

A Bookworm

WORMING THROUGH OLD BOOKS

By a Bookworm

No Easy Urn for Lafcadio Hearn

It is in the nature of the bookworm to gnaw about in older texts in hopes of coming upon a means to better understand the present. After Hurricane Katrina, with its havoc and death spurred on by indifference and incompetence, with its near uprooting of the most intricately formed of American cities, I wanted to read of how nature and the Louisiana coast had battled in the past, with what losses exacted, what upheavals settling in to become the customs of the survivors.

This led me to the novel *Chita: A Memory of Last Island* by Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), an author whose place in the world was as tenuous during his own lifetime as has been his literary reputation since his death. For Hearn is neither an entirely forgotten nor a well-remembered writer. Perhaps this is because he is – taken as a whole – an uncategorizable writer, or rather one whose categories seem so mutually incongruous as to repulse those inclined to neatness in their labeling of books and their authors. For Lafcadio Hearn can be regarded as a pioneering, real-crime journalist (for Cincinnati and New Orleans newspapers), translator (notably of the French short-story master, Guy de Maupassant), folklorist, ghost-story auteur, travel writer, cultural interpreter of Japan, and essayist-at-large on the waywardly heterogenous forms of the spirit.

It is not even clear that Hearn should be deemed an American writer, though that is how he is commonly classified. If there is confusion on this score, it is largely the result of Hearn's determination to find his own way quite apart from the values of the Eurocentric culture in which he was raised and from which he spent much of his life seeking to escape. He was born Patrick Lafcadio Hearn. His father was an Irish surgeon major of the British army stationed on the Greek island of Santa Maura, of which his mother was a native. Shortly after his birth, his father was ordered to the West Indies and vanished from his son's life, though it is largely due to this father that the Irish now claim Hearn as one of their own. At the age of two, his mother took Lafcadio to Dublin; two years later, she too exited from his life, leaving him in the care of his paternal great-aunt, a strict Roman Catholic whom he came to detest. Lafcadio was educated at Catholic schools in France and England. During this period he lost the sight of his left eye in a playing-field accident. The blinded eye whitened while the surviving right eye bulged from the added strain, leaving the short and slight Hearn self-aware and vulnerable.

At age eighteen, his family paid Lafcadio's passage to America, where he was expected to make his own way. In his early twenties, he found steady employment with Cincinnati newspapers who published his evocative features on crime scenes, mysterious accidents, and local legends of the supernatural. Hearn was not inclined to take sides or offer explanations, but rather to portray as vividly as possible particularities of mood and setting without veering away from the graphic and disturbing. While Hearn later came to view his journalism of the 1870s as youthful excess, a writer seldom forgets the lessons of his successes, and Hearn surely realized at this point that he possessed the gift of envisioning for readers the boundary lands of their consciousness.

Hearn's career in Cincinnati came to an end because of his open preference for spending his time in the black districts of the waterfront and his ultimate marriage to a black woman from that district. In 1877, Hearn departed for New Orleans, where his marriage came to an end, although he flourished professionally, earning prominence as a columnist whose knowledge of the French Quarter and the Creole patois exceeded that of most lifelong residents of the city. Hearn possessed a genius for rapidly absorbing that which he adored, and his pieces on New Orleans life are part of its essential literary record. It was in 1889 that Hearn published *Chita*, the novel to which we shall shortly address our attention.

But let us first flash forward briefly to the period of his life for which, justly, Hearn is best remembered. In 1890, on the basis of a freelance contract to write features on Japanese life for *Harper's Magazine*, Hearn voyaged to Japan and shortly thereafter decided that here was the land and culture of his heart. He married a Japanese woman of a samurai family, Setsuko Koizumi, and became a Japanese citizen in 1896, taking the name Koizumi Yakumo by which he became known to Japanese readers when his numerous works on his adopted land – the most famous is *Kwaidan* (elaborate and lyrical retellings of ghost tales and eerie legends of old Japan) – were at last translated into Japanese in the 1930s. But even prior to his death in 1904, Hearn had earned fame in America and Europe as the purveyor of exotic Japan par excellence. That has led to modern-day critics accusing Hearn of appropriating and romanticizing a Japan suited to the jaundiced tastes of the racist West. The problem is that the Japanese are also very fond of Hearn. As the Japanese historian Yuzo Ota recently observed, "Hearn's interpretations fit into preconceived ideas on the part of many of the Western readers as

reflected in phrases such as ‘inscrutable Orientals’ and ‘the mysterious East’ and thus was and is easily digestible. It also fits into the deep-rooted assumption on the part of many of the Japanese readers that Japanese culture is so unique that only the Japanese can understand it properly. His writings flatter their desire to be thought to be unique and different from the world.”

So Hearn the writer on Japanese culture is and is not a reliable source because he writes beautifully and continues to be read for pleasure and is codified as a white writer who somehow flatters the racial preconceptions of both whites and Japanese, while never quite seeing himself as either.

Which brings us back to *Chita: A Memory of Last Island*, a novel in which Hearn – who could not invent plots but could bring legends to richer written life than they had ever known – adapted a Louisiana tale that had emerged after a dreadful hurricane struck on August 10, 1856, destroying the posh Creole resort on Last Island, south of New Orleans. According to the tale, a wealthy young Creole mother drowned while holding her infant girl aloft. The infant was saved and then raised by a poor couple who years before had lost their own young daughter.

From this framework, Hearn created a short impressionistic novel that focuses only indirectly on the surviving girl Chita and her rescuers and the biological father who comes by chance years later to encounter her. The true subjects of the narrative – they alone occupy the opening chapters – are the intricate marshes and islands of the Louisiana coast and the subtle shifts of weather that precede the cataclysm. How the fates of Chita and her foster parents and her solitary father are resolved is best kept from those who have not yet read the book. But this brief excerpt from the account of the

hurricane's landfall exemplifies Hearn the minor master of late nineteenth-century American fiction – another category into which he will not quite go – whose words yet serve us now:

Then rose a frightful cry, – the hoarse, hideous, indescribable cry of hopeless fear,
– the despairing animal-cry man utters when suddenly brought face to face with
Nothingness, without preparation, without consolation, without possibility of
respite.