

DENNIS GRAY

'Hazard': The Life of Tom Stobart



Alf Gregory's portrait of Tom Stobart. (RGS)

In 1959, I spent a month in the Dolomites working on the film *Hazard*, directed by Tom Stobart. I have been interested in his story ever since. He sprang to prominence as a member of the 1953 Everest expedition, responsible for the Oscar-nominated film *The Conquest of Everest*. But this was just one episode in a life brim full with adventure in the wilder regions of the Earth.

I first noted his name on a visit to Wharnccliffe in the late 1950s, while climbing a Very Severe called *Himmelswillen*, which translates as 'for heaven's sake!' Tom had made the first ascent solo while a 19-year-old studying zoology at Sheffield University in 1933. I looked up a history of the university's climbing club, which describes Tom as their leading climber at that time,

responsible for several other new routes in the Peak District. His father had been something of a climber and caver, and been on expeditions to Spitzbergen and climbed in the Alps. Noel Odell, the last person to see Mallory and Irvine alive on their fateful attempt on Everest's summit in 1924, was a close family friend in Sussex where Tom had grown up, inspired by these legends and wishing himself to become a Himalayan mountaineer.

Such aspirations lead climbers into career choices, and today there is a panoply of jobs within the sport: instructing, filming, photography, journalism, guiding, manufacturing and retailing. In the 1930s an adventurous spirit needed to be a pioneer to make a living out of wilderness activities. Graduating from Sheffield, Tom took up a scholarship to Cambridge, but found it was not taking him where he wished to be, so he made the brave decision to follow an interest he had developed in film. A film unit had been set up at the experimental education centre at Dartington Hall in Devon. Tom saw that it was making adventure films and he enrolled. He wrote later: 'In 1937 the film industry was one of the most difficult in the world to get into unless you knew the right people. Moreover what I wanted to do was not even something in the normal line of film work and it had never been attempted as a full-time job. I wanted to film original exploration and mountaineering expeditions – and that was not normal film work.'

While part of the Dartington Hall Film Unit he began work on his first film, *Physical Geography of Rivers* (1939). During filming he met the girl of his dreams, a raven-haired Romanian ballet student called Kara, whose mother was determined to bring her home as the clouds of war gathered; Tom decided to follow her and make a great film that would rescue Romania's rather poor reputation, and was consequently trapped in that country when the storm of war arrived. Tom was in trouble as Romania sided with Germany; he was seen as a spy and expelled with immediate effect. His route back to England travelling west was blocked, so he set out east through Bulgaria, Turkey, and Syria, travelling third class, roughing it. (Kara stayed behind, and Tom wrote of their parting: 'she would always act too late just as surely as I would always act too soon.') He must have made a memorable impression on those he met: Tom was six foot six, with a thatch of blond hair, deep blue eyes, and a big, generous smile, which is how I remember him from 1959. He covered the final section by ship, travelling deck class to fetch up stony broke in India, where, after living on the breadline working for Indian filmmakers, he joined the army and set up the service's first film unit on the sub-continent.

As soon as he could get away from his army duties he set out on a trek to the Nanda Devi range, and in 1945, at the end of the war in Europe, he organised a lightweight expedition to climb and film an attempt on Nun (7135m), then still unclimbed. With him was Roy Berry, father of the Bristol climber Steve. After setting up two camps on the mountain, the ascent ground to a halt due to the failure of their stoves; an over-strong and enthusiastic Sherpa called Saki stripped the threads off them. But Tom learned a lot about the difficulties of mountain filming on this pioneering trip.



The fox and the spy: Tom Stobart riding a camel in Jordan in 1962, taken by the zoologist and filmmaker Tony Morrison. Morrison was working for Stobart and the famous Daily Mail correspondent Ralph Izzard on a film for a David Attenborough series. On their way back to Beirut, Stobart bought a fox cub from a local man, which he put into the care of Morrison, since Stobart was returning to Italy to visit his wife Jane at their home in Bordighera. Morrison, having weaned and cared for the cub, in turn gave it to Kim Philby, then living in Beirut, who developed a deep attachment to the creature he named Jackie. It has been suggested that Jackie's death, found dead in the street, prompted Philby's final flight to the Soviet Union. (With thanks to Tony Morrison/nonesuchexpeditions.com)

Returning to the UK after the war, Tom's career as a cameraman, thanks to his work in India, was firmly established and he was invited by what was to become the British Antarctic Survey to travel to the white continent as a documentary filmmaker. Again, this was ground-breaking work: Tom learned a lot about filming in extreme weather and cold conditions. Adventure documentaries and natural history programmes for TV developed apace during his career. At the forefront of these in the early 1950s was the wildlife cinematography of Armand and Michaela Denis, who funded their first film working on the movie *King Solomon's Mines*, Michaela performing as Deborah Kerr's stunt double. Tom worked on some of their documentaries as cameraman.

News of the British attempt on Everest in 1953 reached Tom as he was recovering from a severe liver illness contracted working in Africa, and he only just recovered in time to make it on the team, being the last appointed. With typical aplomb, he had cabled he was available to film the ascent if he was asked to do so.

Filming in high mountains is a thankless task. To get good results requires total dedication to the job and on Everest Tom Stobart was to find how difficult it was to work without hindering the climbing. He brought to the task know-how of filming in extreme conditions that few could match at that time. George Lowe recalled Tom's commitment in the *Alpine Journal* not long after Tom's death.

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.

His main cameras weighed 8lb each, whilst his lightweight handheld ones were two and a half pounds. Unfortunately, perhaps because he had not sufficiently recovered from his African malaise, he developed pneumonia, and had to retreat from the high camps, descending below base to a yak-herder's hut. But not before he had persuaded other team-members – Alf Gregory, George Lowe and Ed Hillary – to continue filming with the hand-held cameras even near the summit. Fortunately he recovered his strength in time to capture the memorable scenes of the climbers returning from the summit. The Everest film was a huge success, being nominated for an Oscar, and shown in mainstream cinemas around the world.

Tom did not rest on his laurels, in 1954 leading an expedition backed by the *Daily Mail* to search for the yeti and learn more about it. The following year he spent in the Everest region, working on an anthropological film about the life of the Sherpa communities, *Tensing's Country* (1955). The following year, a drama occurred that would affect the rest of his life. Tom was a skilled raconteur and I remember this story the keenest of any he told in 1959. He returned to filming in Africa and in a remote area of Ethiopia,

making a natural history programme, a local guide became mentally unstable and opened fire on Tom's party with his rifle. Several of the party were shot and Tom suffered injuries, which left him being partially disabled, with two direct hits to his legs that severed nerves and smashed one of his knees.

It took him quite some time to recover from this terrible event, but while he did so, he wrote his first book, the first of several, an autobiography titled *Adventurer's Eye* published to some acclaim in 1958. Despite his injuries he also returned to filming, making a documentary about the steel-making community in Consett. This led to plans for a safety film for steelworkers titled *Hazard*.

This was for 1959 an innovative project, with a cast of well-known actors and a full professional film crew, and a budget to match. It was a story about two steelworkers from Sheffield who are keen climbers. One is a risk-taking daredevil, the other more reasoned and careful. The action begins in the steelworks and the fact of the different approaches to safety by the two main characters is established by some very dangerous actions leading to some near-misses by the daredevil. For their holidays they travel out to the Dolomites to attempt a new route, and inevitably the approach to this by the risk-taker leads them into serious difficulty and an accident with a dramatic rescue.

Joe Brown led our six-man climbing team and the action sequences were filmed throughout the Cortina region: Tofana, Tre Cime, Cinque Torre. We soon learned that film work is no rest cure. We acted as guides to the camera crews, led them up rock faces to good camera positions, carried heavy film equipment, built platforms for cameras and sound recorders, portered up to film locations 30 prepared dinners each day from local refuges. Among the more bizarre items we carried around were a 20ft ladder and sacks of straw to put underneath in case of a fall: essential to get some of the stars above ground level. It was a serious business but there were lots of laughs, especially when we doubled for the stars.

For me the most interesting part of all this was observing how Tom ran the show. He briefed the crew and the actors what he wanted from a shot, but he left the details – how to pose, for example – to his actors, giving them the freedom to interpret the brief as they saw best as professional performers. On occasion his patience was impressive; one of the actors had trouble remembering his lines and this led to dozens of takes balanced above the ground. Yet I never saw him even slightly annoyed or unruffled. *Hazard* was highly successful. Like Tom's Everest film, it was shown in mainstream cinemas and nominated for a BAFTA. It was screened at a Kendal Mountain Film Festival a few years ago and received an enthusiastic reception from a full house despite being more than five decades old.

Tom made more than a dozen films, and was awarded a BAFTA certificate of merit. In later life he became well known as a writer on cooking, herbs and food. He wrote two seminal books about these subjects, *The Cook's Encyclopaedia: Ingredients and Processes*, and a guide to *Herbs, Spices and Flavours*. He also published a book about filming wildlife, *Tiger Trail* (1975)



Stobart in Beirut. Morrison stayed with the Stobarts in Italy in 1963, and Stobart returned to Jordan in 1964, filming with Joe Brown. After a failed filming venture in India, Stobart struggled financially at his last home on Mallorca before his early death in 1980. (Tony Morrison)

and an American edition of his autobiography, *I Take Pictures for Adventure*.

The last film he directed was about animal traders stealing monkeys in India, 1979's *The Great Monkey Rip Off*. Unusually, despite the serious subject matter, Tom produced it as a comedy; the film made quite an impression internationally. It was to be his last great effort; Tom died suddenly from a heart attack in 1980, at a railway station in West Sussex, on a visit to England from his home in Mallorca. He was 66.

Like so many in his teens he was enraptured by climbing, his early adventures as a student rock climber led on to a life fulfilled by an art form he discovered he was exceptionally good at. It complimented his adventurous approach to living. It seems to me that this is something you either have built into your psyche or not, and that Tom had this in abundance his life story confirms. He really did possess an 'adventurer's eye.'