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GROOVING HIGH

Review of:

Frank Kingdon Ward 1913. *The Land of the Blue Poppy*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 283 pp.

[Twenty-third in a series on "naturalist-in" books.]

From the time of Linnaeus (mid-18th century) into the early 20th century, ambitious plant-collecting expeditions went out from Europe and North America to the farthest reaches of the inhabitable world. The fruits of this were an abundance of research specimens and live material to enrich far-away gardens. A key focus of this effort was the Himalaya, a zone replete with endemic plants and physical adventure.

Frank Kingdon Ward (or Kingdon-Ward; 1885-1958) was an Englishman who explored and collected plants throughout the Himalaya over a period of almost 50 years. His 25 expeditions and many books made him perhaps the best known of botanical explorers.

In 1910, Ward was based on Shanghai, fully expecting to settle down to a quiet city life, when he received an irresistible invitation to undertake a collecting expedition to the border country between Yunnan province and Tibet. *The Land of the Blue Poppy* is the account of this expedition, which largely set the course of Ward's life. The title refers to various species of *Meconopsis*, especially the himalayan blue poppy, *M. betonicifolia*. Ward was the first to bring back viable seed of this handsome plant, which loomed large in his legend.

If that early invitation had not come, would his life have been the quiet urban one he envisioned? I doubt it. Ward had already made one expedition into Tibet and acquired a taste of the life that lay ahead of him. The titles of some of his other books give a sense of the difficulty and high adventure of botanical exploration in its heroic period: *In Farthest Burma*, *Mystery Rivers of Tibet*, *Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges* and *Plant Hunting on the Edge of the World*.

While Ernest Wilson's entered the neighbouring region to the west (see review no. 20 in this series) from the north, Ward approached from the south, coming up through Burma. It would take weeks of traveling just to get into the target region. A major collecting expedition is the opposite of traveling light, and in "that curious little village of many vicissitudes" -- Mandalay -- he set to organizing the mass of porters, pack animals, translators and other local facilitation that it would require.

Initially, there were decided advantages to Ward's attachment to the British Empire, which could open many doors, but there were also disadvantages. Beyond the reach of british authorities, he would be burdened by the local resentment that the empire engendered. Recalling his preparations to ascend into the wild regions, Ward reflected that "Never again did the sense of paralyzing isolation come so vividly upon me as on that first night, when all the trials that awaited me seemed to take shape and rise up in arms to mock my

ignorance and feebleness."

For six months the expedition was based in a village on the divide between the Mekong and Yangzi Rivers. In this area of high, cold deserts, there had been much fighting between Tibetans and the Chinese empire in recent years, memories of which were still raw. It was a time when Tibet was contending for independence, while China and India both sought to absorb it. China was much more successful in this due to its more active trade relations. Chinese merchants represented the real penetration of the region and were a more permanent presence than any government office.

Where the reach of Chinese authority extended, the expedition benefited from the system by which innkeepers were obliged to provide traveling government officials with food, lodging and pack animals at fixed rates. Ward had only to show his government-issued documents to be assured of such local facilitation.

Even so, the government's reach did not extend throughout all of the territory claimed by China. "It is not a little curious that Chinese influence seems to segregate itself in certain places along the trade-routes", Ward remarked, "leaving the intervening country almost untouched, for south of Lu-k'ou I came across Shans living in a state of splendid savagery." At one point the expedition received official permission to enter a particular region of Tibet on condition of signing a waiver absolving the authorities of all responsibility for its safety. In other words, they would be on their own in a lawless area.

Ward spoke Chinese, but hardly any Tibetan. He was favourably disposed to the Tibetans, on the whole, but he freely admitted that both sides were about equally likely to commit atrocities. He also paid close comparative attention to the various minority groups in the region. The expedition traveled with a set of basic medications, and Ward was ready to treat people who requested it, a source of local good will. Sympathetic as he was to the minorities -- the tribal peoples were almost invariably friendly and welcoming -- Ward largely saw the dominant Chinese as a civilizing influence.

In late July, a message arrived that there had been a military confrontation between China and Britain in Lhasa, Tibet, with the result that the Chinese army was out to exterminate all Englishmen that they encountered. Ward was unsure whether this was accurate -- it was later found not to be -- but it was plausible, so he had to move.

As a scientist, Ward was mainly an ecological biogeographer. Although he makes no mention of Alexander von Humboldt, he was evidently much influenced by Humboldt's researches a century earlier in South America. There is much discussion of geography in areas that were very poorly known to the western world. And this is geography on a large scale, including comparisons between the three great rivers -- Mekong, Salween and Yangzi -- with sources in the same area.

Ward's exultation at grand new landscapes is abundantly evident. "Never shall I forget the first view of that noble river [the Yangzi] as we climbed the last spur and looked northwards over the trees towards Batang. The sun was down, and over the purple mountains great puffs of radiant cloud rested, scattering the

dying light; for miles we could follow every twist of the valley, marked by a ribbon of flashing silver, which had still 3000 miles to flow before it reached the ocean."

It was plainly this thrill that kept away discouragement at the many hardships. Riding through a miserable cold storm, he remarks that "To keep up our spirits Gan-ton and I sang songs as we rode along; after all, there was a fine feeling of freedom and irresponsibility while in the company of these happy-go-lucky resourceful Tibetans, and when a man feels in first-rate health a few hardships only make him more conscious of his fitness."

The point is made perhaps even more pointedly by an observation made soon after he had been struck down by sudden sickness: "Though racked with horrid pains, so that I found some difficulty in clinging to my pony, we reached our base camp in the evening, and I soon felt better. On the way down I found masses of a most brilliant blue trumpet-shaped gentian (*G. ornata*), a typical limestone plant, just coming into bloom at the end of September."

There is much discussion of plant formations as a whole, noting how these changed as the expedition crossed one or another divide, as well as changes in vegetation belts with altitude. There is also a focus on conspicuous plant species, but with no deeper treatment of any of them. In particular, although there is frequent mention of plants encountered, there is almost nothing about the significance of finding a particular plant here but not there, or why one species is replaced by another in a particular habitat or zone. Ward, then, shows a fine sense of habitat and plant formations, but very little of the individual organism.

So, why did Frank Kingdon Ward write *The Land of the Blue Poppy* and his many other books of botanical exploration? Was it for the money, or in order to contribute to botany's public profile? Perhaps, but I suspect that he did it mainly because he had a grand story to tell and couldn't stand not to. That is certainly good enough for me.

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