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# A colossus among the cherry trees

Collingwood Ingram, an Englishman, is the forgotten hero who saved Japan's blossoms

**Robin Lane Fox**

## On gardens

**T**he flowering cherries have been as early and magnificent as the magnolias and camellias. They are a month ahead of their season in this crazily accelerated year. The quantity of flower is amazing, but two lifetimes ago, flowering cherries were an uncommon sight in Britain. Now they are in every suburb. Yet their main home is Japan. A Japanese proverb goes: "The cherry is first among flowers as the samurai is among men."

Most of the ones we grow were found or bred from Japanese originals. Next to none of them was known until 1853, when Japan opened to western visitors. It then turned out there were at least 250 varieties of cherry in Edo, the capital. Since the 17th century, local warlords had been planting cherry gardens in the city when they came

compulsorily to court. Japan had 10 native species, but cross-pollinating and grafting had added many more. Eventually, Britain was to add yet another variety in an extraordinary sequence of observation and skilled gardening. It is told in outline in gardening texts but only now has it been fully researched in a remarkable book, "*Cherry*" Ingram: *The Englishman Who Saved Japan's Blossoms*. Japan was the main beneficiary of the discovery, but there, the story is hardly known.

The author, Naoko Abe, won a major literary prize in Japan with what she has now revised for an anglophone audience. The hero, Collingwood Ingram, is remarkable. He suffered as a boy from bronchitis and never went to school. He had private tutors who taught him anything from Latin to French. The family was well off. His grandfather had founded the Illustrated London News; Collingwood's younger brother was to edit it for 63 years until 1963. Young Collingwood loved hunting on the Kentish land round Thanet. Aged 17, he

was invited to become a master of the local hunt, which his father mainly financed. Until March each year he hunted. In April he watched birds. In August he shot grouse. In November he stalked and shot deer in Scotland. Hunting, he thought, is a "primordial instinct inherent in all men".

He loved birds, nonetheless, drew them and observed them in close detail. He first went to Japan in 1902 and loved it, too, at first sight: "I have never seen man and nature in such close accord", he wrote, "or a land of such artistic taste". He returned in 1907 on his honeymoon with his wife Florence, granddaughter of the founder of Laing & Cruickshank London stockbrokers. While she waited, pregnant, he found 74 types of bird in Japan, including the rare white thrush. The couple later named their only daughter, Certhia, after another bird, a treecreeper. In 1919, they moved to The Grange, a house with 25 rooms in Benenden, Kent. For the first time Ingram became interested in making a natural garden, one with no straight

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lines. He had no need for a job and in 1926 he gave up observing and writing about birds: he thought the subject was becoming a dead-end.

Abe has discovered that Ingram was intrigued by two unusual flowering cherry trees in the garden which he had bought from the Harmsworths, owners of the Daily Mail. They had been planted even earlier, in the 1890s. So Ingram switched from birds to cherries, a subject sketchily studied at the time in Britain. He was to become what Abe calls "a cherry-tree colossus". He introduced about 50 new varieties, mostly from his own hybridising. They include an early flowering pair, Okame and Kursar. Recently I described here the acid-pink *Prunus Kursar* as a cherry from central Turkey, just as a supplier had once told me. In fact, it came from Kent, a creation of Ingram's crossbreeding.

Abe is excellent on the changing symbolism of cherries in Japan and the outlines of Japanese history and culture into which they fit. In the Meiji period, one fine pale pink variety, Yoshino, was widely planted, becoming a third of all the cherries in Japan by 1880. Nobody knows where it originated but as it grew fast and flowered beautifully before bearing leaves, it became an item of "cherry diplomacy". Plants were imposed on conquered Korea and even donated to the US, where they surround Washington DC's Tidal Basin. In the 1930s, school songs promoted the pinnacle of "Japanese spirit", the glory of dying for Japan's emperor, at that time a god. "As a young cherry," a Kamikaze poet wrote in April 1945, "Life is most worthy when falling".

Ingram visited Japan again in 1926, this time in pursuit of cherry trees. Abe has found fascinating evidence of his high social and botanical contacts and his methodical cherry hunting. In 1925, a Japanese duke, a keen cherry grower, had visited Ingram's Kent garden and

marvelled at his tree of a big-flowered white variety with long coppery leaves. He called it *tai-haku*, the "big white". Ingram had acquired it from two cherry fanciers in Sussex who had first heard about it in 1899 from a grower in Provence. They had then ordered like-sounding trees from a grower in Japan. Their own ageing tree was looking wretched but Ingram took bits for grafting and soon had it growing well. It was far bigger and better flowered than any other white.

In Japan, a great cherry expert in Tokyo showed Ingram his collection of cherry paintings, including a scroll painted in the 1830s. He regretted that its finest cherry, a white one, had died out many years ago. Ingram exclaimed he was growing it still in Kent. It was *Tai-haku*, no less. Abe tells the remarkable tale of Ingram's attempts to send material for grafting from Kent back to Japan. Eventually, he succeeded by poking bits of his *Tai-haku*'s shoots into potatoes to keep them damp and by sending them more coolly via the Trans-Siberian railway.

*Tai-haku* now grows again in Japan. In Britain in the 1990s the novelist Susan Hill planted a big field of 400 but removed them when a critic complained that their coppery leaves did not suit green Gloucestershire. Recently, and separately, a big field of them has been planted in Northumberland as part of the extravagant Alnwick public garden. *Tai-haku* is a wide-spreading tree, even more impressive than my other white-flowered favourite, the spreading *yedoensis*.

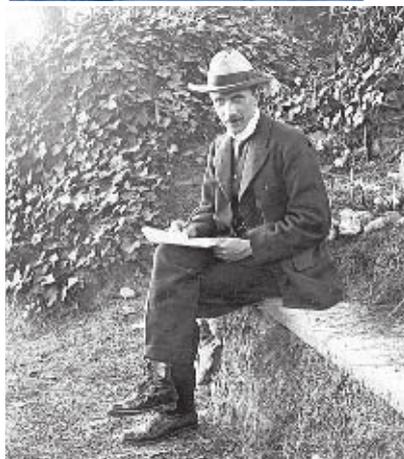
Ingram lived to be 100, married to Florence for 70 years. He was an exceptional plantsman and such an unforgettable personality that I regret never meeting him. However, I have his two early cherries and his white-flowered *Rubus Benenden*, which is just flowering now, and the superb blue-flowered little *omphalodes* which

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bears his name. And I also have Abe's excellent book. Sometimes she strays too far into her own family's history in Japan, but her text is fascinating, a treat for gardeners, cherry-growers and historians.

*"Cherry" Ingram: The Englishman Who Saved Japan's Blossoms by Naoko Abe, Chatto & Windus, £18.99*



**'Cherry' Ingram** — Ernest and Veyan Pollard

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Great White cherry tree (*Prunus Tai-haku*) — Alamy