



Dr. Robert O. Wilson was born in Nanking on the 5th of October, 1906. The son of American missionaries, he attended college in the States and graduated from Princeton University. He received his medical degree from Harvard, in 1929, and returned to the city of his birth (now known as Nanjing) in 1936.

The following year, as Japanese soldiers drew ever-closer to Nanking, Wilson remained as a staff doctor at the University of Nanking Hospital. By the time the city fell, most of the other physicians had fled.

Wilson was the only surgeon left who could treat victims of the Nanking Massacre. His work at the hospital, and in the Safety Zone (which was established as an attack-free area), helped to save thousands of lives. He is the physician who is caring for patients in John Magee's film (historical footage shot during the time of the massacre).

Like his colleagues, Wilson kept a diary of what he witnessed. He also wrote letters to his family about the horribly injured people he treated:

The slaughter of civilians is appalling. I could go on for pages telling of cases of rape and brutality almost beyond belief. Two bayoneted corpses are the only survivors of seven street cleaners who were sitting in their headquarters when Japanese soldiers came in without warning or reason and killed five of their number and wounded the two that found their way to the hospital. (Dr. Wilson's letter to his family, 15 December 1937.)

Days later, Dr. Wilson wrote these words:

Let me recount some instances occurring in the last two days. Last night the house of one of the Chinese staff members of the university was broken into and two of the women, his relatives, were raped. Two girls, about 16, were raped to death in one of the refugee camps.

In the University Middle School where there are 8,000 people the Japs came in ten times last night, over the wall, stole food, clothing, and raped until they were satisfied. They bayoneted one little boy of eight who have [sic] five bayonet wounds including one that penetrated his stomach, a portion of omentum was outside the abdomen. I think he will live. (Dr. Wilson's letter to his family, 18 December 1937.)

In her book, *The Rape of Nanking*, Iris Chang writes about the effects of the massacre on Dr. Wilson:

Robert Wilson, the Nanking University Hospital surgeon, paid the price of Nanking with his health. His widow recalled that while other doctors on the zone committee carefully paced themselves and went to Shanghai at least once a week to catch up on sleep, Wilson recklessly worked nonstop without taking breaks.

Surgery consumed most of his energy during the day, while Japanese soldiers interrupted his sleep at night when he was called away from home time and again to stop a rape in progress. He operated, it seemed, on adrenaline alone.

Finally, his body rebelled. In 1940 violent seizures and even a mental collapse forced Wilson to return to the United States, where he rested for a year in Santa Barbara, California. He never returned to China, nor did he fully recover from the strain.

In the United States Wilson not only endured both seizures and nightmares but also experienced trouble focusing his eyes in the morning. (Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, page 186.)

Woody Harrelson plays the role of Bob Wilson in the film "Nanking," released in 2007. Steve Buscemi has the part in "John Rabe" (2009).

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See, also:

Image and Brief Bio: [John Rabe](#)

Video: [Clip from the Film of John Magee](#)

Credits:

Image of Robert O. Wilson, online courtesy Yale Divinity School Library.

Quoted passages from Robert Wilson's letters, online courtesy Yale Divinity School Library.

Quoted passage from *The Rape of Nanking*, by Iris Chang, online via Google Books.

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