

Frank Kingdon-Ward: Plant Hunter and Romantic

Tony Schilling
United Kingdom

Reprinted from the winter 1991 issue of the Rhodiareview.

A fortunate few dedicated men have left an indelible mark on the map of East Himalayan botanical exploration in that remote corner of Asia, where the wilderness of southeast Tibet, southwest China, northeast India and Burma merge in an exciting confusion of river, gorge and mountain.

Some, like Bailey and Morshead, were military men who merely brushed against botany while engaged in geographical surveys, but others were intrepid plant collectors who totally committed themselves to the task of seeking new species for our gardens.

One such man was Frank Kingdon-Ward who, in view of the diversity of his achievement, is considered by many to be the doyen of more recent plant hunters. His passion for exploration (both botanical and geographical) knew no bounds and this, coupled with his patience, determination and stamina, his keen and perceptive eye, his modesty and his talent for romantic, but scientifically exact writings made him the envy of his contemporaries and a hero of many who follow after him.

He was born in Manchester on 6 November 1885, son of Harry Marshall Ward, a brilliant botanist who was later appointed Professor of Botany at Cambridge, where he founded the University's modern Botany School. After general education at St. Paul's School, Hammersmith, Frank Kingdon-Ward entered Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1904 and achieved his degree in Natural Sciences Tripos. In 1907 he departed for China to take up a post as schoolteacher at the Shanghai Public School.

From an early age he had been fired with a burning urge for botanical exploration. Before he went to the University he had already read Schlimpers' *Plant Geography* and, having been intrigued by pictures of tropical forest, he was naturally led to read other classics of biological exploration. Therefore, while en route to Shanghai, he impulsively went ashore in Singapore, fled the city, and obtained his first personal experience of tropical rain forest. To use his own words: "That was my night out: fireflies and bullfrogs...I just wanted to steep myself in an atmosphere, to revel in the scents, and to see with my own eyes all the exuberance of life that the warmth, humidity, and equinoctial time-sequence of the tropics produces..."

By his own admission, the teaching job which he took in Shanghai was merely a means to an end. Thus he found his work uncongenial and disillusioning. Being already set on becoming a plant collector, but having little or no experience, he needed fortune to smile upon his enthusiasm. In 1909, thanks to an appropriate introduction, he joined an American zoological expedition to western China. His degree in natural sciences and family connections helped him to achieve this initial experience and, although it was in no way a botanical expedition, he managed to make a small collection of herbarium specimens which he gave to the Botany School at Cambridge. For a time, it was thought that three of these were new to science, but the laws of priority soon sank the trio into the disappointing depths of synonymy.

Meanwhile, he returned to his teaching job in Shanghai and then, out of the blue in 1911, Arthur K. Bulley, a rich Liverpool cotton broker and founder of the nursery firm Messrs Bees Ltd, asked him to collect plants in the Yunnan Province of southwest China, his previous collector George Forrest having moved to the employ of J. C. Williams of Caerhays Castle in Cornwall. This expedition proved to be the key which opened the door to the career which he had long felt he had been born to follow. In all, Kingdon-Ward made 22 expeditions for various sponsors spanning 45 years, and it is small wonder that he has left such a clear mark on history.

Exploring Begins

During 1913, he explored and collected in Yunnan and Tibet [described in *The Mystery Rivers of Tibet* (1923)], while in the following year he made the first of his many visits to north Burma [recorded in *In Furthest Burma* (1921)].

During WWI, he served in the Indian Army and attained the rank of Captain, but the year after Armistice, he was back in north Burma on the alpine slopes of Imaw Bum. In 1912, he returned once more to China (Yunnan and Sichuan) and in 1922, he travelled in these two provinces yet again before moving on through southwest Tibet to north Burma.

Then, in the period spanning 1924-25, he made what was probably his most famous and successful expedition, in the company of Lord Cawdor, to Bhutan and southeast Tibet. It was during this long and arduous experience that he solved "the riddle of the Tsangpo Gorge," and exhibited to the scientific world his powers, not only as a first class field botanist, but as a geographical explorer also.

The Tsangpo is that great river of Tibet which is the upper section of the Brahmaputra and, until Kingdon-Ward's survey, a great mystery hung over the geophysical character of the mountain section of the precipitous gorge. Close to Lhasa, the river lies at an altitude of 12,000 feet, but where it emerges from the Himalayas and escapes southward into the Assam Valley it is a mere 1,000 feet above sea level. The actual unsolved riddle of the Tsangpo Gorge was the presence, or otherwise, of the much rumored Falls of Brahmaputra, a story, which, over the years, had become known as "the great romance of geography." Bailey and Morshead's journey of 1913 had settled the last doubts regarding the actual course and identity of the river, but the gorge itself remained unexplored as neither they, nor the Sikkimese pundit Kintup (who travelled there almost 35 years earlier at the request of the Survey of India), managed to penetrate its mysterious depths.

Honored by RHS

In the winter of 1924, Kingdon-Ward and Cawdor followed the river gorge down from Tibet past the great guardian peaks of Namche Barwa and Gyala Peri. Near to the base of these two mountains (the breasts of the goddess Dorje Phangmo), lie the settlements of Gyala and Pemakochung, both of which gave their names to two of Kingdon-Ward's discoveries and introductions: *Berberis gyalaica* (KW5962) and *Rhododendron pemokoense* (KW6301). Beyond the adjacent pass named Nyima La in the Rong Chu Valley, he discovered and collected one of the best of all primulas for woodlands and bog gardens: *Primula florindae* (KW5781). Further west, on what he described as "the wooded hills east of sacred Lhasa," he first collected the plant which probably brought him the most fame, the much acclaimed "blue poppy," *Meconopsis betonicifolia* (KW5784).

This epic expedition down the major part of the difficult gorge finally succeeded in dispelling the myth of rainbow-ringed waterfalls 150 feet high, but Kingdon-Ward found compensatory romance in the form of many more plant species new to science, including *Berberis tsangpoensis* (KW6326), *Rhododendron leucaspis* (KW6273), *R. auritum* (KW6278), *R. venator* (KW6285), *R. montroseanum* (KW6261) and *R. scopulorum* (KW6354).

The Tsangpo still guards some of its deepest secrets and, until such time as someone completes an unbroken survey along the entire length of the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra River from Assam to Tibet, the remaining mysteries will persist.

Expert on Burma

From 1926 until 1956, almost all Kingdon-Ward's collecting efforts were focused on the mountains and gorges of Burma and Assam, an area which, over the years, was to become considered as "his country." He was in Burma early in WWII, when the Japanese invaded the country, but thanks to his intimate knowledge of the area, he had little trouble in escaping into

India. There, he instructed the armed forces in jungle survival techniques, and after the war was over, he became employed by the United States government to search for wrecked planes and the graves of lost aircrew. To assist them in these field operations the Americans could not have wished for a more experienced guide and adviser.

It was during one of these searches that he found *Lilium mackliniae* on Mount Sirhoi in Manipur. He returned there again in 1948 with his wife Jean, for whom the lily is named, for the sole purpose of seeing the plants in flower. Its color in cultivation was said to be a muddy white, and he simply could not accept the fact that what he considered to be one of his "botanical swans," had actually been dubbed "an ugly duckling"! The story of that energetic pilgrimage back to Mount Sirhoi makes compelling reading in his book *Pilgrimage for Plants*, for he relocated the lily in large numbers and laughed with delight when he discovered it to be "...a delicate shell pink outside like dawn in June, with the sheen of watered silk; inside it was like faintly flushed alabaster."

Near Disaster

Two years later, while on an expedition in the Lohit Valley on the borders of Assam and Tibet, he and his wife were lucky to escape with their lives when on 15 August 1950, they were caught at the epicenter of what proved to be one of the most severe earthquakes ever recorded.

The story of that epic adventure was modestly documented by Kingdon-Ward in *Nature* and also in the *RHS Journal* (June 1952). His wife gave the story graphic and compelling coverage in her book *My Hill So Strong* (1952), a book which also gives an insight into her husband's unique style of existence in the wilderness he constantly sought after. It reveals much of interest, not least of which is quiet bravery as he fought daily against his great fear of heights. What misery he must have experienced at times during his long years of endeavor, as he trod carefully, and white-faced with tension, across unstable bridges in quest of his goals. He also suffered recurring bouts of malarial fever, contracted in the harsh climate of north Burma, a region which had claimed the life of Reginald Farrer in 1920 when only 40 years old.

Kingdon-Ward was a man of great patience, immense energy, resolution and endurance, and with a sharp and critical eye for detail. This keen power of observation backed by his scientific training put him in a class of his own. He was in every sense of the word, the complete natural scientist with a wide and catholic interest in all aspects of his hunting ground.

Man of Many Talents

No one has traveled more widely in the eastern Himalayas, nor written in such detail about it. No one has collected more selectively and with such individualism, nor summarized his observations so clearly. Not only was he a brilliant field botanist, he also involved himself in the natural distribution of plants and their ecology, as well as the various factors which interrelate with them such as climate, aspect, even zoology and ethnology. In consequence, one is just as likely to find his writing in the *Geographic Magazine*, *Nature*, *The Gardeners Chronical*, or the *RHS Journal*.

On top of all this talent, he was a man of great modesty, and with a quiet yet sharp sense of humor and a concern for animals. When in Monyul in 1938, he impulsively purchased a "black long-haired dish-faced bow-legged Bhutanese dog with large appealing eyes and well covered in fleas." It cost him one rupee, he called it Beetle, and from that date on they traveled the Himalayas together.

His earlier travels were often his loneliest, but following his second marriage in 1947, his wife, Jean, constantly accompanied him and helped him immensely with his work. Their only other companions were their porters and guides, often cheerful and friendly, but sometimes sullen and hostile. Those eastern gorges of the Himalayas harbor many little known tribes of

variable temperament, the Naga, Abor and Mishmi, being a few of those with which he spent so many of his years.

Kingdon-Ward's success realized him many honors. In 1932, the Royal Horticultural Society awarded him the Victoria Medal of Honor and in 1934, the Veitch Memorial Medal. In 1930, the Royal Geographical Society awarded him their Founders Medal. The Massachusetts Horticultural Society awarded him the George Robert White Medal in 1934, and in 1936, he was given the Livingstone Medal by the Royal Scottish Geographical Society. In 1952, he received the OBE for his services to horticulture, and in 1957, he was installed as an Honorary Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Gardeners.

Kingdon-Ward died suddenly in London on 8 April 1958. Scarcely a week before he had been discussing possibilities for his twenty-third expedition to north Iran or perhaps the Caucasus. He also had his shrewd green eyes set on a trip to Vietnam.

In all, he wrote some 25 books and an amazing number of articles for a large number of journals. It could be said that he wrote out of necessity in order to fund his next expedition, but he also wrote because he felt compelled to share his love of nature and his zest for the unknown.

He was by his own confession an unashamed romantic, a fact which showed in the very titles of his books. Just three examples are: *The Land of the Blue Poppy*, *Plant Hunting on the Edge of the World*, and *Plant Hunter's Paradise*. It could be argued that his writings are as much his memorial as his plant introductions and his geographical observations were.

So superbly did he write that the "armchair explorer" can almost feel the breeze upon the cheek, almost smell the blossoms, see the distant blue hills, or hear the pounding of the mighty rivers. What one really does sense is the great spirit of adventure which he enjoyed so deeply, and it is easy to feel that one has actually shared his experiences, trod the same paths and observed that same beauty.

There has never been, nor is there likely to be, another man quite like him. Botanists, gardeners, geographers, lovers of literature and others, owe him more than can easily be measured. His was the country of river gorges, ours are the treasures which outlived him.