

Career Overview, Model # 2

Jeanie Macpherson

May 18, 1888 - August 26, 1946

Jeanie Macpherson is best known as Cecil B. DeMille's screenwriter since she worked so closely with the director-producer from 1915 through the silent era and into the sound era for nearly thirty years. Like many others, she appears to have begun her career on the performance side, as a dancer and then as an actress. Early sources refer to her acting for D.W. Griffith at Biograph and then the Edison Company before she went on to Universal. At Universal, Macpherson began to write as well as act, and possibly even to direct. She is credited with directing the one-reel *The Tarantula* (1916) in a 1916 *Photoplay* article that refers to the popularity and profitability of the film, although Slide cannot confirm this. He does, however, say that when the film negative was destroyed by accident, she was asked to reshoot the film since director Edwin August was no longer with Universal.

While some sources have said that Jeanie Macpherson was fired from Universal, Slide says that DeMille urged her to quit and go to work for him at what was then the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company and which would later become Famous Players-Lasky Corporation. Of the forty-eight silent films Higashi lists as produced and/or directed by DeMille during this period, Macpherson is given scenario credit on twenty-seven. The question of their mode of working together is complicated by their relationship. Summing up the generally accepted version, Higashi refers to that relationship as one of DeMille's "more well-known liaisons." (244) Higashi also notes the contradictoriness of the record on the significance of Macpherson's creative contribution in her collaboration with DeMille. In an interview in 1957 DeMille says: "She was not a good writer. She would bring in wonderful ideas but she could not carry a story all the way through in writing. Her name is on many things because she wrote with me. I carried the story and she would bring me many, many ideas." But Jesse Lasky's version from a memo in 1915 differs: "Cecil actually does little writing himself as Miss Macpherson does all the continuity while

Cecil advises and changes the important points or situations in the scenario.” Another story is told in the salary records of the Famous Players - Lasky Corporation. In 1918, Macpherson is making less than Marion Fairfax but more than Beulah Dix Flebbe, although by the mid 1920s, she is the highest paid female employee in the scenario department, surpassing DeMille’s brother William on the pay scale. (See Famous Players-Lasky Corp. Salaries, March 23, 1918)

In other ways, DeMille supported Jeanie Macpherson, referring to her often in his autobiography and crediting her there with the title of his 1917 film about Joan of Arc, a star vehicle for Geraldine Farrar. (DeMille, 171) Macpherson titled *Joan the Woman*, DeMille says, to “emphasize the humanity” over the sainthood of the historical figure. In 1924, DeMille also made some attempts to be sure that Macpherson had the rights to the original stories that she had written for him. Significantly, these included *Forbidden Fruit*, *Adam’s Rib*, *The Little American*, *Don’t Change Your Husband*, and *The Ten Commandments*. (Higaski, 227) Macpherson is also credited on at least one other DeMille blockbuster, *The Cheat* (1915), the Gloria Swanson vehicles *Male and Female* (1919) and *Manslaughter* (1922), and many of the melodramas of marriage and divorce for which he was famous.

Much more work needs to be done on DeMille’s paternalism which encouraged the devotion of women such as his talented secretary Gladys Rosson and academy-award winning editor Anne Bauchens, both of whom, like Macpherson, never married. DeMille’s financial support seems to have extended to Macpherson’s mother, Mrs. Claire MacPherson (different spelling) and even included helping Jeanie to pay her back taxes and rescuing her from bankruptcy. The DeMille Collection files at Brigham Young University, however, appear to have been purged of any correspondence that would clarify the nature of their relationship. We are left with the ambiguity of documents like Macpherson’s own portrait of the producer titled merely “DeMille.” Here she defends him fiercely, arguing for seeing his childlike side, and working hard (in flowery prose style) to soften him in the light of the record of his cold monomania: “Scintillating, dominant and magnetic. Or as shy as a boy at graduation is Cecil B. De Mille.

A connoisseur of rare tapestries, and gems, and human beings.” Jeanie Macpherson’s own capabilities should not be in question, however, as much evidence points to her resourcefulness—to her interest in flying , to give only the most well known example.

Jane Gaines

Bibliography:

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(Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1959).

Higashi, Sumiko. *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley:
University of California Press, 1994). See for filmography - complete credits.

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Filmography: Jeanie Macpherson as screenwriter

The Captive, 1915; *Chimmie Fadden Out West*, 1915 (Sc.: Cecil B. DeMille and Jeanie Macpherson);
The Cheat, 1915 (Sc.: Hector Turnbull and Jeanie Macpherson); *Temptation*, 1916 (Sc.: Cecil B.
DeMille and Jeanie Macpherson); *The Golden Chance*, 1916; *The Heart of Nora Flynn*, 1916; *The
Dream Girl*, 1916; *Joan the Woman*, 1916; *Romance of the Redwoods*, 1917 (Sc.: Cecil B. DeMille and
Jeanie Macpherson); *The Little American*, 1917; *The Woman God Forgot*, 1917; *The Devil Stone*,

1917; *The Whispering Chorus*, 1918; *Old Wives for New*, 1918; *Till I Come Back to You*, 1918; *Don't Change Your Husband*, 1919; *For Better, For Worse*, 1919; *Male and Female*, 1919; *Something to Think About*, 1920; *Forbidden Fruit*, 1921; *The Affairs of Anatol*, 1921; *Saturday Night*, 1922; *Manslaughter*, 1922; *Adam's Rib*, 1923; *The Ten Commandments*, 1923; *Triumph*, 1923; *The Golden Bed*, 1925.

Archival - Film Print Sources

The Butler and the Maid Prod. Thomas A. Edison, Inc. (Thomas A. Edison, Inc. US 1912) Cast: Jeanie MacPherson; si, b&w; 35mm. 1 reel of 1 (inc.) 191 ft. Archive: LOC. English intertitles.

The Affairs of Anatol. Prod./dir. Cecil B. DeMille , sc.: Jeanie Macpherson (Famous Players-Lasky Corporation/Paramount Pictures US 1921) si, b&w; 35mm, 9 reels of 9, 8508 ft. Archive: LOC. English intertitles.

The Little American. Prod./dir. Cecil B. DeMille sc.: Jeanie Macpherson (Artcraft Pictures Corp./Mary Pickford Film Corp. US 1917) si, b&w 6 reels of 6, 1996 ft. Archive: LOC. English intertitles.