

French Canadian Names

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In Louis Hémon's delightful novel, *Maria Chapdelaine*, there is an interesting paragraph concerning personal names among French Canadians that should interest onomatologists. The piquancy of the names of persons used by the author in the development of his story is commented upon as follows:

"In the Province of Quebec there is much uncertainty in the spelling and the use of names. A scattered people in a huge half-wild country, unlettered for the most part and with no one to turn to for counsel but the priests, is apt to pay attention only to the sound of names, caring nothing about their appearance when written or the sex to which they pertain. Pronunciation has naturally varied in one mouth or another, in this family or that, and when a formal occasion calls for writing, each takes leave to spell his baptismal name in his own way, without a passing thought that there may be a canonical form. Borrowings from other languages have added to the uncertainties of orthography and gender. Individuals sign indifferently Denise, Denije, or Deneije; Conrad or Conrade; and men bear such names as Hermenegilde, Aglaë, Edwige."

This "perfect little cameo" of the lifeways and thoughtways of rural French Canadians is no less interesting for its numerous examples of Canadian French place names—"a thousand names piously bestowed by peasants from France on lakes, on rivers, (and) on the settlements of the new country." The author obviously enjoys these names as much as his readers should: "How sweet to hear these names. . . Where can one (better) find the happy music of the French names?"

This tenderly fictionalized ethnography of folk life is now easily available in an inexpensive paperback edition, as a Doubleday "Image Book" (D40), Garden City, N. Y., 1956 (translated by W. H. Blake, with the above quotations from pp. 46, 182-3). The present edition of this popular Catholic classic is in at least its 25th reprinting in English translation since 1921. It is a novel of unusual interest to students of names, but, so far as I have noticed, goes unmentioned in the standard bibliographies of onomatology.

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