The Library of America interviews Christopher Benfey about Lafcadio Hearn

In connection with the publication in March 2009 of *Lafcadio Hearn: American Writings*, edited by Christopher Benfey, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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In his* New Yorker *review of Jonathan Cott's 1990 biography of Lafcadio Hearn, Brad Leithauser wrote "The canon of nineteenth-century American literature contains a number of outsize oddballs (Poe, Dickinson, and Whitman foremost among them), but even in such singular company Hearn often succeeds in looking sharply eccentric. In his fifty-four years, this British-Irish-Greek-American-Japanese essayist, fiction writer, folklorist, and translator clashed with our country's miscegenation laws (in 1874, with a black clergyman presiding, he married Mattie Foley, an eighteen-year-old mulatto who was born a slave); denounced Christianity and pursued Buddhism; composed journalism of such raw gusto that even in our unbuttoned age it can still jangle the nerves; . . . talked to ghosts in mediums' dens; and became, possibly, a bigamist (his marriage, in 1891, to a Japanese woman was evidently not preceded by a divorce from Mattie). Given a life so contrarily colorful and so charged with explosive social issues, it is surprising that Hearn has not found his way onto more English-department syllabuses." Does this sound accurate? Will* Lafcadio Hearn: American Writings *remedy this oversight?

I'm completely convinced that Hearn's time has come. He famously wrote that he worshiped "the Odd, the Queer, the Strange, the Exotic, the Monstrous." Such pronouncements have made it easy to dismiss him as some oddball combination of Poe and Gauguin, living in an escapist world of dreams. But what Hearn was really interested in was the astonishing variety of human life. That's what comes across strongly in his *American Writings*, in which his omnivorous

curiosity is everywhere on show. Despite his traumatic early years, when he was abandoned by his relatives and just about everyone he trusted, he retained an incredible zest and openness for new experiences and places. When he finds himself in a new locale—an African-American dive in segregated Cincinnati, a voodoo ceremony in New Orleans, an uncharted Filipino fishing village in the Gulf of Mexico—he wants to devour everything in it. He simply goes *further afield* than any of his contemporaries—try to imagine Henry James or Edith Wharton in these places! It's true that Hearn's tastes run toward the decadent and the evanescent. "The Last of the Voudoos" is the title of his vivid article on the legendary voodoo wizard Jean Montanet, and we've also included his charming portrait of "The Last of the New Orleans Fencing-Masters."

But it's variety that Hearn is after. In this regard he reminds me of Henry Adams, who wandered off to Japan and the South Seas during the 1890s. Hearn can't bear the thought that in the modern world, people and places are becoming more homogenous, that the things and practices that interest him are vanishing. "I am apt to become tired of places," he writes to his friend George Gould in 1888. "Such is exactly my present feeling—an unutterable weariness of the aggressive characteristics of existence in a highly organized society." When the restless mood hit him—and it hit him a lot—he was "sure to wander off somewhere else," to Martinique, to Japan, or wherever life seemed less regimented and "organized."

Most people may know Hearn from his writings about Japan, where he spent the last 14 years of his life. Your volume opens with his first book,* Some Chinese Ghosts *(1887), six tales based on Chinese legends. How do these tales compare with* Kwaidan *(1904), perhaps his best-known work?

Late in his life, Hearn became the Brothers Grimm for Japan, assembling the bare bones of some Japanese ghost stories and transmuting them—with a whiff of Poe and Mérimée—into literary masterpieces. Japanese readers often think that *Kwaidan* is a book of Japanese folktales, but it's really pretty much pure Hearn. In 1964, Masaki Kobayashi made an unforgettable film version of four of the tales. It's surprising to discover how much of *Kwaidan* is already there in Hearn's much earlier *Some Chinese Ghosts*. Here is Hearn living in New Orleans, with not a jot of direct experience of Asia, confidently reworking Chinese legends he has gathered from a multitude of scholarly sources. Borrowing freely from the French writer Gautier's jeweled style, Hearn is at his most Baroque in retelling the story of the forging of the great imperial bell, in which "gold and brass will never meet in wedlock, silver and iron never will embrace, until the flesh of a maiden be melted in the crucible," or when he's evoking the miraculous origins

of Chinese porcelain. These six precocious tales, a foretaste of Hearn's later life in Japan, are really about the miracle of artistic invention, which was on Hearn's mind as he struggled to make the transition from life as a hardworking journalist to that of a novelist and writer of exotic tales.

Almost half the volume is devoted to what many consider Hearn's masterpiece,* Two Years in the French West Indies *(1890), which recounts in often sensuous prose his observations while living in Martinique. This book seems to preserve in amber the town of St. Pierre, which was completely destroyed when Mount Pelée erupted in 1902.* The New York Times *review closed with "There is no writer who could have so steeped himself in this languorous Creole life and then tell so well about it." How does this work compare with other travel writing of the time?

One of our best current travel writers, Pico Iyer, uses the phrase "global soul" for people who have adapted themselves to our new world of mass migration and globalization. Hearn, it seems to me, was an early version of a global soul. Born into the British Empire, he experienced firsthand the bitter divisions of the American Gilded Age, and lived to witness the rise of a new power in Asia: Imperial Japan. Like Conrad and Nabokov, he was at home in several languages; like them, he was an intellectual and aesthetic nomad, nowhere truly at home. Forced by circumstances to be always on the move, always finding a way to make a living under new conditions, Hearn developed a unique writing style to register this kind of experience. He met Mark Twain in New Orleans (we've included an interesting sketch of their encounter), but he rejected Twain's cutting irony and jaded sense that the world was pretty much old hat. Hearn's ability to capture the fleeting and fragmentary nature of immediate experience is sometimes referred to as literary impressionism. Dip into *Two Years in the French West Indies* at random and you'll see what I mean, as in this voyage to the island of Santa Cruz: "As we approach, sunlighted surfaces come out still more luminously green. Glens and sheltered valleys still hold blues and grays; but points fairly illuminated by the solar glow show just such a fiery green as burns in the plumage of certain hummingbirds."

Even though Hearn lost one eye in a childhood accident and had poor vision in the other, his writing shows acute sensitivity to colors and perspective. He liked to include drawings and woodcuts in his letters and articles and even bought an expensive camera for his trip to Martinique.* Two Years in the French West Indies *includes numerous illustrations. What was Hearn's involvement with the creation and selection of these plates?

People with terrible eyesight can be amazingly observant. The near-sighted Edgar Degas, the subject of my book *Degas in New Orleans*, visited the Crescent City a few years before Hearn and got more of post–Civil War New Orleans into his paintings than any other artist. Hearn was touchy about illustrations, and complained when *Harper's Monthly* published three of his Martinique sketches with "illustrations that contradict the text." He was much happier with the illustrations for *Two Years in the French West Indies*. He credited these to "several beautiful photographs" taken by William Lawless, British Consul at St. Pierre, which were "used in the preparation of the illustrations." It's not entirely clear what this "preparation" consisted of; some of the illustrations seem to be drawings based very closely on photographs while others, like the ghostly "Confirmation Procession," seem freely drawn, and others still, like a diagram of a rowboat, are strictly informational. It's also clear that various artists had a hand in them; one handsome drawing, of one of the carrier-women known as "porteuses," is signed "Hillborg." My strong suspicion is that *Harper's* drew on its vast picture file. Hearn evidently preferred the illustrations based closely on photographs. My sense is that these illustrations, by providing the visual facts, allowed Hearn to convey the elusive impressions and the atmosphere that interested him most.

Guy Davenport has called* Chita *(1889) a "lost classic" of American literature fusing "French narrative as perfected by Prosper Mérimée, Pierre Loti, and Guy de Maupassant with Winslow Homer." It has to also be considered a classic of the disaster genre. Is it due for rediscovery?

It's an absolutely gorgeous book, rendered more piquant by the Katrina disaster. It's about a little girl who survives a devastating hurricane on an island near New Orleans in the Gulf of Mexico. The pages in which Hearn evokes the origins of the storm, from the first "monstrous wrinkle, an immeasurable fold of green water, moving swift as a cloud-shadow pursued by sunlight," to the full-blown explosion of the storm are some of the great passages in American literature—worthy of Melville—about sheer looming disaster. Once you've read the book, you want to go back and read it again—it's such an exquisite balance of natural forces, tragic characters, and the bewitching landscape of the Gulf islands. It slowly dawns on the reader that the Civil War occurs in the interstices of the narrative, distant but exerting its pull like a distant storm. I'm convinced that *Chita* had a major influence on writers like Kate Chopin, who covered some of the same terrain in her classic novel *The Awakening*. Davenport is right that Hearn provided a bridge between French and American literature, through his translations of Flaubert and Maupassant, and through his

own fiction, which has a distinctively French tinge, in both its melancholy decadence and in its sharp-eyed observation.

The reviewer for* The Nation *found Hearn's second novel* Youma *(1890) to have a "saner richness" than* Chita*. How is it different?

Youma is a pendant to *Chita*, though the disaster this time is manmade—the eruption of a slave rebellion in Martinique in response to the Republican uprising in France of 1848. We don't think of Hearn as a political writer but *Youma* has great political sophistication in its portrait of a beautiful slave torn between her loyalty to her own people and her love for the family she has so loyally served. There's a great scene early on in the novel that prefigures the final conflict: a six-foot-long poisonous snake slides into the room where Youma is taking care of the little daughter of the white family, who moans in terror that "there is Something in the room!" *Youma* has the chiseled feel of certain American classics of historical fiction such as Melville's "Benito Cereno"; *Chita* is more of a dream unleashed.

Hearn cut his teeth as a 25-year-old journalist in Cincinnati (1875-1877) and quickly became known for his colorful accounts of grisly crimes. Do you think that crime was just a standard beat for an apprentice reporter, or was it something that his temperament drew him to?

Hearn realized early on that he could bring something fresh to the gory stories of the popular press. He was so steeped in Poe that his friends in New Orleans called him "the Raven," and he knew his Baudelaire by heart. One thing he learned from Poe is that you've got to try to enter into the psyche of the criminal if you really want to make crime and criminality feel immediate to the reader. In his article "Gibbeted: Execution of a Youthful Murderer," he goes even further, and makes his readers really sympathetic to the young man convicted of killing a man during a drunken melee in Cincinnati. It turns out, as we've discovered in our own time, that public executions don't always go as planned, and that's the case in spades on the scaffold in "Gibbeted."

According to historian Wilbur Mineray, who oversees the Hearn collection at Tulane University, "more books [have been] written about Hearn than any other New Orleanian other than Louis Armstrong." S. Frederick Starr entitled his collection of Hearn's writings* Inventing New Orleans*. You've selected 104 pages from the 2,000 some news stories Hearn wrote during the ten years (1877–1886) he worked as a journalist in New Orleans. Is it accurate to say he invented New Orleans? Can you point us to the pieces that support this claim?

Immediately upon his arrival in 1877, Hearn realized that New Orleans was a literary gold mine, ripe for prospecting. Along with his close friend George Washington Cable, Hearn really discovered New Orleans as a literary property, collecting African-American songs and proverbs, Creole recipes, stories of voodoo, and so on. We've included some delightful little essays of his on such topics as the "curious nomenclature of New Orleans streets" as well as his great evocation of the dampness of New Orleans in wet weather: "It is spectral, mysterious, inexplicable. Strong walls and stout doors can not keep it from entering; windows and doors can not exclude it. You might as well try to lock out a ghost. Bolts of steel and barriers of stone are equally unavailing, and the stone moulders, and this steel is smitten with red leprosy." But Hearn went further than Cable in revealing a single Caribbean cultural realm, part French, part Spanish, part African, and part "American," both in his New Orleans and Martinique journalism and in *Chita*.

You include 40 pages of Hearn's letters but they are addressed to just three correspondents. Hearn was notoriously unsociable and even paranoid. How were his relationships with these three people different? Why pick these letters?

When I started working my way through Hearn's letters, I discovered immediately that previous selections, especially those by his New Orleans friend and newspaper colleague Elizabeth Bisland, had been heavily edited. Bisland cut out all mention of Hearn's sex life, his confession, for example, that during a period in 1881 he "went out almost nightly to visit different places and pass each evening with a different woman." The letters we've included reveal two contrasting sides of Hearn's temperament: his intense eroticism and his equally intense scholarly curiosity. Sometimes these merge, as in his meditation on the erotic poetry of Gautier or Huysmans' "terrible essay on the odors which emanate from a woman's armpits." Hearn's letters are really written in series, pursuing certain lines of thought with particular correspondents.

His most revealing letters by far are addressed to Henry Krehbiel, a close and trusted friend from his Cincinnati days who became music critic for the *New York Tribune* and wrote a pioneering study of African-American music. There's a running contrast in these letters between Hearn as Latin-Greek-Mediterranean dreamer-sensualist vs. Krehbiel as Northern Goth, cerebral and repressed. A letter to Hearn's editor Page Baker, describing a sensual stay at Grande Isle in the Gulf (where part of Chopin's *The Awakening* is also set) is profusely illustrated with Hearn's wonderful drawings of local fauna, including Miss Bisland swimming with loosened hair. With a third correspondent, a

Philadelphia doctor named George Gould, Hearn pursued his own conflicted ideas about American literature, including Emerson and Whitman. "Then there is a shagginess, an uncouthness, a Calibanishness about Whitman that repels," he wrote. "He makes me think of some gigantic dumb being that sees things, and wants to make others see things, and cannot for want of a finer means of expression than Nature gives him. But there is manifest the rude nobility of the man. . . . Whitman lays a Cyclopean foundation on which, I fancy, some wonderful architect will yet build up some marvelous thing."

How did you become involved with the work of Lafcadio Hearn? Compiling a 900-page selection of his American writings must have immersed you in his world. What discoveries did you make while there?

I feel as though I've been following in Hearn's footsteps for a long, long time. I grew up in Indiana, not far from Cincinnati, so that territory is familiar to me. When I started researching my book on Degas in New Orleans, I kept bumping into Hearn, and a few phrases of his made it into my book, like his lovely description in *Chita* of the narrow steamboats lined up along the wharf at the foot of Saint-Louis Street, "all striving for places to rest their white breasts against the levee, side by side,—like great weary swans." My next book, *The Great Wave*, is about the American fascination with Japan during the Gilded Age, and of course Hearn is an integral figure in that story. I recount his friendship with the Boston Orientalist Ernest Fenollosa, whose manuscripts on Asian poetry and the Chinese written character were so important to Ezra Pound. In addition to restoring the erotic side of Hearn's temperament, I'd say that my biggest discovery was how sophisticated Hearn was about Asia before he ever set foot there.

You are responsible for one of the more beguiling works of literary criticism of the past year.* A Summer of Hummingbirds *(2008) connects the worlds of Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Martin Johnson Heade in the summer of 1882 through the image of the hummingbird. So is there a leitmotif that connects the many worlds Lafcadio Hearn travels through in this volume: Cincinnati, New Orleans, and Martinique?

What a great question. I'd say that the leitmotif is a woman on the move. In Cincinnati, it's Hearn's own common-law wife, Mattie, who is born a slave in Kentucky, wanders north to Cincinnati, communicates with spirits, walks and works the streets, marries Hearn, moves to Indianapolis, and so on. In *Chita*, it is Conchita herself, literally adrift in the waters of the Gulf, and then making her

way among the various cultures of the islands and New Orleans. Hearn begins his "Martinique Sketches" with a vivid portrait of "*Les Porteuses*," native women who travel great distances on foot to deliver produce to the plantations in the interior of the island. "Those who believe that great physical endurance and physical energy cannot exist in the tropics do not know the creole-carrier-girl." I suspect that all these women on the move are in some sense self-portraits of the rootless Hearn himself, adrift in the world.

Is there enough additional Hearn material to make another Library of America volume?

On to Japan!