

By Marc Glassman



Toronto-born Mary Pickford, "America's Sweetheart," in *Little Lord Fauntleroy*.

**Pickford:
The Woman Who Made Hollywood.**

By Eileen Whitfield. Macfarlane, Walter & Ross, publishers. 1997.

**Marie Dressler:
The Unlikeliest Star.**

By Betty Lee. The University Press of Kentucky, publishers. 1997.

On April 6, 1918, the first anniversary of the United States's entry into the First World War, throngs of people lined Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington D.C., eager to catch a glimpse of the four great stars who had come to launch a major war-bond campaign. Douglas Fairbanks, Charles Chaplin, Mary Pickford and Marie Dressler were at the height of their fame then, fully capable of inducing tens of thousands of their fans, and by proxy the entire nation, into spending millions to save the world for democracy.

Ironically, of the four major players at this historic rally, only one, the athletic Fairbanks, had actually been born in America. Chaplin, the lovably comic Londoner, eventually was forced out of America during the anti-Communist hysteria of the early 1950s. And those

acclaimed American nationalists, Mary Pickford and Marie Dressler, had been born 80 kilometres apart in Ontario, Canada during the latter part of the 19th century.

After decades of neglect, Pickford and Dressler are now the subjects of two well-researched biographies. Not too surprisingly, both books are written by highly regarded Toronto female journalists, Eileen Whitfield of *Toronto Life* and Betty Lee, formerly of the *Globe and Mail*. Though neither work has a clearly stated agenda, it seems reasonable to assume that Whitfield and Lee were attracted to these long-gone icons because they were powerful Canadian women. After 100 years, Pickford and Dressler, loved and forgotten in their adopted country, have been reclaimed by their homeland.

Dressler and Pickford had wildly contrasting careers but the patterns in their lives have a surprising symmetry. Both had to deal with failures as fathers: Pickford's alcoholic papa died before she was six while Dressler's all too alive one drove her out of the house by the time she was 14. Perhaps as a reaction, they didn't keep their real names. Leila Koerber turned into Marie Dressler while Gladys Smith became Mary Pickford, but both remained devoted to their mothers. Neither had much formal education. In both cases, the stage became their life by adolescence. Both actresses had to work hard for years, doing one-nighters for road shows and the vaudeville circuit before success came to them. And when success arrived, the names of major producers, Joe Weber in Dressler's case, David Belasco's in Pickford's, were associated with their celebrityhood.

When it comes to cinema, Pickford's and Dressler's lives diverge. After encountering the strangely abusive and romantic presence of D.W. Griffith in 1909, Pickford reluctantly gave up the stage (apart from one brief reprise with Belasco three years later). With Pickford, Griffith had found cinema's first great star. Whitfield makes the case that the mature Griffith was attracted to the teenaged Pickford and that their sexual roundelay set off sparks that makes a film like *New York Hat* still impressive today. Adolph Zukor, one of the great moguls of cinema, supplanted both Griffith and Belasco as a father figure after 1912, guiding Pickford through a series of roles as feisty children.

Dressler, by contrast, was much older than Pickford and spent the majority of her career on stage. A naturally gifted comedienne, singer and dancer, Dressler was a legend on Broadway. Although she scored a huge success in 1914 with Chaplin in *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, Dressler's reputation remained as a giant of the theatre until 1927 when she returned to Hollywood to score her final, lasting triumphs.

Both actresses won Oscars for Best Actress, Pickford for *Coquette* in 1928/1929 and Dressler for *Min and Bill* in 1930/1931. (In between, the Montreal-born Norman Shearer won for *The Divorcee*.) Dressler and Pickford shared a close friend and ally, scenarist Frances Marion who understood their appeal with the public and was capable of constructing scripts for both of them.

Intriguingly, both Pickford and Dressler battled against their public personas. For Pickford that meant essaying unpopular adult roles like *Kiki* and *Rosita* instead of merely reprising *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* or *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. As a founder of United Artists, the wife of Douglas Fairbanks and a mature, sophisticated woman, the strain of playing adolescent girls while well into her 30s must have been telling on Pickford. That, along with the coming of sound, seems to have destroyed her confidence. Her Oscar was Pickford's valedictory to cinema. The final 40 years of her life were a sad coda in which she slowly drank herself to death, while surrounded by her millions.

Dressler was a great clown who wanted to be an aristocrat. Even acceptance by the Vanderbilts and the Stuyvesants wasn't enough for her. It was only with the parts of Old Marthy in *Anna Christie* opposite Garbo and her Oscar-winning role as the motherly Min to Wallace Berry's Bill that Dressler was able to ascend to the level of tragedienne. For Dressler, always the artist, those acclaimed roles confirmed her as a person of "finer feelings," a true member of the nobility. Regrettably, soon after those triumphs, Dressler succumbed to cancer.

Creating credible biographical portraits of people from past eras is a difficult task. Although Dressler and Pickford appeared in talkies, few of their intimate friends are alive today. Whitfield and Lee deserve praise for their painstaking efforts to recount the tales of these two Canadian giants of early cinema. ■