

The Mounties or the R.C.M.P.

Written by Nadine Fabbi, Assistant Director, Canadian Studies Center
Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington
For a hard copy of this essay, other background materials, or questions contact Nadine at:
206-543-6269 or nfabbi@u.washington.edu
Last Updated: March 2003

Introduction

Almost everyone has heard of the Mounties, Canada's federal and provincial police force (except for Québec and Ontario). The Mounties are famous around the world. Some people say that Canada is the only country in the world where the police are heroes. And the Mounties are definitely heroes in Canada and an important part of the country's tourist trade. Almost every tourist shop in Canada has postcards of the Mounties and other Mountie paraphernalia. And every summer thousands of tourists from around the world watch the Musical Ride, an equestrian show where Mounties and thoroughbred horses perform synchronized maneuvers.

The aim of this module is to teach students about the history of one of Canada's most famous symbols — that of the Mounties — and to show how the history of the Mounties is closely linked to the U.S. Students should also learn more about Canadian geography particularly in the prairie regions of the country.

The creation of the Mounties as a police force was highly influenced by an event involving American wolfers in Canada's West in the 1870s. The North-West Mounted Police was formed to bring law and order to the West and, once this goal was achieved, the force was to be dismantled. However, shortly after whiskey traders were driven from the West, the influx of Americans to the Klondike Gold Rush in the 1890s caused the federal government to once again draw on the Mounties to protect Canadian sovereignty. By the time the Gold Rush was over, the Mounties were firmly established in Canada and their image later romanticized and popularized by Hollywood.

Students will need writing tools and a map of North America. Simple exercises involving geography and math will be suggested throughout the module.

Note: Throughout this module the term "First Nations" will be used. This is the Canadian term for "Native American". The term "Métis" refers to the descendants of French-Canadians and Plains Nations women.

Relations with Natives peoples in Canada and the U.S.

Canada became a Confederation in 1867. At that time only four of the provinces, as we know them today, were part of this new country: Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Québec and Ontario. Have the students locate these four provinces on their maps, draw a line around them, and label them, "Canada — 1867". British Columbia, on the west coast, was a separate colony at this time and the three prairie provinces — Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta — were still largely owned by the Hudson's Bay Company. Today's three prairie provinces and the northern territories were known as the North-West Territories. Have the students draw a line around the North-West Territories or all of the land west of Ontario to the British Columbia border and including both northern territories. Have them label this area, "North-West Territories". At that time there were very few Europeans in the North-West Territories and almost no settlers.

When the Hudson's Bay Company ran a fur trading empire in the North-West Territories, it maintained good relationships with the First Nations peoples. There were strict laws

forbidding the trade of alcohol for furs or intermarrying. The Europeans in the U.S. not only traded whiskey for furs, but the whiskey was often a mixture of some fairly unscrupulous ingredients like tobacco juice and even poisonous substances. In those days there was a marked difference between the way the Europeans in Canada and those in the U.S. treated the aboriginal peoples.

In the States there was a saying that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. The First Nations peoples were perceived as a hindrance to west-ward expansion and settlement and so the American government didn't mind that they were killed off in the process of colonization. There were a number of European and Indian wars in the U.S. in the early years of settlement. In fact, as much as \$20 million dollars per year was spent to rid the West of the Plains Nations. In Canada the European fur traders and aboriginal peoples, for the most part, maintained a relationship of co-operation and mutual respect. There was a reason for this. The fur traders depended on the First Nations peoples for their trade. The aboriginal people were needed as guides, interpreters, trappers, and were a valuable resource for wilderness survival skills. Though the motivation was perhaps self-serving, the result was that there were laws against the trade of whiskey and the senseless murdering of the Plains people in the West.

How the Mounties were created

The Canadian government was well aware that the new Territories needed a military or policing force — a national presence of some kind. First, there was the real threat of American annexation. Already several American fur-trading forts had been established in the West and some were even flying flags that resembled the stars and stripes. These traders could pose a real threat to Canadian sovereignty particularly because the prairie border was not firmly established or maintained at that time. Second, Canada had plans for a national railway that would bring hundreds of thousands of settlers to the West and realized the need for dialogue and treaty negotiations with the First Nations. Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, was well aware of the potential problems in the West but his government was also preoccupied with other concerns and the formation of a military or police force was put on hold.

In 1873 a tragic event occurred involving U.S. wolfers that caused the Canadian government to speed up plans for the creation of a federal police force. In May of that year a gang of wolfers from Fort Benton made their way to Canada to hunt wolves. As the story goes they poisoned a buffalo and then waited while the wolves came to eat the carcass. After the wolves died, the wolfers collected their hides and headed back to the U.S. Little did they care that the dogs belonging to the First Nations peoples would also feed off the buffalo and die.

That night the wolfers horses were stolen. When the men woke up they were furious and sought revenge. They followed the horse tracks north to the Cypress Hills where a group of over 200 Assiniboine had just set up camp. The wolfers asked the Assiniboine chief, Chief Little Soldier, if he knew what happened to their horses. Little Soldier said his people were not involved but that he had seen a group of Cree pass by earlier and indeed they had horses.

That night the wolfers and Assiniboine drank together but the next morning, before noon, the Americans started to fire shots into the Assiniboine camp. They still wanted revenge and cared little who paid for the crime. No one knows the exact number of people killed, but it is argued that anywhere between 24 and 200 Assiniboine were massacred, about half a dozen of the women raped, and just one wolver shot. Chief Little Soldier was among the massacred.

When the wolfers returned to Fort Benton they were hailed as heroes and vanguards of civilization. When the news hit eastern Canada, the government was shocked and the newspapers referred to the Americans as scum. At almost the same time that the Assiniboine were being slain, an act of government was passed to set up a national police force to keep peace in the West. When the Canadian government heard of the massacre, the process was sped up considerably. A federal act had established a police force in May. By August that force was officially formed, the first recruits signed up in September, and the journey West begun in October. The Cypress Hills Massacre had everything to do with the creation of the Mounties. Without this event the Prime Minister may have not put the force together for some time.

Cypress Hills

On a map of North America have the students locate the point where the borders of Alberta, Saskatchewan and the U.S. meet. Approximately 50 miles north of the U.S. border, directly along the Alberta/Saskatchewan border, they will see Cypress Hills Provincial Park. This is the site of the massacre in 1873 that spurred the creation of the Mounties. Have them mark this spot.

Now, have the students travel south along the Alberta/Saskatchewan border, over the U.S. border to the Missouri River. Follow the Missouri River west to Fort Benton. Fort Benton is where the American fur traders, responsible for the massacre, lived at that time. Have the students mark this point and draw a line connecting the two sites.

The Great March West

This next section will trace the Great March of the 300 first North-West Mounted Police from Canada's capital to Fort Whoop-up — the notorious American whiskey-trading fort. (The most famous member of this first group was Francis Dickens, son of the English writer, Charles Dickens.) This section will give students the opportunity to learn about Canadian geography while following the trail of the Mounties as they traveled West.

Have the students find Ottawa, the capital of Canada, in Ontario. This is where the force was created and where the trip West originated. From Ottawa the first group of 150 recruits left in October of 1873 by train to Collingwood, Ontario on the south shore of Georgian Bay just above Lake Huron. Have the students draw a line from Ottawa to Collingwood. At Collingwood the Mounties had their first casualty — one officer shot himself in the arm! Many of these men weren't experienced with guns or horses and were eager for adventure but not prepared for the trip or their responsibilities.

From Collingwood have the students draw a line to Thunder Bay, Ontario on the western shores of Lake Superior. It took three steamers to get the men from Collingwood to Thunder Bay (then Prince Arthur's Landing). The third steamer was being navigated by a drunken skipper who nearly lost the boat and its passengers in a storm. Four days later all of the recruits had safely reached Prince Arthur's Landing.

From Thunder Bay have the students draw a line, following the Trans-Canada highway, to Winnipeg. This is approximately a 500 mile trip that the recruits made in canoes, on foot, horseback, and ferries across the lakes. It took them a month to make the trip. Have the students figure out how many miles per day the men would have traveled to have made the trip in a month. They would have traveled 16 to 17 miles per day on average to have made it from Prince Arthur's Landing to Fort Garry (present-day Winnipeg.) The journey was horrible. The men ran out of food and water and suffered from exhaustion and freezing conditions. The force only lost one recruit however, and the rest were acknowledged as

members of the police force during their winter in Manitoba. Because the men couldn't travel in the winter, they stayed at Fort Garry where they trained. The following spring they were to meet up with a second group of recruits — another 150 members who traveled West on a U.S. railway.

From Winnipeg have the students move directly south on their maps until they come to a small city at the U.S. border called Emerson. A second group of recruits met up with the first the following summer near the site of present-day Emerson or what was then Fort Dufferin. On 8 July 1874, over a year after the Cypress Hills Massacre, almost 300 North-West Mounted Police began the 900 mile trek to the West. Their mission was to storm Fort Whoop-up and eventually bring an end to the whiskey trade in the West.

Have the students locate Lethbridge in southern Alberta. Present-day Lethbridge was the site of Fort Whoop-Up. It is 900 miles from Fort Dufferin to Fort Whoop-up and it took the men over four months to make it to their destination. The procession was two and a half miles long! It was a very difficult trip and many of the men gave up and turned back. But those that made it represented the first official Canadian presence in the West.

No Whiskey at Fort Whoop-Up

The Mounties finally found Fort Whoop-Up in the fall of 1874, but there wasn't a drop of whiskey on site. The Americans had cleverly cleaned the place up before the force arrived. The N.W.M.P., after building themselves a fort just west of Whoop-Up (Fort Macleod), proceeded to bring law and order to the West. Whenever they heard of whiskey being traded for furs, they sought out the culprit and confiscated all of the illegally traded furs. Within a few years the whiskey trade was put to an end.

Though the Mounties attempted to bring the wolfers to justice, the American courts let them off and those tried in Canada were released for lack of evidence. No one was ever punished for the senseless massacre of the Assiniboine people. Anti-Canadian sentiment was high in the American press during the trials — how dare the Canadians have a say in the justice of Americans or treat "Indians" like real people! In Canada the reputation of the Mounties soured particularly with the First Nations.

Relations between the Mounties and the Plains Cree

Thanks to Jerry Potts, a Métis guide and interpreter, the relations between the Mounties and the First Nations were basically good. Jerry Potts initially helped the Mounties to find Fort Whoop-Up, ferreted out whiskey traders in the area, and acted as a liaison between the Plains Nations and the Mounties. Potts worked for the Mounties for over 22 years and at his death a three-gun salute was fired over his grave. He was a highly respected man in his day.

The Mounties first won the confidence of the Plains Nations during their attempts to arrest and convict the wolfers. Whites attempting to punish other whites for crimes committed against aboriginal peoples was something quite new in the West. As time progressed the Mounties kept that confidence protecting the First Nations from unfair trading practices.

It was here, in the Canadian West, that the Mounties first earned their reputation as fair enforcers of the law and caregivers of the community. In a famous quote, Chief Red Crow said of Macleod, the Assistant Commissioner of the North-West Mounted Police, "He has made me many promises. He has kept them all."

The Battle of Little Big Horn and relations between the Mounties and the First Nations

Just three years after the Cypress Hills Massacre, on 25 June 1876, Sitting Bull and the Sioux Nation wiped out General Custer's 7th U.S. Cavalry at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in Montana. By the following year over 4,000 Sioux including Sitting Bull had fled to Canada where they were safe from the U.S. army. North-West Mounted Police Inspector Walsh feared an Indian War between the Sioux and the Blackfoot as the two Nations were not the best of friends. Acting on this fear Walsh bravely rode into the camp of over 4,000 near the Cypress Hills. He announced that while in Canada the Sioux must obey the Queen's law. The following day Sitting Bull watched as Walsh handled a tense situation with an Assiniboine man. When the face-off was over with Walsh had won Sitting Bull's respect. Eventually the Sioux returned to the States and Sitting Bull surrendered but not before Sitting Bull and Walsh became good friends, a friendship that was admired by other Plains people and respected by the Americans.

Have the students locate the site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn at the Little Bighorn River in Montana and draw a line linking that site to the Cypress Hills.

Negotiating treaties

The Mounties had created a very good relationship with the Blackfoot Nation of southern Alberta. In the late summer of 1877, over 4,000 Blackfoot, Piegans, Stoneys, Bloods, and Sarcees gathered in southern Alberta to negotiate treaty rights with the Mounties. Their tepees formed a village three miles long and a mile wide! The treaty would give Canada the rights to the land in exchange for some cash and protection from the Mounties. After three days of negotiations, the First Nations agreed and the entire southern portion of Alberta become part of Canada.

While the deal was hardly fair to the Plains people, it was thanks to the trust that the Mounties had built that the treaty was considered at all. During the negotiations, Chief Crowfoot said in a speech to those assembled, "If the police had not come to the country, where would we all be now? Bad men and whiskey were killing us so fast that very few, indeed, of us would have been left today. The police have protected us as the feathers of a bird protect it from the frosts of winter." The reputation of the Mounties was once again affirmed.

Naming the Mounties

When Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald was planning a force in the newly opened West, he first wanted to call the police force the Mounted Rifles. When the U.S. government heard of the proposed name, it threatened to retaliate by putting an armed patrol along the border. The Canadian government quickly changed the name to Mounted Police so that it would sound more like a law-enforcing organization than a military one. Even the name of the Mounties was affected by the U.S.! "North-West" was used because the force was only intended to serve in the North-West Territories and only for a limited time. It was really because of another event, again involving the U.S., that the life of the Mounties was extended.

The Mounties and the Klondike Gold Rush

In 1893 gold was discovered near Dawson in the Yukon. Tens of thousands of people, many from the U.S., traveled up to the Yukon to pan for gold. Have the students find Dawson, Yukon on a map of Canada. It is right next to Alaska. Because the border between Alaska and the Yukon wasn't clear at that time, the Canadian government feared that the Americans might stake claim to Canada. The Mounties were sent North to protect Canadian sovereignty once again. They were the only legal authority in the area as they had been in the North-West Territories ten years earlier.

The Mounties had the law in place before the prospectors arrived. During the entire gold rush the Mounties kept the peace in the area. It was during the gold rush, in 1898, that the Yukon Territory was created clarifying the boundary between Canada and the U.S. Many American newspapers carried pictures of the Mounties in their scarlet coats and Stetson hats. This image became a popular one in the U.S. and built on the earlier image of the Mountie as a good guy who keeps order in society.

Hollywood and the Mounties

Not only are the Americans responsible for the creation of the Mounties, but they made them famous too. Hollywood made over 300 movies with Mounties in the 1920s and 30s. The Hollywood image of the Mountie is that of a hero. He is well-dressed, always gets his man, and usually without violence. From this image the Mountie became a hero not only in Canada but around the world. The Americans also made comic books of Sergeant Preston of the Yukon and his dog, King.

Even the King of England recognized the uniqueness of the N.W.M.P. They earned such a reputation protecting Canadian sovereignty and the people who lived in Canada that in 1903 the King of England, King Edward VII, recognized the Mounties for outstanding service and gave them the title, "Royal." They were known as the "Royal North-West Mounted Police" until 1920. In that year the force became a truly national one and the name was changed to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or R.C.M.P.

Conclusion

The motto of the R.C.M.P. is "Maintains le droit", "Uphold the right". That is certainly the way the Mounties have been perceived in Canadian history and by Hollywood. The Mounties were conceived as a force to bring justice to the First Nations in the Canadian West and to protect Canada from American interests. From Jerry Potts to Sitting Bull to Chief Crowfoot, the Mounties have been seen as a force that at least attempts to have peaceful negotiations with communities and to protect their members. Today the core values of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police are integrity, honesty, professionalism, compassion, respect, and accountability.

The Mounties are a vital part of Canadian society. They are truly a national icon. Interestingly, such an important and crucial part of Canada's history and symbolism is closely linked to the U.S. It was the presence of American fur traders in the West that first concerned the Canadian government giving it reason to consider a national police force to protect Canadian sovereignty. The Cypress Hills Massacre, committed by American wolfers in 1873, sped up this process. Once the whiskey trade was eliminated in the West, the Mounties started to work with the Plains Nations to settle treaties and lay the groundwork for European settlement. When the Canadian government thought the force was no longer necessary, the Klondike Gold Rush brought thousands of Americans to the Yukon again challenging Canadian sovereignty. It was during this time that the stereotype of the Mountie began to show up in U.S. newspapers paving the way for the movie industry early in the 20th century. Canada doesn't tend to have heroes. But thanks to Hollywood, and to a long and solid reputation across the country, the Mountie has become a hero for Canada on an international scale. An R.C.M.P. Constable was recently quoted as saying, "People are fascinated with the R.C.M.P. and the mystique and respect it generates."