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George Monteiro

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

S'inspirant du récit de la vie de Jos Montferrand que fit l'historien Benjamin Salte en 1883, André Montpetit publia l'année suivante, à l'occasion du cinquantenaire de la Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal, une série de courts essais sur *Nos hommes forts*. À cette occasion, Montpetit donna à Montferrand de nouveaux adversaires en la personne des sept frères MacDonald qui se mesurèrent au héros canadien-français sur le pont de la rivière Outaouais.

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# *Montferrand meets the McDonalds : freezing one frame in the growth of a legend*

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George MONTEIRO

In *America in Legend*, Richard M. Dorson talks briefly about Joe Mouffreau, a legendary hero among French Canadian lumberjacks. In the Upper Peninsula in Michigan he had heard about Joe's exploits :

how in lumberjack fights he kicked lethally with his long legs, and once left his footprint on the ceiling. In his taped reminiscences, Louis Blanchard, the French Canadian woodsman of Wisconsin, recalled that the 'big man we heard most about was Joe Mouffreau, a big Frenchman who was supposed to have come over from Canady.' He was seven feet tall and wore size seventeen shoes. Joe would pull crooked logging roads straight with his yoke of oxen, hitching them, with a great chain it took ten men to carry, to a hole the men dug around the start of the road, then giving a few yanks, whereupon the road straightened right out. He let his men sell the left over road to peddlers. Yet, writes Dorson, Joe Mouffreau "as not found his biographer."<sup>1</sup>

Dorson errs here, and it puzzles me that he would do so, for he was the editor who accepted for publication and subsequently printed in the *Journal of American Folklore* my study, "*Histoire de Montferrand: l'athlète canadien* and Joe Mufraw."<sup>2</sup> Therein I argue and demonstrate through an analysis of anecdotes and shared motifs (especially the feats of jumping high enough to put footprints in a ceiling and of indicating directions by lifting a plow off the ground and pointing with it) that Joe Mouffreau — also known, through a continuing process of change in pronunciation and orthography, as Mufferson, Muffrow, Mifferson, Muffrau, Muffreau, Maufree, Mufraw, Maufraw, Moufron, Muffraw, Mafraw, Le Mufraw, Ma Frau,

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1. *American in Legend: Folklore from the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York, Pantheon, 1973), p. 174.
  2. *Journal of American Folklore* (1960), 73 :24-34.

Murphy, and Murphraw<sup>1</sup> — has his source in the historical personage known as Jos. Montferrand, and that the biography of this famous strong man was written in 1883 by the Canadian historian Benjamin Sulte. I also mentioned in passing that some of Montferrand's exploits were described as well a year later in *Nos hommes forts*, a collection of historical essays by A.N. Montpetit compiled in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society of Montreal. To a showpiece treatment of the timely and heroic exploits of one Napoléon Mathurin, who had recently survived shipwreck in the Atlantic Ocean, Montpetit added accounts of familiar notables, such as Claude Giguère, Petrus Labelle, and Jos. Montferrand — accounts he reworked from "Tours de Force," his thirteen-part series, published from November 9, 1871 to April 4, 1872, in the Montreal weekly *L'Opinion publique*.

The most famous of his strong men was clearly Montferrand (1802-1864). Something of the extent of Montferrand's renown in the nineteenth century can be conveyed through Benjamin Sulte's brief anecdote about the hero of Papineau's Rebellion in 1837: "His look impressed at first glance. One day, I heard several persons ask who he was. Someone replied: 'Papineau,' and one of the witnesses of this little scene cried out naively: 'Had you told me it was Jos. Montferrand, I would have believed it!'"<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Montferrand, whose fame has lasted well into the twentieth century,<sup>5</sup> has been called "the most extraordinary model of his time, almost a mythical leader";<sup>6</sup> and Jacques Ducharme, writing about French-Canadians in New England, reports that "the ideal of physical strength, always the

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3. Some of the sources for these variations on the original name are Walter HAVIGHURST, *Upper Mississippi: A Wilderness Saga* (New York, Farrar and Rinehart, 1937), p. 182; Homer A. WATT, *The Rise of Realism* (New York, Macmillan, 1933), pp. 270-271; James STEVENS, *The Saginaw Paul Bunyan* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), pp. 220-243; Esther SHEPARD, *Paul Bunyan* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1924), pp. 49-63, 152-170; Earl CLIFTON BECK, *Lore of the Lumber Camps* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1948), pp. 339-342; Daniel G. HOFFMAN, *Paul Bunyan: Last of the Frontier Demigods* (Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press for Temple University Publications, 1952), p. 205; and R. P. McLAUGHLIN, "Joe Mafraw," *The Frontier* (Nov. 1928), 9:28.
  4. Benjamin SULTE, *Papineau et son temps: Mélanges historiques*, edited by Gérard Malchelosse (Montréal, G. Ducharme, 1925), XIII, p. 83.
  5. See, for example, *Rhode Island: A Guide to the Smallest State*, Federal Writers Project (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1937), p. 101; Jacques DUCHARME, *The Shadows of the Trees* (New York, Harper, 1943), p. 165; and Richard M. DORSON, *Bloodstoppers & Bearwalkers: Folk Traditions of the Upper Peninsula* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 88-90.
  6. Lucien BRAULT, *Ottawa, Old and New* (Ottawa, Ottawa Historical Information Institute, 1946), p. 67.

admiration of people who live close to the soil, takes on meaning to Franco-Americans in the phrase : ‘*C’est un Jos Montferrand.*’”:

André Montpetit had a great deal to do with popularizing news of Montferrand’s exploits. Besides retelling in 1884 such traditional anecdotes as those involving Montferrand’s successful leap to mark both feet on a ceiling eight feet high and his easy victory over a formidable black opponent, two anecdotes he had originally used in *L’Opinion publique*, Montpetit chose to incorporate some new material about Montferrand. One of the new anecdotes is particularly instructive in that it shows us in unmistakable fashion how Montpetit was wont to shape his materials, moving away from the straits of biography and out into the open waters of legend. In introducing us to the MacDonalds, Montferrand’s new adversaries, we are offered a rare opportunity to see how a recent historical event is accreted to already existing legendary material : How one was caught up in his victories ! Who does not recall the seven MacDonald brothers, who vowing to kill him, had barred, one day, his path on the bridge over the Ottawa River ? Montferrand was then “foreman”, or, if you will, “team leader” in the logging camps . . . After having completed his day’s work, Montferrand resolved, at dusk, to go ask news of his lady who had been left on the other shore.

Let us say quickly that through sundry bouts, separately (and even two by two), the MacDonalds had endured the weight of his arms and the push of Montferrand’s foot. They had felt, for several days, an unpleasant feeling somewhere other than around the heart. One of the MacDonalds, it is said, affirmed that the behavior of the strong Canadian athlete was hardly honorable in regard to them, and much too honorable regarding the young woman, the name of whom story does not record. He was jealous, and that jealousy, stirred up by the desire for revenge, caused him to draw his brothers into committing an act of baseness and cowardice.

Montferrand could have imitated Leander by swimming across the river to meet his beautiful lady, but he decided it was simpler to make a detour and to cross the bridge at the foot of the rapids.

Once there, he finds himself in the presence of seven robust men, seven highlanders, four of whom standing more than six feet tall. He recognizes the McDonalds. He is alone against the seven, who have completely barred his path across on the bridge’s narrow platform.

Will he turn back ? His well-known agility would allow him to escape his enemies. He need only traverse a few acres to succeed in

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7. *The Shadows of the Trees*, p. 167.

rejoining his men, who are camped on the banks of the river ; he could even allow himself to utter a cry of appeal to make them come running . . . but one could then have said that Jos Montferrand was afraid ! Rather death than such weakness !

Armed with sticks, the seven brothers advance upon him, clamoring and howling with rage ; finally they have him at their mercy.

Instead of intimidating Montferrand, their cries excite him. With the strenght of his two arms, he tears a rod from the parapets of the bridge, and whirling it over his head, he throws himself upon his adversaries, beating them with his "killer-rod." He knocks the down, stunning them and causing them to fall at his feet, before they have managed to land even one blow. There remains standing but one of the seven, the youngest, and who has fallen back before the *fear-some* appearance of Montferrand, and who now begs him for mercy.

Mercy ? Good, says Montferrand go tell your mother that Montferrand is true of heart and gallant, over and above his being a man of force, something which she should not doubt, seeing the manner in which your brothers have been handled. I much prefer to give pardon than to avenge myself. Your brothers will get up soon, because I wanted only to stun them, whereas I could have beaten them to death with sufficient cause. When they get up, if they come to shake my hand, I will be their friend. Good night, Archer ! And tell your brother Duff when he comes to, that "Loetitia" is a word that he must henceforth drop from his vocabulary.

Indeed, the McDonalds recovering from their dizziness, *made sure* to remember the conduct of the Canadian fighter by vowing for him a friendship which would never diminish. In my childhood, one referred to this episode in the life of the valiant battler as the combat of Montferrand against "the seven-headed beast."<sup>8</sup>

This account interests us in several ways. For one, Montpetit did not tell it in 1871-72 ; but when he did tell it, in 1884, he claimed belatedly that he had heard the story in his boyhood. For another, that Montferrand's battle is characterized as a battle with "la Bête à sept têtes," an allusion to the widely disseminated *conte* of the clever Ti-Jean who wins the princess' hand by killing "the Seven-Headed Beast,"<sup>9</sup> offers us a clue into the kind of biography favored by Montpetit — one flavored by folklore. Eager to convince his ethnic audience of Montferrand's large capacity for heroics, he compares him to

8. *Nos hommes forts* (Québec, C. DARVEAU, 1884), pp. 23-27.

9. This is an obvious allusion to tale type AT300 (Antti AARNE and Stith THOMPSON, *The Types of the Folktale* [Helsinki, FF Communications, 1961]). In Stith THOMPSON'S *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, I (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1956) such battles against the seven-headed dragons are designated as motif B11. 2. 3. 1.

a Leander who spurns the romantic opportunity to swim to his *jeune fille*, thereby setting the stage for his encounter with the “seven-headed dragon” who bars his way on the bridge he would cross. By alluding to the well-known *conte* he relates the MacDonald brothers (Montferrand’s seven-headed adversary) to the beasts of the folktale. It is because of folklore that Montferrand has precisely seven opponents, and not, say, ten or two.

The most interesting matter, however, is that the adversaries introduced into Montpetit’s accounts of Montferrand for the first time in 1884 are the MacDonalds, a name missing in all prior accounts of Montferrand’s prowess. It may be equally significant that Benjamin Sulte, a sober, if sometimes credulous, historian, also fails to mention the MacDonalds in his monograph on Montferrand in 1883. In fact, even in the 1884 edition of the work, prepared after he had seen *Nos hommes forts* and in which he appropriates some of Montpetit’s new material, Sulte omits in the midst of a long quotation from Montpetit precisely those paragraphs which present the MacDonald anecdote. Sulte’s own *Histoire de Montferrand: l’athlète canadien* was reprinted a number of times in subsequent years, but it was not until 1924, in the twelfth volume of his collected works, *Mélanges historiques; Études éparses et inédites de Benjamin Sulte* (published the year after Sulte’s death, the final revision and annotation being the work of an editor, Gérard Malchelosse), that Montpetit’s account of Montferrand’s battle with the MacDonalds on the Ottawa bridge finally made its way into what remains to this day the standard biography of Montferrand,<sup>10</sup>

Who were the MacDonalds identified by Montpetit only as Montferrand’s adversaries? And why did Montpetit fail to mention them in 1871-72 when he wrote of Montferrand for *L’Opinion publique*?

To attempt to answer the second question first, my hunch is that *pace* Montpetit’s own word the name “MacDonald,” as he would use it, was unknown to him in 1871-72. But in the 1880s the name might well have been familiar enough to his readers to evoke an immediate response. For it was in 1881, to suggest an answer to the second question, that the McDonald boys were lynched at Menominee, Michigan, thereby giving rise to a local legend. An episode of mob justice and orgiastic killing, the lynching of the McDonalds took place

10. *Mélanges historiques* (Montréal G. DUCHARME, 1924), XII, p. 7. It should be noted, moreover, that in the pages on Montferrand in E.-Z. MASSICOTTE’S *Athlètes canadiens-français* (Montréal, Beauchemin, 1880) there is of course no mention of the McDonalds.

nine years after Montpetit had first published his pieces on Montferrand. The circumstances surrounding their lynching are summarized by — who else? — Richard M. Dorson:

The lynching of the McDonald boys in 1881 in Menominee, a town in Michigan's Upper Peninsula on the Wisconsin border, is a historical event that rapidly grew into legend. Menominee was then a rough sawmill settlement where pioneer conditions still prevailed. A feud had flared between Billy Kittson and the McDonalds that ended, after a train of ugly incidents . . . in the fatal stabbing of Billy. The two McDonalds were jailed. A group of irate townspeople took the law into their own hands, entered the jail, and seized the accused pair whom they mauled and hanged.

Though history does not speak to the matter a folk ballad does have it that the McDonalds, like Montferrand, were Canadians.

The jail is broke, the mob is in ;  
 Give us one work to say,  
 Take a message to our mothers  
 Who live in Canaday.  
 It will make them broken-hearted  
 And cause them grief and pain  
 To think they never more shall see  
 Thei own dear sons again.<sup>12</sup>

So durable did the legend of the McDonalds prove, in fact, that to this day "echoes of the tale float around Michigan and her neighbor states," writes Dorson, "and can be heard in saloons and boarding houses when lumberjacks and lakesmen talk about knife-killings and witch-healings."<sup>13</sup>

By 1884, when Montpetit rewrote his account of Montferrand, the recent events at Menominee had already flowered into legend; and to the historian who would exalt his French-Canadian hero to quasi-mythic proportions, the ready-made McDonalds proved to be most useful inserts as Montferrand's obligatory adversaries.

Brown University  
 Providence, R.I.

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11. "Legends and Tall Tales," *Our Living Traditions: An Introduction to American Folklore*, ed. Tristram Potter Coffin (New York and London, Basic Books 1968), p. 165-66.
  12. Quoted in Dorson, *Bloodstoppers & Bearwalkers*, p. 174.
  13. *Bloodstoppers & Bearwalkers*, p. 169. Dorson's account of "The Lunning of the McDonalds Boys" was first published in *American Mercury* (1948), 66:698-703.

**Résumé**

S'inspirant du récit de la vie de Jos Montferrand que fit l'historien Benjamin Salte en 1883, André Montpetit publia l'année suivante, à l'occasion du cinquantenaire de la Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal, une série de courts essais sur *Nos hommes forts*. À cette occasion, Montpetit donna à Montferrand de nouveaux adversaires en la personne des sept frères MacDonald qui se mesurèrent au héros canadien-français sur le pont de la rivière Outaouais.