

Presentation given at The Japan Foundation on October 26th 2010 by D. Fleet

James Kirkup in Japan: How living in Japan influenced his life and works.

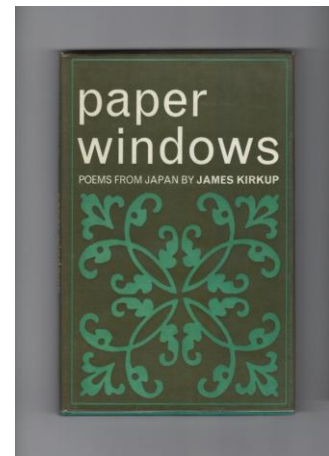


On the third of January 1959, James Kirkup boarded a plane from London, having been invited by the University in Sendai to teach English Literature. Some thirty-six hours later he arrived in Tokyo to be met by the Dean, Professor Kobayashi.

'I was soon through customs, for I only had one small bag. At the passenger exit the Dean was waiting for me, a quiet gentleman with a scholarly air and a friendly smile, whom I liked at once. (*These Horned Islands*, p22)

James later learned that the Dean was also a fine calligrapher and painter, and a master of the tea ceremony

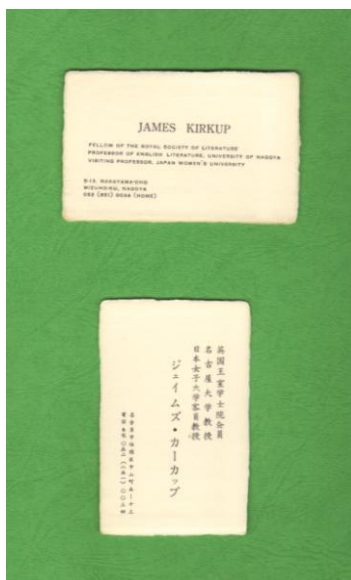
and James soon appreciated how fortunate he was to have him as his mentor as he grew to admire and venerate him. The Dedicatory Poem that James wrote on the occasion of Professor Kobayashi's 70th birthday can be found in his 1968 publication, *Paper Windows*.



So what was James' first impression of Japan as he was driven through Tokyo? 'People, people *everywhere*.'

'Everywhere people were walking, trotting, running, cycling, driving along helter-skelter on tiny three-wheeled trucks; there was a lorry load of blue-bloomered, apple-cheeked working women with white cloths draped round their heads, smiling and waving at me; there were sturdy blue-jeaned boys with white towels knotted round their shaven pates and riding rickety bicycles, holding the handlebars with only one muscular brown hand, while the other bore aloft above the right shoulder a tall pile of trays and dishes and bowls full of noodles and steaming soup. Farther on there were women in kimono and wooden pattens, pattering along, carrying rosy-faced babies on their backs, wrapped in padded, quilted, flowery capes. I glimpsed a jovial granny dandling a baby by jiggling up and down with it on her back. Vans

decorated with banners and balloons and flags and streamers for the New Year whizzed passed our sedate limousine in a mad flurry of vermilion, blues, greens and a frenzy of flickering black characters on rattling cloth pennants. Everything was sharp, quick, keen, a little too hectic. It was like looking at a speeded-up film. And the noise was deafening.’ (These Horned islands, p23)



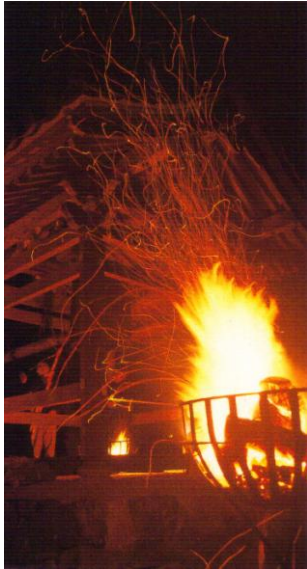
James soon discovered that on a visit or when meeting someone for the first time, it was pleasant and courteous to exchange name cards. So one of his first tasks was to order a box of cards with his name, address and telephone number in English on one side and, with the Dean’s help, in Japanese on the other.

‘His pen seems to flicker wittily as he rapidly writes out the Japanese letters, that look like sprays of bamboo leaves. My name is printed in the simplified form of characters called katakana.’ (These Horned islands, p48)

Another custom which James found much harder to adopt was the removal of shoes on entering, as this description of his first visit to a tempura recounts:

‘Shoes off at the front door – I still sometimes forget – and then slip-slopping up highly polished, very steep stairs with high, narrow steps in very tiny slippers, heelless, that keep falling off my feet. I have to crab upstairs sideways. I lose a slipper that goes slithering down the steps; on my way down to retrieve it, I lose the other one. It’s like Snakes and Ladders, if only it wasn’t so dangerous. I abandon the slippers and pad on in my stocking feet.’(These Horned islands, p55)

Before they left the restaurant they were presented with free packets of Peace cigarettes and tastefully designed boxes of matches bearing the restaurant’s name. James realised that despite poverty, there is an air of richness in Japan which comes from common generosity and good-hearted courtesy. Always there are these little gifts and quiet attentions that mean so much. He sensed that it is the small things and the ability to give and receive them gracefully that make a poor man rich. For a moment, he felt that Europe, where you have to pay for everything, seems terribly mean.



Before travelling on to Sendai, they visited a Shinto temple and James took part in the New Year rituals, including ringing the bells to drive out all the evil remaining from the old year.

After throwing his coin into the vast collecting box he gave several hefty tugs on the rope and the loud, flat banging of the bell gave him a feeling of extraordinary elation, exuberance and happy release.

‘I felt I had driven out at last all the devils that had been tormenting me, not only during the past year, but all my life. I felt at home and at peace.’

(These Horned islands, p61)

As James settled into his new life, he wrote many poems about his strange and exciting experiences.

Japanese Umbrella

Leaning your folded
Lacquered ribs
Against the paper
Window-grille,
You stand on one
Fine bamboo foot,
A folded flower.

A flower that
Opens not
To the sun, but
To rain or snow,
It's fifty petals
Of oiled paper then
Unfurl with a rustling sigh.



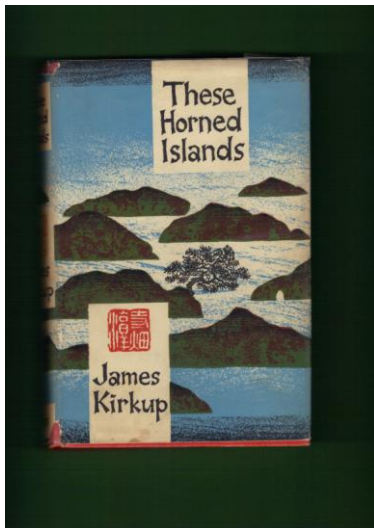
Practising Noh Chants

I like the serious pose
Of these students practising Noh chants.

The one holding his closed fan
In both hands across his knees
Is chanting a dramatic solo.

Soon the others, also kneeling,
Will take up their closed fans
In both hands, lay them across their knees
And join him in a deep male chorus,
Mysterious and old and strong.

These young men's black uniforms
To me are as glorious
As the players' most resplendent robes.



James believed that only by walking the streets could he get to know the people and share intimately and immediately their special way of life. He recorded everything in his daily journal which subsequently provided him with plenty of material, both for a series of essays that he wrote for a local Japanese newspaper and for *These Horned Islands*, the first of his books about Japan.

He not only described his new life in Sendai but hoped to give to the West a picture of ordinary Japanese life, especially in the northern towns and villages, which he felt were still largely untouched by tourism and retained their ancient spirit.

He had great admiration for all the old Japanese virtues and traditions and, although his book gave detailed information about landmarks and events, it was the people and their customs that really interested him. Primarily a poet, James used his ability to capture all the sights and sounds and smells that he encountered on his travels.

It wasn't long before James began translating modern Japanese poetry and earned many reviews acknowledging his sensitive translations. Because he did not read the language well enough, he used texts and prose versions prepared by his Japanese students or, whenever possible, he worked in close collaboration with the poets themselves.

It was while James was teaching English Literature at Tohoku University that he began to take a serious interest in the art of haiku both in the traditional, true form of three lines and seventeen syllables and in its modern, free-form. He discovered it was practised by all kinds of people he was meeting in his daily life - teachers, students, translators, workmen and housewives. He was drawn to the wide variety of haiku magazines, often beautifully printed and illustrated, and started contributing haiku of his own to the magazines and newspapers.



A red camellia
suddenly dropped in my path –
omen in winter

Late Autumn full moon
dissolving in the old pond
Alka seltzer ghost

After making tea,
fresh water in the kettle
stops its little song

Haiku: washing line
hanging out my syllables
to dry – and flower



Over the coming years, James was to write many books containing both his own and translated haiku, gaining him international regard and respect.

Having been fascinated by myths and legends since he was a child, James published several collections of folktales and urban legends which became popular with both Japanese students and teachers.

Wishing to present these narratives in dramatic form, James found the 31 syllable,

5 lined tanka especially suitable as the form lends itself to accompanying mime, music and dance.

His love of and skill with the various poetic forms would lead to several high points in his life, including the Japan P.E.N. Club Prize for Poetry in 1965, becoming President of the Poets' Society in Japan in 1969 and of the British Haiku Society from 1990 to 1997.

Also in 1997, he was presented with the Japan Festival Foundation Award, the same year that he was the only foreigner to be invited to the Imperial New Year Poetry Reading in the presence of the Emperor and Empress at the Palace in Tokyo, which he described as 'a wonderful experience indeed'.



On the 14th January, 1961, James left Sendai after what he described as two extraordinary years. On his departure, the Dean, his students, friends and colleagues shook his hand and bowed in goodbye. Immediately, James thought:

‘Now I am on my own again, once more a stranger, belonging already more and more to the distant West, familiar but half-forgotten, half-dreaded...’.

(These Horned Islands, p434)

However, it wasn't long before he returned to the East firstly as a lecturer in Malaysia and then as a Literary Editor in Tokyo, before becoming Professor of English Literature at Japan Women's University.

‘Now I was on my way back to my beloved Japan. At Osaka, there was the usual long line in front of the immigration counter. Then something quite wonderful happened. The young clerk at the immigration counter beckoned to me, indicating that he wanted me to jump the queue. When I got to the counter, amid curious and furious glances from the waiting travellers, he said: ‘Good evening, Professor Kirkup.’ It was one of my old students at Tohoku University. I had not recognised him in his uniform. He checked my passport and asked me how long I was going to stay in Japan. ‘One year,’ I replied. My visa was a cultural one, valid for only one year, though it could be renewed. ‘I hope you will stay longer than that,’ he said, smiling as he handed back my passport. An indeed, as things turned out, I did.’

(Me All Over, p140)

Yes, much longer! Apart from two lecturing posts in America and returning to England in the 1970s when his mother's health was failing, James spent the rest of his working life in Japan.

Positions held by James Kirkup

1956 - 57 Visiting Lecturer in English, Swedish Ministry of Education

1957 - 58 Professor of English Language & Literature, University of Salamanca, Spain

1959 - 61 Professor of English Literature, Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan

1961 - 62 Lecturer in English Literature, University of Malaysia

1963 - 64 Literary Editor of Orient/West, Tokyo

1964 - 68 Professor of English Literature, Japan Women's University

1968 - 69 Poet in Residence and Visiting Professor, Amherst College, USA

1969 - 71 Professor of English Literature, Nagoya University, Japan

1974 - 75 Arts Council Fellow in Creative Writing, University of Sheffield

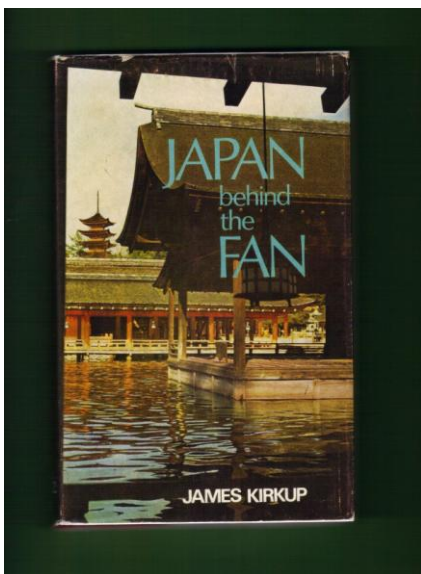
1975 - 76 Morton Visiting Professor of International Literature, Ohio University, USA

1976 - 77 Playwright in Residence, Sherman Theatre, University College, Cardiff

1977 - 89 Professor of English Literature, Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, Japan

During this time, as well as his poetry, autobiographies and translations, James wrote numerous books for his students about English Language and Literature, life in England, Japan and the many other countries he had visited, and a variety of other popular themes. In his leisure time James travelled the country from the gigantic cities to remote mountain temples, participating in tea ceremonies, meditating and experiencing all aspects of Japanese life.

In his next book, *Japan behind the Fan*, he recounts these experiences as well as providing a detailed guidebook for visitors to the country, describing everything from the beauty of Japanese eyes to the intriguing mechanics of the little tins of fruit juices sold at the stations.

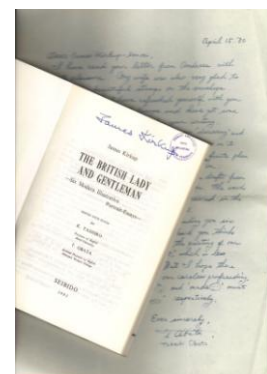


‘I am writing the notes on my trip to Kōyasan in a kyo-hon, or Buddha-book, the sort of notebook one buys at every Buddhist temple; it consists of two hard covers about four inches by seven, and in between these covers is a single length of paper, about a yard long, folded to make the leaves. Pilgrims use this kind of notebook for collecting the stamps and great vermilion seals of the temples they visit, often with finely written messages from the priests, who also use them for writing down the sutras. They are plain, pretty and useful, and I often use them for my writing. The paper is thick, soft and slightly rough, suitable for brush and black ink rather than pencils or ballpoints. Fortunately I have with me my Japanese fountain-pen with a plump little brush instead of a nib.’ (*Japan behind the Fan*, p133)

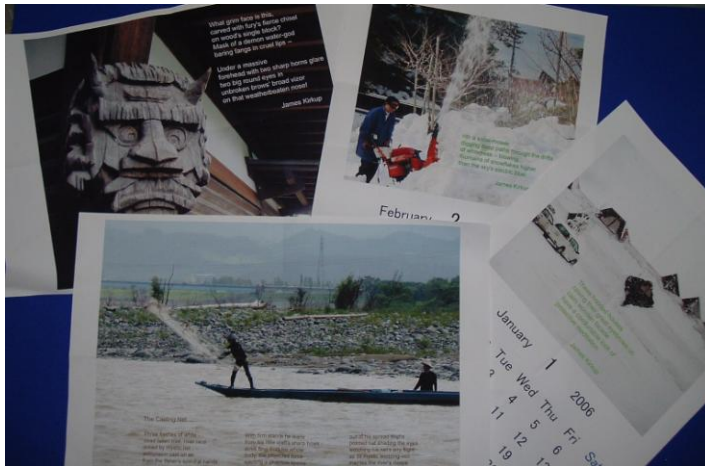
Although James was accustomed to being alone, he established some lasting friendships during these years. One such was Professor Takeshi Obata who many years later reminded James of their first meeting:

‘I have several vivid memories of you when I was one of your students at Sendai: the calm and profound tone of your voice in a gloomy auditorium; a figure of proud loneliness in a coffee house, ‘Silver Star’ where you often came to listen to classical music and so on. Among these memories, the most impressive one that I remember well is that of a picnic to Nobiru seashore in spring. I just dipped my foot into seawater, when you came to me and simply said: ‘Too cold to bathe’, looking over the sea far away. It was your first words spoken to me, but I remember I could not find any words to speak to you.’

(*Me All Over*, p58)

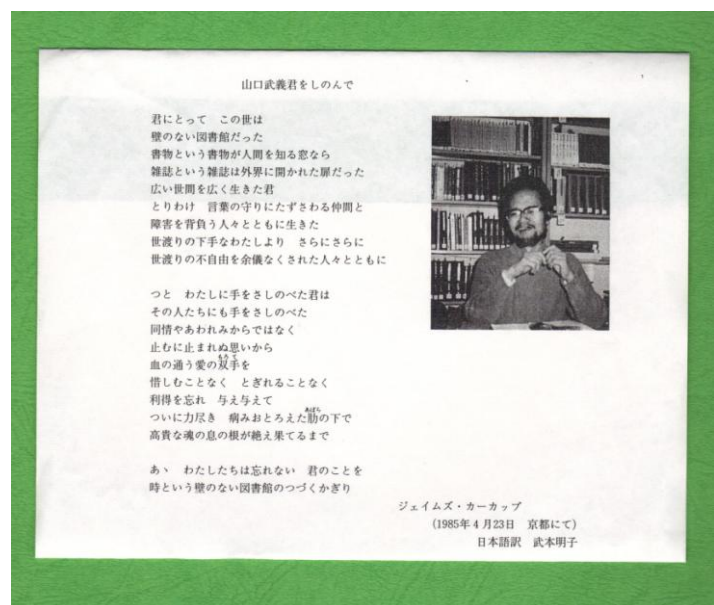


Fortunately as time went by they were to exchange more than a few words as well as working together on several projects. Another student from that time was Eisuke Shiiki, subsequently editor of the *Tanka Magazine* who, when he retired, became known for his photographs of traditional themes with a contemporary eye.



They enjoyed working together with James' poetry complementing Eisuke's photographs in several magazines and calendars.

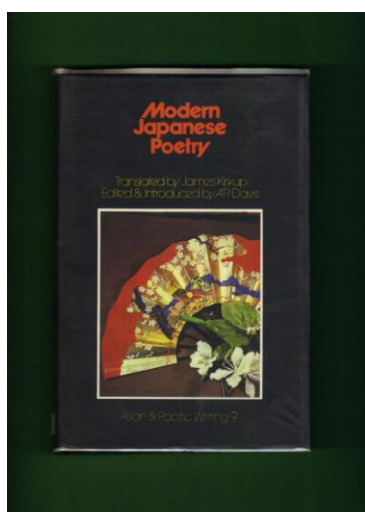
Yamaguchi Takeyoshi was a librarian with whom James struck up a strong friendship, and while travelling in both America and Europe James would regularly send him postcards and letters. On his death in 1985, James wrote this moving memorial poem:



In Memory of Yamaguchi Takeyoshi

For you, all life
was a library without walls,
each book a window on humanity,
each periodical an open door
upon an ever-larger world
in which you worked together with
your fellow men, a union of other
guardians of the word, and those
who had been stricken from the start
with handicaps far greater than
my own deep incapacity
to live within societies in which
I feel myself a total stranger

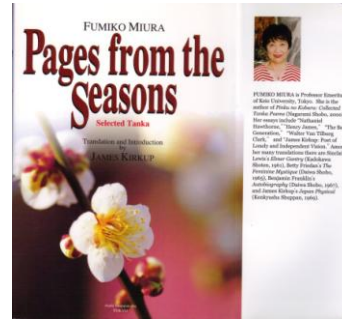
So shall I remember you
always, for you simply accepted me,
as you did them, without commiseration,
but with pure concern
and practical affection,
giving of yourself so generously,
so unfailingly, without consideration
for your own advantage,
till there was nothing left to give,
and in your delicate body
the great heart was still.
So we shall remember you,
in time's great library without walls.



In 1963, when he was at Japan Women's University, James met Fumiko Muira.

Their first project together was this large volume, *Modern Japanese Poetry*, followed by numerous university textbooks and after James retired they continued to collaborate and never lost touch. James described her as an amazing lady who has survived eight major operations for atom bomb cancers and continues writing. In her book, *Pages from the Seasons*, which James translated into English, some of her tanka tell the tragic story of the consequences of the atom bomb attack on Nagasaki when she was still a schoolgirl there.

Already spreading
overhead, the mushroom cloud
rising.....the warnings
“Nagasaki citizens
take cover”never reached us.

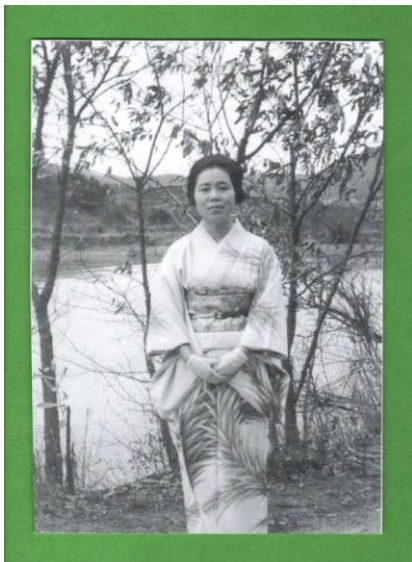


On the red surface
of a sphere with rough red soil
like the planet Mars –
Never shall I forget the smell
of human bodies burning.

I often wonder...
what kind of judgement was it ...
my innocent flesh
branded by the atom bomb?
...At times, it makes me angry.

In the Acknowledgements of her book, Fumiko Muira wrote:

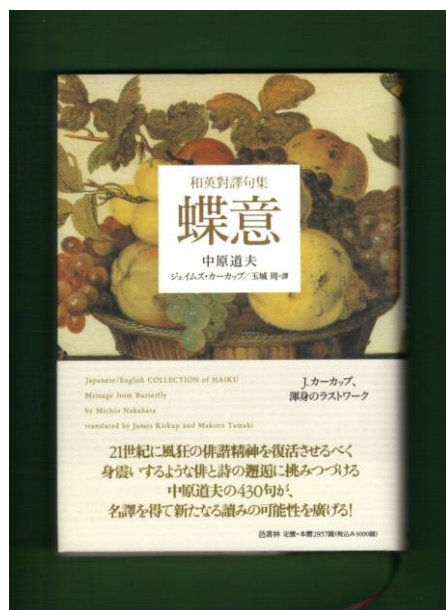
‘I am infinitely indebted to James Kirkup for his ingenious and superb translations of my tanka, which he made with the excellent help of Makoto Tamaki, keeping the strict form of the tanka, closely following the originals. James Kirkup has provided me with inspiration and encouragement from the earliest stages of my academic life and has helped me to transform my dream of this book into reality. With prayers and poems he encouraged me throughout all the ordeals of my many years battling with cancer. Thanks to his understanding and support, I could keep the dream alive up to this present day.’



James also had a significant friendship and working relationship with Akiko Takemoto who lives in Kagawa. While he was living in Japan, James and Akiko translated the works of many modern Japanese poets together. Akiko came to South Shields in 1973 to learn more about the town while she was translating James’ first two autobiographies into Japanese, under the titles *The Only Child* and *When I Was A Boy*. Her translation of *The Only Child* was selected as a ‘good book’ by the Japan Literary Association and accepted into nearly all the public libraries in Japan. It was during her visit to the North East that I met

Akiko and we have remained in touch ever since, and it is thanks to her that The James Kirkup Collection was established. When James retired he left a lot of his possessions with Akiko for safe-keeping and when I wrote to her to tell her about an 88th Birthday celebration for James that Anne and I were planning, she decided to send everything to me for the event. We were so excited to receive her parcels which included James' kimonos, typewriter and many of his publications, which the Library and Museum subsequently agreed to accommodate. Which brings me to Makoto Tamaki, who has undoubtedly been the most important friend of all. James once told me Makoto is a poet not a business man, and when James died Makoto decided he wasn't able to look after the literary estate. So he began packing the contents of James' study into boxes and gradually, these books, manuscripts and documents are being added to The Collection, which at present stands at about 1,500 items.

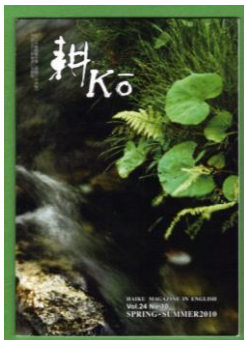
Makoto became James' assistant when he was a young man and as the years passed their working relationship led to them translating and writing numerous pieces together. In later years, Makoto's role changed as James's health failed and he became increasingly dependant upon Makoto. However James was as mentally alert and creative as ever, and it is most fitting that this beautiful, bilingual book of Michio Nakahara's poems that they produced together should be James's last work.



It was not in Japan, but Andorra, where James first heard of this great contemporary haiku poet. Among the papers I have received from Andorra is James' account of how this came about.

'My friend and co-translator had just finished tea and we were preparing for an evening's work. Then suddenly a visit from Chizuko, a Japanese friend who occasionally conducts sight-seeing tours of Andorra; that afternoon she had been with a large group of Japanese tourists – all of them haiku enthusiasts – in the inspirational company of their leader, the great haiku poet Nakahara Michio. At once my friend, Makoto Tamaki, himself a haiku poet, jumped at the opportunity and went to spend the evening with them while I stayed home, as I had to finish some work for a French magazine. I finished my work around midnight. But still Tamaki-san had not returned home. It was not until after 4 o'clock with dawn approaching, that I was awakened by Makoto's return. He and Nakahara sensei had spent the night discussing haiku and their favourite poets over glasses of wine in the hotel bar. When Makoto returned home he was flushed and excited – not because of a glass of wine or two – but because he had developed a hero-worship for the great haiku poet. After Nakahara and his group left Andorra, Makoto wrote to the Master and was overjoyed to receive a reply – the beginning of a long-lasting correspondence. Naturally I too became fascinated by Nakahara's wonderful works, with Makoto's help and encouragement, and I felt deeply honoured when Nakahara began publishing my translations of his haiku in his monthly magazine, *Ginka*.'

As Michio Nakahara says in his Postscript to the book, this English version of his haiku poems was created from an extraordinary bringing-together of people. James had looked forward to the publication of this book so much, which makes his death just weeks beforehand even more poignant.



The heartfelt tributes to James from his Japanese friends continue to reach me.

Just recently I received this issue of *Kō*, containing a wonderful collection of articles and poems In Memory of James.

Remembering
Kirkup's voice in days gone by –
roses' fragrance

Roses fallen –
a British poet passed away
leaving haiku

James had been Poetry Advisor and a regular contributor to the magazine since 1987 and his friend, the editor and publisher, KōKo Katō writes:

‘With his creative sincerity he has left his eternal poesy as a beacon for our Japanese culture. We remember his name as an admirable genius.’

James ‘found’ himself in Japan and despite his extensive travels, it was the only place where he felt ‘at home’.



‘Life in Japan made a new person of me. I learned here, sometimes painfully, how to live and how to write. Japan has taught me to have the courage to be myself, to be an individual and solitary in a civilization where conformity is the rule and solitude the exception. Yet however peculiar and lonely I may appear here, I do not feel an outcast, as I do in England. Nor can I think of myself as an expatriate, for I feel at home everywhere in the East as I never do in Europe. Beyond the pettiness

of much of Japanese life, and beneath much that is ugly on the surface, there is a profound, vast, resonant affirmation of life, a sense of ultimate quiet and eternity in everything, a mythological unity. These things perpetually comfort and enfold me, as in the strong arms of a giant god. This fundamental feeling is in essence a sense of the continuity of being which I have had since childhood, but was never so vividly aware of until I came to Japan.’ (Japan behind the Fan, ix)

It was James’s wish that he should return to Japan on his death and Makoto is arranging for his ashes to be buried at this beautiful, peaceful temple in Kyoto.

