James Cousins (1873–1956):
Rumours of the Infinite

DAVID BURLEIGH

INTRODUCTION

James H. Cousins¹ is perhaps best remembered for the role he played in the formation of the early Irish theatre. His name appears quite regularly in historical accounts,² and some of his own dramatic work survives. Yet, although he wrote prolifically in both verse and prose, Cousins thought of himself as primarily a poet.³ In a late poem addressed ‘To Ireland’, he acknowledges the beginning of his spiritual odyssey there:

I loved your paths for on them dawned
The vision of the Hidden Way

But the trajectory of Cousins’ life had by that time already carried him much further:

You were to me the door of life,
But life grew larger than its door.⁴
From India, which became his base after leaving Ireland, the poet also visited America, Europe and Japan for extended periods. It is his little known, but nonetheless well-documented, visit to Japan which is considered in this portrait.

James H. Cousins was born in Belfast on 22 July 1873, the first child of four in a Methodist family. Though his formal education ended early, his considerable gift for self-education enabled him to secure a teaching post. He also served for a time as secretary to the Mayor of Belfast, and his first volume of poems was published there, by subscription, at the age of twenty-one. The conventional mould of his early verses, shaped according to a Wesleyan upbringing and the Unionist sympathies of those around him, was broken when he joined the Gaelic League. It was then that he began to learn about Celtic mythology, and to incorporate this into his religious outlook. When he moved to Dublin and met ‘AE’ (George Russell), his personal philosophy expanded to take in Theosophical beliefs. Unlike W.B. Yeats and AE, whose interest had preceded his, Cousins formally espoused the tenets of the Theosophical Society. He also became a vegetarian. The beliefs that he thus acquired had a profound effect on everything that he subsequently wrote, and did.

 Probably the most significant contribution that Cousins made to the Irish literary revival was to introduce the actor-brothers, Willie and Frank Fay, to AE, who had a play ready to perform. This led to the formation of a drama group, out of which the Abbey Theatre later grew. Cousins wrote several plays and was successful for a time. But when Yeats, who became the dominating force, complained of ‘too much Cousins’, the budding playwright was ‘snuffed out.’ Some of Cousin’s plays, dealing as they mostly did with Celtic legends, were composed in verse. At the same time he continued to publish collections of his poetry, while supporting himself with clerical and teaching jobs.

When, in 1903, Cousins married Margaret E. Gillespie (1878–1954), a young woman from Roscommon, his new wife joined him in vegetarianism. She later became a member of the Theosophical Society as well. Their successful and long-lasting marriage also united them in a strong belief in the equality of the sexes. Margaret Cousins had formal training as a music teacher, and occasionally gave piano lessons. She was also something of an activist, and was imprisoned twice in the fight for women’s suffrage. A contemporary diarist remarks that, at the Cousins’ house, ‘you [were] always sure to meet some interesting people.’ Among these people was the youthful James Joyce, to whom the couple were helpful, although Joyce was derisory about the poet’s verse. When James Cousins became bankrupt from unwise investment at the age of forty, he and his