Above Ailefroide, oil on canvas, 71x91cm. *(Tim Pollard)*

elementary structures pushing their way skyward through the surrounding landscape. I want them to be quite gothic yet detailed enough for a climber to recognise and follow the significant routes. As a young climber, I remember sitting in the Old Dungeon Ghyll pub looking at Heaton Cooper's illustrations of the rock climbs in Langdale. I'd be checking out routes while admiring his artistic prowess. His drawings showed through shading the block-like structure of the mountains and crags. This is something I always wanted to embody in my work.

The process is continual and developmental. I'd like to think I'm getting better. Being self-critical is vital to the process. It is still difficult to predict how a painting will turn out but that is all part of the all-consuming fascination.

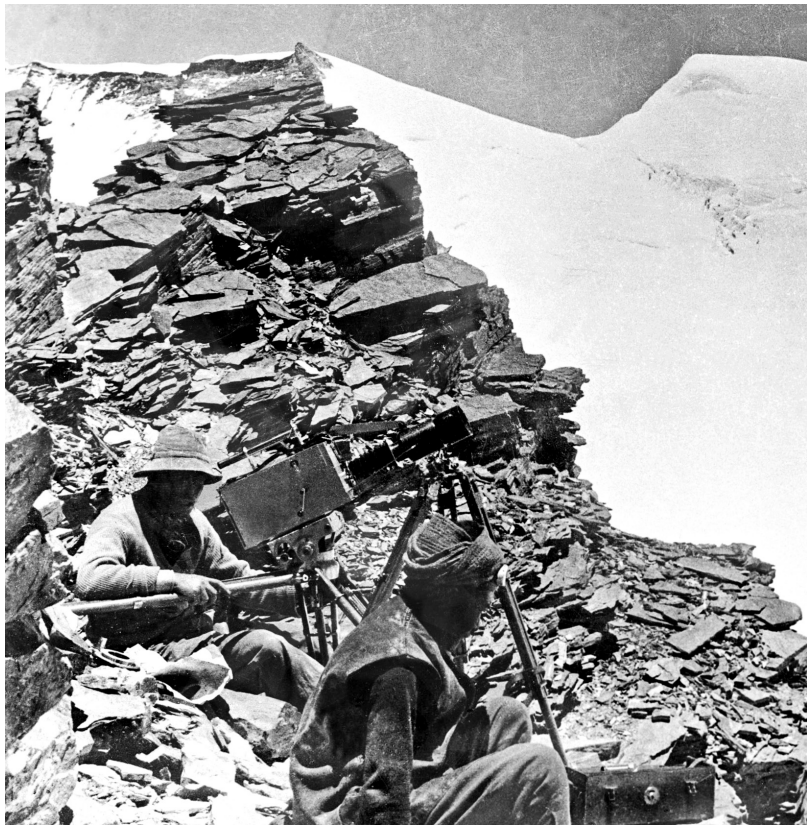
All the original paintings used to illustrate the section headings and this article are for sale from Tim Pollard. Email: **tjpvp@hotmail.co.uk**

JOHN CLEARE

Filming Mountains

John Noel at work with his 20 inch Cooke telephoto lens high on Everest, his sherpa assistant acting as focus puller.(© *Royal Geographical Society)*

By gum! They were men in those days. We all know the story of the pre-war Everest attempts, especially the 1924 epic from which Mallory and Irvine failed to return, and we will probably have seen, at some time or another, snatches of the original film which recorded the expedition. The film, shown quite widely in Britain, Europe and America in the aftermath of the attempt, was made by Captain John Noel, the expedition's official photographer, described as 'a soldier by profession, an artist in spirit and a brilliant camera technician by necessity' – and undoubtedly also a talented entrepreneur.



Noel working at his 'eyrie' on the rocky slopes above Camp III with his 20 inch Cooke telephoto lens trained on the North Col some 2½ miles distant. The snowy peak is Point 6862m. *(Alpine Club Photo Library)*

Shot on unstable nitrate, long-gone negative stock, the original projection prints deteriorated badly and five years before he died in 1989, Noel suggested to the BFI that his film might warrant restoration and be 'worthy of a place in the National Archive. . . I would welcome this destiny for my picture.' The film restored by the BFI over three years was premiered in October 2013.

Born in 1890, John Noel studied art in Florence, entering the ambit of the great mountain photographer Vittorio Sella, before passing into Sandhurst. Commissioned in 1908, he joined the East Yorkshire Regiment and while serving in India was able to indulge his passions for exploration and photography. In 1913 he made a remarkable journey into forbidden Tibet, using the 1881 reports produced by the pundit Chandra Das to plan his route. Travelling in disguise with three native companions and secreting cameras and basic surveying equipment in their sparse gear – plus a rifle and revolver – they crossed into Tibet from Sikkim and traversed formidable, unexplored country to within just 40 miles of Everest, before being

arrested. Now joining the handful of Europeans who had seen Everest from the north, Noel befriended Dr Alexander Kellas, the doyen of Himalayan pioneers, and together they lobbied the British authorities for an official expedition to explore, map and climb the mountain. But the Great War intervened, and during the retreat from Mons and later at Ypres, Noel found himself in the thick of the fighting. Eventually withdrawn from the front suffering from shell-shock, he survived the war as a small-arms instructor. It was the lecture he gave to the Royal Geographical Society in 1919, recounting his 1913 journey, that proved one of the catalysts for the eventual convening of the Mount Everest Committee. This was formed jointly by the AC and the RGS in January 1921, chaired by Sir Francis Younghusband and charged with mounting the subsequent Everest expeditions.

Although not a technical climber per se, Noel was a tough and experienced wilderness traveller, and after military commitments had prevented him joining the 1921 reconnaissance expedition, he resigned his commission to become an important member, as support climber and photographer, of the full-blown 1922 attempt. His initial film – *Climbing Mount Everest* – the first movie footage ever shot in Tibet, documented the expedition during which he reached Camp IV (6990m) on the North Col. Cinematography was barely 20 years old and although he was guided by the Antarctic work of Herbert Ponting, there were many techniques to be developed and lessons to be learnt. For instance he rigged up a darkroom at base camp in which, working only at night, he managed to process hundreds of still photographs and 17,000 feet of cine film. But frozen developer and blowing dust almost jeopardised the entire exercise. There must be another way.

1924 Everest Expedition: John Noel filming departing porters watched by their relatives, Darjeeling. *(Alpine Club Photo Libary)*

The 1924 expedition was expected to succeed and Noel was fully prepared to record it. He had floated a company, Explorer Films Ltd, with Younghusband as chairman, which purchased the film rights to the entire trip for the princely sum of £8,000 – crucial funding for the Everest Committee. He built a proper film laboratory in Darjeeling, complete with electric generator, in which he installed two technicians to process the exposed film negative that would be returned regularly by runner from Base Camp. He even invented and produced the Base Camp Post Cards which would be signed by the climbers and posted

John Cleare in action driving the 16mm Eclair camera in the Khumbu Icefall during the International Expedition to the SW Face, 1971. *(John Cleare / Mountain Camera Picture Library)*

back to children and collectors at home in return for a small donation. Thus was produced *The Epic of Everest*.

Only two original 35mm nitrate prints had survived, though in poor condition, and at the BFI these were scanned at high resolution and a digital master reconstructed, selecting the best quality sequences from either. Scratches and mould were eliminated, while fading and the original colour toning of several rushes were repaired using new digital techniques. Finally many sequences were interpolated, a process in which – in this case every third frame – is duplicated to minimise the characteristic jerky movement displayed when the original 18 fps is run at the 24 fps required for digital cinema projection.

The original film was silent and used 'intertitles' – often lengthy full-screen captions – which have been retained. However, if Noel was presenting the film himself he would add appropriate commentary and an accompaniment of live music composed by Somervell, and sometimes even a display and chanting by the 'Dancing Lamas' troupe he had bought over from Tibet – in so doing provoking a 'religio-diplomatic' incident. For the reconstructed film a modern sound track was specially commissioned from the film music composer Simon Fisher Turner 'made from found and stolen life sounds, alongside new music and fake foleys,' he wrote – and was played live at the London premiere, unfortunately very loudly, by a five piece ensemble. It was, to my mind, a harsh cacophony entirely out of keeping with the subject, though others may feel differently.

For those younger climbers accustomed to the gripping climbing footage shot by the likes of Leo Dickinson and Alastair Lee or seen at the Kendal Mountain Festival, this film may appear tame, naïve even. But it should be viewed in the context, not only of 1924 and history, but of the mountain itself, at the time virtually unknown and its hinterland unexplored. It was, after all, unique footage. The extensive coverage of the people and their habits, their villages, of lamas and landscapes and of the expedition's huge logistic train, would surely have been an eye-opener when seen in flickering black and white some eighty years ago. After a lengthy and well documented approach march, the mountain eventually appears in the distance – the classic view of the northern flank from Rongbuk Monastery – but then of course the camera follows the route to the North Col, located by Wheeler in 1921 and explored only in 1922 by Mallory and Bullock, which diverts up the tributary East Rongbuk Glacier. The North-east Ridge itself, where we know in retrospect that the crucial action was played out, is hardly seen again until the closing sequences, and that in enfilade at a distance of some 2½ miles. And there are no diagrams, dotted lines or named features to explain it all.

Thus we view charming footage of climbers and sherpas threading their way through forests of imposing penitentes and crossing snowfields via 'Ice Lake Camp' to 'Snow Field Camp' (Camps II and III respectively) while many viewers might conclude that the savage North-east Ridge Pinnacles towering over the head of the East Rongbuk Glacier are the actual summit. Noel did reach the North Col himself (Camp IV – 'Ice Cliff Camp') but after one short sequence at the camp, the coverage runs out apart from some hazy, foreshortened, extreme telephoto images of the summit pyramid. Knowing something of the politics of the expedition, and the logistic snarl-ups in the face of fickle weather, I feel that though keen to do so, Noel was restrained from going higher, although he is recorded as playing a valuable part as a support climber. But with Mallory and Irvine now obviously dead and the appropriate signals laid out in the snow, the film rapidly concludes with an image of the memorial chorten and the final 'intertitle' bearing the words:

'If you had lived as they had lived and died in the heart of nature, would you yourself wish for any better grave?'

Words which were doubtless considered appropriate in the aftermath of WW1.

Certainly the BFI have done an excellent job and the film is well worth seeing, despite the incongruous sound track. As an intriguing, historical, mountain travelogue it is a great tribute both to its maker and to the bold expeditioners of 1924. They were indeed men in those days.

Dubbed by Bruce 'St Noel of the Cameras', and with no professional

John Cleare (camera) and John Peacock (actor) at work on the Zermatt Breithorn filming BBC's *Last Blue Mountain*, March 1970. 16mm silent Arriflex with a 400 foot magazine. *(John Cleare / Mountain Camera Picture Library)*

help, Noel had trained up two dedicated and extremely efficient Sherpa assistants. His equipment included 14 cameras, both movie and still, his work-horse being a Newman Sinclair 'Auto-kiné' which while normally clockwork operated, used an electric motor for time-lapse shots. Essentially an 18 x 12 inches polished duralumin box, padded with non-freeze rubber, the Auto-kiné weighed nearly 20 lbs loaded with 400 feet of panchromatic 35mm film, which running at 16 frames per second was just enough for six minutes shooting – all being well – before the precise yet fiddly process of reloading became necessary, probably with numb fingers. The nitrate-based film stock itself was fragile and in low temperatures would snap under even slight stress.

Then there were various lenses and filters for each, both yellow and red, to accentuate clouds and diminish the extreme UV content of high altitude light. Noel's special lens was a 20 inch (500mm) Cooke telephoto with a clip-on, six-power telescopic viewfinder synchronised with the optical axis of the lens, a crucial lens for the distances at which he was forced to work. The camera demanded a sturdy tripod, itself weighing at least 20 lbs. Cameras would gather the ubiquitous Tibetan dust blowing below the snow-line, while lenses would fog with sudden changes of temperature, such as struggling from the open air into a warm tent. To shoot anything at all required a major physical effort besides mental stamina and dedicated artistic and technical application.

Leo Dickinson at work with his Sony Digital Betacam on Everest's North Col in 1995. It was revolutionary to be able to view the rushes instantly. *(Leo Dickinson / Mountain Camera Picture Library)*

Much of the 1924 action footage is concentrated on the steep face of the North Col, to observe which Noel established a camera platform – his 'eyrie' – on the craggy slopes above Camp III from where he could follow the action with his telephoto lens from a distance of a mile and half.

It is fascinating to compare the daunting problems which Noel overcame with those we faced filming on Everest almost 50 years later. The International Expedition of 1971 had two objectives: firstly, to make the first ascents of the South Face and of the West Ridge Integral; secondly, to film them. Cinematography had developed out of all recognition by then – Noel had worked of course in black/white, a process in which the cameraman must visualise his subject in terms of shape and texture, translating rather than copying nature, while we would be working entirely in colour, and the BBC hoped (against hope) that we would shoot 'sync' sound from Kathmandu all the way to the summit. Now we had an all professional camera team of seven, of which two cameramen and a sound man were experienced climbers technically capable of reaching the top, and we had dedicated sherpas to assist us.

Our main cameras, by now all 16mm, were three shoulder-balanced, sync-sound Éclairs, each weighing some 13 lbs with a loaded 400 foot magazine and carried in a neat, sherpa-able back-pack that we'd designed, and two Arriflexes, rugged, smaller, slightly lighter and designed in Germany in WW2 as a combat camera, again using a 400 foot magazine

allowing just over ten minutes of shooting. Both were powered by batteries, each weighing a further 3lbs or so and giving a very limited run in cold conditions. We also had a couple of small Canon Scoopics, a brilliant and revolutionary camera with a fitted 6:1 zoom lens, weighting around 6lbs, similar to an amateur Super-8 though frustratingly using only 100 foot / 2½ minute film rolls. Crucial back-up was provided by two small, go-anywhere, unbreakable clockwork Bell & Howell 16mm 70 DLs, also taking 100ft loads, and a couple of tiny clockwork B & H Autoloads with 50ft magazines.

Although technically our gear was light-years in advance of 1924, the basic principles were the same: our equipment was still heavy and awkward to climb with at altitude when every ounce feels like a pound, but at least our cameras were ergonomically designed, well balanced and we could frequently dispense with the tripods which had hardly changed from Noel's day, still weighing well over 20lbs when fitted with a decent precision head. Although in theory each 100 feet of film gave about 2½ minutes shooting time, our cameras had to be started at slow speed to avoid film snapping in the cold, and were bastards to reload with numb fingers or in driving snow. During an alpine winter shake-down session we'd discovered that when reloading, valuable feet of every hundred foot film roll were fogged by glacial glare, and at the higher Himalayan altitudes I had to reload actually inside a specially designed 'changing bag' which covered both camera and me down to waist-level.

Solar cells were still in the future, and all discharged camera batteries were carried by runner to Lukla and flown to Kathmandu for recharging, a major drain on logistical resources. Exposed film, both still and movie, was periodically flown to London and reports cabled back to Nepal. Patience and persistence were essential.

Life was still tough enough three year later, when I found myself driving a 70mm Super Panavision camera on the Eiger with Clint Eastwood. Both technically and creatively it was a joy to use, a Rolls Royce among cameras; there were LCD readouts in the viewfinder for the controls and the two separate power sources, one of them solely to maintain the camera at the correct operating temperature. But not surprisingly it was large and very heavy and I suffered a hernia hauling one up the Difficult Crack on jumars.

Fast-forward another 40 years. Although Imax had reached the summit of Everest using 65mm film and vast resources in '96, the digital revolution was already happening. By the mid-80s video sound cameras had appeared with many feet of tape replacing film and creating new problems.

Leo Dickinson filmed on Everest's North Col in 1995 using the Sony Digital Betacam which was state of the art, weighed under 5 kgs, ran for 40 minutes per loading and recorded synch sound. Images contained 2k pixels – by 2012 much smaller cameras contained four times as many. Leo recalls that it was revolutionary to be able to play back the rushes instantly, one less headache at high altitude.

State of the art 2013 – but for how long? Alastair Lee with one of his two Canon EOS C300 digital cinema cameras in Queen Maud Land, Antarctica. See also page 137. *(Alastair Lee)*

By the early 2000s solid state 'flash drives' or memory cards had replaced tape, minimising moving parts. Indeed, technology is advancing so fast that there are many different cameras to choose from, each liable to be obsolete within a year or two. Typically they'll weight 6 or 7 lbs in running order, while the cameraman can expect to shoot sync-sound for a couple of hours before reloading. In fact broadcast quality movie (though the BBC are reluctant to acknowledge it) can even be shot on what is essentially a DSLR stills camera weighing little more than a couple of pounds, accepting a wide range of lenses and allowing about 30 minutes recording on a 4GB card: viewfinding and focusing can present problems in the movie mode and naturally it eats batteries, but solar cells can provide on-location recharging.

Truly go-anywhere filming may be easy these days, but however sophisticated the equipment, it is still the man or woman behind the camera who creates the pictures.

The Epic of Everest - The official record of Mallory and Irvine's 1924 Expedition, (87 mins).
A film by Captain John Noel, restoration by the British Film Institute. Available from **bfi.org.uk/shop**