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Royal Bank Letter

Published by Royal Bank of Canada

VOL. 79 • NO. 2 • SPRING 1998

Canada and the MOUNTIES

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police is 125 years old this year, and that is worthy of celebration. We should be glad to have this most 'Canadian' of institutions among us, for in many ways, the Mounties have passed on to us the kind of country we have today ...

Many countries have their men on horseback, charismatic and forceful leaders whose military exploits are commemorated by bronze statues of them in ornate uniforms, mounted on magnificent steeds raring to go into battle. Canada has a man on horseback, too, but he is as different from the usual model as Canada's mainly non-violent history is different from that of most other lands.

He appears not on pompous memorials in parks and city squares, but on coins, postage stamps, posters, jigsaw puzzles, and even the occasional T-shirt. He is the stereotypical Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman, perhaps the best-recognized symbol of Canada around the world.

He is not a king or general or *presidente*, but an anonymous constable or sergeant. He sits erectly in his scarlet tunic and stiff-brimmed hat on a horse that stands at attention like a good soldier. The illustrated Mountie is the very embodiment of the Canadian constitutional ideal of peace, order, and good government.

While the horseback motif might no longer reflect the reality of the RCMP, "the force" has doubtless come by its sterling reputation honestly. It has earned the right to rank as one of the most famous police forces in the world.

As this distinctively Canadian institution celebrates its 125th anniversary this year, it can claim achievements unmatched in the annals of policing anywhere. Certainly, few police forces have had such a

positive effect on their nation's history.

If Canada today occupies the second largest land mass in the world, it is largely due to the devotion to duty and outright heroism of individual Mounties. The shape of the nation, in all its awesome magnitude, has been defined by lonely police detachments showing the flag on the prairie, in the mountains, and on the Arctic ice and tundra. More important, the Mounties have been largely responsible for the civilized social character of a country that has always kept the wild side of human nature on a tight rein.

When the North West Mounted Police came into being by an Act of Parliament on May 23, 1873, it looked as if the young Dominion of Canada had taken on more than it could handle. In 1870, when it was only three years old, it assumed ownership of 1.3 million square miles of land, an area larger than France, Germany, Italy and Spain combined. The natives there literally were restless. The Métis of Manitoba had already risen in revolt, and the Indians farther west were reported neither to understand nor approve of the new scheme of things.

As if Canada did not have enough on its plate, it added another province in 1871: British Columbia. The former colony on the Pacific coast joined Confederation on the condition that a railway be built to link it to the East. Between the Red River and the B.C. border in the western mountains stretched a vast expanse of country occupied almost exclusively by some 30,000 Indians, few of whom had the slightest acquaintance with what, in those Victorian times, was called "the White Queen's law."

The NWMP was primarily Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald's baby. He was partly motivated by a pledge his government had made in the contract with the British government for the acquisition of the North West Territories (not to be confused with the present smaller, more northerly N.W.T.) to see to the care and protection of its aboriginal inhabitants.



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Terrible damage was being wrought to native society by whiskey traders who had filtered in from the western United States, then a land of anarchical violence and deadly enmity towards Indians. Their rot-gut product was causing violence, debauchery and impoverishment among the aboriginal tribes. Adding to the chaos were outbreaks of inter-tribal warfare. In October 1870, a battle between the Blackfoot and Crees in the present southern Alberta took at least 100 fatal casualties.

The great John A. took a personal hand in the organization of the proposed force, down to its clothing. He had been informed that the tribesmen regarded the red coat worn by British troops who had previously served in the West as a symbol of trustworthiness, good will and fair dealing. He therefore ordered the adoption of a scarlet coat with, in his words, "as little gold lace, fuss and feathers as possible." A disdain of fuss and feathers has been a characteristic of the Mounted Police ever since.

A tradition is forged

Macdonald was well aware of the geopolitical implications of his policy. The United States government was then waging a relentless war against the Plains Indians, and there was a possibility of an influx of Indian refugees into Canada which would be resented to the point of armed action by the Canadian tribes. American politicians were covetously eyeing the huge jurisdictional vacuum across their northern border. In the absence of Canadian authority, they could justify moving troops into Western Canada, possibly as a bridgehead for American settlement, on the grounds that it was a potential staging area for Indian raids into the U.S.

The legislation which established the force called for the recruitment of 300 officers and men of good character, strong constitution, able to ride a horse and to read and write either English or French. It was to be a paramilitary body run by army officers and trained and equipped to do battle if necessary. Its first order of business was to stop the whiskey trade. It was then to set up posts in the West, make peace with and among the native peoples, and enforce Canadian law.

Its numbers were laughably small, considering that the U.S. had tens of thousands of troops in its western possessions. Three hundred men (at one point, the government thought that it could get by with 150) were expected to tame

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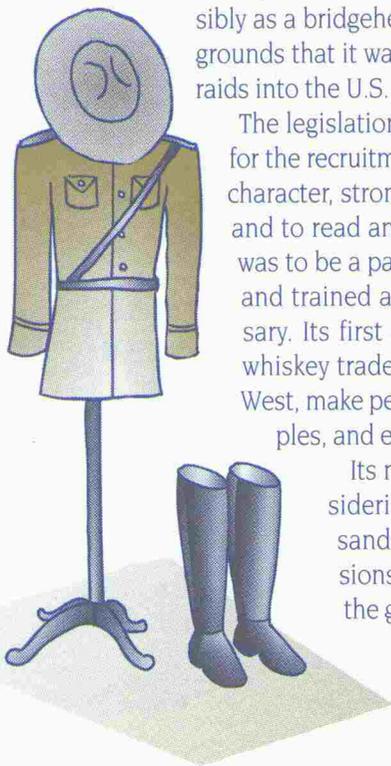
And what a land! Temperatures could range from minus 50 Fahrenheit in winter to plus 100 in summer, and fierce storms were common in all seasons. When an expedition of 275 Mounties set out for the Far West in 1874, they rode into a near-desert plagued by intense heat, dust, mosquitoes, locusts, thunderstorms, and "hailstones as big as walnuts." It was almost completely unmapped. The policemen travelled for days on end without seeing another human being. There was scant vegetation to feed their horses and oxen, which died by the score from exhaustion and malnutrition. What little water they found was usually foul, sickening both men and animals.

The "Great March" from Manitoba to the Rocky Mountains did much to give the Mounted Police the tradition of endurance and resourcefulness for which they would become legendary. Before they had finished building their log forts in the present Alberta, they were forging another tradition – that of dashing, determined action. They swept down on the whiskey traders with such impact that, within a few weeks, the liquor traffic was almost totally extinguished. They then turned to the Indian practice of horse-stealing, ever a source of inter-tribal conflict. A handful of Mounties would gallop into a camp where they were hopelessly outnumbered and, more by force of character than of arms, collar horse thieves and haul them off for trial.

Forestalling an all-out war

The officers in charge taught their men patience, tact and understanding in dealing with natives, while convincing the Indian chiefs that the application of formal law was imperative. The chiefs greatly appreciated the NWMP's efforts to rid their society of the scourge of the whiskey trade. "If the police had not come to this country where would we be now? Bad men and whiskey were killing us so fast that very few of us would be left today. The police have protected us as the feathers of a bird protect it from the frosts of winter," the great chief of the Blackfoot Confederacy, Crowfoot, later said.

Some historians claim that the rapport between the chiefs and senior officers of the NWMP was the secret of success in bringing the Northwest under law and order. Their mutual trust and friendship was sorely tested when emissaries of the Sioux, then locked in a life-and-death struggle with the U.S. Army, proposed an alliance with the Canadian tribes to drive the white



man from both sides of the border. The Canadian chiefs rejected their overtures, and promptly reported the discussions to the police.

In the late 1870s, after routing General Custer's forces at the battle of the Little Big Horn, some 4,000 Sioux, headed by their hero, Sitting Bull, crossed into Canada. Their competition with the Canadian tribes for buffalo meat threatened an all-out tribal war which the Mounties forestalled by appealing to the chiefs for forbearance and gradually persuading the Sioux to return to the U.S. under an amnesty.

To the rescue of Confederation

Much of the force's work was directed towards preparing the Indians for the inevitable demise of the buffalo, on which they depended for food, clothing, fuel and shelter. No one could predict how soon and suddenly the buffalo would disappear, as they did to all practical purposes in 1879. The Mounties, now with several posts scattered throughout the Northwest, found themselves ministering to a people on the edge of starvation. The Indians' retreat from the nomadic way of life to the relative confinement of reserves left the land open for white settlement.

In the meantime, the force again came indirectly to the rescue of Confederation by imposing order on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. They kept the peace among 4,000 unruly workers as the line pierced through country occupied by restive Indians, and they did it with exactly 31 men specially assigned to the task. Had the CPR not been completed on schedule in November, 1885, British Columbia would almost certainly have seceded. The fact that it was built well within B.C.'s deadline was a credit to the professionalism of the Mounted Police.

The Northwest Rebellion under Louis Riel earlier that year represented the last gasp of the old free-ranging hunting society. Mounted Policemen had warned repeatedly that neglectful and insensitive government policies towards the Métis and Indians could lead to bloodshed. When it came, they were in the front line of the campaign against the rebels, suffering eight fatal casualties. It would not be the last time that the Mounties courted unpopularity among natives and others by dealing with the consequences of misguided government policies.

The years between the rebellion and the turn of the 20th century saw the force engaged in overseeing the settlement of hundreds of thousands of homesteaders and the mushroom-like emergence of western cities. With the increase in population came an

increase in violent crime. The Mounties were becoming known the world over for their intrepid and relentless tracking down of robbers and murderers, no matter how far and long it took them. A legend grew up that they "always got their man." In fact, they did not always get their man – just nearly always. But it was not for lack of trying, no matter how toilsome or lethally dangerous the pursuit.

More often, however, their astonishing feats of travel took the form of outdoor patrols in all kinds of weather to check that all was well in the most remote camps and homesteads in their enormous field of jurisdiction. They cared for the sick, helped and instructed the feckless newcomer, rescued the stranded, and escorted "lunatics" to asylums, mental illness being a major problem in those lonely parts.

Setting a Canadian style

Their duties expanded in line with their fame. This year is not only the 125th anniversary of the Mounted Police, but the 100th anniversary of the Klondike gold rush. When gold stampedes came up the Chilkoot and White Passes from Alaska to enter the Yukon Territory, they were met at the summits by small detachments of Mounties who coolly relieved them of all side arms, collected customs duties on their gear and provisions, and turned them back if they did not carry sufficient supplies for a year. The "Klondike Argonauts" made their long journey up the Yukon River to Dawson City under the eyes of NWMP officers who prevented them from doing anything reckless. No one can tell how many lives were saved that way.

When the stampedes reached the gold rush capital, they found a replica of an American frontier town, complete with saloons, gambling casinos, and dance halls. But they soon learned that it was not the Wild West, and that was because of the omnipresence of the Mounties. In its brief heyday, Dawson City had a population of 14,000, with a high proportion of people who had been convicted of crimes elsewhere. But it was said to be as safe and law-abiding as Ottawa.

With their understated elan, the Mounties were setting a Canadian style which was grudgingly appreciated by our more libertarian American neighbours. It was one of calm and courteous insistence that the law must be observed, and an assurance that it would be upheld at whatever cost. Mounties had given their lives for that principle, but for the most part their fearlessness had an almost hypnotic effect in deterring crime and violence. The fact that the redcoats were so few – the entire vast Yukon, with its proliferation



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of mining camps, was policed and largely administered by a force of 285 – only added to their aura of invincibility.

The Yukon proved a launching pad for the conquest of the Far North. Travelling by canoe, snowshoe and dog team, Mounted Policemen made patrols of thousands of miles and set up police posts only hundreds of miles from the North Pole. They prevented foreign whalers from exploiting the Inuit, and introduced the Inuit themselves to a code of law that often clashed with their culture. But, as in the case of the Indian scouts who began serving with the force in the 1880s, Inuits became valued partners of Mounted Policemen by assisting on patrols and serving as special constables.

That indefinable quality called class

By 1920, when the old Royal North West Mounted Police became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and was given full responsibility for all federal law enforcement, it was the administrative heart and soul of Arctic Canada. Up there, the men of the force were very much more than just officers of the law. They served as postmen, government paymasters, game wardens, mechanical inspectors, justices of the peace, scribes, first aid men, midwives, and dentists, at least to the extent of pulling teeth.

Naturally enough, the Mounties' colourful exploits attracted the attention of the world media. Writers were quick to recognize that they had that indefinable quality called class. Numerous magazine articles and books appeared about them, and the fictional Mountie became a staple of pulp fiction, as he later would of radio programs and comic books. Starting as early as 1904, Mounties were featured in more than 250 movies. Rarely did these bear any resemblance to reality. For one thing, movie Mounties were constantly filmed brandishing guns, whereas the genuine article never resorted to firearms unless all else had failed.

The conversion of the old Royal North Westers into the RCMP hastened the modernization of the organization. The Mounties were soon to be found examining forensic evidence under microscopes, doing plainclothes detective work, and fielding underground agents to smash narcotic rings. Its newly

formed marine division became the scourge of smugglers and rum runners. Horses gave way to police cars, and the erstwhile Riders of the Plains became highway patrolmen and "town cops" as the force signed contracts to act as the provincial police in all the provinces except Quebec and Ontario.

But the old panache remained. In the 1940s the RCMP schooner *St. Roche*, with a typically sparse crew of 10, became the first vessel to navigate the fabled Northwest Passage in both directions. Its incredible voyage strengthened Canada's claim on the High Arctic, adding to the assertion of sovereignty already made by Mounted Police posts in the Arctic islands, and the painstaking exploration done by Mounties on extended expeditions by dog sled. Their superlative style had put Canada on the map figuratively, by attracting worldwide publicity. But they literally put large parts of Canada on the map of international recognition by their physical efforts.

Living up to their motto

One hundred and twenty-five years on, the Mounted Police form a very different outfit from their founding fathers. To begin with, one can no longer speak, in that old ringing cliché, of what a fine body of men they are; they are a fine body of men and women now. The new Mounties are more likely to be following a paper trail in a case of white collar crime than a trail through the frozen wilderness in pursuit of a crazed killer. But they are as determined as ever to maintain the right, as their motto prescribes.

As always, the Mounted Police are more concerned with the prevention of crime than its punishment. In the beginning, that took the form of patient explanations of the law to the Plains Indians. It now takes the form of proactive community policing, a subject high among the priorities of the modern force.

Like every institution these days, the RCMP must suffer the slings and arrows of hyper-criticism from the media and politicians. And – satirization perhaps being the sincerest form of flattery – it comes in for more than its share of ridicule. But it remains a truly great Canadian institution, one that has done a great deal to shape our national heritage. It continually faces hard questions, but the overriding question is: Without the Mounted Police, where would this country be today?

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