R. C. MACLEOD

Born in Calgary, R. C. Macleod was educated at the University of Alberta, Queen’s University, and Duke University. His Duke doctoral thesis, which was accepted in 1971, has been published in revised form under the title *The North West Mounted Police and Law Enforcement 1873-1905* (Toronto, 1976). Dr. Macleod is Associate Professor of History at the University of Alberta.
THE NORTH WEST MOUNTED POLICE
1873-1919

R. C. Macleod

ISBN 0-88798-032-5 Historical Booklets
ISSN 0068-886X Historical Booklets (Print)
ISSN 1715-8621 Historical Booklets (Online)

The Canadian Historical Association Booklets

No. 31

OTTAWA, 1978
THE NORTH WEST MOUNTED POLICE 1873-1919

Among the government institutions which were created in the nation-building period of Canadian history, none was the subject of as little deliberation as the North West Mounted Police, which became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1919. Yet few of our institutions are as distinctively the product of the Canadian experience as the national police force. Starting in 1873 as a small, temporary organization whose activities were confined to the North West Territories, the Mounted Police by the end of the First World War had emerged as a permanent body with nation-wide responsibilities.

I. The Formation of the North West Mounted Police.

It was the acquisition by Canada of the Hudson's Bay Company territories between the Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains which made the Mounted Police necessary. This at least was the view of the one man who really counted, Sir John A. Macdonald. Macdonald's thinking on the problem of administering the new territory was influenced by the western experience of both the Hudson's Bay Company and the United States, neither of which was very encouraging to the Prime Minister. The Canadian view of the lawlessness and violence that accompanied American westward expansion was doubtless exaggerated, but the hard fact remained that in the 1860's wars with the Plains Indians were costing the United States vast amounts of money. Similar wars in the North West Territories would bankrupt the Canadian government in short order. The efforts of the Hudson's Bay Company to introduce courts and law enforcement institutions on the British model, essentially similar to those south of the border, were not much more successful. The defiance of constituted authority during the Sayer trial in 1849 was only the first of a long series of incidents in Rupert's Land which indicated that existing institutions were incapable of keeping even the small population in order. That the same institutions would be up to coping with the stresses imposed by the arrival of large numbers of Canadian settlers seemed a very unlikely proposition.

Even under ideal conditions some conflict between settlers and the native population was inevitable. The only realistic question was, how best to manage the cultural friction and mitigate its detrimental effects on all concerned? The cheapest and simplest method in the short run was to let events take their course in the West. The settlers could wrest the land from the indigenous population by whatever means they could command. This kind of
Darwinian struggle was not without its advocates in parliament at the time. For Macdonald and his ministers, however, it was unthinkable. The long tradition of peaceful dealings with the Indians of Eastern Canada could not lightly be ignored. More important still, the risks involved in a *laissez-faire* western policy were too great. The young Dominion might be drawn into a series of ruinously expensive conflicts with the plains tribes. Unrest in the region might provide an aggressively expansionist United States with the excuse to move in and take over, as it had in Texas and California.

Macdonald was grappling with these problems long before Canada actually acquired the North West Territories, perhaps as early as 1865. The use of military force to keep the peace had proved both expensive and ineffective in the United States. The only alternative seemed to be an armed police force with powers which went far beyond any possessed by the miniscule local constabularies in Canada at the time. Macdonald was reluctant to abandon the principle of local control of law enforcement which Englishmen, Canadians and Americans universally regarded as an important bulwark against tyranny. European-style police controlled by the central government constituted an un-British threat to the liberties of the subject. In Ireland and India, however, where the British ruled populations unschooled in the responsibilities of democratic citizenship, such organizations had been found most useful. The Royal Irish Constabulary in particular caught Macdonald’s eye and became the model for the NWMP.

By 1869, when serious negotiations for the Canadian takeover of Rupert's Land began, Macdonald had decided that a federal police force was the best solution to the problem of maintaining peace and order in the new territory. Captain D. R. Cameron, who accompanied the ill-fated Lieutenant-Governor William McDougall to Red River in 1869, carried instructions to recruit such a force as soon as Canadian control was established. Half the men were to be chosen from the Metis population after the pattern of the British Army in India. The insurrection of the Red River population led by Louis Riel put an end to this scheme and altered not only the timing of the creation of the Mounted Police but the composition of the force as well. The premature birth of the Province of Manitoba placed an unexpected constitutional obstacle in the way of a federal police force since the British North America Act stipulated that law enforcement was a provincial responsibility. The expense of keeping a militia force at Red River in the wake of the uprising brought Macdonald's native parsimony to the fore, and the plan for a Mounted Police force was temporarily shelved.
There it stayed for three years along with other government plans for the administration of the North West Territories. In 1872 Macdonald finally returned to the task of creating an institutional structure for the new region. Constant prodding from the Lieutenant-Governor of the North West Territories, Alexander Morris, was the most influential factor in Macdonald’s decision to go ahead with the force. Perhaps also a sense of the impending demise of his government over the Pacific Scandal helped spur a sudden flurry of activity on the West. A revised edition of the 1869 plan for the Mounted Police was decided upon as part of a package which included legislation establishing a court system, magistrates and a larger NWT Council. A new government department, Interior, was set up at the same time to oversee western development. In May of 1873 Parliament passed “An Act respecting the Administration of Justice, and for the Establishment of a Police Force in the North West Territories”.

The legislation of May 1873 merely gave the government the authority to establish a police force by order-in-council. It was not until August that this final step was taken. At that time the first contingent of 150 of an authorized 300 men was recruited and sent via the lakes and the Dawson route to spend the winter at Fort Garry. A second contingent would join them in the spring of 1874 and all would then move west to the Territories. The entire force was recruited in Ontario and Quebec, the Red River uprising having convinced the government that the Metis were untrustworthy. The police were to be mounted, armed and organized along the lines of a cavalry regiment and even had a few artillery pieces in the event that they had to act as a military force.

The uniform adopted was the red tunic of the British Army which all authorities agreed was of great symbolic significance to the Indians. The commanding officer was given the title Commissioner. There was an Assistant Commissioner and two officer ranks: Superintendent and Inspector, and Superintendent and Sub-inspector. Surgeons and Veterinary Surgeons completed the officer corps. The non-commissioned ranks consisted of Chief Constable, Constable, Acting Constable and Sub-Constable. Within a few years these rather awkward rank designations were changed to the titles which have lasted until the present day. Superintendent and Inspector for the commissioned ranks; and Staff Sergeant, Sergeant, Corporal and Constable for the non-commissioned ranks. Lieutenant-Colonel George Arthur French, an Anglo-Irish artilleryman commanding the gunnery school at Kingston, was chosen as first commissioner of the Mounted Police.
II. Indians and Ranchers 1874-1884.

French, bringing with him the second contingent of 150 men, arrived at Dufferin, Manitoba by rail through the United States in June of 1874. His instructions were to march west to the foothills of the Rockies where traders from Fort Benton, Montana were known to be operating. In the classic pattern of the North American fur trade, competition among small, independent traders had led to the wholesale use of liquor, with disastrous results for the native population. The first assignment of the Mounted Police was to eliminate the trade before it led to open conflict between Indians and whites. Ottawa’s original instructions called for French to take his force straight west just north of the 49th parallel so that the camps and supply dumps established by the Boundary Survey could be used. These orders were changed at the last minute when rumours reached Ottawa of an Indian uprising just south of the border. The police were instructed to keep well north of the line to avoid any entanglements, a change which condemned them to journey through arid and unmapped territory for most of the way.

The route proved so hard on the horses that the weakest had to be detached half way to the destination and sent to Edmonton via the easier Carlton Trail. By the time the rest of the force reached the foothill country early in September, horses were dying daily and the men were ragged and starving. French’s original orders called for him to clean out the whisky traders and then send half his men to Edmonton and return with the other half to Fort Ellice. The difficulties of the march convinced the Commissioner that a permanent post in the border country was essential to control the situation. Ottawa agreed to the change. French then left Assistant Commissioner James F. Macleod with 150 men to establish a fort and returned to set up his headquarters.

Given the condition of the force when it reached its destination, any determined effort by either the whisky traders or the Indians would have wiped it out without difficulty. Fortunately, neither group was disposed to dispute the presence of the police. The traders were interested in profits, not in fighting the Canadian government, and the notorious Fort Whoop-Up was found to be manned by a single individual. The Indians of the Blackfoot confederacy had been informed of the impending arrival of the police by the missionary, John McDougall, who had distributed gifts on behalf of the government to demonstrate the peaceful intent of the expedition. Assistant Commissioner Macleod, fortified with supplies obtained from Fort Benton and the services of the inimitable guide, Jerry Potts, was left free to house his men and horses for the winter. Construction was begun on a post located on an island in the Old Man’s River, named Fort Macleod on French’s instructions.
The border area from Fort Macleod east to the Cypress Hills was to remain the major focus of Mounted Police activity for the next decade. In 1875 posts were established at Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills and at Fort Calgary on the Bow River. In the North Saskatchewan valley an additional post was set up at Battleford to oversee the Metis settlements of the area. Each of these divisional posts established smaller outlying detachments and sent out patrols to cover the surrounding territory. The first priority of the Mounted Police in this period was to establish and maintain friendly relations with the Indians, especially the Blackfoot who, unlike the Cree farther north, had no tradition of peaceful contact with whites through the fur trade. The goal of the force was to prepare the way for treaty negotiations. Once treaties were signed and reserves allotted, the Indians could be settled on their lands and converted to an agricultural way of life.

The Blackfoot were understandably suspicious at first, in spite of John McDougall's assurances. Crowfoot, the most influential of the Blackfoot chiefs, arranged a test for the Mounted Police in October of 1874. He sent his brother-in-law, Three Bulls, to Fort Macleod to report that two American traders were selling whisky. The two were quickly arrested, fined and had their liquor destroyed. Satisfied that the police were serious in their intention to apply the law to both peoples, Crowfoot and the other chiefs met with Macleod in November and agreed to cooperate and abide by the law. The meeting was a momentous one since Crowfoot and Macleod liked and respected each other at once. Their personal relationship was to become a cornerstone of police-Indian relations.

More important still was the real, if temporary improvement that the presence of the Mounted Police made possible in the way of life of the plains Indians. Prior to the arrival of the police the condition of the Blackfoot had been desperate. The whisky trade had brought with it social disintegration as well as poverty and disease on a large scale. This was why leaders like Crowfoot, who recognized the causes of their plight, were prepared to cooperate with the police. For the brief space of five or six years, until the buffalo disappeared, the Blackfoot recovered their former prosperity and self-respect. They naturally attributed this state of affairs to the presence of the Mounted Police and this recognition created a bond which was to carry the force through a number of severe crises in the years ahead. Its immediate effect was to enable the Lieutenant-Governor of the North West Territories to negotiate and sign a treaty with the Blackfoot in 1877, only a year after that with the Cree.

The foundering of John A. Macdonald's first trans-continental railway scheme in the morass of the Pacific Scandal meant that
large-scale settlement in the west did not occur immediately. The hiatus provided the Mounted Police with an invaluable ten-year breathing space which they used to good effect to work out methods of settling disputes between Indians and settlers. The presence of the police themselves attracted enough settlement in the immediate vicinity of major posts to provide a sort of laboratory for the development of these techniques. There was no formula for success, but the application of patience, tact, common sense and courage enabled the force to handle every situation that arose. In this period the emphasis was on educating both Indian and rancher. Each had to be convinced that the other party had rights which must be respected.

The closest thing the Mounted Police had to an absolute rule was to avoid the use of firearms except as a last resort. Mounted Policemen regularly rode into armed and excited groups of both races with their guns holstered. They knew that moral authority was the surest defence since they were heavily outnumbered and potential reinforcements were thousands of miles away. The success of these tactics is demonstrated by the fact that the force did not fire a shot in anger in the period to 1885.

The only major threat to peace in the North West Territories in the decade 1874-1884 came from outside the country. After his victory over General Custer and the 7th Cavalry at the Little Big Horn in 1876, Sitting Bull brought 3000 of his followers across the border to the vicinity of the Mounted Police post at Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills. There the Sioux remained for four years. Nearly half the total strength of the Mounted Police had to be stationed at Fort Walsh to keep the lid on this explosive situation. The force was under intense pressure from Ottawa to get the Sioux back to the United States as soon as possible. The U.S. Army was watching the border closely and threatened to pursue any marauders back into Canadian territory. Canadian Indians resented the presence of the Sioux in the one area where a few buffalo remained. The Blackfoot offered to assist the police in exterminating the aliens. Fortunately for the police, Sitting Bull and his people, although half-starved during most of their stay in Canada, were willing to do almost anything to avoid returning to the United States.

The man who had to maintain the delicate balance of opposing forces was Superintendent James Morrow Walsh. In carrying out his task successfully Walsh was also assisted by a warm personal friendship with the Sioux chief. Walsh admired the Sioux and their leader and became the one white man Sitting Bull ever really trusted. By using the tactics developed earlier with the Blackfoot, Walsh was able to maintain control and gradually wear down the resistance.
of the Sioux. After several years of hunger and constant pressure to return, Sitting Bull's people began to drift back across the border. In 1881 the chief, deserted by most of his people, finally left himself. Ironically Walsh became a victim of the incident almost as soon as Sitting Bull did. The Superintendent, for all his skill and courage, was a vain man who revelled in the international publicity he received as 'Sitting Bull's Boss'. Walsh's superiors strongly resented his monopoly of the limelight and along with Sir John A. Macdonald came to believe that he was deliberately prolonging the incident for his own purposes. As soon as Sitting Bull was safely in American custody, Walsh was forced to resign his commission and leave the Mounted Police.

III. The 1885 Rebellion.

Sitting Bull was not long across the border when signs of a new, and this time purely Canadian trouble began to appear. The unrest was centred in the North Saskatchewan valley and at its root was the Canadian Pacific Railway, under way at last and pushing rapidly west from Winnipeg. Construction of the railway increased tensions already present among Indians, Whites and Metis on the North Saskatchewan eventually to the breaking point. The decision to shift the main line of the railway 200 miles south had left the white settlers heavily in debt for land bought at inflated prices and with no prospect of being able to market their crops. But if the railway was too far for the settlers, it was too close for the other two groups. Several bands of Cree in the area, most notably those of Big Bear and Poundmaker, had refused to sign Treaty Number Six and were clinging precariously to their old nomadic way of life. For these people the railway was an end to their hopes. The Metis, many of whom had been driven from Red River in 1870 by Canadian settlement, had no retreat left and faced an unresponsive bureaucracy in Ottawa that ignored their efforts to establish title to their lands on the Saskatchewan. Bad weather and crop failures in the early 1880s added to the climate of desperation.

The Mounted Police began to respond to these developments in 1881 by shifting men northward. Battleford was strengthened and new posts opened at Prince Albert and Qu'Appelle. Louis Riel, hero of the Red River resistance and obvious focus for present discontents, was kept under surveillance in Montana. The numbers of the force were increased to 500 in 1882. Needless to say, none of these measures served to prevent the rebellion from occurring. The problems involved were fundamentally political and beyond the powers of the police. All they could do was distribute a little
relief to the destitute, often from their own pockets, warn Ottawa and prepare for the worst.

By the spring of 1885 the Mounted Police were spread very thinly across the North West Territories. Supervision of the railway construction, now into the mountains of British Columbia, had absorbed most of the increases in the force. Those Mounted Policemen stationed in the North Saskatchewan valley could see only too clearly that Ottawa's neglect was driving the population to open rebellion. The force was sending unambiguous warnings to this effect to the government six months before the first shots were fired. By this time, however, the Mounted Police were no longer the only agents of the federal government in the west and the authorities chose to believe the soothing words of officials who had a vested interest in denying the possibility of trouble. When Riel's negotiations with Ottawa failed the inevitable explosion occurred.

Controversy surrounds the part played by the Mounted Police in the 1885 rebellion. By the time the fighting began at Duck Lake in March, Commissioner A. G. Irvine had managed to scrape together some two hundred men in the threatened area. The first encounter was a clear defeat for the Mounted Police. Superintendent L. N. F. Crozier, with a seven-pounder gun and accompanied by a force of about a hundred police and civilian volunteers, was halted by a group of Metis and Indians on the trail to Duck Lake where they were going to retrieve arms and supplies from the Hudson's Bay post. Fighting broke out and it quickly became apparent that the Metis, who surrounded the government force on three sides, had an overwhelming advantage in position, if not in numbers. After seeing ten men killed and a dozen wounded in half an hour, Crozier withdrew. He was criticized at the time and since for failing to wait for Irvine to arrive with a hundred reinforcements before leaving for Duck Lake. No doubt Crozier acted hastily, but in view of the untenable ground at Duck Lake and the Metis tactics of fighting from cover, the extra men could scarcely have changed the outcome of the battle.

Following this initial defeat Commissioner Irvine withdrew his men to the two major settlements of Battleford and Prince Albert and awaited the arrival of the military from the east. Only a handful ofMounted Police participated actively in the later stages of the fighting. After Colonel Otter's column relieved Battleford some police took part in the abortive attack on Poundmaker at Cut Knife Hill. A few members of the force under Superintendent Sam Steele acted as scouts for General T. B. Strange's Alberta Field Force. The incident which aroused the most debate was Commissioner Irvine's failure to lead his men out of Prince Albert
and attack the rebel positions in the rear at the battle of Batoche. The reasons for his inaction are unclear. It is possible that General Middleton’s orders did not reach Irvine or were incomprehensible. It is equally possible that Irvine decided that his responsibility to protect the civilians gathered in the town overrode other considerations.

In any case the situation was exploited to the full by Middleton, who needed a scapegoat. The general’s early telegrams to Ottawa had confidently predicted that the rebels would either flee at the sight of his force or be quickly overwhelmed. The stubborn resistance of the Metis at Fish Creek and Batoche proved highly embarrassing to Middleton, and he seized upon Irvine’s inaction to divert attention from his own timidity in pressing home the fighting. There was an old score to settle here too since the Militia had resented the Mounted Police from the time of its formation. A more aggressive policy on Irvine’s part might have brought a quicker victory at Batoche and would certainly have helped the reputation of the Mounted Police, but nothing within the Commissioner’s power could have changed the outcome of the rebellion. Middleton’s criticisms of the Mounted Police were accepted altogether too uncritically at the time and by historians since 1885.

The uninspiring military performance of the Mounted Police led to demands from some of Macdonald’s cabinet that the force be disbanded or absorbed into the military. Macdonald was unwilling to take such a drastic step but did decide to get rid of Irvine as a gesture to restore public confidence. On the eve of the rebellion the force had been doubled in size to a thousand men and a new broom was needed to shake up the organization and restore morale and discipline. After a search had turned up a suitable replacement in the person of Lawrence William Herchmer, Irvine was asked to resign.

IV. Commissioner Herchmer’s Reforms.

The new commissioner must have realized that his position was a precarious one. All three of his predecessors, French and Macleod as well as Irvine, had been forced to retire after disagreements with the government. Although his brother, Superintendent W. M. Herchmer, was one of the original officers of the force, L. W. Herchmer was the first commissioner brought in from outside. He faced a considerable degree of hostility from the officers of the force on this count. In addition to the internal problem of discipline and morale, Herchmer was faced with the much more fundamental one of changing the character of the Mounted Police to enable them to cope with the influx of settlement the railway would bring.
Cursed with a dour and tactless personality, Herchmer was never fully accepted by the officers and men he commanded. Yet his determination and force of character were such that he was to leave a permanent imprint on the force. Of all the men who led the Mounted Police only the first commissioner, French, and J. H. MacBrien in the 1930s were as important in guiding the evolution of the force.

Drill, discipline and a thorough revision of the regulations soon restored pride and self-respect to the force. Herchmer laid much greater stress on training than ever before, bringing the brightest and most promising officers to Regina (since 1882 the headquarters of the police) to handle it. With a thousand men at his disposal, Herchmer was able for the first time to introduce a training program that went beyond drill and horsemanship. In addition to a much more thorough grounding for recruits, experienced constables up for promotion could be brought in for special courses.

Recognizing that the need to maintain large concentrations of men was a thing of the past after 1885, Herchmer set about dispersing the force as widely as possible. Only by providing thorough coverage of the inhabited portion of the North West Territories could the police achieve their maximum effectiveness. A typical distribution of the force for this period is the one for 1889, reproduced below. The numbers in brackets indicate strengths.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'A' Division</td>
<td>Maple Creek</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'B' Division</td>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>(74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'C' Division</td>
<td>Battleford</td>
<td>(89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'D' Division</td>
<td>Fort Macleod</td>
<td>(96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'E' Division</td>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>(111)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'F' Division</td>
<td>Prince Albert</td>
<td>(86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'G' Division</td>
<td>Fort Saskatchewan</td>
<td>(78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'H' Division</td>
<td>Fort Macleod</td>
<td>(80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'K' Division</td>
<td>Lethbridge</td>
<td>(102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depot Division (training)</td>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>(222)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(There were no 'I' or 'J' Divisions)

Each division was commanded by a superintendent who was normally assisted by two or three inspectors. Depending on its size a division would have ten to twenty non-commissioned officers, the rest of the strength consisting of constables. Scouts, interpreters and special constables were recruited from the native population as needed.

Within each division half to three-quarters of the men were stationed at headquarters with the rest scattered throughout the area.
in small detachments. About half those at headquarters were assigned to patrol duty. Patrols were of two kinds, regular and flying patrols. The former followed a fixed route at established intervals. Constables on regular patrol carried a book that was signed by all settlers on their route and in which any complaints were recorded. Flying patrols were random in their timing and did not follow established routes. They were intended to cover any gaps in the network of regular patrols and prevent lawbreakers from taking advantage of the predictability of the normal tours. Those men at headquarters not assigned to patrol duty were fully occupied acting as jailers, attending court sessions, looking after routine housekeeping and administration and coping with any emergencies or special assignments.

The detachments sent the information gathered by the patrols to divisional headquarters in weekly reports. In turn, headquarters prepared a monthly summary for the Commissioner in Regina. This system gave the police an accurate and up to date picture of conditions all over the Territories. Much of the content of the reports was only indirectly connected with criminal activity. They noted the state of crops and livestock, weather, cases of poverty and destitution, movements of people in and out of the district; in short the general social and economic condition of society. The format of the reports was a matter of deliberate policy since the police were at least as concerned with preventing crime as with apprehending offenders. Much of their time was spent distributing money to families in need of relief or organizing temporary work for them around the post. Neighbourhood quarrels were settled quickly before they could escalate into violence. New settlers were assisted with advice about local conditions.

The task of advising settlers was one of the highest priorities of the Mounted Police. Immigrants from Europe and the United States received special attention. Both the government and the police themselves saw the force as one of the major instruments for ‘Canadianizing’ the new arrivals. Since most Canadians saw themselves as a particularly peaceful and orderly nation, this meant a determined effort to instruct the immigrant in the necessity for a stable and law-abiding society. In this sense the Mounted Police were an integral part of the National Policy, helping to mold the social and political character of the region in the same way that the CPR shaped its economic destiny. This dovetailing of ideology with the primary function of the police lay behind the powerful sense of mission that gave the force its unique character.

Such was the system devised by Commissioner Herchmer to cope with the changing times. On the whole it functioned admirably,
especially in the period 1885-1895 when sufficient men were available to manage it properly. The system was not perfect, of course, and Herchmer found his efforts to make some desirable changes blocked by Ottawa. One of his pet schemes was the creation of a separate detective branch within the force. The government scuttled this plan on the grounds that it would discourage towns and cities from building up their own municipal police. A proposal for a railway police branch met a similar fate. One hangover from the early days that the Mounted Police found onerous was their role as magistrates. Under the Mounted Police Act superintendents and inspectors were *ex officio* justices of the peace. Throughout the Territorial period Mounted Police officers tried the great majority of lesser offences themselves. This not only left them open to charges of conflict of interest but absorbed a great deal of time. All efforts to divest themselves of their judicial powers came to nothing because enough civilian JP's could not be found.

As memories of the 1885 rebellion receded, the opposition Liberal party in the House of Commons became increasingly critical of expenditures on the Mounted Police. Their argument was that the force had never been intended to be a permanent organization. Now that the frontier had been tamed the necessity for the police had passed, and they argued that it should be phased out over a period of years. As long as Sir John A. Macdonald lived the government firmly dismissed these demands. But after the old man's death in 1891 the weak and divided leadership of the Conservative government was more inclined to yield to the logic of the Liberal arguments. Accusations of misconduct against Commissioner Herchmer and a resulting judicial inquiry weakened the force politically at this time, even though the Commissioner was vindicated. The Liberal critics of the police began to demand an immediate end to the force. The government responded by gradually reducing the numbers of the police from 1000 to 750 by 1895.

V. Northward Expansion.

Because the Liberal party had been so vociferously opposed to the Mounted Police, their victory in the 1896 federal election seemed to promise a rapid end to the force. However, a number of events combined to alter the new government's attitude. One was renewed fear of an Indian uprising in the North West Territories. The Cree in particular were restless on their reserves in the 1890s. White fears and Cree frustrations were focussed by an incident involving an Indian named Almighty Voice. This young man was arrested on a minor charge in October of 1895. He escaped custody and shot to death Sergeant Colin Colebrook who tried to re-arrest him. For the next year and a half, until the spring of 1897, Almighty
Voice evaded the most intense manhunt in the history of the Mounted Police. When he was finally cornered there was a bloody shoot-out in which Almighty Voice and two friends were killed along with two Mounted Policemen and one civilian. Several others were wounded. It was obvious to everyone that Almighty Voice had remained at large only because of the aid and encouragement of his people. This was a new and disturbing development since the police were accustomed to cooperation from the Indians in such cases.

Public uneasiness in the Territories over the incident reinforced an existing determination on the part of westerners to resist any effort by the government to do away with what they now considered their police. Liberal party organizers across the prairies reported to Laurier that any move to abolish the force would bring disaster at the polls in the next election. The Liberals had also discovered by this time that the Mounted Police were an attractive source of patronage for a party long in opposition and anxious to reward its friends. The plans for eliminating the force were shelved.

Another development that was to be in the long run even more important for the survival of the Mounted Police had also begun to unfold in 1895. Gold had been discovered in the Yukon in 1894 and Inspector Charles Constantine was ordered north to investigate. When Constantine reported that American miners were pouring into the region the government decided to use the Mounted Police to assert Canadian sovereignty over the region. In 1895 twenty men were sent in and within three years more than 250 were stationed in the Yukon, a third of the force. The decision to send in the Mounted Police was a natural one since they were called upon to perform the same kind of duties as they had in the early days of the North West Territories. In addition to their police role they carried out a whole range of administrative functions from carrying the mail to acting as claim recorders.

Everyone who visited the Yukon agreed that it was the quietest and best policed gold rush on record. There were only two murders during the heyday of the Klondike, both of which were solved. Dawson, which mushroomed into a city of 20,000 almost overnight, had its quota of gamblers and prostitutes, but they were closely supervised by the Mounted Police and on Sundays all activity ceased. The Sabbath in this frontier mining camp struck visitors as being as dull and respectable as in Toronto. Superintendent Sam Steele did not hesitate to store two million dollars worth of bank notes under his bunk. Millions, in fact, passed yearly through the hands of constables earning $1.50 a day (50¢ more than they would have received in the Territories). Only three
succumbed to the temptation and all were caught. Perhaps the greatest service the police performed in the Yukon was in ensuring that all travellers had adequate food supplies before they were allowed in.

The establishment of 'B' and 'H' divisions in the Yukon gave the Mounted Police a foothold in the Arctic which was rapidly extended in the early years of the twentieth century. After the Yukon was brought under control the next logical move was into the Mackenzie valley to the east. By 1903 a chain of detachments had been extended north from Edmonton as far as Fort Resolution on Great Slave Lake. In that year the indefatigable Charles Constantine (now a superintendent), who had pioneered operations in the Yukon, was ordered north to the remote Hudson's Bay post at Fort McPherson near the mouth of the Mackenzie. Fort McPherson was the most convenient location from which to supervise the American whalers who operated from Herschell Island every summer. A series of regular patrols of the region, the most important being the annual Dawson-McPherson patrol linking the new area with the Yukon, was inaugurated in 1904. In 1905 the expanding network of posts in the western Arctic was organized as 'N' division.

At the same time that the Mackenzie posts were being established, Superintendent John Douglas Moodie was pushing the operations of the force into the eastern Arctic. Moodie's destination was Fullerton, a whaling station on the western shore of Hudson's Bay. Patrols from the post at Fullerton covered a vast semi-circular area stretching from Repulse Bay in the north to Baker Lake in the west and Churchill in the south. In 1904 Fullerton was designated headquarters of 'M' division. The western and eastern Arctic regions were linked and the barren lands east of Great Slave Lake explored in an epic patrol that took nine and a half months to complete in 1908-9. The patrol, led by Inspector E. A. Pelletier, was the longest in the history of the force until 1918 when Inspector F. H. French (a nephew of the first Commissioner) completed a search which lasted four years and covered 4000 miles for the murderers of the explorers Radford and Street. This left only the Arctic islands which had to wait until the 1920s and the building of the patrol vessel St. Roch before coming under Mounted Police supervision.

The expanding northern role of the Mounted Police with its obvious importance for the establishment of Canadian sovereignty, provided a major justification for the existence of the force in the period 1900-1914. Both the Laurier and Borden governments used the well-publicized Arctic operations of the police to counter
parliamentary critics. In fact, there were no objections to the maintenance of the Mounted Police in the far North, but the larger percentage of the force remaining in the South was a much more controversial matter. Commissioner Aylesworth Bowen Perry, who replaced Herchmer in 1900, fully expected to preside over the dissolution of the force in the part of the Territories soon to be granted provincial status. By the time the creation of Alberta and Saskatchewan was imminent in 1904, however, it was apparent that neither the federal government nor the new provinces had any intention of seeing the Mounted Police disappear from the prairies. Ottawa found the political pressure for retention of the force too strong. In any case, confining police operations entirely to the Arctic was not a feasible proposition. The cost of training and maintaining a pool of experienced men in the north would be prohibitive. Instead, agreements were worked out with the new provinces by which the Mounted Police were, in effect, rented from the federal government for use as provincial police. Alberta and Saskatchewan after 1905 paid $75,000 a year each in return for the services of 500 men in the two provinces.

VI. The War and Security and Intelligence Operations.

The period 1905-1914 was generally a quiet one for the Mounted Police. Operations in the north expanded steadily and the well-established routine on the prairies continued as before. The major difficulty in this period was recruiting. For the first time in the history of the force, the high wages and full employment of the boom years dried up the usual sources of manpower. Beginning in 1912 several hundred men were recruited in England. Wages for the force were belatedly raised in an effort to deal with the situation.

The war, when it came, affected the Mounted Police as drastically as it did other elements of Canadian society. Several old problems that had been of relatively minor concern suddenly became vitally important, while some of the traditional concerns of the force receded into the background. Most of the changes wrought by the war proved to be permanent and by 1919 the character of the Mounted Police had been fundamentally altered. The safeguarding of national security became the first priority in wartime and would remain a major concern even in time of peace.

At the outbreak of the war Ottawa regarded the prairies as the most vulnerable part of the country. American neutrality provoked fears that German-Americans and others hostile to the Allied cause might try to take advantage of the long, open land frontier in the west. The border patrols which had been maintained
by the Mounted Police for forty years were greatly strengthened to
meet this apprehended threat. The strength of the force was
increased from 750 to 1200 men. The danger soon proved to be
greatly exaggerated and disappeared altogether in 1917 when the
United States entered the war.

The large immigrant population of the west, many of them
recent arrivals from Germany and Austria, presented a more
intractable problem. The Mounted Police had always considered
the Canadianizing of the foreign-born to be one of their responsi-
bilities. Indeed the peculiar demographic makeup of the prairies
was one of the arguments most frequently used to rationalize the
continued presence of the force in Alberta and Saskatchewan after
1905. The experience of the Mounted Police with European
immigrants had been almost entirely favourable. The crime rate
among immigrants was lower than that for the population as a
whole. Much of the work of the police with immigrants consisted
of protecting them from the nativist prejudices of their neighbours.

These prejudices, never far below the surface at the best of
times, blossomed with the outbreak of the war. Spies and saboteurs
were reported in every corner of the west by zealous patriots.
Hundreds of these reports were investigated, but not a single proven
case of sabotage emerged. The facts did little to alter public
opinion, and to satisfy popular fears all complaints had to be
examined. Unemployment was severe in the west at the beginning
of the war with the result that many enemy aliens lost their jobs.
In some areas they became destitute and were refused welfare. For
reasons both of security and humanitarianism, government policy
was to intern suspects. Most of the eight thousand odd investigated
by the Mounted Police were put in internment camps for the dura-
tion of the war.

The concern to prevent subversion of the war effort involved
the police in another area which was to have more serious con-
sequences in the long run. This was the infiltration and surveillance
of the Canadian Communist Party after its formation in the later
stages of the war. Police attention also extended to a variety of
radical labour organizations such as the Industrial Workers of the
World and the One Big Union movement which were having con-
siderable success in their efforts to displace the more tractable
craft unions. Radical labour organizers were rounded up by the
Mounted Police whenever possible and union meetings were attend-
ed by undercover agents alert for signs of subversive intent. In the
hysterical atmosphere which followed the Bolshevik Revolution in
Russia in 1917, police surveillance was extended to almost all
labour organizations and many leftist political groups.
The Mounted Police were also very anxious to play a more direct part in the war. The military tradition was deeply rooted in the force because a majority of the officers had always come from the Militia or the Royal Military College. Apart from the 1885 rebellion the police had made a substantial contribution to the Canadian forces which fought in the South African War. Two units, Lord Strathcona’s Horse and the Second Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, were drawn largely from the officers and men of the Mounted Police. Because of its distinguished service in South Africa, the force was allowed to prefix ‘Royal’ to its name in 1904. In the greater conflict of 1914-1918 the police were frustrated in their desire for military action until the late stages. Partly this was due to the fact that there proved to be little need for cavalry until 1918, partly because the government considered their services vital at home. In 1918 the force was allowed to organize two cavalry squadrons. The first of these served in France and the second went to Vladivostok with the Allied Expeditionary Force but saw no action.

The concentration on security and intelligence work along with the manpower drain caused by the war meant that normal police work had to be severely curtailed. This raised again the question of the future of the force. The crisis came in 1917 following the decision by the governments of Alberta and Saskatchewan to adopt prohibition. The Mounted Police wanted no part of the effort to dry out the prairies. During the Territorial period, from 1873-1891, the force had attempted to enforce prohibition. From the police point of view the experiment had been a disastrous one. Public hostility had built up to the point that the effectiveness of the force was seriously threatened. Faced with this distasteful task a second time, Commissioner Perry reported that it would destroy morale and discipline. He therefore recommended the cancellation of the contracts with Alberta and Saskatchewan.

VII. A National Police.

The end of Mounted Police responsibility for provincial policing in 1917 was the kind of opportunity both the Laurier and Borden governments had been seeking to eliminate an embarrassing constitutional anomaly. Prime Ministers from Macdonald onward had repeatedly stated that the special status of the prairies as far as policing was concerned would end when Alberta and Saskatchewan were on the same footing as the older provinces. The question could not be decided while the war lasted but in 1919 it had to be faced. The matter was handled with more decisiveness and skill than any previous government had shown in its dealings
with the Mounted Police by the President of the Privy Council, N. W. Rowell.

Rowell toured western Canada late in 1918 to sound out opinion concerning the future of the force. Everyone he talked to favoured retaining the force, and he reported to Parliament in May of 1919 that there were two realistic options open to the government. One was to absorb the Mounted Police into the army as a cavalry unit. The second was to expand the force into a national police organization. The latter course offered more flexibility since it would allow the Mounted Police to continue their work in the north. This was the plan favoured by the government. During the second parliamentary session of 1919 in the fall the RNWMP Act was amended to merge the force with the Dominion Police and change the name to Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Headquarters was to be moved from Regina to Ottawa. The size of the force was set at 2500 men. This was double the number Rowell had proposed in May and reflected the fears aroused by the Winnipeg General Strike.

The Dominion Police was a small federal police force, numbering about 200 men in 1919, which had existed since 1868. It guarded government buildings, enforced federal statutes not included in the criminal code and performed a variety of other tasks, the most important of which was the operation of the Fingerprint Bureau established in 1911. By absorbing the Dominion Police the RCMP acquired a nation-wide role immediately and enhanced its standing as the senior police force in the country. There were many important changes ahead for the Mounted Police but the legislation of 1919 was the most decisive in their long history.

Most of Canada's basic governmental institutions were borrowed directly from Britain and crossed the Atlantic with only minor changes. In the case of the NWMP the lack of suitable models had forced the Canadian government to be creative. Few would argue that the experiment was anything but an outstanding success. The Mounted Police represented much that was best in the Canadian character and little that was mean or petty. It is entirely fitting that they should have become one of our national symbols.
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The RCMP Papers in the Public Archives of Canada (R.G. 18) are the most important source for the history of the force. The papers of various Prime Ministers, especially Macdonald and Laurier, also contain much information on government policy concerning the Mounted Police. The Annual Reports of the Commissioner provide good summaries of yearly operations and are widely available in the Sessional Papers.

There are numerous autobiographical accounts of this period in the history of the force. The best of these are listed below:


The most useful secondary writing on the history of the force include the following:


