

Catalogue of the Reginald J. Farrer Collection at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

GB 235 RJF

Title: The Reginald Farrer Collection

Dates of Creation: 1880 – 2004

Name of Creator: Reginald Farrer (1880-1920), Farrer family and Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Administrative / Biographical History:

Reginald John Farrer, traveller, plant collector, plantsman and writer, was born on the 17th February, 1880 at 3 Spanish Place, London, the eldest of two boys born to James Anson Farrer (1849-1925) and Elizabeth Georgina Ann, nee Reynell-Pack.

Farrer was born with a cleft palate and hare lip, the operation scars to correct this he later covered up with a thick moustache. Having to endure many childhood operations he was educated at home and also at Newnham Rectory. Spending much time by himself, Farrer enjoyed studying the flora in the hills surrounding his family's Yorkshire estate, Ingleborough in Clapham, which his father inherited in 1889. At the age of fourteen, Farrer redesigned its alpine garden.

In 1898 he attended Balliol College in Oxford, graduating in 1902. While there he helped H.J. Bidder construct the popular rock garden at St John's College.

Family holidays were often spent in Europe, but in 1903 Farrer went on his first long journey to Beijing / Peking, briefly visiting Korea before spending around 8 months in Japan. His first book, *The Garden of Asia* (1904) describes this stay. At this time, Farrer's plant and gardening interests were overtaken by his ambition to become a novelist, poet and playwright. Unfortunately, most of this work was not well regarded and is now forgotten.

In 1907 *My Rock Garden* was published which turned out to be his most popular and influential work, and was followed by "Alpines and Bog Plants" in 1908. Also in 1908, he and his friend Aubrey Herbert travelled to Ceylon, where Farrer became a Buddhist, publishing *In Old Ceylon* on his return.

Farrer then tried his hand at politics, and although being elected a Yorkshire County councillor, he lost a parliamentary contest at Ashford in Kent in 1910. He apparently spent much of the £1000 election expenses given to him by his father on orchids.

Farrer's European travels continued throughout 1903-1913, often travelling with fellow gardeners such as Edward Augustus Bowles to places like the Dolomites and the Maritime Alps, resulting in further books such as *Among the Hills* in 1911 and *The Dolomites* in 1913. By this time Farrer had set up the Craven Nursery Company (and Plant Club) in his home village of Clapham which won various awards, mainly from the Royal Horticultural Society.

In April 1914, Farrer and William Purdom, a gardener and plant collector trained at Kew, travelled to Kansu (Gansu), in north-west China, to spend two years collecting plant specimens and seeds, a brave achievement as the area was notoriously lawless at the time with Farrer having to avoid bandits such as the infamous 'White Wolf'. More books followed on his return, *On the Eaves of the World* in two volumes in 1917, and *The Rainbow Bridge*, published posthumously in 1921.

Farrer was back in England by the spring of 1916 and being declared unfit for war service he instead joined John Buchan's Ministry of Information until it was dissolved in 1918. Farrer's work here was ultimately published in *The Void of War* (1918).

In 1919, *The English Rock Garden* was published in two volumes and Farrer embarked upon his second plant collecting expedition, this time to Upper Burma accompanied by Euan H.M. Cox. Based at Hpimaw, Farrer explored the surrounding mountains, collected and painted plants and wrote many articles for the *Gardener's Chronicle*. Unfortunately, few of the plants they discovered proved suitable for cultivation in Britain, and despite going to great lengths to avoid other plant collectors working in the area, Farrer had encounters with George Forrest's collectors and with Frank Kingdon Ward. When you are evaluated by how many new and profitable plants you could introduce, this was all bad news for Farrer.

After a year, Cox returned home, and in 1920, Farrer continued on to Nyitadi, where after spending months alone with his local collectors / assistants, he became ill and died, probably of diphtheria, on the 17th October. He was buried six days later at Kawngglanghpu. His family were able to arrange for a headstone reading "He died for love and duty in search of rare plants". He was unmarried.

Farrer's flamboyant writing style irritated some of his more 'serious' colleagues, and today he is known more for his colourful descriptions rather than his plant knowledge. He was awarded the Gill memorial by the Royal Geographical Society in 1920 and is commemorated in a nature trail in the Yorkshire Dales

National Park which passes some of Farrer's own plants. His herbarium specimens, notable for the expressive detail of his field notes are at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, as are a notable proportion of his archives.

Much of the above information was gleaned from Basil Morgan's entry on Farrer in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, volume 19, 2004, pp.123-4.

Archival History: The Reginald Farrer collection comprises some material which has been generated or collected by the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and some material which has been donated, lent or purchased in recent years (2000-2010). The collection was arranged in 2010 and catalogued in 2011.

Scope and Content: The Reginald Farrer collection comprises correspondence between Reginald Farrer and his family (his mother in particular), E.A. Bowles, John Buchan, Sir Francis Younghusband, Ernest Gye, Sir Isaac Bayley Balfour and others as detailed below. It also includes paintings, photographs, 35mm slides, glass plate negatives and lantern slides covering mainly his two plant collecting expeditions to China in 1914-15 and Burma in 1919-1920, as well as scripts for plays written by Farrer.

System of Arrangement: The collection is split into 4 different origins / provenances.

- The first comprises material from the Royal Botanic Garden Archives including two boxes of correspondence between Farrer and RBGE's Regius Keeper Sir Isaac Bayley Balfour and a photograph album.
- The second consists of the Farrer Family Collection which was donated to the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh by Farrer's family in 2005; this collection consists mainly of Farrer's correspondence, photographic material, paintings and literature.
- The third consists of five photographic albums by Reginald Farrer and William Purdom and is at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh on loan from the Lakeland Horticultural Society.
- The fourth is a set of correspondence between Reginald Farrer and Ernest Gye and was purchased at auction by RBGE in 2008.

Conditions governing access: The collection is open for access, with some photograph albums requiring permissions from an organisation other than the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh before reproduction and/or use.

The Listings:

GB 235 RJF **The Reginald J. Farrer Collection**

RJF/1 Reginald Farrer - Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh archives
Two boxes of correspondence, seed lists and field notes to, from and relating to Reginald Farrer and his expeditions to Kansu (Gansu) in Northern China (1914-1915) and Upper Burma (1919-1920) and one box containing a photo album and letter. These records were likely brought together from various sources within the RBGE Archives so that items relating to Farrer were kept together. It has been decided to keep this collection together.

RJF/1/1 Reginald Farrer - Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh correspondence, box 1 of 2

1913-1918

This box comprises mainly correspondence to and from Reginald Farrer and Sir Isaac Bayley Balfour, Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (1888-1922) but there is also correspondence to/from Sir/Colonel David Prain, Arthur W. Hill, W.R. Dykes, George Redman of the Craven Nursery, and Edward Arnold.

RJF/1/2 Reginald Farrer - Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh correspondence, box 2 of 2

1919-1987

Four folders relating to Farrer's second expedition to Upper Burma between 1919 and 1920 and his death there. Correspondence is mainly between Farrer, Sir Isaac Bayley Balfour and William Wright Smith, Regius Keeper and Deputy Regius Keeper at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, but also S.R. Fasoms, gardener at Craven Nursery/Ingleborough, Lionel de Rothschild, E. L'Estrange P. Thompson [?], and post Farrer's death, Claude Barton of the Ingleborough Estate Office, Colonel Stephenson Clarke, Euan H.M. Cox, H.M. Farrer of Farrer and Co. solicitors [dealing with Farrer's estate] and Farrer's mother, Bessie requesting coloured paintings of *Gentiana farreri* and *Lilium farreri* so that glass windows may be made up for the church in Clapham.

There are also seed and plant lists, identifications, distribution lists to subscribers [though no list of subscribers was found], and a folder of letters from Reginald Farrer to Euan H.M. Cox dating between February and September 1920, some typed transcripts, all copied by Cox's son Peter in 1987, alongside associated correspondence between Peter Cox and D.M. Henderson, then Regius Keeper at RBGE.

RJF/1/3 Reginald Farrer - photograph album and miscellaneous

1914-1984

1. Photograph Album donated to the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in 1984 by Miss Gwen Hall, Cumbria. It was bequeathed to her in 1976 by Elsie Purdom, William's sister. There should have been 2 albums but only one was transferred. [It looks as if the other one went to the Lakeland Horticultural Society, and is now at RBGE on permanent loan - RJF/3/1]
2. Undated letter found in a donated copy of 'English Rock Garden' by R. Farrer.

RJF/2 Reginald Farrer - the Farrer Family Collection

1880-2004

This collection was donated to the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh Archives in 2005 by the Farrer family.

This collection has been split into four components;

- written material (arranged chronologically as far as possible),
- photographic material,
- Farrer's watercolour paintings and
- miscellaneous artifactual material.

RJF/2/1 Farrer Family Collection - written material

1880-2004

RJF/2/1/1 Box 1: 1880-1902; includes Farrer's birth announcement and certificates and four folders of correspondence, mainly to his mother from Ingleborough, Newnham Rectory, Balliol College, Scarborough and Europe.

RJF/2/1/2 Box 2: 1903-1913; includes Royal Horticultural Society certificates, 1902-1913; correspondence relating to Japan trip 1903; general correspondence mainly to mother and E.A. Bowles, 1905-1913; correspondence from Kandy, Ceylon and Colombo, 1908; correspondence from Canada, 1908; correspondence from Europe, 1908; correspondence to and from the Herberts, mainly 1908; correspondence from European trip, family and E.A. Bowles, 1910; items relating to Farrer's Parliamentary campaign, Ashford, Kent, 1910; correspondence from European trip, 1912; and copy of *Primula Hybrids in Nature* by R. Farrer from the *Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society*, 1913.

RJF/2/1/3 Box 3: 1914-1916; includes letter from William Purdom outlining plans for 1914 China Expedition; correspondence from 1914-15 China expedition; some letters to and from Isaac Bayley Balfour, 1915; correspondence to parents from Japan, [1916?]; various maps of Kansu, China; Farrer's writings about Kansu - published reprints and manuscripts, 1916-18; Farrer's writings about

- Kansu - not known if published; newspaper cuttings including articles written about the 'White Wolf' of Kansu, c.1914, some written by Farrer; invoices from Kansu expedition; list of slides relating to Kansu expedition compiled in 1985; transcriptions of two photograph albums relating to Kansu expedition [RJF/2/2/3-4]; miscellaneous ephemera.
- RJF/2/1/4** **Box 4: 1916-1918**; folder of correspondence, mainly to mother but correspondents also include Aubrey Herbert, E.A. Bowles, William Purdom, Nell Purdom [William's sister], Hugh Faulkener and Italian Legation, Beijing. Subjects include Farrer's operation, John Buchan, gardener's pay, London Air Raid, World War One and Edinburgh. Also, letter from John Buchan, Ministry of Information dated 12/12/1917 referring to Farrer's writing; and folder of documents relating to Farrer's time at the Ministry of Information, 1917-18.
- RJF/2/1/5** **Box 5: 1919-1920**; includes correspondence to family and Aubrey Herbert, 1919 - includes references to Frank Kingdon Ward and George Forrest; telegrams from RJF to his mother, 1919; correspondence to family, 1920; letter from Farrer to Sir Francis Younghusband, 13/09/1920; correspondence from Isaac Bayley Balfour and William Wright Smith of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh to Farrer and family, 1917-1924; general correspondence, 1920, correspondents include Lionel de Rothschild, Postmaster Gye? J.T.O. Barnard, and William Purdom; folder of ephemera including telegram, ticket to Rangoon, diary entry and Burmese travelling times and Regulations for dealing with tribes; copy of Gardener's Chronicle including article by Farrer, 1921-22; notes written by Farrer's mother regarding instructions and dispatches from Farrer; plant / seed lists, including identifications from Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh; Farrer's supply lists; information relating to E.H.M. Cox, including, copies of few diary pages, maps and letters from Farrer to Cox; and various maps of various dates relating to Farrer's collecting localities.
- RJF/2/1/6** **Box 6: 1920-1984**; Farrer's death and post-death, including poem written by Farrer one week before his death 'found in the pencil copy of the Empty House' [Farrer's last unpublished novel]; telegram sent to Farrer after his death; correspondence relating to Farrer's death - correspondents include E.A. Bowles, Hugh Faulkener; F. Vivian Clerk, Bidder, Sir Francis Younghusband, Sepoy Jange

Bhaju, E.H.M. Cox, J.T.O. Barnard, S.M. Frank, A.W. Porter, W.T. Stearn and Charles Graham and telegrams reporting death and letters about location and upkeep of the grave; photographs relating to Farrer's grave; undated correspondence - letter from William Purdom to Farrer; Rev. Henry Jardine Bidder to Farrer, and 4 undated letters from Farrer to his parents [mention of autocars in London]; postcard showing Edith Sitwell from Edith to Farrer's mother, March 1922, and photograph of Edith as a child [Sitwells are related to the Farrers] and collection of book reviews collected by Farrer, 1901-1920.

RJF/2/1/7 **Box 7: Retrospective articles in the media about Farrer and his plants, 1920-1989**, including articles in the press, Country Life, Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society, Quarterly Bulletin of the Alpine Garden Society, etc; various lists [see also plant lists in 2nd expedition box 5] including paintings, plant introductions, photographs and transparencies, all apparently drawn up in the 1970s-80s mainly by C. Graham?; flyer from nurseries catalogue [W. Wells jnr, Surrey] showing *Gentiana farreri* c. 1921; newspaper cuttings relating to Gertrude Bell c. 1927; family correspondence regarding Farrer Conference, 1994 and Exhibition, 2003-4; captions and poster relating to 2003 Exhibition - 'The Father of Rock Gardening' held at the Folly, Settle, North Yorkshire.

RJF/2/1/8 **Box 8: Plays / Dramas by Reginald Farrer**, including 'La Reine des Perses' [in French], 20/03/1895, includes poem 'Hymn to Astarte Syriaca', 10/06/1895; 'The Martyr', 25/09/1903-05/10/1903; 'The House of Stark' - various drafts; 'Hearts and Diamonds' - just last Act, but includes Farrer's illustration of 'Lady C'; and 'The Spanish Duchess'.

RJF/2/2 **Farrer Family Collection - photographic material**
c.1890-2004

consists of 4 photograph albums; 2 albums of loose photographs; 3 boxes of lantern slides, 1 box of glass plate negatives and 1 box of 35mm slides.

Photograph Albums

RJF/2/2/1 **Album 1: 1900-1908**; includes Japan, 1902; China, 1903[?]; Ceylon, 1908; Japan, 1903 [photos by Gertrude Bell]; Canada, 1900 and St. Marten Lantosque Vesubie, 1902.

RJF/2/2/2 **Album 2: 1914-1915**, plants from Kansu expedition and some early shots of the Rock Garden at Ingleborough found amongst Reginald's things.

RJF/2/2/3 **Album 3: 1914-16**; China including people, places and itinerary - some photographs by William Purdom.

RJF/2/2/4 **Album 4: 1915**; China including people, places and itinerary - some photographs by William Purdom.

Loose photographs

RJF/2/2/5-6 **2 folders of loose photographs** (1xA4 – 2/2/5, 1xA3 – 2/2/6), some modern copies, of Farrer, his family, Ingleborough, and people, plants and locations in China.

Lantern slides

RJF/2/2/7-9 **3 boxes of lantern slides**, seemingly of people, plants and locations in Japan, and possibly also some taken in the European Alps[?] and Canada.

Glass Plate Negatives

RJF/2/2/10 **1 box of quarter glass plate negatives** mainly of plants taken in China[?] but also includes what appears to be [and what the Farrer family claim to be] two of the first complete descent into 'Gaping Gill' near Ingleborough by Martel in 1895[?]

35mm slides

RJF/2/2/11 **Box of 35mm slides** - various photos taken from the collection to illustrate talks.

RJF/2/3 **Farrer Family Collection - watercolour paintings**

1914-1920

7 boxes/folders of paintings

The bulk of this collection was donated by Farrer's family in 2005, with six further watercolours being added to this collection in 2010 - these had previously been on loan to the Alpine Garden Society. A further painting was added to this collection in 2006 from a private individual who had been given the painting by Farrer's family.

RJF/2/3/1-7 **7 boxes comprising a collection of 58 watercolours** executed by Farrer in the field either on his first plant hunting expedition to China between 1914 and 1915, or on his second to Burma between 1919 and 1920. They are mostly of plants, rhododendrons in particular, but there are two of views.

RJF/2/4 Reginald Farrer – miscellaneous

1902-1991

1 ledger, 2 boxes, 1 tube

RJF/2/4/1 Items relating to Craven Nursery

RJF/2/4/1/1-2 Ledger and wooden box relating to the Craven Nursery and Farrer's Plant Club. The contents of the box have been left as they were and include receipts, letters, plant lists and a metal key ring? The ledger records plants dispatched and covers 1914-1921.

RJF/2/4/2 1 box containing Farrer's 'chop' - a wooden stamp used to write his name in Chinese[?], and his medals as follows: 1902; silver Flora medal, RHS, for Alpine Plants at Temple Show; 1903, silver Flora medal, RHS, for Alpines at Temple Show; 1904, silver gilt Flora medal, RHS, for a Rock Garden at Temple Show; 1904, silver gilt Banksian medal, RHS, for Alpines at Holland House Show; 1905, silver gilt Flora medal, RHS, for Alpines at Chelsea Show; 1905, silver Banksian medal, RHS, for Alpines at Temple Show; 1913, silver medal, Shropshire Horticultural Society, for Rock Garden. Also 2 cassette tapes, 1991, in poor condition. [They seem to be a recording of a talk about Farrer given by Joan Farrer.]

RJF/2/4/3/1-2 1 tube containing 2 certificates: Gill Memorial, May 1920, from the Royal Geographical Society; and South Kent Liberal Association, certificate of condolence after Ashford election, 1910.

**RJF/3 Reginald Farrer - Lakeland Horticultural Society
Photographic Albums**

1910-1920

5 albums

These 5 albums of photographs are at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh on permanent loan from the Lakeland Horticultural Society. They appear to be from William Purdom who travelled and collected plants with Reginald Farrer in Kansu / Gansu, northern China in 1914-1915, but one was compiled by Reginald Farrer and three relate to their collecting trip, so all 5 albums have been stored within the Reginald Farrer collection.

Written permission must be acquired from the Lakeland Horticultural Society before any of the photographs in the albums can be reproduced or used. RBGE can assist with this.

William Purdom was born on the 10th of April at Heversham near Kendal but he spent most of his childhood at the Lodge, Brathay

Hall in Ambleside, where his father, William, was head gardener. After leaving school at 14, Purdom's first four years of gardening training was under his father's tuition, before joining Low Nursery of Enfield, and then the Veitch Nursery of Coombe Wood.

In 1902 Purdom applied for a student position at the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew where he stayed for six years before being chosen to lead a plant collecting expedition to China in 1909 planned by Veitch and the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts. He returned to England in 1912.

Reginald Farrer heard of Purdom's achievements and determined to travel to China to collect plants with Purdom as his assistant. He chose Kansu / Gansu in northern China as it was hoped that this area would yield alpine plants suitable for the British climate. The dangerous and difficult expedition took place between 1914 and 1915 and was funded by Charles Hough of White Craggs, Ambleside and William Groves of Holehird.

Farrer returned to England in 1915, but Purdom elected to remain in China to become a forestry advisor to the Chinese Government. He died in November 1921 in Peking / Beijing after a short illness at the age of 41 while working on a comprehensive forestry survey for the Chinese Railways.

Biographical information on William Purdom was compiled by Margaret I. Perkins, Hon. Archivist for the Lakeland Horticultural Society.

- RJF/3/1** **Volume 1: 1914-1915;** Inscription to 'My dear Bill, from RF', 07/02/1917. Photographs by Farrer. Starts in Peking in 1914 and progresses to Mei S'an, Gwang Hui Ssu, Mien Chi Hsien, Hwa S'an, Lin Tung, Satanee, Siku, 'Thundercrown', Jo-ni, then in 1915, Lanchow, Sining, Wei-Yuan, 'Wolvesden Pass', Tien Tang Ssu, Chebson Ssu, 'Creda Rossa' and 'Clear Lake'. Many shots of villages and mountain scenery, including the locations where various plants were found. There are also photographs from Farrer's lone journey south from Lanchow, before he was reunited with Purdom to travel down the Ja-ling-Jang, through the Yangtze Gorges to Ichang.
- RJF/3/2** **Volume 2: 1912;** Inscribed 'J. Purdom, from C.H. Hough, Xmas 1912. This appears to be from Purdom's first expedition to China between 1909 and 1912 and covers Peking, Amdo and River Tow in Tibet, Jehol, Peling Range, Kansu, Choni, and pictures of people and places, including one of Purdom himself.
- RJF/3/3** **Volume 3:** A compilation of photographs of Tibetan and Kansu people and scenery from both of Purdom's Chinese expeditions, 1909 - 1915. Many of these photographs appear in other albums.
- RJF/3/4** **Volume 4:** Photographs recording Purdom's work as Advisor of the State Forests for the Railways. It shows

Kwang Shan Po Forest Station, Chi Kung Shan, the selection of a site for establishment of forestry nurseries, the Hsi Ling tombs, Li Kia Chia, the survey of the Kalgan Railroad for afforestation, and ends with some shots at the railway station during the 1920 famine.

RJF/3/5 **Volume 5:** A small collection of photographs, some dated 1912, many taken in Peking. They include Purdom with the Commercial Attache to the British Legation, Sir Alexander Hosie, and include images of W. Christie with Mission children. There are many undated photographs of Purdom on expedition in Kokonor, Shansi and Honan.

RJF/4/1-13 **Reginald Farrer - correspondence to Ernest Gye**

1919-1920

A collection of 13 letters purchased at auction in 2008, written by Reginald Farrer and most likely sent to the British Diplomat Ernest Frederick Gye C.M.G., though Farrer tends to refer to him as his "Poison", "Viper" or "Venom".

Gye's mother was the singer Dame Emma Albani and his father was Ernest Gye, the lessee of Covent Garden theatre. Gye entered the Foreign Office in 1903, became Second Secretary in 1908 and Councillor in 1924. He served for some years in Tehran in the earlier part of his career (and where he was when these letters were written) before being appointed Minister and Consul General in Tangier in 1933. Three years later he was made Minister Plenipotentiary in Venezuela, retiring in 1939.

The 13 letters were written in Upper Burma (now Myanmar), mainly from Hpimaw and Nyitadi, and date between May 1919 and September 1920, the last being written only five weeks before his death. The letters are liberally peppered with nicknames and gossip, and the identity of everyone mentioned may never be known; for example, his 1919 travelling companion, fellow plant collector Euan Cox, is often referred to by the name "Jumps". In amongst intimate information and personal references are descriptions of the country, people met and plants collected.