David Walsh, "Entry on: The Eagle of the Ninth by Cyril Walter Hodges, Rosemary Sutcliff", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1248. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Cyril Walter Hodges , Rosemary Sutcliff

The Eagle of the Ninth

United Kingdom (1954)

TAGS: Ancient Slavery Hadrian Mithras Roman Army Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	The Eagle of the Ninth
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1954
First Edition Details	Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Eagle of the Ninth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, 255 pp.
ISBN	9786029225150
Official Website	rosemarysutcliff.net (accessed: July 1, 2021)
Available Onllne	audiobooks.co.uk (accessed: July 1, 2021).
Genre	Historical fiction
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	David Walsh, University of Kent, djw43@kent.ac.uk
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Creators



Cyril Walter Hodges , 1909 - 2004
(Illustrator)

Born in Beckenham, Kent, C. Walter Hodges was an English illustrator educated at Dulwich College and later Goldsmiths College of Art. Hodges had an illustrious career as an illustrator, with arguably his most famous works included in Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Eagle of the Ninth*. Hodges was also an avid theatre lover and became an expert on Shakespearean theatre. In 1964, he illustrated the children's book *Shakespeare's Theatre*, for which he won a British Library Kate Greenaway Medal.

Source:

Matthew Eve, "C. Walter Hodges: A Life Illustrating History", *Children's Literature in Education* 35 (2004): 171–198.

Bio prepared by David Walsh, University of Kent, djw43@kent.ac.uk



Courtesy of Anthony Lawton.

Rosemary Sutcliff , 1920 - 1992
(Author)

Award winning and internationally well-known children's writer Rosemary Sutcliff was born in Surrey, UK on December 14th, 1920. Her father was a naval officer and she spent her childhood in Malta and other naval bases. She suffered from Still's Disease, a form of juvenile arthritis, and was confined to a wheelchair for most of her life. She did not attend school or learn to read until she was nine years old, but her mother introduced her to the Saxon and Celtic legends,

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Icelandic sagas, the works of Rudyard Kipling, and fairy tales that became the basis for her historical fiction and other stories. After attending Art School and learning to paint miniatures, she turned to writing. She published her first book, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, in 1950, followed soon after by her best-known novel, *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954), about the Romans in Britain. It is still in print today and been adapted into a film, TV, and radio series.

She wrote over 60 books, predominantly historical fiction for children. Her stories span settings from the Bronze Age, the Dark and Middle Ages, Elizabethan and Tudor times, the English civil war to the 1800s. In 1959 she won the Carnegie Medal for The Lantern Bearers, and was a runner up for other books. She was a runner up for the Hans Christian Andersen medal in 1974. In the same year she was made an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for her services to children's literature, and was promoted to a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1992, the year she died. Two works based on Homer's epics, *Black Ships Before Troy* (1993) and *The Wanderings of Odysseus* (1995), were published posthumously. Sutcliff spent much of her later life in Walberton, Sussex, in the company of her father, house-keeper, gardener and various dogs. In her memoirs, *Blue Remembered Hills* (1983) she recounted her life up to the publication of *The Eagle of the Ninth*.

Source:

Official website (accessed: October 20, 2020).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com and David Walsh, University of Kent, D.J.Walsh-43@kent.ac.uk

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Additional information

Adaptations

Radio

"The Eagle of the Ninth", ad. Michael Hyde, For the Schools, BBC Home Service, 1955.

"The Eagle of the Ninth", ad. Felix Felton, Children's Hour, BBC Home Service, 1957.

"The Eagle of the Ninth", ad. Felix Felton and Susan Ashman, Story Time, BBC Radio 4, 1971.

"The Eagle of the Ninth", ad. Sean Darner, Children's BBC Radio 4, 1996.

TV

"The Eagle of the Ninth", ad. Bill Craig, BBC One London, 1977. Sutcliff felt the series did a good job of capturing the spirit of her novel, and that Anthony Higgins was a great choice for the role of Marcus.

Film

"The Eagle" ad. Jeremy Brock, Toledo Productions/Film4 Productions/DMG Entertainment, 2011. The film is a loose adaption of *The Eagle of the Ninth*, with a number of elements altered: Cottia is completely absent; Esca is not freed until the eagle has been retrieved; Marcus meets a number of survivors from the Ninth Legion, who (including Guern) reform to fight against the Seal People; and the at the end Marcus and Esca's retirement to the South Downs is not included.

Translation

German: *Der Adler der Neunten Legion: eine Erzählung aus der Zeit der römischen Besetzung Britanniens*, trans. Ilse Wodtke, Stuttgart: Union Verlag, 1964.

French: *L'aigle de la 9e légion*, trans. Bertrand Ferrier, Paris: Gallimard jeunesse, 2011.

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Italian: *L'aquila della IX legione*, trans. Misio Tagliaferri, Bergamo: Janus, 1973.

Japanese: *Daiku gundan no washi*, Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 2007.

Polish: *Dziewiąty Legion*, trans. Dariusz Kopociński, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Telbit, 2011.

Spanish: *El Aguila de la Novena Legion*, trans. Francisco García Lorenzana, Barcelona: Plataforma, 2008.

Summary

The Eagle of the Ninth is the first in a series of novels that recount the adventures of various generations of the Aquilii family down to the Norman period. In each case, one of the protagonists owns a Dolphin Ring, which has been passed on through the family. The publishers, Oxford University Press, state that the primary audience for these novels are 11–16-year-olds*.

The Eagle of the Ninth, set in the first half of the second century CE, begins with the nineteen-year-old centurion Marcus Flavius Aquila arriving at Isca Dumnoniorum (Exeter) to take command of the fort, but Marcus is later wounded during an attack by a local tribe and discharged from the army. Thereafter, Marcus goes to stay with his uncle Aquila at Silchester, where he buys a British slave called Esca and meets Cottia of the Iceni tribe. Following surgery on his leg, Marcus regains some of his lost mobility, and when the Legate Claudius Hieronimianus, an old friend of uncle Aquila, visits, they discuss the Ninth Legion who had been lost beyond Hadrian's Wall while under the command of Marcus' father. When Claudius mentions that the eagle standard of the Ninth has reportedly been seen beyond the frontier, Marcus begs permission to go on a mission to retrieve it. Claudius agrees, and Marcus sets off in disguise with Esca, who he has freed. Beyond the Wall, they encounter a tribesman named Guern, who they soon discover was a member of the Ninth, and Guern explains to Marcus how the legion, including Marcus' father, had been killed. Marcus and Esca push on, and having been befriended by Dergdian of the Seal Clan are invited to the Feast of the New Spears, in which they witness the eagle being brought out from a sacred cave. Marcus and Esca steal the eagle and make their way south while fending off the tribesmen that chase them. Eventually, they are saved by Guern, who helps them cross a bog and reach Hadrian's Wall. Once

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back at Silchester, Marcus finds he has been given land and a pension, and Esca receives Roman citizenship. Marcus decides to build a farm on the South Downs, where he will live with Esca and Cottia, the latter of whom he is now betrothed to.

* Margaret Meek, *Rosemary Sutcliff*, London: Bodley Head, 1962, p. 39.

Analysis

The story of Marcus, a young man who finds his prospects radically altered and so goes on a journey to find a new place in the world, would provide the template for many of Sutcliff's Romano-British protagonists. As Sutcliff later reflected in an interview with Emma Fisher: "I think really I've only got one plot; a boy growing up and finding himself, and finding his soul in the process, and achieving what he sets out to achieve; or not achieving it, and finding his own soul in the process of not achieving it. And becoming part of society."*

Sutcliff's Romano-British novels took much inspiration from Rudyard Kipling's stories about the Roman centurion Parnesius, which were included in *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906). There are several clear parallels between Kipling's Parnesius and Sutcliff's Marcus: both their families originally hail from Italy; they both travel north and must deal with the tribes beyond the frontier, and both decide they would rather remain in Britain than go elsewhere in the Empire. Like Kipling, Sutcliff also focused on the unit commanders or men that gain promotion to this rank, portraying them as honest, loyal, brave, and inspiring, while the officer classes, who are awarded high-ranking positions through the fortune of birth, are often arrogant, lazy and selfish, as we find with Tribune Placidus in *The Eagle of the Ninth*. The personalities of both Sutcliff's and Kipling's protagonists owe much to Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842), which outlined the principal virtues expected of a Roman hero, which included: "fortitude, temperance, veracity, spirit to resist oppression, respect for legitimate authority, fidelity in the observing of contracts, disinterestedness, ardent patriotism". For Sutcliff, the importance of these qualities had been reinforced in the military milieu in which she grew up, while she had also developed her own sense of stoicism and

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perseverance as she sought to overcome her disability, and this was a biographical element that she clearly projected onto the wounded Marcus (as well as other disabled characters throughout her novels). Subsequently, *The Eagle of the Ninth* and its sequels serve a didactic purpose, illustrating to young readers what qualities they should strive to develop. As Sutcliff explained in her essay *History is People*: "... I do try to put over to the child reading any book of mine some kind of ethic, a set of values... I try to show the reader that doing the right/kind/brave/honest thing doesn't have to result in any concrete reward... and that doesn't matter."**

Marcus is also an example of a hero who, upon his return from his quest, does not find encounter the homecoming he had anticipated. In this case, Marcus believes that the return of the standard will see the Ninth Legion reformed, but despite succeeding in his mission this is not to be. A homecoming that does not meet the protagonist's expectations is a common trope in both classical mythology (e.g. Odysseus and Jason) and modern children's literature, and in the latter reflects the realisation that one cannot return to their youth.***

The integration of Roman with other groups is a common theme throughout the series, and how readily this occurs appears to exist on a sliding scale from the Celtic-Britons, to those from beyond the northern frontier, and finally the Germanic peoples in the later novels. Concerning the Celtic-Britons, in *The Eagle of the Ninth*, although Esca describes how his people fear losing their way of life under the Romans, he and Marcus quickly become firm friends, and Esca is later made a Roman citizen. Moreover, Marcus is betrothed to Cottia of the Iceni, a somewhat surprising union when the memory of the Boudiccan Revolt (60/1CE) would have still been relatively fresh. Those from beyond Hadrian's Wall have a more varied relationship with the Romano-British protagonists, with some undoubtedly their foes, but the possibility of integration is suggested by the friendship that forms between Marcus and Dergdian, (and in later novels Justin/Flavius with Evicatos and Alexios with Cunorix), as well as Guern's decision to reside beyond Hadrian's Wall after the destruction of the Ninth Legion. Arguably, there is a suggestion here of differing characteristics inherent among those in the far north compared to those in the south, perhaps foreshadowing the English/Scottish of later generations (with the Romans primarily related to the former).

Cults and rituals play a prominent role in Sutcliff's Roman Britain novels. Sutcliff found the supposed religious "tolerance" of the

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Romans very appealing****, and this tolerance is exhibited by Marcus and her other protagonists, many of whom are members of the cult of Mithras. Sutcliff's portrayal of the Mithras cult again owes much to Kipling, who made both Parnesius and his friend Pertinax Mithraic initiates, as well as the centurion Valens in *The Church that was at Antioch* (1929). Kipling used the cult to illustrate that there were "many ways to the light" alongside Christianity, partly as a veiled attack on the evangelical Christians of his time, and although Sutcliff does not take such an approach in her novels (Christians are absent from The Eagle of Ninth and but appear as protagonists in later stories), the open-mindedness Marcus exhibits (such as when he and Esca pray together to their respective gods) again sets an example for the young reader. In contrast, the local Druids often act as antagonists, including the one who encourages the attack on Isca Dumnoniorum in *The Eagle of the Ninth*. Arguably, in Sutcliff's novels the Druids demonstrate how religious figures who gain too much influence in society (a "stranglehold" as Sutcliff described it*****) often do more harm than good and can inflame tensions between the government and local people. In this case, Marcus initially appears to strike up a bond with the hunter Cradoc, but due to a Druid's rabble-rousing they end up fighting against each other and Cradoc is killed. Again, there are possible allusions here to contemporary media that depicted the (usually erroneous) threat of insurgencies led by "religious" groups, such as the Thuggee of India and the Mau Mau of Kenya, in areas that were/had been controlled by the British Empire. More broadly, Sutcliff's portrayal of cults and rituals among the local populations of Britain was influenced by her fascination with anthropological studies of religion, particularly James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1906–1915), and the Feast of the New Spears featured in *The Eagle of the Ninth* is the most overt example of this.******

The relationship between man and dog is also a recurrent theme in the book. Marcus is comforted by Cub while recovering from surgery and had kept a dog in his younger years in the Etruscan Hills. Uncle Aquila also owns a dog and still remembers a previous dog he owned years before. The affection Cub gives Marcus while he is bed-ridden undoubtedly reflects Sutcliff's own relationship with her dogs, who gave her a sense of companionship throughout her life, especially in her early years when her illness and transient lifestyle made it difficult to make friends.******* The theme of mutual affection between a dog and its owner can be traced back to antiquity, with perhaps the most

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famous example being Odysseus and his dog Argos, as well as being a common trope in modern children's literature, such as with Timmy from the *Famous Five*, Toto in *The Wizard of Oz*, and Fang in the "Harry Potter" series.

Sutcliff sought inspiration from a variety of archaeological and historical materials, in this case, most notably a bronze eagle recovered from the excavation of the forum-basilica of Silchester in 1886. The sculpture, now in Reading Museum, was originally interpreted as a legionary standard, although is now believed to have come from a statue of Jupiter.******** The ruined state of Exeter in the post-war years, and the archaeological remains that this brought to light, also served as an inspiration, as Sutcliff would frequently visit the town's hospital for treatment.********* Additionally, the fate Ninth Legion after the early second century remains a mystery (Campbell 2018). A discussion of the sources Sutcliff used for each novel can be found in Talcroft's (1995) study**********.

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* Emma Fisher, "Rosemary Sutcliff", in Justin Wintle, ed., *The Pied Pipers: Interviews with the Influential Creators of Children's Literature*, London: Paddington Press, 1974, 182–191, p. 190.

** Rosemary Sutcliff, "History is People", in Virginia Haviland, ed., *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, Brighton: Scott Foresman and Company, 1971, 305–312, p. 306.

*** Charles Butler, *Four British Fantasists: Place and Culture in the Children's Fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, and Susan Cooper*, Lanham: Children's Literature Association and Scarecrow Press, 2006, 102.

**** Raymond H. Thompson, "Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff", 1986, d.lib.rochester.edu (accessed: July 1, 2021).

***** Ibidem.

****** Philip Burton, "Rosemary Sutcliff's the Eagle of the Ninth: A Festival of Britain?", *Greece and Rome* 58.1 (2011): 82–103, p. 89.

******* Rosemary Sutcliff, *Blue Remembered Hills*, London: Bodley Head, 1983, 22–24, 82–83.

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******** Emma Durham and Michael Fulford, "Symbols of Power: The Silchester Bronze Eagle and Eagles in Roman Britain", *Archaeological Journal* 170 (2014): 78–105.

********* Peter Wiseman, *Exeter and the Ancient World: People and Stories*, Exeter: The Mint Press, 2020, 31–49.

********** Barbara Talcroft, *Death of the Corn King: King and Goddess in Rosemary Sutcliff's Historical Novels for Young Adults*, London: The Scarecrow Press, 1995.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Ancient Slavery Hadrian Mithras Roman Army Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History

Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture

Abandonment Adventure Adversity Animals Authority Boys Coming of age Conflict Death Emotions Family Gender, male Heroism Hierarchy Historical figures Identity Initiation Integrity Masculinity Resilience Values Violence

Further Reading

Butler, Charles, *Four British Fantasists: Place and Culture in the Children's Fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, and Susan Cooper*, Lanham: Children's Literature Association and Scarecrow Press, 2006.

Burton, Philip, "Rosemary Sutcliff's the Eagle of the Ninth: A Festival of Britain?", *Greece and Rome* 58.1 (2011): 82–103.

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Mattingly, David, *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire 54 BC–AD 409*, London: Allen Lane, 2006.

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Meek, Margaret, *Rosemary Sutcliff*, London: Bodley Head, 1962.

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Wiseman, Peter, *Exeter and the Ancient World: People and Stories*, Exeter: The Mint Press, 2020.

Wright, Hilary, "Shadows on the Downs: Some Influences of Rudyard Kipling on Rosemary Sutcliff", *Children's Literature in Education* 12.2 (1981): 90–102.

Addenda

An audio-documentary on Rosemary Sutcliff's life and works can be found at audioboom.com (accessed: July 1, 2021).

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