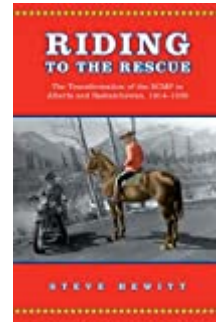


Steve Hewitt. *Riding to the Rescue: The Transformation of the RCMP in Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1914-1939.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. xiv + 205 pp. \$68.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-9021-8; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-4895-0.



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The Transformation of the RCMP

Not all dissertations convert well into books; *Riding to the Rescue*, a recent volume in the Canadian Social History Series, is one that does so quite well. This is not to say that no traces of the study's origins as a dissertation remain—they do, especially in the opening chapter, which contains a combined literature review and discussion of theory, and in the bibliography, which one notes with approval has been updated since the dissertation was defended more than thirteen years ago. However, it is to say that those echoes of the strict requirements of the dissertation format which remain do not seriously detract from what is an interesting, and at times provocative, account of an important period in the life of one of Canada's most famous institutions.

The theme of the book is laid out very clearly in the short preface. Steve Hewitt's aim is to address the quarter century between 1914 and 1939, interestingly including World War I but stopping on the eve of World War II—a period between what is termed the “golden age” of the Mounted Police and the modern age. During these years, it is suggested, both the nation and the Mounted Police were transformed by the effects of industrializa-

tion, mass immigration, urbanization, and political radicalism; as a result the state and the Mounted Police entered into a partnership designed to ensure the continuation of Anglo-Canadian hegemony. Hewitt seeks to demonstrate this transformation and partnership with reference to events in Saskatchewan and Alberta, where the bulk of Mounted Police officers served, though what he has to say is assumed to have application throughout the country.

The rather short text (139 pages of text and 39 pages of endnotes) is divided into seven chapters. The first is an introduction that addresses “Policing History,” and here a fairly wide net is cast, with brief discussion of some of the ways in which scholars in a number of countries have approached the subject. It is significant that the chapter both begins and ends with the botched Royal Canadian Mounted Police Security Service operation in 1974 that ultimately led to the separation of security responsibilities from the Mounted Police's other duties and, Hewitt suggests, to the end of the Mounted Police myth.

Chapter 2 examines the crucial period during and after World War I when the Mounted Police were forced

to seek a new role for themselves, and found one in the perceived need to introduce an internal security function into Canadian policing, especially in the prairie provinces. Hewitt assigns a leading role to then Commissioner A.B. Perry, who was charged with leading the Mounted Police in the crucial years after the First World War. This chapter is the heart of the book, and subsequent chapters provide support for the positions stated in it.

Chapter 3 examines the characteristics and values of the men who served in the Mounted Police between the two World Wars. Chapter 4 looks at the various classes of undesirables—from political radicals to ethnic groups—that became the targets of Mounted Police attention during the period. Chapter 5 is concerned especially with the introduction and implementation of secret service operations targeting Canadians. Chapter 6 considers the work of the Mounted Police as it affected labor, with particular emphasis on three incidents in Saskatchewan during the 1930s. Chapter 7 provides a brief conclusion, situating developments during the 1914-1939 period within a broader context, especially the Mounted Police's later security operations.

The book has a number of notable strengths. Certainly one is that it provides useful information about some less well-known aspects of Mounted Police operations. This is true throughout, but particularly so in chapter 5, which provides more than a glimpse into the Mounted Police's policies and procedures with respect to the use of secret agents and informants. The stories of agents such as John Leopold and Frank Zaneth make fascinating reading, and the details provided do not duplicate what can be found in most accounts of the Mounted Police. Another example is the very interesting view of the motivations and actions of the Mounted Police during the major instances of labor unrest during the 1930s: Estevan in 1931, Saskatoon in 1933, and Regina in 1935.

There are also limitations, though, or at least places where one wishes that a more substantial argument had been put forward. The most obvious limitation may be that very little is said of the day-to-day operations of the

Mounted Police. Hewitt's position seems to be that, despite the fact that these activities occupied most of the members' time, it was their security work that was crucial. This, however, is hardly self-evident, and the argument needs much more substantial support. The same sense that more substantial supporting arguments are needed arises elsewhere as well. Perhaps the best example of this is the position taken in chapter 2 to the effect that Commissioner Perry transformed the Mounted Police in the aftermath of World War I. This is certainly true and has long been known, but Hewitt seems to suggest a degree of foresight and intention on Perry's part that is not persuasively demonstrated in the material presented. Indeed, it could be argued (and on the evidence presented more reasonably) that Perry was not prescient at all, but merely making fairly predictable responses to the current situation, and that both his actions and future developments were part of a gradual process that had its origins long before World War I. Certainly, concerns about the immigration of southern and eastern Europeans and of Asians were not new, nor were difficult and sometimes violent labor relations. Moreover, the adoption of British style secret police and security relations was entirely in keeping with Canadian policies which, since the 1870s (and in many senses long before that), had seen the prairies more or less as a colony, and which had seen the Canadian government consciously shape its administration of the prairies after the British colonial office. In this analysis, the Mounted Police become followers rather than leaders; a position Hewitt does address, though not as thoroughly as one might wish.

Riding to the Rescue is a useful addition to the substantial literature on the history of the Mounted Police in Canada, though its comparatively narrow focus and its often-jaundiced view of the actions and motives of the Mounted Police means that it will not be the first place teachers direct students interested in the subject. Nonetheless, Hewitt has emerged as a major contributor to the field, and it is to be hoped that what he has to say here, and in his other writings, will encourage new thinking and new work on the history of the Mounted Police—not least from Hewitt himself.

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