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The Literary Encyclopedia

Charles Godfrey Leland (1824-1903)

Jodie Matthews (University of Huddersfield)

Editor; Educationalist; Historian / Chronicler; Humorist; Journalist; Novelist; Poet; Scholar.
Active 1841-1902 in United States

Leland was born in Philadelphia to an old New England family. His father was a descendant of puritans who had arrived in America in the seventeenth century, while his mother's family came from Rhode Island and later moved to Massachusetts. Schooled in Philadelphia, Charles spent summers in New England. A delicate youth, he was tall and rather weak and had a passion for literature, making him seem eccentric to his peers. He had a self-confessed tendency to idealism and romance, something he later attributed to an inflammation of the brain suffered at a young age. At 14, his father gave him a share in the Philadelphia library, and, around this time, the budding scholar chanced on the works of Carlyle, leading him to discover Spinoza, Schelling, Kant and Fichte.

At 17, he went to Princeton but was unhappy there. He wrote for the college journal, the *Nassau Monthly*, and graduated four years later. Soon after returning to Philadelphia he sailed for Europe, visiting the sights of Italy before studying at Heidelberg University. Here and in Munich, where he settled for a while as a student, he became enamored with German philosophical and drinking culture and would draw on this period of his life for the hugely popular series, *Hans Breitmann's Ballads* (1869-71). These comic ballads, following the adventures of an intoxicated German American who speaks in heavy dialect, served to provide comic relief in a society experiencing considerable European immigration and still riven by the consequences of the civil war.

Leland travelled further in Europe, before arriving in Paris in 1847, where he was caught up in revolutionary events. He became one of the inner circle at the revolutionary headquarters, the Hôtel du Luxembourg, and on 24 February 1848 he joined in the fighting. On his return to America, he began studying law and, though it was not to his liking, he persevered to open his own office as Attorney-at-Law in 1851. He continued to write, contributing to leading magazines in New York and Philadelphia.

By the time the abolition of slavery became an urgent question, Leland was a newspaper editor and wrote for the abolitionist cause, until the proprietor of the publication became nervous about this political content and put a stop to the articles. Leland married his fiancée, Belle Fisher, in 1856. Moving with the Republican magazine, *The Continental*, to Boston in 1861, he met with literary figures of the day, including Emerson, Holmes and Longfellow. *The Continental* failed

financially and Leland returned to Philadelphia in 1862. The city was threatened by the Confederates, and both Leland and his brother answered the call to arms.

By the mid-1860s, Leland had become an imposing physical presence and managing editor of a newspaper. By the end of the decade, his reputation as a writer was made by the *Breitmann Ballads* and he once again left America for Europe, where he began his study of Gypsies, for which he is probably best-remembered today. He believed ethnology to be the best pursuit for the hobbyist because it caused him to investigate his ancestry. Amongst other publications emanating from this period of research were *The English Gypsies and Their Language* (1873), *The Book of English Gypsy Songs* (1875) and *The Gypsies* (1882). Leland moved, apparently fluidly, from Gypsy tents, studying their language and culture, to London society, where he met his early inspiration, Carlyle, as well as Tennyson, Bulwer, Browning, and Wilde. In 1870 he found himself a celebrity in London, with the character Hans Breitmann appearing on three stages at once. Two new Breitmann sequences were published in 1871, *Hans Breitmann as an Uhlan* and *Hans Breitmann in Europe*.

In 1879, Leland returned to Philadelphia, where he took an interest in teaching the practical arts and founded the Industrial Art School, while continuing to write on witchcraft, voodoo and magic. It is difficult to discern how credulous he was on these subjects. On the one hand, he seemed to subscribe fully to their power, while also attempting to impose a scientific explanation on their existence. For example, he describes in *Gypsy Sorcery and Fortune Telling* (1891) how when the conscious will rests, a different kind of power takes over. This, he proposes, is from where clairvoyance and witchcraft emanate. He also saw the association of magic with certain groups of people as an historical construction. He proposed that the Gypsies looked wild and unconventional because of their lives as nomadic wanderers. This appearance caused others to associate them with devils, fairies, elves and goblins, a connection that proved lucrative, as the same people would pay to have their fortunes told on the strength of such a connection.

Leland published several other lesser-known volumes of poetry and minor books on various subjects, including *The Poetry and Mystery of Dreams* (1855), pamphlets on travel, work on art and design, a translation of Heine, and *The Alternate Sex; or, The Female Intellect in Man, and the Masculine in Woman* (1902).

Leland died in Florence in 1903 having returned, finally to Europe. His reputation now lives on through websites fascinated with the occult, and most recently through the resurgent academic interest in the historical representation of Gypsies and travellers.

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