

Sunday, October 12th 2014

The Epic of Everest (UK 1924)

dir: John Noel

sponsor: Richard Hall (Chairman, LFS)

Lincoln Film Society is pleased to welcome you to The Venue for today's screening of a remarkable and historic film.

2 years ago, we showed *The Great White Silence*, a film made in 1913 by Herbert Ponting, of the expedition to the South Pole led by Captain Scott. As everyone knows, Scott's attempt to become the first person to reach the Pole and claim the glory for Britain ended in tragedy yet created an heroic legend. But Ponting's film also provided such dramatic footage of Antarctica – which, it must be remembered, would never have been seen by people who watched it for the first time 100 years ago – that the tragic story it had to tell was offset by its importance as a revealing documentary in its own right and an extraordinary technical achievement in the history of cinema. The same can be said of *The Epic of Everest*.

The interest and audience response to *The Great White Silence* when we showed it, meant that the Society had no difficulty in deciding to include today's film in our season. Indeed, having shown *Touching the Void* (another utterly riveting documentary about the challenges and dangers of mountaineering) a few years ago to a spellbound audience, we are convinced there is still a fascination and desire to learn more of these epic adventures and the people who are driven to undertake them.

We are therefore pleased to welcome 2 such guests: Robin Ashcroft (Past Director of the Kendal Mountain Festival), an experienced climber and an authority on Captain John Noel, will introduce the film. He will be followed by Joe Beaumont, Lincolnshire by birth but now living in the Lake District, who will introduce a short film about a climbing incident in which he was involved.

The afternoon will conclude with a showing of *The Epic of Everest*.

The following is an extract of an article from Sight and Sound magazine, reproduced with kind permission.

John Noel's 1922 film, *Climbing Mount Everest*, had a disappointing première and only modest success when it toured the country. Ultimately it grossed £10,000 at the box office; but the Royal Geographic Society and the Alpine Club which had organised and sponsored the expedition – made a profit of only £500. This setback did not for a moment deter the film-maker. In June 1923 Noel made an unexpected and unprecedented offer to the Everest Committee. In exchange for all photographic and film rights to the upcoming 1924 expedition, he pledged to raise £8,000, an extraordinary sum in 1923. The terms of the deal were



very specific. He would pay £1,000 upon signature, an additional £5,000 by December 31st, the end of the year, and a final instalment of £2,000 by 31st March 1924. The Everest Committee for its part would guarantee diplomatic access to Tibet, facilitate his work in the field provided it was not in conflict with the goals and safety of the expedition and provide equipment, three tents at Camp 111, two on the North Col, as well as one oxygen apparatus and 5,000 litres of oxygen. The committee would have access to the photographs for promotional purposes and various publications, including the anticipated expedition account. But ownership would rest with Explorer Films, the company established by Noel to make all of this possible. Among his private investors were the Aga Khan and Sir Francis Younghusband, president of the RGS and chair of the Everest Committee, who also served as chairman of the board of the new enterprise.

It was an odd turning point in mountaineering history. The quest for the highest summit slipped from imperial venture to commercial opportunity.. The Everest Committee had no choice but to accept. The cash infusion transformed its bottom line. Noel's offer implied not only an investment of £8,000 but also a saving of £2,000, since the committee would no longer be responsible for paying for film and photographic costs. In a single gesture Noel shouldered all the financial risks, even as he liberated the committee to move ahead aggressively with plans for a third expedition to the mountain.

Arriving in Darjeeling in the March of 1924, the staging point for the Everest expeditions, Noel had a number of immediate challenges to overcome. His attempts to develop and process film in the field in 1922 had encountered extreme difficulties. Dust and sand ruined emulsions. Water and even chemical developers froze overnight. The air inside his lightproof tent became toxic to breathe. For 1924 he decided to concentrate all the work in

Synopsis: Chronicling the ill-fated 1924 expedition by a British team led by General Charles G Bruce — with a major contribution from Captain John Noel, who served as director and lone camera operator having secured the photographic rights — *The Epic of Everest* stands as a rare monument to human accomplishment and stiff-upper-lipness. Restored by the BFI National Archive and accompanied by Simon Fisher Turner's eerily beautiful new score, Noel's remarkable film follows the 12-man team, powered by a small army of Sherpas and horses, from base to near-summit as they strive to conquer the mythical, unfathomable Everest, a feat which had proven elusive on the only other two previous attempts.

Credits
Director/cinematography: John Noel
Music : Simon Fisher Turner

UK, 1924. 90 mins

Lincoln Film Society

Patron: Jim Broadbent

Darjeeling. Using funds from his investors, he bought a piece of land and ordered the construction of a photographic laboratory, fully equipped with developing trays, chemical supplies and an electric generator for power. To run the lab Noel hired a local photographer, Arthur Pereira, who with one assistant would work for seven days a week for four months. The film itself would travel to Darjeeling in relays of porters and horsemen, carried in air and watertight containers, which had been custom-built in London. Altogether Noel had 14 cameras, including one pocket-sized model, designed to carry just two minutes of film, for the men to take on the summit attempt.

Noel's technical innovations were startling. Obligated to use black and white film, he recorded the colours of every still photograph with reference to a standard chart, so that once converted to glass negatives, the images could be accurately tinted by hand. His film cameras had special features that mitigated the effect of static electricity, and electric motors that allowed both time-lapse and slow-motion exposures, both novelties at the time. Clipped to his camera was a six-power telescope which was synchronised with the optimal axis of the lens, such that the image in the telescope was in the aperture of the lens. With a 20-inch telephoto lens he would capture still images at 3,000 yards – the farthest so far achieved. From a perch above Camp 3, at an altitude of about 22,000 feet (6,700 metres), he would be able to film the ascent from a distance of 3 miles (4.8 km), with almost perfect clarity. To transport his cameras, he bought mules, and had saddles specially designed. With two trained porters to help, he found that with practice he could have his camera out of its box and mounted on a tripod in 30 seconds or less. The footage that eventually found its way back to Pathé News and to theatres all over Britain would be of a quality rarely before seen in newsreels.

and features sequences at Phari Dzong (Pagri), Shekar Dzong (Kegar) and Rongbuk monastery. But what resonates so deeply is Noel's ability to frame the vulnerability, isolation and courage of people persevering on one of the world's harshest landscapes.

The restoration by the BFI National Archive has transformed the quality of the surviving film elements and reintroduced the original coloured tints and tones. Revealed by the restoration, few images in cinema are as epic – or moving – as the final shots of the blood-red sunset over the Himalayas.

Bryony Dixon, Jan Faull - BFI National Archive

The restored film received its première at the 2013 London Film Festival, described in the programme as follows:

The official film record of the third attempt to climb Everest is one of the most remarkable films in the BFI National Archive. This legendary expedition culminated in the deaths of two of the finest climbers of their generation, George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, and sparked an on-going debate over whether or not they did indeed reach the summit. Filming in brutally harsh conditions with a specially adapted camera, Captain John Noel captured images of breathtaking beauty and considerable historical significance.

The movie is among the earliest filmed records of Tibetan life

Our next film - The Past (12a) Friday October 17th, 7.30pm

Written and directed by Asghar Farhadi, *The Past* stars Ali Mosaffa as Ahmad, an Iranian man who returns to France when his separated wife Marie (Bérénice Bejo) asks him for a divorce, so she can move on with her new partner, dry-cleaner Samir (Tahar Rahim). Marie has become exasperated with daughter Lucie's recent behaviour and asks Ahmad to see if he can talk to her and find out why she has suddenly become so angry. However, Ahmad's presence further exacerbates tensions within the family, particularly when he discovers the full extent of the situation.

Farhadi follows his outstanding film *A Separation* (shown by the Society in January 2013) with another detailed examination of the challenges faced by couples in a failing relationship, while a Bejo's star continues to rise after *The Artist*, as she again proves her worth, this time in a dramatic role.