

4-1-2006

## In Search of the Anglophone Doctor in Jacques Ferron's Story "Le petit William"

Vivian C. McAlister

*University of Western Ontario, vmcalist@uwo.ca*

Christiane I. McAlister

*Dalhousie University, cimcalis@hotmail.com*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/surgerypub>

 Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), and the [Surgery Commons](#)

---

### Citation of this paper:

McAlister, Vivian C. and McAlister, Christiane I., "In Search of the Anglophone Doctor in Jacques Ferron's Story "Le petit William"" (2006). *Surgery Publications*. Paper 48.

<http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/surgerypub/48>

In search of the Anglophone doctor in Jacques Ferron's story "Le Petit William"

Vivian McAlister, FRCSC

Christiane McAlister, M Arch

Department of Surgery, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario

Address for correspondence: Dr. Vivian McAlister

C4-212, University Hospital,

London, Ontario, N6A 5A5

[vmcalist@uwo.ca](mailto:vmcalist@uwo.ca)

## Abstract

The story of '*Le Petit William*' (*Contes anglais*, 1964) is based on Ferron's experiences as a general practitioner in the Gaspé in 1946. A medical event, use of the maternal left lateral position by a *sage-femme* to deliver a baby boy, becomes allegory. The *sage-femme* had learned the technique from a visiting Anglophone doctor. A simple joke, which superficially appears to be the story's culmination, takes on a sombre political tone when considered in the light of the Latin epigraph. Trips to the Gaspé, a review of the history of obstetrics and speculation are used in this paper to understand the realities upon which Ferron's fantastic literature is based.

### *A la recherche du médecin « anglais » dans 'Le petit William' de Jacques Ferron*

L'histoire de « Le Petit William » (*Contes anglais*, 1964) est basée sur les expériences de Ferron comme médecin de campagne en Gaspésie en 1946. Un événement médical, l'usage de la posture obstétricale « position latérale gauche » par une sage-femme lors de la naissance d'un petit garçon, donne lieu à une allégorie. La sage-femme avait appris la technique d'un accoucheur « anglais », de passage dans la région. Une plaisanterie simple, qui semble à première vue être la culmination de l'histoire, prend un ton politique plutôt sombre quand on la considère à la lumière de l'épigramme latine. Partant de renseignements recueillis lors de voyages en Gaspésie, d'une revue de l'histoire obstétricale, et de la spéculation, nous essaierons de comprendre les réalités sur lesquelles la littérature fantastique de Ferron est basée.

*In pedes procedere nonscentem contra naturam est, quid argumento, est appelaveret agrippas aegre partos. Pliny.*

The drive in to the village of Petite-Madeleine in the Gaspé evoked in me the same anxious sense of anticipation that I felt when I first drove 25 years ago into Lampman, Saskatchewan where I was to be town's only doctor. I am sure Jacques Ferron felt it as well when he brought his young wife to Petite-Madeleine in 1946. In Lampman, worry about my performance was soon replaced by a sense of professional isolation. I missed medical company to discuss patients and problems. Instead I studied notations made by my predecessor physicians in the patients' charts. I was following in the footsteps of colleagues. Ferron felt this isolation as well – he treasured stories regarding Dr Cotnoir, his predecessor in the village. For the next 30 years these stories and his own experiences in the Gaspé found their way into Ferron's writing. As a physician reading these medical stories, I experienced the same sense of following a colleague's trail. Just as I grew to know my predecessor colleagues in Lampman through their notes, I came to understand Dr. Ferron through Jacques Ferron, the writer.

The purpose of my trip to Petite-Madeleine was to investigate the background to Ferron's story 'Le Petit William' which appeared in his 1964 book, *Contes Anglais*.<sup>1</sup> In it, the narrator describes being called to attend a young woman as she gives birth to a baby boy. The setting is consistent with Ferron's own medical practice in the Gaspé in the late 1940's. The young woman ignores the doctor's attempts to keep her supine '*ship-shape according to my rites*' but instead she turns on her side and remains '*capsized*' through

out the delivery (note: quotations from Ray Ellenwood's English translation of 'Le Petit William' are given in italics).<sup>2</sup> When finally the doctor-narrator turns to the sage-femme or Francophone midwife for help, he is told to take off his gloves and make himself comfortable. He is brought a cup of tea and the midwife assures him that his predecessor, Dr. Cotnoir, had a '*habit of drinking two or three cups while he was keeping an eye on a patient*'. And thus with tea and conversation the midwife makes sure that observation is the limit of the narrator's contribution to the birth.

The old woman explained that an Anglophone doctor had practiced in the area for a brief period, '*a boat brought him, a boat took him away*'. He had taught her aunt who was his assistant. '*He had his own special way of doing things: first of all he never put his finger in the right place, and secondly he made the woman lie on her side*'. The delivery is successfully completed but the narrator is told there is only one problem: '*the poor babe will have to be called William. After all, he is a little Englishman, so to speak*'.

Empathy for his subjects is a strong characteristic of Ferron's writing. '*The women are strapped down the way we want them*'. In "Le Petit William", Ferron slips quietly from his training to learn from an old country woman and her young charge. '*When it was all over, she rolled onto her back.....we placed the baby next to her. She seemed surprised: she had it with her back turned and maybe she thought it just dropped from heaven. That's the big advantage to the English position*'.

A lecture on this topic by Ferron's English translator, Prof. Betty Bednarski of Dalhousie University, revived memories of medical training at the Rotunda Hospital in Dublin in the 1970's. Midwives and medical students were taught to place the mother in the left lateral position for delivery as opposed to the dorsal position that was favoured by the other maternity hospitals in Dublin and by most physicians in Britain and North America. A multipara who had learned the lateral position would automatically turn on her side as she sensed the progress of labour and would remain '*capsized*' despite attempts of those assistants familiar with the dorsal position '*to right her*'. This could cause confusion if the mother transferred from the Rotunda to other hospitals for subsequent confinements. At the Rotunda, rectal examination was used by midwives to determine the stage of labour in order to avoid contamination that might accompany vaginal manipulation. This explains Ferron's reference: '*he would never put his finger in the right place*'.

Ferron was capable of including obscure medical detail in his stories without losing the reader's interest in his message. While the 'English position' allowed for the safe and easy delivery of this baby of Quebec, the price was loss of its French identity. Another example of Ferron's use of obscure reference, that would be available to only a few of his readers, is the epigraph. Calling the French baby by the very English name William, echoes Pliny's suggestion in Ferron's misquoted epigraph that breech babies should be named Agrippa because Agrippa was one of the few breech babies that amounted to anything. Superficially the epigraph might suggest that the baby's English identity is a good thing. Few of Ferron's readers today would know that the completion of the Pliny quotation states that while this was good for Agrippa, it was not for the world at large

because Agrippa was the progenitor of Caligula and Nero. In this apparently simple story the complex balance between benefit to the individual of assimilation into the Anglophone world and communal loss to the Quebec nation is realized using subtle medical and classical knowledge.

Despite the symbolism, Ferron's story has the ring of truth. In an interview with Pierre L'Hérault, Ferron admitted that a real event was the basis for the account.<sup>3</sup> Sometime before Ferron's arrival in the Gaspé, an unnamed Anglophone doctor had stayed for one winter in Grande Vallée because his ship had been wrecked in the St Lawrence; '*a ship brought him, a ship took him away*'. This town is 10 miles east of Petite-Madeleine. The visitor provided maternity services and trained several sages-femmes during his stay. Having discovered the reality behind Ferron's fiction, I sought more information regarding its personalities and most particularly if the visiting doctor was trained, as I was, by the Rotunda Hospital in Dublin.

The left lateral position is often called the Sims's position after Marion Sims (1813 - 1883).<sup>4</sup> There are several links between Sims and the Rotunda. Sims founded Women's Hospital for New York modelled on the Rotunda Hospital. During the American civil war he travelled to Europe to avoid mixed loyalties, being from Alabama but living in New York. He visited the Rotunda frequently over the next few years, lecturing and demonstrating surgery as a guest of Dr. McClintock, Master of the hospital.<sup>5</sup> However Sims described his position for surgery to correct vesico-vaginal fistula and not for

maternal delivery.<sup>6</sup> The left lateral maternal position was already in use at the Rotunda and Sims did not advocate its use in the Women's Hospital for New York.

Use in the Rotunda of the left lateral position and digital rectal examination can be traced back to its second master, Fielding Ould.<sup>7</sup> In 1742 he published the first textbook of obstetrics in the English in which he described these techniques. The left lateral position probably originated as a traditional technique in Britain and Ireland. It became known as "le posture Anglais" in French literature. French textbooks that were in the library at Laval during Ferron's education usually referred to Le Posture Anglais only to dismiss it as a product of English prudery.<sup>8</sup>

Ferron's removal to Petite-Madeleine can be viewed in several contexts. Although he graduated with distinction from Laval in 1945, his school and university careers were unsettled. His mother died when he was 10 years old. The family environment became anarchic if still cultured and caring. He was expelled and readmitted to Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf where he received a classical education from the Jesuits: Pierre Trudeau was a school mate with whom he would continue a life long intellectual rivalry. At the age of 22 and without a means of support, he married a fellow Laval student, Madeleine Therrien. He volunteered for the army while in medical school but missed action in World War II. Instead he would be a medical officer in the prisoner-of-war camp at Longueuil. His motivation for going to the Gaspé may have been to acquire the seclusion required to start a family.



He may have sought seclusion but he did not find tranquility. A road to Petite-Madeleine had been built to service Brown's paper mill. Conversion to hydroelectric power had resulted in village being the first in the Gaspé to be electrified in 1920. The mill closed in 1927. Albert Fournier of Grande Vallée told us in 2003 about the difficulties the doctor in Ferron's time had travelling to villages beyond Petite-Madeleine which was by row-boat in summer and by sleigh over the mountain in winter. Jacques and Madeleine Ferron arrived by car in 1946 and stayed in the house formerly occupied by the mill manager. The house, which was on the shore of the St Lawrence, had two entrances. Ferron converted the manager's office into his 'cabinet'. Now a bed and breakfast, we were able to stay in Ferron's house during our research. Edith Patterson lived next door in the 1940's. In 2005, she recalled for us her friendship with the Ferrons. Jacques delivered her second child: the left lateral position was not used. Two doors away lived the Boileau family who bought Dr Cotnoir's house at a sheriff's sale for \$4,000 in 1942. Cotnoir had become ill and would die 6 months later in Gaspé. Ferron described Cotnoir as a heavy drinking but skilled physician with a very broad practice.<sup>3</sup> Albert Fournier confirmed this opinion in an interview in 2003. Alain Boileau reported in 2005 that a few members of the community who were dissatisfied with Cotnoir precipitated his bankruptcy in 1942 even though his indebtedness was a result of his reluctance to pursue unpaid accounts. It was also suggested that Ferron's stay was cut short by a dispute with the parish priest who convinced the Duplessis government to withdraw Ferron's permission (or subsidy) to practice in Petite-Madeleine. We did not discover the cause of the dispute but Ferron was denounced from the pulpit as a communist. In 1949, Ferron's name was included in a round up of communists by the Duplessis government. Ferron

avoided internment because he was admitted to the Royal Edward Sanatorium at Sainte Agathe for treatment of tuberculosis, the disease that had killed his mother.<sup>9</sup> This unsettled period in Ferron's life which included his father's suicide in 1947, culminated in his separation from Madeleine Therrien in 1949. Ferron had spent less than two years in the Gaspé but the experience would inform his writing for the rest of his life.

No memory of the Anglophone doctor in Ferron's story persists in Grande Vallée today. It is attractive to imagine that he trained at the Rotunda Hospital. Courses in obstetrics at the Rotunda were by far the most popular in the British Isles at that time. Manuals of midwifery written by the hospital's Master continued to advocate delivery in the left lateral position.<sup>10</sup> Modern studies suggest superior foetal oxygenation occurs with this maternal position.<sup>11,12</sup> The old midwife told Ferron in 1946 that her aunt had been taught by the Anglophone doctor. This would place the visitor's practice in the Gaspé between 1890 and 1930. *A boat brought him and a boat took him away.* Ferron's writing is often characterised as fantastic but it seems to be rooted firmly in reality, especially for those who know the events upon which it is based. The Anglophone doctor's story is a lesson to all physicians regarding the powerful effect of their transient presence may have on those they serve. We only met a few people in the Gaspé who had read Ferron but they were all mystified by his 1962 book that was named for Dr. Cotnoir. The story contained no recognizable features of their doctor or their area. Our interpretation is that *Cotnoir* (Éditions d'Orphée, 1962) is a reflection upon the troubled life of Ferron's father onto which the author transposes features of his own life. By identifying a predecessor

colleague whom he never met with his father, Ferron demonstrates the impact physicians have on one another.

Alain Boileau, current owner of Cotnoir's house, told us that his father had a habit of painting messages on the rafters of the basement. In one corner Alain found three names together: Cotnoir, Ferron and Lahaie. Could Lahaie (or Lahey) be the doctor we sought? With the help of Nicole Provencher, at the archives of the Quebec college of physicians, we identified Maurice Lahaie as Ferron's predecessor in Petite-Madeleine from 1939-1940. Dr. Lahaie graduated from Laval in 1938. He was, therefore, an unlikely candidate for the Anglophone doctor whose identity remains unknown. Maybe it is better that way.

## REFERENCES

1. Ferron J. Contes Anglais et Autres. 1964; Éditions d'Orphée, Montréal
2. Ellenwood R. Little William. *Impulse* 1974; 3: 11-12
3. Ferron J et L'Hérault P. Par la porte d'en arrière. Entretiens. Montréal, 1997, Lanctôt éditeur.
4. Baskett TF. On the Shoulders of Giants. Eponyms and names in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. 1996; RCOG Press, London: 209-11.
5. Breathnach CS. Biographical Sketches No. 36 – Sims. *Ir Med J* 1984; 77: 27.
6. Sims JM. The story of my life. 1884; D. Appleton and Company, New York.

7. Ould F. A Treatise on Midwifery. In Three Parts. 1742; Nelson and Connor, Dublin.
8. Graham H. Eternal Eve The History of Gynaecology & Obstetrics. 1951; Doubleday & Company, New York.
9. Bayne R. Ascending the Magic Mountain. Can Med Assoc J 1998; 159: 517-8.
10. Jellett H. A manual of midwifery. 1905; Balliere, London
11. Carbonne B, Benachi A, Leveque ML, et al. Maternal position during labor: effects on fetal oxygen saturation measured by pulse oximetry. Obstet Gynecol 1996; 88: 797-800.
12. Aldrich CJ, D'Antona D, Spencer JA et al. The effect of maternal posture on fetal cerebral oxygenation during labour. Br J Obstet Gynaecol. 1995; 102: 14-9.