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'Kwaidan: Encounters with Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904)', Farmleigh Gallery, Dublin, 7 March-24 August 2025

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The Kwaidan Exhibition project emerged from an invitation from Irish artist Stephen Lawlor to forty artists, twenty Japan-based and twenty Ireland-based, to create prints inspired by their choice of text from one of Lafcadio Hearn's best-known works, completed in the year of his death in Tokyo in 1904. No stranger to curating collective creative crossovers between literature and the visual arts, Lawlor had previously organized an exhibition of the work of Irish writers and artists inspired by Hearn's contemporary, the Irish 'Celtic Twilight' poet and Nobel laureate, W. B. Yeats. Indeed, it was while presenting this latter exhibition in Japan in 2017 that he first encountered Hearn's potent aura.

The challenges of writing an academic review of the Kwaidan exhibition reflect those underlying the project itself. They are further magnified when the focus of the commissioning journal is as specific as 'the study of decadence from antiquity to the present'. Clearly, the most meaningful encounters with authors, 'decadent' or not, are those that engage most searchingly with the actual writing. In the case of an œuvre as prolific and multipolar as that of Hearn, the deeper and more complete the engagement with both its unity and heterogeneity, its unspoken principles and diverse articulation, the more resonant and illuminating the encounter. In Hearn's case, the principal obstacle to such an engagement is the intrinsically translational and multiple or protean quality of the writing. Consequently, its quiddity is just as difficult to identify as the author's principal cultural affiliation or association: Anglo-? Hiberno-? Greco-? Creolo? Americano-? Japano-? Or just migrant, global or multiply creolized? And what about his Francophilia? Ironically perhaps, the exhibition's principal feat was to bring, by degrees, these challenges and questions into focus, none more sharply than the question of where Japan and things Japanese fit in the overall arc of Hearn's life story, imaginary and poetics. The fact is that almost every line and image

of the œuvre as a whole registers the trauma of the losses and desertions suffered in childhood and adolescence, just as the succession of Hearn's own migratory pivots recalls the trail of his father's serial imperial postings overseas. The exhibition's decontextualized fixation on *Kwaidan* and Japan belies this recurrent reenactment of loss and rupture, just as it also belies the fact that, for about three years prior to his premature death in Tokyo aged 54, Hearn was actively seeking to leave Japan.

The word 'Kwaidan' means 'weird things' and the eponymous volume is usually, though reductively, construed as a collection of Japanese ghost stories. Like all the books published while Hearn was living in Japan, *Kwaidan* first appeared in English in the United States, but was quickly translated into Japanese under the naturalized writer's Japanese moniker. A subsequent Japanese film adaptation directed by Masaki Kobayashi in 1964 cemented his fame for a new generation in Japan. How many, though, of Koizumi Yakumo's Japanese readers, especially his child-readers, had any idea that the author was not just as Japanese as them? The subtitle of *Kwaidan* is *Stories and Studies of Strange Things* and perfectly illustrates Hearn's compulsive genre switching, a penchant perhaps linked to his mixed origins and subsequent 'transnationality'. Like so many of his collections, the volume includes both narratives and essays. Alongside seventeen tales of the supernatural it features three 'insect' studies, on butterflies, mosquitoes, and ants (indeed, the 'ant' study explicitly inspires one of the exhibition prints). The studies confirm the place of insects in both Japanese and Chinese mythology and, crucially, themselves incorporate stories and even poems (haikus).

Across Hearn's work, his trans-genre, composite or hybrid writing is a constant. Not only does he mix genres, but he liberally intersperses English with words from other languages (chiefly French, Creole, or Japanese). Furthermore, his preferred writing register is what he calls 'poetical prose'.[1] Indeed, Hearn seems to have implicitly and instinctively adopted a multiply blended, cross-over writing, which could perhaps be seen as a 'modern' equivalent of the creolization found in waning, late-stage cultural empires. Hence, even when the end-stage of a previously dominant

culture is not Hearn's direct thematic focus, his style and composition across time and place bear this same creolized/creolizing imprint.

Just as Creole is haunted by the languages from which it emerged, Hearn's entire œuvre is hauntologically driven. Yet ghost narratives specifically become progressively more dominant in his work, appearing to peak in Japan. Indeed, in the recent Penguin anthology of Hearn's *Japanese Ghost Stories* (2019), only eight out of the thirty-four tales are from *Kwaidan*. Already, the Cincinnati writings had included several remarkable ghost stories and, amongst the six volumes authored during the New Orleans years, three share a focus on 'strange things', including the volume entitled *Stray Leaves from Strange Literature* (Osgood, 1882). Crucially, though, all three collections emphasize two different modes of 'otherworldliness', both of them central to Euro-colonial fin-de-siècle decadence: firstly, the supernatural or fantastic; secondly, the culturally exogenous (Egyptian, Creole, francophone etc.). Indeed, this double emphasis is particularly explicit in the Egyptian or Chinese reference of two of the three titles: *One of Cleopatra's Nights and Other Fantastic Romances* (Worthington, 1882) – translations of Egypt-based and other tales by Théophile Gautier; and *Some Chinese Ghosts* (Roberts Brothers, 1887). This same double gravitation to 'other worlds' orients most of Hearn's narratives from the French Caribbean also. In the main section of *Two Years in the French West Indies* (the 'Martinique sketches'), Hearn represents Martinique as a space haunted above all by several 'pasts' or 'passings', including those of Greco-Roman antiquity. Moreover, he dwells on the fact that the then colony was known in French as 'l'île des revenants' [the Isle of Ghosts].

Hearn was a keen reader of Baudelaire and an accomplished translator of the work of several later French exponents of outright fin-de-siècle aesthetics like Flaubert and Gautier. Indeed, his speciality was re-telling the stories of others, mostly culturally distant others. He had often first discovered these tales in written form and his scholarly sources were frequently French Orientalists such as Émile-Louis Burnou, Antoine-Léonard de Chézy, and Stanislas Julien. However, he also relied in Ohio, Louisiana, and Florida, as also in Martinique and Japan, on oral

sources. His local informants included his own wives, Alethea (Mattie) Foley and Setsuko Koizumi or other women with whom he shared the same domestic space, for example his French-Creole speaking landladies or housekeepers in Martinique: these are identified only as 'Cyrillia' and 'Manm-Robert' in *Two Years in the French West Indies* (Harper & Brothers, 1890).

In his preface to *Kwaidan*, Hearn states that written his sources were mostly 'old Japanese books' and notes the Chinese, not Japanese, origins of some of his material. Furthermore, he volunteers the fact that only one tale had an oral source (an old Japanese farmer), adding that one other tale was based on his own experience ('Riki-Baka'). These particular disclosures about provenance highlight Hearn's acute awareness of two matters about which he regularly fretted in his correspondence: namely the 'modern' conflation of literary value with originality and fiction and his own limited ability to produce writing in this most prestigious of modern literary genres. In New Orleans he became so exercized by these limitations that he forced his fascination with the supernatural, psychic or fantastic-phantomatic to stretch beyond the transliteration, translation, or re-styling of the stories of others, whether traditional folktales or literary narratives like those of Gautier. This effort towards original fiction yielded the morbid mini-romances involving supernatural phenomena such as metempsychosis or lost/impossible love which were collected posthumously in *Fantastics and other Fancies* (Houghton Mifflin, 1914). Hearn's two most substantial 'fictions', emerging respectively from his New Orleans and his French Caribbean years, were less marked by the morbid Creole Gothic exuded by the 'Fantastics'. These were *Chita*: *A Memory of Last Island* (Harper & Brothers, 1889), a novella inspired by a true natural disaster story first heard from Hearn's Louisiana-based friend, the novelist George Washington Cable and *Youma: The Story of a West Indian Slave* (Harper & Brothers, 1890), based on the history of recurrent slave uprisings, especially in Guadeloupe.

Neither the exact timbre of Hearn's re-imagination of the source tales nor the texture of his re-writing can transfer, of course, into the prints inspired by the *Kwaidan* pieces. This explains the importance of Niall MacMonagle's catalogue essay: 'The Effect of Darkness'. It was for his

contribution to the appreciation of literature in Ireland and beyond that this former English teacher, a well-known art critic and editor of numerous poetry anthologies, was conferred with an honorary doctorate from University College Dublin in 2017. His vivid insights into Hearn's haunted imagination contextualize and illuminate the uniquely imaginative and aesthetic connections made with *Kwaidan* by each individual print.

It is crucial to acknowledge here the doubly dynamic dimension – peripatetic and teleological – of the exhibition project as a whole. The prints were first shown mid-June 2023 in the magical Lafcadio Hearn Memorial Museum in Matsue, run by Hearn's great-grandson Bon Koizumi and his wife Shoko. Through 2023 and 2024 they were shown in several other Japanese cities: Yaizu, Nagoya, Kyoto, and Toyama. In Ireland, the exhibition opened first in April 2024 at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation in Co. Mayo, before moving first to the Tramore Coastguard Cultural Centre, on to Sligo's Hyde Bridge Gallery, and thence to Limerick's Hunt Museum. The next two venues (Dublin and Osaka) had been the exhibition's magnetic poles from the outset. The April 2025 gala opening in April at Farmleigh, a major Dublin heritage estate and Ireland's official guesthouse for visiting dignitaries, was matched by the almost simultaneous showing in the Irish pavilion at World Expo 2025 in Osaka. Unlike all the aforesaid venues for temporary showings, 'Ireland House' in Tokyo, the brand-new premises of the Irish Embassy in Japan will have its walls permanently graced by the Kwaidan prints. These will also enjoy, however, several other tangible and permanent afterlives: firstly, in the catalogue, which was produced to coincide with the Osaka and Farmleigh climaxes; and secondly, in the limited number of boxed sets available for purchase at https://kwaidanexhibition.com.

The project's two ambitions as stated on the exhibition website were 'to raise Lafcadio Hearn's profile to its rightful place within the Pantheon of Irish writers' and 'through Hearn's words and the works of the forty printmaking artists, to bring Ireland and Japan closer together culturally'. As the second aim is vastly more defined and circumscribed than the first, its success is easier to gauge. That success was never in doubt given the support that the project received from

the Irish state, specifically from the Irish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and from the Office of Public Works (OPW), the main Irish built heritage body which manages Farmleigh. The objective of furthering Japanese-Irish *entente* matched to perfection the central plank of Ireland's foreign policy and also its trade policy: intense leverage of cultural heritage and connections.

Certainly, the exhibition's cultural connectivity was ostensibly limited to the Japan-Ireland axis. The exhibited content was confined, after all, to work by Japanese and Irish artists, and the latters' inspiration was exclusively work from Hearn's Japanese period. Moreover, with one vital exception (the closing UK coda from September 2025 in Ushaw, where Hearn had attended school), the exhibition did not physically travel beyond Ireland and Japan. Two points must be made, however, about this exclusive concentration on the Ireland-Japan axis. Firstly, it belies Stephen Lawlor's intense but ultimately unsuccessful efforts over 2023 and 2024 to bring the project to both the francophone and anglophone Americas, particularly French Creole America to which Hearn's spirit remained so deeply attached up to the very end. Secondly, the decontextualized tenor of the exhibition's encounter with Hearn's Japan period was appreciably mitigated over time in Ireland (where Hearn often seems much less well-known than in Japan) by the determination of the other main exhibition commissar, Kieran Owens of the OPW. The Dublin opening in March 2025 coincided, for example, with the latter's deft facilitation of an academic study day on 'Lafcadio Hearn's Japan: from Enchantment to Intercultural Understanding'. This was hosted jointly by Trinity College Dublin's Centres for Asian Studies and for Literary and Critical Translation. Of the three academic speakers, two – from UK universities – have been to the fore in examining Hearn's fin-de-siècle translational imagination and style.[2] The third, a postdoctoral speaker from the United States, addressed a matter that would merit a whole other exhibition and conference in itself: namely the illustration of Hearn's writing, particularly by the author himself (with ink sketches or woodblock prints).[3] In an even more significant mitigation, Kieran Owens managed to have the exhibition's UK iteration and its final two Irish showings contextualized in relation to Hearn's family background and the author's complete

writing trajectory and multidimensional range. In all the smaller Irish venues – Ballinglen, Tramore and Sligo – there had been minimal curatorial emphasis on the broader, colonial context of Hearn's life and work, even in Japan. However, in the final showing before Dublin, at Limerick's Hunt Museum, viewers benefited from a small number of contextual storyboards about Hearn's origins, upbringing and peripatetic life-story. Furthermore, for both the gala opening in Dublin and the Ushaw coda these evolved into a much more comprehensive display, occupying a whole separate exhibition room at Farmleigh. Kieran Owens's fourteen richly informative panels are illustrated with documents such as Hearn's school reports, his parents' marriage certificate, family photographs etc., and some of the panels present Irish critical commentary on Hearn. The panels were supplemented, moreover, by cases exhibiting an impressive collection of Hearn's writings, some in translation, as well as critical and creative works centred on his life or work.

What, then, of the Kwaidan project's first stated ambition, namely to raise Lafcadio Hearn's profile within the Irish Writers' Pantheon? This aspiration seems to conflate two aims: firstly, that of having Hearn recognized as an Irish writer; secondly, that of apotheosis, or raising to 'Pantheon' status his profile in general, i.e. internationally and independently of his national classification. Certainly, Hearn's profile as an Irish writer is not, and has never been, high anywhere in the world, not even in Ireland, though it has benefited, in advance of the *Kwaidan* exhibition, from three major twenty-first century boosts in Ireland specifically. First, the steady amplification of the landmark 1993 study by former Irish diplomat, Paul Murray; second, the visit of the 2015 travelling exhibition *Coming Home: The Open Mind of Patrick* [sic] *Lafcadio Hearn* to Dublin's Little Museum; and third, the monumental achievement of Agnes Aylward in developing an outstandingly beautiful, meaningful, dynamic and alive *lieu de mémoire* in Tramore where Hearn holidayed as a child. The Lafcadio Hearn Japanese Gardens inaugurated in 2015 are about to boast a magnificent built extension named after another famous story collection, *Kokoro* (1896). In all three cases, Hearn's multi-lateral, transcultural range features as the single most significant dimension of his life's work.

Clearly, the Kwaidan exhibition has occasioned an unprecedented boost in Hearn's profile both in Ireland and in Japan, where it was already healthier than anywhere else. In many ways, however, it is the entire world and not just Ireland (or Japan), that needs to recognize Hearn's importance. Not, though, as an 'Irish writer' but as a multiply abandoned orphan whose part-Irish origins and mainly Irish childhood somehow propelled him to become a transnational, translingual, migrant 'world writer' in the mould of Joyce and Beckett. True, unlike those two canonical (Post-)Modernist figures and more like his fellow Irish-raised contemporaries Oscar Wilde or George Moore, Hearn was writing from or out of a recognizably colonial fin de siècle.[4] Unlike all four, however, he was irresistibly drawn to the global scale of colonial encounters and to its promise of 'other worlds' on the cusp of emerging, haunted, from the old. Roy Foster may have been right to identify Hearn as a 'displaced person', but it is hard to see the trajectory of this constitutional nomad, more '*revenant*' than 'remainer', as having been, any more than that of Joyce or Beckett, 'a search for location', if location is taken to mean a singular place of belonging.[5] As for Foster's suggestion that Hearn is a 'unique Irish writer' who is 'redefined, and in a way, reclaimed' in Paul Murray's study, this surely needs to be nuanced, as much in relation to Hearn's unsettled multipolarity as in relation to Murray's perspective. The fact is that neither Hearn nor his writings gravitate much at all towards Ireland and indeed the trajectory that Murray justifiably terms a 'Fantastic Journey' was no Odyssey. Ireland was surely no more Hearn's Ithaca than was Lefkada, and in any case there could be no homecoming to the place that had ceased to be his home after he was definitively disinherited around 1867. Moreover, Murray's putative 'national reclaiming' takes place within a painstaking study of all the multiple 'overseas' locations in which Hearn successively (or simultaneously) embedded a multipolar imagination so anticipatory of Creole modernisms. This fidelity to a restless, free-ranging poetics is what the ultimate Irish iteration of the Kwaidan exhibition also achieved in the final analysis by hybridizing the artistic, creative encounter with Hearn via the bio-bibliographical storyboards and bookcases.

According to the catalogue, the Kwaidan project has 'magnetised the critical landscape of Hearn studies for many years to come'. How realistic is this claim in relation to the international future of Hearn studies, or even just its Japanese, Irish, and British future? Whatever the answer to this question, there can be no doubt regarding its stakes, and not just for the two named archipelagos. What makes it matter is not only Ireland's exceptional historical position in Western Europe as a former settler colony and Japan's exceptional historical position both in Asia and in relation to Europe and its former colonies, including the one that became an empire. It is also, if not principally, the choice now facing the planet between extractive, (self-)destructive, imperialist domination versus whole-world translational, multilateral, relational connectivity.

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[1] See Lafcadio Hearn, letters to W. D. O'Connor, April 1886 and February 1887, in *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, ed. by Elizabeth Bisland (Houghton Mifflin, 1906), I, p. 364, p. 381; letters to H. E. Krehbiel, [n.d.] 1886 and October 1886, in *Life and Letters*, I, p. 374, p. 379.

[2] Papers included Stefano Evangelista's 'Lafcadio Hearn and the Invention of the Haiku' and Fraser Riddell's 'Sensing Through Description in Lafcadio Hearn's "My First Day in the Orient"(1894)'.

[3] Kathryn Webb-Destefano's paper was titled '*Kwaidan* Illustrated: The Unpublished Watercolours of Kazuo Koizumi' and addressed the extensive Lafcadio Hearn materials held at the University of Virginia.

[4] For wide-ranging reflection on the global context of decadence, see *French Decadence in a Global Context: Colonialism and Exoticism*, ed. by Julia Hartley, Wanrug Suwanwattana and Jennifer Yee (Liverpool University Press, 2022).

[5] Roy Foster, 'Foreword', in Paul Murray, *A Fantastic Journey: The Life and Literature of Lafcadio Hearn* (Japan Library, 1993), pp. xi–xiv (p. xiv).