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Petals and politics

Flower power

The Englishman who helped safeguard Japan's cherry trees

ON MARCH 21ST a Japanese phenologist observed the pink-and-white blossoms on a cherry tree in the Yasukuni shrine in central Tokyo and formally declared the start of the cherry-blossom viewing season. There are many of this type of cherry, known as *somei-yoshino*, in the shrine that honours Japan's war dead. Some are so old they are held up by wooden struts. In Japan's militaristic mythology, the petals represent the souls of dead fighters.

Few of those currently visiting Japan would associate the delicate flowers with the cruelty of war. More likely they will swoon over nature's ephemeral beauty and, like their hosts at this time of year, drink wildly. Yet the *somei-yoshino* has a dark past, which Naoko Abe explains in her lovely book, "The Sakura Obsession". It is also the story of a quintessentially English nature lover, Collingwood "Cherry" Ingram, who was one of the first to grasp the *somei-yoshino* cherry tree's dangerous seductiveness, and to attempt to tame it.

Cherry trees come in hundreds of forms. In the mountains of Japan, the lordly *yama-zakura*, for instance, is one of a few wild cherries. But in the cities, the vast majority are *somei-yoshino*, a cloned variety that flowers for a mere eight days or so in spring, evoking syrupy delight as its mist of pink blossoms billow in the wind. As Ms Abe tells it, the tree was first hybridised in the 1860s, just as Japan was emerging from a 400-year period shut off from the outside world by its rulers. After the fall of the shogunate, its outward-looking leaders needed a symbol of unity and modernisation. The *somei-yoshino* "fitted the bill perfectly".

Ingram was a cherry devotee. Shortly after returning from the first world war, the middle-aged country toff decided to plant as many cherry varieties as he could find in his large garden in Kent. He imported seeds, grafted scions onto root stock, and worked feverishly to understand the naming system of Japanese cherry trees. In 1926 his quest took him to Japan, almost 25 years after he had first visited the country as a young man and been smitten by its beauty.

He was no idle enthusiast. He soon realised that an extraordinary variety of cherry trees cultivated during 2,000 years of tree-worship in Japan were in danger of being lost in favour of one, the *somei-yoshino*. Not only did he relate this in a blunt speech to the titans of Japanese industry at Tokyo's Imperial Hotel. He also promised to help Japan restore more variety by sending stock back from his garden.

The Sakura Obsession. By Naoko Abe. Knopf; 400 pages; \$27.95. Published in Britain as "Cherry" Ingram: The Englishman Who Saved Japan's Blossoms" by Chatto & Windus; £18.00

Two tensions animate this book: the difficulty of sending fragile scions around the world and successfully grafting them; and the wrenching historical context. As Ingram battled to safeguard Japan's cherry legacy, the country was succumbing to belligerent nationalism. Many loathed the idea of relying on a Westerner to recover its botanical heritage. Moreover, the *somei-yoshino* cult was just getting into its swing. Within 20 years, kamikaze pilots would fly to their doom with cherry blossoms painted on their fuselages. After death, they were promised, they would be reborn as blossoms at Yasukuni.

Be warned. It is hard to view the blossoms of the *somei-yoshino* with such tender joy after reading Ms Abe's book. On the other hand, visitors to Japan will yearn to see more of the *yama-zakura*, great-white cherries and other varieties that Ingram so devotedly helped to rescue.

These days Japanese people increasingly bemoan the tide of foreigners, especially from China, who join their *hanami*, or cherry-blossom viewing parties. Perhaps commentaries like Ms Abe's will inspire them to cultivate other cherry trees, which flower earlier or later, and delight in their variety, as their ancestors did centuries ago. ■



Pretty in pink