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# IRISH ARTS

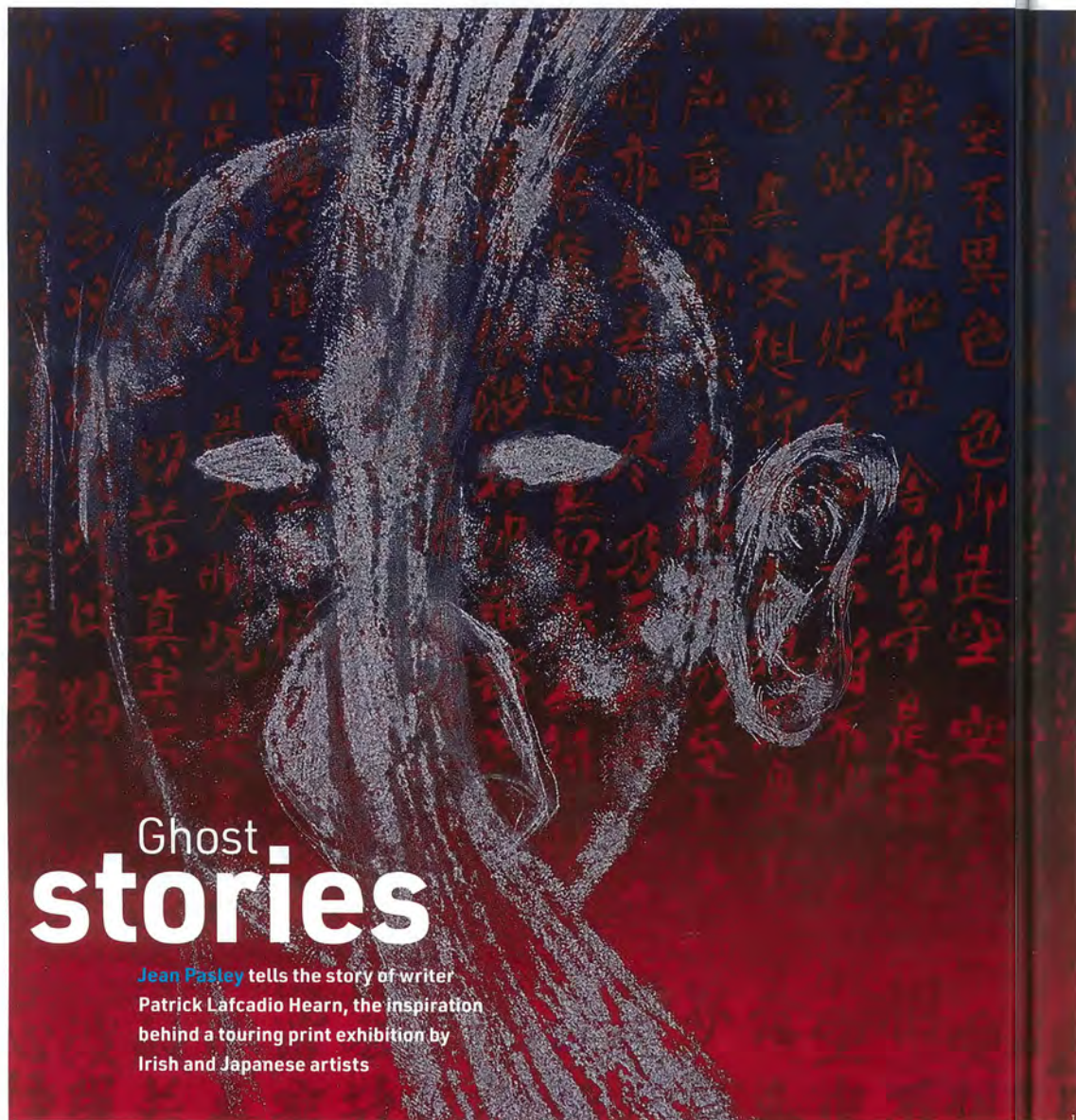
WINTER (DECEMBER 2024 - FEBRUARY 2025)

REVIEW



## 40 Years 1984-2024

**ANNA PAVLOVA'S IRISH PAINTERS ■ GENIEVE FIGGIS INTERVIEW ■ TAKE A BREATH AT IMMA ■ CLARE LANGAN PHOTOGRAPHS ■ LEINSTER HOUSE IRISH PARLIAMENT ■ JENNIFER TROUTON ARTIST ■ MEDIEVAL CARVINGS IN GALWAY ■ KINSALE LIBRARY RIAI WINNER ■ LATE BRONZE AGE GOLD**



# Ghost stories

Jean Pasley tells the story of writer Patrick Lafcadio Hearn, the inspiration behind a touring print exhibition by Irish and Japanese artists

This year marks the 120th anniversary of the death of Patrick Lafcadio Hearn, a 19th-century writer who is greatly revered in Japan. Born in 1850 to a Greek mother and an Irish father, he was abandoned by his parents at an early age and grew up in Rathmines, Dublin in the care of his elderly, widowed great-aunt, Sarah Brenane. The Hearn family were Protestant, but Sarah Brenane converted to Catholicism on marriage and brought Patrick up in that faith. As a teenager, he was sent to a boarding school in England run by Catholic priests, an experience that turned him off organised religion forever. An accident at the school resulted in the loss of his left eye and left him permanently disfigured. Later in life, his other eye became myopic and he used a monocular to examine the world. Some scholars attribute his acute powers of observation to the need for such intense focus.

Hearn was due to inherit his great-aunt's considerable wealth. However, she came under the influence of a distant cousin, Henry Molyneux Hearn, and rewarded his devout Catholicism by investing in his various businesses. He took control of her finances and ruined her – whether through incompetence or lack of scruples Hearn never could decide – but by the time he finished school the coffers were empty. Patrick Lafcadio Hearn was heir to nothing.

Molyneux then bought the teenage boy a one-way ticket to America and promised him that relatives in Cincinnati would look after him. However, when he introduced himself to those relatives, they shut the door in his face. Until then he had led a privileged life, and he was totally unprepared for the harsh realities of the world. His first few months in America were spent trawling the streets for work, homeless, starving and utterly alone. Rescue came in the form of Henry Watkins, who gave Hearn a job in his printing shop, which led to a career in the newspaper business. Watkins became a lifelong friend.

Once established as a journalist, Hearn did well in Cincinnati. He became known for his reports on the darker side of life in the city – gruesome murders, anything macabre. This career was cut short when, in 1874, at the age of twenty-four, he married his mixed-race lover, Mattie Foley. Interracial marriage was a crime at that time in the US and *The Cincinnati Enquirer's* star reporter was fired. As rumours of the scandal spread, colleagues avoided him and friends shunned him. Hearn ignored them all and stood by his wife. However, the marriage did not last. In the end he escaped under a cloud to New Orleans.

At some point during his time in America, Hearn dropped his first name. He was known thereafter simply as Lafcadio Hearn. In New Orleans, he became interested in French Creole and Caribbean culture and once again was drawn to the dark side, writing about voodoo and debauchery in the city. He travelled on to the West Indies and wrote about his experiences there. Having exhausted topics of interest in the West, he looked to the East. At that time, Japan had been



1 **TYOKO HARA** *THE PASSION OF HOICHI* 2022 etching 19.5 x 19.5cm

2 **STEPHEN LAWLOR** *O JOCHU MUJINA* 2023 etching 22 x 19cm

3 **KATE MACDONAGH** *GHOSTLY SHADES* 2023 woodblock 42 x 54cm



closed to the outside world for two hundred years. Western influence had only penetrated the port cities; beyond them, the country remained largely unspoiled. In going there, he effectively stepped not just back in time but into an entirely alien culture. Hearn's plan was to write about Japan and then retire to the West Indies.

In 1890, at the age of forty, he landed in Yokohama. He never left Japan; he married a Japanese woman, became a Japanese citizen and took the Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo. In 1904, after fourteen productive years, he died of heart failure. He is buried in Tokyo. His final book, *Japan: an Attempt at Interpretation* (1904), was published posthumously and hailed as a masterpiece.

Hearn's legacy of work chronicles Japan's ancient culture – its society, its religion and the way of life of ordinary people. Today, there are museums dedicated to Hearn in the cities where he lived, and his house beside Matsue Castle has been preserved as it was when he lived there.

Marking the anniversary of Hearn's death and his book *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1904) – a collection of ghostly tales based on Buddhist and Shinto legends – twenty Irish and twenty Japanese artists have responded to various stories within the book. The resulting exhibition

**HEARN'S LEGACY OF WORK CHRONICLES JAPAN'S ANCIENT CULTURE – ITS SOCIETY, ITS RELIGION AND THE WAY OF LIFE OF ORDINARY PEOPLE**

of prints is touring Ireland and Japan. It is coordinated by artists Stephen Lawlor, Ed Miliano and Kate MacDonagh.

Several of the artists in the exhibition were inspired by the story 'Mujina'. In Japanese folklore, the *mujina* is a supernatural creature, a slightly luminescent shapeshifter. It often takes the

form of a woman in order to lure a victim, usually a man. When the *mujina* strokes its face, it becomes as featureless as an egg.

A number of other artists created their prints in response to 'The Story of Mimi-Nashi Hōichi' (Earless Hoichi), which tells of an impoverished blind musician, Hoichi, who plays so beautifully that even ghosts and goblins weep. One night, Hoichi is tricked into playing for the ghosts of fierce samurai warriors of the Heikei clan. When the monks at the temple where Hoichi lives discover this, they write text from the Buddhist Heart Sutra all over his body to render him invisible. Unfortunately they forget to protect his ears and, when the ghostly warriors come for Hoichi, all they can see are two ears floating in the darkness. They rip the ears from his head. This is an unusual ghost story in that it has a happy ending. Hoichi recovers from his wounds, the story spreads and he becomes famous and wealthy.

Many classical Japanese ghost stories tell of *rokurokubi* and *nukkekubi*. These are creatures who seem human, but their necks stretch infinitely, leaving the heads free to wander around, at times detached completely, terrifying those they encounter. They drank oil from lamps and sometimes drank



a victim's blood or ate them while they slept. In Hearn's story 'Rokurokubi', a traveller in an isolated part of the country accepts hospitality from a woodcutter and wakes to find five headless bodies in the house. He sees the heads outside floating in the night air, talking about how they will eat the traveller.

Whatever the inspiration, the prints are intriguing. 'Kwaidan' is an exhibition not to be missed. The techniques used include woodblock, etching, screenprinting and lithography. Dark backgrounds and graduated light illuminate faces. Bodies are placed within ghostly, liminal spaces with touches of moonlight highlighting features, or the lack of them. The common theme of fading light lends a crepuscular mood. There are smooth transitions between the varying

shades and few hard lines. Well-known Japanese symbols feature in many of the prints: cherry blossom, coloured koi (carp) and the famous *Heikeigani* (crabs). Legend has it that these crabs contain the souls of slain samurai. The patterns on their backs suggest human faces.

As this extraordinary writer's work is becoming more recognised in Ireland, the country where he grew up, we might finally claim Patrick Lafcadio Hearn as another authentic Irish genius in exile. ■

*'Kwaidan: Encounters with Lafcadio Hearn'*, the Hunt Museum, Limerick, 3 December – 22 February; Farmleigh Gallery, Phoenix Park, Dublin, 6 March – 24 August; Embassy of Ireland, Tokyo; Yanagisawa Gallery, Saitama; and Expo 2025, Osaka, dates TBC.

Jean Pasley is the author of *Black Dragonfly* (2021), a historical novel based on the life and work of Patrick Lafcadio Hearn. The Japanese edition, *Kuroi Tombo*, was published in 2024.

4 YOKO AKINO *MUJINA* 2022 etching 36 x 26cm

5 JIN HIROSAWA *ANOTHER WORLD* 2022 silkscreen 42 x 34cm

6 NIALl NAESSENS *UBAZAKURA IN THE GARDEN OF SAHOJI* 2022 aquatint etching 20 x 31cm

7 JAMES MCCREARY *SPRITS OF HEIKE* 2021 mezzotint 14 x 22cm

8 ROBERT RUSSELL *THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT* 2022 etching 16 x 25.5cm