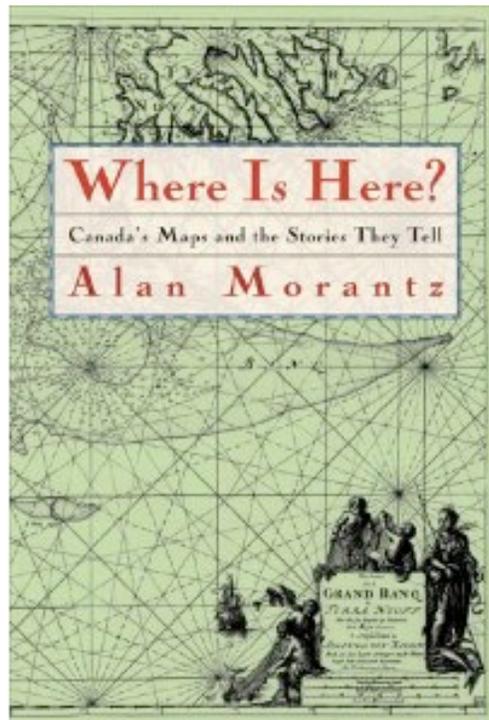


Father Petitot's mad mapping adventure

An excerpt from:



THE ERA OF LARGE-SCALE FRENCH SURVEYING AND MAPPING ended with the fall of Louisbourg in 1758, but significant mapping by French missionaries carried on to the last days of Canada's exploration. Taking up the challenge of the Jesuits more than two hundred years later, and using many of strategies employed in the early days of New France, the Oblates made their own mapping mark on the northwest in the late nineteenth century.

The Religious Institute of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate was founded in Paris in 1816. Twenty-five years later, they established their first foreign mission in Canada and, guided by their motto, *Usque ad extremum terrae!* (Right to the ends of the Earth!), set their sights on converting the Native peoples of the Mackenzie Valley. The long-bearded Oblates, with their distinctive black robes, earned a reputation among the Métis, Dene and Inuit as independent and passionate religious pioneers. For more than a century they, along with the RCMP and the Hudson's Bay Company, represented the white presence in the Canadian North.

Like the Jesuits, the Oblates missionized Native people while they were on the move between seasonal activities. Many of the itinerant missionaries could not survive the rigours of the tundra and the boreal forest, and either died travelling overland or returned to France. Still others developed a dim view of those they were trying to "save." But like the Jesuits, many of the Oblates were fascinated by the Canadian world and absorbed by their studies of the North. Men such as Father Van de Velde made observations of polar bears and Father Guy Mary Rousselière worked at archaeological digs at Pelly Bay, Chesterfield Inlet and Baker Lake. They were particularly fascinated by the Amerindian view of the land.

Well into the nineteenth century, the only things known, geographically speaking, of the western arctic and the Mackenzie watershed were fruits of the efforts of famed explorers such as Sir John Franklin, Alexander Mackenzie and Peter Warren Dease. Theirs were high-profile projects, eagerly followed in Canada and Britain. These maps, hard won to be sure, essentially were road maps in that they sketched the main arterial waterways of the region. Fairly well known were the large lakes of Manitoba, the west coast of Hudson Bay, and the Assiniboine River valley and the prairies. There was knowledge of a chain of mountains beyond the Saskatchewan River and of extensive prairie grasslands to the south of the Saskatchewan forks. But the interior of the country remained little known to Europeans.

In 1875, seemingly out of nowhere, two maps published by the Société de Géographie de Paris revealed what was between the waterways, from the Rockies east to the Coppermine River and the Arctic coast south to Great Slave Lake. Just as surprising was the source of these maps: not a professional explorer or surveyor but an Oblate missionary by the name of Father Emile Petitot.

AMONG A COLOURFUL CREW OF MISSIONARIES, PETITOT WAS A STANDOUT.

Respected among the Native people, feted by the geographical societies of England and France yet feared and loathed by his colleagues, Petitot was one of Canada's greatest amateur geographers, ethnographers and map-makers. Until aerial surveying was conducted later in the twentieth century, Petitot's maps of the Northwest Territory were considered the standard for all others. He compiled a French-Eskimo dictionary, based on the dialect spoken by the Tchiglit, who lived at the mouth of the Mackenzie and Anderson rivers, and a dictionary of the major Athapaskan languages — including the Chipewyn, Hareskin and Loucheux dialects — that is still used today. Petitot's mapping and other scientific achievements are all the more remarkable considering the missionary spent much of his time on the thin edge between sanity and madness while trying to stay one step ahead of the Superior who wanted to banish him from Athabasca country.

In 1862, only two weeks after he was ordained as an Oblate priest, Petitot found himself on a ship headed for Quebec and then on to the Mackenzie River, where he lived for the next twelve years at missions in Fort Providence, Fort Resolution and Fort Good Hope. Not that he stayed long at any of these locales. Most of the time he travelled with native companions in the uncharted areas of the North, places between the well-surveyed rivers and coastal regions. Using Fort Good Hope as his base, Petitot travelled from Great Slave Lake to the Arctic Sea and between the Mackenzie and Laird rivers.



He was a keen observer of both the land and the people who guided him. In books that he would later publish, he described Amerindian weapons, housing construction, sleeping arrangements, detailed physical characteristics, tattooing, cannibalism, incest, and the trafficking of women. Of the small tribe known as the Loucheux, “the mountain dwellers” who were nearly all cross-eyed, Petitot observed, “It was among those Indians that I saw the first Redskins who were hump-backed, misshapen or with tooth trouble.” Elsewhere he added, “The number of stammerers among the Dindjie: 5 stammerers out of 150 people.”

Petitot also set down important observations of native cosmology and wayfaring. While exploring around Good Hope in 1878, he learned that the Tchiglit named the north *Kanoug-argnerk*, meaning the “desolate, unfortunate baneful” point of space, that the Inuit call the Orient *Tcanera-nerk*, the foul point, because it is from the East that arrive hail, blizzards and snowstorms, the long summer rains, and sleet, and that they call the south the “previous point,” towards which aspirations and desires are directed. To the Tchiglet, the west is *Ouarvan-nerk*, the initial point, the point of departure, of origin; to the Inuit, the west is simply unknown.

He clearly learned much about living off the land in their company. In a letter to J. Fabre in June, 1868, Petitot wrote: "At the ends of all islands or deltas of the river, where there is wood, the Eskimos drive wooden shafts into the river bottom, to serve as guiding-marks. These are fir trees from which some of the limbs have been trimmed off. Every channel having only one such guiding-mark is a dead end. The presence of many guiding-marks shows that the channel is a safe route and leads to one of the four outlets of the river."

LIKE THE JESUITS, PETITOT PUT A NATIVE FACE on the maps of the Northwest. His two maps (one redrawn by a cartographer and a second manuscript map done in Petitot's own hand) completed the maps of Sir John Franklin. They cover the Arctic basin area between the Coppermine River and the Rockies and from Great Slave Lake to the Arctic Sea. They include geographic data of the interior between Great Bear Lake, the Mackenzie River, and the Arctic, showing the hunting territory of the Dene-dindjie tribes, permanent trails, boundaries of tribal territories and "Indian names of all localities." They also revealed the Rivière a Roncière-Le Noury, discovered by Petitot in 1868. For eighty years, geographers denied its existence until aerial photography proved Petitot right.

In *The geography of the Athabaskaw-Mackenzie region and of the Great Lakes of the Arctic Basin*, Petitot revealed how he compiled his maps. Since he had no other instruments than a compass and a watch, and had no means of getting any, he used the Franklin expedition maps on which he added his own geographical data. "I therefore preserved the data that I had checked with the aid of my own instruments (such as they were) and made no change in the general delineation of the Mackenzie River and the Rocky Mountains, nor in the location and general outlines of Great Bear and Great Slave Lakes," he wrote. "Given two points whose positions had already been well established by means of instruments, and whose distance one from the other, in geographic miles, was known to me, I set down within that particular area my own geographic material." Periodically he would compare his compass north with the North Star to keep track of the local compass variation caused by variation in the magnetic field.

Besides taking Paris by storm, Petitot became the toast of Ottawa and London. He addressed a Canadian Senate committee looking into the geological makeup of the Mackenzie basin, while the Royal Geographical Society awarded him the Back Prize in 1883. Lieutenant-General Sir J.H. Lefroy addressed the Geographical Section of the British Association in Swansea in 1880 and spoke glowingly of the special contributions of Petitot:

He has on foot or in canoe, often accompanied only by Indians or Esquimaux, again and again traversed that desolate country in every direction. He navigated the Mackenzie ten times between Great Slave Lake and Fort Good Hope and eight times between Fort Good

Hope and its mouth. We owe to his visits the disentanglement of a confusion which existed between the mouth of the Peel River and those of the Mackenzie, owing to their uniting in one delta; the explanation of the so-called Esquimaux Lake, which has no existence, and the delineation of the course of three large rivers which fall into the Polar Sea in that neighbourhood. Petitot also traced and sketched several lakes and chains of lakes which support his opinion that this region is partaking of that operation of elevation which extends to Hudson's Bay.

PETITOT WAS CLEARLY AN EXPLORER AT HEART, and travelling on the land had the added bonus of being far from the watchful eye of his superiors. According to University of Ottawa religion professor Robert Choquette, after living with Petitot for a year, the coadjutor bishop of St. Boniface said, "He dreams only of long voyages. He often asks me to send him to the Eskimos. . . He charges carelessly into the greatest dangers. Last fall, I had to invoke religious obedience to prevent him from going skating on ice that was only one inch thick... He is even more careless on a canoe or barge. He had to freeze his fingers before agreeing to wear mittens.... He has a great facility for learning, and an even greater one for walking, but...he must be made into a good missionary."

It does not appear that Petitot was made into a great missionary. Perhaps that is why he seemed to be so popular among the Native people with whom he travelled. If you believe his own memoirs, his hosts respected him. The Hareskin called him *Yat-ci-Nezun*. (Father Good), while the Trakwel-Ottiné looked upon him as a great physician, *Intranzétchot*. This was no small feat, and likely was a factor in his success as a mapmaker and observer of the natural world. As retired Canada Land Surveyor and map historian Lou Sebert pointed out in the journal *Geomatica*:

It appears that he had no difficulty in getting native people to disclose the names they had given to geographic features. This is in marked contrast to the experience of Dr. Bell and other geologists working in northern Ontario and Quebec at about the same period. They found that the Indians of their area were rather reticent in disclosing place names and in fact were rather casual about consistency in naming features. In some cases, a place had a winter name that was quite different from its summer name. Petitot seems to have experienced no such difficulty but it must be remembered that he could speak the native dialects while Bell had to work through Native interpreters.

BUT FOR HIS COLLEAGUE AND SUPERIORS, PETITOT WAS A HANDFUL. His sexual longing for young Indian men caused consternation, and when he ignored his promise to stay away from one particular boy, Bishop Faraud in 1866 pronounced a sentence of excommunication. It was later lifted when the young man in question married. Petitot also

exhibited erratic and violent behaviour; he was convinced the Indians and whites were trying to kill him. He would swerve between normalcy and madness; and when darkness came, as it did in the winter of 1868, he became stark raving mad. He predicted the end of the world, accused Father Seguin of murdering Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, and proclaimed that he was a Mohammedan, Jew, pagan, Antichrist or angel. During these crises, Petitot was frequently tied down and placed under guard after having run around naked outdoors at temperatures of minus forty degrees Celsius. On two occasions, he tried to murder Seguin by strangling him or butchering him with an axe, in order to offer him in sacrifice for the salvation of the world, all the while screaming and howling. In October 1881 he was directed to return to France, an order he ignored. It was not until 1882 that Petitot was surreptitiously registered in a Montreal hospital for the mentally ill, and spent two years there before returning to France and living out his days. And with that, the era of missionary mapping of Canada drew to a close.