

TIMOTHY SILVAIN O’SULLIVAN

Doctor by the King’s Grace

by
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Though Irishmen began to infiltrate into New France as early as 1665, within a few years some of their number were already well established and rooted in the new soil, but the first Gael to achieve prominence as a permanent resident did not arrive till 1718.

His story has been told by several writers, yet they have shown scant sympathy for him. M. Aedegius Fauteux was the author of a lengthy article about him in the *Bulletin des Recherches Historiques*, but was dearly prejudiced against him and never missed an opportunity to present him in an unsympathetic light. The Abbé Sattin, P.S.S, in his “Vie de Madame d’Youville” is vituperative and, unfortunately, could be said to be lacking in honesty. The Abbé Faillon is more just. He generally gives facts without comment, but in his book, of the same name, he fails to free himself of prejudice.

Towards the end of the 17th century a son was born to Daniel O’Sullivan and his wife, Elizabeth McCarthy, of the parish of St. Philibert in County Cork. The exact year appears to be controversial as do many dates in his story. The child was baptised Timothy. Some claim that the father was a doctor; however, little indeed is known of him.¹

On reaching manhood, Timothy left Ireland and his spirit of adventure led him to Spain where he entered a Dragoon Regiment. In a few years he had achieved his captaincy. The Regiment was probably an Irish one, for, at that time, there were to be found three Irish Regiments in the service of Philip V, the grandson of Louis XIV. This theory is heightened by the fact that O’Sullivan was sent to his native land to seek recruits for his Squadron amongst his adventurous compatriots.

He sailed from Spain, destined for Erin, but ill luck followed him and the ship he was on was overtaken by pirates and brought to New England. He appears to have escaped his captors and to have made his way northward to New France, for he arrived in Montreal in 1718, just seventy-six years after

¹ *Bulletin des Recherches Historiques*, Vol. VII, p. 24 & Vol XXIII, p. 306.

its foundation. It is from this time that his career becomes of interest to us.²

Settled in his new surroundings he was well received. He soon dropped the “O” from his name, and in a short time Sullivan began to take other form till it assumed a French version and became Silvain, so Timothy O’Sullivan of Cork became Timothée Silvain of Montreal.³ Soon well established, he met an eminent widow, a member of one of the best families in the colony. She was Marie Renée Gaultier de Varennes. Her father had been Governor of Three Rivers and she was the sister of Pierre Gaultier de la Verenderye, the explorer of the West. At eighteen she had married Christophe Dufros de la Jemmerais, an officer of Breton origin who had died in 1708.⁴

She was left with six children, three boys and three girls, and in very straightened circumstances, so much so that de Vaudreuil, the Governor, and Randot, the Intendant, petitioned the government in Paris for financial help for her. But it was not till 1714 that anything was granted; then she received a pension of 500 ecus, the amount usually allotted to the widows of officers.⁵

She is said to have been ten years older than O’Sullivan at the time that they were married at Pointe-aux-Trembles, not far from Quebec. Whether the marriage was an elopment or an effort to avoid publicity is not known. It appears strange that they travelled so far for the wedding and that they were not married in the church at Montreal or at Varennes where lay the seignory of her family. What lends further credence to the clandestine nature of the ceremony is the fact that the witnesses were not prominent citizens or members of her family but two habitants, one from Boucherville and the other from her own and neighboring parish of Varennes. Also, that the marriage contract (an important document in all French marriages) was not signed till three months later, helps to bear testimony to this theory. This is the first document on which he signs himself Silvain rather than Sullivan.⁶

Our hero proved to be a devoted father to her children. The eldest daughter, Marie-Marguerite, became the wife of Monsieur d’Youville and on his death founded the famous Canadian Order of Grey Nuns or Sisters of Charity.⁷

Four months after their marriage the bride’s mother, Marie Boucher,

² M. J. et Geo. Ahern, Drs. – *Notes pour Servir a l’Histoire de la Médecine dans le Bas Canada, depuis la fondation de Québec jusqu’au commencement du XIX Siècle*, p. 323.

³ Abbé Faillon – *Vie de Mde. d’Youville*. – p. 9.

⁴ *Bul. Res. Hist.*, op. cit., Vol. XXIII, p. 307.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 310 and Abbé Tanguay, *Dictionnaire Généalogique des Familles Canadiennes*, Montreal 1886, Vol. 1, pp. 555-6, Vol VII, p. 595.

⁷ *Recherches Faillon*, 3 BD, p. 383 and Le Jeune, R.P.L, *Dictionnaire Général du Canada*, Ottawa, 1931, Vol. II, p. 824.

widow of René Gaultier de Varennes, gave them. a house on St. Vincent Street in Ville Marie.⁸

Evidence of the fact that his father had been a “doctor” is to be found in Sullivan’s ambition to practice medicine in Montreal. He had undoubtedly acquired a more than general knowledge of “phsik” during his youth or in Spain. As he required a commission or “brevet” to belong to this profession, in 1723 the Varennes family put in motion the necessary efforts to acquire this authority. A petition, signed by the people of the little town and by the Seminary of St. Sulpice, pointing out the urgency of having another physician in their midst was submitted to the Ministry at Paris. At the same time, O’Sullivan sought his naturalization as a subject of the French King and de Vaudreuil added his high recommendation. Success crowned these efforts and in 1724 a “brevet” arrived giving to Timothée Silvain, “Irlandois de nation” the right to practice medicine on the Island of Montreal “under the orders of Sieur Sarazin, the ‘Medecin du Roi’ at Quebec. On the same day that Silvain became the ‘Medecin pour le Roi’ Ponchartrain signed his papers of naturalization.⁹

By 1742 the city appears to have had an ample supply of medical talent, for we find that not only Timothée Silvain was practising his profession on St. Paul Street but also that Joseph Istre, Surgeon, lived on Notre Dame Street as well as Claude Benoit “the son of Joseph Benoit,” physician and surgeon. Pierre Pinhureau de Maisonneuve, surgeon to the Hôtel Dieu, lived on St. John Street and old Doctor Jean Guichard, aged 75, had his office on St. Vincent Street, while there was also Ferdinand Feltz, the Chief Surgeon of the Hospitals.¹⁰

His worst enemy, however, was his temper which kept him constantly in trouble. He was often before the courts and his frequent litigations were the amusement and *divertissement* of the people of Montreal.

Many of those who wrote of these lawsuits have treated him rather shabbily and appear to have used undue effort to show bias against him. Fauteux says of him – “That notwithstanding what sort of a doctor he may have been, he was an unsatisfactory neighbour. High tempered to excess, he always had a stick, in the air or a sword drawn.”¹¹

In 1724, a complaint was entered against him by one Antoine Pondret, a baker, in which he sought justice, claiming that on September 26th Timothée Silvain attacked him while walking on St. Paul Street, seized him, hit him with the hilt of his sword and left him in a dangerous condition.

After Silvain’s marriage, for the first few years, all had gone well in his

⁸ *Bul. Res. Hist.* op. cit., Vol XXIII, p. 310.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

¹⁰ Olivier Maurault, Mgr. – “1742,” *Cahiers de Dix*, Montreal, Vol. VII, p. 165.

¹¹ *Bul. Res. His.*, op. cit., Vol. XXIII, p. 337.

practice, but an de Vaudreuil's death, his enemies became more active as he had no longer a protector. Beauharnois was convinced that as a doctor he was incapable, and wrote to the Court at Paris about certain difficulties between him and the Sieur Benoit, the Surgeon of the Troops. In 1728 he wrote to the "Council of Marine" criticizing Silvain's methods, saying that "he gives medecines of which nobody knows anything."¹² However, a new champion appeared in his behalf, for the Intendant Dupuy held another opinion. He countered with a letter, also to the Ministry, in which he said that – "Sieur Silvain is an Irish gentleman whose father was also a doctor" – and that he was very charitable towards the poor, hazarding himself daily by crossing the rivers on the ice to bring succor at a time when the ice was in a dangerous condition, also reminding the Ministry that he married the widow of M. de la Jemmerais who had six children and was "without an ecu." He added that Sieur Silvain had been a father to them and deprived himself of the very necessities of life to bring them up and give them a proper education. Dupuy's pleading prevailed and the Ministry sided with Silvain.¹³

Beauharnois had not realized that Silvain had many allies and that through his marriage he had powerful connections, for the Baron de Longueuil, the Governor of Montreal and Mon. de Chassagne, the Governor of Three Rivers, were his brothers-in-law. A niece of both of them, Marie Jeanne, the daughter of Jacques Le Moyne de Ste. Helene, had married René Gaultier de Varennes, a brother of Mme. Silvain, in 1712, and was thereby a sister-in-law of our doctor.¹⁴

In 1731, he found himself again before the courts. He had met a man named Charlebois, who was about to leave for the village of PointeClaire, whom he admonished saying, that if he or any of his family should give evidence in a case involving a man named de la Sabloniere, he would throw him out (of court) and beat him with his cane. For this offense, Silvain was condemned to pay seventy-five livres damages, thirty-five livres of the fine to be given to the Hospital of the Hôtel Dieu.¹⁵

In 1734 he went to France. Beauharnois again ranted about him for he feared that he was seeking the appointment of Medecin-du-Roi at Quebec. This was in no way the case.

Being a man of many parts, and being still in Paris in 1736, he decided to make proof of his nobility. He must be an Irish nobleman and to prove this he seems to have drawn wholeheartedly on his imagination. One would judge him to have been in intimate association with those romantic swordsmen of

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 338.

¹³ *Rec. Faillon*, op. cit., p. 383.

¹⁴ *Bul. Res. His.*, op. cit., Vol. XXIII, p. 336.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

King James, the Wild Geese, for they lent themselves unstintingly to his cause, gave eloquent testimony as to the antiquity and nobility of the House of O'Sullivan and signed the petition setting forth his claims.¹⁶

Mgr. Tanguay published this extraordinary document. It is written in old French and all the names are spelled phonetically. It was deposited with the "Court Authorities" at Paris and its appears to have been as follows:

"We, the undersigned, My Lord Fitzjames of Barwich [Berwick], Colonel of an Irish Regiment; My Lord Claar [Clare], Brigadier of the Armies of the King, and Colonel of an Irish Regiment; M. Rute, Lieutenant-General of the Armies of the King and Colonel of an Irish Regiment; M. Goulgla [this should be 'Douglas,' for that is how the petition is signed. The "G" seems to have been substituted for "D."] Lieutenant-General of the Armies of the King and Colonel of an Irish Regiment; M. Coucq [Cooke], lieutenant-General of the Armies of the King and Colonel of an Irish Regiment; My Lord of Castle Connell, Lieutenant. General of the Armies of the King and Colonel of an Irish Regiment; My Lord, the Abbé Melfort, Doctor of Sourbonne; Madame the Marshal of Berwick; Madame the Princess of d'Auvergne de Bouillon; Madame la Princess of Izanguin [Inchequin?]; together certifying to all whom it may concern, that Monsieur Thimoté O'Sullivan, Son of Monsieur Cornelius Daniel O'Sullivan, Count of Killarney in Ireland and Lieutenant-General of King James II, of glorious memory, is descended from the most ancient and the most illustrious houses of Ireland, from which have come His Highness, Monsigneur the Duke of Sutherland, Monsiegnieur, the Count of Bearhaven, the Marquis of Castile and Grandee of Spain, My Lord of Cashel, My Lord, the Duke of Musgrave, and many other general officers, bishops and prelates, that we recognize the Sieur O'Sullivan as our near relative and allied to the most illustrious houses of Ireland, of England and Scotland, and that he served to our knowledge, as a Captain of Dragoons during sixteen years in Spain. In 1716, being sent by order of his General Officers to recruit for his Regiment in Ireland, he was taken by pirates and brought to New England. In order to preserve his Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Religion, he journeyed into Canada where he resided for some years and married the daughter of Monsieur de Varennes, Governor of the City of Three-Rivers of an ancient family of nobility, widow of M. de la Gemmeraye, Captain of a Company of the Marine detachment in that Colony. In faith of which we have signed the present certificate to serve and be of use to him for the purpose of rendering testimony as to his birth."

Done at Paris, this 12th of January, 1736. Signed:

Fitzjames de Barwick,

¹⁶ Ahern, op. cit., p. 82.

Claar,
Rute,
Duglas (Goulgla),
Coucq,
Melfor,
Hugène O'Sullivan,
M. de Bocilly de Barwick,
Trant de Bouillon,
d'Izanquin de Monaco,
Castilconnell.

The petition was looked upon graciously by Royal favour and the Court of France recognized the nobility of the "Silvain" ancestry and placed Timothy O'Sullivan amongst the ranks of the "noblesse." After this, his name appears in some documents as "de Silvain."

On his return to Montreal he had a family quarrel and he was accused of having maltreated Mme. Silvain. Her brother, de la Verenderye, and her nephew, de Varennes, attempted to take her away. They entered action before the local Court for separation. It proved a lengthy trial and created a sensation in Montreal.¹⁷

O'Sullivan opened the proceedings with a complaint to the Judge, Sieur Raimbault, that "he had been assaulted and attacked at sword point by Sieur de la Verenderye as well as by Monsieur de Varennes." He stated that he was at home – "doing nothing" – when these people "entered and took his wife away by the hand" – M. de la Verenderye calling out to him – "get out if you have any valour, you own nothing here."

Amongst those testifying against him was the Abbé de Chèze P.S.S., who declared that an ecclesiastic from the Seminary, a Mon. Girard, had gone to give consolation to Mme Silvain on Christmas Day, when she told the young man that her husband had chastized her after Midnight Mass and that she could no longer live with him. A reconciliation was quickly arranged, but a few hours later, a man-servant went back seeking the Abbé who returned with him and who, on entering, found Silvain dressing the finger of his brother-in-law whom, when he returned to meddle, our doctor had wounded with his sword. After some persuasion, peace reigned again.¹⁸

O'Sullivan won his case, and the Court refused to authorize any separation. However, he took Civil action against de la Verenderye and de Varennes, but unfortunately the verdict in the case is not available.

He was not always so lucky in his lawsuits. On another occasion, he was ordered by the Court to pay forty-five livres nine sols judgement (judgement

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 83 and 84.

¹⁸ *Bul. Rec. Hist.*, op. cit. Vol. XXIII, p. 356.

interlocutoire). He did not hasten to pay. The bailif Laurent accompanied by the “Huissier-du-Roi,” Guignard, and two others were sent to collect the fine. When the writ was presented to Silvain, he seized Guignard by the hair, threw him to the floor and pummelled him with the hilt of his sword. In the fracas, the sword was broken. This infuriated our hero. He seized Guignard again by the hair and forced him to kneel down and kiss the floor twice, asking pardon of God and of the King as well as asking for justice for himself.

Guignard was so mauled that he was obliged to take to bed, while one of his assistants, named Perrin, was laid up for twenty-two days. Silvain held no rancor and attended them medically with charitable devotion.¹⁹

The greatest of his exploits also took place about this time. In 1738, Monsieur de Monrepos, the Lieutenant-General who succeeded Judge Raimbault in 1741, permitted a tenant to leave a house on Notre Dame St. which belonged to Silvain. The judgement was based on a complaint of a neighbor and on the attestation of the policee that the chimney was almost in ruin and a danger to the neighboring houses. Silvain demanded satisfaction and appears to have gone to the residence of the Monrepos where he covered the Judicial Officer with invectives. De Monrepos led him to the door but once on the street, Silvain could no longer restrain himself and struck him across the chest with his walking-stick. The Lieutenant-General brought complaint to the “Lieutenant-Particulier” Faucher, who ordered Silvain imprisoned.

To accomplish this was another affair. Maitre Adhemar, who was presiding (tenant le Siege), knowing that no one would hazard to approach Silvain alone, went to the Governor seeking assistance for the “Officers of Justice.” The Governor, de Beaucourt, found no need to give an order in writing as he deemed that justice had a right to all the assistance it required. Guignard and de Coste, another bailif, went to the guardhouse and demanded eight men and a sergeant to help them present the summons.

As luck would have it, the officer of the guard was Silvain’s own brother-in-law, de Varennes, who seems to have forgotten all his personal differences and, remaining faithful to his family connection, refused to co-operate, even threatening to arrest the bailifs. These appealed again to the Governor and returned to the guardhouse. De Varennes told them to get an order from the Governor. The row was carried on all the next day but when the bailifs finally arrived at Silvain’s residence they were too late. He had not only disappeared but also his personal furniture and belongings had been removed and Madame Silvain informed them that she had no knowledge of his whereabouts.

The affair caused great commotion and the little city was divided into two camps, the military siding with de Varennes and Silvain, while the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

judiciary backed Monrepos. This tempest-in-a-teapot even reached Versailles and de Varennes was deprived of his Company. Monrepos succeeded, in the end, in having the Varennes condemned to jail. He was liberated after six weeks on the appeal of the Bishop. From this on, Monrepos was regarded by the military as an odious being and left severely alone. Ville Marie was flooded with satirical and lascivious songs, and doggerel written, to celebrate the turn of events, by anonymous writers, and many of the Garrison were suspected.²⁰

In the whole affair, Silvain could be judged to have emerged best, for while all the troubles were at their height, he was quietly installed at the Seigneurie of Varennes.²¹

The Abbé Sattin was perhaps the most unfair of his biographers. In his *Vie de Mme. d'Youville*, speaking of her mother, Mme. Silvain, he says – “Madame, her mother, after eleven years of widowhood made a second marriage. This time with a stranger, a doctor, who far from placing her in a more flourishing situation ... through wasting her fortune and also through his conduct, the lack of control of which he displayed amongst the people, caused Mme. de la Jemmerais to forego a rich and honourable position.” A statement of this kind, coming from a cleric seems odd for it is not only vindictive but deliberately false, for we know when she married she was not only penniless and seeking aid, but we have the evidence of the Intendant Dupuy that “she did not possess an ecu,” and that if her children were properly educated, it was much due to their stepfather. What is further, when he died, he left quite a considerable estate.²²

The Abbé Faillon is also guilty on this score. In his book he says – “This marriage which tended to divide between the children of the two marriages the patrimony which Mme. de la Jemmerais would one day enjoy and might affect the future of her daughter (Mme d'Youville) and make her miss a rich establishment”²³ – when one realizes that the children of the second marriage all died very young (the boy was stillborn) as well as the fact that if any patrimony were to be enjoyed it belonged rather to O’Sullivan than to his wife, we are forced to fear that these two clerical gentlemen should have weighed the matter presented to them in a less biased light and not have distorted the truth.

Though Beauharnois questioned his capacity as a doctor, Dupuy tells of his success and devotion in his profession and his name is to be seen to-day

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

²¹ M^{gr}. Pontbriand, – *Archives Publiques et Correspondance Générale* 1744 Serie C 11, Vol. F. his. folio 427.

²² Abbé Sattin – “Vie de Mme. d'Youville” – published in *Les Rapports de l'Archiviste, Québec, 1928-29*, pp. 387-392.

²³ Faillon, op. cit., p. 309.

on the marble plaque at the entrance of the Hôtel Dieu Hospital at Montreal showing that he was a physician in attendance from 1725 to 1730.

L'Alphabet Lafillard, that wonderful manuscript list of all the "Officers of the Pen and Sword" serving in the Colonies of France, which is to be found in the Dominion Archives at Ottawa, divulges the fact that he was actually an honorary surgeon in the French Army and was retired with a grant of three hundred livres at the time that he was practising in Montreal.

As an Irishman, he was an ardent Catholic and practised his religion vigorously. He was one of the small number of citizens who held pews in the Church of Ville Marie. His was situated in the apse of the chapel of St. Amable and could not have been one of the worst, for it cost fifteen livres a year.

Silvain and his wife had four children, three girls and a boy. One girl reached the age of fourteen, the others died in infancy.²⁴

He was quite a landowner living on St. Paul Street in a two-story house of stone, with court and garden.²⁵ He was also the owner of another house of wood on St. Gabriel Street with court and garden,²⁶ while he possessed land on St. James Street.²⁷

He died in Montreal, in 1749, and was buried in the chapel of St. Amable, where he had his pew, in the parish church. The records give his age as 59, but this is very uncertain. He was most probably much older. His funeral service cost one hundred and thirty-seven livres, ten sols, which was a very considerable sum at that time.²⁸

His will was made about two months before he died and by it he provided a lifetime revenue for his wife. Being childless, he left all his capital to his step-children (again proving the lack of veracity in l'Abbé Sattin's statements). He bequeathed three hundred livres to the Fabrique of the parish church of Varennes to erect a small stone construction to serve as a "Chapel for the Processions of the Blessed Sacrament" – and to his step-grand-children, the children of Mme. d'Youville and to Ignace Gemelin – the husband of her daughter Marie Louise – all the books and manuscripts in his library. He signed his name, Timothée Silvain O'Sullivan.

Most writers have treated his memory unfairly. He was a romantic, adventurous character, and succeeded in all save the curbing of his temper.

His struggles with the authorities were not vindictive and he left behind the story of a generous and devoted doctor, charitable to the poor and a good

²⁴ Pontbriand, op. cit., folio 427.

²⁵ *Rapports de l'Archiviste, Québec, 1941-2* – p. 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁸ Extract from the Registers of Births, Marriages and Burials of the Parish of Montreal for 1749.

but unappreciated father. He left a fortune, which was large for a citizen of the French regime, to people who did not esteem what he had done for them.

He has left behind him a question that has yet to be answered. What was he really? It is difficult to understand how a man could have led such a full varied career in a town so small and in a country so new. A Spanish Dragoon, a devoted physician, or a French nobleman, the Surgeon of the French Troops – perhaps in part a mountebank, or the comfortable landowner, – which was he? Or maybe he was just a sympathetic Irishman who got much out of life and gave much in return. Without taking his burdens too seriously, he left a mark upon the city that he chose to live in. The story of his sojourn in New France adds an interesting chapter to the tale of the Wild Geese and particularly of those who sought a haven of liberty and adventure under the lilies of France across the seas.