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Jennifer J. Connor

Volume 8, Number 1-2, 1986

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081425ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081425ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Connor, J. J. (1986). The Legend of Joseph Montferrand and its Scientific Context in the 1880s. *Ethnologies*, 8(1-2), 7–20. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081425ar>

Articles

The Legend of Joseph Montferrand and its Scientific Context in the 1880s

Jennifer J. CONNOR

While he lived, Joseph Montferrand (1802-1864) was a well-known and admired French-Canadian lumberman in the Ottawa-Hull region of Ontario and Quebec. As a strongman, his many exploits in the name of French-Canadian honour were extolled far and wide and earned for him the immortality of the hero.

Joseph Montferrand's most prominent biographer, the historian Benjamin Sulte, related many of his exploits in *Joseph Montferrand, l'athlète canadien*.¹ Perhaps the lumberman's most famous feats were kicking his "signature" into a tavern ceiling with his caulked boots, and single-handedly defeating more than 150 Irishmen on a bridge in Hull, Quebec.² Though Sulte wrote his biography only twenty years after Montferrand's death, however, on occasion he had difficulty discerning fact from fiction in the accounts of the strongman's feats. Within these two decades, Sulte noted, "Montferrand est entré dans l'imagination populaire."³ This comment signals some of the confusion which has arisen over Joseph Montferrand, the actual strongman; Joseph Montferrand, the legendary man; and the later Joe Muffraw (so-called owing to the English pronunciation of his name), the more comic hero of tall tales. Most works on Montferrand deal with his attenuated character in the Muffraw tales. While the purpose of this paper is not to untangle the various strands of his legend, a review of works dealing with Montferrand will show the scope and

1. Benjamin Sulte, "Jos. Montferrand," in *Mélanges Historiques, Études éparses et inédites de Benjamin Sulte*, ed. Gerard Malchelosse, 1883; reprint ed. Montreal, C. Ducharme, 1924, vol. 12, pp. 9-60.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40; 32-34.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

continued popularity of the legend. Following this review I will argue that the significance of his legend in the 1880s, when Benjamin Sulte wrote his biography, owed much to prevailing scientific thought at the time. Montferrand's popularity then among Montreal literati helped formalize his legend, and perhaps paved the way for the later incarnation of the legendary Montferrand as Joe Muffraw.

In 1960 George Monteiro examined the legend of Joe Muffraw in detail, noting that Muffraw tales have been collected not only in Canada, but also in the states of New York, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota, among others.⁴ He concluded that the Muffraw legend eventually was subsumed under the Paul Bunyan tales in the United States. Since Monteiro's article, numerous works on Joseph Montferrand or Joe Muffraw have appeared in Canada. In fact, over the past twenty-five years in general a series of popular works originating from the Ottawa Valley has done much to publicize and commercialize the legend. The first of these, *Tall Tales of Joe Mufferaw* by Bernie Bedore, presents a collection of stories based on the author's memories of shanty tales told him as a boy in the Ottawa Valley.⁵ His tales bear the mark of the skilled storyteller and use many traditional motifs (especially in the "Lie" classification). Many have resonances of Paul Bunyan tales, particularly as Joe Mufferaw, like Bunyan, has a companion: his pet white moose, Broadaxe. Bedore also wrote numerous pamphlets, articles, books and songs relating to the Muffraw legend, and in 1971 had a television series called "Mufferaw Land."⁶ All of these activities increased public awareness of Muffraw and influenced later authors, storytellers and song writers. Perhaps of some importance for our understanding the transformation from Montferrand to Muffraw is Bedore's later comment that he originally began writing the shanty tales without giving a name to his main character; he then gave the name "Mufferaw" after remembering sayings current in the area: "There goes old Joe Mufferaw," or "Come here Little Joe Mufferaw."⁷ This process of developing tales was also used by William Laug-

4. George Monteiro, "Histoire de Joseph Montferrand, l'Athlète Canadien and Joe Muffraw," *Journal of American Folklore* 73 (1960), 24-34.

5. Bernard Vance Bedore, *Tall Tales of Joe Mufferaw*. 1963; reprint ed. Toronto, Consolidated Amethyst Communications, 1979.

6. Bernard Vance Bedore, *The Big Pine*. Arnprior, Ont., Mufferaw Enterprises, 1963, "Some Fine Athletes: A Tall Tale of Joe Mufferaw from the Upper Ottawa Valley." Arnprior, Ont., By the author, 1965. The television series was noted by Edith Fowke, *Folklore of Canada*. Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1976, p. 305n.

7. Joan Finnigan, "I Come from the Valley": *The Ottawa Valley*. Toronto, NC Press, 1976.

head of the Red River Lumber Company, who wrote of Paul Bunyan.⁸

More recent publications include the several works by Ottawa Valley writer, Joan Finnigan.⁹ Her works, especially, "*I Come from the Valley*", generally draw on Bedore's tales, but Finnigan has also included tales from Ottawa Valley residents. Her *Giants of Canada's Ottawa Valley* in particular gives the most detailed overview of Montferrand and his legend in the area. Following a detailed biography of Montferrand, which appears to be loosely translated from Sulte, Finnigan takes the narrative to the present day, quoting anecdotes from interviews with Bernie Bedore and other Ottawa Valley residents.

Other popular works have also discussed the legend. Most recently, a brief entry in the *Canadian Encyclopedia*¹⁰ cites a couple of feats attributed to Montferrand—including pointing a plough to give someone directions, a motif which seems actually to be more popular in the United States than in Canada.¹¹ In 1978 Donald Mackay included a lengthy section on Joseph Montferrand in his *The Lumberjacks*.¹² Although Mackay interviewed men who had worked in lumbercamps, his discussion seems to rely heavily on Sulte's work (which he cites in a bibliography). Unlike Sulte, however, Mackay states that "Long before Paul Bunyan and his blue ox Babe there were stories of Joe Montferrand and his mythical pet white moose."¹³ Apart from Bedore, only one other reference to a moose has so far appeared, and that is in a then unpublished folklore paper by Jeanne L. Pattison. Moreover, an informant in this paper, Mrs. Simon Parcher of Renfrew County, suggested she first heard the story of the pet moose after she was married (1922); and "the moose was just an ordinary moose, not anything outside, just an ordinary moose."¹⁴ Both comments seem to contradict Mackay's claim, so it appears his writing has also been influenced either directly or indirectly by Bedore's stories.

8. Monteiro, "Histoire," pp. 28-29.

9. Finnigan, "*I Come from the Valley*"; *Some of the Stories I Told You Were True*. Toronto, Deneau, 1981; *Giants of Canada's Ottawa Valley*. Burnstown, Ont., General Store Publishing, [1983]; *Look! The Land is Growing Giants: A Very Canadian Legend*. Montreal, Tundra, 1983; and *Laughing All The Way Home*. Ottawa, Deneau, 1984.

10. Nancy Schmitz, "Montferrand, Jos.," *Canadian Encyclopedia*. Edmonton, Hurtig, 1985, Vol. 2, p. 1155.

11. Monteiro, "Histoire," p. 27.

12. Donald Mackay, *The Lumberjacks*. Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978.

13. *Ibid*, p. 39.

14. Jeanne L. Pattison, "On the Trail of Joe Mufferaw," Group 6C-Acc. 2, York University Archives, Toronto, Ontario, 1974, pp. 21-23.

These popular works include some traditional material from informants, as do others. For example, an American work, Walker D. Wyman's *The Lumberjack Frontier*, includes tales of Joe Mouffreau, which are the re-told recollections of Louie Blanchard, a lumberjack on the Chippewa River in Wisconsin in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵ Apparently Blanchard had heard more about Joe Mouffreau, "a big Frenchman who was supposed to have come over from Canady" than he did about Paul Bunyan.¹⁶ More specifically, folklorists have mentioned the Muffraw legend in their works. In his *America in Legend*, Richard Dorson discussed Joe Mouffreau, based on Louie Blanchard's tales as re-told by Walker D. Wyman.¹⁷ And Edith Fowke has described and published stories of Mufferaw.¹⁸ The stories in Fowke's *Tales Told in Canada* were collected in the Ottawa Valley by Jeanne Pattison;¹⁹ more details and contextual information, however, are found in Pattison's complete manuscript referred to earlier, from which these stories were published. For instance, her informant, Mrs. Simon Parcher, recalls the stories "coming back" in the 1920s, although Mrs. Parcher's daughter, Mrs. Jean Richter, thinks she first heard of Muffraw through Bernie Bedore.²⁰ Pattison interviewed Bedore himself and discusses the tales collected from all three informants in this manuscript, referring to their motifs and context.

Although most of these publications are popular accounts in English, they have helped keep the memory of the French Canadian Joseph Montferrand alive, particularly in the Ottawa Valley. The legendary Muffraw has also been kept alive through song. Gilles Vigneault, a French Canadian singer, had a popular song in the 1960s called "Jos Montferrand,"²¹ thirty years after La Bolduc's "Johnny Monfarleau."²² And Tom Connors wrote and recorded "Big Joe Mufferaw,"²³ a song

15. Walker D. Wyman, *The Lumberjack Frontier: The Life of a Logger in the Early Days on the Chippeway*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1969, p. x.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

17. Richard Dorson, *America in Legend: Folklore from the Colonial Period to the Present*. New York, Pantheon, 1973, p. 174.

18. Fowke, *Folklore of Canada*, p. 305.

19. Edith Fowke, *Tales Told in Canada*. Toronto, Doubleday Canada, 1986, pp. 75-80.

20. Pattison, pp. 23; 25.

21. Marc Gagné, *Gilles Vigneault Bibliographie descriptive et critique*. Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1977, p. 711.

22. Gerard Goyer and Jean Hamelin, "Montferrand (Montferan), dit Favre, Joseph," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography: 1861 to 1870*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1976, Vol. IX, pp. 561-64; see pp. 563; 564.

23. Tom Connors, *Stompin' Tom Meets Big Joe Mufferaw*. Boot Records BOS7123, 1972.

that seems to owe much to Bedore's stories.²⁴ To date, only two folk-songs have apparently been collected: "Joe Mafraw" is in English and was collected in Montana;²⁵ the second song, "Chanson de Jos Montferrant," was collected by Marius Barbeau in Quebec in 1918,²⁶ and as its title indicates, the song is not about Montferrand, but was supposedly composed by Montferrand about the life of voyageurs.

All of these published tales and songs have tended to focus on the legend of Joe Muffraw, not on either Joseph Montferrand the historical figure or Joseph Montferrand the larger-than-life man of earlier legends. Moreover, they offer little insight into reasons for the legend. Only three, in fact, give detailed contextual information: Monteiro analyzes the legend in the United States; Pattison classifies motifs in local Ottawa tales; and Finnigan explains some of the background behind the Ottawa Valley stories in her *Giants*. Two other works do provide more insight into the legend, however. In their biographical article of Joseph Montferrand, Gerard Goyer and Jean Hamelin probe the issue of the legend's popularity by asking two questions: first, why did French Canadian society value strong men and physical strength so highly; and second, why did Montferrand, out of at least ten other strong men, attract the popular imagination? To the first question, they suggest that "the more a society feels weak and threatened, the more it clings to giants."²⁷ To the second, they offer three reasons: the personality of the hero, the place of his exploits, and the period in which he lived. Specifically, they note

Because his exploits belonged to the period which saw the disappearance of the *coureur de bois* and the *voyageur*, and the suppression of the *Patriotes* by British soldiers, he was a proper hero for a nostalgic and anxious people in search of a symbol onto which it could project its fears, frustrations, and dreams. Unable to realize their visions, French Canadians, between 1840 and 1880, built a symbolic country in their ideology, their legends, their literature, and their art. In the struggle they continued to wage against the English and against nature, French Canadians found hope and greater self-respect in the Montferrand legend.²⁸

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24. There is some discussion of this point between Pattison and Bedore (Pattison, p. 40). Bedore feels that his stories were borrowed but is resigned in the knowledge that the song increased awareness of Muffraw.
 25. R.P. McLaughlin, "Joe Mafraw," *The Frontier* 9 (1928), 28.
 26. The headnote states that this was composed in 1875. The song is catalogued under the title "Le retour des bois carrés" at CELAT, Faculté des Lettres, Université Laval, Quebec; and at the Centre for Folk Culture Studies, Museum of Civilization, Ottawa.
 27. Goyer and Hamelin, p. 564.
 28. *Ibid.*

This suggestion has validity, particularly when we realize that many of the legends about Montferrand existed in his own time. We might also note along with Goyer and Hamelin that supporting this theory is a resurgence of Montferrand stories and songs in the 1960s during the so-called quiet revolution, a period of great dissatisfaction and unrest in Quebec. However, as the anglicized name Muffraw implies, by the 1960s and 1970s, the published stories mainly dealt with the legendary, rather comic hero, not with the historical man; moreover, since most of them were told by English-speaking people, the value of the “quiet revolution” theory becomes questionable. So we are left with what appears to be two separate traditions—one primarily French, especially in the nineteenth century, and the other primarily English in the twentieth century.

In a more recent discussion, George Monteiro examines nineteenth-century sources of information about Joseph Montferrand in more detail and touches on reasons for the popularity of his legend.²⁹ Specifically, Monteiro refers to the works of Benjamin Sulte and A.-N. Montpetit, published in 1883 and 1884 respectively.³⁰ These works seem to have influenced each other, particularly as Sulte extensively quoted anecdotes from the earlier edition of Montpetit’s work (1871-72). More significantly, as Monteiro points out, in his 1884 edition Montpetit actually expanded his discussion of Montferrand, adding an anecdote he claimed “belatedly that he had heard. . . in his boyhood.”³¹ The new anecdote recounts Montferrand’s victory over seven large MacDonald [sic] brothers. Monteiro speculates that the anecdote actually derived from a recent historical event—the lynching of the McDonald brothers in 1881 in Michigan—which had become local legend by 1884, when Montpetit was writing. Unfortunately, however, several aspects of this event throw into doubt its influence on Montpetit’s writing: first, there were only two McDonald brothers in Michigan; second, no mention is made of their height or strength in the accounts cited by Monteiro; and third, the incident occurred in Michigan near the Wisconsin border, relatively far from Quebec. Why then would Montpetit manufacture an anecdote based on an American local legend when he had so much original material on Montferrand closer to home? Indeed, it seems more likely that Mont-

29. George Monteiro, “Montferrand Meets the McDonalds: Freezing One Frame in the Growth of a Legend,” *Canadian Folklore canadien* 6 (1984), 95-101.

30. Sulte; A.-N. Montpetit, *Nos Hommes Forts*. 1871-72; revised ed., Quebec, Darveau, 1884.

31. Monteiro, “Montferrand Meets,” p. 98.

petit referred not to the two Michigan McDonalds, but to the MacDonnell brothers who worked for the same lumber company on the Ottawa River as Joseph Montferrand. If we accept that Montpetit did remember the anecdote from childhood, and realize that Scottish pronunciations of "MacDonnell" and "MacDonald" are similar (with the emphasis on "Don"), it seems more probable the he simply mistook the spelling of the name of brothers known closer to home. Sulte himself referred to the McDonnell [sic] brothers in an incident in which they were not Montferrand's adversaries, but apparently his friends.³² In recounting the same incident, Joan Finnigan assumes that since no other MacDonnell brothers have been recorded in the lumber business in the Ottawa Valley at that time, the anecdote probably refers to the eleven MacDonnell brothers of Sand Point.³³ This suggestion seems more plausible, for in addition to their proximity, their friendship with Montferrand may in fact have resulted from a fighting incident such as that described by Montpetit, given the propensity of lumbermen for fighting in that era. As Montpetit himself noted, as quoted by Monteiro, "the MacDonalds. . .made sure to remember the conduct of the Canadian fighter by vowing him a friendship which would never diminish."³⁴

But while this local context for the origin of the anecdote is more plausible than that proposed by Monteiro, it still does not explain Montpetit's increased desire in 1884, in Monteiro's words, to "exalt his French-Canadian hero to quasi-mythic proportions."³⁵ In addition to cultural reasons (as noted by Goyer and Hamelin), Montpetit's desire may have been influenced by prevailing scientific thought at the time of his writing. In effect, Joseph Montferrand the legendary figure may have symbolized far more than his biographers have given him credit for to date. More concrete evidence of Montferrand's link to nineteenth-century scientific thought may be found in another 1884 work also published in Quebec. Specifically, in his *The Climate of Canada and Its Relations to Life and Health*, Dr. (later Sir) William Hingston offered two anecdotes about Joseph Montferrand.³⁶ Hingston,

32. Sulte, p. 23. In this edition, Montpetit's story of the MacDonald brothers also appears (pp. 38-39), thus adding to the confusion.

33. Finnigan, *Giants of Canada's Ottawa Valley*, pp. 19; 61. Finnigan devotes a whole chapter each to Alexander MacDonnell and Joseph Montferrand in this book.

34. Monteiro, "Montferrand Meets," p. 98.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

36. William Hingston, *The Climate of Canada and Its Relations to Life and Health*. Montreal, Dawson Brothers, 1884.

a prominent Montreal surgeon and former mayor of the city, discussed the Canadian climate, taken in its broadest sense to include all living conditions. He divided his book into three parts. Part III begins with the habits of the people of Canada, both good and bad (for example, clothing, intemperance, smoking), followed by sketches of different ethnic groups and their characteristics. After the Teutons and Irish (including the “Scotch”) is a section on French-Canadians. Hingston praises the ancestry of the original French immigrants (as with the rest of his work in a highly lyrical—some might say overblown—vein), and then sets the scene for his discussion of the physical stature of the French:

It may be that circumstances other than climate have here moulded the character of the former; but of this there can be no doubt: that to climate, in its widest sense—I mean to *all* the circumstances in which they live—are to be referred a remarkable change in physique, to which I shall again allude. Living in the plenitude of life, constantly in the open air, and in the pursuit of labour which develops [sic] that physique to the farthest—in childhood permitted to grow and to strengthen by resisting the heat of summer and the winter’s cold, till both become indifferent to them, or are made to minister to their comfort. That they have grown up strong and now form the healthiest white people on this continent, it were useless to deny.³⁷

Hingston continues in this vein by referring specifically to the strength of the French. In the following lengthy passage, he includes two exploits of Joseph Montferrand as examples. I will quote his footnote discussions as well, since they are also informative:

The strength of some of the men may—to those who look only at the lesser bulk of the French-Canadian as compared with that of the English-speaking—appear to be somewhat exaggerated; but those who are at all familiar with the exploits of some of the descendants of the early Norman and Breton settlers in Canada, will bear me out when I state that that nationality has produced some of the strongest men who have ever inhabited this country.

The De Salaberrys, Duchesnays, Lacasses; the Grenons, Montferants, Monarques; the Dumouchels, Tranchemontagnes, and others, whose names do not now occur to me, have, for generations, been possessed of tremendous muscular strength. A De Salaberry has struggled against six ordinary men; two brothers, Duchesnay, have, on the Richelieu river, stood, back to back, and levelled a whole crowd; Montferant’s strength appeared to be almost fabulous, and in the North-West he more than once saved his life by tremendous marches to escape the Indians, who much envied him the possession of his strength. The late Sir George Simpson once spoke to me of his terrible strength—strength associated, as

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 227-28.

it should ever be, with the tenderness of a little child. On one occasion he carried, at the portage of Grand Calumet, loads weighing 505 pounds each, half a league at a time, without depositing them; continuing the labour from 4 a.m. to 10.30 p.m. Joseph Montferant *dit* Fabre was then 27 years of age, was 6 feet 4 3/4 inches, and weighed 182 lbs.*

On one occasion he started with nine men for Fort McKenzie. John Knight, a Scotchman (interpreter), Gillespie and McLeod were of the party; the rest were picked Indians. The journey was performed in January. Neither rest nor halt was indulged in till the end; no food, no drink, was taken; but, without halting, a bud or twig would be nipped off with the teeth in passing, and chewed to keep the mouth moistened. + Of these, six made the journey, the rest having fallen by the wayside. But of those six, one only (an Indian) with Montferant survived, the remaining four died within two months. The Indians ever after called him "Mandji" (man-eater). It is remarkable that all those nine were between twenty-four and twenty-six years of age.

*I saw him when, at 64 years of age, he was living at the corner of Mignonne and Sanguinet streets, in this city, suffering from ophthalmia. [sic] His splendid frame still attested his enormous strength.

+ This hint was quietly given to Montferant by an Indian woman ere he started: 'Don't touch water, don't touch snow, don't stop, don't sleep.'³⁸

Unlike Sulte's work, which drew anecdotes from Montpetit's earlier edition (1871-72), much of Hingston's discussion does not seem to have a written source. Moreover, these stories sound more plausible than the tall tales presented by Sulte and Montpetit, such as the time Montferrand successfully routed 150 Irishmen (Shiners) on the bridge between Hull and Bytown (later Ottawa). Nevertheless, both of Hingston's stories do show folklore accretions of the sort that became associated with the strong Frenchman twenty years after his death. Of note is the footnote which perhaps alludes to the taboo against eating or drinking while travelling through the otherworld (C211; C262).³⁹

38. *Ibid.*, p. 228-29.

39. Hingston also provides another story, about strongman Grenon taken from M. de Gaspé, in a footnote to the Montferrand anecdotes:

Grenon, one Sunday, when walking in the woods, came across a full-grown bear. The animal attempted to escape, but his pursuer was at his heels, brought him to bay, and at length succeeded in seizing him by the back of the neck, and in this way managed to arrive at the church door of Baie St. Paul, as the people were collecting for mass. Grenon, it would appear, had some difficulty in bringing him, for he stated on arriving:- 'Le gredin n'aime guère la société des honnêtes gens; il s'accrochait avec ses griffes à tous les arbres et racines qu'il trouvait à sa portée.' The inspection of the place, says the narrator, convinced the curious of the truth of his words: shoots of young trees and roots which the bear had caught marked the road traversed by the animal in grip of this giant of the Laurentides. (Hingston, p. 229n)

Of some interest is Hingston's first footnote which refers to his having seen Montferrand "at 64 years of age." The address is correct (based on Sulte's information), though the age is wrong (Montferrand having died at age 62), so at first glance we may assume that Hingston's account is reasonably factual. Yet, this is the first indication that Montferrand suffered from an eye condition (ophthalmia). It is tempting to suggest that Hingston knew the strongman as a patient, but if that were the case, given his topic and style of writing, he would have devoted more space to his personal examination of such a giant. Although Hingston may have deduced the man's condition purely from passing observation, it is more likely that he actually mistranslated this passage from Sulte (Sulte described Montferrand's shining face which smiled on all who looked at him.)⁴⁰ The similarity in language at least allows us to infer that Hingston was familiar with Sulte's work.

Following this discussion, however, Hingston expanded his thoughts on French Canadian physique by presenting the results of experiments he conducted using his medical students in Montreal. He examined their weight, height and strength, and concluded the strength of French Canadians is "extraordinary."⁴¹ The fact that three Quebec writers—Sulte, Montpetit and Hingston—discussed Montferrand twenty years after his death, despite their influence on one another, naturally leads one to wonder about the significance of his legend in the 1880s, particularly in its association with scientific discussions. In other words, one wonders what, if any, factors influenced three different writers to write about Montferrand (or revise and republish an earlier work in the case of Montpetit) at this particular time.⁴²

One obvious influence might have been the well-known Canadian awe and reverence for the country's physical impact on the people, particularly as it affected the literary imagination.⁴³ As we saw, William Hingston discussed the large men in terms of the conducive climate in Canada. So too did Benjamin Sulte conclude his discussion of Montferrand, and other strong men, by suggesting that the influence of the environment had much to do with their growth:

40. Sulte, pp. 51-52; Finnigan, *Giants of Canada's Ottawa Valley*, p. 28.

41. Hingston, pp. 232-33. Hingston's description of French peasantry in this section also seems to be influenced by Sulte's language.

42. Another 1880s work discussing Montferrand is E.Z. Massicotte, *Athlètes canadiens-français*. Montreal, Beauchemin, 1880; see Monteiro, "Montferrand Meets," p. 99n.

43. Northrop Frye, "Conclusion," in Carl F. Klinck, ed., *Literary History of Canada*, 2nd ed. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1976, Vol. II, pp. 333-61; see p. 342.

Ces circonstances, cette influence, que sont-elles? L'air, le sol, le manger, le boire, la vie que l'on mène—en un mot l'hygiène. Pourquoi dit-on que changer d'air est toujours excellent? Parce que l'air n'est pas le même à dix ou vingt lieues de chez nous. Les émanations de la terre varient d'une manière étonnante. L'eau qui coule partout n'est pas la même partout, il s'en faut. Un site exposé au nord nous impressionne plus ou moins qu'un autre ouvert à l'est ou au midi ou à l'ouest. Les forêts, qui se ressemblent tant, diffèrent entr'elles par les essences qui les peuplent. Les cultures ont des effluves particulières à leurs espèces, et celles-ci subissent encore des modifications, suivant les sols où elles poussent.

La nature est un grand laboratoire de chimie, composé de salles, de compartiments, de corridors. Il s'agit de tomber dans la bonne chambre.⁴⁴

Following this passage, Sulte discusses the changes in French families who came to Canada two hundred years before, and concludes:

Dans l'ensemble, les Canadiens-français ont acquis en Amérique une force musculaire qui dépasse celle de leurs cousins de France. Les voyages célèbres de nos compatriotes ont fourni à la race canadienne un contingent énorme de vigueur physique. Ce jeune pays avec son climat sain, son agriculture, ses forêts résineuses, ses eaux si vives et si pures, la quiétude qu'il répand dans les esprits, sa nourriture abondante et riche par elle-même, a rafraîchi le sang des colons, calmé leurs nerfs, affermi les muscles, fortifié leurs os.

Il n'est pas nécessaire d'être savant pour comprendre cela; le chiffre du groupe que nous formons en dit assez. . .⁴⁵

Sulte therefore sees the Canadian environment—its healthful climate, pure waters, abundant food and its peace and tranquillity—as conducive to engendering and developing physically such men as Joseph Montferrand. He goes even further to suggest that strong bodies beget superior minds, commenting: "Ceci n'est pas une formule que j'invente. La science l'entend ainsi. Il existe un école qui affirme que l'intelligence est surtout remarquable chez les individus dont le père, le grandpère ou le bisaïeul a été cultivateur ou forgeron. Quelle joie pour nos écrivains! car ils descendent tous de la faucille ou du marteau."⁴⁶ On this hopeful note, Sulte ends his biography of "Jos. Montferrand."

Perhaps the key to understanding the late nineteenth-century historical and medical interest in Joseph Montferrand—and other strong men in this period—lies in Sulte's concluding discussion. Essentially, it is Darwinian in tone. Indeed, it is possible that both Sulte

44. Sulte, pp. 58-59.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

and Hingston were influenced by the Darwin-inspired thought that pervaded the literature of the late nineteenth century. Canadian historian Carl Berger has recently shown that Darwin's theory of evolution, first published in 1859, was not widely accepted by Canadian literati until the 1880s and 1890s.⁴⁷ Moreover, the theory's staunchest opponent in Canada was the internationally known scientist, Sir William Dawson (1820-1899), who wrote and spoke a great deal on the subject. In Montreal Dawson kept the issue of evolution in the foreground of the natural history societies.⁴⁸ The educated men writing about Joseph Montferrand in the 1880s in Montreal, including historian Benjamin Sulte, therefore, were probably much aware of the theory and the debate it engendered; although they may not have consciously written Darwinian notions, their work shows a belief in environmental influence, or selection based on "climate." Moreover, even if not Darwinian believers themselves, they would have been influenced by the general contemporary belief in the laws of heredity (i.e., strong will beget strong, or weak will beget weak) which was compatible with Darwinian theory at the time.⁴⁹ During this period as well, environmental issues and concerns led to a new interest in public health (the "l'hygiène" which Sulte referred to): with increasing urbanization, observers felt that people were becoming weaker and sicker. This belief lay partly behind Hingston's own experiments into the physical condition of French (and British) Canadians. He repeated them after other scientists questioned his results, and he claimed they did not differ from twenty-five years previously.⁵⁰ He summed up:

After a longer or shorter residence in Canada the constitution of Europeans becomes acclimatized, it suffering, in the meantime, no inconvenience, unless bad habits have attended a change of residence; and the offsprings of these Europeans, after a few generations attain a size and strength superior to those of their sires, when peace, comfort and plenty attend.⁵¹

His qualification in the last line seems to suggest the opposite may result in less amenable surroundings such as the city. Indeed, the fact

47. Carl Berger, *Science, God, and Nature in Victorian Canada*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

49. Michael Bliss, "'Pure Books on Avoided Subjects': Pre-Freudian Sexual Ideas in Canada," in S.E.D. Shortt, ed., *Medicine in Canadian Society: Historical Perspectives*. Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1981, pp. 255-83; see p. 266.

50. Hingston, pp. 236ff.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

that Hingston established the first voluntary health organization in Canada in 1875 when he was Mayor of Montreal⁵² indicates his concern for a healthy city environment (at a time when Montreal was considered one of the most unhealthy cities on the continent).⁵³ Ironically, his perception of French Canadians was not confirmed by other contemporaries who observed they "have not the physical strength for anything like heavy work,"⁵⁴ and that they had the highest mortality (especially infant mortality) in Montreal throughout the half century before Hingston's writing. What we see, then, is Hingston commenting, not on the reality of the present or even the past, but on the possibilities for the future—based on his nostalgic assumption that "peace, comfort and plenty" were the norm in an idyllic Canada of a remote time, the Canada of Montferrand and other giant men.⁵⁵

In sum, there may have been a confluence of societal and scientific influences which spurred these nineteenth-century writers—Montpetit, Sulte, Hingston, and others—to reflect nostalgically on the strong men of days gone by. They praised the physical condition of strong men like Montferrand and contrasted it with the moral condition which, in its childlike innocence, was for them clearly superior. They harkened to the fine heritage of such men and offered hope for future generations. In Montferrand in particular they found—or perceived—a perfect combination of brute force and gentle nature who "knows instinctively that he must only use his strength to redress wrongs and punish the wicked."⁵⁶ In him they idealized the result of debate over nature and nurture. While other strong men may have been too brute-like, Montferrand had "terrible strength. . . associated, as it should ever be, with the tenderness of a child."⁵⁷ Joseph

52. Maude E. Abbott, *History of Medicine in the Province of Quebec*. Montreal, McGill University, 1931, p. 89.

53. Abbott, p. 89; Terry Copp, "Public Health in Montreal, 1870-1930," in *Medicine in Canadian Society*, pp. 395-416, see p. 396; and Jean-Claude Robert, "The City of Wealth and Death: Urban Mortality in Montreal, 1821-1871," in Wendy Mitchinson and Janice Dickin McGinnis, eds., *Essays in the History of Canadian Medicine*. Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1988, pp. 18-38, see p. 28.

54. Robert, note 53, p. 168.

55. This romantic view of Hingston and his French colleagues also coincides with the development of French-Canadian nationalism, as discussed by Janet McNaughton, "French-Canadian Nationalism and the Beginnings of Folklore Studies in Quebec," *Canadian Folklore Canadian* 7 (1985), 129-47, see p. 133.

56. Goyer and Hamelin, p. 563.

57. Hingston, pp. 228-29.

Montferrand perhaps provided an ideal opportunity for nineteenth-century Canadian men of letters to witness the marvel of evolution—or at least heredity—while at the same time stimulating French pride in their heritage.

This discussion has attempted to show both the continued popularity of the legend of Joseph Montferrand and some of the complexities surrounding the legend. Over the past one hundred years publications on Montferrand/Muffraw have ranged from quasi-biographical to folklore studies to fiction. Examining another publication, recently discovered, provides further insight into the use of his legend at particular time and broadens our understanding of Montferrand by adding a scientific dimension to his historically and culturally important role. To say simply, then, that Joseph Montferrand was a man of the hour, who gave confidence to others and who lifted their pride during a critical period of their existence,⁵⁸ might be true of the historical man; but it does not entirely explain his popularity in the 1880s or later. Whether as the gentle strongman of late nineteenth-century intellectual writers or as the comic hero of mid-twentieth century popular writers, his complex persona clearly calls for a fuller exploration by modern scholars.

University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario

58. E.Z. Massicotte, quoted in Malchelosse, "Préface" to Sulte, p. 8.