David Walsh, "Entry on: The Lantern Bearers by Charles Keeping, 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/1263. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Charles Keeping , Rosemary Sutcliff

The Lantern Bearers

United Kingdom (1959)

TAGS: Christianity Odysseus / Ulysses Roman Army Roman Empire Roman History





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Lantern Bearers
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1959
First Edition Details	Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Lantern Bearers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, 252 pp.
ISBN	9780809830282
Official Website	rosemarysutcliff.net (accessed: February 2, 2022).
Available Onllne	amazon.co.uk, play.google.com, kobo.com, waterstones.com (all links accessed: February 2, 2022).
Awards	1959 – Carnegie Medal
Genre	Historical fiction
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	David Walsh, University of Kent, djw43@kent.ac.uk

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

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

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators



Charles Keeping , 1924 - 1988
(Illustrator)

Charles Keeping was an English illustrator born in Lambeth, London. During World War II, he worked in an ammunitions factory, as a gaslighter, and (after turning 18) as a wireless operator in the Royal Navy. After the war, he studied illustration and lithography at Regent Street Polytechnic and went on to produce illustrations for various publications, including *Punch* magazine. Keeping came to prominence when he was commissioned by Oxford University Press to illustrate Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Silver Branch*, the sequel to her most famous novel *The Eagle of the Ninth*, and he would go on to illustrate many of her subsequent novels set in Roman and post-Roman Britain. He also illustrated Leon Garfield and Edward Blishen's adaptation of Greek myths, *The God Beneath the Sea*, and served as the illustrator for many Folio Society editions, including the complete works of Charles Dickens. He lived in Bromley, London with his wife Renate, who was also an artist and proprietor of the Keeping Gallery until her death in 2014.

Source:

Douglas Martin, *Charles Keeping: An Illustrator's Life*, London: Julia MacRae Books, 1993.

thekeepinggallery.co. (accessed: July 1, 2021).

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

Rosemary Sutcliff , 1920 - 1992

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.



Courtesy of Anthony Lawton.

(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, 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).

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

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

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Additional information

Adaptations	Radio "The Lantern Bearers", ad. Felix Felton, Children's Hour, BBC Home Service, 1961. "The Lantern Bearers", ad. Monica Grey, Story Time, BBC Radio 4, 1984.
Translation	German: *Drachenschiffe drohen am Horizont*, trans. H. Kloerss, München: Dt. Taschenbuch Verl., 1977. German: *Die Fackelträger*, trans. Astrid von dem Borne, Stuttgart Verl. Freies Geistesleben, 2006. French: *Le dernier des aigles*, trans. Philippe Morgaut, Paris: Gallimard jeunesse, 2013. Italian: *L'ultimo soldato dell'impero*, trans. Elcograf, Milan: Mondadori, 2013. Japanese: *Tomoshibi o kakagete*, trans. Yoko Inokuma. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2008. Korean: *Hwaebbuleul deulgo*, trans. Deok Hyong, Gong, Seoul: Hakwon, 1991. Hungarian: *A lámpás hordozói*, trans. Sudár Balázs, Pécs: Alexandra, 2011. Spanish: *Aquila, el último romano*, trans. Angel Jimenez, Madrid: Ediciones SM, 1995.
Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, 255 pp. Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Silver Branch*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957, 223 pp.

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Rosemary Sutcliff, *Frontier Wolf*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, 196 pp.

Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Shield Ring*, London: Oxford University Press, 1956.

Rosemary Sutcliff, *Dawn Wind*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961.

Rosemary Sutcliff, *Sword at Sunset*, London: Hodder and Stoughton 1963.

Rosemary Sutcliff, *Sword Song*, London: Bodley Head, 1997.

Summary

In the *Lantern Bearers* is the fourth book 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 has an age-range of 11–16 (Meek 1962, p. 39).

In the *Lantern Bearers*, which is set in the mid-fifth century, Aquila, an eighteen-year-old Romano-British solider serving at Ruputiae (Richborugh), is informed that orders have come to abandon the province of Britain. Aquila deserts, deciding he would rather remain in Britain, and returns to the family farm on the South Downs, only for it be attacked by Saxon raiders. The Saxons kill everyone except Aquila and his sister Flavia, the latter of whom is carried away. Found by a group of Jutes, Aquila is taken back to their homeland where he serves as a thrall (slave). After nearly three years, the threat of famine drives many of the Jutes to settle permanently in Britain, including Aquila's master. Returning to Britain, he finds the south-east coast dominated by Saxon settlers, led by Hengist, who had originally been invited to Britain by the local king Vortigern. In the Germanic settlement Aquila encounters Flavia, now a Saxon in appearance, and discovers she is married to a Saxon and has a son by him. Flavia helps Aquila escape, but refuses to join him, saying she could not leave her husband. Aquila then makes his way westward in the hope of joining the forces of Ambrosius, who is the son of king Constantine and grandson of the Roman general and usurper Magnus Maximus. At Uroconium (Wroxeter), Aquila observes life in the Roman town has continued

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

much as it had in previous centuries, even if in a dilapidated state, and by chance meets a follower of Ambrosius who takes him into the Welsh mountains to meet the Romano-British leader. Aquila becomes one of Ambrosius' closest followers, and is given a local chieftain's daughter, Ness, to marry, although his years of hardship make him cold and distant, while Ness resents having been taken from her home when she loved another man. In subsequent years, however, Aquila and Ness grow closer and have a child, while various conflicts are fought against the Saxons. However, Aquila then struggles to form a connection with his son, Newt, who becomes a close friend of Ambrosius' nephew Artos (Arthur). Eventually, Hengist suffers a significant defeat at the hands of Ambrosius, and the Saxon advance is momentarily checked. In the aftermath of the fighting, Aquila finds his injured nephew (Flavia's son) and sends him back to his mother. At the coronation of Ambrosius as High King, Aquila admits to having helped a Saxon and will submit himself to punishment, and Newt comes to stand by his father's side to support him, although Ambrosius pardons Aquila anyway.

Analysis

Aquila' story follows the standard pattern for a Sutcliff novel as it describes the tribulations of a young man whose life is radically altered by various events; the removal of Roman troops from Britain, the destruction of his home, the loss of his family, his enforced servitude as a Jutish Thrall, and finally his return to Britain where he joins Ambrosius' retinue. 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" (Fisher 1974, p. 190).

Aquila is also the archetypal hero who returns home only to find things cannot be restored to what they once were, most notably when he finds out that the hope of rescuing his sister is misplaced. The theme of returning home and not encountering the welcome one expects is a common trope in classical mythology, and the parallels with such stories are alluded to here when the Jutes have Aquila read extracts of *The Odyssey* to them, while one of the final chapters is called "The Return of Odysseus". This theme often appears in children's literature, as the process of growing up inevitably means

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

that "home" will one day become alien (Butler 2006, pp. 102–109).

The difficultly of parent-child relationships is also a theme in the novel, something that would be relatable to many young readers. The most obvious example here is the tense relationship between Aquila and Newt, but Vortigern and his son Vortimer also fall out, while Ambrosius must deal with the expectations placed on him due to his ancestry. The relationship between Aquila and Newt may echo Sutcliff's relationship with her own mother, who suffered from mental illness and could be very demanding of her daughter, while the general belief among Sutcliff's generation that men should not exhibit emotion, which Sutcliff did not think necessarily a good thing (Sutcliff 1983, pp. 54–55), may also be projected on to the novel.

Yet despite his difficulties, Aquila still exhibits the general qualities expected of Sutcliff's protagonists, including loyalty, stoicism, fortitude, and the ability to do the right thing even if he risks the ire of his superior in doing so (e.g. helping his nephew return home). As Sutcliff explained in her essay "History is People" (1973, p. 306): "... 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." Sutcliff's template for such characters was derived in part from stories her mother had read to her as a child, most notably those about the Romano-British centurion Parnesius in Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Macaulay's Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842).

As the title suggests, light and darkness are prominent themes in the book (Meek 1962, pp. 33–50). Aquila fires the beacon at Rutupiae just after the last Roman ship has left, alluding to Carausius' analogy in *The Silver Branch* that as long as one light still burns the darkness might be held at bay. Subsequently, Aquila, Ambrosius, and their comrades become the lantern bearers, providing light to guide people in the "Dark Ages", until in *Dawn Wind* (1961) when St Augustine comes to Britain and brings with him a reconnection to Rome and, as the title suggests, the light of 'civilisation' once more. The 'darkness' is the Germanic peoples, in particular the Saxons, who arrive in increasingly large numbers in Britain and begin to dominate the land. The image of Britain attempting to keep a spark of 'civilisation' alive while under threat of Germanic invasion would have certainly been relatable to many of Sutcliff's readers in the wake of World War II, and the influence of the war on children's literature in the

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

1950s–1970s is well documented (Butler 2006, pp. 8–9).

Christianity plays a prominent role in the novel, with the Aquilii family having converted at some point in the previous century after having worshipped other deities (notably Mithras) in early novels, although there is little to suggest a deep sense of religiosity among them. Furthermore, Aquila is aided by the monk Brother Ninnias, who helps him with his emotional scars. Notably, while Ninnias' faith helps him support others, he does not feel he should force it onto anyone and describes how a fellow monk who took it upon himself to convert a group of Saxons lost his head as a result. Sutcliff's generally positive portrayal of Christians in her novels contrasts with those that appear Kipling's in *Puck of Pook's Hill* and *The Church that was at Antioch* (1929), where Christians are an impediment to the smooth running of the Roman Empire. Kipling's aim was primarily to critique evangelical Christians, and the death of Ninnias' fellow monk alludes to Sutcliff having similar reservations about those who try to force their religion onto others. Indeed, Sutcliff remarked that she felt more at home writing about the pre-Christian era, as she did not like the medieval period due to the 'stranglehold' Christianity had on life at the time (Thompson 1986), and Sutcliff recalled in her memoirs how an overbearing evangelical masseuse had inspired great fear in her as a child (Sutcliff 1983, pp. 56–58).

Sutcliff sought inspiration from a range of archaeological and historical materials for her novels, and a list of sources she used when researching for *The Lantern Bearers* can be found in Margret Meek's study of her novels (1962, p. 71). This list includes references to works on Romano-British archaeology by R.G. Collingwood and Ian Richmond, post-Roman sources such as Gildas and Nennius, and later medieval legends written by Geoffrey of Monmouth and William of Malmesbury. A discussion of the sources Sutcliff used for each novel can also be found in Talcroft's (1995) study.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Christianity Odysseus / Ulysses Roman Army Roman Empire Roman History

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Abandonment Adventure Adversity Authority Boys Character traits 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.

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

Kipling, Rudyard, *Puck of Pook's Hill*, London: Macmillan and Company, 1906.

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

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

Snyder, Christopher, *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons, A.D. 400-600*, Stroud: Sutton, 1998.

Sutcliff, Rosemary, *Blue Remembered Hills*, London: Bodley Head, 1983.

Sutcliff, Rosemary, 'History is People', in Virginia Haviland, ed., *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, Brighton: Scott Foresman and Company, 1973, 305–312.

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

Thompson, Raymond H., "Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff", 1986, at the Camelot Project website (accessed: July 12, 2021).

Wright, Hilary, "Shadows on the Downs: Some Influences of Rudyard

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

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:

https://audioboom.com/posts/7750122-rosemary-sutcliff-and-re-imagining-roman-britain-documentary (accessed: July 12, 2021, no longer available).

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.