Elżbieta Olechowska, "Entry on: The Eagle of the Ninth by Michael Simpson", peer-reviewed by Daniel A. Nkemleke and Katarzyna Marciniak. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2022). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1556. Entry version as of July 12, 2026.

Michael Simpson

The Eagle of the Ninth

United Kingdom (1977)

TAGS: Ancient Slavery Ancient Warfare Iceni Legionaries Mithras Roman Army Roman Britain

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

General information	
Title of the work	The Eagle of the Ninth
Studio/Production Company	BBC Scotland; DVD produced by Simply Media, distributed by Simply Media under BBC licence
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1977
First Edition Details	*The Eagle of the Ninth*. Dir. by Michael Simpson [4 episodes] & Baz Taylor [2 episodes], script by Bill Craig, Rosemary Sutcliff, Donald Bull, & Arden Winch, prod. by Pharic Maclaren. UK: BBC Scotland, 1977.
Running time	Six episodes @ 30 minutes, altogether 180 minutes on 2 discs
Format	DVD, VHS
Date of the First DVD or VHS	DVD: January 16, 2017
Available Onllne	All six episodes available on YouTube at Evergreen Media channel (accessed: November 21, 2022).
Genre	Historical drama, Television mini-series
Target Audience	Crossover (children, young adults)
Author of the Entry	Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com

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Creators

Michael Simpson , 1930? - 2007
(Director, Producer)

Michael Simpson was a theatre (Birmingham Repertory Theatre) and television (BBC) director and producer, married to the actress Jane Freeman (1935–2017) best known for her role of café owner in the long-lived series *Last of the Summer Wine* (1973–2010). At the BBC, Simpson started directing the program *For Schools and Colleges: Drama*; he wrote, produced, and directed *The Remarkable Case of Mr. Bruhl* in 1955; in 1965 he adapted Jaroslav Hašek's famous novel and directed the TV-movie *The Good Soldier Schweik*; directed 4 episodes of the series Scene from 1968 to 1976, 4 in the *Play for Today: The Fishing Party* (1972), *Three for the Fancy* (1974), *The Other Woman* (1976), *Scully's New Year's Eve* (1978). In 1977, he directed a 5-part mini-series *For the Love of Albert*, as well as 4 out of 6 episodes of the mini-series adaptation of Rosemary Sutcliff's novel *The Eagle of the Ninth* (*Frontier Fort*, *Esca*, *Across the Frontier*, *The Lost Legion*). In 1977, he directed the 7-part mini-series *Prince Regent*. In 1982, episodes 1, 4, 5 of *Agatha Christie's Hour* were directed by Simpson. His directing and producing career at the BBC continued with dozens of productions until 2002 and included such titles as *Driving Ambition* and *A Taste of Honey* (1984), *Theatre Night* (1985–1988), *A Dorothy L. Sayers Mystery* (1987), and 26 episodes of the longstanding police procedural *The Bill* (1990–2002). Simpson died in London in 2007.

Source:

Lewsen, Charles, "Jane Freeman Obituary", *The Guardian*, April 17, 2017 (accessed: November 21, 2022).

Michael Simpson (I) at IMDb (accessed: November 21, 2022).

Bio prepared by Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw,

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Additional information

Casting	Marcus Flavius Aquila: Anthony Higgins, Esca: Christian Rodska, Marcus' father: Peter Whitbread, Cottia: Gillian Bailey, Liathan: David Hayman, and others.
Adaptations	The series is an adaptation of the first part of Sutcliff's trilogy which is composed also of *The Silver Branch* (1957), and *The Lantern Bearers* (1959). In 2011, a US-UK film version of the novel was produced by Duncan Kenworthy and directed by Kevin Macdonald.
Summary	The action takes place at the beginning of Hadrian's reign, in Roman Britain. In 117 CE, twelve years after the unexplained disappearance of the Ninth Hispana Legion, an elite unit of the Roman army composed of experienced soldiers are attacked by the Brigantes whose upraising they were preparing to prevent. A young centurion of the 4th auxiliary Gallic cohort, Marcus Flavius Aquila, is posted to Britain where he hopes to discover what happened to the Ninth. His missing father was the second in command of the legion and as such, charged with the protection of its Eagle. Unfortunately, he is severely wounded during the attack of the Brigantes. While he was able to warn his unit about the attack, he becomes permanently unfit for active service. However, with help of a young Briton, Esca, whose life he saved, Aquila crosses the Hadrian Wall and travels far north disguised as an eye doctor. He eventually finds the Ninth' Eagle worshipped as a god in a remote pagan temple. The symbolic emblem was taken by victorious northern tribes after the last desperate fight to death put on by the remnants of the demoralized Ninth Legion under the command of Aquila's father. The Eagle was recovered but the Ninth Legion could never be reborn.

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Analysis

This television series is a 1977 adaptation of Rosemary Sutcliff's 1954 novel produced by BBC Scotland. Previously, BBC also adapted it into a six-part radio series in 1957, a 90-minute play in 1963, and a radio-drama in 1996. The novel, hugely popular in the 20th century since its publication, is still in print and has contributed to an increased awareness of the history of Roman Britain for generations in English speaking countries, as well as worldwide. In 2011, it was made into a UK-US film *The Eagle*, directed by Kevin Macdonald and co-produced by Toledo Productions, Film4 Productions and DMG Entertainment. The BBC series after forty years was released on DVD. In 2020, the centennial of Sutcliff's (she was born December 14, 1920) was marked in various ways, including podcasts, by classicists who "grew up reading Sutcliff's novels."* Contributors to the Our Mythical Childhood Survey celebrated the occasion by preparing entries about this beloved author, such as *A Circlet of Oak Leaves*, *Black Ships Before Troy: The Story of The Iliad*, *Eagle's Egg*, *Frontier Wolf*, *Mark of the Horse Lord*, *Outcast*, *Song for a Dark Queen*, *The Capricorn Bracelet*, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, *The Hundredth Feather*, *The Lantern Bearers* and *The Silver Branch*.

The Eagle of the Ninth is a rather straightforward adaptation of the novel showing its age mainly through visibly fake hair and beards, battle scenes with a handful of soldiers, as well as the mix of film for exteriors and video for interiors, usual for the 1970s. Over three decades will need to pass before cinematography bridges the gap between expensive films and cheap television.

* See email to Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, from David Walsh, University of Kent, entitled *Rosemary Sutcliff at 100*, dated August 10, 2020.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Ancient Slavery Ancient Warfare Iceni Legionaries Mithras Roman Army Roman Britain

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Character traits Death Friendship Loss Past Values War

Further Reading	*Aigle de la IXe légion (L')*, at peplums.info (accessed: November 21, 2022). Lawton, Anthony, *Rosemary Sutcliff's historical novel The Eagle of the Ninth was BBC TV film in 1977*, at rosemarysutcliff.com, March 30, 2010 (accessed: November 21, 2022). Loonyliterature, *Eagle Of The Ninth: DVD Review*, at theconsultingdetectivesblog.com, January 27, 2018 (accessed: November 21, 2022). Nevins, Jake, "Aesthetic excellence: how cinematography transformed TV", *The Guardian*, March 1, 2018 (accessed: November 21, 2022). *The Eagle of the Ninth – Simply Media DVD Review*, at archivetvmusings.blog, January 8, 2018 (accessed: November 21, 2022). For more information on Rosemary Sutcliff's novels on Roman Britain, see the website dedicated to the author: Rosemarysutcliff.com

Addenda	Before the DVD publication, the series was broadcast in Belgium (1978), The Netherlands, and Spain.

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