

# "A Girl in a Book": Writing Marjorie Pickthall and Lorne Pierce

by Sandra Campbell

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In 1925, thirty-five year old Lorne Pierce of Ryerson Press published a biography of Marjorie Pickthall, who had died just three years earlier at the age of thirty-nine. In 1925, Pierce was a young man to watch in Canadian publishing, a dynamic editor and literary tastemaker working to make his mark on Canadian culture at the nation's oldest and largest publishing house. A graduate of Queen's University (B.A., 1912), of Union Theological Seminary, New York City (B.D., 1916) and Victoria College, Toronto (B.D., 1917) and of United Theological Seminary, Montreal with a doctorate in theology (1922), Lorne Pierce was an ordained Methodist minister, an ardent cultural nationalist, and a philosophical idealist. He admired the romantic nature poetry of the Confederation poets, and, as a result, he fostered a post-First World War literature redolent of idealism, nationalism and Canadian nature imagery.

Five years before, in June 1920, when Pierce had been a young Methodist minister making a name for himself as a community organizer in the rural pastorate of Brinston in eastern Ontario, he was asked to join the ninety-one-year-old Methodist Book and Publishing House as its Literary Critic and Advisor. He soon became editor of its trade division. Pierce had already made a name for himself not only as a successful instigator of community development schemes but also as an eloquent writer and speaker on spiritual and national issues.

As for his work at Ryerson Press, Pierce confided to his diary on his appointment that his was "a real he-man's job, that of making our Meth [odist] B[oo]k Room the cultural mecca of Canada."<sup>1</sup> Near retirement, forty years later, he wrote that his editorial desk was a "sort of altar at which I serve ... as one very much concerned about the entire cultural life of Canada."<sup>2</sup> From his devout Methodist mother, Harriet Singleton Pierce, a temperance activist, from his studies at Queen's and elsewhere, from his work as a student teacher and minister on the raw

Saskatchewan prairie between 1909 and 1914, and from his wartime military and pastoral service, Pierce had developed a militant national ideal. That ideal embodied what William Westfall has termed "romantic evangelism": a commitment to presenting the ideal in literature and in art, to inspire the individual and exalt the nation.<sup>3</sup> For Pierce, as for his friends and collaborators including Macmillan publisher Hugh Eayrs, book columnist William Arthur Deacon, journalist B.K. Sandwell, academic Arthur Phelps, and Group of Seven member J.E.H. Macdonald and many others, the development of national consciousness was, in the words of one historian, "an idealistic and spiritual goal, a great ideal." This circle of artists and men of letters were convinced of the inspirational power of literature and art to foster national myths, heroes and symbols.<sup>4</sup> By 1925, Pierce had plunged into the work of cultural nation-making, which included publishing E.J. Pratt's first major volume of verse in 1923 and bringing out Grove's landmark prairie novel *Settlers of the Marsh* in 1925 as well as the whiggish "Makers of Canadian Literature" series of critical anthologies.

Here I shall examine the influence of gender roles and stereotypes in Pierce's "he-man's task" as man of letters through an examination of his writing of biography as "idealizing narrative" in his *Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance* (1925), a work in which he presents Marjorie Pickthall (1883-1922) as a literary and gender ideal in response to certain tensions about the role of women and the direction of literature in the twenties. Later in his career, he exaggerated his depiction of Pickthall to an even greater degree, as the Canadian literary climate and his view of it changed.

As Pierce's biographer, I will also argue, however, that Pierce's 1925 biography of Pickthall must be understood not only in the light of the literary climate of the day, but also in terms of tensions and difficulties in his career and in his marriage to Edith Chown Pierce. To understand Pierce and to understand his impact as editor and man of letters in any coherent and complete way, it is necessary to hear, to recover and to give voice to his wife. Her work and her sacrifices were in fact an important element in his career, a contribution which Pierce himself later came to believe he had too little acknowledged. Behind Pierce's work as biographer (of Pickthall) and my work as biographer (of Pierce) lie changing concepts of gender, of biography, and of what constitutes a written literary life in Canada. Some questions seem paramount. What did Pierce emphasize, downplay or omit in his life of Pickthall, and why? What values and conventions about women and about literature governed the writing of and the favourable reception accorded Pierce's book on Pickthall? What material and interpretations do I include in my biographical account of Pierce as biographer and why? As Norman

Denzil has written, mindful of Derrida, "a life history ... is a narrative, influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context."<sup>5</sup> Life stories never stay closed and are subject to multiple interpretations and reinterpretations,<sup>6</sup> as an examination of Pickthall and Pierce reminds us.

Elsewhere I have argued that, during the first five decades of this century, the attitudes of critics (the overwhelming majority of whom were male) and editors (ditto) about traditional poetry and traditional images of femininity coalesced.<sup>7</sup> Many of Pierce's dealings with women writers early in his career reflected this linkage. (By contrast, in the 1940s, he was to finance childcare for Dorothy Livesay as she worked on the draft of a novel about her complex relationship to her father.) He is an important example of the way in which the male literary establishment early in the century tended to stereotype Canadian women writers. Such stereotyping had marked effects on both the careers and literary reputations of the individual women writers involved and the Canadian literary canon for the period. The stereotyping reflected the uneasiness of a patriarchal, traditional literary establishment about the attributes of both literary modernism and the modern woman. Both were seen as tainted with sexual and social licence, hostility to tradition, and an unbecoming frankness, despair, anger and alienation. In a 1920 review of Margot Asquith's candid diary, Pierce made it clear that he had ideals of decorum and reticence about both women and literature. He equated Asquith's social and sexual revelations with female immodesty:

Her whole performance [in the diary] has as much justification as dressing in the street. It is a practice ... that defies every canon of good taste and good breeding. ... [The book is] a crowning illustration of the ultimate abomination to which verbal and ethical desolation may descend.<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, male traditionalists, to the limited extent that they promoted female poets at all, were enthusiastic about female poets whose life and art seemed to them to embody both romantic womanhood and romantic literature: that is to say, both were traditional, delicate, pure, refined, and non-threatening.

Lorne Pierce's biography of Marjorie Pickthall, whom he never knew in life, was in fact the culmination of a pattern long evident in Pickthall's critical and publishing history. Pickthall was consistently depicted by male critics as a fragile romantic idealistic maiden, writing verse to which exactly the same adjectives were applied. Born in

England in 1883, Pickthall, the only child of Arthur and Lizzie Helen Mary Mallard Pickthall, had grown up in Toronto, where her engineer father had brought his family in 1889. Pickthall attended Bishop Strachan School. Coming to notice early in the century by winning fiction and poetry competitions in Toronto newspapers, she had published her first book of poetry, *The Drift of Pinions*, in 1913. After the trauma of her mother's death in 1910 and her father's subsequent remarriage, Pickthall left Canada for England in 1912, where she remained until her return to Canada in 1920. She lived in British Columbia until her death in 1922.

Pickthall wrote many short stories as well as poems, successfully placing them in the leading British and American periodicals of the day. She also produced novels and children's books. Pickthall's early career had been guided by two leading literary men, Professor Pelham Edgar of Victoria College and McGill's Sir Andrew Macphail, the editor of *University Magazine*, the latter an outspoken foe of the new woman. With Pickthall in England, Macphail assumed the dominant role in the choice and production of her first volume of poems in 1913. During a period spent working at Victoria College Library before her departure from Toronto, Marjorie Pickthall was often wittily ironic about the literary men who guided her and once wondered if her first book of poems would not be a "fine hash" between them. Pickthall herself disliked the "fragile poetess" stereotype of her. She once shocked a dotting hostess who assumed that she would admire a kindred spirit like Wordsworth's ethereal Lucy Gray by telling her that she would like to "slap" Lucy Gray.<sup>9</sup> In later career, after learning that Edgar had lamented that she was producing little poetry, she wrote to tell him drily that "though I must live up to my reputation for being lamb-like under criticism," poetry paid little in comparison to fiction, and that her verse manuscript in hand was difficult to publish, unlike fiction.<sup>10</sup>

Despite Pickthall's own dislike of her public image, after her death in 1922, Professor Archibald MacMechan's eulogy typified the persistent romantic, ethereal image of her: "[s]he was in the world but not of it ..."<sup>11</sup> Pierce's *Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance* is a reverential volume in this vein, exquisitely bound in violet and gold cloth, which enshrines a literary and gender ideal of sweetness and sensitivity. The endpapers, illustrated by Group of Seven artist Frederick Varley, feature a sweet-faced maiden in Grecian draperies, seen in profile amid an idealised landscape of stars, flowers, birds, rabbits, squirrels and boughs. Pierce had taken over work on the volume in 1923 from Helena Coleman, an older poet and friend to Marjorie Pickthall. Pierce eagerly sought the task.<sup>12</sup> It is clear from his diary that

he saw the Pickthall volume as interweaving him with the tradition of romantic lyrical nature poetry in Canada and as showing the increasing trust and regard in which he was held by influential figures such as Helena Coleman, Archibald MacMechan, Pelham Edgar, Andrew Macphail and others. In October 1923, he exulted to his diary: "Miss Helena Coleman seems to be willing to trust the precious task to me at last! No one must approach her Marjorie Pickthall but those who have clean hands and a warm heart."<sup>13</sup>

Coleman stressed to him the need for the most painstaking "restraint and delicacy...one of the most important points in the whole undertaking" with "as few words as possible" about the personal.<sup>14</sup> Pierce embarked on his task with a sense that he needed to satisfy an influential readership, including Coleman and Pickthall's father (both readers of the manuscript), by avoiding harsh scrutiny or the revelation of the painful, unpleasant or incongruous. Pierce's own concept of biography at this time was equally circumspect, despite his awareness of the changing view of biography evident in such works as Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918). Rejecting psychology's "almost morbid preoccupation with soul surgery" as a biographical approach, he wrote in 1927 that "[t]he true conception of biography is the portrait of a soul in its adventures through life."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, there was the need to respect a "lady" recently deceased: the account was styled "a book of remembrance." He had other restrictions as well. For example, Andrew Macphail declined to give Pierce any of Pickthall's letters on the proprietary grounds that they were either "too personal" or "too businesslike."<sup>16</sup> The work was a narrative shaped and limited by interpenetrating ideals of poetry, womanhood, eulogy, and decorum.

Pierce's foreword to the book shows the appropriations and tensions of his narrative in its very language. He justifies his text about Pickthall in the first person singular as "in every way a labour of love." Pierce asserts that "[t]he main purpose [herein]...has been to tell the story of her life simply, and, where possible, let Marjorie Pickthall speak for herself"(vii). Ironically, he immediately switches to the use of the pronoun "we" in relation to the book. Though he seems to mean by we "myself and Pickthall's friends and admirers," there is a clear sense that biographer and subject speak as one. To use Ira Nadel's term, there is a significant "shift in the level of telling."<sup>17</sup> Whatever the plural signifies, the virtues of the life narrative and the critical appraisal are to be stereotypically feminine: "I hope that we have performed this as Marjorie Pickthall herself might have done, with becoming reticence, with sensitiveness, avoiding dogmatism, and ever cautious for the true,

the beautiful and the good" (viii).

A reading of the book makes clear that, for Pierce, Pickthall's work mirrored her nature, and both embodied literary and gender ideals. That is, to his eyes, both the woman and her work were beautiful, pure, and delicate as well as primarily emotional and intuitive, not intellectual or reasoned or systematic. As Joanna Russ has pointed out, much of the critical writing about women's work makes it apparent that the talent is perceived to emanate from an emotive "nowhere and it bears no relation to anything." Pierce's analysis conforms to this pattern, with Pierce seeing her work as "miraculous," which Russ tells us is another common way in which female artistic achievement has been discounted.<sup>18</sup> Pickthall's major poems are seen as unaccountable in terms of who and what she was:

It is, perhaps, enough to behold here a shy, simple lovable girl busy with paints and poetry, and to recognize yonder [her poems] "The Immortal" or "Bega" without trying to elucidate the miracle. How did it happen, and when? For few poets have we so much [biographical] data, and still of none are we less able to explain. It is, perhaps, enough to wonder. (51)

Woman's writing, like woman, remains mysterious, and her mind not rational or systematic. The conflation of the woman and her work is striking in Pierce's analysis:

The quality of her beauty is timeless. The total effect is a purifying and ennobling of the whole nature, and yet this is not reproduced by any doctrinal system of ideas, nor by reasoning of any kind, but whatever it is, it is produced through the imagination alone [by]... which we are identified with the beautiful, which is not only felicitous but also loving and true. (200)

Pierce portrays Pickthall as an icon of literary craftsmanship and good taste in Canadian literature. He portrays her as an exemplar of purity and refinement, "a challenge to bad artists dealing in cheap sentimentality, in muttering compromise and bad taste, and to all those who stress commonplace and subsidiary things..." (197). Even the "paganism" that Pierce sees in her nature poetry is defined as a "sanctified sensuousness" that is "typically Canadian" (165). In his concluding chapter, Pierce opposes her to the spirit of modernism:

Her contact with nature purified her spirit, cleansed it of all morbidity, and thus, while her contemporaries were wearing themselves out in inartistic disputations over sex, psycho-

analysis, and kindred concerns, she was pursuing essential truth and beauty to their happiest and holiest hiding-place. (166)

What of Pickthall's own voice in the work? After all, approximately eighty of the book's two hundred and seventeen pages consist of excerpts from Pickthall's own diaries, letters, poems, and fiction. The excerpts depict a Pickthall who seems more ambitious, more academically gifted and shrewder than Pierce's frame portrait of her. But these counterpoints are weakened by the fact that Pierce's frame narrative fails to address the tensions in Pickthall's life expressed in the extracts. For example, he quotes Pickthall's frustrations at the restrictions of female gender without comment, declining to relate those frustrations to her life and work:

To me the trying part is being a woman at all. I've come to the ultimate conclusion that I'm a misfit of the worst kind, in spite of a superficial femininity—emotion with a foreknowledge of impermanence, a daring mind with only the tongue as an outlet, a greed for experience plus a slavery to convention—what the deuce are you to make of that? —as a woman? As a man, you could go ahead and stir things up *fine*. (104, *Pickthall's*)

Pickthall is permitted to ask the question, but her biographer does not reply. Moreover, an examination of the typescript of the book, now at Queen's, shows that even some final excisions to the manuscript tend to make Pickthall seem more conventionally feminine in her interests. For example, two entries from her 1899 girlhood diary which show her enthusiasm for books on the Royal Navy and on the Franklin expedition were dropped while more stereotypically "girlish" rhapsodies are retained.<sup>19</sup> Nowhere does Pierce make reference to a male-female love affair in Pickthall's life, even to comment on its absence in his narrative—surely astonishing for any estimation of a female life, especially since there is evidence in his research material about the male admirers of this primarily woman-identified woman. Nowhere does he analyze her numerous friendships—social and literary—with other women. Her relationship with her mother is seen as primary but even here Pierce largely averts his gaze: "Sorrow at any time is too sacred for any inquisitive probing and analyzing, and such grief as was Marjorie Pickthall's deserves reverent and understanding silence" (62).

Pickthall's later nervous collapses, given the feeling of the day about the revelation of psychological illness, are merely touched on as "occasions ... [of] unshakable melancholia" (58).<sup>20</sup> Such silences, gaps

and cuts in Pierce's biographical narrative seem to veil its subject, obscuring rather than revealing her. In this idealizing narrative, the "he" refuses to dwell on any anger or deviation or extreme emotion in "her" in his construction of a literary and gender ideal.

Critical reaction to the book demonstrates how widespread and deeply-embedded in the Canadian literary world of the day were the literary and gender values Pierce expressed. The reviews of the book applauded Pierce and the valorization of Pickthall as a feminine and literary ideal. The Toronto *Globe* commended Pierce's depiction of a "shy, lonely girl." Another reviewer pronounced Pierce "eminently fitted" to write of her life of "passionless purity."<sup>21</sup> The *Canadian Bookman* assured readers that Pierce had respected Pickthall's virtue—metaphorically, of course—in terms that were also echoed in an Edmonton newspaper:

Marjorie Pickthall might well have challenged the most prurient of [modern] biographers to do his worst and stood unscathed, for a purer soul has seldom been garmented in flesh. But Dr. Lorne Pierce has given a revelation of purity in a book that will stand among the classic biographies ....<sup>22</sup>

W. T. Allison expressed surprise that Pierce had found so much to say: "[t]hose who knew this quiet retiring woman could not dream that much space would be required to chronicle the events in her short and uneventful life."<sup>23</sup> Austin Bothwell, another well-known Western literary man of the time, was astonished at the young Marjorie's bookishness, given her sex. In an assessment that today provokes astonishment, he wrote:

I suppose with the single exception of Anne of Green Gables, and she was a girl in a book, this is the only known case in Canada of a fifteen year old girl exclaiming 'It is lovely' of a book.<sup>24</sup>

Pierce's biography, it is clear, conceived of Pickthall in terms of literary and gender values more reflective of the climate of the day than of the mind and personality of the poet herself. Moreover, he even managed to make Marjorie Pickthall a better "good daughter" posthumously. Pierce dedicated the volume to her father, and although Pickthall had willed her own royalties to her mother's English relatives, Pierce donated royalties from the 2000-copy edition to Arthur Pickthall. He also wrote to Marjorie's heir, Laura Mallard, to urge her to stop collecting royalties in favour of Arthur, who had medical expenses.<sup>25</sup>



In Pierce's later depictions of Pickthall, for example in his 1943 Memorial Address at Victoria College,<sup>26</sup> and in his Introduction to his 1957 edition of the *Selected Poems*, Pickthall and her work have become even more fragile, more dreamy, more "imperfect [in] understanding" and more marginalised.<sup>27</sup> Literary tastes and woman's image had changed, and Pierce had increasingly turned away from devotion to Bliss Carman, Marjorie Pickthall and the West Coast poet Audrey Alexandra Brown (author of the successful *A Dryad in Nanaimo* {1931}) to publishing the McGill poets, Dorothy Livesay, Earle Birney and others. In his 1943 address, Pickthall is now the "end" of the "old poetic tradition." Pickthall, as a Victoria College library assistant, is symbolically pictured waiting on student E.J. Pratt. Pierce comments:

Thus the old should ever give way to the new, in a manner suggestive of a ritual. At any rate, she ... was a little wistful and not a little lost amid it all, was shortly see the chaos of the World War, and would scarcely survive it. The new day would demand other gifts than hers. (5)

Pierce declares that Pickthall's feminine "cloister" and eclipsed "old tradition" must give way to "the soaring power and robust certitude" of Pratt. She is now seen as unsuited, in person or art, even to be a helpmate: "[s]he wrote of men who could take the world in their strong hands and rebuild it alone and according to their will, but she was no consort for these, only in her dreams" (6). In contrast to 1925, her importance is "difficult to estimate," and he grants her only "first place among the women writers of Canada in her time" (23). But her woman's realm is ever more depicted as a second-rate and narrow kingdom, long on wisps and short on intellect, as the 1957 Introduction makes clear. All her work anticipates is decline: "[s]ome have suggested that the apparent confusion of symbol and creed in her work anticipated the religious and intellectual fuzziness of our time" (29).

Pierce's construct of Pickthall had changed to accommodate changes in literary tastes and the downgrading in the valorisation of the image of the sequestered maiden during World War II and its aftermath. As Marlene Kadar has pointed out, biography is a way of seeing in which issues of representation and of gender operate, and a biographical subject can become a "distant and mastered 'object' of discourse."<sup>28</sup> The construction of Pierce's narratives of Pickthall is strongly governed by gender and literary values: his depiction of her changes with those values in these culturally determined narratives of her life.

But there is an important thread in the tapestry that the biographer of 1996 must consider. The very strength of Pierce's 1925 idealisation of Pickthall as a woman suggests a personal need to idealise Pickthall, not just something 'in the air.' Pierce's failure to mention any male love objects or interests or even their absence (in a real transgression of the norms of female biography), except her father, the man who gaveth this man access to this woman, also suggests that he had a certain proprietary interest in his subject. What personal events in Pierce's life at this time shaped his presentation of Pickthall?

In fact, Pierce's creation of *Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance* between 1923 and 1925 came at a time when he was experiencing the anger and self-assertion of his wife Edith Chown Pierce (1890-1954), whom he had married in 1916. Pierce's desire to succeed as a man of letters put considerable strain on his marriage: he was driven to overwork even more than usual, spending hours at his desk at home after long days in the office. His income was limited, and his diary for the early 1920s repeatedly refers to the financial problems the couple, with two children born in 1920 and 1922, were experiencing.

Edith Pierce, for her part, was at home in a too-small house with two small children, sometimes for weeks at a time with her husband away on long Western trips with a wood furnace to be stoked and walks to be shovelled. A graduate of Queen's—where she had met Pierce—and a niece of pioneering feminist Alice Chown, she had long resisted marriage, because she felt that her emotional needs, those of a woman who had early lost her mother and father, might not be met by a husband. She had told him at the close of their long courtship, conducted mostly by mail:

... I have been so long deciding [because] [y]ou have to mean so much to me. You must be husband, father and mother. It is a lot to expect in one man, but it is not too much when that man is Lorne....<sup>29</sup>

By 1923, the tensions endemic to patriarchal marriage were being felt with Edith feeling financially and emotionally bereft. Pierce's response was to invoke for his wife that idealisation of womanhood evident throughout his youth, which had begun with his mother. During a long business trip to the West, he wrote to an Edith struggling with house, children and finances:

Life has been very full for me—so fast & furious. ... But you belong to that pantheon of women in my mind, Mary... Beatrice and Eloise—women who made achievement

possible and who inspired it.<sup>30</sup>

So driven was Pierce to succeed in his vision for Canadian literature that he began to divert his limited financial resources to a Canadiana collection which he donated to Queen's. Edith later wrote of this period that "I used to think that my new winter coat (that should have been) went on the shelves at Queen's."<sup>31</sup> When Pierce was arranging to donate the Lorne Pierce Medal to the Royal Society of Canada in the spring of 1924, he concealed from his wife that he had agreed to pay the cost of striking the medal, a cost which they could ill afford. Ironically the deception came to light just as the Pickthall book appeared in spring 1925. Edith accidentally learned the truth from someone else even as Pierce wrote her rapturous letters from Ottawa on his lionization at the announcement of the Medal. In a letter sent to Ottawa, Edith Pierce told her husband that he had done her "the greatest injustice" of their married life:

I know I would not have given it my approval in our [financial] circumstances. I imagine our friends & [relatives] must laugh when they think of the way we live and [you] giving prizes, a medal and Canadiana. I suppose it is all [what] you want to be -- something to your family or something to Canada. It is a pity you have us.<sup>32</sup>

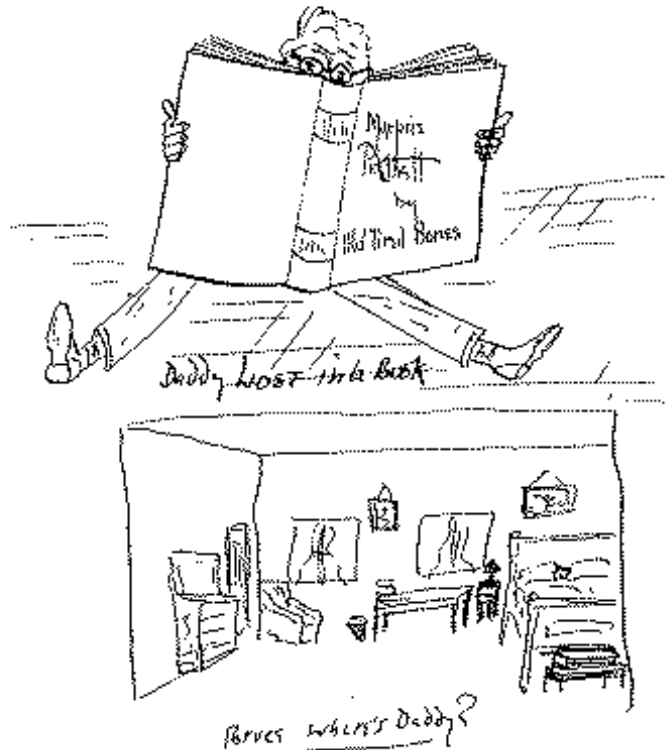
Pierce's diary significantly omits any mention of Edith's anger though the evidence of marital conflict surfaces in letters for the years 1923-1925. As Pierce experienced the dark reality of his own relentless ambition and the force of female anger and self-assertion, is it surprising that he buried himself more than ever in work and that he conceived of Pickthall in idealized terms? In marital discord, what better "other woman" for a high-minded minister to devote himself to than a dead one—in his eyes devoted utterly to literature and without taint of earthly desire? As Jean Paul Sartre has so sardonically put it of the biographer's freedom to shape his subject: "a corpse is open to all comers."<sup>33</sup>

Pierce's diary and his letters do suggest that he became infatuated with the Pickthall he created. He wrote of his labours far into the night on his portrait of her: "it is worth it all, even though I get nothing for it in a monetary sense, just to have dwelt so long with radiant beauty, & to have stood so near to the soul of sweet, simple goodness."<sup>34</sup> In a 1924 letter, Pierce sent his family a drawing made during his work on Pickthall during his weeks-long annual trip to the west which hints at her role as a symbolic 'other woman.' In the drawing, captioned "Daddy Lost in a Book," he is hidden behind a large book, open and clutched to his bosom, titled "Marjorie Pickthall by Old Tired Bones": below, his son awakes in a large empty room crying "Where's Daddy?"<sup>35</sup>

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The Macdonald,  
Edmonton, Alta



Clearly, the extreme qualities of Marjorie Pickthall the idealised woman and poet in Pierce's narrative were constructed not only out of biases in Canadian literary and gender history but in reaction to a particular and difficult phase in the long marriage of Edith and Lorne Pierce. To omit that influence and the knowledge of it in writing Pierce's biography seems unconscionable, but it raises issues of privacy and pain for Pierce's children. Only their permission and their courage

make the revelation of such material possible. Patriarchal marriage influenced all of Pierce, and biographers should, in the spirit of l'écriture féminine, "transgress the structure of domination" and document "the struggle for voice of those on the wrong side of the power relationship."<sup>36</sup> With Pierce, that struggle affected both the man, his work, the woman and children whose lives he shared and the literary reputation of the woman whose life he inscribed in his idealizing text. Biographers—male and female alike—should be mindful that to ignore or disregard or downplay or idealise gender and family when we write is to repress and distort and warp the biographical subjects inscribed. In examining Canadian literary lives, it is desirable to deconstruct Northrop Frye's famous question about Canadian literature to incorporate the tensions of gender embedded in both the query and the lives: "W(he)re is (her)e?"

Analysis of Pierce's mis(s)/treatment of Pickthall as woman and poet prompts another question. If Pierce's view of Pickthall is inevitably blinkered and limited by the values of his day, how are we to assess her life and her work? Where do we place her in a revised canon? In company with other scholars of women's writing such as Lorraine McMullen, Mary Rubio, Elizabeth Waterston, Lorna Knight and Helen Buss, I would argue that we are only just now beginning to understand the meaning and the power of the work of women writers. We are only now beginning to appreciate the actual achievement of such women as Isabella Valancy Crawford, L.M. Montgomery, Dorothy Livesay, Phyllis Webb and many others. In this process, Janice Williamson's 1986 article "Framed by history: Marjorie Pickthall's devices and desire" is one possible point of entry for us to reassess the power and the pleasure of Marjorie Pickthall's work in terms other than of traditional fear and bias.<sup>37</sup> As Pickthall herself well knew, she never in fact was the original of that funhouse mirror, the "girl in a book" of whom Austin Bothwell wrote so disparagingly after the publication of *Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance*. She was far more complex, a woman writer of pain and presence, whom we all, female and male alike, ought to read, hear, see and assess with new eyes.

## Notes

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1. Lorne Pierce diary, 11 July 1920, Lorne Pierce Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ont. Unless otherwise noted, all other archival material cited is from this collection. [\[back\]](#)
2. Pierce to Rev. Garth Legg, undated {1958}, file 4, box 27. [\[back\]](#)
3. William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's, 1989) 195. [\[back\]](#)
4. Mary Vipond, "National Consciousness in English-Speaking Canada in the 1920s: Seven Studies" (Ph.D. diss: University of Toronto, 1974) 533. [\[back\]](#)
5. Norman Denzil, *Interpretive Biography* (Newbury Park, California: Sage, 1989) 30. [\[back\]](#)
6. Denzil 6, 82. [\[back\]](#)
7. See Sandra Campbell, "Nationalism, Morality and Gender: Lorne Pierce and the Canadian Literary Canon, 1920-1960," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 32/2 (Fall 1994): 135-160. [\[back\]](#)
8. Pierce, review of *An Intimate Diary*, by Margot Asquith, *Christian Guardian*, 20 October 1920: 25. [\[back\]](#)
9. The story is related in Jean Blewett, clipping [from *Saturday Night*], 9 May 1925, Scrapbook 52. [\[back\]](#)
10. Pickthall to Pelham Edgar, 21 Feb. 1921, vol. 1, Wilson MacDonald Papers, National Archives of Canada. [\[back\]](#)
11. Archibald MacMechan, quoted in Pierce, *Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1925) 147. [\[back\]](#)
12. See Helena Coleman to Pierce, 14 April, 10 June and 10 Sept. 1923, box 59, Lorne Pierce Collection (Pickthall). [\[back\]](#)
13. Pierce diary, 28 October 1923, Pierce Papers. [\[back\]](#)
14. Coleman to Pierce, 24 July 1924, file 7, box 1, Pierce Papers. Both Coleman and Pickthall's father, among others, read and commented upon a draft of the MS. before publication. Later in the 1940s, Coleman was to censor and repossess some of the Pickthall

- letters Pierce had given to Victoria College Library. [\[back\]](#)
15. Pierce, *An Outline of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1927) 191. [\[back\]](#)
  16. Undated memoir by Andrew Macphail, box 67, Pierce Collection (Pickthall). Macphail cooperated by providing the memoir in lieu of original material. [\[back\]](#)
  17. Ira Nadel, "Biography and Theory or Beckett in the Bath" in *Biography and Autobiography*, ed. James Noonan (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993) 12. [\[back\]](#)
  18. Joanna Russ, *How To Suppress Women's Writing* (Austin: University of Texas Press: 1983) 90-91. [\[back\]](#)
  19. TS. of *Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance* 27, file 5, box 38, Pierce Papers. [\[back\]](#)
  20. Interestingly, when Pierce received detailed information from Charles Mair and others about Pickthall's nervous collapse in British Columbia after her death, he published some details of her convalescence in a nursing home by means of a pseudonymous letter to a Toronto newspaper. [\[back\]](#)
  21. "True Poet and Canadian," *Toronto Globe*, 23 April 1925, and E. J. R., "Marjorie Pickthall," *Hamilton Spectator*, 25 September 1926, both in Scrapbook 52, Pierce Papers. [\[back\]](#)
  22. Albert E. Smythe, "Marjorie Pickthall," *Canadian Bookman*, May 1925 and W. Everard Edmonds, "With Pen and Pencil," *Edmonton Journal*, 29 August 1925, both in Scrapbook 52, Pierce Papers. [\[back\]](#)
  23. W.T. Allison, "A Monument to Marjorie Pickthall," *Calgary Herald*, 9 May 1925, file 12, box 67, Pierce Collection (Pickthall). [\[back\]](#)
  24. Austin Bothwell, "A Canadian Bookshelf," *Saskatoon Phoenix*, 16 May 1925, p. 149, Scrapbook 52, Pierce Papers. [\[back\]](#)
  25. Pierce to Laura Mallard, 24 May 1924, box 59, Pierce Collection (Pickthall). Mallard's reply was an icy acknowledgment that she had received his letter, without comment. The Pickthall estate royalties continued to be sent to England. The reasons for Pickthall's will do not appear in the biography. [\[back\]](#)
  26. Pierce, "Marjorie Pickthall: A memorial address...April 7, 1943, in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the poet's death," *Acta Victoriana* LXVII, 6 (Graduation Issue): 21-30. The address was in conjunction with an exhibition of Pickthalliana, some of which Pierce had donated to Victoria after being given it by the widow after Arthur Pickthall's death. A similar estimate of Pickthall about this time is found in Pierce, "Marjorie Lowry Christie Pickthall," *Canadian Who Was Who*, Vol. II (1938) 349-352. [\[back\]](#)
  27. Pierce, Introduction to *The Selected Poems of Marjorie Pickthall*,

- ed. Lorne Pierce (Toronto: McClelland, 1957) 19. Pickthall's I.Q. seems to have deteriorated markedly: now "rapture and intuition are substituted for reason" in her poetry in his view, while her body "scarcely sustained the demands of a cloistered life in times of peace" (15,19). [\[back\]](#)
28. Marlene Kadar, "Coming to Terms..." in *Essays on Life Writing: From Gender to Critical Practice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 3-5. [\[back\]](#)
  29. Edith Chown to Pierce, 29 Jan. 1916, box 4, Pierce Family Papers. [\[back\]](#)
  30. Pierce to Edith Pierce, spring 1924, box 7, Pierce Family Papers. [\[back\]](#)
  31. Edith Pierce to Blanche Hume (Pierce's longtime assistant), undated [c. 1950], box 1, Blanche Hume Papers. [\[back\]](#)
  32. See Pierce to Edith Pierce, 18 May 1925 and her reply of 20 May 1925, box 7, Pierce Family Papers. At the 1926 Society meetings, he wrote to assure her that "In all my conversations with the Fellows I have associated your name as sharing the idealism and sacrifice." See Pierce to Edith Pierce, 19 May 1926, box 7, Pierce Family Papers. [\[back\]](#)
  33. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert*, Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) x. [\[back\]](#)
  34. Pierce diary, 18 May 1925, Pierce Papers. It is not clear if Edith Pierce knew that Pierce had decided to divert his royalties to Arthur Pickthall. [\[back\]](#)
  35. The drawing is found in Pierce to Edith, Beth and Bruce Pierce, [Spring 1924], box 7, Pierce Family Papers. [\[back\]](#)
  36. Denzil 82. [\[back\]](#)
  37. See Janice Williamson, "Framed by history: Marjorie Pickthall's devices and desire," in *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing* ed. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: Longspoon/Newest: 1986) 167-178. For example, Williamson interprets Pickthall's poem "The Spell" as a feminine "paradigm ... of contiguity and multiplicity," a creative reworking of the Narcissus myth in female term [\[back\]](#)
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