

Toponymical Imperialism in Quebec, 1911-1928.

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September 9, 2010

Naming the land is an important exercise - it enables people to navigate and travel based on common understandings; and it is a reflection of the culture, knowledge and history of the people who live on the land. But naming the land is also an exercise in control.

In his annual report for the year 1912, Jules Allard, Minister of Lands & Forests for Quebec, stated, "I am considering the appointment of a geographical commission in order to remove certain drawbacks arising from the multiplicity and oddity of the names given to certain places, lakes, rivers, etc."¹ In that year, the Quebec Geographic Names Commission was established. Its job, in part, was to standardize place names and promote French history and culture. In practise this would often mean the removal of "barbarous" indigenous place names and their replacement with "cultured" French toponyms.

The Minister's comments were a reflection of cultural attitudes of that time, and they can also be seen in a 1911 report by GC Piché, Chief of the Forestry Service, of his journey to Abitibi:

As most of the names given to the rivers, stations, etc., are Indian names impossible to pronounce or which have no meaning as many French or English names, I have taken the liberty of replacing them by others, giving committee be appointed to study this question of names and that, in the Abitibi territory, the name of the township be given either to the village or to the principal river or lake in such township.²

Minister of Lands & Forests Jules Allard reported again in 1913:

The Government has carried out the project of forming a geographical commission which was mentioned in my last year's report. This has already done a fairly considerable amount of work, both by rectifying the names given to certain places, lakes and rivers, and by changes made in names which were frequently very strange and bizarre.³

¹ RN 50535. 30 June, 1912: Annual Report from the Minister of Lands and Forests of the Province of Quebec to Sir Francois Langelier, Knight, Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Quebec . Quebec Sessional Papers Vol. 46 Part 2, 3 George V (1912) No. 5, Report of the Minister of Lands & Forests of the Province of Quebec for the twelve months ending 30th June, 1912 (Quebec: Louis V Filteau, 1912): p. v.

² RN 50537. 30 June, 1912: Appendices to the Annual Report of the Department of Lands & Forests, Quebec (pt. 2) . Quebec Sessional Papers Vol. 46 Part 2, 3 George V (1912) No. 5, Report of the Minister of Lands & Forests of the Province of Quebec for the twelve months ending 30th June, 1912 (Quebec: Louis V Filteau, 1912): Appendix No. 18: 18 November, 1911: Report on the choice of villages in Abitibi and the means of promoting settlement in that region, from GC Piché, Chief of Forestry Service, Quebec: p. 49

³ RN 50543. 3 November 1913: Excerpts from Annual Report and Appendices from Jules Allard, Minister of Lands and Forests, Quebec to the Honorable Sir François Langelier, Knight, Lieutenant-Governor of the Province of

Mandated by Order in Council, the Quebec Geographical Commission had the explicit power to “name geographical points in the new territories under exploration”, and “to suppress, when necessary, Indian geographical names which are too difficult to pronounce, or too long”. The Commission was also empowered to “demand all the maps made by surveyors and explorers, for examination or consultation, even before they are made public”.⁴

The Commissioners developed eight principles to guide their work:

1. To preserve and retain geographical names consecrated by use;
2. To restore, upon maps, when necessary, the historical names given by the first discoverers and explorers.
3. To avoid duplicating the names of townships, lakes, river capes, mountains, etc.;
4. Whenever two or more geographical names designate the same place or the same point, to give priority to that one which is more recommendable through seniority or through euphony;
5. French composite geographical names to be hyphenated, in accordance with the French form method;
6. To accept Indian names with the greatest circumspection, and to set aside those whose pronunciation is difficult and spelling doubtful;
7. In spelling Indian names, when retained, to follow pronunciation as closely as possible.
8. The diphthong “ou” shall replace the words spelled with double oo in Indian names.⁵

Particular attention was given to Indian toponyms, as explained in the Commission’s first annual report:

The Commission [...] devoted considerable time at its various special meetings to the work of weeding and correcting the multitude of Indian names in the recently explored territories. Most of such names, inelegant in appearance and spelled in different ways, have even been a source of difficulty and embarrassment to map-makers. ... After carefully studying the question, the Commission resolved that the understanding and clearness of our maps would be impaired if barbarous appellations were retained which

Quebec . Quebec, Sessional Papers Vol. 47 Part 3,4 George V (1913) No.5, Report of the Minister of Lands and Forests of the Province of Quebec for the twelve months ending 30th June, 1913 (Quebec: E.E. Cinq-Mars, 1913): p. vi

⁴ RN 50650. 30 June, 1914: First Annual Report from Quebec Geographical Commission. Quebec, Sessional Papers Vol. 48 Part 2, 5 George V (1914-1915) No. 5 Report of the Minister of Lands and Forests of the province of Quebec, for the twelve months ended 30th June 1914 (Quebec: E.E. Cinq-Mars, 1914) Appendix No. 43: p. 88.

⁵ RN 50650. 30 June, 1914: First Annual Report from Quebec Geographical Commission. Quebec, Sessional Papers Vol. 48 Part 2, 5 George V (1914-1915) No. 5 Report of the Minister of Lands and Forests of the province of Quebec, for the twelve months ended 30th June 1914 (Quebec: E.E. Cinq-Mars, 1914) Appendix No. 43: pp. 88-89.

consisted of from eighteen to twenty-five letters strung together, in most instances, in a fantastic manner ... Indian names consecrated by time or possessing any euphony have been kept, but the Commission has set the others aside or has translated them into ordinary language, or again, has replaced them when possible by historical or descriptive ones.⁶

And so, Lake Canamableacossa was re-named Lake Goulet after a settler; Wamillkazillic river was re-named the Briand river after a former bishop of Quebec; Lake Gtahmao was changed to Lake Pasteur, the name of a French savant. These examples are all taken from outside the Abitibi-Temiscamingue region: in this same report, the Commissioners explained that there were so many Indian names in Abitibi-Temiscamingue to remove, it would take too much space to list them all!

We omit mention of the many changes made in the territory of Abitibi in the County of Temiscamingue for it would entail a nomenclature as long as it would be fastidious. These few instances suffice, to show that the Commission's efforts ever tend to make our maps more intelligible and more within reach of the masses, by doing away with bizarre and fantastical names and replacing them by others more appropriate to circumstances and localities.⁷

And so, in their effort to promote French culture and language, the government of Quebec literally wiped Algonquin names off the map.

The 1916 annual report put it another way: "The chief object of the work is to assure uniformity in geographical names, to do away with uncouth ones and avoid as much as possible repetitions of names which are a source of embarrassment and confusion."⁸

The place names ("toponyms") in Algonquin territory reflect the area's long history. Today many lakes and rivers have three names. These include the original Algonquin name and the English names which were often used during the fur trade and lumbering days. But contemporary maps show mostly French names which were introduced by the government of Quebec as part of its effort to advance and impose the French culture in the early 20th century.

⁶ RN 50650. 30 June, 1914: First Annual Report from Quebec Geographical Commission. Quebec, Sessional Papers Vol. 48 Part 2, 5 George V (1914-1915) No. 5 Report of the Minister of Lands and Forests of the province of Quebec, for the twelve months ended 30th June 1914 (Quebec: E.E. Cinq-Mars, 1914) Appendix No. 43: p. 90.

⁷ RN 50650. 30 June, 1914: First Annual Report from Quebec Geographical Commission. Quebec, Sessional Papers Vol. 48 Part 2, 5 George V (1914-1915) No. 5 Report of the Minister of Lands and Forests of the province of Quebec, for the twelve months ended 30th June 1914 (Quebec: E.E. Cinq-Mars, 1914) Appendix No. 43: pp. 90-91.

⁸ RN 50759. 3 November 1916: Annual Report from Jules Allard, Minister of Lands & Forests, Quebec. Quebec, Sessional Papers Vol. 50 Part 1(1916-1917) First Session of the Fourteenth Legislature of the Province of Quebec. 2nd Session of 1916. Departmental Reports (Quebec: EE Cinq-Mars, 1916) Report of the Minister of Lands and Forests of the Province of Quebec for the twelve months ended 30th June 1916 (Quebec: E.E. Cinq-Mars, 1916): p. v

Sometimes these translations simply provided a French translation of an Algonquin name; other times, they imposed something entirely new.

The Commission was re-constituted on April 6, 1920. In its annual report for that year it framed its mandate around “purifying” place names and the “systematic eliminating” of Indian toponyms. In hindsight their mission takes on a dark and fanatical aspect:

The Quebec Government, in creating the Geographical Commission, only followed the example of the big countries of the world which have all recognized the usefulness of similar bodies. In the Province of Quebec, particularly, the innumerable badly spelt Indian names that are spread over our geographical maps were giving, to say the least, a strange aspect to our country and it was therefore important, that the work of correcting and of systematic eliminating be undertaken and carried out.

Since its official recognition (6th April 1920) the Geographical Commission continued the work of the one which preceded it, doing an indispensable work of purifying and giving the historical names of men or places whose memory should be preserved, to new administrative divisions or geographical phenomena not yet baptized.⁹

Surveyors had to be mindful of the Commission’s powers. A. E. de la Chevrotière, Land Surveyor, in his report of exploration of the Maganisipi and Kipawa Rivers in 1920, used many Algonquin toponyms, but he was quick to add that “The Indian names contained in this report have not all been accepted by the Quebec Geographical Commission.”¹⁰

There are very few Algonquin toponyms left on official maps. This is largely thanks to the diligent work of the Commission, which by 1928 had refined its approach to the eradication of Indian toponyms:

During last year, the Board denominated nineteen townships in the county of Gaspé. At the present time, maps of the north of Pontiac and southeast of Témiscamingue are under study for the same purpose. [...]

The Board has established as a principle to preferably use French denominations in new regions where most of the geographical names are in the Indian language. Whenever it is

⁹ RN 50888. 30 June, 1921: Appendices to the Annual Report (1) from the Dept of Lands & Forests, Quebec. Quebec, Sessional Papers Vol. 55 Part 2 (1922). Third Session of the Fifteenth Legislature of the Province of Quebec. Session of 1922, Departmental Reports. Report of the Minister of Lands and Forests of the Province of Quebec for the twelve months ended 30th June 1921 (Quebec: LS-A. Proulx, 1921): Appendix No. 21 Report of the Quebec Geographical Commission: p. 95.

¹⁰ RN 50888. 30 June, 1921: Appendices to the Annual Report (1) from the Dept of Lands & Forests, Quebec. Quebec, Sessional Papers Vol. 55 Part 2 (1922). Third Session of the Fifteenth Legislature of the Province of Quebec. Session of 1922, Departmental Reports. Report of the Minister of Lands and Forests of the Province of Quebec for the twelve months ended 30th June 1921 (Quebec: LS-A. Proulx, 1921): Report on the Operations of the Surveys Branch for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30th 1921: p. 89.

practicable, these Indian appellations are replaced by their equivalent in French.

Amongst those presently before the Board, we may mention in the following:

Kanimiti - le danseur (dancer).

Sagagamou - lac embarrassé (obstructed lake).

Canocitogama - le lac fourchu (branching lake).

Canimina - ne va pas au large (does not expand).

Awashimamiga - en bas du cours d'eau (downstream).

Akost - tremper dans l'eau, mouiller (dipping, wet).

Camishigama - grande eaux, grand lac (big waters, big lake).

Washkega - marais, marécages (swamp).

Cacabonga - banc de sable fermant le passage (sandbar blocking the way).

Antostagan - chercher le cours d'eau dans la forêt (searching the stream in the forest).

Cawasejouan - rivière à l'eau claire (clear water stream).

Gatawagan - chose cachée (hidden thing).

Samaqua - aplati, écrasé (flattened, crushed).

Namejish - petit poisson, petit esturgeon (small fish, small sturgeon).

Kaopatina - le détroit de la montagne (the strait of the mountain).

Opawika - il y a plusieurs détroits (there are several straits)

Titipiti - roulé, tordu (rolled, twisted).

Sassaganag - lac des îles (island lake).

Ogascan - l'arête du doré (fish-bone).

Winnewiaska - il y a beaucoup d'herbes sales (there is plenty of dirty grass).

Winnewash - herbe sale (dirty grass).¹¹

It must be said that since those days, much has changed, and at least since the late 1990's, the government of Quebec appears to be more supportive of the use of indigenous toponyms (<http://www.toponymie.gouv.qc.ca/ct/accueil.html>). This can only be a good thing.

¹¹ RN 50861. 30 June, 1928: Appendices to the Annual Report (2) from the Dept of Lands & Forests, Quebec . Quebec, Sessional Papers Vol. 62 Part 1 (1929). Second Session of the Seventeenth Legislature of the Province of Quebec. Session of 1929 Departmental Reports. Report of the Minister of Lands and Forests of the Province of Quebec for the twelve months ended 30th June 1928 (Quebec: Rédempti Paradis, 1928): Appendix No. 25 - Quebec Geographic Board: pp. 132-133.