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HISTORY

‘Cherry’ Ingram: The Englishman Who Saved Japan’s Blossoms by Naoko Abe review — flowers of the kamikaze

In war Japan’s cherry trees bore a dark new symbolism, says Richard Lloyd Parry

[Richard Lloyd Parry](#)

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- [Asia](#)
- [Japan](#)



An 1830s woodcut of travellers in cherry blossom seasonBUYENLARGE/GETTY IMAGES

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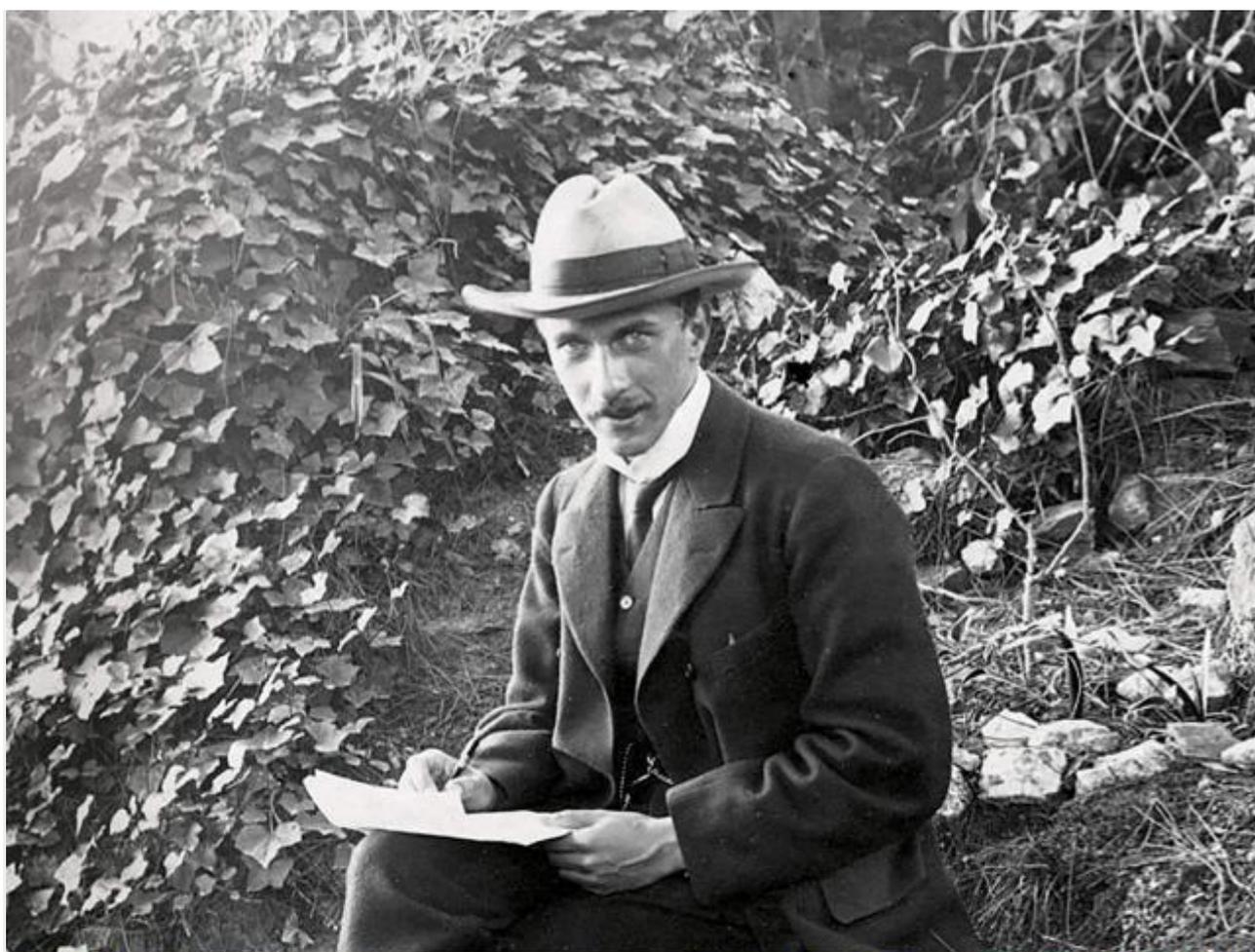
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On the face of it at least, there are few more innocent pleasures than the annual blooming of Japan's cherry blossoms. No flowers in the world are anticipated with as much excitement, and their month-long progress across the country, from warm south to cool north, is the occasion for a restrained national carnival. They are a symbol of spring, an inspiration to poetry, a marker of the new academic and financial year, and an excuse for salarymen and women to take off their jackets, sit in the park and get insensibly drunk during the middle of the day. But like many seemingly timeless symbols, the cherry blossom is charged with invisible energies, a crackling force field of history, politics and war.

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, the *sakura* went from being a symbol of youth and rebirth to the stage prop in a grotesque cult of death, an association that still faintly lingers. Even the trees that are enjoyed today have physically changed beyond

recognition. This is the hidden history at the heart of Naoko Abe's book — the “story of the cherry blossom, its short life and complex ideology”. After reading it, the annual ritual of *hanami* (flower-viewing) will never be quite same again.



NAOKO ABE

'CHERRY' INGRAM

The Englishman Who
Saved Japan's Blossoms

The story is told indirectly through the life of Collingwood Ingram, a British amateur horticulturalist who died in 1981 aged 100. Ingram was born into a rich and eccentric Victorian family who ran *The Illustrated London News*. As a child he kept albino sparrows and had an uncle who was trampled to death by an elephant in Somaliland; as an adult, Ingram never had to work. Despite Abe's attempts to make a great man of him, he comes across as a conventional member of the rural upper classes, distinguished only in two respects — a passion for gardens and a fascination with Japan.

During a visit to the country in 1926 he noticed a lamentable depletion in the cherry blossoms for which Japan, through the woodblock prints of Hokusai, was internationally famous. The rich diversity of species — wild trees and cultivars — that had once flourished on the hills, riverbanks and city streets were rapidly being stifled by the variety known as "Somei Yoshino".

These are the trees under which Japanese get drunk today, whose pale, pink-white leaves blossom in fluffy profusion and are gone in little more than a week. To snobs such as Ingram, "Somei Yoshino" was horticultural Babycham compared to the champagne and single malt of more sophisticated varieties such as the Taihaku ("Great White") or Yamazakura ("Mountain Cherry"), which had once lent such diversity to the Japanese spring, flowering at different times and with diverse colours all over the archipelago.

Parallel with this horticultural development was a political one — Japan's rapid domination by right-wing militarists bent on colonising East Asia by force. The first imperial cherry blossom party had been held in the 9th century; since then the flowers had been symbols of youth, and of its poignant beauty and transience. Under the fascists who were in the ascendant by the 1920s, the meaning of the *sakura* was subtly and brutally redefined.

From being emblems of life, they became symbols of violent death on the battlefield, of the ultimate sacrifice in the service of the emperor. The abundant and fashionable "Somei Yoshino" became the emblem of militarist Japan's conception of the nation and its people — a single dominant cultivar, unanimous in its love for the emperor, for whom violent, premature death was as natural and as lovely as the blooming of spring flowers.

"The fact was that, in little more than a generation, Japan's leaders had quietly and imperceptibly transformed the symbolic meaning of the cherry blossom — flowers of peace for more than 2,000 years — into flowers of mass destruction," Abe writes.



A kamikaze pilot with blossom

This aestheticisation of violent death found its ghastliest expression in the propaganda surrounding the kamikaze pilots, many of them teenage students, some 3,800 of whom were sent to their deaths in the last year of the Pacific War. Cherry blossoms were painted on their planes; they were seen off by young girls waving cherry branches, and they composed final poems on the same theme.

"For the glory of the emperor/ What is there to regret?" 2nd Lieutenant Kazuki Kamitsu wrote shortly before flying to his death in the sea off Okinawa. "As a young cherry/ Life is most worthy when falling." He was 20 years old.

It is an extraordinary story, but unhappily for Abe, the chapters that recount it are not enough to justify a 400-page book. Dear old "Cherry" Ingram, who went on to write the definitive monograph on his obsession and helped the Japanese to reintroduce lost cherry species, is simply not interesting enough and his story makes heavy demands on readers who are not horticulturally minded. Abe is a Japanese journalist resident in London and her English is faultless, but it lacks the stylishness and ambition that would have been needed to bring alive the more mundane tracts of Ingram's story.

The worthwhile parts could have been encapsulated in a long magazine article. They are padded out to excess with detailed accounts of Ingram's very long and largely uneventful life, heading up the local Home Guard during the war, judging local gymkhanas and swapping tree clippings with other toffs in rural Kent.

There is a smaller and more powerful book here struggling to be set free, one with a solemn and timely lesson. "Whenever I thought about the cherries' extraordinary history," Abe writes, "I was struck by the tragedy that had allowed Japan's naturally varied canvas to be painted over with the uniform hues of a single variety. As Japan learned through bitter experience, a society with tunnel vision is an unstable one."

"Cherry" Ingram: *The Englishman Who Saved Japan's Blossoms* by Naoko Abe, Chatto & Windus, 400pp, £18.99