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In the Footsteps of Lafcadio Hearn: Ethnography as a Research Methodology for Writers

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With the exception of American author and journalist, Donald Richie (1924-2013), few foreign-born writers have written on Japanese culture, spirituality, and folkloric traditions to the depths which Greek-born, Irish writer Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) achieved in his lifetime. Based on field notes and interviews conducted during a research trip to Shimane Prefecture in November, 2020, this essay examines Hearn's writing through an ethnographic lens. In so doing, it determines how he achieved realism and authenticity in his stories. Reference is made to one of his best-known publications, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), and selected examples from this have been used to show the value of ethnographic research when applied to writing practice.

INTRODUCTION

Patrick Lacadio Hearn (1850-1904) was a traveller, writer, teacher, and storyteller whose contribution to Japan's literary canon has placed him among the nation's most notable of non-Japanese writers. The *Irish Times* journalist, Mary Gallagher (2018), called Hearn "an absolutely homeless storyteller, who dwelled long enough in the American South, the Caribbean and Japan to be able to translate these worlds into words" (p. 35). Today, one only needs to visit the Lafcadio Hearn Memorial Museum in Matsue, Shimane Prefecture, or to scroll the books section of Amazon.com, to see that his storytelling, and his life story, still attract interest both in Japan and abroad.

This essay is not a biographical piece. Rather, it examines the relationship between ethnographic research and storytelling using examples drawn from one of Hearn's best-known works of nonfiction, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894). Building on previously published research (Rowe, 2020), this paper poses the questions: How did Hearn achieve realism in his writing? What methodologies did he use? And, what insights may be gained from the study of his writing?

In answering, I refer to two of the stories contained in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, in which Hearn provides rich and vivid descriptions of the people and places he encounters. Comments by Mr. Bon Koizumi, the writer's great grandson and director of the Lafcadio Hearn Memorial Museum, whom I was fortunate enough to meet and talk with during my visit to Matsue, also shed light on the writer's research practices.

Finally, I will explain how Hearn's writing has impacted on my own writing practices, and how these methods might be passed on to students of literature, students of writing and cultural studies, to enhance their own storytelling skills.

Who Was Lafcadio Hearn?

Born in the Greek islands to a Greek mother and an Irish father, Hearn spent his youth in Ireland and the UK. Cited in *Lafcadio Hearn: Tracing the Journey of the Mind* (2016, p. 43), he “regularly suffered from hallucinations, seeing ghosts and spirits,” events and influences which would later shape his storytelling in Japan. Later, he sought adventure abroad; he travelled to the US at the age of nineteen where he worked first as a magazine researcher, then as a crime reporter. A job with *Harper's Weekly* magazine took him to New Orleans where, amidst the mix of Creole, African and French cultures, his interest in folklore was piqued. Hearn wrote books on Creole cuisine and proverbs, and later, when Harper's sent him to the Caribbean island of Martinique, he produced a collection of sketches entitled, *Two Years in the French West Indies* (1890). Aspects of supernaturalism, such as voodooism and zombies, greatly interested him during this period and were to fuel his fascination with Japanese spiritualism, ghost stories, myths and legends later on.

Harper's Weekly sent Hearn to Japan in 1890. However, soon after arriving in Yokohama he quit out of discontentment, and by luck and a well-placed contact, secured a teaching position in Matsue, the prefectural capital of Shimane. In the fifteen months following his arrival, he would meet and marry the daughter of a local samurai family, assume Japanese citizenship, and take the name Koizumi Yakumo, by which he is widely known in Japan these days. Testimony to his industriousness is that he would also gather enough material to later write and publish his early impressions as *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*.

Hearn wrote prolifically up until his death in 1904; a fact which is soon apparent on visiting the Lafcadio Hearn Memorial Museum in Matsue, where, under the directorship of Bon Koizumi, Hearn's great grandson, and the curatorship of his wife, Shoko, a large collection of newspaper stories, travel articles, books and letters, along with his writing, smoking, and travel paraphernalia, is displayed. Hearn's former residence, a well-preserved traditional Japanese house, is located nearby the museum and offers visitors a chance to explore the living space and gardens where the writer worked and mused. Here, immersed in the traditions, language, and culture of Shimane during the Meiji period (1868-1912), and far from the influences of Western thought, he would have no doubt been able to observe, record, and write with clarity on his new home, Japan.

Ethnography and the Writer

Ethnography, to use one definition, is “a type of qualitative research that involves immersing oneself in a particular community or organisation to observe their behaviour and interactions up close” (Caufield, 2020, para. 1). Writers, in general, find inspiration in the world around them and record its details by watching, listening, sensing, and even tasting their environment, in order to

authenticate and add realism to their writing. It is unlikely that most would call themselves “ethnographers,” although many would agree that the research methods which they use are similar.

Because the word “ethnography” implies a scientific purpose (ethnography is a branch of anthropology) and is not often used when discussing how writers create their texts, Hearn would have probably been more comfortable with “keen observer.” The way he imbues his stories with atmosphere and realism, as a *National Geographic* magazine writer or a travel journalist might do, has the effect of “transporting” the reader. In “The Chief of the Province of the Gods”, one of the short stories included in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, Hearn relates what he sees, hears, and feels, as he wanders the canals and lakeshore of Matsue one morning. His descriptions of an awakening city remind us that little has changed in workday Japan, albeit business shoes have replaced wooden *geta* sandals.

The toil of the day begins; continually louder and louder the pattering of the geta over the bridge. It is a sound never to be forgotten, this pattering of geta over the Ohashi - rapid, merry, musical, like the sound of a dance it invariably is. The whole population is moving on tiptoe, and the multitudinous twinkling of feet over the verge of the sunlit roadway is an astonishment (Hearn, 1894, p.103).

Explains Bon Koizumi, “Matsue city was a special place for my great grandfather because its local culture was so accessible, the people honest and kind, and he could obtain Western-style food like beef, beer and dairy produce locally, which made his life more comfortable. As for his writing, he did much of his research on foot, taking long walks and recording the details as he travelled about the city” (personal communication).

Here, it is worth noting that Hearn lost his right eye in a childhood accident, which Bon Koizumi says, most likely contributed to a greater dependence on his olfactory and aural senses, as this passage seems to imply:

I listen to the voices of the city for a while. I hear the great bell of Tokoji rolling its soft Buddhist thunder across the dark, and the songs of the night-walkers whose hearts have been made merry with wine, and the long sonorous chanting of the night-peddlers. (Hearn, 1894, p. 103)

While Hearn’s impressions take the reader on a roving stroll through Matsue in the way that a contemporary travel story does, they also offer historical insights; that is, a window on late nineteenth-century Japan. In this way, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* serves both as a guide for travellers to modern day Matsue and as a source of ethnographic data for writers, historians, and academics.

Hearn wrote during the time of Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, and Rudyard Kipling, and like them, his adventures informed his storytelling. Hearn, however, does not write with the same Imperialist overtones as Kipling (Gopen, 2000), nor does he raise moral arguments against it as did Conrad (Hawkins, 1974),

but rather, allows his surroundings to shape his narratives in a way which reveals his wonderment and appreciation for the places he travels through.

Before me, tremulously mirroring everything upon its farther side, glimmers the broad glassy mouth of the Ohashigawa, opening into the grand Shinji Lake, which spreads out broadly to the right in a dim grey frame of peaks ... But oh, the charm of the vision—those first ghostly love-colours of a morning steeped in mist soft as sleep itself resolved into a visible exhalation! (Hearn, 1894)

Urbanisation and commercial development have altered Matsue since Hearn's day. Yet, even more than a century later, the prefectural capital, known as the "City of Water" for its moats and canals, and proximity to Lake Shinji, still possesses charm and atmosphere. The following is an extract from my notebook:

Crossing a canal I catch the aroma of coffee beans on a sea breeze; an ivy-smothered roasthouse stands on the other side of a stone bridge. Canal boats putter beneath it, engines packing more grunt than an egg-beater — but only just. Their conical hatted ferry men wave, holding their tillers steady, because that's all you need to do in a city whose waterways are uncrowded and arrow-straight.

Of the short stories contained in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, all but one relate Hearn's experiences and impressions of Shimane on arrival and during his short period of residence. Situated in the Chugoku region of western Japan, Shimane is known as Izumo, or "Province of the Gods," and described by the Shimane Museum of Ancient Izumo as "one of the three main backdrops where Japanese mythological legends evolved and most definitely the birthplace of many legends." (Shimane Museum of Ancient Izumo, 2017). From an ethnographic standpoint, it is an ideal place to study Japanese spiritualism and folklore.

Serendipity favours the traveller who makes few plans, and this appears to have held true for Hearn; the chance to teach at a middle school in Matsue, which he took after quitting *Harper's*, offered him access to this world of ancient Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. As a result, many of the stories contained in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* explore the traditions and rituals of these religions and afford readers precisely that: "glimpses" of the mysterious and the unfamiliar.

For the most part, Hearn's Shimane stories evoke a strong sense of "being there," an aspect of storytelling which inspired me to venture beyond Matsue to Mihonoseki, a seaside village situated thirty-five kilometres away. Hearn's story, "At Mihonoseki," recreates a world of raucous sailors' parties down bluestone laneways lined with bars and guest houses, a fishing port with a hardworking populace, all of it overseen by the deities of the revered place of Shinto ritual and worship, Miho Taisha Shrine.

Fieldwork in Mihonoseki

In my case, I set out from Matsue by local bus to make the ninety-minute journey to Mihonoseki, whereas Hearn travelled by “steamer” boat, allowing him to unwind his narrative slowly and prepare the reader for arrival in the small half-moon-shaped bay with an anecdote about the “Great Deity of Mihonoseki” who detests eggs (Hearn, 1894). This becomes a subtext with which he later, and humorously, concludes his story.

Shimane is the second-least populated prefecture out of Japan’s forty-seven prefectures (Statista, 2019). Coupled with the sudden decrease of inbound visitors to Japan due to the 2020 Covid-19 situation, this created a unique situation: like Hearn, I also found myself the sole foreign traveller in Mihonoseki, and without a guide or interpreter, I became the teller of my own story.

Literature enriches the travel experience, and Hearn’s words do for the reader precisely that. In “At Mihonoseki,” he ventures into the narrow backstreets of the village, overhearing the laughter of hard-drinking sailors and the sing-song voices of the “dancing girls,” as he follows a stone pathway to the majestic Miho Taisha Shrine, observing:

But the whole town is well worth seeing. It is so tightly pressed between the sea and the bases of the hills that there is only room for one real street; and it is so narrow that a man could jump anywhere from the second story of a house upon the water-side and into the second story of the opposite house on the land-side. (Hearn, 1894)

Today, the lively drinking spots and parties no longer exist, except for the Kagura Bar housed inside the one hundred-year-old Mihokan Hotel which overlooks the port and accepts mainly a tourist clientele. Just as Hearn did, my journey took me along on a bluestone pathway lined with lamps, passing by a liquor store, where, in the early evening, fishing industry workers stood chewing over the day’s proceedings and sipping hot sake and beer at a small counter inside. To revisit the definition of ethnography, I soon “immersed oneself in this particular community” and through conversations with the owner, an elderly man by the name of Mr Fukuda, discovered that it wasn’t such a long time ago since the “liveliness” had ended. “During the Showa period, the sailors fought a lot, the sailors drank a lot, and the girls came from as far away as Kobe to serve them,” Mr Fukuda said, adding that he has lived in Mihonoseki all his life.

Mihonoseki, like Matsue, has changed considerably since the time of Hearn’s visit. The black and white photos on display inside the Mihokan depict a tiny port crowded with fishing boats and rimmed by double-story wooden hotels and tile-roofed fisherfolk houses. It remains a working port, albeit on a small scale, a stopover for sightseers en route to the Mihonoseki lighthouse, and a popular place for weekend anglers.

A point of reference and prominent landmark in “At Mihonoseki” is the 1,729-metre ancient volcanic mountain, Daisen, which overlooks the Sea of Japan in Tottori prefecture. Hearn writes:

Far away to the right, over blue still leagues of sea, appears the long low shore of Hoki, faint as a mirage, with its far beach like an endless white streak edging the blue level, and beyond it, the vapoury lines of woods and cloudy hills, and over everything, looming into the high sky, the magnificent ghostly shape of Daisen, snow-streaked at its summit, (Hearn, 1894)

More than a century later, the view from my table inside the Mihokan has changed little. The following is an extract from my notebook:

Daisen floats! Ten kilometres across a becalmed Sea of Japan, the ancient volcano rises from its bed of mist. My coffee cup rattles, the window pane shudders, a fisherman shouts above the engine throb to the captain of a small ferry boat which has just docked—ten metres from my table.

CONCLUSION

Hearn achieved realism in his writing through travel and observation. In note-taking and recording his thoughts and impressions, it is evident that he engaged in a form of ethnographic research which allowed him to write truthfully and with realism. Works such as *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, *Out of the East* (1895), and *Gleanings in Buddha Fields* (1897) demonstrate this clearly.

By “following in the footsteps” of Hearn — travelling to Matsue and Mihonoseki, and using his travelogues to inform my travels — I was able to gain a deeper insight into Japanese culture, spiritualism, and history. Similarly, by combining travel with the study of travel literature, writers, and students of writing, may deepen their experience of the world and create more meaningful texts.

Hearn’s journey as a traveller and a writer in many ways mirrors my own. I left my country of birth (New Zealand) to take up residency and citizenship in Australia. Later, I embarked on a series of world travels which I funded by writing about the people and cultures that I encountered. Arriving in Japan, I found employment as an English teacher, married a local Japanese woman, and currently draw on the “immersive” experiences of living in Japan to write fiction.

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