



CENTENARY SCREENING

# The Epic of Everest

## The Epic of Everest

Directed by: Captain John Noel  
Production Company: Explorers Films  
UK 1924  
87 mins  
Digital

Restoration supported by  
The Eric Anker-Petersen Charity

BFI National Archive  
Lead Curator: Bryony Dixon  
Archive Production Curator: Jan Faul  
Restoration: Ben Thompson,  
Kieron Webb, David Jones,  
Peter Marshall, Dave Gurney

Deluxe Digital London  
Restoration: Mark Bonnici, Graham Jones,  
Stephen Bearman, Paul Doogan

Music: Simon Fisher Turner  
Musicians: James Brooks, Andrew Blick,  
Peter Gregson, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Ruby Thapa,  
Madan Thapa, Simon Fisher Turner, Asaf Sirkis

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Introduced by Dr Jan Faul

*The Epic of Everest* is the official film record, shot by Captain John Noel, of the third British expedition to attempt to reach the summit of the world's highest peak. We begin with the large contingent of men, animals and equipment gathered to journey across the Tibetan Plateau towards Everest. En route, the film records some of the earliest images of the Tibetan people and their culture, including scenes at the village of Phari (Pagri), Shekar Dzong (Xegar) and the Rongbuk Monastery. On the slopes of Everest we follow each stage of the climb as the mountaineers and Sherpas progress, enduring incredibly harsh conditions. When the camera can go no further, a specially designed telephoto lens, filming at a distance of over two miles, records the final attempts of climbers Mallory and Irvine to reach the summit.

The film exemplifies the age of heroic adventure. Man had already reached the North and South Poles; now the new challenge was to climb the world's highest peak – 'the Third Pole'. The Mount Everest Committee was formed in 1920 by the Alpine Club of Great Britain and the Royal Geographical Society. Special permission to enter Tibet was granted by the 13th Dalai Lama, negotiated by the remarkable diplomat and Tibetologist, Sir Charles Bell.

In 1921 Lieutenant Colonel Charles Howard-Bury led a reconnaissance expedition to establish a route for future climbs. In 1922 the second expedition, led by Brigadier General Charles Bruce, recruited Captain John Noel as official cameraman. In 1924 Noel returned as official cameraman, having bought the photographic rights in advance. A version of his film became *The Epic of Everest*. Like *The Great White Silence*, Herbert Ponting's filmed record of Captain Scott's 1910-13 expedition to the South Pole, Noel's film served both as an absorbing documentary of an extraordinary journey into the interior of Tibet and as a memorial to a tragedy. The loss of Mallory and Irvine turned the failed expedition into one of the 20th century's most compelling mysteries. In 1999 Mallory's body was found on the slopes of Everest. A vest-pocket Kodak camera carried by Mallory is still missing. Fierce speculation continues – would any film it contains solve the mystery of who first conquered Everest?

## Captain John Noel (1890-1989)

The son of an army officer and grandson of the 2nd Earl of Gainsborough, Noel had a privileged education. He was sent to school in Switzerland, where he developed a keen interest in mountaineering. At art school in Florence he encountered the work of Vittorio Sella, who specialised in mountain photography.

In 1908 Noel was commissioned from Sandhurst into the East Yorkshire Regiment and posted to India. It was during this five-year posting that he planned and executed his undercover attempt to reach Everest through the forbidden territory of Tibet. Disguised in Tibetan clothes, he came within 40 miles of Everest before being discovered and ejected. After the War, Noel presented a paper describing his exploits to the Royal Geographical Society in London, and so the idea of an expedition to climb Mount Everest took root.

Noel was unable to take part in 1921's first reconnaissance of Everest because of his army commitments, but by 1922 he had resigned his commission in time to join the Second Expedition as official photographer. As part of his preparation, he consulted Herbert Ponting, who gave him advice on camera equipment and filming in sub-zero temperatures based on his experience in Antarctica. The quality of Noel's 1922 film, *Climbing Mount Everest*, proved that this was time well spent.

With a return to Everest planned for 1924, Noel decided to buy the photographic rights, and set up Explorers Films to raise the required finance. His shareholders included such luminaries as the Aga Khan and the British Army officer and

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explorer Sir Francis Younghusband. He also planned to protect his investment, learning from his experience of processing film at high altitudes, by building a photographic lab in Darjeeling. Teams of runners and the Indian postal service brought the precious negatives down from the mountains in specially designed waterproof sacks.

Despite the disastrous loss of Mallory and Irvine, Noel set about editing his film *The Epic of Everest* both as record and as a memorial to the climbers. He arranged for a group of Tibetan lamas to travel to London to accompany the film, performing traditional dances and playing Tibetan horns. An elaborate stage set was built to create a monastery courtyard against a backdrop of snow-covered mountain peaks. The film was a hit – Captain Noel toured the UK and Europe and made no fewer than seven coast-to-coast tours of America.

In 1984 Captain Noel wrote to the curator of the National Film and Television Archive (now the BFI National Archive), outlining his wishes for a restoration of the film to make it 'worthy of a place in the National Archives... I would welcome this destiny for my picture... a sort of maximum attainment in my life.'

### The restoration

The restoration by the BFI National Archive's restoration team, undertaken in collaboration with Sandra Noel, the director's daughter, has transformed the quality of the surviving elements of the film and reintroduced the original coloured tints and tones. The team were able to overcome some serious challenges inherent in the material, to do full justice to this heroic feat of exploration cinematography.

The team started with the Archive's full-length original nitrate print, which included tinted and toned shots, and a shorter nitrate print from Sandra Noel which we think was originally used for Captain Noel's lecture tour, and which was of superior quality. These were both scanned at very high resolution, using a wet gate to eliminate scratches and a new technique developed by our image quality specialist to scan certain scenes with a selective use of green or blue LEDs. This allowed us to get the best possible results from parts of the image compromised by either deterioration of the blue toning or severe mould damage.

The team then reconstructed the restoration master using the shots with the best photographic quality from the two source prints. Finally, we repaired the extensive physical damage of 89 years of wear and tear, leaving those marks that were an inherent part of the processing of the original processing.

*The Epic of Everest* is now fully preserved in the national collection for future generations, on film as well as in digital versions.

### About the score

Simon Fisher Turner's score for *The Epic of Everest* was a year in the making. The result is an epic of contemporary music-making, employing a dizzying range of instruments, musicians, found sounds and natural noise, collaged into an evocative homage to mountains and those in thrall to them. The score is a companion piece to the composer's haunting score for *The Great White Silence*, the official film record of Scott's last expedition to the South Pole, premiered at the BFI London Film Festival in 2010.

At the heart of the score are a recurring group of complementary sounds: harsh winds, deep breaths and unexpected frequencies, offering a sonic re-imagining of the emotional highs and lows of the Everest expedition. Sounds of yak bells, sighs, Himalayan silence, typewriter keys striking paper and traditional instruments mix with samples of the original recordings made by Captain John Noel of the Tibetan lamas who accompanied the film at its premiere run at London's Scala cinema in 1924.

BFI production notes