

# The Railway Man (2013)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hour 14 min.

Our Advisories: Violence 5; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star review (1-5): 4.5

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

*Romans 12:7-18*

This is the third feature film that I know of dealing with the Japanese mistreatment of World War 2 Allied soldiers during the building of the infamous Burma-Thailand railway along the River Kwai. (More comparison of the three later on.) Just as *To End All Wars* was based on a true story told in a book, Ernest Gordon's *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, so is director Jonathan Teplitzky's film based on an autobiography, this one by former POW Eric Lomax. It is part romance, part POW adventure, and all about healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Along with the currently showing *Joe*, it is grace suffused, making it one of those "must see" films for people who seek more than just entertainment from their film fare.

The telling of the story of Eric Lomax (Colin Firth) begins in 1980. A self-described "railway enthusiast," Eric takes a seat in a passenger car opposite Patti (Nicole Kidman), a lovely young woman. He becomes inspired so by their conversation that after he gets off at his destination that he buys another ticket to the place where she had revealed she was headed. Sure enough, he manages to encounter her, and soon their brief courtship leads to their wedding, the bride and groom marching into the church between two rows of Eric's wartime comrades as

a bagpiper plays. However their honeymoon is ruined by a wartime-induced nightmare that has Eric crying out and convulsing on the floor. He will not reveal what has disturbed him so, and this refusal to share with her becomes a threat to their marriage. Fortunately Patti's experience as a nurse has endowed her with patience and a certain amount of understanding, but she is approaching the limits of her endurance.

Patti begs his best friend Finlay (Stellan Skarsgard) to reveal to her what had happened to them in Burma, but he at first refuses, finally giving in to her fervent pleading. Thus the story of the horrible mistreatment of Eric and his comrades is told in a series of flashbacks. As the Japanese assemble Eric's unit and ship them in freight cars to the terminus of the railway line in Burma, they make clear their contempt for their captives. Later one of them, Nagase Takashi the camp interpreter (played by Tanroh Ishida as a young man), tells him that had he been captured he would have taken his own life in order to save his honor. In Japanese eyes the prisoners gave up their honor when they surrendered and now live in shame.

Half-starved, Eric (the then 21 year-old youth played by Jeremy Irvine) and his comrades labor long hours to extend the railway line, the Japanese intending to use the finished line to transport troops to India. Eric assembles from parts stolen from trucks and junk piles a makeshift radio. Listening in at night to the BBC, he learns of the first Allied victories in Northern Africa. The next day he and his friends spread the news, this filling them with hope that Hitler, and eventually his Japanese allies, can and will be defeated. Some who were about to give up the will to live become determined to live another day.

Then the Japanese officers discover the radio. To save the rest of the men from brutal punishment Eric claims that he, and only he, made the radio. Equally damning in the eyes of

his captors is a crude map of the river and railway that Eric had drawn to show his comrades where they were. Nagase and his superior officer, believing that Eric was contacting the Chinese and revealing their location, place him in one of the tiny wooden cages exposed to the hot sun where troublemakers are kept, taking him out for periodic beatings. He tries to point out that it was a receiver, not a transmitter, that he had concocted, but to no avail. They then drag him into the special room, the dark entranceway of which we had been shown several times in Eric's nightmares.

After relating numerous such episodes of their wartime trials, Finlay shows Patti a folded news story he had clipped from a paper. It reveals that Nagase Takashi is still alive, working as a tour guide at the camp in which he and Eric had been imprisoned. The camp is now a museum visited by tourists interested in WW 2. He has never shown it to his friend, and now Patti must share the burden of whether or not to reveal this to the traumatized Eric. Only after a tragic incident shakes their world does Patti make that decision. It is one that will send Eric to the camp/museum to confront the man who so sadistically ill-treated him. The climax is so powerfully moving that this film will stay with you and inspire you for years to come.

Especially when compared to the fictional (though expertly made) [\*Bridge on the River Kwai\*](#) this film emerges as a major work of forgiveness and reconciliation. David Lean's 1957 film, based on a novel, depicts the pride of a British officer pitted against his Japanese counterpart, as the former resolves to build a bridge superior to anything his enemy could have built. Meanwhile a special Allied squad is in the jungle planning to blow up the structure. There is no trace of forgiveness and reconciliation in the strictly war adventure film, although it is greatly enhanced by the study of the British officer's character.

On the other hand director David L. Cunningham's 2001 film [\*To\*](#)

[End All Wars](#) is a good companion for the new film. Based on Ernest Gordon's 1962 memoir [Through the Valley of the Kwai](#), it too centers on the theme of forgiveness of unspeakably brutal treatment. The epilogue of that film is a brief clip of the aged Ernest Gordon meeting with the former Japanese camp interpreter. The book was my favorite of the 60s, the first book for which I wrote an extensive study guide. Thus I was thrilled when decades later it was finally adapted into a powerful film. (Click onto the title to see my review. Also, a detailed guide will be included in my forthcoming ReadtheSpirit book *Blessed Are the Filmmakers*—watch the site for the announcement of its publication.)

I have read that the film condenses greatly Eric Lomax's account, There being no mention of his first marriage and two children—as well as Patti's three by her previous marriage. I don't know if the original went into any of the spiritual basis for Eric's observation "Sometime the hating has to stop," but there is no mention of it in the film, though we do hear a brief snatch of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm uttered by a prisoner. Oh, let me add to this: posted on the [Imdb](#) site of the film is a comment by a viewer who *has* read the book, and he points out, "Eric's deep Christian faith helped him through the nightmare and perhaps lead to his forgiveness of his tormentor decades later. He carried a Bible for decades during and after his imprisonment until it was utterly worn." Nonetheless, for people of faith this is indeed a deeply spiritual story, especially in the last sequence showing the confrontation of Eric and Nagase Takashi (played by Hiroyuki Sanada). Such a film makes us even more aware of how shallow and cheap are the usual action/adventure films about so-called heroes wreaking vengeance on those who wronged them.

#### For Reflection/Discussion

1. How does the film start out like another light boy meets girl movie? At what point does its mood change?

2. Late in the film Eric responds to the older Nagase's comment, "You are a soldier, Lomax. You never surrendered," with, "I'm still at war." How do we see him "still at war"? How is this still an issue with many American veterans today?

3. Why do you think Eric and his fellow vets keep silent about their traumatic war experience, even when urged to open up by a loved one? How does the incredibly brutal past experiences set the victims apart from those back home?

4. What is behind the contempt the Japanese captors heap upon their prisoners? (This Bushido code is especially emphasized in *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, and to a lesser extent its film adaptation *To End All Wars*. Note that the book is available in its reprinted form from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).)

5. What is Eric's motive for building a radio and spreading news gleaned from it to his friends? For a film with the similar theme of hope see the film set in the other zone of World War 2, [Jacob the Liar](#), about a mild mannered captive in a Jewish ghetto in Poland. (The role of Jacob is one of Robin Williams' underplayed roles.)

6. What do you think of Eric's stepping forward and assuming all the responsibility for building the radio? How is this a good example of John 15:13?

7. How do we see by what he does that Finlay is just as deeply disturbed as Eric?

8. When we at last are taken into the room and Eric's torture is revealed, were you surprised by its connection with a scene from [Zero Dark Thirty](#)? What do you think of those American officials who claimed that water boarding is not torture? What have they had to do to convince themselves that the policy they endorsed was right?

9. What is Eric's intent when he journey's to confront Nagase, and what reveals this? If this had been the usual type of

action/adventure film, what would have resulted?

10. What is the spiritual/mental state of Nagase Takashi at this point? Why has he become a tour guide at the museum? When Eric raises his hammer to smash his enemy's arm, what does Nagase do? How does this prove the sincerity of his avowed convictions? 11. What do you think of their friendship mentioned at the end? Do you wish there could have been some additional scenes showing this, or are we shown enough as it is?

12. Compare this to other films of forgiveness and reconciliation, such as the already mentioned *To End All Wars*, [Amish Grace](#) or the great documentary *The Power of Forgiveness*.

Note: *This time we have included the set of discussion questions so you can get an idea of what is offered in the Visual Parables journal wherein almost every film comes with a set of questions. This publication is designed for leaders who use films with groups and/or for film lovers who just want to think more deeply about their film fare (which is why we call the sets of questions "For Reflection/Discussion." There are now over 1000 of my individual reviews on the free site, but in back issues there are at least twice that number of reviews, as well as special articles on holidays, the Church Year, social justice themes, a book/DVD review column, plus Lectionary Links, a favorite department for preachers looking for a film related to the Common Lectionary text. To subscribe go to the Store.*