

【報告】

**An American in Japan:
Thoughts about the 150th Anniversary of Lafcadio Hearn's Arrival in Cincinnati**

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This past summer I had the opportunity to teach an intensive course focusing on the American writings of Lafcadio Hearn at Kumamoto University. Embarrassingly, it was in my preparation for this course when I realized it would soon be the 150th anniversary of his arrival. As a graduate student I spent several years preparing a doctoral dissertation on Hearn and Cincinnati with rediscovered materials from Cincinnati newspapers. I hoped to provide students with an overview of Hearn that not only focused on his life and work but also had relevancy today. These students inspired me as they really showed a significant interest in the trials and tribulations of his time in Cincinnati such as his relationship and forbidden marriage to an African American. I am American and I first became aware of Hearn as an undergraduate. Much like students at Kumamoto I was not aware of most aspects of his life in the United States. It was my continued research into his writings and letters in Japan that led to an awakening of my own interest in his American journey. Obviously, students are young and impressionable and this course at Kumamoto made me realize how inspiring his letters and writings can be to those with a strong interest in intercultural encounters and experiences. A look back at his perspectives of the America of his day can be surprising, shocking, and quite relevant.

As a reporter for *The Cincinnati Enquirer* and *The Cincinnati Commercial*, Lafcadio Hearn wrote important commentary on the social ills that victimized minorities. Of course as any journalist, a primary motivation was to help increase the circulation of the paper. However, according to, Bill Spears from the *Cincinnati Enquirer*,

One day in 1874, Hearn arrived at *The Enquirer* to be told that he was dismissed for 'deplorable moral habits.' Politicians and civic leaders unsettled by Hearn's articles had threatened the newspaper with a scandal over his alliance with Mattie, and under pressure from John R. McLean, Cockerill gave in and fired his star reporter. (Spears 65)

This was the turbulent period after the American Civil War when former slaves were freed but marginalized and discriminated by unjust social norms. According to Nikki M. Taylor of Howard University, author of *Frontiers in Freedom – Cincinnati's Black Community 1802-1868*,

“Much of what is known about Cincinnati’s black shadow community in the past – Civil War era comes from journalist and ethnographer Lafcadio Hearn” (Taylor 187). Hearn had a special relationship with the black community because his “love relationship with mulatto Aletha Foley” gave him insider status. A modern day evaluation of Hearn’s approach can be viewed with traces of racist sentiments. However, Taylor commends Hearn for going beyond the boundaries of the racist society of his day. While Hearn would work around and within the sentiments of his day, one important point is that he married Foley who worked at his boarding house in Cincinnati. This was illegal and he knowingly put his career in jeopardy. When the Civil Rights Debate was raging during the forty-third congress in 1874. A front-page article in the Cincinnati Enquirer on January 7, 1874 clearly exemplifies the sentiments of Hearn’s days as a young reporter. This article reads:

The proceedings of the House today were marked by an extraordinary scene, which would disgrace this country if Congress could disgrace anybody. The Radicals had fixed up a job to put up a Massachusetts negro, named Elliot, now hailing from South Carolina to deliver a speech full . . . Their grand idea was to try to make it appear that a negro could be the peer of a white man in debate. (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 7, 1874)

On March 1, 1875, Congress approved the Civil Rights Act, guaranteeing equal rights to African Americans in public accommodations and jury duty. After the passage of this bill in 1875, fifty-three African Americans were known to have been lynched. The following two years more than 125 black Americans were lynched by mobs. On the very same page of Hearn’s *A Curious Orientalism* is an article entitled, *Negro’s in Public Schools*, which details the state fighting the admittance of African American children into public schools. The overall sentiments of the general public can be clearly seen in its conclusion.

There is nothing more ruinous to the common schools than to attempt to educate the two races together, and the laws of Ohio to educate them apart should be faithfully executed for the interest of the two races. (*The Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 2, 1873)

On May 29, 1874 another headline reads, “TROUBLE AHEAD. What the Civil rights Bill Portents.” Racial strife is an element of everyday life. This article reacts to the soon to be enacted legislation.

The enactment of this Civil Rights bill portends the gravest consequences in the way of engendering bad blood, and inciting a clash of races. It is very well for staid Northern statesmen viewing the Southern situation from afar, to talk in glittering

generalities of equal rights and social equality; but that does not remove the inborn and natural feeling of race isolation a social sense, which is universal among whites of the South, and which no arbitrary legislation can ever remove. (*The Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 29, 1874.)

There were cases of reported violence throughout the South of African Americans being shot dead for insisting on their rights to enter restaurants, saloons, or hotels. Hearn was caught up in the whirlwind of Southern whites trying to keep their supremacy but yet he continued to follow his own instincts. He writes in 1873 that civil liberties and religious freedom are the founding ideals of the American Democracy. He was vigorous and idealistic and sought out subject matter avoided by most journalists such as the life of the poor, murders, racial tensions, and of course, ghosts. His big break was his vivid and outright grotesque reportage of the Tanyard Murder. Hearn broke all decorum of newspaper reporting by putting his reportage of a “Violent Cremation” on the front page with illustrations of the killers and the mutilated remains.

It is, however, this period that is important as Hearn could indulgently explore the underbelly of society and expose “social evils.” He reports on minority groups, the deplorable conditions of factory workers and social outcasts. In his *A Case of Lunacy* of July 1876, interestingly just at the centennial of the founding of America’s democracy, he writes about the delusions of a drunken mulatto man. Nicholas O’Neil dreams of a place “wherein strangers from the four quarters of the earth might be quartered free of charge, and Civil Rights should be respected”(*Cincinnati Commercial*, July 18, 1876). At this time, though, only a lunatic might imagine such a preposterous vision or at least Hearn had to play to the sentiment of the society in order to keep his employment. Again his marriage with Mattie is not only illegal, but also a social taboo.

Once Hearn settles in New Orleans, he writes Watkin about his newfound success. Yet, his past in Cincinnati still hovers like a dark cloud. He writes to Watkin “I have succeeded in getting acquainted & being introduced into the best society. I see my way clear to a position here, - but then I feel sure some one will tell that story on me, sooner or later. Then I will have to go away”(Kuwabara). Amazingly, Hearn was nervous but yet became close friends with George Washington Cable who angered most white southerners with his articles on the plight of African Americans and his advocacy for granting freed slaves equal rights. He shares a story with one of his former colleagues in Cincinnati about a group of fugitives from the South, white and black, heading for the North. The steamer is carrying cotton that bursts into flame and the captain and other white passengers are the first to abandon ship. The mulatto man dies a hero

while the white passengers escape in cowardice with little remorse for the loss of those left aboard.

He becomes an accomplished journalist in New Orleans and as editor for the *Item* in 1881 he writes to the readership that denunciations of religion, free thought, and “attacks upon sects of races” are all “equally condemned” and ignored. He declares that,

whatever an editor may be in his private life, in his sanctum he has no specific religious ideas, no freethinking aggressiveness, no sectarian prejudices, no humanitarian theories, no vegetarian or carnivorous proclivities, no political preferences. (*The Item*, May 1881)

In 1894 he would reminisce to Basil Hall Chamberlain of his idealistic, yet impossible rebellion telling him that he thought he could overturn the universe. His choice to ignore the social norms of his day is often used as an explanation for a lifestyle of which others could not approve. Elizabeth Bisland suggests that Hearn was “sick, unhappy and unpopular” with the root cause being the resentment of his co-workers resulting from his marriage to Foley that she labeled as a “pathetic, high minded piece of quixotism” (Bisland, *The Japanese Letters* Preface).

In Japan, as the editor of the Kobe Chronicle, Hearn could tackle issues that had bothered him since his days in Cincinnati. In an editorial of October 20, 1894 he establishes his unique perspective to readers that “by long residence in the Southern States of America” he was “familiar with the abnormal social conditions there existing [. . .] He continues that “Rarely can one open an American newspaper without reading of lynchings and killings of negroes; [. and .] It would be impossible to contradict that conditions in certain parts of the South are not the conditions of civilization” (*Kobe Chronicle*, October 20, 1894). The impact of his experiences in Cincinnati can be clearly seen in a number of articles for the Kobe Chronicle.

As a young reporter he criticized the use of military force to bring Christianity to other cultures. His feelings in this regard would strengthen in Japan. On August 16, 1895 Hearn criticizes the actions of missionaries for their collisions with Chinese culture. In an editorial of October 4, 1885 entitled *The Latest Word on International Morality*, he laments over the continual use of violence in relentless wars. At the conclusion of this essay, Hearn attacks “Jingoism” or the excessive nationalism that results in the belief of one nation’s complete superiority over all others. Then, Hearn probably makes one of the most profound statements of his career.

Certainly it is clear that it is the growth of intellectuality that we must look to for the elimination of race hatreds and the spread of a sane cosmopolitanism. Race hatred

itself is based on a sort of perverted emotionalism and sentimentalism, which will disappear only with the substitution of ideals that look to the extension of the limits of law and order from communal to international relations. (*The Kobe Chronicle*, October 4, 1895)

Hearn's strong opinions in these commentaries did not sit well with some readers. However, he stood his ground for the rest of his time in Japan even though he came to feel a sense of alienation from the foreign community.

The late nineteenth century was a time when modern civilization encroached and Hearn, a young Irish immigrant, found himself in a cruel, modern world but his empathy with to those on the fringes of society became a guiding light in the muck of the unforgiving, racial sentiments of his time. He would gain a respect for other cultures that led him to Japan. Sadly many things that he took notice of have not disappeared as we still tackle many of the same social ills. I was proud that students in my class at Kumamoto were keen to quickly pick up on issues such as interracial marriage and racial discrimination that mirror the continuation of the same social prejudices and biases in our daily lives. In a letter of advice to his former student in 1894 Hearn writes about his time in Cincinnati,

When I was a young man in my twenties, I had an experience very like yours. I resolved to take the part of some people who were much disliked in the place where I lived. I thought that those who disliked them were morally wrong, -- so I argued boldly for them and went over to their side. Then all the rest of the people stopped speaking to me, and I hated them for it. But I was too young then to understand. There were other moral questions, much larger than those I had been arguing about, which really caused the whole trouble. The people did not know how to express them very well; they only *felt* them. After some years I discovered that I was quite mistaken -- that I was under a delusion. I had been opposing a great national and social principle without knowing it. And if my best friends had not got angry with me, I could not have learned the truth so well, -- because there are many things that are hard to explain and can only be taught by experience. . . . Ever very affectionately,
Your old teacher, LAFCADIO HEARN. (*Life and Letters* 64-65)

Honestly, I am deeply saddened by this letter, as Hearn seems to be telling his student nothing can be done and in this respect I disagree with him. I think his works can be a vehicle to inspire students to go beyond these conventional perceptions.

One would think we could do better after 150 years. For instance, as an American in Japan the

Japanese sense of “Uchi and Soto” is something that holds back the advancement of intercultural cooperation and understanding in Japan. Sometimes I want to exclaim “Why Japanese people?” We always hear about the declining birthrate in Japan but we rarely hear about the declining numbers of students studying abroad. When talking with high school students about the 2020 Olympics I am honestly ashamed to hear them repeat the claim that too many foreign visitors will result in too much garbage and ill manners. Again I want to exclaim, “Why Japanese people?!” Obviously this idea comes from the mainstream media and I do not blame only Japanese media outlets for spreading bias and prejudices. Recently we see stereotypical and prejudicial portrayals by fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana in advertising. About a year ago I was in complete shock with the social media driven riot by white nationalists at the University of Virginia. I was there only a few weeks afterward to do research. Then we have the never-ending talk of a wall to immigration in current American politics. As educators we have a responsibility to go beyond the proliferation of stereotypes and prejudices in our interactions with students and I think Lafcadio Hearn in the classroom can be an inspiring and important tool to become aware of how far we have come and how much further we need to go.

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