

The Girl from God's Country: Nell Shipman and the Silent Cinema

by Kay Armatage

Reviewed by Chris Blakeman

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HISTORICALLY, Canada is one of the least significant centres of feature film production among the developed nations. Although this has dramatically changed in the past 20 years, in the formative years of early cinema Canada's output was almost negligible. The United States gave us D.W. Griffith's towering *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and hugely influential *Intolerance* (1916). France produced *Queen Elizabeth* (1912), starring Sarah Bernhardt, one of the greatest actors of the age. The 1912 historical epic *Quo Vadis?* came out of Italy. Canada's contribution was *Back to God's Country* (1919), a ludicrously bad, almost incoherent melodrama that has two minor distinctions: one, it features the first full-frontal female

nudity of a "star" in the history of cinema, coming long before Hedy Lamarr's more famous nude swim in *Ecstasy* (1933); and two, it's by far the highest-grossing Canadian film made during the silent era. Sex sold, even in 1919.

The star, co-producer and co-writer of *Back to God's Country* was Nell Shipman (1892–1970), a minor Canadian-born actress/writer/producer who had some success in California in outdoor adventure films. Her first major studio picture, *God's Country and the Woman* (1915), was a commercial success and led to substantial contracts with Vitagraph, Fox and Lasky. Although she was a pioneer in film, she was hardly the only one. During the free-for-all scramble in the early days of commercial cinema—before there was a Hollywood or a studio system—there were many examples of successful and powerful women in the business, and Canada provided two of the most successful and powerful, Mary Pickford and Norma Shearer, plus a handful of top-flight comedians and screen beauties.

The Victoria-born Shipman was neither blessed with the beauty nor the comic timing of her more-successful contemporaries, but she was a scrappy lass who was determined to make movies and be a star in an age when proper ladies didn't engage in this sort of thing. Acting since the age of 14 in California, she married the much older Canadian producer/con man Ernest Shipman in 1910 when she was 18. After the success of *Back to God's Country*, which was shot on location in northern Alberta along the Lesser Slave Lake and in California on the Kern River, Nell left Ernest and went back to the United States with Bert Van Tuyle, the production manager on *God's Country*, where she established an independent company specializing in outdoor adventure films. However, she left no mark on film history, not

one of her films is a work of art and nowhere did she leave an indelible image of an artist who transcended her maudlin material. She is not listed in any of the standard film encyclopedias or guides (except for *Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film*).

Enter stage left, Kay Armatage, an associate professor of women and cinema studies at the University of Toronto, who has engaged in what seems to be a career-long quest to resurrect Shipman's star status. The result of her labours is *The Girl from God's Country: Nell Shipman and the Silent Cinema*, a convoluted and academically laden "working biography" that tries very hard, but fails, to convince the reader that Shipman was anything other than another failed Hollywood wannabe who made some very bad choices in men. A film pioneer perhaps, but one who got lost in the wilderness and ended her years as a bag lady in New York, sleeping in subways because she couldn't afford shelter. When Shipman applied for help from the Motion Picture Relief Fund, her claim was rejected because she did not meet its eligibility requirements. This rejection seems to be the jumping-off point for Armatage, and her book is full of righteous anger against the Hollywood (read male) establishment that failed to recognize Shipman as one of its pioneering figures (and a Canadian to boot).

Armatage writes in her introduction: "Fighting for a middle ground between heroic fantasies of empowerment or resistance and the (un)pleasures of negativity, while acknowledging the scholarship of writers whose discourse emphasizes liminality, ambiguity, and paradox, I have resolutely tried not to make spurious or extraordinary claims for the works or to press them into the various fashionable moulds of theoretical cinematic discourse." With chapters entitled "Historians and Historiography" and "Femininity, Interspecies Communications, and Feminine Desire," she proceeds to fill 350 pages (plus over 800 notes) with extraordinary claims about the importance of Shipman's career.

Not content to write a conventional biography—given the slight importance of Shipman as a filmmaker, this is probably a good strategy—Armatage gives us chapter after chapter of revisionist feminist history of the silent era. Fascinating, I'm sure, for the members of the Canadian Film Studies Association and Armatage's students, who provide her with a captive audience, but for the uninitiated reader the gloss-over factor kicks in early.

In addition, the book has several factual errors such as the claim that "There remains now only one annual festival of women's films (in Creteil, France)," when a quick hit on Google under "womensfilmfestivals" comes up with 46 annual festivals worldwide including the one in St. John's, Newfoundland, which started in 1989. *Back to God's Country* was based on a book by James Oliver Curwood (1878–1927), an American pulp novelist who had great success with stories about the Canadian North. Armatage rightly claims that "Many of Curwood's novels were made into films. In addition to the Shipman vehicles and their remakes, the list continued well into the 1950s." Well, actually, no. Again a quick hit on Google will reveal that Curwood stories were still being filmed as recently as 1995; and, indeed, there was a second Canadian feature based on a Curwood story—Don Haldane's *Nikki, Wild Dog of the North* (1961).

The Girl from God's Country is plagued with the kind of radical chic that infiltrated the 1970s and introduced an ironical ennui to popular North American culture. This appears to impair Armatage's ability to distinguish—for fear of lacking a liberal sensibility—good from bad. At one point in her book, she confesses that "[Shipman] seems a lot like me." One can only hope that this is the end of her obsession with "Canada's first star," and the rest of us will be spared yet another "complete" retrospective of Nell Shipman's films at the Toronto International Film Festival where Armatage is a long-time programmer.

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