

War's End: Without End

Dr Mark Rawlinson

Together with *Murmur* (2006) and *Hiroshima* (2007), *War's End: An Island of Remembrance* marks the concluding part of Kirk Palmer's trilogy of moving image works centered on Japan. Collectively these works examine how historical events manifest in the present-day physical substance of place, where the pall of the Pacific War and the A-bombings are a latent and unifying presence. Like Palmer's previous moving image works, *War's End: An Island of Remembrance* avoids didacticism in favour of nuance; it is free from gratuitous imagery of war and its after-effects. The customary apocalyptic moment of blinding white light and rising mushroom cloud from the nuclear explosion, the epitome of the destructive technological sublime, is absent. Instead, Palmer traces the unfolding arc of a morning from first light on the island of Yakushima, one which subtly communicates the imminence of an aerial destructive force about to be unleashed.

At 7:45 a.m. on August 9, 1945, the small island of Yakushima, located south of mainland Japan, became the aerial rendezvous point for B-29 Superfortress bomber 'Bockscar' and two other B-29s accompanying it on the mission to drop the second atomic bomb. From the start, the mission was ridden with complications, and when Bockscar was unable to make visual contact with the third plane, strict radio silence prevented any communication. With the A-bomb pre-armed onboard, Bockscar circled Yakushima relentlessly for 40 minutes before abandoning the rendezvous and proceeding to the target. However, the delay over Yakushima combined with unfavourable weather conditions ultimately prevented the plutonium bomb from being dropped on the primary target - the city of Kokura - and Bockscar released 'Fat Man' on its secondary target: Nagasaki.

The chance juxtaposition of the Bockscar incident and the island of Yakushima, which faced the future prospect of a planned military assault (as part of Operation Olympic), generated for Palmer an 'uncanny, disturbing image of extreme opposites: abominable human destructiveness and vital elemental nature.'¹ The chance delay over Yakushima sealed Nagasaki's fate, and if it is true that the second atomic bombing forced the Japanese surrender then that catastrophe may have spared Yakushima. It seems incongruous, yet tragically apt, that a place of such exemplary and primordial natural beauty should exist in the midst of an area that experienced such terrible human destructiveness, including mankind's most abominable act of all: nuclear warfare.

It is hard to process the thought but if it were not for that 40 minute period of aerial confusion between Bockscar and the other B-29s, Yakushima might well no longer exist in its present form; the fact that it has remained and remains largely unchanged across millennia, pushes this place beyond human history

and knowing. Because of this, Palmer believes Yakushima can be seen as ‘an unofficial garden of remembrance - a place of immense natural beauty and heritage that provides a poignant vantage point from which to reflect on a tragic episode in human history.’ The ancient landscape of the island speaks to permanence, to endurance, exemplified by the 'Jomon Sugi' cedar tree found deep within Yakushima's mountain forests. This giant Japanese cedar - perhaps as much as 7200 years old – is a resolute presence that epitomise what Palmer describes as ‘the existentially humbling impact of the island.’ In essence, the island’s abundance of natural phenomena and life cycles provide ‘an array of temporal yardsticks’ against which *War’s End* pitches the aerial events of August 9, 1945.

War’s End’s simple evocation of this place plays out through a set of simply observed scenes of the landscape of the island; such simplicity though is problematised by the soundtrack—the slowed down sound of the Angelus (call to prayer) of Urakami Cathedral—which both encapsulates imminent threat, and creates a tension between sound and image, which in turn echoes the tension between the nuclear power of Fat Man and the enduring power of Yakushima’s ancient landscapes. The sound of the slowed down bells mirrors the sound of Bockscar’s dizzying pause over the Island, an aural signature that intrudes upon the contemplative visualization of the island. Arguably Palmer’s combination of sound and image is not a straightforward dialectic; there can be no satisfactory synthesis: the silence of the bells simultaneously recalls Yakushima’s escape and Nagasaki’s terrible fate.

This event, like the island itself, is irresolvable, unfathomable, beyond comprehension; but it is exactly because of these things Palmer has pursued through three films the awful legacies of nuclear war and its ongoing effects on Japan. As always, *War’s End* carefully reproduces in fine, and often overlooked, detail the exact times of day, weather conditions, and moon cycle of the 9 August 1945. As yet another example of echoing and layering of the historical moment, Palmer’s work carefully reconstructs from in-depth research a visual reality, often unnoticed by the viewer, that resonates and engages with contradiction and tension in ways which are not immediately apparent. There are no answers, only further questions; there is no comfort to be drawn from Yakushima’s survival – how could there be? And yet... Maybe there might be some sense in which the enduring nature of the island signals hope, restitution, or solace. What can be said, with certainty, is that Palmer’s *War’s End* is, through its denial of closure, a fitting conclusion to this trilogy.

ⁱ Yakushima would have been attacked having been designated a preliminary target for Operation Olympic - the assault on Kyushu, the southern main island of Japan. Operation Olympic was the first phase of the wider Operation Downfall - the planned invasion of the four main islands of Japan