

The “Uncomic” Side of George A. Birmingham Commonly Known as a Comic Novelist

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一般的に喜劇小説家と言われているジョージ・A・バーミンガムの
「喜劇的でない」側面

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【要 旨】

ジョージ・A・バーミンガム（1865年～1950年）は、『オックスフォード・アイルランド文学案内』（1996年）が「『煮えたぎる鍋』（1905年）から『ふたりのごろつき』（1950年）まで約60冊の喜劇小説を書いた」と述べているように、一般的には喜劇小説家と言われている。しかしこの記述は誤りで、バーミンガムの約60冊の小説は喜劇、政治、歴史、ミステリーと多岐のジャンルに及ぶ。本研究ノートで、筆者は、バーミンガムの最初の小説「追放されて一ストレイド荒野の物語—」と政治小説『悪い時代』（1908年）を取り上げる。両作品は19世紀後半のアイルランド社会の暗い面を暴き出している。それによって筆者は、バーミンガムの「喜劇的でない」側面に光を当て、今後研究すべき課題を呈示する。なお、「追放されて一ストレイド荒野の物語—」は、バーミンガムの書簡を手掛かりにして筆者がテキサス大学オースティン校図書館で発見したものである。

【キーワード】

ジョージ・A・バーミンガム 喜劇小説 19世紀後半のアイルランド社会
政治小説 土地戦争

【Synopsis】

George A. Birmingham (1865-1950) is commonly known as a comic novelist, as is evident in the entry for the author in *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (1996), which mentions that Birmingham wrote between *The Seething Pot* (1905) and *Two Scamps* (1950) nearly “sixty comic novels”. It is incorrect because his sixty novels cover a wide range of genres such as comedy, politics, history and mystery. In this research note, the present writer picks up Birmingham’s first work of fiction, “Driven: A Story of Strade Moor” (1893), and a political novel, *The Bad Times* (1908), both of which

uncover the dark phases of Irish society in the late 19th century. The present writer aims to shed light on Birmingham's "uncomic" side and present some issues to discuss in the future.

[Key Words]

George A. Birmingham comic novels Ireland in the late 19th century
political novels Land War

Introduction

George A. Birmingham (1865–1950) is commonly known as a comic novelist, as is evident in the entry for the author in *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (1996), which mentions that Birmingham wrote between *The Seething Pot* (1905) and *Two Scamps* (1950) nearly "sixty comic novels".¹⁾ It is incorrect because his sixty novels cover a wide range of genres such as comedy, politics, history and mystery. In some novels, the mixture of multiple genres is witnessed. For example, although *The Seething Pot* and *The Northern Iron* (1907) are initially a political novel and a historical novel, comical descriptions are given to certain scenes in them. The reason why Birmingham tends to be regarded simply as a comic novelist is that many of his novels are amusing and seemingly light-hearted. However, those novels actually have serious connotations and represent Birmingham's genuine wish for reconciliation between every human being. Birmingham has a belief that the spirit of joke or the fixed determination to try to find humor in every human deed is indispensable for humans to evade conflict and to lead fruitful lives. His belief sounds quite persuasive and seems to appeal to universal minds because it is the outcome of various difficulties and hardships that Birmingham underwent in the most turbulent times of

Irish history.

In this research note, the present writer picks up Birmingham's first work of fiction, "Driven: A Story of Strade Moor" (1893), and a political novel, *The Bad Times* (1908), both of which uncover the dark phases of Irish society in the late 19th century. The present writer aims to shed light on Birmingham's "uncomic" side and present some issues to discuss in the future.

"Driven: A Story of Strade Moor" : Birmingham's Unknown First Work of Fiction

In his autobiography, *Pleasant Places* (1934), Birmingham recalls his first attempt at writing fiction.²⁾

After graduating the Divinity School of Trinity College, Dublin in 1888, Birmingham started working as the curate of Delgany, County Wicklow. The rector of the town was the Rev. J.J. Robinson. The next year Birmingham married Ada Susan Wynne. When they embarked on their married life, they were so poor that they did not afford to pay even coal bills. Then Birmingham decided to write a short story and send it to a first-rate magazine to get paid for it. He wrote a story, based on his experience in his parish, and sent it off to *Temple Bar*³⁾ in London. The story was at once accepted and he received ten pounds.

Birmingham does not mention any more of the story in his autobiography.

The Papers of J.O. Hannay held by the Manuscripts and Archives Research Library of Trinity College, Dublin, contains a letter which the office of *Temple Bar* addressed to Birmingham on December 7, 1891. It informed him of their willingness to publish his story, mentioning that “(u)pon looking through the papers laid aside for favourable consideration by the Editor, I notice that “Driven” has a place—so unless you hear to the contrary shortly, you may conclude that it is among those likely [to] appear in the future”.⁴⁾

While he was in Delgany, Birmingham became a close friend with T.W. Rolleston. In a letter to Rolleston’s son, Birmingham made another mention of the story:

My own first attempt at writing was made in 1891 or early 1892. It was a short story and I *sent* it, not *took* it, to your father for criticism and advice. If he had been at Delgany I should have taken it to him, so he must have been somewhere else. His letter in reply was very encouraging and he advised me to send the story to ‘Temple Bar’, which I did and it was published in early 1893.⁵⁾ (Italics original)

Birmingham’s memory is incorrect. The story was published in *Temple Bar* No. 395 in October 1893 with the title of “Driven: A Story of Strade Moor”.

The story, presumed to be set in a small village in Wicklow Mountains, is as gloomy and depressing as John Millington Synge’s play, *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903), of which the setting is also an isolated village in the same mountains. The following description makes it most likely that the village is located somewhere in Wicklow Mountains:

A road ran straight across the bog and might be seen struggling up the boundary mountains on the south, and over the hills on the north, beyond which lay civilization and fields of turnips and fat kine and a village, and a church and a chapel, and a dissenting meeting-house. This was the village of Darragh. Beyond it, still further north, lay Kildrum, a market town, a very metropolis as it seemed from Strade, where was published a newspaper, and in which were two churches with tall grey spires.⁶⁾

Darragh, Kildrum and Strade are fictional place names. Considering Birmingham’s remark that the story was based on his experience in his parish, Darragh may represent Delgany where Birmingham worked as the curate, and Kildrum may represent Greystones where Birmingham’s wife lived with her family before marriage. Strade seems to be one of the small villages located in a valley surrounded by the mountains, which is similar to Glemalure in Synge’s *In the Shadow of the Glen*. Strade is inhabited by only twelve families including the O’Donnells. There is a tiny church and the rectors used to give services there. But, at present, the rector lives in Darragh and a young curate, the Rev. James Harrison, is in charge.

Birmingham might have modeled the rector and the curate on the Rev. J.J. Robinson and Birmingham himself. The curate’s name, James Harrison, sounds similar to Birmingham’s real name, James Owen Hannay.

Although Harrison struggles to make the O’Donnells more religious, his efforts fail and he becomes extremely unpopular. The O’Donnells have a servant girl, who is an orphan. Mrs. O’Donnell beats her with a stick due to her ineffectiveness and the girl flees to Harrison’s house for help. When the curate remon-

strates with Mrs. O'Donnell in strong language, all the twelve families in Strade, who are relatives, bind together, "put the case in a curious light", and send for the rector to complain. The rector blames Harrison, demanding that he must learn to "curb his enthusiasm".

Another incident that increases Harrison's unpopularity and makes the rector angrier is Harrison's dismissal of his housekeeper. On Sundays, young Christian shopkeepers from Kildrum come to hold Gospel meetings in the O'Donnell's house and sell things to the inhabitants of Strade. Harrison's housekeeper spends all her money and, as Harrison suspects, a little of his on whiskey, and always gets drunk on Mondays. When Harrison dismisses his housekeeper, both Strade inhabitants and Kildrum shopkeepers give an outcry against the curate for his "outrageous act of religious persecution". The rector abuses Harrison sternly.

When Harrison is returning home, depressed, another incident waits for him, which leads to the total annihilation of his life at last. As it is a pleasant evening in early September, Harrison makes a detour to come by a stream flowing cheerfully. Then he finds the O'Donnells' servant girl lying unconscious in the stream. Harrison suspects that she has tried to commit suicide because she was beaten again by Mrs. O'Donnell. He rescues her and decides that the girl shall never go back to the O'Donnells. Then he takes her to his house.

Mrs. O'Donnell, wondering why her servant girl is away so long, goes out and happens to see Harrison and the girl walking together and entering the curate's house. In Harrison's house, the girl notices her mistress peeping through the window, gives shrieks and grips Harrison's coat firmly with terror. The girl disappears the next morning, while Mrs. O'Donnell gives a report of what she has wit-

nessed to her acquaintances, including the editor of a local newspaper and the rector of Darragh. They come to believe that Harrison has had affairs with the girl.

Harrison is unable to produce to the rector the evidence for Mrs. O'Donnell ill-treating the girl and that for his rescuing her from suicide. The result is that he is dismissed from his curacy and must leave Strade for a secular job in Dublin. Although he works for a big haberdashery warehouse for two years, he has no friends among coworkers, being despised by them and shutting himself in his lodgings. One hot Saturday afternoon in August, while walking on Grafton Street with his face wearing the "sullen, haunted look which it wears almost always now", he is stopped by a beggar. He recognizes that the beggar is the O'Donnells' servant girl. With "intense earnestness and a light in his eyes", Harrison seizes her by the arm and yells to her, trying to take her with him. But, as the girl screams madly with terror, he lets her go, saying to himself, "There's no hope for me now at all."

As shown before, Birmingham relates in *Pleasant Places* that the story was based on his experience in his parish. He also mentions in the same book the reason for his departure from Delgany is that his relationship with the rector, J.J. Robinson, and his wife became difficult at the end of his time in Delgany.⁷⁾ There was trouble in the parish and the rector and Birmingham took different views of it. Birmingham supposed that Mrs. Robinson felt even more strongly about it than her husband did.⁸⁾

Birmingham received the letter from the office of *Temple Bar* letting him know their acceptance of the story in December 1891, and left Delgany for Westport the following year. Piecing these facts together, it may be conceivable that this story derived from Birming-

ham's troubled relationship with the Robinsons. The story is quite dark and totally different in tone from Birmingham's later comic novels. The present writer considers that it is necessary to investigate more deeply what made Birmingham write such a dark, depressing story.

According to *Pleasant Places*, a London publisher, being struck by "Driven: A Story of Strade Moor", asked Birmingham to write a novel for them. However, the publisher went bankrupt soon after he wrote the manuscript of the first few chapters.

The Papers of J.O. Hannay reveals that Birmingham made further attempts at novel-writing shortly after he moved to Westport. He sent the manuscript of a collection of short stories to a London publisher, T. Fisher Urwin. But they replied to Birmingham on November 23, 1893, that it did not come within the range of their publications because they preferred one-volume novels.⁹⁾ Birmingham sent the manuscript of a short story entitled "The Story of the Night" to *Temple Bar* again. However, this time they gave a reply to him on January 8, 1894, mentioning the editor regretted that he had been unable to find a place for it in the magazine.¹⁰⁾

The Bad Times: The Most Pessimistic Novel by Birmingham with an Accurate Representation of Ireland in the Late 19th Century

The Bad Times (1908) recounts the lives of the Butlers in the West of Ireland for three generations. Stephen Butler fought for the freedom of Ireland in the early 19th century. His son, Anthony Butler, strived to help people suffering from the Great Famine around the middle of the century. Stephen Butler, who was his grandfather's namesake, strug-

gled to settle the Land War and to reconcile landlords and peasants in the late 19th century.

After Britain suppressed the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland, they enforced the Acts of Union in 1800 and put the whole island of Ireland under their rule. Although many of the Anglo-Irish gentry were bribed to vote for the Union, Stephen Butler, the landlord of Dhulough in the West of Ireland, was one of the few exceptions who opposed the Union to the last. He was shot by a bravo who sided with the Union, and was nearly killed. When he came home, the village people cheered him because they loved him for his justice and his courage. When he arrived at his house, he met his son, Anthony Butler, who was brought up by his foster-mother since the boy's mother died at the time of his birth. The boy had the gentle, timid eyes of his mother and learned to love his foster-mother and stood in awe of his father. Stephen took his son to the village church and swore his perpetual hostility to Britain and unflinching allegiance to Ireland:

"Standing in the presence of God, and holding by Christ the Savior of the world, I swear that never while life lasts will I yield obedience to laws made for this realm in England, except in so far as such laws are forced upon me by power which I cannot resist; that never while life lasts will I pay loyalty to any government other than that proper, under its own constitution, to this kingdom of Ireland. That I shall resist to the utmost of my power, wherever resistance is possible, the tyranny of foreigners imposed by fraud and perjury on this my native land. May Christ withdraw His mercy from me, and may God the Father put black blight upon my soul on the day when I am false to this my oath." ¹¹⁾

Stephen's spirit was succeeded to by his son and his grandson in different ways. Stephen died, being disappointed with Anthony who preferred art to political fight. He became an artist and wandered through Europe. However, he was never happy because he was haunted by his incompetence. In Spain, he met a priest of Irish descent named O'Neill. His ancestor had fought on the losing side of the Jacobite War in Ireland in the late 17th century and exiled himself to Spain. When Anthony read the earliest numbers of the *Nations* offered by O'Neill, he was immensely touched by the teaching of the Young Ireland Party, or their ideal of a united Ireland. Anthony returned to Ireland and got acquainted with the leaders of the Party, understood and admired their policy.

Then the Great Famine struck Ireland, and the estate in Dhulough which Anthony took over from his father was smitten, too. A wealthy Quaker from Belfast, Micah Ramsden, came to rescue the worst parts of the famine-stricken West of Ireland. Anthony worked with him and the man died of the famine fever. When Anthony went to Belfast to inform Ramsden's daughter, Priscilla, of her father's death, he found her a woman of calm ways and a brave heart, and asked her to be his wife. At the end of a year, they married and started their new life in Dhulough. However, as Anthony saw an exodus of people leaving Ireland with sickening despair and cottages falling to ruin, his spirit was broken by the failure of his hopes. His health was undermined by the horrors of the famine and the fever. After three years of married life, Anthony died, leaving his wife with a boy, a Stephen Butler.

Priscilla was helped such a great deal by her uncle and her cousin with the management of Stephen's estate that debts and mort-

gages began to melt away. Priscilla gave education to Stephen at home until the boy turned fourteen years old, when she died. Her uncle and her cousin, both being Stephen's guardians, decided to send him to an English public school. Stephen inherited from his grandfather and his mother a fierce Irish temper, a sensitive pride and a kind heart. These dispositions became more outstanding in the public school. When he was bullied by older students, he revenged himself in unheard-of ways and refused to bully younger students. He went up to Oxford University, where he came to realize that he was an Irishman. At that time, the Fenians started shooting English politicians and policemen. The murder of Irish landlords and the execution of Irish tenants became more common. Stephen was detested by his university friends because he showed his sympathies with those Irishmen. Stephen determined to quit Oxford University when his guardian and great-uncle died, leaving behind him a considerable fortune.

After traveling abroad for a while, Stephen came home to Dhulough as a landlord and visited the church where his grandfather swore his oath. The rector, Eugene Hegarty, gave a service for Stephen. Then he realized clearly the weight of responsibility which lay upon him. He understood that he had thrust upon him a position of leadership, a possibility of great influence. He desired to do "only what was right and brave".¹²⁾ However, Stephen's resolve to work for the peace of Ireland led him into the whirlpool of the Land War, which would bring him to a tragic end.

Stephen had a lengthy discussion about Ireland with Lord Daintree, another Anglo-Irish landlord in Dhulough. While Stephen admired some of the Anglo-Irish gentry for their struggle to achieve Home Rule for Ireland, Lord Daintree pointed out that it was too late in

their times, foreseeing the Land War in which Irish peasants would raise a rebellion against those Anglo-Irish landlords including himself and Stephen:

...There's a new spirit in the country now—a growing feeling of class hatred, and a very natural desire for security and a fair chance of living. This will be stronger for a many day to come than the feeling for nationality. These amiable Home Rule gentlemen are, no doubt, perfectly sincere in what they call their patriotism, but they are utterly mistaken about the times they live in. The next great popular agitation will be against their class and not against England.¹³⁾

Besides Hegarty and Lord Daintree, another person whom Stephen made friends with in Dhulough was a Catholic clergyman, Father Staunton. Stephen became a Member of Parliament at Westminster and spoke for the Irish cause. Father Staunton introduced Stephen to Rafferty, an old Fenian who lived alone on a small island. Although Rafferty told stories of bygone Ireland, he avoided talking about his fight as a Fenian and showed no interest in Stephen's political activity as a Home Ruler. Stephen was made to realize that he did as little as other Irish Nationalist Members did to be useful for Ireland. Then he turned to the extreme left wing of the Nationalist Party.

In the meantime, the West of Ireland was on the brink of the Land War. The tenants of Lord Daintree's estate paid their rents with difficulty, while most of those on another landlord Snell's estate were unable to pay theirs due to the rise of the rents. Paddy Heverin, a publican and moneylender in the village of Cuslough, organized a Land League meeting, in which Father Staunton's curate, Father O'Sullivan, proposed to boycott Snell and his

family.

As Father Staunton watched the development of the Land League and their methods of agrarian agitation, he harbored hostility toward them. John Manders, the agent of Lord Daintree's estate and Snell's estate as well as Stephen's, was shot and wounded. Father Staunton refused to give Father O'Sullivan his permission to hold a Land League meeting. He also warned people in his parish against joining the Land League. People booed and shouted at Father Staunton on his way home after seeing Manders. Consequently he became ill and Father O'Sullivan took charge of the parish.

When Stephen, back from Westminster, visited Manders to ask about the problems the Land League caused, Paddy Heverin and Sheridan, son of the evicted tenant, came to meet Manders and tried to present the League's demands. But Manders, threatening them with an empty pistol, replied that he would never listen to what the League as a body had to say. Then young Sheridan, referring to what wonderful things Stephen's father had done to help the people during the Great Famine, appealed frantically to Stephen for justice:

"I'm not begging from you, nor it's not asking mercy or pity I am. But I'm telling you this so that whatever comes you may know what the people that once were your own people and would have died for you or yours—that you may know the things they are suffering now. You're are angry to-day—yes, there's anger in your heart, don't I know it? Can't I see it? But it's justice we're asking, only justice and no more..."¹⁴⁾

Stephen fell into a great conflict regarding the justice the landlords claimed and that the

Land Leaguers claimed. He struggled to reconcile both of them. However, he was resented by both of them and encountered the tragedy at last.

Conclusion: Events Birmingham Underwent during the 1890s and the 1900s as the Foundation for His Significant Comic Novels in Later Years

Following his wife's advice, Birmingham decided to drop the idea of novel-writing in the late 1890s and to devote himself to his vocation of a clergyman. In 1901 and 1902, Birmingham was invited as a Donnellan Lecturer by Trinity College, Dublin, and preached at the university's chapel. His lectures were published in two books, *The Spirit and Origin of Christian Monasticism* (1903) and *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1904).

In the meantime, saddening events befell on Birmingham in succession in the 1890s and the 1900s. His father, Robert Hannay, who was the Vicar of Belfast, died in May, 1894. Frederick Richard Wynne, his father-in-law and the Bishop of Killaloe and Clonfert, died a tragic death in November, 1896. The bishop's wife got ill and had an operation in October. As her physical condition became worse on the evening of November 2nd, the bishop went to summon the doctor early on the morning of the next day. On his way back from the doctor's house, the bishop died suddenly and his wife also died a few hours later.¹⁵⁾ Birmingham's younger brother, Robert Saurin Hannay joined the British Army and fought for the Boer War. He was killed in a traffic accident in Cape Town in late May, 1902, when the war was over.¹⁶⁾

In the 1900s, Birmingham himself got involved in a number of dismaying events. He founded the Westport Literary Society in 1902

and held meetings regularly, in which each member talked about the book which they chose and discussed it with other members. In a meeting in February, 1903, Birmingham's wife, Ada, picked up the topic of the Young Ireland Movement and talked with admiration about poetry written by the leaders such as Thomas Davis and Clarence Mangan. According to Birmingham's memory recorded in *Pleasant Places*, a Nationalist man present at the meeting vehemently praised Ada's talk, which generated uneasiness and discomfort among other members because most of them were Anglo-Irish Protestants. Birmingham recited some of Young Irelanders' poems, expecting that their musical beauty would soothe the savage mood. However, his recitation produced counter effects, and his friends and parishioners came to distrust him.¹⁷⁾

This event made Birmingham and his wife more interested in Irish history and more inclined to Nationalism.¹⁸⁾ He sympathized with the Gaelic League and wrote numbers of articles to defend their movements against Protestants' accusations in *The Church of Ireland Gazette* and other periodicals. As the League's founder, Douglas Hyde, was moved by Birmingham's support of them, he pleaded with Birmingham to run for the election for their governing body. Birmingham became a member of it in late 1904. But the publications of *The Seething Pot* (1905) and *Hyacinth* (1906) caused a great uproar among the Gaelic Leaguers, because they suspected that Birmingham adopted real persons for the models of characters and criticized the Catholic Church. As Birmingham could not endure some members' harsh accusations, he decided to withdraw from the governing body of the League.

In 1907, Birmingham published two novels, *Benedict Kavanagh* and *The Northern Iron*.

The former portrays a young man who was the son of an ardent Nationalist but brought up as a Unionist by his father's friend and struggled to find what would be best for Ireland. The latter depicts Presbyterians in County Antrim fighting for the freedom of Ireland in the 1798 Rebellion and their defeat. The next year, Birmingham published another two novels; *The Bad Times* and *Spanish Gold*. The former looks most pessimistic among Birmingham's novels, while the latter marks his new start as a comic novelist.

The 1890s and the 1900s were very eventful and uproarious for Birmingham. It seems that both decades built the foundation for Birmingham's comic novels in later years. They are not only amusing but have significant connotations because they are the outcome of varied experiences Birmingham had as a devoted Christian clergyman in the most turbulent times of Irish history. The present writer aims to investigate more closely how those experiences served to develop Birmingham's sense of humor, as well as how they made him write such dark and pessimistic works as "Driven: A Story of Strade Moor" and *The Bad Times*.

Notes

- 1) "BIRMINGHAM, George A. (pseudonym of Canon James Owen Hannay) (1865–1950)", *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, edited by Robert Welch (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1996), pp. 47–48.
- 2) George A. Birmingham, *Pleasant Places* (London: William Heinemann, 1934), pp. 75–76.
- 3) *Temple Bar* was a literary periodical of the mid and late 19th and very early 20th centuries (1860–1906). The complete title was *Temple Bar: A London Magazine for Town and Country Readers*. (*Wikipedia*, accessed on November 2, 2020)
- 4) "Letter from the Office of Temple Bar to J.O. Hannay", December 7, 1891, Trinity College Dublin Manuscripts 3454–7. (Referred to as TCD MSS hereafter)
- 5) C.H. Rolleston, *Portrait of an Irishman: A Biographical Sketch of T.W. Rolleston* (London: Methuen, 1939), p. 37.
- 6) "Driven: A Story of Strade Moor", *Temple Bar*, No. 395, October 1893, p. 237. I discovered this story in the library of the University of Texas at Austin in August, 2013.
- 7) *Pleasant Places*, p. 63.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 9) "Letter from T. Fisher Urwin to Hannay", November 23, 1893, TCD MSS 3454–9.
- 10) "Letter from the Office of *Temple Bar* to Hannay", January 8, 1894, TCD MSS 3454–10.
- 11) George A. Birmingham, *The Bad Times* (1908; rpt., London: Methuen, 1919), p. 16.
- 12) *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- 14) *Ibid.*, p. 190.
- 15) "Obituary of Frederick Richard Wynne", *Mayo News*, December 1896, TCD MSS 3430–10.
- 16) "Letter from Percy F. Capel-Hogg to Hannay", June 9, 1902, TCD MSS 3454–65.
- 17) *Pleasant Places*, pp. 179–182. The *Mayo News* on February 14, 1903, also gave a report of the society's meeting in which Birmingham's wife read a paper, "The Young Ireland Movement". The Nationalist man present at the meeting is supposed to be a Nationalist politician, William O'Brien (1852–1928).
- 18) *Ibid.*, pp. 182–183. The *Mayo News* on January 14, 1905, also gave a report of Birmingham and his wife studying Irish history with the headline, "A Protestant Minister among the Gaels".