

ERIC LIDDELL **THE** *Flying* **MAN**

by Mark Harris

Chariots of Fire

In 1981, movie audiences in the USA and abroad were introduced to 1924 Olympic champion Eric Liddell through the film “*Chariots of Fire*,” which went on to win four Academy Awards, including the award for best picture. The focus of this film was on the events preceding and including those Olympic games in Paris.

For the few that may have never seen that film, here is a brief summary. Eric Liddell of Scotland and Harold Abrahams of England are two of the top sprinters in the United Kingdom in the early 1920s. Their paths cross early in the movie when Eric defeats Harold in a 100-yard race – a rare defeat that drives Abrahams to hire a coach and strive to improve. This is a controversial move in the eyes of officials in the U.K. who question whether the use of a professional coach threatens the “strict amateur code” that all U.K. athletes are to follow. Abrahams also struggles with the difficulties of being a Jew in “Christian England.”

Eric’s struggle surrounds whether or not his running is interfering with his ministry, the opposition being voiced by his sister. This conflict was probably imagined for story purposes, as his sister in later interviews denied that she opposed his running. Sadly, the film portrayal has tarnished her own reputation, taking what little is known of her life and making it a picture of Christian intolerance for worldly activities.

Both men make the Olympic team and head for Paris. On the way, Eric discovers that the heats for the 100-meter dash are to be held on a Sunday. To run on a Sunday goes against his Presbyterian con-

victions about the Sabbath, and he opts out of that race—much to the consternation of the officials of his Olympic team. A consolation of sorts is offered, as he is offered a teammate’s spot to run in the 400 meters—not his best event.

In the climax of the movie, Harold Abrahams wins the 100-yard dash, and then Eric Liddell wins the 400 in world-record time. As he is running, his words to his sister from earlier in the film are recalled, “When I run, I feel His pleasure.” Not noted in the movie, Eric also earned the bronze medal in the 200 meters. Also not emphasized in the movie was the fact that he was assigned the outside lane, and at the gun took off in a sprint. Onlookers assumed that he would surely burn out at that pace, but calling on inner reserves he was able to hold off the challengers in the second half of the race and win handily. He later said, “The secret of my success in the 400m is that I run the first 200m as fast as I can. Then, for the last 200m, with God’s help I run faster.”

Harold Abrahams went on to fame in England as a sports commentator and as the chairman of the

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Amateur Athletic Association. He died in 1978, and his memorial service is used as the framing device in introductory and closing scenes of the movie.

We are also told at the closing of the film that Eric returned to China and died in an internment camp near the end of WWII, for which all of Scotland mourned.

The Sequel

What we are not told in that movie is that the second half of Eric Liddell's life was every bit as inspiring as the first half – although in a different way.

Now that inspiring story is to be portrayed in a major motion picture to be called “*The Flying Man*.” The screenplay has already been written, and the team plans to begin shooting in early 2009, aiming for a theatrical release date in late 2009 or early 2010. The film is to be produced by a joint Chinese/American team, and is to be partially filmed in China.

The planner and director of the project is Z. Wang, a filmmaker from China. He has stated that he considers it a great privilege to honor this heroic figure who was born and died in China (and after whom Mr. Wang named his son). His vision for doing this story was partially inspired by these words of Psalm 77:

“Then I thought, ‘To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High. I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all of your works and consider all your mighty deeds...’”

As with “*Chariots of Fire*,” “*The Flying Man*” will aim for excellence in production. Mr. Wang’s passion for this project has attracted and inspired a collection of top-notch acting and filmmaking talent. The filmmakers will employ a story-telling approach that will allow Eric’s life to speak for itself, aiming to appeal to the widest possible audience.

“*The Flying Man*” production company plans to distribute the film worldwide, as the story of Eric Liddell has international appeal. A series of premiers are planned for many strategic cities, including London, Paris, Toronto, Moscow, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Singapore.

The Story

Eric Liddell was born in 1902 in the city of Tianjin, China (approximately 50 miles southeast of Beijing). His parents were Presbyterian missionaries. Not long after his birth, the family moved to Siaochang, approximately 100 miles northwest of Beijing. Eric returned to the U.K at the age of six to enter school, and over time gained sporting fame in rugby and as a runner – the latter being the subject of “*Chariots of Fire*.”

In Scotland after the Olympics, Eric was the Michael Phelps or Usain Bolt of his day. With his fame, all kinds of doors to earthly success could open up for him, but he announced that he would return to China, following in the footsteps of his father and older brother.



Eric with his Chinese students

The China to which Eric returned was suffering from the effects of war, famine and other tragedies. He went to work at the Anglo-Chinese College in Tianjin as a science teacher and became a favorite of his Chinese students.

After returning to Tianjin from his first furlough in 1932, he married Florence Mackenzie, the daughter of Canadian missionaries. The couple had three daughters, Patricia, Heather and Maureen.

In 1937, his happy life was interrupted by the invasion of Japanese forces into Northern China. During the occupation, Eric's work became dangerous and traumatic as he witnessed the brutality of the Japanese soldiers. He helped the victims in whatever way he could, including teaching them hymns. In one dramatic event, he risked his life to save a wounded Chinese soldier.

In 1941, life in China had become so dangerous that the British government advised British nationals to leave. Eric faced a difficult decision and elected to stay in China to continue his work in spite of the danger. However, he sent his pregnant wife and two daughters to Canada, not realizing that he would never see them again. Eric then based himself full-time in Shaochang.

After the USA entered the war, the Japanese Army pushed further into China. When the fighting reached Siaochang in 1943, the Japanese rounded up the westerners and sent them to the Weihsen Internment Camp, the largest internment camp in Asia during WWII, located almost halfway between Beijing and Shanghai.

While in the camp, Eric continued his informal ministry to all needy people around him. He helped the sick and aged and freely shared his food with those more in need. He organized and refereed soccer matches for young people. When he found a boy with no shoes in the cold winter, Eric gave him his running shoes – the very ones he used in the Olympics.

Eric showed his character most brightly when he instructed his fellow prisoners not to hate the Japanese, but to forgive them and pray for them.

Life in the camp degenerated as food and supplies became more scarce. An opportunity came to Eric when his name appeared at the top of a list for POW exchanges that was negotiated on his behalf by Winston Churchill. He refused to be exchanged, giving up his place to a pregnant woman and choosing to remain and continue serving the other prisoners. Eric's health began to fail, and his longing for his family (which had grown with the birth of a third daughter) only increased his suffering.

Eric died in the camp on February 21, 1945, five months before liberation. A brain tumor, exacerbated by exhaustion and malnourishment, hastened his demise. In death he was greatly honored and mourned, both in the camp and in Scotland.

The Impact

The life of Eric Liddell has been an inspiration to millions in the Western world, thanks in part to the recapturing and communicating of his story in film. *"The Flying Man"* has the opportunity to ex-



The government invested a million dollars to revamp the former residence of Eric Liddell.



tend that impact, completing the untold portion of his life story. Those watching the Beijing Olympics have already caught some glimpse of this, as NBC devoted a segment to a reverently positive retelling of the story of Eric Liddell's life between the 1924 Olympics and his death in 1945.

Not as widely understood is the expected impact in Liddell's beloved China. There are few westerners who are as honored by the Chinese, including the modern Chinese government, as is Eric Liddell. He is esteemed as a hero both in sports (he was the first person born in China to win an Olympic medal) and in life, and is especially revered for his sacrificial love for the Chinese people. In every way he is an admired role model of excellent character.

This honoring has taken several forms over the years, including the following:

1. He is honored as a war hero. In Tianjin, Eric's house is protected as a building of historical significance, and was restored at great expense to the government.
2. At the site of the Weih sien Internment Camp, a stone monument was erected in his honor.
3. Many TV networks in China have produced documentaries of his life.
4. A 24-hour movie channel in China purchased the rights to "Chariots of Fire" in 1990 and has shown the film repeatedly. The audience has been estimated at 850 million. Each time the channel has aired the film they have received enthusiastic response – Chinese people from each corner of the country have sent hundreds of thousands of letters and e-mails to the channel manager, requesting a replay of the movie.

5. A book called "Running the Race" by John Keddie, a biography which portrays Liddell's sporting accomplishments in the religious context in which it was lived, was recently published in Mandarin and distributed in China. It

is a rare honor for such a story to be given such preference by the Chinese government – further proof of the esteem granted to Eric Liddell in China even today.

The producers of "The Flying Man" expect that this film will be received with much acclaim and appreciation in China, perhaps even beyond the acclaim received for "Chariots of Fire." The timing of the film is significant, since the story of

Eric Liddell links the 2008 Beijing Olympics with the 2012 London Olympics, deals with relevant issues of sport and world peace and portrays the virtues of commitment, devotion and forgiveness. The life of Eric Liddell will continue to influence people more than 60 years after his death.

Get Involved

If the prospect of this film production has motivated you to get involved, here are a few ways you can do this:

1. Pray for the financing, production and distribution of the film.
2. Promote awareness of the film project, which will help build anticipation for its release.
3. If you would like to donate to

the organization that is funding the early stages of this project, you may inquire about this by sending an e-mail to: loveinchinacommunications@gmail.com. 



The former residence of Eric Liddell has been one of the Tianjin Historical and Stylistic Architectures, protected by the Government of Tianjin.



The memorial stone for Eric Liddell. It was presented by the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and has been set in the site of the former Weih sien Internment Camp.