



Review

The Last Samurai is a 2003 American period drama war film directed and co-produced by Edward Zwick. The film stars Tom Cruise, with Timothy Spall, Ken Watanabe, Billy Connolly, Tony Goldwyn, HiroYuki Sanada, Koyuki, and Shin Koyamada in supporting roles.

While it is a film I very much enjoyed, I am always cautious whenever Hollywood attempts to deal with cultural history events of other countries and Americanises them. This was the case here.

However there are aspects of the film that contain sufficient historical authenticity and provide examples of interesting elements of Japanese culture that justify its inclusion on my 'show list' for our Japanese history program.

The film is historically based on part of the real life story of **Saigo' Takamori**, a Daimyo and Samurai from the island of Satsuma, which in 1878 launched a rebellion against Japan's Imperial Army, in an attempt to change the direction of the nation's modernisation program. In the film his role is played by Katsumoto.

In the Boshin War of 1868, Takamori was supported by a French Army Captain by the name of Jules Brunet. In 'The Last Samurai' this role is adopted by Tom Cruise, but in relation to different and later conflict - the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877.

Plot

Tom Cruise portrays Captain Nathan Algren, formerly a Captain of the US 7th Cavalry, who is now a bitter alcoholic traumatized by the atrocities he committed during the American Indian Wars. Algren is approached by his former commanding officer Colonel Bagley to train the newly created Imperial Japanese Army for

Japanese businessman Omura, who intends to use the army to suppress a samurai-led rebellion against Japan's new Emperor.

Despite his hatred of Bagley for his role in the Indian Wars, an impoverished Algren takes the job for the money, and is accompanied to Japan by his old friend, Sergeant Zebulon Gant.

Upon arriving in Tokyo, Algren meets Simon Graham, a British translator knowledgeable about Japan and the Samurai, who teaches the viewing audience quite a lot about Japanese personality and culture.

Algren finds his Imperial soldiers are actually conscripted peasants that have no knowledge of firearms or battle culture. Early in their training, Omura informs Algren that the rebel Samurai are attacking one of his railroads, and orders the under trained imperial army to be deployed against them, despite Algren's protests that they are not ready.

The next section of the film provides a great example of 'poetic license' where the scene is concocted to display the obvious incompetence of the Japanese Imperial Army, while at the same time exhibiting the fierce battle tactics of the Samurai warriors.



The 'fake' battle in a mist covered forest area is a disaster; the conscripts are routed and Gant is killed. Algren fights to the last before he is surrounded; expecting to die, he is instead taken prisoner when Samurai leader Katsumoto decides to spare him.



An historically interesting and accurate aspect of this scene is the ritual death of the Japanese Imperial Army General Hasagawa. As a former but honourable Samurai who opted to support the changes being proposed for modernising Japan, following defeat on the battlefield he chose to die by the Bushido creed, by committing ritual seppuku, with Katsumoto as his second.

Algren is subsequently taken to Katsumoto's village to live among his family, and these scenes provide interesting and informative insights into aspects of the Japanese culture of the time.

Watch this section of the film closely, as some questions will be raised about it in our 'Chat Room'.

While Algren is at first poorly treated by the Samurai community, he eventually gains their respect and actually becomes friends with Katsumoto. Algren overcomes his alcoholism and guilt, and learns some things of the Japanese language and culture. He develops sympathy for the Samurai, who are angry that the spread of modern technology has eroded traditional feudalism and their Samurai status and power.

Algren develops an unspoken affection for Taka, Katsumoto's sister and the widow of a Samurai Algren killed in the concocted forest battle.

One night, as the village is watching a kabuki play, a gang of **ninja** (employed by the industrialist Omura) infiltrates the village and attempts to assassinate Katsumoto. Algren warns Katsumoto, saving his life, and then helps to successfully defend the village.

In the next scene Katsumoto has requested a meeting with Emperor Meiji and has been promised safe passage to Tokyo. He takes Algren with him, intending to release him.



Upon arriving in Tokyo, Algren finds the Imperial Japanese Army is now a well-trained and fully equipped fighting force, armed with modern artillery and Gatling machine guns.

Katsumoto, in a meeting with the Emperor Meiji, discovers to his frustration that the young Emperor has essentially become a puppet of Omura and the other industrialists who sit around the Emperor's advisory table.

At the conclusion of this meeting and following the recent passing of a new law to curb Samurai power, Omura orders Katsumoto's arrest for carrying a sword in public and asks him to commit seppuku to redeem his honour. Katsumoto is confined to a villa to give him time to consider this request.

Algren rejects Omura's offer to lead the new army to crush the rebels, following which Omura orders his assassins to kill Algren – but the agile now samurai trained Algren kills his assailants instead. Algren then proceeds to assist Katsumoto's Samurai in freeing their leader from the Imperial Army. In the process, Katsumoto's son Nobutada is mortally wounded, and as a devout samurai he sacrifices his life to allow the others to escape.

In the next voluminous scene of a Japanese landscape, as the Imperial Army marches to crush the rebellion, a grieving Katsumoto contemplates seppuku, but Algren convinces him to fight until the end, and he joins the Samurai in battle. Citing the Greek Battle of Thermopylae, the Samurai use the Imperial Army's overconfidence to lure its soldiers into a trap by using a smoke screen to deprive them of artillery support. The ensuing mêlée inflicts massive casualties on both sides and forces the Imperial soldiers to retreat.

Knowing that Imperial reinforcements are coming and that defeat is inevitable, Katsumoto orders a final suicidal charge on horseback. During the charge, the Samurai break through Bagley's line; Algren kills Bagley (surprise surprise), but they are eventually mowed down by the latest technology – Gatling guns, which were the fore runners to the Maxim and Vickers machine guns of the Great War.

The captain of the new Imperial Japanese Army, previously trained by Algren and horrified by the sight of the dying Samurai, disregards Omura's direction and orders the Imperial guns to cease fire. A mortally wounded Katsumoto takes this opportunity to commit honourable seppuku with Algren's help, as the soldiers at the scene kneel down in respect for the fallen Samurai.

In a rapid move forward scene, set some days later, as trade negotiations between the US and the Japanese governments are about to conclude, Algren, though injured, arrives and interrupts the proceedings.

He presents the Emperor Meiji with Katsumoto's sword and asks him to remember the traditions for which Katsumoto died.

The Emperor Meiji finally realizes that while Japan should modernize and continue to interact with other countries, at the same time it should not forget its own culture, traditions and history.

In response, Meiji rejects the US trade offer (why?), with Omura protesting the decision; the Emperor then threatens to seize the Omura family assets and distribute them to the poor (a Hollywood thought that was never a possibility).

At the conclusion to the film Algren's fate is shrouded in mystery; while various rumours about him circulated, Graham concludes that Algren had finally found peace in his life and returned to the village to reunite with Taka, for a true fairy tale (Hollywood) ending.

In this film the Japanese Imperial forces are depicted as mostly corrupt, even though they included many former samurai, who were ultimately fighting for what they also believed would best advance the Japanese nation.

On the other hand it portrays the Samurai as a noble caste of warriors who are fighting a righteous but unwinnable battle.

While it may not be the most historically accurate film 'The Last samurai' provides stunning Japanese scenery, incredibly well orchestrated battle scenes and glimpses of Japanese culture and insights into the conflict over the issue of the country's modernisation.

The character depicted by Omura



In an endeavour to encourage rapid economic growth the Meiji government fostered the formation of a small number of very large single aristocrat family owned cartels that operated in key business areas of the modernising Japanese economy.

Known as **Zaibatsu** (wealthy clique) each of these business organisations had its own bank in which it could mobilize capital, and was given a virtual 'vertical' monopoly in a given sector of economic activity.

The 'big four' Zaibatsu were Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo and Yasuda, each of which had connections to aristocratic/ noble families of the Nara and Heian eras.

In the 'The Last Samurai' the Japanese character Omura owns the fledgling Japanese railway system, and is portrayed as having a key role in providing influential advice to the Emperor Meiji that is beneficial to his company.

In the real world Japan the highest class court noble of the time on the Emperor's advisory panel was a man called Iwakura Tomomi. He was a part owner of the incorporated Nippon Railway, which, with financial and technical support from the Japanese government, rapidly expanded Japan's railway network.

My best guess is that his part in the film was played by Omura.

We will learn more about the **Zaibatsu** later in the course.

Points of Interest for our Chat Room Discussion



Pay particular note to the scenes where the Emperor Meiji is present, where he is portrayed sitting on his throne located in a small dark enclave on a raised dais in the shadows behind a much larger meeting room.

In the larger room his advisers sit at a table in a U-shaped format where they discussed / debated policy matters within the hearing of the enclave. This enabled the young Emperor to consider the pros and cons with respect to key policy direction decisions that were made on behalf of the Japanese nation.

Who, in your opinion, was actually making the final decisions on Japanese government policy under this arrangement??

This was the same advisory format that was used two emperors later, during the era of Emperor Hirohito both before and during World War Two.

To what extent do you consider Emperor Hirohito would have been involved in key decisions of the Japanese military leading up to and during the War??

This issue will become pertinent in the film “Emperor” which we will view later.

Was Katsumoto a ‘significant’ Daimyo?

Describe the terrain and climate around Katsumoto’s village and make an assessment of its rice producing potential relative to the Kwanto region.

How strong were Katsumoto’s defences, and what military forces would he have been able to retain?

What political strength / influence would his opinions likely have had?

Samurai Values

List and describe Samurai values that you would despise

List and explain Samurai values that you would commend.