



Scene from
The Thin Red Line

World War II Wild Card

Hollywood's fascination with the Second World War rolls on, with a dozen projects currently in development at major studios. The next movie to tackle WWII, *The Thin Red Line*, will be a big one, costing more than \$50 million to make and featuring a stellar cast that includes Nick Nolte, George Clooney, John Travolta, Sean Penn, and Woody Harrelson. This dramatization of the Battle of Guadalcanal will arrive in theaters in late December, the offspring of two of America's most unusual storytellers.

Writer-director Terrence Malick, a famous recluse who hasn't directed a picture since Carter was President, hasn't given an interview since 1974. It's unclear how he'll portray the bloody event. Those close to the project are revealing little, but one thing's certain: With Malick behind it, the film is a wild card. After all, how many other directors once had a day job as a logger and spent evenings translating the philosopher Heidegger from German to English? Asked several years ago what he was interested in filming, Malick answered: Molière's play *Tartuffe* and James Jones' novel *The Thin Red Line*.

A Waco, Texas native, Malick grew up working on oil wells and cement mixers before attending Harvard. He graduated in 1966; then went to England on a Rhodes scholarship. After that, he became a collector of experiences, lecturing in philosophy at MIT and writing for *Newsweek*, *Life*, and the *New Yorker*.

Though his wife warned, "Do not get into the movie business. It will kill your soul," Malick nevertheless found his way to Hollywood. He made two well-regarded pictures: *Badlands* (1973), a story set in the '50s about a young man and his accomplice girlfriend who go on a killing spree through South Dakota, and *Days of*

Heaven (1978), about Texas drifters before World War I. Neither were box office successes, but *Days of Heaven* garnered an Oscar for cinematography.

Malick reportedly became frustrated with the movie business, however, and withdrew to the extent that one associate described being involved with him as "like working with the CIA." Reputedly a devout Episcopalian, Malick never completed his next project—a World War I film that was to begin with a prologue about the "creation of the universe." Finally, in 1989, he started working on a screenplay of *The Thin Red Line*.

The late James Jones, who wrote the 1962 novel, was another unorthodox character. Once described as "akin to Marcus Aurelius in his long apprenticeship to war, suffering, and the effort to bear it all," Jones' best work was inspired by his experience in the Army, which he joined fresh out of high school in 1939 and served in until 1944.

An eyewitness to Pearl Harbor, Jones later landed on Guadalcanal, where he was forced to defend himself by killing a Japanese soldier in hand-to-hand combat. His experiences sparked an intense interest in U.S. military history that animated such works as *From Here to Eternity* and *The Thin Red Line*. The latter was dedicated to "those greatest and most heroic of all human endeavors, WAR and WARFARE; may they never cease to...provide us with the heroes, the Presidents and leaders, the monuments and museums which we erect to them in the name of PEACE."

This sentiment was tough for some literati to swallow. Close friends like William Styron, who said military life was without "human dignity" and causes "men

to behave mostly like beasts," surely parted company with Jones' affection for the Army. The divergence between Jones and the literati became even more stark after he visited Vietnam in the early 1970s. Jones bristled at those who cast aspersions on U.S. servicemen as murderers and rapists, and he refused to toe the "Viet Cong are innocent peasant-patriots" line championed by many of his colleagues.

It remains to be seen how James Jones will be treated by Hollywood today. A source who worked on the picture told me that while it will surely depart from the heroic portrayals of World War II servicemen in such films as *Sands of Iwo Jima* and *Saving Private Ryan*, and even though the title is derived from the saying, "There's a thin red line between the sane and the mad," the movie will stop short of the *Platoon-Apocalypse Now* approach where soldiers are deranged psychopaths. "I think there will be a modicum of incompetence and darker sides to characters," the source said. He added that Malick's chief mission was to present Guadalcanal "as it really was—unblinking, no holds barred."

When I asked executive producer George Stevens, Jr., whether the movie would show American soldiers exhibiting bravery, sacrifice, and leadership, I was struck by his answer: "Guadalcanal called upon sacrifice. Sacrifice—that's really what it's about. Young men went 6,000 miles from home to do what their country said needed to be done."

Actually, many American soldiers—and surely Bronze Star and Purple Heart recipient James Jones—were doing what they knew needed to be done at Guadalcanal. How will Terrence Malick deal with that daunting call to duty?

—John Meroney

BookTalk

DOCUMENTING THE DELUGE

By Frederick Turner

Noah's Flood: The New Scientific Discoveries About the Event That Changed History

By William Ryan and Walter Pitman
Simon & Schuster, 298 pages, \$25

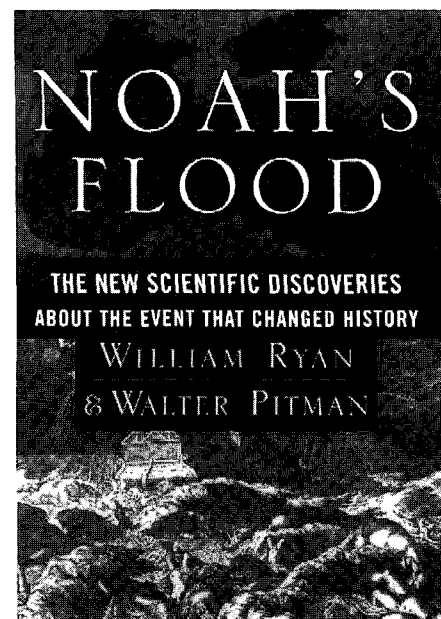
What is the relationship between scientific truth and religious truth? Are they two alternative and contradictory explanations of the same universe, one true, one false? Do they describe, without contradiction, two completely different universes? Or do they describe the same universe, in different ways? If the last, how are we to describe that difference, so as to avoid bringing the two views into unnecessary conflict?

In the exhausted standoff that followed the bloody religious wars of the renaissance and reformation, science and religion agreed to confine themselves to separate territories—science to the realm of fact, religion to the realm of value. That truce allowed for the great intellectual achievements of the Enlightenment, including the foundations of physics and chemistry, and the U.S. Constitution. But it also, perhaps, led to an uncertainty about what is good and true and important in the human sphere, whose damaging consequences we see all about us in education, the family, and public morality. The separation of science and religion also led perhaps to a denaturing of scientific knowledge, a stripping from it of human significance and thus historical meaning.

Today there are signs that the cordon sanitaire, the quarantine between religion and science, can no longer be pre-

served. The logic of religion itself has led its moral theology back from the otherworldly contemplation of the divine to a renewed concern with the world of physical reality and human history; there have been too many scandals of religion standing lost in prayer at the sidelines while Holocausts, Gulags, famines, ethnic cleansings, and other human disasters cried out for practical action and attention to real facts. Meanwhile science has given birth to technologies that can no longer be viewed as value-free—reproductive interventions, recombinant DNA manipulation of the genes of animals, plants, and humans, mood-altering drugs, and suchlike. Scientists have begun to speculate in a scientifically legitimate and testable way about issues that are of intense concern to religion, such as the origins of the universe and the possibility of artificial intelligence. Scientific historical scholarship has turned its attention to the life of Jesus. Most fundamental of all is the issue of evolution, where there are contested claims to fundamental truth.

William Ryan and Walter Pitman in their fascinating book *Noah's Flood* have given us, without entirely meaning to, an opening to the reconciliation of science and religion, at least in the special case of the Great Flood. The book tells two stories—one, spanning tens of thousands of years, the epic saga of how human civilization in Asia and Europe survived and flourished in the huge climatic and geological changes that followed the last Ice Age; the other, spanning a couple of centuries, how religious and historical scholars, archaeologists, oceanographers, earth scientists, and climatolo-



gists pieced together the first story.

It turns out that religious accounts and scientific accounts complement each other very nicely. The key event is the catastrophic flooding of the Black Sea basin, by salt waters from the Mediterranean that broke through the Bosphorus about 7,000 years ago, driving the human civilizations that flourished on the rich coasts of the shrunken lake into a great diaspora. This event shows up in the myths and legends of dozens of nations. Shipborne survivors of the flood could indeed have fetched up on the foothills of the mountain range that includes Mount Ararat.

The story of how the deluge was discovered is deeply instructive as to the proper relation of religion and science. In the nineteenth century there were two camps on the issue of the flood: a fundamentalist camp, which hoped to use the new geological evidence that large areas of dry land had once been under water as support for the Biblical deluge; and a secular camp, which saw the new geology as sweeping away centuries of superstition and revealing the flood story as a mere fable. As the evidence mounted, the secular camp seemed to be vindicated; there could have been no world flood, and the geological history of the planet appeared to be one of gradual accumulation and incremental evolution rather than one of dramatic divine interventions. But meanwhile, brilliant and courageous young scholars and archae-