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【ハーンとわたし】

Hearn and I

Lynne Murphy

Hearn was a complicated character having had both devastating and enriching experiences throughout the course of his life. Born in Greece, raised in Ireland, further educated in England, and having established himself professionally in the U.S. he was exposed to such diversity of culture that allowed him to develop an open-mindedness and a level of imaginative ability that continues to impress.

Reading the work that he wrote during his time in Japan, I am impressed by his keen awareness of the sounds of nature, and observances of the people. For Hearn, loneliness ended in Matsue. Hearn's heart was soothed by the simplistic beauty of his surrounding environment, his mind inspired by the quaint, unusual culture. For me, as a foreigner who now lives in Matsue, this resonates with me. I, like Hearn, have been moved by the subtleties of expression in nature, and the calm, reserved demeanor of the people.

My interest in Hearn has been further heightened by the fact that Hearn spent his formative years in Ireland. Being from Ireland myself, I am curious to learn about the impact that the Irish environment had on Hearn, and subsequently, on his work.

Hearn, in the care of his great-aunt, had a strict Catholic upbringing. He experienced life in Dublin, sometimes visiting Tramore in Waterford, and also Cong, in Mayo. It is said that his experience of encountering the Celtic oral tradition through Celtic fairytales and ghost stories cultivated a powerful imagination, and inspired works such as Urashima Taro, Mujina, and Himawari. It is also said that it was the nature of Hearn's Irish upbringing that triggered the development of the open-minded character that made him so receptive to the subtleties of Japanese culture. Hearn had the advantage of being able to see Japan from a Japanese perspective, and this set him apart from his contemporaries at the time. It is refreshing to think that while other Westerners were failing to truly understand, Hearn's interpretation was accurate and detailed.

We know about how the literary impact of the Irish environment contributed to Hearn's work. I would like to know more about how the physical aspects of the Irish environment influenced Hearn. Apparently, Hearn found Ireland's long dark winters gloomy and depressing. This kind of weather scared him, and even provoked feelings of trauma when he thought he could see ghosts and spirits. The way in which the clouds loom low over Izumo reminds me of winter weather in Ireland.

It has been interesting for me to realize, that the weather is not the only common factor between "the Land of the Gods" and "the Emerald Isle". There is some resemblance in national character, perhaps because both countries are island nations. The Irish and the Japanese alike seem to prefer simplicity of expression and there is an expectancy of listeners and readers to be intuitive in their interpretation of language. One could consider that it was the Irishness in Hearn that allowed him to adapt so comfortably to the cultural environment of Matsue.

Through further exploration of Hearn's literature, I hope to develop a better understanding of Hearn, and the significant role that Ireland appears to have played in his life.