

F. KINGDON WARD AND THE EXPLORATION OF THE EASTERN HIMALAYA AND THE RIVER GORGE COUNTRY OF SOUTH EASTERN TIBET

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(An introduction to a Bibliography reprinted by kind permission of the author, from “Geological Research”, Vol. 3, 1915)

WHILE working on the distribution of the vegetation in the Himalaya the present writer became thoroughly fascinated with the material which Francis (Frank) Kingdon Ward^[1], through his many expeditions, contributed to our knowledge of the Eastern Himalaya and the river gorge country of Southeastern Tibet. To say that without his effort—practically continuous since he set out for his first trip in 1909 until his death in 1958—the map of the vegetation of the Himalaya would display many more blank areas, would be an understatement ; it is more to the point to state that without F. Kingdon Ward’s achievements our knowledge of these areas would be very scanty indeed.

The treatise on the vegetation of the Himalaya, with the accompanying map², came out of press at the end of January 1958. A copy was sent to F. Kingdon Ward immediately c/o British Museum (Natural History) as the only address known promising some chance of reaching the explorer; various efforts to contact him during the years before remained unsuccessful owing to F. Kingdon Ward’s absence in the field. This time, surprisingly, F. Kingdon Ward was “in town”—and back came a letter of acknowledgement by return of post : “Should I come to Germany again I shall make a point of visiting you” was the quintessence of the letter dated February 2, 1958. But within little more than two months F. Kingdon Ward was dead, and an unparalleled source of information about the Eastern Himalaya and the river gorge country was stilled for ever.

Only a short while before, in a review of F. Kingdon Ward’s “Return to the Irrawaddy^[2]“, the present writer ventured to say that the time was now ripe for us to receive full monographic treatment of the area of F. Kingdon Ward’s many expeditions—the mountain world of the Eastern Himalaya, Southeastern Tibet and Northern Burma—a monograph which only F. Kingdon Ward, out of the wealth of his unequalled experience of the region, could dare to undertake. His sudden, unexpected death left this wish unfulfilled.

In 1960 “Pilgrimage for Plants” appeared as a posthumous collection of various papers by F. Kingdon Ward, and attached to it a biographical introduction (11-18) and a bibliography (181-186) by Dr. W. T. Stearn. A concluding note states that F. Kingdon Ward’s life was so nomadic that he kept no record or set of his publications, and that the list given is “certainly incomplete” (186). There the matter rested for the time being.

In 1969 Professor Dr. C. Troll, Head of the Department of Geography at the University of Bonn until 1966, and originally responsible for the idea of the thesis on the vegetation of the Himalaya (see footnote 2), asked the present writer to join a Symposium of the Academy of Sciences in

Mainz on “The Geocology of the High Mountain Regions of Eurasia”. He suggested a contribution on the country “further East” of the Himalaya, knowing full well that particular interest in this direction had developed out of the thesis on the vegetation in the Himalaya. Primarily, this contribution was meant to serve the symposium in drawing attention to some particular aspects of geocological importance^[3]. However, it seems to have developed into a further step towards a more comprehensive analysis of the literature available about this tremendously interesting region, now closed to outsiders. It seemed only natural to turn to F. Kingdon Ward’s writings again. Bearing in mind Stearn’s note of caution relating to the bibliography mentioned above, it seemed appropriate to try to compile a full bibliography of F. Kingdon Ward’s work, in order to assemble all the sources provided in his writings for our better knowledge of the region, and to do it at once, before it became too late to approach still available sources of personal information. No outsider known had spent more time in the area or become more familiar with these remote places.

In spring 1971 work on the bibliography began in earnest : at the British Museum (Natural History); the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew ; the Royal Geographical Society, Kensington Gore ; and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh. Stearn’s contribution (1960) provided the starting point. In July-August 1971 the former Mrs. Jean Kingdon Ward, now Mrs. Rasmussen, after first contacts in London in March 1971, was visited in Norway. In June 1972 work was continued in libraries in Cambridge. In between, research went on in and from Heidelberg. By the end of September 1972 the bulk of the bibliography was assembled.

Besides the compilation of the bibliography it was intended, right from the beginning, to compose a map as well, showing the area of F. Kingdon Ward’s explorations, and all the localities he mentions in his publications, in order to give, in addition to the bibliography, an idea of “where F. Kingdon Ward has been”. It proved difficult enough to try and locate the various localities mentioned as accurately as possible under the given circumstances. However, the compilation of the map was concluded by March 1974.

The bibliography which includes, besides the books, papers in periodicals, etc., of scientific interest only (not, for instance, articles in newspapers), became far more voluminous than anticipated. The map work proved far more difficult to tackle than had been foreseen, even by someone who could claim a certain experience with the difficulties of the maps available for the area under consideration.

The basic idea is, first of all, to provide a suitable tool for further research into many fascinating problems presented by F. Kingdon Ward’s “hunting grounds”, especially as this area has been closed to outsiders for a quarter of a century and is not likely to be accessible again for some time to come. F. Kingdon Ward’s writings provide a unique source of information that he himself was unable to compose into a monograph of the area, now so urgently needed. Under these circumstances a bibliography of his work may serve as a substitute for something we are at present unable to obtain. The short annotations and keys to particular subjects may facilitate the use of the bibliography, and the various indices may prove helpful in using the map.

Stearn in his biographical note in “Pilgrimage for Plants” gave full credit to F. Kingdon Ward and his achievements ; so did the various obituaries at the time of F. Kingdon Ward’s deaths. It

can scarcely be the task of the present writer to add to the tributes from individuals, who, from their personal knowledge of the explorer, were in a much better position to pass judgement. F. Kingdon Ward is, no doubt, best remembered in botanical circles. Here it seems that his memory is, perhaps, especially vivid amongst horticulturalists and active gardeners—scarcely surprising when we consider F. Kingdon Ward's impact on the gardens of his own country especially, which he enriched with such a wealth of plants and colours from exotic places—as an individual effort, perhaps, unparalleled.

The present writer had neither the privilege to know F. Kingdon Ward personally nor—at least, until now—the chance to see any part of the area concerned. But from an appreciation of F. Kingdon Ward's written works he has always held the explorer in high esteem. If he now endeavours to pay some tribute, his approach will, of necessity, be a different one and, perhaps, a very personal one.

5. Attention is drawn in particular to Sir George Taylor's tribute : King- don-Ward, Francis (Frank) in : Dictionary of National Biography (D.N.B.), 1951-1960, published 1971, 587-588.

There is a certain definite quality about F. Kingdon Ward and his writings. They open up a region unknown to the reader in such a way that even someone not much inspired by his own imagination is likely to be lured away “into the wilds” by F. Kingdon Ward's vivid description. F. Kingdon Ward usually succeeds in transforming his readers into travelling companions, or, at least, into typical armchair explorers. It is true that he had first to look after his business, which was plant collecting ; but the breadth of his observations in the field, of all that had a bearing on his primary task of plant collecting, was outstanding. So also were his vivid descriptions of the individual plants he saw and the vegetation in general. These faculties are of the very essence in getting to know a region hitherto unknown.

The map was mainly composed to show at a glance the extent . of all F. Kingdon Ward's journeys ; but it must not be forgotten that many of these remote places were visited again and again by the explorer in pursuit of his business. In doing so he gained that intimate knowledge of country and habitat, plants and people, so necessary for the successful conduct of his collecting trips. This knowledge of the requirements of the plants, the seasonal aspect of the localities and, above all, the changes he noticed during his various visits, showed him to be, besides being the explorer and plant collector, a first-class ecologist as well.

Living in unknown, unexplored country for lengthy periods, exposed to its hardships and excitements, its challenges and its fascinations, entirely forced to rely on his own wits and resourcefulness, all this developed in F. Kingdon Ward what we would call in modern terms the basically geocological approach —that means, to perceive the country round about in its entirety, and to study the interactions of the various forces at work therein. By living “in the wilds” he became part of his surroundings out of sheer force of circumstances. This is why we regard F. Kingdon Ward as an explorer in a class of his own. There have been others in the same field and they, too, have added to our knowledge ; but he has been there more than once—often many times to a particular locality—so that whereas the other contributed, he alone gained the overall view and a superb grasp of the region concerned. His country was the country of the river gorges, and while there are many river gorges all along the Himalaya, where the rivers plunge

down from the Tibetan Plateau to cut their way through the mountains to the plains, the river gorge country of F. Kingdon Ward's fame begins roughly from the 90° E meridian and stretches from there eastwards to the Yangtze—this, truly, is “F. Kingdon Ward country”, the country that he above all others made his “hunting ground” for a lifetime.

F. Kingdon Ward's writings abound in splendid examples of his ecological perception. For instance, there are the flat marshy valley bottoms in the wet Assam Himalaya, at altitudes of about 3,000 m which he noticed to be covered with “myriads” of primulas (“Primelwiesen”). This amazing and beautiful sight he explained—no doubt correctly—as the result of the selective grazing performed by the cattle, yaks, etc., kept by Tibetan herdsmen up there during the summer months.

Many were the dangers he lived with on his travels ; in fact, they no doubt were so frequent that they are seldom actually mentioned. One supreme example of a peril he encountered—and at the same time a unique scientific experience—was his involvement in the Great Assam Earthquake of 15th August 1950, which he was able to observe in the Lohit valley—in fact, sitting more or less right on top of the epicentre ! His reports about this geological cataclysm, its consequences to the topography, the river courses, plant life, etc., make not only thrilling reading, but also widen our understanding : only very rarely is someone with a trained mind in a situation to observe the forces of nature at work in such a catastrophic way—and afterwards be able to get away with the experience and accurately report it.

Living in wild country, exposed to the rigours of its climate, makes one aware more than anything else of the peculiarities of the climate. Amongst the most interesting observations from a climatological point of view are F. Kingdon Ward's contributions towards the complicated problems of local wind phenomena. Of course, the various valleys of the Himalaya, and the river gorges in the East in particular, offer prime examples, being situated between the high plateau of Central Asia and the plains of the Asian periphery, thereby providing “channels” for the air currents. But what is needed besides the overall view are local observations from odd stations here and there—casual observations are useful in their way, but data from particular valleys and localities revisited are of even greater importance and help immeasurably to compare and check observations, so that one may gain a better idea of the mechanism involved.

F. Kingdon Ward's intimate knowledge of the Eastern Himalaya and Southeastern Tibet enabled him to recognise the overall layout of the region and led him to ponder the topographical and morphological developments in Southeastern Tibet at length. His distinction between the three “types” of country—the lower gorge country (V-shaped valleys), the upper gorge country (U-shaped valleys), and the plateau country—is a case in point. Each of these types presents an entirely different ecological set-up—in short, different “worlds”. They form the basis of our understanding of Southeastern Tibet today.

F. Kingdon Ward may not always have expressed himself very systematically—had he been inclined in this direction, no doubt he would have had to give up some of the time he spent in travelling. We might, perhaps, have gained more systematic studies, but would have lost some field material. One problem fired his imagination at a very early stage of his travelling career, a problem in which he actually never lost his interest. This is his theory about a possible extension

of the main Himalayan axis towards the East—a classic example of how his mind worked ! He recognised the distribution of plants at the higher altitudes above the timber line on the great North-South Ranges in the East; he observed climate, rainfall, sunshine, wind, and humidity. Out of this he perceived “climatic divides” and reflected on the morphology of the country, present and past glaciation, etc.—in short, he observed in the field, “read in the book of nature”, revisited places, compared observations on the one range with his findings on the other and contemplated the possible sequence of events in a region outstanding for its remoteness, difficulties of terrain, and challenging problems. Naturally F. Kingdon Ward had his particular interest— and this theory about the possible extension of the main Himalayan axis towards the East was certainly very near to his heart. With the botanical evidence clearly foremost in his mind, he had a good many supporting arguments gained the hard way in very tough country indeed.

In short F. Kingdon Ward’s writing presents a wealth of information—botanical, climatological, morphological, also zoological and ethnological. An enumeration like this, however, does not give to the ‘explorer the credit he deserves, for he is an ecologist par excellence with an eye for the place, the habitat, the particular locality or region, as the stages upon which all this happens. To know F. Kingdon Ward at his best read, for instance, his reports on the Tsangpo Gorge, or Zayul and the Lohit Valley regions in which he was particularly interested—in short, wherever snow mountains and river gorges are concerned.

F. Kingdon Ward started, it seems, somewhat as an “amateur explorer”, not too serious, more “to enjoy himself”, “doing some sort of a trip”, in typical Empire fashion so prevalent amongst the young enterprising Britons of those days. It is not quite clear what actually made him get going, though he did collect some plants and seeds on his very first expedition with an American zoologist. In a letter, not later than 1911, despatched during his first expedition proper from some odd place in Western China to Professor Sir Issac Bayley Balfour, then Director of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, there is already something else besides the amateurish collector: “the snow mountains in the West” had caught the imagination of the future explorer. Soon he is pondering the possibility of a connection between the floras of the Himalaya and of China, mentioned above, and his thirst for the unknown becomes apparent. In a very confidential letter to Professor Sir William Wright Smith of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, he indicates the possibility of a journey “down the Tsangpo”—an operation actually to take place only a few years later (1924-25), though to this very day not fully completed because of the sheer impossible steepness of the country in the Tsangpo Gorge, which at a certain point halted even F. Kingdon Ward (see : *The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges*, London 1926).

The zest for the unknown, for the still blank patches on the map of the world, together with his love for nature—these formed the basis for his career as an explorer. In the achievement of his goal he was helped by the enormous opportunities open in those days to the young and enterprising man—and in particular for the Briton, backed as he was by the influence of a vast mighty Empire. His first lone venture was decisive—he never really settled again. For some time, plant hunting in the service of a fund-providing concern was a necessary evil, and truly regarded as such : F. Kingdon Ward felt irked by the restrictions put on his freedom, and whenever he could he freed himself from such obligations. Nevertheless the interest of horticultural circles helped him in no small way “to go exploring”—or rather, to collect plants—so he had certain obligations to fulfil.

The business of collecting plants for commercial interest is something very different from “picking flowers” or even collecting herbarium specimens. F. Kingdon Ward quickly developed his own ways and methods which helped him to gain an intimate knowledge of the region—in fact he made the best of a bad job he sometimes felt severely, but which, all in all, provided him with opportunities he otherwise would never have had.

In the early days it seemed easier to approach his chosen collecting grounds from the East, when the central power of Imperial China was on the decline, and a number of consulates of His Britannic Majesty offered (at least at some places in the interior parts of China) suitable “ports of call”, from which to approach the mountain vastness further West. These routes from the East seemed in those days more inviting than to force a way through a hostile Tibet, or even through the notoriously difficult approaches in the Assam Himalaya, where topography, climate, vegetation, and not least the local tribes, combined to make the very start already a nightmare. Later, Tibet and the Assam Himalaya became very much a part of F. Kingdon Ward’s hunting grounds, or served him to reach his ultimate destination further East.

An area roughly circumscribed by 89°-102° E, 24°-32° N embraced F. Kingdon Ward’s world. It enclosed the least known parts of Asia of his days, and also the least accessible and the most difficult ones to travel in from the point of view of topography—for one thing he was usually moving right across the grain of the country. It was difficult for other reasons, too, particularly political ones; for instance, there were differences between China and Tibet over sovereignty and suzerainty, which raised special problems in the political no-man’s-land in between. The local people, with not much knowledge of Peking, or even of Lhasa for that matter, considered the area as their own realm and were certainly not inclined to bear allegiance either to the one or the other, nor to pay tribute. But however difficult it may have been in F. Kingdon Ward’s days, there was still the chance for the enterprising man, with good luck and determination, to force his way through and to succeed. It was a lucky chance, during his brief career as a reluctant schoolmaster in Shanghai, that first led him from the East into the interior of the continent, where he caught fire for those great mountains. Later, political developments after the Second World War forced him out of his field proper, though he was able to continue for a while in Northern Burma. However, the majority of his journeys were clearly concerned with the area roughly indicated above—and in this area F. Kingdon Ward for the sake of horticultural plant collecting, concentrated on the higher altitudes. This forced him continuously—as could be expected from a country of that nature—up and down steep slopes. No wonder that the vertical changes in vegetation form such a prominent theme in his writings.

The record of F. Kingdon Ward’s travels begins in 1909 and goes on to 1957—and as Stearn relates (1960, 18), scarcely a week before his unexpected death the possibilities of further plant collecting expeditions were discussed. This brings the total up to nearly 48 years of travelling, with just that much time in between to write the immediately necessary reports to keep the horticulturists interested, and the general public, too. It was yet another of his achievements that in between all the expeditions, with the preparations involved, etc., etc., F. Kingdon Ward found the time to be a prolific writer. It seems that whereas the bibliography compiled by Stearn, 1960, gives already a foretaste, yet the bibliography in this present volume displays for the first time the vast mass of papers F. Kingdon Ward turned out in the course of his life. True, here and there there are repetitions—he might report the same expedition in a book and also in various papers;

but the sheer quantity of work produced is astounding for a man who spent so much of his life travelling “in the wilds”. Perhaps it is timely to remember that the most exciting observations are scientifically of not much value unless they are as accurately as possible described and published, and thereby made available to others interested. This is why we feel so greatly indebted to F. Kingdon Ward as a writer. On the other hand, F. Kingdon Ward simply had to write ; he could not rely on abundant funds, there was no research institution to see him through in case of need. In fact, he made his living by collecting plants and by writing and lecturing. So long as all goes well this sounds quite a pleasant enough way of life ; but there were other periods when things were rather grim, and it reveals the steadfastness of his character that, invariably, he followed his calling and went out exploring again and again, when on several occasions he had the chance of a much easier life.

Not to forget, F. Kingdon Ward was a first-class photographer too, and his photographs (always developed by himself in the field) are an important part of his records of remote places. However, from a scientific point of view it is to be regretted that in the captions we usually lack concise data as to time and place, so helpful for a thorough evaluation.

Referring again to the map of the vegetation of the Himalaya mentioned earlier (see footnote 2) it is only fair to say that without F. Kingdon Ward’s contribution most of the country East of Bhutan would still be blank on the map—all the more so in that the detailed way in which F. Kingdon Ward described his routes rendered his reports immediately available for evaluation, at least for the purpose mentioned. It seems to have given him some satisfaction to see his contributions on this map incorporated in the wider context of an analysis of the vegetation of the Himalaya, from the Hindu Kush in the West to the Yangtze-kiang in the East^[4].

But the abundant material hidden in F. Kingdon Ward’s writings is as yet scarcely tapped for the purpose of gaining a better knowledge and understanding of his whole field of work, the map of the vegetation of the Himalaya being but one example. Out of the analysis of the vegetation developed, for instance, a careful evaluation of F. Kingdon Ward’s observations concerning local wind phenomena in the various river gorges. These, put together in the wider context of similar phenomena in the Himalaya, helped greatly towards an understanding of this complex problem in tropical mountains in general⁷; in fact, the observations won from the “mighty river gorges” in the East were fundamental to putting into proper perspective the various rather vague observations collected from valleys further West, within the Himalayan system.

There is no doubt that our concept of Tibet and its regional differentiation in the Southeast has gained immeasurably by F. Kingdon Ward’s explorations, not to mention his contribution to the problems of plant distribution in which his writings abound. Last but not least, his many succinct observations of little known tribes and populations deserve special mention, at a time when even the last tribe living “on the edge of the world” is in danger of becoming extinct, “absorbed” or otherwise “organised”. But only an overall synthesis of this vast mountain world, relating the many priceless observations in an ecological way, could really bring into focus what F. Kingdon Ward achieved through his knowledge of this part of the world.

F. Kingdon Ward’s reports and writings are classic examples of reliable observations. They enable the general reader to gain a sound idea about the region explored. As to the more sophisti-

cated reader, he gains an understanding of the immense complexities involved in this region. F. Kingdon Ward's approach to the unknown is truly geocological as we would call it today. The very fact that the country he spent a lifetime to explore is now closed for further exploration from the outside made it seem all the more appropriate and timely to undertake the compilation of F. Kingdon Ward's bibliography now. It may serve as a stop-gap for the time being, to facilitate access to some, at least, of the written information available about the area while the region remains closed. It may also serve to bring together all the contributions F. Kingdon Ward made towards our present knowledge. Finally, in so doing it may emphasise the many unsolved problems the area still offers. Let us hope that these problems may one day again be tackled in that spirit of indomitable explorership so remarkably displayed by F. Kingdon Ward, when field exploration can be resumed in that most fascinating part of Asia.

6- F. Kingdon Ward in letter dated February 2, 1958 : “. . . proud to think that I have been able to contribute something. . . .”

7. Schweinfurth, U. : Uber klimatische Trockentaler im Himalaya, Erdkunde 1956. 297-302- see also footnote 4.

[1] F. Kingdon Ward was a Founder-Member of the Himalayan Club. See his contributions to the Himalayan Journal, Vol. I, p. 51 ; Vol. V, p. 46 ; Vol. VII, P- 103 ; Vol. XI, p. 74 ; Obituary notice Vol. XXI, p. 141.—Editor.

1- F. Kingdon Ward : Pilgrimage for Plants, 1960 ; Stearn, W. T., 11, footnote 1. “His father's surname was Ward, his mother's before marriage was Kingdon ; his name at registration of birth was Ward, Francis Kingdon, but in his later years (from 1947 onwards) he preferred Kingdon Ward, Frank. His friends called him Frank, Ward, and Kingdon Ward without much consistency.”

². Schweinfurth, U. : Die horizontale and vertikale Verbreitung der Vege- ation in Himalaya. Bonner Geogr. Abh. H. 20, 1957.

3 Schweinfurth, U. : Ward, F. Kingdon : “Return to the Irrawaddy”, London, 1956—review in Erdkunde, 1958, 80.

4.Schweinfurth, U. : The Eastern Marches of High Asia and the River Gorge Country. Erdwiss. Forschg. TV, 276-287, Wiesbaden 1972.