THE URBAN FRANCOPHONE VOLUNTEER: SEARCHING FOR PERSONAL MEANING AND COMMUNITY GROWTH IN A LINGUISTIC MINORITY

by

Robert A. Stebbins

The University of Calgary
THE URBAN FRANCOPHONE VOLUNTEER: SEARCHING FOR PERSONAL MEANING AND COMMUNITY GROWTH IN A LINGUISTIC MINORITY

by
Robert A. Stebbins
The University of Calgary
ADDRESSING THE FOUNDING MYTHOLOGY
OF THE MOUNTIES

The Mounted Police and Prairie Society, 1873-1919


Nadine C. Fabbi-Shushan
University of British Columbia

This summer several hundred civilians dressed in the red serge of the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) will re-enact the Great March West—"the creation story" of the force, according to historian Steve Hewitt in the epilogue to The Mounted Police and Prairie Society, 1873-1919. As Mountie buffs are well aware, the Great March took place in the spring of 1874, 125 years ago, when about 300 newly-appointed members of the force made their way from southern Manitoba to Alberta supposedly to protect the Natives from American fur traders. Hundreds of American fur traders had set up forts in Canada where whiskey was traded with the Indians, a practice not tolerated on the north side of the border. But the event that caused Sir John A. Macdonald to speed up the creation of a federal police force, was the massacre of an encampment of Assiniboine Indians by a gang of American wolfers the previous spring. The mission of the new force was to bring justice to the Assiniboine and an end to the whiskey trade.

Today members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) owe their heroic reputation to this founding myth and to the consequent role of the force in the early history of the Canadian West. In the years immediately following the Great March, the NWMP established themselves as protectors of the Natives; men who could enforce the law without drawing a gun; and harbingers of the Canadian welfare state to the new wave of immigrants in the West. By and large the nation clings to these stereotypes as they represent characteristics that Canadians value. Certainly, those who are part of the re-enactment of the Great March want to perpetuate the creation story and mythology of the NWMP.

William M. Baker, RCMP historian from the University of Lethbridge, selected the essays for this text specifically to address the founding mythology. The essays, as the book title suggests, focus on the years prior to the evolution of the NWMP to the RCMP and all

were written relatively recently and are therefore more revisionist and realistic (or less romantic) than previous works. The book is divided into five sections each offering a unique perspective: First Nations, law enforcement, social issues, characteristics of the force, and the evolution of the NWMP to the RCMP in 1919-20. The epilogue, the only essay written specifically for the text, summarizes those early years and makes a link between historical events and current stereotypes.

Appropriately, the book begins with a lengthy section on the First Nations and their relations with the NWMP. Each of the essays attempts to take a First Nations perspective and to avoid being overly complimentary to the Mounties. None of the writers, however, is able to successfully argue that the Canadian West wasn't a "mild" one particularly as compared with the Indian wars and vigilantism south of the border. However, they all look beyond the assumption that Canadians are simply a kinder, gentler people and therefore treated the aboriginal people "better" than their American counterparts and search for other reasons for the historical differences. American educators, in particular, will find the essays insightful because of the many comparisons with the U.S. experience.

Historian Desmond Morton, for example, argues that while Canadians pride themselves on having a better record in regards to European/Indian relations, the aboriginal peoples on both sides of the border are nonetheless suffering from extreme disenfranchisement today. While this may be true, surely one cannot argue that the histories of the two nations were similar in terms of European/Native relations. Morton himself admits that in the late 19th century there were over 900 Indian Wars in the US compared with six or seven in Canada. Regardless, the comparisons between the US cavalry and Mounties (the basis of the essay) are insightful and Morton's argument that the founding myth of the NWMP had more to do with concerns over Canadian sovereignty than for the welfare of the First Nations people is certainly something to consider.

In the following essay, John Jennings has no problem giving Canada credit for a better track record with its indigenous peoples, however he argues that the different histories/treatment were not because Canadians are inherently a "nicer" people but because of the presence of the NWMP. Jennings uses newspaper clippings to argue that there was a great deal of underlying violence in white prairie society and that without the presence of the force there could easily have been as many incidents in Canada as there were in the U.S. While Jennings' article challenges stereotypes about Canadians, it perpetuates those of the Mounties as protectors of the First Nations. Jennings also points out
how the NWMP had a unique relationship with the Natives setting them apart not only from the white settlers or ranchers, but also from the Department of Indian Affairs and federal government.

The weakest and least insightful essay in this section is one by Brian Hubner who imposes a simplistic neo-Marxist interpretation on the Mounties and the Great March West turning Indians and Mounties alike into one-dimensional characters. On the other hand, the master's thesis by B.J. Mayfield, is very insightful as the author is less concerned about distilling myths about the Mounties than in telling an accurate and indepth history of their relationship with the Blackfoot people. Mayfield argues convincingly for why the Indians accepted the Mounties and how, over time, the relationship switched from one of protector to that of treaty negotiator. Mayfield also presents the Blackfoot as more than mere victims by describing how their leaders cunningly negotiated for the best possible treaty terms given the realities of the disappearance of the buffalo and the inevitability of European settlement. The essay includes some of the most famous quotes by Chief Crowfoot and Red Crow in their entirety, a wonderful resource for historians.

The next section on law enforcement begins with another engaging essay by R.C. Macleod on crime in the Canadian West successfully challenging stereotypes that Canada's West was not a colorful one. The following two essays (by William Beahan and Anna-Maria Mavromichalis) pick up on two of the most interesting crimes mentioned by Macleod, riots against Chinese in Calgary and the tarring and feathering of a Lethbridge phialander, providing a complete and interesting account of each. Regardless that the reader is given a much more realistic sense of life in Canada's West, the essays nonetheless reaffirm that the events and unlawfulness in Canada's West pale by comparison to what went on in the U.S. In addition, by illustrating how the NWMP took quick and effective control of each situation and acted as intermediaries between the individual, community, and the law, the authors perpetuate the stereotype of the Mounties as upright and fair. The NWMP is most impressive in their handling of the riots against the Chinese in Calgary in the 1890s ignoring federal policy to ensure the safety and welfare of the Chinese community. These are the sorts of incidents that are responsible for the positive stereotypes of the Mountie.

The four articles in the social issue section discuss the relationship of the NWMP in dealing with social minorities and other events of social significance such as mining strikes, prostitution, abortion and infanticide. R.C. Macleod's essay is a terrific opener to the section as it distinguishes differential treatment of ethnic minority immigrants from official discrimination in terms of the actions and responses of the NWMP. Macleod backs this distinction with specific and engaging examples which illustrate that while the NWMP did treat European minority groups differently than the rest of society, they did so with the intention of helping and not of further oppressing them.

The following three essays focus on specific social incidents or issues. The editor, Baker, writes a detailed account of the 1906 miners strike in Lethbridge arguing that the role of the Mounties was complex and that neither Marxist nor romantic interpretations of their role are accurate. Horrall's essay about prostitution and Beahens on abortion and infanticide in the West lend little insight into the character of the NWMP but do shed light on the struggles of women in the West.

The first two articles in the fourth section entitled, "Characteristics of the Force," are a bit specific for the general reader—one is on the architecture of Mountie headquarters and the other on the involvement of the force in theatre. The remaining two essays, however, give a overall sense of how the character of the force affected Western history. In "Pioneers and Police on the Canadian Prairies, 1885-1914," Carl Betke presents the NWMP as far more than a law enforcement agency giving examples of how the members of the force worked closely with the new immigrants assisting them with health and material needs or, in essence, implementing the Canadian welfare state in the West. The final essay is one of the most interesting in the text because it looks at the mythology of the force in the 19th century. The selection is out of a book by Keith Walden entitled Visions of Order: The Canadian Mounties in Symbol and Myth and compares the character of the Mountie to that of a knight. According to Walden, the Mountie represents Anglo culture and has integrity, high moral standards, is sensitive, well bred, hard working, and non-violent. This essay would be very useful in a course reader on Canada to explain how many stereotypes about Canadians are rooted in early Mountie history and characteristics.

The final section in the text, "Crisis and Change," including the Epilogue, speaks to the impact of World War I, the Bolshevik threat, and the 1919 Winnipeg Strike on the evolving character of the force. The authors all agree that the force was radically changed by the influx of eastern and southern Europeans to the West and the political climate of the early 20th century, including the threat of Communism. The romantic vision of the NWMP in the 19th century gave way to a reputation that was linked to secret service activities and a tighter role with the federal government versus the previous role as an ally of Natives and settlers. S.W. Horrall offers the most general overview of this period of transition focusing on the Winnipeg General Strike as the
major turning point in the history of the NWMP as an institution.

In the epilogue S.R. Hewitt compares the duties of the Mounties pre- and post-1919 and attempts to understand why it is that the romance of the former period endured well into the 20th century. Hewitt argues that the Mounties are Canada’s most popular national icon whose early reputation and character reflect values Canadians appreciate. As Hewitt so aptly puts it, “Who would not want to be as that version [the 19th century Mountie] has portrayed: courageous, honest, competent, forthright, a defender of the weak, an enemy of the corrupt. The ‘honest broker’ is also an image Canadians seek to project to the outside world” (362). Certainly, the re-enactment of the Great March West shows that the spirit of the Mountie myth is alive and well in Canada and the essays in The Mounted Police and Prairie Society, 1873-1919 give historians and sociologists a solid sense of the source and strength of that myth. William M. Baker’s selection of essays both perpetuate and challenge former myths and stereotypes giving the reader a very complete and unbiased view of the force from a diversity of perspectives. I would highly recommend this book to educators in Canadian Studies. Separate essays could be used in course readers for classes on First Nations, western history, ethnic minorities, and even women’s studies. As a whole the book provides a comprehensive and engaging account of the impact of the Mounties on Canadian history and the West.