

## **Beeman, Birdman, Hunter, Spy: the heroic age of the wildlife filmmaker**

Thursday 15 April, 11am

Presented by Bryony Dixon

A particular breed of explorer from the earliest days of films was the wildlife cameraman. These intrepid pioneers risked life and limb, travelling to the remotest parts of the planet to bring us unprecedented access to the natural world and inevitably having a few adventures along the way. They were men of great resource, inventing and developing their own equipment, braving the dangers of not only the physical and animal worlds but, more dangerously, the world of men. This selection will show the work of J. C. Bee-Mason, Oliver Pike, Joe Corbett, and the legendary Colonel F.M. Bailey.

### **Films**

#### **Oliver Pike (Birdman)**

*Hotes de l'Air* (1910) 7 mins

*St Kilda, Its People and Birds* (1908) 271ft 5 mins

*Wild Birds in their Haunts* (1912) 7 mins

#### **James Bee-Mason (Beeman)**

*The Bee's Eviction* (1909) 2mins

*Life of the Honey Bee* (1911) 490ft 8mins

*Through Green Hell, Across Bolivia* (1927) extract  
15 mins

#### **Jim Corbett (Hunter)**

*Honey Harvest In India*: Jim Corbett home movies  
(1933) (silent)

#### **Col Frederick Bailey (Spy)**

*Kashmir, Rangoon, Inle Lakes* 1928-29 203608a  
685ft (8 Mins)

### **Biographies**



*Mecanopsis betoncifolia baileyi*

#### **Colonel F.M. Bailey**

"Frederick Bailey was a British explorer and secret agent, considered by many to be the last true player in the Great Game. In 1904, as a Tibetan-speaking subaltern, he had ridden into the forbidden city of Lhasa as a member of a team to investigate reports of a Russian presence there. Later, his travels in Tibet and China earned him the highly prized gold explorer's medal of the Royal Geographical Society. Between 1905 and 1909 he served as a British Trade Agent - really a cover for political intelligence work - at Gyantse in southern Tibet. Later he accompanied a British punitive expedition into northern Assam as its intelligence officer, and was awarded the coveted MacGregor Medal for explorations contributing to the defence of India. During the First World War he was posted as an intelligence officer to Shushtar in Persia, and in 1918 returned to India to undertake the secret

mission into Central Asia which is the subject of this book.” Amazon review of F.M. Bailey and Peter Hopkirk’s book *Mission to Tashkent*

This endlessly fascinating character was like something out of a John Buchan novel – a British explorer, naturalist, linguist and secret agent. During his time collecting intelligence round Tashkent he was even employed at one time by the Bolsheviks to spy on himself. In between missions, this ace-of-spies also collected butterflies and plants having several Himalayan species named after him including the famous blue Himalayan poppy. Later in life he and his wife travelled and filmed these home movies full of the wildlife he loved and which he donated to the BFI National Archive

### Jim Corbett

“Edward James ‘Jim’ Corbett (25 July 1875 in [Nainital](#), India – 19 April 1955 in [Nyeri](#), [Kenya](#)) was a [British hunter](#), [conservationist](#) and naturalist, famous for slaying a large number of man-eating tigers and [leopards](#) in India.

Corbett held the rank of [colonel](#) in the British Indian Army and worked for the [Bengal and North Western Railway](#). However, Corbett was frequently called upon by the government of the [United Provinces](#), now the Indian states of [Uttar Pradesh](#) and [Uttarakhand](#), to slay man-eating tigers and leopards who had killed people in the villages of the [Garhwal](#) and [Kumaon](#) region. Corbett succeeded in many cases where others had failed. Between 1907 and 1938, Corbett shot much-feared man-eaters such as the [Champawat Tiger](#), the Leopard of Rudraprayag, the Tigers of Chowgarh and the Panar Leopard, who had cumulatively killed over a thousand people. His success in slaying the man-eaters earned him much respect and fame amongst the people residing in the villages of Kumaon, many of whom considered him a [sadhu](#) (saint).” From Wikipedia.

Despite the apparent contradiction of being a hunter and a conservationist, Corbett was committed to only killing animals that were a direct threat to local

villages. He was instrumental in establishing one of the first great wildlife reserves, in the outer Himalayas near where he was born. The park is named in his honour and is now home to big cats and many other native species. Corbett made a series of home movies in India which were donated to the BFI National Archive.

### J C Bee-Mason



John Charles Mason, filmmaker, explorer and naturalist, was noted for his early films about bee-keeping. Such was his association with apiarism that at some point in his life he changed his surname to Bee-Mason. After some early success with his beekeeping films, he appears to have become a war photographer during the 1914-18 conflict, travelling in France, Belgium and Russia. He was part of the team recruited through the Scout movement on Shackleton's final voyage to the Antarctic on the Quest in 1921/2, which was curtailed by the sudden death of its leader.

Bee-Mason was a member of several scientific expeditions as a cinematographer including the Algarsson-Worsley British Arctic Expedition and produced the film *Under Sail in the Frozen North*. In 1927 he joined Bolivian diplomat Mamerto Urriolagoitia and Julian Duguid, author of the expedition book *Green Hell*, in an expedition across the lowland jungles of Bolivia for which he shot a great deal of footage for a film for commercial release. The film was never released,

perhaps due to the additional issues surrounding the introduction of sound in 1930. In his book of their travels, Duguid gives an affectionate though sardonic reading of Bee Mason's concern for the success of the film after they have been warned against the folly of setting out into the hostile jungle of Bolivia:

"It is one thing to yield to the lust for adventure, and quite another to hear a tough young man who knows the country rejoice at his absence from the game; so I returned to Bee-Mason and drew the picture with coloured words. He sprang up his face aflame with emotion, and just as I was congratulating myself on having passed the old explorer's guard, he burst into speech. 'If only those Indians would kill you or Urrio,' he cried, 'my film would be worth something.' There are difficulties sometimes in working with a monomaniac."

<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/1266258/index.html>

#### Oliver Pike



Oliver Pike was a pioneer of natural history photography and cinematography from the late 1890s, photographing wildlife in its natural surroundings. His claim to significance lies in the groundbreaking techniques he developed to capture animals in their natural habitats and in the fact that he passed this knowledge on. He published 25 books on the subject as well as making over 50 films and giving many lectures.

When still young, he developed his own stills camera, the 'Birdland', so good that it was bought by a London manufacturer. He later designed a cine-camera for wildlife photography that was camouflaged so as not to scare away the animals. He had a profound knowledge of photographic

technique, as demonstrated by his handbooks on photography and cinematography, and by his surviving films, which contain use of focal planes unprecedented in their time.

According to his own account, once he had made his own first film, *In Birdland* (1907), he offered it to the Palace Theatre of Varieties in London's Cambridge Circus, at that time one of the largest theatres doing regular Cinematograph shows, and the film was such a draw that it played for six weeks. He made the ground-breaking film *St Kilda, It's People and Birds* (1908) around the same time for James Williamson. Pathé then offered him a contract.

*In Birdland* marked Pike's break into filmmaking, a career in which he would distinguish himself for 30 years. In 1921 he went to work for 'old friend' Bruce Woolfe at British Instructional on the celebrated *Secrets of Nature* series (1922-33), and later for the similar *Secrets of Life* (1930-50). His last film was released in 1947, when he was 70.

He was a fellow of the Royal Photographic Society, and 300 prints, negatives and lantern-slides of his work, held by the RPS, are archived in the National Media Museum in Bradford. Pike also personally donated several of his films to the BFI National Archive.

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