

The many faces of *Madeleine de Verchères*

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Rather than discuss one film that has forever disappeared, I thought I would consider a group of films related to this disappearance. They focus on a character closely linked to the history of Canada. Canadian cinema is not particularly rich in films with a historical focus; yet, before the advent of talkies, some producers did make attempts in that direction. The British American Film Manufacturing Company (BRIAM) produced *The Battle of the Long Sault* (Frank H. Crane, 1912), the first fiction film funded by Canadian investors, though its promoter was an American who had come to Quebec to prepare other films inspired by historical events in Canada. In the same period, the Canadian Bioscope Company produced *Evangeline* (E.P. Sullivan/William H. Cavanaugh, 1913), a dramatization of the deportation of Acadians, based on a poem by Longfellow. Neither film has survived.

The Battle of the Long Sault told the story of Dollard des Ormeaux, then a glorious hero of the history of New France who has since been discredited. The film presented the rivalry between the Iroquois (Mohawks) and French colonial settlers. This two-reel action film offered spectators what they loved best: costumes, fights, suspense, crowd scenes, and acts of heroism. According to the press in Montreal, the film, which was presented at the Lyric Hall and at Ouimetoscope, was a great success – so great a success, in fact, that it incited the BRIAM to produce another film of the same kind. This time, they chose an equally famous heroine as the star, Madeleine de Verchères (1678-1747); at age 15, she and other women and children valiantly defended their fort against the Iroquois in 1692. The story of Madeleine is a legend based on historical events. In the view of historian Marcel Trudel, Madeleine created her own legend, telling and retelling her story over a 40-year period without anyone contradicting her version of events. It is worth stating that the subject was hardly new, since the Kalem Company had already produced *Fighting the Iroquois in Canada* in 1910, a short (240-m) film about the heroine's strong-willed defence of the fort against Iroquois assaults.

As it had done for *The Battle of the Long Sault*, the BRIAM appealed to Natives in Kahnawake to appear as extras in the film and for the right to shoot in the reservation. Once again, the producers were planning to use Chief Joe Beauvais in their project, who had experience in movies (in addition to *The Battle of the Long Sault*, he also took part in L.O. Armstrong's *Hiawatha*); however, just as the

production got under way, he became ill and died. As a result, the company announced in March 1913 that it was planning to shoot *Madeline* [sic] *de Verchères* with Olive S. Pinckey in the title role. The film was never screened publicly despite newspaper announcements of its imminent release. The reason for this setback is unknown. The fascination exerted by this historical character continued unabated, and two years later, in August 1915, newspapers announced that a new production of *Madeleine de Verchères* was in the works. Unfortunately, nothing came of this project. Was the young heroine stricken by a curse?

Finally, at the beginning of the 1920s, fortune smiled once again on Madeleine de Verchères. In September 1922, the company Le Bon Cinéma National brought together a production team in Kahnawake for *Madeleine de Verchères*. The film was directed by Joseph-Arthur Homier, produced by Arthur Larente, scripted by Emma Gendron, and starred Estelle Bélanger. The five-reel feature was released on November 25 of that year. It was the first Quebec feature made for theatrical release. A few days prior to its premiere, newspapers called it “one of the most beautiful products made in this country. This will be an appealing and colourful historical spectacle.” The objective of Le Bon Cinéma was to endow Montreal with a large studio “where appealing films of an educational, historical, or dramatic nature will be produced. Our history is filled with interesting events that we would love to see on the big screen. There is no lack of historians to write scripts and young people from [...] to play the parts of our heroes are legion. [...] We hope that the management of Le Bon Cinéma will receive from our fellow citizens all the encouragement they deserve and their enterprise will be fruitful and successful in establishing one of the world’s most important industries right here.”

Finally, on December 11, 1922, crowds gathered at théâtre Saint-Denis in Montreal to see this latest re-enactment of an event from our national history: “scene after captivating scene make this film the most interesting history lesson we’ve ever had,” wrote a chronicler at *La Presse*. The film was discussed in newspapers until April 1923. We may suppose that it was shown elsewhere in Quebec. Unfortunately, neither the film or the screenplay were preserved – a major loss for our cinema. The film’s subject and its ambitious scale were clearly signs of a will to national affirmation that has always inspired a small segment of Canadian film producers. At one point or another, all national cinemas face the question of representing their national history. The disappearance of important milestones from the era of silent film is a serious obstacle in perceiving and analyzing this particular issue. Films such as these expressed a desire by Canadians to establish a national industry that owed nothing to foreign interests. This is an important point to emphasize regardless of the quality of the work that was produced.

The various players who worked together to produce the film occupy an important place in our history and are representative of certain aspirations regarding the cinema. Let us briefly review their careers. Photographer Joseph-Arthur Homier (1875-1934), who directed his first film in 1922, *Oh! Oh! Jean*, joined forces with distributor Arthur Larente to establish Le Bon Cinéma National to produce an epic on Madeleine de Verchères. Later, he collaborated with screenwriter Emma Gendron to produce a new film, *La Drogue fatale*. Though his career was cut short because his films did not generate the expected financial results, he deserves to be recognized as Quebec's first ever feature-film director. Arthur Larente, owner of the Cinématographe, a theatre hall located at 65 Ste-Catherine Street East, started shooting newsreels in 1907 for screening in his hall, before reorienting his career toward distribution. He was active as a distributor until the Second World War. As for Emma Gendron (born in 1904), she was a young journalist at *Samedi* and *La Minerve*. Following her adventure in movies, her name appeared in periodicals that she either founded or managed, such as *Le Bon Loisir* and *La Revue de Manon*. Her interest in writing extended as well to the stage and the novel. She was clearly a person who aspired to play a non-traditional role in Quebec society, ply an unusual trade for a woman (writing and journalism), and pursue the adventure of writing for the screen.

Most Canadian shorts and features from the era of silent film have disappeared. Our collective memory of the cinema of that time rests not on works that we may watch and enjoy, but on written accounts uncovered by historians in the past 25 years. These losses are all the more saddening in light of the fact that Canadian film production has a long history of lagging development, especially with regard to feature film, and was confined to important but more marginal categories (documentary and animation) whose productions were rarely seen on big screens and movie theatres. The disappearance of *Madeleine de Verchères*, the most popular heroine of Canadian silent film, unveils the conditions under which Canadian cinema may have tried to establish itself and survive, especially in the category of fiction features, as well as the extreme and longstanding lack of concern for preserving our national audiovisual heritage, which has resulted in unfortunate acts and irretrievable losses. The existence of film archives has certainly changed the state of things, but we must continue to develop new means of preserving our film and television heritage, which are at the moment still too modest.