

THE IRISH TIMES

* * *

IT SEEMS LIKELY that much of the material in "Cranes at Dusk" is autobiographical. Like her ten-year-old heroine, Hisako Matsubara was born in Kyoto, the daughter of a Shinto priest, and her recollections of the last days of the war as seen through the eyes of the fictional child, have the awesome ring of truth.

When the story opens, the Japanese in the weavers' district where the family lives know that the war cannot go on much longer, and are resigned to die, each meeting the invader with a bamboo spear . . . "We shall never suffer the enemy to set foot on Japanese soil . . . Japan will never be defeated — we would all rather die in beauty."

But it was not to be. The Emperor decided otherwise, and to the people of the weavers' quarter in Kyoto, astonishment at the news of surrender was hardly as great as their amazement that the Tenno himself should condescend to announce it on the radio: "to us all, to the people," they murmured in bewilderment.

Hisako Matsubara recaptures the painful confusion of that

moment with the conviction of experience, then goes on the record the first steps of tremulous transition from the Old World to the New. The Americans, "the hairy ones," arrive and are seen to be relatively harmless if decidedly exotic. The Japanese observe their strange ways with bemused curiosity, and impelled initially by her own personal curiosity, the child, Saya, starts attending the local Christian church.

Some of the most illuminating passages in the book deal with the little girl's reactions to this alien religion as she discusses it with her father, whose views are of a wider and non-sectarian nature.

* * *