



Schoolcraft's drawings of Chingwauk's recollections of Agawa Rock

Lol how all things fade and perish!
From the memory of the old men
Pass away the great traditions,
The achievements of the warriors,
The adventures of the hunters,
All the wisdom of the Medas,
All the craft of the Wabenos,
All the marvellous dreams and visions
Of the Jossakeeds, the Prophets!
*Picture Writing,
Song of Hiawatha,
Book XIV*

An unusual encounter with nature and history awaits Lake Superior Park visitors who search out Agawa Rock. From Sinclair Cove a trail leads one down through an interesting system of geology marked by well-eroded diabase dykes. Promontories rise ever higher on either side, and before long one is standing on great broken boulders, the last barrier by land to those who would walk out onto a smooth stone shelf below the great cliff that is Agawa Rock. Geologically the face is a fault plane, but that is a cold designation, for this is a place of emotions. The mood of the rock is as variable as Lake Superior itself, and to come to terms with this site, one must return to it again and again, as one might to a favorite shrine. For many generations of Ojibway Indians of the area the sanctity of this spot has exerted just such an appeal.

Some of the feelings which overcame Indian tribesmen have outlived them in the form of rock paintings. A diverse series survives at Agawa and these mute reminders executed in red ochre depict many of the moods suggested in the passage from Hiawatha quoted above. As a resident of the northeastern United States, the nineteenth century poet H. W. Longfellow found it convenient to fashion his great romance of Indian life in an Iroquoian mould. The figure of the Iroquoian culture-hero Hiawatha was in fact however, a direct counterpart of the Ojibway demi-god, Nanabozho, the grand hero of the Lake Superior country. Longfellow had borrowed heavily from the scholarly work of his friend Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Indian Agent and ethnographer at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. It is from those same books by Schoolcraft that we first learn something of the series of pictographs found at Agawa Rock. It was with great delight that Mr. Selwyn Dewdney, the closest student of Shield Rock Art in Canada, came across the Schoolcraft reference in the 1950's. In one of the volumes of *Intellectual Capacity and Character of the Indian Race*, Schoolcraft related information given to him by one Chingwauk. It is not clear if this Chingwauk was the same influential Chief of the Sault Ste. Marie Indians, or another powerful Shaman of the same name. He provided Schoolcraft with a birch-bark scroll upon which he had outlined the nature of two



fish, canoes and Misshepezhieu



Myeegun on horseback, Mikanok the turtle and four suns over the water



canoes, Misshepezhieu and mythical serpents



canoes



canoes, caribou and reclining deer



Ontario
Ministry of Natural Resources
Hon. Frank S. Miller, Minister
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Agawa Rock
Indian Pictographs

CA 20N
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In addition to those which were executed to commemorate great events, others may have been done for religious and ceremonial purposes, in homage to one's clan, and perhaps just for mere amusement. For instance, Agawa Rock has all of the qualities of seclusion sought by those in quest of a vision, and important part of Indian coming-of-age. Such visions were held to be important in establishing one's clan symbol, or in gaining insight into one's character. For the Algonkians, the clan symbol was an important aspect of one's identity, and persons of different tribes who shared a clan sign might feel greater loyalty to each other than to their fellow tribesmen or even family members. Clan symbols correspond to various fishes and animals such as the sturgeon and lynx. On a higher level of vision seeking, a Shaman might fast at great length. Some have claimed that the Misshepezhieu, a creature of great power, was seen only by such medicine men after much privation. The Agawa symbols are in many cases then, probably indicative of these searches for "manitou personal." There are other sacramental aspects of Agawa Rock. It has a reputation, along with many other spots on the Lake Superior coast, as a place where gifts of tobacco, food, and ornaments should be left for the gods. Such sacrifices were especially important to those travelling by water, for above all the spirits of the water had to be appeased. Voyageur and Indian alike were mindful of their obligations at such sites.

Many legends have been inspired by Lake Superior and the great contemporary Ojibway artist, Norval Morrisseau, related the following tale to Selwyn Dewdney in *Legends of my People: The Great Ojibway*, as in many legends, the Thunderbirds of Nanabozho are pitted against the malevolent water-god, Misshepezhieu: "An Indian family was travelling one summer near the area called Agawa Rock. On one of the beaches the Ojibway Indian said to his wife, "Let us make a fire, to eat." They left for the bush, the woman to get wood, the man for bark, leaving their only child, wrapped in a tikanagan, or carrier, near the canoe, although the old-time Ojibway feared Lake Superior. On returning they found their baby gone. When they looked at the sand, they saw Misshepezhieu's footprints. The tracks were seen leading into the water, with the baby. The couple did not know what to do. Finally the man spoke, "I will call on my protectors, the bird of thunder, to come to our help. Although we shall not see our child again, I will do what I can through the help of my protectors. Let us now go under the canoe," and then he started to play his drum. In about half an hour the thunderbirds, or thunderstorm, arrived in that area. The lightning began to pour on a mountain close by and it got dark. For two hours the storm lasted. Misshepezhieu tried to hide but

lightning fell all over the place and he was killed. Then the rain and lightning ceased, the skies cleared and the sun shone, an empty cradle was seen floating and beside it two small dead cubs. This tale, like the paintings, is stark simple, yet perplexing. Schoolcraft long ago observed the tendency of the Indians to paint their symbols in places "not easily accessible, as on the perpendicular face of a cliff." Their purpose was "to produce a feeling of surprise or mystery." This appears to be a just conclusion about Shield art generally. There is not for instance, that love of action in the Agawa Pictographs that is such a characteristic of the rock-paintings of the Australian Aboriginal Bushmen. Instead the Ojibway mind displays a fascination for the occult and as Mr. Dewdney observed the ways of such a disposition were "baffling to early traders and missionaries" whose literal minds were "incapable of understanding the native style of thinking, subtle indirect, and highly allegorical, the more so when the concept was a focus of fear..." It may be then that some of the artists of Agawa would have agreed with Hiawatha: "My painting makes me powerful over others."

Agawa Rock is located in Lake Superior Park near the Agawa Bay Campground. A sign on Highway 17 leads you down a road to a parking area near the site. From there, take the trail to the Rock.

The positions of the drawings as presented here show the approximate positioning on the Agawa Rock face.

- A. fish
- B. mythical serpents
- C. deer (?)
- D. canoes forming Myeenguns war party
- E. crane
- F. Migazee or eagle
- G. canoes
- H. Misshepezhieu
- I. Myeengun on horseback
- J. Mikenok the turtle
- K. four suns over the water (the trip took four days)
- L. 2 bears
- M. caribou
- N. reclining deer
- O. 2 figures with drums (?)



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