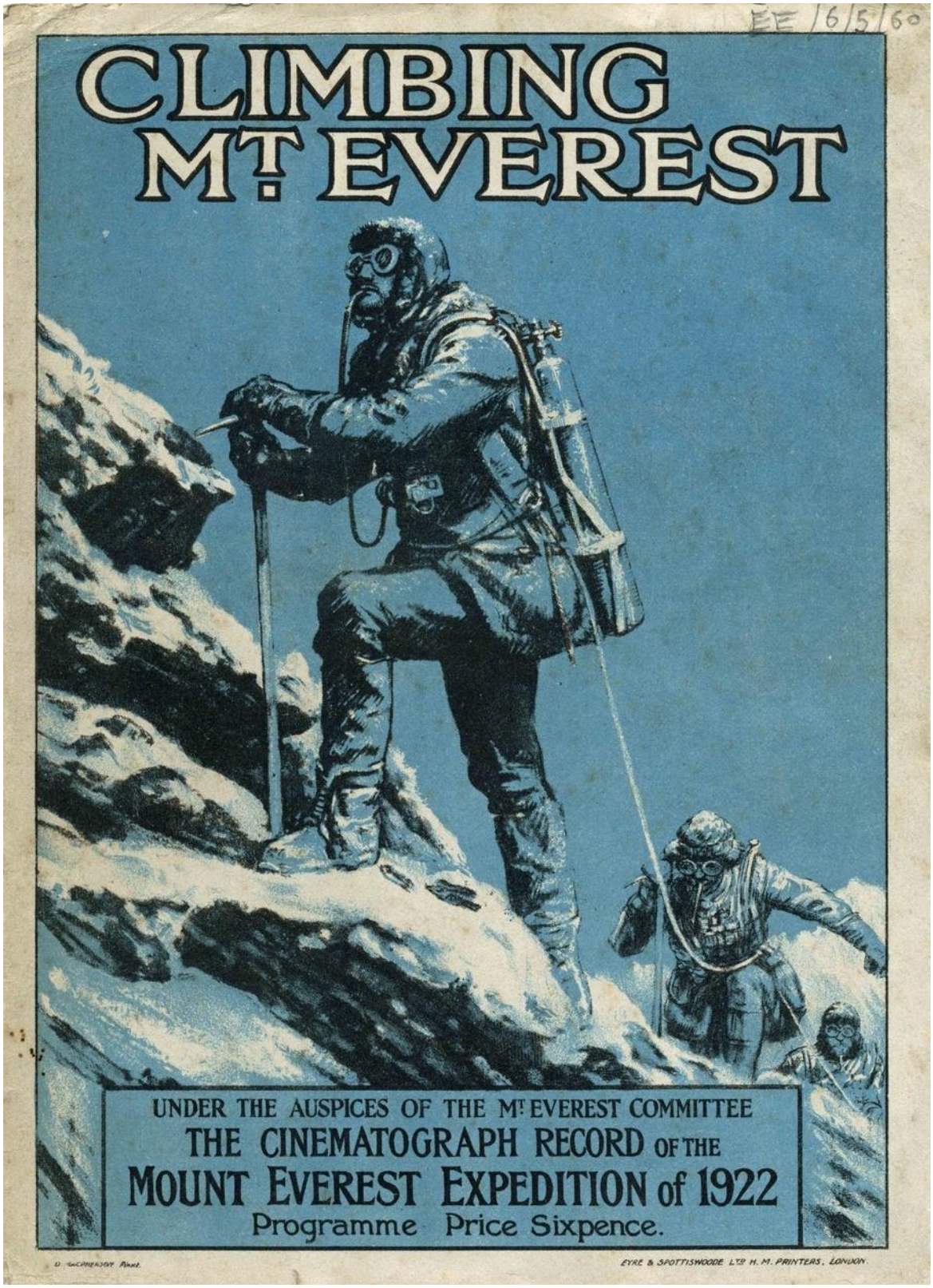
Tim Chamberlain – Exhibition Review: *Everest through the lens* (Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), 1 Kensington Gore, London, SW7 2AR, UK: 5 October 2022-20 January 2023) | Other Everests



Climbing Mount Everest. Under the auspices of the Mt. Everest Committee: the cinematograph record of the Mount Everest Expedition of 1922. EE/6/5/60 (RGS-IBG Collection)

Everest through the lens was an exhibition marking the centenary of the first two British attempts to climb the world's highest mountain in 1922 and 1924. It examined the expeditions as seen through the lens of official expedition cinematographer, Captain John Noel. Focussing on the two films he made, *Climbing Mount Everest* (1922) and *The Epic of Everest* (1924), the exhibition set out 'to unpick the uncomfortable and complex social, racial and geopolitical dynamics that shaped the expeditions – from their beginning to enduring legacy.' Utilising a range of photographic and documentary sources, as well as a handful of well-chosen objects – such as a kinomatograph camera, similar to the one Noel used at high altitude, and Noel's own Remington portable typewriter – exhibition visitors were guided through the various stages of the two expeditions, from their meticulous preparation, through their actual execution, to their final presentation in both print and film media.

As a documentary filmmaker, Noel's lens was far from an objective one. The narrative of both films gives a distinctly colonialist view of the 'heroic' exploits of the British climbers, whilst the far larger entourage of local porters and other indigenous labourers who were key to enabling the endeavour are lost somewhere in the flickering side-lines, obscured by the simultaneous glare of the white snows and the reflected imperial glory bestowed upon the films' British protagonists. Viewing the expeditions in the context of their times, this was a period when empires and nations vied to best one another in epic feats of exploration in harsh and extreme environments. Notably the British had lost out in the races to be the first to reach the North and South Poles, hence the summit of the world's highest mountain – or the 'Third Pole' as it was then dubbed – represented a last chance at attaining pre-eminence. Together, the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club formed the Mount Everest Committee, which tasked itself with recruiting a team of elite mountaineers and geographers. Naturally these men were all British born and bred, privately educated and recruited through a network of mutual contacts. Letters and medical appraisals show that social considerations of class and military background counted as much as aptitude and experience in mountaineering. We are told that George Finch, as an Australian, was a lone exception to this rule, but that consequently he 'was looked down on by some team members.'

A far more overtly condescending view was expressed with regard to the indigenous communities whom the expeditions encountered as they made their way through Tibet. An intertitle card from one of Noel's films gives a clear example, stating that: 'The men and women exist from the cradle to the stone slab, on which their dead bodies are hacked to pieces, without a wash the whole of their lives.' The British expedition members were genuinely fascinated by the cultures they encountered in the Himalaya. Noel filmed scenes described in another intertitle as: 'the weird and fantastic devil dances at the sacred monastery of the Rongbuk.' A Tibetan cymbal brought back by

the expedition leader, Brigadier-General Charles Bruce in 1922, included in the exhibition, shows how the British climbers were particularly struck by Tibetan music which must have seemed very different to their unaccustomed ears. Climber and surgeon, Howard Somervell transcribed Tibetan folk songs into Western musical notation, and Noel later had bands perform this music as an evocative accompaniment to the screenings of his silent films.

Social hierarchies shaped the expeditions. Base Camp was effectively a small village, run by the British along familiar colonial lines, with clear demarcations according to social, racial and class considerations. The selection process for local porters may have been less careful to note down details, but everyone recruited – 'from bootmakers to botanists' – had a role with set expectations and was renumerated accordingly. Ranked highest in this hierarchy were the high-altitude porters, who were very skilled and often more adept mountaineers than the British, who nicknamed them 'tigers.' It is notable in many of the photographs of the expedition that there is a marked discrepancy in the size and weight of the loads which these men were charged with carrying compared to the British members of the team. Without their efforts, lugging huge quantities of supplies, equipment and oxygen tanks to the various camps ascending the mountain, the British climbers would have struggled in their attempts to reach the summit. These efforts were not without genuine risk, as a disaster in 1922 made only too apparent. Seven porters – six Sherpa, Thankay, Sangay, Temba, Lhakpa, Pasang Namgya, Pema, and one Bhotiya, Norbu – lost their lives in an avalanche. George Mallory, seen as the hero of Noel's films, felt himself responsible. Writing to a friend, he stated that the men who died were 'ignorant of mountain dangers, like children in our care. And I am to blame.' However, the loss of these men's lives was dealt with in a bureaucratic manner, with their families in Tibet, Nepal and Darjeeling being financially 'compensated.'

In Noel's film, the disaster was edited out of the final cut for fear of a negative backlash from viewers. A poignant memorial of this fact is embodied in a small bronze figure of the goddess Tara, which was on display in the exhibition. This was given to the British climbers on their return from Everest by Dzatrul Rinpoche, the Head Lama of Rongbuk Monastery, to commemorate the lives of the seven men who died. This action was filmed by Noel, but in the final version of his film Noel edited and placed these scenes at the start, representing the exchange as though it were a gift given to bless the expedition when it was first setting out.

Similarly, Noel appears to have had no qualms about appropriating an image of a deity depicted in a mural at the monastery in order to accentuate the sense of drama. A deity which the British stylised as 'a mountain goddess angrily destroying the bodies of white climbers.' As it is well-

known, the 1924 expedition resulted in the loss of the lives of climbers, George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, who disappeared from view while making a bid to reach the summit and never returned.

The names of Mallory and Irvine, like those of Robert Falcon Scott and his men in Antarctica, were of course duly added to the roster of 'heroic defeats' which now characterise the annals of British Imperial exploration. A vision of heroism and self-sacrifice which Noel's films did much to crystallise. As the final sections of the exhibition showed, this was not without controversy however.

Noel very actively sensationalised Tibetan culture as a marketing ploy for his films. He was personally invested in them, having funded much of the 1924 expedition himself in order to retain the rights to his footage. He hired and brought to London a troupe of seven Tibetan dancers to perform at screenings. These 'dancing lamas' were in fact Tibetan novice monks rather than lamas. The publicity stunt deeply offended the Dalai Lama and Tibetan government, such that they banned all Westerners from entering Tibet to climb Everest for the next ten years. Despite the fact the British mountaineering community knew that the controversy of the 'dancing lamas' was the real cause of the ban, the Everest expeditions were meticulously stage-managed operations, consequently they drew ranks and found a convenient scapegoat in John Hazard, who undertook an unauthorised survey expedition in Tibet also in 1924, pinning the blame on his activities instead.

For a small exhibition, *Everest through the lens*, explored a number of less well-known faces of the two earliest attempts by British mountaineers to 'conquer' the world's highest peak very effectively. It elucidated a number of often overlooked themes, incorporating a rich array of written and visual documentation; particularly Noel's film, *The Epic of Everest*, which was screened on a continuous loop as part of the exhibition. Shining a light on the lives of those whose names are well-known to history, such as Mallory and Noel, but more importantly it also highlighted the indigenous team members who have stood, obscured in the background for far too long. Recovering some of those names which otherwise might have been lost to history in the panel and label texts, as well as listing them in the leaflet accompanying the exhibition. In doing so, *Everest through the lens* showed that there is still much to be learned about cultures of imperial exploration. By taking a closer look, information which has lain hidden in the archival shadows cast by the official record which the two British expeditions carefully created as their own legacy can begin to emerge. Much like the unnamed Sherpa who can be seen steadying the camera tripod, if one looks very carefully, at the well-known photograph of John Noel, seated on a kit box, shooting the first of his films at high altitude in 1922.

Captain Noel kinematographing the ascent of Mt. Everest from the Chang La [one of his Sherpa porters can be seen steadying the tripod] MEE22/0602 (RGS-IBG Collections)

Tim Chamberlain gained a BSc in Anthropology from the University of East London, and an MA in World History from Birkbeck College, University of London, where he is currently undertaking a PhD looking at Western travellers in East Tibet during the early 20th century, exploring themes of science and empire. He tweets @waymarksblog