

Climbing Mount Everest:  
Expeditionary Film, Geographical  
Science and Media Culture, 1922 – 1953

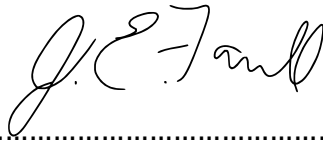
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Thesis submitted to the University of London for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2019

I declare that all work presented in this thesis is entirely my own



Handwritten signature of Janette Elaine Faul in cursive script.

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Janette Elaine Faul

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## Abstract

### Climbing Mount Everest: Expeditionary Film, Geographical Science and Media Culture, 1922 – 1953

This thesis considers the significant role of the moving image in documenting the expeditions to climb Mount Everest 1922 – 1953. It examines the history and technical development of the medium during the first half of the twentieth century with particular reference to the engagement of the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club in commissioning cinematographic records of Everest expeditions. It seeks to re-evaluate the place of film within the historiography of exploration and its development as a means of disseminating geographical and scientific knowledge. It also assesses methods of negotiating with the media to promote and manage exhibition. And it considers the re-use of archival film in both historical and contemporary contexts, notably in the context of restoration projects.

The thesis considers the production, circulation and re-use of Everest films through a sequence of case studies informed by the wider literature on expeditionary film (Chapter 2) and an account of the film, manuscript and print archives underpinning the study of Everest expedition films (Chapter 3). There follows an account (in Chapter 4) of the funding and exploitation of the 1922 and 1924 Everest films, produced by John Noel: and a discussion (in Chapter 5) of the role of the lecture tour and its relationship to film distribution in the 1920s. Chapter 6 considers the films of the two expeditions undertaken in 1933 – another climbing expedition and the first flight over Everest. Chapter 7 examines the film of the successful 1953 expedition which was funded through a government agency, commercially produced and exhibited, with additional promotion through a series of international lecture tours. The thesis concludes by reviewing wider issues concerning the preservation, restoration and re-use of expeditionary film.

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## Abbreviations

AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
AMIA	Association of Moving Image Archivists
AMNH	American Museum of Natural History
BBFC	British Board of Film Classification
BECTU	Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union
BFI	British Film Institute
BUFVC	British Universities Film and Video Council
BUND	British Universities Newsreel Database (News on Screen)
FIAF	International Federation of Film Archives
IOR	India Office Records
MEC	Mount Everest Committee
MEF	Mount Everest Foundation
NFFC	National Film Finance Corporation
RGS	Royal Geographical Society
RGS-IBG	Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers
TIDA	Travel and Industrial Development Association
TNA	The National Archives
TNL	Times News Library
UCLA	University of California, Los Angeles, Film and Television Archive

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Introduction

This thesis examines the production and distribution of expeditionary film, using film made on climbing expeditions to Mount Everest from 1922 to 1953 as its focus. In doing so it establishes a formal place for film in the history of geography and exploration, as well as the consideration of its wide commercial and cultural significance. To most people, aware that the mountain was successfully climbed in 1953, the defining visual image is that of a figure holding flags aloft on the summit, triumphantly encapsulating that event. However a series of films preceded the 1953 climb, providing a visual record of the events leading to the ascent. The existence of these films, mostly preserved in the archive of the Royal Geographical Society with IBG (referred to as RGS-IBG or the Society),<sup>1</sup> has been largely overlooked in the pantheon of mountaineering literature. This thesis explores the history of the films themselves, the role of the cinematographers and the methods of exhibition and audience reception. The role of archival preservation is also assessed as are the opportunities provided by the transition from analogue to digital in enabling availability.

This thesis is the product of a collaborative doctoral award co-supervised at Royal Holloway and the RGS-IBG. However, professional experience of

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<sup>1</sup> The Royal Geographical Society merged with the Institute of British Geographers in 1995. The text will refer to the RGS for the pre-1995 period and then RGS-IBG for subsequent years.

working with early cinema over the last forty years has brought a unique perspective to the research. By way of explanation I refer to my early introduction to film study. As a junior member of National Film Archive<sup>2</sup> staff I attended the 34<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) held in Brighton, 28<sup>th</sup> May – 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1978. Those of us taking part had little idea of the importance of the event and its consequences for our careers as archivists. One of the symposia, ‘Early Fiction Films 1900 – 1906’ would have a profound influence on future academic study of film and the work of the film archive movement. Prints of films from the period arrived for screening from participating international archives - 548 films in total - providing an unparalleled opportunity for study. In 2008 McKernan described the Congress as:

A major milestone, if not the starting point for the whole field. Out of that gathering of academics eventually came the organisation Domitor, which still represents scholarly interest in early film studies. Tom Gunning and Andre Gaudreault’s notion of the ‘cinema of attractions’ was undoubtedly formed to some degree by the experience.<sup>3</sup>

Charles Musser has also described the Congress as ‘a crucial moment’<sup>4</sup>:

The conference signaled a new integration of academic and archive-based history and fostered tendencies that contributed to the formation of a new historiography. One of the most fundamental

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<sup>2</sup> The National Film Archive, a division of the British Film Institute (BFI) has had several name changes during its existence – the National Film Library, the National Film Archive, the National Film and Television Archive, currently the BFI National Archive and will be referred to either as ‘the archive’ or using the name applicable to the period referred to in the text.

<sup>3</sup> McKernan, L. (2008) Brighton Beach Memoirs. Available at <https://bioscopic.files.wordpress.com/2008/04/cinema-1900-1906> (Accessed: 20th January 2018)

<sup>4</sup> Musser, C. (2004) ‘Historiographic Method and the Study of Early Cinema’. *Cinema Journal* 44. 101-107

changes involved a new approach of attitude towards the subject. Too often scholars have maintained a superior attitude towards the works they examine and the creative artists who made them.<sup>5</sup>

The subject area of the FIAF meeting was fiction film – as McKernan noted, ‘non-fiction film, even the bridesmaid, was not included’.<sup>6</sup> However in subsequent years, researchers and academics became more interested in working with film archives across genres, recognizing the cultural role of media studies and encouraging scholarly debate. And so the study of archival film assumed academic status. According to Gauthier (no date) the writing of film history prior to the Brighton Congress was the work of ‘learned amateurs who took up their work with enthusiasm in the absence of formal studies’.<sup>7</sup>

The role of publicly funded film archives, first established in the 1930s, was crucial in establishing the importance of film as a cultural form open to scholarly enquiry. Distinct from the commercial pressures of the film industry, such archives established criteria for collecting and preserving collections of national importance and maintaining continued access to material. Seminal documentation would also be produced. 1948 saw the publication of the first volume of *The History of the British Film* under the auspices of the British Film Institute (BFI). Rachael Low’s chronological multi-volume work would take over three decades to complete and was regarded as the authoritative reference text for film historians. Gauthier

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<sup>5</sup> Musser, ‘Historiographic Method’. 101

<sup>6</sup> McKernan, ‘Brighton Beach Memoirs’.

<sup>7</sup> Gauthier, P. (no date) ‘The Brighton Congress and Traditional Film History as Founding Myths of the New Film History’. Available at <https://www.academia.edu/1795860/> (Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

defines such work as 'traditional film history' and refers to the evolution of 'scholarly film history' in the 1980s under the aegis of the university. However it was due to the work of early film historians like Low, especially their commitment to documenting the growth of the film industry, alongside the work of founding film archivists in collecting and preserving the moving image, that a firm foundation was established on which future historians could build a body of academic work.

I refer again to my own career when, in 1982, I moved from the role of Keeper of Records to the Production Library of the National Film Archive, handling requests from researchers and television producers. A phone call in 1982 from a rather irascible elderly gentleman asking about the use of his film material in a recent television programme was my introduction to Captain John Baptiste Lucius Noel. I have recalled that conversation many times since, when, in the course of my research for this thesis, I found myself transcribing his hastily written notes from Everest Base Camp in 1922 and then following his subsequent life-long journey with his films and slides. Aside from the specialist world of mountaineering film, Noel's contribution to the history of expeditionary film has been largely forgotten, overshadowed by the continuing fevered speculation about who was first to summit the peak – could it have been Mallory or Irvine in 1924?

This thesis provides a comprehensive overview of the place of film and film-makers within the history of Everest expeditions – examining the material, contextualising extant sources and also referencing what has been lost over the decades. It also considers how the Royal Geographical Society and the

Alpine Club, which together combined to form the Mount Everest Committee (MEC), regarded the role of film and how it would fit within the established conventions of those institutions. Technological developments during the twentieth century enabled improved quality and greater detail to be recorded in the field, but also increased availability of film imagery for audiences well beyond the membership of those Societies. For the geographical establishment, this raised issues about what was the proper role of film in documenting and presenting such expeditions.

In this vein, the place of the Everest films alongside other expeditionary films in the 1920s and 1930s is examined – the expectation of financial gain is also assessed. However continuing national and international media fascination with the subject has maintained a role for the films. This thesis has provided an opportunity to combine specialist knowledge of what is fast becoming an obsolete form, with the history of the exploitation of that form and the unravelling of the forgotten documentation which provides the factual evidence and contextualisation. The archives of the Mount Everest Committee, held at the Society, hold an unrivalled, detailed record of the planning and execution of the attempts to climb Everest. Much consulted by historians and explorers over the decades, they also hold evidence of the background to the recording of film records and establish the rationale for such activity .

The thesis examines the historical and social background to the development of expeditionary film. The parallel role of the expedition lecture is assessed, as is the continuing role of the lecturer which is still



celebrated by the Society. I suggest that it was the initial reluctance to engage with the established commercial film industry that led to the production of some of the most memorable moving images of Mount Everest. New evidence provides provenance for the re-assessment of the place of the film lecture alongside the commercial screening of films. The relationship with the BFI National Archive is described and the new opportunities created for the film collection.

Driver (2001) has referred to the 'cultures of exploration' as reflected in the activities of the RGS, 'a hybrid institution, seeking simultaneously to acquire the status of a scientific society and to provide a public forum for the celebration of the new age of exploration'.<sup>8</sup> The Society 'part social club, part learned society, part imperial information exchange and part platform for the promotion of sensational feats of exploration' in the nineteenth century would strive to rid itself of the slur of sensationalism in the opening decades of the twentieth century. In doing so it necessarily had to tread a careful path in developing relationships with new forms of media. The following chapters investigate just how successful the Society's engagement with, and management of, the medium of film would be in the recording of its venture to mount attempts to conquer Everest, the 'Third Pole'.

The decision to commission a film of the second expedition to Everest in 1922 marked a significant development for the RGS and the Alpine Club. It was regarded almost as a necessary evil to engage with the process. The

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<sup>8</sup> Driver, F. (2001) *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire*. Oxford: Blackwell. 24

resulting film record would place the climb firmly in the developing genre of expeditionary film-making and make it worthy of preservation. After 1922, successive expeditions would always include a cameraman, officially appointed or unofficially filming events – filming became the province of both the professional and the enthusiastic amateur. The acquisition of such disparate film records by the Society provides a rich source of evidence for the historian alongside the cornucopia of written expeditionary records held in the RGS-IBG Collection. The challenges of preserving and now ensuring that these films take a permanent place alongside the memoirs, reports and photographic images have been met, and the films made available in digital form now enable a new assessment. In the course of research for this thesis, extant film records have been consulted in their various forms and a summary of their subsequent use described. This has provided a definitive listing for future study and importantly has documented films that have not survived. These ‘lost films’ are now on the radar and as a result of this research, hopefully, may be located and take their place in the Everest archive.

## 1.2 Thesis structure

The chapters that follow explore aspects of the film produced on successive British expeditions to Mount Everest (a summary of which is presented in Table 1). The emphasis in this thesis, as discussed in Chapter 2, is on the sponsorship, production, distribution and reception of Everest films between 1922 and 1953. This requires an appreciation of the wider context of expeditionary film and especially its relationships to developments in

media culture and technology. In Chapter 2, I examine the historiography of expeditionary film. The uneasy relationship between the scientific and commercial uses of expeditionary film is evident in the decision made by the MEC in 1922 to commission an official cinematographer, rather than a commercial production company to produce and distribute a film about the second Everest expedition. Chapter 3 provides evidence of the disparate sources consulted and a definitive listing of the films themselves. The remainder of the thesis considers key aspects of film-making on successive expeditions over the next three decades, the chapters combining a thematic approach with a chronological arrangement. Chapter 4 addresses the funding and commercial context of the filming of the 1922 and 1924 expeditions, focussing on the marketing and promotion, editorial control and business models adopted in distributing the productions. The 2018 bequest of the Noel Collection to the RGS-IBG provides an important new source of material for the research presented here. Chapter 5 considers the role of the illustrated lecture alongside film exhibition and examines the relationship between the lecture and film in fulfilling the ambitions of the Mount Everest Committee. Chapter 6 considers the films produced by the two expeditions of 1933 – the climb led by Hugh Ruttledge and the Houston Mount Everest Flight. The relationship between these very different expeditions and their modes of exhibition are examined within various educational and commercial contexts. Chapter 7 covers the commissioning and production of the official record of the 1953 ascent of Everest, mapping the global reach of the resulting media coverage. Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with a review of the historical significance of the Everest films and

their continued heritage value, notably in the context of digitisation and re-use. In particular, the 2013 restoration of *The Epic of Everest* is considered, covering technical aspects and subsequent international distribution. With the approaching centenary of the first expeditions to Everest, I also outline future possibilities for further research into the subject.

## Chapter 2

### The History and Literatures of Expeditionary Film

This chapter considers the nature and history of expeditionary film as a focus of scholarly enquiry in a variety of contexts including film history, the history of scientific exploration, cultures of mountaineering (especially in relation to empire) and changing approaches to the uses of archival film. While the study of expeditionary film is not entirely new, it is a topic which has been relatively neglected both by film historians (for whom travelogue has long been regarded with suspicion) and historians of exploration (where work on visual imagery has focussed more on other media, including print and photography). In recent years, however, new work in both the academic study of film and in histories of scientific exploration has suggested new ways of approaching the relationships between travel, exploration and film, as well as the importance of film to the culture of expeditionary science. On the one hand, works such as Jeffrey Ruoff's edited collection *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel* (2006) have raised far-reaching questions about the ways in which travel has been understood within film studies.<sup>1</sup> On the other, historians of field sciences such as anthropology and geography have reconceptualised the ways in which the experience of exploration and encounter have been conceptualised and visualised, including on film, as evident for example in a recent collection entitled *Recreating First Contact: Expeditions, Anthropology and Popular*

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<sup>1</sup> Ruoff, J. (2006) *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*. Durham: Duke University Press

*Culture* (2013).<sup>2</sup> The substantially increased availability of, and access to, digital film footage has also provided a notable stimulus to research, raising new questions about the uses to which this archive of travel film can be put.

The chapter begins by examining work on the development of travelogue in the context of early film history (section 2.1). I then turn specifically to the historiography of expeditionary film, with reference to the deployment of film in scientific exploration (section 2.2). I then consider the academic literatures on the history of exploration considering the role of film within popular and commercial cultures of exploration in Britain from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries (section 2.3). There follows a discussion of the place of film within mountaineering histories, with special reference to the Everest expeditions from 1922 to 1953 (section 2.4). Finally, I consider the development of new approaches to the film archive and to digital restoration, and their significance for the study of expeditionary culture (section 2.5).

## 2.1 Travelogue in film history

While the term ‘expeditionary film’ suggests a distinct type of film made in connection with an organised journey for exploration or some other (usually scientific) purpose, its history is intertwined with that of travel film more broadly. The connections between film and travel go back to the earliest days of the history of film, as indicated by the coining of the word

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<sup>2</sup> Bell, J. A., Brown, A. K. and Gordon, R. J. (eds.) (2013) *Recreating First Contact: Expeditions, Anthropology and Popular Culture*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution

'travelogue' in the early twentieth century to denote a film or a lecture on travels, often produced with a commercial intent (as in the case of films made by commercial distributors such as Charles Urban in the 1900s). Later practitioners and theorists seeking to raise the esteem in which non-fiction film-making was held often sought to differentiate their work from 'mere' travelogue. For example, in an essay outlining the defining principles of documentary, John Grierson made reference to the French usage of the term *documentaire* claiming that for them it meant only 'travelogue'.<sup>3</sup> In similar vein, Robert Flaherty took a critical view of his first attempt in 1916 to film what became *Nanook of the North*: 'It was, he felt, too much a travelogue – "a scene of this and that, no relation, no thread"'.<sup>4</sup>

The historiography of the 'travel film' was for much of the twentieth century shaped by a distinctly negative perception of travelogue as a superficial, commercial genre. In her classic work on the history of British film in the 1920s, Rachael Low wrote somewhat disparagingly of the filmic equivalent of 'traveller's tales',<sup>5</sup> though she allowed for a more diverse body of work under this heading in her subsequent volume on non-fiction film in the 1930s:

Travel films, which observe places and people rather than events, range all the way from the short commercial travelogue seen in the

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<sup>3</sup> Hardy, F. (ed.) (1946) *Grierson on Documentary*. London: Collins. 78  
Grierson first used the term 'documentary' when reviewing Flaherty's second film *Moana* (1926) for the *New York Sun* 8<sup>th</sup> February 1926.

<sup>4</sup> Barnouw, E. (1983) *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. New York: Oxford University Press. 35

<sup>5</sup> Low, R. (1971) *The History of the British Film 1918-1929*. London: Allen & Unwin. 288

cinemas to the film made during a scientific expedition or voyage of exploration. All, of course, could also be described as educational or interest films, and jungle pictures or the big polar and mountaineering films were par excellence the films which middle-class parents liked their children to see.<sup>6</sup>

Acknowledging the range and diversity of the genre of travel film was one way that film historians have sought to go beyond earlier dismissive views of 'mere' travelogue. Another more fundamental move was to consider the importance of travel for the development of film itself. As Jeffrey Ruoff has argued, far from being a marginal element in the early history of film, the depiction of the experience of travel is actually one of its constituent elements: 'The cinema is a machine for constructing relations of space and time; the exploration of the world through images and sounds of travel has always been one of its principal features'.<sup>7</sup> Such arguments are now a commonplace in the study of early film. Brownlow (1979) for example maintains that travel was 'the mainstay of early moving pictures, providing the very sensation of travel in a railroad car'.<sup>8</sup> Hales Tours provided an immersive experience, the participants given the sensation of a moving carriage from which they viewed images of distant locations. Fiction films also featured travel: for example, one of the most celebrated of Georges Méliès' films was a journey – *Voyage dans la Lune* (1902). R.W. Paul's 1906 film *The (?) Motorist* used miniatures and superimposition to create a

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<sup>6</sup> Low, R. (1979) *The History of the British Film 1929-39: Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930s*. London: George Allen & Unwin. 60

<sup>7</sup> Ruoff, J. (2006) 'Introduction: The Filmic Fourth Dimension: Cinema as Audiovisual Vehicle', in Ruoff, J. (ed.) *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*. Durham: Duke University Press. 1

<sup>8</sup> Brownlow, K. (1979) *The War, the West and the Wilderness*. London: Secker & Warburg. 405



journey to Saturn, with a car travelling around the rings of the planet – both fantasy representations of inter-planetary travel.

The relations between early film, popular entertainment and spectacle were fundamental to Tom Gunning's (1990) influential account of what he called a 'cinema of attractions' which 'directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary'.<sup>9</sup> Gunning referred to the exhibition of short travel films 'surrounded by a mass of unrelated acts in a non-narrative and even nearly illogical succession of performances'.<sup>10</sup> Other historians have provided detailed studies of the role of film in the work of travelling showmen such as Lyman Howe and Burton Holmes. According to Musser (1990) the travelogue 'was one of the most popular and developed forms of film practice' in the early years of cinema.<sup>11</sup> The role of travelling lecturers in circulating knowledge of far-off places to a wide audience through the use of lantern slides and moving film has been the subject of much discussion.<sup>12</sup> Film historian Deac Roussell (2002) has thus examined the various categories of travelling showmen appearing in a range of venues – fairground, town hall, theatres – where both narration

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<sup>9</sup> Gunning, T. (1990) 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', in Elsaesser, T. (ed.) *Early Cinema: Space – Frame - Narrative*. London: BFI Publishing, 58

<sup>10</sup> Gunning. 'The Cinema of Attractions'. 60

<sup>11</sup> Musser, C. (1990) 'The Travel Genre in 1903-1904', in Elsaesser, T. (ed.) *Early Cinema: Space – Frame - Narrative*. London: BFI Publishing. 123

<sup>12</sup> Musser, C. and Nelson, C. (1991) *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Travelling Exhibition, 1880 – 1920*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

and persuasion played roles in their relationship with audiences.<sup>13</sup> Joe Kember (2002) has also addressed the role of the showman/lecturer in familiarising the audience with the moving image: 'he established a rapport with his audiences that was familiar to them as a showland tradition, yet promised rewards which they had never before experienced'.<sup>14</sup> Kember thus explores the distinctions between showing and telling, providing an insight into the difference between 'attractionist and narrative cinema':

A performer who addressed audiences during or between films, the lecturer has been understood both as a legacy of earlier narrative forms (especially the magic lantern show) and as a marker of difference from later developments in the narrative self-sufficiency of films.<sup>15</sup>

In her study of early travelogues, *Education in the School of Dreams* (2013), Jennifer Lynn Peterson argues that early travel films did not present a unified view of the world but rather showed 'incomplete, provisional and often badly translated versions of knowledge about the places they depict'.<sup>16</sup> The films, produced by a number of different companies in the early 1900s, cumulatively provide images of distant lands and customs but they do not present 'a coherent message about geography or power':

Nonetheless they assume a great deal of authority in describing the world for their viewers, confident in their own privilege to define other places and other people. Activities such as map making, census taking, photography and descriptive writing were all done by colonial

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<sup>13</sup> Roussell, D. (2002) 'A Slippery Job: Travelling Exhibitors in Early Cinema' in Popple, S. and Toulmin, V. (eds.) *Visual Delights: Essays on the Popular and Projected Image in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. Trowbridge: Flicks Books. 51

<sup>14</sup> Kember, J. (2002) 'It Was Not the Show, It Was the Tale You Told: Film Lecturing and Showmanship on the British Fairground', in Popple and Toulmin. *Visual Delights*. 62

<sup>15</sup> Kember. 'It Was Not the Show, It Was the Tale You Told'. 63

<sup>16</sup> Peterson, J. L. (2013) *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film*. London: Duke. 129

powers as part of their effort to know and control their territories. Travelogue films may have mimicked such colonial strategies, but as commercial films, they were not engaged in the enterprises of state control. Rather they presented generalized and popularised versions of imperial ideology, and they remained open to other uses.<sup>17</sup>

Significantly Petersen argues that the conventions of the early travel film went on to influence expeditionary film-making.<sup>18</sup>

New commercial imperatives shaped the business of distributing and exhibiting early films, alongside the traditional lecture circuits. Brown and Anthony (1999) contend that ‘the older and conservative lantern trade had more in common with the equally conservative and predominantly middle-class photographic market than it did with the new film business’.<sup>19</sup> They further note that the illustrated lecture business provided filmmakers with a supply of successful themes to follow in the creation of their visual narratives. Commercial production companies had ‘clearly rejected organic growth and natural market development in favour of a much more dynamic and strategic approach in which products were to be subordinated to financial and structural objectives’.<sup>20</sup> A notable figure in the new market for commercial non-fiction films at the start of the twentieth century was Charles Urban. As McKernan (2013) has shown, Urban pioneered the non-fiction film under the banner “We Put the World Before You” – providing ‘film as popular science, film as the provider of knowledge, film that could

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<sup>17</sup> Peterson. *Education in the School of Dreams*. 139

<sup>18</sup> Peterson. *Education in the School of Dreams*. 272

<sup>19</sup> Brown, R. and Anthony, B. (1999) *A Victorian Film Enterprise: The History of the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company, 1897 – 1915*. Trowbridge: Flicks Books. 32

<sup>20</sup> Brown and Anthony. *A Victorian Film Enterprise*. 1

not be dismissed as wasting time'.<sup>21</sup> Urban also launched his own 'expeditions', augmenting his catalogue of film material offered for commercial return (Figure 2.1). In 1903 Urban received funding from the British North Borneo Company to send a cameraman, H. M. Lomas, to film in North Borneo. McKernan describes Urban's films as 'unimpeachably uncritical': as a consummate businessman, he was 'unquestionably in favour of tradition, capital, empire, privilege and conquest'.<sup>22</sup>

If commercial imperatives dominated the market for travelogue, the making of film about distant places was also taken up by others with more educational and instructional goals in mind. In contrast with the business models of popular entertainment, French banker Albert Kahn funded an inventory of photographs and moving images, *Les Archives de la Planète*, designed to document the cultures and landscapes of the world for future study rather than immediate exploitation. Paula Amad (2010) has provided a perceptive account of the development of Kahn's project and the educational ethos behind it – the archive as Kahn saw it, she argues, would be 'non-commercial, non-theatrical and non-circulatory'.<sup>23</sup> The film and autochrome collection, under the direction of geographer Jean Brunhes, was 'operated within an elite pedagogical network' which was 'isolated from

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<sup>21</sup> McKernan, L. (2013) *Charles Urban: Pioneering the Non-Fiction Film in Britain and America, 1897-1925*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press. 36

<sup>22</sup> McKernan. *Charles Urban*. 52

<sup>23</sup> Amad, P. (2010) *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète*. New York: Columbia University Press. 154

commercial film culture'.<sup>24</sup> Overtly internationalist, Kahn's project contrasts with more propagandist uses of travel film in interwar Britain within the documentary movement, as illustrated by the work of the Empire Marketing Board and the Travel and Industrial Development Association film unit (TIDA) and production companies such as British Instructional Films and Gaumont British Instructional, successful producers of educational films which were distributed to the imperial colonies.<sup>25</sup> An example of such educational short travelogues is the *Secrets of India* series, produced from material shot on location during the Houston-Mount Everest Flight (to be discussed in Chapter 6). According to Jaikumar (2011), such films present images of 'people and places who are preserved in time, but wrenched from their spatial contexts through acts of imperial film production, circulation and preservation'.<sup>26</sup>

## 2.2 The emergence of expeditionary film

The emergence of a distinct film genre that can be defined as 'expeditionary film' – designed as an integral part of an organised scientific venture, often to remote environments, documenting the expedition itself as well as its objects – depended on a variety of factors, some of them reflecting the

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<sup>24</sup> Amad, P. (2001) 'Cinema's "Sanctuary": From Pre-Documentary to Documentary Film in Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète (1908-1931)', *Film History* 13, 150

<sup>25</sup> Swann, P. (1989) *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926-1946*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>26</sup> Jaikumar, P. (2011) 'An "Accurate Imagination": Place, Map and Archive as Spatial Objects of Film History', in Grieveson, L. and MacCabe, C. (eds.) *Empire and Film*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 182

commercial contexts in which travel film flourished in the early decades of the twentieth century. For example, Frank Hurley's 'synchronised lecture entertainments' of the 1920s, based on his Antarctic and wartime travels, clearly extended the tradition of travelling showmanship discussed above: as Dixon has argued, these stage performances 'offered local audiences a sense of participating in what was thought to be an authoritatively modern, international experience'.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Homiak has described early expeditionary film-making as 'a kind of collecting practice' which 'valorized the achievements of expeditions' and provided 'products' for lecture circuits: 'for audiences of the day, this supported a popular epistemology that equated seeing with a kind of knowing'.<sup>28</sup>

However, expeditionary film also reflected impulses within the development of sciences such as anthropology, geography and ecology during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The earliest example of expeditionary film-making is widely acknowledged to be the anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon's *Torres Straits* (1898). Haddon's rationale for including a motion picture camera in the expedition's field equipment was that it was 'an indispensable piece of anthropological apparatus'.<sup>29</sup> Over the next two decades the role of film within expeditionary culture developed from the initial means of providing visual

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<sup>27</sup> Dixon, R. (2011) *Photography, Early Cinema and Colonial Modernity: Frank Hurley's Synchronized Lecture Entertainments*. London: Anthem Press. 215

<sup>28</sup> Homiak, J. (2013) 'Foreword' in Bell, J. A., Brown, A. K. and Gordon, R. J. (eds.) *Recreating First Contact*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution. vii

<sup>29</sup> Griffiths, A. (2002) *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press

evidence to a vital component, a shared experience documenting every aspect of the explorer's journey. Technical proficiency and directorial skills became key requirements. As Mitman (2016) has noted, visual images 'had become thoroughly ingrained into the practices of expeditionary science by the 1920s'.<sup>30</sup>

As a descriptive term, 'expeditionary film' covers many forms of film-making, reflecting various different forms of commissioning with diverse institutional, corporate, cultural, educational or commercial agendas. The reputation of commercial travelogue for sensationalism often meant that scientists, like documentary film-makers, were keen to differentiate their work from 'mere' travelogue. In his study of natural history film-making, Mitman (1999) refers to the wildlife expeditionary films of Martin and Osa Johnson who received patronage from the Explorers Club and the American Museum of Natural History.<sup>31</sup> Such patronage did not guarantee success as, by the mid 1920s, the studio system 'monopolized control of the commercial entertainment film industry through vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition'.<sup>32</sup> The AMNH regarded the films as a record for future generations. 'In contrast the Johnsons had far fewer scruples about the preservation of authentic nature when commercial success depended on their ability to make nature conform to the

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<sup>30</sup> Mitman, G. (2016) 'A Journey Without Maps: Films, Expeditionary Science and the Growth of Development' in Mitman, G. and Wilder, K. (eds.) *Documenting the World: Film, Photography and the Scientific Record*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 125

<sup>31</sup> Mitman, G. (1999) *Reel Nature: America's Romance With Wildlife on Film*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 26

<sup>32</sup> Mitman. *Reel Nature*. 27

conventions of Hollywood entertainment'.<sup>33</sup> Erik Barnouw (1983) also writes of the 'tawdry' contribution of Martin and Osa Johnson to the genre: 'Self-glorification was the keynote'.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Petterson (2011) has articulated the difference between travel and expeditionary films as reflecting fundamentally different motivations, commercial as opposed to scientific.<sup>35</sup>

Yet this distinction between scientific and commercial motivations becomes much less clear when the question of sponsorship is considered.<sup>36</sup> In the opening decades of the twentieth century the filming of large scale expeditions was often supported by commercial sponsorship, including deals negotiated with publishing companies, media organisations and film distributors. Exclusivity commanded increased fees but with this came an expectation of success. This could sometimes result in controversy over the results reportedly achieved. Mattuozzi (2002) considers the case of Richard Byrd, whose polar expeditions attracted considerable media attention between 1926 and 1935: 'the explorer, like the movie star became a celebrity, and geographical expeditions became carefully orchestrated narratives structured to maximise publicity and dramatic appeal'.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Mitman. *Reel Nature*. 27

<sup>34</sup> Barnouw, E. (1983) *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. New York: Oxford University Press. 50

<sup>35</sup> Petterson, P. B. (2011) *Cameras Into the Wild: A History of Early Wildlife and Expedition Filmmaking 1895 – 1928*. Jefferson: McFarland. 5

<sup>36</sup> For example, see Barcham, T. (2013) 'Commercial Sponsorship in Mountaineering: A Case Study of the 1975 British Everest Expedition', *Sport in History* 33, 333-52

<sup>37</sup> Mattuozzi, R. N. (2002) 'Richard E. Byrd and the Legacy of Polar Exploration', *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 110, 210



Inevitably some expeditions resulted in failure and even tragedy – but heroic failure was also a recurring theme in expeditionary films. Thus Ponting and Hurley, whose films documented unsuccessful attempts to reach the South Pole and cross Antarctica, became as well known as the leaders of these expeditions, Scott and Shackleton. Similarly, in 1924-1925, Hamilton Rice's expedition up the Amazon to reach the headwaters of the Rio Branco was unsuccessful. But as Martins notes, 'Failure nevertheless became a virtue: and the production of visual records of the journey, in the form of maps, photographs and films, its most significant legacy'.<sup>38</sup> Likewise too Unsworth's (1981) comment on the repeated failure of interwar climbing expeditions to reach the summit of Everest: this is what gave the mountain 'real stature in the public's eyes'.<sup>39</sup> As we shall see in the case of some of the Everest films examined in this thesis, expeditionary film was not averse to highlighting the romantic and tragic aspects of scientific endeavour.

The history of expeditionary film can also be positioned in relation to the documentary film movement. Grierson's famous description of documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality' was one which would have been recognised by the makers of the more widely-circulated expeditionary films of the period, including those made on Everest expeditions. In this context it is worth noting that Robert Flaherty's film

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<sup>38</sup> Martins, L. (2007) 'Illusions of Power: Vision, Technology and the Geographical Exploration of the Amazon, 1924-1925', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*. 290

<sup>39</sup> Unsworth, W. (1981) *Everest*. London: Allen Lane. 225

*Nanook of the North* (1922), widely acknowledged as a seminal work in the documentary field, was shaped by Flaherty's vision of character and narrative. As Rony has argued, the success of *Nanook* created a vogue for 'the racial film' – 'time machines into a faraway present which represented a simpler "savage" past',<sup>40</sup> as exemplified in the films of Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack. In making *Grass* (1925) and *Chang* (1927), these filmmakers 'took on the macho individualistic personae of modern Davy Crocketts who risked their lives in order to film distant places'.<sup>41</sup> Both of these influential documentary films were distributed commercially by Paramount Pictures. In 1933 Cooper and Schoedsack again worked on the subject of the intrepid jungle filmmaker but this time on a feature film – *King Kong*, 'the ultimate carnivalesque version of early ethnographic cinema'.<sup>42</sup> Rony has traced the relationship between *Nanook of the North* and *King Kong*, describing the former as 'a work of taxidermy, inspired by the politics and aesthetics of reconstruction' and the latter as 'a monster, a hybrid of the scientific expedition and fantasy genres'.<sup>43</sup> While subsequent critics have challenged this reading of *Nanook*,<sup>44</sup> Rony's critique was effective in challenging the wall that film historians had created to separate documentary from other genres of film, raising questions about the extent to which expeditionary film, travelogue and Hollywood fantasy might have more in common than sometimes assumed. In this spirit, Mitman suggests

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<sup>40</sup> Rony, F. T. (1996) *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*. Durham: Duke University Press. 133

<sup>41</sup> Rony. *The Third Eye*. 133

<sup>42</sup> Rony. *The Third Eye*. 160

<sup>43</sup> Rony. *The Third Eye*. 160

<sup>44</sup> A. Grimshaw (2014) 'Who Has the Last Laugh? *Nanook of the North* and Some New Thoughts on an Old Classic', *Visual Anthropology* 27. 421-35

that *King Kong* was ‘a stunning climax to the brief reign of the travelogue – expedition film, [combining] mystery, intrigue and danger of unknown lands: the violence and raw sexuality of nature waiting to explode: the thrill and adventure of capturing and taming savage beasts’.<sup>45</sup>

### 2.3 Popular cultures of exploration

In order to understand the role of film within scientific and mountaineering expeditions such as those to Everest, it is necessary to consider the place of images and imaginative geographies within a wider culture of exploration. The associations between exploration, national identity and imperial prestige during the ‘golden age’ of exploration during the nineteenth century has attracted a considerable literature.<sup>46</sup> The role of geographical societies in the creation of the ‘awareness of non-Western worlds’ through print and visual media has received particular attention, since such societies provided ‘a key transmission belt of knowledge about explorers, making heroic legends of exploration available to the general public and adorning them with the credentials of a scientific institution’.<sup>47</sup> In Britain, such a role was played by the Royal Geographical Society which, in the work of Driver

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<sup>45</sup> Mitman, *Reel Nature*. 57

<sup>46</sup> Riffenburgh, B. (1994) *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism and Geographical Discovery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Driver, F. (2001) *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>47</sup> Sèbe, B. (2014) ‘The Making of British and French Legends of Exploration, 1821-1914’, in Kennedy, D. (ed.) *Reinterpreting Exploration: The West in the World*. New York: Oxford University Press. 112

and others, has been closely associated with the culture of imperial exploration.<sup>48</sup>

Scholarship on the popular culture of exploration during the nineteenth-century has emphasised the role of images of heroic exploration in print, in visual imagery, in exhibitions and in theatre.<sup>49</sup> The legacy of narratives of heroic exploration, relating the exploits of Stanley, Livingstone, Burton, Speke and others is evident in the subsequent history of film-making, as Staples (2006) has argued. Discussing images of African peoples and culture in film, she suggests that images of the archetypal heroic explorer endured well into the twentieth century, and were closely associated with the perpetuation of stereotypical colonial imagery.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, nineteenth-century traditions of popular entertainment associated with images of exploration – for example, the Stanley and African Exhibition held in London in 1890 (which featured *tableau vivantes* featuring village scenes and two native boys)<sup>51</sup> – have clear counterparts in twentieth-century cultures of exhibition, including the live performance of the ‘Dancing Lamas’ arranged in connection with a showing of the film *The Epic of Everest*, considered further below and in Chapter 4.

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<sup>48</sup> Driver. *Geography Militant*. 202

<sup>49</sup> Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer*; Driver, *Geography Militant*; Ryan, J. R. (1997) *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*. London: Reaktion Books; Koivunen, L. (2009) *Visualising Africa in Nineteenth-Century British Travel Accounts*, London: Routledge; Lewis-Jones, H. (2017) *Imagining the Arctic*. London: I.B.Tauris

<sup>50</sup> Staples, A. J. (2006) ‘Safari Adventure: Forgotten Cinematic Journeys in Africa’, *Film History* 18, 393

<sup>51</sup> Driver, F. *Geography Militant*, 146-168; Coombes, A. (1994) *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Notwithstanding the survival of imperial traditions and colonial stereotypes, the twentieth century witnessed important changes in the culture of exploration, reflecting new developments in technology and communications, the professionalization of academic geography and eventually the onset of decolonisation.<sup>52</sup> In the specific context of visual technology, the development of expeditionary film brought new possibilities of apparently more direct engagement between audiences and the experience of exploration in remote environments, and new possibilities for the dissemination of knowledge to a much wider audience. Nonetheless, as Altman suggests;

In many ways these expedition films served to perpetuate the tradition of films made and accompanied by platform lecturers. Always closely identified with a specific explorer, who often made personal appearances and provided lectures in conjunction with film screenings, these films were usually distributed by the explorer himself or herself rather than by one of the era's well-known production companies.<sup>53</sup>

The culture of showmanship that pervaded early travelogue presented geographical societies with a dilemma: while such films had genuinely popular appeal, for many they smacked too much of commercialism and sensationalism. Thus when the RGS commissioned film coverage of the second expedition to climb Mount Everest in 1922, the Society placed controls on its exhibition and distribution in an effort to maintain scientific and geographical authority. The Society's vision of a popular culture of

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<sup>52</sup> Naylor, S. and Ryan, J. R. (eds.) (2010) *New Spaces of Exploration: Geographies of Discovery in the Twentieth Century*. London: J.B. Tauris. 30

<sup>53</sup> Altman, R. (2006) 'From Lecturer's Prop to Industrial Product: The Early History of Travel Films', in Ruoff, J. (ed.) *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*. Durham: Duke University Press. 74

exploration was still rooted in a vision of geographical science that was fundamentally about expertise rather than entertainment. It was not until 1937 that the Society published approved guidelines for the use of film alongside photography in the 11<sup>th</sup> Edition of its publication *Hints to Travellers*. There was particular interest in the technical challenges of filming in extreme environments, and the development of new technologies including the use of colour film. As Gordon (2013) notes, Kodak presented its short-lived Kodacolor process for use with 16mm film cameras and stock during an afternoon session at the Society in 1932 at which papers were read on both photography and film.<sup>54</sup> There was, it seems, more readiness to embrace new developments in the technology of expeditionary filmmaking – especially where the challenges were greatest – than to address the engagement of genuinely popular audiences through the medium of film.

#### 2.4 Histories of mountaineering and mountain films

The relationships between mountain climbing, exploration and conceptions of sublime nature have been highlighted by scholars working in a number of disciplines, especially geography, history, art history, the history of science and anthropology. Veronica della Dora has suggested that the human fascination with mountains has long been ‘deeply interlaced with our

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<sup>54</sup> Gordon, M. (2013) ‘Lenticular Spectacles: Kodacolor’s Fit in the Amateur Arsenal’, *Film History* 25, 36-61. See Phillips, F.B. (1932) ‘The Kodacolor Process’, *Geographical Journal* 80, 240-242

cultural values and with our aesthetic tastes and practices'.<sup>55</sup> In her overview of the history of the representation of mountains she reflects that 'visual technologies turned mountains into commodities for the consumption of the European urban bourgeoisie'.<sup>56</sup> These visual technologies included drawing and mapping, but also the uses of spectacle in popular lectures and entertainment. The growth of Alpinism in mid-Victorian Britain, for example, was largely initiated by the sensational performances of the showman (and founder member of the Alpine Club) Albert Smith at the Egyptian Hall (as discussed in Section 5.1). Peter Hansen suggests that such popular interventions 'helped to legitimize exploration and the broader imperial expansion by transforming imperialism from an abstraction into something tangible and readily accessible to ambitious professional men'.<sup>57</sup> Similarly Ann C. Colley (2010) describes Albert Smith as 'a major force in leading the drama of the mountains down to other arenas of performance, away from the regions of the sublime, and into the grasp of those who wanted to reconstruct its events and market its excitement'.<sup>58</sup>

In *The Summits of Modern Man*, Peter Hansen has explored conceptions of individual freedom and agency underlying the culture of mountaineering as it developed from the late eighteenth century:

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<sup>55</sup> Della Dora, V. (2016) *Mountain: Nature and Culture*. London: Reaktion Books. 8-9

<sup>56</sup> Della Dora. *Mountain: Nature and Culture*. 133

<sup>57</sup> Hansen, P. H. (1995) 'Albert Smith, the Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Journal of British Studies* 34, 322

<sup>58</sup> Colley, A. C. (2010) *Victorians in the Mountains*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing. 80

The narratives of modern man imagine that an autonomous individual is first on a hitherto untrodden peak. Yet this modern man on the summit was almost never alone. For many mountaineers and historians, however, the assertion of individual will is the essence of mountaineering and modernity.<sup>59</sup>

Hansen sees the culmination of this tradition in the attempts to climb Everest during the twentieth century, by which time the culture of western mountaineering had become embedded in national and imperial imaginaries. Indeed, Isserman and Weaver (2008) suggest that 'expeditionary culture in the age of empire is best exemplified by the Everest expeditions.....(which) followed the high colonial imperative of exploring, surveying and ultimately subduing the Himalayan frontier'.<sup>60</sup>

A particular set of circumstances and individual players would combine to create the agenda for the successive attempts to climb Mount Everest rather than any other Himalayan peak. This can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century during the undertaking of the Great Trigonometric Survey of India. The location of 'Peak XV' in 1856, which was identified by Andrew Waugh to be the highest in the Himalayan range at 29,002 feet, and given the name of a former Surveyor General, George Everest, rather than its indigenous name, would place Mount Everest as the ultimate goal – the Third Pole to be conquered. Pundits were dispatched beyond the borders of the Indian Empire to confirm the location. Positioned within the border states that formed the territory of the 'Great Gamers' it was confirmed as a

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<sup>59</sup> Hansen, P. H. (2013) *The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering After the Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 3

<sup>60</sup> Isserman, M. and Weaver, S. (2008) *Fallen Giants: A History of Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes*. New Haven: Yale University Press. xi



strategic imperial prize. Key connections would bring together a very distinct cadre to lobby official support and oversee such an undertaking. Principal players were Lord Curzon and Sir Francis Younghusband – Curzon a former Viceroy of India, responsible for the acquisition of the Society’s Lowther Lodge headquarters in South Kensington, and Younghusband, a distinguished Army officer and explorer, principally remembered for having led an incursion into Tibet in 1904. Both men were veterans of the Great Game and both held the role of President of the RGS, in 1911-1914 and 1919-1922 respectively. As Isserman and Weaver state: ‘out of the political and military struggle to control the colonial frontier...ultimately came the thought of conquering the summits’.<sup>61</sup> They further link this goal to the ambitions of the polar expeditions led by Scott and Shackleton:

With the capture of the poles, the exploratory influence in all its forms – national, individual and institutional – needed another virgin prize, and this it found in the Himalaya. Furthermore, the enormous publicity surrounding ‘the race to the pole’, together with the extravagant national commemoration of Scott’s martyrdom, suggested an entire rhetoric in which to couch Himalayan aspiration, a high rhetoric of struggle and honor and fellowship and sacrifice that no one had as yet fully deployed.<sup>62</sup>

Patrick French’s biography of Younghusband further expands on this, seeing the expeditions as ‘the peaceful successor to his invasion of 1904’.<sup>63</sup> French’s description of the RGS is somewhat provocative – ‘the stomping

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<sup>61</sup> Isserman and Weaver. *Fallen Giants*. 22

<sup>62</sup> Isserman and Weaver. *Fallen Giants*. 81

<sup>63</sup> French, P. (1994) *Younghusband: The Last Great Imperial Adventurer*. London: Harper Collins. 328

ground of explorers and officials from all over the Empire....conducting an alternative foreign policy from the steps of Number One Kensington Gore'.<sup>64</sup> In his inaugural speech as President in 1920, Younghusband laid emphasis on his determination to make Everest the main feature of his tenure. His own account of his ambition, written in 1926, is revealing:

Climbing the mountain was no mere sensationalism. It was testing the capacity of man. If he could pass the test of climbing the highest mountain he would feel himself capable of climbing every other peak that did not present insuperable physical obstacles; and the range of geographers would be extended into new and unexplored regions of the earth.<sup>65</sup>

French regards Younghusband as 'moving away from a rigid empirical approach to geographical exploration, towards a looser definition, in which experience and personal fulfilment were as important as bald statistics'.<sup>66</sup>

The methods used in pursuing this imperial goal have been the subject of recent study. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1999) has considered the relationship between Western climbers and their Sherpa workforces during the early Everest expeditions. She argues that Western climbers represented power and authority, while the Sherpas were portrayed in the West as the 'untouched, innocent, unspoiled,'<sup>67</sup> an argument very much in the tradition of Said's critique of Orientalism. However, on later expeditions,

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<sup>64</sup> French. *Younghusband*. 328

<sup>65</sup> Younghusband, F. (1926) *The Epic of Mount Everest*. London: Edward Arnold. 25

<sup>66</sup> French. *Younghusband*. 329

<sup>67</sup> Ortner, S. B. (1999) *Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 45

as Hansen has argued, the relationships between climbers and porters changed from that of leaders and led, Sahibs and Sherpas, to those of partners and collaborators.<sup>68</sup> Yet this process was slow and uneven. As Driver (2015) argues, the depiction of the Sherpa role for much of the period covered by this thesis was tightly circumscribed by colonial convention, as reflected for example in the portrait of Everest film-maker John Noel with his camera at Chang-la in 1922 in which a Sherpa is partially visible, holding the tripod steady. (Figure 2.2) In the shadow of the film-maker and his equipment, the Sherpa remains both anonymous yet indispensable to the expedition.<sup>69</sup>

The enduring influence of colonial and imperial themes in the presentation of British Everest expeditions can readily be detected in accounts of the successful ascent which appeared in the press on the morning of the Coronation on 2nd June 1953. The wider significance of this moment and its relationship to the sequence of expeditions examined in this thesis has been discussed by Everest historians, notably Hansen, whose account stresses the longer-term imperial context as well as the specifics of the postwar era:

An ascent envisioned before 1914 to represent British authority in India and launched in the 1920s when the British Empire had reached

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<sup>68</sup> Hansen, P. H. (1999) 'Partners: Guides and Sherpas in the Alps and Himalayas, 1850s-1950s', in Elsner, J. and Rubiés, J.-R. (eds.) *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel*. London: Reaktion, 210-31

<sup>69</sup> Driver, F. (2015) 'Intermediaries and the Archive of Exploration', in Konishi, S., Nugent, M. and Shellam, T. (eds.) *Indigenous Intermediaries: New Perspectives on Exploration Archives*. Canberra: ANU Press. 18

the widest extent, succeeded only in the 1950s amid the dismantling of the empire and the beginning of the Cold War.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, in an early account of British responses to the successful ascent, Gordon Stewart concludes that while the British relived at this moment some sense of 'that pride and assurance that came so easily in the days of the Victorian Empire', the substance of empire itself was rapidly being replaced by its shadows as postwar decolonisation proceeded apace.<sup>71</sup> In a later paper, Stewart returned to the question of the symbolic significance of successive British attempts to climb Everest focussing especially on the figure of Tenzing himself:

Tenzing provided an alternative reading to the introspective national narrative which had informed British writing about, and perceptions of, the Everest expeditions. In this context, the culminating moment for the British on Everest, the final conquest of the world's highest mountain on the borderlands of their former empire in India, signified the end of the era of unchallenged imperial narrative.<sup>72</sup>

This paper was the subject of a debate with Hansen drawing attention to the contradictory moment that defined 1953, relating both to the decline of empire and the onset of the Cold War, and also emphasising the ambivalent identities that were performed by Tenzing himself, expressing some of the tensions of the moment.<sup>73</sup> Returning to the theme in 2000, Hansen examined the multiple nationalisms reflected in the official and media

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<sup>70</sup> Hansen. *Summits of Modern Man*. 248-9

<sup>71</sup> Stewart, G. T. (1980) 'The British Reaction to the Conquest of Everest', *Journal of Sport History* 7, 37

<sup>72</sup> Stewart, G. T. (1995) 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches: The Conquest of Everest and Late Imperial Culture in Britain 1921-1953', *Past & Present* 149, 197

<sup>73</sup> Hansen, P. H. (1997) 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches: The Conquest of Everest and Late Imperial Culture in Britain 1921-1953', *Past & Present* 157, 164. See also Stewart, G. T. (1997) 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches: Reply', *Past & Present* 157, 189

responses to the ascent in India, Nepal, Britain and New Zealand, arguing that 'divergent interpretations of the 1953 ascent of Everest were the contingent results of particular postcolonial nationalisms and masculinities'.<sup>74</sup> In a further article Hansen explored Britain's changing status in the world and its significance for the loss of British exclusive claims to the mountain, especially after Indian independence and the opening up of the Nepal route.<sup>75</sup> Hansen considers the choice of Hillary and Tenzing for the summit attempt 'an inclusive definition of Britishness consistent with the expansive definition of the Commonwealth articulated at the time of the Coronation'.<sup>76</sup> British reaction to Everest was thus 'a complex amalgam of images of military leadership and planning, science and technology, nationalism and internationalism and partnership within the Commonwealth'.<sup>77</sup>

The question of the role of film in depicting the successful 1953 ascent, as well as the earlier Everest expeditions examined in this thesis, has yet to be subjected to extended analysis. In the literature on the history of mountaineering more generally, film has tended to play second fiddle to still

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<sup>74</sup> Hansen, P. H. (2000) 'Confetti of Empire: The Conquest of Everest in Nepal, India, Britain and New Zealand', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, 308

<sup>75</sup> Hansen, P. H. (2001) 'Coronation Everest: the Empire and Commonwealth in the Second Elizabethan Age', in Ward, S. (ed.) *British Culture and the End of Empire*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 60

<sup>76</sup> Hansen. 'Coronation Everest'. 63

<sup>77</sup> Hansen. 'Coronation Everest'. 65. See also Conefrey, M. (2012) *Everest 1953*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications. 279

photography.<sup>78</sup> Everest expedition historians from Walt Unsworth to Wade Davis have paid some attention to the logistics of film-making in the course of more general histories, though without examining the wider commercial and cultural contexts of expeditionary film.<sup>79</sup> In film studies, meanwhile, the study of mountaineering film has received much less serious attention than more established genres (such as documentary), and such work as has been done tends to focus on particular case studies. For example, film historian Gerry Turvey (2007) has discussed the contributions of the American film-maker and Alpinist Frederick Burlingham to the development of early mountaineering film.<sup>80</sup> Burlingham's coverage of the ascents of Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn, the Jungfrau in the 1910s were adventurous (he even descended into the crater of Vesuvius with a camera) and helped establish the genre, paving the way for more ambitious mountain filming in the following decades. Later set-piece expedition films, including those made on Everest, have tended to be regarded with some disdain by mainstream film historians. For example, even while recognising the achievement of the early film-makers, Rachael Low's authoritative history of British film nonetheless dismisses much of their work, as in her portrayal of the 1920s Everest films:

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<sup>78</sup> On the latter, see Ryan, J. R. (2013) *Photography and Exploration*. London: Reaktion Books; Ryan, *Picturing Empire*; Brown, D. A. (2007) 'The Modern Romance of Mountaineering: Photography, Aesthetics and Embodiment', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 24, 1-34

<sup>79</sup> Unsworth, W. (1981) *Everest*. London: Allen Lane; Davis, W. (2011) *Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory and the Conquest of Everest*. Oxford: Bodley Head

<sup>80</sup> Turvey, G. (2007) 'Frederick Burlingham: Exploration, Mountaineering and the Origins of Swiss Documentary Cinema', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27, 167-191

The emotional impact of this historic material fights to get through the antiquated technique, the long information titles, the interminable takes, the vistas of snowy peaks with no movement to be seen except the occasional drift of a wispy cloud.<sup>81</sup>

The commercial and popular context of the distribution of such films has attracted some attention from historians, notably in the context of the controversy surrounding the showing of Noel's 1924 film *The Epic of Everest*, accompanied by a theatrical performance involving Tibetan monks, dubbed 'The Affair of the Dancing Lamas'.<sup>82</sup> The colonial context and diplomatic consequences of this affair have been discussed by Hansen and Davis, amongst others.<sup>83</sup>

Noel's film-making on Everest has often been celebrated by Everest climbers and mountaineering historians, but it has rarely been examined in detail from a technical, aesthetic or broader historical perspective, with the notable exception of a chapter in Reuben Ellis' *Vertical Margins: Mountaineering and the Landscapes of Neoimperialism*. Ellis uses the 'Affair of the Dancing Lamas' to draw attention to 'Noel's resort to a travelogue emphasis on Tibetan culture',<sup>84</sup> and situates Noel's preferred filmic style in the wider context of the emergent field of documentary. He also draws attention to the specifically colonial aspects of Noel's films and the wider context of empire film-making in the interwar period:

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<sup>81</sup> Low, R. (1971) *The History of the British Film 1918 -1929*. London: Allen & Unwin. 288

<sup>82</sup> Hansen, P. H. (1996) 'The Dancing Lamas of Everest: Cinema, Orientalism and Anglo-Tibetan Relations in the 1920s', *American Historical Review* 101, 712 - 747

<sup>83</sup> Davis, *Into the Silence*, 564

<sup>84</sup> Ellis, R. (2001) *Vertical Margins: Mountaineering and the Landscapes of Neoimperialism*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press. 172

The ideological cargo carried by Noel's film work can be regarded as a somewhat inadvertent precursor to the more methodical and intentionally purposeful propaganda for colonial rule that grew up soon after...underwriting the legitimacy of British presence and influence in Asia.<sup>85</sup>

The imperial and military aspects of expeditionary culture as reflected in successive efforts to 'conquer' Everest have attracted attention from historians such as Hansen, Davis and others. Rather less attention has been given to the specific role of Everest film in an imperial context, though there are now substantial literatures on the study of colonial film (including work on the re-use of Everest footage within colonial and educational film, as examined in Chapter 6).<sup>86</sup> A study of the 1933 film *Wings Over Everest* by historian Patrick Zander provides probably the most developed political analysis of a single Everest film. It is described by Zander as 'a high-nationalist statement about British regeneration and the power relations of empire'.<sup>87</sup> The 1953 film *The Conquest of Everest* has also been discussed in the context of the intersection of late imperial, Commonwealth and Cold War moments as discussed above, though its specifically filmic qualities have received very little attention.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ellis. *Vertical Margins*. 171

<sup>86</sup> Grieveson, L. and MacCabe, C. (eds.) (2011) *Empire and Film*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Colonial film: moving images of the British Empire, [www.colonialfilm.org.uk](http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk).

<sup>87</sup> Zander, P. (2010) ' (Right) Wings Over Everest: High Adventure, High Technology and High Nationalism on the Roof of the World, 1932-1934', *Twentieth Century British History* 21, 329

<sup>88</sup> Hansen. 'Coronation Everest'. 67



## 2.5 The film archive in a digital era

In his 2016 essay on expeditionary film entitled 'A journey without maps', historian of science Gregg Mitman (2016) has written of the 'the vitality of film as both a material object and cultural artifact, created for one purpose, archived for another and resurrected yet again for quite different reasons'.<sup>89</sup> Mitman's work on film footage from a 1920s Harvard expedition to Liberia, in common with much recent academic literature on travel, expeditionary and colonial film, was made possible by projects to catalogue, restore and make available film footage in digital form.<sup>90</sup> As well as making previously unseen material better known by film historians, the increased availability of digitised footage has the potential to enable access and discussion amongst much larger and diverse audiences, including scholars beyond film studies in disciplines such as history, geography and anthropology; special interest groups (such as mountaineers); educators in schools, museums and other institutions; and community audiences in various parts of the world. In this section, I consider the history of film archives, the research literature on archival film and the challenges of the digital era. Further commentary on archive film and digitisation is provided in Chapter 8.

The physical properties of film and the technical challenges posed by its storage and management have been considered from various points of view, technical, professional, historical and theoretical. One common theme across these fields is the role of individual collectors and specialist

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<sup>89</sup> Mitman. 'A Journey Without Maps'. 126

<sup>90</sup> See especially Bell, Brown and Gordon, *Recreating First Contact*; and Grieveson and MacCabe, *Empire and Film*.

institutions in archiving, preserving and conserving film, ensuring its long-term survival. In Low's 1971 history of British film, the establishment (during the 1920s and 1930s) of professional bodies dedicated to film preservation, storage and scholarship is portrayed as 'part of a hunt for dignity' for the medium.<sup>91</sup> In 1929 a British Empire Film Institute was established to promote British films throughout the Empire. Significantly, amongst its earliest acquisitions for its 'Empire Library of British Films' were Herbert Ponting's polar expeditionary films.<sup>92</sup> While this body was short lived, in the same year a Commission on Education and Cultural Films was set up. Its report, *The Film in National Life* (1932) published by the British Institute of Adult Education, recommended the establishment of a national institution 'to promote the various uses of film as a contribution to national well-being'.<sup>93</sup> In the following year, the British Film Institute was created and in 1935 the BFI incorporated the National Film Library (precursor of the National Film Archive). With no statutory deposit legislation in place and a full forty years of film screenings to archive, the NFL's mission to acquire and preserve a national collection of significant film was heavily dependent on the goodwill of the industry. There was no intention at this stage to exhibit film, which would have brought the Institute into competition with commercial distributors.

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<sup>91</sup> Low. *The History of the British Film 1918-1929*. 35

<sup>92</sup> Arnold, H. J. P. (1969) *Photographer of the World* London: Hutchinson & Co. 93

<sup>93</sup> Butler, I. (1971) *To Encourage the Art of the Film: The Story of the British Film Institute*. London: Robert Hale. 1. See also Nowell-Smith, G. and Dupin, C. (eds.) (2012) *The British Film Institute, the Government and Film Culture, 1933-2000*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

The fundamental role of national film archives in preserving and conserving film heritage has long been recognised. Without investment from the public purse and technical expertise developed over the decades of the twentieth century much material would certainly have been discarded. As statutory deposit for film has never been implemented in Britain, the development of the BFI's collection depended on the selection and acquisition policies of successive curators, relying on their own view of the intrinsic merit of film material rather than its commercial potential. Technological advances over the last century have resulted in a succession of fundamental changes in the material form of film, with, for example, flammable nitrate stock being succeeded by safety acetate, then polyester stock, film being succeeded by videotape, and then tape to digital files – each transformation bringing logistical problems for the continued preservation of the film archive.

The reassessment of early cinema by film historians over the last forty years has depended on the work of communities of film archivists, such as those who attended the 1978 FIAF Congress in Brighton (as discussed in Chapter 1). A new phase of academic engagement with the film archive was heralded by Paul Smith's edited collection, *The Historian and Film*, which appeared in 1976.<sup>94</sup> During the latter decades of the twentieth century, film archivists active in such bodies as FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives) and AMIA (Association of Moving Image Archives) were closely involved in the development of new approaches to film. In 1994 Penelope Houston,

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<sup>94</sup> Smith, P. (1976) *The Historian and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Editor of *Sight and Sound*, wrote an homage to film archivists under the title *Keepers of the Frame*, providing a detailed history of the International Federation of Film Archives (founded in Paris in 1938) based on interviews with many of the key players.<sup>95</sup> In this history, the archivist was the hero:

All archivists have a powerful sentimental attachment to silent cinema, a determination to hold onto any scrap that comes their way, however trivial or rudimentary. They see it as their role to try and make up for the sins of the past, the history of loss and neglect. They are in the business of salvage, without looking to many of its material rewards.<sup>96</sup>

The recent revival of interest in early cinema has been documented by prominent practitioners in the field of film preservation, including Paolo Cherchi Usai, Senior Curator at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, and a former Director of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. His book *Burning Passions: An Introduction to the Study of Silent Cinema* (1994), described by Tom Gunning as ‘an initiation into an obsession’, provided a comprehensive history of technical developments in the preservation of film, the international organisation of film archives and a methodology for film research.<sup>97</sup> Concerned more specifically with expeditionary film, Pamela Wintle (2013) of the Smithsonian Museum’s Film Department, has provided an account of the practical knowledge involved in managing a single archive film collection. She argues persuasively that such film material owes its existence not only to the labours of those pioneers who took the camera

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<sup>95</sup> Houston, P. (1994) *Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives*. London: BFI Publishing

<sup>96</sup> Houston. *Keepers of the Frame*. 15

<sup>97</sup> Cherchi Usai, P. (1994) *Burning Passions; An Introduction to the Study of Silent Cinema*. London: BFI Publishing

into remote and challenging environments, but also to the work of the 'determined and intrepid archivist'.<sup>98</sup>

The coming of the digital era has posed fundamental questions for film archivists and theorists alike. Some archivists, including Cherchi Usai himself, have lamented the demise of analogue film. In *The Death of Cinema*, Cherchi Usai posed questions about the future role of film archives and the choices to be made about what defines cultural heritage. The multiplication and proliferation of film footage in the digital era accentuated arguments about the essential role of the archivist in documenting and interpreting film:

Moving images produced outside the world of fiction give identity to the viewing experience as fragments of empirical evidence, but they can prove nothing unless there is some explanation of what they are. Be it ever so eloquent, the moving image is like a witness who is unable to describe an event without an intermediary.<sup>99</sup>

Archival film conserves images of places and cultures, traces of encounters and experiences, that may escape the official record entirely. An example of the value of such evidence in the context of Everest expeditions can be found at the BFI in the unedited 16mm home movies of Derek Williamson, Political Officer in Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim in the 1930s. Standing in the grounds of his Gangtok residence, Williamson filmed the 1935 Everest Reconnaissance party led by Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman. The party walk

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<sup>98</sup> Wintle, P. (2013) 'Moving Image Technology and Archives', in Bell, J. A., Brown, A. K. and Gordon, R. J. (eds.) *Recreating First Contact: Expeditions, Anthropology and Popular Culture*. Washington: Smithsonian Institute. 39

<sup>99</sup> Cherchi Usai, P. (2001) *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age*. London: BFI Publishing, 31

past the camera, Tilman and Shipton carrying the wooden box containing the porter's wages. Included in the party is a young Tenzing Norgay – probably his first appearance on film.<sup>100</sup> Writing more generally about sources for the history of expeditions, Martin Thomas (2015) has written of the 'multivalency' of expeditionary film, drawing attention to its diverse uses in a postcolonial era. For example, Arnhem Land footage originally filmed in 1948, and now digitised, has provided Aboriginal people with a unique record of their culture, and a means of preserving it for future generations. As Thomas argues, the contemporary film archive in such cases 'complicates any simplistic assumption that the relationships between expeditions and indigenous societies can be nothing but exploitative'.<sup>101</sup>

As Mitman notes, expedition film footage has many lives.<sup>102</sup> Such an argument does not depend simply on digital re-use: in the case of the Everest films studied in this thesis, and typical of expeditionary film more generally, different versions of the same footage were produced, edited and re-edited. The journey taken by such material before it enters an archive, as Cherchi Usai notes, is another important aspect of its biography:

Several things happen to a film between the time of its first screening and its entry into a moving image archive or a collection. This segment of time shapes the internal history of the copy: the history of the places where it was shown and kept, and of the people who, with varying

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<sup>100</sup> *Mrs. Williamson's Film Collection: Reel 15* – a collection of 22 reels in all covering the Williamson's tour of duty in Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan, 1932-35. See Chapter 3 and Table 1 .

<sup>101</sup> Thomas, M. (ed.) (2015) *Expedition into Empire: Exploratory Journeys and the Making of the Modern World*. New York: Routledge. 4-5. See documentary *Etched in Bone*. Australia 2018. Red Lily Productions. Dir./prod. Martin Thomas and Béatrice Bijon. 72 mins.

<sup>102</sup> Mitman. 'A Journey Without Maps'. 145.

degrees of awareness, preserved it. It is also the history of the changes that have taken place within the object in the course of time: the history of its progressive self-destruction, and, perhaps, of its final disappearance before it could be restored.<sup>103</sup>

Emphasis on the historicity of archival film can be extended to the level of the individual reel: as all archivists know, the material itself has its own life, inevitably undergoing wear and tear, decay, even obsolescence as a consequence of changes in film format or technologies of projection. Far from overcoming such challenges, the transition to digital multiplies them. In the current era, digital cloning provides identical copies, but constant review is required to monitor problems of corrupted files. If the original film form is not preserved and digital versions fail, the images are lost. Aside from issues of damage, the circulation of different versions of film on different platforms further multiplies and complicates the 'afterlife' of films such as Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, as argued by Roswitha Skare.<sup>104</sup> The same can be said of BFI restoration projects concerned with classic expeditionary films, such Hurley's *South*, Ponting's *The Great White Silence* and Noel's *The Epic of Everest* (as discussed in Chapter 8).

In recent years scholars have paid increasing attention to the aesthetics of early film, especially the wide range of experimental colour processes used and the restoration of such colour which has been facilitated by new digital

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<sup>103</sup> Cherchi Usai P. (2000) *Silent Cinema: An Introduction*. London: BFI Publishing. 12

<sup>104</sup> Skare, R. (2016) *Nanook of the North From 1922 to Today*. Frankfurt: PL Academic Research. 20. See also Elsaesser, T. (2016) *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema*. Amsterdam University Press; Cherchi Usai, P. (2013) The Digital Future of Pre-Digital Film Collections, *Journal of Film Preservation* 88

techniques.<sup>105</sup> For Noel this was a continuing ambition throughout his life (as discussed in this thesis). The study of sound used to accompany the exhibition of silent films is another element of academic research – particularly relevant in the restoration of *The Epic of Everest* (See Chapter 8).<sup>106</sup>

Film restoration projects have raised wider conceptual questions not only about the relationship between different versions of film, but about the nature of the connection between a restored film and its original. As Janna Jones puts it:

Moving image restoration moves away from the cultural belief that restoration references an original single artefact. The original film is not a material object, rather it is a conceptualisation of an artefact. To be specific it is an idea of a film that existed prior to its first projection.<sup>107</sup>

In theory, such questions ought to provide common ground for film archivists and film theorists. But as Giovanna Fossati, an influential contributor to the field has remarked, there remains a gulf between theory and practice: ‘as a result scholars often neglect film as material artefacts,

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<sup>105</sup> Street, S. (2012) *Colour Films in Britain: The Negotiation of Innovation 1900-55*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Gunning, T., Yumibe, J., Fossati, G., Rosen, J. (2015) *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

<sup>106</sup> Brown, J. and Davison, A. (eds.) (2013) *The Sounds of Silents in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>107</sup> Jones, J. (2012) *The Past is a Moving Picture: Preserving the Twentieth Century on Film*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 147



and archivists work with little reference to theoretical frameworks derived from academic research'.<sup>108</sup>

## 2.6 Conclusion

In assessing academic study of expeditionary film this chapter has examined the changing relevance of film to its audiences. It has reviewed and sought to define the differing roles of the travelogue and the expeditionary film. It has examined the culture that fostered expeditions and the history of mountaineering filmmaking. It has considered the tensions between commercial and cultural outcomes – the different forms of exhibition and distribution and continued value of the medium for research. It has also examined how literatures have reflected the changing perceptions of race, the politics of empire, the role of scientific and geographical exploration, the importance of the visual record and its form in a time of transition. And it has considered the literature on the changing role of film archives in preserving the material form of film and in ensuring its survival and restoration for future generations in a digital form. Having made the case for the significance of the moving image in the study of expeditionary culture, the following chapter turns to the question of sources and methods in the interrogation of archive film.

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<sup>108</sup> Fossati, G. (2009) *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 103

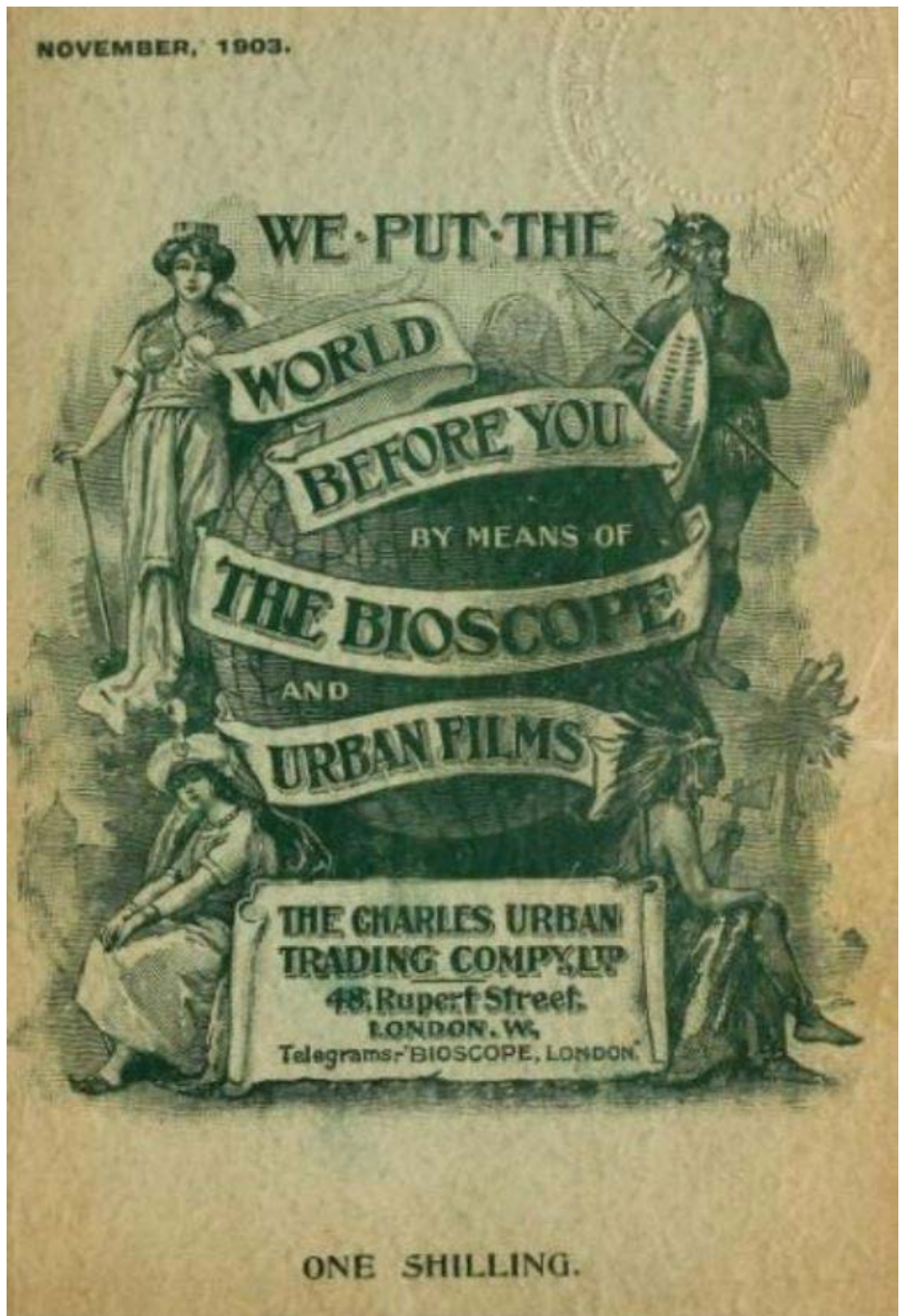


Figure 2.1 'We Put the World Before You by Means of the Bioscope and Urban Films' Charles Urban catalogue, 1903

[www.museumofmodernart;nyarc;mediahistory;Americana](http://www.museumofmodernart.nyarc.mediahistory.Americana)



Figure 2.2 J.B. Noel kinematographing the ascent of Mt. Everest from Chang La. 1922 RGS-IBG

## Chapter 3

### Sources and Methods

This chapter provides an overview of the sources and methods used in this study of expeditionary film associated with the successive British attempts to climb Mount Everest, 1922 – 1953. The various expeditions during this period gave rise to an extensive and diverse body of literature including formal expedition reports, academic studies, popular histories, biographies and autobiographies. While the subject of film has figured in some of these accounts, there has – as argued in Chapter 2 - been no sustained study of the production, distribution and reception of film associated with these expeditions. It is the objective of this thesis to address this by producing a new corpus of work on the archive of moving images produced between 1922 and 1953 to sit alongside existing narrative histories of the climbs. Key themes considered include the commissioning, production, distribution and promotion of the films, including the relationship of the Mount Everest Committee with the commercial film industry. In particular, I assess the business models used in distributing and exhibiting the material and examine how the films were received nationally and internationally.

The first part of the chapter discusses the form, location and accessibility of the body of archival film material relating to Everest expeditions which provides the core material for this thesis (section 3.1). This is followed by an outline of the major ‘official’ expedition films in the period 1922 to 1953 (section 3.2). The chapter then turns to an evaluation of manuscript and

print sources, reviewing the value of a range of unpublished and published materials in contextualising the film footage and considering their potential to enhance an understanding of the films (section 3.3). This is followed by a discussion of autobiographies, memoir and interview sources (section 3.4).

### 3.1 Everest film archives

The substantive chapters to follow will analyse various aspects of films made on successive Everest Expeditions between 1922 and 1953. A key step in the research process was the establishment of a definitive list of extant film material, providing a corpus of work for study. The survival of archive film in a variety of forms is influenced by a number of factors, including its intended purpose (commercial, educational or private), exhibition history, ownership and continuing distribution rights. In this context, it is important to note that the films produced on successive expeditions were not originally regarded as a series and were rarely viewed as such: each film was made under distinct circumstances and had a distinct history and outcome. A semblance of consistency across the period was provided by the Mount Everest Committee, established in 1921, later the Joint Committee, which governed the work of the expeditions, including their film records. The fact that the Committee had a controlling interest in the outcomes of the expeditions, ensured that much of the film material would have a common repository. As a result a set of film records relating to most of the expeditions studied in this thesis resides today within the collection of the RGS-IBG (though physically deposited and stored at the BFI National Archive, as the appropriate body to preserve the material). The rights were

transferred to the Mount Everest Foundation (MEF) established in 1953 to continue funding climbing expeditions from surplus revenue and royalties accrued from the success of the 1953 ascent. By 1973 this was revised, as summarised by Alasdair MacLeod, Head of Enterprise and Resources at the Society:

In 1973-74, the Mount Everest Foundation transferred the Everest photographs to the Society. Since then the Society has, in accordance with its charitable objectives, preserved, protected, curated and, since 2004, made the photographs available to the general public. In 2008, and in order to enable the Society to readily protect its copyright in the photographs, the Society and the Foundation signed a legally binding Confirmatory Deed of Assignment, confirming that all rights, in perpetuity, transferred to the Society from the Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

A major exception was the film of the 1924 expedition, also held at the BFI National Archive, the rights to which were controlled by Sandra Noel, daughter of the filmmaker John Noel. In 2018 rights in the *The Epic of Everest* were bequeathed to the Society by Sandra Noel. The bequest also included the transfer of additional film and associated documentary material from Sandra Noel's personal collection to the RGS-IBG Collection, as described below. This significantly augmented the resources available for study of the history of Everest film.

Table 1 presents an overview of the film materials produced on major Everest expeditions led by British climbers between 1922 and 1953, including information on cinematographers, producers, distributors and

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<sup>1</sup> Summary provided by Alasdair MacLeod, Head of Enterprise and Resources, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2019. My understanding, confirmed by Alasdair MacLeod, is that the assignment of rights to the Society in 2008 included film.

current location. The original film materials survive in a variety of forms: indeed it is important to acknowledge the physical form of the film material and its limitations. The very act of film projection carries an inherent risk of damage as the sprockets are laced up and the footage run through the mechanism. The many human interventions required in the act of screening a reel of film mean that some degree of wear and tear on the fragile strip of celluloid is unavoidable. Taken for granted in the analogue era, such degradation can sometimes be reversed in high-level digital restoration projects (as discussed in Chapter 8). Where multiple copies of film footage could be identified, my goal was to locate the best quality footage for each expedition. While the BFI National Archive holds the bulk of the archival film, material survived in a number of other sources, especially where a film had been commercially distributed. In these cases, film material was typically re-edited to enable further exhibition for different audiences. Technical developments would enable enhancements such as the addition of sound, alternative gauges would provide material for home consumption as well as the commercial market. In some cases, although multiple copies were made for distribution, none appear to have survived. As well as providing a sample of the overlooked genre of expeditionary film within the burgeoning film industry in the first half of the twentieth century, Table 1 draws attention to the role of the BFI National Archive in preserving such material. As no statutory deposit exists for film, titles were selected for inclusion in the Archive according to criteria which have been subject to historical change. The quality of the expeditionary films in the BFI archive varies widely: they may include original negatives and duplicating material,

to ensure long-term preservation, or ex-distribution prints which display wear and tear after substantial use. The earlier generation material may have been acquired during a laboratory clear out of abandoned reels, sometimes damaged or incomplete. Such is the reality of archival content. A search through the Correspondence Block files held at the RGS-IBG revealed the developing relationship with the newly established BFI in the 1930s which led to the deposit of tranches of films, starting in the late 1940s, when the RGS recognised the need for specialist care for its film collection (see Chapter 3.3). However this deposit did not include the 1924 film, *The Epic of Everest*, whose ownership and photographic rights belonged to the filmmaker John Noel. A print of this film had been acquired by the BFI in 1944 as part of a private collection of films owned by a Mrs Arton. Discovering this in the late 1970s, Noel realised the benefit of depositing his own material with the BFI as a film of historical importance, although correspondence reveals that he maintained a keen interest in new technical opportunities for his film.

My prior experience as an archivist/curator at the BFI provided a background in handling analogue film and a knowledge of both archival practices and the history of film exhibition which was of use to the research. In the course of my career at the BFI, I had the opportunity to view archive film material using traditional analogue research facilities - winding benches and a Steenbeck editing table. Manual controls enabled stopping and starting so that individual frames could be examined. Archivists in the analogue era routinely encountered a variety of physical problems when



examining collections of material including excessive shrinkage of the stock, broken perforations, peeling emulsion, poorly cemented splices, the use of grading clips. Alongside the materiality of individual reels, consideration should be given to the physical issues of preserving the film form. The greatest long-term problems for film preservation were caused by the base of the film stock. By the 1970s film archives and commercial laboratories were facing major issues affecting conditions of storage and conservation. Until 1951 35mm film was produced on flammable nitrate stock, inherently unstable, which would eventually become congealed and sticky, finally degrading to a powder in the can. The occurrence of devastating nitrate fires which destroyed lab and archive holdings were a wake-up call for the film industry to review assets. During the late 1970s and 1980s programmes of duplicating nitrate material onto safety acetate stock were implemented. Archives were inundated with collections of original nitrate material to be preserved in approved temperature controlled storage conditions. The 'nitrate emergency' was followed by issues with acetate film which could also suffer from decay. Vinegar syndrome – so called because of the acrid smell produced from the aging acetate material would also require remedial duplication onto polyester stock. A further olfactory complication for 16mm film produced in the late 1920s and early 1930s was the use of camphor oil to maintain flexibility in the film stock.<sup>2</sup> The development of transfer from film to videotape in the 1980s provided a temporary fix rather than a long-

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<sup>2</sup> Volkmann, H. (1965) *Film Preservation: a Report of the Preservation Committee of the International Federation of Film Archives*. English Version. London: National Film Archive. 42

term solution; tape formats became obsolete which would necessitate return to original film sources to retransfer onto new formats. By the start of my doctoral research in 2013 most of the Everest titles in the BFI National Archive had been transferred to digital tape format for screening on BFI premises. This provided easier access and less wear and tear on the film copies. As will be explored in later chapters, certain versions or film elements were found to be missing, but crucially moving images of each of the Everest expeditions from 1922 – 1953 were available within this central collection.

Having considered the physical issues of film preservation it is appropriate here to consider the parameters around which the BFI National Archive - a publicly funded body – operates. While the deposit of film material in an archive does not mean that the owner relinquishes copyright in the material, subsequent access arrangements are of necessity governed by rules designed to minimise wear and tear on the footage. Criteria developed in the pre-digital environment apply. Negative or earliest generation material is given master preservation status – not to be projected or viewed for research purposes. A secondary print can be viewed on editing tables under supervision. A deposit agreement details permitted use once in the custody of the archive. Therefore donors are required to ensure that all commercial requirements are met before deposit. In Captain Noel's case his constant plans for re-use put pressure on the relationship with the BFI National Archive, as I discovered in a conversation with former Curator David Francis (see section 3.4). Unlike commercial film laboratories which

stored material for a fee and would then make material available for reprinting on demand, the Archive did not charge for preservation. This could be prone to abuse, leading to the term 'free warehousing' among frustrated archive staff who felt that publicly funded archives were being taken for granted. It could be equally frustrating for the *bona fide* researcher who had tracked down existing material only to find that access was denied. 'What's the point of an archive if you can't view the material' was an oft heard phrase.

In 2015-17 funding provided through the National Lottery's Unlocking Film Heritage Digitisation Fund enabled the complete RGS-IBG collection of over one hundred films to be made available in digital form on the BFI Player. Prior to its digitisation, knowledge of most of these films was limited and little demand made on the content. An exception was the film of the 1953 climb, *The Conquest of Everest*, rights to which were controlled by a commercial distributor, British Lion, maintaining availability of material for exhibition purposes while separately depositing a print with the RGS for educational purposes. Over the years the pattern of ownership of such distribution companies changed. For example, EMI took over control of the British Lion catalogue, then it passed to French company Canal Plus Images, now Studio Canal. Currently *The Conquest of Everest* is part of Studio Canal's UK catalogue and released on their DVD label.

Continued mythology surrounding the fate of Mallory and Irvine in 1924 had also maintained interest in the early Everest films over the decades.

Noel's very personal continued control of the 1924 film *The Epic of Everest* required careful management. The BFI recognised the historical importance of the material and encouraged its deposit in the national collection. Noel recognised this and saw it as an accolade but also put heavy demands on the institution. Indeed it had been the increasing technical problems with unstable nitrate stock that finally persuaded him to deposit in the early 1980s. By then the possibility of transferring content onto videotape became a reality and the Captain, now in his ninth decade, decided that this was the route he wanted for his material.

The film footage documenting each expedition was also complemented by newsreel coverage which was widely circulated and helped to promote public awareness of both the expeditions and their films. Table 2 provides an overview of sources of cinema newsreel and television coverage of Everest expeditions between 1922 and 1953. As this indicates, Pathé carried several stories relating to the 1924 expedition, including shots of Noel demonstrating the operation of his camera and coverage of the Tibetan lamas who appeared on stage during film screenings. Newsreel production companies maintained libraries of material, including out-takes and unreleased footage which have subsequently been regarded as valuable assets. Through the companies' own digitisation programmes, material is now available for on-line research and commercial access. The main newsreel libraries were Reuters, Pathé and Movietone. These were never dormant archive collections, but provided an important historical resource for re-use, unlike theatrical releases that had come to the end of their

commercial viability or amateur unedited coverage which had never been intended for public consumption. As with film distributors, the management of these newsreel collections has changed in recent years as commercial footage libraries vie with each other to acquire and represent the material, now considered as a valuable addition to existing collections, providing 'a one stop shop' for researchers. The fact that this material has been digitised, including unused footage kept in the can, provides full access to the content as originally filmed. Records of cameramen's reports (dope sheets) kept by newsreel libraries can be researched through News on Screen, an online source developed from the British Universities News Database (BUND) which documents newsreel stories released in British cinemas between 1911 and 1979. This is hosted by Learning on Screen, formerly the British Universities Films and Video Council (BUFVC).<sup>3</sup>

Table 2 also includes news footage filmed by the BBC on the return of the successful climbers from the seventh Everest expedition in July 1953. Prompted by the estimated audience figure of twenty million for the broadcast of the Coronation in June 1953, the BBC recognised the potential for covering topical events on television and so negotiated for its own news cameramen to film alongside the cinema newsreel crews on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1953. Unlike live broadcasts, which were not recorded at this time, this unused material was produced on film and kept for possible future use in the news library. It would be another year before televised news bulletins became part of the scheduled programming (from 5<sup>th</sup> July 1954). The footage has

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.learningonscreen.ac.uk> (pre-2019 [www.bufvc.ac.uk](http://www.bufvc.ac.uk))

been digitised and is now available through the commercial arm of the BBC, currently managed by Getty Images, adding to the Corporation's revenue streams.

### 3.2 Everest on film: the principal expeditions, 1922-1953

Using Table 1 as a guide to the corpus of British films on Everest expeditions from 1922 to 1953, this section provides a chronological survey of the principal films and their associated archival variants. The earliest film – *Climbing Mount Everest* (1922) – was the first to be commissioned by the MEC and the only film to be exhibited commercially, through a lecture agency, under the Committee's auspices. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the need to generate revenue through a programme of public screenings overcame the Committee's initial aversion to the use of commercial cinema as a means of disseminating the scientific purpose of the expedition. Although a number of prints were made to accommodate bookings during the initial distribution through Christie's Lecture Agency, the material held in the RGS – IBG Collection is the only surviving footage from the 1922 expedition (see Chapter 4).

The second film – *The Epic of Everest* (1924) – was exploited by Noel outside the control of the MEC. As described earlier, in 1980 he deposited the film material in the Archive under a separate agreement initially also offering a copy of his 1930 re-edit *The Tragedy of Everest*. After his death in 1989, a version of *The Epic of Everest* without captions, regarded as his 'lecture version', was deposited by his daughter Sandra, but this copy was missing

Reel 1 (apparently loaned to an acquaintance by Noel and not returned). The quality of this incomplete fine grain was superior, illustrating a wider point about variation in quality of different versions of the same film. Throughout his life, Noel had re-edited and re-worked his material for different audiences – this had resulted in footage from both the 1922 and 1924 films being used to create the title *The Tragedy of Everest*, initially made for distribution in the USA. Correspondence revealed that the copy of this film which had initially been passed to the BFI was soon recalled by Noel to be lent to a colleague – and no record of its return could be found.<sup>4</sup> Noel's letters revealed that a separate sound track existed for this version for which the narrator was an American actor, David Ross. References in newspaper reviews of the lecture tours and film screenings undertaken by Noel were copious but the lack of physical material proved frustrating. However this would eventually be rectified with the 2018 bequest of further Noel material to the Society. In autumn 2018 I was asked by the RGS-IBG to examine the collection. The discovery of film cans within the collection led to the identification of two shorter versions of Noel's films – a fortuitous find indeed. Mindful of Fossati's observation that 'scholars often neglect film as material artefacts',<sup>5</sup> here was evidence to the contrary. I undertook to digitise this material as part of my research for this thesis. Witnessing the digitisation of these films revealed an outcome which exceeded my expectations. The label on the can read *The Tragedy of Everest*, raising hopes that it was the 'missing' footage that I had been seeking. The scanning

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<sup>4</sup> Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

<sup>5</sup> Fossati, G. (2009) *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 103

process revealed that this indeed was Noel's re-edited version of his 1924 film material. The opening caption presented the film as 'the story of Captain Noel, the Explorer', suggesting that he was the central character rather than the Society and the expedition. The subsequent footage included a shot of the Darjeeling processing laboratory set up by Noel in 1924 – with General Bruce and porters posing for the camera. Previously this shot was only available as a still image, having been edited out of the 1924 version of the film.

While examining the boxes of files in the Noel collection I discovered two further small 16mm reels labelled *The Epic of Everest* (Figure 3.1). The metal cans and spools indicated that the material dated from the 1930s, as also suggested by the smell of camphor oil coming from the film stock. Examination of both copies determined the best quality print and scanning revealed a short 15 minute version of Noel's original feature length film, released as a Kodak Cinegraph (Table 1). Further evidence of Noel's reversioning of his 1920s footage was found in a Kodak box labelled 'film cuttings' which contained several short sections of 35mm film (Fig. 3.2). We know from his correspondence that Noel used short sections of film to create individual frame stills to fulfil press and promotion commitments.<sup>6</sup> Using Harold Brown's pioneering identification chart, I was able to read the Kodak edge code on the stock (a small circle and triangle) revealing that the

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<sup>6</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 20<sup>th</sup> August 1924. EE 31/4/10 RGS-IBG



material dated from 1923.<sup>7</sup> The code also confirmed that this was nitrate stock and needed specialist storage. Checking the content on a lightbox showed a collection of landscape images cut from original film but never used.

Noel also created short travelogues from material filmed on location for use in his lecture tours, following the example of Burton Holmes and Lowell Thomas (as discussed in Chapter 2 and again in Chapter 5). A search on the websites of existing commercial footage libraries revealed a film entitled *Land of the Shalimar*.<sup>8</sup> Released by Capital Films in 1931, it runs for 7 minutes 51 seconds. The titles refer to the 'explorer' Captain John Noel and the narration is by David Ross, the same person employed as narrator on *The Tragedy of Everest*. But the sound track of *Tragedy* remains undiscovered. Paperwork from Noel reveals that he only had a mute copy when he first passed the material to the BFI.<sup>9</sup>

The film records of the 1933 expeditions proved to be equally fragmented. Four separate films were produced from the Ruttledge climb, as listed in Table 1 and detailed in Chapter 6. On this expedition there was no officially appointed cinematographer so individual climbers undertook to film scenes on lighter 16mm camera equipment. Percy Wyn-Harris took the most

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, H. (1990) *Physical Characteristics of Early Films as Aids to Identification*. Brussels: FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives)– includes a chart of edge codes and edge marks used by film stock manufacturers to denote year of production.

<sup>8</sup> *Land of the Shalimar* (TFA-162C) [www.travelfilmarchive.com](http://www.travelfilmarchive.com) (Accessed 20/03/2018)

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

extensive footage and on the return from the expedition his family financed the creation of a sound accompaniment, narrated by Frank Smythe, a notable member of the climbing party. However, the surviving film footage in the RGS-IBG film collection is mute. An empty film can, found in the vaults of the RGS-IBG archive, carried a label displaying the Western Electric logo and provided proof that a version with separate sound had indeed been held at the Society. I tracked Wyn-Harris's own master copy to the Alpine Club collection – but again this was silent material. Archival research eventually revealed the actual form of the sound narration – in this case, sound on disc (see Chapter 6). In such cases, another option is to contact surviving family members – in this case Frank Smythe's son Tony. However, as detailed in his recent biography of his father, much of Frank Smythe's paperwork was destroyed by his wife after his early death at the age of 49.<sup>10</sup> So the elusive sound track still remains untraceable. Other contacts of this kind proved more fruitful: for example, it was through attending the well-known Kendal Mountain Festival in 2013 that I learned that the 1933 climb film had been re-edited by Stuart Keen and John Earle in 1950, and released as *Everest 1933*, with a sound narration by Hugh Rutledge. An original copy could not be located but a research copy of the material, on DVD, featuring Earle's own live commentary as presented at the 2013 Kendal Mountain Festival, was available through the Mountain Heritage Trust.<sup>11</sup> This version is a

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<sup>10</sup> Smythe, T. (2013) *My Father Frank: Unresting Spirit of Everest*. Sheffield: Baton Wicks. 296

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.mountain-heritage.org> (Accessed 11/05/2015)

compilation of different versions of the 1933 footage, contextualised by the commentary.

In contrast to the films of the 1933 Ruttledge climb, the film of the Houston Mount Everest Flight of the same year was produced for the commercial market by Gaumont British. Footage of cinema newsreel releases reporting on the progress of the expedition is also widely available online. Copies of the commercial release *Wings Over Everest* are held in the RGS-IBG collection as well as the National Library of Scotland. Material filmed on location by the Gaumont British crew was also destined to be edited into a series of instructional films under the series heading *Secrets of India*.<sup>12</sup> More intriguing still was the U.S. release of the film – re-edited and narrated by Lowell Thomas in 1934 as *Wings Over Mount Everest*. This shortened version received an Academy Award for Best Novelty Short in 1936 (as discussed in section 6.5). In 2014 I was alerted by BFI colleagues that the Academy of Motion Pictures was in the process of restoring all historic Oscar-winning films. A copy of the British version was loaned by the BFI in 2015 to the UCLA Archive for comparison with the mute and sound master preservation material held in Los Angeles. Requesting an update on progress, I have recently been informed by Todd Wiener, Motion Picture Archivist at the UCLA Film and Television Archive, that the restoration work, funded by the Packard Humanities Institute, has now been completed. In fact, the newly restored film was screened as part of the 2019 UCLA

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<sup>12</sup> See [www.colonialfilm.com](http://www.colonialfilm.com) for examples of *Secrets of India* series. Also available on BFIPlayer.

Festival of Preservation on 15<sup>th</sup> February; an event held in the Billy Wilder Theater on Wilshire Boulevard.<sup>13</sup> As material had not become available during my research, archive documentation proved invaluable: draft scripts held in the Lowell Thomas Collection located at the Marist college in New York proved the nearest I got to the film itself (see Chapter 6).<sup>14</sup>

In 1935 a reconnaissance expedition led by Eric Shipton, accompanied by Bill Tilman and Michael Spender, was sent by the MEC to conduct a preliminary exploration and mapping exercise prior to the next scheduled attempt to be led by Hugh Ruttledge in 1936. Still photography was the only visual record. However by the 1930s the use of 16mm camera equipment was becoming more widespread. In the course of previous work at the BFI for a project to identify and access all available film material of Tibet in the BFI collection, I identified a growing quantity of amateur film shot in the Himalayas during this period.<sup>15</sup> Amongst 22 reels of material filmed by Derrick Williamson, Political Officer in Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan in 1935, and donated to the BFI by his widow, I found the only filmed coverage of the 1935 Everest expedition, which included a young Tenzing Norgay. This was verified by Peggy Williamson in her autobiography:

We entertained the members of the 1935 Everest Reconnaissance Expedition: I have a vivid memory of them all setting off down the garden with ice-axes and umbrellas, with those two great

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<sup>13</sup> Correspondence with T. Wiener, Motion Picture Archivist, UCLA Film and Television Archive. 29/08/2019

<sup>14</sup> [www.library.marist.edu/archives](http://www.library.marist.edu/archives) (Accessed 30/05/2018)

<sup>15</sup> *The Search for Shangri-la*. Programme of BFI National Archive material distributed by the Independent Cinema Office (<https://www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk>)

mountaineers, Eric Shipton and H.W.Tilman, carrying between them a wooden strong box full of cash to cover all the expedition's expenses.<sup>16</sup>

The filming of the party at the Gangtok Residency was also confirmed in Tony Astill's account of the reconnaissance.<sup>17</sup>

The films of the fifth and sixth British Everest expeditions in 1936 and 1938 respectively are not examined in this thesis in any detail. As had been the case in 1933, no official films were commissioned, and instead unofficial film records were made by the individual climbers themselves. The material available in the RGS-IBG collection, as indicated in Table 1, is incomplete and was never intended for circulation. On both occasions the early onset of the annual monsoon resulted in the climbing parties having to abandon their attempts on the summit. However, intriguing reviews of the 1936 footage, detailed in the next section, describe yet another 'lost' film record, – a 70 minute part-colour film taken by mountaineer Frank Smythe. The 1938 Everest expedition was led by Bill Tilman, a man averse to publicity and large-scale expeditions. His paper read at the Alpine Club in December 1938 defined his economy of purpose: 'I hoped to do without newspaper support because, as all will agree, the publicity concerning Mt. Everest becomes more and more objectionable'.<sup>18</sup> The extant material from 1938 was shot by

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<sup>16</sup> Williamson, M.D. (1987) *Memoirs of a Political Officer's Wife in Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan*. London: Wisdom Publications. 138. See also Venables, S. (2003) *Everest: Summit of Achievement*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 128

<sup>17</sup> Astill, T. (2005) *Mount Everest the Reconnaissance 1935: The Forgotten Adventure*. Southampton: Tony Astill. 62

<sup>18</sup> Tilman, H. W. Mount Everest 1938. *Alpine Journal* Vol.51. No.258. 4. Paper read before the Alpine Club, December 5, 1938.

Captain P. R. Oliver on an 8mm camera: although partly in colour, it is poorly focused and remains unedited.

The seventh expedition organised by the Mount Everest Committee was a completely different affair, in terms of its organisation as much as its eventual outcome. October 1953 saw the release of *The Conquest of Everest*, an official documentary record of the successful climb. The film relied on Noel's historic footage of the 1922 and 1924 expeditions to establish an authentic background. The original material was shot on 16mm Kodachrome stock but subsequently blown up to 35mm Technicolor for cinema release. The 1953 film has remained in commercial distribution ever since, copies still readily available in DVD form on the Studio Canal label. Further out-takes from the film were deposited at the BFI from Beaconsfield Studios where Countryman Films had completed the original edit in 1953. Referred to as *Everest Rolls* on the original archive cataloguing card and filed away in a wooden index drawer, the material came to light in the late 1990s following an enquiry from a television researcher. When this footage was transferred onto a digital tape a number of alternative takes not included in the final edit became visible: similar shots had been made available through the Index Stock Shot Library as stock footage for the commercial market. Another 16mm title, made by Countryman Films from material shot on location by Tom Stobart, was issued in 1955, under the title *Tenzing's Country*. The only material from this version of the film I have located was listed in a Christie's auction catalogue with an accompanying image of rusty

cans bearing the title on camera tape.<sup>19</sup> This title was listed as a short film, part of the British Lion catalogue in the 1960s, though, unlike the original 1953 film, this version was not transferred to Studio Canal's ownership.

As illustrated in this section, the task of identifying and locating extant film footage from Everest expeditions, and indeed many other kinds of expeditionary and travel film, can be both absorbing and frustrating. For curators and researchers working in this field, there is always the faint hope that a 'lost' version once known to exist will eventually materialise in a private collection. In the case of Everest expeditions, this desire for missing visual evidence echoes a larger and more sensational possibility: the recovery of photographic evidence of the moment of ascent itself. Across the entire corpus of film produced in the period examined in this thesis, one shot remains undocumented – moving footage of climbers actually reaching the summit of Everest. It was a still image rather than film footage that captured the moment in 1953. Controversy over the possibility that Mallory and Irvine reached the summit before their deaths on the upper reaches of the Mountain in 1924 has re-surfaced time and time again. The possibility that they in fact had reached the summit has for decades fed the popular imagination, giving rise to endless speculation as to the location of the VPK camera known have been carried by the climbers. Indeed, legal opinion has been sought on the ownership of the small vest pocket camera should it ever be found. If it had actually been used, so the argument goes, conditions at

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.christies.com> Lot 188 Sale date 8<sup>th</sup> October 2014. Accessed: 20/10/2016

such high altitude would have preserved the images. To date no such evidence has been found, but the mystery remains. <sup>20</sup>

### 3.3 Everest on paper: archival documentation

Having established a definitive list of surviving film footage and discussed aspects of its incorporation within film archives, the next step is to consider the documentary archive of film production and distribution, both published and unpublished. The single largest and most comprehensive body of archive material is in that of the Mount Everest Committee, held at the RGS-IBG. The archive is catalogued at item level and can now be searched through the Discovery search engine on The National Archive website. Online access to the catalogue is merely a preliminary to consultation of the original documents in the Foyle Reading Room. Each grey cardboard box reveals a wealth of contextual information, a plethora of archive material, sometimes annotated with spidery handwritten notes, providing intriguing insights into relationships and rationales. As Baron (2014) observes more generally concerning digital catalogues, while vital as a tool for ‘transforming archives into webs of searchable information’, they do not in themselves create meaningful narratives: it is through the actual conduct

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<sup>20</sup> Holzel, T. and Salkeld, A. (1999) *The Mystery of Mallory and Irvine*. 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition. London: Pimlico. See also Greenemeier, L. ‘Historical Development: Could a Frozen Camera Dethrone Hillary and Norgay as the First to Summit Everest’. *Scientific American* 26<sup>th</sup> January 2010 (<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/mount-everest-mystery> Accessed: 28/4/2019) and Poston, P. (2011) ‘Why the Camera and Film are Not Doomed to Destruction!’ (<http://www.wou.edu/las/physci/poston/everest/camera.htm>. Accessed: 28/4/2019)  
Hoyland, G. (2013) *Last Hours on Everest: the Gripping Story of Mallory and Irvine’s Fatal Ascent*. London: Collins. 161-162



of research on the contents of archival boxes that ‘stories may be traced through the careful observation of the human eye and the capacity of human association and memory’.<sup>21</sup>

Given the sheer scale of the Mount Everest Committee archive, thousands of individual items filed in 150+ archive boxes, it is a considerable challenge to grasp its overall structure and shape. At the start of my research, a box-file on the shelves in the FRR labelled ‘EE files’, containing typed and handwritten notes on the contents of each file, proved an invaluable collective reference tool. A handwritten note at the front of the file indicates that the catalogue was originally compiled by a former Fellow of the Society, possibly Arthur Longbottom, under the supervision of Mr. Blakeney, Hon. Secretary of the Mount Everest Foundation.<sup>22</sup> The work of listing and labelling files and documents had been undertaken around 1960, when the Mount Everest Foundation had an office at the Society’s headquarters. It was these lists that provide the basis for the catalogue entries now accessible via TNA, the work of digitisation having been undertaken as part of the A2A project in 2003. The archives themselves provide invaluable contextual evidence concerning many aspects of the work of the Mount Everest Committee, including the production, distribution and impact of films made on successive Everest expeditions. The material includes original contracts,

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<sup>21</sup> Baron, J. (2014) *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*. London: Routledge. 139

<sup>22</sup> The Mount Everest Foundation was formed in 1953. Its main objective was to fund continued exploration of mountain regions, using surplus funds and royalties earned from the successful summit of Everest. ([www.mef.org.uk](http://www.mef.org.uk))

expedition manifests, personal letters and memoranda, promotional material, correspondence with media, advertisers and sponsors, often including marginal annotations giving more insight into the ebb and flow of discussion. Such marginal commentary enables the researcher to read between the lines, and to trace the shifting relationships between Committee secretaries, expedition leaders and cinematographers. As an initial exercise, I transcribed the handwritten correspondence between John Noel and Arthur Hinks, Secretary of the MEC, during the 1922 and 1924 Expeditions. While Noel's handwriting was particularly spidery, I soon developed an eye for deciphering his script, down to pencil notes when his ink had run out. The information routinely provided in such correspondence has a variety of uses. For example, one letter provided an address for the film processing laboratory built in Darjeeling in 1924 – Belombre.<sup>23</sup> Scrutiny of maps of the district in the 1920s revealed its location, close to the railway station, an obvious choice given the need to transport cumbersome processing equipment and chemicals on the small gauge Darjeeling railway.

Given the complexity and fragmentation of the film material identified in Table 1, the documentary evidence in the Mount Everest Committee archive, combined with other sources, can shed light on questions about the provenance and reception of particular variants of Everest films. For example, the correspondence between Hinks and the Wyn-Harris family in December 1933 provided evidence of a difference of opinion over the exhibition of 'the official sound film' of the 1933 climb. An unanswered card

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<sup>23</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 5<sup>th</sup> August 1924. EE 31/4/10. RGS-IBG

inviting Arthur Hinks to attend the screening of the film *Climbing Mount Everest 1933* at the Polytechnic Cinema in Upper Regent Street. raised further questions<sup>24</sup> (Figure 3.3). In a subsequent letter, Hinks complained that the sound record did not match the projection speed of the picture.<sup>25</sup> The significance of these comments became apparent when I tracked down the Western Electric Company's advertising of its sound-on-disc system used to exhibit the film, as advertised in the BFI's film magazine *Sight and Sound* (see Chapter 6).<sup>26</sup>

As well as providing information about the provenance of film footage and judgements about its quality and use, the MEC archives also contain detailed evidence of the Committee's contracts, its negotiations with the press and advertisers and its relations with film producers and distributors. The increasing interest in expeditionary film from production companies becomes more apparent after 1924, especially with the publicity surrounding Noel's second film. Determined to maintain its authority and to resist charges of sensationalism, the MEC carefully filed away numerous 'Film Offers' from major British production companies as well as a number of individual filmmakers. One such was a handwritten note from renowned director Michael Powell in 1952, offering to pay his own way and bring his

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<sup>24</sup> Folding card invite for screening on December 18<sup>th</sup>1933. EE 48 File 1. RGS-IBG

<sup>25</sup> A. Hinks to G. Harris 28<sup>th</sup> December 1933. EE 43/6/11c. RGS-IBG

<sup>26</sup> *Sight and Sound* Vol.3. Spring 1934. viii

own camera if he could accompany the next Everest expedition. A pencil note indicates that the request was politely declined.<sup>27</sup>

Looking beyond the Mount Everest Committee archives, a variety of other materials, unpublished and published, enable further exploration of the core themes of the thesis. The correspondence files of the RGS for the interwar period, for example, shed light on the Society's relationships with the fledgling institutions established to represent film culture – the British Empire Film Institute in 1926 and its successor the British Film Institute in 1933. The tone of the early correspondence is indicative of the Society's wariness of commercial film, as reflected in its reservations about the MEC's commissioning of the first films (Chapter 2). In 1929, for example, Arthur Hinks, Secretary of the MEC and co-manager of the distribution of the 1922 film, expressed concerns about the purchase of Ponting's film of Scott's last expedition to Antarctica by the British Empire Film Institute in 1929, questioning the merits of the film, notably its 'diagrammatic representation of parties buzzing up and down the Beardmore Glacier'. He described these as 'fundamental criticisms arising from the fact that the photographer was not with the expedition after it left the base'.<sup>28</sup> Relations with the BFI were somewhat more cordial and by January 1937 the RGS had nominated Leonard Brooke as its representative on the Geography Committee of the BFI Education Panel. The terms of reference of this Committee included providing advice on teaching films and collaboration in respect of future

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<sup>27</sup> Film Offers: M. Powell to E. Shipton (undated). EE 61, RGS-IBG

<sup>28</sup> A. Hinks to G. Askwith, 26 March 1929. CB 10 Box 9, 1931-40: British Empire Film Institute. RGS-IBG

productions of geographical film.<sup>29</sup> Such institutional relationships led eventually to the decision, made in the late 1940s, to deposit the Society's film collection at the BFI.

Tracing the provenance of films deposited in the BFI collection through documentary archives can be a challenging process, especially given changes in archival practice. Original records of film selections and acquisitions at the BFI National Archive were recorded on cards, and later transferred to multi-part Kalamazoo forms (which I created as part of my role at the archive in the 1970s). Uniquely these records preserved filmographic details, reasons for acquisition as well as donor information and technical descriptions of each film element held. The imperative in the digital era to merge various databases held across different BFI departments in order to create a fully comprehensive online resource has resulted in significant gains in terms of access, but also some loss of original provenance information. Survival of these earlier paper records enabled me to establish that the first film footage from *The Epic of Everest* was actually acquired by the BFI in 1944, several decades before Noel deposited his own material. In the founding years of the archive it was customary to purchase titles from private collectors. As Houston (1994) reflected, early film archivists often 'snapped up the unconsidered trifles that landed up on street market stalls, were left behind by travelling showmen or abandoned

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<sup>29</sup> O. Vaughan to A. Hinks, 13 January 1937. CB 10 Box 9, 1931-40: British Film Institute. RGS-IBG

in derelict cinemas'.<sup>30</sup> A note on the original archive record states that the print of *The Epic of Everest* was part of a collection purchased from a Mrs Arton in 1944, as noted above. Noel was not aware of this until approached for permission to screen part of the film at the National Film Theatre in 1978 as part of a programme to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ascent of Everest. He accepted a royalty of £10 but requested more information on the provenance of the print.<sup>31</sup> This prompted initial discussions about the deposit of his own film material which was finally secured in 1980.

Official government archives, such as those held at the India Office Library, allow researchers to trace official handling of the political aspects of the expeditions and their film-making, including the relationships between the RGS, Whitehall and the Government of India. Evidence concerning film may occasionally surface in such archives, for example in relation to sensitivities over locations (or the route of the Everest flight in 1933). More generally, these files provide a wealth of information on the changing political background to the Everest expeditions pre- and post-Partition and the delicate negotiations undertaken to gain permission for entry into Tibet and later Nepal. The combination of political and commercial interest in Everest expeditions is more evident in newspaper archives, pre-eminently those of *The Times*, published by Times Newspapers, now a subsidiary of News UK, owned by News Corp. This extensive news archive holds important material relating to the Everest climbs, all of which were reported on exclusively by

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<sup>30</sup> Houston, P. (1993) *Keepers of the Frame: the Film Archives*. London: BFI.

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<sup>31</sup> Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

*The Times* (with the single exception of the 1933 climb, sponsored by the *Daily Telegraph*). This includes valuable information on commercial aspects of sponsorship and promotion, and sometimes colourful correspondence, as in the case of the redoubtable Lady Fanny Houston, sponsor of the Houston Mount Everest Flight in 1933 (see Chapter 6).

Major published sources relevant to the study of Everest film include official expedition reports and scientific papers published by the sponsoring organisations, the RGS and the Alpine Club, including articles in periodicals such as the *Geographical Journal* and the *Alpine Journal*. Such material needs to be interpreted in the context of the genres and institutions that produced them, defining and limiting what could be authorised for publication and how it could be presented. Evidence concerning the role of expeditionary film provided within articles published in the *Geographical Journal*, valuable as it may be, is incomplete and in some key respects misleading especially as far as the commercial contexts of Everest were concerned. The simplest way of demonstrating this is by considering the periodical's actual format prior to its incorporation into austere bound volumes or, latterly, its digitisation as sets of discrete articles, each with its own author and title. In its original form, the journal actually appeared monthly, each issue containing several pages of advertising material which were routinely excised from the bound volumes and excluded from the digitised versions considered by most scholars. The formal expedition reports published in the Journal would have been read alongside advertisements for cameras and film equipment, alongside tents, climbing kit and expedition provisions. Film suppliers

sought to capitalise on the publicity surrounding Everest expeditions, especially, for example, records that ally where their own equipment was in use. The December 1936 issue, for example, records that Kodak were the proud suppliers of colour film stock used on the latest Everest expedition (Figure 3.4). This particular example provides significant further information about the use of film on this climb since only monochrome footage survives in the RGS-IBG collection. Taking such evidence seriously also requires research beyond the Mount Everest Committee archive: in this case, the search led to the Kodak Staff Magazine which in February 1937 carried a feature on the colour film taken by Frank Smythe. Here it was noted that some of the footage had been abandoned on Everest when the party had been forced to retreat due to weather conditions, an intriguing reference to yet another lost film.<sup>32</sup>

Cherchi Usai (1994) has eloquently described the use of written sources in the interpretation of film history: 'many secrets are buried in the pages of periodicals, catalogues, memoirs and legal notes. Without these documents films are silent witnesses of indecipherable projects and ambitions'.<sup>33</sup> In the case of Everest films, trade magazines and press reports provide valuable evidence concerning the progress of filming and audience reception on release. Trade journals such as the *Bioscope* and *Kinematograph Weekly* routinely documented new film releases, including notices and reviews to

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<sup>32</sup> *Kodak Magazine* Vol.16. No.1. February 1937. 8 (PDF available at [www.mcnygenealogy.com](http://www.mcnygenealogy.com). Accessed 20/05/2018)

<sup>33</sup> Cherchi Usai, P. (1994) *Burning Passions: An Introduction to the Study of Silent Cinema*. London: BFI Publishing. 33



encourage exhibitors. They were also useful arbiters of audience reaction to films and gauged current trends in content available for the growing network of cinema circuits. Correspondence in MEC files refers to Noel's recognition of this role, and his insistence on placing an advertisement in the *Bioscope* for *The Epic of Everest* (Figure 3.5). (The six-page advert appeared in January 1925).<sup>34</sup> Cinema advertisements carried in local newspapers are also indicative of the supporting material exhibited alongside individual films. In this context, valuable resources were provided by the digitisation of *Radio Times* listings made available via the BBC Genome project, and of newspapers through the British Library Newspaper Archive.<sup>35</sup> An equivalent source in the US, Newspapers.com,<sup>36</sup> provided unique coverage of lecture tours and film screenings across North America, as reflected in Chapter 5. Local reports on the US Lecture Tour Circuits and the reception given to the films and lecturers indicated a rather genteel class of audience attending screenings – whereas local cinema adverts printed in the papers suggest more sensationalist programming. Examples were found such as a double bill featuring *Rasputin: the Intrigues and Love life of Russia's Sex Mad Monk* with added attraction *Tragedy of Mount Everest* which played at the Europa Theatre, Philadelphia in 1932.<sup>37</sup> In 1935 *The Gay Deception*, the Romantic Screen Surprise of the Year played alongside a special added

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<sup>34</sup> *Bioscope* 22nd January 1925. 15-20

<sup>35</sup> [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)

<sup>36</sup> [www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com)

<sup>37</sup> Advert in *The Morning News*, Wilmington, Delaware. 7<sup>th</sup> October 1932. 10. ([www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). Accessed 20/07/2017)

attraction of historic value *Wings Over Mt. Everest* at the Rivoli in La Crosse, Wisconsin.<sup>38</sup>

The practice of collecting and assembling news cuttings relating to a specific event, often undertaken by a professional agency or commercial bureau, provides an additional seam of evidence. Such albums usually document the date and location of each report, sourced both nationally and internationally. Several examples of such albums survive in the MEC and RGS-IBG archives. Noel himself had employed a news agency in the 1920s and the resulting volume was passed to the Society by his daughter.<sup>39</sup> Another volume of press cuttings donated by Major V. C. P. Hodson covers reports relating to both of the 1933 expeditions, providing a useful basis for comparison of their reporting.<sup>40</sup> A further box file of cuttings covering the American lecture tours of 1953-4, not yet collated into an album, provides a record of the syndicated press stories appearing across North America. In the course of my research, I filed these in archive wallets in order to aid the conservation of the by-now yellowing fragile newsprint. The 2018 donation of additional Noel papers also included two further volumes of press cuttings: one album covered news relating to his 1922-3 lectures, while the other (labelled 'Explorers Films Ltd. Foreign Cuttings Relating to Lectures and Films', Figure 3.6) contains notable reports on the first screenings of

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<sup>38</sup> Advert in *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin. 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1935. 8. ([www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). Accessed 20/07/2017)

<sup>39</sup> Noel Newscutting Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

<sup>40</sup> International news coverage collected by Major V.C.P. Hodson, Indian Military Historian. Volume given initially to National Army Museum, Sandhurst and passed to the RGS 10<sup>th</sup> January 1968. EE 50a. RGS-IBG

*The Epic of Everest* in India and Ceylon in September-October 1924 before the material travelled back to the UK.

The 2018 bequest of John Noel's remaining personal papers to the RGS contained significant further material relating to the production and distribution of the early Everest films. This included several versions of a typed script, including captions and scenes, to be used in the 1924 film, each version tailored to a different audience. These contain captions not found in the recently restored version of *Epic of Everest* (see Chapter 8). Noel was particularly active in promoting the use and re-use of his films, sometimes using novel forms of publicity. As well as providing edited film footage for Pathé newsreel items, for example, he introduced additional schemes such as sending postcards from Base Camp, a series of cigarette cards which could be collected and also sent images to sponsors of his equipment. A photographic portrait was sent to the *British Journal of Photography* which illustrated the use of the camera at high altitude complete with a report on its success.<sup>41</sup> The Wellcome Collection archive includes a unique image from Burroughs Wellcome, suppliers of film developing chemicals, which shows Noel winding film outside the photographic tent at Base Camp (Figure 3.7).<sup>42</sup>

Posters and art work advertising commercial film releases also provide material relevant to the distribution history of the Everest films. Carefully

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<sup>41</sup> *British Journal of Photography* 11<sup>th</sup> August 1922. 482

<sup>42</sup> Wellcome Collection: Ref. WT 2916

folded and filed away in a shabby manila file amongst the newly-accessioned Noel papers, I discovered a forgotten collection of film posters and promotional leaflets (Figures 3.8, 3.9 & 3.10). Such materials provide a fascinating record of Noel's enduring efforts to promote his film work in a variety of different contexts. For one audience, Noel would be described as a Fellow of the RGS and the official cinematographer of the 1922 and 1924 expeditions; for another (in America), he became a travelling showman 'Picture Historian of the Expedition. Hon. Life Member of the American Museum of Natural History'<sup>43</sup>. Other examples of posters, film programmes and other promotional materials survive in archives at the RGS-IBG, the BFI, the Bill Douglas Centre at Exeter University and private collections. They range from pedagogic literature, such as the educational pamphlet written by the geographer George Cons and commissioned by the Western Electric Company in 1933 for circulation to schools (Fig. 3.11), to more commercial material of the kind contained in Anthony Bard's collection of postcards and memorabilia.<sup>44</sup> A highlight of the Bard collection is its documentation of an ill-fated attempt by Col. Victor Haddick, one of Explorers' Films investors, to drive a Citroen Kegresse tractor into Tibet in 1924. It had been hoped to produce a film of this exploit to accompany Haddick's planned lecture tour in India, but only still photos have survived. Extracts from Noel's films were by then available to use on tour. The unique programme produced to accompany Col. Haddick's tour is held at the Bill Douglas Centre in Exeter (Figure 3.12). Rare programmes such as this are now available to review

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<sup>43</sup> Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

<sup>44</sup> [www.himalayana.com](http://www.himalayana.com) (Accessed 04/02/2016)

and compare with mass produced programmes for the UK market. In 1953, for example, a commemorative programme was produced to accompany the lectures given by Hunt and Hillary and *The Times* also published a special illustrated supplement for sale at screenings. The poster designed for the 1953 film *The Conquest of Everest* was designed by James Boswell, famous for his artwork for features produced by Ealing Studios in the 1950s. A signed copy can be found in the prints and drawings collection at the V&A.<sup>45</sup> Bright primary colours, red and yellow, illustrate a lithograph of tents pitched at the base of the mountain (Figure 3.13). However the image always associated with the film, Hillary's still image of Tenzing holding flags aloft at the summit, was the one used in the Campaign Book used by British Lion to promote the title (Figure 3.14).

### 3.4 Everest expedition reports and memoirs

An official published report was required to document each Everest Expedition with contributions from the climbers. However, most of these reports contain scant reference to the filming of the expeditions, further confirming the Committee's attitude to the relatively low scientific value of the films. In 1922, leader of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Expedition, General Bruce, was supportive of Noel's cinematic efforts referring to him as "Saint Noel of the Cameras" but made little reference to the official film in his published

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<sup>45</sup> *Conquest of Everest* poster. V & A Museum No. E726-1982 ([www.collections.vam.ac.uk](http://www.collections.vam.ac.uk))

report.<sup>46</sup> It was Noel himself who wrote his own account of the 1922 and 1924 attempts – *Through Tibet to Everest* which was published in the UK and USA, supporting his own lecture tours.<sup>47</sup> In the 1924 official report by Norton it was Bentley Beetham who described the use of Noel's photographic equipment and the extended use of developing facilities by other members of the party.<sup>48</sup>

In this respect the 1933 Houston Mount Everest Flight was something of an exception. This expedition, undertaken independently of the MEC, generated two published texts. The official report was *First Over Everest*, containing contributions from members of the successful flight including Geoffrey Barkas, the Gaumont-British producer.<sup>49</sup> A second publication, *The Pilots Book of Everest*,<sup>50</sup> contains reports which underline the conflict between commercial expectations and the scientific achievement which its authors claimed was not given sufficient recognition in the film produced. Although the film was aimed at the commercial market, the photographic images taken during the second flight over Everest provided new scientific evidence which Hinks subsequently used in mapping this approach to the summit. In his history of Everest, Michael Ward pays tribute to what

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<sup>46</sup> Bruce, C.G. Brigadier-General. (1923) *The Assault on Mount Everest 1922*. London: Arnold.

<sup>47</sup> Noel, J. B. L. (1927) *Through Tibet to Everest*. ( 4<sup>th</sup> edn.1989) London: Hodder & Stoughton

<sup>48</sup> Norton, E. F. (1925) *The Fight for Everest*. London: Arnold. 324-326

<sup>49</sup> Barkas, G. (1933) 'Filming the Flight', in Fellowes, P. F. M. , Blacker, L. V. S. ,Etherton, P. T. and Clydesdale, Marquess. *First Over Everest: the Houston-Mount Everest Expedition 1933*. London: Bodley Head. 232-244

<sup>50</sup> Douglas and Clydesdale, Marquess. (1936) 'Apologia Nostra', in Douglas and Clydesdale, Marquess and McIntyre, D. F. *The Pilots' Book of Everest*. London: Hodge. 1-6

became known as the Hinks-Milne map in the planning of the next attempt up Everest through Nepal.<sup>51</sup> (The use of this important visual evidence, almost a by-product of the filming of the flight, is discussed further in Chapter 6). Lord Hunt's official account of the successful ascent in 1953 is again brief in acknowledging the achievements of the cameramen: 'our return to Everest was now attracting a wider public interest than ever before, and the Committee felt that the taking of a film would perhaps be the best way of telling the story to the greatest number of people on our return'.<sup>52</sup>

More personal memoirs, such as those recorded for the BECTU Oral History project and transcribed on the BFI Screenonline pages, provide further insight into the making of Everest films and the background negotiations. Interviewed by Stephen Peet on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1988, John Taylor's recollections of 1953 are colourful, and portray the strain of producing a feature film within a short time frame, with the additional pressure of a Royal Premiere in Leicester Square, London, the heart of the UK's cinema industry.<sup>53</sup> This audio interview is also now available on the British Entertainment History Project site.<sup>54</sup> George Lowe's letters, recently published, provide personal testimony of his role in supporting Tom Stobart and being responsible for

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<sup>51</sup> Ward, M. (2013) *Everest: A Thousand Years of Exploration*. Kirkby Stephen: Hayloft Publishing 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. 132

<sup>52</sup> Hunt, J. (1953) *The Ascent of Everest*. London: Hodder & Stoughton. 30

<sup>53</sup> John Taylor BECTU Interview Part.2. [www.screenonline.org.uk](http://www.screenonline.org.uk) (accessed 30/05/2016)

<sup>54</sup> John Taylor Side 7. British Entertainment History Project [www.historyproject.org.uk](http://www.historyproject.org.uk) (Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> March 2019)

filming at high altitude.<sup>55</sup> Stobart, the official cinematographer, published accounts of his filming in 1953,<sup>56</sup> as did Alan Gregory, photographer, mountaineer and travel agent from Blackpool.<sup>57</sup> James Morris, official correspondent for *The Times*, revealed the media frenzy surrounding the 1953 climb in his book *Coronation Everest*.<sup>58</sup> Further light on the contest is shed by his reports held at The Times News Limited Archive, which reveal elaborate plans for a press blackout on news of the successful ascent until the morning of the Coronation.<sup>59</sup>

The research for this thesis included a small number of informal interviews, usually in connection with archival film and documentary archives held either at the BFI or RGS-IBG, or in private hands. My conversations with Noel's daughter Sandra over the years since we first met in the early 1990s confirmed that she was fiercely supportive of her father's achievements in filming the Everest climbs of 1922 and 1924. Her publications, presentations and website on the subject contained unique material,<sup>60</sup> much of which has now been donated to the RGS-IBG. David Francis, former Curator at the BFI National Archive and founder member of the Magic

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<sup>55</sup> Lowe, G. (2013) *Letters From Everest*. United Kingdom: Silverbear

<sup>56</sup> Stobart, T. (1958) *Adventurer's Eye: the Autobiography of the Everest Film-Man*. London: The Popular Book Club

<sup>57</sup> Gregory, A. (1993) *Alfred Gregory's Everest*. London: BCA

<sup>58</sup> Morris, J. (1958) *Coronation Everest*. London: Faber & Faber

<sup>59</sup> Morris, J. (1953) 'Reporting the Conquest of Mount Everest : How Exclusive News of the Expedition was Sent Secretly to P.H.S.', *The Times House Journal* September 1953. Times Newspapers Limited Archive.

<sup>60</sup> Noel, S. (2003) *Everest Pioneer: The Photographs of Captain John Noel*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing

*Be Inspired: The Life of John Noel, Soldier, Explorer, Climber*. Lecture given by Sandra Noel at RGS-IBG 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017 <http://www.mounteverest.uk.com>



Lantern Society, remembered Noel as akin to P.T. Barnum.<sup>61</sup> He also considered Noel's hand-tinted lantern slides to be some of the finest he had ever seen.<sup>62</sup> Noel was continuously devising new revisions of his material, including combining his film and colour slides and hoping for public funding to achieve them. Francis recalls that it was the concerns over the risk of keeping flammable nitrate film materials that eventually persuaded Noel to deposit his material at the National Film Archive in the early 1980s. Apparently Noel also offered to sell his film rights to the BFI at that point, if funding could be found to achieve his ambitions for a final 'directors cut'. A conversation with Dougal McIntyre provided recollections of his father David McIntyre's involvement with the Houston-Mount Everest Flight and access to photographs from that expedition (see Chapter 6).<sup>63</sup>

The combination of access to film materials and documented records found in the MEC archive provided the key information required to undertake my research. Additional sources, outlined above, also provided a rich body of evidence, enabling a full examination of the films, their production and distribution for the first time. This would also uncover significant information concerning the film-makers themselves and the institutions involved in the attempts to climb Everest.

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with David Francis 17<sup>th</sup> February 2019

<sup>62</sup> D. Francis to J. B. L. Noel 10<sup>th</sup> May 1984. Sandra Noel Collection/RGS-IBG

<sup>63</sup> Conversation with Dougal McIntyre. 7<sup>th</sup> July 2019

**Table 1. Everest Expeditionary Films**

<b>Expedition/Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Notes</b>	<b>Source</b>
2 <sup>nd</sup> Expedition / 1922	<i>Climbing Mount Everest</i> (1922)	Sponsor: Mount Everest Committee Ph. J.B.L.Noel 35mm silent b/w 83 minutes	RGS-IBG Collection/ BFI National Archive
3 <sup>rd</sup> Expedition / 1924	<i>The Epic of Everest</i> (1924)	Prod. Co. Explorers Films Ph. J.B.L.Noel 35mm silent b/w & tinted 87 minutes.	Noel Collection/RGS-IBG Collection BFI National Archive BFI DVD – 2013 restoration
	<i>The Epic of Everest</i> (c.1930)	Kodak Cinegraph 16mm silent b/w 15 minute version of 1924 film	Noel Collection/RGS-IBG Collection
	<i>The Tragedy of Mount Everest</i> (1931)	US release by Capital Films Prod. J.B.L.Noel Re-edit including material from 1922 and 1924 films 16mm b/w 30 minutes. Narration: David Ross	Noel Collection/RGS-IBG Collection (mute copy)
	<i>Land of the Shalimar</i> (1931)	Travelogue produced in US by Noel using location footage filmed in Kashmir 16mm b/w 7 minutes Narration: David Ross	<a href="http://www.travelfilmarchive.com">www.travelfilmarchive.com</a>
4 <sup>th</sup> Expedition / 1933	<i>Climbing Mount Everest</i> 1933	Ph. Percy Wym-Harris 16mm b/w 32 minutes Narration: Frank Smythe	RGS-IBG Collection/BFI National Archive (mute copy)

		Shown at London Polytechnic Cinema Dec.1933-Jan.1934 Distributed by Western Electric Roadshows	
	<i>Fourth Everest Expedition</i> (1933)	Ph. Percy Wynn-Harris 16mm b/w silent 76 minutes Shown at RGS 27 <sup>th</sup> Nov. 1933	RGS-IBG Collection / BFI National Archive
	<i>Ilford Everest Expedition</i> (1933)	Ph. Hugh Rutledge 16mm b/w silent 28 minutes Shown at RGS 3 <sup>rd</sup> Dec. 1934	RGS-IBG Collection / BFI National Archive
	<i>Everest – Shebbeare</i> (1933)	Ph. Edward Shebbeare 16mm b/w silent 11 minutes	RGS-IBG Collection / BFI National Archive
	<i>Everest 1933</i> (c.1951)	Prod. Stuart Keen & John Earle Narr. Hugh Rutledge 16mm b/w Re-edit of Rutledge and Wynn Harris footage	DVD with later commentary by Earle – Mountain Heritage Trust
Houston-Mount Everest Flight (1933)	<i>Wings Over Everest</i> (1934)	Prod. Co. Gaumont British Picture Corporation Dir. Geoffrey Barkas & Ivor Montagu Ph. S.R. Bonnett 35mm b/w sd. 42 minutes	RGS-IBG Collection / BFI National Archive
	<i>Everest Flight Blacker</i> (1933)	Short section of footage showing the summit of Everest 35mm b/w silent 1 minute	RGS-IBG Collection / BFI National Archive
	<i>Secrets of India</i> series(1934):	Prod.co. Gaumont British	BFI National Archive

	<i>Bikaner Fair City of Udaipur Darjeeling a Foothill Town Devil Dancers of Sikkim</i>	Picture Corp. 35mm b/w sd. 10 minutes Educational shorts edited from material filmed on location during the Houston-Mount Everest Expedition	<a href="http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk">www.colonialfilm.org.uk</a>
	<i>Wings Over Mount Everest (1935)</i>	Prod.co. Gaumont British Picture Corp. Dir. Geoffrey Barkas & Ivor Montagu Ph. S.R.Bonnett Re-edit and narration: Lowell Thomas 35mm b/w 20 minutes U.S. distributor: Fox Film Corp. Won Academy Award for Best Novelty Short in 1936	UCLA Film and Television Archive 2019 restoration
Everest Reconnaissance 1935	<i>Mrs. Williamson's Film Collection Reel 15</i>	Part of amateur 16mm b/w silent collection filmed by Frederick Williamson, Political Officer – Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim.	BFI National Archive
5 <sup>th</sup> Expedition (1936)	<i>Everest 1936 – Rutledge (1936)</i>	Ph. Frank Smythe 16mm b/w silent 19 minutes Original material 70 minutes filmed on Kodachrome colour stock (Kodak Staff Magazine and advert in G.J.)	RGS-IBG Collection / BFI National Archive

6 <sup>th</sup> Expedition (1938)	<i>Everest Expedition 1938 Part 1 - 4</i>	Ph. P.R.Oliver 8mm silent b/w & colour 58 minutes	RGS-IBG Collection / BFI National Archive
7 <sup>th</sup> Expedition (1953)	<i>The Conquest of Everest (1953)</i>	Prod.co. Countryman Films/ Group 3 Ph. Tom Stobart, George Lowe 16mm Kodachrome blown up to 35mm Technicolor for cinema release. 78 minutes Royal Premiere October 1953	DVD – Studio Canal Film – RGS-IBG Collection / BFI National Archive
	<i>Everest Rolls</i>	Out-takes from original Kodachrome footage filmed during expedition. Deposited at BFI by Countryman Films after completing edit at Beaconsfield Studios	BFI National Archive
	<i>Tenzing's Country (c.1955)</i>	Prod.co. Countryman Films Edited from material shot on location .	Copy put up for auction at Christie's
	<i>Everest Conquered</i> 14 <sup>th</sup> July 1953 19.45 pm	BBC Television Presenter: Paul Johnstone 'Members of the British Expedition tell of their struggle and final triumph'.	Radio Times Issue 1548 10 <sup>th</sup> July 1953 p.22 ( BBC Genome)
	<i>It Happened to Me</i> 29 <sup>th</sup> December 1953	BBC Television – Children's Television item. 'Cameraman Tom Stobart tells of his experiences during the	Radio Times Issue 1572 25 <sup>th</sup> December 1953 p.26 (BBC Genome)

		1953 expedition and shows some of the film he shot.	
--	--	---	--

**Table 2. Everest Expeditions: Cinema and Television News Coverage 1924 – 1953**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Newsreel/Title</b>	<b>Notes</b>	<b>Source</b>
21/2/1924	Pathé Gazette: <i>Mount Everest Expedition Leaves for India</i>	Captain Noel demonstrates Newman Sinclair Camera	<a href="http://www.britishpathe.com">www.britishpathe.com</a>
24/4/1924	Pathé Gazette: <i>Scenes at Base Camp</i>		<a href="http://www.britishpathe.com">www.britishpathe.com</a>
4/12/1924	Pathé Gazette: <i>6 Holy Lamas from Tibet, Hermits who Live 14,000ft up the Mountain, Arrive in London</i>		<a href="http://www.britishpathe.com">www.britishpathe.com</a>
23/1/1933	British Movietone News : <i>Everest Expedition Embarks for India</i> (BM2216)	Hugh Rutledge and Party at Liverpool St. Station; Rutledge talks to camera	<a href="http://www.aparchive.com">www.aparchive.com</a>
20/2/1933	British Movietone News: <i>Mount Everest Flyers Set Out for India</i> (BM2261)	Clydesdale and fellow pilots at Heston Airport	<a href="http://www.aparchive.com">www.aparchive.com</a>
20/2/1933	Pathé News: <i>Fellows, Clydesdale and McIntyre at Heston Airport</i> (ID 697.32)		<a href="http://www.britishpathe.com">www.britishpathe.com</a>
20/2/1933	British Paramount News Issue 207: <i>Everest Flyers Off</i>		<a href="http://Reuters.screenocean.com">Reuters.screenocean.com</a>
20/2/1933	Universal News Issue 273: <i>Everest Flyers Off</i>		<a href="http://Reuters.screenocean.com">Reuters.screenocean.com</a>
20/2/1933	Gaumont Sound News Issue 333: <i>Mount Everest Expedition Leaves Heston Aerodrome; Lord Clydesdale</i>		<a href="http://Reuters.screenocean.com">Reuters.screenocean.com</a>
6/4/1933	British Paramount News Issue 220: <i>Flyers Conquer Everest</i>		<a href="http://Reuters.screenocean.com">Reuters.screenocean.com</a>
6/4/1933	Gaumont Sound News Issue 346: <i>Mount Everest Conquered</i>		<a href="http://Reuters.screenocean.com">Reuters.screenocean.com</a>
22/5/1933	Pathé News : <i>His Ain Folk</i> (ID 707.13)	Clydesdale and McIntyre arrive in Scotland	<a href="http://www.britishpathe.com">www.britishpathe.com</a>

15/6/1933	Gaumont Sound News Issue 366 : Mount Everest <i>Expedition Flyers Return Home</i>		Reuters.screenocean.com
13/8/1936	Gaumont Sound News Issue 374: Hugh Rutledge <i>Speaks on his Everest Expedition</i>		Reuters.screenocean.com
19/5/1952	Pathé News: Everest Model (ID 1387.30)	Sir Stephen Tallents and George Finch Examine 6ft Model of Everest: route to be taken by 1953 expedition	www.bitishpathe.com
16/2/1953	Gaumont British News Issue 1995: Roving Camera <i>Reports – Everest Expedition Leaves for India</i>		Reuters.screenocean.com
16/2/1953	British Movietone News : Everest Expedition Leaves (BM58565)		www.aparchive.com
25/5/1953	Gaumont British News Issue 2023: The Everest <i>Expedition</i>		Reuters.screenocean.com
25/5/1953	Universal News Issue 2385: The Everest Expedition		Reuters.screenocean.com
25/6/1953	British Paramount News Issue 2329: First Pictures: <i>Everest Heroes back at Base</i>		Reuters.screenocean.com
25/6/1953	British Movietone News: Everest Conquered (BM 59279)	Kathmandu welcome to returning climbers	www.aparchive.com
25/6/1953	Pathé News: Everest Heroes Arrive	Expedition arrives back in Kathmandu	www.britishpathe.com
2/7/1953	Pathé News: Everest Conquerors in Delhi	Hillary, Hunt and Tenzing Arrive to Heroes Welcome in Delhi	www.britishpathe.com
2/7/53	British Movietone News: Nepal and India Greet <i>Everest Victors (BM59310)</i>		www.aparchive.com
1953	Pathé News: Everest Conquerors in Rome	BOAC flight lands - mute	www.britishpathe.com
1953	Pathé News: Everest Conquerors in Paris	Mute unissued material	www.britishpathe.com
3/7/1953	BBC Television: IB012374 001	Team leave plane – Hunt waves Union Jack flag tied to ice axe	BBC Motion Gallery- gettyimages.co.uk



3/7/1953	BBC Television: IB012374 002	Hunt lifts Union Jack flag tied to Ice axe aloft for press photographers	BBC Motion Gallery - gettyimages.co.uk
3/7/1953	BBC Television: IB012374 0019	Antony Head, Secretary of State for War, praises the successful Everest expedition party upon their return to the UK	BBC Motion Gallery- gettyimages.co.uk
3/7/1953	BBC Television: IB012374 0021	Tenzing, Hunt and Jack Longland. Hunt talks about his feelings on learning of the success of Hillary and Tenzing	BBC Motion Gallery- gettyimages.co.uk
3/7/1953	BBC Television IB012374 0026	Hillary talks to Jack Longland about items he and Tenzing left on the summit of Everest	BBC Motion Gallery- gettyimages.co.uk
6/7/1953	Gaumont British News: <i>Everest Heroes in Britain</i> (Issue 2035)		Reuters.screenocean.com
6/7/1953	British Paramount News Issue 2332: <i>Everest Heroes Arrive</i>		Reuters.screenocean.com
6/7/1953	Universal News Issue 2397: <i>Everest Heroes in Britain</i>		Reuters.screenocean.com
6/7/1953	Pathé News: <i>Everest Heroes Home</i>	Interviews with Expedition Members at London Airport	www.britishpathe.com
6/7/1953	British Movietone News: <i>Everest Victors Here</i> (BM59407)		www.aparchive.com
20/7/1953	British Movietone News: <i>Everest Heroes at Garden Party</i> (BM59407)		www.aparchive.com
20/7/1953	Pathé News : <i>Royal Garden Party</i>	Everest Party Arrives at Buckingham Palace	www.britishpathe.com
26/10/1953	British Movietone News: <i>The Queen sees Everest Film</i> (BM 59969)		www.aparchive.com

26/10/1953	Universal News Issue 2429 : <i>Film Premiere</i>		Reuters.screenocean.com
29/10/1953	Pathé News: <i>Conquest of Everest Premiere</i>	Warner Theatre, Leicester Square b/w version	www.britishpathe.com
29/10/1953	Pathé News: <i>Conquest of Everest Premiere</i> – selected originals	Mute colour rushes 7 mins. Mute b/w rushes	www.britishpathe.com
31/12/1953	British Movietone News: <i>Tenzing Interview</i> (BM59396)	Series of unedited takes – Tenzing uses model of Everest to demonstrate route taken	www.aparchive.com

<https://www.britishpathe.com>

<https://www.aparchive.com>

<https://www.reuters.screenocean.com>

<https://www.gettyimages.com/bbcmotiongallery>

Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> February 2019



Figure 3.1 *The Epic of Everest*, 16mm Kodak Cinegraph c.1930  
Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

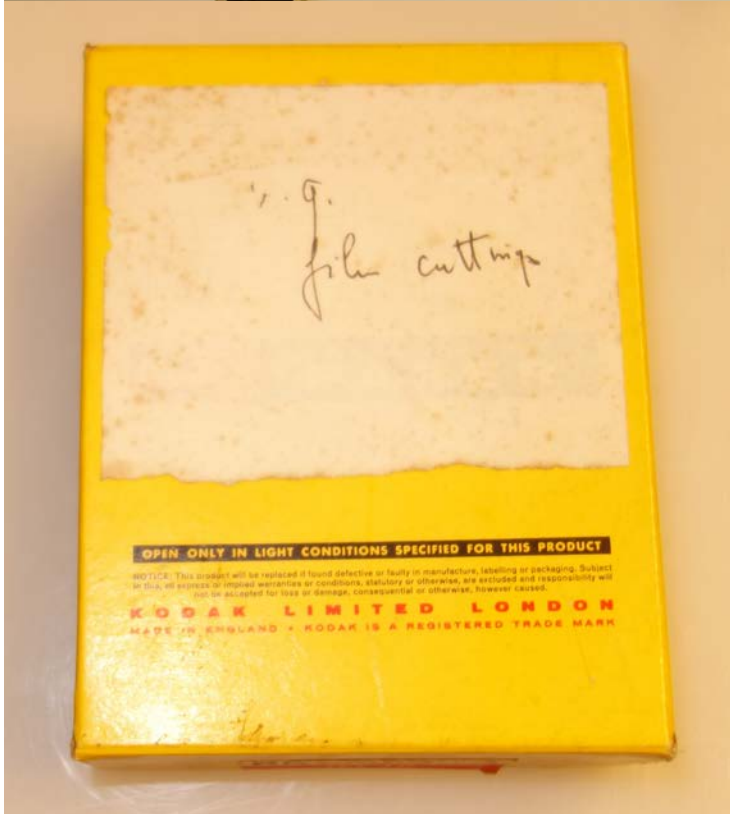


Figure 3.2 Noel's film cuttings,  
1924  
Sandra Noel Collection/RGS-IBG

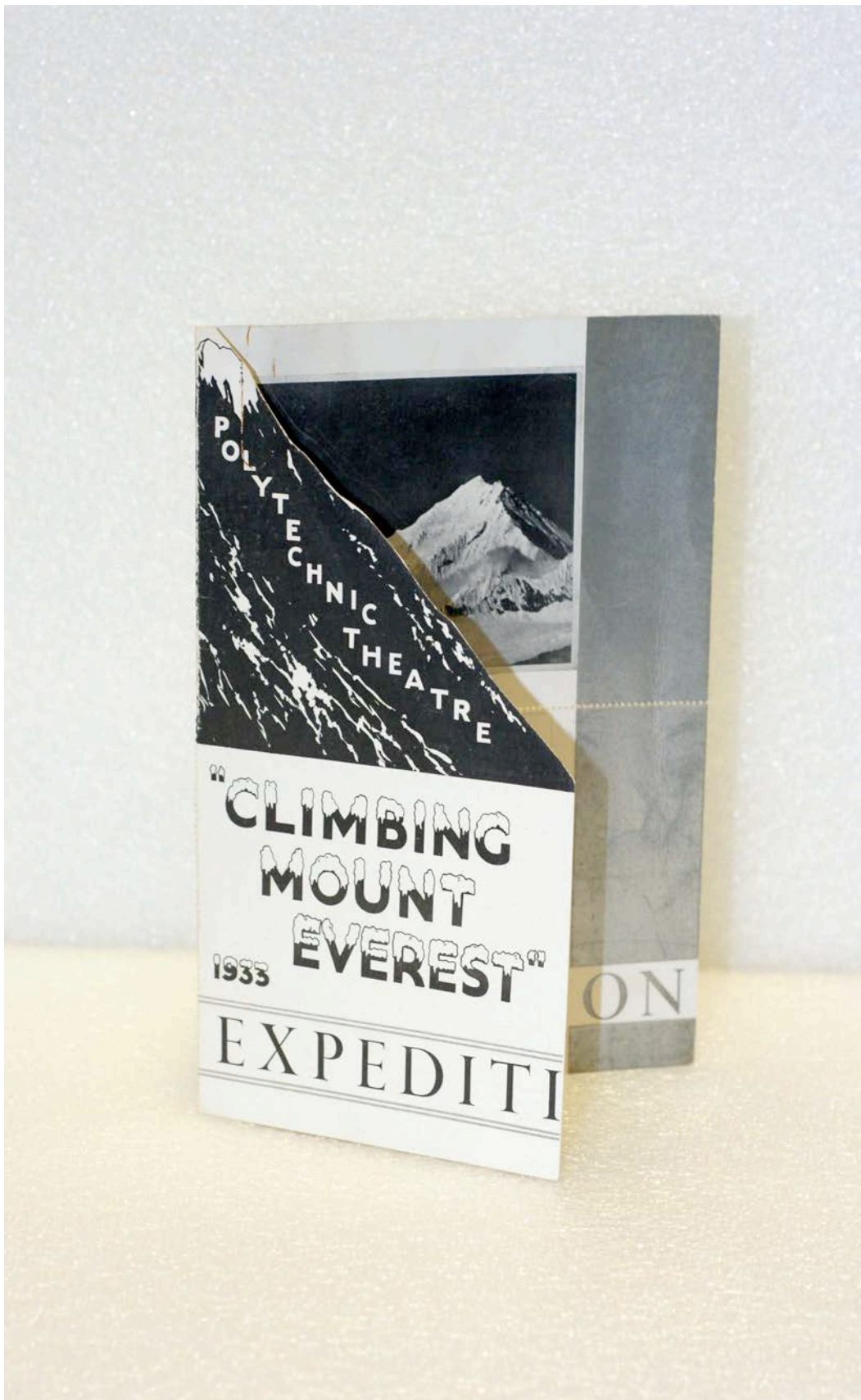
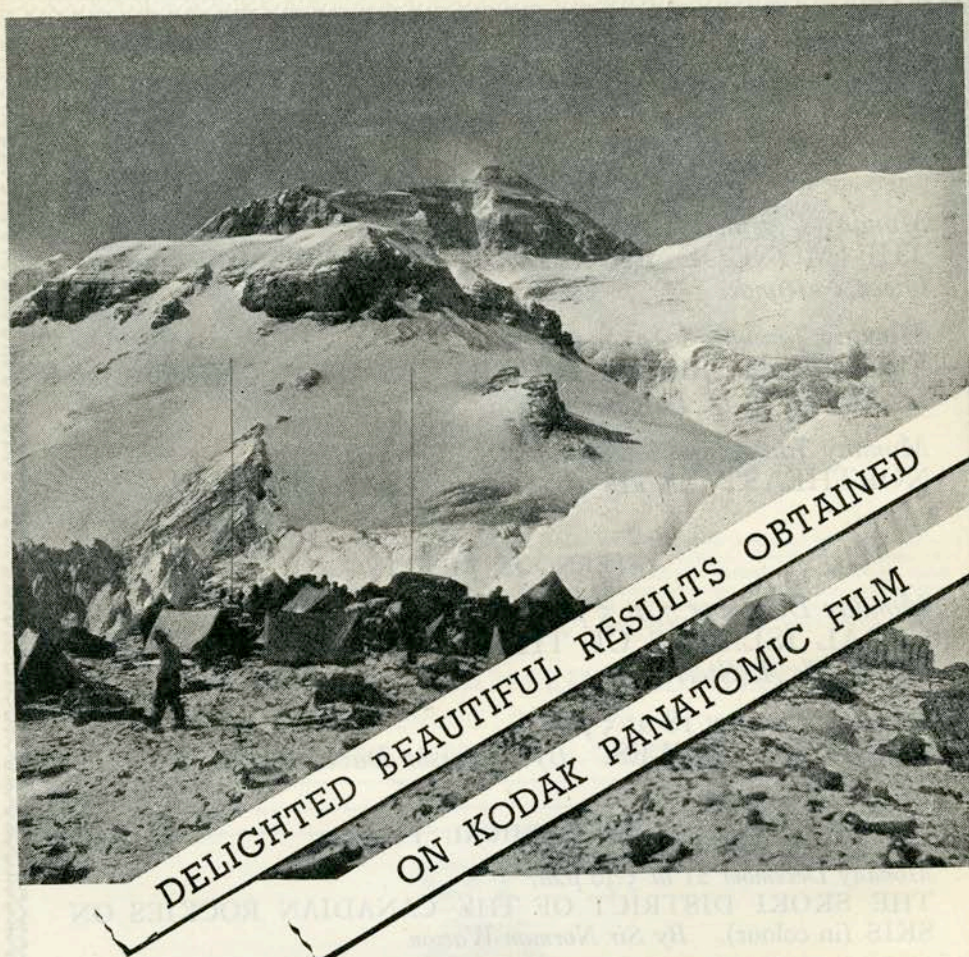


Figure 3.3 Invitation card for screening of *Climbing Mount Everest 1933*  
EE 48/1 RGS-IBG





## A Message from Everest

The above telegram arrived in London last summer from the Everest Expedition. As in 1933, only Kodak Film was used for the entire photographic record—'Panatomic' Film for the still pictures, and Ciné-'Kodak' Film.

The Expedition has since returned with an enthralling collection of pictures, including many taken at altitudes of well over 20,000 feet. Especially interesting is a 70-minute moving picture, part of which was filmed in full colour on 'Kodachrome'—Kodak's new 16 mm. colour film that needs no filters or attachments, either for taking or showing. This is the first colour film ever to have been taken on a Himalayan expedition.

Other apparatus included Ciné-'Kodaks' (16 mm.) and several 'Retinas'—Kodak's miniature precision camera. All materials were supplied from stock, and were exactly the same as those on sale to the public.

## Kodak and Ciné-Kodak

KODAK LIMITED, KINGSWAY, LONDON, W.C.2.

Figure 3.4 Kodak Advert, *Geographical Journal* December 1936. RGS-IBG



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BERLIN  
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### THE WEEK AT A GLANCE

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# The Epic of Everest

SEE PAGES 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20

Figure 3.5 *Bioscope* 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1925, 3  
[www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) accessed 10/3/2019

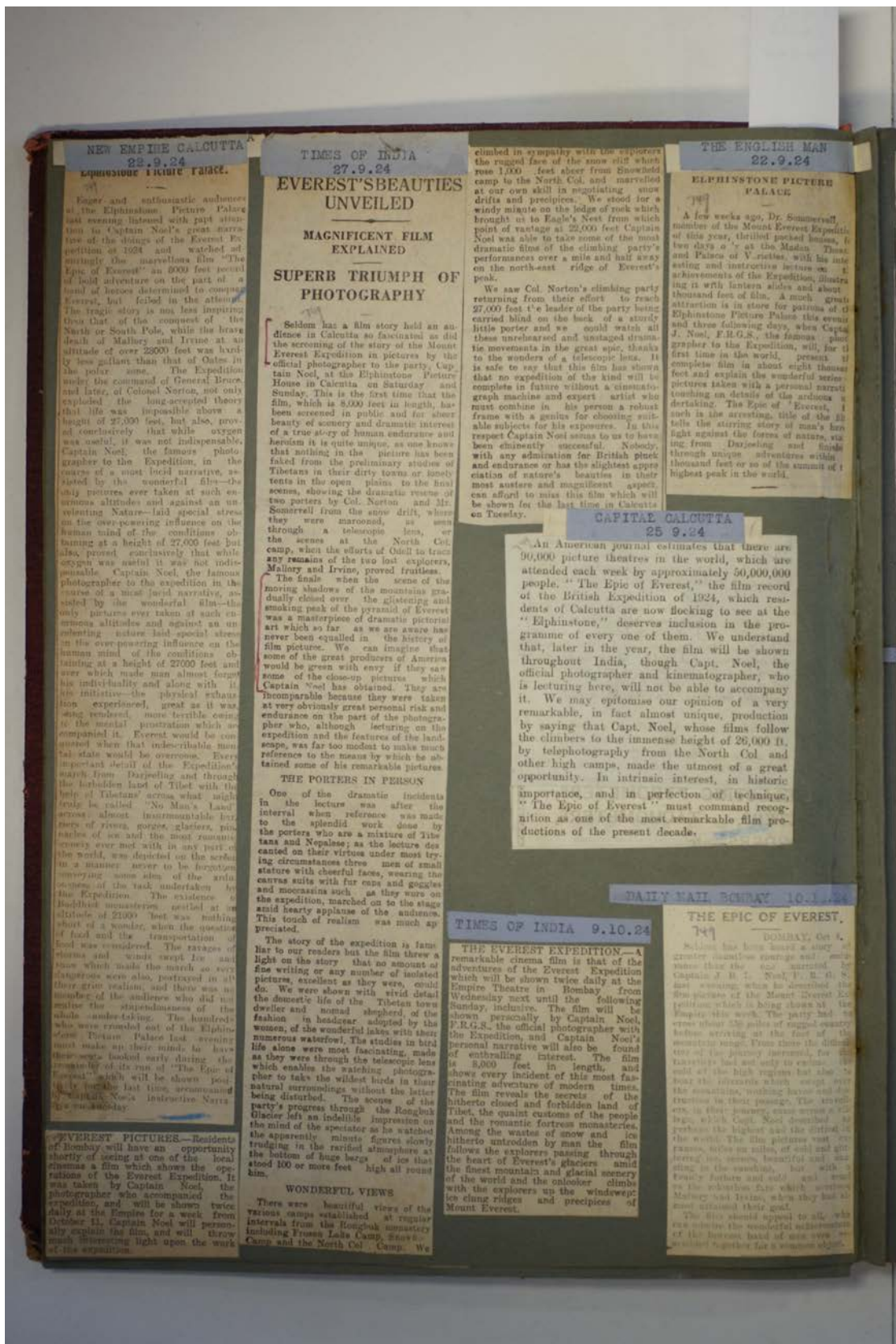


Figure 3.6 Explorers Films Album 1924  
Sandra Noel Collection/RGS-IBG





Figure 3.7 Captain Noel winding film stock outside Photographic Tent at Base Camp, 1922  
Wellcome Collection Ref. WT 2916

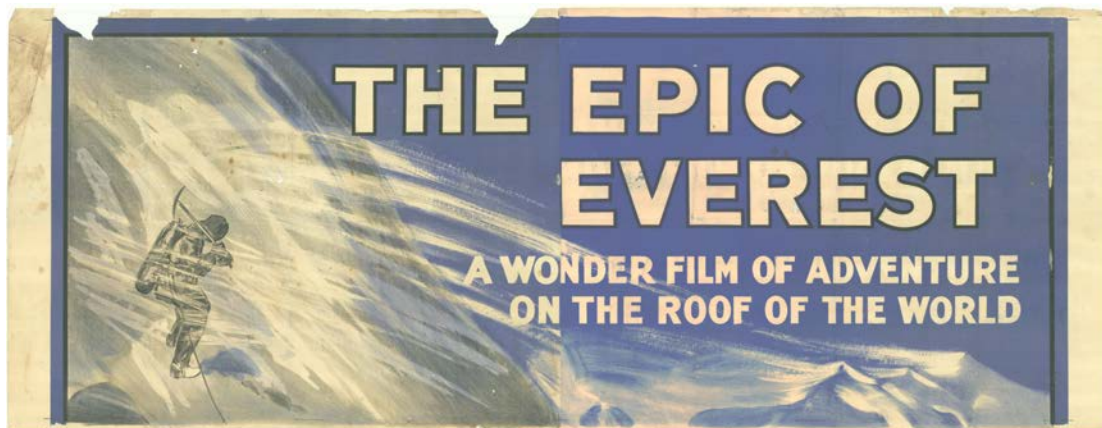



Figure 3.8 Banner Poster for *The Epic of Everest* c.1924  
Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

**CORINTHIAN PICTURE HOUSE**  
"THE EPIC OF EVEREST."



The Fairytand of Ice.


Fortress of Kampa Dzung.      Ice Cliff Camp.

Irvine and Mallory 600 feet from the Summit of Mount Everest.  
These men were never seen again.

**Corinthian Picture House,**  
EDEN QUAY, DUBLIN.

Monday, SEPT. 14th. For One Week Only.  
Showing at 3, 5, 7 & 9 p.m.

A BIG SUPER PRODUCTION

**THE EPIC OF EVEREST**

A WONDER FILM OF ADVENTURE ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD  
ILLUSTRATING THE GREAT EXPEDITION FOR THE  
CONQUEST OF MOUNT EVEREST IN 1924.

The Most Sensational and Daring Effort to secure a Picture ever made, photographed by

**Capt. J. B. NOEL, F.R.G.S.,**  
who will appear at each performance.

*What the Newspapers say:*

WEEKLY DISPATCH "A chapter of Screen Sensations hitherto unequalled."  
DAILY MAIL "Show attention. No volume of words could be more interesting than Capt. Noel's film."  
DAILY EXPRESS "A sweeping triumph of British Cinematography."  
SUNDAY HERALD "Will sweep the Screen of the country, and of the world."

**SEVEN LAMAS**

BROUGHT BACK BY CAPT. NOEL FROM THE INTERIOR OF TIBET WILL BE SEEN AT THE CORINTHIAN DURING THE WHOLE OF THE WEEK AND GIVE A SHORT PERFORMANCE PRIOR TO THE SHOWING OF THE FILM. THIS IS THE FIRST TIME IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD THAT A LAMA HAS SET FOOT IN A EUROPEAN COUNTRY.

The Whole Performance will be the same as presented for  
Eight Weeks at the New Scala Theatre, London.

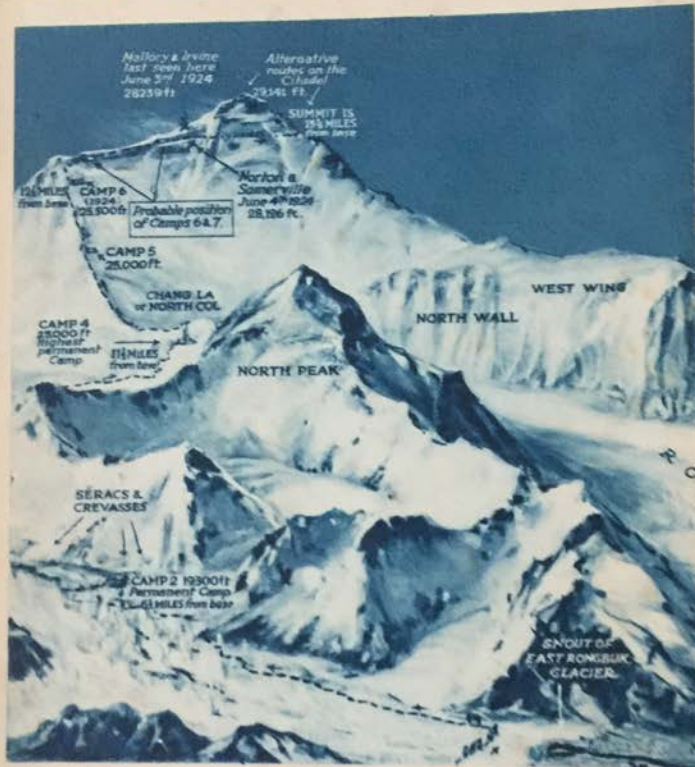
Figure 3.9 Flyer for performances in Dublin, September 1925  
Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG





Figure 3.10 Poster for *The Tragedy of Everest* c.1931  
Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

# THE CHALLENGE OF EVEREST



By G. J. CONS, M.A.

Lecturer in Geography at Goldsmith's College, University of London

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS . . . PRICE SIXPENCE

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON PRESS LTD.

Figure 3.11 Pamphlet produced to accompany educational screenings of *Climbing Mount Everest 1933*  
Author's collection



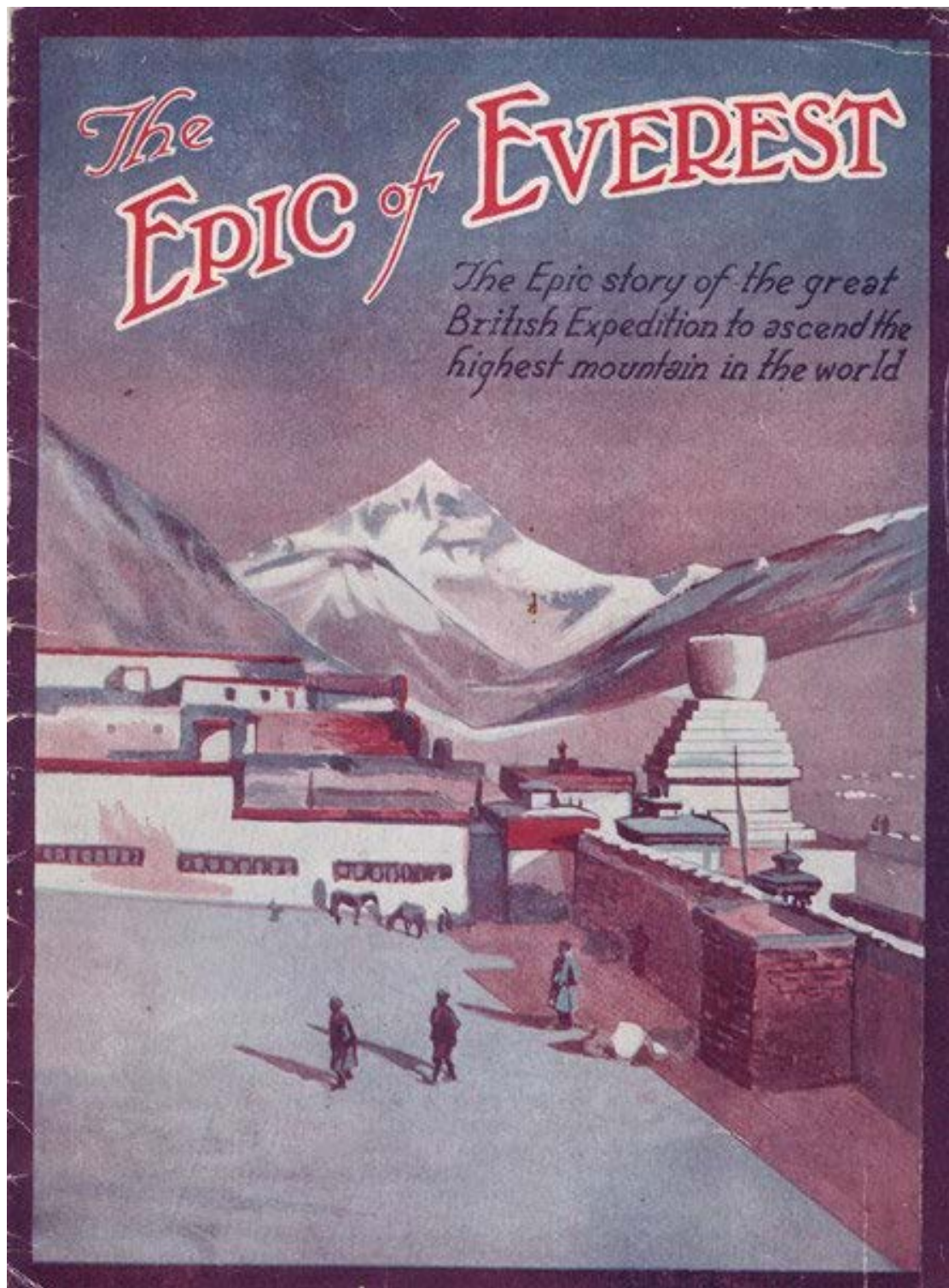


Figure 3.12 *The Epic of Everest* programme to accompany Col. Haddick's lectures in India  
Item 18254, Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter

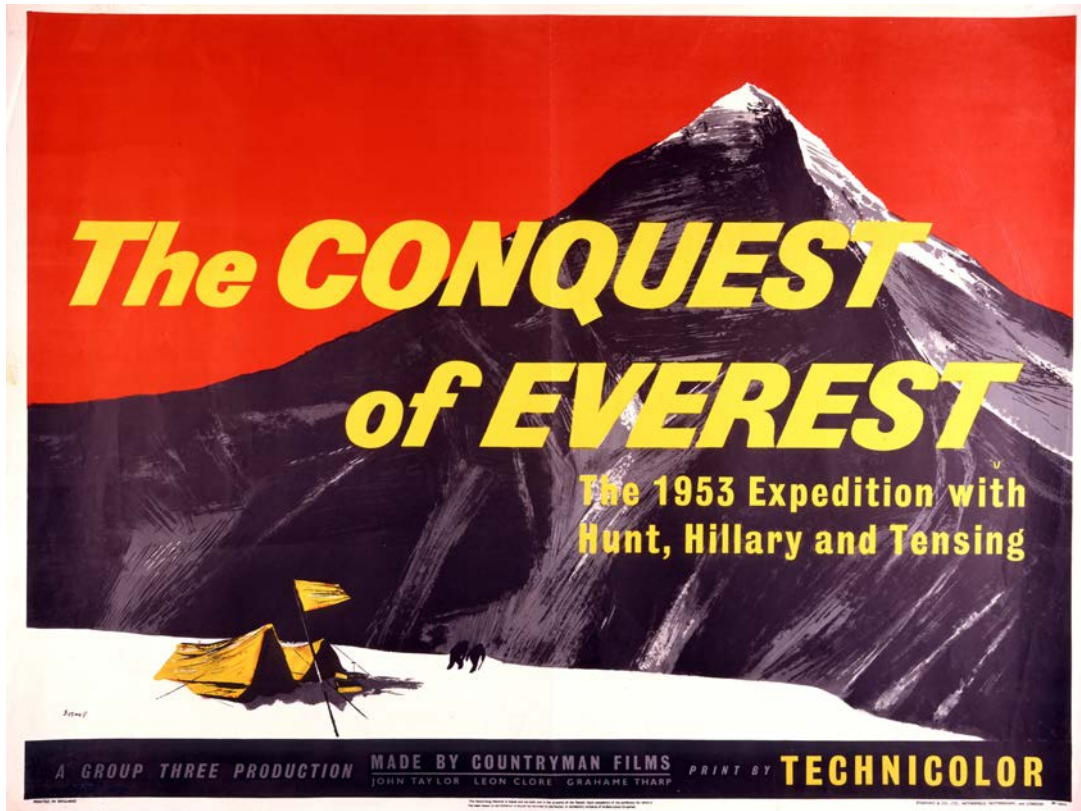
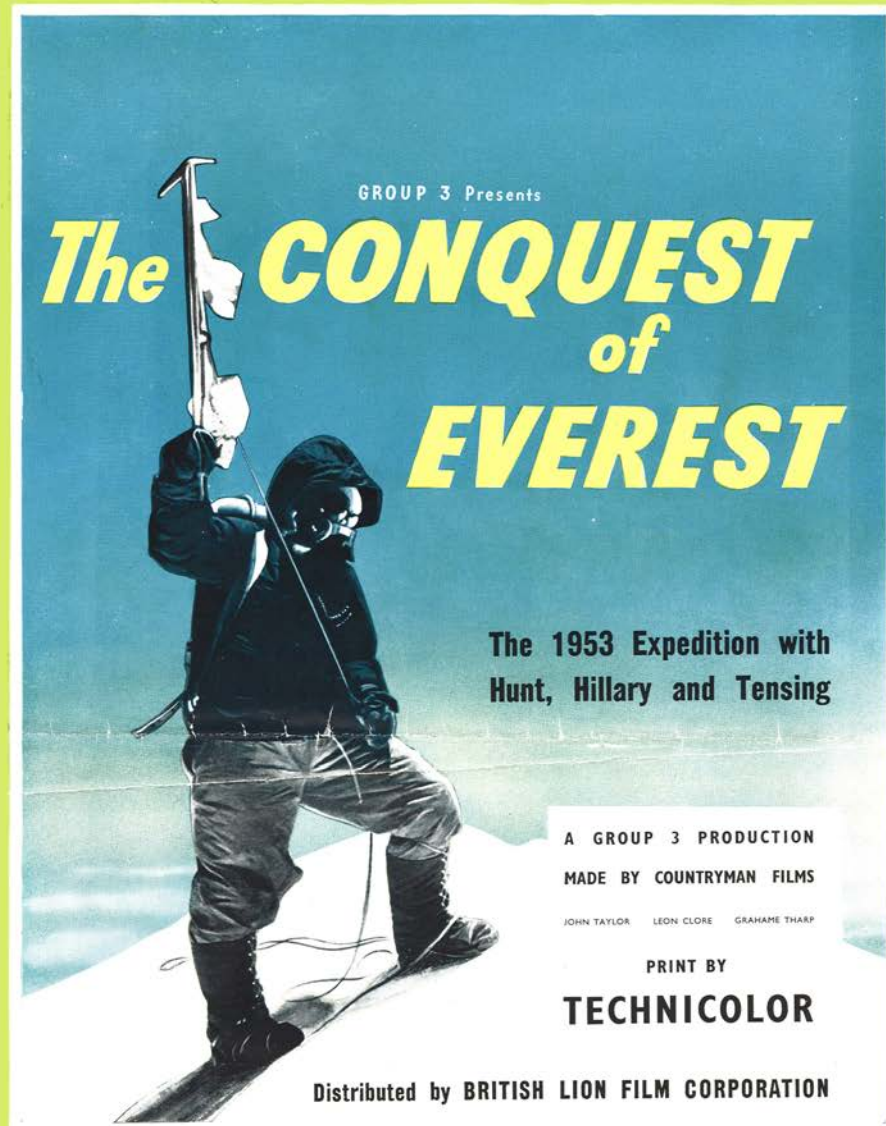


Figure 3.13 *The Conquest of Everest* poster designed by James Boswell  
Courtesy Studio Canal



## CAMPAIGN BOOK

Figure 3.14 *The Conquest of Everest* Campaign Book  
Courtesy Studio Canal

## Chapter 4

### The Commercial Context of Everest Films: Funding,

#### Distribution and Exhibition, 1922-1925

This chapter considers issues surrounding the funding and subsequent commercial distribution of Everest films. As a case study it reviews the production and exhibition of the official film records of the 1922 and 1924 Everest expeditions filmed by Captain John Noel under the auspices of the MEC. Many aspects of the practice of film-making will be considered, including sponsorship, production, marketing and promotion, distribution and exhibition. Key issues include the relationship of Everest expeditionary film to the burgeoning genre of travelogue material already available to popular audiences. What were the primary aims of creating film records – were they predominantly commercial, scientific or cultural? How well was the Mount Everest Committee prepared to manage the outcomes of dealing with the distribution and exhibition of the films? Was there evidence of any intermediary advice sought by or provided to the Committee? What was the role of the cinematographer and his relationship with other members of the expedition and the MEC? As development of a robust business model was crucial to the commercial success of the films, how was this managed nationally and internationally? Efforts at promotion and marketing will be considered and a measure of the different models used in 1922 and 1924 will be made. In conclusion the lasting consequences for the role of film within the RGS will be examined. A key and continuing element in this



examination will be the relationship between Arthur Hinks, MEC Secretary (Figure 4.1) and the cinematographer Captain John Noel.

This chapter draws extensively on MEC archives to establish the initial rationale for embarking on the commissioning and production of a film record. Personal correspondence between members of the expedition and the MEC illustrates individual working relationships which would influence the development of Everest film. Contractual agreements and accounts provide further evidence of the commercial context and outcomes of the film ventures. Newspaper archives and trade journals provide evidence of the reception of the films and the level of marketing and promotion involved in each case. The chapter is organised as follows. Section 4.1 examines the commercial context for the making of Everest films. Section 4.2 focuses on the role of the MEC in generating funding and sponsorship. Section 4.3 considers the process of production of the films themselves. Section 4.4 addresses marketing and promotion and Section 4.5 turns to distribution and exhibition. The conclusion discusses the commercial outcomes.

#### 4.1 Commercial context

The development of film technology in the first decades of the twentieth century brought new opportunities and challenges. The impact on what was required for a major expedition was significant. As Rachael Low notes, 'soon a cinematograph was regarded as a normal part of an explorer's equipment although his films were not always originally intended for commercial

distribution'.<sup>1</sup> The expense of production and distribution had to be set against the commercial possibilities of film. Alfred Cort Haddon, widely credited with making the first ethnographic film on the 1898 Torres Strait expedition (Chapter 2 above), was also reported as having advocated to Walter Baldwin Spencer in 1900 that he sell his films of native Australians to a commercial company to help pay for the apparatus.<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on the revenue raising potential of film was shared more widely. An editorial in *Motion Picture World* 16<sup>th</sup> October 1909 advocated that 'all expeditions should take moving pictures – always sure of a market and interest in large sections of the public'.<sup>3</sup>

The establishment of a commercial market for film was in place by the 1910s coinciding with the great age of polar exploration. Antarctic expeditions led by Scott, Amundsen and Shackleton were equipped with cameras. While official cinematographers accompanied the British expeditions, it was not so with Amundsen. He had been given a camera by Norwegian film pioneer Hugo Hermansen 'presumably in the hope that he would bring back something worth showing publicly in Hermansen's cinemas'.<sup>4</sup> *Roald Amundsens Sydpolsferd* (Roald Amundsen's South Pole

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<sup>1</sup> Low, R. (1949) *The History of the British Film Vol.2 1906-1914* London: Allen and Unwin. 155

<sup>2</sup> Dunlop, I. Ethnographic Filmmaking in Australia: the First Seventy Years (1898-1968) *Studies in Visual Communication* 9 (Winter 1983). 11

<sup>3</sup> *Motion Picture World* 16<sup>th</sup> October 1909 'Another Lost Opportunity'. Cited in Griffiths, A. *Wondrous Difference*. (2002) Columbia University Press. 236

<sup>4</sup> Jeavons, C. (2011) 'Of Ice and Men, Recent DVDs from Norway', *Journal of Film Preservation*, 84, 69. A review of the release on DVD of *Roald Amundsens Sydpolsferd* (Roald Amundsen's South Pole Expedition 1910-

Expedition) is 'in effect a home movie – and a fairly rough and unstructured one' – a 16 minute film, which was used by Amundsen on his lecture tours, but not released commercially until the restoration on DVD in 2011. As reviewed in Chapter 2, films of British polar expeditions soon became widely commercially distributed. A tradition had been established with the work of Herbert Ponting and Frank Hurley and in 1922 the British release of Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* added a new title to the growing catalogue of films shot in extreme environments.

Funding models for the production and distribution of expeditionary film varied as did the management of their exhibition. For example, Scott's 1910 expedition to the South Pole was largely funded by the government. The RGS also contributed £1000. Herbert Ponting's film of the expedition was first released by Gaumont in 1913. Ponting's biographer H. J. P. Arnold records that 'the cinematographic exploitation presented no problem – 40% to the expedition, 40% to Gaumont and 20% to Ponting'.<sup>5</sup> After the initial release, Ponting bought the rights from Gaumont in 1914 for £5000 and subsequently re-released the film *The Great White Silence* in 1924. For his part Shackleton received very substantial funding from donations for his 1914-16 expedition to cross Antarctica. This included £25,000 from a syndicate 'on condition that he secured the services of the recently returned

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1912) which had been recently recognized by the UNESCO Memory of the World Register.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold, H. J. P. (1969) *Photographer of the World: The Biography of Herbert Ponting*. London: Hutchinson & Co. 84

Mawson's Expedition cinematographer'.<sup>6</sup> So the value of a filmmaker in the person of Frank Hurley added significant cachet to the official film of the expedition. Shackleton formed a company to manage exploitation of the film – I.T.A. Film Syndicate Ltd. In May 1918 he sold UK rights to Jury's Imperial Pictures Ltd. for £5000 plus a 50% royalty which enabled him to continue to use the film for lecturing purposes.<sup>7</sup> The pioneer of documentary film Robert Flaherty received the financial backing of Revillon Frères, French fur traders, to produce his film of the Inuit. Flaherty's first attempt at filming went up in smoke, the result of a cigarette setting light to the flammable nitrate film stock. But he returned to make *Nanook of the North*, largely considered a masterpiece of documentary cinema and released just months before the London screenings of Noel's first film, *Climbing Mount Everest* (See Chapter 2).

#### 4.2. The Mount Everest Committee, funding and sponsorship

John Noel first looked upon Mount Everest in 1913 when, in disguise, he entered Tibet without the necessary authorisation and managed to travel to within forty miles of the mountain before being turned back. His ambition to reach Everest was put on hold during the First World War: but by 1919 this was revived and Noel delivered a paper to a meeting of RGS Fellows,

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<sup>6</sup> Gray, M. and Newton, G. (2004) 'Pioneer of Polar Photography' in *South with Endurance: Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition 1914-1917: The Photographs of Frank Hurley*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 232 (original extract from the diary of Thomas Orde-Lees)

<sup>7</sup> Fisher, M and Fisher, J. (1957) *Shackleton*. London: James Barrie Books Ltd. 440

outlining plans.<sup>8</sup> Noel later recalled that *Punch* had documented the proceedings under the heading 'Himalayans at Play' and referred to experiments with 'man-lifting kites and trained albatrosses'.<sup>9</sup> Parody aside, the idea of an expedition to Everest had taken root and preliminary planning began. On 30<sup>th</sup> December 1920 Arthur Hinks, Secretary of the RGS, wrote a letter to Captain Noel:

My Dear Noel,

I think I ought to let you know at once that the Dalai Lama has given permission for the Everest Expedition to start this coming season, and that we are hoping to get a party into the field under the joint auspices of the Society and the Alpine Club.

In view of your keen interest in the matter and your particular skill as a photographer, I thought I ought to ask you quite unofficially whether there is any chance that you would be able to join this party if you were asked by the Society or the Alpine Club. You will understand that this is a very preliminary enquiry because we do not now yet how big the party can be – much depends on the funds available: we have only just begun to think about them. If you should happen to know any millionaires who would like to put down a nice round sum to help, you might mention the matter to me.<sup>10</sup>

By return Noel replied enthusiastically: 'it has always been my best ambition to accompany any expedition that finally goes to Everest'.<sup>11</sup> Throughout January 1921 the correspondence continued with Noel drawing up a wish list of photographic apparatus and developing equipment for use in the field. As Secretary of the MEC, Hinks played an important role in matters of finance, equipment and personnel. It is evident that Hinks backed Noel as the official cinematographer over any other competition from the

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<sup>8</sup> Noel, J. B. L. (1919) 'A Journey to Tashirak in Southern Tibet, and the Eastern Approaches to Mount Everest', *Geographical Journal* 53, 289-303

<sup>9</sup> Noel, J. B. L. (1927) *Through Tibet to Everest* (4<sup>th</sup> edn. 1989) London: Hodder & Stoughton. 95

<sup>10</sup> A. Hinks to J. B. L. Noel 30<sup>th</sup> December 1920. EE 18/3/1. RGS-IBG

<sup>11</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 31<sup>st</sup> December 1920. EE 18/3/2. RGS-IBG

industry. While Noel was contacting commercial companies for estimates on film stocks and chemicals as well as equipment, Hinks also wrote to William Bates Ferguson at the Royal Photographic Society for advice. Ferguson replied on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1921 suggesting that Herbert Ponting 'ought to know all about snow and ice work but I hear he is a bit difficult to deal with.' He ends his letter 'Has the expedition selected its photographer yet? The man is almost more important than the outfit'.<sup>12</sup> Hinks' response concurs with Ferguson: 'Mr. Ponting is well known to us, but I do not think in this case we will consult him'.<sup>13</sup> This was ironic, as Noel himself admired Ponting's cinematography and regularly sought his advice on adapting camera equipment for use in extreme conditions. Ferguson also recommended that Hinks contact George Abraham, a well-respected climber and photographer based in Keswick.<sup>14</sup> Abraham responded positively, offering 'to put my expert knowledge at the service of the Society regarding the photographic outfit for the Expedition'.<sup>15</sup> Such experts were consulted on photographic matters but not on the business of film production and distribution.

The inaugural meeting of the Mount Everest Committee was held at the Alpine Club on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1921, chaired by Francis Younghusband with Arthur Hinks as Acting Secretary. Item 4 on the agenda considered the 'publication of information' and it was duly resolved to reserve to the RGS

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<sup>12</sup> W. B. Ferguson to A. Hinks 18<sup>th</sup> January 1921. EE 7/1/8. RGS-IBG

<sup>13</sup> A. Hinks to W. B. Ferguson January 1921. EE 7/1/9. RGS-IBG

<sup>14</sup> W. B. Ferguson to A. Hinks January 1921. EE 7/1/10. RGS-IBG

<sup>15</sup> G. Abraham to A. Hinks January 1921. EE 7/1/11. RGS-IBG

and the Alpine Club all rights of publication. Members of the expedition would have no unauthorised communication with the press. However word was out and in a letter dated 28<sup>th</sup> January 1921, H. Bruce Woolfe, Managing Director of British Instructional Films, based at Elstree, put in a pitch for filming the expedition:

We should be glad if you would inform us if you have made any arrangements with regard to having a film record made of the coming expedition to scale Mount Everest. No doubt you desire to have a film showing the ascent of the mountain together with any items of interest you may require. We specialise in geographical work and should very much like to undertake this subject, either working for you or at our own expense. We should be prepared to discuss this at your convenience.<sup>16</sup>

Hinks responded by stating that the Committee was not entertaining any such proposals. Geoffrey Malins, director of *The Battle of the Somme*, wrote a similar letter offering to bear all expenses in making a film of the expedition and pay the Committee a third of profits in return for exclusive rights.<sup>17</sup> Again his letter received a negative response: no exclusive rights would be granted and any such photography would only be taken by members of the expedition.<sup>18</sup>

The MEC continued to meet weekly, and much of its business was concerned with finance and logistics. On the 9<sup>th</sup> February 1921 Sir Francis Younghusband reported that he had met with the writer and publisher Colonel John Buchan. Buchan offered advice on press and communications, including suitable newspapers for reports and letters, and intimated that his

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<sup>16</sup> British Instructional Films to Secretary RGS 28<sup>th</sup> January 1921.

EE 6/5/1. RGS-IBG

<sup>17</sup> G. Malins to F. Younghusband 12<sup>th</sup> January 1921. EE 6/5/3. RGS-IBG

<sup>18</sup> F. Younghusband to G. Malins EE 6/5. RGS-IBG

own company would make an offer to publish an official account. The Committee, after consideration, minuted that the expedition should be kept as far as possible in the hands of the two Societies and 'should not be exploited as a newspaper expedition'.<sup>19</sup> This resolution needs to be seen in the context of earlier expeditions, including the Society's fraught relationship with the journalist Henry Morton Stanley.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless the possibility of revenue generation was considered a priority for discussion. A Memorandum of a meeting between Younghusband, Buchan and Captain Farrar of the Alpine Club held on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1921 laid out six methods of raising funds, recommended by Buchan. They included arrangements for the sale of cinema rights, with Buchan recommending a meeting with leading cinema distributor Sir William Jury (who was at that time managing the official film record of Shackleton's Transantarctic expedition and the feature length film *The Battle of the Somme*). The control of rights was a key issue. At a subsequent meeting it was resolved that 'forms of agreement not to hold any communication with the press, photographic or cinematograph agencies should be drawn up at once and submitted to all members for signature'.<sup>21</sup> While the communications would be tightly controlled, there was no getting away from the need to raise funds to enable the expedition to take place. After the war RGS funds were depleted and membership had

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<sup>19</sup> Item 8. Mount Everest Committee 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting at Alpine Club 9<sup>th</sup> February 1921. EE 98. RGS-IBG

<sup>20</sup> Driver, F. *Geography Militant*. 117 -145

<sup>21</sup> Item 9. Mount Everest Committee 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting at Alpine Club 16<sup>th</sup> February 1921. RGS-IBG



dropped from 5,200 to 4,800.<sup>22</sup> Although supported in principle by the British Government, public funds were not available. In this context, exclusive deals with publishers and the press provided one source of support. In addition, advertising opportunities and commercial sponsorship was also encouraged. Sir John Norman Collie, President of the Alpine Club, came up with his own idea to contact Lord Leverhulme, founder of Lever Brothers the manufacturer of a famous household soap. He playfully presented his proposal to Hinks, complete with suitable slogans, as an offer that couldn't be refused:

give us £10,000 and we will take a large cake of Sunlight Soap and a flag also with Sunlight Soap emblazoned on it and we will plant them on the top of Everest. Then he will be able to say:

1. Sunlight Soap beats the record. 29,002 tablets sold hourly.
2. Sunlight Soap towers aloft and dominates the Kingdoms of the Earth.
3. Avoid worry – use Sunlight Soap and for Ever-rest.

I am sure that he would see that it was a really superb advertisement, and , being a businessman, would give us £10,000 at once.<sup>23</sup>

There is no record of Hinks' response in the MEC archive.

The first expedition (in 1921) was a reconnaissance to survey and plan a route rather than an attempt to reach the summit, and there was no film record. The first film would be taken in 1922 on the second expedition. In spite of Buchan's recommendation to seek advice from a respected film distributor, the management of this film was handled by the MEC itself. Although Hinks had a profound mistrust of the popular press, he was persuaded by Buchan to negotiate exclusive deals with *The Times*, the *Graphic* and the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*. Why then did he draw the line

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<sup>22</sup> Mill, H. R. (1930) *The Record of the Royal Geographical Society 1830-1930*. London: Royal Geographical Society. 198

<sup>23</sup> N. Collie to A. Hinks 26<sup>th</sup> February 1921. EE 11/5/6. RGS-IBG

against meeting Sir William Jury? Jury was a leading film distributor. During the war he had been a member of the War Office Cinematograph Committee and in 1918 headed the Ministry of Information's Cinematograph Division. One possible explanation was that Jury was a self-made man, starting his career as a fairground showman before forming Jury's Imperial Pictures. In spite of being the first man to be knighted for services to the film industry he would still fail to pass muster. 'A rotten lot...all sharks and pirates' was Hinks' judgement on the press.<sup>24</sup> In this context, Noel was to play a vital intermediary role, enabled by his elite background, his role in the army, his knowledge of photography and his passion for the idea of an Everest expedition.<sup>25</sup> Looking back many years later, Noel emphasised the conservatism of the geographers:

The Royal Geographical Society was a very conservative body; they didn't want an ordinary professional person from a film company to make the pictures. Half of them didn't want any pictures at all. It was just a scientific climbing expedition. They didn't want any vulgarity in the newspapers. So they invited me. The idea was that the film, when it was eventually shown, would produce money for the expedition.<sup>26</sup>

Press and commercial interest in the expedition was a measure of the importance attached to the adventure and national pride in the ambition to 'conquer' Everest, the Third Pole. Sale of exclusive rights to individual newspapers caused a flurry of protest, including from representatives of the

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<sup>24</sup> Davis, W. (2011) *Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory and the Conquest of Everest*. London: Bodley Head. 159

<sup>25</sup> Noel was the third son of Lieutenant-Colonel the Hon. Edward Noel, an officer in the Rifle Brigade and second son of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Gainsborough. After passing out from Sandhurst, he joined the East Yorkshire Light Infantry.

<sup>26</sup> Brownlow, K. (1979) *The War, the West and the Wilderness*. London: Secker & Warburg. 454

Indian press. Syndication of articles both nationally and internationally was a means of increasing revenue and controlling media output. Press coverage was bound to elicit further pitches for involvement from commercial film production companies. As Davis notes, Hinks was the 'nexus' for these approaches,<sup>27</sup> and, having already selected a suitably qualified cinematographer, he responded in typically forthright fashion. However, unsolicited offers continued in 1922. British Instructional Films Ltd. and British and Colonial Kinematograph Co. Ltd. both offered advice and assistance over technical production of the film. Edward Godal, Managing Director of British and Colonial, wrote on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1922:

we make a speciality of developing negatives and printing copies of such important and careful work as these expeditions entail. We are doing the developing and printing, apart from giving expert advice, for the Shackleton expedition.<sup>28</sup>

An ingratiating approach from a production company called Solar Films was particularly irksome to Hinks.

The Great War swept away many shams and substituted for them an intense desire for the realities of life. This desire has been extended to the Cinematograph World where, too, there is a rapidly growing demand for something real. Solar Films Ltd. has been founded to supply this. Each travel film is taken by a competent director under the guidance of a leader who possesses special qualifications for the task. The result is that an artistic and authentic picture of life and conditions in the various countries is presented to the British Public.<sup>29</sup>

This letter was signed by Sir Percy Sykes, prominent diplomat and Gold Medallist of the Society, which gave it a degree of credibility at the RGS. Although the offer was turned down, Hinks discovered that Solar Films

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<sup>27</sup> Davis, W. *Into the Silence*. 127

<sup>28</sup> British & Colonial Kinematograph to RGS 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1922. EE 6/5/10. RGS-IBG

<sup>29</sup> Solar Films to RGS (undated). EE 6/5/52. RGS-IBG

were publicly announcing that they would be involved in the filming of the expedition. A furious message was despatched to Noel in case he should read the story :

Solar Films have had the impudence to put it about that they are going to have the Mount Everest film, but they are liars, and any statement to that effect which you see in the papers may be discredited.<sup>30</sup>

When it was announced that a third expedition would again attempt to climb Everest in 1924, securing sufficient funding was once more a pressing issue for the MEC. After the costs of the 1922 expedition were revealed to be £12,538 (against the 1921 reconnaissance costs of £4,241) the Alpine Club expressed concern, anxious about their members' individual liability should the proposed expedition result in a shortfall:

Even if the Expedition attains its objective, the realisation for the third Expedition can hardly approach those of the second since the adventure is no longer a novelty. It must not be forgotten that, while the expenditure in England can be controlled with proper supervision and business like methods, the expenditure in India is difficult to foresee and even more difficult to control.<sup>31</sup>

Council Minutes for the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1923 recorded that some members of the Alpine Club had suggested that the MEC become a limited liability company. The RGS took the view that if the Alpine Club was not prepared to continue it should withdraw and the RGS take full control of the next expedition. The Council Minutes stated that an 'informal message' was sent as a response on 17<sup>th</sup> December. The Alpine Club wished that the old arrangements and relationship should continue. 'They have made domestic

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<sup>30</sup> A.Hinks to J. B. L. Noel 12<sup>th</sup> April 1922. EE 18/3/56 . RGS-IBG

<sup>31</sup> Alpine Club to RGS 26<sup>th</sup> November 1923. EE 16/3/79. RGS-IBG

arrangements which obviate any question of the same kind arising in the future'.<sup>32</sup>

Noel's continued ambition to film a successful ascent of Everest provided the solution to the issues of financing the expedition. He had put forward an ambitious 'scheme' to fund in its entirety the making of a film record himself, in return for the film and photographic rights. The main issue for the MEC concerned press coverage and it was agreed that a special clause must be included in the Agreement to ensure the avoidance of vulgarity and objectionable publicity. Deals would be done separately with the press, as in 1922, and Noel would provide images for their use. This strengthened Noel's control over the production of the film and gave him plentiful opportunity to plan publicity and promotion both during filming and on his return.

#### 4.3. The logistics of production

The MEC formally appointed Captain Noel as photographic officer to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Everest Expedition at its meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1921, immediately authorising expenditure of £600 on cinematograph and film. In a letter confirming this Hinks wrote 'I need hardly say how much pleasure it gives me to send you this official letter, for which you will however have been

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<sup>32</sup> Council Minutes 17<sup>th</sup> December 1923: Item 4. Vol.11 May 23 1921 – June 8 1925. RGS-IBG

prepared'.<sup>33</sup> Noel had already consulted Ponting over which camera equipment would be suited to the extreme conditions expected at high altitude, learning from his experiences in Antarctica and seeking modifications from the manufacturer James Sinclair. Burroughs Wellcome would supply chemicals for processing and developing films, also providing advice on amounts and timing required for different film stocks and the effects to be achieved. Some indication of the extent of the photographic chemicals required is found in the Burroughs Wellcome archive. A handwritten letter from Noel stated 'We need developer for 20,000 ft kinema film and 1000 glass plates'.<sup>34</sup> The reply noted that 'each 400ft requires 24 gallons of developer', this being the capacity of a developing tank. In all, 11 cases of photographic chemicals were delivered to the Army and Navy Export Department for shipment in February 1922, including 3cwt. of Hypo fixer (the common name for sodium thiosulfite salts used in the final stage of processing film). When combined with camera equipment, developing tanks and a photographic tent – all to be transported to Base Camp – the demanding logistics of such a project become clearer. Noel was also allocated his own porters, eight in all, to support photography and film.

Hinks suggested to Noel that he should enlist the services of a photographic assistant. Noel replied,

I had thought of this before but did not like to propose it on account of the cost. I would like to get all the work done myself. However, as you

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<sup>33</sup> A. Hinks to J. B. L. Noel 15<sup>th</sup> December 1921. EE 18/3/34. RGS-IBG

<sup>34</sup> J. B. L. Noel to Burroughs Wellcome 14<sup>th</sup> January 1922. Wellcome Collection WF/M/I/PR/E16: Box 102

suggested it, I would propose the best form of assistant would be a Boy Scout. One would get a most excellent and keen young chap.<sup>35</sup>

Hinks was quick to respond:

a native hill man who had worked for Burlington Smith at Darjeeling would be best. I do not think it is the least use contemplating sending anyone from England – a Boy Scout or otherwise.<sup>36</sup>

Regular correspondence between Hinks and Noel continued throughout the 1922 expedition, providing updates on the progress of the party alongside reports on the results achieved in photography and filming. A steady supply of photographic images was required to fulfil the obligations of the deals in place with the press. Noel was very reliable in sending the requested material, much more so than General Bruce, the Expedition leader, who was continually late in sending his cablegrams. As Hinks' cables made clear:

27<sup>th</sup> April 1922

We have been very glad to hear in Bruce's letters that you are going very strong and have already been disporting yourself in true operator style on the roof of a railway train.<sup>37</sup>

4<sup>th</sup> May 1922

I hear both through Bruce and through Longstaff how active you have been with your cinematograph and am delighted to know from Bruce that films are already developed and successful. This is an excellent augury for the future.<sup>38</sup>

Noel's own account of his exploits in 1922 (published in 1927) reveals the hardships of processing film footage:

I pitched a dark-room tent on the banks of the glacier river, and there got ready for the work of developing films at 16,000 feet above the sea, higher than any mountain in Europe and miles higher than films

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<sup>35</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1922. EE 18/3/39. RGS-IBG

<sup>36</sup> A. Hinks to J. B. L. Noel 4<sup>th</sup> January 1922. EE 18/3/41. RGS-IBG. (refers to the J. Burlington Smith Photographic Studio in Darjeeling)

<sup>37</sup> A. Hinks to J. B. L. Noel 27<sup>th</sup> April 1922. EE 18/3/59. RGS-IBG

<sup>38</sup> A. Hinks to J. B. L. Noel 4<sup>th</sup> May 1922. EE 18/3/60. RGS-IBG

had ever been worked before. If it be asked why the work should have been done up there, the answer is that I wanted to be able to check results as I went along, and to repeat any scene if necessary.<sup>39</sup>

He developed his film at night and left it in the wash tanks until the morning. In order to stop the water freezing an oil lamp was left burning. There were constant battles to avoid dust and grit getting onto the film stock. The flammable nitrate film was hung to dry over a smouldering yak dung fire. Noel's letters to Hinks were generally very positive about the results of his filmmaking: indeed few of the hardships were referred to. The following extracts reveal the progress of the production:

10<sup>th</sup> May 1922  
Everest Main Base Camp  
Rongbuk Glacier  
Tibet

My Dear Hinks  
I have spent the time since we got here in developing my kinema films, some 6000ft, and I am glad to tell you it is all good stuff. I have got a wonderful film of the great Lama at Rongbuk and our visit to him.<sup>40</sup>

12<sup>th</sup> June 1922  
Base Camp  
I have some splendid kinema film of Everest and the clouds and winds blowing on the mountain. I used panchromatic film and got beautiful dark skies to show off the winds and driving snow and mists.<sup>41</sup>

8<sup>th</sup> July 1922  
Shekar Dzong

The film is all good negative, many thousands of feet of it, and I hope it will project well and prove an interesting record of our doings. The only point I am a little anxious about is the "steadiness" when it is printed and projected. I have had trouble with vibration in the constant wind of Tibet and the mountains and have trouble

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<sup>39</sup> Noel, J. B. L. (1927) *Through Tibet to Everest*. (4<sup>th</sup> edn.1989) London: Hodder & Stoughton. 156

<sup>40</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 10<sup>th</sup> May 1922. EE 18/3/61. RGS-IBG

<sup>41</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 12<sup>th</sup> June 1922. EE 18/3/67. RGS-IBG



sometimes with my tripod which is not solid and heavy enough for work in this country.<sup>42</sup>

28<sup>th</sup> July 1922

My dear Hinks,

Just a note by this mail to tell you that I am comfortably fixed up at Gyantse. Macdonald, the Trade Agent, has kindly lent me his quarters in the fort, and I have been able to fix up a splendid dark room, where I have all the film gear laid out in good working order. I develop 800 feet a day, having some 10,000 ft to get through altogether.<sup>43</sup>

1<sup>st</sup> August 1922

Gyantse

In my scheme for the Film Story of Everest ... moving diagrams will be a great help and will save the need of much titling and written explanation, beside being a novel feature.<sup>44</sup>

19<sup>th</sup> August 1922

Gyantse

The film developing apparatus has completely broken down. The acid has eaten away the fixing tank in a dozen places and its life is ended although I have mended it with solder four times. So I will be sending what film I take in future home for developing. I will send it direct to Williamson Film Printing Co. 80, Wardour St.<sup>45</sup>

29<sup>th</sup> August 1922

Yatung

Please excuse pencil. I have no ink left. I am now on my way down at Yatung, Chumbi Valley. I want to get a "leech" picture and also others of forest scenery, river and cane bridge etc.

The moving diagrams are most important. I hope you will be able to get them drawn, the still picture part of them - I will arrange for the filming of the moving part of the diagrams. I believe there is a man called Mcpherson on the staff of the Sphere who draws these birdseye perspective black and white pictures v. well.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 8<sup>th</sup> July 1922. EE 18/3/70. RGS-IBG

<sup>43</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 28<sup>th</sup> July 1922. EE 18/3/75. RGS-IBG

<sup>44</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 1<sup>st</sup> August 1922. EE 18/3/77. RGS-IBG. Noel's reference to 'moving diagrams' relates to his request to Hinks for material required to be edited into the finished film.

<sup>45</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 19<sup>th</sup> August 1922. EE 18/3/82. RGS-IBG

<sup>46</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 29<sup>th</sup> August 1922. EE 18/3/86. RGS-IBG

6<sup>th</sup> September 1922  
Gangtok

I will bring film overland and I suppose Dover one arrives at in England. I will probably have to camp the night there as it will take a long time to measure the film in Customs. I wish I could avoid measuring it and get Customs to take my word for the amount because a lot of it is gritty. It dried gritty at the Rongbuk base camp, being dried in the open air. It should be rewashed first and not passed through any measuring machines which will scratch it.<sup>47</sup>

The correspondence between Noel and Hinks gives some sense of the logistical planning required to undertake a project on this scale. Noel provided Hinks with his storyboard ideas for the construct of the film, enrolling him in effect as a co-producer. The RGS headquarters at Lowther Lodge also served as a cutting room for the final edit of the 1922 film.<sup>48</sup> The insurance policy for the flammable film stock included a clause covering 'spontaneous fermentation', which was of course an alarming possibility.<sup>49</sup>

Having practical experience of the problems he encountered in the field in 1922, Noel presented a significantly more business-like scenario to the climbing party in 1924. He was at pains to reassure all members :

To some people the cinematograph camera is disconcerting and perhaps annoying, but the members of the Expedition last year will agree that I very carefully avoided worrying anybody by asking them to "pose" or photograph them when they did not feel like being taken. On this new Expedition I want to assure everybody that the presence of my

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<sup>47</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 6<sup>th</sup> September 1922. EE 18/3/88. RGS-IBG

<sup>48</sup> J. B. L. Noel to J. M. Scott, MEC (1933). EE 43/6/3j. RGS-IBG. This was correspondence in response to Hinks' attempts to track down the negative of the 1922 film in 1933. No one knew where it was.

<sup>49</sup> A. Hinks to Hawes Wilson & Sons re. insurance of the film negative 'still partly at this house', 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1923: Insurance Policy Document from Royal Exchange, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1924. EE 40/15. RGS-IBG

cinematograph camera will never on any occasion cause worry or annoyance to anybody.<sup>50</sup>

Noel outlined other ambitious plans for promoting the film, including his intention to 'bring back a small party of Sherpa porters or Tibetans to England who will appear with the presentation of the film in London'. As well as the live performers:

we are bringing out a new invention we have got the rights to use, of a voice recording machine by which we will be able to make on aluminium discs records of Tibetan speech, singing and music. We have obtained facilities to use a new British-invented colour process for cinematography which has not yet been seen in public but which we have been able privately to arrange for. This friese green(sic) colour process is superior to and also simpler than any other colour process yet produced. We hope to obtain by these means all the scenic effects of the film in natural colours, also the customs and costumes of the people in Tibet, together with the flowers, butterflies, river and forest scenery in Sikkim.<sup>51</sup>

From this detailed plan it appears that Noel had already envisioned multiple opportunities for the use of material recorded on location other than the film of the attempt on Everest.

The logistical challenges of film-making in the field were eased somewhat on the 1924 expedition. Having purchased the film and photographic rights, Noel was in a better position to provide suitable facilities for film production. A plot of land was purchased in Belombre, close to Darjeeling Railway Station and a processing laboratory built and managed by Alfred Pereira (Figures 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4):

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<sup>50</sup> J. B. L. Noel to G. Bruce 26<sup>th</sup> January 1924. Sandra Noel Collection/RGS-IBG

<sup>51</sup> Noel to Bruce 26<sup>th</sup> January 1924. Sandra Noel Collection/RGS-IBG

The only plot of ground Pereira could get was a jungle covered mountain slope at a horrible angle. However he found a contractor and coolies, cut into the hill, banked it and ran up a house 60 feet by 40 feet of cement, stone, wood and tin. The little railway station was crowded out with Pereira's enormous packing cases, containing developing tanks, drying apparatus and washing wheels, motor generator for developing his own steady supply of printing current, chemicals etc. Pereira had everything organised to the last tool and screw.<sup>52</sup>

On this expedition Noel had further modified his Newman Sinclair camera equipment so that it could easily be set up at higher altitudes.

The cameras were carried on chosen mules, fitted with special saddlery. They were contained in metal boxes with clip handles, so that the lid opened up in an instant. If it rained the lid acted as an umbrella. The boxes were double-cavity watertight, quite light and painted white in order to reflect the sun.<sup>53</sup>

Attention to detail, resulting from his experiences in 1922, enabled a relatively smooth filming operation at extreme altitudes, when the cameras were mounted on metal rucksack frames carried by the porters.

When I wanted to take a picture the porter turned his back. I opened the box and took the camera out. Another porter carried the tripod and put it up. There were no screws on the tripod head. It had a special device which Mr. Newman made for me in which the camera slid on in two grooves, so there was no fumbling about in the cold trying to find the screw head.<sup>54</sup>

Noel's Sherpa camera crew were never credited by name. They are seen throughout the 1922 and 1924 films alongside members of the climbing party, but remain anonymous as indigenous intermediaries.<sup>55</sup> Pereira

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<sup>52</sup> Noel, J. B. L. (1927) *Through Tibet to Everest*. (4<sup>th</sup> edn.1989) London: Hodder & Stoughton. 218. Pereira's role is discussed further below.

<sup>53</sup> Noel, S. (2003) *Everest Pioneer: The Photographs of Captain John Noel*. Stroud: Sutton. 48

<sup>54</sup> Noel, S. *Everest Pioneer*. 48

<sup>55</sup> Driver, F. (2015) 'Intermediaries and the Archive of Exploration' in Konishi, S., Nugent, M. and Shellam, T. (eds.) *Indigenous Intermediaries: New Perspectives on Exploration Archives*. ANU Press and Aboriginal History Inc. 14-19

wrote of his experiences in the Darjeeling laboratory as the batches of film arrived from the field.

For the next four months work went on early and late seven days a week and frequently towards the end all night as well. Many hundreds of lantern slides were made, miles of negative developed, and positive copies prepared for showing in Calcutta and Bombay prior to our return.

It was a wonderful experience to be the first to follow the Expedition's doings week by week as the photographs came down from Everest, and the emergence of new films from the darkroom was always a thrilling event. General Bruce, compelled by a severe attack of malaria to relinquish the Leadership of the Expedition became a frequent visitor. Lord Lytton too, then staying in the hills, evinced keen interest in the laboratory's work.<sup>56</sup> (Figure 4.5)

As in 1922, Noel continued to maintain a regular flow of correspondence with Hinks. After the loss of Mallory and Irvine he was forced to rethink his plans for the structure of the film.

5<sup>th</sup> August 1924  
Everest Film Laboratory  
Belombre  
Darjeeling

My dear Hinks,

It was a v. sad end to the Expedition indeed and I expect you all got a shock at home when you heard. Was the Committee much distressed? I took a lot of film in the mountains and it is of good quality but owing to the failure of the Expedition to reach the top we will not make a success of it as we would if there had been a conquest. However I am quite happy and my scheme considerably helped the Committee to send the Expedition which is the main thing. I am going in consequence to present quite a different film to be called "The Roof of the World" dealing with the lofty mountains and country of Tibet and Mt. Everest will be part of the story....I got telephoto pictures this time up to 2 ¼ miles range!<sup>57</sup>

22<sup>nd</sup> September 1924  
Mount Everest Hotel

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<sup>56</sup> Pereira, A. (1925) 'Personal Reminiscences of the Mount Everest Expedition, 1924', *The Year's Photography* October 1925. 26-7

<sup>57</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 5<sup>th</sup> August 1924. EE 31/4/10. RGS-IBG

Darjeeling

In answer to your cable re. slides, I wrote you as soon as I got the wire saying I would cut out some bits of film for you, Here they are. I fear we are rather hard up for still photographs this year as I did not take more than a few myself. Beetham's photos were not v. good as he had bad luck with the camera being wrong. Also of course he was ill preventing him going up high. I did nothing but film work and got some jolly film. It is v. fine quality owing to the developing in the laboratory.<sup>58</sup>

The letter concludes with a list of 23 frame stills cut from the film. The entire span of Noel's correspondence with Hinks provides a fascinating record of the progress of the filming.

#### 4.4 Marketing and promotion

The most striking contrast between the 1922 and the 1924 films is found in their marketing and promotion. Hinks' anxiety about publicity was only heightened by the necessity of engaging with the press in order to raise funds to mount the expeditions. However press intrusion during the course of the climbs was positively discouraged. Precise numbers of cablegrams from the field were agreed in advance as were numbers of images provided. Specific newspapers had exclusive rights to publish reports and paid handsomely for the privilege. Syndication rights controlled wide spread reporting. Thus revenue was created and the extent of reporting managed. A measure of Hinks' distrust of the press is illustrated by his refusal to allow coverage of the departure of the reconnaissance party in 1921. As he wrote to Howard-Bury:

We don't know the way about among these sharks and pirates.

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<sup>58</sup> J. B. L. Noel to G. Bruce August 1924. EE 31/4/10. RGS-IBG

No one regrets more sincerely than I do that any dealings with the Press was ever instituted at all. I was, as you remember, always against it but I am not in a position to do more than make the best I can of the instructions of the Committee --- at any rate, we have kept the newspapers in their proper place and not allowed them to pretend they are running the expedition. The illustrated people are still sore over the fact that every member of the party got away without being photographed or cinematographed.<sup>59</sup>

In both 1922 and 1924, the MEC drew up an agreement for members of the expedition to sign which outlined protocols for dealing with the press. All negotiations had been agreed in advance with specific newspapers in order to secure funding. Telegrams and photographs would be supplied at regular intervals to those papers and would subsequently be syndicated. Any deviation from this would prejudice the agreed fees. Instructions issued to General Bruce in January 1922 were very specific – fifteen telegrams to be sent, starting with the departure from Darjeeling. Even the word count was regulated.

The telegrams should be composed in such a way as to convey a vivid picture of the gradual unfolding of the drama which is being enacted. Beyond these telegrams neither you nor any member of the Expedition should make any communication to the press.<sup>60</sup>

The appearance of unauthorised images in several newspaper reports in April 1922 caused Hinks concern. He wrote to Mrs. Bruce asking if she had supplied a photo of General Bruce standing by a train in Kalimpong: ‘You can imagine how serious this would be to the financial prospects of the

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<sup>59</sup> A. Hinks to C. Howard-Bury ( EE 12) cited in Unsworth,W. (1981) *Everest*. London: Allen Lane. 34

<sup>60</sup> Instructions issued to Gen. Bruce, 31<sup>st</sup> January 1922. EE 18/1/33a. RGS-IBG

expedition'.<sup>61</sup> Bruce was also chided for sending the image 'by some other course than through the Committee':

I have ventured to explain to Mrs Bruce how important it is that any photographs sent home privately should not go out of her hands when there is any danger that they will be used in the press. These people are so very touchy about their rights, and always imagining that other people are as anxious to do them as they are to do other people.<sup>62</sup>

In the same letter Hinks asks if Noel has any photos to send:

so that we could start with the Graphic and get some money out of them. We have not the least doubt that there will be plenty of money to be made eventually out of the lectures and cinematograph, but we do not want to run in to debt if we can help it.<sup>63</sup>

Later it transpired that the photo had been taken locally, not by a member of the expedition, and passed to a news agency (Figures 4.6 and 4.7). This was outside the Committee's control of course. Once the party had embarked on the long trek towards Everest there would be less risk of unauthorised photography.

In 1922, no advance plans for the promotion of the film were put in place by the MEC (see below). The decision of how the footage would be screened – as part of a lecture or as a stand alone film was still under consideration and the Committee would wait for Noel's return to England before decisions were finalised. Gerald Christy of the Lecture Agency was enlisted to organise a lecture tour and found himself also involved in the exhibition of the film (see Chapter 5). He attempted to offer Hinks advice about the need

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<sup>61</sup> A. Hinks to Mrs. G. Bruce April 28<sup>th</sup> 1922. EE 18/1/59. RGS-IBG

<sup>62</sup> A. Hinks to G. Bruce 4<sup>th</sup> May 1922. EE 18/1/61. RGS-IBG

<sup>63</sup> A. Hinks to G. Bruce 4<sup>th</sup> May 1922. EE 18/1/61. RGS-IBG



for processing multiple prints to meet demand for the provincial screenings:

I am daily getting enquiries from people asking when the film will be available, but as I can learn nothing of the plans, I can only reply that I can tell them nothing. The result is that scores of chances of showing the film are being lost.<sup>64</sup>

Little funding had been budgeted for advertising. In January 1923 he wrote to Hinks:

It is quite impossible to do anything more effective with the sandwich boardmen. The poor devils get 3/- per day....those boards are no lightweight and are most tiring on a windy day.<sup>65</sup>

Another attempt to promote film screening was suggested by Christy to be achieved by taking out more large adverts in papers as being most cost effective.

The 100<sup>th</sup> performance is on Monday January 29<sup>th</sup>, so I shall try to get a paragraph in the papers on Friday or else Saturday of this week announcing this, and at the same time announcing that the next two weeks will be the last. This should pull things up tremendously.<sup>66</sup>

The reality of the situation became evident to Hinks by the end of 1923 when he wrote to Christy to ask if there was any opportunity to get the film booked by schools or institutions. Christy replied:

I think the fact that it was not released in the spring immediately after the Philharmonic Hall run has made a difference. I should think many places would have taken it then who won't now.<sup>67</sup>

Product endorsement appeared in the press and journal adverts, these being paid for by the sponsors rather than the MEC budget (Figures 4.8 and 4.9).

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<sup>64</sup> G. Christy to A. Hinks 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1923. EE 25/4/9. RGS-IBG

<sup>65</sup> G. Christy to A. Hinks January 1923. EE 25/4/5. RGS-IBG

<sup>66</sup> G. Christy to A. Hinks 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1923. EE 25/4/8. RGS-IBG

<sup>67</sup> G. Christy to A. Hinks 19<sup>th</sup> December 1923. EE 25/4/43. RGS-IBG

A very different approach was taken to promoting the 1924 Everest film. After major investment in the film and photographic rights, Noel and his company (Explorers' Films), took every opportunity to publicise the film in advance of its distribution. As well as improvements to the camera equipment Noel was also investigating technical developments in film stock and the added attraction of colour, as he had outlined in his letter to the expedition members. Film maker Claude Friese-Greene was experimenting with a two colour system 'Natural Colour' and trade shows early in 1924 demonstrated the results.<sup>68</sup> Noel seized on this as a novel opportunity to add value to his enterprise and used it to publicise the forthcoming expedition (Figure 4.10). According to the *Sunday Pictorial* :

What colours are at the top of the world?.....One of the most impressive results of the film of the hazardous climb is expected to be the revelation of the colours at the summit of the mountain. This colour film record will also have important scientific and educational values. Glaciers and other splendours of the mountain will offer extraordinary opportunities for colour photography.<sup>69</sup>

In the same month (February 1924) the *Bioscope* reported on how Everest would be filmed. A farewell luncheon for the members of the expedition was held at Pagani's Restaurant in Great Portland Street and Noel was quoted: 'thanks to Mr. Friese-Greene's new process of colour photography, it would be possible for the first time to record the wonderful colour effects

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<sup>68</sup> This was an additive process – alternative frames were stained red and blue green: increased speed of projection created an illusion of natural colour but the images suffered from 'fringing' during movement. Friese-Greene used this process in his travelogue of Britain, *The Open Road* (1925)

<sup>69</sup> *Sunday Pictorial* 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1924. Noel Cuttings Album EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

which were so marked a feature of the Himalayan forests.<sup>70</sup> Continued press coverage reported on the prospective use of the colour process:

It speaks volumes for this inventor's process that, after those at the head of the expedition had viewed results already obtained, and found them so beautiful, they at once decided it was the process which would do most justice to the subjects.<sup>71</sup>

Noel had already seen the subjects which would illustrate the use of colour most effectively. The *Morning Post* carried a slightly more realistic description of the colour process after a demonstration held at the Holborn Empire in March 1924: 'The process is clearly not perfected, for vivid colours find it wanting, and the best effects are gained in landscapes'.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless the colour story persisted in newspaper coverage, despite the fact that in the event it wouldn't be used in the making of the film, as indicated in a report in *Empire News* in November 1924:

The 1924 Mount Everest Expedition film, which is due to reach this country shortly is likely to be the greatest picture of high adventure and glorious tragedy the world has yet been given. Many of the scenes were taken by the Friese-Greene colour process and surpass any previous achievements in this direction.<sup>73</sup>

Arthur Pereira, who as we have seen was engaged by Noel in 1924 to oversee the construction and running of the film processing lab in Darjeeling, was no mere technician. As Honorary Secretary to the Royal Photographic Society, he regularly wrote and reviewed new photographic

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<sup>70</sup> *Bioscope* 21<sup>st</sup> February 1924 Noel Cuttings Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

<sup>71</sup> 'Colour Films of Mount Everest: Claude Friese-Greene Process Selected' *Bioscope* 21<sup>st</sup> February 1924 Noel Cuttings Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

<sup>72</sup> *Morning Post* 26<sup>th</sup> March 1924 Noel Cuttings Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

<sup>73</sup> *Empire News* 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1924. Noel Cuttings Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

processes. He would have advised on the problems inherent in using the new process – fringing of colour during movement and, on a practical level, the increased speed required in projecting material to achieve a look of natural colour. It was impossible to combine two different speeds of projection within an edited reel. Although the prospect of a colour film record obviously appealed to the entrepreneurial instincts of Noel, it was crucial to be able to exhibit his film as widely as possible. He therefore decided to use the well-established process of tinting and toning selected scenes of the film. In a handwritten note to Hinks from Base Camp a fleeting reference to the colour film confirms that he had finally decided against using the process: ‘I just got your letter about the colour film. I took it on only at the last moment.’<sup>74</sup>

Noel also enrolled press assistance in promoting an unorthodox scheme of sending thousands of postcards from Base Camp, in order to maintain public awareness of the expedition. Pereira produced several news items for Pathé at the Darjeeling Laboratory which further promoted the forthcoming film for cinema audiences. Other ever more ambitious publicity schemes – including the use of a Citroen Kegresse tractor (accompanied by Colonel Haddick, one of the investors in Explorers Films) to drive across the Tibetan plateau and film the journey - were considered, only to be abandoned, as mentioned in section 3.3 above. Noel’s acquisition of rights to the 1924 film enabled him to entertain a much wider range of possibilities

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<sup>74</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 17<sup>th</sup> May 1924. EE 31/4/10. RGS-IBG

for promoting and distributing the 1924 film. Hinks, meanwhile, could only express muted criticism of 'Noel's fantastic way of doing things'.<sup>75</sup>

#### 4.5. Distribution and exhibition

The business models for the distribution and exhibition of the 1922 and 1924 films reflected some of the conflicting pressures of finance and publicity already noted. In 1922 it appears that little, if any, prior planning for the exhibition of the film was undertaken, nor any consideration given to the manufacture of sufficient prints to service potential demand. While en route to India Noel wrote to Hinks from Marseilles on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1922, outlining his concerns about commercial exploitation:

I do feel anxious that every care is taken by the Expedition to keep the pictures out of the hands of people who will seek to get them and exploit them for themselves with little benefit to the Expedition itself. These pictures I get – whole programme completed will be very valuable indeed, and what I hope is that their full value and worth will benefit the Geographical Society and the Expedition and not any of the commercial people outside who would like to step in and exploit them.<sup>76</sup>

Noel was reassured by Hinks in a letter dated 12<sup>th</sup> April 1922:

We are already bombarded by cinematograph concerns of all sorts to whom we say uniformly – NO....We are not budging from the position that we are making no engagement at all about the films, intending that the Committee and not the financier shall have the first of the profits.<sup>77</sup>

Correspondence between General Bruce, leader of the Expedition, and Hinks reveals that further approaches were made. In a letter from

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<sup>75</sup> A. Hinks report to MEC. 4<sup>th</sup> November 1925. EE 98. RGS-IBG

<sup>76</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1922. EE 18/3/54. RGS-IBG

<sup>77</sup> A. Hinks to J. B. L. Noel 12<sup>th</sup> April 1922. EE 18/3/56. RGS-IBG

Kalimpong, dated 28<sup>th</sup> March 1922, Bruce praised Noel's photographic work but also referred to approaches from an Indian distributor:

Noel has already begun his tremendous photographic offensive and the results of the journey up the Teesta Valley should be a great success. He travelled up the whole way mounted on the roof of the train, and as I am writing this in the garden here Noel is walking out, it being 6.30 in the morning. There is no more thorough member of the Expedition than he is. I have been already approached in India to grant the sole rights of the Cinema Film for India and Burma. This in itself and by itself should be worth a good many thousand pounds.<sup>78</sup>

The firm in question was Madans, the leading importer of films for the Indian market. Hinks' response was immediate:

The method of dealing with the cinematographic rights will demand the most careful consideration, and nothing whatever should be promised to anyone in India. We shall have to get out a complete scheme of dealing with the films and to make any arrangements whatever before Noel's return would I think be most embarrassing. He will naturally have very definite views himself, and I think that it will be some time before any parts of the film are released, as they say to the ordinary cinematograph shows. We shall certainly keep them at first for illustrating lectures. You will of course bring back any offers received, but I am sure you will be careful not to commit us to anything.<sup>79</sup>

A letter to Noel, on the same topic, stressed the importance of not getting involved in such negotiations during the expedition:

Bruce seems to have been attacked by cinematograph people in India. I am writing him by this mail urging him to make no undertakings whatever. I am sure you will add your support to this. I shall do everything possible to keep the whole thing in the hands of the Committee and make no arrangements whatever for using the film apart from our own lecture until the whole question has been discussed with you after your return to England.<sup>80</sup>

Although Hinks was emphatic about MEC policy on deals with commercial distributors, it is clear from the correspondence files that no proper

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<sup>78</sup> G. Bruce to A. Hinks 28<sup>th</sup> March 1922. EE 18/1/48. RGS-IBG

<sup>79</sup> A. Hinks to G. Bruce 27<sup>th</sup> April 1922. EE 18/1/58. RGS-IBG

<sup>80</sup> A. Hinks to J. B. L. Noel 27<sup>th</sup> April 1922. EE 18/3/59. RGS-IBG

business plan had been devised. The MEC were clearly waiting to see the results of the film making before making definite plans for distribution. Meanwhile Hinks and Noel debated whether to sell the film to a distributor rather than holding it back for a lecture tour to take place. This would be a constant dilemma for the MEC in the ensuing years (as discussed in Chapter 5). Noel was adamant that an outright sale would bring the best returns, writing from Gyantse in August 1922:

I think it is absolutely necessary for us to dispose of the film by sale. That is the film that is to be shown in the kinemas, because it is impossible to rent or distribute it ourselves. That is not only impossible to “manage” but also it would put us up against the trade. You must sell the film outright as an exclusive film (for England) reserving lecture rights and then organise lectures after the film has done its life in the kinemas. I myself think that after we show it to the trade we will get an offer by one man to buy the whole thing out – that is buy the film and run the lectures paying the Committee for the film rights and so much a week for the lectures. If this happens and the offer comes up to what the Committee are satisfied with, perhaps this would prove the best plan, as it would save all management and all organisation troubles.<sup>81</sup>

On this occasion, however, Noel was over ruled by the MEC:

Since I wrote to you last I have seen the President who entirely agrees that lectures with the film should take precedence over any sale to the theatres. It may be that you have some conclusive reasons against this but I cannot imagine what they are.<sup>82</sup>

Noel had no option but to go along with the RGS President’s plan, but he still harboured a sales plan. Writing from Gangtok the following month:

Myself I would suggest that we get lectures organised first (which is what you think is preferable) and then take the film and dispose of it separately in each country that would be interested in it, beginning with England. We will translate it into each language and the job that I could do would be to take it around and sell it in each country if the Committee would give me traveling expenses from the proceeds and a small percentage as commission on what we got in each country...

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<sup>81</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 8<sup>th</sup> August 1922. EE 18/3/79. RGS-IBG

<sup>82</sup> A. Hinks to J. B. L. Noel 17<sup>th</sup> August 1922 . EE 18/3/81. RGS-IBG

Armed with a letter of introduction to the British Minister in each country I could organise a public display of the picture, writing the Big Whigs of the place and the press and the film trade people to view it. In this way advertising it well, we ought to get a good return from nearly every country and we would get our film of Everest all over the world.<sup>83</sup>

Although Sir John Buchan had recommended that the MEC discuss plans for possible distribution of a film with Sir William Jury, one of the leading figures in the industry (and successful distributor of *South*), even offering to meet him on their behalf, as noted above (section 4.2), nothing further was reported. A proposal for the management of the Mount Everest film was eventually put before the MEC on the 8<sup>th</sup> November 1922.<sup>84</sup> A possible explanation for this can be found in the opening sentences of Arthur Hinks' later report on the management of the 1922 film, submitted in 1927:

Before the return of the 1922 Expedition, Captain Noel expressed a strong wish that the management of the film which he had taken should remain under the control of the Committee and that the film should not be disposed of to some commercial company. Shortly after his arrival he proposed that I should be associated with him in the arrangements for the exploitation of the film.<sup>85</sup>

So it appears that Noel had his own agenda. Ellis (2001) suggests that for Noel the mountain had taken on 'an alter ego as potential commercial property.'<sup>86</sup> Having invested in producing a film record, the MEC was faced with creating a plan to exhibit the results. Letters from the expedition leader General Bruce waxed lyrical over the revenue potential of the

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<sup>83</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 6<sup>th</sup> September 1922. EE 18/3/88. RGS-IBG

<sup>84</sup> Item 5. 36<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Mount Everest Committee 8<sup>th</sup> November 1922. EE98 . RGS-IBG

<sup>85</sup> Mount Everest Film 1922: Report to the Mount Everest Committee A.R.Hinks 1<sup>st</sup> March 1927. EE/43/1/6a. RGS-IBG

<sup>86</sup> Ellis, R. (2001) *Vertical Margins: Mountaineering and the Landscapes of Neoimperialism*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press. 142



forthcoming film: indeed he described it as 'a gold mine'.<sup>87</sup> Bruce's praise for 'St. Noel of the Cameras' put undue faith in the film-maker's power as far as audiences were concerned.

The MEC planned to show the film as a lecture film to a Joint Meeting of the two Societies on November 21 1922. The film would then be exhibited at the Philharmonic Hall until the New Year, followed by a short provincial tour (Figure 4.11). A different version, with intertitles rather than an accompanying lecturer, would then be produced for wider distribution. Rather than an experienced film distributor, the lecture agent Gerald Christy was co-opted as financial advisor. Christy raised issues over the late booking of halls but his comments were disregarded. At a meeting of the Committee on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1922, the recommendations of the Treasurer concerning the terms of management of the film were presented. Item 3 contained a very pertinent comment:

It is impossible to form any estimate of the value of the film. A great deal depends upon skill in authorship and management, but much more on the incalculable factor of public favour.<sup>88</sup>

The *Geographical Journal* published a review of the film in January 1923 designed to encourage all Fellows to go to the screenings:

Now, if ever, is the opportunity for the moving picture to prove that it can be thrilling and entertaining, and at the same time educational in the best sense. If these pictures do not appeal to the public at large, it will be because they are resolutely averse to being entertained by real life, however strange and exciting. We are confident that the

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<sup>87</sup> C. Bruce to A. Hinks 4<sup>th</sup> April 1922. EE 18/1/49. RGS-IBG

<sup>88</sup> Recommendations of the Treasurer on Terms of Management for the Mount Everest Film. 37<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the MEC. 5<sup>th</sup> December 1922 EE 43/1/6a. RGS-IBG

kinematograph record of the Mount Everest Expedition of 1922 will attract and please many who have a well-founded mistrust of the instrument in its common use.<sup>89</sup>

Publicity flyers in the Noel papers provide evidence of renewed attempts at distribution in late 1923, including one which suggests that the film was serialised (Figures 4.12 and 4.13).

The intense national interest in the expedition prompted an expectation that large audiences would be attracted to screenings of the film, but these audiences did not materialise. In a preliminary report to the Mount Everest Committee, presented by Arthur Hinks in October 1923, a number of problems were outlined:

The result in London was as good as could be expected considering we had no capital for a large advertising campaign and could obtain only a short lease of the Hall. As for the Provincial tour we found evidence everywhere that the slide lectures given by Messrs Mallory and Finch had spoiled the market and, apart from that, it appears to be too expensive to run a film lecture in public halls. It is also hard without very lavish advertising to attract the public to a hall which they had not associated with the exhibition of films.<sup>90</sup>

The Final Report on the exploitation of the film, written by Hinks in 1927, reflects on the decision to go it alone:

I think it certainly right to say that no travel films exploited outside the trade organisations have been successful. It is probably true that there is a good deal of general opposition of the trade concerns against any attempt to run an independent organisation, but apart from that there is no doubt that to exploit a film successfully requires one to

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<sup>89</sup> The Mount Everest Kinematograph Film. *Geographical Journal*. Vol.61. No.1.(Jan.1923) 51

<sup>90</sup> Mount Everest Committee Minutes. Preliminary Report by Arthur Hinks presented to the 44<sup>th</sup> Meeting 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1923. EE 98. RGS-IBG

have at command a very much larger organisation than any single film can hope to have.<sup>91</sup>

In retrospect, it seems that Hinks found himself completely out of his depth in attempting to negotiate international deals on the film. He had inadvertently sold German rights twice which resulted in legal expenses. Theatrical rights for America and Australia had been negotiated with Lowell Thomas but he had failed to exploit the films as expected. This must have been an extremely difficult admission for Hinks who blamed himself for the financial failure of the enterprise:

The whole business was an unsatisfactory enterprise which ought not to have been undertaken in the shape in which it was – a very worrying affair which at times has nearly driven me crazy.<sup>92</sup>

Notwithstanding the disappointing reception given to the 1922 film, there was never any question that a film would not be made in 1924. Noel's proposal to fund as well as make the 1924 film emphasised the need for a film that could compete in the wider market:

Travel films have in the ordinary way little scope except as lecture films and it is almost impossible to get them into the cinemas which is the chief source of revenue for films, but next year by taking an elaborate and carefully produced film with more capital available for production and exploitation than the expedition would ordinarily care to spend I expect to be able to make a film that can compete in the cinematographic trade with the usual productions and so obtain a large enough scope to repay the cost of producing the film. Success will depend vitally on whether the mountain is conquered...<sup>93</sup>

Noel set up Explorers Films Ltd. in 1923 and agreed to raise the sum of £8000 to purchase worldwide film and photographic rights to the film of the

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<sup>91</sup> Mount Everest Film 1922: Report to the Mount Everest Committee. A.R.Hinks 1<sup>st</sup> March 1927. EE 43/1/6a. RGS-IBG

<sup>92</sup> A. Hinks to S. Spencer, Alpine Club 1<sup>st</sup> March 1927. EE 6/5/56. RGS-IBG

<sup>93</sup> J. B. L. Noel to G. Bruce. Draft Proposal. EE 31/4/5. RGS-IBG

3rd expedition.<sup>94</sup> Specific clauses in the agreement governed the role of the cinematographer and his party – he was, for example, not to ‘interfere with, hinder or delay the climbing party’.<sup>95</sup> Although now in control of production, Noel’s correspondence with Hinks remained regular and informative, in much the same vein as his despatches had been in 1922. However he now had an investment to protect and the failure to reach the summit meant a radical change of plan. As noted above (section 4.3), Noel re-framed the focus of the 1924 film and set out his justification for its proposed title in a letter to Hinks in August 1924:

As the people at home would hardly want to see a second “Climbing Mount Everest” the title is a good one for the public although to geographers it may be incorrect but still few geographers go to see films.<sup>96</sup>

While this last comment firmly places Noel in the commercial camp, his letter to Hinks ends with a request which demonstrates the continued amicable working relationship between the two men:

Hinks, I wanted to ask you a confidential thing about the Expedition’s cinema camera. I couldn’t afford to buy it before starting and I haven’t very rosy hopes of making any money when I return as my arrangement was in forming my company not to draw any returns before shareholders had all been repaid what they lent me! I don’t suppose the Committee need further funds at all and so do you think they would possibly let me have the camera in return for my efforts which were successful to raise funds for the Expedition? I and my wife are going to Italy next autumn to do a picture in Italy if we can.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> This converts to a sum of over £328,000 in today’s prices.

<sup>95</sup> Agreement between MEC and Noel for photographic rights. EE 22/2/2. RGS-IBG

<sup>96</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 5<sup>th</sup> August 1924. EE 31/4/10. RGS-IBG

<sup>97</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 5<sup>th</sup> August 1924. EE 31/4/10. RGS-IBG: Minutes of the MEC Meeting held on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1924 confirmed that Noel be allowed to keep the camera ‘in recognition of services rendered’. EE 43/4/2. RGS-IBG

Whereas in 1922 Noel and Hinks had debated the preferred sequence of lectures and film screenings at length, in 1924 Noel took control over distribution. As he wrote to Hinks in December 1924:

You will quite realise, however, that the lecture film produces no money as your experience of before shows and you can hardly expect us to attempt the same scheme after we have contributed thousands of pounds to the Expedition and spent an equal sum on production as well. The whole idea is to get the film at the cinemas and repay the shareholders who have supported this Expedition and the photographic scheme.<sup>98</sup>

While the deaths of Mallory and Irvine close to the summit of Everest could have been potentially disastrous for Noel, the tragedy attracted further attention to the expedition once the remaining climbers returned. Having secured the rights for the handling of the 1924 film and still photographs, Noel had ambitious plans for their exploitation. He booked the New Scala Theatre in London's Charlotte Street to screen the finished film, now called *The Epic of Everest*, for a ten week period, commencing in December 1924. He commissioned Joseph Harker to create a stage set depicting a Himalayan mountain range with a foreground of a Tibetan courtyard.<sup>99</sup> Noel's original plan had materialised: as a prologue to the film, a group of Tibetan lamas would perform ceremonial dances, chanting and playing Tibetan instruments to set the scene (Figures 4.14 and 4.15). Orchestral accompaniment to the film was conducted by Eugene Goossens Snr. During an intermission, Noel provided a commentary in the form of a lecture.

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<sup>98</sup> J. B. L. Noel to A. Hinks 18<sup>th</sup> December 1924. EE 31/4/14. RGS-IBG

<sup>99</sup> Joseph Harker was a prominent set designer in London, working at the Lyceum Theatre which was managed by Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula*, who named one of the characters in his book after him.

Cinema trade papers carried positive reviews of the 1924 film, as for example in the *Bioscope* for 18<sup>th</sup> December 1924:

This magnificent production is as unique among travel films as was the expedition of which it forms a record amongst adventurous enterprises. As presented at the Scala the film constitutes a thrilling entertainment which should draw large houses for weeks to come.<sup>100</sup>

Iris Barry also wrote a review of the film for the *Spectator* on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1924:

The audience is impelled to applaud, rather unexpectedly, vistas of towering summit mists and sunlight in a virgin world, and it does so not only out of admiration for the staunch party of mountaineers, nor for the great skill of the cameraman: it applauds beauty. The picture has magnificently that rare quality of communication through the visual sense which is one of the peculiar qualities of the cinema: it communicates an experience which almost none of us can ever have in fact.<sup>101</sup>

As Haidee Wasson notes, this film was for Barry a representation of 'the purest and most plainly sociable valuable quality of the cinema: simplicity of form and clarity of thought combined with a myth of exploration and education'.<sup>102</sup>

Press reports in the winter of 1924-5 noted a 'Boom in Travel Pictures'. In the words of the *Star*:

The arrival of Everest brings the West End's travel films up to three, for Captain Hurley's Pearls and Savages is still at the Polytechnic

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<sup>100</sup> *Bioscope* 18<sup>th</sup> December 1924 Noel Cuttings Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

<sup>101</sup> Barry, I. 'The Cinema: The Epic of Everest at the Scala'. *Spectator* 20<sup>th</sup> December 1924. <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/20th-december-1924/10/the-cinema>. Accessed 24/07/2019

<sup>102</sup> Wasson, H. (2002) 'Writing the Cinema into Daily Life: Iris Barry and the Emergence of British Film Criticism in the 1920s' in Higson, A. (ed.) *Young and Innocent: the Cinema in Britain 1896-1930*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press. 327

Cinema and Mr. Ratcliffe Holmes' Kilimanjaro is settling down at the Philharmonic Hall.<sup>103</sup>

The *Weekly Despatch* also ran a piece 'Explorers Filling London Screens':

Never has London been the port of embarkation for so many wildly romantic screen voyages as it will be this week, with no fewer than four important exploration films running in the West End.

The fact emphasises cinematography's revolutionary effect upon foreign travel, which is no longer, for the general public, a matter of second hand report and hearsay evidence, but thanks to the vicarious sight seeing of the camera explorer, a personal experience open to every picturegoer.<sup>104</sup>

However the spectacle of the Everest screenings at the Scala, although an initial success, soon lost audiences to other new cinema releases. Poor audience attendance was reported as early as 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1925, for example in *Time and Tide*: 'The night I went to the Scala the audience was wretched, The banquet was spread but where were the guests?'<sup>105</sup> The *Outlook* for the same date reported:

The other night I walked through the theatre district and holiday crowds were streaming into every cinema, the cruder the title and placards, the longer the queues. My destination was The Epic of Everest but in this theatre was only a handful of people. If the dear public loved good things for their own sake it would flock to this film by the tens of thousands....but, unless I happened to strike an off night, the public prefers not reality and beauty, but sham and shoddy.<sup>106</sup>

After the initial run at the Scala, Noel continued to tour with the film throughout the UK, accompanied by the Tibetan lamas. The exotic visitors attracted much attention in the press, assuming celebrity status (Figure 4.16). Visits to provincial cities were recorded in the press – 'Lamas to Visit

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<sup>103</sup> *Star* 6<sup>th</sup> December 1924 Noel Cuttings Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

<sup>104</sup> *Weekly Despatch* 7<sup>th</sup> December 1924 Noel Cuttings Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

<sup>105</sup> *Time and Tide* 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1925 Noel Cuttings Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

<sup>106</sup> *Outlook* 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1925 Noel Cuttings Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

Dundee – to view War Memorial and make tour of the city’ announced the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* of the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1925, while also carrying adverts for *The Epic of Everest* which would open at the Palace Theatre on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1925.<sup>107</sup> ‘Coming of the Lamas’ and ‘Lamas to See Belfast – Civic Reception at the City Hall’ appeared in local Belfast newspapers in September 1925.<sup>108</sup> The lamas’ tour was the sort of publicity stunt which Hinks and the RGS had always feared .

Eventually news of the tour reached the Tibetan authorities and after a flurry of protest and diplomatic intervention, it was discovered that neither the correct permissions or travel documents had been procured. Noel had neglected to check that these papers were in order, reportedly relying on the Trade Agent John Macdonald, who accompanied the party as interpreter, to ensure that the correct protocols had been observed. Considering the delicate diplomatic negotiations that had been necessary to gain permission to enter Tibet and conduct the Everest expeditions, this should have been a priority and the omission reflected badly on the MEC. ‘The Affair of the Dancing Lamas’ as it became known, resulted in permission being withdrawn for any further attempt on Everest for almost a decade.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> *Dundee Evening Telegraph* 29<sup>th</sup> May 1925 Noel Cuttings Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

<sup>108</sup> *Belfast Telegraph* September 1925 Noel Cuttings Album. EE 41/6. RGS-IBG

<sup>109</sup> Hansen, P. (1996) ‘ The Dancing Lamas of Everest: Cinema, Orientalism and Anglo-Tibetan Relations in the 1920s’. *American Historical Review*, 101, 712-747



Noel extricated himself from any culpability over the Lama affair, leaving the possibility of any future Everest expeditions to the Committee to negotiate. In December 1925 he wrote to Hinks to tell him that his hopes for an American deal to distribute *The Epic of Everest* had fallen through with the result that Explorers' Films had gone bankrupt. He planned a further lecture tour in America and asked to license some extracts from the 1922 film to include alongside *Epic*. Hinks replied immediately offering to help and wanting to discuss the long term plans for the 1922 film. 'I hope that you will have a splendid time in America and success to remove the memory of past troubles to some extent'.<sup>110</sup> In the 1930s Noel once more toured America on the lecture circuits assuming the role of a showman - 'Captain John Noel with his own exclusive Mt. Everest films, On The Roof of the World' (see Chapter 5).

#### 4.6 Conclusion

In commercial terms, the 1922 and 1924 films were not a success. Figure 4.17 shows a very basic balance sheet for the exploitation of the 1922 film *Climbing Mount Everest* covering the period 4<sup>th</sup> December 1922 to January 31<sup>st</sup> 1927. The auditor's report reveals that sum total of profit was £521.16.11. However if the considerable expenditure on cameras, negatives, films and transport had been included in the figures, this would have wiped out any profit. There was no administration in place to pursue and collect overdue payments. The figures were balanced but only because the Managers weren't claiming sums still due to them. Sadly the great

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<sup>110</sup> A. Hinks to J. B. L. Noel 15<sup>th</sup> January 1926. EE 31/4/27. RGS-IBG

expectations of profit from the film hadn't materialised. Hinks' 'Notes for Auditors' signed by him on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1926 reads like a confessional. Here he refers to 'the scattered and in some respects rather incomplete accounts of the various branches of the enterprise which we unadvisedly took up in 1922'.<sup>111</sup> The text ends on a tragic note: 'A considerable gap in the accounts and a number of uncertainties are due to the fact that the lady clerk who was doing the work in 1924 broke down in health and in fact went out of her mind'.<sup>112</sup> All evidence suggests that the normally fastidious Hinks was completely overwhelmed with the management of the 1922 film. The decision to pass commercial management and distribution over to Noel in 1924 needs to be seen in this light.

Notwithstanding its much greater substance and its more commercial direction, the management of the 1924 film also led to financial disappointment for Noel. As Noel later wrote concerning *The Epic of Everest*:

The film was shown in Calcutta at Madans Theatre very shortly after the return of the Expedition to Darjeeling, also in Bombay. Col Haddick, one of the private company's shareholders, made a tour of the Palaces of Indian Rajas to show lantern slides made by Mr. Pereira in the Darjeeling laboratory. This tour was very successful. The initial screenings at the Scala Theatre returned some £14,000. Expenditures were substantial for rent of theatre, theatre staff, orchestra, scenery painting and elaborate newspaper advertising and salary of a very skilled press agent.<sup>113</sup>

After the London screenings in 1924 *The Epic of Everest* was distributed provincially by the Astra National Corporation of Wardour Street. Forty

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<sup>111</sup> Mount Everest Film 1922, Notes for Auditors. EE 43/6/1. RGS-IBG

<sup>112</sup> Mount Everest Film 1922, Notes for Auditors. EE 43/6/1. RGS-IBG

<sup>113</sup> Noel, J.B. L. (undated) *History of the Everest Film and the Still Colour Pictures*. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

copies of the film were printed to fulfil bookings. Noel also toured Germany with a specially adapted version of the film for 10 weeks in 1925. After the liquidation of Explorers Films in 1926, Noel took back rights in the film. In 1930 he re-edited *Epic* into a 30 minute version with a sound track which was distributed in America by Capital Films. However, he reported that he received little financial reward for this enterprise. 'From personal lectures in USA I did very well, but from the theatrical showing of my film I got almost nothing!'<sup>114</sup> So the very different commercial plans for both films ended in failure. While Noel continued to exploit his films and slides, the MEC had to deal with the consequences of his unconventional methods. Despite several attempts to secure permission to mount a new attempt on Everest during the 1920s, it was not until 1933 that a new expedition was undertaken.

The MEC's decision to commission films of the 1922 and 1924 expeditions raised, but could not solve, fundamental questions about the relations between expeditionary film, publicity and commerce. The combination of the RGS Secretary's distaste for press sensationalism and John Noel's enthusiastic endorsement of a commercial approach to film could have been fractious, but in the event both men developed a unique working relationship, as reflected in their extensive correspondence over the course of the two expeditions. Although the commercial outcomes were disappointing and a major diplomatic incident had suspended further

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<sup>114</sup> Noel, J. B. L. *History of the Everest Film and the Still Colour Pictures*. Sandra Noel Collection/RGS-IBG

attempts on Everest, Hinks and Noel continued to maintain an amicable relationship throughout. Their discussions over the commercial potential and vagaries of film distribution and exhibition provide a window onto wider issues concerning expeditionary film. The following Chapter explores these issues further by examining the role of the lecture tour in the promotion and circulation of Everest films.



Figure 4.1 Arthur Hinks, Secretary of the Mount Everest Committee  
RGS-IBG

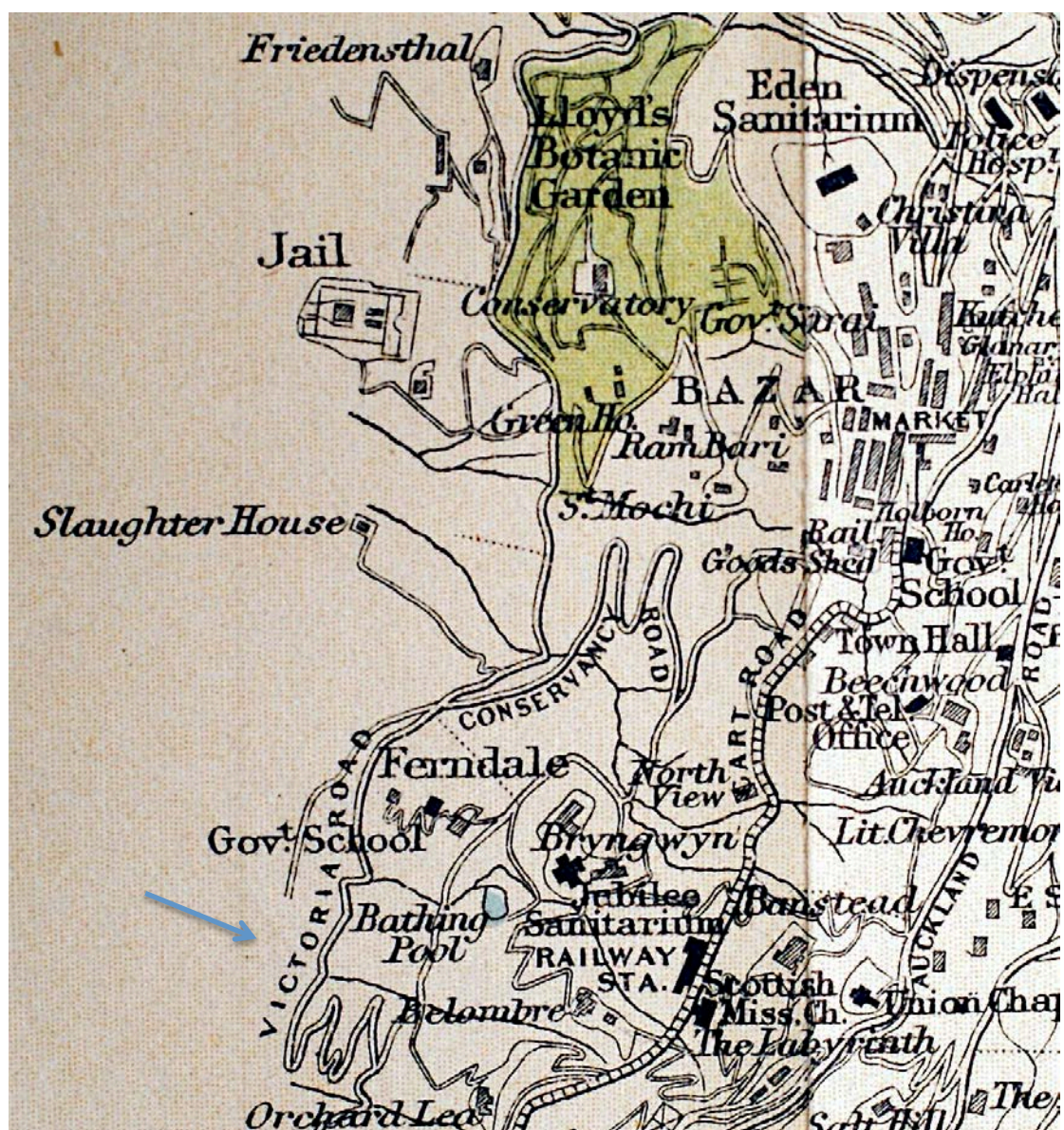


Figure 4.2 Section from a map of Darjeeling showing Belombre, location of the Mount Everest Laboratory

Source: *A Handbook for Travellers in India, Burma and Ceylon*  
 London: John Murray (1924) RGS-IBG





Figure 4.3 The Mount Everest Laboratory, Darjeeling 1924  
RGS-IBG



ARRIVAL OF THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPHS  
FROM EVEREST.

Figure 4.4 Runners bringing film material for processing at the Mount Everest Laboratory

Pereira, A. 'Personal Reminiscences of the Mount Everest Expedition, 1924'.  
*The Year's Photography 1925* EE 6/6/4 RGS-IBG





Figure 4.5 General Bruce checking accounts at the Darjeeling Laboratory  
Photographed by A. Pereira 1924  
EE 6/6/4 RGS-IBG

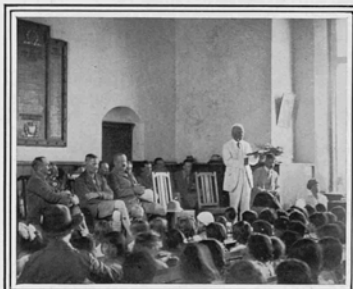
# The ATTEMPT to CONQUER EVEREST'S SUMMIT.



**General Bruce, the Leader, About to Board the Train**  
On the journey up the Teesta Valley, Captain Noel, the official photographer of the expedition, took a cinematograph film from the roof of a carriage. On arrival at Kalimpong the party rested overnight, starting off on their momentous journey the next morning.



**The Mount Everest Expedition Photographed Before Leaving on their Journey**  
In this group, taken before the departure from Kalimpong, are seen (at the back, from left to right): Captain Morris, Captain Bruce, Dr. Somerville, Mr. Mallory, Dr. Wakefield, and Mr. Crawford; in front are Captains Fusch, General Bruce (leader), Dr. T. G. Longstaff, and Lieut.-Colonel Strutt.



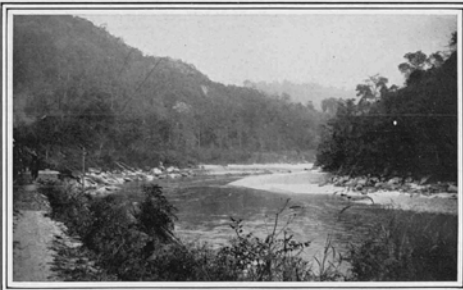
**The Farewell Service, Conducted by Dr. Graham, at Kalimpong**  
The short service before the departure of the expedition was an impressive one. Dr. Graham read the 32nd Psalm ("I to the hills will lift mine eyes") and offered a short prayer commending the party to the care of Heaven for help and guidance.



**Off on the Great Adventure—The Party Sets Off Along the Pedong Road**  
After the service at Kalimpong, farewells were said, and the Boy Scouts, headed by their pipers, accompanied General Bruce and his party a good distance along the Pedong Road, which gradually led the members of the expedition away from civilization.



**The Inspection of Girl Guides Before the Departure**  
The Girl Guides are a strong institution up in the hills. General Bruce, the leader of the expedition, inspected all the girls on parade, and afterwards read a message in the school hall from General Sir R. Baden-Powell, their Chief.



**A View in the Teesta Valley—The Trossachs of India**  
The pictures we give on this page are the first to be received in England of the departure of the Everest Expedition from Kalimpong, their last civilized halt, on their momentous mission towards the eternal snows. At this moment the expedition is actually at work on the slopes of Everest, and important news may now come through at any moment.

Image © Illustrated London News Group

Figure 4.6 *The Sphere* 17<sup>th</sup> June 1922 'unauthorised' photos of the members of the Mount Everest Expedition in Kalimpong  
© Illustrated London News/ Mary Evans Library

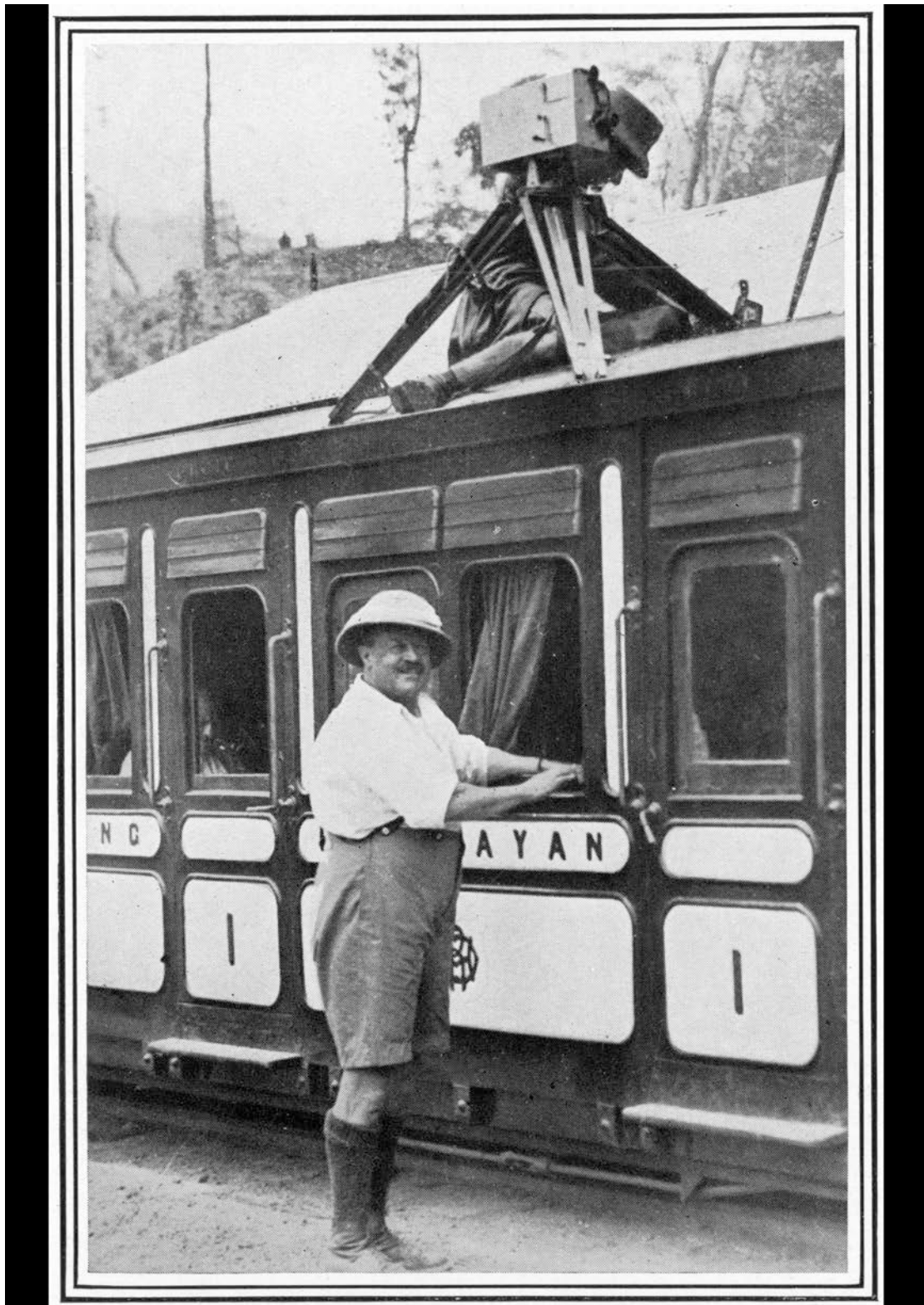


Figure 4.7 Close-up of Col. Bruce and Captain Noel with camera on roof of train at Kalimpong, 1922 Ref. 12587169  
©Illustrated London News Ltd./ Mary Evans



THE



Kine' Camera

On MOUNT EVEREST



Capt. J. Noel, F.R.G.S., with his Newman-Sinclair Kine' Camera and Cooke Telephoto Lens on the North Peak of Mount Everest (22,000 feet).

Captain Noel writes :—

" I was photographing the climbing parties on Everest at a distance up to 2½ miles, and got excellently clear pictures of the men as little black moving figures over the snow patches on Everest slopes. Owing to the lightness, portability and ease of working the camera, I was able to accomplish this after carrying the whole apparatus up the difficult rocky cliffs from the glacier below. *At all times the camera behaved perfectly, and during all my climbs I found the apparatus never a burden but always a pleasure to operate.* I could not have got my pictures unless my camera had been so portable and efficient. At the greatest altitudes I frequently relied on the motor electric drive which worked perfectly, and when the great howling winds of Everest were blowing, and also one's breathing through lack of oxygen was fast and heavy, *the motor drive was much better than handle turning.*"

And regarding the batteries used for the motor drive, Captain Noel further writes :

" Each battery has driven the camera for about two hours, and still registers its full voltage at the present moment while I am on my way home at the conclusion of the Expedition, six months after original charge. The batteries travelled across Tibet on mule-back—very often upside down—and the only attention they have needed has been to change the rubber corks twice, add a little water (melted snow) and clean the terminals."

**SINCLAIR  
LONDON**

Figure 4.8 Advert for Newman Sinclair camera – British Journal Almanac (1925) Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG





# Everest

## *The Highest Point On Earth*



This photograph was taken at Khamba Dzong, Tibet, a short distance from Everest. The figure wearing the sun helmet is General, the Honorable C. G. Bruce, Commander of the Expedition. Opposite, one of the members is operating the Remington Portable. Writing from Khamba Dzong on April 13, 1922, General Bruce says: "The Remington Portable Typewriter is a very great success and we have it continually in use—it has gone through a pretty hard trial as we have taken it over several high passes in very bad weather."

The heroic efforts of the hardy explorers who attempted to reach the "top of the world" have won the admiration of all lovers of true sportsmanship.

The story of this attempt to conquer

the "mountain of mystery" contains one of the finest tributes ever paid our product—the fact that the day-by-day record of the expedition was written on a

# Remington Portable

Service under the frightful conditions encountered by the Mount Everest Expedition may be called the extreme test of a writing machine. Under this test, the Remington Portable has given final proof of its surpassing strength and dependability. Amid mountain cold and storm, under conditions where man could hardly live, this sturdy little type-

writer daily tapped out the story of effort, hardship and supreme endurance.

The Remington is the most complete of all portable typewriters—with Standard Keyboard—just like the big machines. And it fits in a case only four inches high.

REMINGTON TYPEWRITER COMPANY  
(Incorporated)

374 Broadway, New York

Sold by over 2000 dealers and  
all Remington Branch Offices

Paragon Ribbons for Remington Portable  
Typewriters, 30c. each — \$5.00 a dozen

Send for our illustrated "THE HIGHEST POINT ON EARTH." Address Room C3



Figure 4.9 Advert for Remington Portable Typewriter  
Sandra Noel Collection/RGS-IBG

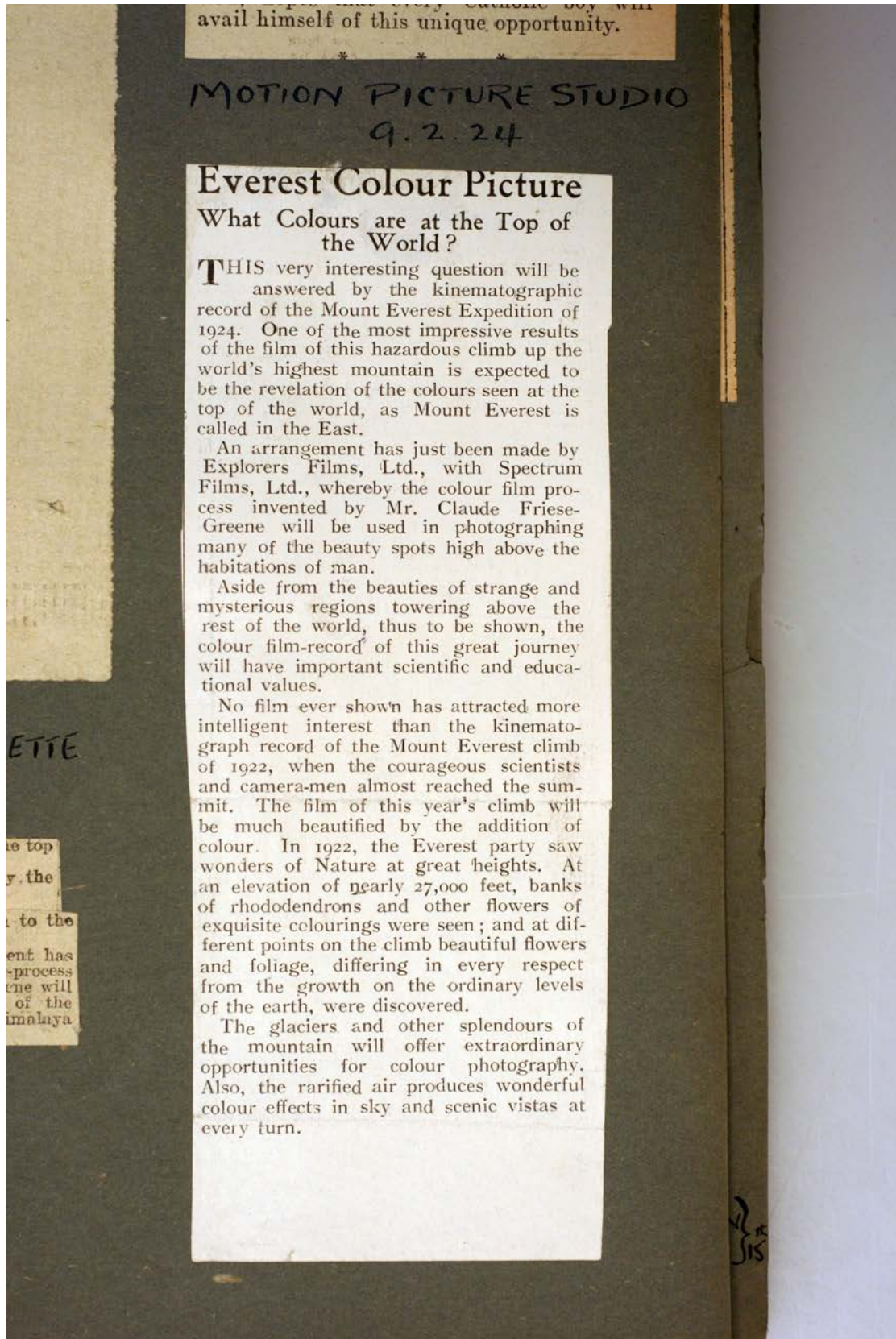


Figure 4.10 Noel Press Cuttings Album 1924  
EE 41/6 RGS-IBG





Figure 4.11 Programme for *Climbing Mount Everest*, 1922  
EE 6/6/60 RGS-IBG

# CLIMBING MOUNT EVEREST

This remarkable film played  
to record business for

**TEN CONSECUTIVE WEEKS**

at the

**PHILHARMONIC HALL,  
LONDON.**

It is being presented for a second exclusive  
run of four weeks in September, 1923, at the

**POLYTECHNIC HALL,  
REGENT STREET,**

**LONDON'S NEW HOME FOR  
TRAVEL & NATURE PICTURES.**

Figure 4.12 Flyer for *Climbing Mount Everest* screenings at Polytechnic Hall, September 1923  
Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG



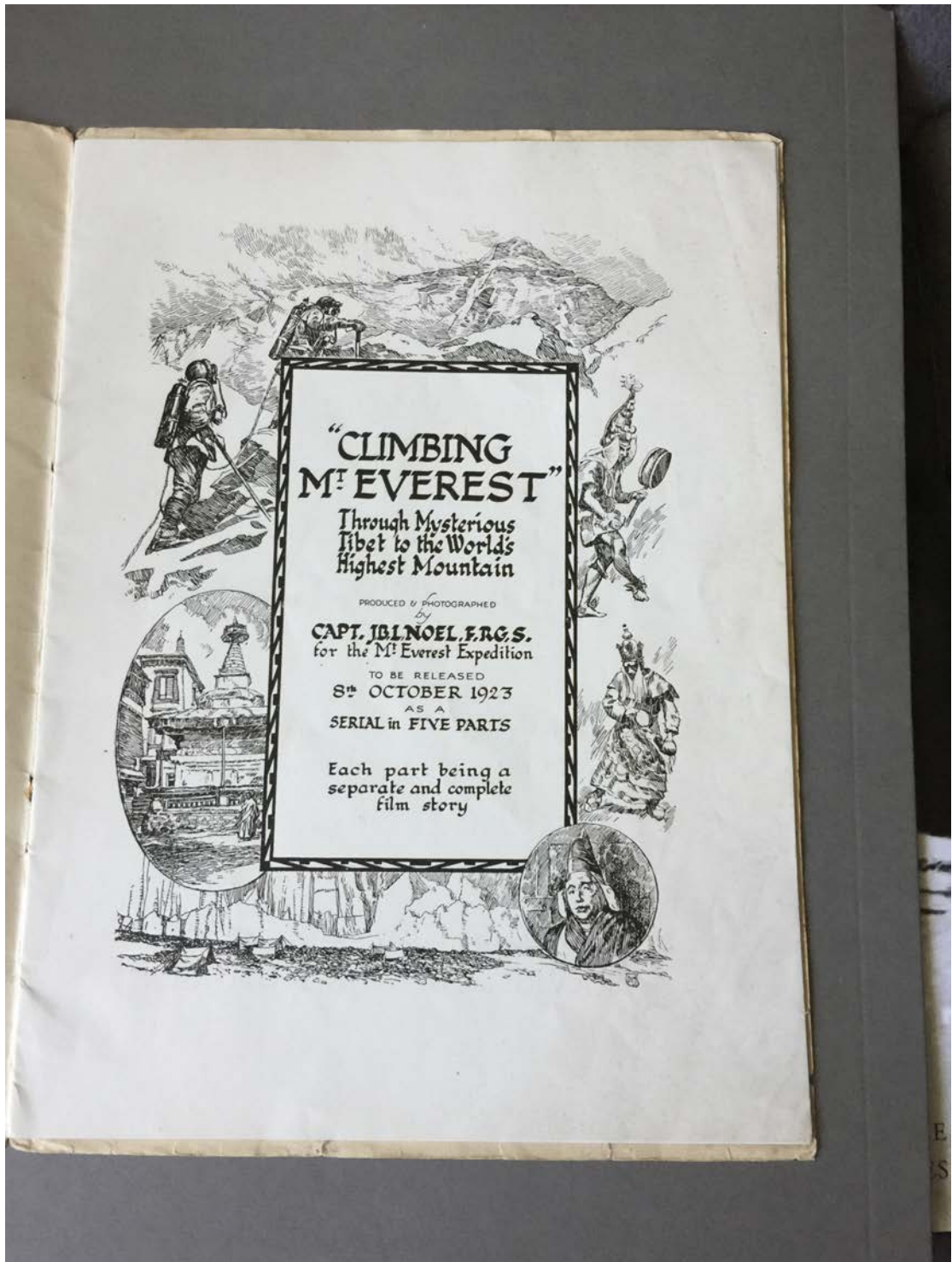


Figure 4.13 Flyer for *Climbing Mount Everest* to be released on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1923 as a 5- part serial  
Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

# TIBETAN MUSIC AT THE SCALA THEATRE.

*Something Rare and Strange in Elemental Music from the World's Biggest Trumpets*



HOW THE CLIMBERS SUCKED OXYGEN THROUGH A LITTLE PIPE—A CLEVER RECONSTRUCTION FOR CAPTAIN J. B. NOEL'S FILM—THE TOTAL WEIGHT OF THE THREE OXYGEN CYLINDERS WAS 24 LB.



A LITTLE DONKEY BORN ON THE EXPEDITION—HE WALKED TWENTY-TWO MILES ON THE DAY OF HIS BIRTH



TO KEEP OUT THE INTENSE COLD OF TIBET—RUBBING A CHILD WITH BUTTER



THE TIBETAN DRUM IS SEEN ON EXTREME RIGHT—THE PEACOCK FEATHER SPRAYER ON THE LEFT

*Special Sennex pictures*

Many of our readers are familiar with the huge trumpets which the Tibetans use for their civic and religious festivals, but few, if any, have ever heard the elemental music which these great instruments give forth. They can do so now, in London, at the Scala Theatre, where genuine natives of Tibet herald the Everest film with a selection of native music. This interlude is one of the strangest and most bizarre things in London at the present moment. The lower picture gives something of the effect of the set piece, with the musicians and performers. It is a great moment when the giant horns send their thunderous notes pulsating through the theatre. At first, the music seems to picture Chaos, but in a second or two one seems to

visualise the birth of a world—these are the primeval trumpeters announcing the assembly of the elements. The chief officiant clashes cymbals, and others blow on hollow bone pipes; another plays a drum with a curious bent tapper. The tunes of the Tibetans are, we understand, in the pentatonic scale, which appears to be the national mode. Semitones are extremely rare. "In the chants of the Lamas," says Mr. T. H. Somervell, "an occasional rise of a fifth or an augmented fifth is characteristic." The Tibetans apparently regard the supertonic as the root of their scale. The whole effect of the Tibetan concert at the Scala is very impressive, and carries one very effectively into the Buddhistic atmosphere of Tibet.

Figure 4.14 *The Sphere* 24<sup>th</sup> December 1924  
Noel cuttings Album EE 41/6 RGS-IBG



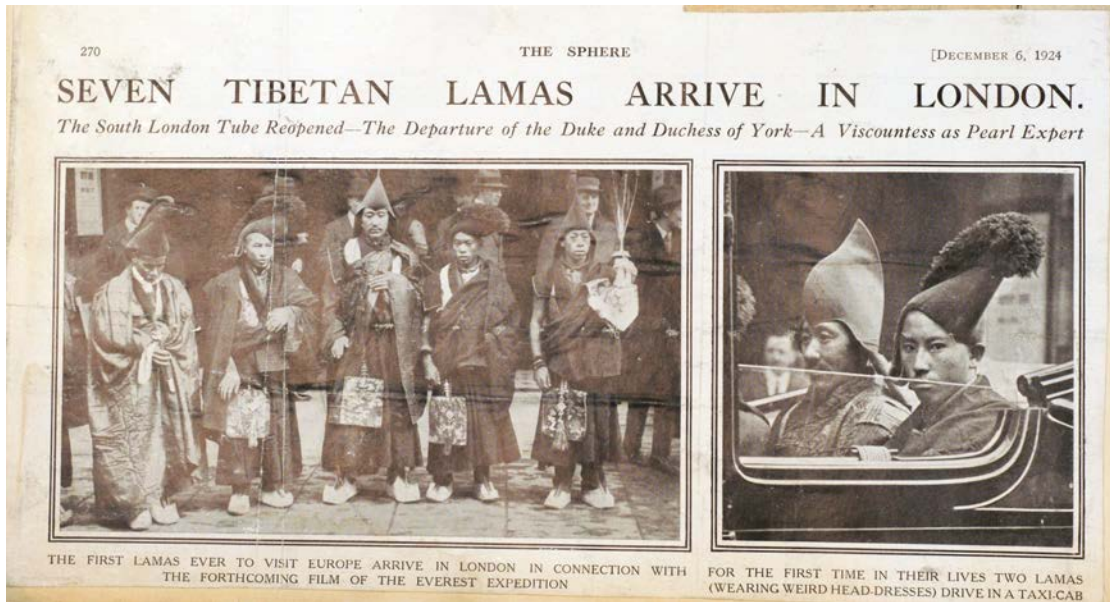


Figure 4.15 *The Sphere* 6<sup>th</sup> December 1924  
Noel cuttings Album EE 41/6 RGS-IBG



Figure 4.16 The First Lamas to Visit Europe, from *The Sphere* 6<sup>th</sup> December 1924 Ref. 12587172  
©Illustrated London News/ Mary Evans.



## Chapter 5

### 'Because it's There': Everest Lecture Tours in the 1920s and 1930s

The phrase 'Because it's There', which has become one of the greatest clichés of all in the literature of mountaineering, was reportedly uttered by George Mallory in an impromptu response to a journalist's question during his 1923 lecture tour of America. This chapter discusses the relationship between lecture and film in the communications strategy of the Mount Everest Committee. While it was crucial to engage with all forms of media in order to finance the expeditions to Everest, it was also necessary to maintain the reputation of its parent bodies, the RGS and the Alpine Club, as pre-eminent authorities on mountain climbing and geographical exploration. Wary of more popular forms of mass communication and possible criticism over resorting to such methods, the MEC was determined to exert control over the presentation of the expeditions in both verbal and visual form. This chapter reviews the parallel and sometimes combined roles played by the illustrated lecture and the film record.

The chapter first outlines the origins of the illustrated lecture in the nineteenth century considering the growing fascination with mountaineering, Alpinism, popularised through illustrated entertainments, lantern slides and animated pictures (Section 5.1). It then examines the use of the illustrated lecture to document the 1922 attempt on Everest, exploring the tensions between managing the lecture circuits and the

commercial exploitation of the film by the MEC in order to increase revenue for further expeditions (Section 5.2). The chapter then turns to the role of the illustrated lecture on the 1924 expedition and the repercussions of the changed arrangements concerning photographic rights (Section 5.3). The final section examines the continuing life of Noel's films as deployed in his subsequent national and international lecture tours (Section 5.4).

### 5.1. Animated Pictures: lantern slides, film and geographical lecturing

A century before the successful ascent of Everest, another mountaineering feat became an overnight sensation. Crowds flocked to the Egyptian Hall in London's Piccadilly to marvel at a novel entertainment, *Albert Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc*, regarded as a defining moment in the annals of mountaineering history ( see Chapter 2 above). The first performance was given on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1852. With the flamboyance of a showman, Smith, as master of ceremonies, recounted his journey from London, across the Channel and through France to Chamonix, before describing the ascent of Mont Blanc. The stage was set with props from the journey and painted backdrops illustrating the various locations. Thousands crowded into the grand venue. *The Times* reported that 'Mont Blanc Mania pervades the minds of our countrymen'.<sup>1</sup> The show ran for seven years, finally closing in 1858. It was instrumental in popularising both the growth of mountain tourism and the new sport of Alpinism. Peter Hansen has outlined Smith's

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzsimmons, R. (1967) *The Baron of Piccadilly: The Travels and Entertainment of Albert Smith 1816 - 1860*. London: Bles. 140

influence, connecting his work with the aspirations of the Victorian middle-classes: 'They created distinctly middle class cultures around new status symbols and leisure patterns, such as sports and summer holidays. Mountain climbing combined both of these to perfection. Albert Smith literally turned social climbers into mountain climbers'.<sup>2</sup> The show had a profound influence on the young Edward Whymper, an engraver from Lambeth who attended Smith's lectures in 1858. Elected a member of the Alpine Club in 1861, he regularly presented lectures on his own Alpine experiences. His photographs and engravings were used to illustrate his magic lantern lecture '*My Scrambles Amongst the Alps*'. In 1900 he took this lecture to the United States, where he gave a series of presentations in New England.<sup>3</sup>

The first moving images of Alpine climbs became available at the end of the Victorian era. These short films would appear alongside lantern slides in popular entertainment venues. In 1900, filmmaker Cecil Hepworth published a guide to 'Animated Photography' in which he advocated the use of both still and moving images:

Undoubtedly the best plan is to show one or two lantern slides between each animated photograph. This still picture is a great relief to the eyes and a thorough rest after the almost more or less tiring living photograph. Its good qualities do not show up the imperfections of the animated picture when its turn comes, for the two things are so distinct and different that they are not mentally compared.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hansen, P. H. (1995) 'Albert Smith, The Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain'. *Journal of British Studies* 34, 309.

<sup>3</sup> Berg, P. (2011) *Whymper's Scrambles with a Camera; a Victorian Magic Lantern Show*. London: Alpine Club

<sup>4</sup> Hepworth, C. M. (1900) *Animated Photography the A B C of the Cinematograph*. London: Hazell, Watson & Viney. 74



Key pioneers of the Alpine film at the start of the twentieth century were Frederick Burlingham ('the man who cinematographed the Matterhorn'), Mrs Aubrey le Blond, (the author of *True Tales of Mountain Adventure*), and film-maker Frank Ormiston-Smith. All produced short mountaineering films which were made available for inclusion in popular music hall entertainments.

By the late nineteenth century, visual images were widely used in the classroom through the use of lantern slide projectors, particularly for geographical instruction. The RGS took a lead in promoting technical aids through influential officers such as John Scott Keltie, Inspector of Geographical Education. Demand for provision of equipment and slides in the classroom led to the forming of the Geographical Association in 1893 and schools were encouraged to subscribe to a lantern fund to enable wider distribution of sets of instructional slides.<sup>5</sup> Conflicting opinions on the educational value of film are exemplified in contemporary publications. In a paper read at the Imperial Education Conference in 1911, the geographer Halford Mackinder referred in somewhat condescending terms to the 'ubiquitous cinematograph':

I venture to plead for the simplicity of the lantern slide. Our object in Visual Instruction is not to render thought unnecessary, but rather call forth the effort of imagination...I believe that the good teacher can make the blackboard and the lantern slide speak to better educative purpose than he could the cinematograph. The picture palaces of the present

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<sup>5</sup> Ryan, J. R. (1997) *Picturing Empire Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*. London: Reaktion. 193. See also Humphries, S. (1989) *Victorian Britain Through the Magic Lantern*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson

moment debauch the imagination by relieving the spectator of all effort.<sup>6</sup>

An alternative view was put forward on behalf of the developing film industry by Frederick Talbot in 1912. Although he acknowledged the shortcomings of films produced for the educational market, he believed that film could stimulate a child's imagination:

Words sometimes convey very little to the immature mind. Throw upon the screen a series of pictures of an actual journey, and the youngster gleans the facts without the slightest effort. He sees the towering snow-capped rocks with their precipitous flanks; the melting snow and ice flowing down from the mighty glacier and forming a tempestuous, rushing river; he sees in their natural surroundings the folk of a hundred strange and distant tribes.<sup>7</sup>

He also referred to the reluctance of the educational authorities to use film

In the classroom:

Unfortunately, the feeling against the moving picture has not been entirely eliminated, despite its tremendous popularity. Once an energetic Board of Education realises the possibilities of cinematography as a supplement to the information conveyed by text books and manuals, the film manufacturers will hasten to supply the demand thus created.<sup>8</sup>

For Mackinder, the champion of 'new geography', use of the lantern slide as an educational tool was a means of 'inculcating young audiences with a fixed geographical mindset'<sup>9</sup> rather than inspiring a new generation and stimulating debate. Maintaining control over content was seen as vital. The RGS actively engaged in presenting a varied programme of illustrated

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<sup>6</sup> Mackinder, H. J. (1911) 'The Teaching of Geography from an Imperial Point of View, and the Use which Could and Should be Made of Visual Instruction'. *Geographical Teacher*, 6. 85-6

<sup>7</sup> Talbot, F. A. (1912) *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked* London: Heinemann. 314

<sup>8</sup> Talbot. *Moving Pictures*. 315

<sup>9</sup> Ryan, J.R. (1997) *Picturing Empire Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* London: Reaktion. 213

lectures to Fellows, visual formats and equipment evolving as technology developed. As H. R. Mill later recalled, the more conservative ranks of the Fellowship railed against the adoption of 'modern improvements' such as lantern slides to illustrate evening lectures, declaring that they would lower the Society's discussions to the level of 'a Sunday School treat with a magic lantern'.<sup>10</sup> However by 1890 a lantern was purchased which could also be hired for use from the RGS. The parallels between the initial reticence to the use of lantern slides can also be made with the Society's wariness of dealing with the film industry. Emily Hayes (2018) has documented the Society's ambivalent engagement of the magic lantern, also associated with forms of sensational music hall entertainment, finding its use as key to reform at the RGS where eventually decisions were made to develop 'conscious strategies to democratize geographical knowledge, notably via the harnessing of engaging visual modes of communication'.<sup>11</sup>

Travelling lecturers produced a wide catalogue of programmes for hire, including various forms of visual presentation. The Society had rigid guidelines about the acceptance of such material. Henry Hibbert FRGS approached the Society in 1909 offering to give one of his 'Grand High Class Cinematograph and Lantern Lectures'. The subjects on offer included a selection of animated panoramas including 'A Scamper Across the Alps:

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<sup>10</sup> Mill, H. R. (1930) *The Record of the Royal Geographical Society, 1830 – 1930*. London: Royal Geographical Society. 103

<sup>11</sup> Hayes, E. (2018) 'Geographical light: the magic lantern, the reform of the Royal Geographical Society and the professionalization of geography c.1885-1894'. *Journal of Historical Geography* 62. 35

Switzerland, the Playground of Europe' which sounded remarkably like Whympfer's lantern lecture. He received a polite decline:

All our meetings for the session are filled up already....moreover, although I am quite sure that your lectures are quite full of interest, they are probably more of a popular character than those which we are accustomed to at our regular meetings, which deal mainly with the results of original exploration and scientific geography.<sup>12</sup>

The RGS was not alone in being reluctant to endorse popular animated lectures which were on offer. Similar concerns were also found at the American Museum of Natural History where measures were put in place to regulate the material shown to audiences. As Alison Griffiths has pointed out, in the early twentieth century 'moving pictures rented from commercial exchanges or brought to the Museum by visiting lecturers were something of an unknown quantity to curators, due in large part to cinema's relative newness as a medium and to motion pictures' associations with cheap amusements'.<sup>13</sup> Museum President, Henry Fairfield Osborn, personally vetted potential lectures, insisting that examples of slides or artefacts be shown before any moving images in an effort to ensure that 'the content of the film's images and inter-titles, the subject of the lecture, the relationship of the film to magic lantern slides, and the controlling vocal sanctioning of the speaker would all preserve the scientific seriousness of the talk'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Letter to Henry Hibbert 18<sup>th</sup> January 1909. CB8 Christmas Lectures (G-R). RGS-IBG

<sup>13</sup> Griffiths, A. (2002) *Wondrous Difference; Cinema, Anthropology & Turn-of-the Century Visual Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press. 266

<sup>14</sup> Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*. 267

A more widespread and much less scientifically serious form of illustrated lecture was the province of the travelling showman. Lyman Howe and Burton Holmes were two of the most prominent showmen in America, both touring extensively with their popular shows (as discussed in Chapter 2). Howe's career spanned 40 years from 1880 to 1920 and Holmes toured from 1890 to the early 1950s. It was in fact Burton Holmes who first coined the term 'travelogue' in 1904 to give his travelling show 'a greater air of novelty'.<sup>15</sup> His on-stage commentary alongside selections of films and slides was reminiscent of the stage performances of Albert Smith. Holmes provided his audience with a unified, subjective view of his topic.<sup>16</sup> Using his own images and film, he could provide better continuity than many other lesser showmen who bought stock material from catalogues to incorporate in their shows. The performances were multi-media experiences involving images (still or moving), text (spoken or in the form of inter-titles) and sound (live lecture or music).<sup>17</sup>

Griffiths emphasises the level of authorial control exerted by Howe and Holmes in devising their illustrated lecture programmes.<sup>18</sup> An image of Burton Holmes in 1909 shows him dressed in a kimono to present a lecture

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<sup>15</sup> Barber, X. T. (1993) 'The Roots of Travel Cinema: John L. Stoddard, E. Burton Holmes and the nineteenth-century illustrated travel lecture', *Film History* 5. 82

<sup>16</sup> Musser, C. and Nelson, C. (1991) *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Travelling Exhibition, 1880-1920*. Prince: Princeton University Press. 181

<sup>17</sup> Peterson, J. L. (2013) *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film*. London: Duke. 53

<sup>18</sup> Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*. 206

on Japan at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences.<sup>19</sup> He regularly appeared in his films, providing the audience with an air of authenticity. His flamboyant presentation was certainly at odds with the concept of a serious scientific lecture. However at a time when the mainstream film industry was dividing into separate production and exhibition arms, the lecturer was in control of the whole process from taking films to presenting and commenting on them. The subject of appropriate dress code was also raised with the RGS. In a letter concerning a Christmas Lecture to be given in January 1920 at the Aeolian Hall, Bond Street, on the subject of 'A Visit to the Temples of Korea', Miss Hilda C. Bowser tentatively asks if it would be suitable to wear her 'Chinese visiting dress' to give the lecture.<sup>20</sup> There is no record of the Society's response.

## 5.2 Everest : illustrated lectures and lecture tours

In the 1910s and 1920s 'scenics' and travelogues continued to draw audiences curious to see distant countries and customs. As detailed in Chapter 4, polar exploration provided a new wave of extraordinary expeditionary film-making. Frank Hurley and Herbert Ponting were engaged as official cinematographers on the Antarctic expeditions led by Shackleton and Scott. Lecture tours, films and written accounts would follow. Both Hurley and Ponting were masters of their profession and created photographic and moving images that captivated audiences. The London-based Lecture Agency, managed by Gerald Christy, had responsibility for

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<sup>19</sup> Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*. 208

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Hilda Bowser December 1919. CB8 Christmas Lectures (A-F). RGS-IBG

arranging a programme of national lectures. The films were professionally distributed. *South*, Shackleton's expedition film, was managed by Sir William Jury's Imperial Pictures and Ponting's record of Scott's doomed attempt to reach the South Pole was initially handled by the Gaumont Company under the title *The Undying Story of Captain Scott*. Ponting bought back the rights from Gaumont and embarked on his own extensive lecture tour. He re-edited the film which was released in 1924 as *The Great White Silence*.

Following the 1921 Reconnaissance Expedition to Everest, the MEC commissioned a series of national lectures to be managed by Gerald Christy's Lecture Agency. Having already negotiated exclusive contracts for print publication, public lectures would also be used as further publicity. Arthur Hinks, MEC Secretary, was reluctant, described by two recent historians as having a 'gentlemanly distaste for money' and a 'pathological dread of publicity'.<sup>21</sup> However it was necessary to create funds for a further expedition and the MEC expected to control and authorise all media outcomes. George Mallory was selected to present lectures in January and February of 1922. The only public lecture in London was given at the Queen's Hall on January 10<sup>th</sup> – its programme declared that the narrative would be illustrated by a large number of lantern slides from most remarkable and very beautiful photographs taken on the expedition. 'Mr. Mallory will speak of marvellous surroundings which were until a few months ago entirely unknown to the world'.<sup>22</sup> (Figure 5.1) Over a period of

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<sup>21</sup> Isserman and Weaver, *Fallen Giants*, 96

<sup>22</sup> Mallory Lecture Flyer. EE/10/1/47. RGS-IBG

ten weeks, Mallory toured the country giving a total of thirty lectures. Audiences apparently responded well to the concept of a British expedition seeking to climb Everest. In Manchester's Free Trade Hall an audience of three thousand filled the venue with hundreds being turned away.<sup>23</sup> Mallory reported that 'it was a splendid audience to talk to, quick/responsive and sensible and yet quite willing to listen when I spoke of the beauty of what we saw'.<sup>24</sup>

While the next expedition to Everest was being planned, as discussed in Chapter 4, the cinematographer Captain John Noel was waiting in the wings. An official film record was to be produced which would also play a role in publicising the venture and hopefully create much needed revenue. From now on both film and lectures proliferated, sometimes being combined in the established form of the 'animated lecture' but increasingly as stand-alone screenings.

Having invested in producing a film record, the Committee was faced with creating a plan to exhibit the results. Rather than placing the film with a recognised distributor, the MEC decided to go it alone - a decision that would later be regretted (as discussed in Chapter 4). In this context, it is clear that Hinks viewed the material as content for a 'lecture film' rather than a commercial cinema release. Indeed it is referred to precisely in these terms in correspondence. As outlined in Chapter 4, his view was that the

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<sup>23</sup> Davis, *Into the Silence*, 380

<sup>24</sup> G. Mallory to F. Younghusband 14<sup>th</sup> January 1922. EE/3/4/49. RGS-IBG



management would be best overseen in house and the exhibition of the film would be placed with the trusted Gerald Christy of the Lecture Agency. A proposal for the management of the Mount Everest film was put before the MEC on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1922, Hinks and Noel putting their names forward to jointly manage distribution:

The film is now being prepared by Captain Noel as a Lecture Film to be shown at the Joint Meeting on November 21. We propose that this film shall be put on exhibition at a Hall in London (the Philharmonic Hall if possible) for 6 weeks or more from December, and that a short provincial tour in a few of the provincial cities shall be arranged for a duplicate of it early in the New Year.<sup>25</sup>

Based on the reaction to the 'lecture film', the MEC contemplated subsequently releasing a different version with captions for wider distribution. Christy raised issues over the late booking of halls but his comments were disregarded.<sup>26</sup> Already the extent of the work involved was becoming apparent with Noel having to concentrate on the final edit of the film and preparing title captions. The intense national interest in the expedition prompted an expectation of large audiences – after all this was on a par with the polar expeditions of Shackleton and Scott.

The lecture tours, proposed in 1922, would eventually take three different forms – a lecture with a speaker and lantern slides, a lecture film with speaker and a lecture film with explanatory captions instead of an accompanying speaker. These arrangements were complicated to manage without previous experience. As discussed in Chapter 4, the Committee's concern to maintain control of publicity was reflected in its requirement

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<sup>25</sup> Proposal for the Management of the Mount Everest Film. EE/98. RGS-IBG

<sup>26</sup> G. Christy to A. Hinks. 4<sup>th</sup> January 1923. EE 25/4/2. RGS-IBG

that all members of the expedition sign an undertaking which included specific reference to dealing with the press and making public appearances:

I further bind myself not to hold any communication with the press or with any press agency or publisher, or to deliver any public lecture, or to allow any information or photograph to be published either before, during or after the expedition without the sanction of the Mount Everest Committee.<sup>27</sup>

Gerald Christy of the Lecture Agency was again tasked with managing the speakers. He selected Mallory, Finch and Noel as the main contributors, considering that they had the most appropriate experience to undertake public lectures. In the autumn of 1922, while Noel completed his work on the film, Mallory and Finch set off on a national tour, giving lectures accompanied by lantern slides and photographs.

On occasions where he introduced the film, Noel would provide an alternative lecture, drawn from his experiences as cinematographer. After the initial London run at the Philharmonic Hall in March 1923, provincial screenings of *Climbing Mount Everest* received enthusiastic reviews. *The Hastings and St. Leonard's Observer*, reported that the film lecture was 'of great educational value and a special effort should be made by schoolmasters and others responsible for the young to see that they attend'.<sup>28</sup> Various other members of the expedition found themselves called upon to present *Climbing Mount Everest* – not always a happy experience as described by John Morris, Expedition Transport Officer, when called in at short notice by General Dunsterville to lecture alongside the film. On this

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<sup>27</sup> EE 13/5/1. RGS-IBG

<sup>28</sup> *Hastings and St. Leonard's Observer*, 7<sup>th</sup> April 1923. 9

occasion George Mallory had been taken ill with food-poisoning and no one else was available:

I protested that I had never spoken in public and moreover had not yet even seen the film. The General realised this, he said, and to make things easier had already installed a large mirror in front of the circle, so that without turning to the screen I could observe what was passing across it ... I still think of it as the most terrifying experience of my life. I walked onto the platform sweating with fright and appalled at the rows of expectant and staring faces.<sup>29</sup>

To add to his concerns over the planning of various events surrounding the official lectures and film screenings, Hinks discovered a rival lecturer on the scene, Lt. Col. Eldred Pottinger D.S.O., F.R.G.S., purporting to be an authority on Everest. In a catalogue of lectures for the 1922-23 season, the Lecture League, a Liverpool-based agency managed by F. Tillemont-Thomason, announced that Lt. Col. Pottinger was available to lecture on 'The Conquest of Mount Everest and other Himalayan Explorations': adding that 'the lecture is acknowledged to be far and away the best on the subject of Mt. Everest'.<sup>30</sup> Naturally Hinks challenged this and a flurry of letters ensued between the Lecture League, Pottinger and Arthur Hinks, who accused Pottinger and the agency of making false claims and attempting to undermine the work of the MEC. Each party took a defensive stance, although it was obvious that the rival agency had taken advantage of public interest in the Everest expeditions. Pottinger eventually admitted that his film was 'pre-war':

The Bioscope Film is of Darjeeling - lettered as such - showing a train coming into Darjeeling - scenes in the Thibetian quarter of Darjeeling - a procession through the streets and a Thibetian 'Lion' dance.

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<sup>29</sup> Morris, J. (1960) *Hired to Kill*. London: Hart-Davis & Cresset Press. 202

<sup>30</sup> Lecture League Catalogue 1922-23. 7. EE 13/3a/20. RGS-IBG

Nobody could possibly imagine that it may in any way (be) part of the Mt. Everest Kinematograph film.

The Mount Everest expeditions are matters of public interest and it would be impossible for anyone to lecture on those regions without referring to them. I feel I have been instrumental in arousing an interest in these expeditions amongst classes whom your lecturers would not reach.<sup>31</sup>

This explanation was not consistent with the publicity which continued to promote Pottinger's lecture under the title 'The Conquest of Everest'.<sup>32</sup> The correspondence comes to an end in May 1923 with Hinks writing a conciliatory letter to Pottinger:

I was told among many other things that you were so distressed by the inadequacy of the lecture efforts of the lecturers representing the Mount Everest Committee, that you felt it necessary to take the matter up yourself. This is the kind of stuff that the Manager of the Lecture League writes to me. I am sure you will repudiate such a statement as equally as I do.<sup>33</sup>

The reference to the inadequacy of lecture efforts related to George Finch who had reportedly been including his own Alpine material in lectures. Hinks had already challenged Finch on this very subject, determined to keep rigid control of the content of lectures and reminding him of his obligations to the MEC. Finch was asked not to lecture in public on the subject of Everest except under the auspices of the MEC and abide by such terms for a period of two years. He refused to accept such conditions and in so doing would not be asked to join any further expeditions.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> EE 13/3a/1. RGS-IBG

<sup>32</sup> The Pottinger lecture continued to be advertised as 'The Conquest of Everest', *Dover Express and East Kent News* 29<sup>th</sup> February 1924

<sup>33</sup> A. Hinks to E. Pottinger, May 1923. EE 13/3a. RGS-IBG

<sup>34</sup> Wainwright, R. (2016) *The Maverick Mountaineer*. London: Allen & Unwin.  
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John Morris, back with his Gurkha Regiment in India, and undeterred by his initial experience, offered to lecture while home on leave, or back in India later in 1923. Hinks responded by asking him to give a paper at the RGS on his trip up the Gorge of Arun ('the only new piece of geographical work done this year'):

I am not sure yet about the kinematograph lectures in the provinces so late as June or July. We shall have to learn by experience whether they would be profitable in the summer, but I will bear your offer in mind. I have had no reply at all from Madan.<sup>35</sup>

Hinks had been confident that Madan, the leading Indian distributor, would exhibit the film, but he was to be disappointed.

Meanwhile the official Everest lectures continued and, in January 1923, the Lee Keedick Agency in New York signed up Mallory for a two-month tour. The lecture tour was principally a fund-raising venture for the next expedition in 1924. David Pye's memoir of Mallory suggests that he was disappointed with the small number of lectures that had been arranged and audience reactions.<sup>36</sup> He had tailored the lecture for an American audience, using Somervell's slides and several from the 1921 reconnaissance. After a lecture in Washington on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1923 he wrote 'it was technically better than any lecture I've ever given either year and had any amount of spontaneity too. There, if it doesn't 'take' now – well , I can do no more and I'll come home'.<sup>37</sup> Further lectures took place in Philadelphia, the Broadhurst Theatre in New York on the 4<sup>th</sup> February, Montreal, Detroit on

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<sup>35</sup> A. Hinks to J. Morris 6<sup>th</sup> February 1923. EE 16/2/186. RGS-IBG

<sup>36</sup> Pye, D. (2002) *George Leigh Mallory: A Memoir*. Bangkok: Orchid Press. 138

<sup>37</sup> Pye. *George Leigh Mallory*. 139

17<sup>th</sup> February, followed by Harvard, Toledo, Iowa City, Hanover and finally Boston. However, audience figures were disappointing, as was the level of revenue. Keedick reportedly reduced the lecture fee to \$250 to attract more venues. He advised the MEC in February 1923 that Mallory was ‘a fine fellow and gives a good lecture’ but ‘the American people don’t seem to be interested in the subject’.<sup>38</sup>

Although the tour didn’t live up to expectations it was made famous due to a press conference, reported in the *New York Times*, March 18<sup>th</sup> 1923, at which Mallory, when asked why he was seeking to climb the Mountain, responded with the celebrated retort ‘Because it’s there’. Opinions vary as to the accuracy of this statement – was it apocryphal? Was it a throw away comment by Mallory, irritated by constantly being asked the same question? Certainly George Lowe reported experiencing the same frustrations thirty years later during the triumphant lecture tour of America in 1954.<sup>39</sup> Mallory had enjoyed his UK tours saying that he felt ‘like some celebrated prima donna in the provinces’ and was ‘much intrigued by the whole art of casting a spell upon an audience; it’s rather amusing to practise one’s guile on two or three expectant persons’.<sup>40</sup> However the American audience did not fall under Mallory’s ‘spell’. A rather blunt explanation was provided by a New York agency, the Pond Bureau, in May 1924. ‘The trouble with Mallory when

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<sup>38</sup> L. Keedick to G. Christy. 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1923. EE 25/4/29. RGS-IBG

<sup>39</sup> Lowe, G. (1959) *Because It Is There*. London: Cassell. 43

<sup>40</sup> Pye. *George Leigh Mallory*. 136

he came was that no one knew his name'.<sup>41</sup> This was also the opinion of Lee

Keedick:

I know that you will be disappointed as I am in the return for this tour. While I felt that the American people in general might not be interested, I did feel that there might be enough Britishers in America who would be keenly interested to make this tour a financial success. I am inclined to believe that one cause for the lack of response was that Mallory's name had not been featured in the press notices about the expedition. It was known simply as a British expedition and while there was plenty of press publicity, yet no one name was conspicuously connected with the enterprise.<sup>42</sup>

Regardless of the outcomes of the North American lecture tour, Mallory's statement would be forever linked to Everest. The last paragraph of the *New York Times* report contained a prophetic comment.

Be not beguiled, O armchair explorer! Stick to the comparative security of your subway strap. For this quiet young man's casual comment raises the ghost of such a tremendous adventure as the fireside mind can scarce conceive; of crawling along knife edges in the teeth of a bitter wind; of chopping footholds up the face of a wall of ice; of moving on where each step may very reasonably be expected to be the last.<sup>43</sup>

For all the attention paid to Mallory's comment, in retrospect, the American lecture tour was a financial failure. The plan to tour the film itself was abandoned. As the MEC Minutes recorded:

The failure of Mr. Mallory's lecture tour in the United States and the general lack of interest in British films in the United States made considerable difficulties in exhibiting the film there. The original plan was for a member of the Expedition to undertake a prolonged lecture tour but this proved to be too risky an arrangement.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> J. Pond to P. Taylor. 14<sup>th</sup> May 1924. Anthony Bard Collection

<sup>42</sup> L. Keedick to G. Christy 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1923. EE 25/4/33. RGS-IBG

<sup>43</sup> *New York Times* 18<sup>th</sup> March 1923 'Climbing Mount Everest is Work for Supermen'.

<sup>44</sup> Mount Everest Committee Minutes, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1923. EE 98. RGS-IBG

### 5.3 *The Epic of Everest* (1924): Noel the showman

As noted in Chapter 4, Noel wrote to all members of the climbing party in January 1924 outlining his 'photographic plans' for the 3<sup>rd</sup> expedition.<sup>45</sup> In addition to a theatrical release for the 1924 film there was to be a programme of lectures featuring members of the climbing party following the precedent of the 1922 expedition. Noel explained that lecturing rights had been included with the photographic rights so that programmes could be co-ordinated to prevent a clash of events. He proposed four options:

1. An informal talk given by a member of the climbing party to accompany a screening of the complete film, which would have explanatory titles throughout.
2. A slide lecture tour with the Lecture Societies and Institutions in England from January 1925 to the summer of 1925.
3. A slide lecture tour in America to Lecture Societies, Colleges and Institutions 'for such members who can arrange long enough time to go to the States'.
4. 'Slide and perhaps film tours in the Colonies for any member of the party who could get away'.<sup>46</sup>

With such personal investment in the success of the expedition, the eventual loss of Mallory and Irvine close to the summit of Everest could have been potentially disastrous for the commercial prospects of the film. However in the event the tragedy only served to attract further attention to the expedition once the remaining climbers returned. Noel booked the New Scala Theatre in London's Charlotte Street to screen the finished film, *The Epic of Everest*, for a ten week period, commencing in December 1924. This

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<sup>45</sup> J. B. L. Noel to G. Bruce 26<sup>th</sup> January 1924. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

<sup>46</sup> J. B. L. Noel to G. Bruce 26<sup>th</sup> January 1924. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG



event would become an illustrated performance piece.<sup>47</sup> With Captain Noel giving a lecture during the intermission, the whole performance was again reminiscent of the spectacle previously presented by Albert Smith (as described in section 5.1).

Advance publicity for this performance, managed by Noel himself, included several short Pathé news items, produced in Darjeeling by Alfred Pereira, Noel's production manager at the expedition's processing laboratory. Press announcements created awareness of forthcoming events such as the *Westminster Gazette*, which detailed the lecture to be given at the Albert Hall on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> October.<sup>48</sup> General Bruce, Captain Norton, Captain Geoffrey Bruce and Noel Odell were to relate their experiences to an audience of RGS and Alpine Club members only. A Public lecture followed at the Queen's Hall on Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> October, given by Odell and illustrated by lantern slides. The film was shown at the Scala Theatre in December. Regional papers also carried reports on the lectures given by members of the expedition. Beetham, Odell and General Bruce between them covered large areas of the country in November and December 1924, prior to the film's provincial release in 1925. Lengthy reports and descriptions of the lectures recounting personal reminiscences were surely calculated to increase the potential audience for the film itself.

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<sup>47</sup> See Brown, J. (2013) 'Framing the Atmospheric Film Prologue in Britain, 1919-1926' in Brown, J. and Davison, A. (eds.) *The Sounds of the Silents in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 200 - 221

<sup>48</sup> *Westminster Gazette*, 9 October 1924

The *Southern Reporter* of 18 October 1924 gives some sense of the general tone of the reporting of the provincial lecture tour:

Mr. Bentley Beetham gave the address at the Victoria Hall, Selkirk, on Friday evening and held the attention of the audience for almost two hours...The address was illustrated with wonderful lantern views of the expedition and the great mountains which had to be skirted or traversed before Everest was reached..<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, the *Chatham News* of 31 October 1924:

A large and fashionable attendance filled the Chatham Town Hall on Monday evening when Brig. Gen. the Hon. C. C. Bruce, C.B., M.V.O., the leader of two attempts to ascend Mount Everest delivered an intensely interesting lecture on the 1924 expedition. Gen. Bruce is a born lecturer. His delivery is clear and natural and he possesses, above all things, a happy aptitude for keeping his audience in a very good humour ...The General's discourse was punctuated by an extensive and exceedingly rare series of slides, from photographs taken on the journey.<sup>50</sup>

As noted in section 4.5, cinema trade papers carried positive reviews of the film, notably the *Bioscope* which emphasised its potential when accompanied by popular lectures:

An attraction for the ordinary cinema it has far bigger possibilities than the average travel picture, and if it is to be slightly abbreviated, should prove a great success in the hands of imaginative showmen.<sup>51</sup>

The *Geographical Journal*, however, was noticeably more critical, highlighting the lack of an accompanying lecture:

We regret only the unavoidable absence of a lecture such as accompanied the first film, for which the sub-titles, with a touch of the professional jargon, are a poor substitute.<sup>52</sup>

As noted in Chapter 4, one of Noel's more bizarre sidelines on the 1924 climb was his role in the failed attempt by Colonel Haddick to drive a Citroen Kegresse Caterpillar car for part of the journey. Hinks was alerted to

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<sup>49</sup> *Southern Reporter*, 18 October 1924, EE 41/6 (Captain Noel's Newspaper cuttings album).

<sup>50</sup> *Chatham News*, 31 October 1924, EE 41/6.

<sup>51</sup> *Bioscope*. 18<sup>th</sup> December 1924. EE 41/6

<sup>52</sup> Anon. (1925) 'The Mount Everest Film of 1924'. *Geographical Journal*, 65. 63

newspaper reports of this enterprise published in the *Daily Mail* on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1924 (sent from a correspondent in Kalimpong). Not wanting this to prejudice the exclusive deal with *The Times*, he took immediate action and wrote to Norton on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1924 referring to:

His (i.e. Noel's) man in Darjeeling taking part in a somewhat curious enterprise trying to get a caterpillar car over the Jelap, of which high falutin accounts have been sent home to "The Times" by a certain Lieut.-Col. Haddick. "The Times" submitted them to me and I told them it had nothing whatever to do with the Expedition, but was concerned entirely with Noel's photographic and lecturing concern.....It would be rather a pity if "The Times" published a high-flown story about what looked like a silly enterprise in pushing a car up towards the Jelap, and I think "The Times" will take this view and won't tarnish the thing with side shows.<sup>53</sup>

Nothing daunted, Noel arranged for Haddick to undertake an illustrated lecture tour in India. In a handwritten undated note entitled *History of the Everest Film and the Still Colour Pictures*, Noel recalls that Haddick made a tour of the Palaces of Indian Rajas showing the lantern slides made by Pereira in the Darjeeling Laboratory. 'The tour was very successful'.<sup>54</sup> A printed programme of lecture notes produced to accompany this tour introduced Noel as 'Expedition Photographer and Official Organiser of the Lectures, 1924'. The fact that this maverick lecturing venture continued caused considerable upset amongst members of the MEC. John Withers, Expedition lawyer, wrote Haddick 'a stiff letter'.<sup>55</sup> On his return home Haddick visited Hinks to explain his position and he was asked to stop advertising his lectures. However, as with Pottinger, in spite of agreeing to do so, he continued to pose as an official lecturer to the expedition. Reports

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<sup>53</sup> A. Hinks to E. F. Norton 10<sup>th</sup> July 1924. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

<sup>54</sup> Noel, J. B. L. (undated) *History of the Everest Film and the Still Colour Pictures*. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

<sup>55</sup> A. Hinks to J. Withers 18<sup>th</sup> December 1926. EE 27/1/7. RGS-IBG

on his lectures can be found in regional newspapers, such as the *Kent and Sussex Courier* for the 10<sup>th</sup> December 1926 where an advert for the Tunbridge Wells Opera House promoted a lecture by Haddick titled ‘The Epic of Everest’, featuring a film and slide show of the expedition. Haddick is credited with being ‘of the Mount Everest Expedition Photographic Section’.<sup>56</sup>

After the initial run at the Scala, Noel continued to tour with the film throughout the UK accompanied by the Tibetan lamas. He also presented the film in Berlin ‘with a few words in German that he had learned by heart’.<sup>57</sup> Promotion of the lecture announced ‘this is the first time that “real” lamas have come to Europe’.<sup>58</sup> A flyer found in the Noel private papers advertises the visit of Noel and the Seven Lamas to Dublin (Figure 3.8). Correspondence between Explorers Films and the Pond Lecture Bureau in 1925 reveal that Noel also planned to tour America with the Tibetans.<sup>59</sup> Regardless of the diplomatic embarrassment of ‘the Affair of the Dancing Lamas’, he continued to plan lecture engagements in America and in 1926 embarked on a tour entitled ‘On the Roof of the World’.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Kent and Sussex Courier* 10<sup>th</sup> December 1926

<sup>57</sup> Noel, J. B. L. (undated) *History of the Everest Film and the Still Colour Pictures*. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

<sup>58</sup> *Guardian* 16<sup>th</sup> June 1925. 1

<sup>59</sup> P. Taylor, Explorers’ Films to J. B. Pond, Pond Bureau, New York, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1925. Anthony Bard Collection

<sup>60</sup> *Burlington Free Press*, Vermont 12<sup>th</sup> January 1927. 6  
([www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). Accessed 20/03/2019)

#### 5.4. Noel's film lectures: 'On The Roof of the World'

The tragedy surrounding the 1924 expedition helped to create a market for Noel's film lectures. In later years, he succeeded in maintaining interest in America where Mallory had failed in 1923. His frequent lecture tours in America during the following decade were covered in the local press. An April 1926 report in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* refers to one of his lectures as 'the Photodrama of the Century'.<sup>61</sup> The following year, the *Boston Globe* carried a report of Noel's lecture at the Symphony Hall when 'more than 2000 were thrilled by the story he related'.<sup>62</sup> A recent discovery in the Noel papers is a leaflet advertising 'a special flying visit' to Stratford-on-Avon by Captain John Noel and Mr. Frederick Raetz, Distinguished American Artist, to give a lecture 'Through Tibet to Everest' on 20<sup>th</sup> September, 1928. The lecture would be 'illustrated by pictures in colour and personally presented' (Figure 5.5). While no further lectures were reported in the press in 1929, reports of lectures returned in 1930. At an after dinner lecture in South Bend, Indiana, in November 1930, Noel illustrated his talk with 'Mt. Everest Wonder films...said to be the finest of their kind in the world'.<sup>63</sup> He had been engaged on this occasion by the Alber Celebrity Bureau in Cleveland to tour North America 'with his wonderful films of mountains and life about them'. A publicity flyer, located in the library of the University of Iowa, reads like many produced for the travelling showmen who crossed the US in the

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<sup>61</sup> *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1926 ([www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). Accessed 20/05/2019)

<sup>62</sup> *Boston Globe*, 12<sup>th</sup> April 1927 ([www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). Accessed 20/05/2019)

<sup>63</sup> *South Bend Tribune*, 25<sup>th</sup> November 1930 ([www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). Accessed 26/05.2019)

1930s, following the model of Burton Holmes (Figure 5.6). The showman, Noel, takes centre stage, under the headline 'Capt. John Noel with his own exclusive Mt. Everest Films, "On the Roof of the World"':

Capt. Noel played an important part in both of the last expeditions, not only as one of the directing heads of the organisation but also as official photographer. He is without doubt the greatest living mountain photographer and his movies are a work of real art.<sup>64</sup>

However an intriguing reference in the flyer makes mention of 'his recent expedition to Mount Siniolchu, the World's Most Beautiful Mountain'. This is further described:

During the summer, autumn and early winter of 1929, Captain Noel headed his own expedition to the world's most beautiful mountain, Mt. Siniolchu, accompanied by the distinguished American artist, Mr. Frederick Raetz. Captain Noel brings back the finest pictorial record ever made on an expedition: scenes among the greatest mountains in the world, luxuriant forests, quaint people whose customs and manners are recorded in moving pictures for the first time, and marvellous mountain scenes, photographed as only Captain Noel can photograph mountains.<sup>65</sup>

This return to Sikkim presents an intriguing scenario. The 'Affair of the Dancing Lamas' had created a diplomatic incident which resulted in no further attempts on Everest until 1933. Alongside this, a shot in the 1924 film, known as 'the lice-eating scene', had offended the Maharajah of Sikkim to such an extent that he banned Noel from ever returning to the country. Noel was asked to remove the scene from *The Epic of Everest* before it was screened in Britain. However reference is made to it in scripts contained in

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<sup>64</sup> Captain John Noel with his own Exclusive Mt. Everest Films: "On the Roof of the World" ([www.digital.lib.uiowa.edu/tc](http://www.digital.lib.uiowa.edu/tc) . Accessed 20/05/2018)

<sup>65</sup> [www.digital.lib.uiowa.edu/tc](http://www.digital.lib.uiowa.edu/tc). Accessed 20/5/2018. (Mount Siniolchu is one of the highest peaks in Sikkim)

the Noel papers.<sup>66</sup> There is no evidence of this scene in any extant material so it appears that Noel cut it out before the London screenings. However as referenced earlier, Noel had entered Tibet in disguise in 1913 without obtaining permission, so the apparently clandestine 1929 expedition was following an earlier precedent. Noel clearly relished his career as a travelling lecturer, so such an expedition would provide new and exciting material. Intriguingly I have only found reference to the 1929 expedition in the US press , as in the *Lancaster New Era*, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1930:

‘The Expedition to Mount Siniolchu’ is the title of the next Travel Club lecture, to be delivered in the Martin Auditorium next Tuesday evening by Captain John Baptiste Noel, who addressed the club several years ago, showing exceptionally fine pictures and describing the unsuccessful effort to reach the top of Mount Everest.

This expedition to Mount Siniolchu was less ambitious but more successful and the story of it is said to be replete with strange and thrilling adventure.

He had with him, on this latest exploration, Frederick Raetz, one of the best of the photographic colorists, and the Harvard University Film Foundation backed the enterprise, so the pictorial record is the very best.<sup>67</sup>

Another lecture is reported in the *San Francisco Examiner*, 28<sup>th</sup> October 1930 in a piece headed ‘Noel Will Relate Taj Mahal Story’:

What is said to be the world’s most beautiful story of married love will be discussed tonight by Capt. John Noel, explorer and world traveller. His subject will be “The Vale of Kashmir and the Taj Mahal” ....accompanied by Frederick Raetz, American colorist, he went to India where they spent many months living among the natives,

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<sup>66</sup> Typed script refers to ‘old beggar man with child on his knee: searches in child’s hair for lice: finds louse and eats it.’ Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

<sup>67</sup> ‘Captain Noel here Tuesday’, *Lancaster New Era* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania) 8<sup>th</sup> February 1930. 3 ([www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). Accessed 15/06/2019)

See also Anon. (1930) ‘The University Film Foundation of Harvard University’, *Science* 71. 381.

gathering data for the lecture and filming rare scenes. All of these have been colored by Raetz.<sup>68</sup>

In April 1932, the *Ottawa Journal* carried a further story on Noel's lecture 'The Glory of the Himalayas' which included 'two thrilling motion pictures, Epic of Mount Everest and Vale of Kashmir'.<sup>69</sup> Noel clearly adapted and re-worked his material during this time to maintain interest in his moving images and coloured slides.

As Kevin Brownlow has noted, Noel was a great admirer of Burton Holmes, the 'Baedeker of illuminated information'.<sup>70</sup> When interviewed by Brownlow in the late 1970s, Noel still recalled Holmes' operation in detail:

He had his own circuit, his own management. ..He lectured to mass audiences, never less than two thousand, they paid two dollars a seat.....He was a very fast speaker, and had a beautiful voice, which he synchronised perfectly with his films, and he'd show them on a huge screen. He never walked on the stage; he used to pull the curtain apart and run on.<sup>71</sup>

Noel was obviously very influenced by the Burton Holmes model. In a handwritten, undated note, in his papers, Noel recorded memories of his life in the early 1930s.<sup>72</sup> He travelled the USA from coast to coast with an operator and portable film projector and portable still picture dissolving view projector - his 'Colour Dissolvograph', which he claimed as his own

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<sup>68</sup> 'Noel Will Relate Taj Mahal Story', *San Francisco Examiner*, 28<sup>th</sup> October 1930. 11 ([www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). Accessed 15/06/2019)

<sup>69</sup> *Ottawa Journal*. 7<sup>th</sup> April 1932. ([www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). Accessed 26/05/2019)

<sup>70</sup> Brownlow, K. (1979) *The War, the West and the Wilderness*. London:Secker & Warburg. 420

<sup>71</sup> Brownlow. *The War, the West and the Wilderness*. 420

<sup>72</sup> Noel, J. B. L. (undated) *History of the Everest Film and the Still Colour Pictures*. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG



invention and which is much referred to in his papers, though I have found no evidence of its survival. He was re-engaged by the same management for seven subsequent years and by his reckoning, during the 1930s, had crossed the North American continent 14 times and lectured to a million people. As well as smaller venues on the lecture circuits Noel was also invited to lecture at the National Geographic Society. Records show these lectures took place on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1926 and 12<sup>th</sup> December 1930.<sup>73</sup>

Noel constantly looked for new opportunities for promotional lectures. His 1924 film was re-edited and a sound track recorded and combined with the picture in 1931, re-released by Capital Films under the title *The Tragedy of Everest*. As Noel toured the American lecture circuit, presenting his films and slides, this 30-minute edit was also being exhibited as a support film to the sensational feature film *Rasputin* (Figure 5.2).<sup>74</sup> A favourable review was given by the Manager of Loew's Lexington Theatre in New York City, writing to Noel on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1933:

I want to express my pleasure at having played the "Tragedy of Mt. Everest" at this theatre. I cannot call to my mind any film that created such a sensation. This is saying a great deal as no doubt you are aware of the fact that we play to the highest class clientele of any theatre in the United States.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> J. Hess, National Geographic Society, to J. B. L. Noel 17<sup>th</sup> September 1981. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

<sup>74</sup> Capital Films newspaper advert, *Morning News*, Wilmington, Delaware, 7<sup>th</sup> October 1932, 10. [www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com): accessed 20/07/2017

<sup>75</sup> F. Owens, Manager, to J. Noel 15<sup>th</sup> June 1933. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

As discussed in Chapter 3, another short film, filmed by Noel, entitled *The Land of the Shalimar*, survives.<sup>76</sup> The content indicates that this could have been produced after the unauthorised 1929 filming expedition and possibly used to illustrate Noel's 'Kashmir and the Taj Mahal' lectures.<sup>77</sup> A distribution agreement, found in the Noel papers, indicates that the film was originally 20 minutes in length (2 reels), though it seems that only 1 reel has survived. Noel retained rights in the picture content on both *Tragedy* and *Shalimar* which enabled him to incorporate material into his lectures. Capital had negotiated only non-exclusive theatrical rights which gave Noel the option of pursuing other screening and lecture rights. The Capital distribution deal was for a five-year period with all rights then subsequently returning to Noel.

Noel's collection of photographs and hand-tinted glass slides, now held at the RGS-IBG, was put to constant use in his lecture performances. These slides demonstrated the potency of the colour that he had wanted to capture in his film record, technically not possible in 1924. On the paper sleeves of each slide his handwritten notes outline the structure of his lectures, under headings such as 'costumes and customs', 'Darjeeling', 'Tibetan Plateau' 'pack animals', 'High altitude' and 'view of summit'. These slides themselves evidence the fact that Noel, the cinematographer had become the travelling showman (Figures 5.3 & 5.4 ). His lectures, incorporating material obtained in 1929, delivered under the titles of 'The Epic of Everest', 'On the Roof of

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<sup>76</sup> [www.travelfilm.com](http://www.travelfilm.com) (accessed 10/04/2019)

<sup>77</sup> 'Kashmir and the Story of the Taj Mahal' commentary. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

the World', 'The Glory of the Himalayas', 'The Vale of Kashmir', were generally well received. The use of colour in the lantern slides was always advertised as the big selling point – along with the dramatic story line and exotic location.

### 5.5 Conclusion

On his return from America c.1934, Noel continued to seek opportunities to present his film and slide shows, and maintained a keen interest throughout his life in technological developments, constantly planning new edits for his material. During the 1930s the developing emphasis on creating small gauge versions of travelogues and instructional films for film societies, schools and local halls provided new use for documentary films and maintained awareness of such material when theatrical runs had ceased.

The BFI's quarterly publication *Sight and Sound* provides evidence of the evolving non-theatrical market by carrying reviews and critiques of available films. Specific genres were reviewed under headings such as 'Geographical and Travel', 'History and Politics', 'Industry and National Services'. A full-page advert for Wardour Films lists "Interesting and Fascinating Films that Educate by Eye and Ear", specially selected for Schools, Institutes etc. Pride of place is given to '*The Tragedy of Everest – A Tale of Daring and Indomitable Courage* graphically dramatised by Captain Noel, F.R.G.S.'<sup>78</sup> (Figure 5.7). *Land of the Shalimar* is also listed amongst Wardour's available titles. A more audacious advert for the Wardour release

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<sup>78</sup> *Sight and Sound* Vol. 2 Winter 1934. v

of *Tragedy* is included in the Noel papers, indicating that the film was available for a much wider market than the strictly educational (Figure 5.8). By the 1930s improving film technology was an enabling factor in creating a wider audience than the somewhat elitist group described by Musser and Nelson (1991):

The travel lecture emerged as the antithesis of the dominant film industry. The one appealed to a small elite seeking education and enlightenment, the other to a mass audience seeking amusement.<sup>79</sup>

Rather than a strict divide in audiences between entertainment and the art-film, Nowell-Smith and Dupin (2012) refer to the third film culture 'with very little connection to either the entertainment or art film cultures. This was a culture of film envisaged as a medium of communication and more narrowly of communication for educative or instructional purposes'.<sup>80</sup>

This chapter has examined the use of illustrated lectures to present and promote the achievements of the Everest expeditions, the MEC's preferred option, as it was an established means of disseminating geographical knowledge. I have also explored the role of the lecturer as showman on lecture circuits in the United Kingdom and North America. In particular, I have considered the role played by John Noel, official cinematographer of the 1922 and 1924 expeditions and his subsequent career as professional lecturer into the 1930s, following his clandestine return to the Himalayas in

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<sup>79</sup> Musser, C. and Nelson, C. (1991) *High Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880-1920*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 181

<sup>80</sup> Nowell-Smith, G. and Dupin, C. (eds.) (2012) *The British Film Institute, the Government and Film Culture, 1933 – 2000*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 14

1929. Noel's lecturing on the subject in fact carried on into the 1950s as he re-worked his films and coloured slides, continuing his mission to recount the events he had witnessed (Figures 5.9 and 5.10). Indeed, as we shall see in Chapter 7, lantern slides continued to be used, in conjunction with film, on lecture tours promoting the successful climb in 1953. The expanding market for film exhibition was by this time reaching well beyond the theatrical, providing educational access to a much wider audience. Expeditionary film would take advantage of this market.

Gen  
Kempbell  
Room 116

**QUEEN'S HALL** Langham Place, W.  
Sole Lessees - - - Messrs. Chappell & Co., Ltd.

On **TUESDAY EVENING, JANUARY 10th**, at 8 30

THE ONLY PUBLIC LECTURE IN LONDON

ON THE

# MOUNT EVEREST EXPEDITION

over  
Chalk  
29  
35.1.26  
Row 16 91-

Will be given on behalf of the Mount Everest Committee

BY

**Mr. GEORGE MALLORY**

*who led the Climbing Party*



VIEW FROM THE PEAK AT THE HEAD OF THE KHARTA GLACIER WHICH FIRST REVEALED THE ROUTE TO THE SUMMIT. Photo by G. L. Mallory

Chairman :

Brigadier-General The Hon.

**C. G. BRUCE, C.B.**

Chief of the Mount Everest Expedition, 1921.

The narrative will be illustrated by a large number of Lantern Slides from most remarkable and very beautiful photographs taken on the Expedition

**Tickets : Stalls and Front Two Rows of Grand Circle, 7/6; Area Stalls and Grand Circle, 5/-; Balcony (unreserved), 3/-; Area, 2/-.**

From the Queen's Hall Box Office, Langham Place (Phone, Langham 2823); Ashton & Mitchell's Royal Agency, 33 Old Bond Street, and Branches; Hays, 26 Old Bond Street, W., and Cornhill, E.C.; Keith, Prowse & Co. (all Branches); Lacon & Ollier, 2 Burlington Gardens, W., and 17 Royal Exchange, E.C.; Cecil Roy, 15 Sussex Place, 11 Pont Street, and Branches; Army & Navy Stores, 105 Victoria Street, S.W.

The general management of this Lecture throughout the Kingdom is in the hands of **GERALD CHRISTY**, The Lecture Agency, Ltd., The Outer Temple, London, W.C.2. (Gerrard 2899.)

P.T.O.

Figure 5.1 Flyer for Mallory's Lecture at Queen's Hall 1922  
EE 10/4/17 RGS-IBG

**THE PLAYHOUSE**  
 duPont Bldg., Wil., phone 6030  
 MATINEE 3.15; NIGHT 8.30  
 ALL WEEK, STARTING  
 MONDAY, OCT. 10  
 Now in its 14th week at the Europa  
 Theatre, Philadelphia.

**CAPITAL FILMS**  
 present  
**SAINT  
 OR  
 SINNER**



**RESPLIT**

**The INTRIGUES & LOVE LIFE  
 of RUSSIA'S SEX MAD MONK**

Added Attraction  
**"Tragedy of Mt. Everest"**  
 SPECIAL PRICES—Mat. 1 to 6 p. m.,  
 bal., 25c.; orch., 35c. After 6, bal., 35c.;  
 orch., 50c.; children 15c. all times. Tax  
 included.

Figure 5.2 Capital Films Newspaper advert. *Morning News*,  
 Wilmington, Delaware, 7<sup>th</sup> October 1932  
[www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com)



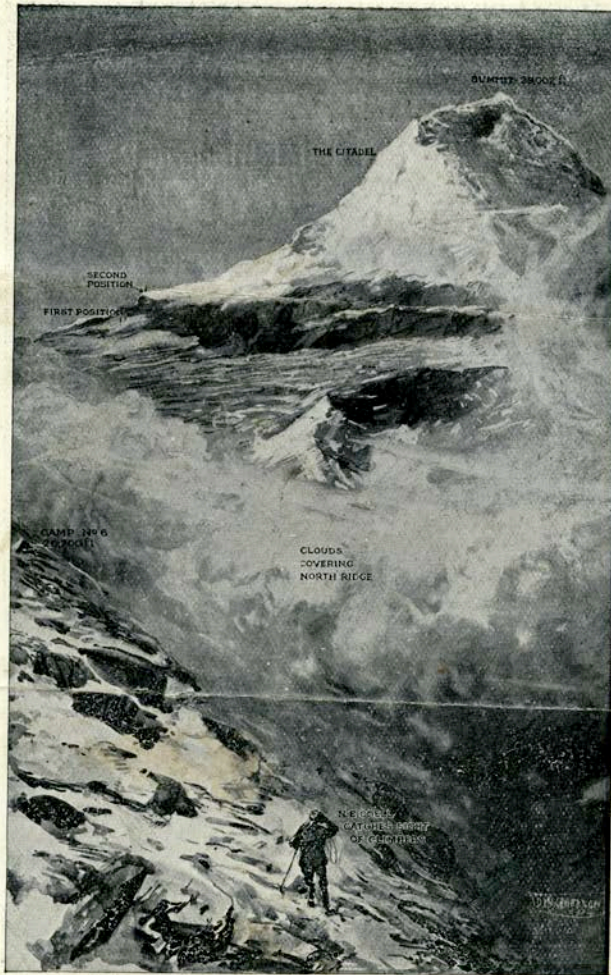


Figure 5.3 Tinted glass slides 'High Peaks and Passes'  
Noel Collection. RGS-IBG





Figure 5.4 Tinted glass slides 'Trees and Ferns'  
Noel Collection. RGS-IBG



*Odell above Windy Ridge Camp, 25,000 feet, catches sight of Mallory and Irvine within 600 feet of the summit*

THE PICTURE HOUSE, STRATFORD-ON-AVON  
will present for a special flying visit

**"Through Tibet to Everest"**

Illustrated by pictures in colour and personally presented by  
CAPTAIN JOHN NOEL, F.R.G.S. and MR. FREDERICK RAETZ  
of Mount Everest Expedition the Distinguished American Artist

**THURSDAY, 20th SEPTEMBER, 1928**

Afternoon at 2.30 Doors open at 2 Evening at 7.30 Doors open at 7

Prices of Admission for this Engagement (including Tax) —

BALCONY (Reserved) 2/4; Unreserved 2/- STALLS (Reserved) 1/10; Unreserved 1/6 & 1/-

Special Terms for School Parties of ten and upwards, if booked previous to ... which these  
BOX OFFICE open daily from 10 to 1 and from 2 to 4

Figure 5.5 Programme for Lecture at Stratford-on-Avon given by Captain Noel and Frederick Raetz, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1928  
Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG



# CAPT. JOHN NOEL



WITH HIS OWN EXCLUSIVE

## Mt. Everest Films

### "On the Roof of the World"

THE tragic attempt to conquer Mt. Everest, the highest mountain in all the world, was filmed by Capt. John Noel, the official photographer for the last two Mt. Everest Expeditions. Capt. Noel's personal story, as told with the moving pictures, is without doubt an epic drama of the day. The visualization is full of dramatic high spots culminating in the disappearance of Mallory and Irvine at a point 800 feet from the very top of the world, where these two climbers disappeared forever.

Capt. Noel played an important part in both of the last expeditions, not only as one of the directing heads of the organization but also as the official photographer. He is without doubt the greatest living mountain photographer and his movies are a work of real art.

#### *"The Great Himalaya Mountains"*

During the summer, autumn, and early winter of 1929, Captain Noel headed his own expedition to the world's most beautiful mountain, Mt. Siniolchu, accompanied by the distinguished American artist, Mr. Frederick Raetz. Captain Noel brings back the finest pictorial record ever made on an expedition: scenes among the greatest mountains in the world, luxuriant forests, quaint people whose customs and manners are recorded in moving pictures for the first time, and marvellous mountain scenes, photographed as only Captain Noel can photograph mountains. Many of these scenes will be reproduced in colors, the work of Mr. Raetz. Captain Noel has the most complete equipment ever taken on an expedition of this kind, most of it constructed for him to his own special design, the equipment alone costing in excess of \$25,000.00.

#### *Mountain Movies of Sublime Beauty*

His "wonder films," as the metropolitan press of America has described his motion pictures, are without doubt the finest mountain photographs ever made. The feat is even more remarkable when one considers the terrific storms and alternating heat and cold under which the mountain were forced to work in the rarefied atclimbers mosphere at the very top of the world. Oxygen tanks were necessary at 22,000 feet. The violet rays of the sun burned unmercifully and yet in the shadow of a rock one's foot became frostbitten within a few minutes. Such was life among the Himalayas.

*Watch Your Newspaper for Subject to be Presented*

Management  
**THE ALBER BUREAU**  
Louis J. Alber, President  
3608 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, O.  
Long Distance HENderson 5616

University of Iowa Libraries | [digital.lib.uiowa.edu/tc](http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/tc)

Figure 5.6 Flyer for Captain Noel lecture 'On the Roof of the World', 1930.

Records of the Redpath Chautauqua Collection, The University of Iowa Libraries



INTERESTING AND FASCINATING FILMS  
that **EDUCATE** by EYE AND EAR

THE TRAGEDY OF  
**EVEREST**

A Tale of Daring and Indomitable Courage graphically dramatised

By **CAPTAIN NOEL, F.R.G.S.**

Running Time 29 minutes.

Certificate "U"

- ANIMAL WORLD OF MAKE-BELIEVE.** Time: 10 mins.  
How insects change their appearance to evade their enemies.
- ENGLAND'S PLAYGROUND.** Time: 11 mins.  
Interesting tour of Blackpool.
- WINGS OVER THE ANDES.** Time: 32 mins  
Wonders of Nature and mysteries of man in unexplored Peru.
- WILD MEN OF KALAHARI.** Time: 36 mins  
Sensational revelations of prehistoric man, savages of a lost civilization.
- BACK TO NATURE.** Time: 49 mins.  
Expounding the ways to health, beauty and grace, under the auspices of the British Association and British Institute of Adult Education.
- CIVILIZATION OF AFRICA.** Time: 10 mins. per reel.  
Series of Six One Reelers. An Interesting trip from Cape to Cairo.
- MEXICO.** Time: 34 mins.  
The beauties and customs of Mexican life.
- SIX ONE REEL TRAVELOGUES.** A beautiful interest and travel series.
- ENCHANTED ISLES.** Time: 33 mins.  
An interesting expedition to the South Seas depicting almost unbelievable beauty.
- SEEING BERMUDA ON A BICYCLE.** Time: 11 mins.
- THE LAND OF EVANGELINE.** Time: 11 mins.  
Scenes of Arcady made famous by Longfellow's poem.
- A LAND THAT TIME FORGOT.** Time: 9 mins.  
A strange country undisturbed by modern customs.
- TROPIC LURE.** Time: 11 mins.  
Shots of many beautiful South Sea Islands.
- POMPEII.** Time: 10 mins.  
A comprehensive picture of this historic city.
- MANCHURIA.** Time: 11 mins.  
The Treasure House of the Far East.
- COMRADES OF THE DESERT.** Time: 11 mins.  
Animal life in the desert.
- THE NAVAJO WITCH.** Time: 10 mins.  
Scenes of the Painted Desert of Arizona.
- ISLE OF BIRDS.** Time: 7 mins.  
A Latin Paradise with millions of beautiful birds.
- HIGH ANDES.** Time: 8 mins.  
Unique pictures taken 23,000 feet above sea level.
- EXHIBITION DAYS.** Time: 10 mins.  
Dedicated to the first Exhibition Flyers.
- DAWN.** Time: 6 mins.  
Italian Church Bells Series.
- AVE MARIA.** Time: 4 mins.  
Italian Church Bells Series.
- MERRY RINGING.** Time: 5 mins.  
Italian Church Bells Series.
- THAT'S CRICKET.** Time: 17 mins.  
Features Australia's crack cricketers.
- THAMES. (Disc Only)** Time: 22 mins.  
Romance and history of England's great river.
- CAPE OF GOOD HOPE.** Time: 12 mins.  
Interesting travel short.
- DENIZENS OF THE ZOO.** Time: 8 mins.  
A visit to the Zoological Gardens, Pretoria.
- FIVE ONE-REEL AUSTRALIAN SHORTS.** Time: 11 mins.  
The brave pioneers' first flights.
- FIRST TEN YEARS OF FLYING.** Time: 11 mins.  
Cities of the Old West.
- LIKE A BEAVER.** Time: 11 mins.  
Life and habits of the Beaver.
- MONKEY WHOOPEE.** Time: 11 mins.  
A riot of fun with monkeys.
- THE FIGHT TO LIVE.** Time: 11 mins.  
The eternal struggle for existence by the denizens of the deep.
- BRITANNIA RULES THE WAVES.** Time: 10 mins.  
When Windjammers sailed the Seven Seas.
- SINGING WATERS.** Time: 9 mins.  
Magnificent views on the Columbia River.
- TAPU TABU.** Time: 9 mins.  
Quaint scenes and native customs of Samoa.
- CAMERARING IN CHINA.** Time: 8 mins.  
Interesting scenes taken on a tour of China.
- CAMERARING IN CANADA.** Time: 8 mins.  
Interesting views on a Canadian trip.
- BOULDER DAM.** Time: 10 mins.  
Harnessing the great river in Colorado.
- UP AND DOWN THE EQUATOR.** Time: 9 mins.  
The land of the ancient Incas.
- THE NATIVITY IN ITALIAN ART.** Time: 9 mins.  
Interesting study of Italian paintings and sculpture.
- CONQUEST OF THE AIR.** Time: 26 mins.  
A history of Flight through the ages.
- CAMBRIDGE.** Time: 21 mins.  
Pictorial survey of the famous University City.
- THE SMOKE THAT THUNDERS.** Time: 11 mins.  
Beautiful shots of Victoria Falls.
- THIS IS PARIS—THAT WAS!** Time: 11 mins.  
Life in Gay Paree thirty years ago, with witty commentary by Tommy Handley.
- GET THAT LION.** Time: 29 mins.  
Lion hunting in Arizona.
- THE ISLAND OF PERILS.** Time: 29 mins.  
Life among the Faeroe Islanders.
- RIDDLE OF RHODESIA!** Time: 9 mins.  
Ancient ruins discovered in darkest Africa.
- THE MAN EATER.** Time: 26 mins.  
Divers seeking sunken gold and a desperate fight with Sharks.
- BIRD ISLANDS OF PERU.** Time: 12 mins.  
Amazing story of bird life off the desert coast of Peru.
- ISLE OF DESIRE.** Time: 27 mins.  
Pre-nuptial ceremonies and festivities in a South Sea Island.
- JUNGLE HELL.** Time: 67 mins.  
Weird and strange adventures of Mr. & Mrs. Martin Johnson in the Wilds of Africa.
- SATAN'S PLAYGROUND.** Time: 30 mins.  
Panoramic Vista of the sinister Death Valley, California.
- FLAME OF THE PACIFIC.** Time: 24 mins.  
A glamorous and exotic short of the romantic Pacific Islands.
- THE PHANTOM SEA.** Time: 26 mins.  
Strange animal life in the basin of the Salton Sea, once covered by the ocean.
- THE WONDERFUL ANIMAL WORLD.** Time: 36 mins.  
A chronicle of things strange and queer in amazing Australia.
- VIENNA THE WONDERFUL.** Time: 11 mins.  
Architectural wonders of this Austrian capital.
- A DREAM OF VENICE.** Time: 9 mins.  
The city of canals, beautiful glimpses blending music and artistic cameracraft.
- 'NEATH ITALIAN SKIES.** Time: 7 mins.  
Delightful novelty views of Lake Maggiore
- LAND OF THE SHALIMAR.** Time: 12 mins.  
The superb river scenery of the Vale of Kashmir, and the wonders of Taj Mahal.
- THE MAGIC NORTH.** Time: 10 mins.  
A beautifully artistic tour of the wonders of Scotland.
- LAND OF ROMANCE.** Time: 11 mins.  
Pictorial record of the most fascinating parts of Scotland.
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Interesting picture dealing with Indian mysticism.
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An idyllic love story from the land of Lotus Blossoms.
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Figure 5.7 Wardour Films advert in *Sight and Sound* Vol.2, Winter 1933-4

Author's collection



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Figure 5.8 'Everest' Flyer, Wardour Films, c.1933.  
Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

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**AND THE**  
**TAJ MAHAL**

**THE MOST BEAUTIFUL LAND OF THE EAST**  
**AND THE**  
**ROMANTIC STORY OF THE TAJ MAHAL**  
PICTURED in COLOUR and DESCRIBED By  
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Photographer of the PIONEER Everest Expeditions

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**OCTOBER 4. 5. 6. DAILY 3 P.M.**

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Figure 5.9 Poster for the 'Kashmir and the Taj Mahal' Lectures, 1956.  
Sandra Noel Collection/RGS-IBG



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*AUTHOR OF "THROUGH TIBET TO EVEREST" & "THE STORY OF EVEREST"  
OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPHER TO 2 OF THE PIONEER MT. EVEREST  
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Figure 5.10 Poster for 'Through Tibet to Everest' Lectures, 1953  
Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

## Chapter 6

### The Everest Films of 1933: Climbing Film and Aerial Travelogue

#### 6.1. Introduction

1933 was a unique year in the history of expeditions to Everest. Alongside a further attempt to climb Everest, organised by the MEC under the leadership of Hugh Ruttledge, an aerial expedition, dubbed the Houston-Mount Everest Flight after its principal sponsor, was organised to independently film the features of the mountain by means of a flight over the summit. Since the ill-fated climb and debacle of the affair of the 'dancing lamas' in 1924, all applications for permission to make further attempts on the summit had been denied by the Tibetan authorities. However, in 1932, their position was unexpectedly reversed. This chapter examines archival film footage made on both the land and aerial expeditions of 1933, using correspondence and trade journals to identify and contextualise the material. The account is situated within the wider context of media coverage and press sponsorship of these two expeditions. Technological advances created new opportunities for the aspiring amateur film-maker to both produce and exhibit material. Commercial production companies were increasingly aware of the public appetite for expeditionary film. Geographical and political agendas created fertile ground for media exploitation. Sponsorship by the press and other commercial interests provided greater incentives to finance and control media coverage, but could also lead to clashes of purpose. While the diplomatic protocols were carefully observed to preserve international relationships and maintain the



established order, Everest was becoming an international commodity for the media markets. Control of publicity was becoming increasingly complex for the MEC to manage, while it was potentially big business for the commercial market. At the same time a new impetus was given to the film by the growth of the educational market .

This chapter considers the interaction of media in presenting the story and outcomes of the land and aerial expeditions, drawing attention to the differences between them. Particular emphasis is given to the multiple forms in which film of the expedition survives, a feature of the film archive which has hitherto been under-researched. The different versions and uses of the film record are explored in relation to the popular culture of expeditionary science, including issues surrounding sponsorship and media control. The chapter begins by introducing the 'official' MEC expedition led by Rutledge, known at the time and since as the 'Fourth Everest Expedition' in the sequence organised by the MEC since 1921. It includes an account of preparations for filming, relations with the Press and a review of the various film records taken by members of the climbing party (section 6.2). It then turns to the Houston-Mount Everest expedition, reviewing the background to its aerial film-making before examining press coverage of the filming and aspects of sponsorship and media control (section 6.3). The next section provides an account of the history of the public exhibition of the film records of both the 1933 climb and the flight (section 6.4). Finally, the chapter explores the re-versioning of 1933 film footage and the subsequent commercial and educational uses of the films (section 6.5).

## 6.2 The fourth Everest expedition and its films

On the 19<sup>th</sup> March 1931, the MEC met for the first time in six years. The second item on the agenda was a proposal to consider the possibility of approaching the Tibetan government to ask permission for a new Everest Expedition. Initially it was reported that the *impasse* remained unresolved. Leslie Weir, Political officer in Sikkim, wrote to Hinks on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1931: 'I found a very strong resentment against the last Everest Expedition. This, I am afraid, is directly attributable to Noel'. In the same letter, he described the reaction of the Maharajah of Sikkim to a further request from Noel for a travel permit:

The Maharajah of Sikkim is a member of the Himalayan Club and has given every facility to the Bauer and Dyrenfurth Expeditions to Kanchenjunga which is in his territory. He however gave a very firm and definite refusal to an application of Noel to conduct an expedition in Sikkim in 1929.<sup>1</sup>

As suggested in Chapter 5, the Maharajah's ban did not deter Noel from returning to film covertly in Sikkim. This was not reported to the authorities in Britain and attempts continued to obtain official permission for another attempt to climb Everest. By 1932 the situation had changed. At a meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> September it was reported that letters from the India Office had been received conveying through the Government of India and the Political Officer at Sikkim the consent of the Dalai Lama to an all-British Expedition

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<sup>1</sup> L. Weir to A. Hinks 26<sup>th</sup> July 1931. EE/41/5/1. RGS-IBG

to Mount Everest in 1933. At the next meeting on the 6<sup>th</sup> September the minutes recorded the discussion on the production of a film:

The Committee then considered the question of a cinematograph film and resolved that no attempt should be made to take apparatus of standard size and produce a film for public exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Minutes do not reveal the reasoning behind this decision, it is clear that the experiences of 1922 and 1924 had had a lasting effect and the MEC, presumably unaware of Noel's activities in 1929, were not prepared to risk any further upset in the delicate relationship re-established with the Tibetan Government. A filming expedition on the scale of 1924, complete with professional 35mm film equipment and a bespoke processing laboratory, was clearly out of the question. However, the decision not to produce a film on 35mm stock for 'public exploitation' did not of course mean that film was not produced at all. New lighter 'substandard' 16mm cameras and film had become available for home movie making and could be used if necessary. The expedition leader Hugh Ruttledge (Figure 6.1) summed up the position in his official account of the 1933 expedition:

The expeditions of 1922 and 1924 secured a good cinematographic record, due to the energy of Captain Noel. It was decided to dispense with this in 1933, but Wyn Harris, Shebbeare and I took 16mm cameras. Almost everyone carried a camera for still photography. Cinema film, film-packs and roll films were presented by Kodak Limited, and panchromatic plates and cinema film by Messrs Ilford.<sup>3</sup> (Figure 6.2)

Unlike 1922 and 1924, there would in fact be no official cinematographer: in 1933, filming was done by multiple members of the expedition team,

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<sup>2</sup> Item 10, Mount Everest Committee 61<sup>st</sup> Meeting, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1932 EE/98. RGS-IBG

<sup>3</sup> Ruttledge, H. (1934) *Everest 1933*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. 40-41

including the leader Hugh Ruttledge, climber Percy Wyn Harris and transport officer Edward Shebbeare, the oldest member of the party. The climbers would use more portable 16mm equipment, reflecting the growing amateur interest in film-making. In 1932 the IAC (Institute of Amateur Cinematographers) had been established to further the craft, producing manuals on editing, captioning and sound recording. By strange coincidence another Percy W. Harris was vice-president of the IAC and author of its manual on home processing, which celebrated a new age of amateur film: 'Nowadays with modern film stock, modern cameras and the equipment described in this book, there is no reason why a modern amateur film should not rival the best of the professionals in all the essentials'.<sup>4</sup>Dispensing with the requirement for commercially produced film also reduced the pressure on the Committee to generate revenue in order to cover costs. This must have been a relief for Hinks, so burdened with what he perceived as his mismanagement of the commercial enterprises of 1922 and 1924 (see Chapter 4). With no great expectations for the distribution of the film record, he hoped it would be sufficient for material to be shown to RGS Fellows and other audiences for lectures given by the expedition party.

Ruttledge is on record as having filmed in the Nepal-Tibet border in 1926. Writing from Almora, a hill-station in the Kumaon Himalaya, to Dr. Longstaff on 13<sup>th</sup> October 1926 he reported:

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<sup>4</sup> Harris, P. W. (1935) *Home Processing: A Manual for Amateur Cinematographers*. London: George Newnes. 111

The cinema film taken on Rakaru Tibet has come out pretty well and afforded some interest in Naini Tal during autumn week. Glad to hear you are able to keep up the climbing. How I envy you your mountaineering career. It is the finest of sports and I think as food for the soul as for the body.<sup>5</sup>

By 1929 Ruttledge had retired from the Indian Civil Service and was able to undertake new travels. A further innovation on the 1933 climb was the use of radio equipment and a field telephone to ensure better communication. Regular weather reports could be received which were to be of great practical benefit in planning the campaign. However, the need for media reporting could not be avoided. Ruttledge described leaving Liverpool Street station en route to join ship at Tilbury:

The Mount Everest Committee and relatives and friends loyally endeavoured to distract the attention of the pressmen what time we tried to creep into our carriages unobserved, or at least looking as much as possible like invalids on their way to a Continental cure. But it was no good. We were compelled to face the music, to be photographed, to "say something extempore".....At Tilbury the indefatigable Press was ready for us again, this time with a "movietone" recorder.<sup>6</sup>

No such reticence to engage with the Press had been evident when Captain Noel had signed up with Pathé News to publicise the departure of the 1924 expedition. Rather than a means to maintain public interest in the aims of the expedition, Ruttledge regarded media interest as intrusive. While he was committed to sending regular despatches for publication in the *Daily Telegraph*, an arrangement secured through the MEC, all other publicity was an irritant. The contrast with the attitude to publicity manifested by the

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<sup>5</sup> H. Ruttledge to T. Longstaff, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1926. CB9/127. RGS-IBG

<sup>6</sup> Ruttledge, H. (1934) *Everest 1933*. London: Hodder & Stoughton. 49  
See Table 2 for British Movietone item.

organisers of the Houston–Mount Everest Flight would become clear. In a letter to Hinks dated 30<sup>th</sup> April 1933, written at Basecamp, Ruttledge wrote:

The papers received yesterday informed us of the success of the Houston-Everest flight. Thank God that business is over, and that we need not worry about them. I do wish we had no publicity at all, and could work in peace.<sup>7</sup>

Close working relationships with the press had been long established as a given in reporting on the progress of large-scale expeditions. In the case of both the 1922 and 1924 Everest expeditions, exclusive publicity deals had been struck with *The Times*, providing much needed revenue. In 1933 this would change. In December 1932 the MEC appointed literary agent Leonard Moore to negotiate terms. The initial proposal offered to *The Times* in return for exclusive rights was for a sum of £3000 and 50% of income from the sale of all despatches, photographs and broadcasting for a fixed period.<sup>8</sup> After a protest from *The Times* the request was reduced to £2000 plus 50% of sales. Lints Smith, Manager of *The Times* wrote to the President of the RGS, Goodenough, expressing regret at this ‘dramatic and impracticable revision of the financial proposals’ and concluded that ‘*The Times* has been compelled to disassociate itself from the Expedition of 1933 by reason of the new and unexpected demands made upon it’.<sup>9</sup> Unable to agree financial terms with *The Times*, the MEC concluded a deal instead with the *Daily Telegraph*. This caused much protest from other newspapers. The owner of

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<sup>7</sup> H. Ruttledge to A. Hinks, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1933. EE/48b. RGS-IBG

<sup>8</sup> L. Moore to W. Lints Smith, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1932. Subject files: Mount Everest: 1933 Houston Mount Everest Expedition. Times Newspapers Ltd. Archive, News UK and Ireland Ltd.(TNL Archive)

<sup>9</sup> W. Lints Smith to W. Goodenough, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1932. Subject files: Mount Everest: 1933 Houston Mount Everest Expedition. TNL Archive

the *Manchester Guardian* wrote 'we are inclined to protest against a matter of this national importance being made into an exclusive'.<sup>10</sup> This was followed by criticism of the Society's motives – 'our quarrel is perhaps more with the Royal Geographical than with the *Daily Telegraph*'.<sup>11</sup> He continued:

We think they are acting contrary to the spirit of their Charter in allowing their agents to put up to auction exclusive news rights in ventures such as this.... Common sense indicates that such trafficking in exclusive news rights, trading as they must do all the while on the goodwill of other newspapers and the heroism of the dead, oversteps reasonable limits.<sup>12</sup>

Following its rebuff by the Mount Everest Committee, *The Times* then directed its attention to the proposed flight over Everest and by the 16<sup>th</sup> March 1933 had signed an agreement with the Houston - Mount Everest Flight Committee and the Gaumont British Picture Corporation Ltd. to conclude an exclusive deal for press and photographic rights. It would send a dedicated correspondent to provide despatches on every angle of the expedition, including the filming, and sought to prevent press leaks to competitors among the rival press (see section 6.3 below).

Although the MEC had driven a hard bargain for press rights to the Ruttledge climb, with the result that the 1933 expedition was the only one of all the MEC expeditions which was not sponsored by *The Times*, it is quite apparent from archival correspondence that there was no plan to coordinate the resulting film records. No reference was made to any filming activity in the *Telegraph* despatches and although Ruttledge was nominally

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<sup>10</sup> J. R. Scott to W. Lints Smith 24<sup>th</sup> January 1933. Subject files: Mount Everest: 1933 Houston Mount Everest Expedition. TNL Archive

<sup>11</sup> J. R. Scott to W. Lints Smith 30<sup>th</sup> January 1933 . TNL Archive

<sup>12</sup> J. R. Scott to W. Lints Smith 1<sup>st</sup> February 1933. TNL Archive

responsible for them it apparently fell to Hinks at the RGS to create some order from the footage produced by Rutledge, Shebbeare and Wyn Harris. The footage which survives in the RGS-IBG Collection is contained in four titles, identified as shown in Table 1: 'Everest - Shebbeare' (Shebbeare), 'Ilford Everest Expedition' (Rutledge), 'Fourth Everest Expedition' (Wyn Harris) and 'Climbing Mount Everest, 1933' (photographer named as Wyn Harris, narrator Frank Smythe). Percy Wyn Harris captured high altitude footage, and was joined on the highest reaches by Frank Smythe (Figure 6.3). Smythe himself had successfully climbed Mount Kamet in 1931 and had made a film of that ascent, *Kamet Conquered*, which was released in 1932 in both silent and sound versions.

As reported in the *Geographical Journal*, the Society held two separate screenings of the 1933 Everest expedition footage, over a year apart. Giving the barest details, the *Journal* recorded that on 17<sup>h</sup> November 1933 at 5.30 p.m. 'A Film of the Mount Everest Expedition of 1933 by Mr. Wyn Harris' was shown.<sup>13</sup> On 3 December 1934 at 5.30 p.m., 'Mr. Hugh Rutledge's Film of the Mount Everest Expedition 1933 and other Mount Everest Films' were shown.<sup>14</sup> The content of these films and the relationship between them is clarified by examining each of them in turn.

(i) *Everest - Shebbeare*

Shebbeare's film is silent footage, 11 mins in total, shot mainly during the journey across the Tibetan Plateau. In correspondence with Rutledge on

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<sup>13</sup> *Geographical Journal* Vol. LXXXII November 1933 iii

<sup>14</sup> *Geographical Journal* Vol. LXXXIV December 1934 iii



24<sup>th</sup> November 1933, writing from Calcutta, Shebbeare referred to the content:

barring a fairly decent fording scene and the burhel [Himalayan sheep], which are interesting though not good, your own stuff and Wyn's has probably covered all the ground much better than any of mine. The 50ft. stock supplied by Houghton & Butcher (Selo agents) was admittedly bad – coarse grained and an earlier "mark" than the 100ft stock that you were given. H & Bs complain that Selos never gave them any indication of this or that the speed was only about half that of the 100ft stock. I should say that Selo was the most unbusiness[like] firm in the world if I hadn't had the privilege of dealing with Houghton & Butcher who are worse.<sup>15</sup>

Apparently extra stock had been bought in Calcutta and paid for out of Expedition Funds.

(ii) *Ilford Everest 1933*

This film is silent footage shot by Ruttledge, 28 minutes long. In a letter to Hinks dated 19<sup>th</sup> September 1934, Ruttledge wrote:

The film you mention was exposed by me. It was presented to the Mount Everest Expedition by Ilford. I went down myself to Ilford in June, ran through the film with the experts and edited it tentatively. It is the property of the Mount Everest Committee, and if you think it like to be of any interest you may wish to show it at the RGS. I do not suppose it is worth exhibiting in public. If the Committee does not want the film, I shall be glad to take it over for myself, and of course pay the processing charges. Wyn Harris left his brother in charge of his film, and I know not what has been done about it.<sup>16</sup>

Hinks followed up with a letter to Ruttledge on September 25<sup>th</sup> 1934:

On Friday we went through your film... on the whole the episodes are rather too long as the film is cut at present. There is rather a lot of saddling, rather too long a show of football, and generally speaking many of the incidents want a little cutting. The titling is also at present not well adapted to show the interest of the film. The bald titles Camp 1, 2, and 3 tells the spectator little, and the record of course stops with the North Col.

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<sup>15</sup> E. Shebbeare to H. Ruttledge 24<sup>th</sup> November 1933. EE 43/7/4. RGS-IBG

<sup>16</sup> H. Ruttledge to A. Hinks 19<sup>th</sup> September 1934. EE 43/6/14. RGS-IBG

Now we should like to show this film at our Film Meeting on Monday December 3 as part of the programme ... We should probably find it desirable to show a little of Wyn Harris's film of the higher climbing just to continue the interest better.<sup>17</sup>

Ruttledge seemed non-committal about his film, as is illustrated in a typed note dated 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1935 in answer to a request forwarded to him from Shebbeare for a copy of his own material:

The negative film was presented to the expedition of 1933 by Messrs. Ilford. I exposed it in my own Bell-Howell camera. It was developed at home by Messrs. Ilford, who prepared one positive print and 'edited' it in consultation with Mr. Hinks and myself. The positive was shown, once I think, at the RGS and since then I believe the Committee returned it to the keeping of Messrs. Ilford at the latter's request. So far as I am concerned, I will gladly consent to Mr. Shebbeare having a copy made for him.

I know nothing about Mr. Shebbeare's film, except that he bought some reels of negative film in Calcutta, and I believe sent the negative film home. I have never seen it.<sup>18</sup>

In fact Shebbeare was trying to find where his own material had ended up. As he wrote to Hinks in September 1935:

I sent 300ft of 16mm cinematograph film (positive and negative) to the RGS from India as instructed by Mr. Hugh Ruttledge. This was all the film taken by me and was the only stock on 50ft Selo reels taken on that expedition. Could you tell me where the negative of these films is now? I learn from Messrs. Ilford that they have only the 100foot of stock taken by Mr. Ruttledge.<sup>19</sup>

(iii) *Fourth Everest Expedition*

This silent footage is 76 minutes in length, with intertitles. The credit roller names Percy Wyn Harris as the filmmaker with added reference to the film stock used. It further states that the film is 'being shown by permission of

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<sup>17</sup> A. Hinks to H. Ruttledge, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1934. EE 43/6/14b. RGS-IBG

<sup>18</sup> H. Ruttledge to A. Hinks, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1935. EE 43/6/18a. RGS-IBG

<sup>19</sup> E. Shebbeare to A. Hinks, 8<sup>th</sup> September 1935. EE 43/6/18c. RGS-IBG

the Committee of the 1933 Mount Everest Expedition'. In another copy of this film held at the BFI the credit roller explains that the film has been taken on 'substandard film' and offers an apology for any technical and artistic faults – 'substandard' here being the industry definition of 16mm film, rather than the quality of the stock itself. The apologetic tone of the introductory captions firmly places the film as non-commercial. The content is a comprehensive record of the journey, interactions with Tibetans as well as the events of the climb, in the travelogue tradition of Noel's 1922 film. After the return from Everest in 1933 Wyn Harris had to return directly to colonial service in East Africa rather than having a period of leave in which to edit a new version of the film. Correspondence at the Society reveals that his family took control of the exhibition of the edited version in his absence (see below).

(iv) *Climbing Mount Everest 1933*

This film is 32 minutes long, edited down from the longer *Fourth Everest Expedition* and is credited as the official sound version of the Everest Expedition – although as yet I have only been able to locate silent versions. Wyn Harris is named as the cameraman and Frank Smythe the narrator. In a letter to the advertising department at the *Daily Telegraph* on the 18<sup>th</sup> September 1933, H. C. Griffith, Promotion Manager for the Western Electric Co., Bush House, suggested that a proposal be put to the MEC to add a running commentary. Outlining the advantages, such as professional editing and a subsequent distribution package, including the provision of an operator and a projectionist to facilitate bookings of the film, he assured the

RGS that 'you would be relieved of all the work and expense in connection with the distributing of the film and it would be undertaken by an organisation thoroughly conversant with this sort of work'.<sup>20</sup> A sound film would result in larger audiences and negate the expense of hiring lecturers to accompany each screening. Two days later, on the 20<sup>th</sup> September, Arthur Leslie, Manager of the Polytechnic Theatre, Regent Street wrote to J. M. Scott at the RGS:

I do feel that an opportunity should be given the public to see and hear the story of the recent Everest expedition. We are prepared to give the film an indefinite presentation at this theatre which I feel sure would amply repay you for any expense you may enter upon in connection with its preparation.<sup>21</sup>

Western Electric commissioned George Cons, Lecturer in Geography at Goldsmiths College, to write an introductory reader for schools wishing to book a screening of *Climbing Mount Everest 1933*, 'the official sound film record of the 1933 expedition'. The primary aims of the pamphlet were 'to prepare the pupils for a full appreciation of the adventurous climb' as well as identifying 'the geographical value in the film'. To date no sound version of the film has been located, the only material we have from the text of Frank Smythe's narration is printed at the end of this reader:

So Everest remains unbeaten. The topmost point of the Earth's surface has yet to feel the foot of man. The roof of the world guards its eternal solitude in peace.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> H. C. Griffith to J. M. Scott, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1933. EE 43/6/6. RGS-IBG

<sup>21</sup> A. Leslie to J. M. Scott, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1933. EE 43/6/7. RGS-IBG

<sup>22</sup> Cons, G. J. (1934) *The Challenge of Everest*, London: University of London Press, 32

Smythe's own film *Kamet Conquered*, although a record of a successful climb, failed to gain recognition. Ironically he had berated the industry and the public for their unrelenting desire for sensation:

pictures of scenery count for nought against the sensational products of Elstree and Hollywood. The public has been so soaked in sensational make believe that the unvarnished truth is no longer anything but boring. Truth has been prostituted on the altar of art. The cinema audience of today would hardly be content to see the conquest of Everest without the introduction of a fatality.<sup>23</sup>

Frank Smythe (Figure 6.3) along with other members of the 1933 climbing party, undertook to present a series of lectures using lantern slides and extracts from the film. He was permitted to use up to 12 minutes of film in these lectures.<sup>24</sup>

The publicity surrounding the showing of these films generated further media interest in the 1933 climb. Ruttledge was invited by the BBC to take part in a radio broadcast in October 1933 describing his part in the expedition. The BBC subsequently offered him 'an electrical recording in the form of a wax record...we thought you might like to have, for your own personal use, one of the half dozen special records which are being made for the Corporation's own use'.<sup>25</sup> In the early 1950s, Ruttledge returned to the subject of the 1933 expedition, narrating a 50 minute version of the film, *Everest 1933*, produced by Stuart Keen and John Earle (Table 1). This version appears to be a re-edit using content from *Ilford Everest* and *Fourth Everest Expedition*. A revised commentary was added to the film by John

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<sup>23</sup> Smythe, F. (1932) *Kamet Conquered*. London: Gollancz. 411

<sup>24</sup> G. Christy, The Lecture Agency to P. Wyn Harris, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1933. EE 43/6/9. RGS-IBG

<sup>25</sup> Presentation Director, BBC to H. Ruttledge 10<sup>th</sup> October 1933. EE 41/3. RGS-IBG

Earle some fifty years later and presented at the Kendal Mountain Festival in 2013.<sup>26</sup>

Alongside material from the 1933 climb, film material from an earlier British attempt on Everest appeared on the circuits. In May 1933 a review in a Leeds newspaper heralded the trade show of a re-edited version of Captain Noel's 1924 film. Edited down to a 30-minute film in America, Noel was quick to take advantage of the renewed interest in Everest (see Chapter 5). In 1926 Hinks had declared to General Bruce that 'Noel has much to answer for, but I'm afraid he will never realise it.'<sup>27</sup> After a series of lecture tours in America, Noel now returned without any qualms. Re-edited and re-titled *The Tragedy of Mount Everest*, Noel's film footage would re-establish the public's interest in earlier climbs. However the *Yorkshire Post* was quick to report that the film had been spoilt by 'the frothy American narrative that has been added.'<sup>28</sup> A poster added further sensationalism declaring it 'an epic of man's desperate struggle against oriental superstitions and the wraths of the killer-Gods of the Mountain of Death' (Figure 3.9).

### 6.3 The flight over Everest

The concept of an aerial alternative to a climbing expedition on Mount Everest had been considered in the 1920s. In an appendix to his 1927 book

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<sup>26</sup> I am indebted to the Mountain Heritage Trust for providing access to the DVD copy in their collection.

<sup>27</sup> A. Hinks to G. Bruce. 13<sup>th</sup> April 1926. EE 43/4/10a. RGS-IBG

<sup>28</sup> *The Yorkshire Evening Post*. 31<sup>st</sup> May 1933

*Through Tibet to Everest*, Noel himself had written enthusiastically of ‘the conquest of Everest by air’:

The flight to Everest should be made in a north-easterly direction from a Base on the plains of India.....It must be remembered that the great advantage the flight project enjoys over a mountaineering project to reach the summit is that Everest is so close to India – the flight need not exceed 200 miles. Therefore the aviators can reach the mountain and complete the major part of their feat in one day.<sup>29</sup>

The coming of flight created new possibilities for travel film and photography. According to Rachael Low, ‘air transport provided the cinema with a new form of the old phantom ride.’<sup>30</sup> Yet the case for aerial film went wider. Aviator Alan Cobham had pioneered aerial filming in Africa. His films *Round Africa with Cobham* (1928) and *With Cobham to Kivu* (1932) drew praise from Forsyth Hardy in *Cinema Quarterly* magazine:

this aerial travelogue is a remarkable revelation of the startling effects in panoramic geography which it may obtain...S. R. Bonnett who was responsible for the photography has achieved some outstanding and occasionally magnificent work.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, Cobham was approached by the MEC concerning a possible flight over Everest in 1925 but had declined.<sup>32</sup> The RGS received many offers from enthusiasts – stuntmen included – interested in feats of aerial adventure. For example, the idea of a flight to Everest prompted pilot, mechanic and ‘wingwalker’ Roscoe Turner to write to the Society from Corinth, Mississippi in September 1922:

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<sup>29</sup> Noel, J. B.L. (1927) *Through Tibet to Everest*. (4<sup>th</sup> edn. 1989) London: Hodder & Stoughton. 297

<sup>30</sup> Low, R. (1979) *The History of the British Film 1929-1939: Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930s*. London: George Allen & Unwin. 86

<sup>31</sup> *Cinema Quarterly* Vol.1. Autumn 1932 28-29

<sup>32</sup> Item 7. Mount Everest Committee 54<sup>th</sup> Meeting 4<sup>th</sup> November 1925 EE/98. RGS-IBG

I agree to hang from an airplane in the following manner, by using a specially constructed ladder of small steel cable and steel tubing cross bars, the ladder to be about 50 feet in length. In addition to the ladder a grass rope of best quality about a hundred and fifty feet in length and attached to a lifebelt so that should something happen to me while exploring the top the pilot could speed up his motor and pick me up and fly on.....Should you be interested in this method of reaching the top of Mt. Everest, I will make it for you provided you will furnish plane and pilot, all equipment and pay all my expenses'.<sup>33</sup>

A photo was enclosed to provide evidence of his 'size and physique'.

It took another decade before a more realistic plan was devised. In 1932, Stewart Blacker, Indian Army officer and flying corps veteran, and the son-in-law of Lord Peel (Figure 6.4), sought the support of the India Office for an expedition to conduct an aerial survey of Everest. He outlined the expedition objectives as follows:

1. To surmount and explore from the air the most important point, geographically speaking, on the earth's surface, after the poles. By penetrating to what has hitherto proved inaccessible to humanity to set up a new milestone on the road of human achievement.
2. To create a new height record for aircraft carrying two persons, and to add value to this feat by combining it with a flight of interest to geographical science.
3. To produce a cinematograph film of exceptional attraction and real worth, not only to science, but to the world in general.
4. To carry out these feats with British personnel and material as a means of demonstrating to the world the practical pre-eminence of our aircraft and pilots, especially in the sphere of altitude records, which are, at present, held, for the most part, by US and French machines, thereby to stimulate enterprise and initiative.<sup>34</sup>

The anticipated positive outcomes were couched in terms calculated to gain official approval. However, a major consideration in this context was the recent change of heart in Tibet and the renewed plans of the MEC. Alarm

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<sup>33</sup> Turner to National Geographic Society (sic), London. 4th September 1922. EE16/2/141. RGS-IBG

<sup>34</sup> Salmond to Sassoon 7<sup>th</sup> March 1932, with attachment marked confidential. IOR/Mss/Eur/E240/1. 227-229



bells rang at the RGS when, in March 1932, Stewart Blacker first submitted his plans. There was concern that all the careful negotiations to obtain permission for the next attempt to climb Everest would be overturned. The India Office had only agreed to consider Blacker's plan if it had the endorsement of the Society. The Society was not to be asked for financial backing but its approval would give the project the institutional authority it required. E. P. Donaldson of the India Office, wrote to J. Walton, Under Secretary of State, after a meeting with Blacker in March 1932:

He proposes to work under the auspices of a committee composed of Admiral Sir William Goodenough (President R.G.S.), Sir Herbert Lawrence (Chairman of Vickers Aviation), and Lord Peel; but the success of the enterprise depends on his making satisfactory arrangements with the film companies and upon his obtaining support from other interests (e.g. Lord Wakefield, Lady Houston and those interested in the altitude record) for the provision of funds necessary to finance the expedition. He must, therefore, be in a position to produce an assurance in writing that consent will be forthcoming from the Government of Nepal and the Government of India for a flight over their territories before he can negotiate.<sup>35</sup>

Correspondence ensued between Blacker and Hinks in order to gain the endorsement of the Society. A handwritten note to Hinks from Blacker, dated 6<sup>th</sup> April 1932, provides assurances:

Dear Hinks,  
I saw the President here yesterday and spoke about the Mount Everest flight. I was able to assure him, on the strength of interviews with the film people, that the popular or "dramatic" film or films could, and would, be kept entirely separate from the scientific, i.e. the geographic film, and connected pictures. In addition, of course, I could guarantee, that given the benediction of the Society to the enterprise, its name would not appear except in connection with the strictly scientific film.

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<sup>35</sup> E. P. Donaldson to J. Walton. March 1932. IOR/L/PS/12/4255

I set great store by the cachet that the Society can give the project especially if it be conveyed to the India Office, i.e. Sir Samuel Hoare.<sup>36</sup>

On April 27<sup>th</sup> 1932 Arthur Hinks sent a letter of official support for Blacker's project to Walton, Under Secretary of State for India, reporting that the President and Council of the Society were of the opinion that, subject to permission being granted for the flight, 'results of scientific and geographical importance are likely to be obtained'. Walton's reply confirmed the importance given to the role of the Society. "The Secretary of State is grateful for this expression of your Council's views, which will be given full weight when Major Blacker's proposals come before him for official consideration'.<sup>37</sup>

Whitehall imposed rigorous conditions on Blacker concerning the route, the restrictions governing any flight over Nepalese territory and the importance of maintaining good relationships with the Maharajah of Nepal. Weir, Political Officer in Sikkim, who had finally secured permission for the 1933 climbing expedition, had to inform the Tibetan Government and the Dalai Lama of the flight in case the interests of the land expedition might suffer. It is clear from official correspondence that the MEC were kept fully informed of matters as well as Blacker, as indicated in the following letter to Hinks from Donaldson at the India Office, dated 18<sup>th</sup> October 1932:

I write to let you know that, as we arranged, we sent a telegram to the Government of India putting to them the risk of the Tibetans becoming annoyed when they hear of the flight.

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<sup>36</sup> S. Blacker to A. Hinks 6<sup>th</sup> April 1932. CB 10 L.V. S. Blacker. RGS-IBG

<sup>37</sup> J. Walton to A. Hinks. May 1932. IOR/L/PS/12/4255

We have now heard from them that Col. Weir, who is at present in Lhasa, has been authorised to mention the Everest flight to the Tibetan Government in conversation, explaining that it is totally unconnected with the land expedition, that Blacker will not fly over Tibet, but that he has obtained permission to fly from British territory over Nepal to survey the mountain on the Nepalese side. We hope that this action, of which Blacker is being informed, will secure the desired result of avoiding annoyance the Tibetans might feel if the project had not been mentioned to them beforehand.<sup>38</sup>

Donaldson also wrote to Blacker on the same day further qualifying the position:

Weir has suggested that any press communiqués which Colonel Etherton may issue should make it plain that the flight will be over British and Nepalese territory only and that the descriptions of the flight should carefully omit all mention of Tibet, however tempting, in case the interest of the land expedition might suffer. We trust that you will be able to fall in with this suggestion.<sup>39</sup>

Press and publicity would have to be carefully monitored. Although an exclusive deal had been done with *The Times* for news coverage, there would always be the possibility of a rogue report which might offend either the Nepalese or the Tibetans. The *Daily Express* of 17<sup>th</sup> October 1932 included such a report in its gossip column 'The Talk of London':

The organisers...have arranged for a complete film of the mountain in all its magnificent impregnability to be taken...The pilots will fly over two "forbidden" countries Nepal and Tibet, and they expect to cross and encircle the mountain in eighty minutes.

The film of this amazing flight should, indeed, be an epic – to apply perhaps the most misused word in Hollywood. In any case, the filming of two "forbidden" lands and the world's highest mountain by British airmen will easily eclipse any Hollywood "epic".<sup>40</sup>

When contacted by Donaldson over this sensational story, Blacker indignantly described it as 'bilge':

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<sup>38</sup> E. P. Donaldson to A. Hinks. 18<sup>th</sup> October 1932. IOR/L/PS/12/4255

<sup>39</sup> E. P. Donaldson to L. V. S. Blacker. 18<sup>th</sup> October 1932. IOR/L/PS/12/4255

<sup>40</sup> *Daily Express* 17<sup>th</sup> October 1932

the newspaper rights are now in the hands of the “Times” who will, I trust ensure that no-one poaches on their preserves. But no one can guarantee that irresponsible “freelancers” will not insert paragraphs in gossip columns. We can but contradict them officially.<sup>41</sup>

When news of the unfortunate column reached Weir in Lhasa, a telegram was despatched to the India Office asking for steps to be taken to prevent publication of such misleading statements, emphasising in particular the phrase about the ‘filming of the two forbidden lands’.<sup>42</sup> Donaldson reminded Blacker of ‘the danger to the interests of the land expedition’ and suggested that, before leaving for India, Colonel Etherton should ‘make the acquaintance of our Information Officer, Mr. MacGregor, with whom we would ask him to co-operate on the issue of press communiqués.’<sup>43</sup> However this was not the last time press reports were to cause difficulty. The *Daily Telegraph* reported on the forthcoming flight on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1932:

The equipment will include the most up-to-date photographic apparatus for the taking of cinematographic films, and the pictorial records of flights over Nepal and Tibet and the great mountain itself will be intensely interesting.<sup>44</sup>

Managing sensationalism in the press would continue to be problematic. In order to emphasise the worthy scientific outcomes of the expedition, Lord Peel, President of the Everest Flight Committee put out a statement, headed ‘The scientific goal’, which was printed in newspapers around the world:

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<sup>41</sup> L. V. S. Blacker to E. P. Donaldson. 19<sup>th</sup> October 1932.

IOR/L/PS/12/4255

<sup>42</sup> Decipher of Telegram from L. Weir, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1932. P.Z.7120/32

IOR/L/PS/12/4255

<sup>43</sup> E. P. Donaldson to L. V. S. Blacker, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1932. P.Z.7120/32

IOR/L/PS/12/4255

<sup>44</sup> *Daily Telegraph* 14<sup>th</sup> December 1932

Its scientific goal consists in mapping by cameras the inaccessible glaciers, valleys and cliffs on the southern flank of Mount Everest. The aim is not so much to produce a map of any immediate practical utility as to demonstrate to the world the relative facility and quickness with which such a map can be made of a region forbidden to ground methods by both policy and physical obstacles of the country. It is hoped to supplement the vertical survey photographs taken along the course of the two machines by a new method of using stereoscopic 'obliques'. In addition to the actual topographical mapping there is definite expectation of adding to geological and physiographical knowledge and possibly it may be feasible to explore the gravitational field and record accelerometer observations. Besides the tangible scientific objectives there is the more immediate one of bringing home to the world the supremacy of British aircraft and engines.<sup>45</sup>

*The Times* officially reported the progress of the flight over Everest under the terms of its exclusive agreement with the Mount Everest Flight Committee. Their Aeronautical Correspondent, E. Coulston Shepherd, sent regular accounts from Purnea (a town in Bihar, 50 miles from the Nepalese border) of the preparations being made for the flight to Everest, including informative pieces on the techniques being used by the Gaumont British film crew under the direction of established British director Geoffrey Barkas (Figures 6.5, 6.6 and 6.7):

29<sup>th</sup> March 1933

Since our arrival in India much attention has been paid by Mr. Geoffrey Barkas and his assistants of the Gaumont-British Film Corporation to the making of preliminary sections of the Gaumont-British film which is to record the whole work of the expedition. The pilots, unaccustomed to the camera, have learned to adapt themselves to film technique, and have arranged a scheme of flying to give the operators the best opportunity of making good films aloft. All across India the machines flew in formation for one to be photographed from the other against interesting and picturesque backgrounds.<sup>46</sup>

An explanation was given of how filming would be carried out at high

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<sup>45</sup> *Star*, Christchurch, NZ. 25<sup>th</sup> February 1933. EE 50a. Everest Flight 1933, bound file of newscuttings, RGS-IBG

<sup>46</sup> *The Times* 29<sup>th</sup> March 1933

altitude:

For special “shots” during subsidiary flights film cameras, controlled by cables, will be slung under the starboard wing and on the post near the tail of the Westland-Wallace aeroplane, and should afford remarkable pictures of flying in mountain country.

31<sup>st</sup> March 1933

An aeroplane trip to the Nepal frontier to examine conditions from the point of view of photography was made by Mr. Geoffrey Barkas, of the Gaumont-British Film Corporation, and Air Commodore Fellowes this morning... Regarding the work of photographers at an altitude, Mr. Barkas said experience showed that the standing position, with head and shoulders above the cockpit, was indispensable for freedom of movement and training the cameras, but the limit of time for this exposed position was two minutes. He added that the exertion of moving in the cockpit at an altitude, shifting the cameras and bending to reload was much more exhausting than at ordinary heights and pressures.<sup>47</sup>

Although permission was only granted for one attempt to fly over the summit it was found that, due to poor weather conditions creating dust haze, the photographic results were poor and a second unauthorised flight was undertaken on April 19th. This was a risky venture but one which brought success. It was reported that mail for the Rutledge expedition was to be taken on the flight, though the climbing party was not spotted as, in fact, they had days before entered Tibet from Sikkim. A photograph of Etherton handing a bag of mail to the pilot, reportedly containing letters to The King and Lady Houston, duly appeared in the press coverage (Figure 6.8).

After the successful flight on 19th April 1933, *The Times* continued to report on the progress of the film in order to maintain public interest. On 22<sup>nd</sup> April the newspaper published a profile of film director Geoffrey Barkas and

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<sup>47</sup> *The Times* 31<sup>st</sup> March 1933

the two cameramen, S. R. Bonnett (who had filmed with Alan Cobham on his long-distance flights) and Arthur Fisher (cameraman on the second unauthorised flight), ( Figures 6.9, 6.10, 6.11 and 6.12). 'The record of this enterprise', the paper intoned, 'with its great services to science and its inevitable appeal to the public at large, should go down in film history as a pioneer achievement without parallel'.<sup>48</sup>

On 13<sup>th</sup> May 1933 *The Times* reported that the daily continuity reports, or 'dope sheets', made by the cameramen had been received at the Gaumont British London offices. 'There is even a laconic touch in the report made on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, when Everest was surmounted...baldly chronicled by Mr. Bonnett as "Snow scenes over Everest in the sun" ...an extraordinarily interesting film is in the making'.<sup>49</sup> The film crew's activities were also reported in the Indian press. The *Allahabad Pioneer* reported on 30 March that while they waited for the weather to clear, 'the cinema experts are busy taking films of everything of local colour such as the Maharaja of Durbhanga's elephants bathing at Korha'.<sup>50</sup> The *Times of India* reported a day later that

There was a huge gathering at Lalbalu this morning when a talkie film was made with the landing base as the background, the expeditionists participating and Soanthal dancers and gaily decked elephants figuring prominently. Lord Clydesdale and Mr. McIntyre flew in the Westlands for a few minutes when the film was taken.<sup>51</sup>

The achievement of the flight itself was celebrated in India as well as London. In the words of a reporter for *The Statesman*, published in Calcutta on 7 April, 'The world shrinks in time and space. For the first time man

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<sup>48</sup> *The Times* 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1933

<sup>49</sup> *The Times* 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1933

<sup>50</sup> *Pioneer Allahabad* 30<sup>th</sup> March 1933

<sup>51</sup> *Times of India* 31<sup>st</sup> March 1933

flew above Everest on Monday and yesterday morning the aeroplane left Karachi carrying several parcels of film illustrating the flight'.<sup>52</sup>

Although presented to the RGS as a scientific venture designed to advance the possibilities of aerial mapping and photographing the roof of the world, the sponsorship of the Houston-Mount Everest Expedition and its film suggested other agendas were in play. According to Zander (2010) the flight over Everest was 'a techno-political display – a high nationalist statement about British regeneration and the power relations of empire'.<sup>53</sup> The flight depended on the financial backing of Lady Houston (Figure 6.13), a wealthy and independent-minded woman known equally for her sponsorship of aviation and her right-wing politics (as discussed below). But the film itself also depended on a conventional commercial infrastructure. Production was controlled by one of the largest British film companies, Gaumont British Productions, which took the opportunity not only to make a film of the flight over Everest for commercial distribution, but also to take film footage at various sites in India and Nepal for other uses. At the outset it was decided that full advantage would be taken of the location and the fact that a professional film crew would be sent out with the expedition personnel. A series of short travelogues were planned to maximise opportunities for the growing instructional market. The India Office provided advice on the correct protocols within the individual Indian States:

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<sup>52</sup> *The Statesman*, Calcutta 7<sup>th</sup> April 1933

<sup>53</sup> Zander, P. (2010) '(Right) Wings Over Everest: High Adventure, High Technology and High Nationalism on the Roof of the World, 1932-1934'. *Twentieth Century British History* 21, 329



we are sure that the party will find no obstacles placed in their way in connection with their visit to cities in British India, but suggest that they should communicate in advance with the District Officers at the places they intend to visit and with the Director of Information, Bombay, giving them particulars of their plans and ask them for any advice they may require as to the scenes they prepare to photograph.<sup>54</sup>

Permission had to be obtained from local rulers to undertake these filming projects. Scripts would be vetted first by Whitehall and then locally. Such requirements may have been influenced by a determination not to repeat the diplomatic blunders that had occurred when dealing with the Government of Tibet in 1924. The directors Geoffrey Barkas and Ivor Montagu complied with all official requests. A private showing of the film *Wings Over Everest* was provided for India Office officials at the Gaumont British Studios at Lime Grove on the 26<sup>th</sup> July 1933 and a report sent to the government of India in Simla indicating that 'there was nothing in the film to which any objection could possibly be taken'. Advice was also taken on the contents of the short films, particularly the one filmed in Kathmandu, 'in case there might be scenes included in it which might offend Nepalese susceptibilities'.<sup>55</sup>

While the politics of making film in India and Nepal were managed relatively smoothly, the sponsorship of the flight by Lady Houston resulted in further difficulties at home. Having invested £15,000 in the expedition (the current equivalent is £760,000) Houston was determined that the film was made and presented in a way consistent with her views. She described

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<sup>54</sup> India Office to P. T. Etherton, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1933. P.Z.892/33  
IOR/L/PS/12/4255

<sup>55</sup> Letter J. Walton to W. Fraser-Tytler, August 1933. IOR/L/PS/12/4255

the expedition principally as a means of affirming Britain's prestige in India rather than simply as a scientific achievement. On 1st June 1933, the day a grand lunch was held at Grosvenor House to celebrate the achievements of the expedition, she issued a press release explaining her motives in financing it. Asserting the values of the 'English Race', she emphasised the potential impact of such a 'great deed of heroism' in the face of campaigns for Indian independence:

For this is surely a proof to them that pluck and courage are not dead in our race, and perhaps, who can tell, this may make them remember all the advantages and privileges they have enjoyed under English rule, and all the loving kindness that was shown them by our forefathers, who fed them when there was famine, who nursed them when there was plague, and who administered absolute justice to them in every dispute.<sup>56</sup>

While Lady Houston's statement was printed in some of the press, *The Times* did not report it; and moreover its proprietor, Major Astor, declined to read out her message to the celebratory dinner as he deemed it too 'political'. Convinced that *The Times* was taking undue credit for its sponsorship while refusing to endorse her case for a renewal of empire in India, Houston responded by issuing writs and publishing her correspondence with Astor, while making explicit her case against what she regarded as the 'betrayal of India':

This correspondence reveals to what depths advocates of the White Paper [on the government of India] will descend. The searchlight of publicity exposes Major Astor and the Editor of "The Times" – AS MEN WHO DARED NOT SPEAK OR PRINT THE TRUTH contained in my message –Why I Financed the Houston Mount Everest Expedition.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> 'The Everest flight: Lady Houston explains why she financed it', 1st June 1933. Subject Files: Mount Everest: 1933 Houston Mount Everest Expedition. TNL Archive

<sup>57</sup> *Correspondence Between Lady Houston and Major Astor, M.P. Proprietor of The Times Newspaper*. 13<sup>th</sup> June 1933. TNL Archive

Houston also complained about the management of the filming over Everest, which against her wishes had involved filming on more than one flight. For her, the flight itself was the ultimate aim and not the quality of the images recorded. Reports from E. Coulston Shepherd, *The Times* correspondent writing to his foreign news editor from Peshawar on 28 April, revealed resentment amongst the film crew at her interference:

No member of the party will join any future Houston stunt. What made them especially bitter and caused the two pilots to dig their toes in was the feeling that they'd been caught by Lucy for the stunt part of the show and then forbidden to do the only bit of serious work in the programme. They did not want publicity... Clydesdale has consulted his solicitors as to his right to have cut out of the film any sections in which he appears, which may show him in sensational or heroic light.<sup>58</sup>

Clydesdale finally let his feelings be known in no uncertain way. He and McIntyre eventually documented their roles in *The Pilots' Book of Everest*, published in 1936. An introductory chapter, entitled *Apologia Nostrum*, held little back:

In our opinion the whole value of the film would begin and end by depicting a true account of our activities as they took place. I believe that a film of this kind would not only have been appreciated properly by the public, but be of scientific interest.....The film that was actually produced in its finished form proved to be neither the one thing nor the other. It depicted film shots taken on different flights each with different weather conditions, all shown as though they were taken on the one flight. The two Gaumont air photographers produced truly magnificent material, possibly the best film pictures ever taken of high mountains, but considering what foundations for a perfect production there were, the finished film was very disappointing.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> E. C. Shepherd to R. Deakin. 28<sup>th</sup> April 1933. TNL Archive

<sup>59</sup> Douglas and Clydesdale, Marquess, and McIntyre, D. (1936) *The Pilots' Book of Everest*. London: Hodge. 4-5

Clydesdale also commented that there could have been a combined expedition of climbers and the flying team, 'each branch in touch and collaborating with the other by wireless and giving mutual assistance'.

Lady Houston's imperial agenda, the Gaumont-British Film Corporation's commercial ambitions for the film and the interests of advertisers were difficult to reconcile. *The Times* correspondent privately reported that Clydesdale had returned a watch to Rolex, along with a threatening letter, after they had used his name in publicity without his permission; and that the use of the Dictaphone to record pilot's commentary while in the air over Everest had been persevered with for purely commercial reasons, despite the fact that it had proved 'utterly useless'.<sup>60</sup>

The desire to produce a commercially successful film naturally influenced the way it was made. Describing his part in directing the film in the official expedition account, Barkas suggested that a 'working scenario' had been used, though the final form of the film could only be devised once the outcome of the flight was known:

My principal duty had been to amass all possible information and to give facts dramatic significance – in short to produce a working scenario.....Everest herself must write the climax and denouement: so the script was worked out in detail up to the morning of the famous flight. The machines would leave the ground – and then a blank.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> E. C. Shepherd to R. Deakin. 28<sup>th</sup> April 1933. Subject files: Mount Everest: 1933 Houston Mount Everest Expedition. TNL Archive

<sup>61</sup> Barkas, G. (1933) 'Filming the Flight', in Fellowes, P., Blacker, L.V.S., Etherton, P., Douglas and Clydesdale, Marquess. *First Over Everest: The Houston- Mount Everest Expedition 1933*. London: Bodley Head. 235

While weather conditions delayed flights, Barkas had busied himself in setting up establishing shots. These included getting the pilots to don their heated suits for the camera:

I managed to dragoon the members of the flight into playing scenes in which they appeared in the full regalia of heated suits, helmets and goggles. As these manoeuvres were carried out on the burning plains of India, instead of the rare and refreshing altitudes for which these feather bed boiler suits were designed, I was surprised at the docility in which they consented to play.<sup>62</sup>

This form of production was the very antithesis of the MEC's instructions to Noel on climbing expeditions, which was never to intrude on the work of the expedition. The filming did not end with the conclusion of the flights. Blacker and Etherton travelled with the film crew to Darjeeling, where they were entertained by the Governor of Bengal, Sir John Anderson. Filming on Tiger Hill, looking towards Kangchenjunga, Blacker and Etherton staged a very stilted scene in which they wondered if man would ever fly over Everest. This would eventually form the opening sequence of *Wings Over Everest*. In his history of the 1933 flight, James Douglas-Hamilton refers to Clydesdale's 'reservations' about the value of the film, which omitted the work of the meteorologists and the assistance given by local rulers. 'Barkas on the other hand intended the film to be an enthralling account of a great achievement and of the tenacity which had led to its success'.<sup>63</sup> Barkas dramatized the problem encountered by cameraman Bonnett when his oxygen supply developed a leak during the second flight. A reconstruction shows the severed air pipeline being hastily mended with a cloth and the

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<sup>62</sup> Barkas, 'Filming the Flight', 241

<sup>63</sup> Douglas-Hamilton, J. (1983) *Roof of the World: Man's First Flight Over Everest*. Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing. 146

plucky cameraman carrying on regardless. In reality the physical act of filming in such conditions was, if anything, even more dramatic and dangerous. Blacker who flew with Clydesdale described in great detail the contortions of observing and managing the equipment:

I alternated between diving down to the survey camera to help it do its appointed task, and leaning over the side of the open cockpit to take obliques and train the cinema camera on magnificent spectacles.<sup>64</sup>

The survey camera filmed through an open hatch in the floor and the cumbersome heated flying suit and goggles were necessary to enable filming in the open cockpit (Figures 6.14 and 6.15). Hazardous at any time, there was the added danger of carrying flammable nitrate film stock which had to be kept clear of the heating wires which were plugged into the cockpit.

Relations between the expedition team and Lady Houston were worsened by a dispute over ownership of an advance paid by Gaumont British on account of royalties. Concerned that this might go to court and become public knowledge, Blacker visited Donaldson at the India Office on the 18<sup>th</sup> May to seek advice. Officials sympathised but, unsurprisingly, did not want to become involved. A handwritten note from Sir Samuel Hoare summarised the position. 'I do not at all want to be drawn into controversy with this demented lady'. Donaldson was of the opinion that Lady Houston was 'wholly unreasonable and capricious, but since she had provided the funds and her name was prominently associated with the expedition, I thought it

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<sup>64</sup> Blacker, L. V. S. (1939) 'Flight Over Everest' in Sykes, P. (ed.) *Explorers All*. London: George Newnes. 157

was for the Committee to come to terms with her; they ought not to expect a Government Department to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for them'.<sup>65</sup>

Houston's argument with the film-makers extended to its content as well. A carefully-posed introductory scene purporting to be filmed at her Scottish hunting lodge (though in reality at Byron Lodge in Hampstead) had been cut out by the directors. In this scene she had articulated her rationale for funding the expedition – 'the people of India will then know from this success that we are not the decadent people their leaders try to make us out to be'. Ivor Montagu, one of the film directors (whose role is discussed below), recalled 'trying to deflect her from fierce references to Gandhi, currently fasting and in danger of dying'.<sup>66</sup> However, Houston went to the Studios demanding an explanation and after some resistance the scene went back in.<sup>67</sup> *Wings Over Everest* premiered in the Curzon Cinema on 3rd June 1934. As reviewed later in this chapter opinion was mixed – while the audacious flight captured the public's imagination, the structure and content of the film was disappointing.

#### 6.4 Exhibition of the 1933 films

##### 6.4.1 Climbing Mount Everest 1933

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<sup>65</sup> E. P. Donaldson to J. Walton, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1933. P.Z.2936/33 IOR/L/PS/12/4255

<sup>66</sup> Brown, G. 'Table Tennis Over Everest'. *Sight and Sound*. Vol.53. Spring 1984. 98-99

<sup>67</sup> Macnair, M. (2016) *Lady Lucy Houston DBE: Aviation Champion and Mother of the Spitfire*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Aviation 130

The sound version of Wyn Harris' film was first shown at the Polytechnic Theatre in London's Upper Regent Street on 18th December 1933. The Polytechnic Theatre was well established as the specialist venue for travel film screenings. Noel's film of the 1922 Everest expedition had been screened there from August to September 1923, closely followed by *Nanook of the North* in December. Smythe's *Kamet Conquered* and *With Cobham to Kivu* had played as a double bill in February 1933. The Everest film would play from December 1933 to January 1934. The following summer, from July to September, *Wings Over Everest* would be shown with Flaherty's *Man of Aran* as a double bill (Figure 6.16).

As Wyn Harris had returned to colonial service in East Africa, his father and brother played a significant part in arrangements for the exhibition of his film. Although Rutledge had been deputed by the Mount Everest Committee to take responsibility for negotiations over distribution,<sup>68</sup> he reported to the Committee on 23 November that the Harris family had signed a contract with the Polytechnic Theatre to show the film for a period of six weeks for a payment of £300. As the family had spent £360 on putting a sound track to the film, there was a shortfall of £60 which would potentially be covered by the renewal of the contract with the Polytechnic Theatre for a further six weeks or by showing the film in schools through the Film Library. The Committee resolved that the Harris family should not

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<sup>68</sup> Item 7. Mount Everest Committee 79<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1933. EE/98. RGS-IBG



bear any financial loss.<sup>69</sup> The Harris family were also involved in arrangements for the wider distribution of the film through the Western Electric Company's popular road shows (Figure 6.17). This required a commitment from the MEC that it would make no claim to the 'talking version of the film'. When Rutledge put this proposal to Hinks in December 1933 he responded in no uncertain terms:

I cannot agree that the Mount Everest Committee have no claim to profits derived from this film, or at any rate after the out of pocket expenses of the sound record have been covered, but there does not seem to be anything on record here about the arrangements you made with Mr. Harris and I wish you would send me a note of it.<sup>70</sup>

Although Hinks was invited to the first showing of *Climbing Mount Everest 1933*, his invitation card remained unanswered (Figure 3.3). He actually went to see the film the following day. The 30-minute film played alongside a programme including a film of pearl diving in the Malay, *Samarang*, and a selection of Mickey Mouse and other Disney cartoons. Hinks was not impressed and on the 28<sup>th</sup> December he wrote to George Harris, Percy's brother, with his observations :

Seeing the film advertised to be shown at the Polytechnic Theatre , I went to see it on the 19<sup>th</sup>, and it seemed to me that it had been greatly spoiled by the synchronisation with a talking record which required that the film should be shown half as fast again as it was taken. The result is that people scutter about in a very unnatural way instead of moving with the extreme slowness required by high altitude....It is a great pity that this point was not attended to when the record was made.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Item 4. Mount Everest Committee 81<sup>st</sup> Meeting 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1933. EE/98. RGS-IBG

<sup>70</sup> A. Hinks to H. Rutledge 28<sup>th</sup> December 1933. EE 43/6/11b. RGS-IBG

<sup>71</sup> A. Hinks to G. Harris 28<sup>th</sup> December 1933. EE 43/6/11c. RGS-IBG

Hinks' letter may offer a hint about the manner in which sound had been provided, which may have been in the form of a sound disc. This would explain the fact that all existing copies of the Wyn Harris' film are silent, including his own master copy of the film, presented to the Alpine Club by his widow. Sound discs made to accompany film at this time had limited life, so it is unlikely that such a disc survives. Western Electric projectors could accommodate film with or without a sound track (Figure 6.18). In this context, it is worth noting that Smythe's commentary on *Kamet* also falls short of expectation – it is monotone, complete with audible corrections, and accompanying dreary music – adding little to the historic content and impressive high altitude camerawork. In a letter to Hinks, George Harris asked if the longer silent version of the Wyn Harris film was being loaned to schools by the RGS, as this would interfere with the distribution of the sound version by Western Electric.<sup>72</sup> This was emphatically denied by Hinks. The misunderstanding was probably caused by an enthusiastic review of the long version of the film by Forsyth Hardy in *Cinema Quarterly* magazine:

A record of the Everest Expedition, made by Wyn Harris, who had no previous film experience, has been produced with a £40 Kodak camera. The film, which lasts for 75 minutes, is a valuable document, and as the 16mm stock on which it was made cost only £30 it should do much to encourage amateur production when it comes to be publicly shown.<sup>73</sup>

The next issue of the same magazine published an image of Everest taken from the film, stating that:

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<sup>72</sup> G. Harris to A. Hinks. EE 43/6/15. RGS-IBG

<sup>73</sup> *Cinema Quarterly* Vol.2 Autumn 1933. 65

The film which lasts for 75 minutes has been publicly shown on a full screen at the London Polytechnic and should do much to popularise sub-standard production. Enquiries regarding the hiring of this film should be sent to the Royal Geographical Society, South Kensington, London SW7.<sup>74</sup>

I have not found reference to any such plans to hire out this version and so can only assume that, in Forsyth Hardy's enthusiasm for the long version, he had been over optimistic about its potential use.

An attempt to create some publicity around screenings of the short version of the film was quickly rebuffed by Hinks. Western Electric Road Show Agents in Bournemouth, Aish & Co., wrote to Literary Agents Christy & Moore Ltd. on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1934, asking for permission to reprint a colourful passage written by Frank Smythe in Rutledge's newly-published account of the climb.<sup>75</sup> The headline to an article about the book, published in the *Daily Express* of 1<sup>st</sup> October 1934, would have infuriated Hinks: 'The Unseen Ghost that Haunted a Lone Everest Climber – he saw two weird things hovering over the mountain'. The hapless agents, Aish & Co., asked to reprint the passage in a leaflet to distribute to prospective clients, saying that it was 'of particular interest to ourselves and our clients since the running commentary in the film is spoken by Mr. Frank Smythe himself'.

Hinks' reply was terse:

I am bound to say that I do not approve of using this rather sensational extract from the book in dealing with the film. It appears to me to be giving unnecessary emphasis to a rather fantastic account by a climber at the limit of his endurance. It is just the thing that a sensational newspaper would pick out of the book, but I do not myself think it is quite fair to use it in advertising the film.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Cinema Quarterly* Vol.2 Winter 1933. 119

<sup>75</sup> Letter Aish & Co to Christy & Moore 11<sup>th</sup> October 1934. EE 44/4. RGS-IBG

<sup>76</sup> A. Hinks to Aish & Co. 19<sup>th</sup> October 1934. EE 44/1/32. RGS-IBG

In her *History of British Film*, Rachael Low dismissed the 1933 Everest film as below standard: 'Bad weather and inadequate equipment led to a film which, though made with courage and determination was said to be technically poor and of little interest'.<sup>77</sup> *Sight and Sound's* review was a little more positive:

This is a very impressive film... but after seeing it one is tempted to make a case for the still camera as opposed to cinematography for use on mountain climbing expeditions...at these unimaginable heights there can be no material for the cinecamera: no life or movement beyond the extremely slow movement of the climbers – the only thing that moves fast is the wind.<sup>78</sup>

*Sight and Sound* reported a great deal of interest from schools in booking the film. A group booking scheme to be run by local educational authorities was suggested. Western Electric Road Shows were widely advertised in the BFI publication (Figure 6.19). Fulfilling the BFI remit to foster the art of film, the magazine concentrated on documentary and expeditionary titles with reviewers such as Paul Rotha providing authoritative critiques of available material. Articles on educational material and equipment were practical, designed for use in the classroom and film society use – specialising in geographical and travel releases in particular. With the advent of sound, a 'dual format' approach had been widely adopted by the film industry; projectors in the early 1930s could play a silent film with synchronised sound in disc form or as a combined picture and sound film. The Spring 1933 issue of *Sight and Sound* announced the new service being

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<sup>77</sup> Low, R. (1979) *The History of the British Film 1929-1939: Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930s*. London: George Allen & Unwin. 85

<sup>78</sup> *Sight and Sound* Vol.2. Winter 1933-34. 145-6

provided by the Western Electric Company: 'One of the major difficulties in developing the use of film for educational purposes arises from the fact that schools and other potential users of films lack the necessary equipment and are unable to buy it during the present time of financial stress'.<sup>79</sup> Licensees acted as agents for Western Electric who supplied them with 'portable sound reproducing apparatus ready at any time for exhibition in classroom, factories or club halls. Only safety film is used and there need be no preliminary difficulties with the licensing authorities. The unit can be operated from any electric lighting point...if no supply is available a petrol electric generator can be used'. This was a convenient and efficient means of distributing 16mm material. Local agents provided demonstrations of the equipment for teachers. The *Yorkshire Evening Post* of 9<sup>th</sup> November 1934 declared that 'the portable equipment necessary for showing the films, including projector, screen and talking apparatus can be erected in the classroom in half an hour'.<sup>80</sup> The provision of equipment, films and qualified operators to run the projectors was considered a great success. The Summer 1935 issue of *Sight and Sound* ran a review article on the first year of the service. Over 15,000 screenings had taken place since December 1933. One film gets special mention: '*Climbing Mount Everest* has proved an enormous success, over 700 exhibitions of this film alone have been arranged'.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Sight and Sound* Vol.2. Spring 1933. 10

<sup>80</sup> *The Yorkshire Evening Post* 9<sup>th</sup> November 1934. 14

<sup>81</sup> *Sight and Sound* Vol.4. Summer 1935. 80

*Climbing Mount Everest 1933* was seen more widely than has sometimes been supposed. This is apparent in publicity for local screenings such as in the *Burnley Express* of 14<sup>th</sup> March 1934. Under the heading 'First Presentation in the North of England' an announcement declares that the Sound Film Record of the Mount Everest Expedition will be shown in the Cooperative Assembly Rooms on the 29<sup>th</sup> March, with proceeds going to the Children's Clog Fund.<sup>82</sup> Lebas (2011) makes special mention of the film in her study of municipal cinema, noting that the Western Electric Roadshow agent in Scotland had shown the film 'in Glaswegian non-commercial cultural venues as diverse as the Cameronian Regimental Memorial Club and the Jewish Institute.'<sup>83</sup> The Spring 1934 issue of *Sight and Sound* ran a review of new apparatus with comparative prices. The Western Electric 16mm sound-on-disc projector is described in detail – with variable speed to accommodate both film and records, the motor is enclosed to reduce noise when running and greater portability is achieved by having an easily detachable disc assembly.<sup>84</sup> At £255 it was the most expensive 'substandard' projector on the market – but of course Western Electric already had provision for hire through the road show scheme in place.

In subsequent years, the 1933 Everest film fell into obscurity. A letter written to the Editor of the *Manchester Guardian* in July 1953, after the news of the successful ascent, was headed '1933 Everest Film' –

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<sup>82</sup> *Burnley Express* 14<sup>th</sup> March 1934

<sup>83</sup> Lebas, E. (2011) *British Municipal Cinema 1920-1980: Forgotten Futures*. London: Blackdog Publishing. 136

<sup>84</sup> *Sight and Sound* Vol.3. Spring 1934. 45

I have a copy of the Everest film made in 1933 by Wyn Harris, with a spoken account by Frank Smythe. I should be glad to give a show of this film to any bona-fide interested club or society. I also possess the necessary obsolescent equipment.<sup>85</sup>

One wonders if Mr. Pritchard of Wythenshawe got any requests to show his copy and indeed what then happened to the film and the equipment.

#### 6.4.2. *Wings Over Everest*

*Wings Over Everest* was not released until a year after the successful flight over Everest in April 1933. The co-director, Ivor Montagu, had remained in London during the filming on location. For the son of a hereditary peer and avowed communist, founding member of the London Film Society and promoter of Soviet film, this might seem an unusual choice of film subject. However, as Campbell (2018) notes, it appealed to the mischievous side of Montagu's nature. Montagu recalled the reaction of Woolf and other Gaumont-British executives at an initial screening – 'they were clutching each other in hysterics of laughter....the most absurd thing ever made, but truthful, not of the upper class, but of the way they would see themselves'.<sup>86</sup> Contemporary reviewers were divided. Forsyth Hardy considered that the film had 'value and impressiveness which would withstand the most indifferent presentation'.<sup>87</sup> A review in the *Observer* found that the film was successful 'as a study in the engaging nonchalance of the Englishman in the

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<sup>85</sup> Pritchard, E. J. '1933 Everest Film' *Manchester Guardian* 15<sup>th</sup> July 1953

<sup>86</sup> Campbell, R. (2018) *Codename Intelligentsia: the Life and Times of the Honourable Ivor Montagu, Fimmaker, Communist, Spy*. Stroud: The History Press. 232

<sup>87</sup> *Cinema Quarterly* Summer 1934. 252

face of danger'.<sup>88</sup> Paul Rotha however considered the style of the film 'too chatty for conviction. This is accentuated by the "Play up you chaps!" attitude adopted throughout by most of the persons appearing in the film and stamps the picture with that false sincerity associated with the fifth form'.<sup>89</sup> Film historian Rachael Low recognised the achievements of the cameramen on the flight sequences: 'In some ways it was the most ambitious British expeditionary film of the thirties, different in every way to the polar and climbing films'.<sup>90</sup> Probably the most scathing review appeared in the *Alpine Journal*, in 1934:

The flight itself being contained in the last five minutes, of which the most interesting part is confined to forty-five seconds or less...The films give mostly the appearance of having been taken through a keyhole covered with sheep netting.<sup>91</sup>

The film appeared on a double bill with a musical *Two Hearts in Waltz Time*. It was also included in the non-theatrical catalogues of the 1930s. Lowell Thomas re-edited the material for the US market, cutting it down from 45 minutes to 20 minutes and adding new sections of narration (as discussed below). This version achieved far greater success than the original and in 1936 *Wings Over Mt. Everest* won an Academy award as Best Novelty Short.

An interesting comparison of the two 1933 Everest films appeared in the *Illustrated London News*. Alice Greeven (writing under the pseudonym Michael Orme) in her regular column, 'The World of the Kinema', expressed

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<sup>88</sup> *Observer* 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1934

<sup>89</sup> *Sight and Sound* Vol.3. Summer 1934. 74

<sup>90</sup> Low, R. (1979) *History of the British Film 1929-1939: Films of Comment and Persuasion in the 1930s*. London: George Allen & Unwin. 85

<sup>91</sup> *Alpine Journal* Vol.XLVI. 1934. 405-6



more admiration for the climbing film than the big budget film of the flight. Having watched *Climbing Mount Everest* at the Polytechnic, she described it as an ‘engrossing, courageous film...a tale of achievement rather than of failure’.<sup>92</sup> However she was not so impressed by the dramatized sequences in *Wings Over Everest* which were described as ‘much like those bashful microphone “messages” of the latest sporting personality....all the nonchalant courage and modesty after great achievement that characterises the whole picture is summed up in the answer to the question put to the airmen by his waiting colleague: “What was it like?” – “Oh – all right”’.<sup>93</sup>

#### 6.5. Re-editing and reversioning

The material basis for this chapter is constituted by the archive of film which survives from that taken on the expeditions of 1933. As with all archival film the surviving film may only be a portion of the original footage. And it is clear from the above that the films had a variety of different uses – special interest, educational and commercial. Further investigation is required to address detailed questions regarding the multiple versions of the film record including the issue of the sound track on *Climbing Mount Everest 1933* and the provenance of the longer film *Fourth Everest Expedition*. The existence of multiple versions of the 1933 climb has long been acknowledged: as Rachael Low noted, ‘Different versions of it, in different lengths and with or without synchronised commentary, seem to

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<sup>92</sup> Orme, M. (1933) The World of the Kinema. *The Illustrated London News* 30<sup>th</sup> December 1933

<sup>93</sup> Orme, M. (1934) The World of the Kinema. *The Illustrated London News* 16<sup>th</sup> January 1934

have appeared'.<sup>94</sup> The Western Electric pamphlet *Challenge of Everest* refers to the film as 'the official sound record', raising a further question: was there an option of a sound-on-disc version as well as a combined sound on film? As Smythe's own film *Kamet Conquered* had been released in both silent and sound versions, it is possible that Wyn Harris followed this model.

The reversioning of film footage from the Houston-Mount Everest Expedition was planned from the start. In 1934 Gaumont British released four short films made during the expedition under the series title '*Secrets of India*': these were *Bikaner, Fair City of Udaipur, Darjeeling a Foothill Town* and *Devil Dancers of Sikkim*.<sup>95</sup> These films became part of the growing catalogue of instructional films distributed by Gaumont British in the 1930s. Produced by Mary Field, they were repackaged in 1937 for the educational market as *Indian Town Studies* under the supervision of the geographer G. J. Cons, who had also been involved in writing a reader for *Climbing Mount Everest* (see section 6.2 above). Writing in *Sight and Sound* in 1935, Cons discussed the use of film in the classroom, arguing that 'geography and most of the subjects of the school curriculum must be studied carefully from the standpoint of cinematography'. Referring back to his involvement with the Wyn Harris film, he wrote that '*Climbing Mount Everest* was used to give the children an experience of man in action in another field of human endeavour. Undoubtedly such films are going to help to free education from

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<sup>94</sup> Low, R. (1979) *The History of British Film 1929-1939: Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930s*. London: George Allen & Unwin. 85

<sup>95</sup>*Secrets of India* films available to view on [www.colonialfilm.org](http://www.colonialfilm.org)

its bookishness and lifelessness'.<sup>96</sup> Such points were part of a wider argument for the educational use of film.<sup>97</sup> From the perspective of the film-makers, the production of educational shorts – such as those in the *Secrets of India* series – had a commercial rationale, as they could be shown alongside the main Gaumont British feature, reaching wider audiences in the process.

As *The Times* had negotiated an exclusive deal to cover the Houston-Mount Everest expedition, news coverage was syndicated internationally, prompting worldwide acclaim for the flight crew. The expedition leader, Commander Peregrine Fellowes, was signed up by the Lee Keedick Agency for a lecture tour in America from December 1933 to March 1934. Team members Colonel Etherton and Colonel Blacker lectured in Europe. On 25<sup>th</sup> March 1934 Etherton was granted a private audience with the Pope, who had apparently followed the expedition with great interest.<sup>98</sup> In December 1933, as a guest of the Société de Géographie in Paris, Blacker had given a lecture with both film and lantern slides. The technical and scientific achievements of the expedition were internationally recognised.

*Wings Over Everest* itself was released in a new form in the United States in 1935. Following successful lecture tours by Air Commodore Fellowes in

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<sup>96</sup> Cons, G. J. (1935) 'Films and Living Geography'. *Sight and Sound* 4, 78-9

<sup>97</sup> Driver, F. (2013) 'George Cons, progressive education and geographical film: a lost history'. Session on 'Radical Geography in the Interwar Period: Disciplinary Trajectories and Hidden Histories'. RGS-IBG Annual Conference 2013

<sup>98</sup> *Flight* April 5, 1934. 339

America, Gaumont British negotiated a deal with the Fox Film Corporation who employed Lowell Thomas to re-edit the film down from 45 minutes to 22 minutes. Thomas had pedigree – as an established traveller, film-maker and reporter he was well respected in the film industry. He had found success with his films of T. E. Lawrence and General Allenby's entry into Jerusalem in the early 1920s, his lecture tours regularly drawing large audiences in London at the Albert Hall and Covent Garden Opera House. He would also become the voice of Fox Movietone News in the 1930s. Lowell Thomas' 1935 version of *Wings Over Mt. Everest* won the Academy Award for Best Novelty Short Film in 1936. Although now recently restored and held in the UCLA archive, the film itself is not yet currently available for research viewing. I have therefore had to rely on Lowell Thomas' draft scripts for the film, held in the Marist College in New York, as well as a pressbook in BFI Special Collections. The pressbook encourages patrons to use lobby cards with a cut out of the mountain as an added feature: 'A Supreme Screen Thrill – Many Box Office Angles for Showmen'.<sup>99</sup> The contrast with the mediocre British reviews was clear: 'a picture that will rock the most hard boiled out of their coma....and to the appreciative, a Supreme Screen thrill of human courage, daring and glorious achievement....and what an ace narration by Lowell Thomas'.<sup>100</sup> The Lowell Thomas script indicates that the opening sequences shot on Tiger Hill and the scenes of Lady Houston in her boudoir were amongst those cut from the original. Obviously aimed at the US audience, the narration makes much of

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<sup>99</sup> *Wings Over Mt. Everest* pressbook. PBS – 14980, BFI Special Collections

<sup>100</sup> *Wings Over Mt. Everest* pressbook. PBS – 14980, BFI Special Collections

the fact that Blacker wears a monocle – even when wearing goggles during flight. References to local superstitions are highlighted: ‘They believe the anger of the mountain divinity may bring evil on the whole land...so if this flight should by chance be followed by any disturbances of nature, these wings over Everest will be blamed for it.’ This is again referenced in the concluding paragraph:

Not long after these planes landed from their magnificent flight, earthquakes shook the Himalayan highlands and the plains of Bengal...To the natives it could mean only one thing – the anger of the Goddess. The Government of India immediately announced that any further flights over Everest were forbidden. The natives were assured that the sanctuary of the Goddess would not be profaned again.<sup>101</sup>

The closing line reads ‘Wings over Everest. Monocle over Everest’. BFI Special Collections have a copy of the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) report on the British version, which provides a much more reserved opinion: ‘story and dialogue quite free from objection’.<sup>102</sup>

## 6.6 Conclusion

Although the 1933 Everest expeditions had very different ambitions and outcomes in media terms, there was a mutual bond formed between Hinks and Blacker over the scientific results achieved. In a paper published in the *Geographical Journal* in February 1933 - ‘The Mount Everest Expedition and the Mount Everest Flight’ – the shared commitment to photographic survey was emphasised:

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<sup>101</sup> *Wings Over Mt. Everest* draft script, Lowell Thomas Papers. Marist College, New York

<sup>102</sup> *Wings Over Everest* BBFC report, 25/6/33. Ref. BBFC-1-2-241, BFI Special Collections

The highest summit of the world deserves cartography more precise....than the map which M. Charles Jacot-Guillarmod drew from the not too precise surveys and the admirable camera pictures of former expeditions. If two of the party could have been chosen for this stereo-survey and left to deal with it while the others climbed, that would have sufficed. But it has been from the first the policy of the Committee to keep this year one single object in view, to gain the summit, and nothing has been allowed to divert any part of the strength from that objective.<sup>103</sup>

The author is not named, but the references to the need for scientific survey point towards Arthur Hinks. The paper later refers to the forthcoming flight:

The plans submitted to the Council of our Society by Colonel Blacker in preliminary form in the spring of last year have since been greatly modified and improved, thanks to the generosity of Lady Houston, whose financial support has made it possible to plan the flight without having as its first and compelling object the production of a saleable film. ....and we understand that the principal object of the flight as now organized, under the command of Air Commodore Fellowes with the Marquess of Clydesdale as chief pilot and Colonel Blacker as principal observer, will be to secure these photographs, vertical and oblique. They will have more importance than can be realized immediately.<sup>104</sup>

Further evidence of the mutual interest in the images can be seen in a letter from Blacker to Hinks, dated 6<sup>th</sup> October, 1933, sent from the Expeditions headquarters in Grosvenor House, Park Lane.

My Dear Hinks,  
Since I last saw you I have seen a few still photographs which have been made by enlargement from the film. These are very interesting, because there is hope that from them we might be able to fill in a few gaps on the obliques. This is the more so, because by having pairs of stills 24 exposures apart we shall get stereoscopic results. I am following the matter up and am going to try and secure not only a

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<sup>103</sup> Anon. (1933) 'The Mount Everest Expedition and the Mount Everest Flight'. *Geographical Journal* 81, 154

<sup>104</sup> Anon. (1933) 'The Mount Everest Expedition and the Mount Everest Flight'. *Geographical Journal* 81, 155

number of stills, but a further exhibition of the film.....on the moviola (editing equipment). Would you care to be present?<sup>105</sup>

Hinks accepted the invitation by return of post.

In February 1934 the *Geographical Journal* published a discussion paper on 'Plotting the Vertical Photographs of the Second Mount Everest Flight'. Both Hinks and Blacker took part in the discussion. Blacker was at pains to outline the difficulties and restrictions experienced during the flight, but expressed his thanks for the co-operation received from the Society. He outlined the contribution of both still and cine cameras, hoping that further results 'will be obtainable from a more detailed study of the obliques not only from the still camera, but from the cinematograph film which affords a certain number of "stereoscopic pairs". These remain to be disclosed to the public'.<sup>106</sup>

In introducing Hinks to the discussion the President, Percy Cox, made reference to his contribution - 'Our Secretary has taken the strongest and most expert interest in the flight and survey'. Hinks for his part made a plea for the long term preservation of the images:

It seems to me that the value of the negatives will increase year by year. Gradually we shall know more about the surrounding country; gradually we shall get more ground control and it is by no means impossible that ten or twenty years hence we may put all those negatives into a plotting machine and do some reasonably accurate contouring with them.....I hope all means will be taken to preserve

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<sup>105</sup> L.V.S. Blacker to A. Hinks, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1933. CB 10 L. V. S. Blacker. RGS-IBG

<sup>106</sup> Cox, P., Blacker, S., Hinks, A. et al (1934) 'Plotting the Vertical Photographs of the Second Mount Everest Flight: Discussion', *Geographical Journal* 83, 114

undamaged and for use one hundred years hence these exceedingly valuable negatives produced as a result of the Mount Everest Flight.<sup>107</sup>

Twenty years later, as discussed in Chapter 7, Hinks' contribution to the mapping of Everest would be used in preparation for the 1953 climb. An image from the Clydesdale photographic album held in the MEC archives reveals an example of the work undertaken at the RGS to plot the terrain (Figure 6.15).

A fragment of film, some 50ft in length, given the title *Everest Flight, Blacker* today forms part of the Society's film collection. The quality is poor but the images of the summit of Everest contained in this sequence show that it is an out-take from *Wings Over Everest*. The images appear the same as those in Blacker's photograph album (Figure 6.14), indicating that this sequence was taken on the second flight. This has been confirmed by Dougal McIntyre, son of David McIntyre.<sup>108</sup> Was this possibly a sequence used by Blacker during his lectures? We have seen that the pilots were unhappy with the scant use of the filmed sequences of the summit in the finished film, which, if they had survived the edit, would have had great scientific value. As a rule, the material that lands on the cutting room floor doesn't survive. This makes the survival of this fragment intriguing (as also the material which has survived from the 1953 expedition, described in Chapter 7).

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<sup>107</sup> Cox, P., Blacker, S., Hinks, A. et al (1934) *Geographical Journal* 83. 116-117

<sup>108</sup> Interview with D. McIntyre 7<sup>th</sup> July 2019



As this chapter has shown, amateur and commercial films survive in many different versions and tracing the original film can be problematic for the academic researcher. Different versions and lost film elements add to the challenge. Nonetheless the Everest expeditionary films of 1933 in their various surviving forms are intriguing visual records of two very different expeditions. Together they present a unique case study in the distribution of expeditionary film both commercially and in the classroom.



Figure 6.1 Hugh Ruttledge, Leader of the 1933 Mount Everest Expedition  
RGS-IBG

# KODAK FILM ON EVEREST 1933 · 1924 · 1922



1925 EVEREST EXPEDITION  
The highest photograph ever taken on earth. Mount, Rumbold, Smith, Wyn Harris, Dr. Green and Capt. Wyn Harris used Kodak Film.



1911 EVEREST EXPEDITION  
Climb a steep ladder to reach the summit on wall of the North Col.



1911 EVEREST EXPEDITION  
The only "Polar" brings up the man to summit higher than any other day in the world.



1911 KAMET EXPEDITION  
View from the summit of Mount Kamet, 24,477 feet. Taken by Mr. F. S. Smythe.



1924 EVEREST EXPEDITION  
Did you see the famous "Epic of Everest" film on the screen? This was taken on Kodak 15 mm. stock. Made in one of Prof. Finch's splendid pictures.



1922 EVEREST EXPEDITION  
A view of Everest's summit from the 1922 Camp Five. One of Captain Noel's remarkable pictures.

The marvellous pictorial record of the 1933 climbing expedition taken by Mr. F. S. Smythe was made on Kodak Film. Mr. Wyn Harris's unique cinema record was also made on Kodak Film. The "Epic of Everest" Film of the 1924 expedition and Professor Finch's wonderful pictures were all taken on Kodak Film. Captain Noel's notable pictures in 1922 were also taken on Kodak Film.



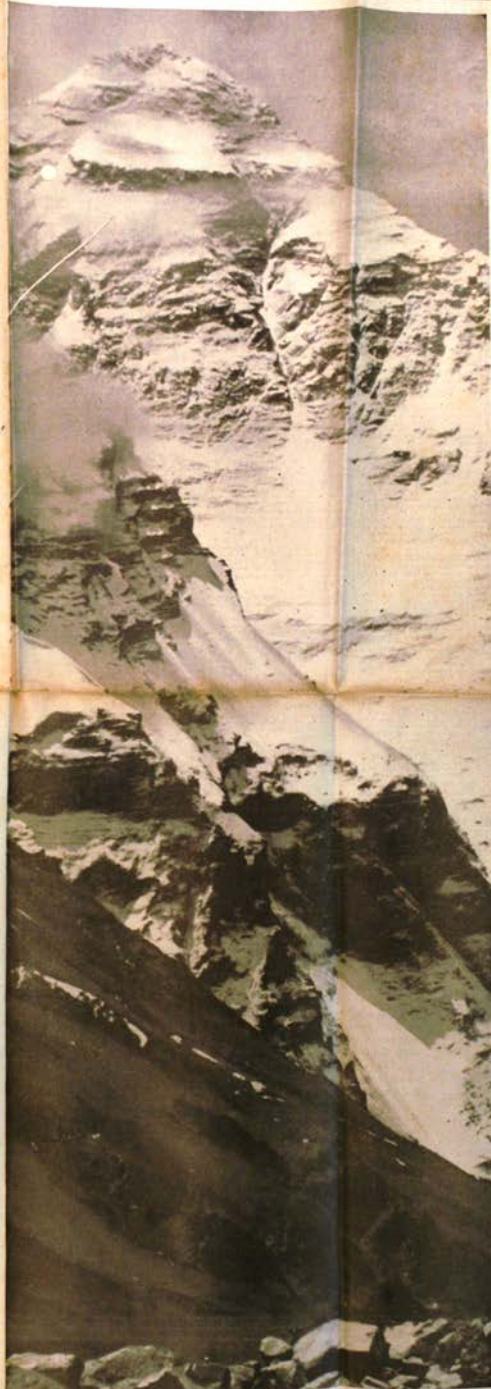
In his climb of Kamet in 1932 Mr. F. S. Smythe used Kodak Film both for his superb still pictures and for the famous film "Kamet Conquered."



When failure is not to be thought of—when the world is waiting to see the authentic picture record of their thrilling adventures, the climbers know that they can rely absolutely on Kodak Film for its brilliant detail, its rich quality and its utter dependability in all climates.

And you, when you buy Kodak Film, are buying just the same promise of success in every spool.

KODAK LIMITED, KINGSWAY, LONDON, W. 2



Taken by Mr. F. S. Smythe. The white dot indicates the highest point reached in 1933.

Figure 6.2 Kodak Advert, *Daily Telegraph*, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1933  
EE 50a RGS-IBG

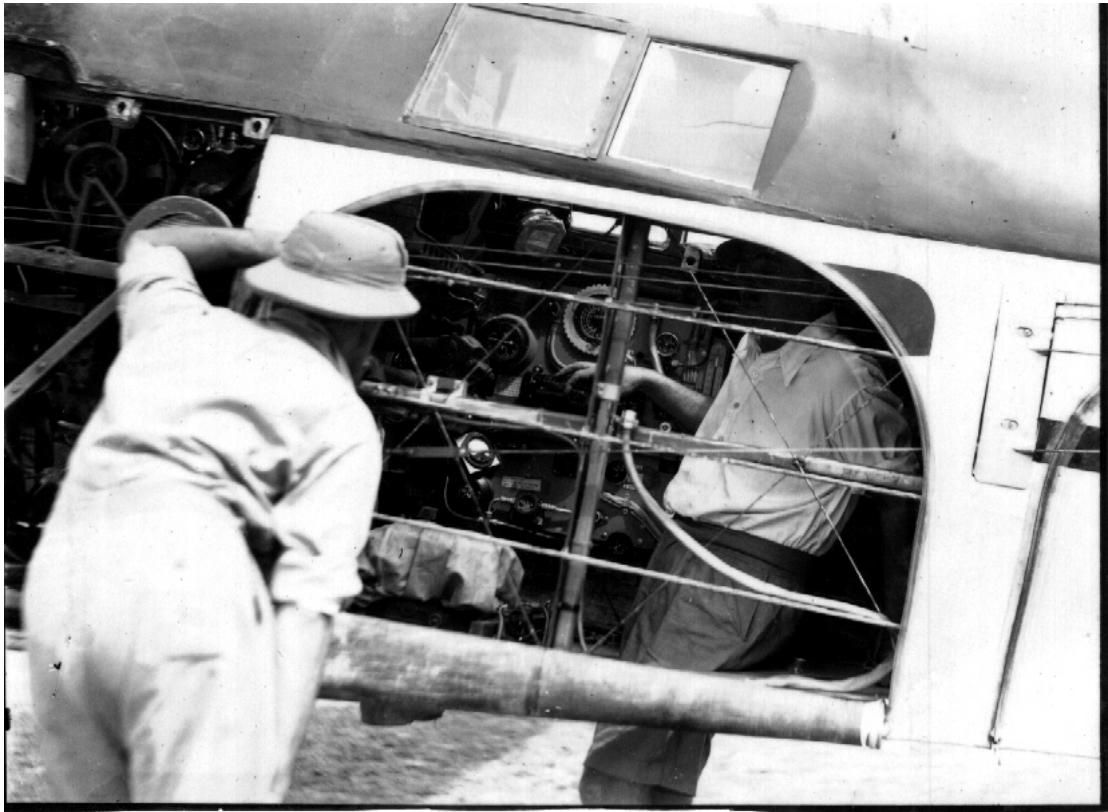


Figure 6.3 Frank Smythe, 1933  
RGS-IBG





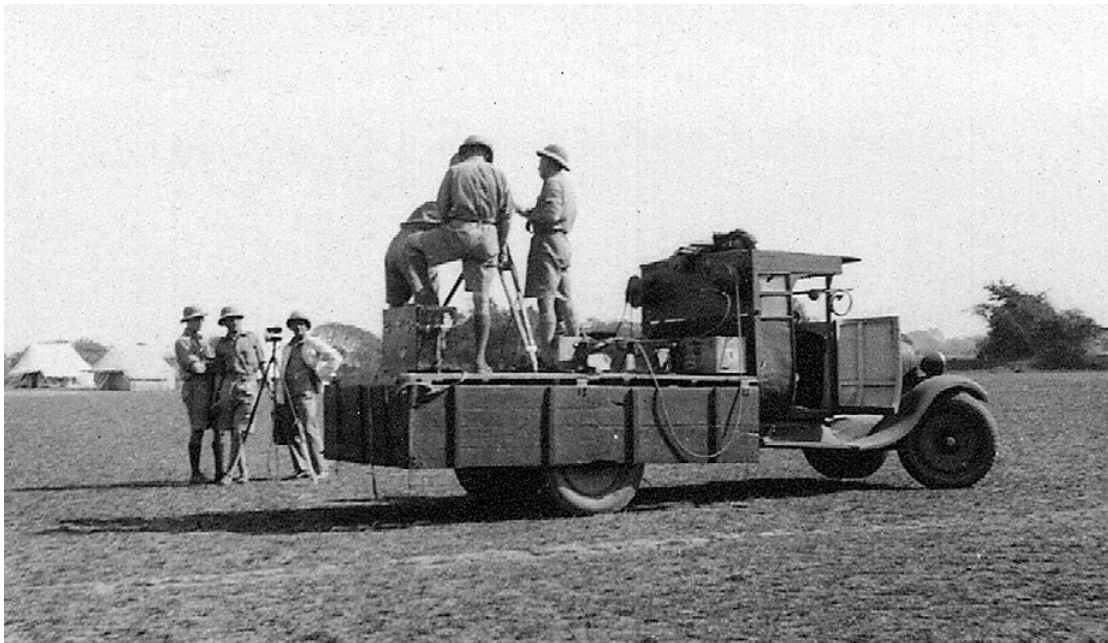
Figure 6.4 L. V. S. Blacker in flying gear, Purnea 1933  
Douglas-Hamilton, J. (1983) *Roof of the World: Man's First Flight Over Everest*  
Edinburgh: Mainstream. 18



Figures 6.5 and 6.6 Houston Mount Everest Flight 1933  
Top: Camera position in plane  
Bottom: Truck used by the camera crew  
Courtesy David McIntyre Collection

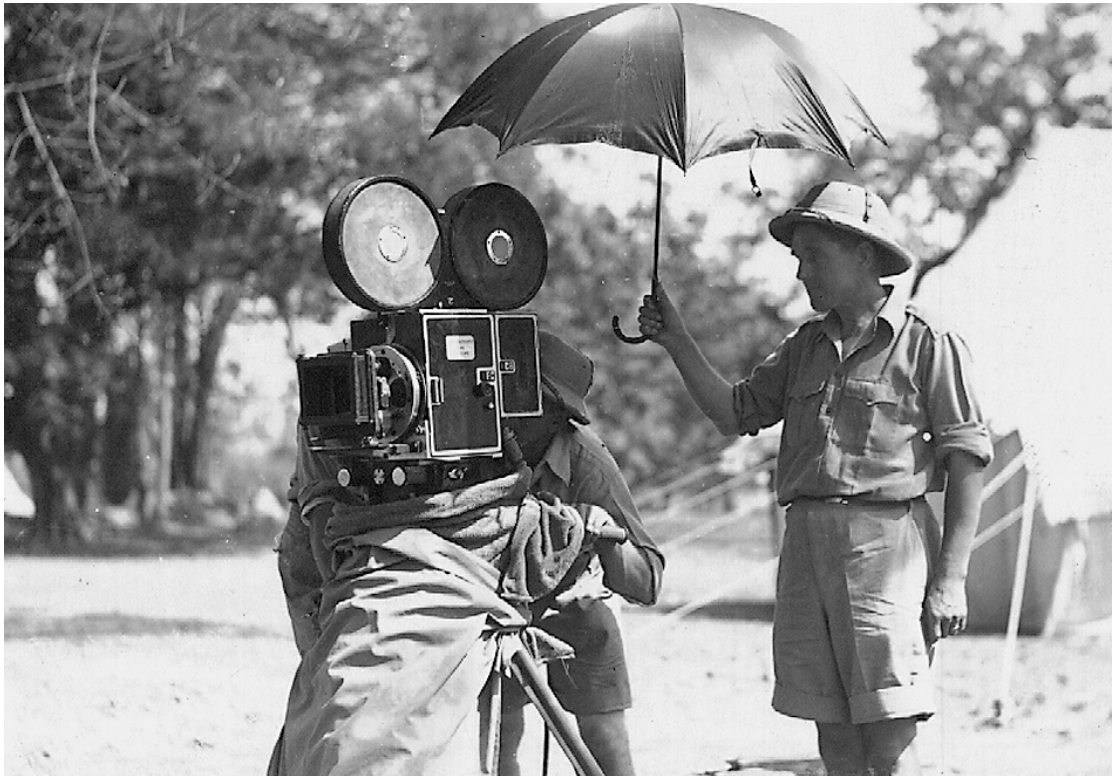


Figures 6.7 and 6.8 Houston Mount Everest Flight 1933  
Top: Flying party with camera equipment  
Bottom: Col. Etherton hands mailbag to pilot  
Courtesy David McIntyre Collection



Figures 6.9 and 6.10      Houston Mount Everest Flight 1933  
Top: Maharajah's Elephants parade past aircraft, Purnea Airport  
Bottom: Camera crew set up on the back of truck  
Courtesy David McIntyre Collection





Figures 6.11 and 6.12 Houston Mount Everest Flight 1933  
Top: Gaumont-British cameraman in action  
Bottom: Pilot David McIntyre and Cameraman S.R. Bonnett  
Courtesy David McIntyre Collection



Figure 6.13 Lady Fanny Houston  
Fellows, P, F, M. et al (1933) *First Over Everest:  
The Houston-Mount Everest Expedition 1933*.  
London: Bodley Head. Frontispiece



Figure 6.14 Images from the Blacker Album, showing the second flight GO-82 RGS-IBG



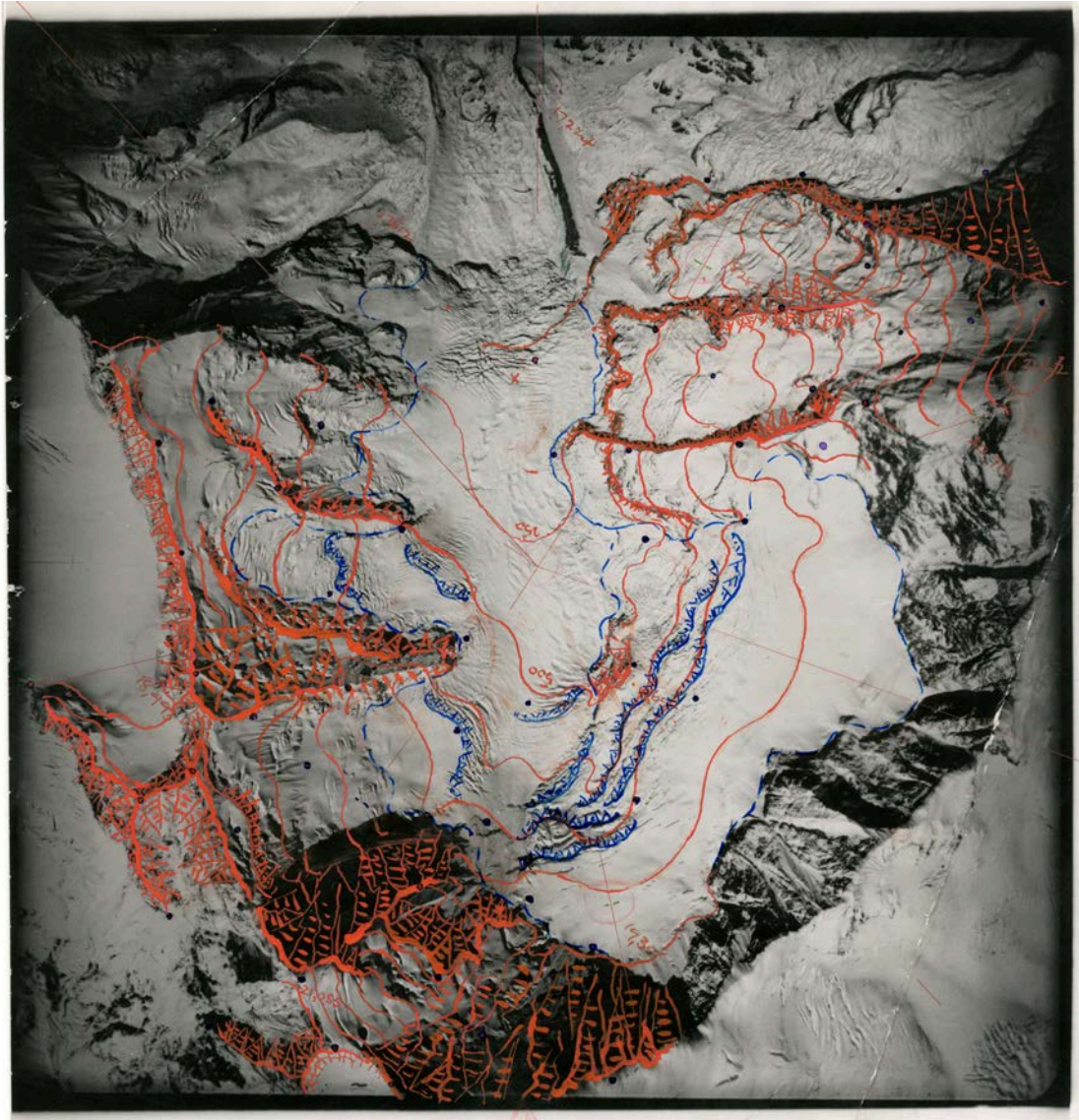


Figure 6.15 Image from the Clydesdale Album, showing plotting work carried out at the RGS  
GO-84 RGS-IBG



Figure 6.16 Programme for Polytechnic Theatre screening, 1934  
Item 17058, Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter





This official talking film of the 1933 Rutledge Mount Everest Expedition can be shown in schools, clubs or in any hall in any part of the country at a really low cost. The hiring fee includes films, equipment & services of expert operators. Other programmes of entertainment, interest or educational films obtainable.

#### If you are interested

Get in touch with your nearest Road-Show Agent and obtain details of this comprehensive service, which provides, for one fee, films, operator and equipment.



#### WESTERN ELECTRIC ROAD-SHOW AGENTS

- 1 Jay's Film Service,  
17, Blythwood Square, GLASGOW, C.2, Scotland.
- 2 W. Erskine Mayne,  
6, Donegall Square West, BELFAST, Northern  
Ireland.
- 3 Wilson & Ridley Ltd.,  
4, St. Mary's Place, NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE.
- 4 White's Sound Film Service,  
12, Park Place, LEEDS.
- 5 C. A. Newton & Co.,  
St. James's Street, DERBY.
- 6 E. O. Walker & Co. Ltd.,  
26, Cannon Street, MANCHESTER, Lancs.
- 7 Walker Bros. (Electrical Engineers) Ltd.,  
Quality House, Temple Row, BIRMINGHAM.
- 8 W. J. Creemer, Esq.,  
101, Albany Road, CARDIFF, South Wales.
- 9 Gillman Film Services,  
16, Cornmarket Street, OXFORD.
- 10 Western Electric Company, Ltd.,  
Bush House, Aldwych, LONDON, W.C.2.
- 11 H. Salanson & Co. Ltd.,  
20, High Street, BRISTOL.
- 12 F. A. Wintersgill & Co. Ltd.,  
100, Cavendish Place, EASTBOURNE, Sussex.
- 13 Halkworth Wheeler, Ltd.,  
7 & 9, Church Street, FOLKESTONE, Kent.
- 14 Aish & Co.,  
Yelverton Road, BOURNEHOUTH, Hants.
- 15 Eagle Electrical Engineering Co.,  
Beech Avenue, South Milton St., PLYMOUTH,  
Devon.

Figure 6.17 Western Electric Roadshow advert for *Climbing Mount Everest 1933*  
*Sight and Sound 1934*

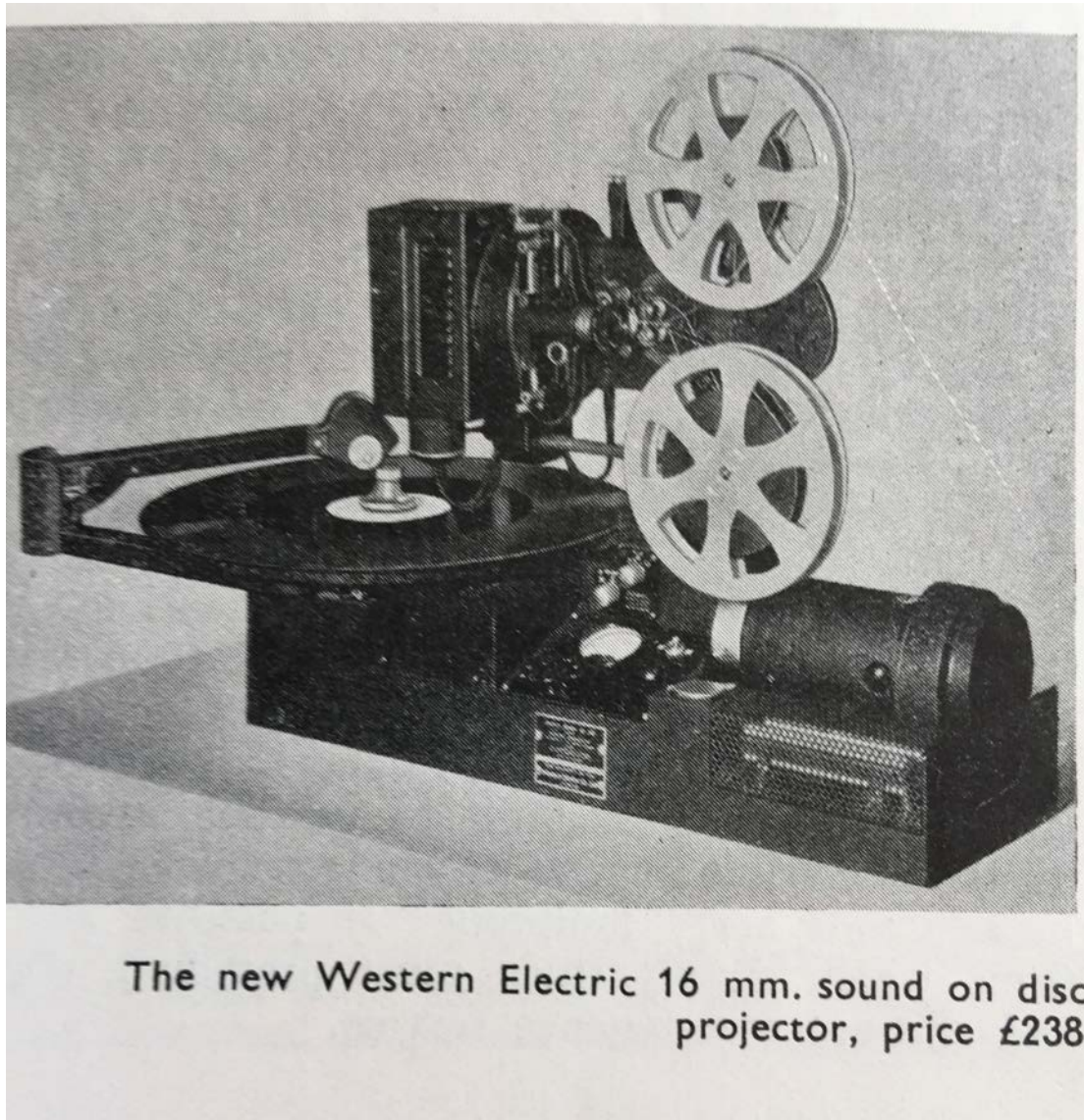


Figure 6.18 Western Electric sound-on-disc projector  
*Sight and Sound* 1932





### STANLEY

An authentic reconstruction of Stanley's search for Livingstone and following his actual route contains wonderful photographs of big game and other animals which abound in the Congo and depicts the many interesting peculiarities of native habitation.



### WITH BYRD AT THE SOUTH POLE

This is the film record of Byrd's flight over the South Pole. It presents a living picture of conditions in the Antarctic, a unique demonstration of the geological significance of the ice regions, of the Ross Barrier, the Rocky Mountains, the Queen Maude mountains and the value to geographical surveys of the aeroplane.



### ANIACKCHAK

Aniakchak is the world's largest active volcano. The film shows all that Father Hubbard saw in his recent expedition—from the commencement of the expedition to his landing by plane actually in the crater, and his subsequent exploration.



### CLIMBING MOUNT EVEREST

This is the official film of the Ruttledge expedition. 'Climbing Mount Everest' tells the whole story. It shows the gradual change of scene from tropic India—through temperate and frigid belts—to the bleak icy sterility of the summit, and gives an insight into that almost unknown Tibetan territory.

## WESTERN ELECTRIC ROAD SHOW SERVICE CAN SCREEN THESE FILMS—IN YOUR OWN BUILDING

For one moderate, inclusive fee, Western Electric provide everything—films, screen, reproducing apparatus, and a skilled projectionist, thus ensuring a high standard of presentation. Your choice of films is wide. For besides the four above, scientific, musical, geographical and other excellent material is available.

Write for the Address of your nearest Road Show agent



WESTERN ELECTRIC CO., LIMITED, EDUCATIONAL DEPT., BUSH HOUSE, ALDWYCH, W.C.

Figure 6.19 Full page advert for Western Electric Roadshows Sight and Sound 1934



## Chapter 7

### The Conquest of Everest (1953)

#### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the commissioning, production and reception of the 1953 film *The Conquest of Everest* and its significance in the wider context of the history of expeditionary film. Thus far in this thesis I have considered the changing role of the films taken on successive attempts on Everest over a thirty-year period, focussing on the technology involved, relationships with press and sponsors, the role of the cinematographer and the methods of distribution utilised by the MEC and the commercial film industry. While the previous expeditions were unsuccessful in their ultimate objective, apart from the 1933 flight over Everest, the films themselves, when edited and exhibited, could command large audiences. The press and film industry had played a crucial role in creating this interest, making a virtue out of failure. 1953 marked a watershed moment in the history of the filming of Mount Everest – the peak had been reached and the crowning moment, duly recorded with a camera, would be circulated around the world.

In this chapter I examine the changing nature of media management of Everest expeditions, as reflected in the 1953 ascent. Archival evidence reveals the extent of aggressive marketing of the expedition and its leading personalities. Scientific achievement and geographic exploration now took second place to the euphoric publicity surrounding the success of the climb. In the course of the discussion, I review the fortunes of the commercial film and the global

reach of the lecture tours which both played a significant role in the creation of a media event still celebrated. The chapter begins with an overview of the changing context of Himalayan mountaineering in the post-war years, with renewed interest in a possible attempt on Everest and the reformation of a Joint Himalayan Committee representing the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club (section 7.2). I then review media activity surrounding the 1953 Expedition – including press, television, radio, cinema newsreel, film and lecture tours - and the negotiations required to maintain control of these multi-media relationships (sections 7.3-7.4). I also assess the role of the production company and the film-maker (section 7.5). Finally, I review methods of exhibition, including traditional lecture tours and the independent distribution of the film itself (section 7.6). The conclusion considers the success of the media coverage of the 1953 ascent and the opportunities created to maintain global interest in the story of Everest.

## 7.2 The post-war return to Everest

As revealed by archives in the India Office Records, several approaches were made in 1946 and 1947 to obtain official permission for a renewed attempt to climb Everest. These did not always follow the accepted protocol, which, as in the pre-war period, required MEC approval. In 1946 Lawrence Kirwan, the new Director and Secretary of the RGS, was prompted to write to Whitehall complaining, in exasperation, that he had been approached for information that would assist a proposed expedition by a group of British officers:

This is just one more case of people planning in the Himalayas and approaching official bodies like the War Office and the R.A.F. for assistance without going through the normal channels.<sup>1</sup>

A Scottish expedition was proposed in 1946, funded by Sir Donald Pollock, former Lord Rector of Edinburgh University. The application was sent direct to the India Office requesting that permission to enter Tibet be sought through the Viceroy's Office. The official response was again negative:

It is not proposed to invite the opinion of the mountaineering authorities in this country on the project ...it is most improbable that the Government of India will feel able to sponsor it.<sup>2</sup>

This was confirmed by a letter from The Viceroy's office:

This moment is particularly unsuitable for approaching the Tibetan Government on this delicate subject. The Dalai Lama is still a minor and the present period is considered a critical one in his horoscope. It is unlikely that anyone could be found in Lhasa who would be prepared to undertake the responsibility of sponsoring the proposal for another expedition to Everest at this time.<sup>3</sup>

Eric Shipton, who had planned a return to Everest in 1947 under the auspices of the Alpine Club, had received a similar response. The upheaval of Partition in 1947 led to much of the Himalaya being declared a prohibited area. Nevertheless it was felt appropriate to re-form the Mount Everest Committee as the Joint Himalayan Committee in 1947 with Lawrence Kirwan (Hinks' replacement) as Secretary. The Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 effectively closed the door for further attempts following the traditional route to Everest. However, Nepal was beginning to open its borders (having previously granted permission for the Houston-Mount Everest Flight in 1933). The opening up of this possible new route is described by Unsworth as 'one of the most

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<sup>1</sup> L. Kirwan 15<sup>th</sup> October 1946. IOR/L/PS/12/4353

<sup>2</sup> E. P. Donaldson 14<sup>th</sup> September 1946. IOR/L/PS/12/4353

<sup>3</sup> G. Abell to M. J. Clauson 30<sup>th</sup> September 1946. IOR/L/PS/4353

significant events in the whole history of mountaineering. Not only did it give climbers the opportunity to tackle many of the world's highest peaks, it also gave them the key to Everest itself'.<sup>4</sup>

News of renewed official interest in the possibility of another Everest expedition attracted wide media attention. Eric Shipton's reconnaissance trip in 1951 prompted a number of film offers, including a proposal from Admiral Film Productions for a project to find the Abominable Snowman. A proposal from Jay Lewis Productions to accompany the next expedition prompted Kirwan to write a letter to Peter Tanner at Ealing Studios: "I should be very grateful for a confidential word as to their status". He described the proposal as 'a sort of cavalcade of the Everest attempts' with John Mills proposed to play the role of George Mallory. "I think the answer to this is pretty certain to be no".<sup>5</sup>

The Joint Himalayan Committee archives contain an intriguing undated handwritten note from the film-maker Michael Powell, intended for Eric Shipton. It reads:

Dear Mr. Shipton,  
Would it be possible to join your expedition if I pay my own expenses and bring my own cameras?  
Yours sincerely  
Michael Powell <sup>6</sup>

This prompted a reply from Kirwan dated 5<sup>th</sup> February 1952 explaining that there would be 'no question of a cameraman being taken this year' but

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<sup>4</sup> Unsworth, W. (1981) *Everest*. London: Allen Lane. 268

<sup>5</sup> L. Kirwan to P. Tanner 1<sup>st</sup> July 1952. EE/61/Film Offers. RGS-IBG

<sup>6</sup> M. Powell to E. Shipton (undated). EE/61/ Film Offers. RGS-IBG

suggesting that he might reapply if a further expedition took place in 1953.<sup>7</sup> Powell responded by saying that ‘The trouble is that I may not be free next year, while this spring I am’.<sup>8</sup> Shipton, like Ruttledge before him, shunned the idea of media interference, keeping to the concept of a small, efficient and focused team of climbers, without the baggage of former large-scale expeditions. When a film proposal was sent to the Joint Committee from Adrian de Poitier, an editor from the Crown Film Unit, the document was sent to all members of the Committee for consideration.<sup>9</sup> A response sent by Peter Lloyd suggested that Shipton would have to be ‘won around’ as ‘he is strongly opposed to taking cameramen on any expedition’.<sup>10</sup> Although it was anticipated that Shipton would be appointed as leader of the 1953 attempt, in the event Colonel John Hunt was selected.

Britain no longer had a monopoly on Everest attempts. Nepal had granted permission to a Swiss mountaineering team in 1952. Recognising that the 1953 attempt could be the last unchallenged British-led expedition, the Committee set about investigating the potential of multi-media coverage. The traditional option of securing a lucrative deal with the press took priority and an exclusive agreement with *The Times* provided funding of £10,000 (equivalent to a current figure of c. £239,000) for exclusive despatches and photographs and control over subsequent syndication. By the early 1950s, the

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<sup>7</sup> L. Kirwan to M. Powell 5<sup>th</sup> February 1952. EE/61/Film Offers. RGS-IBG

<sup>8</sup> M. Powell to L. Kirwan undated. EE/61/Film Offers. RGS-IBG ( Powell’s film *Black Narcissus* (1947) had been set in the Himalayas although mostly shot at Pinewood Studios)

<sup>9</sup> Film proposal from A. de Poitier 20<sup>th</sup> April 1952. EE/61/Film Offers. RGS-IBG

<sup>10</sup> P. Lloyd 8<sup>th</sup> May 1952. EE/61/Film Offers. RGS-IBG

British film industry was in a much healthier position and funding for film production was available through the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC), which relieved the Joint Committee of a substantial burden. In addition to cinema newsreels and a theatrical film release, BBC television and radio would also cover the expedition.

Against competition from the major British studios, a small company, Countryman Films, initially set up to make natural history short films for Columbia Pictures, was eventually selected to produce the film of the climb. Countryman would be responsible for the actual filming and production work with a larger company, Group 3, supervising and in overall financial control. The producers at Countryman were John Taylor, Leon Clore and Graham Tharp, while the cameraman was Tom Stobart who had a background of expeditionary film-making, having just returned from filming in the Sahara. Adrian de Poitier would edit the material. John Taylor, brother-in-law of John Grierson, had a sound documentary film pedigree having worked with Flaherty on location during the making of *Man of Aran*. An application was submitted by Group 3 to the NFFC in early February 1953 for a budget of £21,964 (equivalent to current value of £524,000) to cover the production of the film (working title *Everest 1953*). Group 3 would then secure a distribution deal when the film was completed.<sup>11</sup> An agreement was drawn up between the RGS (representing the Joint Committee), Countryman Films and Group 3 on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1953 to cover the production of *Everest 1953* and also

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<sup>11</sup> Summary of Application, Group 3 Ltd. 10<sup>th</sup> February 1953, NFFC archive. British Screen Finance

incorporate the provisions of the news agreement with *The Times*. While Tom Stobart was the official cameraman, as on previous expeditions, this did not prevent other members of the climbing party from taking films or still photographs. The February 1953 agreement enabled them:

to dispose of such still photographs under the provisions of The Times Agreements or otherwise as the Society shall think fit provided that no cinematograph film so taken shall be exhibited in any public place prior to the general release of the first of the said films and after such release shall not be exhibited in any public place at which payment is made for admission.<sup>12</sup>

The Agreement made provision for limited news filming.

Newsreel cameramen to take cinematograph films in connection with the said Expedition prior to its arrival in the Himalayas or after its departure therefrom.<sup>13</sup>

The Agreement also made provision for climbers to assist Stobart in his filming:

members of the climbing party shall give the said Thomas Stobart or such other cameramen as aforesaid all practical assistance and facilities to enable him to record in as comprehensive manner as possible the progress of the said Expedition.

Publicity for the film, as with the use of photographs, would be subject to the provisions of *The Times* Agreement. The content of these agreements thus covered a variety of media in addition to film. It was clear that the combined resources of print, photography, film and broadcast media were essential in disseminating the story of the climb.

### 7.3 Everest in print: the press

A memorandum from Hunt to members of the expedition dated 11<sup>th</sup> December 1952 laid out very precisely just how they should deal with the Press:

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<sup>12</sup> Agreement re. Everest 1953, 19<sup>th</sup> February 1953. EE/84. RGS-IBG

<sup>13</sup> Agreement re. Everest 1953, 19<sup>th</sup> February 1953. EE/84. RGS-IBG

The position about press rights is that The Times, in return for a sum of money which will cover considerably more than half the expedition's total expenses, has exclusive world copyright on all news, articles and photographs. The object of other newspapers is to break into this copyright as much and as often as possible. In view of our relation with The Times, defined in a very carefully drawn up contract, which all members of the expedition and of the Committee should read, no breaks of this kind should take place....Any news that is to be given to the Press before departure on preparation plans, new types of equipment, especially oxygen and so on, will be given by the Leader in one or two introductory articles in The Times in early February.<sup>14</sup>

As later became clear, this official protocol did not extend to the Sherpa members of the party. A hastily typed note, dated 10<sup>th</sup> March 1953, from Hunt at the British Embassy in Kathmandu to Norman at *The Times* revealed that members of the press were quizzing them: 'I cannot muzzle them, though I have asked Tenzing not to speak to pressmen, he has a complete right to do so'.<sup>15</sup> An urgent message was sent from Kirwan to Hunt urged him to get Tenzing to sign a contract, noting in particular, that 'he must sign no film contract except with Countryman Films'.<sup>16</sup> In 1955 Tenzing referred to *The Times'* right to all despatches sent by members of the Expedition. 'Colonel Hunt tried to get me to sign the agreement like the rest. But I declined to do so. For the first time in my life I was in a position to make a considerable amount of money'.<sup>17</sup>

The exclusivity of *The Times* deal would present further problems, generating numerous complaints from international journalists. On 8<sup>th</sup> January 1953

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<sup>14</sup> Memorandum on Dealing With the Press - J. Hunt 11<sup>th</sup> December 1952.

Subject Files: Mount Everest 1953 Expedition. T.N.L.Archive

<sup>15</sup> J. Hunt to G. Norman 10<sup>th</sup> March 1953. T.N.L. Archive

<sup>16</sup> J. Hunt to L. Kirwan 17<sup>th</sup> June 1953. T. N. L. Archive

<sup>17</sup> C. G. Parker to F. Mathew 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1955. T. N. L. Archive



Arthur Hutchinson, *The Times* correspondent in Delhi wrote of the risks involved:

in the East every messenger, every cable-office clerk and almost every government official has his price – and for the first news (however bare the details) of a successful assault the news agencies will almost certainly be prepared to pay that price.<sup>18</sup>

He followed up with further information gleaned from a Swiss diplomat referring to the previous year's attempt on Everest by a Swiss party:

The local journalists are likely to try and exercise a good deal of political pressure in an effort to break our news monopoly on the forthcoming expedition. The line of argument they propose to adopt is, apparently: "Why should no news of a major event taking place in Nepal be allowed to reach the Nepalese press and people, and be confined to the readers of a foreign paper – and not even an Indian paper at that?" I can well imagine that this could all lead to a good deal of unpleasantness. Would it be possible to brief the Expedition's leader on ways of giving a certain amount of relatively harmless information to the journalists in Kathmandu, after the "meat" has been transmitted to us? <sup>19</sup>

Hutchinson's advice was heeded and further instructions sent by Gerald Norman. *The Times* would have two representatives in Nepal – Hutchinson to watch over security arrangements in Kathmandu and receive and forward dispatches and film packages to *The Times*, and James Morris as an additional correspondent to oversee the coding of messages and the special arrangements for runners. 'He could attempt to act as an "insulator" between native runners who know what the news is that they are carrying, and others, covering lower stages of the journey, who need not know'.<sup>20</sup>

The Expedition's mail was sent to the British Embassy in Kathmandu in sealed bags addressed to the Ambassador. Hunt held a press conference in

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<sup>18</sup> A. Hutchinson to I. McDonald 8<sup>th</sup> January 1953. T. N. L. Archive

<sup>19</sup> A. Hutchinson to I. McDonald 12<sup>th</sup> January 1953. T. N. L. Archive

<sup>20</sup> G. Norman to A. Hutchinson 4<sup>th</sup> February 1953. T. N. L. Archive

Kathmandu before the departure of the expedition 'to allay Nepalese feelings about our copyright'.<sup>21</sup> A handwritten postscript by Norman adds the following:

In a letter to the Nepalese Embassy, MacDonald describes Morris as "transport organizer". It can be made clear that he is NOT going as a writing correspondent.

MacDonald thinks you should be in Kathmandu as soon as the Expedition gets there, if only to keep an eye on the opposition.<sup>22</sup>

The 'opposition' would indeed be following the progress of the Expedition in earnest. In later correspondence Hutchinson provided details of the reporters in question: they included Ralph Izzard of the *Daily Mail*, Colin Reid of the *Daily Telegraph*, a Reuters correspondent and other Indian correspondents and stringers:

so far not much to worry about but they are well in with Nepalese and Indian sources through whom our final message over Namche radio will have to come. They may, therefore, be reserving their "thieving" energies until the last possible minute, to avoid frightening us into protective counter-measures prematurely.<sup>23</sup>

Hutchinson was also suspicious of Christopher Summerhayes, the British Ambassador in Kathmandu: 'every single letter and news message addressed to me from Morris has been opened and read by S – except when I have been present at the arrival of the runner'.<sup>24</sup> He was particularly scathing of

Summerhayes's odd behaviour on June 1<sup>st</sup> in informing me that no message had been received, of any kind, regarding the outcome of the assault, when only 30 minutes previously he had transmitted to the Foreign Office the result of the climb...I reiterated my question when I thought I detected an even greater shiftiness than usual in his reply: nor was there any particular purpose in lying, for I was scarcely likely to hasten off to inform the opposition.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> G. Norman to A. Hutchinson 4<sup>th</sup> February 1953. T. N. L. Archive

<sup>22</sup> G. Norman to A. Hutchinson 4<sup>th</sup> February 1953. T. N. L. Archive

<sup>23</sup> A. Hutchinson to G. Norman 19<sup>th</sup> May 1953. T. N. L. Archive

<sup>24</sup> A. Hutchinson to G. Norman 13<sup>th</sup> June 1953. T. N. L. Archive

<sup>25</sup> A. Hutchinson to G. Norman 13<sup>th</sup> June 1953. T. N. L. Archive

Hutchinson felt that Summerhayes wanted to be the man who broke the news to the world, citing as evidence the fact that he had deleted Morris and Hunt's signatures from the vital message before transmission to London.

George Lowe described the behaviour of the rival press representatives as 'a sordid, dirty chapter of the Everest story'.<sup>26</sup> He singled out the tactics used by the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent Colin Reid:

He was paying £87 a week to have the telephones and telegraph system monitored and he covered the wireless waves too. He offered £5000 to Fletcher, the Embassy wireless operator for the news.<sup>27</sup>

Lowe quoted the newsmen as saying:

this is the worst, most cut-throat, double crossing newspaper war they have ever known, and that it seems is saying something. The arguments as to whether the 'Times' has a right to world news and a copyright on the story is hotly debated. The Ambassador was attacked by the news hawks to say he was aiding and abetting by sending the message in code through Foreign Office channels....It's a long, long tale of intrigue, squabble and bribery.<sup>28</sup>

Lowe had little regard for the Indian press :

It seems a fact that the Indian Press in general are very anti-British and their vituperative abilities are most ably developed. The virtuosity they show in twisting a story is far greater than any British paper!<sup>29</sup>

Ralph Izzard, the *Daily Mail* correspondent, was also aware of local press hostility and its wider anti-colonial context:

This was not just another British Expedition supported by "hired Men". Articulate Asia – and that includes the fanatical student bodies – long frustrated by lack of material achievement and some natural jealousy of the long dominant European, had found an outstanding, indeed unique, champion in Tenzing. It was, therefore, a matter of intense chagrin to the Indian Newspaper correspondents in Kathmandu that they should be starved completely of news of their hero and that the only authentic

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<sup>26</sup> Lowe, G. (2013) *Letters From Everest*. United Kingdom: Silverbear. 161

<sup>27</sup> Lowe, G. *Letters From Everest*. 161

<sup>28</sup> Lowe, G. *Letters From Everest*. 161

<sup>29</sup> Lowe, G. *Letters From Everest*. 159

account of his doings should appear in a single London newspaper, an expensive one at that, with a comparatively small circulation.<sup>30</sup>

In his book *Coronation Everest*, James Morris painted a similar picture of intense press rivalry: 'All kinds of odd journalists were arriving in Kathmandu like converging scavengers, to pick up what they could, using their claws if need be'.<sup>31</sup> In an account for *The Times House Journal* he wrote:

The most careful plans were therefore laid in Printing House Square to ensure that The Times had the fullest and speediest news service from the mountain. We alone had copyright of Colonel Hunt's own dispatches, but there was nothing to prevent any enterprising rival from sending a correspondent to the foot of the mountain to pick up what they could.<sup>32</sup>

Increased media attention concerning the key role of Tenzing prompted Countryman to realise that he should be signed up as a member of the climbing party to eliminate other offers from film-makers. This was not considered necessary when the individual protocols were drawn up (see above). Against all the odds Morris managed to get news past the press pack and sent the following message by runner for despatch back to the waiting presses of *The Times* – 'Snow conditions bad stop advanced base abandoned may twenty nine stop awaiting improvement'.<sup>33</sup> With miraculous timing, the coded message revealing the success of the expedition on May 29<sup>th</sup> reached Printing House Square on the eve of the Coronation and *The Times* was finally able to publish their scoop in the morning edition on 2<sup>nd</sup> June. Other newspapers could only follow this in later editions with banner headlines such as 'The Crowning

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<sup>30</sup> Izzard, R. (1954) *The Innocent on Everest*. London: Hodder & Stoughton. 236 - 7

<sup>31</sup> Morris, J. (1958) *Coronation Everest*. London: Faber & Faber. 18

<sup>32</sup> Morris, J. (1953) 'Reporting the Conquest of Mount Everest: How Exclusive News of the Expedition was Sent Secretly to P.H.S.', *The Times House Journal* September 1953. Subject Files: Mount Everest 1953 Expedition. TNL Archive

<sup>33</sup> Morris, J. *The Times House Journal* September 1953. TNL Archive

Glory; Everest is Climbed' (*News Chronicle*) and 'All This and Everest Too' (*Daily Express*).

#### 7.4 Television, radio and cinema newsreels

Broadcasting opportunities also added another level of complexity to the management of the media. The Everest correspondence files at the RGS-IBG include a note, dated 26<sup>th</sup> June 1953, from Boyd at the BBC to Kirwan about protocols of who should film and record the arrival of the party at London Airport.<sup>34</sup> On 29<sup>th</sup> June, Boyd had to check with Kirwan whether Stobart could be interviewed in the early evening radio programme, 'In Town Tonight'.<sup>35</sup> Sidney Barton, the film's publicist, felt that this would be covered by their special permission to use Stobart to publicise the film. However Francis Mathew of *The Times* vetoed this, stating that 'in my opinion the appearance of Tom Stobart on In Town Tonight would be an infringement of our agreement'.<sup>36</sup>

The Sub-Committee on Publicity and Related Matters submitted a report to the Joint Himalayan Committee for approval on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1953. It covered all eventualities including film publicity, book publication and serialisation, magazine rights, photographic exhibition, articles written by members of the expedition, production of an official Everest stamp by the Indian Government, arrangements for the arrival at London Airport of the party, press conferences, lectures and the preview of the film. Specific arrangements laid out for press

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<sup>34</sup> D. Boyd to L. Kirwan 26<sup>th</sup> June 1953. EE/83. RGS-IBG

<sup>35</sup> D. Boyd to L. Kirwan 29<sup>th</sup> June 1953. EE/83. RGS-IBG

<sup>36</sup> F. Mathew to D. Boyd 1<sup>st</sup> July 1953. EE/83. RGS-IBG

coverage of the arrival at London Airport were made. Press would be forewarned of the timing of the arrival but it was proposed that:

with the exception of Television pictures on the tarmac on disembarkation, all Press interviews, photographs, BBC and television interviews and speeches, would take place within the main conference room.

By agreement with The Times, BBC and Countryman Films it is proposed that commercial newsreels should not be separately covered on the arrival, only material being made available to them through the BBC.<sup>37</sup>

An examination of news stories and cameramen's dope sheets reveal that this policy was not adhered to by news companies determined to cover this story. Pathé News released a story on 25<sup>th</sup> June, under the title 'Everest Heroes Arrive' (filmed in Kathmandu on 16<sup>th</sup> June), which covered the return of the advanced party. These dope sheets carried details of 'the opposition' – in this case the story was covered by a number of companies including British Movietone News, British Paramount News, Indian News Review and Columbia Broadcasting.<sup>38</sup> Similarly Pathé's coverage of the return to London Airport – *Everest Heroes Home* – filmed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July by cameraman John Rudkin – stated that BBC, NBC and CBC were also present. However it was Rudkin who captured the memorable shot 'Mr. Pugh's Little Girls (sic) Break Out and Run to Meet Father'.<sup>39</sup>

BBC Television broadcast a special live programme, produced by Paul Johnstone of the Television Talks Department, on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1953 from Lime Grove Studios. The itinerary showed the packed schedule that awaited the

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<sup>37</sup> Report of Sub-Committee on Publicity and Related Matters 25<sup>th</sup> June 1953. EE/99/2. RGS-IBG

<sup>38</sup> Pathé News Issue 53/47: Everest Heroes Arrive. 25<sup>th</sup> June 1953

<sup>39</sup> Pathé News Issue 53/50: Everest Heroes Home. 6<sup>th</sup> July 1953

contributors - Hunt, Hillary, Wylie, Bourdillon and Tenzing: 'We will collect them from The Times lunch at 3.00 p.m, by car, take them to the Commissioner's party at 5.45 p.m. We will then collect them again from there at 7.00 p.m. and bring them to the Studio for the programme at 7.45 p.m.'<sup>40</sup> The audience figures indicate how well the programme was received. Donald Boyd of the Talks Department wrote Kirwan on the 11<sup>th</sup> August: 'an audience of getting on for a million and a half and the appreciation shown was high. This is very satisfactory. Your team did a wonderful job in the studio. It was arduous for them, but did achieve results'.<sup>41</sup>

### 7.5 *The Conquest of Everest*

The Expedition had achieved its goal. Expectations for the feature film were therefore high and publicity maintained this while the film of the climb was being edited at Beaconsfield Studios (Figures 7.1 and 7.2). However for Tom Stobart, anxiety over the content remained. Due to his illness while accompanying the climb, George Lowe had undertaken the high altitude shots (Figure 7.3). No one had seen the results until the film was processed on their return. In his 1958 memoir *Adventurer's Eye*, Stobart described the euphoria amongst the climbers on the return journey and his own anxiety for the condition of the unprocessed material:

There was grave danger to it in the heat of the Indian summer. It was met at the airport by a fast car and rushed, with a wave from the Customs, into the cool of the High Commissioner's wine cellar.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> P. Johnstone to L. Kirwan 13<sup>th</sup> July 1953. EE/83. RGS-IBG

<sup>41</sup> D. Boyd to L. Kirwan 11<sup>th</sup> August 1953. EE/83. RGS-IBG  
(ownership of Television sets had increased due to the transmission of the Coronation ceremony in June 1953)

<sup>42</sup> Stobart, T. (1958) *Adventurer's Eye; the Autobiography of the Everest Film-Man*. London: The Popular Book Club. 245

Producer John Taylor recalled efforts to produce the expected feature-length film in a six-week edit at Beaconsfield Studios. The initial edit involved the original 16mm Kodachrome footage and bought in material. Subsequently this version had to be blown up to 35mm Technicolor for cinema release. A tight schedule indeed.

We shot everything all over the place to pad it out because we had to make an hour and a half of it. We put shots of the Coronation procession, Everest grave, anything we could think of. The minute the mountain was climbed everybody climbed onto the act – Balcon, Korda - anyone you could think of it was their film, well, not their film, it was part of their empire kind of thing.<sup>43</sup>

Countryman had also contacted the National Film Library at the BFI requesting historic footage to cut into the film. In January 1953 a research screening of John Noel's *Climbing Mount Everest* (1922), *The Epic of Everest* (1924) and Frank Smythe's *Kamet Conquered* (1931) had been arranged for Adrian de Poitier (who would edit the 1953 film) at the BFI's Viewing Theatre at 4, Great Russell Street. Notably it was extracts from Noel's films which made it to the final edit. Stobart had also contacted Countryman advising that footage had been taken by the Indian Air Force during a flight over the summit of Everest: 'It was excellent and I sent a cable off to the company "get hold of this at all costs" because it would at least give the audience a glimpse of the place Hillary and Tenzing finally reached'.<sup>44</sup> The footage was duly included.

Although relieved of the financial responsibility for the film's production, the Joint Committee still had some control of the overall structure and content of

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<sup>43</sup> John Taylor: BECTU Interview Part 1 (1988) ([www.screenonline.org.uk](http://www.screenonline.org.uk))

<sup>44</sup> Stobart. *The Adventurer's Eye*. 245



the final edit. Terms laid out in the Agreement between Countryman Films, the RGS and Group 3 Ltd. dated 19<sup>th</sup> February 1953 included clauses covering film publicity:

Any such publicity shall be of a dignified nature and not being such as to suggest that the said Expedition is being organised with the production of a film as one of its main objects.

The Society will use its best endeavour to arrange for members of the climbing party to go to Group 3's Studios for extra shots and post synchronising if required.

Nothing in this clause contained shall oblige the Society to do or to cause its members to do anything inconsistent with the scientific nature of the said Expedition.

Group 3 recognises the amateur status of the members of the said Expedition and will not require of any such member any action which would affect or be inconsistent with such status.<sup>45</sup>

An on-screen credit was agreed in the form: 'Produced with the co-operation and assistance of the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club'.

Conditions governing the initial use of film footage were clearly outlined by *The Times*, anxious to maximise the exclusive deal negotiated to publish reports from the Expedition leader John Hunt (and the paper's own correspondent in the field, James Morris). By 11<sup>th</sup> June 1953 the Committee had recognised that there might be 'cases in which the interests will clash',<sup>46</sup> and called a meeting with Countryman's public relations company, Sidney Barton Ltd., Paul Hodder-Williams of publishers Hodder & Stoughton and Francis Mathew, Manager of *The Times*. Kirwan wrote to Mathew:

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<sup>45</sup> Agreement between RGS, Countryman Films and Group 3. 19<sup>th</sup> February 1953. EE/84. RGS-IBG

<sup>46</sup> L. Kirwan to F. Mathew 11<sup>th</sup> June 1953. EE/83/Times Contract. RGS-IBG

In your letter of February 11<sup>th</sup> to me you agreed that the film company might indulge in publicity for the Everest film from that date, but only to the trade press of the film industry for their exclusive use. For any other publicity they would require to wait until the termination of The Times contract, which in this context would be four days after the date of the publication of the last of Hunt's two summarising articles.

They would, I think, be happy if they could start a full publicity campaign from about the middle of July or a little earlier if possible and, of course, they would be concerned only with the making of the film and with the part played by Tom Stobart the cameraman.<sup>47</sup>

A letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> June 1953 indicates that Williams-Thompson, representing Sidney-Barton, had met with Mathew. After outlining issues concerning use of stills, a potential issue was raised over the content of the film:

We are very anxious indeed not to give any impression in the early stages that the film material was only taken up to a certain height as we feel that would detract from the public's interest in the film. Although it is true that ordinary photographs can be worked in the film, it still in the public's mind, is not quite the same thing and we are therefore very anxious, at this stage, for as little as possible to be said about the film or Stobart, until he is back and we have had a real chance to talk to him and have a look at the material. Any help you can give here will be very much appreciated as this is quite a major point from our point of view.

Also, we want to keep if possible such items as the fact that Stobart used his pick axe as a camera tripod unknown until Stobart can tell it himself, which will make good editorial matter.<sup>48</sup>

Some anxiety remained about the quality of the footage. When the rushes were screened, including George Lowe's footage from the South Col., Stobart recalled that the material 'brought to life what I had observed only from a distance, relief flooded in like sunshine on a spring morning'. For Stobart, after the confirmation that the material was fit for purpose, he was able to pass responsibility to the editor:

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<sup>47</sup> L. Kirwan to F. Mathew 11<sup>th</sup> June 1953. EE/83/Times Contract. RGS-IBG

<sup>48</sup> M. Williams Thompson to F. Mathew 25<sup>th</sup> June 1953. EE/84/Film Publicity. RGS-IBG

From now on I could leave it to other people. When you look at a shot and remember that taking it was agony you cannot bear to do what has to be done – to throw it onto the cutting room floor. That is best left to others.<sup>49</sup>

John Taylor's recollection, when interviewed in 1988, was that it was George Lowe who spent the most time in the edit. Stobart 'was feted all over London and he could never find time to come down to the studio and tell us what the material was....We took George Lowe on for a fee of five hundred quid to come and tell us what it was about so we got to know him very well indeed . He was always at Beaconsfield.'<sup>50</sup>

A paragraph in the *Bucks Free Press*, headed "Everest men at Beaconsfield", published on Friday July 17, 1953, documented a visit to the Beaconsfield Film Studios.

Two of the conquerors of Mount Everest, Mr. Edmund Hilary [sic] and Sherpa Tensing, with Tensing's wife and two daughters spent some hours at Beaconsfield last Monday. They went to the Beaconsfield Film Studio to see the first run through of the films taken by the Everest party during the ascent.

The news of their visit spread quickly and a crowd of people, including many admiring children, watched the party as they went to "The Royal Saracen's Head" hotel Beaconsfield for lunch.

The party watched the Everest film closely, but Mr. Hilary [sic] and Tensing modestly refused to talk about their experiences during the climb. They spent some time on the floor at the studio watching the making of a film. Sherpa Tensing and his family – a picturesque group – taking immense interest in the work.<sup>51</sup>

Figure 7.10 is a publicity image released to show the continuing work being undertaken at Beaconsfield Studios – Tenzing, Lowe, Hillary and Stobart are

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<sup>49</sup> Stobart, T. (1958) *I Take Pictures For Adventure*. New York: Doubleday & Co. 287-288

<sup>50</sup> John Taylor: BECTU Interview Part 1 (1988) ([www.screenonline.org.uk](http://www.screenonline.org.uk))

<sup>51</sup> 'Everest men at Beaconsfield', *Bucks Free Press* 17<sup>th</sup> July 1953

posed together looking at a 16mm section of the rushes – the film is marked ‘Lhotse Face Camp 6’.<sup>52</sup>

Stobart meanwhile was attending publicity events to promote the film including a press conference held at the Waldorf Hotel, Aldwych, on 9<sup>th</sup> July. Williams Thompson reported to Kirwan that ‘we had well over 100 and I think we stirred up some interest in the film’.<sup>53</sup> Press reports of this event lauded Stobart’s abilities as a film-maker without even a single frame of the footage to illustrate this. The *Manchester Guardian* reported on Stobart’s description of the difficulties of filming and that the feature film was currently being made ‘enhanced by commentary and music from undisclosed but “very famous” men’.<sup>54</sup> Denis Forman, director of the BFI, published a Members’ Newsletter in July which caught the eye of Kirwan. Writing to Williams Thompson on 15<sup>th</sup> July, Kirwan described it as:

an excellent account of the importance of the Everest film in connection with the whole new field of films of discovery and exploration in the O’Flaherty [sic] tradition. It might be worth while giving further publicity to it if you have not already done so and if the Film Institute people agree.<sup>55</sup>

Forman’s reflections on the filming of the climb were positive, adding cultural credibility to the forthcoming film release:

Normally the cameraman can check on his work within a few hours : even in the remoter locations a cable from the Producer gives him all the guidance or reassurance that he needs. Up on the slopes of Everest

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<sup>52</sup> ‘Viewing rushes at Beaconsfield Studios’. Ref. 10977591. Ronald Grant/Mary Evans Picture Library

<sup>53</sup> M. Williams Thompson to L. Kirwan 10<sup>th</sup> July 1953. EE/84/ Film Publicity. RGS-IBG

<sup>54</sup> *Manchester Guardian* 10<sup>th</sup> July 1953

<sup>55</sup> L. Kirwan to M. Williams Thompson 15<sup>th</sup> July 1953. EE/84/Film Publicity.. RGS-IBG

Stobart was shooting reel after reel of Kodachrome in the kind of isolation that is every cameraman's nightmare. Given reasonable luck, however, the Everest story, when it is released this autumn, will surely be one of the great documents of the screen, ranking alongside *Grass, Chang* and *Kon-Tiki*. Such great epics have been readily recognised by the film industry, and surviving even the inevitable mauling at the hands of studio executives, they have brought an urban population face to face with the savage outer ring of the natural world. On a less elevated plane there have been many fascinating explorers' films, some of them anthropological and some scenic – and , of course, there has been Flaherty too. Having seen a number of explorers' films recently, I have something of a hunch that the day of the film of discovery is about to dawn in the way that the day of the art film dawned some four or five years ago.<sup>56</sup>

On 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1953 the *Evening News* reported that the Everest Expedition colour film 'gamble' had been a great success – with 'practically every foot of film exposed' being of excellent quality. Sir Arthur Jarratt, an executive from distributor British Lion, compared the edit process to that of the Technicolor film of the Coronation, *A Queen is Crowned*, which was released within days of the event:

The Coronation films were out in a few days because they were a record of a complete rehearsed event. Our film has to be built up, and a few days ago we did not even know if we had anything we could use.<sup>57</sup>

By August 8<sup>th</sup> the *Manchester Guardian* was reporting on the structure of the forthcoming film:

Much of the commentary will be spoken by members of the expedition, and this, together with the choice of [Louis] MacNeice as its author, ought to prevent the film from being spoiled by excessive verbal heroics and that offensive way professional commentators have of intoning grand opera prose.... Hillary has recorded a lengthy commentary on his and Tensing's climb. Presumably the climax will be left to his words, and the music, together with a mysterious and exciting device the producers have thought up. But there is no intention of producing a studio dramatization of the final thousand feet, one hears with relief.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Forman, D. Members Newsletter July 1953. Everest cuttings, BFI Reuben Library

<sup>57</sup> *Evening News* 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1953

<sup>58</sup> *Manchester Guardian* 8<sup>th</sup> August 1953

There were some minor misgivings at the RGS after a preview screening. Requests were made for the amendment of the wording of the on-screen credit and for the inclusion of the RGS plaque, which had been specially unscrewed and made available for filming but hadn't made it onto the screen. Establishing scenes of Hunt at Lowther Lodge were included however. Meanwhile there were other last-minute requests. The Pneumoconiosis Research Unit at Llandough Hospital, Penarth was anxious that a shot showing how long it took for climbers to do up the laces in boots had not been included. It was agreed that the rushes at Beaconsfield Studios would be checked for this.<sup>59</sup>

The film received its Royal Premiere on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1953 in the presence of The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. As befitted such an occasion, the screening took place at the Warner Theatre in London's Leicester Square – the heart of the commercial film industry. Stobart recalled:

There was a dense crowd outside the theatre to see the arrival of the Queen. Inside the guests waited expectantly in a packed house, and my own seat was beside the royal box, so that I could answer questions.

So once more, amidst flashing diamonds, we made the ascent of Everest, from warm seats, and when we got to the top it seemed a pity that it was all over and that Everest no longer stood as a challenge.<sup>60</sup>

Critical reviews appeared across the press to coincide with the film's release on the 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1953. The film footage was universally praised, but the music and commentary were not so well received. The *Manchester Guardian's* Philip Hope-Wallace echoed many when he wrote of 'a desire to wring the last ounce of patriotic meaning and rhetorical excitement from the events.' Arthur

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<sup>59</sup> Correspondence on Making of Film. EE/84. RGS-IBG

<sup>60</sup> Stobart. *Adventurer's Eye*. 248

Benjamin's music seemed 'oddly inappropriate, even cheapening, in its effect'. The commentary written by Louis MacNeice and spoken by Meredith Edwards 'seems often oddly at variance with the casual, matter-o'-fact understatement of the fewer words spoken by the heroic climbers themselves...The pictures in short are from life: the sound track is histrionic'.<sup>61</sup> However, other reviews were less critical. The *Daily Worker* reporter prophetically described the film as 'a record of victory over the unknown, which, perhaps, will not be surpassed in its own field this side of space travel'.<sup>62</sup> The *Sunday Times* film critic Dilys Powell praised the film's authenticity:

We have grown over-familiar in the cinema with fictitious danger, and genuine danger, so much less dramatic, so slovenly in its timing, is apt to look unimpressive and even unreal. There have been occasions in the past when one felt that the camera had belittled some heroic feat. But not this time.<sup>63</sup>

By 28<sup>th</sup> October Kirwan was aware of press interest in the making of the high-altitude shots and wrote to Williams Thompson with a suggestion:

I have had a number of calls from the Press and so I think has George Lowe, asking how many reconstructed shots the film contains. Some of them, in fact, refused to believe that a certain amount of the film has not been faked up in a studio, despite denials from us here. I don't know whether it would be worth plugging the authenticity of the shots in any publicity that you may be putting out in conjunction with the distributors.<sup>64</sup>

As the film had now been released, responsibility for publicity had now passed to the distributor British Lion. The question of reconstruction would also be raised during the lecture tours when the climbers were encouraged to provide first-hand evidence that the film contained no such scenes. The use of a still image of Hillary and Tenzing on the summit gave the film absolute validity,

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<sup>61</sup> *Manchester Guardian* 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1953

<sup>62</sup> *Daily Worker* 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1953

<sup>63</sup> *Sunday Times* 25<sup>th</sup> October 1953

<sup>64</sup> L. Kirwan to Williams Thompson 28<sup>th</sup> October 1953. EE/84. RGS-IBG

quashing the initial worries of the publicity managers (Figure 7.4). Praise for the achievement of the film-makers was echoed in reports from New York when the film was first released at the Fine Arts Theatre in mid-December 1953:

If the crowds, which overflow even the standing space in the theatre, and the spontaneous applause which breaks out at the conclusion of every showing of the film, can be taken as a guide, *The Conquest of Everest* is in for a long run. Critics have had to draw heavily on their stocks of superlatives to express the excitement aroused in them by what one of them called “ a thrilling account of a thrilling exploit, perfectly edited and strikingly photographed”.<sup>65</sup>

#### 7.6 Communicating the conquest: lectures and film

As discussed in Chapter 5, the illustrated lecture tour was one of the standard techniques for generating publicity for both books and film associated with Everest expeditions. In 1953, the relative merits of lecture and film were widely discussed. The ‘London Day by Day’ column in the *Daily Telegraph* outlined concerns over the possible clash of the lecture tour and the film’s release schedule:

After the first showing of *The Conquest of Everest* there was much discussion whether it would compete with or supplement the Everest lectures. Certainly this film, which should have a tremendous international success, gives a far more graphic picture of the struggle against the mountain than any lecture. The lecturers are best at describing the planning rather than the climbing itself. This film should certainly sharpen public interest in these details.<sup>66</sup>

However, in the eyes of the Joint Committee, at least, the lecture tour still had priority over the exhibition of the film. News coverage of the successful climb had been syndicated internationally, creating new heroes. The leading

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<sup>65</sup> *The Times* 14<sup>th</sup> December 1953

<sup>66</sup> *Daily Telegraph* 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1953



climbers were treated as celebrities setting out on a national, and international, tour of the world. In some ways this paralleled the world tour being undertaken by the new Queen as she visited her subjects in the Commonwealth. Wilfrid Van Wyck was appointed by the Joint Committee to manage the Everest lectures, beginning with a series of twelve lectures to be held at the Royal Festival Hall – the new venue on London’s Southbank – a symbol of post-war reconstruction. The old values associated with the lecture tour were highlighted in many press reports. The inaugural lecture was given on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1953 at the Royal Festival Hall. Presented by Hunt, Hillary and Gregory to an audience of 3,000 members of the RGS and the Alpine Club. The *Evening Standard* report was headed ‘Brown Paper’ – at the end of the lecture, a Swiss member of the audience had presented Hunt and Hillary with ice-axes (rather than the traditional bouquet), wrapped in brown paper with corks to protect the sharp tips.<sup>67</sup>

Various artefacts from the expedition were put on display at the Festival Hall in the autumn of 1953. On 16<sup>th</sup> September the *Daily Telegraph* reported that tents and other other equipment were still in transit on a slow freighter from India. William Hickey’s column in the *Daily Express*, under the headline ‘When Brave Men Tell Their Tale’, was a typical description of the lecture:

They brought on the climbers in full evening dress. They paraded them before the audience. They introduced them to us. ‘Your Royal Highnesses, my lords, ladies and gentlemen’ began Sir John Hunt. And then the lights faded on him. He picked up his 10 foot marker. The coloured slides came on the screen....The formality faded. It was the old familiar spirit of the village hall, with the returning traveller lecturing to the locals. Hunt

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<sup>67</sup> *Evening Standard* 16<sup>th</sup> October 1953. EE/ 86 Press and Lecture Cuttings.  
RGS-IBG

played the part. He made no more of the Conquest of Everest than the vicar who had toured the cathedrals of Italy, or the spinster who had visited her brother in Rhodesia. He had just the same difficulty with his slides. 'Could I please have that slide back? ..you're going too fast' – then he tripped over the microphone... It was pure village hall stuff.<sup>68</sup>

The report in the *Birmingham Mail* was in similar vein:

When on 4<sup>th</sup> October Birmingham hears the first hand story of Everest from the men who conquered it, the city will share a memorable experience. Sir Edmund Hillary and Mr. A. Gregory will tell it in the way in which our grandfathers might have heard the adventures of Livingstone and Stanley – not with the aid of the cinematograph and the 'talkie' machine but in an old fashioned lecture style with 'magic lantern' slides, teacher's pointer and convention of dress suits....Last night in the modernistic setting of the Festival Hall, London, when this lecture was given for the first time, the years rolled away, and this Victorian style entertainment proved thrilling and fascinating.<sup>69</sup>

The *Nottingham Guardian* reported likewise: 'once again Nottingham will flock to see lantern slides. For whatever hold television, the films or the radio may have on us, we still like to be able to say " I heard it from the man who was there" '.<sup>70</sup>

The correspondence in the Joint Committee archive suggests that, notwithstanding the modern surroundings, the Festival Hall presentations were somewhat improvised. The venue was chosen principally because of its size rather than its technical facilities. The Hall had a capacity of 2,500 seats and could also provide space for exhibits to complement the Everest lectures. (Although the well-equipped BFI Telekinema, built as part of the Festival of Britain location on the Southbank, was still operating in 1953, it was a small

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<sup>68</sup> *Daily Express* 16<sup>th</sup> October 1953. EE/86 Press and Lecture Cuttings. RGS-IBG

<sup>69</sup> *Birmingham Mail* 15<sup>th</sup> October 1953. EE/86 Press and Lecture Cuttings. RGS-IBG

<sup>70</sup> *Nottingham Guardian* 30<sup>th</sup> September 1953. EE/86 Press and Lecture Cuttings. RGS-IBG

venue - a 400 seater – and did not have sufficient capacity for these audiences). Possibly the first ‘lantern lecture’ to be given in the Hall’s short history, the event posed a number of technical challenges, as revealed in the correspondence. Wallace Heaton Ltd. reported that the Hall wasn’t equipped with a screen and they were unable to hire anything suitable. The Festival Hall was asked to share the cost of purchasing a screen which, including tackle to hoist and hang, together with the labour involved, would be in the region of £160. The House Manager wrote to Lawrence Kirwan, Secretary of the Joint Committee, to explain that, although it was in everyone’s interests to see the lectures presented in the best possible form, such a screen would be of very little use to the Hall after the run of 14 lectures at the venue. He proposed that the Hall would loan the RGS a sheet and charge £7 per lecture for its use, the funds being put towards the purchase of a screen. The compromise was agreed and the screen duly ordered. Given the extent of public interest in the story of the conquest of Everest, this booking was obviously important for the Hall. Displays of climbing equipment were exhibited in the Foyer and special cocktails were on sale in the bar, reminiscent of the heady days of the Festival of Britain. The stills photographer to the expedition, Alfred Gregory, was given responsibility for setting up the projection equipment for the slides. Kodak had made 3.5 x 3.5 inch slides from the selected transparencies because it was thought impossible to project 35mm slides across such a large hall. Although of beautiful quality, Gregory found that the light output from the projector in the hall was inadequate. He persuaded Kodak to upgrade the projection equipment and this enabled the use of the original 35mm Kodachrome slides.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Gregory, A. (1993) *Alfred Gregory’s Everest*. London: BCA. 17

Some of the events associated with the 1953 expedition evoked its predecessors. For example, the provincial press reported in autumn 1953 on talks and lectures by Captain Noel, illustrated with his hand-coloured slides, who was seizing a new opportunity to tell his story (Figure 7. 5). Noel was reported to be offering a prize of £5 to the boy or girl submitting the best essay on 'What is the value of climbing Mount Everest'. No evidence of the winning entry was published, but the competition rather poignantly echoes the question reputedly asked of Mallory some thirty years previously. Again perhaps alluding to the controversy over the 'Dancing Lamas', the *Manchester Guardian* carried a story under the headline 'Look no Lamas'. It covered the reaction of a journalist from *Le Monde* who was glad to find British mountaineers sticking to their subject:

The photographs are magnificent and extremely original. There is not a single temple or a single lama to be seen. Instead one sees at every altitude the mountains and the mountains are admirable.<sup>72</sup>

The trade journal *Today's Cinema* reported on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1953 that the climbers' lectures were creating a great deal of interest in the forthcoming film release. 'Pre-publicity is being engineered right at the point where it will do most good to distributor and exhibitor alike'.<sup>73</sup> All the newspaper reports highlighted the enthusiastic audience response to the lecture tours, suggesting that the lectures frequently sold out in hours with hundreds being turned

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<sup>72</sup> *Manchester Guardian* 25<sup>th</sup> September 1953 – in EE/86 Everest Expedition 1953 Press and Lecture Cuttings Press Book 2. RGS-IBG

<sup>73</sup> *Today's Cinema* 28<sup>th</sup> September 1953 – in EE /86 Everest Expedition 1953 Press and Lecture Cuttings Press Book 2. RGS-IBG

away on occasions. Where possible, repeat lectures were organised in order to accommodate the demand.

The schedule of film screenings was organised so that the film would generally be shown a few weeks after each lecture had taken place, as indicated in Table 4. A printed programme accompanied the lectures, with a dedication from the Duke of Edinburgh as Patron of the Expedition, which underscored both its British character and its trans-imperial significance:

That it was a British Party, ably backed up at every stage by faithful Sherpas, has given us particular pleasure, but the whole world can share our pride in the success of these men who have added another glorious chapter in the story of mankind.<sup>74</sup>

The programme also referred to the setting up of a fund from the proceeds of the lecture to support the Mount Everest Foundation, the newly-established charity devoted to supporting future exploration in mountain regions. *The Times* took advantage of selling their special published supplement at cinema screenings of the film for 3s. 6d. (Figure 7.6).

An itinerary of the public lecture programme for the period 24<sup>th</sup> September – 31<sup>st</sup> December 1953 lists a total of 112 events, 26 of these taking place on the continent of Europe. This was a crowded schedule involving most of the climbing team, with Hunt and Hillary the most commonly requested speakers. Revenue began to accumulate – UK box office receipts for 1953 totalled in excess of £33,000.<sup>75</sup> Table 3 gives details of the first weeks of the public programme, in September and October 1953.

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<sup>74</sup> Ascent of Everest 1953 Lecture Programme. EE/79. RGS-IBG

<sup>75</sup> EE 79/12. RGS-IBG

Holding the lecture in advance of a local cinema screening was considered by the Joint Committee to make good business sense. The press coverage, national and international, had been impressive (Figures 7.8 & 7.9). The climbers, now celebrities in their own right, were engaged to promote sales of Hunt's book, *The Ascent of Everest*, and provide advance publicity for the film when it arrived at the local cinema. However, this didn't always run to plan and there were occasions when potentially embarrassing situations could arise. On September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1953, for example, Wilfrid Van Wyck wrote to Kirwan alerting him to the fact that his agent in Paris had rung him:

he is greatly disquieted by the news that the Film of the Everest Expedition is likely to be shown in Paris and Brussels BEFORE the Illustrated Lecture appearances which have been booked.....He feels that this will have a very adverse effect on the Box Office, and he doubts very much whether the President of the French Republic will now attend the first lecture appearance, in view of the fact that the Film will be shown first.<sup>76</sup>

Kirwan was asked to intervene with the distributors to postpone the film screening. A note records that Kirwan 'dealt with' the matter immediately by contacting London Films International.

In January 1954 the official Everest Expedition American Lecture tour began. This was managed by Ford Hicks of the Chicago based National Lecture Bureau who had organised a punishing schedule for a six-week tour. An American Everest Committee had been created for the purpose, composed of members of the American Geographical Society and the Alpine Club of America. Hunt, who had become exhausted by the end of December 1953, would only fly in for the

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<sup>76</sup> W. Van Wyck to L. Kirwan 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1953. EE/79. RGS-IBG

presentation of the National Geographic's Hubbard Medal at the White House on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1954. This in itself was a media event with syndicated press and television coverage of the presentation by President Eisenhower.<sup>77</sup>

The three men who did the bulk of the lecturing on the American tour were Hillary, Evans and Lowe. James Morris, *The Times* correspondent, accompanied the climbers as a kind of minder. The standard lecture on the tour was divided into three parts – George Lowe describing the organisation of the Expedition from Kathmandu to Base Camp, Dr Evans continuing with the establishment of the Advance Base Camp and progress to the South Col, and Hillary describing the final ascent. In all the lecture lasted for about an hour and 45 minutes and was fully illustrated with 110 glass slides. There was some debate over the sole use of slides but the men preferred them to the use of moving film. From a practical point of view, handling the equipment was easier. The slides could be repeated or reversed in order if necessary – enabling the presenter to set his own pace and tailor his lecture to the specific interests of the audience. Projected film would not provide the same flexibility – no stopping or going back to highlight a particular point. It was also easier to replace damaged slides. In some venues there were problems with the glass slides cracking from the heat of the bulb in the projector. Frustrated by the quality of projectors in many of the venues, Hillary ended up by buying a portable projector and using this to ensure the quality of the images.

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<sup>77</sup> Press cuttings. EE 80/4. RGS-IBG

In early May 1954, James Morris wrote to Lawrence Kirwan at the RGS describing the reception given to the visitors in the USA:

The reactions of the Americans to the arrival of the team was much as expected. Ed Hillary was of course especially lionized, due partly for the American predilection for 'the guy who gets there' and partly due to the burning fascination of a real knighthood. I myself, nonetheless, was pleasantly surprised by the large numbers of people who seemed to have a grasp of the true nature of the achievement, and the joint lectures themselves emphasised this nature better than anything. Except for the odd ubiquity of New Zealand diplomatic officials, there was little trouble about the relationship between Britain and New Zealand. This partly because many Americans have never heard of New Zealand and took it to be one of the more obscure border counties.<sup>78</sup>

United Artists secured American distribution rights for the release of the feature film. Their insistence on bringing the release forward caused some disquiet in view of the working model adopted by the Joint Committee, in which, as we have seen, lecture preceded film by some weeks. The French film *Annapurna* was also about to appear in cinemas and UA felt that this could have a negative effect on bookings for *The Conquest of Everest*.<sup>79</sup> There was also an ongoing debate about the lack of film footage within the lecture tour. United Artists were adamant that there was to be no use of material from the film. Finally, after high-level negotiations between J. Arthur Rank and United Artists, it was agreed that Countryman Films, the producers, would send out a small amount of unused material. Kirwan viewed the 13-minute compilation before it was dispatched by air. No high altitude footage was included– this apparently had all been edited into the film. United Artists were insistent that only 5 minutes could be used in lectures. Strict instructions followed that all

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<sup>78</sup> American Lecture Part 1. Report to L. Kirwan from J. Morris 4<sup>th</sup> May 1954. EE/81/16. RGS-IBG

<sup>79</sup> Correspondence File E.P.Dutton and American Everest Committee December 1953. EE 81/7. RGS-IBG



unused out-takes should be returned to Countryman at Beaconsfield Studios. The short reel for use in lectures should also be returned at the end of the tour. In the event it appears that the footage was only used on two occasions, in Boston and White Plains.<sup>80</sup> The men felt that use of moving footage disrupted the flow of the lecture. In practical terms a venue would need separate equipment to project both film and slides. Any footage damaged in projection would be difficult to replace. Although Ford Hicks had been insistent that an American audience would require moving footage to be included in the lecture, it appears that he was proved wrong. The audiences came to see the climbers. They could see the complete film, not just hastily compiled outtakes, when it came to the cinema.

Appearances on radio and television were monitored by the American Everest Committee who had power of attorney to manage publicity. This raised questions about the appropriateness of appearing on sponsored programmes.

The American Committee is fully alive to the necessity to avoid commercializing Everest. Final decisions as to what sponsored programmes to accept have been left to the Committee, on condition that the lecture team themselves should not undertake any form of advertising.<sup>81</sup>

The 1954 North American tour was felt by the American Committee to be an unqualified success, although an exhausting experience. James Morris reported that it 'did a great deal of good for Anglo American relations and for

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<sup>80</sup> American Everest Committee Minutes 17<sup>th</sup> March 1954. EE 81/3. RGS-IBG

<sup>81</sup> Everest Office – Second Progress Report February 1954. EE/99/3. RGS-IBG

mountaineering'.<sup>82</sup> The celebrity treatment on offer in America contrasted with the rather cursory arrangements made for Alfred Gregory in Autumn 1954 when he toured the Belgian Congo. Arranged through the Belgian Consulate, the tour took place over five weeks in September and October. Gregory had to carry his own projection equipment, get the necessary visa and injections against smallpox and yellow fever, organise travel by plane, train and car around the country, and not expect to receive any mail. 'Apparently no towns in the Congo deliver mail'.<sup>83</sup> His schedule gave him only one free day.

Everest lecture tours took place in many countries throughout 1954, with Hunt and Hillary continuing to be the speakers most in demand. Alfred Gregory, the Expedition's photographer, handled French-speaking countries, including Belgium, North Africa and the Belgian Congo, as well as France itself. In April 1954 he reported back to Kirwan that his lectures in Marseilles, Algiers and Casablanca had been a 'terrific success'<sup>84</sup>, with packed houses and excellent press coverage. Kirwan, in consultation with the Foreign Office, actively promoted the lectures as an extension of cultural diplomacy:

We are conscious of the great interest abroad in the Everest Expedition and of the prestige value as distinct from the purely commercial value of lectures about it. Our Joint Committee accordingly considers that, subject to the advice of the Foreign Office, there may be certain countries where the full commercial lecture fee may be unobtainable, which should nevertheless hear an Everest lecture for, broadly, propaganda reasons. Greece, Turkey, Syria and Israel are countries that come to mind.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Hansen, P. H. (2001) 'Coronation Everest: The Empire and Commonwealth in the Second Elizabethan Age', in Ward, S. (ed.) *British Culture and the End of Empire*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 67

<sup>83</sup> V. F. Palmer to A. Gregory 19th July 1954. EE/79. RGS-IBG

<sup>84</sup> A. Gregory to L. Kirwan 26<sup>th</sup> April 1954. EE/79. RGS-IBG

<sup>85</sup> L. Kirwan to Marett, Foreign Office 9<sup>th</sup> November 1953. EE/79. RGS-IBG

One of the most intriguing venues was Moscow. In July 1953 Kirwan wrote to the Soviet Embassy asking if Russia would be interested in being included in the proposed international lecture tour. In December 1953, the British Ambassador in Moscow, Sir William Hayter, wrote to Hillary inviting him to give a talk at the Embassy. ' I think it would be of great help to British prestige for some Russians to hear your lecture and see your slides'.<sup>86</sup> A request was also sent to Hillary from Major General Coleman, GOC Berlin (British Sector):

As you know Berlin is a lonely city, and the Berliners, under the accumulated nervous strain of years of cold war, are apt at times to feel lost and forgotten by the Western world to which they belong. Anything we can do to keep alive their faith in the West and to show our sustained interest in their welfare is, therefore, worthwhile; and I can imagine few things that would so help to this end as a visit from you and a talk about your achievements on Everest.....We would of course be very glad in making the necessary arrangements either with the Foreign Office or with the local Berlin authorities.<sup>87</sup>

Hillary was unable to take up the offer of visiting either Moscow or Berlin but the Foreign Office decided that the opportunity was so important that it warranted 'pressing' the War Office to release Hunt from his Staff College duties specially for it. Sir John and Lady Hunt's travel arrangements were met from the public purse and a suitable slide projector complete with the appropriate transformer to suit Russian voltage was sent separately by diplomatic bag. It was deemed for some reason to be 'too risky' to send it with them on the same flight. (Subsequently the Foreign Office asked Kirwan to cover the cost of transporting this equipment and the sum of £35.11.1d was

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<sup>86</sup> Sir. W.Hayter to Sir E. Hillary 18<sup>th</sup> December 1953. EE/79. RGS-IBG

<sup>87</sup> Maj. Gen. C.F.C. Coleman to Sir E. Hillary 30<sup>th</sup> December 1953. EE/79. RGS-IBG

duly paid). The following is a transcript of a handwritten letter to Kirwan on British Embassy (Moscow) headed notepaper, dated 14<sup>th</sup> June 1954:

Dear Larry,

This will be a scribble as it is being written in a vibrating and bumpy Russian plane (en route to Berlin). This is just to tell you that the Moscow visit was a tremendous success from the point of view of the Hunts and was well viewed by the Embassy. What the real value was for the Russians, or Anglo-Russian relations, I have no idea. Only 12 Russians were invited to attend the lecture. They were most friendly and seriously impressed – there were lots of questions they wanted to ask but time forbade. I gather that some of these had come to the showing of the film and were outspokenly sceptical. One stated pointedly that it was all made in a studio! There was little doubt but that all were convinced after leaving the lecture – and, more importantly, seeing the slides.<sup>88</sup>

Hunt's letter ends with a postscript 'I am now a Soviet Mountaineer, 1<sup>st</sup> class!!'

The last of the international lecture tours took place in June 1955 with Hillary and Lowe visiting South Africa and the Rhodesias. Lectures were given in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban, Capetown, Port Elisabeth, Bulawayo and Salisbury. A plea to Hillary from the Secretary of the Camping and Climbing Section of McDonald's Club in Bulawayo had persuaded them to extend the tour into Southern Rhodesia:

We would here in Central Africa be very honoured to have a visit of a person who has achieved so much for the British Empire, and done so much in the advancement of exploration and promotion of geographical knowledge.<sup>89</sup>

Additional lecture listings are recorded for the Roan Antelope Mine Company in Northern Rhodesia later in June 1955 – in Lusaka, Luanshya, Mutulira, Kitwe and Chingola. On the 29<sup>th</sup> July 1955 Kirwan wrote to J. H. Stodel, African

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<sup>88</sup> Sir J. Hunt to L. Kirwan 14<sup>th</sup> June 1954. EE/79. RGS-IBG

<sup>89</sup> Sir E. Hillary 14<sup>th</sup> May 1955. EE/79. RGS-IBG

Consolidated Theatres, thanking him for the ‘really admirable arrangements’ made for this ‘very successful tour of the Union and Rhodesia’.<sup>90</sup>

George Lowe later wrote of the gruelling nature of these overseas lecture tours, particularly the grand American tour which turned into a ‘coast- to- coast, how – we- climbed –it, why –we-did-it lecture tour’ which left the men ‘fat and flabby climbers suffering from what Dylan Thomas once called “the ulcerous rigours of a lecturer’s Spring” ’.<sup>91</sup> This was reminiscent of Hunt’s comment in December 1953 when asked by a reporter from the *Glasgow Evening News* how long the lecture programme would last: ‘ I presume we go on lecturing until we go mad’.<sup>92</sup> A cartoon in the same paper on 8<sup>th</sup> October had captured the mood of the reticent lecturer. Following a report of the previous evening’s event in St Andrew’s Hall, Glasgow, when Hunt and Hillary had addressed the Scottish Geographical Society. ‘It was put over in the good old British way – rather like a C.O. briefing the blokes on how to capture a strongpoint.’ The cartoon shows two intrepid climbers in action – the speech bubble declares ‘It’s so much easier to do it than to lecture about it’<sup>93</sup> (Figure 7.9). The sentiment was reminiscent of David Livingstone’s famous line in the preface to *Missionary Travels*: ‘I think I would rather cross the African

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<sup>90</sup> L. Kirwan to J. H. Stodel, 29<sup>th</sup> July 1955. EE/79. RGS-IBG

<sup>91</sup> Lowe, G. (1959) *Because It Is There*. London: Cassell. 43

<sup>92</sup> *Glasgow Evening News* 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1953

<sup>93</sup> *Glasgow Evening News* 8<sup>th</sup> October 1953. Everest Expedition 1953 Press and Lecture Cuttings Book 3. EE/86. RGS-IBG

continent again than undertake to write another book. It is far easier to travel than to write about it'.<sup>94</sup>

## 7.7 Conclusion

The best remembered image from the 1953 climb is the iconic still image taken by Hillary of Tenzing holding the flags aloft on the summit of Everest (Figure 7.4). This is the image that still publicises the film on the cover of its DVD release. Stobart was quoted in 1953 as saying 'After all the object was to get to the top, not to make a film'.<sup>95</sup> However the combination of media – print, photographs, film, radio and television - has ever since maintained public engagement with the Everest ascent.

Hillary's often quoted phrase 'we knocked the bastard off' was meant to bring closure to the thirty-year ambition to climb Everest.<sup>96</sup> When he heard that Everest had been climbed, Shipton is quoted as saying that it would mean 'a new era of mountaineering in the Himalayas'.<sup>97</sup> But media publicity would keep speculation alive. Who actually reached the top first? Had Mallory and Irvine summited in 1924, before they were lost? In the archives of the John Noel Estate, donated to the RGS in 2018, I found a rather poignant handwritten letter to Noel from Karma Paul, official interpreter on the early Everest expeditions, living in Darjeeling, dated 5<sup>th</sup> February 1970. 'I am sure this will be a great surprise to you, as I am writing to you after nearly half a century'.

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<sup>94</sup> Driver, F. (2013) 'Missionary Travels: Livingstone, Africa and the Book' *Scottish Geographical Journal* 129. 164

<sup>95</sup> *Oxford Mail* 6<sup>th</sup> November 1953

<sup>96</sup> Unsworth, W. (1981) *Everest*. London: Allen Lane. 337

<sup>97</sup> *Sunday Express* 16<sup>th</sup> September 1953

The letter was prompted by Paul reading a *Sunday Times* Magazine article (28<sup>th</sup> September 1969) about the Everest climb in 1924. Paul writes nostalgically of his association with successive Everest climbs and his regard for the achievement of Tenzing Norgay: 'I am really very proud of him as he was the first Sherpa to get to the Top of "Everest" with Sir Hillary, by the sporting chance of the British'.<sup>98</sup>

In the same year (1970) Tom Stobart wrote to the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC) in an attempt to get a bonus due to the success of *The Conquest of Everest*. Originally paid a fee of £1,900 plus expenses he argued that he had been given a verbal promise from Countryman that he would be paid extra if the film was successful. He had been shot in the leg on an assignment to Ethiopia and was now lame, so in need of some financial help. Countryman Films had been wound up so it fell to the NFFC and the Mount Everest Foundation (MEF) to consider this request. Kirwan wrote to Tom Blakeney of the MEF to the effect that, if any institution could offer financial help, it should be the NFFC. Old issues were raised to defend this:

I recall all too vividly, as the Committee's representative in the negotiations, that they drove a quite unjustifiably hard bargain, for an organisation supported by public funds whose purpose was to encourage worthwhile films. As it was they made a handsome profit.... Stobart's fee was far from generous, though of course, he profited subsequently and indirectly from the success of the film.<sup>99</sup>

In response Lord Tangle (Sir Edwin Herbert, who had been influential in the setting up of the MEF) defended the actions of the NFFC:

The film was really a speculation on the part of Countryman Films and must have been financed as such by the NFFC. In the result everybody

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<sup>98</sup> K. Paul to J. B. L. Noel, J. 5<sup>th</sup> February 1970. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

<sup>99</sup> L. Kirwan to T. Blakeney 18<sup>th</sup> December 1970. EE/163. RGS-IBG

concerned has made a good thing out of it..... If the expedition had failed and the film had in consequence not been a success Stobart would have been well paid. I cannot see any justification for jobbing back just because the film has turned out to be a money spinner.<sup>100</sup>

The MEF benefitted from 12.5% of film receipts and although initially revenue was healthy - £5,628 in the first two years of its release – it had dropped to £2,610 over the next five years and then only £972 over the next 9 years. So in a fifteen year period the returns were £9,210 – hardly a massive amount. However, as the distribution of *The Conquest of Everest* as a theatrical release came to an end, new media developments would create new audiences and opportunities for re-use of the content would grow and exceed financial expectations.

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<sup>100</sup> Lord Tangle to T. Blakeney 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1970. EE/163. RGS-IBG



Table 3. Public Lectures, September – October 1953

<b>Date (1953)</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Speakers</b>
24 <sup>th</sup> September	Southampton	Westmacott and Bourdillon
25 <sup>th</sup> September	Brighton	Wylie and Bourdillon
26 <sup>th</sup> September	Manchester	Hillary and Band
28 <sup>th</sup> September	Festival Hall, London	Hunt, Hillary and Wylie
29 <sup>th</sup> September	Leicester	Hillary and Band
30 <sup>th</sup> September	Nottingham	Band and Lowe
3 <sup>rd</sup> October	Hastings	Westmacott and Lowe
3 <sup>rd</sup> October	Manchester	Hillary and Band
4 <sup>th</sup> October	Birmingham	Hillary, Band and Bourdillon
5 <sup>th</sup> October	Liverpool	Gregory, Bourdillon and Band
5 <sup>th</sup> October	Edinburgh – Royal Scottish Geographical Society and Assoc. of Scottish Climbing Clubs	Hunt and Hillary
6 <sup>th</sup> October	Edinburgh	Hunt and Hillary
7 <sup>th</sup> October	Dunfermline	Wylie and Lowe
7 <sup>th</sup> October	Glasgow – RSGS and ASCC	Hunt and Hillary
8 <sup>th</sup> October	Glasgow	Hunt and Hillary
8 <sup>th</sup> October	Edinburgh	Wylie and Band
9 <sup>th</sup> October	Newcastle	Wylie and Band

Compiled from documents in EE /78 RGS-IBG

Table 4. Locations of Lectures and Film Screenings October – December 1953

<b>Date</b>	<b>Where Lecture Held</b>	<b>Theatre Showing Film</b>	<b>Film showing Date</b>
27.10.53	Hull – Queen’s Hall	Regal, Hull	22.11.53
28.10.53	Bradford – St.George’s Hall	Ritz, Bradford	9.11.53
29.10.53	Leeds – Town Hall	Ritz, Leeds	9.11.53
29.10.53	Sheffield – City Hall	Regal, Chesterfield	15.2.54
31.10.53	Norwich – St.Andrew’s Hall	Regent, Norwich	16.11.53
1.11.53	Norwich – St.Andrew’s Hall	Regent, Norwich	16.11.53
1.11.53	Oxford – Town Hall	Ritz, Oxford	2.11.53
4.11.53	Liverpool – Philharmonic Hall	Forum, Liverpool	Not given
4.11.53	Blackburn – St. George’s Hall	Ritz, Wigan	1.2.54
6.11.53	Stafford – Territorial Association Hall	Empire, Longton Capitol, Hanley Majestic, Stoke	7.12.53
8.11.53	Cambridge – Regal Cinema	Regal, Cambridge	23.11.53
8.11.53	Chester – Gaumont Cinema	Regal, Chester	16.2.54
9.11.53	Sheffield – City Hall	Regal, Chesterfield	15.2.54
15.11.53	Atherton – Savoy Cinema	Regal, Leigh	11.1.54
6.12.53	Swanley, Kent	Regal, Bexley Heath	14.12.53
6.12.53	Canterbury	Regal, Canterbury	25.1.54
15.12.53	Leicester – De Montfort Hall	Savoy, Leicester	Not given
18.12.53	Sheffield – City Hall	Regal, Chesterfield	15.2.54
20.12.53	Ryde, Isle of Wight – Commodore Theatre	Savoy, Portsmouth	31.1.54

Compiled from documents in EE/78 RGS-IBG



Figure 7.1 Tom Stobart with cine camera and Alfred Gregory with camera,  
1953  
RGS/IBG



Figure 7.2 Tom Stobart with cine camera at Camp IV,  
1953  
RGS-IBG



Figure 7.3 George Lowe changes a roll of film in his camera at 27,300ft., 1953  
RGS-IBG



Figure 7.4 Tenzing Norgay on the summit of Mt. Everest, 29<sup>th</sup> May 1953  
RGS-IBG





# THROUGH TIBET TO EVEREST

A story personally told by one of the early Everest Explorers, and profusely illustrated on the screen by remarkable colour pictures of the adventures of the Expedition amid the most stupendous mountains and glaciers of the world around Everest, together with colour pictures of the wonderful tropical forests and flower lands of the Himalayas - Tibet, with its beautiful scenery of plains, lakes and snowy peaks - and the fantastic architecture of the Tibetan monastries - and the Lamas and People of Tibet.

By

**CAPTAIN JOHN NOEL**

*Author of 'Through Tibet to Everest.'  
and 'The Story of Everest.'*

Capt. Noel was the Official Photographer to two of the Royal Geographical Society's Pioneer Everest Expeditions on which Mallory and Irvine were last seen climbing up within 600ft. of the summit of Everest, but were never seen again. This climb was the world's record height attained prior to the conquest of the great mountain by Hillary and Sherpa Tensing.

Press Quotations.

*The Scotsman.*—"Mastercraft in Photographic Art."

*The Philadelphia Forum, U.S.A.*—"Some of the most extraordinary and beautiful pictures ever seen."

By kind permission of the Teachers of Michael Hall.

**The Hall, Michael Hall School, Forest Row**

**SUNDAY, JULY 26th and MONDAY, JULY 27th, 1953**

Promptly at 8.15 p.m.      Finishing at 10 p.m.

ENTRANCE FREE.      *A Silver Collection will be made towards Expenses.*

Figure 7.5 Flyer for Captain Noel's Lecture 'Through Tibet to Everest', Forest Row, Kent. July 1953  
Sandra Noel collection/ RGS-IBG

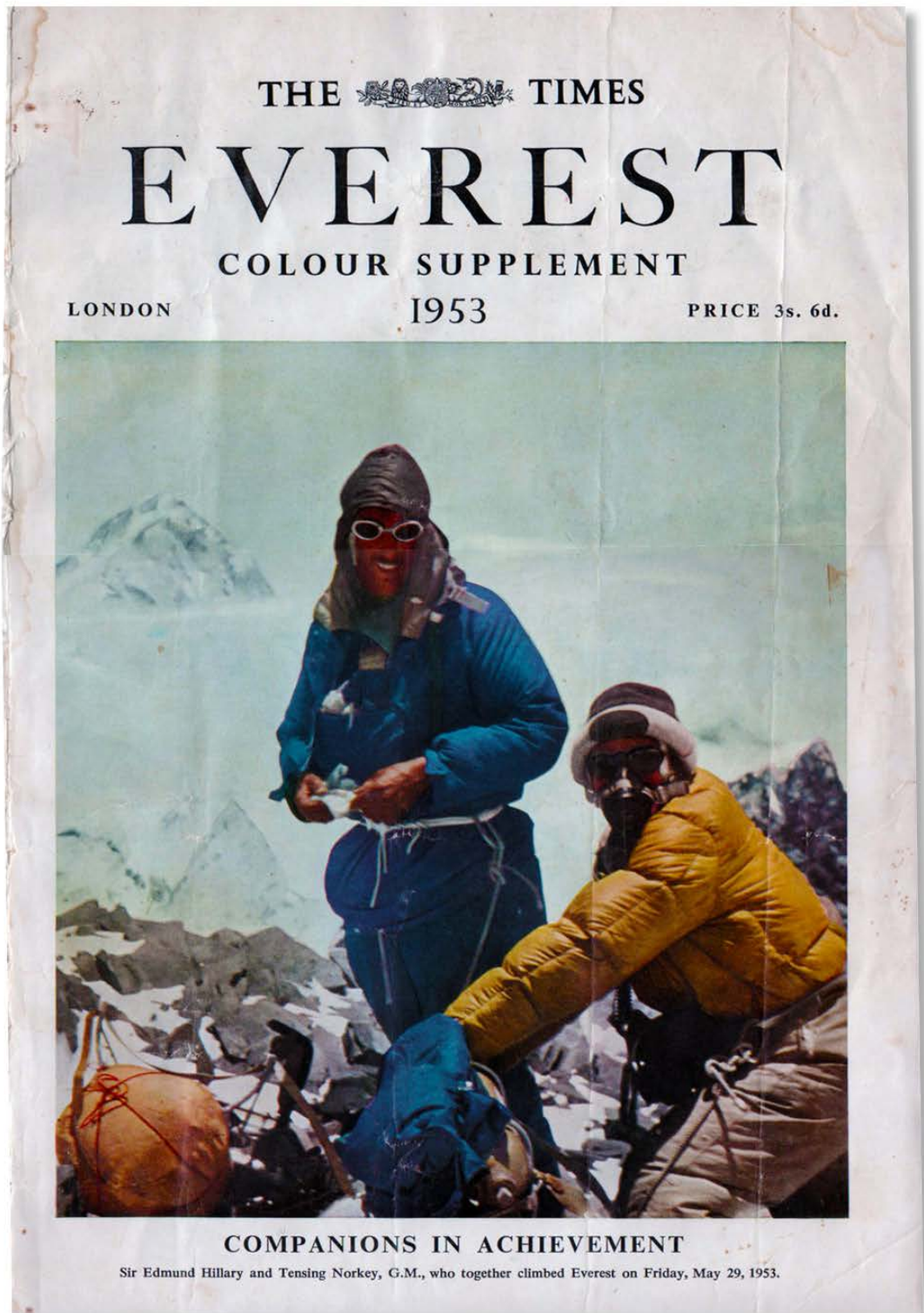


Figure 7.6 *The Times* Everest Colour Supplement, 1953  
EE 86 RGS-IBG



# NEWS CHRONICLE

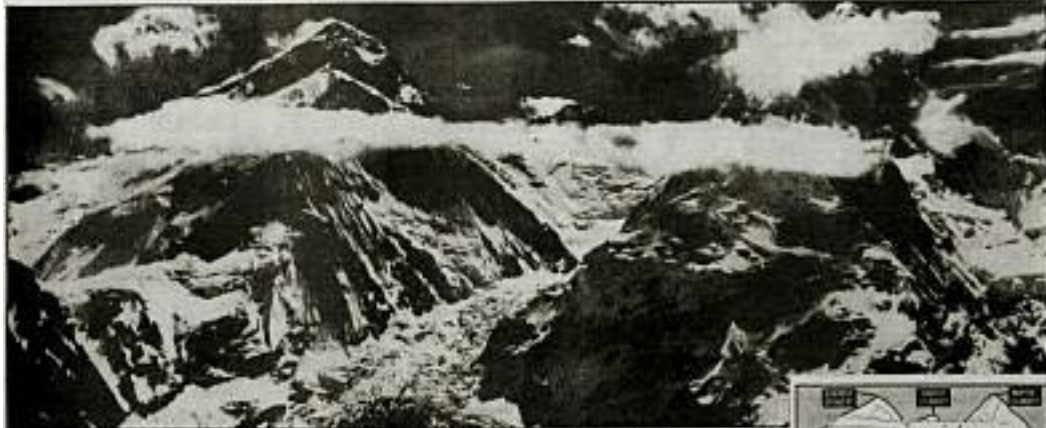
No. 3110

TUESDAY, JUNE 2, 1953

PRICE 11d

THE  
QUEEN'S  
DRESS  
TODAY  
*Back Page*

# THE CROWNING GLORY: EVEREST IS CLIMBED



## Tremendous news for the Queen

### HILLARY DOES IT

**GLORIOUS** Coronation Day news! Everest—Everest the unconquerable—has been conquered. And conquered by men of British blood and breed.

The news came late last night that Edmund Hillary and the Sherpa guide, Tenzing, of Colonel Hunt's expedition had climbed to the summit of Earth's highest peak, 29,002 feet high.

Queen Elizabeth has received word on the eve of her coronation, was immediately told that her brightest jewel of courage and endurance had been added to the Crown of British valour.

It is estimated that a tonnage of 200,000 congratulations will be sent to the climbers.

Adventure takes into its stride and triumph, and the Queen's coronation will be "May the best."

Hillary, a Sherpa of the Himalayas, and Tenzing, an Everest mountaineer, were the first to reach the top of the world's highest mountain on Saturday.

The last day's ascent was accomplished on Saturday, a year ago Hillary climbed to within 100 feet of the summit with a companion, but the expedition failed.

The same party of the present expedition—Hillary—reached to within 100 feet of the summit—then they were rescued by a rescue party. The expedition was organized by Colonel Hunt, who is now in London.

The expedition was organized by Colonel Hunt, who is now in London. The expedition was organized by Colonel Hunt, who is now in London.

The expedition was organized by Colonel Hunt, who is now in London. The expedition was organized by Colonel Hunt, who is now in London.

The expedition was organized by Colonel Hunt, who is now in London. The expedition was organized by Colonel Hunt, who is now in London.

### The new Elizabethan



Here the forecast is rain—fall—sun—snow, BUT the winds are blowing in the rain 10—

## WHO CARES NOW IF IT SNOWS?

PROCESSIONERS AND PROCESSIONERS! Tomorrow morning, snow will fall and the sun will shine. But the winds will be strong.

REPEATED reports, however, that the weather will be fine and the sun will shine. But the winds will be strong.

For the coronation ceremony, the weather will be fine and the sun will shine. But the winds will be strong.

Thousands of people are expected to attend the coronation ceremony. The weather will be fine and the sun will shine.

Thousands of people are expected to attend the coronation ceremony. The weather will be fine and the sun will shine.

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Thousands of people are expected to attend the coronation ceremony. The weather will be fine and the sun will shine.



## Stabbed girl Flash kills 3 dead in Thames

A 16-year-old girl was stabbed to death in the Thames river today. The girl was identified as Mary Smith, of 12, White Horse Lane, White Horse, London. She was found floating in the river near the White Horse pub. The police are investigating the case.



## "A SMILES CLOCK my dear, is the Unforgettable Gift for Coronation Year"

There is indeed a gift that will be a constant reminder of the coronation year. A Smiles Clock is the perfect gift for a wedding or a birthday, or a memento for those who have lived through the coronation year.



Get your Smiles Clock today. It's the perfect gift for the coronation year.

## 400 watch sea rescue

A rescue operation was carried out today, with 400 people watching. The rescue was successful and the victim was brought safely to shore.

## TENT TOWN

A tent town has been set up for the coronation ceremony. The tents are made of canvas and are decorated with bunting.

## No bread

There will be no bread sold today. The bakeries have been closed in honor of the coronation.

## TEN STEPS A MINUTE

A ten-step program has been launched to help people prepare for the coronation. The steps include: 1. Cleanliness, 2. Dress, 3. Grooming, 4. Health, 5. Education, 6. Industry, 7. Frugality, 8. Order, 9. Industry, 10. Frugality.

These steps are the key to a successful coronation year.

These steps are the key to a successful coronation year.

Times Press, Ltd.

Times Press, Ltd.

Figure 7.7 News Chronicle Front Cover, 2nd June 1953  
EE 86 RGS-IBG

The Weather  
Partly sunny to cloudy with  
occasional showers. Tomorrow's  
forecast: Partly cloudy with  
occasional showers. Tuesday's  
forecast: Partly cloudy with  
occasional showers. Wednesday's  
forecast: Partly cloudy with  
occasional showers. Thursday's  
forecast: Partly cloudy with  
occasional showers. Friday's  
forecast: Partly cloudy with  
occasional showers. Saturday's  
forecast: Partly cloudy with  
occasional showers. Sunday's  
forecast: Partly cloudy with  
occasional showers.

# NEW YORK Herald Tribune

European Edition Published Daily in Paris  
PARIS, TUESDAY, JUNE 2, 1953

Special Edition  
**ALL THE LEADING COMICS**  
10 CENTS  
Published by the  
Herald Tribune Company  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York 20, N. Y.  
Established in New York 1861

## Queen Elizabeth II to Be Crowned Today; Mt. Everest Conquered by Two Climbers

### Highest Peak Scaled Friday

By Gustav Collins  
From the Mount Everest Expedition, London, June 2 (Special)—London was electrified tonight by a report that a British expedition has conquered the legendary 29,000-foot summit of Mount Everest, the world's highest peak.

### Dulles: Mid-East Pact Is Out

By Robert Boyd  
The State Department today announced that it had rejected a proposal for a Middle East defense pact. The pact, which was proposed by the British government, would have required the United States to provide military aid to the Middle East region.



This picture, from Eric Shipton's 'The Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition,' shows the mountain peaks to be scaled, which was taken by Col. John C. Hunt's expedition. The scale was pioneered in 1951 by the Shipton party.

### Spectators Pass Night In Streets

By Don Cook  
From the Great Britain Home, London, June 1 (Special)—Londoners passed a quiet night in their homes, but the streets were filled with the sounds of the city.

### Festival Spirit Grips London

By Joseph Newman  
From the Great Britain Home, London, June 1 (Special)—Londoners passed a quiet night in their homes, but the streets were filled with the sounds of the city.

### Forecast Still Calls For Rain

From the Great Britain Home, London, June 1 (Special)—The weather forecast for today calls for rain, with temperatures in the mid-50s.

**J.C. Hughes Gets Draper Post**  
WASHINGTON, June 1 (Special)—J.C. Hughes, a prominent figure in the defense industry, has been named to a new position at the Department of Defense.

**Eisenhower Plans New Aid Agency**  
By Robert J. Donovan  
The President today announced plans to create a new agency to coordinate the administration of the Marshall Plan aid program.

**Maltese Ring**  
The Maltese Ring, a group of individuals involved in a recent scandal, has been identified by law enforcement officials.

**Kaufman Rejects Rosenberg Plea**  
NEW YORK, June 1 (Special)—The United States government today rejected the plea of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for a reduced sentence.

**London's Decorations Are Finest of Century**  
By Gustav Collins  
The decorations awarded to the British Royal Family and other members of the royal household are considered some of the finest of the century.

**Maltese Ring**  
The Maltese Ring, a group of individuals involved in a recent scandal, has been identified by law enforcement officials.

**VA Head Rejoins**  
The head of the Veterans Administration has been reappointed to his position after a brief absence.

**Maltese Ring**  
The Maltese Ring, a group of individuals involved in a recent scandal, has been identified by law enforcement officials.

**Maltese Ring**  
The Maltese Ring, a group of individuals involved in a recent scandal, has been identified by law enforcement officials.

**Prince Charles in Coronation Mood**  
From the Great Britain Home, London, June 1 (Special)—Prince Charles is in a coronation mood as he prepares for the upcoming ceremony.

**Maltese Ring**  
The Maltese Ring, a group of individuals involved in a recent scandal, has been identified by law enforcement officials.

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The Maltese Ring, a group of individuals involved in a recent scandal, has been identified by law enforcement officials.



Motion picture and performance has stirred in front of Buckingham Palace on eve of the Queen's Coronation.

Figure 7.8 Herald Tribune Front Cover, 2nd June 1953  
EE 80/4 RGS-IBG





Figure 7.9 Cartoon in the *Glasgow Evening News*, 8<sup>th</sup> October 1953  
EE 86 RGS-IBG



Figure 7.10 Publicity photograph - Tenzing, Lowe, Hillary and Stobart look at 16mm film rushes at Beaconsfield Studios  
© Studio Canal. Source: Ronald Grant/ Mary Evans Picture Library.  
Ref.10977591



Figure 7.11 Children's cinema show, 1953  
Photographed by Paul Kaye. © The Paul Kaye Collection/ Mary Evans Picture  
Library. Ref. 10922664

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

#### 8.1 Introduction

In this thesis I have examined a unique body of visual material. I have considered the form and function of the various films made on British mountaineering expeditions on Everest between 1922 and 1953 and discussed their significance in relation to the overlooked genre of expeditionary film-making. I have also re-established and contextualised the place of archival film within the collections of the RGS-IBG by drawing together the evidence contained in its manuscript, print and photographic archives. I have provided a holistic overview of the history of the making and uses of film on Everest expeditions and offered new interpretations of the significance of this body of material of relevance to researchers in a number of fields, from film history to the history of geography. The unique opportunity provided by the AHRC Collaborative Award, in partnership with Royal Holloway's Geography Department and the RGS-IBG, gave unfettered access to a rich yet still under-utilised collection. My professional experience acquired over a 40-year career as a film archivist/curator undoubtedly also shaped the perspectives offered in this thesis, since I was keen to highlight the material qualities of archival film and its various uses throughout the project.

The research began with a consideration of the extent and nature of expeditionary film materials deposited and preserved on behalf of the Royal Geographical Society in the BFI National Archive. I also included other repositories where I found complementary supporting footage such as newsreel libraries. I have examined the impact of each of a series of Everest films, looking at the role of film in documenting the geographical achievements of successive climbs alongside its part in the promotion of expeditionary culture in the public consciousness. Various aspects of film-making and exhibition have been considered, both in the context of their time and their continuing availability and cumulative importance in recording what has endured in the national memory as a major feat – the ascent of the highest mountain in the world.

This concluding chapter brings together the significant findings of my research and outlines further opportunities for study. I evaluate the enduring presence of the Everest films in the canon of expeditionary film-making and consider the re-use of film content. I also describe the work of the BFI in curating this material through a case study of the 2013 restoration of the film of the 1924 Expedition, *The Epic of Everest*. The commissioning and release of this film provides an opportunity to reflect on the wider history of Everest on film, and its lasting legacy for the work of organisations such as the RGS-IBG and the BFI in the future.

## 8.2 Summary of key themes

By examining the full range of film material, some professionally exhibited, some unedited and relatively unseen, I have explored archival documentation from a variety of sources to form a narrative connecting the Everest expeditions prior to and including the successful ascent in 1953. I have considered technical developments in film-making over the period of this study, the establishment of protocols concerning the preservation of the material, and geopolitical issues which influenced the successive expeditions themselves.

Although the expeditions of 1922 and 1924 were filmed by the same cinematographer, Captain John Noel, the management of the exhibition of each film was a very different affair, largely governed by the need to generate revenue. In 1922, determined to maintain its authority, the MEC sought to manage outcomes through a lecture agency rather than a recognised film distributor. In Chapter 4 I examined the failings in this business model drawing on frank assessments made at the time and subsequently by the Secretary of the MEC, Arthur Hinks, and published newspaper and trade reviews reporting on the film's reception. The purchase of film and photographic rights by Noel in 1924 enabled him to create his own publicity campaign and follow a route that used spectacle and theatrical performance, outside the control of the MEC, with lasting repercussions for future attempts to climb Everest. In this thesis I have presented research on the largely undocumented role of Noel after the failed 1924 expedition and explored his re-working of his films for audiences



across North America in the late 1920s and 1930s. His very personal connection to these films continued throughout his remaining years and in this respect, as in several others, Noel can be compared with his mentor, film-maker Herbert Ponting. I have also examined the circumstances contributing to the deposit of Noel's film material at the BFI National Archive, alongside the RGS Collection of Everest titles, concluding that it was Curator David Francis' meetings and discussions with Noel that persuaded him of the long-term benefit of approved preservation methods for his work (see Chapter 3). Their shared interest in lantern slides was undoubtedly an important factor in developing the relationship and securing the long-term survival of the film titles. The recent discovery of re-edited versions of Noel's material in his own private collection, prior to its transfer to the RGS-IBG in 2018, has contributed significantly to the account in Chapter 5 of his career as lecturer and showman. Research into the lecture tours undertaken in the 1930s by Noel has uncovered evidence of a rather clandestine return to the Himalayas in 1929 which provided new material to add to his earlier expeditionary films.

The resurrection of British plans to climb Everest in 1933 resulted in the filming of two very different expeditions undertaken in the same year, uniquely for this study: a traditional climbing party organised by the MEC and led by Hugh Ruttledge, and a dramatic new plan developed by a privately-financed crew to fly over the summit to illustrate British aerial achievement and colonial power in a rapidly changing political climate. In Chapter 6, I explored the relationship between the films resulting from these

two expeditions and their subsequent educational re-use. I documented the technology used, describing early use of sound, now obsolete, and – as in the case of the 1924 film discussed in Chapter 4 - the frustration of attempting to locate ‘lost’ material. I also explored the scientific value of the material produced on the flight over Everest. Although commercially produced and distributed, the visual records would have greater significance for the Society in mapping a new approach to Everest and providing evidence in the planning of the successful 1953 ascent (see Chapter 6).

The final film considered in this thesis, that of the successful 1953 ascent, was produced in a very different economic and political climate. Funding and business models for the distribution of the film reveal a change in the role of the RGS and in attitudes towards the process of making and distributing expeditionary film. The Society was contracted to become a partner, benefitting from a percentage royalty, but without any substantial editorial control or involvement in the public exhibition of the film. Following the success of the 1953 ascent, the Society concentrated on using more established traditional methods of public communication which could be monitored. In Chapter 7, I examined the renewed emphasis for the Society on lecture tours, with leading climbers embarking on gruelling national and international tours. This chapter also considered the publicity campaigns and continuing media distribution of the title.

### 8.3 Re-use of material

This study has revealed a body of information on the use and subsequent re-use of the Everest film material. This has taken different forms, determined by the opportunities provided by changing technology and methods of distribution. Initially governed by established means of analogue delivery, theatrical and non-theatrical screenings and subsequently opportunities for broadcast on television, consideration must also be given to the future for digitised material and the role of the film archive. Passive preservation of film, following acquisition into a collection, ensured its survival. Reprinting and the restoration of significant titles provided new copies for improved viewing experience. Digitisation now presents the opportunity to reassess content and bring together material from a range of sources in order to provide a revision of the subject matter. This in turn reveals new evidence, new value and meaning and ensures wider reappraisal of the content. This section now considers the history of the re-use of Everest material.

Most of the films made in the course of Everest expeditions remained dormant for long periods after their initial exhibition. Significant events such as the Festival of Britain in 1951 prompted the Society to screen Ponting's and Noel's films in recognition of their achievement.<sup>1</sup> The developing relationship with the National Film Library at the BFI, as detailed in Chapter 3, provided the means to re-visit the film material. Correspondence in the MEC archive refers to a pre-expedition screening of Noel's films for the prospective filmmakers, Countryman Films, at the BFI's

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<sup>1</sup> RGS Council Minutes Vol.17. 19<sup>th</sup> February 1951 Item 50. RGS-IBG

Great Russell Street viewing theatre.<sup>2</sup> Extracts were subsequently provided for inclusion in *The Conquest of Everest*. There is also evidence, as discussed in Chapter 3, that material was shown to mark anniversaries of the climbs, as in 1978 at the BFI's National Film Theatre.<sup>3</sup>

Periodically, especially from the 1970s, interest would re-ignite around the Mallory and Irvine question, with renewed attempts to locate the missing climbers to try to establish if they indeed had reached the summit in 1924. The development of documentary strands on television provided new opportunities for the re-use of historical expeditionary film. The BBC's series *Travellers in Time* and *World About Us* created platforms to re-examine the significance of ground-breaking exploration. Everest in particular was a regular topic and the successful format of combining testimony and footage appealed to audiences. In 1970 Stephen Peet produced an episode of *Tuesday's Documentary* in which he interviewed surviving members of the 1924 Everest party – Noel, Odell and Somervell. *Everest: The Mystery of Mallory and Irvine* was transmitted on BBC 1 on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1970. In typical style and echoing current emphasis on audience figures, Noel wrote to the BBC to enquire about the programme's reception and the number of viewers.<sup>4</sup> BBC 2 produced a series of programmes to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the ascent of Everest in 1983. One in the series, *Everest – The First Attempts* was a *World About Us*, produced by

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<sup>2</sup> January 1953 Editor Adrian de Poitier viewed *Climbing Mount Everest, The Epic of Everest* and *Kamet Conquered* at Great Russell St.

<sup>3</sup> Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

Richard Robinson. It screened on 28<sup>th</sup> May 1983 and the anniversary was marked by a broadcast of *The Conquest of Everest* on the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1983. Robinson's documentary featured both the 1922 climb and the 1933 flight over Everest, incorporating clips selected from the archive. It is relevant here to consider just how material was supplied from the archive to production companies for inclusion in new documentaries at this time. As programmes were edited on 16mm in traditional cutting rooms, the provision of selected material was a relatively lengthy process. 35mm viewing prints were marked up on archive premises at the BFI and sent to approved Soho laboratories for reduction printing at correct frame rate. Consideration was given to undue wear and tear on film prints in the archive and followed established access guidelines. Although considered unduly lengthy and bureaucratic by many researchers it was an essential means of maintaining quality control. The condition of material would play a crucial role in future restoration projects as will be shown later in this chapter.

Film research in this pre-digital era required booking on-site viewing facilities as the following example describes. During preliminary research for an expedition to attempt to locate the final resting place of Mallory and Irvine, mountain historian Audrey Salkeld with Tom Holzel and David Breashears visited the BFI in 1986, accompanied by John Mallory (son of George Mallory). She described the experience of viewing Noel's films:

The film archive's copies had been modified to be shown at modern film speeds. Even so, the images were shaky and thin. Yet there was one memorable sequence where the Everest team is seen leaving the

governor's residence in Darjeeling. They come down the steps and turn in front of the camera chatting amicably. John Mallory knew by heart all the published still photographs of these early expeditions, but never before had he seen the images move. Now they were coming to life before him. The young, eager man at the heart of the group, with such obvious energy and verve, was the father he never knew.<sup>5</sup>

This was the first of several such expeditions leading eventually to the discovery of Mallory's remains in 1999. By this time the introduction of tape transfer enabled easier access arrangements for researchers viewing material at the BFI, as time-coded VHS research tapes could be made from master broadcast standard tapes. Selected sequences could then be provided on the required master format and be edited into television coverage. The year 1999 signalled a spike of television interest in the Everest story. In that year, a co-production between the BBC and WGBH Nova, initially pitched to the BBC by Graham Hoyland,<sup>6</sup> was transmitted in the US and Britain. Selected sections of the original film coverage were edited into the resulting documentary. *Lost on Everest: The Search for Mallory and Irvine* had its initial showing on BBC 2 on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1999, and prompted much speculation about what had actually happened to the climbers. The Footage Sales department at the BFI handled all research enquiries and provided research or broadcast quality material, fostering frequent conversations with the Society's Picture Librarian and Sandra Noel.

The publication of a number of books about the discovery of Mallory's body on Everest in the period between 1999 and 2001 sustained renewed media

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<sup>5</sup>Breashears, D. and Salkeld, A. (1999) *Last Climb: The Legendary Everest Expeditions of George Mallory*. Washington: National Geographic. 21-22

<sup>6</sup> Hoyland, G. (2013) *Last Hours on Everest: The Gripping Story of Mallory and Irvine's Fatal Ascent*. London: Collins

interest in the 1924 climb.<sup>7</sup> The success of *The Wildest Dream*, Peter and Leni Gillman's biography of George Mallory, published in 2000, resulted in the commissioning of a feature-length dramatized documentary of the same name. Altitude Films would produce on HD and the documentary included archive footage alongside reconstructed scenes. In order to provide high-quality images the production team requested access to the nitrate master material held in the archive – something which was not normally permitted. With both the permission of Sandra Noel in place and clearance from the Preservation Department of the Archive that the master material was suitable for an external telecine from film to tape, the nitrate reels were transported to the approved Soho facility house. As the BFI archive representative, I was appointed to supervise the work. Two versions of the film were telecined, both the complete version with captions and the incomplete lecture version which was missing Reel 1. This exercise established that the incomplete version was superior in quality. The UK premiere of *The Wildest Dream* took place at the BFI Imax Theatre in 2010. As an opening spectacle, mountaineer Leo Houlding abseiled down the side of the Imax building. Once again Everest was in the media spotlight.

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<sup>7</sup> Gillman, P. and L. (2000) *The Wildest Dream: George Mallory: The Biography of an Everest Hero*. London: Headline; Firstbrook, P. (1999) *Lost on Everest: The Search for Mallory & Irvine*. London: BBC Worldwide; Hemmleb, J., Johnson, L. A. and Simonson, E. R. (1999) *Ghosts of Everest: The Authorised Story of The Search for Mallory & Irvine*. Washington: The Mountaineers Books; Holzel, T. and Salkeld, A. (1999) *The Mystery of Mallory & Irvine*. London: Pimlico

#### 8.4 The BFI and the restoration of expeditionary film

The BFI had begun to establish a reputation for its archival restoration projects in the 1990s. This technical expertise would influence the future role and reputation of the archive in providing expertly curated programmes of archive material to contemporary audiences. While expeditionary films would not normally come high on the list of potential restorations, a new precedent was set in 1999 with the photochemical restoration of Frank Hurley's film *South*. Shackleton's 1914 expedition to Antarctica was topical: his place in expeditionary history was being reassessed with great emphasis on his leadership skills. A member of the BFI archive preservation staff, Brenda Hudson, was a subject specialist and her expert knowledge of the film elements held in the collection revealed the existence of previously unknown footage. Working with historian Kelly Tyler-Lewis, author of *The Lost Men*,<sup>8</sup> footage of members of Shackleton's support party, the Ross Sea Ice Party, was identified. (This was indeed an exciting find and would prompt later enquiries about the existence of missing material from Noel's 1924 film).<sup>9</sup> Using colour references noted on the nitrate negative, tinting and toning techniques were applied to the newly restored 35mm master prints. The history and use of early colour processes has now become a subject of much new scholarly research, a direct result of such pioneering archive restorations. The initial screening of the restored film at the BFI National Film Theatre received rave reviews. International interest in Shackleton resulted in numerous requests for material and the

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<sup>8</sup> Tyler-Lewis, K. (2006) *The Lost Men: The Harrowing Story of Shackleton's Ross Sea Ice Party*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 5 re 'lice eating scene'



film was released internationally to art house audiences. The BFI also released the restoration and the newly identified footage on its own VHS label, complete with additionality from the archive. With the approaching centenary of Scott's 1910 expedition to reach the South Pole it was decided to work on restoring Herbert Ponting's film *The Great White Silence*. The BFI held rights in the title which had been acquired in the 1940s. This would now be restored using new digital techniques.

In his 2019 revised guide to silent cinema, Cherchi Usai has reviewed the impact of the digital age for film archives, acknowledging that many readers and students will themselves be 'born digital' without having experience of handling film:

Had it not been for digital resources, the first three decades of film history would have remained the playground for a tiny minority of scholars and hardcore cinephiles. Access to archival collections in digital formats has been no less important for film archives and museums, whose preservation work had previously received scant attention outside specialised festivals and academic conferences...Silent cinema is reconnected with the present, bridging what once looked like an insurmountable gap between the spectators and their own visual history.<sup>10</sup>

Digitisation of film – the scanning of material to produce a digital file – should not be confused with digital restoration properly understood. High-level restoration can be a complex time-consuming process demanding frame by frame examination and determining the best route to deal with any damage or deterioration of the image. All restoration projects depend on the continued existence and accessibility of complete versions of the film. Both

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<sup>10</sup> Cherchi Usai, P. (2019) *Silent Cinema: A Guide to Study, Research and Curatorship*. London: Bloomsbury on behalf of the BFI, 8.

Hurley and Ponting had re-edited material and produced versions for lectures and theatrical screenings. In order to achieve the best quality version of *South* and *The Great White Silence*, for example, the BFI examined all film elements held in the archive and then in both instances consulted material held in the EYE Film Institute in the Netherlands. This enabled comparison of footage, intertitles and tinting and toning records. The restoration of *South* followed traditional photochemical (film laboratory printing) methods with tinting and toning being applied to the new 35mm prints produced. However, when the decision was taken to restore *The Great White Silence*, a new digital route was used. The extensive use of tinting and toning revealed in the nitrate original version was replicated using new digital grading techniques. Stabilisation of the image was essential for an improved audience experience. Intertitle cards were reconstructed using original lettering style and where necessary lengthened to enable real time viewing. Once the images and titles were completed, decisions on musical accompaniment could be made. *South* had been provided with a traditional piano accompaniment. *The Great White Silence* would have a much more ambitious commission. The sound track was created by Simon Fisher Turner using a combination of found sounds, a string quartet and even the silence of Scott's hut recorded by legendary sound recordist Chris Watson. Watching the restored film which was premiered at the 2010 London Film Festival with live musical accompaniment was a memorable experience. It created a contemporary re-evaluation of Ponting's role as an expeditionary film-maker and a greater appreciation of the technical achievements used in the restoration of the film. The BFI released the restoration theatrically and

on its DVD label with great success. Television co-production is also regarded as a key outcome for major archive restorations. In 2011 Discovery Communications produced a documentary in association with the BFI – *The Great White Silence with James Cracknell* – and commissioned an episode of *How Do They Do It?* featuring the restoration of *The Great White Silence* which was also included on the DVD.<sup>11</sup>

With the precedent of a successful restoration of early expeditionary film set, the proposal to restore *The Epic of Everest* met with a positive response. As the BFI held all the then-known film elements for the title, preparation could be carried out in-house.

#### 8.5 *The Epic of Everest* restored

When a press release was issued by the BFI in May 2012, announcing the forthcoming restoration of Noel's 1924 Everest film, a flurry of press comment confirmed the extent of media interest in the project, indicating that this restoration was widely anticipated by both the mountaineering community and the general public. The most important foundation for this project was the securing of adequate funds to enable the level of preparation and technical expertise required. The necessary finances were sought from and provided by the Eric Anker-Petersen Charity. It was also vital to get agreement from Sandra Noel for the project to proceed. An agreement was negotiated with her to cover this collaboration and the division of royalties following the release of the restored film on multi-media formats. It was an

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<sup>11</sup> *The Great White Silence* Dual Format Edition BFIB1085

added bonus to have Sandra's in-depth knowledge of her father's work and her consummate skills in dealing with the media to support the project. This left the decision to be made on commissioning a new score. It was a logical choice to invite Simon Fisher Turner to create a new musical accompaniment and an agreement was drawn up to formalise this. Unusually the original musical score, based on music composed by Howard Somervell, was also available as was a wax cylinder recording of the lamas who had appeared on stage at the Scala Theatre in 1924. At the same time as the film restoration was taking place, Julie Brown, Professor of Music at Royal Holloway, was in the process of re-creating the original classical score which would be recorded in Cambridge in 2013.<sup>12</sup>

In later life Noel himself had anticipated an opportunity to re-work his material once it was preserved in the archive, writing to David Francis in 1984 with ambitious suggestions for combining his moving images with his hand-tinted lecture slides:

the picture film and colour stills need to be edited with a lot of technical treatment into a finished story film all in colour and a good story with music recorded – so that the finished film would be worthy of being a classic story of British Pioneer Exploration and so be truly worthy of a place in the National Archives.<sup>13</sup>

Noel also outlined plans for applying for a government grant to carry out this re-edit which he felt would produce a work 'of National value and Prestige for our nation'. In fact it would be well over two decades before

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, J. (2015) 'A Pragmatically Lavish Recreation: Notes on *The Epic of Everest* as DVD Film Performance', *Journal of Film Preservation* 93. 78-87

<sup>13</sup> J. B. L. Noel to D. Francis 24<sup>th</sup> January 1984. Sandra Noel Collection/ RGS-IBG

plans were being drawn up to undertake the restoration work. David Francis had moved to the USA to become Head of the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division at the Library of Congress and in the intervening years the BFI National Archive had progressed from passive preservation of collections to taking on a more proactive role in leading on restoration and access programmes, gaining awareness and recognition for the specialist work produced and the diversity of its collections.

Recent studies of the developing role of archives in the fields of restoration and access have considered the changing responsibilities of archivists and curators. It is now imperative to provide accessible material for public consumption as well as managing physical conservation and preservation. Fossati (2009) has argued that there is within archives themselves an enduring dichotomy between preservation and exhibition – a tension between what was traditionally seen as the primary purpose, preservation of the material artefact, and the requirement to get the material seen and studied.<sup>14</sup> This can be detected in the Code of Ethics produced by FIAF as a guide to archival practice which states that:

Archives will not sacrifice the long-term survival of materials in their care in the interests of short term exploitation. When restoring materials, archives will endeavour only to complete what is incomplete and to remove the accretions of time, wear and misinformation. They will not seek to change or distort the nature of the original materials or the intentions of their creators.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Fossati, G. (2009) *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 105

<sup>15</sup> FIAF Code of Ethics. (2008)

The best practice guidelines state that ‘access is the ultimate goal of the archive: the purpose of conservation, preservation and restoration is to achieve this objective’. However there are conditions ‘access must be regulated in order to limit any danger to elements in the collection’. In his latest authoritative study of silent cinema Cherchi Usai outlines the pitfalls to be found in mismanaged digital processes:

In the absence of a film curator who is familiar with the way a film looked in its original medium, and is able to compare the digital file with their sources, digital replicas are shiny but lifeless mimics of what the film was at the time of its existence as a photographic object.<sup>16</sup>

In consideration of the range of restorations now available, I have compared the BFI restoration processes and resulting exhibition of the new versions with equivalent historic titles in the United States. I considered two examples of films which have been the subject of academic study, each revealing detailed histories. Roswitha Skare’s in-depth study of Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* provides interesting parallels. As she suggests,

An important factor in the process of keeping *Nanook* present in the public mind was its acquisition by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Film Library in 1938, effectively the beginning of the ‘archival life’ of the film.<sup>17</sup>

Different versions were subsequently produced, including a version with sound in 1947 and a photochemical ‘restoration’ in 1976, compiled from extant nitrate sources. Evans and Glass (2014) describe the reworking of surviving material from the Edward S. Curtis film *In the Land of the Headhunters* (1914), not strictly an expeditionary film but an interesting

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<sup>16</sup> Cherchi Usai, P. (2019) *Silent Cinema: A Guide to Study, Research and Curatorship*. London: Bloomsbury on behalf of the BFI. 18

<sup>17</sup> Skare, R. *Nanook of the North From 1922 to Today: The Famous Arctic Documentary and Its Aftermath*. Frankfurt: PL Academic Research. 85

example of reviving a little known title with important ethnographic value. The authors consider that, since 'restoration' in the late 1970s, 'it has partially displaced *Nanook of the North* as the first documentary film'.<sup>18</sup> They describe another interesting parallel when Flaherty went to meet Curtis in New York after seeing his film. He had been filming in Hudson Bay and asked Curtis to give an opinion on the footage. As Evans and Glass note, 'Curtis offered him advice about narrative and dramatic structure as well as shooting for continuity, reverse angles, framing, editing, mise-en-scene and so on. The result after two more trips to the Arctic was *Nanook*'.<sup>19</sup> This example of mentoring is reminiscent of the relationship between Ponting and Noel described in Chapter 4. However Curtis had a different agenda in that his main motivation in making his film was to finance his multi-volume photographic work *The North American Indian*.<sup>20</sup>

The film restoration of *The Epic of Everest* was largely a technical exercise combining the skills of archivists with new digital restoration techniques. The ability of archive technicians to scan the original nitrate materials frame by frame in house and then work with the digital restoration team at Deluxe Digital ensured that the level of restorative processes would maintain the integrity of the material. Noel had documented the problems created by static when filming and so such inherent blemishes, occurring as a result of the original filming conditions, remained in the restored version, whereas

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<sup>18</sup> Evans, B. and Glass, A. (eds.) (2014) *Return To The Land of The Head Hunters: Edward S. Curtis, The Kwakwaka'wakw, and The Making of Modern Cinema*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 146

<sup>19</sup> Evans, B. and Glass, A. *Return To The Land of The Head Hunters*. 183

<sup>20</sup> Evans, B. and Glass, A. *Return To The Land of The Head Hunters*.147

damage caused by mould could be rectified. In all, hundreds of hours were spent in manually correcting each frame. The tinting and toning found on the original nitrate material, regarded as crucial by Noel, was replicated using state of the art digital resources. Although the images were stabilised in the scanning process it was recognised that there should be some movement to avoid what Cherchi Usai has referred to as 'the embalming effect'.<sup>21</sup> New title cards were created but, in order to avoid incompatibility with the moving film images when incorporated within the appropriate frames, they were printed several times to introduce movement and eliminate the brand new look. This work is extremely time-consuming but accepted as a requirement of the restoration process in order to maintain an authentic aesthetic look. It is this attention to detail that creates a reputation for the work of the archive and an authentic viewing experience for the audience. The restored film was premiered at a Gala screening during the 2013 London Film Festival (Figure 8.1) and the resulting reviews were rewarding for everyone who had worked on the project and created opportunities for the planned theatrical release. Critics and film-goers alike were unanimous in their praise, echoing the enthusiastic reviews in the trade press at the time of the film's original release.

Jones (2012) has eloquently described the process of archival restoration:

Archivists bring two distinct audiences separated by decades, even a century, closer together. Such a consideration enlivens the archive by making moving image preservation a social act, in part, whereby

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<sup>21</sup> Cherchi Usai, P. *Silent Cinema: A Guide to Study, Research and Curatorship*. 18



(imagined) past audiences and contemporary cinemagoers have the opportunity to mingle.<sup>22</sup>

In the commercial environment, revenue generation governs terms of access but this imperative is not so paramount for a cultural institution such as the BFI. The restoration of *The Epic of Everest* was funded by a benefactor but not on the basis of having to recoup all the investment. Rather, the provision of adequate funding to cover such high-quality restoration enabled the fulfilment of the archive's manifesto to encourage the appreciation of the art of film. The specialist skills and equipment used in the restoration process were also part of the publicity generated around the restoration and appeared as part of the additionality packaged in the form of a DVD/Blu-ray release.

In contrast to the approach of many commercial distributors, the BFI has established a reputation by producing accompanying booklets as part of the DVD/Blu-ray dual format package. These contain relevant essays and filmographic background. Special features include different versions of a title or newsreel extras from the archive. *The Epic of Everest* extras were printed in a facsimile of the original cinema programme, a copy of which is held in Special Collections department of the BFI and which can be downloaded from the DVD as a PDF.<sup>23</sup> The alternative original 1924 score recreated by Julie Brown and performed by the Cambridge University Chamber Orchestra is also included, making this an extremely

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<sup>22</sup> Jones, J. (2012) *The Past is a Moving Picture: Preserving the Twentieth Century on Film*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 155-156

<sup>23</sup> *The Epic of Everest* Dual Format Edition. BFIB1154

comprehensive edition. Subsequently a special dual-format release combined *The Great White Silence* and *The Epic of Everest* in a celebration of the work of both Ponting and Noel (Figure 8.2). *Sight & Sound* magazine commissioned Wade Davis to write an essay *The Tragic Mountain* for the November 2013 issue.<sup>24</sup> In the same issue Ian Christie wrote in a feature entitled *The Peak of Silent Cinema*:

the experience of silent film has somehow been recovered, overcoming decades of neglect and condescension, to the point where an evening, or even a festival, of 'live cinema' is an attractive proposition for increasing numbers of enthusiasts, and where new DVD editions of the silent era repertoire continue to appear.<sup>25</sup>

Television and Festival screenings continued to engage audiences – the restoration of *The Epic of Everest* won international acclaim and in 2015, as a result of negotiations with the BBC, a package of mountaineering programmes was transmitted - a *Timeshift* documentary, *Battle For The Himalayas*, which was followed by the restored version of *The Epic of Everest*, recognition indeed.<sup>26</sup>

## 8.6 Conclusion

This study has brought a new perspective to the history of Everest expeditions from 1922 to 1953, emphasising above all the value of the film records, both in relation to the climbs themselves and as documents worth preserving and making more widely available. In the course of my research I have now identified all extant film records and the most significant

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<sup>24</sup> Davis, W. (2013) 'The Tragic Mountain', *Sight & Sound* 23. 34-37

<sup>25</sup> Christie, I. (2013) 'The Peak of Silent Cinema', *Sight & Sound* 23. 44

<sup>26</sup> *Battle for the Himalayas: The Fight to Film Everest (Timeshift)* and *The Epic of Everest* BBC 4 29<sup>th</sup> January 2015

associated documentary materials. The role of the cinematographer and the technical challenges encountered in filming the expeditions on Everest have been examined alongside the role of the media in promoting the filmed records. I have suggested that it was an inherent mistrust of the commercial film industry that led to the engagement by the RGS of one of its own Fellows, John Noel, as an independent film-maker in 1922 and 1924 rather than accepting one of the offers from established professional production companies. This resulted in wholehearted commitment to the project from Noel though at the expense of some unorthodox methods of promoting and exhibiting the filmed material, as for example in the controversy over the 'dancing lamas' in 1924-5 (Chapter 4). While the resulting diplomatic furore would have long lasting repercussions and deter any future plans to commission official film coverage, the films produced by Noel remain some of the most memorable and evocative works in the canon of Everest films, still engaging contemporary audiences almost a century later. I have provided further proof of Noel's continued unorthodox methods in obtaining material in 1929 to supplement his Everest lectures.

Further recognition is also due to the commercially-produced film of the 1953 ascent, perhaps rather more because of the physical achievement of the climbers and the feeling of national pride it evoked, than the directorial style and aesthetic quality of the film itself. Nonetheless *The Conquest of Everest* was one of only two films backed by the National Film Finance

Corporation in the early 1950s to be commercially successful.<sup>27</sup> Harper and Porter (2003) describe the film as 'the only British epic of geographical expansion' at a time of 'cultural myopia' in which 'British cinema represented the rest of the world either as a site of exotic pleasures or as a source of regret'.<sup>28</sup> Everest became synonymous with heroic values and achievement. But what is it about the image of Everest on film that has continued to fascinate us? There are distinct parallels here with the case of still photography, as Ryan (2013) suggests, in which the story of exploration on film is 'not only one of changing technology but of changing audiences and meanings'.<sup>29</sup>

The history of the Everest expeditions recorded on film between 1922 and 1953 reveals a picture of a developing film industry, dependant on keeping abreast with changing audience expectation. As previously discussed, those films which were commercially released provide evidence of regular review and re-working to meet new opportunities. In particular, John Noel's remarkable career presents a unique study of a resourceful and determined individual, constantly seeking to engage with the technical improvements becoming available to him. His establishing material, shot in Tibet, provides fascinating insights into a culture now irreversibly changed due to political upheaval, assuming increasing importance as historical evidence. The stated aims of the MEC in providing material for scientific research have now become extremely relevant to the study of environmental changes in

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<sup>27</sup> Harper, S. and Porter, V. (2003) *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 17

<sup>28</sup> Harper and Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s*, 266-267

<sup>29</sup> Ryan, J. R. (2013) *Photography and Exploration*. London: Reaktion Books.

the area. The material is destined to be re-used as evidence of climate change.

However, alongside the cultural and scientific value of the Everest films as outlined above, and partly due to the circulation of iconic photographs and films made on successive expeditions, the name Everest has today become a commercial brand. Apparently the Beatles *Abbey Road* album was to have been called *Everest*, after the brand of cigarettes smoked by the sound engineer at the recording studio. Plans were even made at one stage to fly to the Himalayas to get a cover shot, though eventually it was decided that it was easier to name the album after the studio and use a shot of the Fab Four crossing the road outside.<sup>30</sup> A more contemporary link with the music industry is the track 'Everest' created by the band Public Service Broadcasting which incorporates images taken from the early films of Everest.<sup>31</sup> A documentary shown on BBC Four in 2016 to celebrate the achievement of Roger Bannister running the four-minute mile in 1954 has the title – *Roger Bannister: Everest on Track*. The most recent commercial use of the image, with a nod to the postcolonial and the eco-conscious, is a new brand of health drink – Tenzing – which is endorsed by Jamling Tenzing and claims to be 'inspired by a traditional Himalayan sherpa recipe'. Wording on a can of Tenzing also makes a rather contentious claim: 'Reaching the top of Mt. Everest takes some serious energy. Our drink is

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<sup>30</sup> 'The Beatles Abbey Road Album was Almost Called Everest' 9<sup>th</sup> September 2017 <https://www.vt.co.beatles> (Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> March 2019)

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.youtube.com.publicservicebroadcasting.everest> (Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> March 2019)

inspired by one of the first men to do so – Sherpa Tenzing Norgay – and the natural energising brew he and others used to help fuel their ascent’. Such marketing provides evidence of a continuing sense of the heroic legacy associated with an event once understood in solely imperial terms, now re-branded in the language of twenty-first century health consciousness.

As I have indicated in this thesis, the search for ‘lost’ films of Everest continues, and further research may discover their whereabouts. However, all the films in the RGS-IBG collection can now be viewed in the UK on BFI Player and are available for study alongside all the other material held in the MEC documentary archive in the Foyle Reading Room. The digitisation of the film records has made a significant addition to the resources of the Society. With the forthcoming centenary of the first Everest expeditions approaching there will be more opportunity to celebrate these films and their place in cinema history. I began this thesis with reference to the FIAF Congress held in Brighton in 1978 – an event which was seminal in the development of recognised academic study of early film and its production. The continued study of film in the intervening years has been largely enabled by the founding members of the archive movement, committed to long-term preservation of the medium. Technology has changed and so has audience expectation and reception of the visual images presented to them. Restoration now follows on from preservation, presenting new opportunities for the future study and appreciation of expeditionary film.

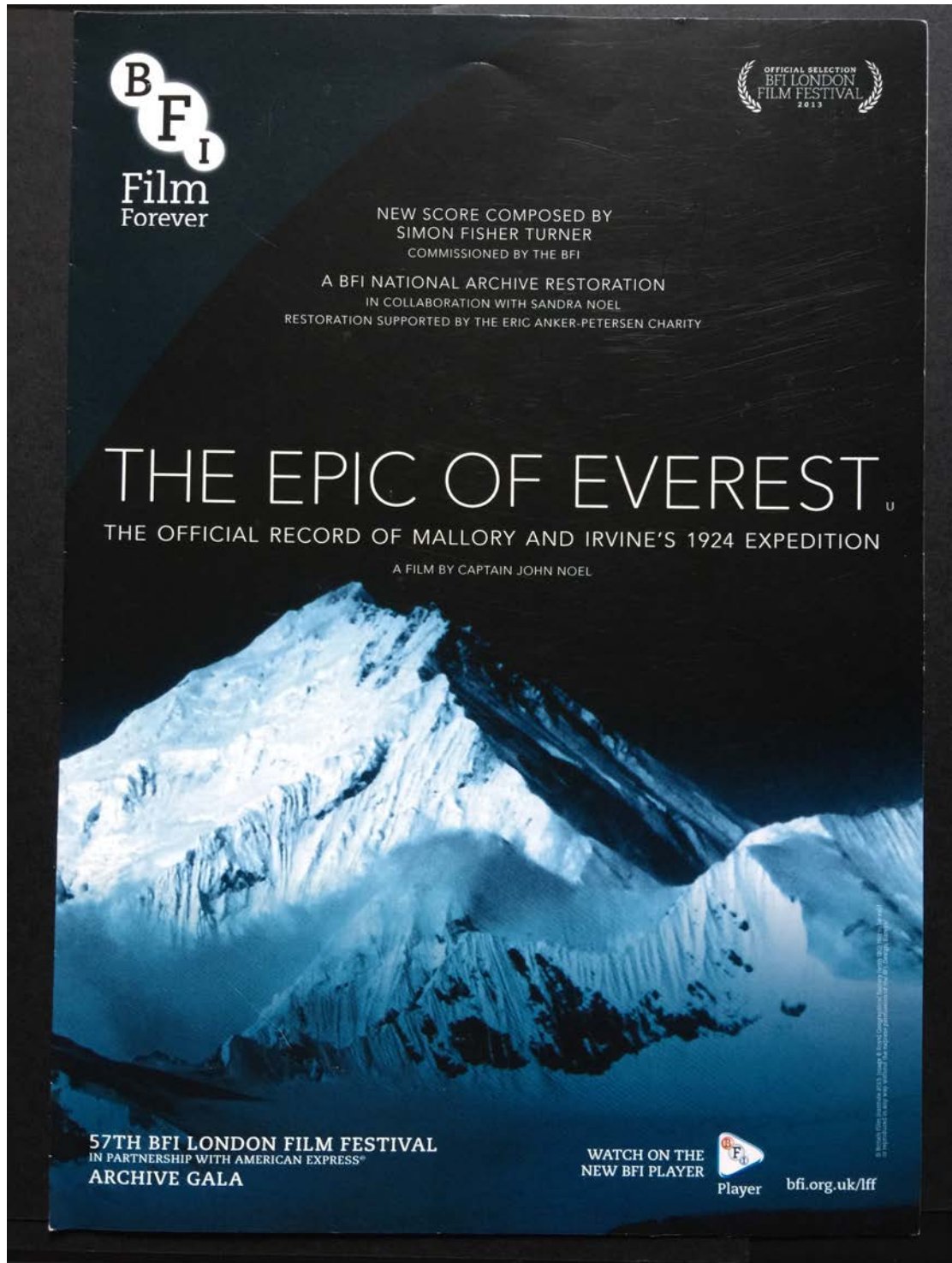


Figure 8.1 London Film Festival Archive Gala Programme, October 2013  
Author's collection





Figure 8.2 BFI DVDs – *South*; *The Great White Silence*; *The Epic of Everest*  
Author's collection



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