



Officers of 'B' Division NWMP, Dawson, Yukon, July 1900.
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The Canadian Mountie

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The frontier has become a memory idealized through stories of its mythic figures. Each frontier holds a different set of mythic figures; these figures reflect the values of the culture, turning the frontier into the substance of myths and legends. Canada's cultural icons were brought into existence as the country attempted to prove itself in a world of vanishing or corrupt frontiers. The symbol of the new, distinctly Canadian, power became the Mounted Police Officer. From the inception of the North West Mounted Police the Mountie became the new symbol for Canada. The requirements set forth for the Mounties, the stories told and written about them, and their durability despite controversy have all given the figure of the Mountie its status as the cultural icon of Canada.

The Mounties are an integral part of the complex and often dangerous Canadian landscape. Canada is divided into seven regions with vastly different climates and landscapes. The two regions that were largely influenced by the presence of the Mounted Police are the Arctic and the Prairies (*Canadian Geography*). These regions are portrayed as some of the most severe areas in Canada. These are the frontiers to which the Mounted Police brought order and "civilization," where the dangers of climate and chaos must be endured and overcome. Due to the harsh northern climate, only twelve percent of Canadian land is suitable for agriculture (*Canadian Geography*). This twelve percent of land is largely contained within the area the Mounted Police were first sent in 1874 -- the southern prairies of Canada. The Mounties paved the way for the creation of Canada's agricultural heart by taming the frontier so that settlement was possible.

The Mounties opened up the land in which a large amount of the Canadian population resides -- along the southern border. During

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the years of 1874 and 1875 group settlement began on the Canadian frontier. The Canadian Government set aside blocks of land on which groups of colonists could homestead (Friesen, J.). Many settlers on the Canadian frontier viewed the Native Canadians and the French-Indian Métis as a threat to Anglo-Canadian culture (Hildebrandt). Immigrants were encouraged to settle in the West by government authorities and the Mounted Police were seen as champions that cleared the way for these immigrants by overseeing relations with the Native Canadians (Hildebrandt). The Mounties patrolled the area, insuring order on the frontier. The Mounted Police were the “civilized” element on the frontier that reassured settlers. They became the protectors of the people entering the frontier.

The Mounted Police did not spring from the Canadian frontier as some other frontier mythic figures seem to have done, but rather were molded purposefully by a government eager to prove its distinctness from the United States. As Canada’s frontier was beginning to reflect the same problems of the United States frontier, a concern over how Canada would react began to grow amongst Canadian leaders. The Cypress Hill Massacre of 1873, in which a group of Assiniboine were slaughtered by wolf hunters, is noted as the catalyst for the creation of the Mounted Police in Canada (Friesen, G. 135). Not wanting to risk sliding into the same problems as the United States in Canadian relations with Native Americans, Canada decided to set itself apart, and did so by the creation of the North West Mounted Police.

Rather than chance following the pattern of military campaigns and disorder of the American frontier, the Canadian government deliberately created a solution that would set the Canadian frontier apart from the American frontier. The Mounted Police were created to be the Canadian answer to problems of the frontier. The force was designed after the Irish Constabulary and named “police” in order to distinguish it from a military organization (Friesen, G. 166). Canada wanted to separate its frontier from the frontier of American militaristic dealings with the Native American population. Naming the force that was to control the Canadian frontier a “police” force, the Canadian government signaled

to the Canadian people, the Native Canadians, and to the United States government that Canada's frontier would not be another version of the American frontier.

When the Canadian Parliament outlined the requirements for entry into the new North West Mounted Police in 1873, its members could not have foreseen that those requirements would be personified as the new symbol of Canada: the Mountie. These men "of a sound constitution, able to ride, active and able-bodied, of good character, between eighteen and forty years [...] able to read and write either the English or French language" were to become symbols and icons of their nation (Prassel 215). The Mounties were brought into existence, shaped from the ideals of the Canadian Parliament -- soon to reflect the entire nation's ideals.

The men who met the requirements set forth by Parliament for entry into the Mounted Police were considered an elite few. In the myths that surround the Mounted Police, it has been said that it is more difficult to gain access to a position in the Mounted Police than in the Canadian government (Friesen, G. 169). This is a continuation of the creation of the icon: only the best will be accepted. The first Mounted Police numbered only a total of three hundred, so although men of all backgrounds were welcomed to apply for a position, few were accepted (Prassel 215). These few were largely made up of middle-class men from Anglo-Saxon and Celtic backgrounds: men from the new British Canada, rather than the old French Canada (Walden 29-34).

The myth of the Mountie often suggests that the officer is aristocratic in nature and by birth. Though the aristocratic *nature* of the Mountie never died out, surviving in the depictions of the honorable actions of the Mountie, the myth of aristocratic birth was quickly left behind. In John Mackie's *Sinners Twain*, the "presence of gentlemen" in the "rank and file" of the North West Mounted Police is resented (Mackie 49). It is difficult to sustain the image of the self-sacrificing Mountie if that Mountie is part of the aristocracy. It is hard to imagine a gentleman doing the work of a subconstable for the pay of seventy-five cents a day (Prassel 215). The average Canadian quickly became a part of the myth of the Mountie and is depicted as the everyman who is elevated

morally, not financially, through service to the Canadian government and the British Empire.

As the image of the Mounted Police Officer begins to emerge in the popular imagination of late nineteenth-century Canada, there is little of the American idealization of the individual. The Mountie is not seen as an individual, but only as the entire force. A Mountie known only as “the policeman” in *Raw Gold* tells a villain: “You can’t buck the whole Force, you know, even if you managed to kill me” (Sinclair 35). This is the image of the Mountie: willing to sacrifice himself for the larger institution he represents. The North West Mounted Police was created to be an extension of the central government on the frontier of Canada, and the Mounties were bearers of the values, and the eyes and ears of that government (Friesen, G. 167). The Mounties were to bring order, law, and civilization to the Canadian North West at any cost (Walden 95).

When the Mounties were first dispatched from the base at Ft. Dufferin, Manitoba to Ft. Macleod, Alberta in 1874 it was not to suppress the violence of the Canadian frontier with more violence, but to be a mediating presence. It was a campaign to quell the tensions between what was seen as a largely American population of wolf hunters and the Native Canadians (Friesen, G. 167). This difference between the frontiers of the United States and Canada is highlighted by the Canadian government’s invitation to Sitting Bull and the American Sioux for refuge in Canada after the military conflicts with Custer (Sharp 281). The Mounted Police were not sent to suppress threatened uprisings or restrict the movement of the Native Canadians, but to oversee the relations between groups of people and insure no conflict would arise. They were to promote order on the frontier.

This overriding duty of the Mountie -- to be a servant of the Canadian government and representative of order on the frontier -- saturates the major events of Canadian frontier history and the popular myth of the Mountie. The move of the North West Mounted Police headquarters from Ft. Macleod to Ft. Walsh in 1878 was made so that the Mounties could focus on the tensions near the Canadian-American border involving the Sioux presence (Sharp 281). The move was not

made out of comfort but out of duty to insure order on the frontier. The Mounted Police were responsible for the entire North West and covered an annual average of one and a half million miles on horseback (Friesen, G. 166).

They were not only “riders of the plains,” as some call them, but dispatched to the Yukon in the 1890s to bring order to a frontier threatening to turn into another version of the lawless American frontier (Stone 83). The Klondike Gold Rush began in July of 1897, and within six months nearly one hundred thousand individuals seeking to make it rich in the gold fields had headed for the Yukon. Only thirty thousand completed the trip (Klondike). Most gold rushers knew little or nothing about where they were going and outfitters sprang up virtually overnight to equip them. The North West Mounted Police required all rushers to have a one year’s supply of goods before they were allowed to cross into Canada (Klondike; *Wikipedia*). The required amount of goods weighed nearly one ton, more than one-half of it food. At the top of each of the extremely difficult passes to the Klondike, the rushers encountered a Mountie post that enforced the supply regulations (Klondike; *Wikipedia*). The Mounted Police were there, in the most extreme environments, to insure the safety and order of the incoming gold-rushers. The Mounties were once again protecting the people on the frontier and maintaining order. The Mounted Police were also sent to insist on a Canadian presence in the Yukon because of a rising number of American gold miners (who were almost always perceived as unruly and violent). Mounties became the legal authority of the area, once again bringing Canadian order to the frontier while still protecting the people (Stone 84).

This insistence of order on the Canadian frontier led to involvement of the Mounted Police in the Riel Rebellion of 1885. Though the justice the Mounties was welcomed almost everywhere they went, their participation in the suppression of the Métis Rebellion was seen as anti-French rather than successfully “maintaining the right” (Walden 5). The Mounted Police’s involvement in the rebellion proves to be one of the few moments in the history of the force that is remembered as a mistake. Wiebe’s *The Scorched-Wood People* shows this sentiment by relating the rebellion from the point of view of the Métis, creating sympathy

with the French-Indians rather than with the Mounties.

Though there have been repercussions from the way the Mounties have performed their duties to the Canadian government, they have always been welcomed as a civilizing presence on the frontier. Even Americans in the frontier could respect and welcome the Mountie, such as the American train robber who told the Mounties who had captured him: “I certainly admire the way you boys do your work” (qtd. in Friesen, G. 165). The inhabitants of the Yukon also welcomed the Mounties and accepted their legal authority, although it actually weakened the system of miner’s meetings that was in place before the Mounties arrived (Stone 84). There was little for the Mounted Police to do in the Yukon; the 1895 report mentions only three incidents that required police involvement or investigation, but the Mounties were still viewed as an integral part of the community -- necessary for order on the frontier.

The same sense of submission to the power of the Mounties is seen in historical fiction about the arrival at Ft. Macleod. The Mounties were expecting resistance to their appearance in the frontier, but were only welcomed by an “old, lame American” in Sluman’s *Blackfoot Crossing*: “Welcome to Fort Whoop-up!” (Sluman 28). There is no resistance to the Mounties’ presence on the frontier. The Mounties are “a pleasant sight” for the people living on the frontier, representing the order, stability, youth, and health of the nation (Pocock 102). The Mounties are the men of Canada’s future, the civilization of the frontier as something distinctly Canadian -- not American, not French, and not British.

The Mountie and the Mounted Police have survived despite threats of disintegration and failure. This persistence has kept the myth of the Mountie alive, so that the Mounted Police become, in Sinclair’s novel, the force “You can’t buck” (Sinclair 35). The Mounted Police survived their first assignment, the Long March of 1874, after coming close to dying after being lost (Friesen, G. 167). The Mounties survive their first disastrous assignment and only thirteen years later, in 1887, the Mounted Police numbered one thousand (Prassel 216). When Canadian Prime Minister Laurier threatened to disband the Mounted Police force in 1896, their necessity to Canada was once again established with the gold strike in the Yukon and the Boer War, which called them to Africa

(Friesen, G. 168). As long as frontiers were in jeopardy of becoming “uncivilized” the Mounties were necessary.

The North West Mounted Police soon expanded out of the Canadian frontier and into the entirety of Canada. After 1904, when the “Royal” prefix was granted by Edward VII, the Royal North West Mounted Police was an established force and the Mountie an established figure in Canada (Friesen, G. 163). The Mounted Police, though always a source of pride to Canadian frontiers, became recognized by Canada at large and internationally. In 1920 the Canadian Parliament gave the Mounted Police responsibility over the entire country of Canada (Walden 1) and renamed the force “Royal Canadian Mounted Police” (Prassel 216). As late as the 1950s, the Mounties were again required on the Canadian frontier. At that time, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had the responsibility of transferring Inuit to the High Arctic (Marcus 1). Both the Mounted Police and the Inuit people were to represent a Canadian “presence in areas of the High Arctic where it was considered *necessary* to demonstrate effective occupation” [emphasis added] (Marcus 51).

In the contemporary age, in which frontiers are rare and order even more rare, the Mountie is still a powerful symbol for Canadian development and order. Even the exposure of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police force’s involvement in “covert and illegal police activities” in the 1970s did little to diminish the image of the Mountie as order and civilization personified (Walden 1). The Mountie as a cultural icon is resilient, despite literature that parodies the figure, such as Ken Mitchell’s 1975 novel *The Meadowlark Connection* (Harrison 238-46). The Mountie still survives as a powerful symbol of Canada and the Canadian frontier. The “riders of the plains” may not be riding the plains of Canada much anymore, but they remain the romanticized mythic heroes that are recognized throughout the world as “Canadian.”

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