



River Queen

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River Queen, New Zealand/UK, 2005

Directed by Vincent Ward
Starring Samantha Morton (Sarah O'Brien), Kiefer Sutherland (Doyle), Cliff Curtis (Wiremu) & Temuera Morrison (Te Kai Poi)
113 minutes || M-Contains violence

An ambitious film from the talented, serious-minded Vincent Ward, *River Queen* takes us into the magnificent heart of New Zealand, both geographically and spiritually.

New Zealand, 1868 – a country in the midst of a war between British settlers and the Maori tribes resisting the colonization of their lands. At the furthest outpost, a young Irish woman's life is torn apart when her son is taken from her and brought up river by his Maori Grandfather. Unsure whether or not he is even alive she continues her search for seven long years... Caught between two sides, *River Queen* tells the story of a woman's struggle to choose sides and her journey to win back her missing son.

“It was the silence of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intent.’ Vincent Ward uncannily invokes Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in his frequently brilliant *River Queen*. There’s a magisterial aerial shot of the winding Whanganui River, establishing the potent sense of place, as Irish settler Sarah heads up-river to find her kidnapped boy. With shades of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Apocalypse Now*, this 1860s journey, set as the last Maori bastions resist British colonization, plumbs the nation’s soul. Though it includes some shameful colonial behaviour and attitudes in which some

people still indulge, thankfully *River Queen* doesn’t succumb to black armband or illusory golden age rhetoric, illuminating our complex past with appropriate shades of grey. *River Queen*, more ambitious and vital than Geoff Murphy’s *Utu*, takes the creative indemnity of ‘fiction’, but is essentially based on real people’s stories. Temuera Morrison portrays Te Kai Po – think legendary warrior Chief Riwha Titokowaru – with his scorching ‘I have tasted white flesh, I shall not die’ challenge to his British Army nemesis. Like Morrison, Cliff Curtis blazes charisma as Wiremu, who fights for both sides. *Ngati*’s wonderful Wi Kuki Kaa is the grandfather who kidnaps his mokopuna. Ward deftly avoids the condescending, jarring pitfalls of well-intentioned but mutton-headed works like *Dances with Wolves* and *The Last Samurai*. The fog of war in the new world, literal and metaphorical, is captured by Ward and his superb cinematographer Alun Bollinger. Bollinger’s brooding images – leisurely paced but gripping – utilise a multi-hued, beautiful palette of green, peppered with blood-red. There are some inventively filmed, invigorating haka. Think Kapa o Pango, but with a battle for your land and way of life, rather than a rugby game, at stake. The Kiwi versus Iwi Rumbles in the Jungle are rugged and visceral. The film is piercing, contemporary analysis of Conrad. Deeply thought and charged, it teaches and warns, as entertains. *River Queen* respectfully, powerfully understands and conveys the Maori world and Maori concepts; man – chief Te Kai Po’s, the Whanganui River’s – and Maori spirituality... A second viewing swayed a few initial doubts. Like *Whale Rider* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *River Queen* convinces that you don’t have to be indigenous to tell indigenous stories. Ward, who lived for 18 months as the sole Pakeha in a remote Maori community in the Ureweras, deserves a lot of mana. This is his history, this is my history, this is your history – every New Zealander should see *River Queen*.”