

# In the Land of the Blue Poppy: Frank Kingdon Ward

By Duncan JD Smith

## The Seed is Planted

Francis ('Frank') Kingdon Ward (1885-1958) was an English botanist, explorer, plant collector and author, who is held by many horticulturists today as the last of the great plant hunters. "His country", as he affectionately called it, was that remote corner of Asia, east of the Himalaya, where the wilderness of south-east Tibet, south-west China, north-east India, and Burma converge in an exciting confusion of river, gorge and wilderness. Kingdon Ward would leave an indelible mark not only on the botanical map of these lands, but also on the domestic gardens of Western Europe.



He was born in Manchester on 6<sup>th</sup> 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 receiving a degree in Natural Sciences. Immediately afterwards, and quite clear in his mind that he wanted ultimately to pursue a life of plant hunting in Asia, he

departed for China to take up the position of teacher at Shanghai Public School. En route he stopped off at Singapore and gained his first experience of a tropical rain forest. For the young botanist it was a revelation.

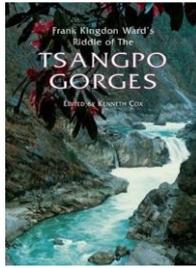
By his own admission the teaching job was a means to an end and in 1909 he was fortunate enough, as a result of his degree and family connections, to be asked to join an American zoological expedition to western China, recorded in his first book *On the Road to Tibet* (1910). Afterwards he returned reluctantly to his teaching job until in 1911 he was invited by one Arthur K. Bulley, to collect hardy plants and seeds in the Yunnan Province of south-west China, on behalf of his nursery, Messrs. Bees Seeds Ltd. This expedition was to be Kingdon Ward's making, and the first of twenty-four daring plant hunting expeditions he would undertake for various sponsors over the next forty five years. During these trips he collected vast numbers of plants, flowers, seeds, bulbs, photographs and drawings. His passion for exploration, combined with physical stamina, patience and determination, made him ideally suited for the task, and his talent for romantic yet scientifically accurate writing made him a justifiably popular author too.

## In Shangri-La

In 1913 he explored and collected plants in both Yunnan and Tibet, described in his *Mystery Rivers of Tibet* (1921), and in the following year he made the first of several visits to north Burma, detailed in his book *In Farthest Burma* (1921).

During the Great War Kingdon Ward served in the Indian Army and attained the rank of Captain, but within a year of Armistice Day he was back in north Burma once more. In 1922 he explored Yunnan again, as well as Sichuan Province. However, it was in 1924-25 that he made perhaps his most famous expedition, in the company of a somewhat impatient Lord Cawdor, to Bhutan and south-east Tibet. Their goal was the little explored and virtually inaccessible Tsangpo Gorge – the world's

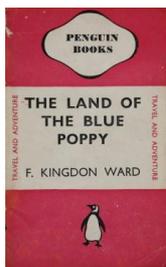
steepest – through which twists the Yarlong Tsangpo, Tibet’s great river that forms the headwaters of the Brahmaputra, from near Lhasa at the top to the Assam Valley at the bottom. For Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims the area is regarded as the portal to an



earthly paradise: for Westerners it was akin to the *Shangri-la* of James Hilton’s novel, *Lost Horizon*. Kingdon-Ward’s book of the journey, *Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges* published in 1926, is his fascinating account of the rich plant and animal life he found there. It showcases perfectly his talents both as botanist and as geographical explorer and at the time seemed to dispel once and for all the existence of the mythical, rainbow-tinged ‘Falls of Brahmaputra’, said to be 150 feet high. It would be another seventy

years before a fully-equipped, modern expedition demonstrated the existence of a *series* of falls, with a compound drop of some 120 feet, just a quarter of a mile from where Kingdon ward gave up his quest.

Several of the plant species Kingdon Ward came across were new to science, whilst others were plants that had been discovered before by westerners but neither samples nor seeds had ever been brought back. In the Rong Chu Valley, for instance, on his way down the Tsangpo Gorge he discovered one of the best of all primulas for



woodlands and bog gardens, namely *Primula florindae*, the Giant Tibetan Cowslip, which he named after his first wife Florinda née Norman-Thompson, whom he married in 1923 and divorced in 1936. Farther west, on what he described quite typically as “the wooded hills east of sacred Lhasa” he collected the first viable seed of the plant that brought him most fame, the much acclaimed *Meconopsis betonicifolia*, or Himalayan blue poppy, first noted by Père Delavay in 1886 (although this was not the blue poppy of Kingdon-Ward’s

popular book *The Land of the Blue Poppy – Travels of a Naturalist in Eastern Tibet* (1913), which was *Meconopsis speciosa*, which he refers to as the Cambridge blue poppy). Other notable finds on the same journey were several species of Berberis and Rhododendron.

### Adventures With Plants

From 1926 until 1956 Kingdon Ward travelled almost exclusively in the mountains and gorges of Burma and Assam. At the start of the Second World War he was in Burma when the Japanese invaded but quickly escaped into India, where he instructed the armed forces in jungle survival techniques. After the war he used his intimate knowledge of the area in helping the United States to locate downed aircraft and lost soldiers. It was during one such search that he discovered *Lilium mackliniae* on Mount Sirhoi in Manipur. He returned there in 1948, this time with his second wife Jean Macklin, whom he married the year before, and after whom it is named. His first wife had never shared in his peripatetic existence accounting largely for their divorce, whereas Jean was happy to play her own part in her husband’s adventures. Indeed, two years later on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1950, while on an expedition in the Lohit Valley on the borders of Assam and Tibet, they were lucky to survive when they found themselves near the epicentre of an earthquake registering 9.6 on the Richter scale. The episode was recorded by Jean in her own book *My Hill So Strong* (1952), which offers a fascinating insight into her husband’s expedition lifestyle, including his battles with recurring bouts of malaria and acute vertigo. To Kingdon

Ward, however, this was all in a day's work, having already survived being impaled on a bamboo spike, fallen off a cliff only to be stopped by a tree, and being lost for two days without food after his tent was destroyed in a storm!



A brilliant field botanist and a gifted storyteller Kingdon Ward was a prolific author, penning exactly twenty five books, in part to help fund his twenty five expeditions but also to impart his passion for plants and the unknown. With unashamedly romantic titles as *Plant Hunting on the Edge of the World* (1930), *The Loom of the East* (1932), *Plant Hunter's Paradise* (1937), *Assam Adventure* (1941), *Burma's Icy Mountains* (1949), *Plant Hunter in Manipur* (1952), *Return to the Irrawaddy* (1956), and *Pilgrimage for Plants* (1960) they are mostly accounts of his expeditions, although several are more prosaic practical guides to gardening, utilising the new species he had helped popularise (for example *Rhododendrons for Everyone* (1926), *Commonsense Rock Gardening* (1948), and *Berried Treasure: Shrubs for Autumn and Winter Colour in Your Garden* (1954)). Most were published under the name Frank Kingdon-Ward and this hyphenated form of his name stuck, becoming the surname of his two wives and two daughters. Interested not only in botany but also geography, zoology, horticulture and even ethnology his writings can also be found in any number of journals, from the *RHS Journal* and *The Gardeners' Chronicle* to *Nature* and the Royal Geographical Society's *Geographic Journal* (*The Seinghku and Delei Valleys, North-East Frontier of India*, May 1930) and *Geographical Magazine* (*India's North East Frontier*, May 1935). On top of all this he was a man of great modesty and with a quiet yet sharp sense of humour. He loved animals too and in 1938 toured the Himalayas with a flea-ridden, long-haired Bhutanese dog called Beetle that he bought for one rupee.

### **Last of the Great Plant Hunters**

Throughout his lifetime Kingdon Ward garnered many awards, from a Royal Geographical Society Founders Medal in 1932 and the Royal Scottish Geographical Society Livingstone Medal in 1936, to an OBE for services to horticulture in 1952. Most fitting were the species named after him, including the yellow-flowering *Rhododendron wardii*, and Ward's Trogon (*Harpactes wardi*), a now threatened Asian bird. He never really gave up exploring and aged 68 climbed to over 11,000 feet in Burma, and was still discovering new species of plants on his last expedition in 1956.



Kingdon Ward died suddenly on 8<sup>th</sup> April 1958, aged 72 after suffering a stroke. It was typical of the man that he had been discussing the possibility of a twenty-third expedition to northern Iran, the Caucasus or possibly Vietnam only the week beforehand. Having collected and catalogued over 23,000 plants the last of the great plant hunters was buried in Grantchester near Cambridge, the headstone today cloaked with *Berberis calliantha*, one of Frank's own introductions from his 1924-25 Tsangpo expedition.

### **Books by F. Kingdon Ward:**

*On the Road to Tibet* (1910)

*Land of the Blue Poppy – Travels of a Naturalist in Eastern Tibet* (1913)

*In Farthest Burma* (1921)

*Mystery Rivers of Tibet* (1921)  
*From China to Hkamti Long* (1924)  
*The Romance of Plant Hunting* (1924)  
*Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges* (1926)  
*Rhododendrons for Everyone* (1926)  
*Plant Hunting on the Edge of the World* (1930)  
*Plant Hunting in the Wilds* (1931)  
*The Loom of the East* (1932)  
*A Plant Hunter in Tibet* (1934)  
*The Romance of Gardening* (1935)  
*Plant Hunter's Paradise* (1937)  
*Assam Adventure* (1941)  
*Modern Exploration* (1945)  
*About this Earth: An Introduction to the Science of Geography* (1946)  
*Commonsense Rock Gardening* (1948)  
*Burma's Icy Mountains* (1949)  
*Rhododendrons* (1949)  
*Footsteps in Civilisation* (1950)  
*Plant Hunter in Manipur* (1952)  
*Berried Treasure: Shrubs for Autumn and Winter Colour in Your Garden* (1954)  
*Return to the Irrawaddy* (1956)  
*Pilgrimage for Plants* (1960)  
*My Hill So Strong* by Jean Kingdon-Ward (1952)

Articles by F. Kingdon Ward:

*On the Possible Prolongation of the Himalayan Axis beyond the Dihang*, Geographical Journal (Oct 1919), Royal Geographical Society  
*The Seingku and Delei Valleys, North-East Frontier of India*, Geographical Journal (May 1930), Royal Geographical Society  
*India's North East Frontier*, Geographical Magazine (May 1935), Royal Geographical Society

Biography and anthology of F. Kingdon Ward:

*Frank Kingdon-Ward: The Last of the Great Plant Hunters* by Charles Lyte (1989)  
*In the Land of the Blue Poppies: The Collected Plant-Hunting Writings of Frank Kingdon Ward* edited by Tom Christopher (2003)

A Website about F. Kingdon Ward by his grandson

<http://www.french4tots.co.uk/kingdon-ward/index.php>