LATERRIÈRE: QUEBEC’S FAVORITE DOCTOR AND SPIN DOCTOR

Pierre de Sales Laterrière [1743 (1747?)–1815] was Quebec’s first memoirist writer. A fascinating character, he was a skilled medical doctor, but an even more skilled spin doctor. Merriam-Webster defines “spin doctor” as: “a person (such as a political aide) whose job involves trying to control the way something (such as an important event) is described to the public in order to influence what people think about it” (spin doctor). Laterrière often stretches the limits of credibility in his narrative to cast himself in a positive light, most likely to refute public opinion of his questionable personal and political activities. This lesson plan focuses on a brief biography of Laterrière and on excerpts from his memoirs as a context to introduce the passé simple. (See the Bibliography for information on Laterrière’s Mémoires, Ed. Bernard Andrès.)

Biographical Sketch of Laterrière

Pierre de Sales Laterrière is considered to be Canada’s first memorialist (Donovan 138-144).1 He was born near Albi, France, in 1743 (1747?) and studied near his hometown at the Royal College of Toulouse around 1760. During this time, his Uncle Rustan returned from Canada to visit his family and convinced the young Pierre to emigrate to Quebec. First, however, Laterrière continued his education by moving to La Rochelle where he studied mathematics under Mathieu Mounier. During his stay at La Rochelle, Laterrière traveled to Paris and London. Laterrière then studied medicine with Dr. Rochambeau in Paris. Finally, he left for Quebec.

Soon after his arrival in Quebec, Laterrière traveled to Montreal and Trois-Rivières. He participated in many soirées and enjoyed Quebec social life, commenting that he never knew a people that liked to dance more than the Canadians, evidently himself included. Laterrière began work for two businessmen: Christophe Pélissier and Alexandre Dumas, who was an associate of Uncle Rustan. Dissatisfied with his work in commerce, he returned to his love of medicine and worked with Dr. DuBergès near Quebec for two years. In 1771, he became commissioner, and later inspector, of the Foundry of Saint-Maurice in Trois-Rivières. Laterrière earned a living from his position at Saint-Maurice as well as from practicing medicine, which, he boasts, he understood perfectly. All in all, Laterrière was very pleased with his experience in Canada, calling it a paradise.

Nevertheless, paradise has its counterpart. During this time period, he fell in love with Catherine Delezenne whose father had promised her in marriage to Pélissier. According to Laterrière, the sad wedding took place (1775), but Catherine despised her husband who was decades older than she. It was Laterrière who fathered their child, Dorothea, in 1778. They were married twenty-two (22) years later in 1799, just after Pélissier’s death.

But Laterrière and Delezenne did not always share marital bliss. During the American Revolution, Pélissier plotted to implicate Laterrière as being disloyal to the British by conning Governor Haldimand. Pélissier produced false witnesses, including Delezenne’s father, and Laterrière was condemned to prison for ¾ years (1779–1782) during which time he lost most of his fortune. To pass the time while incarcerated, he built a “machine,” a replica of the fortifications of Quebec, including 60 canons, as well as the Foundry of Saint-Maurice where he had worked, complete with furnaces, a windmill, and a saw. When the guards took the machine to Haldimand, it struck his fancy. Haldimand kept the machine and recompensed Laterrière by releasing him from prison.

Upon his release, Laterrière was forced into exile from Quebec, so he traveled to Newfoundland. He built a cabin in Belle-Vue where he lived with Catherine and Dorothea. It was at this time that his medical practice started to take root. However, the British government demanded that all doctors present their diplomas and certificates of apprenticeship, but Laterrière’s were lost, and the government refused to license him for practice. His only choice was to return to medical school and earn another diploma. Therefore, he headed for Boston and began his studies at Harvard under the noted anatomy professor, Dr. Warren. One night, after bribing the sexton, the medical students stole the corpse of a plump lady out of her grave, who, writes Laterrière, dissected beautifully. After a year of intense study, he graduated with a degree in medicine. Back home in 1789, he also saw his son Pierre-Jean for the first time, who had been born in his absence. Laterrière submitted to an oral re-examination by the medical board and was finally granted a license to practice medicine in Canada. In 1792, his second son Marc-Pascal was born. In 1800, he moved to Quebec in order to send his sons to school but also to find a noble husband for his daughter rather than marrying her to a simple habitant.

Sadly, Laterrière picked the wrong man to wed his Dorothea. Shortly after her marriage to Lehoulier, which was allegedly not consummated, he began to abuse her, beat her, and treat her like a domestic servant. He even attempted to force her to commit adultery with another man. In the meantime, Laterrière moved back to Trois-Rivières. Finally, Laterrière moved back to Quebec and appealed to the courts for a legal separation which was finally granted to his daughter. Dorothea returned to Trois-Rivières with Laterrière and her mother where she lived for the rest of her life without remarrying.

A few years later, Laterrière received a letter from France notifying him of the passing of his father and stating that he must return to the land of his birth to accept his share of his father’s estate. Laterrière and his youngest son Marc-Pascal set sail for France but landed instead in Portugal. The Napoleonic wars had begun, and Laterrière, being Canadian, was considered to be a subject of the British Crown. Napoleon’s edict was that all English subjects, whatever their nationality, who were found in Portugal must be arrested. After some politicking, Laterrière managed to find passage to London.

While in London, Laterrière fell gravely ill to the point that he desired a priest for confession. He managed to recover and was finally able to set sail for Canada in 1808. Yet always the businessman, Laterrière imported at the same time enough merchandise to pay his debts in London, to send one son to school in England and the other to school in the U.S., and to buy the seigneurie des Eboulemens.

The last paragraph of Laterrière’s memoirs consists of a tirade against a certain Dr. Agronome who did not understand the proper use of anesthesia and who also claimed that abortion is not murder. The final two words of Laterrière’s Mémoires are, “Exécrables principes!” Thus ends the story of a doc-
tor, businessman, traveler, and colonist whose memoirs have preserved for us a lively and witty glimpse of life in Quebec during the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries.

**Lesson Plan**

**Objectives**

1. Students recognize the *passé simple* and become somewhat familiar with 18th-century French spelling conventions. Communication standard.

2. Students become acquainted with Laterrière, an important 18th-century Quebec figure. Culture standard.

3. Students are able to explain multiple perspectives of 18th-century Quebec: literary, sociological, and historical. Comparisons standard.

**PREPARATION** (Note: This lesson plan contains lists of French and Quebec historical events and three literary texts with accompanying vocabulary lists. Text #1 focuses on politics, text #2 focuses on science, and text #3 focuses on culture.) Prepare an explanatory handout on how to form the *passé simple*. An excellent explanation of the *passé simple* can be found on the Web site [French.about.com]. See Bibliography.

4. Note 18th-century French spelling conventions that are different from modern day French. For example, the imperfect endings begin with “o” instead of “a,” and some letters are omitted: *temps* instead of *tempas*.

5. Read and review Act III, Scene IV of Molière’s *L’École des femmes* where Agnès throws a message tied around a rock out the window and her love Horace finds it below. See link to the toutmolière Web site in Bibliography.

**Method**

1. Activate students’ background knowledge by asking what they know about Quebec after the Conquest of 1763 and during the time of the French Revolution and Napoleon’s reign. Present historical/cultural circumstances in France and in Quebec 1763–1815. Then present Laterrière’s biography.

2. Divide students into partners. Give each student a copy of the *passé simple* grammar handout. Explain the formation of *passé simple*.

3. Next divide the students into three groups of partners. Pass out copies of all three literary texts to all students. Point out spelling differences between 18th-century and modern French. Assign each text to one of the three groups (even though all students have all texts). Have students work together in partners on their assigned text to transform the *passé simple* verbs into *passé composé*. Ask each group to give examples of their transformations to the class.

4. Ask each group to read their assigned literary text and vocabulary list with their partner. (Words in red in excerpts are found in the vocabulary lists.) Alternatively, ask students to identify new vocabulary words and look up the definitions on in-class computers and report back to the class. (This component of the lesson plan could be assigned as homework the night before.)

5. Have students of each group explain to their classmates the content of their text, as like a book report.

6. Have students discuss in partners what is interesting or far-fetched about Laterrière’s descriptions of:

   - Excerpt #1: Haldimand’s character and Laterrière’s imprisonment
   - Excerpt #2: His knowledge of medicine, his dissections, and his “hoose”
   - Excerpt #3: His discovery of Catherine and his description of Lehoulier

(Possible responses: Laterrière seems to be boasting about his understanding of medicine, grave robbing is illegal, and the existence of animals resulting from horse/moose matings appears to be fabricated.)

7. Encourage whole class discussion of broad themes such as relationships between French Canadians and English Canadians, the status of the economy or education, differences of religion, contribution of Laterrière’s Memoirs to our understanding of Quebec culture within its historical context, etc. Ask students if they think Laterrière wrote truthfully or exaggerated a bit. Suggested questions:

   - Puisque Laterrière était francophone, son jugement d’Haldimand était-il plus sévère que s’il était Anglophone?
   - Quel est l’état des relations francophones/anglophones de nos jours? Quelle est l’évidence qui soutient votre opinion?
   - Est-ce nécessaire que les médecins soient plus probes que le reste de la population?
   - Qu’est-ce que vous pensez de la vantardise?
   - Quels standards éthiques sont obligatoires et quels standards sont facultatifs pour les médecins? La distinction est nette ou floue?
   - C’était correct que l’église catholique n’a pas permis de divorce dans de telles circonstances que celles de Dorothee?

   - Auriez-vous aimé vivre pendant le vivant de Laterrière? Pourquoi ou pourquoi pas?

8. Assign an essay in which students pick a character from the texts (Laterrière, Catherine, Haldiman, Dorothee, Lehoulier, etc.) and write a first person narrative. Students should explain how their character perceives the events that took place in their lives, if possible in connection with the state of affairs in Canada, i.e., what s/he likes and dislikes, and how s/he perceives his/her place in Canadian society. It could be a
defense of his/her actions.

Alternatively, students could write a first person narrative in the form of a letter to another character in the Memoirs, expressing their feelings and asking for action to be taken, etc.

Additional information, the reading texts, activities, and bibliography can be found on the AATF Web site at [www.frenchteachers.org/bulletin/quebecactivity.docx].

Virginia R. Donovan,
University of Wisconsin-Superior
[vdonovan@uwsuper.edu]

Note

1 The biographical sketch is borrowed and abridged from Virginia R. Donovan's dissertation. See Bibliography. Used with permission.