

The Eagle: a Roman centurion travels beyond “the end of the world”

By David Walsh
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Directed by Kevin Macdonald, screenplay by Jeremy Brock, based on the novel by Rosemary Sutcliff

Human beings are insatiably curious. All things being equal, they're eager to know about other places, times and people—and not simply the official version either. Who wouldn't like to know what people were like a thousand or two thousand years ago, how they acted and thought, what they felt deeply about, how they both resembled and differed from us?

With its visual and dramatic capabilities, film offers the possibility of bringing the dead back to life, or at least some semblance of them. Spectators tend to be willing to suspend disbelief if a movie is engaging and intriguing (and, somewhere behind that, truthful) enough.

Some historical moments are more appealing than others, one of them being the Roman occupation of Britain (which lasted, more or less, from 40 to 400 AD). Ancient Rome retains its fascination, and the notion of this seemingly sober, stoical, well-disciplined society attempting to subdue the primitive Britons (who much later turned into a seemingly sober, stoical, well-disciplined people themselves) holds a special interest.

We know or we think we know something about the modern Italians and British, and, in terms of “national characteristics,” for whatever that classification is worth, they seem very unlike one another as peoples. So the notion of the Romans having conquered and inhabited Britain for hundreds of years seems odd and improbable, and that is a good starting point for attracting an audience.

Kevin Macdonald (*State of Play, The Last King of Scotland*) has directed *The Eagle*, from Jeremy Brock's screenplay based on the 1954 novel by Rosemary Sutcliff. The story is this: in 140 AD or so, a young Roman centurion, Marcus Aquila (Channing Tatum), newly arrived in Britain, sets about solving the mystery of what happened to the Roman legion commanded by his father two decades earlier. This Ninth Legion (composed of 5,000 soldiers) was supposedly slaughtered by tribes in Caledonia (modern-day Scotland), north of Hadrian's Wall, and the unit's eagle standard seized.

After an engagement with bloodthirsty local Britons in which Marcus proves his valor as a commander and receives serious injuries, he is rewarded by Rome with medals and, much to his dismay, given an honorable discharge. When Marcus helps save the life of a slave, Esca (Jamie Bell), he takes advantage of having a companion who knows the language and territory and, once the

Roman has healed somewhat, the two set off north of the Wall alone to recover the eagle (and restore his father's reputation).

Having undergone various hardships, including an attack by “rogue warriors,” the pair are directed toward a deserter from the Ninth who tells them part of the story. Soon afterward, they are captured by the savage “seal people,” to whom Esca presents himself as the master and Marcus the slave. The seal tribe, who live by the sea in northern Scotland, turn out to possess the eagle, which they now venerate as a religious icon.

The Eagle is not a disaster, but it's not especially successful either. It is worth noting, first of all, that Sutcliff's original novel was intended for children, for better or worse, and the characterizations are not terribly complex.

Marcus acts bull-headedly and exclusively out of a sense of personal, family and civic pride from beginning to end. “Can you imagine anything more magnificent than to be a soldier of Rome,” he asks his uncle (Donald Sutherland), “to serve with courage and honor?” This is never seriously challenged. The American-born Channing is effective within the narrow limits set him.

Esca, the slave and companion, is also lacking in dimension. He swears an oath of allegiance to Marcus and never deviates, although he appears to at one point. Jamie Bell strains in the role.

The reconstructed “seal people” tribe veers close to stereotype on more than one occasion. The treatment here of the indigenous population is not as complex as in many of the better American Westerns of the 1950s.

Is the film intended as something of a warning about the pitfalls of empire and imperialism, meant perhaps to shed light on current events? We think so at one point, when one of the warrior-Britons presides over the beheading of a Roman soldier, and screams in the direction of the occupiers' encampment, “You have stolen our land and killed our sons!”

Various parallels between the past and the present continue to be drawn, including descriptions of the atrocities carried out by the foreign army. When Marcus asserts to Esca that “The eagle [standard] is Rome,” the latter recounts how his family died at the hands of the Romans and declares, “Rome also did *that*.”

The slave suggests that the Romans who lost their lives in Caledonia 20 years before essentially died for nothing, exclaiming at one point: “Why did they [the lost legion] have to come north?... There's nothing here worth taking. Why couldn't they be satisfied with what they had?” Furthermore, the Roman politicians at home are portrayed as wealthy and arrogant.

However, these hints and suggestions of contemporary relevance are largely forgotten in the heat of the adventure, and we seem meant to conclude, in the end, that the pursuit of the eagle has been worthwhile after all, from a number of points of view. The film ends with a ceremony dedicated to honoring the martial dead, in which Marcus's viewpoint, that there is nothing more "sweet and fitting" than dying for one's country, seems restored to its place of pride.

As a right-wing website correctly points out, "If there's a cautionary subtext here about the vulnerability of a modern superpower, however, it's not something Macdonald seems determined to beat audiences over the head with. Instead, I suspect what people will remember most about *The Eagle* is the film's unapologetic commitment to honor and integrity."

Marcus has more of a "multi-cultural" perspective by the end of the film; he has come to see that bravery and honor are not exclusively Roman property. He also recognizes that the local population is at least as convinced of the rightness of its cause as the Romans.

All right, but aside from that?

There are interesting aspects to the film. It is coherently done. It is not gratuitously bloody and sadistic in the manner of *Braveheart* and *Gladiator*, although it leans in their direction from time to time. The Scottish landscape is often breathtaking; the reconstruction of Roman military tactics is apparently accurate, at least in places. We learn a few things, we think about a different world and time.

Even if the legend of the annihilated Roman legion is not true (as modern scholarship apparently has concluded), the idea of a quest north of Hadrian's Wall (built 122-128 AD), beyond "the end of the world," from the Roman point of view, is a fascinating one.

Still, the results are weak....

Macdonald asserts that the filmmakers attempted to take "a very naturalistic, realistic approach in the film, in the way we shot it.... I come from documentaries and come from more realist tradition, I wanted to take that approach."

It may very well be that *The Eagle* is shot in a more naturalistic way, but that is no guarantee of truthfulness or depth. As is often the case today, the capturing of detail comes at the expense of a broader grasp of things.

No one need pine for the Hollywood epics of the past (much less the Italian "sword and sandal" quasi-industry). The epic genre (set in ancient Rome and Egypt, biblical times, etc.) flourished in the 1950s. One thinks of *Samson and Delilah*, *Quo Vadis*, *Salome*, *Barabbas*, *The Robe*, *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, *Sign of the Pagan*, *The Silver Chalice*, *The Egyptian*, *Land of the Pharaohs*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus*, *Esther and the King*, *King of Kings*, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, *Cleopatra*, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*...and more.

One historian of the film industry comments bluntly: "By the mid-1950s, the blacklist and new technologies led Hollywood to concentrate on apolitical, spectacular films such as biblical epics, westerns, and musicals." A considerable flight from examining contemporary American reality in the wake of the purges of left-wing artists no doubt occurred, and an officially conformist

and stagnant culture could have done no better than search for subjects consecrated by church and state. (Westerns and low-budget science fiction films perhaps lent themselves more easily to social criticism and self-criticism.)

Nonetheless, those epics, foolish and turgid as they often were, managed to convey more of a sense of the sweep of history than a film such as *The Eagle*. They dwelt, perhaps excessively and bloatedly, on "titanic," collective issues in a panoramic fashion: the collapse of empires, wars and uprisings, the emergence of Christianity as a mass, oppositional movement to the Roman Empire and so forth. In that sense, they were far more "historically conscious" than present-day films.

And no wonder. The anti-communist purges did enormous damage, but it could not erase memory and consciousness as a whole. The writers and directors had been alive during great, traumatic events in the middle of the twentieth century. Many of the European filmmakers had experienced first-hand the end of dynasties, revolutionary crises, the rise of dictators. In that sense, their vision was more "realistic."

On the other hand, what have Macdonald and his generation—born in the late 1960s and early 1970s—of younger British writers, directors (Tom Hooper, Christopher Nolan, Sam Mendes, Shane Meadows, Guy Ritchie, Joe Wright, etc.) and performers experienced? They grew up under Margaret Thatcher and John Major, then a decade of Tony Blair. A right-wing consensus prevailed. The working class was largely suppressed, its socialist heritage under relentless attack. History and the study of history were devalued by various ideological trends.

A good deal of money was to be made in film and television, often in Hollywood directly. In place of a fierceness about life and reality, which had characterized a previous generation of British writers and directors, concerns about image and career prevailed.

One had to be sensible. Making big waves never did anyone any good. Of course, one was still opposed to the ugliest side of capitalism; one was tolerant...and in favor of tolerance; one was opposed in principle to war; one was still vaguely concerned about social questions, but the personal was the political now, anyway, wasn't it?

The amorphous liberalism, the weakened awareness of and orientation to the class struggle, the imprecision about historical matters—the overall vagueness—all this inevitably helps produce weak artistic results.

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