

## John Gillespie Magee: Eyewitness of Nanking 1937-38



The Rev. John G. Magee was born October 10, 1884 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. After finishing high school in Connecticut, he received a B.A. from Yale University in 1906 and a B.D. from the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1911. He was ordained as a minister of the Episcopal Church and set off for China in 1912. In China he met Faith E. Backhouse, an English missionary from the China Inland Mission, whom he married in July 1921. They had four sons.

John Magee played a role in saving thousands of Chinese from being murdered by the Japanese, setting up a refugee hospital to take care of wounded soldiers and refugees, and serving as chairman of the Nanking Branch of the International Red Cross and as a member of the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone. Films taken by Magee in Nanking and sent to the West provided some of the first available visual documentation of the Nanking Massacre. After the war, Magee was a witness at the Tokyo Trial. When Magee first returned to the United States in the summer of 1938, after 28 years of service in China, he made an extensive tour to speak about the Nanking Massacre.

Source: [Yale Divinity School Library, the Nanking Massacre Project website](#)

### Excerpt of John Magee letter to his wife, December 19, 1937

The horror of the last week is beyond anything I have ever experienced. I never dreamed that the Japanese soldiers were such savages. It has been a week of murder and rape, worse, I imagine, than has happened for a very long time unless the massacre of the Armenians by the Turks was comparable. They not only killed every prisoner they could find but also a vast number of ordinary citizens of all ages. Many of them were shot down like the hunting of rabbits in the streets. There are dead bodies all over the city from the south city to Hsiakwan. Just day before yesterday we saw a poor wretch killed very near the house where we are living. So many of the Chinese are timid and when challenged foolishly start to run. This is what happened to that man. The actual killing we did not see as it took place just around the corner of a bamboo fence from where we could see. Cola went there later and said the man had been shot twice in the head. These two Jap. soldiers were no more concerned than if they had been killing a rat and never stopped smoking their cigarettes and talking and laughing. J. L. Ch'en's oldest boy, Ch'en Chang, 16 years (Chinese count) was carried off with a great body of possibly 500 from right around where we live two days ago and I think there is very little chance that he is alive. In this group were also 11 other Ssu So Ts'uen Christians. We have been able to get no trace of them since, although I gave the names of our people to the newly arrived Consul-General Tanaka yesterday. . . .

But the most horrible thing now is the raping of the women which has been going on in the most shameless way that I have ever known. The streets are full of men searching for women. Ernest and I, one or the other of us, have to stay and keep our eyes on these houses where our Christians from Hsiakwan and St. Paul's as well as many other refugees we have taken in, are located and Schultz-Pantin's house where we keep our clothing and take such meals as we can. Cola stays at the house as does another man, a Turco-Tartar who is a mechanic. The Ssu So Tsuen and San Pai Lon Christians are housed next door to us and Jap. soldiers keep going in there and robbing these people of the little that they have. It is a regular nightmare to deal with these perverted groups of men. The house where we keep our things is loaded with women and some even sleep in our dining room. They sit in the house all day in dreadful fear. Several days ago a Buddhist priest from a little temple across the street came in and said he had heard that Japanese had carried off two Buddhist nuns and begged me to take some nuns in, which I have done. The house is really packed like sardines. They sleep in the halls upstairs and down and for a while we had a mother and daughter in our bathroom. . . .

Source: P23-24, *American Missionary Eyewitnesses to the Nanking Massacre, 1937-1938* published by Yale Divinity School Library

Digital image of **Letter of John Magee to wife recording events from 8 Dec 1937 (Wed) to 5 Feb, 1938** (26 pages)

<http://divdl.library.yale.edu/ydlchina/images%5CNMP0334.pdf>

[More John Magee documentation in digital image on Yale Divinity School Library, the Nanking Massacre Project website]

<http://www.library.yale.edu/div/Nanking/findingaid.html>

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