

The Egg and I

by Emily Soares | November 09, 2009



Based on the best-selling novel by the same name, **The Egg and I** (1947) stars Claudette Colbert and Fred MacMurray as newlywed city folk who decide to brave the exotic rigors of chicken farming, greeted by the adversity of the elements and the eccentricities of their new neighbors.

The book, a memoir of author Betty MacDonald's humorous misadventures with her first husband on a chicken farm in the Pacific Northwest during the '20s, was a blockbuster hit in 1946. Fans would have expected a major studio to acquire the rights, but they went instead to Universal-International, a new amalgamation of Universal Pictures and William Goetz's independent production company, International Pictures. The purchase of such a high-profile property was Universal's bid to regain some of its cache, and it needed the right stars to go with it. The film was the sixth of seven pairings for Colbert and MacMurray, who were sliding down a bit from their places at the top of the Hollywood pay scale by the time of the film's production. **The Egg and I** is considered Colbert's last commercial success.

The screenplay was written by Chester Erskine, a former playwright, and Fred F. Finklehoffe (*Meet Me in St. Louis* 1944). Though the story was considered watered-down by fans of the book, the film performed well at the box office. MacDonald's account was far earthier than what made it to the screen, thanks to the Production Code that was still very much in effect. The setting was moved up a few decades to 1946, so that Mr. McDonald could be a returning serviceman, looking for a new start.

The film reference *Magill's Survey of Cinema* noted that "As played by Main and Kilbride, Ma and Pa Kettle stole the movie of *The Egg and I* as easily as they had stolen the book." In fact, **The Egg and I** immortalized the Kettles, played by Marjorie Main and Percy Kilbride, and created a spin-off franchise that would make Universal money for years to come.

Main, the daughter of a reverend, taught acting at Bourbon College in Paris, Kentucky, traveled with a Shakespeare company and was introduced to Broadway by W.C. Fields. Though she was a success in dramatic roles such as *Dead End* (1937) with Humphrey Bogart, **The Egg and I** gave her a new career as a popular comedic character actress, which she would remain for the rest of her career. It also garnered her the film's only Academy Award® nomination in the Best Supporting Actress category, which went instead to Celeste Holm for *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947).

The characters continued to make audiences laugh for another nine movies. Percy Kilbride, who retired from the series after the seventh installment, was a popular comic fixture on Broadway during the '30s, though he was always hoping he'd be offered a serious role. Even after the Kettle films allowed him to live a more lavish lifestyle, Kilbride remained content to live modestly in a Hollywood boarding house.

Richard Long makes an early film appearance as Tom Kettle, the oldest and most functional Kettle child. He went on to make three more Kettle films.

Producers: Chester Erskine, Fred F. Finklehoffe
Director: Chester Erskine
Screenplay: Chester Erskine, Fred F. Finklehoffe; Betty MacDonald (novel)
Cinematography: Milton Krasner
Music: Frank Skinner
Film Editing: Russell Schoengarth
Cast: Claudette Colbert (Betty MacDonald), Fred MacMurray (Bob MacDonald), Marjorie Main (Ma Kettle), Louise Allbritton (Harriet Putnam), Percy Kilbride (Pa Kettle), Richard Long (Tom Kettle), Billy House (Billy Reed), Ida Moore (Emily - the old lady), Donald MacBride (Mr. Henty), Samuel S. Hinds (Sheriff), Esther Dale (Birdie Hicks).
BW-108m. Closed Captioning.

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