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Review Article
The Mountie as Metaphor

Best Mounted Police Stories. Edited, with an Introductory essay, by Dick Harrison. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1978. Pp. 258. \$9.95 paper.

Toward the beginning of *Wolf Willow*, one of the most remarkable books written about the prairies, Wallace Stegner remarks: "I have sometimes been tempted to believe that I grew up on a gun-toting frontier. This temptation I trace to a stagecoach ride in the spring of 1914, and to a cowpuncher named Buck Murphy." He then recounts the details of that trip, which he spent riding on Murphy's lap and being almost bowled-over by the cowpuncher's whiskey breath, and eventually reveals that a short time later Murphy "was shot and killed by a Mountie in the streets of Shaunavon" For Stegner, these events are a tangible connection to the wild days of first settlement: the frontier West. For years, he allows, he "got a comfortable sense of status out of recalling that in his youth he had "been a friend of badmen and an eyewitness to gunfights in wide streets between false-fronted saloons." Such feelings persist despite his knowledge that the facts do not jibe with his mental picture, that there had been no walk-down along Shaunavon's main street between Murphy and the Mountie, that Mounties, indeed, did not participate in such showy theatrics. And as a person whose childhood straddled the 49th parallel and whose professional life as a writer often dealt with the history of both Wests, Stegner should be able to separate fact from romanticized fiction, if anyone can. Yet his imagined vision of a showdown between Murphy and the Mountie remains; that it does attests to the pervasiveness of the American Western myth. So widespread is its influence that Canada's contribution to popular literature, the Mountie (of both fact and fiction), has been swallowed up. An American myth has been superimposed over the Canadian fact. Canadians know and recognise the names Billy the Kid, Wyatt Earp, and Wild Bill Hickok, but stare in puzzled bewilderment upon hearing mention of James Walsh, Sam Steele, or Jerry Potts. They have heard of the Virginian but balk at Corporal Cameron. Like Stegner, Canadians prefer their western badmen dead at high noon. Having adopted the American myth, they largely ignore their own popular culture creation, the Mountie.

In spite of his longings, Stegner knows the history of the Mounted Police

and is well aware of how its legend grew. In closing his anecdote of the cowpuncher who died, Stegner points to the cardinal difference between the American West and the Canadian, as each was settled: "In the American West men came before the law, but in Saskatchewan the law was there before the settlers, before even cattlemen, and not merely law but law enforcement. It was not characteristic that Buck Murphy should die in a gunfight, but if he had to die by violence it was entirely characteristic that he should be shot by a policeman." By arriving prior to settlement, the Mounted Police swiftly exerted control over the North West territories, so the Canadian West was neither wild nor woolly; violence was kept to a minimum, and what little there was usually involved the Mounties (who were very adept at getting to trouble spots), although they consistently strove to avoid it. Without question they were an amazing socializing factor.¹ Their exploits—from the Great March across the prairies during the summer of 1874 on—were communicated to the east and, as individual acts of bravery during the first years became known (and there were many), the force rapidly captured the public imagination. Their success in subduing the plains Indians—in contrast to the singular lack of success the Americans had, despite their millions spent—sparked a great deal of interest south of the border. Indeed, it was an American newspaper, the *Fort Benton Record* (Montana), which coined the 'get their man' slogan. In view of the interest generated by the force during its early years, it is little wonder that the Mountie was quickly expropriated as a character in adventure fiction, which was extremely popular at that time.

Harrison notes a fictional Mountie's first appearance in 1888, and from then until the 1930s he was a staple character in adventure tales written by Canadian, British, and American authors. In his introduction to *Best Mounted Police Stories*, Harrison reiterates his previously-published notion that the Mountie in fiction reflects an author's nationality, since the writer's cultural assumptions are revealed by the way in which he depicts the Mountie. Thus Canadians such as Ralph Connor presented Mounties who most closely resembled actual Mounted Policemen. His Corporal Cameron goes about his duties through characteristic 'nerveless confrontation'; that is, like Inspector James Walsh when he took charge of two thousand Sioux (who had recently repaired across the line after a small altercation with General Custer at Little Big Horn) with only 12 men, Cameron is a symbol of empire, of imperial hegemony, and so is protected by the ideals he represents. The British Mountie, seen in the writing of Roger Pocock and John Mackie, was presented in a somewhat different light; he was invariably a black sheep from a good family, out to spend some time in the territories, and was often a confused amalgamation of soldier-mountie. The key difference, however, is that such figures were usually presented as protecting the empire, rather than being protected by it, like the Canadian Mountie. Not surprisingly, American writers were the most inaccurate because of the influence of their own West on the popular imagination. Authors such as James Oliver Curwood, often with scanty knowledge of the North West, portrayed Mounties as American

sheriffs in scarlet, officers who often acted as if above the law. Yet despite his popularity in adventure fiction, the Mountie did not receive his greatest boost—however one views the image that resulted—until he was taken over by the American motion picture industry. Calling Hollywood's adoption of the force an "unrequited love affair," one which has been "passionate and long-standing," Pierre Berton notes that over half the movies made about Canada—575 in all—have dealt directly with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or one of its predecessors.² These films continued the example set by writers such as Curwood. Indeed, they amplified the misconceptions many times over since Curwood's novels often formed the basis of screenplays and were themselves departed from; his *Steele of the Royal Mounted* (1911), for example, which Harrison discusses in his introduction and a chapter from which appears in the anthology, was made into a motion picture in 1925.

These matters are all preliminary to a consideration of Harrison's *Best Mounted Police Stories*. The origin of the Mountie as a metaphor is a mishmash, a hodgepodge of historical fact, misconceived fiction and celluloid ballyhoo that stands in opposition to, yet is always threatened by, the myth of the American West—as Stegner's longings regarding Buck Murphy show. Yet what has resulted from so eclectic a legend is a metaphor for Canada more compelling, certainly, than the venerable beaver. If for no other reason, the fact that the image of the Mountie equals Canada in the world's eye is reason enough to probe its depths.

Dick Harrison has been working on the Mountie story for some years, and his analyses have appeared in a collection of essays published to commemorate the force's centenary, *Men in Scarlet* (1974) and also in his fine culturally-based study of Canadian prairie fiction, *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (1977). In addition, he has published an annotated reader's guide to Mountie fiction.³ *Best Mounted Police Stories* is a logical continuation of his interests and is, indeed, derived from them. Because of this, Harrison tries to do several things with this anthology: introduce the uninitiated to the wide variety of stories available and, primarily through his introductory comments preceding each selection, interpret the story a bit, account for its history, and, when necessary, suggest further reading on the incident it treats. Thus, when coupled with his introductory essay, Harrison's anthology is a thorough introduction to the Mounted Police story as a type and, because the selections are presented chronologically in the order of the historical period they treat, it provides an encapsulated history of the force as seen through fiction.

Despite the breadth of coverage, though, the organization and presentation of this background material hamper the book's readability. Clearly, Harrison has a thesis: that there are distinct Canadian, British, and American fictional Mounties, and that contemporary writers such as Rudy Wiebe are treating the force in their work. He presents these ideas in his introductory essay and he has dealt with them at greater length elsewhere; but here he overdraws his case. As a reader moves through the various selections these ideas are constantly restated in Harrison's prefatory comments which

serve to tell him how each story fits into the editor's scheme. It proves a distraction to have a story explained and slotted before one has read it. Such comments, extremely helpful though they may be, might well have been grouped together or, failing that, have been aligned so as to provide an introduction to each of the four historical periods into which the stories are already grouped.

As to the selections themselves, Harrison has chosen them on several grounds: history, author, readability, and they are generally successful in providing a wide view of the force's history and operations. Thus they run a gamut from an excerpt describing the taking of Fort Whoop-Up from American whiskey traders—one of the force's first acts in the autumn of 1874—to H.J. MacDonald's "The Detachment Man" (1972), a realistic account of a modern Mountie's solitary and somewhat tedious life in a small Saskatchewan town which leads up to his pointless murder at the hands of an unseen assailant. Some of the stories, like MacDonald's or Frederick Niven's "The Sun-Dance in the File Hills" (1917), are tales of some complexity and depth, while others, like Joseph Gollomb's "O'Brien's Doom" (1937) are hardly fiction at all, but rather detailed accounts of particular cases. Selections from other writers, such as Joseph Collins, Roger Pocock, James Oliver Curwood, and Ralph Connor are adventure tales and represent some aspect of Harrison's overall thesis. One note about this method that is disconcerting: because selection was often governed by non-literary considerations, the numerous excerpted pieces, which have been lifted from novels, have a confusing effect upon the reader. They may illustrate Harrison's point well but, because they reveal only a small part of the story, they make far from satisfactory reading. This is especially the case in the first grouping, where each of the selections is only a few pages long and has been taken from a larger work; the problem abates, though, in subsequent sections where Harrison provides entire stories. At the outset, however, *Best Mounted Police Stories* has its reader wondering if it might be better titled "Best Mounted Police Incidents." Consequently, one cannot approach this anthology expecting to find a series of whole narratives, nor any consistency of quality. Although I sympathize with Professor Harrison's difficulties in assembling the book, *Best Mounted Police Stories* is ultimately far better suited for the reader who is interested in the Mounted Police, in themselves, than one who is looking for an engaging selection of readable tales.

Whatever the book's strengths and weaknesses as an anthology of stories, its most outstanding feature is Harrison's fine introductory essay, "Selling a Birth-Rite for a Mass of Plottage." Here he reiterates many of his ideas about and interpretations of the Mountie in fiction, published elsewhere, but he carries those arguments several steps further by seeing the Mounted Police story as "a typical example of the recent history of popular culture in Canada" (p. 1). Because it has been overwhelmed by foreign depictions of the Mounted Police and nosed out by equally foreign western myths—as Stegner's anecdote shows—the Canadian Mounted Police story has since

Ralph Connor's heyday reached only an esoteric few. Harrison, however, confines himself to the Mountie in fiction without stepping out to consider the force's larger legend; that legend grew as a result of fictional portrayals (both accurate and inaccurate), surely, but also adding to it were the obscenely misconceived motion pictures (which Harrison mentions) and biased histories (which he does not).⁴ Harrison is quite right when he asserts that Canadians are repelled by the Dudley Doright image of the force, "the dry husks of a discredited glamour" (p. 1), but the fact that that image is the product of a foreign popular culture industry cannot be ignored. It seems therefore that Harrison has not yet looked at the full ramifications of his subject, or that he is unwilling to carry them to their logical conclusion. Because the verifiable history of the Mounted Police—especially in its first years—served as a basis for fictions, first written by foreigners and later photographed by them, the gestation of the image of the Mountie corresponds exactly to Canada's colonial status. Indeed, the raw material—the force's exploits—were exported abroad and the finished product—the resulting image of the Mountie "getting his man"—imported for domestic consumption. In this way the Mountie as metaphor is an apt embodiment of Canada.

Harrison alludes to the notion of the Mountie as metaphor in his essay's title, "Selling a Birth-Rite," since the Mounted Police had an almost ritual significance to the early Canadian West. However inadvertently, its image was sold abroad leaving English-Canadians bereft of a popular culture, a fact which Harrison decries: "The individual stories [in popular fiction] may thus lose the literary importance we attach to unique expressions of an individual imagination, but as a type they acquire in the process an importance as a common expression of the culture which gave rise to them" (p. 2). He then continues to distinguish between the various types of Mounties seen in fiction—outlined above—and, by drawing upon John Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique*, distinguishes between the Mountie's significance in popular literature and that of the American western hero. Each is related to the Medieval knight—the man on a horse—but while the American hero mediates between the settlers and those who threaten them, "because he possesses 'many of the qualities and skills of the savages,'"⁵ the Mountie arbitrates "in the dispute between savagery and civilization, imposing a solution based on higher authority" (p. 4). The key point is that the Mountie is self-abnegating; he asserts the preeminence of the higher authority he represents and so is essentially metaphorical. This is because the Canadian order the Mountie represents is hierarchical not democratic. The Canadian Mounties found in the fiction of Ralph Connor—especially *Corporal Cameron* (1912)—and other such portrayals reveal the individual Mountie's ability to handle difficult situations largely through their metaphorical capacity, as many of the first Mounties did in fact during the first years. Although Harrison's argument implies the metaphorical aspect of the force, he does not seem inclined to explore the point fully. He does, however, explain how it worked in practice as the first Mounted Policemen attempted to subdue the plains Indians:

In these nerveless confrontations with superior force the Mountie traditionally convinces the savages of at least three things: that his civilized values are more important than an individual life, that they have the power to raise a man above the threat of violence, and that their coming is so clearly inevitable that it does not depend on the success of the policeman himself. In effect, he resolves the conflict by persuading the savage side that no conflict is desirable or even possible. (p. 9)

The metaphorical capacity of the Mountie—both in fact and in fiction—is readily apparent through this method of convincing the Indians; one might also add that the force's case with the Indians was bolstered by the generally fair treatment they accorded natives, especially during the first years. Further, no mention is made of the metaphorical power the Mounties' scarlet tunics had over the Indians. From the very outset these tunics were planned as a visible distinction that the Indians could appreciate between the men who wore them and those in blue, south of the line. This fact did not fail to impress itself upon the Indians, some of whom believed "that the red coat was dyed from the blood of the Great White Queen's enemies."⁶ So in this sense, too, the Mountie can be seen as a metaphor. Thus while advancing his argument by the key distinction he makes between the West—mediator versus arbitrator and democracy versus hierarchical order—Harrison is hobbled by his disinclination to discuss the metaphorical implications of his subject.

Harrison's argument treats the nature of heroism in Canadian literature, both serious and popular, and in his comparison of the Mountie versus the American Western hero he reaches a key, and quite tenable, conclusion. He sees the Mountie as a particular type of hero, the champion, "'one who fights for another or defends a principle or cause.'" Because of his self-abnegation, then, the fictional Mountie's heroism is of a different order than that found in the American West; he is a figure who "is permanently dedicated to fighting for others, and even more conspicuously to fighting for a cause or principle" (pp. 6-7). Modelled on the historical mounties who opened the Canadian West, characters such as Corporal Cameron are champions of a particularly Canadian form of law enforcement, one which operates on the basis of metaphor. It is here that Harrison's argument is the most telling, since he briefly surveys works of 'serious' Canadian literature which also feature self-abnegating heroes; he cites examples from Lampman, Pratt, MacLennan and Watson, but there are others which spring to mind, among them Grove's Abe Spalding. Harrison's notion is significant in that it runs counter to Margaret Atwood's celebrated search for Canadian heroes—in the American mold—in *Survival*; interestingly enough, when she considers Mounties in that book, she uncritically accepts the Americanized archetype of the Mountie "getting his man".

As Harrison wonders about Canada's lack of a popular literature of its own, he notes that the Canadian West never became this country's refuge for imaginative escape, as the American West became for that country. A possible reason he sees for this is Canada's lack of a "foundation ritual." This concept, also borrowed from Cawelti, is "a re-enactment of the process by

which Americans ceased to be European and became American" (p. 13). Harrison's attempt to account for its absence is inconclusive, since he says the Canadian choice not to have one is as basic to their culture as the difference between a revolution and an act of Parliament (p. 13). If by this he means that Canadians, as a people, are too reticent to have anything as radical and unequivocal as a foundation ritual, which would require a complete break with past traditions, he may be correct. But one could equally argue that Cawelti's ritual is the result of contact with the American frontier. If so, are the several environmental interpretations of Canadian history and literature based on European man's contact with the land, some of which Harrison mentions, any different? This aspect of his argument needs further consideration.

In any case, Harrison is decidedly disheartened by the absence of a Canadian popular literature but finds solace in the reappearance of the Mountie in serious fiction; these depictions are found in Rudy Wiebe's last two novels and *Where Is the Voice Coming From?* as well as Ken Mitchell's *The Meadowlark Connection*. I do not think, though, that Harrison makes enough of Wiebe's radically different portrayal of the force when judged alongside earlier fictional Mounties. By adopting the point of view of those who stood in opposition to the force—Big Bear in *The Temptations of Big Bear* and the Métis in *The Scorched-Wood People*—Wiebe offers a view of the Mounted Police significantly different (and perhaps equally biased) from that seen in earlier accounts. The authors of adventure fiction saw the force invariably as a crew of heroes, but Wiebe, in spite of the bias his point of view reveals, presents fictional Mounties, based on historical members of the force, with their warts intact. The selection Harrison takes from *The Scorched-Wood People*, for example, which deals with the skirmish and retreat from Duck Lake during the 1885 Rebellion, shows the force's actions generally, and Superintendent Leif Crozier's actions in particular, to be inept, as indeed they were during the incident in question. So despite his evident bias in favor of the Métis, Wiebe is here presenting the force in a historically accurate manner; in so doing, he is cutting through the various foreign meanings that have been attached to the Mounted's image in order to present the force as it actually was. Laying aside the excesses of Curwood and his ilk, Wiebe has grasped the Canadian fact that Harrison is trying to define. And there, should Canadians want to confront their past, is the closest approach to historical truth yet seen; lightly varnished, perhaps, but the truth nevertheless. It seems to me, therefore, that the absence of the Mountie in popular fiction is offset by Wiebe's work and that of other Canadian writers who have also drawn upon the Canadian past in their work.

Taken as a whole, however, *Best Mounted Police Stories* is a fine introduction to the Mountie in fiction under his various guises. Harrison's task was a difficult one, so the book's faults may be blamed, in part, on the wide and diverse field it surveys. Notwithstanding this, his interpretations of the various selections immediately prior to each story tend to irritate the reader and so belong more properly in the introductory essay or grouped apart from

the stories in some other way. And, as I have said, the introductory essay might also have been expanded to treat the larger image and legend of the force, especially those aspects which are not particularly literary in origin. Thus while the book serves as an introduction to the Mounted Police in fiction it in no way defines the Mountie as a metaphor for Canada—that remains to be done. Such a study can only be obtained by bringing together the component parts of the Mounted Police legend; history, fiction, and film must be considered along with the cultural assumptions—Canadian, British, or American—of their authors. The Mountie, in his ubiquitous red tunic, is a compelling metaphor for Canada in a multitude of ways: the Queen's power, the British system of government and law, Canada's colonial status, and the human drive necessary to make the North West habitable are but a few. However, whatever individual meaning the Mountie's image has taken on over the last century or so, from whatever source, it can be said to be in some sense a reflection of Canada. As such, the Mountie is a repository for metaphorical meanings which help to define, in some sense, this country. Dick Harrison has begun to clarify these various meanings through his other publications and *Best Mounted Police Stories*, but far more work must be done before the significance of the Mounted Police as an imaginative construct is clear.

NOTES

1. Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (1962; rpt. New York: Viking, 1966), pp. 4-5. The two best historical accounts that deal with the force's early years, when the majority of its legend-making actions were taken, are: Ronald Atkin, *Maintain the Right: The Early History of the North West Mounted Police* (London: Macmillan, 1973) and R.C. Macleod, *The North West Mounted Police and Law Enforcement* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976). For a consideration of the growth of that legend, see my "Canada's Mounted: The Evolution of a Legend," forthcoming in a special issue devoted to Western Canada, *Journal of Popular Culture*, in press.
2. Pierre Burton, *Hollywood's Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), p. 111. The third section of Burton's book is devoted entirely to the Mountie in motion pictures and is well-illustrated with still photographs from the films, see pp. 109-66.
3. Professor Harrison's previous publications that deal with the Mountie in fiction are: "The Mounted Police in Fiction," in *Men in Scarlet*, ed. Hugh M. Dempsey (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta/McClelland and Stewart West, 1974), pp. 163-74; "Mountie Fiction: A Reader's Guide," *RCMP Quarterly/Revue Trimestrielle de la GRC*, 40, No. 4 (September 1975), pp. 39-46; and *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1977), pp. 154-82.
4. For a consideration of the biased view of the force advanced by some historians, see Section II of my article, cited above.
5. Harrison is quoting John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1970).
6. Atkin, p. 40. The red tunic was suggested for the Mounted Police from the very outset; in 1872 the Canadian government sent Colonel Patrick Robertson-Ross into the west to

observe and report back on the situation there. He recommended that force be sent as soon as possible to establish law and repress the American whiskey traders, and also "urged that any mounted force sent among the Indians should wear scarlet as 'animosity is rarely, if ever, felt towards disciplined soldiers wearing her Majesty's uniform in any portion of the empire'"; Atkin, p. 37. See also Stegner's chapter on the Mounted Police, "The Law in a Red Coat," pp. 100-10 in *Wolf Willow*. Here he again alludes to Buck Murphy (this time with reference to Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky") and considers the metaphorical power of the scarlet tunic on such badmen; he also summarizes the history of its selection.