

Emile Petitot (1838-1916)

Emile Petitot was not the only Oblate missionary in the Canadian Northwest to distinguish himself outside his professional sphere, but the primacy of his contribution to northern geography and ethnology sets him apart from others of his order.

Born the son of a watchmaker on 3 December 1838, at Grancey-le-Château, France, Emile Fortuné Stanislas Joseph Petitot entered the Congregation of the Oblate Missionaries of Mary-Immaculate in 1860. Fourteen days after his ordination, Petitot left France for the Mackenzie River, where he lived for the next twelve years, based at missions in Fort Providence, Fort Resolution, and principally Fort Good Hope.

His accomplishments during his stay were remarkable. He collected material for his *Dictionnaire de la langue Déné-dindjé*, a dictionary of the major Athapaskan languages; Petitot's work still remains the best available in the field. *Les Traditions indiennes du Canada Nord-Ouest* records extensive legends from the Hare, Chipewyan, Loucheux, Dogrib, Cree, and Blackfoot cultures, all gathered during this period. Rarely at the missions, he travelled widely with native companions, often into territory completely unknown to both Petitot and his guides. In *Les Grands-Esquimaux* he tells of his visit to the Tchiglit Inuit, where in March 1865 he met Noulloumallok-Innonarana, "chief" of the Tchiglit, on the Anderson River *en route* to the Arctic Sea. Noulloumallok's immense respect for the missionary — characteristic of the general response of native peoples to him — is evident in the name the Inuk bestowed on Petitot: "Mitshi Pitchitork Tchikraynarm iyoyé" (Mr. Petitot, son of the Sun). Attending to the physical, as well as spiritual, well-being of the Indians, Petitot nursed them when they were sick, and supplied them with necessary food and clothing. Although suffering from an abdominal rupture, he designed, decorated, and helped build the Good Hope Chapel, declared an official historic site in 1981.

In June 1870 he journeyed from Fort MacPherson to Lapierre House in the face of strong resistance from the Protestants, who considered that territory as inviolably theirs. His maps of the vicinity of Great Slave Lake, of the Anderson River, and of the western branches of the Yukon are remarkably accurate. Travelling between the Mackenzie and Liard rivers, he charted the Petitot River, named in his honour. He corrected and completed the maps of his precursors, notably Sir John Franklin. The Rivière La Roncière-Le Noury, which Petitot discovered in 1868 and placed on the map in 1875, was later denied any existence. Over 30 years after Petitot's discovery, the mouth of a large river (the Hornaday) was found to empty into Darnley Bay east of the supposed mouth of Petitot's Roncière, although the river's course was not extensively surveyed beyond its mouth. Later explorers — Vilhjalmur Stefansson in particular — concluded that, since no river entered Franklin

Bay as described on Petitot's map, the Roncière River, 190 miles in length, did not exist! But aerial photography has proven — some 80 years after its discovery — that Petitot's Roncière River indeed exists: it is one and the same as the Hornaday. After exploring nearly the entire length of the river, Petitot left its course shortly before it drained into Darnley Bay; thus, he only misjudged the exact point at which it meets the sea. Other aerial surveys done after WW II have corroborated the general accuracy of Petitot's maps of the northwest.

The pace of Petitot's northern life could not continue indefinitely. Exhausted after twelve years in the North, he returned to France in 1874, where he arranged for the publication of his dictionaries and numerous other works. At the International Congress of Americanists, held in Nancy the year after his arrival in France, Petitot spoke out in strong support of the Asiatic origin of Inuit and Indians of North America. He also received at this time a silver medal from the Société de Géographie de Paris for his map of arctic regions.

On 24 March 1876, Petitot again embarked for the North. But his health was broken and his great period of geographical discovery had come to a close. After spending most of this second trip helping and studying the Indians in the Great Slave Lake vicinity, ill health ultimately demanded that he give up missionary work entirely. He returned to France in 1883. Upon his return, he was awarded the Back prize by the Royal Geographic Society of London in recognition of his scientific contributions. He joined the secular clergy and, on 1 October 1886, became parish priest at Mareuil-lès-Meaux, where he spent the remaining 30 years of his life ministering to his parish and publishing books and articles on northern Canada. His death came on 13 May 1916.

The geography of the country and the ethnology of its people were Petitot's primary northern interests, but he also made substantial contributions to our knowledge of the geology, paleontology, zoology, and botany of the region. As one reads through the massive volume of his manuscripts, publications, and personal letters, one can see that he was a keen and astute observer; he had a subtle and inquisitive mind and an encyclopedic knowledge. Canada formally recognized Petitot's accomplishments on 2 September 1975, when the Honourable Judd Buchanan, then Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, unveiled at Mareuil-lès-Meaux, France, a plaque commemorating the scientific contribution of Emile Petitot to the Canadian North. More recently, in October 1980 the new Minister, the Honourable John Munro, donated a copy of Petitot's works, originally published in France, to the Institute for Northern Studies at the University of Saskatchewan.



FURTHER READINGS

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