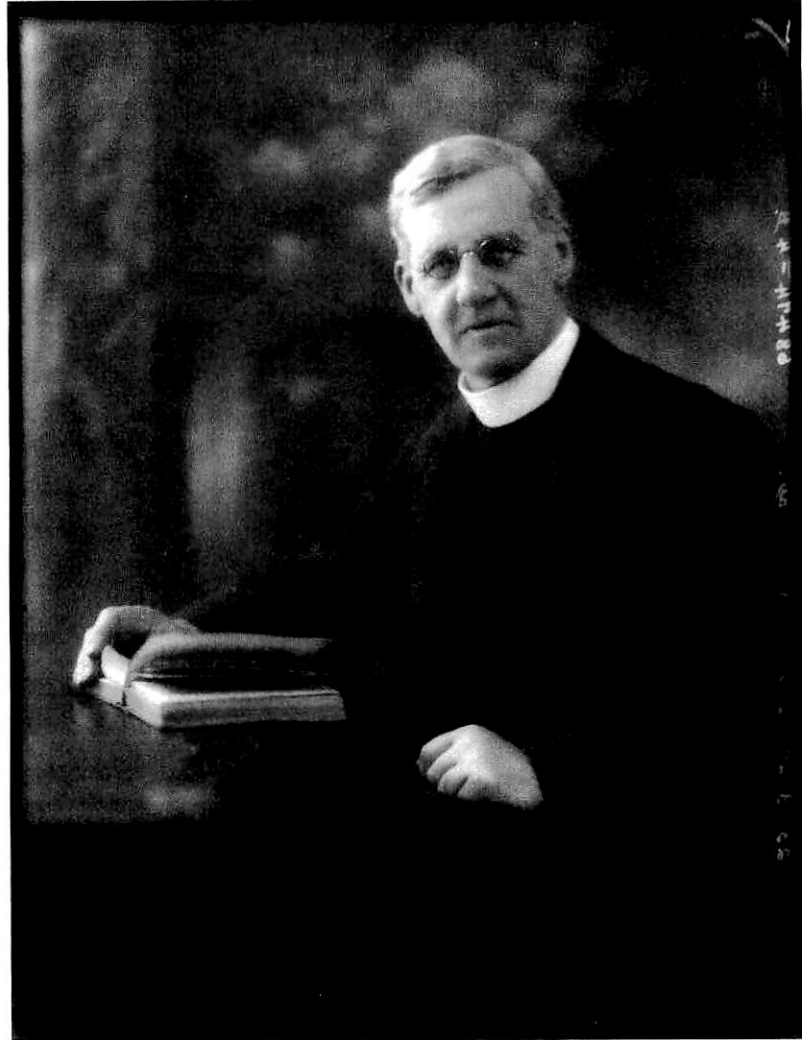


George A. Birmingham, *General John Regan* – A Hearty Wish for Reconciliation between Every Human Being.

Masahiko Yahata



James Owen Hannay by Bassano, 23 March 1927
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When George A. Birmingham's play, *General John Regan*, was produced in Westport on Wednesday, February 4, 1914, it provoked the most violent riot in the history of Irish theatre. In *Cathair na Mart*, No.12, 1992, Brian Taylor makes an analysis of the riot with a historical account of how the play was received in London, New York and Westport.¹ Meanwhile, I will give a literary appreciation of the play and reveal the universal truth that the play represents. The play shows Birmingham's deep faith in Christianity linked with his sense of humour, and emphasizes that humour is indispensable in solving human conflicts and bringing them to reconciliation.

In order to investigate how Birmingham's faith in Christianity and his sense of humour developed, I will trace his career until the appearance of *General John Regan*.

George A. Birmingham was the pseudonym of James Owen Hannay. He was born to a Protestant family in Belfast in 1865 and became a Church of Ireland clergyman. After serving as the curate of Delgany, Co Wicklow, Birmingham came to Westport and served as the rector from 1892 to 1913. Afterwards he transferred to the Church of England when he became the rector of Mells, Somersetshire in 1924. He was the Canon of Holy Trinity Church in South Kensington, London, when he died at the age of 84 in 1950.

As Birmingham recounts in his autobiography, *Pleasant Places* (1934), his family had a strong Unionist tradition and he was given a private tutorial in his infancy by a leading figure of the Orange Order to get Unionism ingrained in his mind.² However, against his family's expectation, Birmingham came to sympathize with Nationalism and claim a united Ireland. As he wrote articles and essays to defend the Gaelic League in *The Church of Ireland Gazette* and other organs, he was criticized and resented by many Protestant Unionists. He joined the executive of the Gaelic League at the invitation of its founder, Douglas Hyde, in 1904.

Birmingham started his literary career while he lived in Westport. His debut novel, *The Seething Pot* (1905), portrays a Protestant youth who, taking over his father's will, attempts to fight for a united Ireland as a Nationalist Party politician. But he is forced to give up the fight by the Catholic priests who are assumed to be bribed by the British Government. His second novel, *Hyacinth* (1906), depicts another Protestant youth who, being discouraged by the arrogant Unionists and the hypocritical Nationalists, withdraws from his fight for a united Ireland.

Both novels were bitterly criticized by many Catholic Nationalists as gross insults to them. A priest in Westport conceived the wrong idea that the caricatured priest in *The Seething Pot* was modelled on him, and stirred up his sympathizers to burn Birmingham in effigy and boo at his rectory. According to *The Mayo News*, May 19, 1906, the Westport Board of Guardians made a resolution to demand an apology from Birmingham, who was also a member of the Board.³ At the executive meeting of the Gaelic League held at Claremorris in September the same year, Birmingham was severely

condemned by the chairman. This affair made Birmingham resolve to leave the executive.

Those who criticized *The Seething Pot* and *Hyacinth* misunderstood Birmingham's true messages from both novels. They overlooked the fact that Birmingham blamed the Protestant Unionist authority as much as the Catholic Nationalist authority for their arrogance, hypocrisy and bigotry. Birmingham intended to expose difficulties facing the fight for a united Ireland. Comparing Ireland to "the seething pot", Birmingham emphasized that the Irish must never give up their fight for a united Ireland.

In 1908, Birmingham published a humorous novel, *Spanish Gold*, the tone of which was totally different from those of his previous serious novels. It became a best-selling novel and gave Birmingham fame as a novelist.

The novel depicts a treasure-seeking adventure by J.J. Meldon and Major Kent on a small island off the west coast of Ireland. "J.J." is a cheerful, optimistic and energetic Church of Ireland clergyman. On the other hand, the "Major" is a serious, conservative and sceptical retired soldier of English descent. While J.J. has no political conviction, the Major is a strong Unionist. Although their dispositions present a striking contrast, they are close friends. They come across a pair of rival treasure-seekers. When J.J. finds out that an old man on the island holds the treasure secretly, he gives up, but the rival treasure-seekers try to steal it from the old man. Without shrinking from their violence, J.J. tries to recapture the treasure, and succeeds it with the help of the islanders including a Catholic priest. The treasure is fairly divided by the islanders. The Chief Secretary of Ireland, who happens to visit the island then, is impressed so much by J.J.'s performance that he recommends J.J. to his friend as the rector of a coal-mining town in Lancashire. J.J. goes to the town with his newly married wife.

In *Spanish Gold* there are no such harsh descriptions of Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Unionists as in *The Seething Pot* and *Hyacinth*. All the characters, including the two villainous treasure-seekers, are portrayed with affection.

The reason for Birmingham's turning into a humorous novelist seems to lie in his involvement with Irish politics and his deep faith in Christianity.

Birmingham was resented by Protestant Unionists because he sympathized with Nationalism and defended the Gaelic League. However the publications of *The Seething Pot* and *Hyacinth* caused misunderstanding among Catholic Nationalists, and Birmingham was resented by them too. Then he agonised, wondering which was right, Nationalism or Unionism. His agony is represented in the next two novels, *Benedict Kavanagh* and *The Northern Iron*, which were published in 1907. It is conceivable that these experiences made him realize that the situations would never get better if he gave truthful and serious descriptions of the conflict between Nationalists and Unionists.

Birmingham was originally a man of humour. While he was working on the committee for the Old Age Pension in Westport, a number of people applying for their pensions tried to cheat him about their ages and incomes. However Birmingham found a lot of amusement in their fictional stories, and later stated, "It does not seem to me now that the English are getting half as much fun out of their Means Test as we got out of ours. They appear to get angry about it, a very stupid thing to do. Public business ought never to be taken seriously. It is always comic and should be treated as a joke."⁴ Assumedly Birmingham applied this notion to the conflict between Nationalists and Unionists, and believed that the conflict should be treated as a joke and ought never to be taken seriously. In other words, he realized that the spirit of humour is indispensable for solutions to every human conflict.

This notion was the outcome of Birmingham's deep faith in Christianity. He regarded love and gentleness as the most important virtues of Christianity. He also claimed that the ideal Christian must be brave and strong, not fearing anything except God. J.J. Meldon of *Spanish Gold* is so brave and strong that, without fearing anything except God, he tries to take back the treasure from the villains and regain peace for the island. Moreover, being a man full of love and gentleness, he releases the villains instead of handing them to the justice.

Dr. Lucius O'Grady of *General John Regan* is the same type of hero, who works hard for the people's common benefit. Though this play also represents Birmingham's wish for a solution to the conflict with the spirit of humour and the virtues of Christianity, many people in Westport misunderstood his message and greeted the play with severe criticism and violence.

General John Regan was Birmingham's second play after *Eleanor's Enterprise*

(1911). When the play was premiered at the Apollo Theatre in London on January 9, 1913, it received great acclaim from both the audience and critics. Many British newspapers reported the play with such favourable comments as “a really satisfactory three-act farce”, “farce of so picturesque and good-natured a quality”, “extremely humorous” and “a great joke”.⁵ As the production continued to attract a huge audience, it ran until September 9 of the same year with a brief suspension in June. The production of the play also started at the Hudson Theatre in New York in November and then moved to the Liberty Theatre, continuing until December 21. It was acclaimed by the American audience and critics as greatly as their English counterparts. But, when the play was produced in Westport the next year, the most violent riot in the history of Irish theatre broke out.

There was an omen of the riot while the play was enjoying a long run at the Apollo Theatre. An Irish person who watched the production wrote a letter of bitter criticism to an Irish magazine, *The National Weekly*. It was published in its February 1, 1913, number with the title, “A Protest against a London Play”. He criticized the play, stating, “I think there is something of a devilish leer in the 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.”⁶

Two English theatre companies went on tour in Ireland with productions of *General John Regan*. One of them, W. Pane Seldon Company, gave its Irish premiere in Kilkenny on January 26, 1914. After touring in Galway and Castlebar, they came to Westport for the production on February 4. It is noticeable how terrible the riot was through the reports of the leading Irish and British newspapers of that time.⁷

The production in Castlebar met with a very hostile reception, as was apparent in the comment by a prominent local Nationalist, “The play is a gross calumny, and an insult to the Irish race.”⁸ A few days before the Westport production, a notice appeared on the walls in the town, which stated, “GENERAL JOHN REGAN. A WARNING. Who will attend this play that ridiculed the priest in London?”⁹ In the London production there was a scene in which the priest, Father McCormack, was tempted to have a secret drink by the hotel’s proprietor, Timothy Doyle. But, when the Irish tour started, the scene was omitted at Seldon’s request.¹⁰ As the riot was anticipated in Westport, a number of police officers were posted inside and outside the Westport town

Hall where the play was to be produced.

As soon as the curtain went up for the first act, fifty or sixty spectators began to groan, boo, whistle and stamp their feet so violently that it was impossible to hear what the players said. When the curtain was raised for the second act and the actor playing Father McCormack appeared, a mob rushed to the stage, made a violent attack on the actor, and tore off his clothes. The police officers tried to baton the attackers and clear the stage. The lights were turned off and the production was discontinued. The attackers, who increased to three and four hundred, threw chairs and other missiles at the police officers. Although they managed to disperse the attackers, the riot was renewed on the streets. The mob yelled and booed at the players who took refuge in their hotel, and threw stones to smash the windows. The riot continued until midnight and twenty men were arrested.



Cast of St Patrick's Drama Group's Westport production of General John Regan. 1977. (Picture: Frank Dolan).

Today the script of *General John Regan* for the Apollo Theatre production is reserved as a part of Lord Chamberlain's Papers in the British Library.¹¹ For my discussion of the play, I will refer to this script because it is assumed to have been used for the Westport production with the scene of the priest's secret drink being omitted.

The setting of the play is a fictional village, Ballymoy, which is supposed to

'GENERAL JOHN REGAN'

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

(By George A. Birmingham)

CAST

Dr. Lucius O'Grady	MARTIN CURRY
Major Kent	MICHAEL HERATY
Timothy Doyle	PATSY STAUNTON
Thaddeus Golligher	MICHAEL CONNOLLY
Horace P. Billing	MARTIN McNALLY
C. Gregg	STEPHEN BREHENEY
Sergeant Colgan	JOE McDONAGH
Constable Moriarty	FRANK DOLAN
Tom Kerrigan	JOHN MORAN
Rev. P. MacCormack	FINTAN MacMAHON
Lord Alfred Blakeney	SEAMUS GAVIN
Mrs. De Courcy	MARIE FLANAGAN
Mrs. Gregg	TERRY REGAN
Mary Ellen	MARGARET JOYCE

1977 Cast.

of yours for the last week and I've seen stagnation; but I reckon this place beats any I've struck yet."¹² Then he adds that it would interest him some to see if he could wake the village up a bit.

The American meets Thaddeus Golligher, proprietor and editor of *The Connaught Eagle*, and tells Golligher the purpose of his visit to Ballymoy. The American is going to write a biography of a General John Regan who was born in this village and later fought for the liberation of Bolivia. He wants to see a statue erected to the memory of the late General and to carry out some research for the biography. However no one in the village knows about the General and the statue.

The play's hero, Dr. Lucius O'Grady, now appears. He is a cheerful, optimistic young man, full of energy. Although the Doctor does not have any knowledge of the General either, he pretends to know about the General and tries to hoax Billing. The Doctor tells the American that the Urban District Council has been discussing the erection of the statue for years. Moreover the Doctor makes the American promise to offer a large donation. Under the leadership of the Doctor, the people in Ballymoy embark on a series of conspiracies to hoax the American. Golligher is ordered to write a leading article about the General in his newspaper to press the claims of the statue strongly. Major Kent, J.J. Meldon's friend in *Spanish Gold*, appears in this play again. Although he opposes the idea of erecting a statue of the unknown General, he is eventually

represent Westport. It is a hot summer day. An American man named Horace P. Billing comes to this village in a large car and reserves a room at the Imperial Hotel which is "no more than a pot house". Finding the village square and street empty and business pretty slack, the American says to Timothy Doyle, the hotel's proprietor, "I've toured this god-forsaken country

persuaded by the Doctor to join the hoax.

The police barrack is disguised as the house where the General spent his childhood. The ruined cottage in Doyle's farm is disguised as the house where the General was born. Mary Ellen, maid in Doyle's hotel, plays the role of the General's grand niece.

With regard to the production of the statue, the villagers depend on Doyle's nephew, who is a sculptor. As no one knows what the General looked like, the sculptor offers them a second-hand statue of a former Deputy Lieutenant of Ireland, which was cancelled when it was completed. The Doctor proposes the idea that they should invite the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to the unveiling of the statue, ask him for the Government money to build a pier for the village, and spend the money for another purpose.

The day of the Lord Lieutenant's visit comes and the villagers are busy preparing to welcome him and his staff. Then, suddenly, a telegram comes to them from Dublin Castle stating that the Lord Lieutenant has cancelled his visit. Instead of him, his aide-de-camp, Lord Alfred Blackeney, turns up with a very angry expression. He tells the Doctor in a fierce temper why the Lord Lieutenant has cancelled his visit, and orders him to stop the ceremony of the unveiling. The villagers blame the Doctor harshly because they believe that their conspiracies have ended in a total failure and that they will suffer a huge debt in the future. However the Doctor defies Lord Blackeney, who is puzzled by the Doctor's strange line of argument.

In the midst of this catastrophic scene, the American man, Billing, reappears and discloses the truth about the mysterious General. He gives his money to the villagers as he promised, admiring Dr. O'Grady for the unfailing energy with which the Doctor has united the villagers to try to hoax him. The ceremony of the unveiling goes on and ends successfully with the villagers' loud cheers.

Is *General John Regan* no more than a piece of farce as the English and American spectators considered it to be? Or is it an insult to the Irish race as many Irish spectators considered it to be?

Certainly there are expressions of satire in this play. But, again, many Irish spectators overlooked the fact that satire is directed at Unionism as well as at

Nationalism.

Thaddeus Golligher is a fanatical Nationalist, who grasps every opportunity to air his Nationalist views and denounce the British rule over Ireland. When the band is playing an Irish patriotic song, "Let Erin Remember" at the unveiling of the statue, Golligher, being drunk, believes that it is an English song and starts protesting. However a harsher satire is directed at a Unionist, Lord Alfred Blackeney. He demands an apology from Dr. O'Grady, believing that the Doctor has tried to hoax the Lord Lieutenant. The Doctor ignores it and says defiantly that, as the role of the Lord Lieutenant in Ireland is "purely ornamental", he should have come and made a speech at the ceremony, whatever the General was. Lord Blackeney gets upset. In the midst of their argument, Billing hands his money to Doyle. The villagers then decide to hold the ceremony of the unveiling as scheduled. Lord Blackeney takes off his hat when the band is playing "Let Erin Remember", being misled to believe that it is the National Anthem of Bolivia. Moreover he is ordered to make a speech at the ceremony, which turns out to be so poor as to be condemned by the villagers.

The representation of Billing also endorses the fact that this play is not an insult to the Irish but the expression of Birmingham's hearty wish for reconciliation between people. If the American were just an honest man with good will and the Doctor tried to hoax the honest man in conspiracy with the villagers, this play could be regarded as a piece of farce exhibiting "the basest, most sordid, and most ignorant qualities of Irish character", as the Irish person who watched a London production put it. But Billing turns out to be a hoaxer, too, and, thanks to the Doctor, the American and the villagers become happy. Dr. O'Grady works for the people's common benefit as hard as J.J. Meldon of *Spanish Gold* does.

As I mentioned before, both of them are endowed with the spirit of humour and the virtues of Christianity; faith, braveness, strength, love and gentleness. Let me illustrate more clearly how Dr. O'Grady holds these virtues.

Birmingham published a number of books on Christianity as well as works of fiction. In *The Spirit and Origin of Christian Monasticism* (1903), Birmingham remarks 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.....The ideal Christian of Protestantism is brave and strong. He is one who fears



The Old Rectory, Westport. Home of Canon Hannay.

God and no one except God.”¹³ Dr. O’Grady represents this ideal Christian figure. He makes the most of life’s opportunities for gain and joy in his attempt to get money from the American. He behaves bravely without fearing anything but God in order to achieve his goal. In *Isaiah* (1937), the biography of a

prophet in *The Old Testament*, Birmingham admires Isaiah for his faith, love and gentleness, stating, “Stern Puritanism is there, uncompromising. Statesmanship is there, wise, far-seeing, well informed. Faith is there, unfaltering even in times of utter hopelessness. But behind all these are love and gentleness - love of Jerusalem and its people; gentleness, not to sin, but to sinners.”¹⁴ Dr. O’Grady has the same strong faith. His faith is unfaltering and he never doubts success even in times of utter hopelessness, too, as is shown by his reaction to the cancellation of the Lord Lieutenant’s visit and his argument with Lord Alfred Blackeney. As he is also gentle and loves Ballymoy and its people, he endeavours to unite them for their common benefit.

General John Regan is a work which shows Birmingham’s faith in Christianity effectively linked with his sense of humour. A few days after the riot in Westport, Birmingham was interviewed by the press in Glasgow, where he stayed for a literary lecture. He said that he was at a loss to understand the reason for the riot because the play was intended as “pure comedy”.¹⁵ It is most likely that he wrote the play as pure comedy without having any intention to represent such virtues of Christianity as mentioned above. But those virtues came out spontaneously without the author himself noticing. This pure comedy also represents the universal truth that humour is indispensable for solutions to every human conflict.

Through the depiction of the trouble and its solution in a small fictional village representing Westport, Birmingham expresses his hearty wish that every conflict in the world will be solved and that every human being will come to

reconciliation. Birmingham continues to create the heroes who are endowed with a sense of humour and the virtues of Christianity and working with the “unflinching faith” to bring people to reconciliation, such as Dr. Whitty of *The Adventures of Dr. Whitty* (1913), The Rev. Anthony Ponsonby of *Appeasement* (1939), and Mr. Van Rennan of *Good Intentions* (1945). These heroes attach eternal value to Birmingham’s novels.

Notes.

1. Brian Taylor, “George A. Birmingham and *General John Regan*: London, New York and Westport”, *Cathair na Mart: Journal of Westport Historical Society*, No. 12, 1992, pp.90-112.
2. George A. Birmingham, *Pleasant Places* (London: William Heinemann, 1934), pp.3-4.
3. “Westport Guardians and Rev. Mr. Hannay: An Apology Demanded”, *The Mayo News*, May 19, 1906, Trinity College Dublin Manuscripts 3444/65. Hereafter cited as TCD MSS. TCD MSS 3430-58 are reserved as the Papers of J.O. Hannay in the university’s Manuscripts and Archives Research Library.
4. *Pleasant Places*, p.149.
5. These quoted phrases are respectively from *The Westminster Gazette*, TCD MSS 3438/17, *The Daily Sketch*, TCD MSS 3438/9, *The Northern Whig*, TCD MSS 3438/11, and *The Daily Telegraph*, TCD MSS 3438/14. Their publication date is January 13, 1913.
6. Anon., “Canon’s Insult to Ireland: A Protest Against a London Play”, *The National Weekly*, February 1, 1913, TCD MSS 3438/48.
7. The newspapers and the periodicals reporting the John Regan Riot in Westport are contained in TCD MSS 3441. I rely on *The Irish Times* of February and March, 1913, for my account of what happened during the riot.
8. *The Irish Times*, February 6, 1914, TCD MSS 3441/43.
9. *The Irish Times*, March 3, 1914, TCD MSS 3441/45.
10. *The Dublin Evening Herald*, February 7, 1914, TCD MSS 3441/40. The play was published as a novel from Hodder & Stoughton in 1913, and a revised version of the play was published from Unwin in 1933. Both publishers were in London. The scene of the priest’s secret drink was omitted from both of them, too.
11. *General John Regan: A Play in Three Acts* by George A. Birmingham, Lord Chamberlain’s Papers, No.1295. Lord Chamberlain’s Office licensed the play on December 31, 1912, for the Apollo Theatre production.
12. *General John Regan*: Act I, Lord Chamberlain’s Papers, p.2.
13. James Owen Hannay, *The Spirit and Origin of Christian Monasticism* (1903; rpt., Whitefish: Kessinger, 2003/4), p.6.
14. George A. Birmingham, *Isaiah* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1937), p.57.
15. *The Manchester Guardian*, February 9, 1914, TCD MSS 3441/51.

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