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***Falling Blossom*** (in the USA: *The Sword and the Blossom*)

Pagnamenta, Peter and Williams, Momoko

Random House, 2006 Biography, Paperback, 318 pp.

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Echoes of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* seem to reverberate in this extra-ordinary love story between British General Arthur Hart-Synott and Masa Suzuki. But any parallels are superficial. Although Pinkerton stepped onto a Milan opera stage in 1904, the same year that Arthur arrived in Japan, real life is more convoluted and profound than a Euro-centric, cliché-riddled opera.

This dual biography is an extension of Tokyo writer Takako Inoue's *Peachblossom e* published under the pseudonym Natsu Hazuki in 1998. In cooperation with Inoue and her publisher, Pagnamenta and Williams add their meticulous and exhaustive research to the body of over 800 letters written by Arthur to Masa discovered in a pawlonia box by her daughter-in-law, Tetsuko, after Masa's death. The two biographers "have correlated accounts in the letters with Russo-Japanese and Great War operations and battles, and looked at British army documents at the National Archives in London, as well as Japanese school, university, and military records." They also interviewed surviving family members in Japan and Europe, but more than merely chronicling the story, they have rendered the details in prose that reads like the best fiction.

Although the couple never married, Arthur did not regard his relationship with Masa as temporary. They had two children together. After living together in Japan they were separated by his postings to Manchuria, Hong Kong, and Burma, during which they wrote letters and he supported her, insisting that she not work. Whenever possible, he returned to her on his leaves. While posted in Hong Kong, he had a house prefabricated in Japan, shipped over, and built for her in order that she might stay with him five months of the year. After failing to

secure a second posting to Japan in 1911, Arthur pleaded with Masa to marry him and accompany him to England; however, for numerous reasons (all of them sensible) she declined. Instead, she would wait. Eligible to retire on a major's pension in 1914, he would return to Japan.

However, Arthur's career was extended by World War I, and he lost both his legs during battle in 1918. He endured a painful recovery and numerous setbacks as he struggled to walk with artificial limbs. In the summer of 1919 he abandoned his dream of returning to Japan and married his nurse. Tellingly, his correspondence with Masa resumed after a two-year hiatus.

"After Pearl Harbour the long correspondence between Arthur and Masa was extinguished, and just as the First World War had torn them apart, a new world added a final coda to the story that had begun under a peach tree in Tokyo in 1904." Arthur's ancestral home had been destroyed during the border disputes of the Irish Civil War. Subsequently, in the Second World War he lost his house in France to the German occupation. Photos, some letters from Masa, gifts she had sent, and items they had collected together were also lost. Some of his poems, however, including, "The Burning of the Letters" and another in which he speaks of the grateful "show of love" given to his wife, reveal his struggle to reconcile his circumstances with his continuing attachment to Masa.

*Falling Blossom* is both uplifting and wrenching, especially because the principle characters are so modern. Alas, under the cultural shadow of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the historical vortex of the early 20<sup>th</sup> their desire for domestic happiness is thwarted by obstacles of race and class, restrictive social conventions, global politics, as well as their individual inabilities to take the action necessary at critical moments in their lives.

This multifaceted and compelling story is a tribute to their resilience and complexity as people, and the miracle of love which endures in spite of everything that works against it.

— Lynda Grace Philippsen