
GEORGE LOWE

Some Memories of Tom Stobart 1914-1980

In 1953 there was an unusual duplication of first names: two of each, Charles, Michael, George and Tom. The Toms were both big men but Tom Stobart was the tallest at nearly two metres or 6'6", with straight blond hair and generous big smile. With his photographer's eye, I remember he framed his subjects by making a rectangle with thumbs and forefingers, then moving the frame back and forth in front of his eye.

During the expedition his concentration on filming was total. He was there, bent over his tripod, his right arm and finger angled high above the camera button. We didn't see him as we walked and talked, for he was somewhere getting a long shot or close in on the local colour. At meals on the trek he wasn't eating, he was working. And quickly the pattern was established which accepted that Tom was there but not there. No scenes were directed or planned and no special consideration was given to him. For Tom had developed his expedition filming techniques in a hard school of experience on board an Antarctic voyage, when he found that 'faking was impossible and scientists were not actors'. He accepted that explorers and climbers were not interested in the making of films, at least not until afterwards when they expected the best.

Tom filmed the setting-up of Base Camp and there he asked me to try filming with an unusual camera weighing around four pounds. This camera was designed to take a sealed cassette of 16mm film, driven by a clockwork spring and mounted with a single fixed lens. Each cassette contained only 50ft of film and the clockwork gave eight to ten seconds before rewinding. This small camera, when kept warm inside clothing, produced excellent results up to the South Col. Above that height none of us could find space or energy to carry it.

In the Icefall and up to Camp IV in the Western Cwm, Tom used his big camera and tripod until he became ill with a cough and breathing difficulties. He descended and the doctors confirmed pneumonia. He went down to a yak herder's hut and rested. I think this must have been pulmonary oedema, a condition of which we had little knowledge at that time. He recovered and returned later, to film the memorable scenes of the climbers' return from the summit.

In relaxed mood, he was a skilled raconteur, especially on his youth, his schooling and learning, but especially, for me, on his unconventional decisions to drop everything and chase improbable dreams. After Everest he continued adventure filming which, sadly, ended abruptly in Ethiopia when a guide and interpreter became mentally unstable and shot several of the party with a rifle.

Tom was hit twice in the legs which severed nerves and smashed one knee. This left him partially disabled. He took to cooking and wrote a good book on herbs. There is no doubt that the wounds sustained in Ethiopia had a long-term effect. Sometime in 1980 Tom died suddenly at a rural railway station in England during a visit from his home in Majorca.