PROLOGUE

Japan’s most celebrated Shogun stoops low to enter his tea house. Tokugawa Ieyasu is dressed not in his usual finery, but in a simple unlined kimono. His silk-decorated sandals or zōri are left outside. Shuffling forward on the slippery smooth tatami matting, he reaches the mizuya, almost silently for such a large man. The mizuya is where the tea master keeps his chadōgu, or equipment, including the natsume or tea caddy. Ieyasu’s tea caddy bears the Tokugawa family crest of three hollyhock leaves etched in gold. Otherwise, the equipment is very simple, in tune with the tea ceremony’s themes of humility, simplicity and naturalism.

Soon, Ieyasu has his fire lit and as the wood scent fills the small room, a voice calls from outside the guest entrance. It is clearly not a Japanese voice. The Shogun bids his guest enter and the door slides back to reveal a blue-eyed Englishman dressed in kimono and bowing low. Tall and usually bamboo-straight, he too stoops to enter and, as he removes his sandals, Ieyesu notices with silent approval that his guest has remembered to wear the clean white socks or tabi for purity.

The Englishman kneels and sits back on his lower legs in the seiza style. Ieyasu motions him to the first guest position opposite the tea-master. There is to be no second guest, nor indeed a third. For the first and probably last time a Japanese Shogun has invited his foreign ‘prisoner’ to the most intimate of his country’s ceremonies.
Still kneeling, the Englishman eases himself to the appointed position, his fists clenched so that the knuckles, not the open palm, touch the floor. Through the rising steam from the cooking pot he saw not the all-powerful, ruthless ruler but a short, chubby man comfortable in his own imperfections and intent on a perfect _otemae_ or performance of this centuries-old custom. Even to this English mariner, used to the rough life of the sea, the ceremony's guiding principles of harmony, respect, purity and tranquillity are already apparent in that simple room. As he accepts the traditional sweet rice cake, he sees the powdered tea scooped into a bowl and how, before he ladles in the hot water, the Shogun taps the scoop on the bowl’s rim twice. Both the scoop and ladle are carved from bamboo and he notices how the Shogun takes his time, seeming to immerse himself in the sound of natural materials. When it comes to using the bamboo whisk or _chasen_, the sound echoes that of the shallow stone-bedded rivers that meander through Japanese formal gardens. The Shogun whisks with intense concentration. It is as though he has set himself the task of emptying his mind of all but the ritual itself.

The pottery bowl has been roughly thrown, its imperfections intended to reflect those of man himself, which the ritual encourages its participants to embrace. So these imperfections are often honoured as denoting the front of the bowl. The Shogun turns the bowl so that its front faces his guest and places it on the _tatami_ mat. The Englishman bows and uses both hands to lift the bowl to his lips. The bitter taste contrasts pleasantly with the trace of the rice cake. He compliments his host on the quality of the tea and remembers to turn the bowl round again before returning it to the mat.

At no time does the Shogun drink tea himself. The ceremony demands of its tea-master humility and service. Nor at any time in the conversation that follows does he talk about himself. In the required spirit of harmony the Englishman thanks his host for the simple flower arrangement in the _tokonoma_ or alcove. The scroll on the wall behind contains one of the Shogun’s own poems. This one is about perseverance and triumphing over adversity, on which
subject both men have perforce become experts. These carefully chosen decorations are all the more powerful because they are the only ones.

They talk now of many things, but there are no demands from the Shogun, no hidden agenda, and the Englishman realizes this is not the time to plead again for his release. Instead it seems a special bond is being forged over the glowing embers. After years of dealing with the Portuguese Jesuits, who saw the Japanese as uncivilized, the Shogun has sensed that this foreigner is different. The Englishman will be so much more useful to Japan if he can respect her culture and understand her beliefs. This Shogun’s rise to power has taught him not to trust his own countrymen, not even his own son. Perhaps he can place some trust in this straight-talking Englishman, who owes the Shogun his life.

Who, then, was this Englishman, on whom such hope was being placed? His name was William Adams from Gillingham in the county of Kent. He was the first Englishman the Japanese had ever met and he was to become one of the most important foreigners in their history, whose memory is still cherished there today.

Adams was part of a courageous but disastrous Dutch trading adventure in which five ships and nearly 500 men left Rotterdam and only one broken ship and twenty-four men reached their final destination. Of that twenty-four, only six men were still able to stand to greet the samurai boarding party. Then for twenty years William Adams was held ‘captive’ in Japan, first as a common criminal and eventually as one of the Shogun’s most trusted advisers. He was made hatamoto, a samurai lord, the only foreigner ever to be so honoured. Anjin, as he was known in Japan, owned great houses and estates and wielded power and influence over Japan’s developing relations with the outside world. He built ocean-going ships, trained the Japanese in navigation and ship’s cannon and became the Shogun’s chief scientific adviser and interpreter in English,
Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese. He died in Japan in 1620, a rich man but almost certainly a sad one, cut off from his English wife and daughter, unrecognized by his native country and disappointed with the English East India Company’s base in Japan, which he had done so much to establish.

What kind of a man was he? How close did he become to Japan’s most celebrated Shogun and to his own Japanese ‘wife’ and children? What does his story tell us about European trading ambitions and rivalries in East Asia at that time, about the cautious opening of Japan’s window on the Western world or, at another level entirely, about the misadventures of unruly Western sailors in Japanese ports? Why did he not leave Japan when he eventually had the opportunity to return home? Why was he trusted by the Japanese but not his own countrymen? Where did his loyalties really lie?