

MARY PICKFORD: CANADA'S SILENT SIREN, AMERICA'S SWEETHEART

Peggy Dymond Leavey
Toronto: Dundurn, 2011

REVIEWED BY LISA SHARIK

In the history of film celebrities, Mary Pickford's name should be as widely recognized as Charlie Chaplin's, but that is not the case. Given the incredible contributions that she made to the movie industry, this fact is both sad and shocking. Mary Pickford was the first film superstar, the first woman to earn a million dollars a year, and for a time, the most famous face in the world. Furthermore, she was an actress who is credited with revolutionizing the acting method, a director, producer, film executive, and one of the founders of United Artists and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. With such accomplishments she is, without a doubt, the most important woman in the history of motion pictures.

Although typically known as America's Sweetheart, Mary Pickford was in fact born and raised in Toronto, Canada in 1892. Thus, Peggy Dymond Leavey gets it right when she refers to Mary Pickford as Canada's **Silent Siren**. This Quest biography, which includes nearly a dozen photographs from various periods of Mary Pickford's life, adds greatly not only to the life and times of Mary Pickford, but also provides much insight into the innovations of the movie industry, from silent films to talkies.

Mary Pickford was born Gladys Louise Smith on April 8, 1892 to parents Charlotte Hennessey and John Charles Smith. When her father John died in 1898, Gladys was nearly adopted by Dr. George Smith and his wife, due to the economic

hardship that her mother Charlotte now faced. Despite the promise of a better life, Gladys was shocked to realize that she would be separated from her two siblings, as well as her mother. Gladys broke down and begged her mother to take her back home. Charlotte agreed to cancel the adoption and from that day forward, Gladys took it upon herself to be the family breadwinner, to ensure that the family would always stay together. Despite the gruelling years of hard work that lay in store for Gladys, had the adoption gone through, the production of silent films, as well as the history of motion of pictures in general would have suffered a tremendous loss.

In 1900, at the age of 7, Gladys made her stage debut in *The Silver King*. This opportunity came about by way of Mr. Murphy, the stage manager for the Cummings Stock Company, who had been boarding at the Smith's house since 1899. Little did Charlotte know that this theatrical debut would snowball into six years of travelling the rails with her children, performing with various production companies.

In 1907, while living in New York City with thousands of other underpaid actors, Gladys decided that if she did not get a role on Broadway, where the money was better and the production did not travel, she would leave acting behind. Thus, with her fierce determination, Gladys Smith marched into Broadway producer David Belasco's office, where she was stopped by the office boy. A very vocal argument erupted, that as luck would have it caught the ear of the great man himself. When Gladys left the office that day, not only did she get the audition (and later the part) but she also got a new name, Mary Pickford, a name that would soon become famous worldwide.

Two years later, after much hesitation, Mary Pickford made her screen

debut in *Her First Biscuit*. Becoming involved with movies during the advent of the industry provided Mary with an understanding of how things worked, as well as insight into how productions could be improved. These early experiences, along with her strength and independence, led her to become not only a great, versatile actress, but also a shrewd businesswoman who negotiated her own contracts and had complete control over her films.

Mary Pickford starred in 200 films, in her 25-year career (a number unheard of today). Given her arduous childhood, as the family breadwinner, it comes as no surprise that the majority of characters she portrayed were strong, feisty, and independent. Although the transition to talkies was difficult, Mary did win the Academy Award for Best Actress for *Coquette* in 1930, her first ever talkie and the first Academy Award for an actress. Married to the swashbuckling silent film star Douglas Fairbanks in 1920, the couple were the start of the celebrity craze in Hollywood, a facet of Hollywood life that continues to this day.

Lisa Sharik has spent the last 15 years immersed in academia. She received both her Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Women's Studies and her Masters in Social Justice & Equity from Brock University. She is currently on leave from her Ph.D. studies in Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies at York University.