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Edited by Andrew Collins



Top of the world

Love and loss echoed down a century when film-maker Anthony Geffen decided to follow in the tragic footsteps of Everest climber George Mallory

BEFORE EMBARKING ON THE Everest attempt that would cost him his life in 1924, the great mountaineer George Mallory gave this famous and immortal reply to the American journalist who asked him why he wanted to do such a thing: "Because it's there." Almost a century later, the British film-maker Anthony Geffen could have used the same quote to describe his reasons for going to the place where Mallory perished. But the "it" in this case was not so much the mountain as the climber's corpse, whose tantalising presence on the north-east ridge had come to light in 1999.

There it was, locked face down into the ground, the hands clawing as if to prevent his heroic, exhausted body falling any further. His back, white as alabaster, had been laid bare by the elements, but you could still see the ragged remains of layer upon layer of fine knitwear, the standard insulation of the day. One leg was crossed over the other, trying to ease the pain of a fracture. There was a snapped climbing rope around his middle, and his waist bore signs of a jerk-injury.

There was no doubt it was him. His name was on the tag of a jersey and the wallet contained his documents. One of these had the heading of WF Paine of 72 High Street, Godalming, where he had bought clothing. But a crucial item was missing from his person; the photo of his beloved wife Ruth, which he had promised he would place at the summit when he and his young climbing companion Andrew "Sandy" Irvine reached it.

The missing photograph is a poignant footnote to Mallory's story. But Geffen's film carries its own tragic twist. Liam Neeson, who had worked with Geffen before, shared his obsession with Mallory, and took the role of narrator in *The Wildest Dream*. It was he who suggested his wife, Natasha Richardson, play the role of Mallory's wife, Ruth. But the production was dogged by off-screen drama, with the camera crew knocked out by altitude sickness or family crisis and the whole project escaping the monsoon by a whisker, which all culminated with the shattering news that Natasha Richardson had died after a skiing accident at the age of 45, a matter of weeks after recording her final speech as Mallory's wife.

Geffen recalls the moment he found Richardson sobbing in the recording booth and asking her what was wrong. She had been reading the words of the telegram informing Ruth of her husband's death. "She was saying she just couldn't imagine what she would do if this [the telegram] were about Liam, or - vice-versa - him reading news of her death."

Movingly, it was the domestic element of Mallory's narrative that had hooked Geffen's interest quite as much as the mountain adventure. Indeed, it was only when he learnt about the presence, or rather absence, of Ruth's photo, that the shape of the film began to form in his mind. "Here was this man, absolutely obsessed with the conquest of the highest mountain in the world. It became

Don't miss...

Tom Hanks and Julia Roberts star in the true-story comedy drama *Charlie Wilson's War*, Saturday ITV1

almost like a person to him. And at that time, in an age of conquest, heroism and self-sacrifice, it was a little like the Third Pole – the next great challenge. But he was also deeply in love with his wife, and devoted to their young children. So there was this pull. Whichever of the two worlds he was in, he couldn't stop himself thinking of the other one."

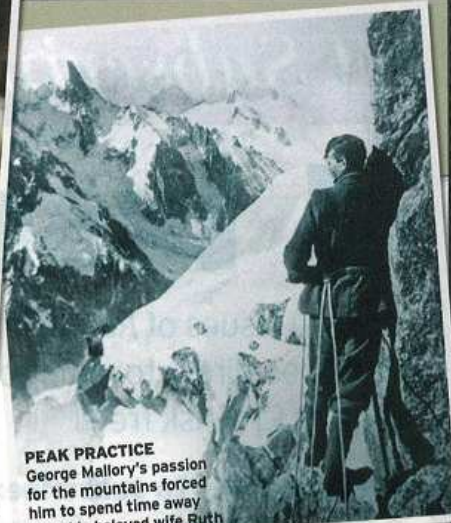
Irvine's body has still not been found, and the question of whether the two men reached the 29,028ft summit before apparently falling to their deaths remains unanswered. It was not Geffen's intention to reach a conclusion, but rather to judge whether it would have been feasible for mountaineers back then, with their more limited technology and knowledge of the mountain, to have conquered the notorious Second Step, a 90ft wall of sheer rock high in the so-called death zone – the region above 26,000ft, where the meagre level of oxygen in the air can't sustain human life.

This entailed setting up what Geffen calls the highest costume drama in history, with the two skilled climbers of today not only following Mallory and Irvine's route but also wearing hobnail boots and gaberdine jackets – and having to make do without the metal ladder up the Second Step that had been erected by Chinese climbers in 1975.

Like Mallory, Conrad Anker, the climber who

"Natasha couldn't imagine what she would do if the telegram were about Liam – or vice-versa"

stands in for Mallory and makes the ascent in *The Wildest Dream*, has three children. And, like Mallory, he has found himself similarly torn between hill and home throughout a distinguished mountaineering career. *Outside* magazine once called him the world's greatest adventurer. It was he who found Mallory's body in 1999 and then co-wrote a book, *The Lost Explorer*, about that discovery. Geffen read it in 2004 while stranded at the airport in Washington DC, and immediately decided that he wanted Anker to return to the mountain and bring Mallory's story to life for a modern audience. He



PEAK PRACTICE
George Mallory's passion for the mountains forced him to spend time away from his beloved wife Ruth

didn't hang about. Before the plane left Washington for London, he had obtained the climber's number from a contact, and got in touch.

THE REST WAS ABOUT AS straightforward as Everest; that is, not at all. With an awful echo of Ruth's bereavement, Anker's wife Jennifer had lost her first husband, Alex Lowe, to the Himalayas in 1999, when he was killed by an avalanche. With him, but unharmed, was his climbing partner and best friend – Conrad Anker. He and Jennifer consoled one another, then fell in love and married; her and Alex's three sons became his step-children. As Geffen's film demonstrates, her response to the climber/husband's mission is as conflicted as was Ruth Mallory's, never mind the 90 years of accumulated knowledge about the threat of Everest. As Geffen says, the stark fact remains that one in six fails to come down.

Anker, now in his mid-40s, and his "Irvine", the young British rock-climbing prodigy Leo Houlding, run into fearsome trouble. At one chilling moment the camera catches the older man as he appears to lose his footing and start to fall down the mountain. As Geffen says, with Everest, everything is always going to be harder and potentially more dangerous because of the sheer height of the thing. This is what helps it retain its mystery and its hold over the public imagination even now, after some three thousand "conquests".

Geffen himself had to get up to 26,000ft, which is a terrific feat for someone who describes himself as a non-climber. He also had to persuade two complete strangers, young New Zealand mountain guides called Woody and Dean, to take a crash course in filming, high up on the mountain, so that they could stand in for the indisposed crew. "At first they didn't know which end of the camera to look through."

He says that when he got back home, it took him about six months to recover. "If I listen now to the messages I left when I was out there, I can't recognise myself at all. I've filmed around the world, in urban troublespots and remote jungles, and I know what it feels like to push yourself close to your limits. But this really was at the edge, because on Everest there's nowhere to hide."

What of his own wife, who became the mother of twins after he started planning the film? "My other half was very anxious," he admits, with the air of a man who is glad his own Everest mission is now history. *Alan Franks*



TWIST OF FATE

As production finished, real-life couple Natasha Richardson and Liam Neeson suffered a tragedy that recalled Mallory's own tale

The Wildest Dream is released in cinemas on 24 September – read more about it in the 2011 edition of the *Radio Times Guide to Films*, see page 47