

JACQUES FERRON'S CANADA

Jacques Ferron's Alberta, and Mine

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I was a rare bird from the west among Jacques Ferron's acquaintance, a fact that certainly stimulated our conversation and correspondence. Even though I'd left Alberta in 1967, and have lived in Toronto since 1972, the prairie remains important in my personal mythology, though not of much interest to anyone I've known except Ferron, who had his own mythology of the west, based on very limited experience but extensive reading. "Let us compare mythologies," wrote the poet, and Ferron and I certainly did, usually facetiously, but often very informatively, at least for myself. Let me give you some examples.

Our correspondence began in 1973, and within months I was holding forth about my grandfather Ellenwood having come to Alberta from Yarmouth Nova Scotia by way of McGill University and Richmond, Québec (where he taught at St. Francis College and met and married his wife) to Cache Creek B.C., and eventually to Red Deer, Alberta, in 1903. Ferron responded with some of what he called Alberta "pre-history" about Blackfoot Indians and Father Lacombe, the charismatic Oblate missionary who was obviously one of his heroes. In March of 1975 he wrote:

Ray Ellenwood, nous n'aimons pas trop penser à l'Ouest; le désastre amérindien a été aussi le nôtre. . . . je découpe dans un livre qui m'est cher ce que nous avons fait de père, notre Lucifer, grand con de Dieu, pitoyable, niais, sot, et pourtant brave homme.

And he inserted a cut-out page with a picture of Father Lacombe along with the following note:

Il a cru d'abord que les Amérindiens subsisteraient, ensuite qu'ils devraient s'accommoder de l'Européen puis il s'est voué aux Ruthènes puis il aurait bien aimé sauver nos métis sans trop y croire. Sa mère était quelque peu sauvage; il a fini, n'ayant

plus que Dieu, et le Révérend Ellenwood est devenu farmer.

The caption of the picture reads: "Le Père Lacombe, âgé de 88 ans, va, une dernière fois, prêcher à Ste-Marie de Calgary (13 mars 1913)." In very obvious contrast, pasted on the back of the envelope was a photograph of a cowboy, identified as Buck Steele,

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dressed all in black on a rearing white horse. Just as I assume Ferron was identifying himself somewhat with Lacombe, I have no doubt that the cowboy is his satiric image of myself and my clan. In the same spirit, five years later in an *historiette* dated 1980 and entitled "La Bible, l'anglais liturgique et le français profane,"¹ he described a cartoonish Ellenwood from

Alberta. This was when the dispute raged over the use of French by air traffic controllers.

Le français n'est qu'une langue profane tandis que l'anglais, grâce à la bible du roi Jacques, est une langue liturgique, sinon sacrée. Un fermier de l'Alberta, admirable de simplicité, Samuel Ellenwood (que son nom soit béni), s'en est prévalu lors d'une audience de la Commission BB; fervent de sa langue, n'en voulant point d'autre, il a dit: "What is good for God, is good for me."

My response to such nefarious slanders was to take the high road and respond with honest historical fact, such as the account of a small force of soldiers from Montréal who stamped their image on a suffering Alberta landscape. This happened during the North-West Rebellion of 1885, when General Middleton, who was imported from India to put down the insurrection, decided that the Soixante-cinquième Carabiniers de Montréal could not be trusted to fight valiantly against the French-speaking and Catholic Métis in Saskatchewan, so he sent them on to Bannerman's Crossing, near Red Deer, Alberta, to fortify a small hotel and keep out of trouble for a few weeks. I objected to the fact that the fort, recently reconstituted, has been named Fort Normandeau after

the Lieutenant in charge, a *Québécois de passage* if ever there was one. I must say that Ferron expressed sympathy with my point of view in that rather absurd instance, but he may not have been so enthusiastic when I commented on Father Lacombe's attempts to establish an exclusive Métis reserve in Saint-Paul, north of Edmonton.² When the initiative did not go well, Lacombe eventually acquiesced with a scheme to advertise for white, French-speaking settlers from Québec. According to George Stanley, this tactic was more divisive than helpful, and by 1909, most of the original métis settlers had left, "carrying with them a resentment against the French Canadians and against their white clergy that has never died out." (p.106) This was not altogether in keeping with Ferron's somewhat rosy image of Father Lacombe, nor with his tendency to see analogies between the fates of French-Canadians and Amerindians.

I could give more examples of similar exchanges, some mordant, some quite sentimental, but the main point is that Jacques Ferron provoked me to educate myself concerning my native province, particularly about the history of the North-West Rebellion. In the late seventies, I was still trying to get a handle on *Le ciel de Québec*. My translation of the book would not be published until 1983, and the information Ferron provided, in the interval, was crucial. Most important was a little book published by Les Éditions Bois-Brûlés in Winnipeg, entitled *L'espace de Louis Goulet*, a memoir of a métis buffalo hunter and trader who became embroiled in the 1885 rebellion at Frog Lake, was a prisoner of Big Bear for some months, and was later arrested and charged with treason in Battleford, Saskatchewan, by Francis Dickens, son of Charles.³ In 1978, Ferron sent me this book, which he called "*le fameux livre sur les Prairies – quand elles étaient françaises.*" It was this book, and the research I did in translating it (with important help from Ferron), that really got me interested in the history of the North West, preparing the way for my eventual work on *Le ciel de Québec*.⁴

The more interested I grew, and the more I learned, the more I became curious about Ferron's own take on the West and its history. Whence came his rather surprising fascination? It is well known that he seldom left the Montreal area. I knew he had traveled by train to and from Vernon, B.C., where he was sent by the Canadian Army for a few months in the summer of 1945. Until recently, I was aware of no evidence to suggest he ever really set foot on the sacred soil of my native province, but now, since the publication in

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*Papiers intimes*⁵ of his correspondence with his father, I can quote the following:

Après être demeuré sept jours et huit nuits dans un wagon, comme Jonas, je suis revenu sur la terre ferme, à Calgary, ville outrageusement anglaise où pour me faire comprendre je dois gesticuler comme un sourd-muet. (p. 232)

The brevity of his stay can hardly excuse an alarming lack of geographical knowledge shown in *Le ciel de Québec* where we are told that, from Edmonton, “*Jour après jour, les montagnes étaient restées à vue.*” (p. 123) I protested that no such statement could appear under my name as a translator born in that city, and so, in *The Penniless Redeemer*, the setting is changed from Edmonton to Calgary (with the author’s consent). Some might argue that if readers will accept that a Mandan chief, dead for 100 years, could suddenly appear in 1937 riding down the main street of Edmonton on a magnificent white horse, then they might accept a glimpse of the mountains from Jasper Avenue. But we Albertans, and we translators, are sticklers for facts.

To return to Ferron’s fascination with Alberta, however, new information has come to light as a result of the researches of Marcel Olscamp. In *Le fils du notaire*,⁶ Olscamp’s study of Ferron’s early years, we learn about two important influences coming from the west. The first was Father Robert Bernier, originally from Saint-Boniface, Manitoba, and a teacher of literature at Brébeuf College in Montreal when Ferron was a student there. Bernier not only inspired Ferron to read the best modern French literature, he also provided a caustic response to the right-wing, insular nationalism of Lionel Groulx. A second inspirational westerner was Jean-Baptiste Boulanger, a brilliant student from Edmonton who came to Brébeuf when Ferron was there. He was the son of one Dr. Joseph Boulanger, who was born in Montréal but decided to settle in Edmonton, where he became an active polemicist for French culture in the community, President of the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society, and founder of the periodical *Le Canadien français*.⁷ This admirable man has a cameo appearance in *Le ciel de Québec* as one of the “*anciens et notables*” of Edmonton, specifically described as the one “*qui parlait la langue des Cris.*” (p. 123)

There are a couple of other incidents in Ferron’s life in which the west had an impact, directly or indirectly. At some time in the late thirties, his eccentric father bought forty unbroken horses and had them shipped by train from western Canada to Louiseville, the

rather sleepy town where he lived, near Rivière du Loup. They were driven to pasture from the station through the town, the intention being to auction them off at a profit. As a business venture it was a failure, but the event certainly caught the imagination of the Ferron children, since it appears in both *Le ciel de Québec* and in Madeleine Ferron’s novel, *Le baron écarlate*. (*Le fils du notaire*, p. 140)ⁱ I am not sure where those actual horses came from. In *Le ciel de Québec*, they are shipped from Edmonton.

But most important of all was that single trip west to Vernon, where Ferron had an obviously powerful experience which he transposed later, and more than once, to Alberta. The best known instance is in the tale “*La vache morte du canyon*” (1953),⁸ where a young cow dies of thirst. The setting is west of Calgary:

Au-dessus du canyon . . . le soleil du matin au soir ne clignait pas d’un ?il; à la longue il fit chaud . . . La petite vache fut bientôt dans l’embarras; dès qu’elle faisait un pas, de milliers de sauterelles s’envolaient et de leur crépitement prévenaient les herbes, qui fuyaient plus loin . . . Au-dessus des sauterelles tournaient des faucons. . . . (p. 80)

Twelve years later, in a text entitled “*D’un amour inquiétant*,”⁹ Ferron disclosed the source of the drought motif, recalling that, while trying to amuse himself in Vernon, he had gone in search of an Indian village indicated on a map and found:

Deux soleils, vingt faucons, des milliers de sauterelles, les cris aigus, les bruissements fauves de la sécheresse . . . Mais qu’est-ce qui m’attendait en bas? Un crâne de vache, quelques poutres calcinées, un étang desséché: les vestiges de l’indian village.

This same passage was repeated verbatim five years later, in 1970, when Ferron reworked “*D’un amour inquiétant*” into “*Le bel héritage.*”¹⁰ But the manipulation of this memory has an even longer history. Marcel Olscamp has found in the Ferron archives early sketches for an unpublished poem describing a cow that dies of thirst and is surprised to see its own skeleton preceding it. (*Le fils du notaire*, p. 287) Meditating on this idea, Ferron seems to have combined it with other, more immediate cultural concerns so that, by the time of “*La vache morte*,” a bleached skull seen in British Columbia has become

ⁱ Marcel Olscamp quotes the brother, Paul Ferron, describing the incident.

the ghost of a cow bleating for Québec in the foothills of Alberta.

“La vache morte” might read like a traditional folk tale in that its hero, François Laterrière fits the ancient prototype of the simple-minded younger son who sets out to make his fortune. But François is loaded down with a whole baggage pertaining specifically to his country of origin. And in the course of the story, standard clichés of how the west was won are turned on their heads in a bitterly farcical vision of the Québec diaspora, of desperate attempts to maintain a semblance of heritage, and of the role all of this plays in the destruction of indigenous peoples, lands, and customs. Behind the deserted house in the canyon lies the ghost of the deserted Indian village in Vernon. Eglantine, daughter of the *Tchiffe*, Eglantine whose name (or so Ferron told me) is the correct name for the wild rose, emblem of Alberta, becomes the innocent victim of François Laterrière’s mania for the ways of the “old country.” A series of scenes reminiscent of ancient mythology (recognitions, premonitions, violent deaths, echos of Europa, Theseus and the Minotaur) eventually lead to the death of Eglantine and a total destruction of our hero’s dream, but the story is not over, as François Laterrière becomes Frank Laterreur, bare-handed matador of the Calgary Stampede, a cowboy with neither horse nor lasso. He

is now an epitome of both innocence and experience, French and English, gentleness and violence. And central to the story is the motif of the journey away from home and the return, or attempted return. It is central in this set of texts, a motif that imitates, of course, Ferron’s own trip to the west and back. Is it possible that Ferron left for Vernon still carrying with him the pan-Franco-Canadian optimism of his Brébeuf days? Does this Voltairian tale, as France Foriel presents it,¹¹ satirize his own loss of innocence?

In “D’un amour inquiétant” and “Le bel heritage we are not only told about the grasshoppers, falcons, and bleached cow bones, but those details are set in the context of an “*amour inquiétant*” and a “*passion des sauvages*” that represent Ferron’s life-long interest in things Amerindian, things which always vanished, like the village in B.C., before he could know them, until, on another army-sponsored journey, he offered a lift to a young Indian woman near Fredericton and developed his whole theory of social manicheism, discovering the Magouas so central to *Le ciel de Québec* and other texts.

But it is in *Le ciel de Québec* (1969), especially, that all these streams come together in a kind of Alberta/ Québec dialectic. There is the drought, which we see first in Edmonton and then hear about in a report sent to Dr. Cotnoir, in which all the familiar details of heat, grasshoppers and falcons are repeated (p.146). And that drought becomes the cause of Cotnoir’s decision to accept a fateful shipment of wild horses from Alberta which eventually stampede through the town of Sainte-Catherine-de-Portneuf. But before taking us to Alberta, Ferron establishes, in Québec city and the surrounding country, including the village of the Chiquettes, his Manichean universe. The Chiquettes are the local métis traces of the “*chasseurs chassés*,” the Amerindians.

And once again, a central motif is the journey out west and back home. Frank-Anacharcis Scot journeys as a missionary to the Eskimos in the far north-west, causes chaos, misunderstanding and near death, loses his “*belle-âme*” and returns home a changed man, ready for a dose of clap, Québec citizenship, and a job in helping the Chiquettes build their new cathedral. Henry Scott, the old métis born on the plains, retraces his father’s footsteps and travels with Frank and the herd of horses back to the “old country,” but his voyage also brings disaster and, like François Laterrière, he finds no place for himself in Québec. But two Scot(t)s insist on frenchifying their names (Henry Scott becomes Sicotte and Frank becomes



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François), thereby associating themselves with the non-English and the Magouas in opposition to police chiefs and Anglican churchmen.

Under Québec skies as Ferron describes them in this fantastic book, things are far from perfect, but there is no killing drought in Chiquetteville, and people from up on the hill and from the other side of the tracks are willing to come and help consecrate a new parish in the village of the Magouas. In Alberta, by contrast, the ghost of a Mandan chief rides his horse down Main Street, a sign that the drought striking the countryⁱⁱ is a kind of retribution for the disappearance of a whole nation, a hundred years earlier. *Le ciel de Québec*, unlike “La vache morte,” is at least optimistic to the extent that Frank-Anacharcis is capable of being Québeckized and Chiquetized.

None of this explains why the West, and particularly Alberta, in these texts becomes so much the locus of despair for Ferron, the place where francophone and Amerindian culture seem doomed to die together, whereas they both may have some chance of survival in Québec. Perhaps it is the simple historical fact that métis culture followed the same route as François Laterrière, in stages from Québec to Manitoba to Saskatchewan to Alberta, which was the end of the road. Perhaps it's nothing more complicated than Ferron's dislike of Alberta politics, including the export to Québec of Social Credit. But I find very persuasive Marcel Olscamp's suggestion that it may have something to do with a strong enthusiasm, and then a change of heart, concerning Father Bernier and Jean-Baptiste Boulanger, who provided Ferron, early on, with living arguments against the insularity of Lionel Groulx. Something happened, perhaps nothing more than the actual experience of traveling west himself in unhappy circumstances and stepping down for a few alienated hours in Calgary, so that, as Olscamp goes on to explain:

Le souvenir des Bernier et Boulanger contribua, quelque vingt ans plus tard, à une prise de conscience inverse du même Ferron, qui crut voir rétrospectivement, dans la présence à Brébeuf de ces êtres exceptionnels, un symptôme de l'échec de l'Amérique française et un repli sur le Québec de ce que le Canada francophone avait produit de meilleur. (Le fils du notaire, p. 193)

Of course, I had no sense of this when I first began translating and corresponding with Ferron. I had blithely retraced some of my grandfather's steps without thinking much about the implications, a

complacency that might explain the exasperation in an undated letter from Ferron, probably written in January 1982, which I received in response to some sort of newspaper clipping I had sent him:

Ce que vous pouvez être provincial, et vieille fille de l'Alberta, avec vos découpages de journaux! . . . Au fait, Monsieur Ellenwood, qu'attendez-vous pour retourner à Calgary? Votre carte de la Saint-Jean-Baptiste? Un mot, et je vous l'envoie. Votre grand-père n'aura été qu'un vagabond presbytérien, un nomade comme tant de héros de l'Ancien Testament; il ne savait sans doute pas qu'il vous traçait une Voie de Précurseur. . . .

Maybe there's some truth in that.

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ⁱⁱ With some historical inaccuracy, by the way, since central and northern Alberta were not badly hit by the drought, which is why many desperate Saskatchewan farmers migrated to the Peace River country.