

## Exploration and toponymy on the Unknown River, Labrador

W. Gillies Ross

Volume 10, Number 20, 1966

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/020632ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/020632ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

### ISSN

0007-9766 (print)

1708-8968 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Ross, W. G. (1966). Exploration and toponymy on the Unknown River, Labrador. *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 10(20), 291–299.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/020632ar>

# EXPLORATION AND TOPONYMY ON THE UNKNOWN RIVER, LABRADOR

by

W. Gillies ROSS

*Department of Geography, Bishop's University, Lennoxville*

The toponymy of the Unknown River is both confused and confusing. At the root of the confusion lies the fact that, in a four-mile stretch of river, there are four waterfalls of unusual and similar appearance. Rock outcrops divide each of the waterfalls, at their brinks, into two or more falls. Any one of the four falls or either set of two — for they are arranged in pairs — may aptly be described as a twin falls. And, in fact, the term *twin falls* has had, in this area, at least five distinct applications.

The history of this confusion demonstrates very well the problems of name-giving in a remote area, a process complicated by inadequate maps, inaccurate descriptions of physical features, and by ignorance or disregard of names previously applied. Moreover, the history of this confusion is not without a moral. Before 1950, few — if any — persons would have considered the toponymy of this region to be of the slightest interest or importance. But with human occupation of the region the matter assumes importance and an intrinsic interest, and the confusion of the past stands revealed.

## *Exploration and name-giving up to 1952*

The first outsider to record a visit to the Unknown River was J. G. Thomas in the summer of 1921, but the fact that he was guided by two trappers from North West River suggests that the area was familiar to the «height-of-landers» prior to this date.<sup>1</sup> They made their way up the south, or right, bank of the river and came upon the Right Lower Falls,<sup>2</sup> to which Thomas gave the name Twin Falls<sup>3</sup> because a large rock divided the water into two cascades. The large wooded island which here separates the two branches of the Unknown River hid from Thomas the Left Lower Falls, although a column of mist rising beyond the trees betrayed its presence. This scene is shown in photographs taken by Thomas.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The *height-of-landers* are those who trap on the lake plateau above Grand Falls. Men from North West River began exploiting the upper part of the Hamilton River basin in about 1900. In 1930 Merrick encountered approximately a dozen height-of-landers near Grand Falls on their way home after the fall trapping (MERRICK, Elliott, *True North*, New York, Charles Scribners & Sons, 1933), and in 1939 Tanner accounted for 18 trapping territories in the upper basin (TANNER, V., *Outlines of the Geography, Life and Customs of Newfoundland-Labrador*, Helsinki, *Acta Geographica*, 1944, p. 703 and figure 253).

<sup>2</sup> For clarity in this paper the waterfalls will be referred to, as they would appear to an observer looking downstream, as Left Upper Falls, Right Upper Falls, Left Lower Falls, and Right Lower Falls.

<sup>3</sup> MERRICK, Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> The photographs taken by Thomas are now in the possession of the Royal Geographical Society.

Four years later Thomas suggested in a letter to the Editor of the *Geographical Journal*<sup>5</sup> that the waterfall be named Grenfell Falls, presumably after Dr. (later Sir) Wilfred Grenfell, mission doctor of the Labrador coast. But that name was not accepted.

In the summer of 1925 Varick Frissell ascended the Hamilton River to Grand Falls. He was accompanied by a Yale student called James Hellier, John and Robert Michelin from North West River, and a Canadian prospector. Above Grand Falls the party crossed to the right, or west, bank of the Hamilton River and walked downstream to Bowdoin Canyon. Leaving the others, Frissell and John Michelin travelled southward, crossed the shallow Valley River, and reached the Unknown River about five miles below the lower set of waterfalls. In the belief that their visit marked the end of any mystery and doubt concerning the nature of the river, Frissell found the name Unknown River « no longer ... appropriate ».<sup>6</sup> He considered calling it Winikapau Shibu (River of Willows), but eventually settled on the name Grenfell River.<sup>7</sup> This name endured no better than Thomas's Grenfell Falls, and the river has continued to be named the Unknown.

Ascending the north bank of the river they presently saw two columns of mist and soon arrived at the Left Lower Falls, the presence of which Thomas had suspected in 1921. As a large rock gave the waterfall a Y-shape, Frissell proposed the name Yale Falls, presumably in deference to Hellier's academic associations, and possibly in analogy to Bowdoin Canyon, name in 1891 by undergraduates of that college. The island that divides the river into two branches prevented them from seeing the Right Lower Falls (Thomas's Twin or Grenfell Falls). Frissell found it « aggravating to have this hidden twin so near and yet be unable to see it. »<sup>8</sup>

The threat of advancing forest fires terminated the exploration, preventing Frissell from following the Unknown River to its source. He and Michelin rejoined their companions near Grand Falls and returned down the Hamilton River to North West River.

By 1925, then, the visits of Frissell and Thomas had demonstrated the existence of Right and Left Lower Falls, and each falls had been photographed.<sup>9</sup> Probably neither of these men suspected the existence of an upper set of waterfalls.

During the summer of 1928 Howard Taylor, an American, led a party of six to the Unknown River. The other members were Dr. J. D. Kernan, Ralph and Philip Rogers, with Wally Chambers and Philippe Colombe as canoeemen. From the St. Lawrence River they ascended the St. Jean and Romaine Rivers in two canoes, crossed the height of land, and followed the Atikonak River to

<sup>5</sup> Editor, *Journeys in Labrador*, in *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 66, No. 1, July, 1925, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> FRISSELL, Varick, *Explorations in the Grand Falls Region of Labrador*, in *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 69, April, 1927, p. 337.

<sup>7</sup> FRISSELL, Varick, *The Grand Falls of Labrador*, in *Among the Deep-Sea Fishers* (International Grenfell Association), April, 1927, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> FRISSELL, Varick, « Explorations ... »

<sup>9</sup> FRISSELL'S photograph of Yale Falls appeared in his article *In Deepest Labrador*, in *World's Work*, Vol. 54, 1927, p. 527.

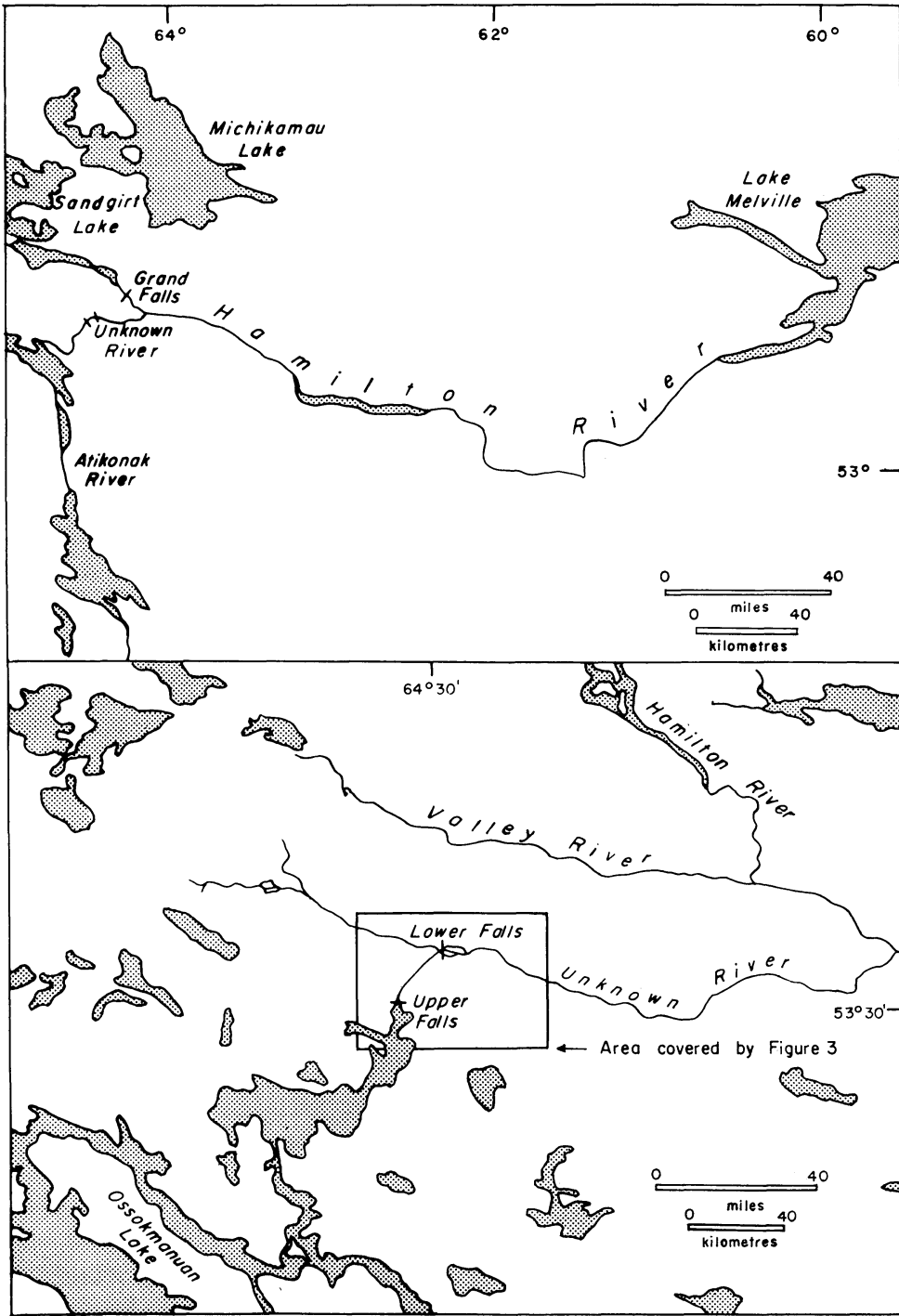


Figure 1 The Hamilton River basin, Labrador.

Figure 2 The Unknown River area.

Ossokmanuan Lake. They descended the Unknown River as far as the first set of waterfalls, which Philip Rogers filmed, and then returned to Ossokmanuan Lake, continued to the Hamilton River, portaged around Grand Falls and descended to the Labrador coast.

Rogers later compared his movies with Frissell's photographs and they agreed that they had seen and photographed the same waterfall. As they had approached from different directions, one up river and one down, each photographing the first falls encountered, it is clear that both believed at this time that there was but one set of falls, whereas, in fact, there are two.<sup>10</sup> Unknowing, Taylor and his companions must have been the first to record the Upper Falls.

The first published description of the Right and Left Upper Falls was a result of exploration by H. G. « Gino » Watkins and James M. Scott in the winter of 1929. Guided by Robert Michelin of North West River, they ascended the Hamilton River in February with dog sleds and travelled south of the Unknown River directly to the Right Upper Falls, passing south of the Right Lower Falls without seeing them. During a short trip in the lake area above the falls they saw from a hilltop columns of mist that indicated another set of waterfalls farther down the Unknown River. Following up this unexpected clue they crossed the river, visited and photographed the Left Upper Falls, and continued downstream along the left bank to the Left Lower Falls first seen by Frissell. They noted the extraordinary similarity of the two left bank falls, which had deceived Rogers and Frissell into believing they had visited the same site.

Watkins and Scott did not propose any names for the three waterfalls visited, although in their publications,<sup>11,12</sup> they referred to « the Upper Falls » and « the Lower Falls » for purposes of identification.

In December, 1930, Mr. and Mrs. Elliott Merrick travelled up the Hamilton River with Arch Goudie, a height-of-land trapper. After spending some time near Grand Falls they snowshoed across to the upper part of the Unknown River and followed it down to the Upper Falls. They inspected both falls of the right bank, and succeeded in crossing the river to visit the two falls of the left bank. In his account of the trip, Merrick used the names Twin Falls and Yale Falls for the Right and Left Lower Falls respectively. He suggested no name for the Right Upper Falls, but proposed « to call the upper fall of the north branch, which is crescent shaped and very high, Goudie Falls, in honour of Arch, who knows more about the lot of them than anybody else. »<sup>13</sup>

In 1950 Andrew Brown and Ralph Gray, of the National Geographic Society, with John and Leslie Michelin, guides from North West River, travelled by canoe from the mining camp at Burnt Creek (near present-day Schefferville) down the Hamilton River system to the Labrador coast. Curiosity about the « mystery-shrouded Unknown Falls » induced them to make a two-week side trip

<sup>10</sup> Not until the results of the Watkins expedition were published in 1930 did Frissell and Taylor realize their mistake and accept the existence of two sets of waterfalls on the river.

<sup>11</sup> WATKINS, Henry George, *River Explorations in Labrador by Canoe and Dog Sledge*, in *Geographical Journal*, vol. 75, No. 2, Feb., 1930, p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> SCOTT, James M., *The Land That God Gave Cain*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1933.

<sup>13</sup> MERRICK, Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

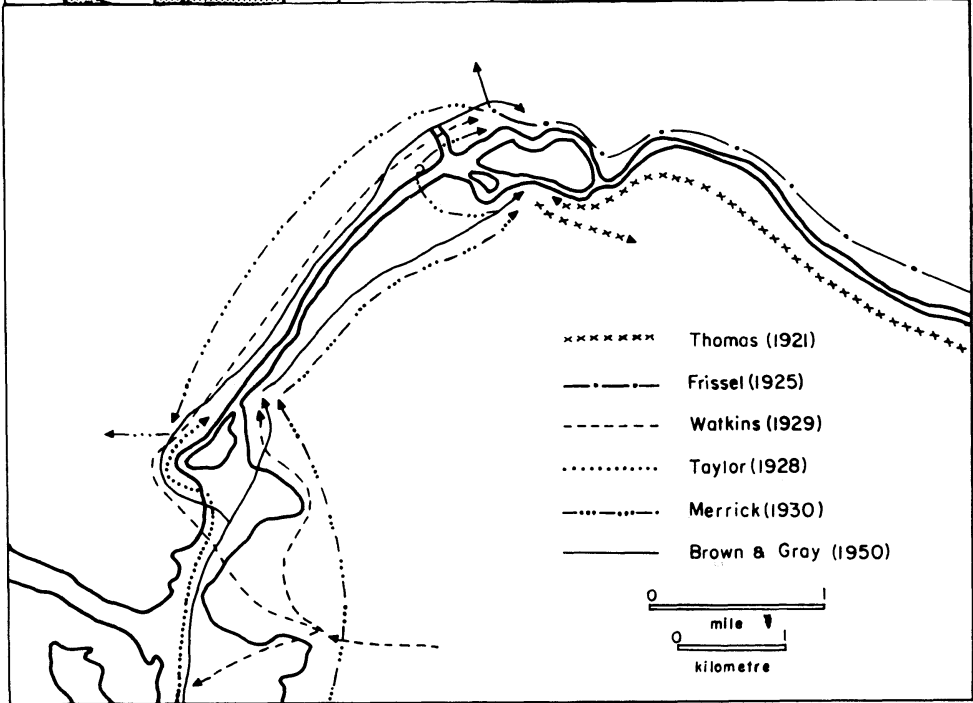
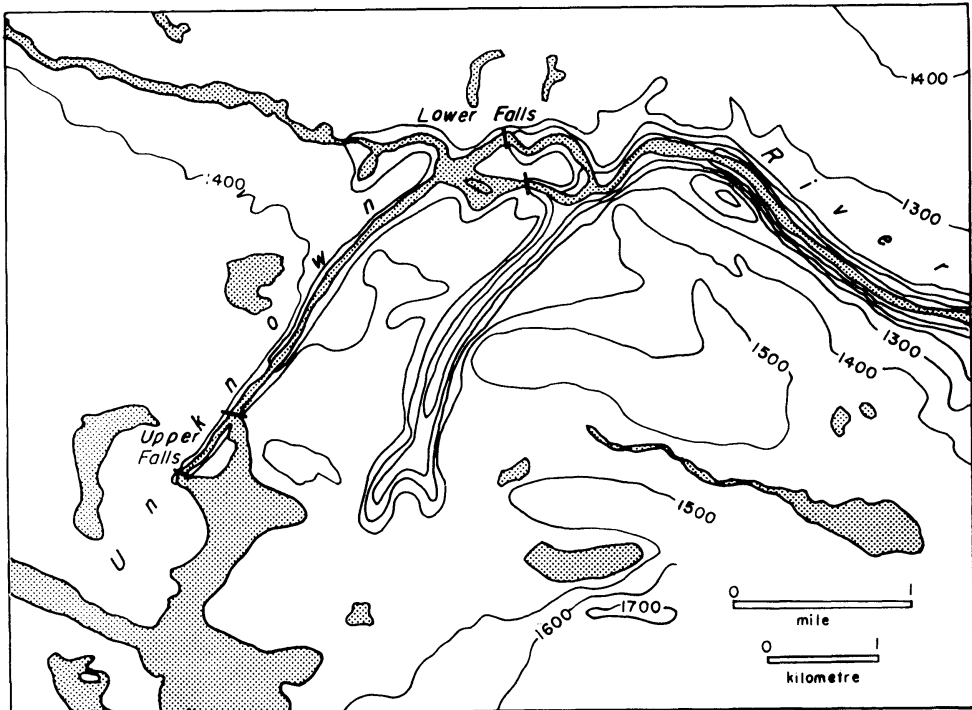


Figure 3 The falls area on Unknown River.

Figure 4 Exploration.

from Sandgirt Lake up the Atikonak River, through Ossokmanuan Lake, and down to the waterfalls of the Unknown River. From a camp above the Upper Falls they walked to each of the four waterfalls, describing and photographing them with care. Then they returned to Sandgirt Lake and continued down the Hamilton River to North West River. In their account of the trip<sup>14</sup> they adopted a usage similar to that of Watkins and Scott, and proposed no new names.

The nomenclature of the waterfalls on the Unknown River before 1950 was pioneer in character. Visitors to the falls suggested names in their articles and books, but these names found only limited, if any, acceptance.

#### *Recent nomenclature*

Since 1950, increasing awareness of the magnitude of the mineral and hydro-electrical resources in the region has led to extensive topographical and geological surveys, the establishment of transportation routes, and the construction of mining and power facilities. This work has required the preparation of detailed maps on which surface features are accurately located and named. A part of this labour has been to give official recognition to names already in use and to adopt some new names.

In 1952, as a result of field work done by Dr. K. E. Eade in the previous summer, the Geological Survey of Canada asked the Canadian Board on Geographical Names for approval of five names that they wished to place on a preliminary geological map of the Unknown River area. The names included the designation Thomas Falls for both Lower Falls, and Scott Falls for both Upper Falls. The Board approved these names and they duly appeared on Preliminary Map 52-9 of the Geological Survey (1952).

To the extent that these two names preserve the memory of men who contributed to geographical knowledge of the region, they are commendable. But, even so, one must regret that the names Twin Falls and Yale Falls, which were proposed by the first men to describe the two Lower Falls, were abandoned. Nor can one take much satisfaction in noting, firstly, that the name Thomas Falls includes the Left Lower Falls, which Thomas never saw, and, secondly: that the Upper Falls are named after Scott, whereas Watkins was the leader of the expedition that identified them.<sup>15</sup> But, these considerations aside, the names were clear and useful. The clarity did not persist long.

The small scale of the map (1:126,720) appears to have made it difficult for the draughtsman to show clearly that the name Thomas Falls included both Left and Right Lower Falls, and his placement of the name above the river's left bank made its application ambiguous. In the same way, the name Scott

<sup>14</sup> BROWN, Andrew, and GRAY, Ralph, *Labrador Canoe Adventure*, in *National Geographic Magazine*, July, 1951.

<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Watkins perished in the service of geography in 1932, while Scott still lives. One of the principles of nomenclature in Canada is that « The application of a personal name during the lifetime of the person concerned should only be made in exceptional circumstances. » (*Principles and Procedures*, Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, Geographical Branch, Department of Mines and Technical Services, Ottawa, Queen's Printer, 1963, p. 4.)

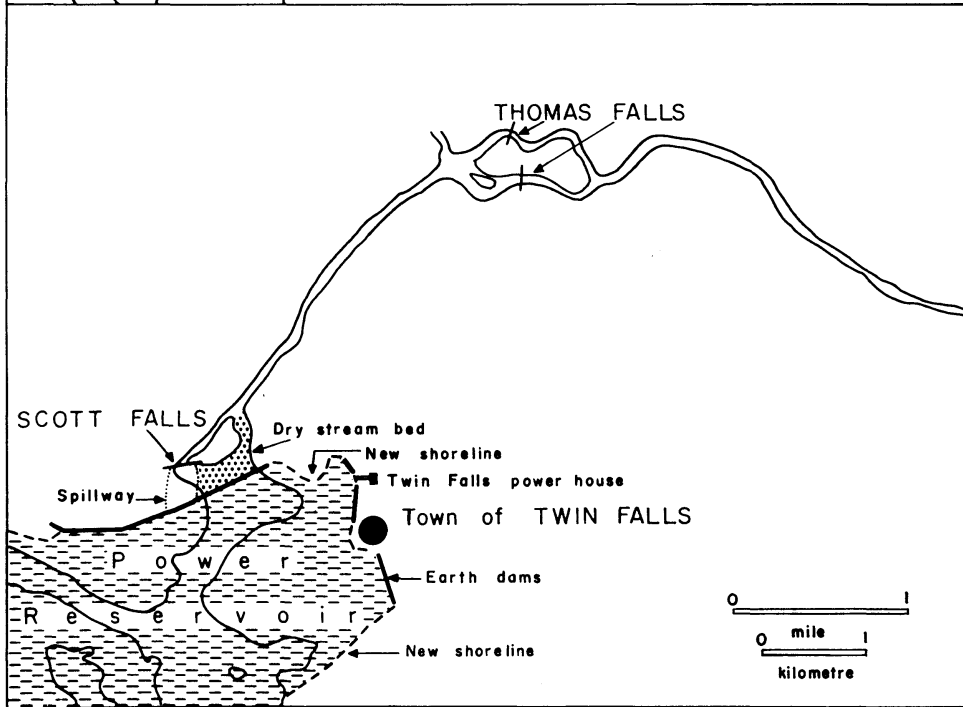
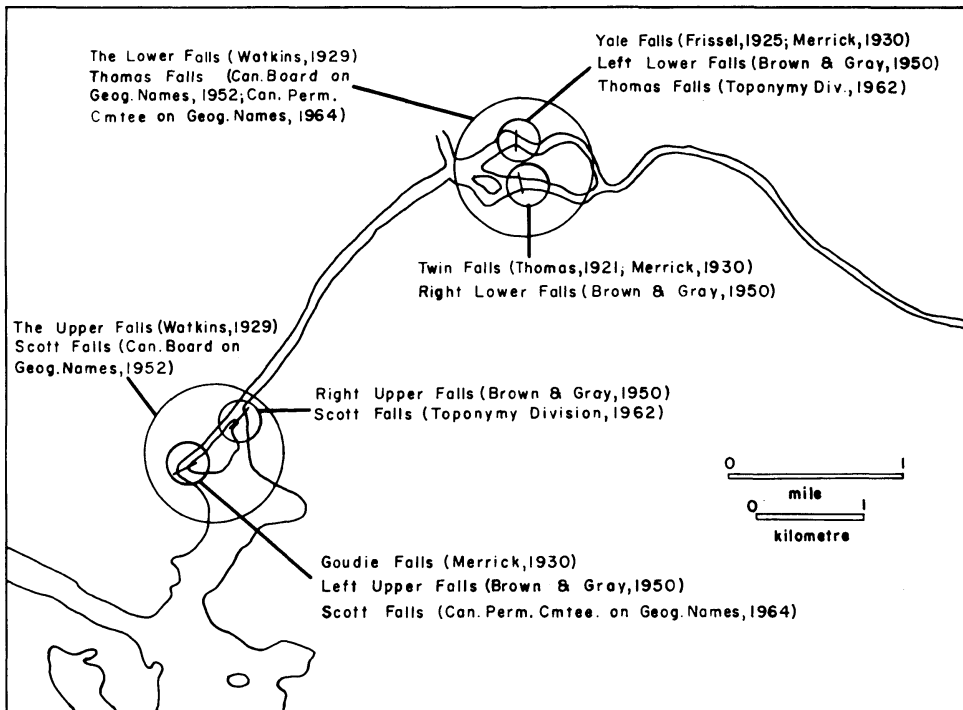


Figure 5 Historical nomenclature of falls.

Figure 6 Recent power development and nomenclature.



Falls was placed near the Left Upper Falls although it was meant to include both Left and Right Upper Falls. Topographical maps later issued by the Surveys and Mapping Branch of the Department of Mines and Technical Surveys perpetuated this confusion. On the 1954 Ossokmanuan sheet (1:250,000) the name Thomas Falls remains near the left Lower Falls, but the name Scott Falls has been shifted to a position near the *Right* Upper Falls, and in that position it appears on the 1959 Provisional Baikie Lake sheet (1:50,000). By 1962 the Toponymy Division of the Geographical Branch held that « Scott Falls apply to the falls on the northeast side of the (upper) island and Thomas Falls apply to the falls north of the (lower) island, »<sup>16</sup> an interpretation substantially different from that of 1952. The objection to this interpretation is that the name Thomas Falls applied to a waterfall (Left Lower Falls) that Thomas never saw, whereas the one he was first to describe went nameless.

In 1964, the Toponymy Division further revised official terminology to accord with local usage. The problems of nomenclature in the region had assumed a new urgency with the establishment by the Twin Falls Power Corporation of a hydro-electric plant and an associated town. Once again both Left and Right Lower Falls are gathered under one name, Thomas Falls, which at least coincides with the intention of the Geological Survey in 1952. But the term Scott Falls, which had identified the *Right* Upper Falls on several topographical map sheets, is now definitely applied to the *Left* Upper Falls (for which Merrick had proposed the name Goudie Falls in 1931). This transfer of name was considered necessary because in 1962 a dam across the Unknown River a quarter mile upstream diverted the water wholly into the left channel, thus removing the Right Upper Falls from the necessity of consideration.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, the town and company associated with the power development have adopted for themselves the old and disused name Twin Falls. The name, according to one report, was not in use among the North West River people in 1950, but, according to another report, they are said to have applied it, by about 1960, to the two Upper Falls. If that is so, it is possible that the name was adopted from them. Again, it may simply be the term Thomas applied to the Right Lower Falls in 1921, transferred to the new situation. Whatever the explanation for the revival of the name, it is clear that some confusion existed over its meaning. Everyone knew it as the name of the townsite; the men from North West River used it for the Upper Falls; some company people suggested that it was a collective name for all four waterfalls; and those few people who knew the history of exploration remembered it as the falls first visited by Thomas.

In December, 1963, the Director of Postal Services advised the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names of his intention to open a post office at the townsite under the name Twin Falls, and the name has since been approved by the Government of Newfoundland as the official name of the town.

---

<sup>16</sup> FRASER, J. K. (Chief, Toponymy Division, Geographical Branch, Department of Mines and Technical Surveys), personal correspondence, 1964. The Toponymy Division is the research and advisory unit of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names. This latter body replaced the Canadian Board on Geographical Names in 1961.

Today one could observe that the name Twin Falls as applied by Thomas has vanished, that half of the Twin Falls of the Labrador trappers no longer exists, and that, despite the fact that several double waterfalls exist on the Unknown River, none of them has the name Twin Falls, although the name is used for a power corporation and a town.

### *Conclusion*

The evolution of names for the four waterfalls on the Unknown River has included three phases. In the first, or pioneer phase, utilization of the area was limited to trapping by a few individuals from North West River and a few Montagnais Indians from the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. No population was settled on the land and there was little or no need to identify by name the waterfalls, which played no role in the economy and were seldom seen. Between 1920 and 1952 five groups of outsiders, curious about the falls, travelled to the river and proposed a few names. Generally the early names were respected by those who came later.

The second phase, which began in 1951, may be called the mapping phase, and was characterized by the publication of geological and topographical maps upon which were entered government-approved names for some of the waterfalls. This nomenclature paid homage to two of the early explorers but at the same time failed to recognize the names which they had either used or suggested. By 1960, when this period ended, both pairs of water falls were located and named on topographical maps on scales of eight, four, and one mile to an inch, although the precise application of the names remained in doubt.

The third phase began in 1961 with the entry of Twin Falls Power Corporation. Official policy concerning the application of names came to be based on current usage in the company town rather than on historical factors.

Of the four names (Twin Falls, Yale Falls, Grenfell Falls, and Goudie Falls) suggested for waterfalls during the exploration of the 1920's and 1930's, three have been discarded completely and one is now applied to a company town. We are reminded of Elliott Merrick's comment when he advocated using the name Goudie Falls in 1931 : « Somebody else will come along and call them something else, so what does it matter ? »<sup>17</sup> One should not now assume that the matter is settled and at an end. The future may well see new names applied or old names restored. For the sake of simplicity let us hope for restoration rather than innovation.

---

<sup>17</sup> MERRICK, Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 197.