

PICTS ON FILM

By Ken McNaughton

Picts—progenitors of the Macnachtan Clan and one of the tribes that kept the Romans out of Scotland—are rarely portrayed in film. But two recent movies, “Centurion” (2010) and “The Eagle” (2011), attempt to bring them back to life.

In 1954, Rosemary Sutcliff published a historical novel for children called “The Eagle of the Ninth” [1]. Discharged because of a battle wound, a young Roman officer, Marcus Flavius Aquila, tries to discover the truth about the disappearance of his father’s legion in northern Britain. Disguised as a wandering Greek eye doctor and travelling beyond Hadrian’s Wall with his freed ex-slave, Esca, Marcus finds that a demoralized and mutinous Ninth Legion was annihilated by a great rising of the northern tribes. In part, this disgrace was redeemed through a heroic last stand by a small remnant (including Marcus’s father) around the legion’s eagle standard. Marcus’s hope of seeing the lost legion re-established is dashed, but he is able to bring back the gilded bronze eagle so that it can no longer serve as a symbol of Roman defeat, and thus will no longer be a danger to the frontier’s security.

Sutcliff created the story from two elements—the disappearance of the *Legio IX Hispana* (Ninth Legion) from the historical record following an expedition north to deal with Caledonian tribes in 117, and the discovery of a wingless Roman eagle in excavations at *Calleva Atrebatum* (Silchester, southern England). The Museum of Reading, which now houses the Silchester eagle, states that it “is not a legionary eagle but has been immortalized as such by Rosemary Sutcliff.” It may originally have formed part of a Jupiter statue in the forum of the Roman town. Sutcliff also assumed that the legion’s title of *Hispana* meant that it was raised in *Hispania* (now Spain and Portugal), but it was probably awarded this title for victories there.

THE EAGLE

Jeremy Brock adapted Rosemary Sutcliff’s historical adventure novel into a screenplay for *The Eagle*, directed by Kevin Macdonald and starring Channing Tatum as the daring young Roman officer [2]. Serving his first post as a garrison commander in Roman Britain, Marcus is wounded while saving the garrison from being overrun by Celtic tribesmen and is honorably discharged. While living at the estate of his uncle (Donald Sutherland) at *Calleva* (modern Silchester) Marcus decides to venture north to retrieve the eagle standard, despite his uncle’s warning that no Roman can survive north of Hadrian’s Wall. He takes with him the slave Esca, son of a deceased chief of the *Brigantes*, Celtic Britons who in pre-Roman times controlled the largest section of what would become Northern England. As they travel through the wilderness north of the Wall they encounter Guern, the Roman-born Lucius Caius Metellus, one of the survivors of the Ninth Legion, who attributes his survival to the hospitality of the *Selgovae* tribe, a people of the late 2nd century who lived in what is now the southern coast of Scotland, north and west of Hadrian’s Wall. Guern recalls that all but a small number of deserters from the Ninth were killed in an ambush by the northern tribes—including Esca’s *Brigantes*—and that the eagle standard was taken away by the Seal People.

In Norse and Celtic mythology, *selkies*, meaning “seal folk,” are mythological beings capable of changing from seal to human form by shedding their skin. They are found in folktales and mythology originating from the Northern Isles of Scotland. As Marcus and Esca press into the Highlands they are eventually found by the Seal People. Esca, the slave, identifies himself as a chieftain’s son fleeing Roman rule, claims that Marcus is his slave, and the pair are welcomed by the tribe.



The Seal People appear in *The Eagle*.

The film mentions Picts, introduces us to two tribes who lived concurrently, the *Brigantes* and *Selgovae*, and the Seal People. The arrival of the Seal People on screen is dramatic, and conjures up a concept that might invoke Picts. Shaved heads, white furs, and painted faces are stark and credible. We enter their village, and wonder if a Pictish village might have looked like this. The tribe has the golden eagle, and the action revolves around Marcus getting it back to Hadrian’s Wall.

As a member of the Screen Actors Guild between 2005 and 2018, I worked 127 days on 76 productions—34 for television, 24 major motion pictures, 12 industrials and 8 low budget jobs—in lead roles, principal roles, as a driver, photo double, stand-in and extra. Consequently, I feel links with some of the principles in these two movies. On my first day as an actor, 10 October 2005, I was among 350 extras for the film *Step Up*, and was the first man selected to play one of the audience members for a school dance performance. For five days I sat front row center, watching kids dance on stage. The female lead was played by a relatively unknown actress called Jenna Dewan. The male lead was another unknown, Channing Tatum, who went on to a celebrated acting career, and played the young Roman officer in *The Eagle*. On a budget of \$12 million, *Step Up* went on to a worldwide gross of \$114 million. Tatum and Dewan married in 2009 and divorced in 2019. Rachel Griffiths, who grew up in Melbourne, as I did, plays the director of the performing arts school. [In the trailer](#) you can see Channing, Jenna, Rachel, Baltimore, and me (second person front row left of the conductor).

Kevin Macdonald, who directed *The Eagle*, was born in Glasgow, and being Scottish, he would have been careful to be respectful about depicting the northern tribes of the 2nd century. The film he directed just before *The Eagle* was *State of Play* (2010), with Australian Russell Crowe, Helen Mirren, Robin Wright and Ben Affleck. In three days of working as an extra on this film, I attended a press conference in the Congressional Library along with real newsmen Bob Schieffer and Bob Woodward; moved up and down an escalator in the Rosslyn subway station in Washington with a redheaded actress who comes to an untimely end; and drove behind Russell Crowe’s car (driven by a photo double) back and forth by the Tiber Island Coop building on the Georgetown waterfront. I did not get to spend time with director Kevin Macdonald.

CENTURION

Neil Marshall was born in Newcastle, England, and has directed horror, science fiction, superhero and adventure films. He wrote and directed *Centurion*, which attempts to explain the historical disappearance of the Ninth Legion in a slightly different way from *The Eagle*, but with some similarities [3]. In his film, the enemies north of the border are identified as Picts, who are supposed to have united the northern tribes.

The Ninth Legion is dispatched to eradicate the Pict threat, led by General Titus Flavius Virilus, played by Dominic West. Virilus is supplied with a Celtic Brigantian scout, Etain. In *The Eagle* of the Ninth, the Roman officer who ventures north takes the slave Esca, son of a deceased chief of the *Brigantes*, so it seems that Marshall was also influenced by Sutcliff's book. *Centurion* does not credit the book, and the film was released one year before *The Eagle*. In *The Eagle*, Esca the slave is an unremarkable young man who experiences a reversal of fortune and is emancipated in the movie. In *Centurion*, Etain is a fierce and defiant young woman who has suffered horrors under the Romans, leads them into an ambush, and goes on a vengeful rampage.



General Virilus (Dominic West) chained to a standing stone in the Pictish village.

Survivors of the ambush continue north, led by second-in-command of the Ninth Legion, Centurion Quintus Dias, played by Michael Fassbender, who speaks the Pictish language. They locate the captured General Virilus chained to a standing stone at the village of the Pictish king. The king's son is suffocated during the rescue attempt, which has a parallel in *The Eagle*, but is not in the book. Virilus is killed in a staged battle with the vengeful Etain, and the remaining Romans attempt to return to the southern border, harassed by the Picts. Marshall films the mountains, glens, forests and snows largely in black and white, with only the blood spurting red in numerous bloody clashes. A welcome respite comes when the stragglers are taken in by Arianne, an exiled Briton accused of witchcraft, who learned Latin while living near a Roman outpost. Dias makes it back to Hadrian's Wall, but finds a decision has been made that the dismal failure of the Ninth Legion should remain a mystery, and Dias must be silenced. He escapes from the camp and returns to Arianne in the forest.

On 19 March 2007, I was called to be an extra in the premiere of the fifth and final season of the Peabody-Award-winning television series *The Wire*. Our scene was shot at night-time in Club Luzerne, a bad part of Baltimore. Dominic West—who plays General Virilus in *Centurion*—played Police Officer James “Jimmy” McNulty in *The Wire*. On set, I asked him where his accent was from, and he said Sheffield, but that he lived in London. He asked if I was English, and I explained I was Australian, but lived in London for five years. I said the pinnacle of my career was watching the Beatles arrive in Piccadilly Circus for the world premiere of “A Hard Day’s Night.” He said he thought that was the pinnacle of Piccadilly Circus’s career as well. Later in the shoot, while I was lurking in the corridor by the bar entrance, Dominic couldn’t get into either the men’s room or the ladies’ room, so we chatted again. I asked him where he lived in London and he said Kilburn. I said that was Irish when I lived in London and he said it still was. I told him one of the places I lived was Primrose Hill and he said that was where Paul McCartney lived. It turns out that Paul’s song “The Fool on the Hill” was inspired by a walk he took on Primrose Hill with his Old English Sheepdog, Martha (hence also his song “Martha My Dear”). The Sergeant Pepper song “It’s Getting Better” was inspired by another walk Paul took on Primrose Hill on the first day of spring, 1967. I lived directly opposite the park, in St. George’s Terrace, in 1965.



Olga Kurylenko plays the mute Brigantian captive scout Etain.

It would be nice if a great movie had been made about the Picts, but *The Eagle* and *Centurion* are both flawed, and there is little character development. *The Eagle* only alludes to the tribe, and *Centurion* smothers them in blood. Members of Clan Macnachtan Association Worldwide might consider offering a recent paperback edition of Rosemary Sutcliff’s book to their children, to introduce the notion of the Picts living north of Hadrian’s Wall. The plot in the book is more straightforward and well explained, full of credible historical and cultural details.

THE EAGLE OF THE NINTH

Rosemary Sutcliff (1920–1992) was an English novelist best known for children’s books, especially historical fiction and retellings of myths and legends. Some of her novels were specifically written for adults. In a 1986 interview she said, “I would claim that my books are for children of all ages, from nine to ninety.” She was affected by Still’s disease when she was very young, and used a wheelchair most of her life. Due to her chronic illness, Sutcliff spent most of her time with her mother, from whom she learned many of the Celtic and Saxon legends that she would later expand into works of historical fiction. In 1954, she published what remains her best-known work, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, part of a series on Roman Britain and its aftermath.

In the edition I read there is a map that shows major locations of her story, with Latin and Celtic place names, and modern equivalents in parentheses, based on a map from the year 150 by Ptolemy, the polymath who lived in the city of Alexandria in the Roman province of Egypt, under the rule of the Roman Empire.

In Sutcliff's story, Centurion Marcus Flavius Aquila marches his cohort, the Fourth Gaulish Auxiliaries of the Second Legion west to the Roman frontier post of Isca Dumnoniorum (Exeter). We are introduced to the life of a Roman soldier at the fringes of Empire, with subdued British tribes, antagonistic tribes beyond the walls, and rumors of wandering Druids. Marcus is wounded in an attack, and recuperates in the home of Uncle Aquila, the brother of his dead father, who lives at Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester).

Marcus purchases a slave, Esca, from the northern British Brigantes tribe, out of compassion, and is fascinated by a thirteen-year-old neighbor girl, Cottia. Uncle Aquila is visited by the Legate of the Sixth Legion, Claudius Hieronimianus, who is on his way back to Rome. There is talk about the Ninth Legion, whose First Cohort was headed by Marcus's father, and which disappeared beyond the northern border without a trace, along with their Eagle talisman. "If trouble were to break out again in the north, a Roman Eagle in the hands of the Painted People might well become a weapon against us, owing to the power it would undoubtedly have to fire the minds and hearts of the Tribes." The Latin word Picti first occurs in a speech written by the Roman author Eumenius in AD 297 and is taken to mean "painted or tattooed people." Marcus resolves to journey north in a quest to retrieve the Eagle, disguised as a wandering Greek eye doctor healing the sick, accompanied by Esca, who he frees, and the Legate eventually agrees. Marcus and Esca travel north to the eighty-mile-long Wall that Emperor Hadrian ordered built, from Segedunum (Wallsend) in the east to Luguvallium (Carlisle) in the west.

Traveling with a couple of ex-cavalry mares, Marcus carries a box of salves—"The Invincible Anodyne of Demetrius of Alexandria, for all kinds of defective eyesight." They criss-cross Valentia (The Lowlands), seeking traces of the lost Ninth Legion. While encamped at an old fort raised at Trinomontium (Melrose), they encounter Guern, one of the 'Painted People,' whose tribe are "The bearers of the blue war shield," but Marcus suspects he is a former Roman soldier. Guern takes them to his homestead and reveals he was "once Sixth Centurion of the Senior Cohort of the Hispana" (Ninth Legion), whose Commander was Marcus's father. Guern claims the Ninth was cursed after they were ordered to dispossess the Queen of the Iceni, Boudicca.



They slowly disintegrated, were overcome, and the Eagle was carried north, across the Firth of Cluta (Clyde) by Painted People “of the tribe of the Epidaii, whose territory is the deep firth and the mountains of the west coast running from the Cluta.” Guern found himself a British wife and said “I look like a Pict, do I not? That is because I am from Northern Gaul” (Western Europe, occupied by Celtic tribes).

Marcus and Esca continue north into Caledonia (the Highlands), along the Western coast, right up to Cuachan, the highest mountain in modern Argyll, where they run into a Chieftain of the Epidaii called Dergdian. Marcus treats the eyes of the chief’s son, Liathan, and they are welcomed into the village. Druids were everywhere. At the approach of The Feast of the New Spears on the Night of the Horned Moon, the chief says “We are the keepers of the Holy Place, we, the Seal People.” Each of the Epidaii clans has a different animal talisman. At the ceremony, with the people calling out, “The Horned One! The Horned One!” the last in the procession is carrying the Roman Eagle. Rosemary Sutcliff has placed the zenith of her tale about the Picts in the heart of Macnachtan Clan territory at the peak of their power.

Marcus and Esca develop an elaborate plan, steal the Eagle back, and make a perilous journey, shown on the map, from Are-Cluta (Dumbarton) to Borrovicus at Hadrian’ Wall, finally returning to Uncle Aquila’s home at Calleva. The Legate is there, and they decide the best thing is to bury the Eagle under the floorboards. The Ninth will not be reconstituted, and this explains why the Eagle of the Ninth is eventually rediscovered in modern times at Silchester. Young Cottia, all grown up, returns from a stay at the fashionable watering place Aquae Sulis (Bath). Marcus is rewarded for his efforts with a grant of land nearby. It seems that the handsome young soldier and the beautiful young girl are going to live happily ever after, which is only appropriate in a children’s book.

REFERENCES

1. Sutcliff, Rosemary, “The Roman Britain Trilogy, Book One: The Eagle of the Ninth,” Oxford University Press, 1954.
2. “[The Eagle](#),” Focus Features, 2011, Internet Movie Database.
3. “[Centurion](#),” Pathé Pictures International, 2010, Internet Movie Database.

NOTES: The Amazon series, “Britannia” (2017) supposedly includes Druids and the march of the Ninth Legion northward during the nineteen episodes of its first two seasons. This work is copyrighted and may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any medium without written permission from Ken McNaughton Living Trust, 3778 College Avenue, Ellicott City, MD 21043; phone/fax: 410-418-9340; kjmcn@comcast.net (13 December 2020).