care about what earthly government will rule the Irish, indicating that one can not tell which is the more legitimate cause, Nationalism or Unionism. He also says it would be impossible for anyone to accept hatred for the inspiration of his life and still be true to God, and emphasizes that a true Christian must love his enemy. Hyacinth, being convinced that the Canon's view is right, gives up his struggle for an independent Ireland. Then Hyacinth decides to leave Ireland for England and work as a clergyman because he wishes to

forget his hopes and dreams for Ireland. He regards his voluntary exile as “a kind of atonement for the betrayal of his old enthusiasm”.<sup>7)</sup>

Horace Plunkett sent a lengthy comment on *Hyacinth* to Birmingham, in which he aptly remarked that the criticism of the Church of Ireland and Trinity College, Dublin, beautifully balanced the criticism of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>8)</sup> However many Catholic and Nationalist readers were only drawn to the criticism of the latter, overlooking the criticism of the former. The fact was that Birmingham accused both upper-class Unionists and Nationalists of arrogance, dishonesty and hypocrisy. Plunkett also mentioned that the interview between Hyacinth and Canon Beecher was one of the best descriptions in the novel. The Canon's words sound very convincing because they seem to represent Birmingham's hearty wish for a peaceful reconciliation between Nationalists and Unionists

In *The Seething Pot* and *Hyacinth*, Birmingham tried to reveal difficulties that Irish people had to face in their struggle for an independent Ireland. It can be said that he had “good intentions” at heart when he wrote both novels.

Another case in which Birmingham's good intentions were grossly misunderstood was a riot that stopped a performance of his humorous play, *General John Regan*, in Westport in February, 1914. According to a historian of the Irish theater, the riot was more ferocious than the one which broke out at a performance of John Millington Synge's play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, in 1907.<sup>9)</sup> *General John Regan* was first performed at the Apollo Theatre in London in January, 1913. It received great acclaim, and subsequently had a long run of nearly eight months. The same year it was also published as a novel. After the play had a success in New York, too, it came to Ireland to be performed by two theater companies. One of them, W. Payne Seddon's company gave their first Irish performance in Kilkenny in January, 1914. Then they toured in Galway and Castlebar before coming to Westport. While the English and the American audience enjoyed the play as an amusing farce, it incurred the rage of many of the Irish audience. According to the *Evening Herald* report of the Galway performance, they had an impression that the play was insulting the Catholic priesthood and belittling the Irish maidenhood.<sup>10)</sup> In Westport, the play was performed in the town hall. As soon as an actor who played a Catholic priest, Father McCormack, appeared on the stage, the mobs rushed, attacked him and rendered him senseless with a blow with the statue of General John Regan itself. Chaos followed. The actors and actresses took refuge in their hotel, while the rioters booed at them outside the hotel and burned Birmingham in effigy.

The setting of *General John Regan* is a fictional town, Ballymoy, which is Westport in disguise. An American millionaire named Horace P. Billing visits this West of Ireland town on a hot summer day, and finds how dull and inactive the town is. He stays in the Imperial Hotel and tells the hotel's owner, Timothy Doyle, that the town's people seem to want desperately to be wakened up. The town's sleepiness or laziness is summed up in a passage as “Business, unless it happens to be market day, absolutely ceases in a town like Ballymoy when the thermometer registers anything over eighty degrees”.<sup>11)</sup> The hotel's

maid, Mary Ellen, makes her first appearance as a slattern and ineffective girl. The hotel's yard is extremely dirty with a manure heap and a pig-stye in it. Mary is depicted as "a very pretty girl, but nearly as dirty as the yard". She is also very slow in serving food to Billing. This portrayal of the girl angered many of the Irish audience.

Billing tells Thaddeus Gallagher, proprietor of a local newspaper, the *Connacht Eagle*, why he came over to this West of Ireland town. He is going to write a biography of the late General John Regan who was born in this town and later turned liberator of Bolivia. He would like to see a statue erected to the memory of the General and do research for his biography. But no one in the town knows about the General and the statue.

Then appears the hero of this play, Dr. Lucius O'Grady. He is a cheerful and optimistic young man full of vigorous energy, a reminder of J.J. Meldon of Birmingham's masterpiece *Spanish Gold* (1908). Though the Doctor does not know anything about the General either, he pretends to know him with the intention of hoaxing Billing. He tells the American that the local council is going to erect a memorial statue to the General before long, and makes him promise to give a huge subscription if his research can get a satisfactory result. Under the leadership of the Doctor, people in Ballymoy start working to hoax Billing and get a lot of money out of him. Thaddeus Gallagher, who is commonly known as Thady, writes an article in his *Connacht Eagle* about how much people in the town appreciate the General's achievements. Major Kent, who is induced by J. J. Meldon to sail out with him for discovering hidden treasure in *Spanish Gold*, appears in this play, too. He shows himself again as a respectable, law-abiding gentleman with a skeptical disposition. Though he opposes the idea of erecting a statue to an unknown General, he is induced by Dr. O'Grady to accept it at last. While Thady is a devoted Nationalist of local origin, the Major is a strong Unionist of English descent. However, when the Doctor introduces both of them to Billing, he says, "But these little political differences of opinion don't really matter. They're both equally keen on doing their duty to the memory of the great General."<sup>12)</sup>

Dr. O'Grady endeavors to unite the town's people to work together for their common benefit. He seems to embody Birmingham's initial intention in this play, which is to convey his sincere wish for a happy union between every political ideology, every religion and every race.

The police barracks is disguised as the house where the General spent his early youth. A ruined house on Doyle's farm is disguised as the General's birthplace. When asked by Billing about the General's surviving relatives, Thady invents a lie as he does not want to disappoint the American, and tells him that a butcher's wife is a relative of the General's. But the butcher, Kerrigan, turns out to be still single. To cover Thady's mistake, Dr. O'Grady creates another lie and tells Billing that Kerrigan is going to marry a grandniece of the General's soon. Mary Ellen plays the role of the grandniece.

With regard to the statue, the town's people depend on Doyle's nephew, a sculptor, for its erection. As nobody has any idea what the General looked like, the sculptor offers them a statue to another dead gentleman, the order of which was cancelled when it was nearly completed. Dr. O'Grady suggests inviting the Lord-Lieutenant to the unveiling of

the statue and asking him to construct another pier in Ballymoy. The town's band is formed. Father McCormack is prepared to give an opening address. The luncheon table is set at Doyle's Imperial Hotel. People gather around the statue. Everyone is ready to greet the Lord-Lieutenant and his party. However, the man who comes to the ceremony spot is not the Lord-Lieutenant but his aide-de-camp. He is very angry, calls Dr. O'Grady and tells him what he has learned about the identity of the General. Now every effort the Doctor has made for the town's financial and economic benefit seems about to come to nothing, and every hope he harbors for people's happy union is on the verge of evaporating. In this catastrophic scene reappears the American man, Billing, and discloses the truth about the General. He admires the Doctor for what he has done with unflinching energy, saying, "We haven't got a medical gentleman on our side of the Atlantic equal to Dr. Lucius O'Grady."<sup>13)</sup> Consequently the American offers his subscription to the town as he promised, and the unveiling ceremony is performed as scheduled.

While *General John Regan* was running at the Apollo Theatre in London, an Irishman watched one of the performances and wrote a letter of strong protest to the *National Weekly*. His letter was published in the magazine on February 1, 1913, with the title, "Canon's Insult to Ireland: A Protest Against a London Play". He denounced Dr. O'Grady as a "common swindler with a persuasive tongue", saying:

I think there is something of a devilish leer in this picture of an Irish doctor, an Irish priest, and of Irish peasants, who for greed of gold enter into a conspiracy of lies and exhibit to the English public the basest, most sordid, and most ignorant qualities of Irish character.<sup>14)</sup>

However a comparison of *General John Regan* with a humorous movie, *Waking Ned Devine* (1998), which attracted a large audience, too, will make clear that this Irishman's bitter criticism of Dr. O'Grady and the play itself is invalid. The setting of *Ned Devine* is a small Irish village with a population of 52, one of whom wins a big money prize in the National Lottery. But the man, Ned Devine, dies from a shock immediately after learning that he has won so much money. There are two old men, Jackie and Michael, who are close friends. They contrive a scheme to misappropriate the money and share it with the other villagers. Under the leadership of Jackie, the villagers try to hoax a man from the National Lottery office. The hoaxing, though it is nearly uncovered, goes through successfully and the money is given to Michael, who is Ned in disguise. But a certain old woman threatens to inform on the fraud to the National Lottery office unless she is given a bigger share of the money. As she suspects that her threat is ignored, she goes to a phone box on the roadside and dials the National Lottery office. Just when she starts talking with the office's secretary, a car crashes against the phone box and the old woman is killed. The villagers, seeing this happen from a public house, cry with joy.

Though the hoaxing in *Waking Ned Devine* looks quite similar to that in *General John Regan*, there is a vital difference between them. In *Waking Ned Devine*, an honest man from the National Lottery office is hoaxed and he never learns the truth. On the other

hand, in *General John Regan*, the American man, Billing, turns out to be a hoaxer, too. Dr. O'Grady and people in Ballymoy try to hoax the hoaxer and everyone learns the truth about the General at the end. Billing is so impressed by Dr. O'Grady's performance that he voluntarily donates his money to the town. This comparison reveals that the two works have different intentions. Dr. O'Grady induces the town's people to enter into a conspiracy of lies for their common good, whereas it is purely for greed that the two old men in *Waking Ned Devine* induce the villagers to do so.

Therefore it can be said that, while *Waking Ned Devine* intended to expose greedy human nature, Birmingham intended to show in *General John Regan* his sincere wish that, no matter how different their political creeds or religious beliefs were, people would overcome their antagonism against others and come to a happy union.

With regard to Irish people's denunciation of Father McCormack, Birmingham's rebuttal was that he had portrayed the priest simply as "a charming, simple-minded, dear old man".<sup>15)</sup> In his novels after *The Seething Pot* and *Hyacinth*, Birmingham ceased to level any harsh criticisms at Irish priests. In *Spanish Gold*, J. J. Meldon, a curate of the Church of Ireland, sailed out to an island off the West Coast of Ireland with Major Kent to discover hidden gold. There were two rival treasure hunters from England. Though the gold was discovered, it turned out that an islander, Thomas O'Flaherty Pat, had secured its possession long ago. Nevertheless the two Englishmen still attempted to steal the gold from him. Meldon and Kent blocked their conspiracy with the assistance of the islanders including a Catholic priest, Father Mulcrone. In the end the islanders were given fair shares of the gold. Forty years later, in *A Sea Battle* (1948), Meldon and Kent sailed out to the same island again. This time their purpose was to prevent German war criminals from coming over to live on the island. Meldon and Father Mulcrone, who had nurtured their friendship since they met forty years ago, worked together and succeeded in expelling the Germans from the island. Hilda O'Donnell pointed out that the main reason for Birmingham's change of views of Catholic priests was that his elder daughter, Theodosia, married a Catholic man. The marriage took place around 1920 while Birmingham was a rector of Carnalway, County Kildare.<sup>16)</sup>

Birmingham lived in Westport from 1892 to 1913. As mentioned above, many Irish people misunderstood Birmingham's intentions in his political novels and *General John Regan*. As he could not stand their increasing resentment against him any longer, he resolved to leave Westport for the United States in 1913. However he asserted he still loved the town and the people.<sup>17)</sup> Looking back on his connection with Irish politics around that period, he also remarked:

It is not for me to write a history of that period of high hopes, shining enthusiasm and gastly deeds. For me it is enough to have learned that greater than all these things is love.<sup>18)</sup>

Birmingham lived through one of the most turbulent periods of Irish history. While he



was in Westport, Ireland was in turmoil with Land Acts and Home Rule questions. World War I broke out in 1914 and Birmingham volunteered as a chaplain for the British army in France. The Easter Rising burst out in 1916. The Free State of Ireland came into being in 1922, though six counties in Ulster remained part of the United Kingdom. Civil war ensued, in which those in favor of the Free State and those claiming a united Ireland fought. During World War II Birmingham served as a canon for Holy Trinity Church in London and held church services regularly even amidst air raids. It seems, however, that Birmingham learned “love” more than antagonism through these conflicts and wars. Through his works of humorous fiction, which were filled with love and good intentions, Birmingham continued expressing his sincere wish for people’s happy union.

Birmingham published a novel titled *Good Intentions* in 1945. This novel was based on a true story, which Birmingham recounted in *The Irish Times* of December 24, 1913. The title of his newspaper article was “O’Flaherty’s Good Fairy: The Message of the Sea, A True Christmas Story”. In the spring of the same year, an American gentleman and his little daughter were on board an Atlantic liner, which had left from New York. On the third day of their voyage, in mid-ocean, romantic fancies occurred to the little girl and her affectionate father agreed to help her realize them. The girl put a message and a self-addressed envelope in a bottle, carefully corked and sealed it, and threw it overboard. Her message was to the effect that she hoped the finder of the bottle would reply to her because she wanted to give the person some present. Drifting in the ocean, the bottle reached the hand of a man living on the West Coast of Ireland. As Birmingham did not want to show the man’s real name, he gave the man a pseudonym, “Thomas O’Flaherty Pat”, the namesake of a character in *Spanish Gold*. O’Flaherty Pat replied to the girl, who lived in New York, and mentioned that he needed a handout of charity because he had a very poor, large family. At that time Birmingham was in New York and writing an article for a certain magazine. By chance the girl’s father was a friend of the magazine’s editor. The editor showed the letter to Birmingham and asked whether what O’Flaherty Pat stated in his letter was true or not. Then Birmingham contacted a friend of his who lived on the West Coast of Ireland, and they gathered all the information about O’Flaherty Pat’s circumstances. As a result they found that his poverty was quite true or, “if anything, understated” in his letter. Then, after a talk with his gracious little daughter, the kind-hearted father sent, as their Christmas presents to the family, a check for a large sum and a parcel of toys and sweets to the O’Flaherty’s.

The novel, *Good Intentions*, starts with a wartime London scene. An American, Mr. Bledsom Van Rennan, is a big business owner and renowned politician, whom the British Government regards as an important personage for their country’s benefit. Sir Aylmer Elton, who is of Irish descent, works for the British Government as a civil servant of high standing. He is a widower with a nine-year-old daughter, Elsie. She is equivalent to the little American girl in the true story. But, in the case of Elsie, it is after going through suspicions, misunderstanding, antagonism and troubles that her good intention bears fruit.

In the autumn of 1940, Mr. Van Rennan visits London on business, and Sir Elton is assigned the task of entertaining this important guest. Sir Elton finds the task delightful and they become warm friends. At that time air raids from German warplanes are becoming more intense and children are evacuated to safer places in England, or to Canada or America. While dining with Sir Elton in a restaurant called the Minerva Club, Mr. Van Rennan suggests that Elsie should come over to America and stay in his house until London is free from the peril of air raids. Sir Elton is expressing his hesitation about parting with his daughter, when he hears a bomb destroying nearby buildings. Panic dispels his hesitation and he asks Mr. Van Rennan to take Elsie with him to America as soon as possible. Van Rennan is due to board an Atlantic liner, the *Ukraina*, for his return voyage the next day. Sir Elton imposes upon his staff the task of speedily getting Elsie a visa and passport for her trip to America, and succeeds in putting her on board the *Ukraina*. Birmingham describes the air raid with humor, as well as portraying the Irish character in Sir Elton with affection:

It was this outbreak of Irishness, and not Van Rennan's willingness to bribe, which accounted for the amazing, almost incredible fact that Elsie Elton went on board the *Ukraina* twenty-four hours after her journey was decided on. If this explanation is the true one, then Hitler's bomb, the one which fell near the Minerva Club, did more than smash several important buildings. It did what even an earthquake could hardly have been expected to accomplish. By thoroughly rousing the Irishman in Sir Aylmer it gave vitality to a whole body of men accustomed to a moribund existence.<sup>19)</sup>

Birmingham does not show any trace of antagonism against Hitler. Or rather he describes the German air raid as something helpful that inspired the Irish character in Sir Elton and roused excitement in his staff's dull, routine work. Birmingham also gives humorous descriptions of German air raids in *Over the Border* (1942) and German war criminals in *A Sea Battle*. These descriptions prove that his humorous novels are full of good intentions and convey his sincere wish that people will overcome antagonism against others to reach a happy union.

While Elsie is on board the *Ukraina*, she throws overboard a bottle which contains a message saying that she wants to send a birthday present to the finder of the bottle. She writes down Mr. Van Rennan's address in New York for the finder to send an answer to. At the end of her message she adds eight crosses which represent kisses. After drifting in the ocean, the bottle reaches the shore of a small island off the West Coast of Ireland, and is picked up by a twelve-year-old girl, Maureen Phelim. Her family is very poor. She, her mother and her baby brother depend on a small income her father, Thaddaeus, earns out of farming and fishing for their living. Thaddaeus is also a strong Nationalist and member of the local IRA whose leader is Michael McCarthy, the schoolmaster and Maureen's teacher. As the message in the bottle his daughter picked up seems mysterious to Thaddaeus, he shows it to Michael. Regarding the eight crosses as "codes", the schoolmaster assures Thaddaeus that the sender of the message is a

German submarine and the “birthday present” will be guns or airplanes to subvert Unionists in Ireland. They decide to wait what will come to them “out of the sea” without answering to the message.

Meanwhile Maureen sends Elsie an answer and encloses a photograph of herself poorly clad. She writes that she wants “something made of gold” or a new dress as her birthday present. During World War II censorship is in operation in Britain, and, as a censor has a suspicion of her mention of gold, he deletes it together with her mention of a new dress. When Elsie receives the letter, there is not much left of the message and it looks totally senseless. Nevertheless, the photo of Maureen convinces Elsie that it is the answer from a girl who picked up her bottle. To Elsie’s joy, Mr. Van Rennan agrees to send a check of two-hundred fifty dollars to Maureen. First he sends the check to Elsie’s father. Then Sir Elton exchanges it for a check of fifty pounds, and forwards it to Maureen. However both men’s good intentions are misunderstood as grossly as Birmingham’s good intentions in *General John Regan*. Sir Elton writes a letter to Mr. Van Rennan, saying that he has received the check and forwarded it to Maureen. The letter incurs grave suspicions among British censors. Holding American shares is prohibited in Britain during World War II. They regard Elsie mistakenly as ELSI, an American company owned by Mr. Van Rennan, and suspect that Sir Elton holds its shares and dividends are paid to him. He is also suspected of siding with the IRA and Germany when the British Naval Intelligence office discovers the identity of Maureen’s father.

Maureen only tells her mother about the check sent to her, and decides to deposit the money in a bank without letting her father know. But his IRA comrade stealthily watches Maureen handing the check to a bank officer, and reports it to the leader, Michael McCarthy. Michael, believing that the money was sent to his IRA unit by a German submarine for the purchase of weaponry, demands that Thaddaeus take the money out of the bank and hand it over to them. But Maureen denies her father’s request to submit the money to the IRA. Thaddaeus, dejected and afraid of being punished, escapes from the island. Maureen fears that her father may be killed by the IRA, and writes a letter to Sir Elton in which she asks him to help her father. When Sir Elton shows the letter to Mr. Van Rennan who is visiting London on business again, Van Rennan resolves to meet Thaddaeus and sort out this trouble. Though his journey to Dublin turns out to be extremely uncomfortable, Mr. Van Rennan shows great patience. At a dirty lodging-house he has managed to find after his midnight wandering, he happens to meet Thaddaeus who newly fled his island. To help Thaddaeus out of the trouble, Mr. Van Rennan offers him another fifty pounds and tells him to give it to his IRA leader, Michael. In conversation with Thaddaeus, Mr. Van Rennan remarks:

The trouble really arose through one little girl, a very nice little girl, wanting to give a birthday present to another little girl, one of the most sensible little girls I’ve ever heard of. That’s the way most of the real troubles in the world start—through *good intentions*.<sup>20)</sup> (Italics mine)

Elsie's good intention caused suspicions, misunderstanding, antagonism and troubles as did Birmingham's good intentions in *The Seething Pot*, *Hyacinth* and *General John Regan*. Therefore the last sentence of this paragraph gives an impression of being Birmingham's own voice. Mr. Van Rennan tells Sir Elton something to the same effect:

I know the child meant no harm. But good intentions are just the most dangerous things there are. Pave the way to—well, the sort of thing I've been through, and Hell's too mild a word for that.<sup>21)</sup>

It is likely that his own experience led Birmingham to convince himself that good intentions were dangerous things. However it should be noted that Birmingham remembered the story about the American girl filled with good intentions for over thirty years and wrote a novel based on it. This is further testimony to Birmingham's faith in good intentions and his genuine wish that people would overcome antagonism against others and achieve a happy union.

Many critics say that Birmingham's later novels are not as good as the novels he wrote while he was in Westport. They regard them as merely light-hearted and often desultory. However his later humorous novels like *Over the Border*, *A Sea Battle* and *Laura's Bishop* (1949) hold serious implications behind their light-heartedness, exactly as *Good Intention* does. Referring to Birmingham's political novels, *The Seething Pot*, *Hyacinth* and *The Northern Iron* (1907), R.B.D. French remarked, "[A] new gift for satiric portraiture is revealed, but they are fundamentally serious works, even tragic in their implications, and they are the work of a Christian moralist."<sup>22)</sup> This is true of Birmingham's humorous fiction, too. They are not only humorous but also serious, and "the work of a Christian moralist". It is one of my research subjects to make clear how Birmingham's Christian morals are incorporated into his humorous fiction and add more seriousness to their implications. It is hoped that the research will reveal that Birmingham's works hold permanent values and therefore deserve more attention.

#### Notes

- 1) George A. Birmingham, *Pleasant Places* (London: William Heinemann, 1934), p.3.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p.181.
- 3) George A. Birmingham, *The Seething Pot* (1905; rpt., London: Edward Arnold, 1932), pp.186-87.
- 4) *Pleasant Places*, p.160.
- 5) *The Seething Pot*, p.297.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p.297-98.
- 7) George A. Birmingham, *Hyacinth* (London: Edward Arnold, 1906), p.272.
- 8) Horace Plunkett's letter of 19th, February, 1906, addressed to James Owen Hannay: J.O. Hannay Papers 3454/21, Manuscripts Department of the Library of Trinity College, Dublin
- 9) R. Hogan, R. Burnham and D. P. Potter, *The Modern Irish Drama 4: The Rise of the Realists* (Dublin: Dolmen, Humanities Press, 1979), pp.152-53 Quoted in Brian Taylor, *The Life and Writings of James Owen Hannay (George A. Birmingham) 1865–1950* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1995), p.130
- 10) Brian Taylor, p.130.

- 11) George A. Birmingham, *General John Regan* (1913; rpt., Bath: Cedric Chivers, 1970), p.7.
- 12) *Ibid.*, pp.48-49.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p.320.
- 14) Anon., "Canon's Insult to Ireland: A Protest Against a London Play", *National Weekly*, February 1, 1913, p.109 : J.O. Hannay Papers 3438/48
- 15) Brian Taylor, p.133
- 16) Hilda Anne O'Donnell, "A Literary Survey of the Novels of Canon James Owen Hannay (George A. Birmingham)", A thesis offered for the Degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Arts (Belfast: Queen's University, 1959), pp.121-22. O'Donnell obtained her information about the marriage from Mrs.Henderson of Wood Cottage, Westport, and Mrs.Donner of "Saltopans", Portballintrae.
- 17) *Pleasant Places*, pp.175-76.
- 18) *Ibid.*, p.194.
- 19) George A. Birmingham, *Good Intentions* (London: Methuen, 1945), p.10.
- 20) *Ibid.*, pp.178-79.
- 21) *Ibid.*, p.187.
- 22) "Birmingham, George A. (1865–1950)", Robert Hogan et al. eds., *Dictionary of Irish Literature: Revised and Expanded Edition A–L* (Westport: Greenwood, 1996), p.155.

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