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Forging a Frontier: Social Capital and Canada's Mounted Police, 1867–1914

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This article examines the role of the North West Mounted Police in creating communities in the Canadian Prairies during the first decades of Confederation. Despite being created as an institution of law enforcement, the Mounted Police acted more often as a social bonding agent, creating the necessary conditions and organizations required to establish permanent communities otherwise isolated from one another. As the only federal presence in the frontier, the force evolved into an autonomous institution of cultural stability, performing vital services and advocating for frontier objectives to the government in Ottawa.

Keywords: praires; settlement; social capital; law enforcement; nationalism; regional identity; national identity

While frequently perceived as a far less romantic tale than the American conquest of the West, largely due to the efforts of generations of filmmakers, the Canadian conquest of the Prairies during the late nineteenth century is perhaps the more remarkable feat. In the span of barely over 30 years, the young Canadian government promoted an ambitious program of settlement that sought to unite the vast western half of their territory to the east both politically and economically. This was done in less time than their energetic American neighbors, and with far fewer resources in terms of finances and manpower.

A critical component of this success was the North West Mounted Police. While a great deal of the hagiography that surrounds the force in the popular Canadian imagination stems from its reputation in the realm of law enforcement, the true success of the force lay far outside policing duties. It was in the creation and investment of social capital, through the provision of community services and promotion of social institutions, that the Mounted Police transformed the Prairies from a collection of isolated settlements into a network of communities.

The term "social capital" lends itself to multiple interpretations among historians, sociologists, and political scientists. In the context of nineteenth century Canada, however, the objective of settlement was to create a series of productive and cooperative communities that would politically and culturally weld the prairie regions to central Canada (the provinces of Ontario and Quebec). Just as financial and human capital are necessary prerequisites for capitalist entrepreneurialism, social capital—the cultural and social institutions that foster cooperation and trust among and across communities—are necessary for the creation of self-sustaining communities.[1] The preponderance of social capital, then, represents the difference between a thriving frontier community and an unstable boom town that may become a ghost town within a decade.

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It was in this capacity that the North West Mounted Police performed their greatest service to the settlement of western Canada. By contributing heavily to the creation of social institutions, whether through the provision of veterinary services to farmers or the patronage of a fledgling arts community, the NWMP helped to lay the foundation of communities with robust cultural transactions. Ironically, the force was able to accomplish its primary goal, the settlement and increased political loyalty of the Canadian west, through methods that were never envisioned by its creator, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald.

In conceiving the force, Macdonald and the Conservatives expected it to operate in two distinct phases. During the first phase, the Mounted Police would be dispatched to the prairies with the intent of preparing the indigenous peoples there for the impending settlement of white farmers and ranchers. Once this was done, the government would deliberately settle groups deemed "reliable"—primarily Anglophone, Protestant people of northern European descent—across the prairies, whereupon the Mounties would enforce the laws of Canada, assist the settlers, and ensure the proper assimilation of these groups into Canadian society. The force was not intended to operate in perpetuity; once the population had risen to the point where a number of self-sufficient cities had been established, it was assumed the force would be drawn down and eventually eliminated, as their purpose would have been fulfilled.[2]

Due to factors of both climate and geography, the settlement of the Canadian prairies required far more logistical and state support than the settlement of the American West. During the critical years of territorial formation, the Mounted Police were the sole state presence; even after provincial status had been attained, the force served as an advocacy organization as well as a law enforcement institution. To the residents of the prairies, they served as an irreplaceable pillar of frontier society and government. These were the same settlers that policymakers had favored in order to win the loyalty of the prairies when the integrity of the state was seen as in doubt. From the perspective of Ottawa, the potential cost of alienating these settlers was simply too high. Beyond this, the simple effectiveness of the force cemented its position as the institutional keystone of the Canadian frontier. As an instrument of law and order, the Mounted Police were a spectacular success, as well as being remarkably cost-effective. Living among their charges led to the force becoming an institution of the frontier, frequently acting as advocate for the prairie populations in policy disputes with the national core.

More so than simple law enforcement, advocacy on behalf of frontier settlements was the crowning success and critical function of the Mounted Police. During the early, formative years of prairie communities, the NWMP engaged in precious little police work. Instead, the bulk of its efforts were dedicated to community services—distributing feed grain, fighting prairie fires, performing veterinary services, building vital infrastructure improvements—in short, investing in the social capital required to transform isolated settlements into communities.[3] There were certainly other factors at work in this process, most notably the government's policy of settling prairie immigrants in ethnic enclaves.[4] The influence of the Mounted Police, however, was both the most visible and most powerful, as they represented the only real exercise of state authority in the region. It was the force's social efforts, rather than the exercise of law enforcement, that most assisted the Prairies in developing into a network of established communities with a social and cultural infrastructure. As early as 1874, Commissioner French pressed the case to the government that the development of infrastructure and other tasks important to the general welfare of the region should be a priority for the Mounted Police.[5]

Generally speaking, the force's existence on the prairies developed over three distinct periods. The first occurred between 1875 and 1885, during which time the NWMP

was dispatched to the frontier in order to prepare conditions for white settlement. This is arguably the most important period for the later evolution of the force, for it was during this period that the functions, duties, and manner of operation that the Mounted Police would come to rely upon were established. Between 1885 and 1895, the force was responsible for overseeing the steady migration of new settlers into the frontier and protecting the new towns and cities that grew in the prairies. Finally, the Klondike Gold Rush gave the Mounties renewed purpose and arguably saved the force from extinction during the final period between 1895 and the outbreak of the First World War.

The Mounties and the US Army were analogous entities in the west, as both were sent out in advance of settlement for reconnaissance and pacification purposes; the similarities ended once those purposes were filled, however.[6] The American army tended to move on once settlers arrived, while the civil functions of governance were delegated to territorial officials and the Department of the Interior. In contrast, the Mounties fulfilled both civilian and military functions, which had the effect of garnering the political loyalty of settlements in the frontier. Surviving in the prairies, which required communal action and the pooling of information and resources, was instrumental in not only the success, but the widespread popularity, of the NWMP.[7]

The difference in emphasis paid tremendous dividends in the realm of relations with indigenous peoples. The Mounties were assisted by the fact that there were fewer indigenous peoples to contend with in Canada than in the United States. Even so, the NWMP were able to establish surprisingly good relations with most indigenous peoples.[8] Most viewed the Mounties not as a sign of repression, but rather as agents of protection against incursions from white settlers.[9] An illustrative example can be found in expenditures for 1885; the United States spent more than the entire Canadian budget, nearly $20 million, on various Indian policies and wars. That same year, the Canadian government paid out barely $400,000 for the same tasks.[10]

A large measure of the force's success in managing relatively peaceful relations between indigenous peoples and white settlers was due to a nearly decade-long interval between the dispatching of the Mounted Police to the prairies and the arrival of white settlers in large numbers. In contrast to the American practice of rapid settlement, the centralized nature of Canada's settlement policy allowed the Mounties a grace period in which to prepare the First Nations for the coming tide of white migration.[11] For the first ten years of its existence, the force established itself as a resource for the indigenous reservations, devoting the bulk of its efforts toward ensuring adequate food and provender.[12] This policy allowed the Mounted Police to establish themselves as both a police force as well as an organ of civil service, a duality of purpose that was intended as much to save money as establish public trust and reliance in the force.[13]

From the perspective of both the officers in the field and their superiors in Ottawa, this approach met with considerable success. Colonel James Macleod, two years prior to being named Commissioner of the force, reported that the indigenous peoples in his jurisdiction were appreciative of the aid rendered by his men and had requested that his detachment remain nearby.[14] The *Macleod Gazette* offered considerable praise for the ability of the Mounted Police to handle relations with the native peoples, and more importantly, to defuse potential conflicts quickly.[15] As early as 1876, the First Nations had apparently accepted the government's policy, and were "giving up the fight" against white settlement in exchange for protection under the aegis of the NWMP.[16]

Acceptance of the NWMP by indigenous peoples was certainly aided by the willingness of the force to exercise their authority against fellow whites, particularly against squatters who would encroach upon reservation lands. In this respect, the hierarchical nature of

Canadian settlement greatly aided the Mounted Police. Their authority was derived from Ottawa instead of being conferred by popular opinion, granting them enough independence of action to sanction the more politically powerful white population. Further, by ensuring that white encroachment onto indigenous lands was curtailed, the force earned the respect of the farmer and merchant populations, to whom conflict with the First Nations would have been ruinous.[17] For the first stage of their existence, the Mounted Police successfully fought any intrusion of other bureaucracies into the handling of affairs with the First Nations, fearing their own carefully cultivated reputation would be undercut by competing departmental agendas.[18]

There was another motivation for the early comity between the First Nations and the NWMP. During the first decade of the Police presence in the prairies (1874–1885), whites were a clear minority as the force sought to establish the infrastructure for later settlement. Fears of American annexation pushed the Canadian government to view its territorial integrity as its top priority, gearing policy decisions toward that goal. Prime Minister Macdonald had remarked bluntly, "I would be quite willing, personally, to leave that whole country a wilderness for the next half-century but I fear if Englishmen do not go there, Yankees will . . . ."[19] With such a premium placed on regional loyalty, the Mounted Police were generous in their dealings with indigenous peoples by the standards of the day, and certainly in relation to the conflicts raging south of the border.

Initially, this policy paid handsome dividends. A crackdown on liquor smuggling between 1886 and 1892 (an issue that had haunted the force in an earlier decade) combined with controlling the horse trade between tribes, gained the force much-needed legitimacy among the tribes. Further, the relative peace and stability of the Canadian prairies brought a degree of prosperity to both First Nations and those white traders that had ventured into the west.[20] A Blackfoot chief, with a dramatic flair perhaps supplied by the interpreter, stated that before arrival of the Police, "the Indian crept along, now he is not afraid to walk erect."[21] The policy of cooperation was validated when the Blackfoot publicly rejected an offer of alliance with the Sioux against American settlers in 1876. In the words of Chief Crowfoot, "we will not join with the Sioux against the Whites, but will depend upon you [the Mounted Police] to protect us."[22] Relations between Canada and the Blackfoot in 1877 had grown warm enough for the tribe to volunteer men to fight as auxiliaries in the Army and to pledge "unaltered loyalty to the British crown."[23]

Relationships between the two peoples were buttressed by the Police's tendency to treat indigenous peoples with the same legal protections as whites, particularly during the first crucial decades in the prairies. Efforts to exclude indigenous people from social events were noted and recorded with disapproval by Police inspectors, one of whom characterized the efforts as "short-sighted."[24] Several instances of false charges against natives, including murder, were dismissed due to flimsy or nonexistent evidence, actions that greatly bolstered the force's credibility.[25] When a group of Cree were being deported to Canada from the United States, Captain Richard Burton Deane reminded his officers that, "we have no right to coerce them and the law will hold us responsible for the abuse of its powers."[26]

Despite these efforts, state policy could not change the fundamental attitudes of whites toward indigenous peoples. A merchant named William Wallace Clarke of Winnipeg who traded heavily with the First Nations (and thus should have had the most to gain from fruitful relations with them) described them as "miserable, ragged, filthy, crawling wretch(es)" with whom the thought of sharing heaven filled him with "horror and loathing."[27] In praising the fair-minded policies of the Canadian government, a Winnipeg *Free Press* editorial declared, "The basis of this happy state of the relations between the white and red population of Canada is ultimately the treatment in good faith of the weaker race."[28] Captain

Deane, who had earlier vigorously defended the rights of the First Nations, revealed his own feelings when he wrote, “The Indians must be duller than we take them for if they cannot appreciate the difference between the moral coercion under the Union Jack and the physical force under the Stars and Stripes.”[29]

Key aspects of the relationship between the Mounted Police and the white population were determined by both the geography of the prairies and the nature of the force’s mission. As a body whose stated task was law enforcement, it was imperative that the officers of the Mounted Police have the cooperation and confidence of the white settlers in order to carry out their duties. Simultaneously, however, the force’s conduct with indigenous peoples had to be seen as both productive in keeping the peace as well as fair in order to secure the cooperation of the First Nations. Compounding this was the force’s directive from Ottawa to both maintain order in the frontier as well as endure the loyalty of a region already chafing under financial strain. To balance these competing demands, the Mounted Police developed a dual role; cooperation among the settlers would be won through the administration of vital services to frontier communities, a cooperation that would in turn allow the force to perform its law enforcement duties without being perceived as a foreign body. In short, the Mounties had to integrate themselves into the frontier in order to weld the frontier to Canada.[30]

From the outset, the civil service duties of the Mounted Police took on a much more vital role in the day-to-day operations of officers and constables than the actual business of law enforcement.[31] With the notable exception of liquor smuggling, which would bedevil the force for decades, much of the emphasis was placed on tasks such as establishing telegraph lines, fighting prairie fires, distributing emergency seed grain, and veterinary services. Even before the force moved to the prairies, Commissioner French pressed the case to the government that the development of infrastructure and other tasks important to the general welfare of the region should be a priority for the Mounted Police.[32]

It is doubtful this absorption of additional tasks would have been institutionalized had it not been for the constant presence of NWMP Comptroller Frederick White. Appointed by Prime Minister Macdonald in 1880, White would function as the liaison between the government and the force for the next 32 years. In that time, he provided a steady source of support, direction, and advocacy for the Mounted Police in a time in which a commissioner served for an average of five years.[33] All correspondence between the force and Ottawa was routed through him, and it was his support for decisions made in the field that allowed the force to adapt to local circumstances with a minimum of interference from the capital.

The function of the force as *ex officio* state welfare providers was inadvertently reinforced in the late 1890s when Sir Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior under Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier, withheld assistance to immigrant farmers as a matter of policy, for fear of creating an underclass of perennial poor supplicants.[34] Facing the prospect of failing farms and destitute settlers, the Mounted Police acted to supply needed supplies and food in times of shortage. The goodwill and trust this created between settler and policeman was the key ingredient in the social capital needed to created permanent settlements in the Canadian West.[35] If social capital is defined, as Putnam argues, as the “collective value of all ‘social networks’ and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other,” then the agricultural, physical, and economic security guarantees provided by the Mounted Police were a powerful infusion of that capital into communities in desperate need of stability and social reinforcement.[36]

For all of its power and influence, however, the NWMP was a consciously rural institution. As much as possible, the force sought to avoid intruding in urban affairs, as both its mandate and duties were concerned primarily with rural, isolated, and vulnerable

settlements.[37] A further deterrent to involvement in city affairs was a desire to maintain the force's independence, particularly from civic leaders whose interest horizon ended at the city limits.[38] Simply put, the Mounted Police could not risk the cooperation of settlers in order to further the ambitions of mayors and other urban interests.

A decision that would inform later policies regarding the prosecution of crimes in the frontier territories illustrated how seriously the force took its public reputation. During the first years of operation, the leadership of the Mounted Police directed their officers to place priority on those crimes that were most detrimental to keeping peace and order. For those crimes that could be resolved without bringing the state into direct conflict with indigenous peoples, precedents were established to avoid formal prosecutions.[39] In the case of laws that were simply unenforceable, such as the prohibition of repeating rifles for indigenous peoples, the force urged the government to remove the unnecessary laws from the criminal code.[40] This emphasis on the preservation of peace and order would become a hallmark of the force's approach to law enforcement, even if it meant sacrificing elements of the criminal code for the sake of public tranquility.

An incident in 1895 illustrated this emphasis on public order over strict enforcement of laws. James Donaldson, a tenant in a lodging house in Lethbridge, had been tarred and feathered by a gang of citizenry after his conspicuous affair with the wife of his landlord, Charles Gillies, an act which drove Donaldson to commit suicide. Superintendent R. Burton Deane, who had been assigned to Lethbridge in 1888, had not only been aware of a plot against Donaldson due to his extensive contacts among the leading townsfolk, but also knew that any attempt to prosecute those responsible for his assault would not only be doomed but would also invite the enmity of the residents.[41] Indeed, the primary action taken by Deane was to reprimand a sergeant who had taken part in the assault and assure him that he would not face jail time.[42]

What makes this case illustrative are the inherent contradictions that the Mounted Police had to reconcile in such an instance. Assault, as crimes went, was not considered especially serious in the frontier society of the Canadian prairies.[43] As the victim elected to leave town (and indeed was so intimidated that he declined to press charges), there was no likelihood of repeat offenses. From the perspective of the Mounted Police, therefore, the matter had been brought to a conclusion with a minimum of public disturbance; indeed, prosecuting the matter would create more disorder than simply letting the incident go unaddressed. From Deane's perspective, the most troubling aspect of the case was the participation of an off-duty member of the force; a certain detachment from local affairs was deemed crucial for effective discharge of the duties of the NWMP, and to have a member of the force taking part in such activities imperiled the force's reputation.[44]

For the Mounted Police, the growth of urban centers meant a retreat further into the frontier. As Commissioner A. B. Perry noted, the NWMP were *frontier* police, not *civil* police.[45] The duty of civil police was to uphold the laws of their municipality; the objective of the Mounted Police was to maintain order, and as the Lethbridge incident illustrated, the two were not always the same thing. Even though the force had the authority to override local police, doing so eroded the goodwill that was so integral to the NWMP's success. For this reason, the force moved itself to more rural environments as settlement progressed westward.

Even so, the degree to which the Mounties and the settlements under their care were enmeshed managed to intrude upon the force's internal conduct. The transfer of Constable G. Ferguson from Fort Saskatchewan to Regina in the spring of 1897 caused enough of a sensation to involve no less than Commissioner L. W. Herchmer, Comptroller White, and Alberta MP Frank Oliver. By the time the matter was concluded, the deadly mixture of

partisan politics and a war of personalities would threaten the continued existence Mounted Police.

In December of 1896, Ferguson was reprimanded for being absent from duty, allowing another constable to be absent, and hesitating to obey orders. These infractions, combined with Ferguson's history of "very undesirable connections" within the community of Fort Saskatchewan, prompted his superior to request the transfer.[46] Unable to purchase his own discharge, Ferguson was transferred to Regina in January of 1897, leaving his wife and family at Fort Saskatchewan.

At this point, Ferguson's family lodged a protest with Mr. Oliver, who in turn, suspected a political motivation for the transfer. The election of 1896 had brought Sir Wilfrid Laurier to power, and his new Liberal government had long suspected the NWMP of being little more than a governmental organ of the Conservative Party.[47] The fact that all key officials of the force were Conservatives fed fuel to the fire of suspicion. Comptroller White, while respected, had a long Conservative pedigree and had been John A. Macdonald's private secretary. Commissioner Herchmer, however, possessed none of White's reservoir of good will. Blunt to the point of harshness in his manner, taciturn, and holding a rigid worldview, Herchmer was frequently described as arrogant and tyrannical.[48] His obvious competence and technical expertise provided no refuge from criticism once his patron, Macdonald, had passed from the scene.

On January 25, 1897, a notice appeared in the *Edmonton Bulletin* that not only reported on the transfer of Constable Ferguson, but went so far as to declare that his transfer was "the commissioner's reprimand for having voted for the supporter of the present government in the last election."[49] The unnamed supporter was obviously Frank Oliver, and the appearance of political patronage within the Mounted Police led to a public firestorm. Three days later, the *Bulletin* heaped vitriol upon Commissioner Herchmer in a scathing editorial. He was described as "sneering," "bragging," and "wreaking vengeance on whomever he pleases," while the transfer of Ferguson was portrayed as being done "out of pure devilishness."[50] Outcry rose to the point where Herchmer was forced to provide documentation of a physical examination to prove that Ferguson had not physically suffered due to the transfer, as well as guaranteeing that the constable could return to Fort Saskatchewan once his tour at Regina was complete.[51]

In the midst of the controversy, it is notable that no public criticism was mounted against the Mounted Police as an institution. The attacks upon Herchmer, however, reached a fever pitch. White felt compelled to request an audience with Prime Minister Laurier and secure his support by declaring that the Mounties should be "absolutely non-political."[52] The fallout from the Ferguson affair was one of grave concern for White, who so feared for the reputation of the force's officers that he openly hoped that members of the Mounted Police would be stripped of the right to vote.[53]

The borderline obsession with the conduct of the Mounties by Comptroller White (and Commissioner Herchmer in particular) was directly tied to both their efficacy in the field as well as their visibility as a symbol of the Canadian government. Unlike the American army, the leadership positions of the Mounties were filled by the sons of eastern elites, bringing with them social and political connections that assisted in boosting the image and reputation of the force among the national political leadership.[54] British citizens so dominated the early years of the force that when A. G. Irvine was named commissioner of the force in 1880, his general ineffectiveness was initially overlooked because he was the first Canadian-born officer to hold the post. These officers were highly educated, frequently having attended elite schools as renowned as Eton and Hull, and were expected not only to carry out the law but to set a social example in their communities.

Through their duties as law enforcement officials, *ex officio* judges, and social service providers, the Mounted Police became, in the words of one former officer, "dry nurses to the community."[55] Once mustered out of the force or simply retired, many former Mounties used the contacts they had established to create private lives for themselves in frontier towns, frequently becoming leading citizens due to their special combination of experience, abilities learned through service, and public reputation. High-ranking officers, particularly superintendents, inevitably became high-profile members of frontier communities, and they were acutely aware of the need to live up to social expectations.[56] R. Burton Deane, while stationed at Lethbridge, once fell ill and was unable to attend the performance of a play; the next morning, news of his illness was reported in the paper, along with the editor's profound best wishes that such an esteemed gentleman recover quickly.[57]

The Mounted Police frequently found itself developing the social capital of frontier settlements from human and natural calamities. Deane, for example, had helped establish the theatre community in Lethbridge after watching a company production; other divisions organized charity drives, held social dances and balls, and created other community events that integrated the force into the daily lives of the frontier settlements.[58] While hardly considered important and rarely mentioned in official reports, these efforts, combined with the tendency of former officers to remain in the community as private citizens, lay the foundations of a middle class in the regions that represented the furthest extent of Ottawa's territorial grip. If the border between American and Canadian blurred among the working classes, it was vivid and unmistakable among the gentry; indeed, it was the cultivation of this middle class that Macdonald had gambled upon when the National Plan was crafted.[59]

Creation of social capital went beyond amateur theater, however. As a primarily rural institution, the Mounted Police frequently had an economic and cultural impact far in excess of its relatively few numbers. The functions served by the force outside of law enforcement shared the characteristic of addressing matters of collective concern to all frontier communities. Communications were vital for both gathering information and calling for aid, while prairie fires were both frighteningly common and had the capacity to wipe out homesteads or even entire communities.[60] The distribution of seed grain, begun in the early days of the force's operation, allowed Canadian farmers to survive killing frosts and other natural disasters that would have otherwise destroyed their livelihood. Police surgeons examined herds of cattle and horses for early signs of infectious disease, and, if a potential outbreak was detected, moved swiftly to impose quarantine.[61] Purchases made by the force in cash-starved settlements represented (for their size) tremendous investment in small-scale economic stability.[62] These duties, often assumed when the need arose and later institutionalized, provided immediate and often personal assistance to a population whose sustenance was frequently balanced precariously on the whims of nature. By providing key social services, the force was able to construct essential community and political relationships that allowed these towns to not only survive but grow over time.

While all policemen down to constables were expected to set a proper social example, it was the absence of such duties south of the 49th parallel that most reinforced the cultural divide between the two countries. To Canadian eyes, Montana was a lawless, wild country populated by the same unsavory characters that the Mounties forced out of the improbably named Fort Whoop-up (modern-day Lethbridge, Alberta), a region that left many communities without a single agent of the government to establish peace and order.[63] What was more shocking to many Canadians, with their views on social class and the origin

of crime, is that many crimes, including liquor smuggling, were committed by the "better classes" of American society.[64] The American west may have been a largely egalitarian, individualistic country, but viewed from the north, it was classless in both senses of the term, a land that seemed to view both the benefits and costs of civilization as abject tyranny.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the main goals of the North West Mounted Police—maintaining public order, securing Canada's territorial integrity, and fostering cultural loyalty to the Canadian state—were being realized with noticeable success. The turn of the century saw Alberta and Saskatchewan on the verge of admission as full provinces, and many in the government, including the new commissioner, A. Bowen Perry, felt that the twilight of the Mounted Police had arrived.[65] With the prairies comfortably in the embrace (if not the outright grip) of Ottawa, the *raison d'être* of the force was vanishing. The death of John A. Macdonald marked the beginning of a period of increased pressure on the force to reduce its numbers as a means of saving money. Herchmer's annual reports to Ottawa beginning in 1894 are prefaced with repeated calls for more men, citing difficulties in performing duties expected of the force by local communities.[66]

Even the respected and long-serving White found himself fending off demands for further personnel reductions. In 1892, he pointed out that the entire strength of the NWMP was one third to one quarter the size of the American troops stationed in Montana and North Dakota.[67] Fearful of drastic and premature cuts to the Mounted Police, he argued that the increasing settlement of the frontier "necessitates the establishment of new detachments to give protection, assistance and confidence to the new arrivals."[68] Once again, the role of the Mounted Police as guarantor of both physical and cultural security was referenced. Despite this, the pressure to reduce the size of the NWMP continued, leading White to inform Herchmer that the Prime Minister was inquiring about progress in reducing expenses "every time I go into [his] office."[69]

The Liberal victory of 1896 brought to power a new group of politicians motivated by more than economic concerns to reduce the size and influence of the force. A former Mountie, James Morrow Walsh, issued a memorandum by way of his friend Clifford Sifton, who had become Interior Minister under Laurier.[70] In it, he argued that the force had become a "political partisan machine," a recruiting pool for Tory loyalists, and that any cuts could only benefit the country.[71] It was this political atmosphere that would contribute to the public firestorm over the Ferguson affair early the next year.

At this point, it was entirely possible that the North West Mounted Police could have been phased out. However, it was during these crucial years that the social and cultural investment made by the NWMP in prairie communities paid vital dividends. Ottawa may have been convinced that the force had outlived its usefulness in early 1897; however, it was abundantly clear that the residents of the prairies most emphatically disagreed and sought to retain the Mounted Police.

Laurier's plan had been to gradually fold the force into the existing military, based on the assumption that the primary role of the Mounted Police was to act as a deterrent against incursions from Native peoples or avaricious Americans.[72] Both the *Macleod Gazette* and *Regina Standard* issued sharp condemnations of the proposal, with the *Standard* noting dryly that the force was one of policemen first, not "soldiers doing useless things."[73] Western businessmen, faced with the prospect of losing the force not only as insurance against outside crimes but also labor unrest, protested that the Mounted Police were "a God send."[74] Most tellingly, a petition was sent to Ottawa by a collection of Alberta ranchers asking the force be restored to full strength, citing not only the ability of the Mounted Police to reduce crime and secure the national boundaries, but also "the priceless value of

their services in preventing and extinguishing prairie fires and the admirable way in which the law of the land is maintained and enforced, presenting in this respect such a vivid contrast to many of the Western [United] States, some of which are still reeking with the crimes and outrages recently perpetrated . . . ."[75]

Public outcry of this magnitude was not lost upon members of Parliament. Frank Oliver had built much of his career as one of the force's most vocal opponents. Once apprised of his constituent's concerns, he began pressing Laurier to halt reductions in the force in early 1897, seemingly visited with an epiphany equal to that of Paul the Apostle.[76] Those regions that had already seen force reduction began directing their complaints to Sir Clifford Sifton, Laurier's Minister of the Interior who had devoted much of his energy into trying to circumvent Frederick White's authority by cutting him out of policy decisions.[77] One such letter came from a timber agent, James Conners of Manitoba, who complained of Americans stealing timber in the absence of Mounted Police patrols. "Perhaps you are not aware," Connors noted, "that the Americans have so many friends and relations connected by marriage and otherwise on this side of the Boundary that they work into one another's hands by smuggling."[78] Left unsaid but not unnoticed was the implication that regular patrols, whose policy was to know all residents along their route personally, could have easily prevented the crime.

This is not to imply that public pressure alone convinced the Laurier government to preserve the NWMP, as two other events intervened to the benefit of the force. The discovery of gold in the Yukon sparked a gold rush in the middle of the decade, which demanded not only an expansion of the force much further north but also required the existing Mounted Police facilities in the prairies to remain operational for logistical support.[79] In 1899, the outbreak of the Boer War not only drew so many officers away that a recruiting drive for the Mounted Police had to be undertaken, but it also removed the politically toxic L. W. Herchmer, who was granted leave to fight in South Africa. His replacement, A. B. Perry, was far more acceptable to Liberal politicians, and removed many concerns about the force remaining a hotbed of Tory discontent.[80]

What the near-death experience of the Mounted Police illustrates, however, is the remarkable degree to which the inhabitants of the Canadian prairies both depended upon and were protective of the force. As a state institution, the Mounted Police occupied an unusual niche; it operated as a buffer between a national government frequently viewed with a mixture of resentment and apprehension and a growing frontier region of crucial importance. Through the shared experience of living in the frontier and the performance of vital services, the force was able to establish a store of indispensable trust and goodwill. Instructions from the government were adapted, modified, and softened to best function in a physical and social environment officers knew intimately, while concerns and demands from local communities could be presented to the government in a manner best suited to produce a sympathetic response due to the extensive contacts the force possessed in Ottawa.

Finally, and most frustrating to opponents of the Mounted Police, it proved politically and culturally impossible to eliminate the force after so much formal and informal authority had been vested in it. The tasks performed by the force on the frontier in many cases could not be performed by any other body; indeed, there was frequently no other institution to turn to. The Mounted Police had effectively become the face of the Canadian state. As a matter of public policy, it was no more possible to ask the Canadians of the prairies to banish the Mounties than it was to ask them to surrender their horses. By standing in place of the federal government, the North West Mounted Police provided the frontier settlers, in many respects the most reluctant Canadians outside of Quebec, with an identity and tradition

they could claim as their own. It is testimony to the attachment to the force that the prairie provinces were prepared to offer considerable concessions in order to keep the NWMP alive, including federal control of public lands, publicly supported Catholic schools, and even the assumption of the operational costs of the force.[81]

It is ironic, in light of Macdonald's National Policy, that the institution that was originally envisioned as the potential bludgeon to enforce obedience to the state would be fated to be the most visible and popular of state institutions. Ultimately, it was the unusual combination of broad and deep authority combined with a large degree of operational autonomy from the central government that allowed the North West Mounted Police to manage the settlement of the frontier. With one foot metaphorically in the national core and other in the frontier, the force acted as a political, social, and cultural conduit that bound the state together.

Even the North West Mounted Police, with its mythologized reputation and symbolic status, could not invent a Canadian nationalism to which prairie communities subscribed. The bedrock of the prairie identity was the shared experiences of frontier life, an environment in which the Mounted Police helped make not only survivable, but a source of prosperity for those who settled there. Settler reliance on the force, and its ubiquitous presence in the lives of prairie residents, provided a common denominator that united immigrants that had originated from a multitude of countries and lifestyles. Yet without the establishment of this regional identity, the creation of the social capital required to permanently settle the vast region, the prairie provinces of western Canada would have lacked the stability and vibrancy that allowed them to grow into an integral part of the Canadian state.

Notes

1. Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" in *Journal of Democracy*, 1997, 2.
2. Ibid., 22.
3. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Shuster; New York, 2000), 19.
4. John A. Eagle, *The Canadian Pacific Railway and the Development of Western Canada, 1896–1914* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 53.
5. Letter, French to Minister of Justice, 14 November 1873. RG-18, A-1, vol. 1, #6, NAC.
6. Ibid., 84.
7. Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 168.
8. Douglas Hill, *The Opening of the Canadian West* (London: Heinemann, 1967), 136.
9. R. C. Macleod, *The NWMP and Law Enforcement, 1873–1905* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 91.
10. Friesen, 165.
11. Desmond Morton, "Cavalry or Police: Keeping the Peace on Two Adjacent Frontiers, 1870–1900," in *The Mounted Police and Prairie Society*, ed. William M. Baker (Regina: University of Regina, 1998), 4. Other factors contributed to the delay in western settlement during the late 1870s and early 1880s, including delays in routing the Canadian Pacific Railway through Saskatchewan and the North American "Long Recession" of the late nineteenth century.
12. NWMP, *Annual Commissioner's Report*, 1884, p. 1, NAC. Also the first year in which interactions with prairie residents make a distinction between white and native peoples, indicating the dearth of white settlement until this point.
13. Letter, Supt. L.N.F. Crozier to Commissioner A.G. Irvine, 7 October 1881, NWMP, *Annual Commissioner's Report*, 1881, p. 48, NAC. Crozier references the declaration by the Governor General that the force was intended to fulfill civic duties in an effort to promote good relations with the residents of the prairies as well as make the most efficient use of state funds.

14. Letter, J. Macleod to Commissioner French, 15 December 1974. NWMP, *Annual Commissioner's Report*, 1874, p. 67, NAC.
15. Editorial, *Macleod Gazette*, 3 February 1883, p.1. The North-West Council in Regina also praised the force's adroitness in relations with the natives, 14 September, 1883, p.1, NAC. The *Gazette* was named for nearby Fort Macleod, which in turn had been named after the colonel.
16. Letter, White to Macdonald, 30 December 1876. NWMP, *Annual Commissioner's Report,* 1874, Appendix D, p. 22, NAC.
17. Editorial, *Macleod Gazette*, 23 December 1882, p. 1
18. Macleod to Deputy Minister of the Interior, 23 December 1878. RG-18, B-3, vol. 47, #253, NAC. The Indian Affairs Department began assuming responsibility for the First Nations at the time the frontier was opened, beginning in 1885. Many of their subsequent policies would be at odds with practices established by the force prior to that point.
19. W. L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 6.
20. NWMP, *Annual Commissioner's Report*, 1874, p. 67, NAC
21. Ibid., 65.
22. NWMP, *Annual Commissioner's Report,* 1876, p. 22, NAC
23. NWMP, *Annual Commissioner's Report,* 1877, p. 21, NAC
24. Calgary Monthly Report, July 1898. RG-18, A-1, vol. 143, #18, NAC.
25. Regina Monthly Report, July 1898. RG-18, A-1, vol. 113, #8, NAC.
26. Lethbridge Monthly Report, June 1896. RG-18, A-1, vol. 114, #25, NAC.
27. Macleod, 145.
28. Editorial, *Winnipeg Daily Free Press,* 5 July 1877.
29. Lethbridge Monthly Report, June 1896. RG-18, A-1, vol. 114, #25, NAC.
30. John Jennings, "Policemen and Poachers: Indian Relations in the Ranching Frontier" in *The Mounted Police and Prairie Society*, William M. Baker, ed. (Regina: University of Regina Press, 1998), 46.
31. Carl Betke, "Pioneers and Police on the Canadian Prairies, 1885–1914", in *The Mounted Police and Prairie Society*, William M. Baker, ed. (Regina: University of Regina Press, 1998), 212.
32. Letter, French to Minister of Justice, November 14, 1873. RG-18, A-1, vol. 1, #6, NAC.
33. A. Bowen Perry was appointed commissioner in 1900, and served until 1923, finally breaking the cycle of brief-tenured leaders of the NWMP. George Arthur French served for three years, James F. Macleod for four, A. G. Irvine for six, and Lawrence W. Herchmer for four. Royal Canadian Mounted Police, *History of the RCMP Commissioners,* 2010. http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/hist/comms-lst-eng.htm
34. Ibid., 118.
35. Macleod, 22.
36. Putnam, 22.
37. Letter, White to Department of the Interior, 27 April 1895. RG-18, A-1, vol. 82, #370, NAC.
38. Macleod, 51.
39. Macleod, 27.
40. Frederick White memo, October 6, 1876. RG-18, A-1, vol. 9, #69, NAC.
41. Anna-Maria Mavromichalis, "Tar and Feathers: The Mounted Police and Frontier Justice," in *The Mounted Police and Prairie Society*, William M. Baker, ed. (Regina: University of Regina Press, 1998), 112.
42. Ibid., 116.
43. Ibid., 115.
44. Ibid., 116.
45. S. W. Horall, "The North-West Mounted Police and Prostitution on the Canadian Prairies," *Prairie Forum*, vol. 10, no. 1, (Spring 1985): 127.
46. Letter, Herchmer to White, February 1, 1897. RG-18, A-1, vol. 134, #162, NAC. At this time, Ferguson's brother-in-law was imprisoned at Fort Saskatchewan for theft. Herchmer takes the time to detail the undesirable character of Ferguson's in-laws, and concludes by describing Ferguson as a "leading Orangeman" and "prominent liberal". Letter, Herchmer to White, January 14, 1897. RG-18, A-1, vol. 133, # 145, NAC.
47. Macleod, 61. Supposed partisanship on the part of the force was a longstanding suspicion among Liberal politicians. Prime Minister Mackenzie, the first Liberal to be Prime Minister, had expressed the same sentiment, and would have eliminated the force outright had it not already been posted in Manitoba in the aftermath of the 1869 Red River rebellion.

48. Ibid., 53.
49. Letter, Herchmer to White, February 1, 1897. RG-18, A-1, vol. 134, #162, NAC.
50. Enclosure, Herchmer to White, February 1, 1897. RG-18, A-1, vol. 134, #162, NAC.
51. Letter, Herchmer to White, March 12, 1897. RG-18, A-1, vol. 134, #162, NAC.
52. Letter, White to Herchmer, January 21, 1897. RG-18, A-1, vol. 133, #145, NAC.
53. Ibid.
54. Freisen, 170.
55. Keith Walden, "Character", in *The Mounted Police and Prairie Society*, William M. Baker, ed. (Regina: University of Regina Press, 1998), 282.
56. It should be noted that while Commissioners took great lengths to reinforce this ideal, particularly Lawrence Herchmer, it was far from a universal fact. One of the most notable exceptions was the conduct of Francis Jeffrey Dickens, son of the famous author, during his service as an officer. He was described by superiors as "lazy, alcoholic, and unfit to be an officer," and after surviving the rebellion of 1885, was mustered out of the force. "Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online", accessed 29 March 2012, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?BioId=39600
57. Baker, 256.
58. Ibid., 247.
59. Ibid., 259.
60. Letter, J.H.Price to Howe, September 4, 1894. RG-18, A-1, vol. 96, #470., NAC.
61. Betke, 119. Responsibility for veterinary care in many western communities would reside with the Mounted Police until 1896, when it was transferred to the Department of Agriculture.
62. Macleod, 22.
63. McKenna, 87.
64. Friesen, 169.
65. Macleod, 57. L. W. Herchmer had lingered on as commissioner despite the formal enmity between himself and the Laurier government until the outbreak of the Boer War. He applied to serve with the Canadian troops in South Africa, which Laurier's government granted with remarkable alacrity.
66. NWMP, *Annual Commissioner's Report*, 1894, p.1, NAC. Also in the report for 1895 (p.1), 1896 (p.6), 1897 (p.19) and 1898 (p.3).
67. Memo, White to Prime Minister Abbott, May 16, 1892. RG-18, A-1, vol. 72, #864, NAC.
68. Ibid.
69. Letter, White to Herchmer, October 20, 1894. RG-18, A-1, vol. 96, #499, NAC.
70. Walsh had been sent to Cypress Hills, Saskatchewan, and rose to prominence by building a relationship of trust with Sitting Bull, who had moved with his warriors across the border after the Battle of Little Bighorn. Known in the American press as "Sitting Bull's boss," his notoriety became a diplomatic embarrassment to John A. Macdonald's Conservative government, who transferred him in 1880 and forced his retirement in 1883. Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. XIII, *1901–1910*, http://www.biographi.ca
71. Laurier Papers, vol. 19, Walsh to Laurier, 15 September 1896, NAC, as cited in Macleod, 59.
72. *Parliamentary Debates*, Oliver and Laurier, May 10, 1897, NAC. Also Macleod, 61.
73. Editorial, *Macleod Gazette*, May 29, 1896, and Editorial, "Playing Soldier", *Regina Standard*, August 7, 1901, as cited in Macleod, 61.
74. Macleod, 62.
75. Petition, Wood et al. to White, May 8, 1895. RG-18, A-1, vol. 108, #318, NAC.
76. Ibid., 63.
77. Minto Papers, Journal Entry October 10, 1902, p. 206-7, NAC.
78. Letter, Connors to Sifton, June 14, 1897. RG-18, A-1, vol. 133, #139, NAC.
79. Macleod, 62.
80. Ibid., 63.
81. Ibid., 69.

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