

# The Scots Influence in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police

by John Walker

*Returning to Edinburgh after almost 40 years in Canada and Australia, John Walker BEd MA CMC met with Prof Ian Campbell to reminisce about a former academic colleague, Sydney Smyth, who had so positively influenced and contributed to his MA thesis study of the Scottish Curriculum Development Centre system. When John also described his previous experience of years researching and lecturing with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Professor Campbell seized the opportunity to suggest John offer a paper to the Journal on the Scots influence in the RCMP.*

‘Scotland is a place in the sun and the rain, but it is more than that; it is a kingdom of the mind [...] the old love for it endures, whatever (a Scot’s) reason or necessity for living elsewhere.’

Frederick Niven: *A Kingdom of the Mind, How the Scots Helped Make Canada*

I found these words to be prescient when researching for this paper. I had gone to Canada as a tradesman when a young man and was now back in Edinburgh after many years’ research and teaching experience with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, attached to RCMP Fairmont Academy in Vancouver and the Canadian Police College in Ottawa. As I sat at the Edinburgh Tattoo on a warm windy atmospheric evening, I was to discover that indeed ‘the old love had endured’ and it was surfacing alive and intense from within me. When the RCMP pipes, drums and dancers marched on to the famous Esplanade I experienced a confluence of pride, tinged with a sense of loss for having been gone for so long, and an overwhelming depth of feeling for both Scottishness and my pride in Canada’s national police force, the ‘Mounties’ and the part I had played in it.



Scottish traditions and influences run deep in the psyche and landscape of Canada. Those influences are evident in the much loved and internationally respected Royal Canadian Mounted Police most commonly known as the RCMP or informally the ‘Mounties’ and as ‘The Force’ internally.

## Migration

There is a vast amount of detail and history written regarding the forced and voluntary emigration of Scots to Canada and their successes and failures. One statistic stands out as it relates to the influence of Scottish highland traditions. Twenty thousand Highlanders are estimated to have

emigrated by the 1850s as the post-Napoleonic war Highland economy collapsed and emigration was seen as the only way to manage tenant farmers and crofters suffering congestion and starvation. Depopulation was the solution but, ironically, within the tragic and often brutal circumstances of their leaving, Canada benefited. Most Scots were hardy, tough, determined, literate and, importantly, used to living in challenging climates. Terrible as the clearances were, and that many of the forced voyages were not unlike the conditions experienced by slaves, they endured.

### **Military Traditions**

Scots also contributed to the new nation as warriors who won battles against the French at the fortress of Louisburg in 1758, The Plains of Abraham in 1759 and Montreal in 1760. Montreal, ideally located geographically at the head of the St Lawrence River, became a centre of Scottish energy and business. The Scots were adventurers, builders, engineers, inventors, business leaders, educators, fur traders, explorers, surgeons, religious leaders and academics who left their mark. The map of Canada is illuminated with rivers, and mountain ranges named after Scottish explorers. Townships with Scottish names are found in every corner of the country. Universities carry the names today of famous Scots and include McGill University in Montreal, Simon Fraser in Vancouver, Dalhousie in Halifax, and Queen's University in Kingston. Scottish symbolism abounds. The province named Nova Scotia, is Latin for 'New Scotland'. The provincial flag was granted by Royal Charter and is in essence a representation of St. Andrew's Cross in reversed colours, with the Scottish Royal Arms centred.



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### **Canadian Policing**

Scots influence in Canadian policing is evidenced in the abundance of formally structured police pipe bands, many with their own or adopted tartans. They add a profoundly Highland Scottish component in the traditions of police forces in the major cities from Victoria, BC, to Halifax, NS. It is a national expression of the discipline, pageantry and customs celebrating Highland Scots culture within policing. Retired RCMP Assistant Commissioner and 2015 Tattoo Drum Major Graham Muir sums it up: 'The bagpipe has become integral to ceremonial occasions for the police and the communities they serve.'

### **The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)**

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police is a much loved and positive symbol of Canada. The organization is admired and respected internationally and has an extensive network of pipes, drums and dancers represented in almost every one of the nation's provinces and territories. There is no better assertion

of Scottish influence than the formal structure in the National Executive Council of RCMP Pipe Bands based at HQ in Ottawa. The structure is complete with policies about uniform, appropriate deportment, membership, funding and the selection of appropriate events. A unique strength of the organisation is that composite bands of pipers and drummers, both RCMP members and civilians, from across the country can be quickly and effectively formed to play in Scottish celebrations including the 2015 Tattoo.

The RCMP employs in excess of 28,000 police and public service employees. It is one of the most powerful bureaucracies in Canada. Organizationally it has significant political power and, as with all of its policing duties, it takes its Scottish heritage very seriously and protects it with zeal.

### **'Bring Forrit the Tartan'**

This article in the *RCMP Quarterly*, Winter 1999 by then Inspector Graham Muir (mentioned above), describes this. When one considers the size, bureaucracy and complexity of the force it is remarkable that, after many setbacks, including news that the tartan issue was 'off the burner', the year-long celebrations for the 125th March West anniversary 'breathed new life into the cause'. A working-level committee of senior NCOs and a Superintendent, the 'RCMP 125 Tartan Sub-Committee' was formed and the RCMP tartan accreditation process was begun. Commissioner Phillip Murray in cooperation with senior commanders in each Division approved the production of an RCMP tartan and accompanying uniform details.

There is a saying in the RCMP that 'there is right way, a wrong way and the RCMP way of doing things and sometimes it works for you and sometimes against you regardless of the logic'. In this case the RCMP way prevailed.

After a long and complicated series of design meetings that included deciding which historic representative colours from the North West Mounted Police expeditionary March West in 1873 would be symbolically represented in the final kilt design. Input into the colours of the tartan, came from RCMP employees across Canada, with the final design unique to the vision of artist Violet Holmes, wife of retired Assistant Commissioner Les Holmes; it bears a clear resemblance to the MacLeod of Harris sett honouring NWMP Commissioner James MacLeod. The selected colours included the dark blue of riding breeches. The scarlet red of the tunic is the colour of the RCMP 'red serge' jacket and represents the time when it was worn 'in the service of Her Majesty' throughout the Empire. Yellow, the cavalry stripe worn historically, is still found on today's working uniform on the trousers and hat band. The modern badge, with centre piece of a bison's head, is represented in the tartan by sienna brown, and the forest green represents the maple leaf, distinctively Canadian and at the heart of the national flag.

A Certificate of Accreditation was awarded by the Scottish Tartans Society in 1988 and, in the same year, the tartan was formally presented to the RCMP by HRH The Princess Anne at Fredericton, New Brunswick on the 125th anniversary of the March West. The RCMP tartan is a metaphor symbolically central to the founding of the North West Mounted Police of 1873, later to become the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1920. Within its

encoded weave and colours, it represents the uniforms and heraldry worn by the officers and men who set out as an expeditionary military force of 275 men with policing powers in the summer of 1873. The success of the March West was a defining moment in the Canadian account of settlement, border security and in the nation building of the Canada we know today. Scots influence was central to its formation and success.

### **Tension on the Prairies and Scots Influence**

Four Scots are central to the success of this intervention: Sir John A Macdonald, born in Glasgow in 1815, the first Prime Minister of Canada; Colonel James Farquharson Macleod, the NWMP Assistant Commissioner born in Drynoch, Isle of Skye and force commander; Colonel Patrick Robertson-Ross born in Edinburgh, Adjunct General of the Canadian Militia; and Jerry Potts, guide and interpreter, born in Canada of a Scottish father who was a fur trader and a Blood Indian mother.

American whisky traders who were also provocatively selling repeating rifles to the natives were crossing the 49th Parallel from Montana. Alarm was raised about border sovereignty and the risk of outright war with the natives, combined with the deleterious effects of whisky trading that could have had a disastrous effect on the predicted advance of the railroad and the settlers who would follow. In 1872 Colonel Patrick Robertson-Ross, was sent out on a fact-finding mission to the North West region. He recommended 'that a cavalry regiment of 550 with riflemen be organized to preserve order in the territory [...]' and wear 'British Scarlet' uniforms to 'starkly distinguish them from the blue-coated American soldiers whom the plains Indians feared and despised'.

### **The Final Straw, The Cypress Hills Massacre**

News was received in the Canadian parliament in Ottawa in 1873 that a massacre of Assiniboine native Indians had taken place at Cypress Hills by American wolf hunters who were on their way back to Montana through Alberta. Clearly, parliamentary action was required and an Act was finally passed in May 1873, driven by the prone-to-procrastination Prime Minister, Sir John A MacDonald who had a deep concern of the need to populate Alberta if he wanted to keep it within Canada and maintain a transcontinental nation. Scarred by the Red River rebellion among the Métis in 1869-70, he could not afford to have a native uprising.

### **The Formation of the North West Mounted Police (NWMP)**

MacDonald had sufficient parliamentary influence to establish a military force, based on the Royal Irish Constabulary, with policing powers and Justice of the Peace status, to march west and establish authority, protect and build good relationships with the native people, punish the guilty, deal with the illegal whisky trading and bring law and order to the province. Recruitment took place, and by 1874 a force of 275 officers and troops formed into six divisions assembled in Dufferin, Manitoba, ready to make the 1200-mile trek west in what was to become known as the March West. Their contingent, which included 114 Red River carts, 73 wagons, and two -pounder





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field guns was led by James Farquharson Macleod. The columns would head south west for Fort Whoop Up, known as the centre of the whisky trade, gun running, border incursions and general lawlessness in Southern Alberta.

### **The March West**

Problems began almost immediately. After a grand brass band celebration in front of politicians and locals, the brightly uniformed command struck out across the prairies. Within days they discovered that their bay horses, selected for parade ground appearance, rather than the unforgiving prairie territory and indigestible grass forage, were completely unsuited for the terrain; they began to die in scores. It was almost a disaster from the beginning. As recommended, but over-ridden, they should have had the tough western mustang horses who were adapted to a prairie diet.

The uniforms, red serge tunics, dark blue trousers and pith helmets were also unsuitable in the ferocious prairie summer heat. The route chosen by the government to reinforce sovereignty took them close to the US Canadian border extending the distance to travel and creating its own problems. Lack of drinkable water became acute.

Slowly and painfully, with the men often walking and supporting their horses by putting covers on them to protect them from the heat and sleeping beside them in the cold nights, the columns made their way across the prairies to Fort Whoop Up only to find it abandoned. They had, however, reached the beginning of their objective. After resting up and looking after both the men and horses they were ready to undertake their mandate which they did with tenacity, vigour and determination ably led by A/Commissioner James Macleod and guided by the influential and somewhat dangerous, highly intelligent Jerry Potts, the legendary half Scots half Indian, whose intensive knowledge of the territory, native tribes and languages was absolutely crucial to the success of the expedition.

### **Managing Sitting Bull**

By the 1880's the entire area was transformed and stability had been achieved. This included managing Chief Louis Sitting Bull of the Lakotas who had recently come across the border a year after the Battle of Little Big Horn. According to legend they were met, to their amazement and admiration by only two NWMP officers. It is reported that many of his warriors still had US cavalry scalps visible on their horses. To the Lakotas Canada was known as 'Grandmother's Land.'

In Ottawa there was considerable concern about their presence in Canada. Under the leadership of Colonel MacLeod and with the essential services of the interpreter Jerry Potts, danger was averted and they settled. At one point they and their families numbered in the thousands. They received protection until the buffalo, having been systematically wiped out, disappeared. Sitting Bull gave up his dream of independence and asked the Canadian government for rations. In 1881, five years after the battle of Little Big Horn, Sitting Bull reluctantly returned to the US where he became a victim of the dreadful reservation system.



## Law and Order achieved and the way paved for the Railroad

Law and order had been achieved in the west and sovereignty and the borders had been established beyond doubt. Stanford Fleming, a Scot from Kirkcaldy, Fife considered the foremost railway and construction engineer of the 19th century and inventor of standard time, later was present when the last spike in the transcontinental railway was driven at Craigellachie, British Columbia in 1885. The Canadian Pacific Railway Company had linked the country from East to West, achieved only by peace on the prairies brought about by the North West Mounted Police, the originating force that became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1920.

The March West, with its critically important Scottish influence, is at the very heart of the history and traditions of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and is taught at the legendary RCMP 'Depot' training centre in Regina. It was re-enacted on the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March West and the founding of the force. In the same year the RCMP tartan was presented by HRH The Princess Royal.

### Edinburgh 2015

Boarded at the University of Edinburgh Pollock Halls Campus, The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Pipes, Drums & Dancers performed at the 2015 Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo for the very first time. They were led by Drum Major Graham Muir. I was there.

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#### Author's Note:

With thanks to the RCMP; D/Comm'r Peter German (ret'd); A/Comm'r Graham Muir (ret'd) and Drum Major RCMP Composite band, REMT 2015; A/Comm'r Frank Richter (ret'd); S/Sgt Bill Shumborski (ret'd); Sgt Jean Caron (ret'd); Drum Major Jared Redekopp, K Division, Alberta.

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