

The Lafcadio Hearn Japanese Gardens of Tramore, Ireland

by Agnes Aylward

Introduction

It is a long way, culturally and physically, from the islands of Japan to the islands of the North Atlantic. It must be a cause for celebration and curiosity when a new Japanese garden suddenly emerges on the South East coast of Ireland, a place not historically noted for its Japanese connections.

In fact it turns out that the extraordinary Lafcadio Hearn Japanese gardens, which have taken shape



Figure 1: Lafcadio Hearn with his wife, Koizumi Setsu. Note that Hearn preferred to be photographed from his right side. (Frontispiece to Lafcadio Hearn by Nina H Kennard¹)

over the last five years in Tramore, a seaside resort in the traditional Victorian mode, were established to commemorate the fascinating life and achievements of one of the earliest popular interpreters of Japan to the West, the writer Lafcadio Hearn.

The story of this garden which unfolds below, rests on the inspirational pillar of Hearn's picaresque life journey, from his birth on a Greek island, through his Irish upbringing and unhappy teenage years at a public school in Durham, through his salad days as an American sensational news reporter, to his ultimate apogee – fulfilment as a great folklorist and interpreter of Japanese culture in the sanctuary of his happy marriage and family life in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Japan.

The Connection of Hearn in Tramore

In 1853 a new railway line came to the seaside town of Tramore in South East Ireland. Amongst its first passengers was Patrick Lafcadio Hearn, a young boy of Irish-Greek parentage. The young Patrick, as he was then known, spent much of his formative childhood years in Tramore in the care of his grandaunt Sarah Brenane. Sarah, a wealthy widow in her sixties, had assumed the role of guardian of the young boy from the age of four when his parent's marriage came to an end. Sarah was a long-time devotee of the resort and ultimately retired there and made it her last resting place.

Hearn's earliest biographer Nina Kennard (1912)¹, identified Tramore as a creative formative influence on him. She attributed Hearn's life-long love of the sea to his days in Tramore, where the great bay: "*presented scenes striking and grand enough to stamp themselves forever on a mind such as Lafcadio Hearn's*".

Kennard attributes Hearn's memory of his youth in Tramore to his fascination, decades later, with Yaidzu

in Japan, where he brought his own young sons each summer and taught them to swim.

"At the fishing village of Yaidzu on the coast of Suruga, while watching the wild sea roaring over its beach of sand, there came to him the sensation of something unreal, looking at something that had no more tangible existence than a memory.....and there became defined in him the thought of having seen just such a coast very long ago in those childish years of which the recollections were hardly distinguishable from dreams."

In addition to his love of the sea, a love that permeated much of his later writing, the young Hearn developed a fascination with the Irish folklore, ghost stories and heroic tales recounted to him by his Connaught nanny. Half a century later, he was to become an iconic figure in far distant Japan, under his adopted Japanese name, Koizumi Yakumo, for his interpretation in chiseled English prose of Japan's most famous folk tales and ghost lore.

Hearn described by one biographer, as a '*wandering ghost*'² was a true citizen of the world. By the time of his death in 1904, he was well known internationally, and particularly in America and in Japan. Many biographers saw Hearn as an American writer and a British citizen and glossed over Hearn's Irish upbringing. He had, after all, left Ireland at the age of 19 and had had a literary career spanning two decades in the United States, before journeying, in 1890, to Japan where he passed the last thirteen years of his life. Although this deficit in knowledge has recently been redressed thanks particularly to the literary efforts of two Irish diplomats based, at different times, in Tokyo, Sean Ronan^{3,4} and Paul Murray⁵, Hearn remained largely unknown to the greater Irish public until the Lafcadio Hearn Japanese Gardens opened in 2015.

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How the Garden Came About

It was a reconnaissance visit to Tramore by Hearn's great grandson, Bon Koizumi, and his wife Shoko, that inspired the decision to create a lasting memorial to their distinguished forebear. In Tramore town centre, under the jurisdiction of the local council, was the former garden of Tramore House. Occupying a 2.5 acre



Figure 2: Professor Bon Koizumi Hearn's great-grandson at the Holy Cross Church graveyard in Tramore where many of his ancestors, including Sarah Brenane, are buried. (Mokoto Fujita)

sloping site, set on a hillside with marvellous views over Tramore Bay, it had been largely forgotten and neglected.

When Bon Koizumi visited the garden in September, 2012, the idea arose to create a Japanese strolling garden there as a permanent tribute to Lafcadio Hearn. The setting with its outcrops of rock and underground spring appeared propitious. The old gardens needed a touch of magic to bring them back to life - but could a Japanese garden be the answer? Was a garden a fitting memorial to Hearn? In fact, had he ever displayed an interest in Japanese gardens?

Initial research of Hearn and his biographers yielded a couple of golden nuggets. One nugget was Hearn's 1892 article "In a Japanese Garden", published in the Atlantic Magazine.⁶ This elegant article revealed his deep admiration and indeed reverence of the centuries old practices and traditions of Japanese garden making, *"In order to comprehend the beauty of a Japanese garden, it is necessary to understand—or at least to learn to understand—the beauty of stones. Not of stones quarried by the hand of man, but of stones shaped by nature only. Until you can feel, and keenly feel, that stones have character, that stones have tones and values, the whole artistic meaning of a Japanese garden cannot be revealed to you"*

Hearn had also described in loving detail the garden of his Matsue residence, with its:

"large rocks, heavily mossed; and divers fantastic basins of stone for holding water; and stone lamps green with years".....where 'green knolls like islets' and 'verdant elevations rise from spaces of pale yellow sand, smooth as a surface of silk, and miming the curves and meanderings of a river course".

This article became a foundation stone for the project.

Another important contemporary reference work was Josiah Condor's 'Landscape Gardening in Japan'.⁷ (Condor and Hearn each acknowledged and admired the other in their publications.)

These century-old writings were sufficient to nurture the seedling idea, which eventually grew, with input from many sources, to become Ireland's main memorial to Lafcadio Hearn. Hearn's life and work are remembered in a garden – or more correctly a series of gardens – which describe the fascinating journey of his life using the medium of a variety of garden landscapes; through rock and water, trees and shrubs with the borrowed landscape of the Atlantic Ocean in the distant vista.

Realising the Dream

The prerequisites of realising the dream were: a compelling theme or storyline; an inspired garden designer; buy-in by the local authority, Waterford City and County Council; securing capital funding, a committed labour force; and strong local support. An advisory committee was established early in 2013, under the aegis of a local voluntary body, Tramore Development Trust, and the next eighteen months were devoted to research and concept development and to sourcing the requisite expertise and funding for the project. Work commenced in June 2014 and the gardens opened to the public on 27 June 2015, Hearn's 165th birthday.

Scoping the concept and developing the vision for the project was exciting, challenging, and surprisingly emotional. The project became a labour of love for all of us involved. Always in the background was the image of the small boy who lost his mother at the age of four, and who last saw his father at the age of seven on Tramore Strand.

Always there to inspire us was the formal and austere early photograph, possibly taken in Tramore, of the little Patrick standing stiffly beside his seated guardian. There was, too, the line by his 1946 biographer, Vera McWilliams⁸ that his times by the ocean were: "*the happiest moments of his Tramore days, and his Tramore days were the happiest of his youth*". All this fed the growing conviction that Hearn's story deserved to be told in a manner which would capture and excite the visitor's attention and would, at last, procure for him the respect and attention of the land that had nurtured him.

Hearn's many biographies yielded much information about his amazing life journey; his schooling at an English Jesuit Boarding School; his forced emigration at the age of 19 to America where his writing career began; his interest in and orientation towards marginal cultures; his fateful assignment by Harper's Magazine in 1890 to travel to Japan for the purpose of writing a series on the exotic culture of the hitherto closed society now forced by the US Navy to open its doors to the West; his marriage in Japan to Koizumi Setsu, with whom he fathered four children; his decision to stay in Japan for the remaining fourteen years of his life, during which he published thirteen books, the last of which procured for him the title of 'Japan's Great Interpreter to the West'.⁹

This was the raw material from which emerged the concept for the garden. It was to be a garden which told the story of a fantastic life ("A Fantastic Journey" – Paul Murray⁹); a life which had overcome many vicissitudes and considerable loneliness to leave a rich literary legacy to the world. The story would be brought to life through a series of individual garden areas or segments planted to capture something of the spirit

of the places Hearn had lived, and something of the essence of his life's work. Later we were to procure, from the Koizumi family, priceless photographs of Hearn with his wife and children which we were permitted to reproduce and use to tell our garden story.

Once the storyline emerged, the single most important task was to find the person who could embrace the storyline and turn it into a living garden. That person was Martin Curran, a landscape gardener, who had, as a young graduate, served an apprenticeship of two years with a Japanese garden company, and who, had an innately creative instinct and an unerring understanding of spatial relationships and, most importantly, the beauty of rocks. Martin worked with the assistance of ten part time staff assigned to the project by the Tramore Community Employment Scheme. Their task was to complete the work within a twelve month period, as part of the funding secured was conditional on this timeframe. On June 27th, 2015, the 165th anniversary of the birthday of Lafcadio Hearn, the garden was opened to the public, with its landscaping and planting completed. In the period since then we have added a number of architectural features, and some others are in planning.

The garden that eventually emerged was in fact a series of ten garden areas, each with its own identity and reference to a period of Hearn's life. The visitor experience, however, is in no way fragmented, as each area flows naturally into the next. The garden trail is laid out in a circuit so that visitors may move chronologically through Hearn's life story, which culminates in the final area "Journey's End".

A Journey through the Gardens

In this section we describe each of the ten garden areas, first with reference to the period of Hearn's

life or work commemorated there, and secondly with reference to the planting and landscaping of the area. Storyboards in each area further amplify this information.

The Victorian Garden

The journey commences in the Victorian Garden which reflects the period of Hearn's childhood summers in Tramore. The intention of this small sheltered walled garden is to recreate the colours, fragrance and textures of a Victorian garden. Plants chosen are typical of plants used in the mid-19th Century, which was a time of mixed styles and colourful planting, when Victorian Schemes displaying coats of arms with bright, and often garish colours were often located within immaculate lawns which visitors were encouraged to admire.

The central beds in the Lafcadio Hearn Victorian Garden are edged with *Hedera helix* 'Ivalace' and *Buxus* pyramids to provide structure, while spring bulbs and summer bedding provide colour. A beech hedge shields the open side of the walled garden, and



Figure 3: A magnificent display of tulips within the Victorian Garden.

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a mature magnolia tree provides additional structure. New additions, which will provide definition over time, include a pyramid pruned *Taxus baccata*, and a variegated *Ilex x altaclerensis* 'Golden King'.

Throughout the garden the roses used are old roses popular during Victorian times. These include the Gallica rose, *Rosa* 'Belle Isis' (1845), *Rosa* 'William Lobb' (1855) and the climbing rose, *Rosa* 'Sombreuil' (1850). In this garden colour and texture is evident all year round.

The Transition Garden

On leaving the Victorian Garden, visitors enter the Transition Garden through a cedar wood niwa mon – or traditional Japanese-style entrance gate. This space represents the period of Hearn's transition from childhood to adulthood and provides many hints of his exotic future.



Figure 4: A cedar wood niwa mon, or traditional Japanese style entrance gate, which leads from the Victorian Garden to the Transition Garden.

The central rock formation depicts the four main islands of Japan. Another rock grouping references the Eastern legend of the turtle and the crane. A central pathway constructed from granite setts, is laid in the shape of a large koi fish. An ornamental pagoda echoes Hearn's first introduction to Eastern culture, (which happened in his teenage years, through his cousin's oriental shop in London). A grassy undulating mound represents the timeless ocean which so fascinated Hearn in Tramore, and which so influenced his future life as a writer.

The planting in this area contains *Pinus nigra* var. *austriaca*, *Camellia japonica* 'Dr. Burnside' which provides a rich red floral display in late winter/early spring, together with a bank of crimson flowered azaleas. Spring colour is continued thanks to a grouping of *Prunus serrulata* 'Tai-Haku', with groundcover provided by *Herniaria glabra*, an evergreen perennial that carpets the base of many of the rocks in this garden.

The American Journey

Next comes the American Garden, which relates the



Figure 5: *Echinacea purpurea* within the American Garden.

story of Hearn's turbulent early years in Cincinnati, where he commenced his writing career as a newspaper reporter and violated Ohio's anti-miscegenation law by contracting a brief marriage to a freed slave, Althea Foley. His subsequent journey down the Mississippi to New Orleans is reflected in the flowing planting in this area. This includes stands of Quaking Aspen, under-planted with Sumach, and drifts of grasses and herbaceous plants native to Ohio. These plants are much used in popular prairie schemes. The Quaking Aspen, *Populus tremula*, catches perfectly the breeze drifting inward from Tramore Bay. The Feather Reed Grass, *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', and the Ohio native, *Panicum virgatum*, otherwise known as Switch Grass, are planted in drifts, again to reflect the movement of the vast prairies.

Punctuating this planting are the upright structures of *Rhus typhina*. Coppiced to the ground annually, the Sumach provides both structure and intense autumn colour and much needed late interest. Colour at ground level is achieved through two Ohio natives widely



Figure 6: Olive tree and flat rocks simulating an amphitheatre in the Greek Garden.

used in informal prairie planting schemes, *Physostegia virginiana* and *Echinacea purpurea*. A drift of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Ferner Osten' mirrors the American prairie scheme. This symbolises the next phase in Hearn's epic life journey, which took him to Japan.

The Greek Garden

As an emerging writer in America, in the early 1870s, Hearn decided to adopt his middle name 'Lafcadio' as his first name. This was the name given to him by his Greek mother to mark his birth on the isle of Lefkada in 1850. The Greek Garden commemorates this and his lifetime longing for his mother, Rosa, whom he last saw at the age of four.

In this small space many large flat rocks have been carefully set into a sloped bank to provide a wonderful tiered seating area in the shape of a Greek

amphitheatre. The ground has been leveled in front of each row to allow for easy access. The Greek Garden receives full sun and is the ideal setting for the aromatic Mediterranean herbs, which have been planted in abundance here. These include *Rosmarinus officinalis* Prostratus Group, *Thymus citriodorus* and *Origanum vulgare*. The handsome evergreen shrub *Phlomis fruticosa* with attractive grey green foliage is also included in the planting scheme in this location. Standing at the front of the Greek Garden is a magnificent ancient olive tree (*Olea europaea*). It is positioned in the ground beside a small well. A hedge of evergreen *Euonymus japonicus* acts as a windbreak and provides shelter from the coastal breeze and to the rear of the garden, on top of the earthen bank, sits a row of *Pinus sylvestris* accompanied by *Olearia virgata*.

Arrival in Japan

Commissioned by Harper's Magazine, Hearn left America in 1890 and arrived in Japan in March of that year. A Fuji-dana, planted with *Wisteria sinensis*, marks the passage between the continents. Within fifteen months of his arrival, he married Setsu Koizumi, daughter of a samurai family in Matsue. She bore him four children and over time became an important source of the folklore material he used to bewitch his English readers.

From this point onwards, the intense plantings of trees, shrubs, bamboo, ferns, grasses and perennials in this area are native to Japan and eastern Asia. The abundance of evergreen shrubs includes: *Ilex crenata*, *Pieris japonica* 'Little Heath', *Fatsia japonica*, *Camellia japonica*, *Ilex aquifolium* 'Harpune' and *Euonymus*



Figure 7: Irises in the Arrival in Japan garden. The Fuji-dana, planted with *Wisteria sinensis*, can be seen just behind the tree-trunk.



Figure 8: The tea garden in the 'Arrival in Japan' section was designed and constructed by Kyoto master gardener, Kazuki Kusumi. Here he is constructing Chasen-gaki ("tea-whisk") fence.



Figure 9: Here Kazuki Kusumi is constructing a yotsume-gaki fence.