
FILM → **THE RIDDLE OF THE RANGE** *Who was the first to conquer Everest? A sparkling new documentary unravels fresh clues in the 86-year-old mystery*

NOW, OF COURSE, IT'S KNOWN as the Death Zone. Above 8,000 metres the body enters a state of "necrosis". Vital organs begin to fold, "mental faculties are compromised". Oxygen levels can't sustain human life, so climbers are effectively dying. They fight the powerfully seductive urge to lie down and sleep in the perilous cold – if they could just shut their eyes for even ten seconds, surely their energy would return? Those

that do now litter the pathway. Some drop dead from heart failure. And there's still 846 metres to the summit.

This makes the footage of George Mallory and his team in *The Wildest Dream* all the more extraordinary. Perhaps they aren't quite so brave, just fantastically underinformed. Nine windswept men stand shoulder-to-shoulder at the base camp, joshing with gay abandon, their snow-capped antagonist behind them. It's 1924 and they're preparing for their leader's third assault on the roof of the world, dressed only in gaberdine and hobnail boots. They look like a cricket club on a fell-walking holiday. Two of them are carrying items of kit they clearly consider as vital a part of their self-shouldered luggage as food and water. They're smoking generous bowlfuls of pipe tobacco.

In the modern world of nylon storm-sheets, lightweight rope and oxygen, their efforts look all the more like an extension of that noble but naive imperialist spirit you find in Trevor Howard movies. There are even echoes of the doomed cavalry campaigns of the Crimean War, the indomitable British bulldog spirit stepping cheerfully into the maw of an undefeatable enemy. In fact Mallory once announced that, after Scott's failed 1912 expedition to the Antarctic, the Empire needed another triumph to put it back on the map. So off they go, powered it seems by little more than hot soup and self-belief, and maybe the odd square of Kendal Mint Cake. Reports are quite matter of fact when one team member starts "coughing up part of his frost-bitten larynx". Why climb the mountain in the first place, the American press had asked him? "Because it's there," was his famous reply.

Two of these men never return. Mallory and partner Andrew Irvine set out for the summit on 8 June and are last seen through a break in the clouds, two tiny figures trudging toward their



Retracing Mallory's route in '20s climbing gear, gaberdine and hobnails.

final obstacle, the Second Step, a then-unknown, almost vertical cliff before the final push to the peak. (A Chinese expedition roped an aluminium ladder over this rock face in '75, used by every expedition since.) In 1999 Mallory's freeze-dried body was located with indications that he must have slipped, broken his rope to Irvine and acquired a compound fracture in his right leg and a wound the size of a golf ball in his forehead.

But did he make it to the top? This was the nagging suspicion haunting Hillary and Tenzing as they planted their flag 29 years later: were they actually the mountain's first victors? Two key discoveries now suggest they might not have been. Alongside the perfectly preserved wallet and documents in Mallory's pockets were his snowgoggles, indicating he must have been descending in twilight and not still climbing in the blinding sunshine. But descending from what, the summit or a failed attempt to

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Mallory (second left, top) about to vanish into thin air, June 1924. In the newsreel, two team members are cheerfully smoking pipes.

conquer the Second Step? Mallory carried a photograph of his wife to leave at the peak, now missing from his personal belongings. Why would he have removed it from his wallet if not to celebrate his victory?

The Wildest Dream investigates

the only other variable in this jigsaw of clues, sonorously voiced by Liam Neeson, Ralph Fiennes, Natasha Richardson and Alan Rickman. The grainy black-and-white newsreel of Mallory's approach to the foothills with 70 porters and pack animals is intercut with spectacular new footage of two mountaineers

retracing his North Col route to gauge the difficulty of climbing the Second Step without using the ladder, oxygen or maps. They are badly shaken by the dead bodies all around them, a problem Mallory initiated but didn't encounter. One of them slips and takes 15 minutes to



First steps in *The Wildest Dream*: Mallory considered Everest an enemy, not a destination.

recover his strength and composure. It's mighty tough, they concede, but it's possible – partly because Mallory and Irvine had the expectations of the nation at their backs, an inconceivable incentive as virtually every endeavour these days is for personal gain (news of their deaths brought pealing bells across Britain and a memorial service in St Paul's, so you can picture the celebrations if they'd succeeded). They also viewed Everest as an adversary, not just

a destination. On first sighting "the prodigious white fang", Mallory declares he has "never seen a more determined and bitter enemy" – gaily adding that, whatever the outcome, they'd "have a great whack to the end!".

Indeed they do, in their touchingly buoyant, stiff-upper-lip sort of way. This film tells that story in the most affecting way imaginable. **MARK ELLEN**

THE WILDEST DREAM will be in cinemas in August