

Mary Pickford and Questions of National Identity During WWI

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"WHEN A CANADIAN GIRL BECAME AMERICA'S SWEETHEART:" MARY PICKFORD AND QUESTIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY DURING THE WWI

It is a little known fact that several of the key figures of early American cinema were, in fact, of Canadian extraction. Pioneering writer-director-producer-actor Mack Sennett, for instance, hailed from Richmond, Québec, while May Irwin, famous for providing American cinema with one half of its first onscreen kiss, was originally from Whitby, Ontario. Similarly, each of the first three Academy Award winners for Best Actress also happened to be Canadian-born. (Mary Pickford, born in Toronto, was awarded the first Best Actress Oscar for her performance in *Coquette* in 1929, to be followed by Montréal native Norma Shearer in 1930 and Cobourg, Ontario's Marie Dressler in 1931). Unlike more obviously foreign, "Other" stars such as Pola Negri and Greta Garbo, these Canadians were, for the most part, physically and linguistically indistinguishable from their American counterparts, blending fairly seamlessly into both the fabric of the Hollywood star system and the larger, governing ideology of American society as a result. As such, their very Canadian-ness was often effaced, obscured, downplayed or forgotten, at least within the discourses of the country that they adopted as their workplace and new home. Indeed, in some cases, these Canadian performers were (somewhat paradoxically) seen and even expressly positioned as quintessential markers of American identity and nationhood. How they were understood, positioned and received by the homeland they had left however, is a subject to which comparatively little study has been afforded.

This issue becomes particularly compelling in the case of Mary Pickford, the Canadian girl who ultimately became known as "America's Sweetheart." While a great deal of attention has been paid to the way in which Pickford's star persona functioned within American society and ultimately responded to that society's needs and contingencies ⁽¹⁾, the relationship between "Little Mary" and the country of her birth has largely been ignored. How did Canadian publicity seek to cast and produce Pickford's image, in light of (and in comparison to) the strong vision of the star as an *American* icon being circulated in the US? Moreover, how did Canadian audiences react to Pickford's success in an American Industry and the apparent appropriation of the star by American society? Finally, what might the answers to these questions indicate about the needs and contingencies of Canadian society itself at the beginning of the twentieth century and the relationship of the Hollywood film industry (and particularly Pickford as a star) to that society? Admittedly, there seems to be a paucity of Canadian primary source material through which to examine this matter.

The available evidence that is accessible, however, is illuminating. A series of articles about Pickford that appeared in *Maclean's Magazine* during 1918, for instance, offers a provocative window on these issues, providing a telling contrast to the image of Pickford as "America's Sweetheart" that circulated in the American films, press and motion picture journals of the day. In fact, a comparison of the divergent ways in which Pickford's persona was produced and discussed by American and Canadian sources during 1917 and 1918 clearly illustrates the way in which the star was positioned and ostensibly came to serve as an important, loved, and socially-charged national symbol for Canadian and American audiences alike during the final years of World War I. At the same time, however, the very discrepancies between these publicity materials also begin to indicate the compelling differences between the Canadian and American societies to which Pickford's star persona responded, and the very national identities that she herself was seen to symbolize.

On the American side of the equation, it has frequently been noted that, during the years of the United States' participation in the First World War, Mary Pickford came to be seen as an important national symbol within her adopted homeland. Recognizing the patriotic potential of Pickford's plucky, indefatigable, virtuous young girl image, Studio officials sought to shape the elements of this persona into a sort of allegory of national identity, re-casting "Little Mary" in the role of the quintessential American in times of hardship such as the Great War in which the country now found itself embroiled. Perhaps most obviously, this process was intimately connected to the production and promotion of Pickford's 1917 film, *The Little American*. With this picture, as Leslie Midkiff-Debauche describes, Adolph Zukor and Jesse Lasky sought to create

a timely, nationalistic film that "would both stretch and remain faithful to the principal elements of the Pickford persona" (65), transferring the star's eternally optimistic, undefeatable, self-sacrificing image into the immediate context of the current International conflict. Apparently, Zukor and Lasky were successful in this project, for, as the *Variety* review of the film proclaimed: "It's a Pickford. 'Nuf said. Just Mary Pickford, the same Mary that one has seen in a score of other pictures, only this time she is made the central figure of a war story" (July 6, 1917). Indeed, as this review suggests, *The Little American* connected the established Mary Pickford persona to a heavily nationalistic and jingoistic war story, helping to transform the star into a quintessential image of American identity during the war years in the process.

As Angela Moore, the "typical American girl," whose "birthday ... is the same day as that of her country," (studio synopsis of film, qtd. in Midkiff-Debauche, 56) Pickford's typical gaiety, determination, innocence, and virtuousness were cleverly connected in *The Little American* to the US national character within the context of world strife. Before allowing her to perform in typical Pickford style, for instance, the film introduces Pickford's character by superimposing her portrait over a billowing American flag, immediately indicating the character-star's status as a patriotic national symbol. Later, as her travels to Europe are interrupted by a German attack, Pickford's Angela further illustrates her quintessential American-ness, bravely clutching the Stars and Stripes in her hand as the ship begins to sink. Finally, having saved the misled German-American boy through her familiar determined, plucky and loveable ways, Angela-Mary returns happily with him to the safety of the United States, before the film ends with a triumphant image of yet another compelling symbol of American identity: the Statue of Liberty. In *The Little American* then, studio officials cleverly adapted and capitalized on Pickford's already popular star image, positioning her persona as a quintessential manifestation of the American national character, and largely transforming this Canadian star into an immediately relevant symbol of American identity in the process.

Furthermore, in concert with the film itself, the publicity materials that circulated in the United States surrounding *The Little American* were also instrumental in recreating the Pickford persona as a potent symbol of the American national character. It was at this point, for instance, that Famous Players developed and promoted the monikers "America's Sweetheart" and "Our Mary" in relation to Pickford, explicitly connecting the star to patriotic action and claiming her identity for the American national cause. Posters for the film, for example, featured images of Pickford wrapped in an American flag, accompanied by the caption: "The Greatest Appeal of America's Sweetheart. Mary Pickford, the beloved girl of the USA in "The Little American" (reproduced in Midkiff-Debauche, 60). Clearly, the extremely popular Pickford was to be seen as a prime example of a "little American", one of the best sort of "girls of the USA" By the same token, press releases for the film also indicated the degree to which Pickford's work and image were to be seen as supreme embodiments of plucky, self-sacrificing American patriotism during the hard years of World War I. An article in the July 21, 1917 issue of *Motography*, for instance, stated:

At the request of Edward Harding, chairman of the executive board of the National Committee of Patriotic and Defense Societies, the new Mary Pickford-Artcraft spectacle, "The Little American," was shown at the Speakers' Training Camp last week at Chautauqua, New York. At this camp well known speakers from all over the country gathered together to receive instructions and training to help them in their tour of the nation to inspire patriotism and acquaint the public with the needs of the war." (145)

Here, Pickford and her work are cast as an example of such superior American Patriotism that the American Government itself has apparently positioned them as models to be emulated in inspiring nationalism and instilling particular conceptions of American identity throughout the country. Again, the girl from Toronto, Ontario paradoxically becomes the prime embodiment of the American national character.

In addition, publicity stories which circulated throughout the United States around this time further emphasized the patriotic elements of Pickford's "America's Sweetheart" character by detailing her participation in nationalistic American causes outside of the film world itself. In fact, the majority of publicity surrounding Pickford during the remaining years of the war called attention to her continuous, self-sacrificing work as a patriotic American citizen, regardless of whether or not the films in which she appeared were in any way related to overtly nationalistic causes or to the war itself. On July 7, 1917, for example, an article in *Motography* proclaimed:

Known throughout the nation as "America's Sweetheart," Mary Pickford is readily living up to what might

be expected of the owner of the title in the present great crisis.

Since President Wilson's declaration of war, "Our Mary" has devoted considerable time and personal effort in furthering the cause of her country. (...) Miss Pickford has spent much of her time recently at public gatherings to stimulate recruiting for both the American and British armies. By way of backing up her plea for the purchase of Liberty Bonds, she personally subscribed toward this loan up to the extent of \$100,000. Another patriotic act by "America's Sweetheart" was recently disclosed when she presented a complete ambulance to the Los Angeles Red Cross for service in France (33).

Such examples of Pickford's patriotic work were rife in the popular press of the day. In the July 14, 1917 edition of *Motography*, for example, an article entitled "Mayor Thanks 'Our Mary,'" detailed the way in which the San Francisco Mayor credited Pickford's speeches and appearances with the ultimate appropriation of more than \$11,000,000 for the city's Liberty Loan Committee (105). Similarly, the August, 1918 instalment of *Motion Picture Magazine* featured a photo of Pickford presenting Field Director Harry R. Minor with a check for \$1200.00, accompanied by the caption: "America's Sweetheart buying 'smiles' for the Soldiers" (60), while the July 28, 1917 edition of *Motography* detailed her efforts to enlist other motion picture stars to join in her charitable work with the Red Cross (184). She received coverage for leading recruitment parades, for auctioning one of her infamous curls for \$100,000 worth of Liberty Bonds, for donating toys to French war orphans, and for becoming "Godmother" to both the 143rd California Field Artillery and the 14th Aero Squadron. Even the pressbooks for *How Could You Jean?*, a 1918 film in no way connected to the war in and of itself, featured articles entitled "Mary Pickford Busy Working in Pictures and Aiding Uncle Sam" and "Uncle Sam Stops Filming of Picture: Mary Pickford's Film Work Interrupted by Patriotic Duty Call." Clearly, just like the more obvious example of *The Little American* and the publicity surrounding it then, the general press coverage of Mary Pickford during 1917 and 1918 strongly positioned her as a supreme example of patriotic, self-sacrificing American identity.

Despite the fact of her Canadian birth then, Mary Pickford was largely situated and ostensibly viewed as a central symbol of the American national character during the final years of the First World War. Indeed, as Leslie Midkiff-Debauche describes, during 1917 and 1918, "Mary Pickford came to be seen by her public as a model "little American" (70). She "was no longer only 'Little Mary,' her previous appellation; she was 'Our Mary,' representing an ideal of modern American youth and femininity" (61). Ironically, given the country of her birth, Pickford was even chosen to star in "100% American," Famous Players-Lasky's short film in aid of the 4th Liberty Loan Campaign. Importantly, as her image was slightly shifted into this vision of quintessential American girlhood during the years of the war, Pickford's public popularity within the United States only grew. In a survey conducted by *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1918, for example, fans chose Pickford as their number one favourite Hollywood star, and the accompanying article proclaimed "Mary Pickford, all-deserving, kept her first place from the start" (Dec. 1918). Obviously, Pickford as the self-sacrificing, generous, patriotic Little American was particularly attractive and relevant image to the American movie-going public in 1917 and 1918, providing audiences with an optimistic, virtuous, and apparently unconquerable vision of the American character with which they might identify and place their hopes as the country suffered through the hardships of the war. That this prime of example of what it meant to be "100% American" might actually hail from another country, was clearly not to be considered at the time.

In Canada, on the other hand, Pickford's Canadian heritage was a point of major emphasis during the final years of the war. The first article in the aforementioned *Maclean's* series of 1918, for instance, (suggestively titled "Our Mary,") begins with a quotation from Pickford that reads as follows:

Canada's my mother, you see, and we've always kept in touch. (...) Of the twenty-nine cousins I have in Canada I know of eleven who are now serving at the front. I get letters from them. I get letters from other boys over there, wonderful letters, letters which by themselves would keep me from forgetting I was a Canadian, if I ever could forget it (22).

Indeed, such attention to Pickford's Canadian-ness can be found throughout the *Maclean's* articles, as even general descriptions of the star insist on underlining her connection to Canada despite her contemporary positioning as "America's Sweetheart." In the December installment, for example, author Arthur Stringer details that "the keynote of [Pickford's] nature might even be sounded in the word 'sunny,' but it seems

more the rarified and softly-illuminating sunlight of her native North-land than the riotous and over-assertive glow of her adopted state" (40). In such instances, Canadian coverage of Mary Pickford at the moment of her development into "America's Sweetheart" seems designed to reassure the Canadian public that their star had not forsaken them or forgotten her roots, despite the compelling drive to Americanize her that could be seen in the films and publicity materials issuing from their neighbour to the South. Further however, the continuous and repeated emphasis on the country of Pickford's birth in these articles also begins to suggest a strong sense of national pride that might be developing around the large scale, unprecedented successes of this Canadian born figure. In particular, alongside this considerable emphasis on her Canadian birth, these articles further foreground Pickford's extreme, worldwide success and her preeminence within the American film industry. "Even the great Griffith," Stringer details, "proclaimed that if he was ever in doubt about a motion-picture production he would rather have the opinion of Mary Pickford than of any man in the business" ("More Intimate Mary Pickford," 75). As such then, Canadian publicity surrounding Mary Pickford in the final year of the war can also be seen to illustrate the star's potential importance as a national symbol, here Canadian rather than American. The articles repeatedly emphasize both Pickford's successes and her country of origin, thus casting her in the role of a supremely successful Canadian in whose reflected glory the Canadian public might happily bask.

Moreover, building on this particularly patriotic construal of Pickford's career and identity, the 1918 *Maclean's* articles further indicate the star's potential symbolic significance within the country of her birth by elaborating the specific importance of her Canadian upbringing and heritage to her current American achievements. In the October article, for example, Pickford herself is suggested to attribute the spirit, determination and work ethic that were largely seen as instrumental elements of her success specifically to her years growing up in Toronto. As she says:

There's one big thing that Canada gave me. (...) It's what I suppose you'd call the zest of life. It may seem a sort of paradox, but it made me rich by what it denied me. It brought me into the world without a silver spoon in my mouth, but it taught me the lesson which the sterner laws of the North always seem to teach its sons and daughters, that you must look ahead and not think only of the passing moment, that bigness should belong to your own life as well as to the map of your own country, and that if you come from the land of the beaver you should always be happy in working like a beaver" (19).

Here, Pickford herself (or Stringer speaking for Pickford?) explicitly connects elements of her wildly popular and successful persona specifically to her Canadian background, recasting the image in a distinctively patriotic light for Canadian fans and providing a potential avenue by which they might experience and express national pride in the process. Similarly, the charity and war work that were essential elements of Pickford's fashioning as the ideal "Little American" in the US are also recast in particularly Canadian terms by Stringer in these articles, here related not to a sense of American patriotic duty, but to a deeply ingrained generosity of spirit that was bred in large part by Pickford's experience of poverty during her Canadian youth. "I have been poor much longer than I have been the other way," she is quoted as saying in the December article. "And being poor taught me to appreciate the things that I've been able to get" (41). In this manner then, the Canadian publicity which circulated about Pickford at the moment of her transformation into "America's Sweetheart" (at least as evidenced by this one set of articles), again points to the way in which Pickford was cast as an important national symbol within the country of her birth, here further emphasizing the star's ties to her Canadian homeland and re-positioning several of the quintessential elements of her popular "American" persona as specifically Canadian in origin.

Equally intriguing, however, is the fact that these articles do not expressly address the American attempts to appropriate Pickford's image as a national symbol at all. Indeed, not once throughout the *Maclean's* articles is explicit mention made of the contemporary positioning of Pickford within the United States as the model "Little American," and, while frequently referring to the star as "Our Mary" or "Little Mary," Stringer never makes use of the familiar "America's Sweetheart" epithet which was so common in the US at the time. Truly, in lieu of explicitly responding (bitterly, ironically, or otherwise) to the fact that this "Daughter of the Dominion" was being heralded as a prime representative of American-ness, these articles rather seem content to reemphasize Pickford's ties to Canada, and to implicitly position her extreme importance to the United States as yet another factor attesting to her considerable achievements. The fact that the young Canadian star had become "the best known girl in America" (*More Intimate Mary Pickford*: 99) is repeatedly

emphasized and cast in generally positive terms throughout these articles, reflecting a strong sense of national pride in this achievement and ultimately belying an underlying assumption that such American acceptance is a necessary and important marker of Canadian success. Here then, these articles begin to point to the sort of deference to assumed American superiority that writers such as Paula Sperdakos have located as central to the Canadian consciousness (133), celebrating and measuring Pickford's achievements in terms of her acceptance by the American industry and its audiences, while never thinking to question the need for the star to leave her home country and seek success elsewhere. Indeed, in the publicity surrounding Mary Pickford during the final years of World War I, the uniquely Canadian sense that the country must relinquish its talent and measure its successes by the degree to which they function within the established systems of greater national powers comes clearly to the fore. As such, as evidenced by these materials at least, Pickford's specifically American stardom seems paradoxically to have become a central point of national pride for Canadians in 1918, reflecting the important way in which the star served as a potent, patriotic symbol for a Canadian nation perpetually hindered by a somewhat prevalent sense of inferiority.

Furthermore, this deeply entrenched Canadian inferiority complex is further indicated by these publicity materials surrounding Pickford in terms of the way in which they position and understand the star as a potential locus for establishing North American unity. While, for Americans, Pickford was required to downplay her true national identity and serve as the quintessential US subject, for Canadians, the star was rather positioned as a nexus at which Canadian and American elements could coalesce, and by which Canadians might ultimately prove their similarity and comparable worth to their neighbours to the south. Along these lines, in the December installment of the *Maclean's* series, Pickford is quoted as saying:

I love Canada and I love the States, and I've always wanted to see them brought closer together. The work we've been doing here, in fact, has been bringing the two countries closer together, for when you laugh and cry over the same pictures and the same characters and sympathize with the same ideals you are no longer strangers to one another. And now that we are not only sympathizing with the same ideals, but standing side by side and fighting for the same ideals, we are really one people!" (39)

While American films and publicity materials of the day generally disavowed Pickford's Canadian heritage and positioned her strictly as a model American then, Canadian publicity such as this seems instead to attempt to negotiate the complex issue of Pickford's national identity and to situate her career as a successful example of a hybrid "Canadian-American-ness." Though, in one sense, this discrepancy might be seen strictly as the result of propagandistic desires to create solidarity between two allied countries of a world at war, or as a response to the practical contingencies of Pickford's situation (Canadian audiences would have to recognize the fact that she lived and worked in the US, while her Canadian birth was not necessarily apparent to American spectators), it might also be taken to suggest a compelling difference between the two countries for which Pickford came to serve as national symbol. In particular, in contrast to the self-confident and somewhat Imperialistic nature reflected in the American willingness to efface Pickford's Canadian-ness and subsume it in the creation of a new American identity, the Canadian understanding of the star as a prime example of the similarities between Canadians and their American neighbours clearly points to the prevalent sense of cultural inferiority that has been said to plague Canada as a "twice-colonized" country. Essentially, Pickford becomes an important symbol of the fact that Canadians *can* make it within the American world, a potentially soothing indication that maybe we Canadians aren't so inferior after all.

At the same moment that these articles use Pickford's persona to assert the ultimate similarity (and thus the similar worth) of Canadian and American citizens, however, they also seem to strain against that very comparison and to allude to areas at which (in Stringer's opinion at least) the Canadian identity, for all its insecurities, should actually be seen as superior to its American counterpart. Again, this is achieved through the particular construal of Pickford's star persona and the specific positioning of her complicated national identity. In particular, Stringer seems to be at pains throughout the series of articles to illustrate the numerous ways in which Pickford differs from the majority of Hollywood stars, pointing variously to her artistry, her intelligence and sincerity, her moral fibre, and her modesty as key points at which this Canadian star diverges from and surpasses her typical American counterparts. In the December article, for instance, he details Pickford's integrity and her unwillingness to participate in the frivolities and debauchery of Hollywood, as well as her supreme skill as a serious actress and great love for the stage. In the September and October installments, he affords a great deal of space to Pickford's considerable intelligence, education,

kindness and humility and the way in which these attributes have not been corrupted by the less admirable Hollywood atmosphere in which she lives and works.

Perhaps most striking in this regard, however, is Stringer's explicit claim to Pickford's unique honesty and sincerity amongst Hollywood players, and the way in which this assertion comes up within the context of a discussion of Pickford's national identity. Following a segment in which he and Pickford discuss her Toronto birth, Stringer writes, "that girl, remarkably dissimilar to her smaller sister-stars, was still honest and simple and direct enough to abjure the fabrication of those pedigreed ancestors so dear to the heart of the garden variety of actresses" ("Our Mary," 102), explicitly casting Pickford's apparently atypical honesty within the framework of her willingness to embrace her Canadian roots. Here then, these Canadian publicity materials that circulated in the final years of the War illustrate yet another way in which Pickford came to serve as an important and socially-charged national symbol in the country of her birth even as she functioned as "America's Sweetheart," providing a site for the proclamation and illustration of "superior" elements of the Canadian identity for a populace that so frequently downplayed its own potential significance.

Indeed, by combining his discussion of Pickford's unique and superior attributes with continual emphases on her Canadian identity throughout these articles, Stringer seems to implicitly connect these elements to Pickford's country of birth, to claim them as Canadian, and to further assert their importance in determining Pickford's ultimate American success. As he maintains, "one cannot ... become the best-known screen-star in the world without having ample reasons for achieving, and what is more important, retaining that position" ("Our Mary," 100). It is Pickford's unique attributes, he suggests, which are at least partially derived from being a Canadian, that largely guarantee her continued worldwide pre-eminence. In this sense, these articles seem to indicate, Canadian-ness itself becomes a key element of achieving success in American and world society. While Canada itself may not offer significant opportunities for large scale, international success, (and while its pervasive sense of inferiority may prevent it from ever doing so) the unique elements and attributes that the country instills in its citizens are positioned as important factors in achieving distinction within the American and international world. As such, the particular Canadian production of Mary Pickford's star persona in the final years of the First World War comes to position the star as a complex and multifaceted symbol of national identity in which Canadian audiences might invest and take pride, and through which they might reassure themselves of their potential national importance within world culture as a whole. "America's Sweetheart," these articles seem designed to reassure their readers, is in fact distinctively Canadian, not only equal to, but in many ways superior to her American counterparts, and thus supremely able to achieve success within even American society.

Clearly then, the complex and contrasting constructions of Mary Pickford's star persona in the US and Canada during the final moments of World War One provide a compelling illustration of the multiple ways in which Hollywood star texts can function within and speak to various societies. Indeed, Pickford's image in these years was crafted and negotiated in Canada and the United States in extremely specific and individual manners that allowed this one woman to simultaneously serve as an important national symbol for both the Canadian and American populaces - a sort of distinctively Canadian Little American. At the same time, the varying ways in which Pickford's persona was constructed and seemed to address its various audiences also offers some compelling insights into the nature and contingencies of the specific societies to which it ostensibly spoke, ranging from the Imperialist nature of early 20th century America and its specifically felt needs upon entering the First World War, to the pervasive influence of the Canadian inferiority complex and the way in which a given star personality might come to embody a multifaceted and reassuring site of Canadian national power and pride.

That said however, the observations advanced in this paper and their provocative implications must currently remain at the level of exploration and hopefully generative conjecture. Indeed, the relative lack of accessible primary source material (particularly on the Canadian side) renders the capacity for any sort of large-scale generalizations across time, space, and individuals (an already dubious project) supremely difficult and problematic. Compelling questions still remain relating to the Canadian construction of Pickford's persona in contexts outside of this one illuminating series of articles, for example, and, perhaps most importantly, to the reception and negotiation of her star text by actual Canadian audiences in various times and communities. Hopefully, such research will be undertaken in the future. Indeed, considering the supremely rich, interesting, and socially-charged insights that can be gleaned from just this limited series of 1918 magazine articles, this

seems to be an area of inquiry which definitely merits further research, not only in relation to the specific and emblematic case of "America's Sweetheart" outlined above, but also within the larger context of the manifold other important Canadian stars of the early Hollywood industry.

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