Looking back... with Alun Hughes

ON THE MEANING OF "NIAGARA"

The name Niagara first appears, in the form Onguiaahra, in the writings of Jesuit priest Jérôme Lalemant, Superior to the Huron Mission, in 1641. The word is clearly of aboriginal origin, but Lalemant says nothing about its meaning. However, a survey of subsequent literature reveals two dominant interpretations. The first, with obvious reference to Niagara Falls, is "thundering waters" or some equivalent like "resounding with great noise," while the second, apparently referring to the Niagara River, is "neck," denoting the strip of water connecting the "head" and the "body" (Lakes Erie and Ontario).

Which of these interpretations is correct? Or are they both wrong, and is the true meaning something else altogether? In seeking to answer these questions I shall trace the evolution of the name over time, sketch the history of native peoples in the Niagara area, and examine how the word has been understood by the many individuals who have sought to explain its meaning.

The Evolution of the Name

Nowadays the name Niagara is attached to a great variety of things, but in early times its use was largely restricted to Niagara Falls and the Niagara River. Accordingly, three overlapping phases in the use of the name can be identified: first, when the falls and river are alluded to but not named; second, when they are named, but spelled inconsistently; and third, when "Niagara" becomes the accepted form.

French explorer Jacques Cartier may have heard of the falls from natives as early as 1535, but there is no conclusive proof of this. The first clear reference comes in 1603, in fellow explorer Samuel de Champlain's *Des Sauvages*, wherein he repeats a native account of "a fall that may be a league broad, over which an exceeding great current of water descends." On Champlain's map of New France dated 1612 the falls are symbolized and labelled "sault de au" [sic], and on a later map of 1632 they are numbered "90" and described in the map legend as "Waterfall at the end of Lake St. Louis [Ontario], of great height, where many kinds of fish are stunned in descending."

Champlain had no first-hand knowledge of Niagara, nor did Jérôme Lalemant, who was the first person to record the name. His informants were fellow priests Jean de Brébeuf and Pierre Chaumonot, who learned it from the Neutral Indians they visited in 1640. Written as Onguiaahra, the name appears in Lalemant's *Relation* (report to his superiors in France) of 1641, and refers specifically to the river, not the falls.

Lalemant writes: "This Stream or River is that through which the great lake of the Hurons, or fresh-water sea, empties; it flows first into the lake of Erié, or of the Nation of the Cat, and at the end of that lake, it enters into the territory of the Neutral Nation, and takes the name of Onguiaahra, until it empties into the Ontario or lake of saint Louys, whence finally emerges the river that passes before Quebek, called the St. Lawrence."

In the same *Relation* Lalemant also mentions a Neutral village called Onguiaahra. It was presumably located close to the Niagara River, but where exactly, and on which side of the river, is not certain (though some place it on the east bank below Lewiston). The village would have belonged to the Onguiarahronon, one of the constituent tribes of the Neutral peoples.

(It should be noted that another Jesuit, Paul Le Jeune, mentions a tribe called the Ongmarahronon in an earlier *Relation* of 1640, and some authorities believe he meant to say Onguiarahronon. Whether or not this means that Le Jeune, not Lalemant, deserves the credit for being the first to record the name Niagara is a matter for debate.)

Lalemant makes no mention of the falls, but in 1648 his successor Paul Ragueneau writes of the waters of Lake Erie being thrown "over a waterfall of a dreadful height" into Lake Ontario, though he does not state its name. Not until 1656 are the falls named, this on a map by Nicolas Sanson, where they are labelled "Ongiara Sault." Ongiara is clearly a variant of Onguiaahra, and the same spelling occurs on maps by Francesco Bressani in 1657 and François du Creux in 1660.

Detail of Sanson's map of New France, 1656

In 1670 Sulpician missionaries Bréhant de Galinée and Dollier de Casson sailed past the mouth of the Niagara River on Lake Ontario. They heard the roar of the falls, but did not venture upstream to find the source of the noise. In Galinée's account of their travels he mentions the falls without naming them, and refers to the river as "properly the River St. Lawrence," which in a sense it is.

Accompanying Galinée and Dollier was the explorer Cavelier de La Salle. He returned in 1678

with Recollet priest Louis Hennepin, who has the distinction of being the first European to publish an account of Niagara Falls based on personal observation. In his *Description de la Louisiane*, published in 1683, Hennepin speaks of "le grand Sault de Niagara," and labels it thus on a map. He also refers to "la belle Riviere de Niagara."

Hennepin uses the modern spelling Niagara, though whether or not he was the first to do so is uncertain. There is a suggestion that this spelling was used by Aubert de La Chesnaye in 1676, in which case it may have been known to Hennepin before he came to America. Regardless, it is the modern form that prevails in French writing thereafter, as in "Saut de Niagara" on maps by Pierre Raffeix and Vincenzo Coronelli in 1688. It was also used for Fort de Niagara, established by the French at the mouth of the Niagara River in 1726.

The English were much slower to follow suit, and were responsible for most of the early spelling variants, 40 of which appear in O'Callaghan's *General Index to the Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*. These should be accepted for what they are, simply attempts to record the native pronunciation of Niagara in writing, reflecting spelling vagaries and transcription problems rather than anything fundamental. Thus Thomas Dongan, Governor of the Colony of New York, spelled the name six different ways (Oneigra, Onijagaro, Onyagaro, Onyagars, Onyagro and Onyegra) in letters he himself wrote between February 1687 and February 1688, and five other spellings (Oneagoragh, Oniagoragh, Onjagra, Onnyagaro and Onyagra) appear in official documents composed by others.

In the early 18th century the spelling became standarized in English, as witness "The Great Fall of Niagara" on Hermann Moll's map of 1715. The British retained the name Niagara when Fort de Niagara was captured from the French in 1759, and the first Loyalist settlement on the west bank of the Niagara River in 1780 was called the Settlement at Niagara. The name was subsequently applied to the Town and Township of Niagara (1798), the Niagara Peninsula (1820s) and the Niagara Escarpment (1850s), as well as other features.

Local Aboriginal History

The Niagara Peninsula has a very long history of native occupation, dating back thousands of years, and rich archaeological sites have been unearthed at Fort Erie, Grimsby, Thorold and St. Davids. This history is divided into five major periods: Palaeo-Indian (commencing 9000 BCE), Archaic, Initial Woodland, Terminal Woodland, and Historic, of which only the last-named concerns us here.

The Historic period begins with the first European contact (by the French) in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, at which time the Peninsula was occupied by the Neutral Indians. Their primary homeland was in the Hamilton area, but their territory extended westward beyond the Thames River and a short distance east of the Niagara River. In terms of language, the Neutral belonged to the Iroquoian family, which also included the Huron and Petun (or Tobacco) tribes around Georgian Bay, and the Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy in the Finger Lakes region — the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga and Mohawk — which became the Six Nations in 1722 with the addition of the Tuscarora. (Note the difference between the terms "Iroquois," denoting the Five or Six Nations, and "Iroquoian," denoting the broader linguistic family.)

What the Neutral called themselves is not known, but the French named them "la nation neutre" because of their refusal to become involved in the longstanding hostilities between the Huron and the Iroquois. They themselves were far from peace-loving, however, and had for many years engaged in vicious conflict with the Mascouten (the "Fire Nation") of modern Michigan.

In the late 1640s, what had been intermittent fighting between the Iroquois and Huron erupted into full-scale warfare. The instigators were the Iroquois, and their main motives were likely twofold: to unite all Iroquoian tribes as one people on one land, and to replace population losses caused by smallpox by taking prisoners. A third factor may have been the desire to expand their hunting territory and secure a stake in the fur trade. The Iroquois, having the advantage of muskets acquired from the Dutch of New Netherland, easily defeated the less-organized Huron, and destroyed the Jesuit presence in Huronia in the process.

The Iroquois then turned on the Petun and Neutral, and by 1651 had killed, dispersed or assimilated both. The Iroquois used the former Neutral lands mainly as a hunting ground and a routeway, though they did establish some villages north and west of Burlington Bay. Their ascendancy was only temporary, however, and by the end of the century they had been ousted by more northerly tribes from the the Algonquian linguistic group, specifically the Mississauga Ojibwa. The latter built villages along the north shore of Lake Ontario, but left the Niagara Peninsula largely uninhabited.

It remained uninhabited until after the American Revolutionary War, when the Peninsula was opened up to settlement for those who had been left landless by the conflict — members of Butler's Rangers, loyalist refugees, discharged soldiers and natives who had fought for the Crown. To facilitate this, a huge piece of land extending westward to the Thames was bought from the Mississauga in 1784, and over the following decade surveyors were engaged to divide the Peninsula into townships and lots of 100 or 200 acres. In the process a lengthy tract extending 6

miles on either side of the Grand River was set aside for the Six Nations Indians who had lost their ancestral lands in the Finger Lakes region.

It is important to note that the Niagara Peninsula was basically empty when European settlement began. There had been no significant native presence close to the Canadian side of the Niagara River since the elimination of the Neutral in 1651, and the creation of the Grand River Tract, which lay some distance to the west, did not change this. On the American side, however, the westernmost Iroquois tribe, the Seneca, had moved into former Neutral territory near the Niagara River before any appreciable white settlement took place.

In Search of the Meaning

One place, of course, to look for the meaning of Niagara is in books on the origin of place names, but no definitive answer is found. The earliest book on Ontario names, Gardiner's classic *Nothing but Names*, published in 1899, gives the meaning as "thunder of water." But the most recent, *Place Names of Ontario*, written by Rayburn in 1997, asserts that there is no basis for "thundering waters" in any aboriginal language — Niagara is a Neutral word meaning "neck." As the dean of modern Canadian toponymists, Rayburn must be taken seriously, but he gives no source for his conclusion.

Other books on place names are just as contradictory, and complicate matters by introducing new meanings. Stewart in 1945 proposes "point of land cut in two," Harder in 1976 posits "at the neck," "across the neck" and "bisected bottom lands," while Hamilton in 1978 favours "thunder of waters" or "resounding with great noise." The most catholic is Armstrong in 1930, who offers several possible explanations: a Neutral word of unknown meaning, a Huron word meaning "thunderer of waters, resounding with great noise," or an Iroquois word meaning "neck … connecting water," or "bisected bottom land," or "divided waterfalls."

In an attempt to sort out the confusion I have consulted over 100 sources — books, articles, maps and documents from the early 17th century to the present — that make some reference to Niagara, most of which say something about the meaning of the word. Aside from toponymists like Rayburn, the authors include ethnologists, anthropologists, linguists, philologists, historians, geographers, cartographers, geologists, government officials and others. Not surprisingly, there is no consensus, and additional interpretations such as "tobacco smoke" and "place of high fall" only add to the confusion.

But "thundering waters" and "neck" emerge clearly as the commonest meanings, and it is time to ask who first proposed them and when. Surprisingly, we find that they both originated with the same person, namely Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, a 19th century American explorer, geologist and ethnologist who, amongst other things, worked for the government as an Indian agent, became an authority on North American native cultures, and located the source of the Mississippi.

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft

In 1821 Schoolcraft published his *Narrative Journal of Travels … through the Great Lakes to the Sources of the Mississippi River.* Commenting on Niagara Falls he says: "[Niagara] is an Iroquois word said to signify *the thunder of waters,* and the word as still pronounced by the Senecas is *O-ni-áá-gáráh,* being strongly accentuated on the third syllable, while the interjection O, is so feebly uttered, that without a nice attention, it may escape notice." This, the earliest known written statement on the meaning of Niagara, comes almost two centuries after the name was first recorded by Lalemant.

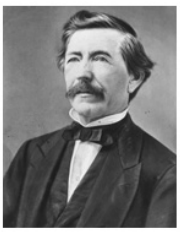
A quarter century was to pass before another opinion was offered, and once again Schoolcraft was the person responsible. By this time he had spent several years in ethnological research, and had married Jane Johnston, daughter of an Irish father and an Obijwa mother. His *Notes on the Iroquois; or Contributions to American History, Antiquities and General Ethnology,* published in 1847, includes a lengthy discourse on native languages, and presents a completely different explanation of the meaning of Niagara. "This name is Mohawk," he claims. "It means, according to Mrs. Kerr, the neck; the term being first applied to the portage or neck of land, between lakes Erie and Ontario." He cites the Mohawk word for neck — onyara — as proof, and lists the equivalents in Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca (oniawl, oniaah, onyaa and kaniasa).

Two comments are in order here. The first concerns Schoolcraft's informant, "Mrs. Kerr." She would have been Elizabeth, widow of Dr. Robert Kerr, an important surgeon in early Upper Canada. As the daughter of Sir William Johnson and Mary (Molly) Brant and the niece of Mohawk leader Joseph Brant, Elizabeth Kerr would undoubtedly have been quite familiar with the Mohawk tongue.

The second comment relates to a certain ambiguity in what Schoolcraft says, for he speaks of "the portage or neck of land," not the river. Four years later in 1851, in *The American Indians, their History, Condition and Prospects,* he dispels any doubt when he refers to "the neck of water which connects lake Erie with Ontario," but the same land/water ambiguity is sometimes perpetuated in

later writing. Few authors, however, go as far as Merrill in *Land of the Senecas* in 1914. He says that the neck in question is the Niagara Peninsula, almost as though the neck, head and body were all land masses (the Peninsula, New York and the rest of Ontario) rather than bodies of water.

If what Schoolcraft wrote in 1821 went unnoticed, his 1847 book did spur some discussion. Orsamus Marshall, a noted Buffalo lawyer and historian of the aboriginal peoples of western New York (later the Chancellor of the University of Buffalo), was the first to enter the fray. In an appendix to the *Narrative of the Expedition of the Marquis De Nonville against the Senecas,* published in 1849, he disputes the claim by "one writer" that Niagara derives from Nyah´-gaah´, the name of a former Seneca village below Lewiston, this because the name existed long before the village did. Noting that Nyah´-gaah´ has no meaning in the Seneca tongue, which is at odds with aboriginal naming practice, he concludes that the village name is simply "a reappearance of Ongiara in the Seneca dialect."




Orsamus Marshall and Lewis Henry Morgan

That "one writer" was probably Lewis Henry Morgan, a Rochester lawyer and an expert on aboriginal kinship systems. In 1851 he refers to presumably the same Seneca village in *The League of the Ho-de´-no-sau-nee or Iroquois.* Noting the similarity between its name in Seneca, Ne-ah´-gä, and in other Iroquois tongues, he claims that one of them is the source for Niagara. But the meaning is lost, unless it is derived, "as some of the present Iroquois suppose," from the word for neck. Of one thing Morgan seems certain — the word is not of Neutral origin. (This is puzzling, for the date he gives for the village, 1650, is improbably early, and suggests that he may be confusing it with an earlier Neutral village.) He complicates matters further by providing a map of Iroquois land on which Ne-ah´-gä appears three times: as the name for Youngstown, for the Niagara River below the falls, and for Lake Ontario. The falls themselves are labelled Date-car´-sko-sase, meaning "the highest falls" in Seneca, the word Ne-ah´-gä, he says, "being understood."

Writing again in 1865, in *Historical Sketches and Local Names of the Niagara Frontier,* Marshall states that the modern form Niagara probably comes from the Mohawk pronunciation Nyah´-ga-ra*h´*. The meaning in Mohawk is neck, "in allusion to its connecting the two lakes," and was likely the same in Neutral, "as they were kindred dialects of one generic tongue." Echoing Morgan, Marshall states that the Seneca name Nya*h´´*-gaa*h* refers only to the river below the falls, and the waterfall itself is Det-ga*h*-sk*o*-ses. The Seneca, says Marshall pointedly, "never call it Niagara, nor by any similar term; neither does that word signify in their language *thunder of waters,* as affirmed by Schoolcraft. Such a meaning would be eminently poetic, but truth is of higher importance."

Which would seem to settle matters, except that in 1882 Jean-André Cuoq, a Sulpician missionary, philologist and expert on native languages, states the exact opposite in *Lexique de la Langue Iroquoise.* In his view Niagara is a corruption of Iorakahre, meaning "retentir, résonner, se faire entendre, faire du bruit, être sonore," which sound not unlike "thundering waters." We have come full circle.

Conclusion

Numerous others have written on the meaning of Niagara, but while some, like Bourinot in 1875 and Beauchamp in 1907, do make useful contributions, many simply repeat what previous writers have said, often uncritically and without citing sources. The early writings quoted above, by Schoolcraft, Marshall, Morgan and Cuoq, are sufficient to illustrate both the nature of the debate and the difficulty of reaching a definitive answer.

Some facts are clear, however. When Lalemant first wrote "Onguiaahra" in 1641 the Peninsula was occupied by the Neutral Indians, so it must be a Neutral word. But the Neutral nation was destroyed in 1651, the language died out, and no-one was left to explain the meaning. Subsequent attempts to do so have all been in terms of extant Iroquoian languages such as Seneca and Mohawk, which were closely related to Neutral and often used similar words to mean similar things. But, to quote one linguistics expert, such an approach is always a "hazardous task" — and especially so given the 170-year gap between the disappearance of the Neutral and the first attempt to explain the meaning. Besides, the field of linguistics was still at an early stage of development in the 19th century, and people like Schoolcraft were not only self-taught, but they were pioneers breaking new ground in the study of Amerindian languages. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that no consensus exists.

So, we are left with two principal interpretations of the name, each quite different (aside from both involving water), plus a number of other meanings, and no obvious way of deciding which is correct. The conclusion, alas, is inescapable — we may never know for certain what Niagara really means.

Principal Sources: (in addition to those cited in text): Thwaites and Campeau versions of *Jesuit Relations;* articles by Heidenreich on Great Lakes exploration and mapping, and Jesuit and native history; articles by Noble, White and others on Neutral history; Tanner, *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History;* Hughes, "The Early Surveys of Township No. 1."

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