3 Lafcadio Hearn: the first great literary emissary from the West

Of all the writers or teachers to have visited Japan, Lafcadio Hearn has been evaluated as the one who achieved the best understanding of Japanese culture and the characteristics of the people – but was this really the case?

Half-Irish, half-Greek, Hearn spent his youthful years not only in England, but in Greece, Ireland, the French Indies and America before coming to Japan at the age of forty in 1890 – over a hundred years ago. He had lost the sight of one eye as the result of an accident when he was a pupil at Ushaw College (St Cuthbert’s) near Durham, and had also endured a string of unsuccessful careers and a miserable personal life before his arrival in Japan; his parents divorced when he was young and he had to adjust himself almost single-handed to unsympathetic societies both in England and abroad, where he felt out of place and not genuinely or fully accepted. Penniless, he had set sail for America when he was only nineteen years old, and found work as a journalist. Spiritually – indeed physically – he was homeless until he found a home and his own family through marriage to a Japanese woman in Matsüe, in the Western part of Japan, where he found real happiness in the warm embrace of the local people. He started as a teacher of English in the secondary school in Matsüe, being promoted later to a professorship of English literature at Tokyo University, a position which Edmund Blunden was destined to occupy twenty years later.

There is no doubt that Hearn observed the Japanese character remarkably accurately, and achieved some deep insights, as revealed in his first accounts of Japan, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, published in 1894. For example, in the field of Japanese education, he found both his colleagues and the conduct of school discipline less harsh than their Western counterparts. He was impressed by the fact that no pupils were caned or whipped in Japanese schools, should they fail to satisfy their tutors both in discipline or study. This contrasted with his experiences in an English public school. Equally, however, Hearn shrewdly noticed that there was generally considerable stress in Japanese classrooms, caused by the frugal and spartan atmosphere, lack of meat, and so forth, which derived from a high idealism and a strongly promoted nationalism. He was amazed to hear that 20 per cent of male students were thorough adherents of the cult of emperor worship, and were ready to die for the emperor, who represented the spirit and honour of Japan – *yamato damashii*. Unlike today, this was the era when the emperor was erroneously but fervently believed to be a ‘living god’ and the supreme
symbol of the nation, long protected by the spirits of various gods and directly descended from a sun-goddess – amaterasu onikami.

Hearn thought, rather mistakenly as it turned out, that Japan’s future must be safe in the hands of those devoted and loyal youths. His prediction was regrettably to prove far from true, because Japan headed thereafter towards increasing aggression in Eastern Asia, playing the roles of oppressor and invader – beginning with the regional war with China in the 1930s, and ending with her miserable defeat in the Second World War. Hearn’s vision of the future was swept aside by the rampant power of militarism which in the late nineteenth century was still under the control of the effaced but single-minded authority of the emperor. The country was also under the strong influence of Shintoism, fascinated by goblin gods, various shades, apparitions and quasi-magical beliefs, for example in snow-women.

Hearn’s acute perception detected that behind the disguise of a gentle mask, there lurked a certain hardness and a ‘volcanic’ temper within the Japanese character. He quotes a story on such a theme, which culminates in the tragic murder of a relation and the double suicide of a young man and his lover, who had been emotionally provoked by his uncle in the public baths. This uncle had previously referred to the young man’s lover in an insulting manner. Hearn was surprised to find that even a rather slight and unimportant matter could easily trigger such monumental anger. He attributed this to a racial trait of South-East Asians, including Malays and so on, and also to the common Japanese custom of suppressing personal feelings.

Hearn was undoubtedly one of the most brilliant storytellers in English literature; and his stories, which were based on what he had heard from his Japanese friends, often touch upon the plight of unfortunate young women who willingly sacrificed themselves and were sold as geisha to save the family from debt-collectors and homelessness. Such a geisha was a ‘slave’ in an institution practising prostitution – under the cover of courtesan-style training in etiquette, dancing and other skills such as playing musical instruments – until she could find a generous patron who would be able to pay off all her debts (thus freeing her from the evil ties). The patron would take her as his mistress or concubine, even sometimes as his wife, securing for her a place in this unsympathetic society. In the usual case, his wife would come from a much more decent background, and their marriage would have been arranged.

The most impressive story, beautifully told by Hearn, concerns a shirabyoshi, one of the upper-crust of the courtesans, who had lived with her samurai lover-patron in a hut in the depths of the mountains – hidden from the eyes of criticism and social censure. In due course, he was taken ill and died, leaving her all alone. The story is entitled ‘Of a dancing girl’.