

GUEST EDITORIAL

Connecting Literature and Medicine

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When the Société des amis de Jacques Ferron launched its idea for a year-long celebration to mark the twentieth anniversary of the death of the great Québécois writer, physician and political figure, Dalhousie University was one of several institutions across the country to express an interest in being involved. As momentum gathered throughout 2005-2006, and events in libraries, bookstores, theatres, cultural centres and university arts faculties followed each other in quick succession, both inside and outside Quebec, it was decided that Dalhousie's unique contribution to *l'Année hommage à Jacques Ferron* would be to pay special tribute to Ferron the physician, his ideas on medicine and the many connections between his medical practice and his literary work.

Consequently, when the Jacques Ferron traveling exhibition came to the east coast in April and May 2006, it was to the main foyer of the Sir Charles Tupper Medical Building and the adjoining Kellogg Health Sciences Library. Dalhousie being the first English-language institution to host the exhibition, and its faculty of medicine the only medical school to participate in the commemoration year's



activities, the Halifax version of the French-language exhibition had been made appropriately bilingual and the medical component hugely expanded. A special 3-page feature on Dr. Ferron in *The Medical Post* of April 4 heralded the event, and copies were on hand to mark the opening.

On April 25, to complement the 5-week display, and to develop some of the themes suggested by it, a day-long symposium was organized around the idea of The Physician Writing by the Medical Humanities Program and the Dalhousie Department of French. The result of that unprecedented collaboration was a coming together of literary scholars and students and practitioners of medicine, from inside and outside Dalhousie, and from the Maritime region and beyond. This special issue of the DMJ contains the full texts of twelve of the seventeen presentations given at the symposium, followed by a short feature on the National Film Board of Canada documentary *Le cabinet du docteur Ferron*, with which the day ended.

Symposium speakers presented in either French or English, and in almost every case texts printed in this issue are in the language of that original choice. The order, too, follows the broad structure of the symposium day itself, beginning with a series of reflections, many of them personal, on the imaginary Canada of Jacques Ferron – Ferron's vision of Acadia and the Maritimes (Moncton in particular), and of Alberta and the Canadian *farouest* – presented by the Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick, the Honorable Herménégilde Chiasson, an avid reader of Ferron and a writer himself; by Professor Jean Morency of the l'Université de Moncton, who lives and works in the city which is the setting for one of Ferron's novels; and by Professor Ray Ellenwood of York University, a native of Alberta, the translator of several books by Ferron and his correspondent for many years. Profoundly attached to his province



and culture, Ferron was nevertheless a curious and sensitive observer of the rest of Canada, a commentator who was informed, perceptive, exceptionally well read, even erudite, and whose critical, often ironic, yet ultimately sympathetic gaze confers meaning on worlds beyond the borders of Quebec.

Writing and medicine have long been seen as complementary and interacting activities. At the heart of the symposium were presentations by eight speakers, five of them students of medicine, on the phenomenon of the physician-writer in general and the connections between reading, writing and the practice of medicine in particular. At the centre of this DMJ issue are texts by four of those speakers: Faculty of Medicine Emeritus Professor, Jock Murray, former Dean of Medicine and founder of the Dalhousie Medical Humanities Program, who reflects on the mindset, qualities and circumstances that have caused such significant numbers of physicians to be drawn to writing; Dalhousie medical students Dylan Blacquiere and Alison Archibald, who write on authors Oliver Sacks and Somerset Maugham respectively; Dr. Jean Désy from Sainte-Brigitte-de-Laval, Quebec, family physician and writer, who has drawn inspiration from Ferron's work and offers a meditation on the co-existence of literature and medicine in his own life.

Underlying all these contributions is a shared conviction that writing and medicine are connected in fundamental ways, and that exposure to literature can provide enrichment and illumination (and in Désy's case, a kind of salvation) for medical practitioners and students of medicine alike. The next group of texts, all by practising physicians, offer examples of close engagement with the work of Jacques Ferron himself. Dr. Vivian McAlister, of the London Health Sciences Centre, writes

with Christiane McAlister of the obstetrical issues raised by one of Ferron's short stories, of the very personal memories of medical training and practice it evoked, and of a readers' journey that took them both to the Gaspé village where Ferron practised in the 1940s. Drs. Ian Cameron and Patrick Sullivan of Dalhousie's Department of Family Medicine reflect on the lessons for physicians contained in two other Ferron stories. Dr. Cameron writes out of his long experience of sharing stories by Ferron with Family Medicine residents in a literature and medicine seminar he created in the early 1980s.

Dalhousie University has had a longstanding connection with Jacques Ferron – both in the Department of French and in the Faculty of Medicine. Two of the final group of texts are by three current graduate students of French whose contributions to the symposium grew out of a graduate literature seminar: Viviane Brochot and Evelyne Szaryk (Ph.D. program) examine the omnipresent themes of birth and death in Dr. Ferron's fiction; Molleen Shilliday (M.A. program) explores the world of mental illness as it is reflected in his novel *Wild Roses*. The final symposium text is based on a reading of that same novel by a student in the Faculty of Medicine. One of the goals of the Faculty of Medicine, through its Medical Humanities program, has been to foster the narrative arts, both written and oral, providing an environment in which students can engage critically with literary stories such as Ferron's and respond creatively to them. "Crazy" is the script of a collaborative performance by Nadia Alam, a member of the graduating class of 2006, and Linda Clarke, facilitator in Narrative Medicine. It is Nadia's creative response to Ferron's *Wild Roses*, a work that resonated strongly with memories of her own experiences during her clerkship on a



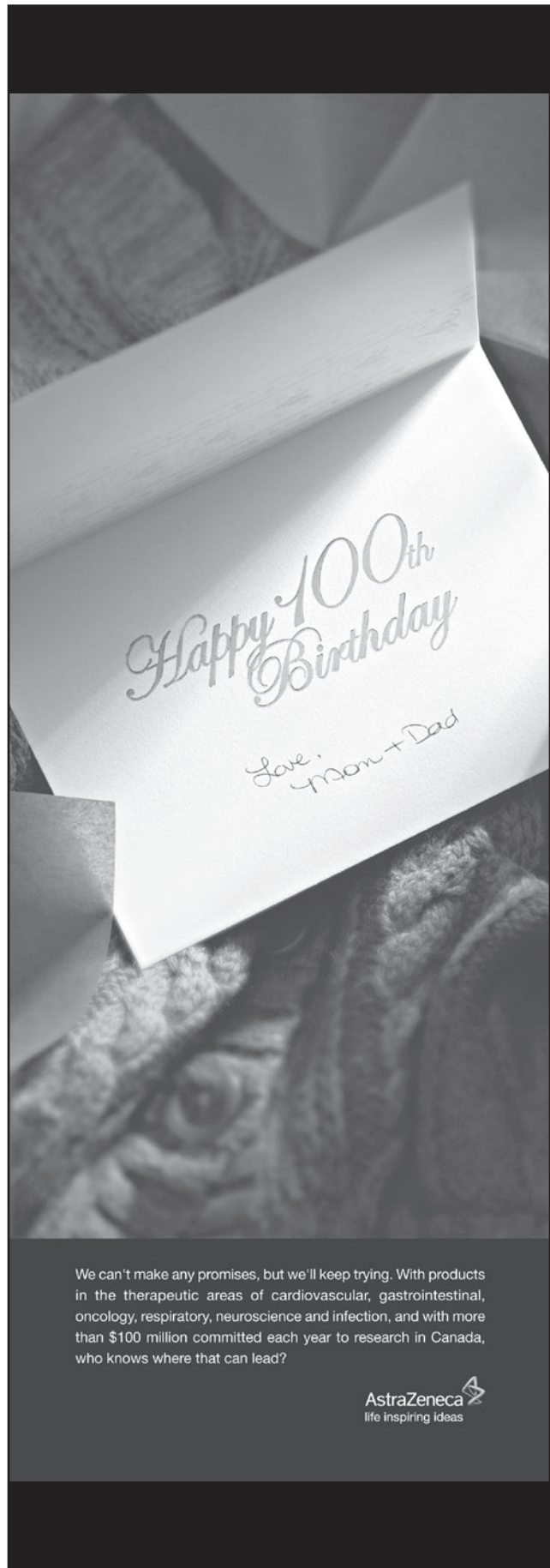


psychiatric ward and inspired her to give narrative form to them.

Along with the May issue's Jacques Ferron supplement, which contained abstracts of all seventeen presentations in both French and English, this special issue will provide a partial record of what was for all in attendance an extraordinary and unforgettable day. In the minds of DMJ readers, the April 25 symposium will continue to resonate. We would like to thank and congratulate all the presenters, all who came to listen and take part in the discussions, all who gave encouragement or helped in the organization – especially co-organizer and collaborator, Dr. Ronald Stewart, Director of Medical Humanities. We express our gratitude to all who provided funding for the symposium and whose support is acknowledged below. Finally, special thanks to Dr. Vivian McAlister for first arousing the interest of the DMJ editorial team. The journal is proud to have devoted, first a supplement, and now a whole issue of this scientific journal, to material of a literary nature. With the recent appointment of a Humanities Editor, in the person of Nathan Lamond, the DMJ recognizes the need for medicine to reestablish its connections with the humanities and reclaim its humanistic roots.

SUPPORT

Support for the symposium was received from: Government of Quebec (Bureau du Québec dans les Provinces atlantiques); Dalhousie University (Vice-President Research, Vice-President Academic, Dean of Graduate Studies, Dean of Medicine, Dean of Arts and Social Sciences, Medical Humanities Program, Canadian Studies Program, Department of French); Mount-Saint-Vincent University (Department of Modern Languages); Saint Mary's University (Department of Modern Languages and Classics); Fondation Langelier; CRILCQ (Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la littérature et la culture québécoises).



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