



THE WILDEST DREAM: CONQUEST OF EVEREST

Spring
Season
2011

Review by Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times:

The most famous comment about the reason for climbing Mt. Everest was made by a man who never made it to the top. Or did he?

That would be British mountaineer George Mallory, who replied, "Because it's there," when asked why he wanted to conquer the highest peak in the world. Mallory looked on his quest as "the wildest dream," and an absorbing new documentary called *The Wildest Dream: Conquest of Everest* deals with the climber's fate and his legacy in an unexpected combination of ways.

Mallory, last seen 800 feet from the summit, ended up disappearing and then dying on Everest in early June 1924. His body was not found until May 1999, when top American climber Conrad Anker found it frozen into the mountainside.

Though letters were found on Mallory's body, missing was the photograph of his wife, Ruth, that he always carried with him, a photograph the climber had promised he would leave on Everest's summit if he got there.



Mountaineers argue to this day whether Mallory made it to the top or not, and that question personally haunted Anker after he discovered Mallory's body (an event that is re-created in the film). In collaboration with director Anthony Geffen, Anker put together an expedition that would retrace Mallory's steps with an eye toward seeing whether that question could be answered.

Solidly directed by Geffen, a TV documentary veteran making his theatrical debut, *The Wildest Dream* goes back and forth between its two narratives, between the historical drama of Mallory's achievement and the present day challenges of Anker's quest.

To tell both of these stories, *Dream* adroitly mixes a variety of material, including contemporary interviews (Mallory's granddaughter is one subject), fascinating vintage newsreels, beautiful and exciting color footage shot on Everest and discreet re-creations of historical events that are overly earnest at times but never get in the way. Both narrator Liam Neeson and reading voices Natasha Richardson, Hugh Dancy and Alan Rickman do exceptionally strong work as well.

Though Anker's personal story turns out to be of considerable interest, it is Mallory's that is the most compelling and stays with us longest. A man who thrived on adventure, risk and pushing limits, Mallory lived a life that was more dramatic than most fiction.

Rich Kline, Shadows on the Wall:

This hybrid movie combines scenic cinematography, documentary and two very different dramatic recreations of a historical event to tell a fascinating story. The film's structure is more suited to TV, but the images make it worth seeing on the big screen.

In 1924 George Mallory and his climbing partner Andrew Irvine died while attempting to climb Mt Everest, something no one would do for another 30 years. The mystery about whether they reached the summit actually deepened 75 years later, when climber Conrad Anker discovered Mallory's body on the mountainside, complete with a clue hinting that he and Irvine were on his way down from the top. So Anker finds his own inexperienced sidekick in young Brit Leo Houlding and sets out to retrace their steps to see if they could have made it up the notorious Second Step.

Within this narrative, Anker and Houlding also recreate the conditions by wearing period-style clothing. This is then crosscut with actual footage and stills from the original expedition, while on the soundtrack we hear the text of letters written back and forth between Mallory and his wife (voiced by Fiennes and Richardson), Irvine (Dancy) and their friend Noel Odell (Rickman).

All of this pieces together the remarkable story of these intrepid men and the conflict they had between their families and their love of climbing. And this is also echoed in the modern-day footage of Anker and his wife (who lost her first husband in a climbing accident) and Houlding and his girlfriend. It's a simple but beautifully assembled film, full of reflective moments and visually powerful moments.

And it also catches the spirit of Mallory, the man who first said, "Because it's there," in reply to a journalist asking why he was climbing Everest. The filmmakers piece together details of the parallel expeditions 83 years apart, following the same route step-by-step. It's thoroughly captivating...it's a terrific examination of obsession and dedication, the importance of family and the enduring legacy of a true pioneer.

