

# Meconopsis

John A. Jackson

Plate 67

**Stem:** strong, leafy, 30 to 60cm, covered with short scattered prickles.

**Leaves:** alternate, irregularly pinnatifid, scattered prickles.

**Flowers:** 5 to 8cm in diameter; colour variable from greyish steel blue to purple blue.

**Petals:** four; Stamens, many; Ovary, one celled and style distinct.

There are several species of this 'alpine' perennial growing at high elevations throughout the Himalaya. The two species of which I have seen the most are *Meconopsis aculeata* (Kashmir to Kumaom) and *Meconopsis grandis* — the large Himalayan blue poppy (Nepal to Tibet). I have never seen them growing in great profusion but usually in small clusters or as a single plant. The generic name *Meconopsis* signifies in Greek that the flower bears a resemblance to a poppy and the plant is of the poppy family, it being of the natural order Papaveraceae.

To the north and east of the village of Gund in the Sind Valley of Kashmir lies a group of limestone peaks rising to almost 5000m. You can cross these mountains via the Yem Har — the Pass of the Goddess Yem, at the foot of which the semi-nomadic traders of Central Asia have for countless centuries stopped and made a brew of tea in thanksgiving for a safe crossing. A tiny lake or sar, the Yem Sar, lies at the foot of the pass supplying cool clean water to the many streams that irrigate the surrounding richly coloured and delicately scented alpine meadowland. There, among the angular glaciated boulders and in the damper areas of ground surrounding the Yem Sar you can find the blue poppy. It was there following a lone trek from the resthouse at Lidderwatt that I found my first *Meconopsis* — just a single isolated plant, its colouring enhanced by a black backcloth of shade provided by two arching rocks. It was sturdy with many blooms and the green of the leaves was the green of emeralds with a texture of velvet. Overall there spread a delicate glinting mass of golden prickles. Sunlight was shining directly onto the almost transparent flowers. Centrally, a five lobed style stood proud of the single green ovary surrounded by an orange ring of stamens, and this bright centrepiece was set against the blue background of the four overlapping petals. They were not a primary blue but a delicate pale blue faintly tinged in parts with an even more delicate barely hinted at royal Purple. I had often heard it said that the blue was the blue of the sky in early morning but I felt this description to be too simple. For me at that moment by the Yem Sar, the only similar delicacy of colouring, almost indescribable, was that of the blue-purple haze rising from distant Himalayan valleys at dawn. A peregrine falcon, wings ripping through the air as it dived, distracted my attention. My eyes returned from sight of bird, glare of sun and dark hue of lake and once again I was impressed by the breathtaking beauty and strength of the flower. Like the Central Asian traders, I brewed tea in thanksgiving for a safe crossing of the pass but remembered also to include thanks for my first find of the Himalayan Blue Poppy.



67 *Meconopsis*, the Himalayan blue poppy.

Photo: John A. Jackson