



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 8, Issue 1

Autumn 2025

Lafcadio Hearn and His American Biographers

Paul Murray

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 21 September 2025

Date of Publication: 31 October 2025

Citation: Paul Murray, 'Review: Lafcadio Hearn and His American Biographers', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 8.1 (2025), 108-24.

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Lafcadio Hearn and His American Biographers

Paul Murray

Independent Scholar

American biographies bookend – and dominate – the voluminous range of writings about Lafcadio Hearn published since his death in 1904, extending from Elizabeth Bisland’s important foundational study, *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn* (1906) to more recent treatments such as Steve Kemme’s *The Outsider: The Life and Work of Lafcadio Hearn* (2023). Examining this long tradition now allows us to bring into sharper focus the significance of two major preoccupations in Hearn’s reception – national identity and race – and to critically evaluate the ways in which American biographers have framed the distinctiveness of Hearn’s life and achievement in their work.¹

Summary of Biographies

A hard spine of Hearn biography was provided by three American female biographers over a period of approximately sixty years. The first of these, *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, published just two years after his death in 1904, by his good friend and former journalistic colleague, Elizabeth Bisland, was not a fleshed-out biography but consisted mostly of a mass of Hearn’s letters, whose publication provided a primary material resource that remains of value to researchers.² She would follow up in a similar vein with *The Japanese Letters of Lafcadio Hearn* (1910).³

Vera Seeley McWilliams published *Lafcadio Hearn*, the first full-length, dedicated biography by an American author, in 1946.⁴ Also titled *Lafcadio Hearn*, Elizabeth Stevenson’s well-regarded biography was published in 1961.⁵ Even *Concerning Lafcadio Hearn* (1908) by George M. Gould – a bizarre attempt to destroy Hearn’s reputation by a former friend – pays a certain tribute to him by including an eighty-page bibliography of Hearn’s work, compiled by Laura Stedman, Gould’s future wife.⁶ Perhaps more than any other biographical volume, Gould’s illustrated the

complexities and ambiguities inherent in the relationships of Hearn's American biographers with their subject.

Edward Larocque Tinker's *Lafcadio Hearn's American Days* (1924) was, as its title implies, concerned solely with its subject's years in the United States.⁷ A massive Hearn bibliography compiled by P. D. and Ione Perkins appeared in 1934.⁸ Interspersed between McWilliams and Stevenson came O. W. Frost's *Young Hearn* in 1958, a study of Hearn's life prior to his departure for Japan in 1890, a relatively short book at just over two hundred pages and without a bibliography.⁹ Alfred E. Kunst's *Lafcadio Hearn* (1969) was even shorter, at one hundred and twenty-seven pages of text, but with endnotes and a bibliography; it was essentially a study of Hearn's writings rather than his life.¹⁰ Kunst therefore starts with Hearn in Cincinnati, leaving out the first nineteen years of his subject's life. His chapters are brief surveys of Hearn's output with minimal biographical fact and little regard for the overall context of his life.¹¹

Subsequent American biographers and commentators include Jonathan Cott, whose *Wandering Ghost* (1993) contains extensive quotations from Hearn's work with linking narrative; Carl Dawson, whose volume is largely a critical study of Hearn's writings on Japan appended to a biographical sketch of his life up to 1890; and, more recently, Steve Kemme, and his full-length *The Outsider: The Life and Work of Lafcadio Hearn* (2023).¹² Linda Lindholm's massive (635 pages) *Lafcadio: A Writer's Journey* (2023), was followed a year later by a second biography, *Lafcadio's Legacy*.¹³ As each of Lindholm's books lacks an index, a bibliography, references, and any evidence of primary material research or original analysis of Hearn's life or literary output, it is not proposed to examine them further in this essay. Similarly, the books of Frost, Kunst, Cott and Dawson, not being full-length biographies, are also not considered in detail.

Biographical Battlelines

To understand the evolution of this impressive body of biographical work, it is necessary to go back to the beginning, to the immediate aftermath of Hearn's death, when the battlelines were

already being drawn up between opposing factions in the United States regarding the merits or demerits of his legacy. In the year following his death the critic Paul Elmer More included a chapter on Hearn in his *Shelburne Essays* (1905).¹⁴ While generally positive about Hearn's literary achievement – he sees Hearn employing 'the power of suggestion through perfect restraint' – More's primary focus was on his engagement with Buddhism.¹⁵ Although sceptical of Hearn's attempt to reconcile Buddhism with modern science, More nevertheless pointed the way towards an evaluation of a major element of Hearn's Japanese achievement, and one that was subsequently neglected by many of his later American biographers.

A different perspective was provided in a magazine article of August 1908, in which Edward Clark Marsh declared that 'Hearn was not a figure of the first importance' and was likely to be so regarded by posterity. He did allow, however, that Hearn's translations were 'almost without a peer in our latter-day literature' and his Japanese work was valuable as 'interpretations of Japanese thought'.¹⁶ Even if unimpressed by Hearn's work, Marsh's piece underlines the extent to which his biography had already taken off in America, citing as he does no fewer than three full-length volumes of related material that had been published in a two-year period from 1906 to 1908: Elizabeth Bisland's *Life and Letters*; Milton Bronner's *Letters from the Raven* (a 1907 edition of Hearn's letters to Henry Watkin, his original Cincinnati benefactor); and Gould's fiercely denunciatory *Concerning Lafcadio Hearn*, the inspiration for Marsh's article.¹⁷

Marsh is critical of Hearn's personal life, claiming that he 'failed of the biggest things [...] because of a fundamental defect of character'. This sprang, he suggests, from a rejection of conventional morality, resulting in a 'morbid delight in scenes and experiences that could only disgust a more normally constituted person'. Alleging that he had spent his time in Cincinnati and New Orleans as an 'outcast [...] among the negroes',¹⁸ Marsh alludes to Hearn's discomfort with American bourgeois culture and raises an issue that would pose – and continues to pose – problems for American biographers: his marriage in June 1874 in Cincinnati to Alethea 'Mattie' Foley, a mixed-raced woman who was formerly enslaved.

In these early years, there was a sharp conflict between two biographers who had known Hearn personally, Bisland and Gould. Bisland formed a close friendship with Hearn when they both worked for the New Orleans *Times-Democrat*. He had a wary appreciation of her beauty but, despite Carl Dawson's claim that Hearn idolized Bisland, it is clear that his feelings towards her were complex and conflicted.¹⁹ He dedicated *A Japanese Miscellany* (1901) to her.²⁰ After Hearn's death, his good friend and executor of his estate, the American naval officer, Mitchell McDonald, agreed that Bisland could write Hearn's official biography. As Stefano Evangelista has observed, she subsequently played 'a very active role in curating Hearn's legacy after his death'.²¹ Marsh's dismissal of Bisland's biography as 'little more than a sketch' was not entirely inaccurate, occupying as it did a mere one hundred and fifty-nine of the thousand pages comprising her two-volume work, the remainder comprising Hearn's letters.²² In addition, much of the biographical text was taken up with quotation and, even then, contained many omissions and inaccuracies.

Bisland found that former friends of Hearn, such as Joseph Tunison and Henry Krehbiel, were urging her to reveal his more seamy side.²³ Krehbiel was disappointed that Bisland failed to be shocked by his story of Hearn frequenting a brothel, dismissing it on the grounds that it merely proved that his interest in African American women was purely aesthetic.²⁴ While Bisland acted honourably in donating the profits from her book to Hearn's Japanese family, she was unscrupulous in editing his letters without making it clear that she was doing so.²⁵

The news of Hearn's marriage to Mattie Foley ultimately became widely known not because of any revelation by his biographers but rather by the actions of Foley herself. Thinking that she could claim substantial royalties from Hearn's estate on the grounds that she had never been divorced from him, she launched a legal action against his estate in 1906. The action failed as the court ruled that her marriage had been invalid due to the prohibition of interracial marriage under anti-miscegenation laws in place in Ohio from 1861. After the story had been publicized in the media including the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, ironically the newspaper that had fired Hearn for marrying Foley, a slew of sensational media coverage followed, most notoriously in the *New York*

Sun of 27 July 1906.²⁶ While further attacks on Hearn would follow, notably Gould's 1908 *Concerning Lafcadio Hearn*, the virulence of the rage directed against his transgression of the American racial norms of the era reflected not just its importance to his posthumous reputation but also represented a turning point in Hearn's life not properly reflected in American biography.²⁷ The coverage of Foley's claim by major national newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, are indicative of Hearn's standing at that time but also of the failure of American biographers to research this story properly, given that the material has been freely available and contains valuable information such as the destruction of the Hearn marriage records in a court house fire in 1884.²⁸

The year after Bisland's *Life and Letters* appeared, Milton Bronner, editor of *The Kentucky Post*, entered the biographical arena with an edition of Hearn's letters to Henry Watkin, *Letters from the Raven* (1907).²⁹ In 1930, Oscar Lewis claimed that Bronner had attempted to prevent Hearn's biography being written by anyone other than himself by threatening to disclose his marriage to Mattie Foley.³⁰ In 1905 Bisland believed that press reports on the subject were the work of Bronner who had 'raked the slums, apparently, to find details for this disgusting story which he has been holding as a threat to blackmail Mrs Hearn's [Setsu Koizumi] representative, Paymaster [Mitchell] McDonald'. She was critical too of Watkin, alleging that he had betrayed Hearn's trust by allowing the publication of letters written in friendship for monetary gain.³¹

Nina H. Kennard, *Lafcadio Hearn* (1912)

I now propose to examine the full-length biographies of Hearn that have appeared since his death. Nina Kennard was Irish, not American, but her 1912 work is important as the first attempt at a full-length biography of Hearn and as a significant primary source for future biographers, having interviewed people in Ireland, England, and Japan who had known Hearn personally.³² It provides a contrast with most American Hearn biography in that she engaged to a greater extent in thematic analysis, which is useful in the context of Hearn's general achievement. O. W. Frost commended

Kennard's biography for undertaking pioneering work in relation to Hearn's early years, noting that the biographies which had appeared since then, including that by McWilliams, had 'no substantial fresh material for the study of Hearn's early life'.³³

While Kennard was clearly conservative – she branded his 1874 marriage to Mattie Foley 'an unpardonable lapse from social law' and alleged that Hearn 'had made his body a house of shame' in Cincinnati (a possible reference to his predilection for prostitutes) – she also saw that her subject was himself essentially conservative in nature.³⁴ Kennard was the first biographer to cover the marriage issue. She created the narrative of Hearn being attracted initially by Foley's kindly attention to his creature-comforts and nursing him back from serious ill-health.³⁵ She also described Foley's birth into slavery and gaining of freedom through the medium of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, a mere six years before Hearn entered the United States. According to Kennard, the pair 'talked much of her early days and years of slavery'. Describing Hearn as 'abnormal by inheritance', her summary of their marriage and the breakdown of the relationship was not favourable to Foley, alleging that it had 'completely turned her head; she gave herself airs, became overbearing, quarrelsome, and Hearn found himself obliged to leave Cincinnati to escape from an impossible position'.³⁶ Foley herself claimed that she had left Hearn in 1877 because of 'his morose and moody temperament'.³⁷

Although she was, like Bisland, positive towards Hearn's *Two Years in the French West Indies* (1890), Kennard devoted more than half her book to Japan, an early recognition of its relative importance to Hearn's achievement.³⁸ She noted that, in Japan, he was writing English with ease for the first time, a crucial break with his unsuccessful attempt to create an ornate, French-influenced, literary style which militated against the success of much of his American output.³⁹

Kennard understood Hearn's need to interpret Japan through its common people.⁴⁰ She examines his story, 'Yuko: A Reminiscence', published in *Out of the East* (1895), to determine whether or not Hearn was guilty, as some critics alleged, of his views being either 'unfavourable to an exaggerated extent' or, as others maintained, being 'too laudatory' of the Japanese.⁴¹ While

accepting, as Hearn himself did, that his sketch was perhaps too romantic, she concluded that ‘the real poetry of the event remained unlesened’.⁴² She went further with another essay in *Out of the East, Jiu-jitsu* (1895), describing it as ‘masterly’, which indeed it is. Kennard challenges ‘those who say that Hearn did not understand the enigmatic people amongst whom his lines were cast’ simply to read this essay.⁴³

Kennard declared *Kokoro* (1896), which she saw as having been inspired by his contact with Kyoto, as ‘absolutely truthful’, noting that he felt justified in ‘selecting facts to be used about Japan’, while being critical of a perceived tendency to generalize from insufficient premises as well as outright contradictions.⁴⁴ In the final chapter of her book, Kennard attempts a balanced appraisal, trying – and for the most part succeeding – to steer a middle path between excessive eulogy and dismissal.⁴⁵

Vera McWilliams, *Lafcadio Hearn* (1946)

The first full-length American biography of Hearn by Vera McWilliams was published thirty-four years after Kennard’s. Evangelista sees Hearn’s ‘international reputation [having] reached its peak in the first decades of the twentieth century’ at a time when his work ‘had a truly global reach’,⁴⁶ though it was in marked decline in the United States and Europe by mid-century. Substantial at over four hundred pages, McWilliams’s study mentions most of Hearn’s writings but with little sustained attention or analysis. She is mostly concerned with biographical information gleaned from primary sources, letters especially, and which were recast as her text. She does not footnote her sources although she uses a wider range than Kennard.

McWilliams’s most intractable problem was not, however, dealing with Hearn’s childhood but rather with the United States of her own era. Her summary of Hearn’s interaction with African Americans is redolent of the racial segregationist values then prevailing:

He prowled through the gaslit chiaroscuro of Bucktown where outcast whites and Negroes lived in criminal degradation and motley-tinted creatures sprang up from the borderland life of miscegenation. And he watched Negroes juba-dancing along the levees and studied

their half-savage, nostalgic simplicity. Their vices he pronounced for the most part acquired, and their virtues original.⁴⁷

Surprisingly, McWilliams does not confront the allegation contained in Tinker's *Lafcadio Hearn's American Days* that Hearn had found Mattie Foley not in a boarding house but in a brothel: 'instead of being a servant she was an inmate of a house in the segregated district, and that instead of Hearn's being actuated by a high moral purpose of atonement, he was simply the victim of an overpowering carnal infatuation'.⁴⁸ Tinker quotes an unnamed friend of Hearn's to the effect 'that Althea's mode of living was as shady as her complexion'.⁴⁹

While Hearn was concerned, after the breakup of his marriage, that Mattie did not 'sell herself' there has never been a claim that Mattie had been a sex worker other than this one by Tinker.⁵⁰ Basing his account on those 'who had known him best', Tinker cites Hearn's Cincinnati friends, Krehbiel, Tunison and the artist, Henry Farny, as sources of information regarding the marriage, which he describes as 'asinine' and invalid because of the law forbidding miscegenation.⁵¹ The engagement with journalism on the part of the three friends cited might imply that they would have had a better knowledge of the seamy side of life in Cincinnati than the average citizen and Tunison's wish for Bisland to reveal Hearn's dealings with prostitutes might point to him as a specific source. Given that Tinker lived until 1968, it is a pity that McWilliams and Stevenson do not appear to have attempted to follow up this explosive claim with him.

McWilliams did cover Hearn's marriage but from a distinctly patronising perspective, stating that 'the emancipation of slaves had separated her [Mattie Foley] from all protection and guidance'.⁵² Allowing that Hearn was 'indifferent to the state law which prohibited such unions', she made no reference to the wider racial issues involved. Nor did she mention that Mattie's father as the white owner of the slave plantation on which she was born. Her account of Hearn's 1875 firing by the *Enquirer* is straightforward: Colonel John Cockerill, the editor, decided that he could no longer 'risk the Foley scandal besmirching his paper'.⁵³

McWilliams makes some effort to come to terms with Hearn's interpretation of Japan. For example, she refers to Fustel De Coulanges' *La Cité Antique* (1864), Hearn's essays, 'Jiu-jitsu', and 'Of the Eternal Feminine' (1893), without seeing them as part of a coherent interpretation of Japan.⁵⁴ She mentions his falling out with the Japan-based, English academic, Basil Hall Chamberlain, but makes no mention of their political differences over the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Commerce and Navigation (1894) or Chamberlain's patronising references to Japanese culture in his book, *Things Japanese* (1890), which Hearn had unavailingly attempted to get him to change.⁵⁵ Despite Hearn being essentially modern on these issues and Chamberlain revealing himself as an old-fashioned imperialist, Hearn is depicted as the sole, unreasonable cause of the break in relations. When McWilliams stated that 'the purpose of this work has not called for critical consideration of Hearn's writings', she was being strictly accurate.⁵⁶ However, the result is a severely self-imposed limit on what her biography could achieve. A number of contemporary reviews of her book reached much the same conclusion.⁵⁷

Elizabeth Stevenson, *Lafcadio Hearn* (1961)

Elizabeth Stevenson's *Lafcadio Hearn* was the first life of Hearn to meet the standards of modern scholarship. She greatly expanded the range of primary sources consulted, which are listed and referenced. The 'Select Bibliography' is fairly comprehensive for the time. While she follows much the same pattern as McWilliams, it is by far the best factual account of Hearn's life up to that point. At the same time it makes little effort to integrate the life and work or identify broad patterns both within the specific periods of Hearn's story or in the context of his life as a whole.

Contemporaneous concepts of race are critical to Hearn biography. It was, however, the institutionalized racism of Cincinnati and the South in the 1870s and 1880s that exercised the greatest influence on him – an aspect that was typically overlooked by his twentieth-century American biographers. Such racism took a number of forms – anti-African American and anti-immigrant, amongst others – relevant to how Hearn's life has been understood. Elizabeth

Stephenson points out that Ohio's anti-miscegenation law was 'valid only between 1861 and 1877'.⁵⁸ While this is correct, it nevertheless ignores the wider historical context. Writing of the laws forbidding interracial marriage, Peggy Pascoe states that they 'provide a virtual road map to American legal conceptions of race; they spotlight the multi-racial framework of white supremacy that emerged after the Civil War and stood at the centre of American law until the 1960s'.⁵⁹ During the century after the 1860s, 'the American legal system elevated the notion that interracial marriage was unnatural to commonsense status and made it the law of the land'.⁶⁰ Both McWilliams and Stevenson wrote their biographies while these laws were still in force: McWilliams's language suggests that she did not have difficulties with them, while Stevenson attempts to dilute their significance.⁶¹

Stevenson's assertion that Hearn was not a thinker is strange given Hearn's extraordinary and original interpretation of Japan, not to mention his status as a Buddhist scholar which has inspired no fewer than four books on the subject.⁶² Stevenson found Chamberlain's *Things Japanese* 'excellent and amusing', ignoring Hearn's efforts to get its author to change derogatory references to Japanese culture. In common with other American biographers, she showed little consciousness of Hearn's achievement in pioneering the projection of Japanese literature, albeit mostly folkloric, 'onto the international stage'.⁶³ It is similarly striking that neither Stevenson nor her predecessors engaged in any way with Hearn's lectures at Tokyo Imperial University, which were extensively transcribed and published in the United States and Japan from 1924 onwards.

Surveying Lafcadio Hearn biography sixty years after Hearn's death and just three years after Stevenson's book, the Korean American scholar, Beongcheon Yu, was unimpressed by what he saw as a general concentration on Hearn's life 'rather than his art and thought'.⁶⁴ He felt that there was an overeagerness to 'read his life experience into his writings and to translate his words into his life pattern', as well as sometimes having too narrow a focus on a 'particular facet rather than an overall synthesis of his achievement'.⁶⁵

Steve Kemme, *The Outsider: The Life and Work of Lafcadio Hearn* (2023)

Writing decades after McWilliams and Stevenson, Steve Kemme (President of the Lafcadio Hearn Society/USA) is more forthright in tackling the social context of the United States of Hearn's time. He provides better context for Hearn's relationship with African Americans and their culture than previous American biographies. Kemme details how the 'Black Laws' enacted in the early nineteenth century made it difficult for 'Black people to permanently settle in the state [of Ohio]', 'depriv[ing] them of their rights to attend public schools and [r]elegat[ing] them to second class citizenship'.⁶⁶ He also draws attention to the outbreaks of violence in Cincinnati in 1829 and 1836, which explicitly targeted African Americans and caused many of them to leave the city.⁶⁷ Additionally, Kemme provides invaluable information on the editorial orientation of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, the newspaper that had employed Hearn at the time of his marriage to Mattie Foley. It was a supporter of the Democratic Party – then the party of opposition to the rights of African Americans – and justified the Ku Klux Klan in an editorial of 1872. It nevertheless reflected the widely held views of its white middle-class readership, who were upset by Hearn's humanising portrayals of African Americans in its pages, as well as his marriage to Mattie.⁶⁸

It is appropriate that Kemme, a former Cincinnati journalist, should bring these insights to bear on Hearn biography. It is not, and does not set out to be, radically new in terms of primary source material or the interpretation of Hearn's life, in Japan especially.⁶⁹ This is not to say that Kemme lacks insight – his point about Hearn being a folklorist at heart rings true – but he has set out to write a relatively short (just under two hundred and fifty pages, without an index), widely-available and reasonably priced introduction to Hearn and he has succeeded admirably.⁷⁰

An American Writer?

The confused and conflicted issues surrounding Hearn's identity raised their head at an early stage. Bisland, for example, claimed that Hearn had moved to Wales aged around seven after which he had 'visited Ireland but occasionally'.⁷¹ She considers the setting of the Hearn story, 'Hi-Mamari'

in Wales to be evidence of this relocation; although Nina Kennard corrected this, establishing that it was set on the estate of Hearn's Elwood relatives in Cong, County Mayo, in the West of Ireland, where today the topography of the story is still recognisable.⁷² Some commentators have clung to the Welsh story, despite its inherent unlikelihood.⁷³

These claims may reflect grotesquely distorted accounts of Hearn's early life given by him to friends such as Bisland while he was living in the United States, perhaps to dilute his Irish identity – and his privileged upbringing – at a time when he wished to be seen as an exotic Latin and was seeking to put behind him the scandal of his Cincinnati marriage. Similarly, Bisland's claim that Hearn had merely been at Ushaw, his English boarding school 'for a time' – he actually spent four years there – may have been to facilitate the possibility of his having been educated, partially at least, in France (Bisland cites reports that he had spent two years there).⁷⁴ Thus Bisland initiated a biographical muddle about Hearn's early life that persists still.

An identity conflict of a different kind arose in 1901, when Hearn had accepted an honorary membership of the prestigious Japan Society of London, which respectfully referred to him as 'Professor Hearn'. While lauding his 'marvellous sympathetic insight' into Japan and emphasising his birth as a British subject (on the basis of his birth in the Ionian Islands, then a UK protectorate) the Society suggested that he 'might be taken as a type of the Anglo-Japanese alliance'.⁷⁵ This connection with the Japan Society – and the British claim on Hearn – has not been covered in his American biography.

A related tussle began at an early stage about the relative worth of his American and Japanese outputs. The first shots were fired by Elizabeth Bisland who chose her ground skilfully by not insisting on the comparative merit of his American work but instead being emphatic about that of his West Indian literary output. She disputed an English commentator's dismissal of Hearn's pre-Japanese work and argued that in *Two Years in the French West Indies* 'the artist has at last emancipated his talent and finished his long apprenticeship' and 'it remains one of his most admirable achievements'.⁷⁶ While Bisland avoided any direct comparison between Hearn's

American and Japanese output, the critic Albert Mordell, writing in 1924, had no such compunction: 'It is a mistake to think of Hearn solely as a "writer on Japan". Japan gave him nothing [...]. He had done in America precisely what he did in Japan.'⁷⁷

There were, at the same time, dissenting voices. In the same year as Bronner's book was published, Matthew Josephson cast Hearn as 'An Enemy of the West' in a chapter of his book, *Portrait of the Artist as American*.⁷⁸ Depicting Hearn as a rootless, failed Romantic, Josephson, without making a sustained effort to evaluate the worth of Hearn's substantial output, concluded: 'Lafcadio Hearn was a minor artist; he contributed no invention, no energizing principle of form, that could give his work a significant order and force.'⁷⁹

Almost thirty years later, O. W. Frost would recycle the assertions of both Bisland and Mordell in his *Young Hearn* biography. He expanded Mordell's claim that Japan had given Hearn nothing by arguing that: 'In truth, America offered him a greater variety of writing experience for mature growth and mature expression; there is very little that he undertook in the Orient that he did not first take up in the Occident.'⁸⁰ Elizabeth Stevenson stated that the American case for claiming Hearn was stronger than that of the British but had never been exercised – a debatable claim given the assertions of Mordell and Frost.⁸¹ Russell Blankenship, having sketched Hearn's varied life in 1931, nevertheless decided that 'he is properly accounted an American writer'.⁸² Hearn was likewise described as having been 'a transient contributor to American literature' in a 1969 literary history of the United States.⁸³

The mischief which a confluence of nationalistic rhetoric and Hearn biography can cause is illustrated in our own day by John Clubbe's attempts to establish that Hearn was, quite simply, an American writer.⁸⁴ To this end, he tried to represent me as his Irish counterpart, allegedly claiming that Hearn belonged to Ireland. Clubbe attempted to buttress his theory by a quotation from my own Hearn biography, specifically a phrase about insisting on 'the Irish' in Hearn.⁸⁵ The phrase in question was not mine however, but came from the introduction to my biography by Professor Sukehiro Hirakawa of Tokyo University.⁸⁶

This was in spite of my clearly expressed view a decade previously that Hearn was a ‘citizen of the world’ who was not exclusively Greek, Irish, American, or Japanese but was rather a unique amalgam of a variety of influences who had an ambiguous relationship with the various countries in which he lived.⁸⁷ This accords with a more recent view expressed by Evangelista that Hearn’s ‘work resists single, stable, national literary identities. Irish, Greek, English, American, Japanese: Hearn was all and one of these at the same time.’⁸⁸ Evangelista also states that for Hearn’s work to become visible again it is necessary to work ‘outside and against rigid national perspectives’.⁸⁹ Accepting Hearn’s life as an organic whole, without trying to claim supremacy for any one element, has always seemed to me to be the best approach. American biography has not to date articulated a coherent conception of Hearn’s Japanese achievement, such as that recently advanced by Evangelista:

Hearn carved for himself a unique position of authority in the debate on the preservation of Japanese cultural traditions, in Japan as well as on a global stage. His work stands as a complex, sometimes fraught, and always brave attempt to reclaim literature and literary studies as the field for the articulation of an ethical cosmopolitanism simultaneously in Japan and in the English-speaking world.⁹⁰

For Kathryn Webb-DeStefano, by the time Hearn reached Japan, any sense of a distinctive ‘Irish imagination’ had transformed into a ‘transnational modernist imagination’.⁹¹ The American critic Mary Goodwin sees Hearn’s art developing from ‘a rather morbid obsession with the gruesome fringes of society’ and moving past ‘the conventions and typical Orientalist structure of Imperial Gothic’.⁹² She argues that ‘Hearn’s assimilation of Japanese culture and values’ is ‘key to understanding the power of his vision of Japan, reshaped to encompass moral and spiritual experience’.⁹³ As Elizabeth Hofmann Reade has observed, Hearn’s writing often ‘transforms a trope or figure associated with racial purity, eugenics, and empire-building – and repurposes it [...] to re-imagine new structures of lineage and descent that deviate from such norms’.⁹⁴ Such fresh thinking on Hearn points to an exciting future where biographical and critical interpretations are blended to create new visions of a unique inter-cultural pioneer.

-
- ¹ For a brief treatment of this topic see Paul Murray, 'Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904)', *The Green Book: Writings on Irish Gothic, Supernatural and Fantastic Literature* 16 (Samhain 2020), pp. 70–71.
- ² Elizabeth Bisland, ed., *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, 2 vols (Houghton Mifflin, 1906). Later reissued as vols. 13, 14, and 15 of the *Koizumi Edition of the Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, 16 vols (Houghton Mifflin, 1923).
- ³ Elizabeth Bisland, ed., *The Japanese Letters of Lafcadio Hearn* (Houghton Mifflin, 1910).
- ⁴ Vera McWilliams, *Lafcadio Hearn* (Houghton Mifflin, 1946).
- ⁵ Elizabeth Stevenson, *Lafcadio Hearn* (Macmillan, 1961).
- ⁶ George M. Gould, *Concerning Lafcadio Hearn*, with a bibliography by Laura Stedman (Jacobs, 1908). For further discussion of the Hearn-Gould dynamic, see Murray, *Fantastic Journey*, pp. 311–16; Antony Goedhals, 'Lafcadio Hearn and George Gould's Philosophy of Spectacles: The Story of a Buddhist-Christian Encounter', in *Diasporic Identities and Empire: Cultural Contentions and Literary Landscapes*, ed. by Anastasia Nicéphore (Cambridge Scholars, 2013), pp. 199–212.
- ⁷ Edward L. Tinker, *Lafcadio Hearn's American Days* (Dodd, Mead, 1924).
- ⁸ P. D. and Ione Perkins, *Lafcadio Hearn: A Bibliography of His Writings* (Houghton Mifflin, 1934).
- ⁹ O. W. Frost, *Young Hearn* (Hokuseido Press, 1958).
- ¹⁰ Alfred E. Kunst, *Lafcadio Hearn* (Twayne, 1969).
- ¹¹ For a comparative judgement on the relative merits of Kunst and other biographers see Robert L. Gale, *A Lafcadio Hearn Companion* (Greenwood Press, 2002), p. xii.
- ¹² Jonathan Cott, *Wandering Ghost: The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn* (Knopf, 1991); Carl Dawson, *Lafcadio Hearn and the Vision of Japan* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Steve Kemme, *The Outsider: The Life and Work of Lafcadio Hearn: The Man Who Introduced Voodoo, Creole Cooking and Japanese Ghosts to the World* (Tuttle, 2023).
- ¹³ Linda Lindholm, *Lafcadio: A Writer's Journey* (Glue Pot Press, 2023); Linda Lindholm, *Lafcadio's Legacy* (Glue Pot Press, 2024).
- ¹⁴ Paul Elmer More, *Shelburne Essays* (Knickerbocker Press, 1905), pp. 46–72.
- ¹⁵ More, *Shelburne Essays*, pp. 47–48.
- ¹⁶ Edward Clark Marsh, 'Lafcadio Hearn', *The Forum*, 40.2 (August 1908), pp. 175–80.
- ¹⁷ Milton Bronner, ed., *Letters from the Raven: Being the Correspondence of Lafcadio Hearn with Henry Watkin* (Brentano's, 1907).
- ¹⁸ Marsh, 'Lafcadio Hearn', p. 177.
- ¹⁹ See Paul Murray, *A Fantastic Journey: The Life and Literature of Lafcadio Hearn* (Japan Library, 1993), pp. 65–66; Dawson, *Lafcadio Hearn and the Vision of Japan*, p. 139.
- ²⁰ Lafcadio Hearn, *A Japanese Miscellany* (Little, Brown, 1901).
- ²¹ Stefano Evangelista, 'Lafcadio Hearn and Global Aestheticism', in *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle* (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 72–116 (p. 86).
- ²² Marsh, 'Lafcadio Hearn'; Bisland, *Life and Letters*, I, pp. 3–162.
- ²³ Lewis, *Hearn and his Biographers*, pp. 72–73. See also, Murray, *Fantastic Journey*, p. 308.
- ²⁴ Lewis, *Hearn and his Biographers*, pp. 81–82. See also, Murray, *Fantastic Journey*, p. 308.
- ²⁵ Murray, *Fantastic Journey*, p. 309.
- ²⁶ See *Ibid.*, pp. 314–15.
- ²⁷ The best attempt to situate Hearn's marriage in its contemporary context is to be found in Kemme, *The Outsider*, 81–83.
- ²⁸ *New York Times*, 14 July 1906; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 14 July 1906; and *Los Angeles Times*, 20 July 1906.
- ²⁹ Bronner, *Letters from the Raven*.
- ³⁰ Oscar Lewis, *Hearn and his Biographers: The Record of a Literary Controversy* (Westgate Press, 1930), p. 27.
- ³¹ Elizabeth Bisland, Letter to Mr [Alexander?] Hill, 20 July 1905, reproduced in *Hearn and his Biographers*, pp. 72–73 (insert).
- ³² Nina H. Kennard, *Lafcadio Hearn* (Eveleigh Nash, 1912), pp. x–xi. Annie 'Nina' Kennard was born Anne Homan-Mulock in County Offaly, Ireland, to an Irish landowner who had changed his surname name from Molloy. Married to Arthur Kennard, she was known for her novels and biographies. See Paul Murray, 'Some New Hearn Primary Source Material', in *Irish Writing on Lafcadio Hearn and Japan, Writer, Journalist and Teacher*, ed. by Sean G. Ronan (Global Oriental, 1997), pp. 255–315, for letters written to and from Minnie Atkinson, Hearn's half-sister, in relation to a trip to Japan which she undertook with Nina Kennard in 1909.
- ³³ Frost, Preface, *Young Hearn*, pp. i–iv (p. ii).
- ³⁴ Kennard, *Lafcadio Hearn*, pp. 104, 111, 167, and 387.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 101–02, p. 207.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- ³⁷ 'Widow of Lafcadio Hearn, Negro Woman Says She Married Novelist – To Sue for Estate', *New York Times*, 14 July 1906.

- ³⁸ Kennard, *Lafcadio Hearn*, pp. 186–383.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 311. See Murray, *Fantastic Journey*, pp. 71–73.
- ⁴⁰ Kennard, *Lafcadio Hearn*, pp. 203–04.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 233.
- ⁴² Ibid., p. 267.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 233.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 284–85 and 319.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 384–97.
- ⁴⁶ Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism*, p. 80.
- ⁴⁷ McWilliams, *Lafcadio Hearn*, p. 72. On the dustcover of her biography McWilliams is described as having ‘a marked preference for the South’ and looking ‘upon Louisiana as her instinctive home’.
- ⁴⁸ Tinker, *Lafcadio Hearn’s American Days*, p. 27.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ See Murray, *Fantastic Journey*, pp. 42–43.
- ⁵¹ Tinker, *Lafcadio Hearn’s American Days*, p. 28.
- ⁵² McWilliams, *Lafcadio Hearn*, p. 67.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 68.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 310, 325, and 351.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 367–68. See Murray, *Fantastic Journey*, pp. 152–53 and 180–83.
- ⁵⁶ McWilliams, *Lafcadio Hearn*, p. 447.
- ⁵⁷ John Ashmead Jr., Review of *Lafcadio Hearn* by Vera McWilliams, *The Atlantic* (September 1946); Edward Larocque Tinker, Review of *Lafcadio Hearn* by Vera McWilliams, *American Literature*, 18.3 (November 1946), pp. 264–65; William W. Clary, Review of *Lafcadio Hearn* by Vera McWilliams, *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 6.1 (November 1946), pp. 80–81.
- ⁵⁸ Stevenson, *Lafcadio Hearn*, p. 52.
- ⁵⁹ Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 2.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 3.
- ⁶¹ The U.S. Supreme Court declared miscegenation unconstitutional in 1967: see Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, p. 4.
- ⁶² Stevenson, Preface, *Lafcadio Hearn*, p. xv; Lafcadio Hearn, *Japan’s Religions: Shinto and Buddhism*, ed. by Kazumitsu Kato (University Books, 1966); Lafcadio Hearn, *The Buddhist Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, ed. by Kenneth Rexroth (Wildwood House, 1981); Jeff Humphries, *Reading Emptiness: Buddhism and Literature* (State University of New York Press, 1999) (more than half of which is devoted to Hearn); Antony Goedhals, *The Neo-Buddhist Writings of Lafcadio Hearn: Light from the East* (Brill, 2020).
- ⁶³ Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism*, p. 94.
- ⁶⁴ Beongcheon Yu, *An Ape of the Gods: The Art and Thought of Lafcadio Hearn* (Wayne State University Press, 1964), p. x.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Kemme, *The Outsider*, p. 81.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 82.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 82–83.
- ⁶⁹ For an overview of Hearn’s Japanese period see Steve Kemme, ‘Foreword’, in *Lafcadio Hearn’s Japan: Fascinating Stories and Essays by Japan’s Most Famous Foreign Observer*, ed. by Donald Richie (Tuttle, 2023), pp. 7–13.
- ⁷⁰ Kemme, *The Outsider*, p. 230.
- ⁷¹ Bisland, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 12. See also Murray, *Fantastic Journey*, pp. 243–44.
- ⁷² Kennard, *Lafcadio Hearn*, p. 39.
- ⁷³ See W. John Morgan, ‘The Lost Welsh Story of Lafcadio Hearn (alias Yakumo Koizumi)’, *New Welsh Review*, 136 (Winter 2024), pp. 39–45. For other adherents to this line of thinking see Dawson, *Lafcadio Hearn and the Vision of Japan*, p. 7, pp. 103–05; Jonathan Cott, *Wandering Ghost, The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn* (Knopf, 1991), pp. 20–21.
- ⁷⁴ Bisland, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 34.
- ⁷⁵ Lafcadio Hearn to Albert E. Price, Assistant Secretary, The Japan Society, London, 27 March 1901, cited by Heidi Potter, former Director of the Japan Society, in an email to Bill Emmott, 20 November 2024; Bill Emmott, email to the author, 13 April 2025; *Transactions and Proceedings of the Japan Society, London*, 6 (1902–1903), pp. 123–24.
- ⁷⁶ Bisland, *Life and Letters*, I, pp. 98–99.
- ⁷⁷ Albert Mordell, ‘Introduction’, in Lafcadio Hearn, *An American Miscellany*, ed. Mordell (Dodd, Mead, 1924), pp. i–lxxix (p. lxxvii).
- ⁷⁸ Matthew Josephson, *Portrait of the Artist as American* (Harcourt, Brace, 1930), pp. 199–231.
- ⁷⁹ Josephson, *Portrait of the Artist as American*, p. 230.
- ⁸⁰ Frost, *Young Hearn*, pp. 217–18.
- ⁸¹ Stevenson, *Lafcadio Hearn*, p. xiv.

⁸² Russell Blankenship, *American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind* (Olt, Rinehart and Winton, 1931), p. 46.

⁸³ Robert Earnest Spiller, ed., *A Literary History of the United States* (Macmillan, 1969), p. 1070.

⁸⁴ John Clubbe, 'Hearn as an American Writer', in *Lafcadio Hearn in International Perspectives*, ed. by Sukehiro Kirakawa (Global Oriental, 2007), pp. 93–102.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁸⁶ The phrase in question, 'Do I insist too much on the Irish in him...?', occurs in Sukehiro Kirakawa, 'Lafcadio Hearn: Towards an Irish Interpretation', in Paul Murray, *Fantastic Journey*, pp. 11–12. More recently, Hirakawa's claim that Hearn's imagination was 'distinctively Irish' is cited in Nicoletta Asciuto, 'Ghosts and Butterflies: Lafcadio Hearn between Ireland and Japan', in *Ireland's Cultural Empire: Contacts, Comparisons, Translations*, ed. by Giuliana Bendelli (Cambridge Scholars, 2018), pp. 71–92 (p. 76).

⁸⁷ Paul Murray, 'Lafcadio Hearn and the Irish Tradition', in *Irish Writing on Lafcadio Hearn and Japan*, ed. by Sean G. Ronan (Brill, 1998), pp. 172–87 (p. 172).

⁸⁸ Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism*, p. 77. Evangelista also describes Hearn as 'a European living in Japan', p. 110.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁹¹ Kathryn Webb-DeStefano, "'What is past, or passing, or to come': Transnational Modernism, Self-Transcendence, and the Rise of Ultrnationalism (1884–1945)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Virginia, 2024), p. 23.

⁹² Mary Goodwin, 'Stranger Fiction: The Asian Ghost Tales of Rudyard Kipling and Lafcadio Hearn', in *Transnational Gothic: Literary and Social Exchanges in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Monika Elbert and Bridget M. Marshall (Routledge, 2013), pp. 237–54 (p. 241).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁹⁴ Elizabeth Hofmann Reade, 'The Tree of Life: The Politics of Kinship in Meiji Japan (1870–1915)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2018), p. 55.