Lafcadio Hearn as an American Writer

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Hearn’s literary fame has arisen because he is the author of lastingly significant books on Japan; but it is best to remember him as an important writer at every stage of his career. Works from all periods have distinct merits. Hearn, to his great credit, has a foot in half-a-dozen cultures in as many lands. In nationality Hearn was overall of no country unreservedly but, at his best, he appeals to citizens of all countries. When I claim Hearn as essentially an American writer I realize that I make a controversial claim and that I may well be accused of the same narrowness of vision that I find objectionable in others. But although virtually unacknowledged by the American literary establishment and currently bypassed by it, Hearn is an American writer all the same, an American writer in roughly the same way and degree that Isaac Bashevis Singer, Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky are American writers. Perhaps more so, for he began with English as his native tongue. And let us not forget that Hearn spent his formative years from nineteen to nearly forty in the United States, that he wrote voluminously and graphically about American subjects, and that the prose style he developed in America is in all essentials an American English. His literary persona – ‘we’ – is American and at every stage of his career he wrote for an American market and readership. All
his books, even those written in Japan, were published in America, and most of his journalism was destined for American newspapers and magazines. At the end of his life he was thinking of leaving Japan to return to America.

Hearn has never fully become part of the American literary tradition, however. No current anthology of American literature that I know of includes writings by him. He is not taught in college and university courses in American literature or American studies. Fifty years ago, when I was a student haunting Manhattan’s then numerous secondhand bookshops, I would often come across volumes by Hearn, most of them published before the war. They were not expensive, but no one seemed interested in them or in Hearn. Why is that, I wondered? So much by and on Hearn appeared in Japan as well as America before the Second World War – what in Japan is called the Pacific War – that Hearn must once have aroused considerable interest in both countries. But the war changed that, and Hearn at least in America became hardly more than a name, a name often forgotten or hardly known.

The situation has not changed greatly since when I was a student. Occasionally, books about Hearn appear in America – biographies, bibliographies, collections of his Cincinnati or New Orleans writings (sometimes confusingly mixing together essays about both cities), paperback reprints of his Japanese books. Many of these volumes have limited scholarly use. Hearn often wrote about the odd and the eccentric, and sometimes, it seems, in America at least, only the odd and the eccentric wrote (and write) about him. Copies of Hearn’s books, including the pre-war collections of his writings, are now readily available through the Internet and we may hope the puzzling and elusive writer of my student days will find new readers.

Why is there now so little interest in Hearn in the United States? There are many reasons for this. First of all, Hearn is seen as not quite American. He was born in Greece, spent his early youth in Ireland, was educated in England, and lived his last fourteen years in Japan. Second, during his twenty-one years in America he wrote mostly for local newspapers and, after a while, for national magazines. Journalistic writing, with rare exceptions, dates as quickly as the paper it is written on. What is not reprinted in books tends to fade away in public memory, and little of Hearn’s American journalism was reprinted in books during his lifetime. Though much of this journalism remains as fresh as when first written, there remains a