

HEALING ALL THE KING'S MEN: MEDICAL TREATMENT AT FORTRESS LOUISBOURG, 1744

Gary Thomson

In Brief • En bref

When the CMA General Council meets in Cape Breton, NS, Aug. 18–21, physicians will have an opportunity to visit the largest reconstructed colonial town in North America, which is only 40 km from the meeting site in Sydney. This article looks at the medical treatment available at the historic Fortress of Louisbourg in 1744, when it was France's Atlantic coast bastion.

La réunion du Conseil général à Sydney, au Cap-Breton (N.-É.), du 18 au 21 août, sera pour les médecins l'occasion de visiter la plus grande ville coloniale reconstruite de l'Amérique du Nord, située à quelque 40 km à peine de Sydney. Cet article parle des soins médicaux qu'on dispensait en 1744 dans l'historique forteresse de Louisbourg, alors bastion de la France sur la côte Atlantique.

Summer, 1744. In the French garrison town of Louisbourg in Isle Royale, Surgeon Major Louis Bertin hurries to answer a summons from the fortress's commanding officer. A stricken soldier needs assistance because a zealous sergeant has punished him severely.

The same week a trading ship of the *Compagnie des Indes* limps into Louisbourg's protected harbour. Eighty-four of her 120 crewmen are suffering the ravages of tropical fevers. The sailors find refuge in the King's Hospital, where medical Brothers of Charity nurse them to health.

Records do not specify Bertin's treatment or whether he saved the soldier's life, but his bill to administrators indicates substantial effort — 102 livres, or one-sixth of his yearly

salary. The host of sick sailors also stretched the capability of the Brothers' 100-bed facility. The resident *supérieur* agonized at the strain their arrival placed on his annual patient-care budget of 6000 livres. The two incidents, recorded among the daily affairs in the 45-year life of Louisbourg, reveal intriguing insights into Canada's French-colonial medical history.

In 1961 master craftsmen and retrained Cape Breton miners began restoration work that would rebuild Louisbourg from ruins. They were guided by more than 750 000 archival documents and countless artifacts. Today Fortress Louisbourg, a National Historic Site, functions as an inhabited time warp. During the summer costumed men, women and children — administrators, clerks, artisans, citizens, tavern-keepers, traders and fishermen — recreate life in colonial France. It is the largest reconstructed colonial town in North

America and a testament to the English–French struggle for supremacy.

Summer, 1744. In Europe Fielding and Hogarth are recording the agonies of the poor and dispossessed. The new fad of monthly magazines is drawing public enthusiasm. Last year, in March, King George II wept at the London debut of Handel's *Messiah*. This is the year 14-year-old Josiah Wedgwood apprentices to his brother Thomas, to "Learn his Art of Throwing and Handling clay."

In Atlantic Canada, Louisbourg defines the zenith of the French colonial presence. Its commercial traffic rivals that of Boston and Philadelphia. Each spring fleets of Basque and Norman fishermen arrive to harvest enormous cod stocks. New England merchants grow rich in their illegal trade with the citizens of Louisbourg.

The harbour is a forest of masts, a stink of tar and fish, a chaos of bales and cables and kegs. Ships from the European-West Indies trade routes jostle for mooring space. Merchant ships await favourable winds before leaving for France. Sailors boast of the facilities, best along the Atlantic-Caribbean route: expert pilots, king's stores, supply depots, large wharf, Admiralty Court. Its superb hospital seduces patients to want to stay beyond the normal discharge time.

Seven hundred soldiers — colonial troops and Swiss mercenaries — protect the king's rich outpost. They shelter, shirk, gamble and fight in the

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fortress. Spread over a strategic hill-top, it's the mightiest military emplacement in North America, the Gibraltar of the New World.

Imposing and aloof, the citadel dominates the town. Inside the draw-bridge, the King's Bastion Barracks quickens the heart with its graceful lines of classic French architecture. Fronted by the Place d'Armes and backed by the 10-m-high walls of the King's Bastion, it houses the power of King Louis XV's Atlantic colonies.

Governor Jean-Baptiste Duquesnel, a one-legged naval officer, lives in lavish official apartments, with the finest French porcelain, silverware and crystal gracing his dining table. Superb Lyons tapestries decorate the walls. Occasionally he rides about in his sedan chair, enjoying the envy his flamboyance evokes.

But amid this opulence, trading and brawling, not all the king's men can remain healthy. What remedies and treatments, then, are available for troopers suffering the pox? Or the naval officer whose sabre arm is slashed in a duel? Or the stevedore whose leg is crushed beneath a 180-kg runaway barrel of imported Martinique rum?

Medical practice at Louisbourg followed official procedures that directed French colonial policy. One directive required a resident surgeon major where military personnel served. What were his duties and working routine? His training and pay scale? His pleasures and pastimes?

In many respects Louis Bertin's service at Louisbourg exemplifies the career of all surgeons in colonial posts. In this summer of 1744 he is 41 and has been chief medical officer since July 1737, when he replaced his father-in-law, Jean Baptiste Lagrange. Previous to his appointment, Bertin studied, then worked, at the naval hospital in Rochefort.

His training began with a 2-year apprenticeship, culminating in the *quatre semaines* exam. In succeeding

weeks he was tested in osteology, anatomy, bleeding and medication. Then he served two journeyman years with a master surgeon at Rochefort.

His practical training with dissecting cadavers gives him invaluable experience with anatomy, yet his mandate allows him to treat only external illnesses: ulcers, wounds, fractures, sprains, tumours and such. Physicians, because of their higher social standing and stronger theoretical studies, tend the "invisible illnesses."

Bertin arrived in Louisbourg in 1735, with five voyages as ship's surgeon behind him. Diligent and respected, he performed the duties of surgeon major in Lagrange's absence until his own official appointment.

Now he lives in an imposing stone house at the harbourfront, where he and his apprentice tend ailing townfolk. When called upon to assist sick officers and soldiers, he goes to the citadel barracks. Though he is on the king's military payroll he keeps civilian status, with social rank equalling a merchant's.

Inside, his *cabinet à remèdes* contains instruments worth 500 livres: shaving basin, bullet forceps, dental forceps, a bone scraper, lancets, razors, precision balance, probes, curved and straight needles, spatulas, surgical scissors and more. He also keeps more than 40 medicines for his potions, purges and infusions: extract of juniper, ointment of roses and red poppy, and a bottle each of shrimps' eyes, powdered vipers and tartar. There is also barley and bean flour for poultices, seeds of squash, melon, pumpkin and cucumber for skin rashes, and betanica plasters for complaints of the head.

In this imaginary third week of August 1744, Bertin will perform many and typical duties: shave and barber two dozen soldiers of the colonial troops, soak the gouty leg of a major in *eau-de-vie* compresses, and sign for a sergeant's *certificat d'invalidité* that will release him from active ser-

vice and hasten his return to France. On Wednesday he will amputate the hand of an enlisted man, and on Thursday he will escort a young private to the hospital for treatment of burns to his left eye. Both of the hideous wounds resulted from premature powder explosions in their muskets. Friday, he will soften the aches in Governor Duquesnel's arthritic limbs with a licorice and barley-water infusion.

Because he needs the additional money from his private practice, Bertin welcomes the latest news from the harbour: the trading ship *Mercure* from Le Cap has arrived, carrying a dozen sailors with scurvy. Further, a Breton fisherman needs an abscessed tooth pulled. And he must complete the autopsy on that unidentified body washed ashore yesterday.

In less-busy moments Bertin will distribute free medicine to destitute Irish immigrants, provide compresses for a female beating victim, witness and sign an inventory of goods for a recently deceased merchant, and bleed a 14-year-old lad to ease the pain in his legs.

Through this week, niggling in his mind, stands the unwelcome prospect of Solange Bonet's imminent delivery. Although he distrusts the ability of the incumbent *sage-femme*, the priests favour this midwife, Mme. LeLarge. She gives the sacrament of baptism to dying babies, and does it well. How many requests has he sent to the minister of marine in Paris, asking for a qualified midwife? And always the same response: lamentable shortages here, Bertin — train your own.

Another prominent Louisbourg surgeon shares Bertin's trials and tribulations. Brother Boniface Vimeux, resident *supérieur* of the King's Hospital, has sworn his life to God in the Order of Saint John of God, a community of mendicants dedicated to the care of the sick and infirm. Founded in Spain two centuries earlier, the order now adminis-

ters 39 hospitals with more than 5000 beds in France and her colonies. Vimeux's passion is to guard and enlarge his order's distinction for conscientious and skilled work. In 1719, that reputation steered Isle Royale officials to select the Brothers of Charity to run the hospital in the new colony.

Like Bertin, Vimeux is an established Louisbourg citizen, having lived here since 1731. He arrived to take charge of an impressive facility: a two-storey building 90 m long, with iron-barred windows and stone walls half-a-metre thick. The four spacious wards hold 100 beds, and a dispensary allows for easy distribution of medicines. At each end are living quarters for six Brothers and assorted servants. The outbuildings include a bakery, kitchen, laundry, well and stables, plus housing for black slaves who clean and cook in the hospital. A stone wall 4 m high and almost 1 m thick surrounds the property. Seaward, the King's Hospital dominates the town with formal, elegant lines. Its slender spire guides approaching ships as surely as the lighthouse.

Regrettably, Brother Vimeux arrived to official complaints of vermin infestation, shortages of sheets, cold wards and dreadful food. He responded to the *commissaire-ordonnateur*, or colonial administrator, with a list of essential materials he required: bedclothes, tools, instruments and medicines. At first common folk showed preference for Indian remedies and soldiers were reluctant to accept hospital treatments. Now, 13 years later, his facility is well stocked with linens, surgical instruments, medicines, pewter serving vessels and nutritious food. For all this, Brother Vimeux still needs steady faith, energy and diplomatic skills to maintain standards.

Like his colleague Bertin, during this week in August 1744 Brother Vimeux has kept a routine that highlights his spiritual and medical responsibilities. He has heard the con-

fession of each soldier and officer upon admission, and urged patients to their daily mass and evening prayers. He has tended to wounds incurred during drunken brawls, broken limbs and hernias resulting from work on the fortifications, sunstroke, gout and rheumatic complaints.

After consultations with royal officials he has, he hopes, stilled two distasteful rumours — that he was overcharging officers for their fresh meat, and that two Brothers were engaging in immoral visitations with women of the town.

However, several problems unique to his position still tax his diligence and patience. Governor Duquesnel has again stuck his officious nose into the accounts book. Vimeux knows the old man's complaints by heart: "You're keeping soldiers confined in hospital too long . . . malingersers . . . nothing wrong with them . . . close to budget overrun."

In fact, Brother Vimeux keeps a strict eye on expenditures. His yearly allocation provides for 500 livres for each of six Brothers, 3000 livres to replace furnishings and utensils, another 600 for medical supplies, 1000 for Brothers' living expenses and 6000 for patient care. Total: 13 600 livres. Only 4% of royal expenditure are allotted to health care — the best health bargain in the Americas, and the royal bureaucrats know it. Why, the entire annual cost of running Louisbourg equates with that of a new warship.

Still, with this war with England and the large number of prisoners in the town, Brother Vimeux knows he will be stretched to his financial limit.

His running feud with *commissaire-ordonnateur* François Bigot over hospital admissions flared again. Bigot sought to commit *un folie* for treatment, and Vimeux protested: no madmen here. One had arrived in 1740, but no principle was established then, or since. The same rule held for patients with venereal disease — *trop dangereux pour tous*. No,



Sentry duty at the refurbished fortress: soldiers at Louisbourg complained of long, boring duty, hard work on the fortifications, inadequate food and a lack of female company

they must be returned to France for treatment.

And Bigot's veiled threats of asking the minister of marine to replace the Brothers with *Les Soeurs Grises* (Grey Sisters) troubles Vimeux. Granted, this nursing order enjoys a lofty reputation for compassion, sacrifice and humble service. Bigot knows they will come cheaper than the Brothers of Charity, but Brother Vimeux trusts to the legal strength of his order's royal letters of patent to serve here.

For now Boniface Vimeux shuffles these concerns to the back of his head. The merchant ship *Grace à Dieu* arrived this afternoon, and he's anxious to check with the harbourmaster about his expected shipment of medicines. Then he'll stop in at *L'Épée Royale*, perhaps meet with his colleague, Bertin. Together, over a cup of that new drink, coffee, he will ask Bertin about the latest rumour. There is an English prisoner, or one of ours. . . . Did the garrison major order him punished to the point of madness, as I'm hearing? ■