

# Jean Rasmussen in Norway

*'Later she married a Norwegian and spent many years in Norway...'*

Jean Macklin, Jean Kingdon-Ward, Jean Rasmussen – three names for one person which describe the three main periods of her life. For most plant lovers she is known primarily as the great plant hunter Frank Kingdon-Ward's wife, but for 50 years her name was Jean Rasmussen.

When you read an article about Jean, it normally ends with something like *'Later she married a Norwegian and spent many years in Norway...'*. This article will try to put some detail into that typical brief sign-off and provide some information about her life through these years.

Jean Macklin was born in India in 1921 as a daughter of a High Court judge in Bombay, an official of the British Empire. She grew up both in India and in England. Her first connection to Norway was when, as a child and later in her youth, she accompanied her father there in summer to enjoy the salmon fishing on the west coast rivers. This was a sport not normally enjoyed by girls, so it is possible that Jean spent time with the local children and thus learnt some of the language, particularly because, at that time Norwegian children did not learn English at school as they do today. One story about Jean relates that, during one of her stays in India, she found an English-Norwegian phrase book among her father's books and, perhaps through sheer boredom, started learning words and phrases from it. What is an indisputable fact is that during her adult years in Norway she spoke (and wrote) Norwegian more or less fluently.

Life in the British colony seems to have been too slow for her. Maybe she longed for something more exciting, more risky and adventurous? We cannot read her mind, of course, but the facts are that in 1947, when by complete chance she met the distinguished 62 year-old plant hunter Frank Kingdon-Ward, she immediately fell in love and wanted to marry him, despite her being only 26. Her parents were, for obvious reasons, less than happy with her decision. The difference in age was one thing, but what kind of a job is plant hunting? And was it true that he did not even have a home in England?

She must have been very confident and persuasive, for the wedding was arranged in spite of her parents' objections, and shortly after their marriage she was off with Frank on their first joint expedition. On this occasion the trip was to Manipur, where they found the famous lily *Lilium mackliniae*, named in recognition of his young wife's maiden name. More about that later.

Five more expeditions followed during the next ten years. At first, she was more like an assistant to Kingdon-Ward, but she learnt along the road and became an experienced botanist and plant collector over the years they spent in the hunting fields. In fact there have been very few eminent female plant hunters in history and, apart from Jean, maybe only Amalie Dietrich (1821–1891) and Alexandra Potanina (1853–1920) are worth mentioning.



JEAN AND FRANK KINGDON-WARD in Manipur, on their first expedition together, in 1948

IMAGE REPRODUCED WITH THE KIND PERMISSION OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS KEW (REF FKW/1/38)



FRANK AND JEAN KINGDON-WARD studying their copy of Joseph Hooker's *The Rhododendrons of Sikkim-Himalaya*  
(A previously unpublished image found inside one of Jean Rasmussen's books.)

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN/COURTESY OF KÅRE OLSEN

Jean Kingdon-Ward published a book about one of her expeditions with her husband in 1952: *My Hill So Strong*. During this particular trip, to the Lohit river valley on the Assam/Tibet border, they experienced the great Assam earthquake of 1950, measuring 8.7 on the Richter Scale, and were in great danger for months, making their way out of the valley through a destroyed landscape where most paths and bridges had disappeared or had been rendered useless. Landslides and rocks were tumbling down from the mountains for weeks after.

*'It is incredibly beautiful here, you will never get rid of me!'*

The Chinese revolution in 1949 and the subsequent invasion of Tibet in 1950 made travelling in lots of areas impossible. In order to continue his plant exploration, Frank returned to Burma, where he had been before. In 1953 he explored the area between the Nmai Hka and Mali Hka, branches of the Irrawaddy in northern Burma. And Jean accompanied him, as usual.

But in 1955 they made a different trip, this time a holiday to Sweden, travelling in an old car dating back to the war, with a 'house' mounted on the back! They were greatly welcomed to the Gothenburg Botanical Garden and later by the Swedish king Gustav Adolf and his queen, who were both very interested in rhododendrons. Frank and Jean gave the king a newly discovered rhododendron species and, after the visit, they described the royal couple as '... the most charming people you could imagine'.

But then something unexpected happened. Instead of visiting more famous places and people in Sweden, they drove all the way through southern Norway to a tiny village called Svorta, in Sunnmøre county on the west

coast. Even today Svorta is just a few houses which you pass in less than a minute by car. Why did they go there? We cannot be sure, but one, if not both of them must have had some kind of reason. During their stay they lived in their improvised 'caravan car' and paid visits to a man called Albert Henry Rasmussen who lived there in a little cabin. Did they know him? Mr Rasmussen, then aged 72, had lived in China for 32 years. Could Frank have met him there on his travels? Maybe, when on his way to the mountains he encountered other Europeans? Or did Jean meet him first, perhaps after the war, when she was a translator in the Rhine Army and Rasmussen happened to be there at the same time as an information officer? Answers to these tantalising questions are likely never to be found.



JEAN AND FRANK KINGDON-WARD pay a visit to the Gothenburg Botanical Garden in 1955

TOR NITZELIUS

The pair had planned to stay for three days, but three weeks passed before they returned to England. In summer 1956 they returned to Norway, the village of Svorta and Albert Henry Rasmussen for another visit, but this time Frank returned to England alone; he found Norway too cold. Much later, Jean also went home, but according to local people she came back in the autumn with all her personal belongings and moved in with Mr Rasmussen. From that time, right up until Frank's death, she appears to have shared her time between her present and later husband, a quite unusual arrangement in the Sixties! She seems to have been very active in this period; among other things, shortly before Kingdon-Ward died, she made a film with Rasmussen about fishing boats at sea. Rasmussen's cabin had a beautiful view over a fjord landscape, and a local woman can remember Jean uttering: *'It is incredibly beautiful here, you will never get rid of me!'*



JEAN AND ALBERT HENRY RASMUSSEN at their home in 1968 ROGER ENGVIK

**ALBERT HENRY RASMUSSEN**

So, who was Jean's next husband? Albert Henry Rasmussen was born in 1883 in the small town of Skien in the south of Norway. He was often in poor health as a child, and that gave him a persuasive argument for being allowed to go to sea. He thought that a warm climate would do him good, and his father, in the end, seemed to agree. After some relatively short trips to North Atlantic harbours, he went aboard a steamer bound for Asia. He left the ship in Hong Kong 'just to look around' but ended up staying in China for 32 years, although he also travelled a lot in other countries. When Japan attacked China in 1937, he was in England. He was unable to go back to collect his belongings and lost them all. Instead he became a war reporter for the

BBC and was present at most of the great events during the last years of the war in Europe. After the war he worked in the Rhine Army, now with a military grade, and for some time he was a war historian to the Royal Navy.

Having been an adventurer for most of his life, he found post-war military work dull, so instead he bought a sailing ship for 200 cigarettes and sailed around the various harbours in northern Europe for some time, until the boat sank on the east coast of England in 1949. Broke and getting older, now 66, he found that the easiest way to earn money was to become a writer, so he started to write books about his own life and his experiences over the years. Since he had been away from Norway for about 50 years, he wrote

in English, now more familiar to him than his own mother language. His first book was published in 1952 and became *Book of the Month* in London! Altogether he wrote eight books, most of them still available.

Rasmussen also wanted his books published in his native language, and he asked a Norwegian friend to translate his first book for him. This was in 1953 and he decided to travel to the village of Svorta on the west coast of Norway to meet the translator, a place he had never visited before. He immediately fell in love with the little village and made it his home for the rest of his life. Well, more accurately, it was his 'address'; he was not ready to settle down in one place yet. He stayed in Svorta during summer, but left when days got colder and was away all winter. Mostly he lived in England or Spain where he was writing, but he also worked on Norwegian merchant ships as an entertainer for the crew. He played the guitar, he sang and above all he was a storyteller. When Jean and Frank arrived in 1955, his cabin was just finished and he lived there alone. He had been married once, in New Zealand, and had a daughter, but he had been divorced for many years. The daughter, Elisabeth, visited her father and Jean just once, around 1960.

### AN UNUSUAL WEDDING

Frank Kingdon-Ward died in 1958, at the age of 70. He had been married to Jean for eleven years and she was now a widow at only 37. A few months later she married Albert Henry Rasmussen, now 75 years old. Although she obviously preferred men older than herself, her two husbands had more in common than age. Both had been adventurous and travelled most of their lifetime, and both had spent many years in China. They had never lived conventional lives and there must have been something about this kind of man that appealed to her. And now she lived in Norway, in a cabin called 'Lilleknuppen' (meaning 'Little bud') and her name was changed to Jean Rasmussen, a name she kept to her death.

The story of their wedding is still one good enough to repeat among the older people in the area. Jean was a Catholic and 'Ras', as she used to call him, was in theory a Protestant, but not very religious. Catholics were almost unknown in Norway at that time, 98% of the Norwegian population belonged to the Protestant church.

Jean and Ras married in a local church, both in Norwegian folk costumes, and they rowed over the fjord in a small boat to get to the church, an old romantic tradition from a time without cars and roads. The ceremony had both Catholic and Protestant rituals, just in case, and most of it was in English. The priest was a Belgian archbishop who came all the way from Belgium to Svorta to conduct the service, most likely a friend of Mr Rasmussen. Two years later, in 1960, he also led the ceremony when the Belgian royal couple married, it was even shown on television in Norway, so he was obviously somebody regarded highly in the Belgian Catholic church. Still Jean made him help her weed her flower beds when he came to revisit them some years later!

The wedding dinner was a mix of Chinese and Indian courses, not at all familiar to any of the local guests. In the Fifties, only traditional Norwegian food was served both for weddings and for daily meals, even among people of higher classes, so there was a great deal of scepticism towards this 'strange' food. In parts of Norway there still is a tradition of having too much food at weddings and other important celebrations, so that left over food can be shared with neighbours afterwards, to thank them for their help during the celebration. Jean and Ras followed this tradition, but several days after this wedding they still had too much left...

### JEAN'S NEW LIFE AS A NORWEGIAN

For the first time since her childhood, Jean now lived in a normal home all through the year. Ras was used to a bachelor's life and now had to change his habits with a woman in his house. Big parties with plenty to drink, guitar playing, singing and storytelling through most of the night was changed to a regular life. When Jean had established order inside, she started gardening. They had a lot of space, and a collection of plants was gradually established. Having been Frank Kingdon-Ward's wife, she had a special feeling for rhododendrons. She wanted to grow the best of her first husband's introductions, and her close friend, Roza Stevenson at Tower Court, helped her to find the right plants. Live plants were imported, but she also raised her own from seeds – rhododendrons and others – which she ordered in quantity every year. She was generous, and gave botanical gifts

to her local friends. Plants from Jean Rasmussen, especially *Meconopsis* and poppies (*Papaver*) still grow in gardens in the area.

Some seem to 'remember' Jean's property as a large botanical park. It has been suggested that as many as 300 *Rhododendron* species were grown there, but that is obviously far from the reality. Compared with local gardens, she must have had lots of different and unknown rhododendrons, but her garden could never have accommodated that many. That number maybe included all her plants: perennials, bulbs and all kinds of shrubs and trees; that would seem more likely.

One particular plant was very special for Jean, and that, of course, was *Lilium mackliniae*, which her first husband named after her. She tried several times to grow it at Lilleknuppen, but never succeeded. Still, she and Ras used to celebrate the 5th of June every year, the day when she and Kingdon-Ward found this lily for the first time. *Lilium mackliniae* can be grown in Norway, but Jean's garden is too wet and cold. Rhododendrons, on the other hand, grow very



JEAN WITH HER SEED STOCK in 1968

ROGER ENGVIK

well on the Norwegian west coast, and her north-facing garden kept them away from the winter sun when the ground was frozen.

Along with ornamentals, she also grew various herbs unknown to the local people, which she used in her cooking. According to rumours, this did not always turn out successfully when she had parties and served her own favourite dishes!

Gardening was not her only hobby, though. She was a keen photographer and also made films. She used to show films from her travels to local audiences and also give lectures about plants. Astronomy was another passion, and she wrote articles and made radio programmes both for the Norwegian state channel NRK and for the BBC.



JEAN WITH LOCAL GIRLS (from left) Kristine, Reidun, Kirsti and Marit in the garden at Lilleknuppen in 1961, with Edvard Sortehaug working in the background

AH RASMUSSEN

*'If my feet could walk in the Himalayas and the alps of Tibet, they can take a Norwegian winter too!'*

Jean and Ras had lots of friends, both in Norway and abroad, and they socialised a lot. People who knew them describe Jean as a charming and intelligent person, sometimes with a drop of English upper class in her veins. When she wanted things done, she found it irritating that she had to wait for local

craftsmen who would finish other jobs first. At Christmas, she and Ras would invite local children for festive parties at their cabin. Ras would play and sing while she, among other things, tried to teach the youngsters to eat with chop sticks, a trick she herself knew very well.

This unusual couple brought a warm wind from the great world with them; they had travelled for years through countries others had only heard about, spoke several languages, ate different food and lived their lives in their own way, even though that did not necessarily fit with local traditions. People are often sceptical of foreigners, especially if they do things differently, but the fact that Jean spoke Norwegian must have made acceptance of her easier. There were still whispers about her. Jean wore trousers more than skirts, and her trousers could have holes in them that were left unattended – she just rolled the legs up to hide the worn places. She didn't wear stockings, even in winter she just put her naked feet into her boots. *'If my feet could walk in the Himalayas and the alps of Tibet, they can take a Norwegian winter too!'* she said.

### *'Who ARE you?'*

There is a delightful story which demonstrates Jean's character in a really positive way. One day in 1975, Per Magnus Jørgensen, Norway's leading authority on rhododendrons, now a professor, was working in his ground floor office at Muséhagen, in the centre of Bergen, when he heard a knock at the window. He went out to see what was going on and encountered a tiny lady who asked him, in Norwegian with English accent, 'Where did you get that beautiful *Rhododendron pemakoense* which is flowering so nicely? I have not seen a better specimen since I saw it in the wild!'

Jørgensen of course knew how rare that species was and also that very few Europeans had ever been to Pemako. He was amazed by such a question, and so his response was another

question: 'Who *are* you?' 'I am Jean Rasmussen, formerly Kingdon-Ward', the lady replied. Mr Jørgensen was speechless at first, he simply could not find the words when faced with one of the original collectors of *Rhododendron pemakoense* right there in front of him. They had a long conversation, and from then on she kept in touch with Mr Jørgensen and the Botanical Garden in



*RHODODENDRON RIGIDUM*, a Kingdon-Ward collection given to Milde Arboretum, Bergen, when Jean left Lilleknuppen PER MAGNUS JØRGENSEN

Bergen. When she left Norway some years later, she donated a great many of her plants to the institution, which they collected from Lilleknuppen in a lorry. Today only *Rhododendron rigidum* is alive in the garden in Bergen, a hardy and magnificent form of the species.

### BACK TO ENGLAND – AT LAST

Jean and Ras lived together for fourteen years. He had suffered from lung problems for most of his life, and in the end he had to have extra oxygen by day and night. Jean now took on a new role as a nurse, which she did very well and with love and devotion. Albert Henry Rasmussen died in December 1972, 89 years old. He is buried in Oslo, together with his daughter Elisabeth Rosemary.

Some time after his death, Jean sold the cabin and most of their belongings, among them a lot of books, and moved to Oslo. She was still only



JEAN RASMUSSEN IN HER GARDEN at Lilleknuppen  
ROGER ENGVIK

51, but she lived alone for the rest of her life. She travelled a lot, and astronomy was now her main occupation. The American space expeditions to the moon fascinated her greatly. Maybe it was the old explorer in her that found this so interesting. When she grew older she moved back to England and settled in Eastbourne. She continued to travel, but in the end both her physical and mental health were reduced. Her last Christmas card to friends in Norway was sent in 2007. She died 3 December 2011, 90 years old. A long and adventurous life was over.

In writing this article, I hope I have been able to throw light upon Jean's years in Norway, and the time when she was Mrs Rasmussen and no longer Mrs Kingdon-Ward.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my thanks to the many people who have helped me with this article: the local people who knew Jean and Ras when they lived at Svorta, some now in their nineties, and with whom I have enjoyed many worthwhile and amusing conversations; Synnøve Bruteig who let me copy a marvellous photo of Jean in her garden with four local girls; Kåre Olsen who let me borrow his books and other things he bought from Jean when she left her cabin after her husband's death; Roger Engvik who has permitted me to use some of the excellent photographs he produced for the local paper *Sunnmørsposten* in 1968; Bjørn Aldén at Gothenburg Botanical Garden who kindly made the use of a photograph taken during Frank and Jean Kingdon-Ward's visit to the garden in 1955 possible; Professor Per Magnus Jørgensen at Milde Arboretum in Bergen who was kind enough to write down his recollections of his contact with Jean through the late 1970s, and has also been able to provide information about where Jean sourced her plants, together with the image of a rhododendron from among Jean's donations to the arboretum; and The Royal Geographical Society with IBG and Kew Gardens has kindly granted permission for a photograph of Jean and Frank Kingdon-Ward on one of their expeditions to be published gratis.

### REFERENCES

- Bruteig, J (2012). Kunstnarmiljøet på Flåte. *Årsskrift for Skodje Sogelag 2012*: 64–80. Skodje Sogelag.
- Carnaghan, C (2012). Jean Rasmussen, *Asian Affairs* 43:3, 546–547. Routledge. (Online: [www.dx.doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2012.720821](http://www.dx.doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2012.720821))
- Rasmussen, J (1952). *My Hill So Strong*. Jonathan Cape.
- Rasmussen, AH (1959). *Jeg gikk meg over sjø og land*. JW Cappelens Forlag.

### OLE JONNY LARSEN

is a keen rhododendron collector from Ålesund, Norway and is an internationally known author of books and articles about plant hunters and rhododendron culture  
[olejonnylarsen@hotmail.com](mailto:olejonnylarsen@hotmail.com)