
CHRISTOPHER RALLING

Filming on Everest

(Plates 62–69)

After making two documentaries on the subject, I thought I had finished with Everest. But when my daughter Jo suggested we should put in a bid through my small company to make a film for the 40th anniversary, I realised that I hadn't. The memories, the tug at the heart, the awesome fascination were all still there.

Down the years since 1975, when my own involvement began, I have got to know and greatly admire a good number of Himalayan climbers, without ever really understanding why they take such risks. Too many of them have died in that time: Dougal Haston, Nick Estcourt, Pete Boardman, Joe Tasker, Julie Tullis, Al Rouse and, most painful of all for me personally, Mick Burke, who was our cameraman on the South West Face expedition. A photograph that I took of him in the Khumbu Icefall hangs on my study wall. Three weeks later he had disappeared somewhere on the summit ridge. I can't explain it, but Mick was the main reason why I wanted to go back.

As with climbers, so with film makers – there's little left to be done on Everest. To date, well over fifty documentaries have been made. We have had dramatic pictures from every ridge and face. We have had action pictures from the summit, canoeing, ballooning, skiing and hang-gliding. In 1988 the Japanese actually erected a satellite dish high on the summit ridge and sent live television pictures around the world.

Considering the extreme conditions, the standard of filming has been extraordinarily high. Among the pioneers, I would give pride of place to Captain John Noel, whose vivid images from the 1922 and 1924 expeditions belie their age. A generation later, Tom Stobart and George Lowe made a unique record of the first ascent in their remarkable film *The Conquest of Everest*. In more recent times there are many to choose from, but I would pick David Breashears who made the first microwave transmission from the summit in 1983, and for sheer versatility Leo Dickinson, who seems to be equally at home whether he is operating his camera from a kayak, a parachute or a balloon.

This is not the place for a detailed discussion about film equipment, but there are two very obvious problems to be overcome when filming on Everest. One is weight and the other is extreme cold. In the course of 70 years, cameras and sound recorders have got steadily lighter. We have moved from 35mm to 16mm, and now to miniature video cameras. These changes have not always meant an improvement in picture quality, but

on Everest mobility counts for much more. If a lead climber can take a small camera in his rucksack, he is likely to produce much more dramatic stuff than a professional cameraman working with a long lens and a tripod thousands of feet below. For best results I would recommend a combination of the two.

But problems of a quite different kind await the documentary maker on an Everest expedition. Ideally, one would like to film everything of interest which happens, while remaining as unobtrusive as possible. In the highly-charged atmosphere of a major expedition, poised on the brink of success or failure, that isn't always possible. During the 1971 International expedition, which was supposed to reflect world fellowship at its best, members of the BBC documentary team became embroiled through no fault of their own in the personal conflict and rivalry which finally destroyed any hope that Norman Dyhrenfurth's fractious team ever had of reaching the summit.

The BBC had exclusive filming rights and were, in fact, major sponsors of the expedition itself, which raised suspicions in the minds of the European members of the team. They managed to convince themselves that the film's producers were only interested in a British success. Matters came to a head when a vote was taken on whether the team should devote all its energy and resources to tackling a new route on the South West Face, or whether some of them should stick to the well tried South Col route. By that stage individual members were spread out between Base Camp and the top of the Western Cwm, and some of the results of the ballot had to be relayed back to the leader, Norman Dyhrenfurth, on the BBC radio link. When the vote went against the South Col attempt, Pierre Mazeaud, a member of the French Chamber of Deputies, accused the BBC of rigging the result. In a famous outburst he shouted 'They expect me ... to work as a Sherpa for Anglo-Saxons and Japanese. Never! This is not me, but France they have insulted.' (How quickly passions boil over in such a cold climate!) All the Europeans, Mazeaud himself, Carlo Mauri from Italy, and the Vauchers from Switzerland walked off the mountain. Allegations in a Swiss newspaper that the film team had been taking drugs brought the BBC to the brink of an ugly libel suit. Wisely, perhaps, they decided to let tempers cool.

There is much more to this story which need not concern us here. But for film makers, the events of 1971 raise an important question. Of course the BBC team were completely innocent of trying to influence the course of events, or of taking drugs. But on a major expedition, how integrated should the two groups, the climbers and their chroniclers, become? At sea-level, there would not be much doubt about the answer. But high mountains, I believe, present a different set of criteria. Inevitably you are all thrown together, often battling with the elements and sometimes depending on each other for survival.

I have been involved in the making of three films about Everest: in 1975, in 1982, and now in 1993. In each case the problem of trying to give an accurate account of events presented itself in different ways.



62. Mick Burke in the Khumbu Icefall in 1975 shortly before he disappeared somewhere on the summit ridge of Everest. (*Chris Ralling*) (p116)

Everest the hard way

In 1975, Chris Bonington, anxious perhaps to avoid a repetition of 1971, decided to make all of us, climbers, reporters and film makers, full members of the expedition. I don't remember balking at this at the time. We were duly flattered, and in any case one of our BBC cameramen, Mick Burke, had already been chosen as a lead climber. Apart from myself the other members of the film team – producer Ned Kelly, cameraman Ian Stuart and sound recordist Arthur Chesterman – had all been to Everest before on the ill-fated 1971 expedition, which Bonington himself had wisely avoided.

I think it is true to say that there was virtually no friction between ourselves and the climbers in 1975, which is not to say that they trusted us to produce the goods. Neither of the two stars, Dougal Haston and Doug Scott, really believed that a documentary film could come anywhere near the actual experience of an expedition, or even a true distillation of it. On the walk-in, Dougal would make elaborate detours rather than pass one of our cameras. After about a week of this, I had a serious chat with him, pointing out that we were in danger of filming 'Hamlet without the prince'. He took the point and became much more co-operative. But his remoteness always remained part of his star quality. Doug said he couldn't help noticing that while a large proportion of British climbers came from the north, the films were almost invariably made by people from the south. It was true enough.

The first bone of contention between the climbers and their chroniclers involved *The Sunday Times* reporter, Keith Richardson. I found him a rather unbending figure, who found it hard to participate in the general banter which is the common coinage of all mountaineering expeditions. But the heart of the problem was Richardson's dogmatic refusal to show his reports to anyone, even Chris Bonington, before they were despatched. 'If I interview the Prime Minister, I don't show him what I've written before publication,' he said. 'What is the difference out here?' The difference, I think, has to do with the altitude and isolation of major Himalayan peaks. If you're not first and foremost a band of brothers, everything can fall apart. Richardson's first report, sent back from Kathmandu, caused a flurry of letters from home, which had a very unsettling effect on the expedition.

As it happened, Richardson was obliged to go down to Namche Bazar with acute altitude sickness, never to return, and the job of reporting for *The Sunday Times* was passed to me. In the mess tent, I made a point of telling everyone that a despatch was going off next morning in case anyone wanted to read it. A couple of climbers read the first one, and after that nobody bothered. Access was all they wanted. There was just one occasion when Chris Bonington was worried about what I might write. Hamish MacInnes, the deputy leader, disappointed that he had not been given a major part to play in the final assault, decided to leave the expedition. It was a serious enough matter to cause repercussions back in the UK. I told Chris that I must tell it as I saw it, and he never pressed the point.

Chris Bonington has a reputation for strong, decisive leadership. But his emotions are never far below the surface. Ned Kelly and I wanted to get his spontaneous and highly personal thoughts on a daily basis, so we equipped him with a high-quality miniature tape recorder to use as a spoken diary in the privacy of his tent. In due course this would form part of the voice-over for the film. However, it was always understood between us that Chris himself would have a say in what was used. It was not the kind of arrangement one makes very often, but on that occasion I think it was more than justified. Chris felt no inhibitions about using the recorder, and when one recalls that there were two heart-breaking disappearances in the course of the expedition – the Sherpa boy Mingma Nuru in the early stages and Mick Burke at the end – there was very little that he asked us to exclude. I shall never forget his prophetic forebodings about Mick on the night before he made his summit bid.

The last picture of Mick, taken by Pete Boardman, shows him clutching his auto-load camera and wearing his Union Jack woolly hat. At that moment he was probably only 20 minutes from the summit, and no power on earth would have made him turn back. We will never know for certain, but the probability is that he did indeed make the first solo ascent of Everest, and shot some historic film that was never recovered. By the time he began his descent, the weather had deteriorated drastically. Unable to see through the driving spindrift, it would have been all too easy to miss the route round a gaping hole in the cornice, which is clearly visible in Doug Scott's picture taken a couple of days earlier. Significantly, Mick had given up wearing his contact lenses a week before and reverted to spectacles.

Undoubtedly the most moving moments in the 1975 film came when Pete Boardman and Martin Boysen gave their account of Mick Burke's last hours before he disappeared somewhere on the summit ridge of Everest. They were scarcely back in Camp 2 themselves and still in a state of shock. I was inclined to hold back, but my colleague Ned Kelly, who has an instinctive empathy with climbers, seemed to know that they were ready to unburden themselves.

Here are some of their words:

BOARDMAN

Anything that anybody says when they're 6000 feet lower down – it's apart from you, and there's nothing really from down there that could stop you if you really wanted to go for the top.

BOYSEN

I struggled and struggled, and I just wasn't working at all well, and eventually I noticed a crampon had dropped off – and then I noticed my other foot was also without a crampon. So I'd lost two crampons on this rock step. One I picked up, but the other one I saw gently rolling down the slope. And I thought Oh God – that's it ... I might as well turn back. And Mick saw this and said 'Hard luck old son ... cheerio.' I wished him good luck with as good a grace as I could manage.



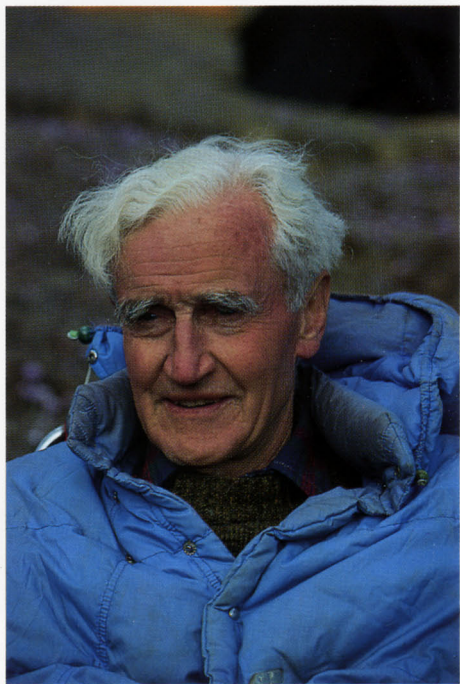
63. John Hunt (*Chris Ralling*) (p121)



64. Edmund Hillary (*Chris Ralling*) (p121)



65. George Lowe (*Chris Ralling*) (p121)



66. Charles Wylie (*Chris Ralling*) (p121)

BOARDMAN

We plodded up to the summit. I sat down about ten feet below it and I waved up Pertemba. We both felt very pleased and happy up there, and after about half an hour we started back down again, very confident that we were going to have a nice leisurely, safe descent. And all of a sudden we saw Mick. I thought it was Martin at first. I hadn't expected Mick to be going so strongly and keenly. He wanted us to go back to the summit to film, but we were moving roped, taking a bit more time, and we also wanted to conserve our energy for the way down. We said, 'Well no'. He filmed us a bit and we said 'D'you want to come with us?' but he said 'I'm so near now. I'll just go up towards the summit.' In fact he said 'Will you wait for me at the South Summit?' So we said 'Sure, we'll wait for you down there.'

BOYSEN

It was a howling gale. The snow was really rattling down, the tents were rattling, and I began to get extremely worried at that point because I was thinking well, if they don't actually get back, or if they miss the fixed ropes due to the whiteout conditions, or anything else ... if they have to stay a night out in that weather, then I thought it's going to be extremely serious. They could very easily die ... the probability is that they would die.

BOARDMAN

We could see about five feet at this time. The snow was icing up our eyes, and we just felt we had to go. We just couldn't wait any longer because, the weather being as it was, we could never have survived a night out ... there.

Mick, more than anyone, would have appreciated their candour.

Everest: the unclimbed ridge

My own involvement with the 1982 expedition, seven years later, began when it was all over. Pete Boardman and Joe Tasker had vanished on the North East Ridge, while tackling the formidable Pinnacles. The circumstances were just as mysterious as Mick Burke's disappearance, and the effect on the survivors equally shattering.

The expedition was a small one. Chris Bonington and Dick Renshaw were the other two high-altitude climbers, with Adrian Gordon as Base Camp manager and Charlie Clarke as the doctor. Instead of taking a professional film crew, Joe Tasker had volunteered to undergo a few day's training at ITN in the use of lightweight camera equipment.

It was Charlie who phoned me up on their return, asking me to take a look at the footage they had managed to retrieve from the mountain. He was afraid it might all be useless; and at our first viewing I was of the same opinion. Most of it, especially the high-altitude material, was so over exposed that you could scarcely make out the climbers in the bleached whiteness of their surroundings. The only hope was to send the negative

to a specialist laboratory, and have the whole lot reprinted. The result was a revelation. Not only was the film perfectly transmittable, but Joe Tasker had shown himself to be a cameraman of real talent and insight. The resulting film, though much simpler in construction than *Everest the Hard Way*, was just as moving and in some ways more powerful and immediate. Of course there were no on-the-spot interviews. Instead, we all met one evening in Charlie's basement kitchen, where the survivors recalled their experiences. In spite of a gap of several weeks, they lost little in the telling.

BONINGTON

I know I was afraid quite a lot of the time, and I didn't admit it. And in the same way, when Pete and Joe actually went for the summit, I'll always remember during the whole lead-up period, they were almost conning themselves that it was going to be a pushover going over the Pinnacles. And I, because I'd actually pulled out, was then of course saying to myself well ... God they look desperately difficult! And I didn't dare say it to them because I didn't want to discourage them. And I'll never forget the night before they actually set out for that final push, they were quite incredibly tense ...

Return to Everest

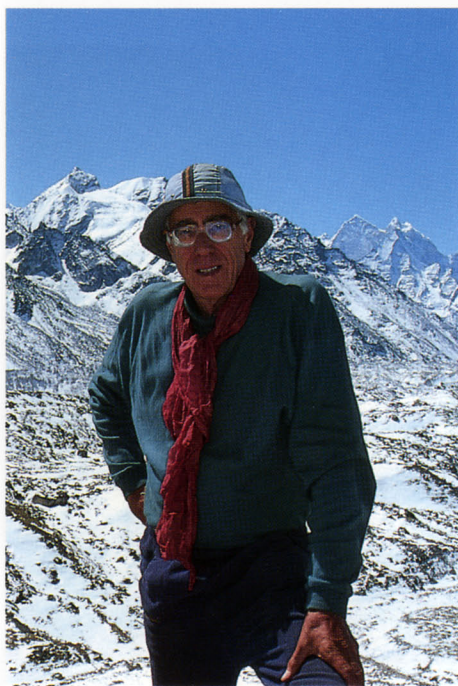
And so to 1993, and the 40th anniversary of the first ascent. Six of the original team, including John Hunt and Ed Hillary, were planning to hold a reunion in the Everest region, accompanied by families and friends. The others from the original expedition who were going back were George Band, George Lowe, Mike Westmacott and Charles Wylie. It looked like a marvellous opportunity for any documentary film maker. The competition was quite fierce. Our own opening bid was a proposal to tell the whole story of Everest in four episodes. But this appeared to get lost in someone's pending tray at the BBC.

I ended up with a commission to make a single programme for Channel Four. The programme editors were quite clear that they wanted a simple film, re-telling the story of the original climb through the reminiscences of the returning veterans. The use of archive film on television is very expensive, and I knew that my budget would run to no more than twelve minutes from *The Conquest of Everest*, which originally ran for an hour and a half. But with a bit of luck and good weather, it looked like a highly feasible proposition.

The first task was to pick the right team. As all Himalayan climbers know, altitude sickness is not just a matter of fitness. It can strike one person and not another in the most arbitrary manner. To replace anyone on a Himalayan expedition is a very expensive business. The best insurance is to choose people who have worked at altitude before, and in this respect we were lucky. The cameraman John Davey, the sound recordist Phil Streather, and the location manager Bruce Herrod had all been high in the Sola Khumbu before. The exceptions were my daughter Jo, the Associate Producer, and Charlotte Moore who joined as our Production Manager.



67. 'The Magnificent Six' From L: Charles Wylie, Edmund Hillary, John Hunt, George Lowe, George Band, Michael Westmacott. 3 April 1993. (Susan Band) (p89)



68. Chris Ralling, director of the film *Return to Everest*. (p121)



69. John Davey, cameraman. (Chris Ralling) (p121)

In London, Charlotte looked at me plaintively as she said 'I'm tougher than I look.' She was. After a few days, both of them were scampering about like mountain goats. Back in London, the redoubtable Joanie Blaikie acted as our belay. In other respects, I think one looks for the same qualities that all good expedition members need: endurance, temperament, and a sense of humour. John Davey needed all three. Unknown to any of us, he broke his arm early in the shoot, but kept on working until the end.

I would be the first to admit that film crews can be an obtrusive nuisance, and sometimes ruthless in pursuit of a story. Even before we left England, I sensed that some members of the anniversary party were more than a little apprehensive that too much media attention might spoil the whole occasion. My main worry was that several teams would all be closing in at the same time. Chris Bonington would be in the offing for Yorkshire TV, a New Zealand crew were making a profile of Hillary, and the Germans were coming in strength. We knew, too, that we would only have a few days before the group set off in different directions, giving us an insuperable problem in deciding whom to follow. Of the original team only George Lowe was planning to retrace the route up to Base Camp itself. After long deliberations, we decided to go with him, even though it meant losing contact with the other five. In retrospect I think it was the right decision.

We managed to get a splendid scene as John Hunt and Ed Hillary arrived by helicopter for a ceremonial welcome at Thyangboche monastery, and another when Hillary dropped out of the sky once again to be greeted by the pupils of Khumjung school, the first to be built with money from the Himalayan Trust. In the short time we spent with them, George Band, Mike Westmacott and Charles Wylie all revealed those honest, friendly, down-to-earth qualities which seem to have been a hallmark of the 1953 expedition. Meanwhile, in his tent one night, John Hunt had given us a most vivid and revealing interview. (If there is a nicer mountaineer in captivity, I have yet to meet him.) As for George Lowe, he revealed himself to be a sharp and witty raconteur who should really be hosting his own TV show. Here he is in an extract from the film, doing a double act with Ed Hillary. They are describing the day the Himalayan Trust was born:

LOWE

We came back with a storm chasing us, and we literally ran up the last couple of thousand feet. It was incredible that we did it, but we got to the top. We were all very tired and then we had that long descent, didn't we ... ?

HILLARY

I remember we came down on a very long rope, because we really just couldn't see anything, and there were masses of crevasses; and I was on one end of the rope up front, and George was on the other end at the back, and I was constantly falling down crevasses, and George, who I must admit had very quick reactions, would jerk on the rope and stop me from going down more than five or six feet ...

LOWE

... and I had three Sherpas anchoring behind me. The idea was that we strung ourselves out in that emergency situation, and this was really the first time those Sherpas had been involved in really hard mountaineering.

HILLARY

There were avalanches tumbling down all around us from the fresh snow and we were absolutely exhausted, but we got to the bottom of the glacier onto the clear ice where it was safe, and we sat down.

LOWE

We had a tent there ...

HILLARY

That's right, and the Sherpas insisted on George and me just sitting down; they almost made us sit down while they prepared the whole camp, and then they more or less put us inside our sleeping-bags, while they got the primus going and brewed up some tea for us. And we just lay there in comfort. We had a very warm feeling about our three Sherpas that day who, even though they were just as tired as we were, insisted on us resting while they looked after us.

LOWE

And we had this big-hearted moment, which was really true. We said we really should try to give something back to these chaps.¹

Back in London, to catch the date of the 40th anniversary, we had just over three weeks in the cutting room, instead of the more usual eight, to complete the film for transmission. Most directors take the view that it is asking for trouble to show a rough-cut to one of the protagonists, but there are exceptions to the best of rules. For John Hunt and his team, the original expedition had become, willy nilly, the most important event of their lives. The style, flavour and balance of a documentary are often determined during the editing process. It's all too easy to get these things wrong in the closing stages.

John and Joy Hunt with their daughter Prue, who had all been with us out in Nepal, came in to the cutting room to see the rough-cut in the middle of May. Their response was very positive, but they thought there was one jarring note. This was a remark of Charles Wylie's early in the film. 'There was one Sherpa,' he said, 'who I think was politically inspired. Unfortunately there were Communist influences in Darjeeling. He was a Darjeeling Sherpa and we had reason to believe that the Communists tried to get him to disrupt the expedition. He had to be dismissed, I'm afraid, and after that there was absolutely no trouble at all.'

I thought long and hard about this, but finally decided to leave the sequence in. For one thing, it was news. I had never read about it in any of the books. Also, it was interesting, to say the least, that not even that

most famous of Everest expeditions had escaped the tentacles of the Cold War. The second reason, a more personal one, was my firm conviction that every good documentary needs one or two jarring notes. Otherwise they run the risk of looking bland, safe and predictable. Needless to say, John took the point.

So much for *Return to Everest*; it was not the most daunting, but perhaps the most satisfying of the three films about Everest I have had a hand in. It was just the latest in that long line of documentaries which began in 1922. But how many of them 'got it right'? By Doug Scott's stringent standards, the answer must be none at all. You cannot capture the essence of one climber's individual experiences, even if he, or she, really wishes to share them. I suppose I have seen a good many of the fifty or so Everest films, and looking back it is easy to see where most of them went wrong. The two ingredients which 'date' most quickly are music and commentary. It may have seemed a good idea at the time to get the poet Louis MacNeice to write the words for *The Conquest of Everest*. But it was not. It may have seemed a good idea to get Orson Welles to read the commentary for *Americans on Everest* in 1963. But it was not. It may have seemed a good idea for the Chinese to turn their film of the 1960 expedition into a hymn of praise to Mao Tse-Tung. But it was not.

I don't have the slightest doubt that my own three efforts will look just as dated in the years ahead. If I had to give advice, banal and obvious though it may sound, to future documentary makers on Everest, it would be, quite simply, to let the sound and the pictures do the work for you, and as far as possible let the climbers tell the story in their own words. Then, at the very least, the film will be true to itself and to its own time.

NOTE

1 George Lowe writes:

We were on the Nup La in 1952. We crossed back from the West Rongbuk glacier chased by a storm. The three Sherpas were Ang Puta and Tashi Puta and Angye – all from Khumbu. Tashi Puta was the younger brother of Angtharkay, the famous sirdar who travelled with Eric Shipton. Within two years of the journey Ang Puta and Tashi Puta (both in their twenties) had died of illness. No one could tell us the reason – other than pointing to their abdomen, grimacing with pain and saying 'they died quick'. Angye I always searched out in Namche on my visits – saw him in '91 – but he died in 1992. I guessed his age as similar to mine!