

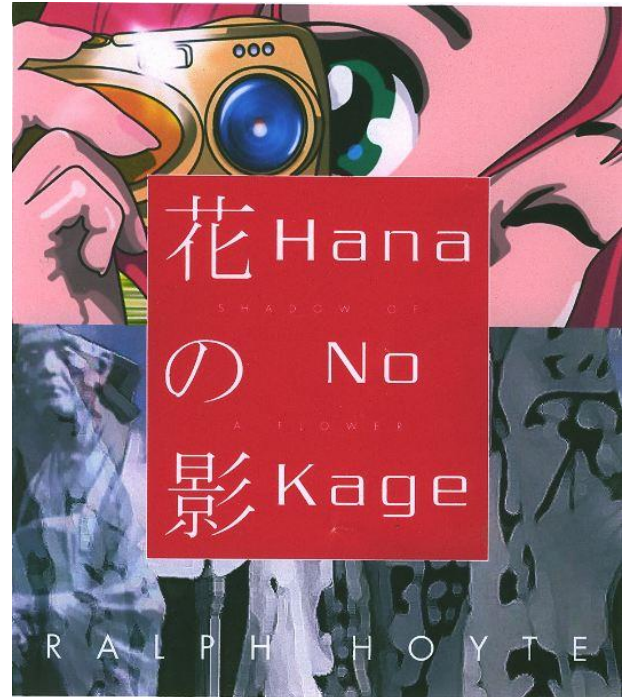
Introduction to Hana no Kage

By

Mike 'Eido' Luetchford 2007

When I met Ralph in Tokyo at the end of his journey to retrace the footsteps of the 17th century poet Basho, he had just returned from climbing Oku-hotaka, which at 10,460 feet, is the third highest peak in the Japan Alps. Alone, up and down in a single day. Without a map, and without a guide. And then hopped on a bus for a five-and-a-half-hour journey back to the capital. Is this man brave, or just foolish? Fortunately, I have known Ralph long enough to know that he is the very best combination of both. Launching himself into unknown spaces with nothing underneath him and no backup. Stepping into the dark. Doing things that no-one has contemplated doing before. Mad! Yet out of this madness he produces a distillation of what our existence is in each fleeting moment – like the shadow of a flower.

As with actions, so with words. Ralph's poetry *is* Ralph, laid bare for all to see. Often challenging the limits of what words will do, and from time to time producing lines that are so sublime they seem not to be composed of words at all, but something more fluid, immediate and ineffable. A poem by Ralph that hangs on my wall includes the line: "...I do not know what I am, do not know what I will do next, I alone am uncatchable and leave no trace, no path, no way, no middle; a path, a way, a middle..." Such poetry carries for me the very essence of what Basho does with his haiku – it captures the nature of the reality in which we live, and of which we really know so little.



Starting out life as a blog, written and posted by Ralph from Japan bit by bit as the journey progressed, I am glad that it has made it to book form. Because for me it captures something about journeying in the hills in Japan, something about the people of Japan, that you won't find in most travel books. Having lived in Japan for more than 20 years, this journey for me tastes of the old Japan, smells of the high mountains, deep valleys and streams that form nearly 70 percent of the total land area of the country. And even of the little public toilet block that you will always find near any temple in the Japanese hills, and which offered Ralph refuge near the top of Gassan, Mountain of Death.



Reading his words, I am transported back to my favourite hikes; the rides on the bus along narrow country roads where I was the only passenger; the clackety-clack of the little train along the single track winding its way through deep wooded valleys, plunging into yet another tunnel, and launching out over yet another improbably frail viaduct. The deserted single-platformed station with its row of humming vending machines selling cans of hot green tea, and the small teashop which welcomes you almost as a member of the family. The absolute inability of the local people to comprehend why you should want to trudge off into the misty mountains, when you could so easily stay, watch the telly and drink sake with them.

Then the crazy mixture of old and new that is everywhere you go. New concrete and glass trinket shop next to old wooden temple with a row of vending machines against its outer wall. High in the mountains, huge concrete dams stretched across deep and inaccessible valley streams (to prevent flash floods devastating villages downstream in the rainy season). A dumper trucks and an old man with a basket of tea leaves on his back. Karaoke and temple bells.

After meeting Ralph in Tokyo, hardly able to hobble along the street after his marathon mountain climb, we arrange to take him to the “*shitamachi*” (downtown), to the place on the banks of the Sumidagawa where Basho’s journey started more than 300 years ago. Even my wife Yoko is saddened by how little has been preserved of the old town. Concrete rules all in modern Japan, and holds its court right up to the very edges of the wide Sumida.

There, amidst the steel and concrete that is modern Tokyo, we found a small park, hidden away and surrounded by a concrete wall, to commemorate the site of Basho’s hut. There is a plaque, and



a small museum further along the river bank, housing some of the original scrolls of this, Japan’s greatest haiku poet. A short distance away, at the place where he is thought to have resided for a while is a statue of the poet, and a one-dimensional recreation of his house. That’s all we find.

But in Ralph’s journey we find the same spirit with which Basho set off in 1689, and in his poetry the same unique reflections on the nature of the reality that we inhabit. *“Just being here – life itself is a miracle; as fragile as a flower’s shadow.”*

This is a journey to dream about. To read before you turn out the light. Sweet dreams!

Mike Eido Luetchford

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