

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 263

Volume 263

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



**Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol.
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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)* has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” *TCLC* “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
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Lafcadio Hearn

1850-1904

(Born Patrick Lafcadio Tessima Hearn; also known as Koizumi Yakumo) American and Japanese novelist, short story writer, essayist, travel writer, and poet.

The following entry provides an overview of Hearn's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *TCLC*, Volume 9.

INTRODUCTION

Hearn is remembered today as one of the leading prose stylists of the early twentieth century. He is also acclaimed for his writings on Japanese culture and literature, which introduced many English readers to that country's customs and daily rituals. Often described as impressionistic or symbolic, Hearn's oeuvre is firmly rooted in the nineteenth-century European literary tradition and reflects the influence of such writers as Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire. The author traveled extensively during his life, residing in the southern United States, the Caribbean, and finally Japan, and the legends, folktales, and customs of these regions figure predominantly in his work. Many of his best-known writings, including *Exotics and Retrospectives* (1898) and *Kwaidan* (1904), reflect the author's fascination with the supernatural, macabre, and grotesque. Although revered in Japan, Hearn had a limited reputation in the United States for much of the twentieth century, where he was primarily known as a regionalist or exotic travel writer. In more recent studies, however, scholars have recognized the universal qualities of his work, praising his craftsmanship and insightful cultural and literary translations. In his 1993 lecture on the author, Sean G. Ronan describes Hearn as a writer "who has revealed an idealized Japan to the Western world," but also one "whose thought and wide range of interests have rendered him universally appealing." Ronan concludes that a "century after his time his aesthetic standards and the charm of his art survive," showing him to be "a man of genius and a very great writer."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Hearn was born Patrick Lafcadio Tessima Hearn on June 27, 1850, on the Ionian island of Santa Maura, to Rosa Tessima, a woman of Greek descent, and Charles Bush Hearn, an Irish surgeon stationed in Greece with

the British army. When Hearn was two years old, his father accepted a post in the West Indies and sent his wife and children to Ireland to live with his relatives. Rosa suffered as a result of the Irish climate. After learning that her husband had taken another wife in the West Indies, she abandoned her children and returned to Greece. Hearn subsequently became the ward of his great-aunt, Sarah Brenane, a devout Catholic, and never saw his mother or father again. In Brenane's care, the author attended a Catholic school in Paris, where he became fluent in French, and was later enrolled in St. Cuthbert's in England. Rather than preparing him for the priesthood, as his aunt had intended, Hearn's educational experiences kindled his lifelong hatred for organized religion. At the age of thirteen, Hearn injured his left eye during a playing-field accident at St. Cuthbert's. The eye atrophied, and his right eye became abnormally enlarged, supposedly from overuse, as a result. For the rest of his life, the author was shy and sensitive about his appearance and considered himself an outcast. Hearn was withdrawn from school at the age of seventeen when his aunt and uncle experienced financial and personal difficulties. He was given enough money for passage to America and instructed to look up a distant relative in Cincinnati. Hearn arrived in New York in 1869 and eventually traveled to Cincinnati, where he took a number of menial jobs to survive; with the help of Henry Watkin, a local printer, he eventually learned how to proofread and copy edit. During this time, Hearn also worked as a journalist, writing stories for the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and *Cincinnati Commercial*.

On assignment with the *Enquirer*, presumably to cover political news, Hearn traveled to New Orleans in 1877, where he settled for the next few years. Instead of writing political stories, however, he penned exotic travel sketches and essays on New Orleans and Creole life, which he sent back to the *Enquirer*. The paper eventually lost interest in his work and stopped paying him. Hearn drifted for a while again before landing a job with the *New Orleans Item*. His first original work, *Stray Leaves from Strange Literature*, a collection of legends and fables, was published in 1884. After traveling to Florida in 1885, he produced *Some Chinese Ghosts* (1887), as well as his first novel, *Chita* (1889), which initially appeared in *Harper's* magazine. Longing to travel again, Hearn went to Martinique, via New York City, in 1887 and remained in the West Indies for two years. During this time, he wrote more fiction, including the novel *Youma* (1890), and the prose collec-

tion *Two Years in the French West Indies* (1890). Hearn's literary career was beginning to develop, and he returned to New York City in 1889 with no real prospects other than to find part-time work in the city and further his chances as a writer. But the author soon realized that he could not stay in New York and be his own man, and he immediately began devising assignments that would take him to more remote, exotic locales. By chance, he landed one such project with *Harp-er's*, which agreed to send him to Japan to write a book about living in the country. Although the author was to return to the United States after a year, he remained in Japan for the remaining fourteen years of his life. In 1891, he married Setsuko Koizumi and became a naturalized Japanese citizen, eventually changing his name to Koizumi Yakumo. In addition to serving as an editor for *Kobe Chronicle*, the author taught English at various schools during the early 1890s and later traveled to Tokyo, where he held a chair of English literature at the Imperial University from 1896 to 1903. He also published some of his best-known works of fiction during this time, including *In Ghostly Japan* (1899), *Shadowings* (1900), and *Kwaidan*. When a wave of anti-foreign sentiment forced Hearn to resign from Imperial University in 1903, he took a lectureship at Waseda University. On September 26, 1904, at the age of fifty-four, Hearn died suddenly of heart failure, in Okubo, Japan.

MAJOR WORKS

Hearn's early writings, inspired by his travels in the southern United States and Caribbean, have drawn attention in recent years. Based on his observations and experiences living in New Orleans, *Creole Sketches* (1924) reveals intimate details about the city from the perspective of a naive outsider, offering descriptions of New Orleans and capturing the intricacies of the Creole dialect. In his first published prose collection, *Stray Leaves from Strange Literature*, Hearn borrowed legends and fables from various cultures, including the Hindu, Chinese, and Jewish traditions, but also incorporated his own style by focusing on the erotic, as in the story "The Corpse Demon," or by emphasizing grotesque, macabre, and grimly absurd imagery in such tales as "The Lion," "The Legend of the Monster Misfortune," and "A Tradition of Titus." Although Hearn gained notoriety with these and other stories, *Chita*, his first novel, was his breakthrough work and marked the beginning of what is considered the second period of his career. Inspired by the great storm of August 1856 that wiped out Last Island, the novel depicts one of the few survivors, a young girl, who is rescued and raised by a fisherman and his wife. In addition to this basic plot, Hearn incorporates lush and poetic descriptions of the Last Island landscape, as well as unflinching evocations of death and decay, and portrays the land and the sea as opposing forces, locked in a mythic and eternal

struggle. Hearn's next novel, *Youma*, is also based on a true story that he learned during his travels through the West Indies. The work depicts a slave girl who dies protecting a white child left in her care, rather than saving herself during a rebellion. These latter works, which explore themes related to the interrelationship between humanity and nature and the conflict between disparate cultures, reflect the author's interest in the evolutionary philosophy of Herbert Spencer.

The third and final period of Hearn's literary career is comprised of works based on his experiences and observations of Japan. The author recorded his first impressions of the culture in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), a series of essays and sketches that exalt both the land and its people. In later works of this period, Hearn adapted Japanese ghost and horror stories, once again demonstrating his fascination with the grotesque and macabre. "Ingwa-Banashi," for instance, in *In Ghostly Japan*, combines eroticism and ghostly possession. Another collection, *Shadowings*, features "The Reconciliation," a tale that centers on a doomed and decaying house. The mood and themes explored in both collections have invited comparisons with the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. *Kwaidan*, one of Hearn's last collections, is comprised of seventeen short stories adapted from medieval Japanese folklore and is considered the most original work of this period. In many of the stories, the author combined elements of fantasy and reality, interweaving his own sense of irony with the imagery and traditional Buddhist insights of the original tales. One of the best-known stories of the collection, "The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hōichi," explores the relationship between art and life, as well as the artist's precarious position in the world. The story centers on a blind lute player living in a Buddhist temple, who is so accomplished that the spirits of the dead return to hear him play. To guard against these spirits, the temple priests cover his body with holy texts, leaving only his ears exposed. Angered, the ghosts tear off his ears, leaving the lute player in pain. Hearn's last book published during his life, *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation* (1904), reveals a transition with regard to the author's perspective on Japan. While his previous writings express a reverent and often idealistic vision of the country, this last work reflects his growing disappointment with contemporary Japanese life, as the country had developed into a modern, industrial nation. In this book, Hearn particularly expressed his dissatisfaction with Japan's dependency on the West and the erosion of its traditional culture in the presence of Western influence.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Hearn first gained notice during the mid-1870s as a young Cincinnati journalist who often wrote bizarre and grotesque stories for the *Enquirer* newspaper. Most no-

table was his coverage of a grisly murder investigation known as the "Tan Yard Case," which earned him national attention. In the years that followed, he published stories, sketches, and essays but finally won literary success in 1889, with the appearance of his first novel, *Chita*. Although some critics found fault with the lush, ornamental style of the work, the novel's themes and evocative romanticism were popular with many readers. His next works, including *Youma*, were less successful. During the 1890s, Hearn once again drew popular and critical interest with his impressions of Japanese culture, collected in such volumes as *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* and *Out of the East* (1895). In initial reviews of these works, commentators praised the author's understanding of contemporary Japan and his ability to convey the intricacies of an unfamiliar culture to Western audiences. But a few scholars expressed doubts regarding Hearn's judgment, asserting that he had sentimentalized and misrepresented various aspects of Japanese life. Regardless, these writings, as well as *Kwaidan*, are credited with familiarizing Western readers with Japanese tradition and folklore. Edward Thomas, writing in 1912, described Hearn's writings on Japan as his "finest work," because in them he achieved "an abnegation of personality" and "made himself a mirror in a manner unapproached by other observers of foreign countries." In the decades after his death, Hearn remained an important figure in Japan, and was particularly revered for his efforts to preserve ancient Japanese legends and folktales. His works are still used in the country's schools for teaching English to Japanese students. Hearn's position within American letters, however, has been more difficult to ascertain, in part because his work is not easily categorized according to one particular literary movement. At times, the author's writings on Japan have been viewed as participating in exoticism or "Orientalism," while his impressions of New Orleans and Creole culture have invited comparisons with writings of the Southern local color movement.

Recent decades have brought a revival of interest in Hearn's literary contributions. While some commentators, such as Hephzibah Roskelly, Naoko Sugiyama, and Mary Gallagher, have focused their studies on Hearn's earlier writings, including his works inspired by the West Indies and Creole culture, most scholars have emphasized the preeminence of his later writings on Japan. For many critics, questions related to the authenticity of Hearn's representation of Japanese culture still hold relevance. In an introduction to Hearn's Buddhist writings published in 1977, American poet Kenneth Rexroth argued that his essays and stories offer "a sensitive and durable vision of how Buddhism was and still is lived in Japan." Countering the view that Hearn's portrait of Japan was more subjective and sentimental than accurate, John J. Espey [see Further Reading] and Donald Richie emphasized the author's evolving opin-

ion of the country, noting the darker, more pessimistic comments on Japanese culture that characterize his later writings. Noted Hearn scholar Paul Murray [see Further Reading] maintained that, far from being overly subjective, Hearn's greatest contribution was his attempt to see Japan "from a Japanese perspective" and explain it "to his Western audience in these terms." On the other hand, Yuzo Ota argued that the author's adaptations of Japanese folktales are "often only pseudo-Japanese stories which had little to do with Japanese mentality, values, and customs," and David Taylor described Hearn's Japanese work as "a self-conscious creation," designed for a marketplace of Western readers, rather than a reliable record in its own right. Other scholars have focused on the thematics of Hearn's writings. While the author's preoccupation with religion and supernatural themes has dominated studies by Sean G. Ronan, Murray, and Masaru Toda, others stressed the importance of "otherness" and marginality in his texts. Roy Starrs, writing in 2006, described Hearn as "a celebrant of alternate, peripheral, minority cultures," while Sugiyama suggested that the author was able to subvert "his own assumptions about race" because of his identity as an outsider. Carl Dawson [see Further Reading] claimed that Hearn's prose, no matter its specific topic, expresses his "grudging self-exploration" and repeatedly introduces "a 'shadow' self straining for definition in a world half-hidden and half-understood." As these and other recent essays attest, Hearn remains a contested figure in Western literature. And while his standing in America is still less than that in Japan, he is increasingly viewed as an important writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, praised for his impressionistic prose style, unique vision, and talent for conveying, in the words of Sean G. Ronan, "the ways that human experience intersects with a complex realm of indefinable forces."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- One of Cleopatra's Nights, and Other Fantastic Romances* [translator; from stories by Théophile Gautier] (short stories) 1882
- Stray Leaves from Strange Literature* (legends and fables) 1884
- "*Gombo Zhèbes*": *Little Dictionary of Créole Proverbs, Selected from Six Créole Dialects* (dictionary) 1885
- Some Chinese Ghosts* (short stories) 1887
- Chita* (novel) 1889
- Two Years in the French West Indies* (essays and sketches) 1890
- Youma* (novel) 1890
- Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*. 2 vols. (essays and sketches) 1894

- Out of the East* (essays and sketches) 1895
Kokoro (essays and sketches) 1896
Gleanings in Buddha-Fields (essays and sketches) 1897
Exotics and Retrospectives (essays, sketches, and prose poems) 1898
In Ghostly Japan (folklore, legends, and prose poems) 1899
Shadowings (short stories, essays, and sketches) 1900
A Japanese Miscellany (short stories, folklore, essays, and sketches) 1901
Kottō (short stories, prose poems, and sketches) 1902
Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation (essays) 1904
Kwaidan (short stories and essays) 1904
The Romance of the Milky Way, and Other Studies and Stories (short stories and essays) 1905
The Japanese Letters of Lafcadio Hearn (letters) 1910
Leaves from the Diary of an Impressionist (sketches) 1911
Fantastics and Other Fancies (short stories, prose poems, and sketches) 1914
Interpretations of Literature. 2 vols. (essays and criticism) 1915
Appreciations of Poetry (essays and criticism) 1916
Life and Literature (essays and criticism) 1917
Karma (novel) 1918
The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn. 16 vols. (sketches, journalism, essays, criticism, letters, novels, short stories, folklore, prose poems, and legends) 1922
Essays in European and Oriental Literature (essays and criticism) 1923
Creole Sketches (essays and sketches) 1924
A History of English Literature. 2 vols. (criticism) 1927
Essays on American Literature (essays and criticism) 1929
Buying Christmas Toys and Other Essays (essays) 1939
Articles on Literature and Other Writings from the Cincinnati Enquirer, 1873 (essays and sketches) 1974
The Buddhist Writings of Lafcadio Hearn (essays and sketches) 1977
Period of the Gruesome: Selected Cincinnati Journalism of Lafcadio Hearn (journalism) 1990
Inventing New Orleans (essays and sketches) 2001
American Writings (short stories, novels, essays, sketches, journalism, and letters) 2009

CRITICISM

Edward Thomas (essay date 1912)

SOURCE: Thomas, Edward. "III." In *Lafcadio Hearn*, pp. 37-91. London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1912.

[In the following essay, Thomas surveys Hearn's Japanese writings, describing his stories as "his finest work," because in them he achieved "an abnegation of personality" and "made himself a mirror in a manner unapproached by other observers of foreign countries."]

Hearn was a natural and prolific letter writer, and his letters from the beginning show him as an artist in his tastes and in his power to express and his desire to improve his power. It is not known how soon he began to think of himself as a writer. If he wrote verse as a boy it has disappeared, and his later verses prove that he had no gift. But as soon as his writing began to be printed and read it drew attention, because it was the work of one who by natural feeling, as well as imitation, had developed his own standards, different from the common standards accepted by journalists at Cincinnati as everywhere else. He is said to have read poetry as a boy, and he continued to admire Longfellow and Tennyson, and to think Swinburne "as to form," as he quaintly puts it, "the greatest nineteenth century poet of England." He said that he liked, not Whitman, but what Whitman felt and failed in expressing. As for Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, he preferred "Dobson, and Watson and Lang." But his remarks on poetry are almost enough to prove that English poetry meant little to him. He liked the foreign and the fantastic and the sensuous. He read Flaubert, Pierre Loti, Balzac's *Contes Drolatiques*, "Gautier's most pre-Raphael and wickeder work," Swinburne, Poe, Rabelais, Aldrich, and "other odd books,"—"an agglomeration of exotics and eccentrics." He wanted to get away from the life of everyday for stories: "I would give anything," he said in 1883, "to be a literary Columbus—to discover a Romantic America in some West Indian or North African or Oriental region. . . . If I could only become a Consul at Bagdad, Algiers, Ispahan, Benares, Samarkand, Nippo, Bangkok, Ninh-Binh—or any part of the world where ordinary Christians do not like to go!" At one time he made up his mind to write once a month "the queerest and most outlandish fancy I can get up," in not more than two hundred words. In a jest he proposed to his musical friend, Mr. H. E. Krehbiel, books on the battle cries of all nations, on the manifestation of climatic influence in popular melody, on the music of nomad races, on the peculiar characteristic of erotic music in all countries, etc. He read the Indian epics. He must at one time have read and re-read De Quincey, but that writer apparently came to stand for something in his youth which he disliked, and by 1893 "De Quincey's charm has for ever vanished"—Whittier's had increased, and Hearn was persuaded by him to a sympathy with religious emotions: "It is like hearing a great congregation singing, 'Nearer, my God, to thee.'"

It is evident that Hearn began with the aim of saying strange things in an exquisite manner. This exquisite manner was to be hunted and dived for. That it did not come by nature may be seen from phrases like "The liver had been simply roasted and the kidneys fairly fried," or "If it be agreeable to you I will call upon you at 1 p.m. on Sunday as per invitation." This is from one of the "**Letters to a Lady**," written when he was twenty-five. He had then "not visited out since he was

sixteen . . . had led a very hard and extraordinary life previous to his connexion with the press—became a species of clumsy barbarian—and in short for various reasons considered myself ostracized, tabooed, outlawed.”¹⁶ This was to explain that he was not used to “the cultivated class of people at all.” His writing, then, was likely to be founded entirely on books, and he would revolt as far as possible from the influence of the colloquial language to which he was used. Under the influence of Gautier and his “perfection of melody, warmth of word-colouring, voluptuous delicacy,” his “engraved gem-work of words,” this became certain. In most of his letters to Mr. Watkin he was free from any such influence, but used only the words and phrases which were likely to come readily to his pen and made a style which was practically written speech, and slangy speech. In 1882 he begins a letter with: “Your letter lies before me here like a white tablet of stone bearing a dead name; and in my mind there is just such a silence as one feels standing before a tomb—so that I can press your hand only and say nothing.” This is nothing like speech. He was then writing for the *Times-Democrat* of New Orleans translations from Maupassant, Jules Lemaître, Pierre Loti, Flaubert, Hector Malot, Camille Flammarion, Dostoevsky, Sienkiewicz, Villiers de l’Isle Adam, Matilde Serao, Tolstoy, Zola, Maxime du Camp, Coppée, Daudet, Baudelaire, and writing articles on Loti, on Arabian women, on the Roar of a Great City, etc.: he allowed a sentence of his deliberate style to enter a letter. His letters to Mr. Krehbiel had been a compromise or mixture of friendly speech and of writing elaborated for the benefit of a public in whom sympathy has to be created. It is a very attractive compromise, as in the description of his lodging in St. Louis Street, an old Creole house.¹⁷

Sometimes he is not ashamed to forget his friend and imagine a public, which he harangues about “that religion of the wilderness which flies to solitude, and hath no other temple than the vault of Heaven itself, painted with the frescoes of the clouds, and illuminated by the trembling tapers of God’s everlasting altar, the stars of the firmament,” or he concludes with: “So I draw my chair closer to the fire, light up my pipe *de terre Gambière*, and in the flickering glow weave fancies of palm trees and ghostly reefs and tepid winds, and a Voice from the far tropics calls to me across the darkness.”¹⁸ He wrote on musical instruments, on luxury and art in the time of Elegabalus; he held it to be his “artistic duty” to let himself be “absorbed into the life” of the Latin city, to “study its form and colour and passion.” There were, he said in 1882, months when he could not write; when he could it was to “write a rough sketch and labour it over and over again for half a year, at intervals of ten minutes’ leisure—sometimes I get a day or two.”¹⁹ He foretold that he would always be “more or

less Arabesque—covering his whole edifice with intricate designs, serrating his arches, and engraving mysticisms above the portals.”

It was in 1882 that he published, in a book which took its title from the first story, translations of Gautier’s *One of Cleopatra’s Nights*, *Clarimonde*, *Arria Marcella*, *The Mummy’s Foot*, *Omphale*, and *King Candaulus*. Three of these, he said, “rank among the most remarkable literary productions of the century.” He wrote a warm-hearted dedication “to the lovers of the loveliness of the antique world, the lovers of physical beauty and artistic truth, of the charm of youthful dreams and young passion in its blossoming, of poetic ambitions and the sweet pantheism that finds all Nature vitalized by the spirit of the beautiful.” A better translation is not likely to be made, because a man capable of doing it better would probably leave it alone and do original work. To those who already know the stories the translations are interesting as Hearn’s early prose, a cumbersome English stiffened with beauties which do not make it beautiful. It is unwieldy but not massive, hard without being firm, and it is not alive. It is not Gautier and not Hearn, yet the more imposing parts of it became parts of Hearn, and he was to write many a sentence like: “She wore a robe of orange-red velvet, and from her wide ermine-lined sleeves there peeped forth patrician hands of infinite delicacy, and so ideally transparent that, like the fingers of Aurora, they permitted the sun to shine through them.”²⁰ His next book, the *Stray Leaves from Strange Literatures* of 1884, consisted of stories which were “reconstructions of what impressed me as most fantastically beautiful in the most exotic literature which I was able to obtain,” from the East and the West, but chiefly from the East. In the next year he published *Ghombo Zhèbes*, a “Dictionary of Creole proverbs, selected from six Creole dialects, translated into French and English with notes, complete index to subjects and some brief remarks upon the Creole idioms of Louisiana.”

In 1887 came *Some Chinese Ghosts*. Hearn calls them black lilies or phosphoric roses, and chose them for their “weird beauty.” In several cases ten lines of an old unadorned legend was the origin of a tale of twenty pages. The Chinese outline was probably in every case a remarkable one, and such it is in Hearn. “*The Story of Ming-Yi*,” for example, is of an immortal beauty. It is of a young tutor who met a beautiful woman in the woods and loved her and used to visit her beautiful palace instead of going home as he pretended. At last he was forced to confess. He showed his elders some of the gifts of his mistress and told them of her palace. The gifts seemed to have “lain buried in the earth for centuries”: as to the palace, there was no house in the place which he described, and the woman was unknown to them. They went to see and found only a tomb. Then they remembered the famous courtesan who was buried