

TALKS TO WRITERS

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Talks to writers by Lafcadio Hearn & John Erskine

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LAFCADIO HEARN & JOHN ERSKINE

**TALKS TO
WRITERS**

TALKS TO WRITERS

BY
LAFCADIO HEARN

SELECTED AND EDITED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
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I

These chapters are reprinted from Lafcadio Hearn's "Interpretations of Literature," 1915, and from his "Life and Literature," 1917 — collections of the lectures he gave at the University of Tokyo between 1896 and 1902. Since the appearance of these lectures there has been a demand for separate groups of them in a form more available to the student. The present volume, therefore, brings together Hearn's remarks on the art of writing, in the hope that such an anthology of his principles and opinions may aid those who aspire in the literary craft.

For the benefit of the reader who may make the acquaintance of Hearn's lectures for the first time in this volume, it should be said that he lectured very slowly, choosing simple words and constructions, in order that the foreign language might be as easy as possible for his Japanese students; and some of his students managed to take down many of his lectures word for word. From their notes — the only record we have of Lafcadio Hearn the teacher — these chapters are selected. No attempt has been made at what might be called a reconstruction of the text. Ob-

vious slips in single words and phrases have been corrected, but passages of any elaborate difficulty have been omitted. The punctuation has been revised, and all dates, titles and quotations have been verified. If there is any oversight in any of these details, the fault is to be laid to the editor and to the note-takers, not to the lecturer. Should the reader be troubled by occasional repetitions in the various chapters, even by an occasional contradiction, he should remember that these are spoken words, which Hearn had no opportunity to revise.

II

Lafcadio Hearn's ideas about the art of writing are the ideas not of a journalist nor of a theorist, but of one who practises the art. He had a very simple body of doctrine, as available as truth itself, and perhaps as rarely attended to. Probably he would say that he gave his students nothing new; yet what he says comes to us with the force of originality, like all sincere remarks of the craftsman on his experience and his ideals. The most original thing an artist can do, he held, is to tell the truth about life as he has lived it; and the highest originality of the critic is to announce principles, however old, and deductions

from those principles, which he has arrived at through experience. Of course the artist will give us truth as it is affected by his own personality, and the critic will give us principles as he interprets them; the intelligent reader, however, will not be distressed by this mingling, will be pleased by it, rather, since he can always distinguish and enjoy separately both the experience recorded and the poet's way of recording it, both the principles of criticism and the attitude of the critic.

Lafcadio Hearn believed, in the first place, that literature is an art of emotional expression — that it is the business of the writer to record an emotion and to produce one. Obviously he followed the romantic definition of literature, making it practically identical with what Sir Philip Sidney meant when he spoke of poetry. This prejudice of Hearn's for the literature of power, for the books that move us, is somewhat singular when we observe the keenness of his appreciation for books of another kind, especially for philosophical works such as the writings of his beloved Herbert Spencer. The truth is that Hearn started as a disciple of the romantic school, but his intellectual interests were too great to be confined within even romantic horizons. He seems to have been a wide reader in every field, and whatever he read he turned to account in the judgments he pronounced upon life. We may