

Folklore in Anglo-American Medical Journals 1845-1897

Jennifer J. Connor

Volume 7, Number 1-2, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081321ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081321ar>

[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. (1985). Folklore in Anglo-American Medical Journals 1845-1897. *Ethnologies*, 7(1-2), 35–53. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081321ar>

Folklore in Anglo-American Medical Journals 1845-1897

Jennifer J. CONNOR

A review of nineteenth-century Canadian medical journals reveals a less objective communication of scientific matter than would be found today. In their pages are many examples of anecdotal information and asides in medical cases as well as eloquent exchanges of insults between practitioners.¹ This mode of communication suggests a milieu where the folklorist might find items of interest.

To date, however, Canadian medical journals have not been systematically examined as a source for the folklorist.² Generally speaking, published accounts of medical folk beliefs in Canada are limited to lists of folk remedies in folklore collections from specific commu-

-
1. For a discussion of the changing nature of such medical journals, see Charles G. Roland, "Ontario Medical Periodicals as Mirrors of Change," *Ontario History* 72 (1980), 3-15. For a complete list of medical journals in Canada, see Charles G. Roland and Paul Potter, *An Annotated Bibliography of Canadian Medical Periodicals 1826-1975*. Toronto, Hannah Institute for the History of Medicine, 1979.
 2. Jan Harold Brunvand touches on aspects of folklore and Canadian medicine in *The Choking Doberman and Other "New" Urban Legends*. New York, W.W. Norton, 1984, pp. 143-44. He also cites other medical works in his discussion of "The Case of the Miraculous Bullet," pp. 134-38. Interestingly, I recall reading this "case" in a Canadian journal some years ago. Unfortunately, despite my skepticism at the time, I did not make note of the reference; but my knowledge of its presence there seems to buttress Brunvand's argument for the case as "an old wartime legend or perhaps a nineteenth-century doctor's or editor's hoax."

nities,³ or in anthropological studies of native Canadian peoples.⁴ Other publications include William Riddell's 1929 article which was based on information in a religious journal,⁵ and Luc Lacourière's article providing an overview of the range of the topic in French Canada.⁶ Articles specifically devoted to native medicine have appeared in medical journals in the past fifty years.⁷ It would seem likely, then, that medical practitioners in the nineteenth century would also have written about medical practices different from their own. This paper will explore the types of folk information which Anglo-Canadian practitioners did discuss in their principal medium for communication, the medical journal. Specifically, these items fall under the closely related categories of folk medicine and folk belief.

One of the earliest references to folk medicine in a nineteenth century Anglo-Canadian medical journal was reported in 1847 by Dr. J. Crawford, Lecturer on Clinical Medicine at McGill College. In recounting a case of tetanus, Crawford explained that a young boy had caught his finger in the latch of a gate whereupon a servant bound up the finger with cobweb.⁸ Such treatment was a common home

-
3. Such works include Helen Creighton, *Folklore of Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia*. Ottawa, National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 117, 1950; W.J. Wintemberg, *Folk-Lore of Waterloo County, Ontario*. Ottawa, National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 116, 1950.
 4. Much has been published on native medicine; for a comprehensive list of sources, see Edith Fowke and Carole Henderson Carpenter, *A Bibliography of Canadian Folklore in English*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981, pp. 122-28; and Charles G. Roland, *Secondary Sources in the History of Canadian Medicine: A Bibliography*. Toronto, Hannah Institute for the History of Medicine, 1984, pp. 93-95.
 5. William R. Riddell, "Popular Medicine in Upper Canada a Century Ago," *Ontario History* 25 (1919), 398-404.
 6. Luc Lacourière, "A Survey of Folk Medicine in French Canada," in Edith Fowke and Carole H. Carpenter, eds., *Explorations in Canadian Folklore*. Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1985, pp. 237-52.
 7. See George E. Darby, "Indian Medicine in British Columbia," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 28 (1933), 433-38; and Arthur F. Van Wart, "The Indians of the Maritime Provinces: Their Diseases and Native Cures," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 59 (1948), 573-77.
 8. J. Crawford, "Traumatic Tetanus—Employment of Ether Inhalation," *British American Journal of Medical and Physical Science* 3 (1847-48), 199.

remedy,⁹ and was given credence by some medical practitioners. Indeed, Crawford notes in this case that the boy was taken the next day to a doctor "who applied some dressing *over the cobweb*, which he allowed to remain on for several days." Crawford's italics seem to indicate that the action was a significant one to him. Unfortunately, despite this and subsequent medical efforts the boy died.

Twenty years after this case, another journal reprinted an article entitled "On the Use of a Spider's Web as a Styptic." The author, a dentist, stated that in his practice spider's web "has proved efficient where everything else has failed."¹⁰ He also advocated its use because it can always be obtained, sometimes when other "more popular remedies" cannot be obtained so readily. These two items, then, represent instances where folk medicine were adopted—or at least sanctioned—by practitioners.

Wounds were treated by other natural means as well. An early reference to native medicine in particular mentions use of moss as a dressing. In 1847, a doctor in Penetanguishene, Canada West (now Ontario) reported a case of a Chippewa Indian who had received a gunshot wound to the arm. The physician who saw him a week after the accident had to remove "a quantity of moss which the Indians had applied to stop the bleeding."¹¹

Native medicine was discussed more fully in articles by Robert Bell in 1886,¹² and C. Flexon in 1897. Flexon noted in particular the Cree belief that bleeding must be stopped at once; to this end willow bark was used in the form of an infusion, or plantain was chewed by

9. See Wayland D. Hand's classifications 858-862; 1261-62; 2750 in *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, Vols. 6 and 7: *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from North Carolina*. Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1961 and 1964. Further references to Hand's classifications will be included in the text of this paper. See also Wintemberg, p. 14; S.A. Holling, "Each Family Its Own Doctor," in *Medicine for Heroes*, ed. Holling, et al. Mississauga, Ont., Mississauga South Historical Society, 1981, p. 35. The closest number in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (6 vols., Bloomington, Indiana University Press, revised and enlarged edition, 1955-58) is X252.1, *Client flees when cobwebs are brought in to medicate cuts*. Other motif numbers will appear in the text of this paper; reference to Ernest W. Baughman's motif numbers will also be identified as such (*Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*. The Hague, Mouton, 1966).
10. "On the Use of a Spider's Web as a Styptic," *Canada Medical Journal and Monthly Record of Medical and Surgical Science* 4 (1868), 75.
11. Thomas Stratton, "Case of Gunshot Wound and Excision of the Head of the Humerus," *British American Journal of Medical and Physical Science* 3 (1847), 33.
12. Robert Bell, "The 'Medicine-Man' or Indian and Eskimo Notions of Medicine," *Canada Medical and Surgical Journal* 14 (1885-86), 456-62; 532-37.

the doctor and applied as a paste to the wound. These two articles illustrate medical interest in native medicine which was to continue into the twentieth century.

Finally, one other folk cure is mentioned in a case reported in 1853 by E. Benzel Sparham, a Brockville, Canada West physician. The patient, a young girl with a tumour, had been taken to other "practitioners" before seeing Sparham. Sparham noted that one of them "recommended the no less revolting and superstitious relic of the darker ages than the application of the hand of a dead person to the tumour."¹⁴ The touch of a dead man's hand was commonly believed to cure swellings from goiter to tumours.¹⁵ Sparham expressed his alarm at such a practice: "How long she had to wait for so grim and appalling an opportunity, I am not prepared to say." His own cure followed the more clinically accepted method of surgical removal.

Folk beliefs, also, were in nineteenth-century Canadian medical journals. One example is found in a case reported in 1851. The patient was close to the time of delivering her sixth child when she fell into a fit. The family summoned Dr. Edward M. Hodder, a prominent Toronto practitioner, who made arrangements to bleed the patient (bleeding was a common medical practice to relieve pressure).

His preparation was stopped, however, for he noted

to my astonishment I was told by her husband and sister, that on no consideration whatever would they allow blood to be taken from her, either by bleeding, cupping, or leeching, alleging as their only reason for refusing, that they had always heard, that taking blood from a person after the 'sun had gone down' was invariably fatal.¹⁶

Hodder tried in vain "to overcome their superstition," but the patient's family remained firm. They suggested he "might call as early, and take as much blood from her in the morning, as [he] pleased." Reluctantly, Hodder left, the power of the family's belief having overcome the medical wisdom of the day. (Owing, perhaps to lack of immediate medical attention, the patient died the following day.) This exact supersti-

13. C. Flexon, "Some Medicines of the Swampee Indians of the North," *Manitoba and West Canada Lancet* 5 (1897-98), 153-55, especially p. 54.

14. E. Benzel Sparham, "Observations on Tumors," *Medical Chronicle* 1 (1853), 14.

15. See Wayland D. Hand, "Hangmen, the Gallows, and the Dead Man's Hand in American Folk Medicine," in his *Magical Medicine*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980, especially pp. 72-74. For reference to the belief in Ontario, see Wintemberg, p. 12.

16. Edward M. Hodder, "A Case of Apoplexy; . . .," *Upper Canada Journal of Medical, Surgical and Physical Science* 1 (1851), 4.

tion does not seem to have been collected elsewhere; but since the central idea concerned the time of day (after sunset), it is conceivable that the superstition is related to others which prohibit any work at that time.¹⁷

The common belief in the hair rapidly turning grey (Motif F1041.7. *Hair turns gray from terror*) appeared more frequently in the medical journals, usually as documentation of a curiosity. The first reference to this belief found in a Canadian journal is an item reprinted in the *British American Journal* in 1861 from *Medical Chirurgical Review*, a British journal. Apparently a correspondent of yet another British journal, the *Medical Times and Gazette*, had asked for authentic instances of hair turning grey in one night. A Staff-Surgeon, Mr. D.P. Parry, then wrote about an incident he witnessed involving a Bengal prisoner of war in 1858:

On February 19th. 1858, the column under General Franks. . . was engaged with a rebel force at the village of Chamda, and several prisoners were taken; one of them a Sepoy of the Bengal army, was brought before the authorities for examination, and I being present had an opportunity of watching from the commencement the fact I am about to record. Divested of his uniform, and stripped completely naked, he was surrounded by the soldiers, and then first apparently became alive to the dangers of his position; he trembled violently, intense horror and despair were depicted in his countenance, and although he answered the questions addressed to him, he seemed almost stupified [sic] with fear; while actually under observation, within the space of half an hour, his hair became grey on every portion of his head, it having been when first seen by us the glossy jet black of the Bengalee, aged about twenty-four. The attention of the bystanders was first attracted by the sergeant, whose prisoner he was, exclaiming, 'He is turning grey,' and I with several other persons watched its progress. Gradually but decidedly the change went on, and a uniform greyish colour was completed within the period above named.¹⁸

Nine years later, in 1870, this anecdote was still circulating, for the *Canada Medical Journal and Monthly Record of Medical and Surgical Science* reported it, this time as taken from the *Avenir National* by way of the *Dublin Medical Press*:

On the 19th of February Colonel Franks was engaged near the village of Chamba with a body of rebels, and many prisoners were taken; one of them a Bengalee, aged about 54, was conducted before the authorities to undergo interrogations. 'I had then,' said Surgeon-Major Famy, 'an opportunity of observing personally the following facts. The prisoner, for

17. See Hand 2916ff (It is bad luck to sweep the floor after sundown).

18. "Sudden whitening of the hair from terror," *British American Journal* 2 (1861), 234.

the first time, appeared to realise the danger of his situation when he found himself stripped and surrounded with soldiers. He trembled violently, terror and despair being depicted on his countenance; and, when replying to the questions addressed to him, he appeared absolutely stupefied [sic] by fear. Then, under our eyes, and in space of some half an hour, his hair, which we had seen to be of a brilliant black, became grey on every part of his head. The sergeant who had charge of the prisoner cried out, 'He is turning grey,' and called our attention to the singular phenomena [sic], of which I thus, with many other persons, was enabled to observe the completion through all its phases.¹⁹

The similarities—and variations—between these two accounts are perhaps obvious: the change in title from “General Franks” to “Colonel Franks”; the change in name and title from “Staff-Surgeon Parry” to “Surgeon-Major Famy”; the change in age from 24 to 54; the change in place from “Chamda” to “Chamba”; as well as other conflation and generalizations in the second version (such as the omission of the year, thus giving the story a sense of timelessness). Many of these changes may be the result of typographical errors having crept into the text over the nine years in much the same way as we see such changes in broadside ballad texts over time.²⁰ However, whether the incident was fact of fiction originally is difficult to say—although one might wonder about the aura of authority given to a story by its attribution to a staff surgeon “who was there.” It is significant that each version of the tale was actually third-hand, and it is not inconceivable that the “original” sources were inventions.²¹ The tale, in short, appears to be part of medical tradition. Moreover, clearly the anecdote circulated in the medical press for some years, if nothing else, attesting to its appeal among doctors. The Dublin editor of the 1870 version referred to the sudden blanching of hair as a “moot point”, but in publishing it he demonstrated recognition of the medical profession’s fascination with the topic. In these respects, the reprinting of the tale resembles modern legends which are often disseminated by the media.

19. “Sudden Blanching of the Hair,” *Canada Medical Journal and Monthly Record of Medical and Surgical Science* 6 (1870), 273.

20. For a discussion of textual variation, see Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*. 1946; reprint ed., Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977, p. 436; Herbert Halpert, “Definition and Variation in Folk Legend,” in Wayland D. Hand, ed., *American Folk Legend*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971, pp. 47-54.

21. Brunvand notes some difficulty in tracing the path of the miraculous bullet case through several reprinted versions; see pp. 135, 137.

Three years following the last report, in 1873, another reprinted item on the topic appeared in a Canadian medical journal, this time apparently to give added scientific credence to a rapid change of hair colour. The writer cited recent cases occurring in man and dog, and posed the following questions:

To what can this change be attributed? The answer is not easy. Is it to the extraction of air? Is it a consequence of the absorption of pigment or the result of the action of some chemical compound; as an acid, eliminated by the skin? . . . is it an instance of the direct action of the nervous system on the hair cells, or indirect upon the vessels of the surface? It would be interesting to know how the white colour makes its appearance—from the apex to the root or vice versa.²²

Finally, in the same journal later in 1873 a reprinted item listing physical effects of the emotions stated that “The sudden blanching of the hair from fear or grief is too well known to require examples.”²³

Two other items were reported in the journals which defy easy classification. The first is a reference to “various stories of fatal cases of poisoning by wearing stockings and other articles dyed with *coraline red*.”²⁴ Although it is possible that the red dye was indeed poisonous, this simple statement is reminiscent of the legend of the poisoned dress (Baughman, Motif Z551.), leading one to wonder about the nature of the “various stories”. It may also be significant that the stockings are red, a symbolic colour which Jan Brunvand has pointed out is common to legends of contaminated foods.²⁵ Unfortunately, since this is the only information found on these stories to date, further discussion of this matter is not possible.

The legend of the poisoned dress, however, also bears some resemblance to stories of human spontaneous combustion, particularly those which describe a girl’s dress bursting into flames while she is at a dance.²⁶ This phenomenon—the sudden and inexplicable fire which can consume an individual yet leave the surroundings untouched—received much attention in the nineteenth century, in

22. “Change of Colour in the Hair,” *Canadian Medical Times* 1 (July 5, 1873), 6.

23. “The Influence of the Emotions,” *Canadian Medical Times* 1 (October 25, 1873, 130).

24. “Poisoned Stockings,” *Canada Health Journal* 1 (1870), 38.

25. Brunvand, p. 119.

26. For a detailed account of this phenomenon, see Michael Harrison, *Fire From Heaven*. London, Pan Books, 1977, especially pp. 103-105.

literary as well as scientific writings.²⁷ While there were definitely cases of death by burning reported, there seems to have been some uncertainty about the cause—hence the notion of spontaneous combustion, refuted and supported alternately by different medical practitioners. The debate also appeared in Canadian medical journals.²⁸ An actual case from Westport, N.S. was published in *Maritime Medical News* in 1892.²⁹ The writer reported that this case “can be relied upon as being strictly true in every respect. The man who last spoke to [the dead woman] . . . and who first saw her after death, with his wife, who put her in the quilt and then in the coffin, were my informants.” He did not think the cause of death was spontaneous combustion which “probably never occurs,” giving instead a plausible explanation for the fiery death of an intemperate woman.

A belief which has been well documented by folklorists, on the other hand, concerns the effect of maternal impressions on an unborn child (Hand 83-120).³⁰ Simply put, it is believed that frights or

27. See, for example, J.R. Oliver, “Spontaneous Combustion—A Literary Curiosity,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 4 (1936), 559-72; George Perkins, “Deaths by Spontaneous Combustion in Marryat, Melville, Dickens, Zola and Others,” *Dickensian* (January 1964), 57-63; Gordon S. Haight, “Dickens and Lewes on Spontaneous Combustion,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 10 (1955), 53-63.
28. In an American article entitled “Spontaneous Combustion,” *British American Medical and Physical Journal* 7 (1851), 245-48, the possibility of such an occurrence is refuted. Another item under the same title in the *Upper Canada Journal of Medical, Surgical & Physical Science* 2 (1852) reports a case of spontaneous burning of a child’s bandage in Fredericton, N.B.; the editor noted cautiously “although we are much inclined to doubt the actual fact as expressed, yet as Spontaneous Combustion is known to have occurred on board ship, in cotton which had become accidentally moistened by oil, it is certainly possible.” (p. 219).
29. George T. Bingay, “Combustion of the Human Body,” *Maritime Medical News*, 4 (1892), 210-12. Bingay called for comment from “some better informed person than myself,” and the editor appended a note: “We submit this case for what it is worth to the consideration of the profession.” Clearly the journal was unsure about the subject of the case and its worthiness for inclusion in a scientific medical journal.
30. See Austin E. Fife, “Birthmarks and Psychic Imprinting of Babies in Utah Folk Medicine,” in Wayland D. Hand, ed., *American Folk Medicine*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976, pp. 273-83; Ellen J. Stekert, “Focus for Conflict: Southern Mountain Medical Beliefs in Detroit,” in Américo Paredes and Ellen J. Stekert, eds. *The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1971, pp. 121-22. See also Hand, “Deformity, Disease, and Physical Ailment as Divine Retribution,” in *Magical Medicine*, especially pp. 59-60. For Canadian examples, see Creighton, p. 16; Roger Paradis, “Henriette, La Capuche: The Portrait of a Frontier Midwife,” *Canadian Folklore canadien* 3 (1981), 114-15.

cravings of a pregnant woman leave their marks upon her unborn child. The mark could be literally that—a birthmark—or it could take a more serious form affecting the anatomy, resulting in a monstrous birth (Baughman, Motif T550.5 *Monstrous birth because mother sees horrible sights*). The belief in maternal impressions is very old, as witnessed by Jacob's placing of striped sticks before cattle so that they would conceive striped and spotted offspring (Gen. 30:37-41). Indeed, it has been discussed and analyzed by medical men from Hippocrates to the present day.³¹ Thus we should not be surprised to find the subject debated at great length in Canadian medical journals. In fact, from 1845 to 1897 there are numerous references to this belief. Most of them were reprinted from other journals, which indicates an ongoing concern of the medical profession for validation or refutation of the belief.

The first case, which was originally published in the *Dublin Medical Press*, included a discussion of monstrosities and their relationship to "mental impressions". The case immediately before the practitioner, Dr. Beatty, was one of a multiple birth, of which one was an acephalous monster:

The only cause assigned for the occurrence was, that the mother had suffered considerable mental distress at about the seventh month of her pregnancy, from having seen the mutilated corpse of a cousin who was murdered in the neighbourhood; to this circumstance the neighbours were disposed to attribute the occurrence in question.³²

After outlining others' theories of causes of the malformation, the physician turned to the "vexed question" of mental impressions. He admitted that "numerous instances on record go to show that some connection exists between impressions made upon the mother and the foetus in utero," and gave two cases from his father's notebook. It is worth quoting them in detail, as they provide the type of discussion that often took place in the journals:

[O]ne, was that of a lady, who, in the sixth month of her pregnancy, while walking on the South Circular-road, was accosted by a strong sturdy beggarman who solicited alms; she walked on, taking no notice of him, but he, finding his persecution unavailing, drew aside his coat and present-

-
31. G. Farkas and G. Farkas, Jr., "Is the popular belief about 'maternal impression' in pregnancy unscientific?", *Proceedings of the XXIII International Congress of the History of Medicine*, 2-9 September 1972, Vol. 2. London, Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 1974, p. 1303; T.W. Glenister, "Fantasies, Facts and Foetuses: The Interplay of Fancy and Reason in Teratology," *Medical History* 8 (1964), 15-30; see especially pp. 21-24.
32. "Four Children at a Birth—Acephalous Monster," *British American Journal of Medical and Physical Science* 1 (1845), 303-304; see p. 303.

ed the short stump of an arm that had been removed half way between the shoulder and the elbow. The lady, greatly shocked at the sight, got home as fast as she could, but went on well up to her full period; immediately on the birth of the child, however, she asked, with great anxiety, whether there was anything the matter with it. Dr. Beatty's father had heard nothing of the foregoing occurrence, was of course surprised at the lady's asking the question, but on looking at the child there was found only one arm complete, the other being only a stump, as if after amputation. *Such was the story, upon which it was for the society to set what value they pleased.* The next case was one recorded several years after, in which the child was born with six fingers on each hand. The lady stated that when five months pregnant, a person sitting in the same room with her was suddenly seized with epilepsy, and the patient's hands moved so rapidly that the fingers appeared to this lady as if multiplied to an immense number. She could never after banish the vision from her mind, and her child was born with these supernumerary fingers. Here, then, was another remarkable instance to be added to the general mass of facts in relation to this subject. (pp. 303-304)

The first case itself is interesting, for its subject—refusing alms to a man with a malformed arm—has been identified by Herbert Halpert as a form of “cursed-child” legend. This case contains the same elements as an Indiana version collected in the 1940s (an English version is similar; but it includes an explicit curse upon the woman and child).³³ Apart from its relationship to other folklore items, however, this narration serves to illustrate several points. First, the two cases involved unpleasant sights which were presumably out of the ordinary. Second, the cases are typical in their recounting of details which the new mother provided following delivery of her deformed child. Third, the second woman noted that she could not help but dwell on the “vision” during her pregnancy; such obsessive thoughts were common in these cases. Finally, the physician declined to comment on the case, offering instead a statement—such as the one I have italicized—by way of dissociating himself from the evidence presented (editors also wrote such statements, as we have seen with the case of spontaneous combustion).

This aversion to commenting was explained more fully in another note reprinted in 1849; here the author stated that the belief is “discredited by medical philosophers of the present day.”³⁴ He cautious-

33. Herbert Halpert, “Legends of the Cursed Child,” *New York Folklore Quarterly* 14 (1958), 233-41; see p. 234.

34. Butler Lane, “Mental Influence of the Mother on the Child,” *British American Journal of Medical and Physical Science* 5 (1849), 49.

ly submitted, however, that

general rules may admit of exceptions, and the occasional asserted instances of transmission to the child of maternal mental impressions, *which come under the notice of medical practitioners*, might be worth some investigation, though almost invariably shunned from the dread of the imputation of credulity or scientific heresy.

The key words here, of course, are the italicized ones, for the practitioner is clearly trying to distinguish between folk belief and scientific inquiry. The scene set, he then presented his own case: since he could "vouch for the facts, they may perhaps be deemed worthy of record." The case involved marks on a child's face along the lines of what would be a harelip, after the mother had seen a child with harelip when she was in her sixth month of pregnancy.

This case is particularly interesting because the editor of the Canadian journal appended a description of a similar case which occurred within his own experience in Quebec. The patient, having suffered an accidental blow to the forehead in her sixth month of pregnancy, feared her unborn child would somehow be marked. It was, by a tumour in the same area as the mother had received her blow. "This case", the editor remarked, "is, to say the least, a strange coincidence."

The medical interest in this general subject continued into 1850, for the same journal reprinted an article in which the author, Alexander Harvey, considered the possibilities of a woman's first husband so impressing himself on her imagination, that any offspring by a second husband would bear the first husband's features.³⁵

Following this article, a hiatus of a dozen years exists in the discussion of maternal impressions, possibly owing to the scarcity of Canadian medical publications in the 1850s. In 1862, however, the subject appeared again, this time in an article by Archibald Hall, Professor of Midwifery at the University of McGill College. Hall wrote about monstrous (especially cyclopean) births in the *British American Journal*³⁶ and commented in his introduction that investigations had resulted in the refutation of "all the old and crude ideas" on this subject, including the influence of mental impressions. Hall then quoted a case of a cyclopean monstrosity from Boston in which the patient

35. Alexander Harvey, "On the Influence Exerted by the Male on the Constitution and the Reproductive Powers of the Female," *British American Journal of Medical and Physical Science* 5 (1850), 238-42.

36. Archibald Hall, "Cases of Cyclopic Malformation," *British American Journal* 2 (1861), 485-88.

recalled that during her pregnancy she interrupted two boys who were "exercising their pugilistic powers": one of the boys had a bloody face. Although the Boston doctor did not refer to mental impressions directly, he stated in his history "Otherwise, there has been nothing remarkable during these [sic] period of gestation." He seemed to be hedging his bets with this comment; otherwise why did he mention the incident at all? Notwithstanding the American physician's allusion to the belief, Hall followed this case with his own in which, perhaps not surprisingly, he made no mention of maternal impressions.

The following year the same journal included a note on two cases reported by an American doctor who was a "firm believer in the development of abnormalities and inhumanities in utero through the influence of the mother's mind."³⁷ To these cases, the Canadian editor added the following comments:

We think these cases fully matched by the following still more remarkable one which has been fully verified, and in truth became afterwards the subject of an artist's pencil. A Chelsea pensioner, *both of whose legs had been shot off* at the fight at Trafalgar, under our immortal Nelson, determined upon perpetrating matrimony, and after narrating his 'Most disastrous chances of moving accidents by flood and field,' &c. to which his 'Desdemona did most seriously incline,' finally consummated the deed upon which his heart was set. In due time the pledge of mutual affection made its appearance, but strange to tell, it was born with *two wooden stumps* resembling those of its paternal progenitor to the minutest particular.

The writer here clearly is sarcastic and the piece evidently is meant to be a humorous, witty refutation of the belief in maternal impression. To this end he has used a common tall tale motif for his description of offspring born with wooden prostheses (Baughman, Motif X1202-X1202.1(f). *Lie: animals inherit acquired characteristics or conditions*). Moreover, apart from textual evidence to this effect, we can safely draw this conclusion, for the editor of the *British American Journal* was Archibald Hall, who as we have seen, believed such "crude ideas" had been refuted by science.

Hall's skepticism was not shared by all physicians, however. For example, another doctor wrote in 1866 that the connection between strong mental impression and affected offspring "seems fully proved

37. "Influence of the Mother's mind upon the foetus in utero," *British American Journal* 3 (1862), 253-54; see p. 254.

to be by no means an infrequent occurrence."³⁸ The physician added two more cases as a "contribution to the literature of this obscure and difficult subject." Significant in this item is the fact that the (British?) writer, in attempting to find a scientific relationship between cause and effect, distinguished between a transient but strong impression on the mother's mind, and a habitual mental conviction of what the result to the child would be. The habitual condition, and not the fleeting one, might bring about the feared result. To buttress his point, he cited a recent work on human physiology which clearly differentiated between the "soundly-judging physician of the present day" who might believe the latter argument versus the "vulgar notion" or "popular error" that marks are caused by "*a sudden fright speedily forgotten.*"

In ensuing years the journals continued to report cases of monstrous births, commonly with some reference made, if not to the doctor's, then to the patient's belief in maternal impressions. For example, a Panama practitioner, writing in 1869 about Siamese twins joined at the head, stated "and, of course, [the mother] ascribes the peculiar formation of the children to the fact of her having witnessed an acrobatic performance a few months previous to her birth."³⁹ In Toronto in 1886—seventeen years later—members of the Toronto Medical Society had an "interesting discussion" upon the possibility of maternal impressions affecting the foetus.⁴⁰ A Dr. Powell related several cases in his own practice where fright to a pregnant woman had resulted in a monstrous condition of the foetus, and Dr. Davidson related a case where a child was born without fingers on the right hand:

The mother had been in the habit of seeing a girl sitting in church, just in front of her, having a hand presenting a similar appearance to that of her child. The condition of the hand in this girl was produced by a burn, and the mother thought she had thus got the impression.

There is no other information given about the doctors' discussion of

38. "Monstrosity in a Child Following a Fright to the Mother in the Third Month of Pregnancy," *Canada Medical Journal and Monthly Record of Medical and Surgical Science* 2 (1866), 165-67; see p. 165.

39. "A Rare Case of Monstrosity," *Dominion Medical Journal* 1 (1869), 222. In another American case, the authors noted that the mother recollected "no fright or disturbance during her last pregnancy," thereby alluding to the belief; see "Account of the Four-Legged Child," *Canada Medical Journal and Monthly Record of Medical and Surgical Science* 5 (1869), 135-38; see especially p. 136.

40. "Toronto Medical Society, Stated Meeting, February 11th, 1886," *Canada Medical and Surgical Journal* 14 (1886), 501-502; see p. 502.

the topic at this meeting. Interestingly, further scientific comment on the general topic was provided the following year by an American physician who wrote that

So-called maternal impressions, monstrosities, marks, etc., are the result of arrest of evolution due to pressure by amniotic bands, pressure by the umbilical cord, adhesions of the placenta, or to some pathological condition of the foetus or its membranes, or to heredity.⁴¹

A report appearing in 1890 gave what appeared to be the first instance of a lawsuit involving maternal impressions. In Ireland a pregnant woman involved in a train accident later gave birth to a crippled child. The child, through its father, sued the railway company.⁴² The novelty of the event evidently appealed to the medical profession since this item was reported from the *British Medical Journal*.

The 1890s saw more reports reprinted from foreign journals.⁴³ One non-Canadian paper is significant in its discussion of theory. In an article entitled "The Influence of Material [sic] Impressions Upon the Foetus," Dr. Drzewieki noted the subject had "not yet found a proper place in science, being relegated to the region of delusions and fantastic fables."⁴⁴ Following a discussion of many examples of alleged effects of maternal impressions, he questioned whether an affirmation could be made that maternal impressions have no influence on the foetus. He concluded that "These are facts, proving that the foetus may unconsciously, but yet truly, express maternal impressions" (p. 112). Moreover, he stated "We must, however, admit that strong and lasting impressions must undoubtedly have influence upon the foetus" (p. 113). (Following this, he drew attention to the "well-known fact" that with animals the first male has a decisive influence upon a female's subsequent offspring engendered by other males, thus tying our discussion back to Alexander Harvey's 1850 article.)

Only one other item on this topic from the last decade of the nineteenth century has so far been identified as Canadian in origin. In 1891, a Dr. R. Johnson read a paper entitled "Maternal Impression" to the Prince Edward Island Medical Association. Unfortunately, apart

41. "Fifty Aphorisms in Pregnancy," *Medical Science* 1 (1887), 240-42; see p. 242.

42. "Maternal Impressions," *Northern Lancet and Pharmacist* 4 (1890), 304.

43. For example, see "Maternal Impression Followed by the Production of a Monster," *Maritime Medical News* 3 (1891), 204; "Baby with a Tail," *Ontario Medical Journal* 2 (1894), 336.

44. J. Drzewieki, "The Influence of Material [sic] Impressions Upon the Foetus," *Canada Lancet* 24 (1891), 110-13; see p. 110.

from its description as a "highly interesting paper. . . illustrated by numerous cases. . . with diagnosis and specimens," no information is given about the paper.⁴⁵ However, its existence does confirm continued interest in the subject among Canadian physicians.

It is of note that this interest was relayed to the general public in popular works intended for home use. For example, in an 1892 edition of *The Practical Home Physician*, the writer vehemently denied any influence of maternal impressions:

Most of the instances of the class already indicated are pure fiction; and many of them clumsy fiction at that. . . .And we can assure the youthful mother that she may gaze with impunity upon a whole museum of deformities and malformations, upon hare-lips, double thumbs, grinning monkeys, and similar attractions without the least danger of bringing a monstrosity into the world as a consequence.⁴⁶

The writer was quick to point out, however, that the mother's mental habits would affect her offspring.

Another domestic medical book published in 1889 in Toronto discussed "mother's marks" and maternal influence as well for the general reader.⁴⁷ George H. Napheys, author of the first part of this two-volume text, generally tended to support the belief by citing "the conclusions of skilled and scientific observers": "We record here, as elsewhere, only the sober utterances of science" (p. 144). However, in the second part of the text, M.L. Holbrook refuted the belief: "there is a conflict of evidence, but it is believed, with a decided preponderance against the existence of such a liability" (p. 353), citing William Hunter's observations on 2,000 cases of childbirth. With such conflicting medical opinions in one text, it is little wonder that women maintained in the face of science their belief in maternal impression.

By 1896 and 1897, medical articles centred on more scientific aspects of the belief in maternal impressions, at least judging by two found in those years. The first note indicated a refutation by a Scottish doctor of the theory that a previous husband influenced offspring by a second husband.⁴⁸ The second is a more lengthy note on the effects of heredity in which the author apparently supported the theory that previous pregnancies have an influence upon offspring, since

45. "P.E. Island Medical Association," *Maritime Medical News* 3 (1891), 150.

46. *The Practical Home Physician*. Guelph, Ontario, World Publishing, 1892, pp. 924-25.

47. George H. Napheys, *The Physical Life of Woman*. Toronto, Rose, 1889, pp. 143-52, and M.L. Holbrook, *Parturition Without Pain*. Toronto, Rose, 1889, pp. 353-56.

48. "The Influence of a Previous Sire," *Canadian Medical Review* 4 (1896), 43.

this is well known to breeders of animals.⁴⁹ His ideas seem to be based more on a physical or chemical transmission of traits as opposed to a purely mental transmission which works in some mysterious way upon the foetus.

By the end of the nineteenth century there appeared to be a movement toward more scientific approaches to the study of monstrous births. Although medical writers varied in their responses throughout the century, there tended to be a tacit understanding that the belief had its basis in observed fact. Moreover, the number of cases and theories attests to the tension between folklore and science with respect to this belief up to the end of the century. This tension may be considered in the context of Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions as reflecting changing medical paradigms—from folklore to scientific interpretations of physiological phenomena—as medicine in general relied more upon the basic sciences for its foundation.⁵⁰ Regardless of individual practitioners' points of view, however, doctors had difficulty ignoring the belief owing to its ubiquity and apparent consistency. In fact, how—rather than why—the impression worked was a matter that concerned the medical profession to a great extent since, as Michael Bliss has pointed out,

Doctors did not know the extent to which mental and physical shocks to a mother's system were transferred along with food and oxygen through the wall of the placenta. Lacking this basic physiological knowledge they had to pay attention to the many current stories about monstrosities and geniuses being the products of maternal impressions.⁵¹

As medical knowledge improved, so did the refinement of the scientific explanations for the physical manifestations of the belief. Scientific validation for the folk belief in maternal impressions may yet come, just as has been the case in more recent years with the belief in lactation as a contraceptive.⁵² Studies have, in fact, been conduct-

49. "The Heredity of Acquired Characteristics," *Canadian Medical Review* 6 (1897), 202-204.

50. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962; second edition, 1970. For further discussion see Kuhn, "Second Thoughts on Paradigms," in Frederick Suppe, ed., *The Structure of Scientific Theories*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1977, pp. 459-82.

51. 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, p. 265.

52. See Albert B. Friedman, "Grounding a Superstition: Lactation as Contraceptive," *Journal of American Folklore* 95 (1982), 200-208.

ed within the last twenty years. T.W. Glenister concluded in 1964 that "progress is being made as regards the elucidation of how malformations occur, but why they should occur is still a question of philosophy."⁵³ In this respect, he indicated the types of environmental factors that are now known to play a role in causing deformities of the foetus. And in 1972, G. Farkas and G. Farkas, Jr. conducted experiments using rats which showed an increase in abnormal births of the rats exposed to stress. Moreover, in a clinical study of 424 women who had delivered malformed children, 344 of them reported psychological trauma in the early stages of their pregnancy. The two researchers concluded:

we have to accept that a psycho-emotional stress—like the 'maternal impression'—may have a harmful influence upon the embryo. Powerful affectations such as anxiety, sorrow, may lead to pathological reactions and irreversible organic lesions. . . . We think, however, that the stress—like the 'maternal impression' and 'imagination' of the pregnant woman—may play in certain instances an important part in 'multifactorial-polygenic' etiology of congenital malformations.⁵⁴

Here we see that scientific discussion of the folk belief is still continuing, with some findings indicating a basis in fact.

A few other conclusions may be made about the belief in maternal impressions as it was discussed in Anglo-Canadian medical journals. First, the belief was widespread in the English-speaking world and was well known to doctors in many countries including Canada. Although most of the items on the topic were reprinted in Canadian journals from foreign sources, their appearance indicates an interest in the topic in the Canadian medical community. With their inclusion Canadians attempted to keep up with current medical knowledge in the international sphere—a wider scope that was bound to include more examples of the "obscure and difficult subject" than could be found in sparsely populated Canada. Furthermore, the reprinted articles spurred Canadian doctors to contribute in their own way to the store of knowledge whenever they could, sometimes through discussions of the topic at medical society meetings.

Second, the belief itself was multifaceted, involving aspects of heredity and physiology that were part of larger scientific concerns in the nineteenth century (notably theories of evolution). This larger context perhaps partly explains widespread medical interest in the possible workings of this physiological phenomenon. These facets in-

53. Glenister, p. 28.

54. Farkas and Farkas, p. 1304.

cluded simple marking of the foetus by momentary alarm to the mother or by ongoing mental strain of the mother caused by a shock (the latter seems to have been the cause of marking most widely accepted by physicians). Other, more serious manifestations included—more significantly for medical writers—anatomical deformities of the foetus caused by the same means. The belief also involved less damaging maternal impressions, for instance, the mother's mental image of her first husband affecting the appearance of offspring to a second husband; such children, it was believed, often looked like the woman's first husband, rather than their actual father.

Overall this introductory survey of nineteenth-century Canadian medical journals has shown that different types of folklore were mentioned, documented and discussed by the medical profession. In particular, the journals provide information on nineteenth-century folk medicine (use of cobwebs, moss, hand of corpse) and folk beliefs (fatality of bleeding except by day, hair turning grey from terror, maternal impressions, and, perhaps, spontaneous combustion). As noted earlier, the writing in these journals tended to follow a narrative style, even for the most scientific of cases, particularly in the earlier years of the century. Such a style allowed for injection of personal opinion and commentary, including feelings about folk belief (witness Dr. Hodder's surprise in one case, and Dr. Sparham's abhorrence in another). Furthermore, these expressed feelings provide insights into the natures of medicine and folklore alike at the time. The physicians in particular often provided folklore information hesitantly, and in practice they were sometimes frustrated in their attempts to convince patients to set aside their superstitions in favour of more scientific approaches to medicine. Yet perhaps their failure to do so becomes more understandable in light of such ongoing scientific debates as that concerning the possibility of maternal impressions. Many physicians themselves believed in such phenomena, and some "practitioners" even adopted traditional folk cures (though whether such doctors were formally educated and licensed is not known).

In all, seventeen Anglo-Canadian journals have been reviewed here for information about folklore; of these, perhaps a dozen articles or notes may be viewed as being wholly Canadian in origin. For the most part, the Canadian sources reveal concerns which were common to the international medical community. Much folklore is embedded in medical cases, though there are specialized articles on native medicine; in other words, little may be found without careful reading of the cases in these journals. It should also be remembered that

few original communications were published in the Canadian journals, many of which faced ongoing struggles to survive. A common plea in editorials, in addition to the usual request for fees, was for contributions from general practitioners and country doctors whose experiences would be appreciated. Since they were not forthcoming, much of the folklore information is contained in reprinted articles. The reprints which were common in nineteenth-century medical journals⁵⁵ were, of course, selected by the editors for inclusion, thus they do demonstrate interest within and without Canada in such topics as maternal impression. Moreover, the reprinted items often elicited editorial comments which provide insights into Canadian reactions to the topics discussed. Finally, frequent reprinting allows the folklorist to collect and compare items which may have their origin in oral tradition, such as the case of the Bengalee's hair turning grey in half an hour. If not begun in oral tradition, such anecdotes at least qualify as printed lore of the medical profession.

University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario

55. See Roland, "Ontario Medical Periodicals," p. 6.