

Women in the World of Lafcadio Hearn

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Abstract

The stories of Lafcadio Hearn and his role as a teacher are well known in Japan, but very few people know much about his life before coming to Japan or why he chose the subjects he did to write about. In this paper and another report, his life and work will be considered from the standpoint of the role played in them by women. In this first report, his relationships with women and their influence on his life and work will be discussed. Seven women were particularly important in Hearn's life and each one is dealt with.

Although many Japanese know and enjoy the stories of Lafcadio Hearn, particularly his ghost stories, very few know much about his life and writing before he came to Japan and why he chose the subjects he did to write about. Hearn was many things; a journalist, a translator, an essayist, a travel writer, a folklorist and, in Japan, a teacher. In this paper and a subsequent report, his life and work will be considered from the standpoint of the role played in them by women. In this first report, his relationships with women and their influence on his life and work will be discussed. In a subsequent paper, his attitudes about women in general, their treatment in literature, and his treatment of them in his own writing will be dealt with.

In considering women in Hearn's life, seven women come to mind; his mother, the great-aunt who adopted and raised him, a woman known only as Cousin Jane, Mattie Foley (his first wife), Elizabeth Bisland, Leona Queyrouze and Setsu Koizumi. Some played a more significant role than others, but they are all important to a better understanding of Hearn, since they all changed this very sensitive person in some way.

Hearn's mother, Rosa Antonia Cassimati, was born on the Greek island of Cerigo in 1823. Of a noble family, she spoke Romaic and Italian but had no formal education and was illiterate.¹⁾ She fell in love with Charles Bush Hearn, a surgeon of the British Army Medical Staff stationed with a regiment on Cerigo, in 1848 and left her home with him, pregnant, in the summer of 1849, when he was transferred to the island of Leucadia. On this island, from which Lafcadio Hearn's name would come, their first son, George, was born in July, and they married in November. However, three months later Bush Hearn was transferred once again, this time to the British West Indies. And, since he had not informed his superiors of his marriage, Rosa could neither go with him nor receive a wife's financial allotment.²⁾ She would not see him again for three years and then it would be in Ireland rather than Greece. In the meantime, she faced the hardships of life without a husband or

family, for the marriage had not received their approval, and of a second pregnancy. Under such conditions, Patrick Lafcadio Hearn was born on June 27, 1850. In the next month, his brother George died.³⁾ What life was really like for Rose is unknown, but, colored by the years that had passed and his idealization of his mother, Hearn wrote of his memories of that time in *Out of the East*, his second book on Japan:

I have memory of a place and a magical time in which the Sun and the Moon were larger and brighter than now. Whether it was of this life or of some other life before I cannot tell. But I know the sky was very much more blue and much nearer to the world — almost as it seems above the masts of a steamer steaming into equatorial summer And all that country and time were softly ruled by the One who thought only of ways to make me happy. Sometimes I would refuse to be made happy, and that always caused her pain, although she was divine; and I remember that I tried very hard to be sorry At last there came a parting day; and she wept, and told me of a charm she had given that I must never, never lose, because it would keep me young, and give me power to return. But I never returned. And the years went; and one day I knew I had lost the charm, and had become ridiculously old.⁴⁾

In the summer of 1852, Charles Bush Hearn reported his marriage to Rosa and in July of that year she and Patrick Lafcadio (he would drop the name Patrick when he came to America) left Greece and traveled to Ireland.⁵⁾ In Dublin, where Bush Hearn's family lived, dark and foggy days replaced the bright ones mother and son had known on Leucadia, English proved impossible for Rosa to learn, and she was highly sensitive to the reservations the Protestant Hearn had about a woman of the Greek Orthodox faith. The years of loneliness, estrangement from her parents, and the death of her first son began to have their effects on Rosa. She fell into depression, was unconcerned about her appearance, flew into violent rages, and then, shortly after reunion with her husband, attempted suicide by jumping out of a window.⁶⁾ She became mentally ill, but through the kindness of a Roman Catholic aunt of her husband, Sarah Brenane, largely recovered. But she was not meant to find happiness in Dublin nor to stay with her son. In 1854, while her husband was once again away, Rosa, again pregnant, returned to visit and make a reconciliation with her family. The trip was paid for by Mrs. Brenane. When she left she undoubtedly intended to return to Dublin, but she didn't. And when Bush Hearn returned two years later he did not go in search of Rosa. Instead he arranged to have their marriage annulled and immediately remarried. In Greece, Rosa bore a third son, Daniel James, and also remarried. But as part of the marriage agreement she was forced to relinquish her ties to her sons. Daniel James was sent to England and raised separately from Lafcadio. Rosa is said to have returned to see her children but was forbidden to. She bore her second husband four children, but she never completely recovered from the mental illness she had experienced in Dublin. It returned and she spent the last ten years of her life in the National Mental Asylum at Corfu, dying on December 12, 1882 at the age of fifty-nine.⁷⁾ A few years earlier, thousands of miles away, her son had considered visiting the Greek Consulate to look for her, but he only knew the name Rosa, and therefore gave up.

The number of years Hearn spent with his mother were short, but during the rest of his life she was never out of his mind. When he and his brother found each other just before he came to Japan, Hearn wrote him;

Whatever there is of good in me ,and, I believe, whatever there is of deeper good in yourself — came from that dark race-soul of which we know so little. My love of right, my hate of wrong, my admiration for what is beautiful and true, my capacity for faith in man or woman, my sensitiveness to artistic things, which gives me whatever little success I have — even that language power whose physical sign is the large eyes of both of us — came from Her.⁸⁾

The few years Hearn had with his mother may have influenced him in two ways. First, it has been suggested that his attraction to dark-skinned women, to Mattie Foley, to unnamed women he met in the brothels of Cincinnati and New Orleans, to others he knew for a short time in the French West Indies, and to Setsu Koizumi, had something to do with “that dark race-soul” he could not forget. It may have also, consciously or unconsciously, led him to write, translate (from French and Japanese) and adapt a number of stories which Beongcheon Yu, author of *An Ape of Gods: The Art and Thought of Lafcadio Hearn*, has called tales of spectral love; love for supernatural beings. Of course, Rosa was not supernatural and other factors probably led to the selection of this theme, but the heroines of these stories, who are always in some way supernatural, leave their husbands in despair.⁹⁾ In his book *Stray Leaves from Strange Literature* (1884) appear three such stories: “The Book of Thoth,” “The Fountain Maiden,” and “The Bird Wife”. In the last of these, the union of an Eskimo hunter and a bird woman, resembles a later story Hearn included in *Kwaidan* (1904) entitled “Oshidori.”^{10), 11)} And, of course, one of Hearn’s most famous stories, “Yuki Onna”, is a tale of spectral love.

When Rosa returned to Greece, her son was left in the care of Sarah Brenane, and it was she who raised him. As for Charles Bush Hearn, he left for India immediately after his remarriage, taking his wife with him. There she bore three daughters, one of whom Hearn would correspond with from Japan. But she died there and Bush Hearn, suffering from malaria, died in 1866 while returning to England.¹²⁾ It is unclear whether Hearn began living with his Aunt Sarah before or after his mother left, but when he was left without either parent in 1856, Mrs. Brenane, then sixty-four, decided to raise him. Unfortunately she wasn’t entirely interested in Lafcadio for his own sake. She wanted him to fulfill her husband’s dying wish for a proper Catholic heir. She did what she thought was good for him in her eyes, but it was not always good. It led him to develop a terror of ghosts as a child that lasted until he was sent away to school and caused him to hate Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. Aunt Sarah thought that if he were made to sleep in a room alone, he would overcome his fear of the dark. This was when he was five and he slept this way for many years. Recalling the experience in the pages of another book on Japan, *Shadowings* (1900), in an essay entitled “Nightmare-touch”, he wrote:

When about five years old I was condemned to sleep by myself in a certain isolated room, thereafter always called the Child’s Room A law was made that no light should be left in the Child’s Room at night,— simply because the Child was afraid of the dark. His fear of the dark was judged to be a mental disorder requiring severe treatment Night after night when I had been warmly tucked into bed, the lamp was removed; the key clicked in the lock; the protecting light and footsteps of my guardian receded together. Then an agony of fear would come upon me. Something in the black air would seem to gather and grow — (I thought that I could even hear it grow) — till I had to scream. Screaming regularly brought punish-

ment; but it also brought back the light, which more than consoled for the punishment. This fact being at last found out, orders were given to pay no further heed to the screams of the Child.

And then he described his haunTERS:

They were not like any people I had ever known. They were shadowy dark-robed figures, capable of atrocious self-distortion — capable, for instance, of growing up to the ceiling, and then across it, and then lengthening themselves, head-downwards, along the opposite wall. Only their faces were distinct; and I tried not to look at their faces.¹³⁾

For the boy, it was a horrifying experience, but without it his interest in ghosts in America and Japan would not have been kindled.

Hearn's hatred of Christianity grew out of the training he received at private Catholic schools Mrs. Brenane sent him to in France and England and also out of at least one experience with the woman he knew as Cousin June. Although not really a cousin, she visited Aunt Sarah every year. Remembering her later he recalled that she never smiled, as though she had some secret grief. She was always severely dressed in black. Usually she was kind; but there were times when she became so silent and sombre that he feared to approach her. At such times she also talked to him about being good, about being truthful, about being obedient, about trying "to please God." Hearn hated this. He felt he was being found fault with and also being pitied. So one dark morning when she began to talk this way, he asked her why he should try to please God more than anyone else. Shocked, she grabbed him and asked him if he knew who God was and what would happen to him if he didn't please God — that he would go to Hell. And then she described it to him:

I do not remember all the rest of her words; I can recall with distinctness only the following: " — and send you down to hell to burn alive for ever and ever! ... Think of it! — always burning, burning, burning! — screaming and burning! — never to be saved from that pain of fire! ... You remember when you burned your finger at the lamp? — Think of your whole body burning — always, always, always, burning! — for ever and ever! I can still see her face as in the instant of that utterance ... the horror upon it and the pain."¹⁴⁾

Although there were individual Christians whom Hearn met during his lifetime whom he admired, he always had a deep disdain for any form of Christianity and felt the attitude was mutual, as indicated in a letter to a friend, Mitchell McDonald, in 1898:

I have down on me the Church. By Church, you must not think of the Roman, Greek, Episcopalian, etc. persuasions-- but all Christendom supporting missionary societies, and opposing free-thinking in any shape. Do not be deceived by a few kindly notes about my work from religious sources. They are genuine-- but they signify absolutely nothing against the great dead weight of more orthodox opinion. As Professor Huxley says, no man can tell the force of a belief until he has had the experience of fighting it.¹⁵⁾

In 1869, alone and with a very small amount of money, Hearn was sent off to America. He had not lived up to his Aunt Sarah's expectations for him as a proper heir and she had found another one. And that person had now sent him off to Cincinnati, Ohio, where a relative of his wife lived, to start a new life. The relative was to provide him with a small sum of money each month, but he was made to feel so embarrassed the first time he went for it that he never returned. So, a stranger in a strange land, he had to find a way to make

a living to survive. He had no work experience and at times he barely did survive, sleeping in livery stables or inside wooden crates in alley ways. He also found some refuge in the Cincinnati Public Library, where he read for hours. He eventually was given some secretarial and clerical work to do by a Unitarian minister and then he made the acquaintance of Henry Watkin, a printer, who allowed him to sleep in his print shop. Gradually he got work on cheap weekly papers and then, in 1872, on a major daily, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*.¹⁶⁾ He remained there until 1875, after which he worked on another paper, the *Cincinnati Commercial*. There he stayed until he left Cincinnati in 1877.¹⁷⁾ By that time he had become a star reporter. But before all this success occurred, he met the next important woman in his life, Mattie Foley, the woman who for a very short time would be his wife.

What is known of Hearn's relationship with Mattie Foley comes from his own direct references to her in letters to his closest friends, such as Henry Watkin, and from portions of somewhat unreliable interviews with her in 1906, at which time she was trying to claim Hearn's estate. They probably met when Hearn was brought to a boarding house at 215 Plum Street in a rundown section of the city. At the time he had no work and probably worked as a servant until he started writing stories for the weeklies. Mattie was the cook in this boarding house. A mulatto, offspring of a white father and Negro mother, and a former slave, born in Manville, Kentucky in 1856, she came to the city some time between 1869 and 1871.¹⁸⁾ She was kind to Hearn when he needed kindness. He could spill out his thoughts and feelings to her, although she did not always understand everything he was talking about. She told him of her troubles, too. He sympathized with her and, for a time at least, loved her. He was hungry for affection and she gave it to him. In addition, she was attractive, sometimes being mistaken for white. In 1875, without using her name, he described her in a story in the *Cincinnati Commercial*:

She was a healthy, well built country girl, whom the most critical must have called good looking, robust and ruddy, despite the toil in a boarding house kitchen, but with a strangely thoughtful expression in large dark eyes, as though she were ever watching the motions of Somebody who cast no shadow, and was invisible to others ... She had never learned to read and write, but possessed naturally a wonderful wealth of verbal description, a more than ordinarily vivid memory, and a gift of conversation which would have charmed an Italian improvisatore.¹⁹⁾

When they began to live together or have a more intimate relationship is unknown, but Hearn decided he wanted to legalize it in the summer of 1874. However, he soon found that under a Ohio law that existed from 1861 to 1877, marriage between a white person and a Negro was illegal. Mattie later said she warned him that he would be ostracized if he married her, but he insisted on going ahead anyway. One friend refused to be a witness and the first minister he asked refused to perform the ceremony. But in some way, by deception, he obtained a license and found a second minister to marry them on June 14, 1874.²⁰⁾ Some friends didn't care, while others ceased to be his friends.

Perhaps in part through his relationship and then marriage to Mattie, the visits that he began to make to Bucktown, the Negro quarter of Cincinnati, were made easier, for it was not a place that many whites even went in the daytime, and Hearn often went there at night. Between 1874 and 1877 he wrote at least a dozen stories about the Negro quarter

and its inhabitants, the steamboat hands and their women. He became a serious student of its unusual society, studying its songs, dances, superstitions and language.²¹⁾ These sketches of Bucktown are almost the only picture that exists of urban Negro life in early post-Civil War America.²²⁾ The interests that began here in other peoples continued in the study of Negroes in New Orleans and the French West Indies and in his books on Japan.

Unfortunately, once they were married, Hearn and Mattie didn't remain together long. They separated and came together again and then separated again a number of times. Mattie could not stand Hearn's dark moods and he was satisfied with neither her cooking nor her cleaning. Their final separation came in the fall of 1877. According to Mattie, she left Hearn and the city, and when she returned nine months later he was gone. Later she said she had heard he died in the South.²³⁾

In letters to Henry Watkin after he left Cincinnati, however, Hearn painted a different picture. He wrote of "her despairing efforts to just speak to me once more, and my only answer being to have her arrested and locked up all night in the police station."²⁴⁾ Later he wrote, "I'm glad Mattie came to see you. I wish I could help her, but I do not know how. If she had a good place, she would do well."²⁵⁾ Guilt-stricken at times, he wrote in June, 1878: "I feel all the time as if I saw Mattie looking at me or following me and the thought comes to me of the little present she made me and a little woolly lock of her hair she sent me, and her despairing effort to speak to me once more."²⁶⁾ They never met again, Hearn dying in Tokyo in September, 1904 and Mattie, in Cincinnati in November, 1913, after amputation of one of her legs.²⁷⁾

Hearn arrived in New Orleans on November 12, 1877 with little more than twenty dollars in his pocket.²⁸⁾ Therefore he started out little better than he had in Cincinnati some eight years earlier. In addition, in the early months of 1878 he was felled by dengue fever. By summer he was to write Watkin the following:

Have been here seven months and never made one cent in the city Books and clothes all gone, shirt sticking through seat of my pants, -- literary work rejected East, -- get a five cent meal once in two days -- don't know one night where I'm going to sleep the next, -- and am d -- d sick with the climate into the bargain. Yellow fever supposed to be in the city. Newspapers expect to bust up D -- n New Orleans! -- wish I'd never seen it.²⁹⁾

But the very next day he got a job as an assistant editor on a new paper, the *New Orleans City Item*, and from then on things went well.

Two women are linked with Hearn during his ten years in New Orleans, although one only in the last year and only briefly. The first, Elizabeth Bisland, he would see again in New York City, where she would eventually move. And, although she would not affect his writing in any particular way, she helped when he needed help, helped his family after he died, wrote one of the early biographies of Hearn and collected his works and letters into the sixteen volume *Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*. Born in 1861, Bisland first met Hearn in the winter of 1882, by which time he was working as an editor on another paper, the *Times-Democrat*, and she was, too. He admired her writing and was attracted to her both physically and intellectually, but suspected marriage to such a forceful woman would make the life of any husband an inferno.³⁰⁾ At the age of sixteen Hearn had been struck in the left eye by the end of a rope. The eye was blinded and was covered with a milky white scar tissue.

The other eye, due to a condition called progressive myopia, tended to protrude. This appearance and his height, he was only five feet three inches (160 centimeters) tall, convinced him that he was unattractive to almost any woman. Therefore he dreamed about an ideal woman, a perfect woman, a woman he could never know, so that he wouldn't be disappointed by rejection.³¹⁾ Hearn was also morbidly awkward with women he considered to be his equals and Elizabeth Bisland and Leona Queyrouze were among them. He went to prostitutes to satisfy his physical needs and turned women like Bisland and Queyrouze into mothers, sisters or younger brothers to allow him to continue his friendships with them. He was able to do this with Leona Queyrouze for a while, before leaving her and the city for the French West Indies, but he wasn't so successful at it with Bisland. He became dazed at the sight of her and she actually frightened him. She admired both Hearn and his writing and may have felt something deeper, but when she showed such interest he could hardly speak to her at all.³²⁾ The feelings appear to have become deeper by 1889, when she was in New York and he was briefly staying in Philadelphia. He then wrote of a visit to a park and of the lovers he had seen there:

Everybody in the park seems to be making love to somebody. Love is so much the atmosphere of the place — a part of the light and calm and perfume — that you feel as if drenched with it, permeated with it, mesmerized. And if you are all alone, you will look about you once in a while wondering that somebody else is not beside you — But I forgot that I am not writing to a stupid man, like myself.³³⁾

Once he was in New York and spent time with her, his feelings grew stronger. Writing to a mutual friend at that time, he remarked: "As for me, she is like hashhish. I can't remember anything she says or anything I myself say after leaving the house: my head is all in a whirl, and I walk against people in the street, and get run over, and lose my way — my sense of orientation being grievously disturbed. But I am not in love at all, no such foolishness as that ..."³⁴⁾ After Hearn went to Japan they continued to correspond, although infrequently. In 1903 she attempted to get him a post at Cornell University but arrangements fell through. Eventually she would visit Japan after his death and meet his family.

The relationship that Hearn had with Leona Queyrouze developed during his last months in New Orleans. They met in a bookstore. She was passing the store, saw Hearn through the window (his picture had appeared in the newspaper), entered the store, went up to him, introduced herself and told him how much she admired his work. This was not typical behavior for a nineteenth century American woman and Leona Queyrouze was not typical. She had been raised like a son by her father and been given an education most women did not receive at that time. She had her own literary ambitions and discussed them and Creole culture with Hearn, for she was a Creole. They kept talking as they walked out of the store and continued until he was at her doorstep. Afterwards he visited her to talk. The effect on him of this woman was expressed at the end of his first visit when he said, trying to avoid a deeper relationship: "I would like to lock upon you as a younger brother; would you mind."³⁵⁾ Almost fifty years later she published a book describing her friendship with Hearn and including letters he had written, *The Idyl: My Personal Reminiscences of Lafcadio Hearn*.³⁶⁾ The number of visits were small and he left New Orleans a short time la-

ter for the French West Indies, but before he left he expressed some of his feelings in a letter to Dr. Rudolph Matas, a close friend: "Sorry you did not meet Miss Q. Would so much have liked your idea of her. I am not sceptical now; but do not know what to do. I fear to write to her. All fire and nerves and scintillation; a tropical being in mind and physique, and I could never be to her what I should like to be."³⁷⁾

Setsu Koizumi, who became Hearn's wife, the mother of his four children and his collaborator in the translation of numerous tales from Japanese, was twenty-two years old when she met Hearn. She was the daughter of one samurai family, the Koizumis, and had been adopted into another, the Inagakis. Neither family was in a financially secure condition and Setsu worked to help. She met Hearn when she cared for him during a serious illness he experienced during his first winter in Matsue as an English teacher. She acted as a live-in maid, but people talked, and even in one of the local newspapers she was referred to as Hearn's "mekake" or mistress. During the Meiji era there was nothing embarrassing about a man having a mistress, but Hearn decided to marry her and take responsibility not only for her but also for her family (or families), an obligation assumed by a Japanese son-in-law at that time. Probably they married in January, 1891³⁸⁾ The marriage consisted of a Japanese wedding ceremony, since if Hearn had married her in a foreign ceremony and registered their marriage at the British Consulate in Kobe, Setsu would have lost both her citizenship and property rights. And the marriage was not made legal from the Japanese side until a few years later when Hearn became a Japanese citizen.

In Matsue, Hearn had been lonely and unable to look after himself and all his life he had wanted a family. Now he had one. If Hearn had not married Setsu, it is likely that he would have returned to the United States or gone to some other part of the world. He indicated as much in a letter to a friend in 1891: "My household relations have been extremely happy. The only trouble is that they begin to take the shape of something unbreakable, and to bind me very fast here at the very time I was beginning to feel like going away."³⁹⁾ Two years later, in a letter to the same friend, he expressed the opinion that the passions of a bachelor had been dampened by marriage, not considering this to necessarily be bad: "Marriage seems to me the certain destruction of all that emotion and suffering, — so that one afterwards looks back at the old times with wonder. One cannot dream or desire anything more, after love is transmuted into the friendship of marriage. It is like a haven from which you can see the dangerous sea currents, running like violet bands beyond you out of sight."⁴⁰⁾

Setsu was not only wife and mother, she was also an assistant and collaborator in Hearn's work. He sent her to Kabuki and other plays and then had her relate the plots to him when she returned home. Once they moved to Tokyo, she went to the bookstores in Kanda to find old storybooks. Then he would ask her to read the stories and then retell the skeleton of the stories to him. Neither of them spoke each other's language well, but they devised a simplified form of Japanese which they referred to as "Herun-kotoba". Once he had written the stories down, he subtracted, added and rearranged their parts until he was satisfied. Then he would practice his first version on Setsu to get her reaction. Recalling how he acted out the parts in the story of "Mimi-nashi Hoichi", she wrote years later: "His

facial expression would change and his eyes would burn intensely. 'I think it was in this way,' he would say; 'How do you think yourself?' ... Had anyone seen us from the outside we must have appeared to be two mad people."⁴¹⁾

What might have happened if all these women except Setsu had not ended simply as memories? If the marriage of Bush Hearn and Rosa had succeeded or if Hearn had proved himself to be a proper heir to Sarah Brenane, he might have never left Ireland or England. Would he have stayed in Cincinnati if he and Mattie had remained happily married? It is unlikely, since Hearn felt at the time he left Cincinnati he had accomplished all he could there and he longed for a fresh environment. In New Orleans and later in New York, Bissland would probably have been too forceful a woman for Hearn to live with. She was a career woman and it is unlikely she would have given up that career. In addition, after years in New Orleans and the French West Indies, Hearn could not stand the hustle and bustle of New York City. Something might have developed with Leona Queyrouze if Hearn had remained in New Orleans longer and had been encouraged by his friend Rudolph Matas. It would not have been in Hearn's blood to leave Setsu. In later years he had the desire to travel to other places, but if he had, he undoubtedly would have sent money back to his family and would have returned. Perhaps Bush Hearn's abandonment of Rosa never left his mind and probably thoughts of his own abandonment of Mattie were there, too. He would not do as his father had done and he would succeed in one area where his father had failed; he would be a good husband and father.

In conclusion, this paper has described the role of women in the life of Lafcadio Hearn. In the future, his attitudes toward women in general, their treatment in literature, and his own literary treatment of them will be considered.

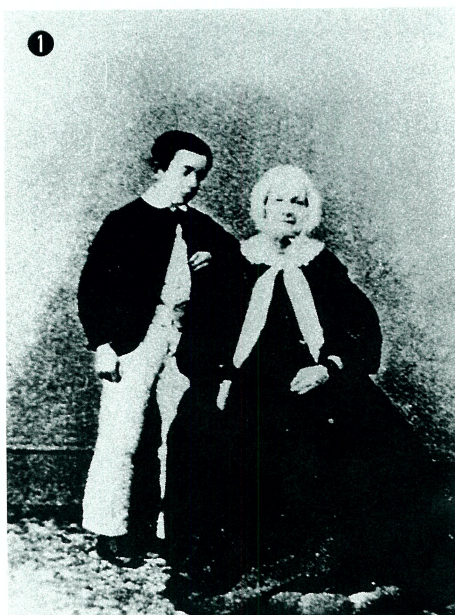
Notes

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40. Ibid., p. 204.
41. Stevenson, *Lafcadio Hearn*, p. 308.
42. Setsuko Koizumi, *Reminiscences of Lafcadio Hearn* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918) pp. 37-38.

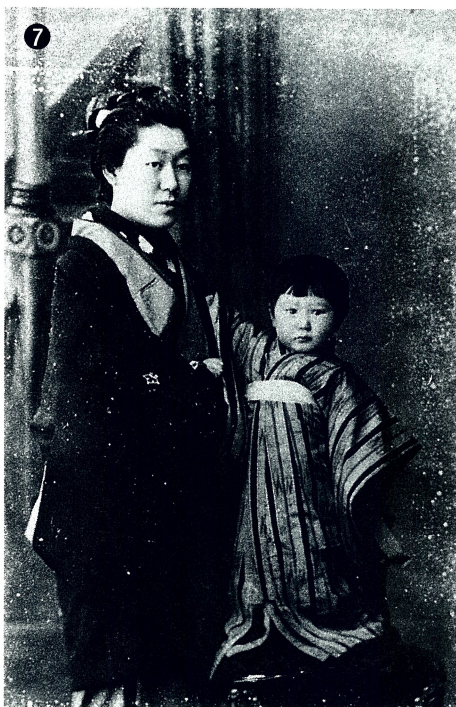
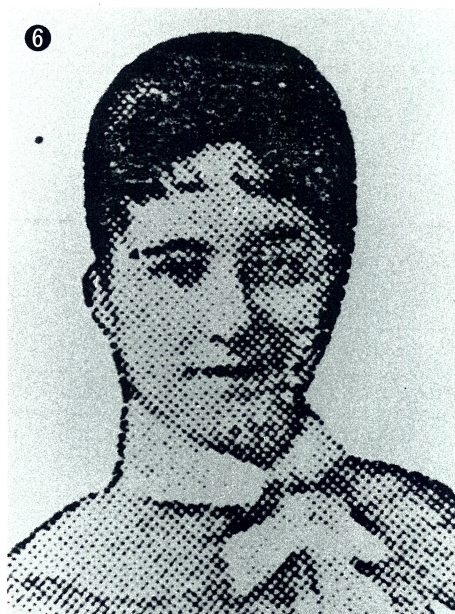
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Said to Be Lafcadio Hearn's Widow.





- ① Hearn and Aunt Sarah
- ② Hearn in Cincinnati
- ③ Mattie Foley in 1906
- ④ Hearn in New Orleans
- ⑤ Elizabeth Bisland
- ⑥ Leona Queyrouze
- ⑦ Setsu Koizumi