

CONCERNING SOME INDIAN PLACE-NAMES IN CANADA.

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In dealing with Indian place-names we are confronted by two main difficulties. The first is that the Indian languages never having been written ones—that is, written by the people themselves, whose common tongue they were—several forms of the same word are often found to have been in use in the same district, and all conveying precisely the same signification. As an instance of this we have Gitchi, Kitchi and Mitchi or Missi, all of them denoting bigness in any one of its different forms.

The second difficulty is that these languages contain a large number of root-words, which, while denoting a fact, idea, or condition, can hardly be said to have what we understand as a distinct meaning. Take for example *saga* or *saki*. It denotes a "bursting out" or "breaking forth" but had been conventionalized to some extent and was frequently used as meaning "the mouth of a river", even where the element of force was completely lacking. And *Ibi* or *Ipi* denoting moisture. We find it in *Sibi*, river, *Tipisi*, moistened—*Nipi* or *Nibi*, water, and many other similar words. We have also the same sound in *Ipinean*, but there it has nothing to do with moisture, as in that word it denotes payment.

Canada. The most important of all Indian place-names to us is *Canada*. It signifies a village or settlement. It is an Iroquois word and by them is used in that sense to this day. But there is a mystery about it, and it consists in its being an Iroquois word.

Their home, as far as we have any reliable evidence was in central and western New York, while all east of them dwelt tribes belonging to the Algonquin linguistic stock. It therefore seems evident that the Iroquois must at some time have forced their way down to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and there coming into contact with the whites, have given this country the name by which we know it. Their stay in the east, however, must have been but brief, for the nomenclature of that region bears very few traces of their presence there.

At the time we are considering—and so it is yet—the great majority of the Indians inhabiting what was originally known as *Canada* was of Algonquin affinity, and so it almost seems as if there were an element of unfairness in naming this country *Canada* instead of *Odana*, its Algonquin equivalent.

Quebec. *Quebec* took its name from the Indian word *Kibec* denoting "closed off" or more literally "shut up". This alludes to the appearance of the St. Lawrence, which at that point, whether approached from up or down river, appears to be

closed off, owing to the position of the Island of Orleans and Cape Diamond.

Ontario. I have never been able to find any definite proof as to the derivation of the word *Ontario*, but have little doubt that it was derived from an Onondaga word *Gontare*, signifying "the Lake".

Lakes were not as common in the Iroquois territory as in that of their northern neighbours, but even if they had been the size of *Ontario* would justify its being called "the Lake".

That *Ontario* is an Iroquois word is almost proven by the "R" in it. In a copy of "A grammar of the Cree language" written by Joseph Howse, F.R.G.S., I find this: "In the northern dialects (including the Cree and Chippeway) the rabid R is never found."

On the other hand *Baraga* who on pages 3 and 4 makes an almost similar statement, afterwards on page 301 modifies it by a note to the effect that there were some Crees who could pronounce *ra-re-ro*, and quotes the names *Rimouski* (the dog's home) and *Restigouche* (the small tree) as proofs. In my copy of *Baraga*, however, I find a note by the late Mr. Lindsay Russell, whose it once was, stating that the R in this case is probably a foreign corruption. And my personal experience, limited though it be, has taught me that while there may be some Crees who can sound the letter R, a great many of them certainly cannot.

It seems an irony of fate that the Crees, known to themselves as the *Nehethowuk*, should come down to us in history bearing a name that they themselves cannot pronounce, and probably bestowed upon them by their hereditary foes the Iroquois.

But be all this as it may, one has only to glance at a map of Canada and the states adjoining it on the south, to realize that practically only in territory once occupied by the Iroquois and their Huron cousins are found Place-names in which the R occurs.

For these reasons I think it is a fair assumption that *Ontario* is an Iroquois word and means "the Lake".

Manitoba. *Baraga* gives this as derived from "*Manitowaba*"—The Straight of the Spirit". No doubt he is correct in this, but no one of our English-speaking Indians or rivermen would ever have used just these English words, few if any of them would have known what the word straight in this sense meant, for to them a straight was always a narrows.

To the Indian any cause that was beyond his comprehension was "Medicine", and he attributed it to the presence or action of a spirit. At the narrows