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The Great March of the Mounted Police in Popular Literature, 1873-1973

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Article abstract

La littérature populaire qui s'est penchée sur l'histoire de la gendarmerie royale a toujours laissé entendre que la longue marche de 1874 avait effectivement apporté l'ordre et la paix dans l'ouest canadien. Cette conclusion, de dire l'auteur, on la tire beaucoup plus en raison de la manière dont on a structuré le récit qu'en fonction de l'analyse objective que l'on a pu faire de l'événement. En effet, certains grands admirateurs de ce corps policier ont façonné la grande marche en suivant le modèle traditionnel du mythe du héros.

Selon ce modèle, un certain nombre d'étapes doivent être franchies avant d'accéder au titre de héros. Le sujet doit d'abord être appelé à l'aventure ou à une façon de vivre hors de l'ordinaire; habituellement, son entrée dans ce monde nouveau est marquée par une circonstance extraordinaire qu'il doit maîtriser; il séjourne ensuite au milieu d'éléments qui lui sont tantôt favorables, tantôt contraires; puis, quand il a triomphé de toutes les difficultés, il est récompensé et il sort de l'expérience grandi et héroïque: il est alors prêt à retourner dans le monde ordinaire.

La longue marche de la gendarmerie, en 1874, ayant été décrite et racontée en tenant compte de toutes ces étapes, l'on comprend facilement que certains en soient venus à considérer la situation dans l'ouest canadien comme étant une conséquence directe des actes accomplis par leurs héros en cette fin du XIX^{e} siècle.

*The Great March of the Mounted Police in Popular Literature, 1873-1973**

KEITH WALDEN

I

In the popular literature dealing with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the achievement of order in various parts of the Dominion was viewed as one of the fundamental accomplishments of the force. Much of the narrative of police history has recounted the way in which the Mounties brought stability and peace to a succession of frontiers, making these formerly wild areas habitable by ordinary settlers or at least amenable to the norms of white civilization. The story of the Klondike provided a classic example and the conclusions of R.L. Neuberger, for one, were typical:

> Dawson was the center of the stampede for gold. Until the Mounties came, it was the wildest and wickedest place in North America. Gamblers and pickpockets and evil women preyed on the miners who had chamois-skin pouches full of gold dust.
>
> After the arrival of the Mounties, things were different.[1]

Dawson became "as quiet and orderly as a New England hamlet."[2] When historians of the force described the push of the police into the northern interior and the Arctic, their message was the same:

> . . .out of seeming chaos emerged order. As an old-timer, a real 'sour-dough', put it to the writer: 'Those Police fellers got a cinch on the country from the word go, an' they never let up. They ran the place, sir, like an all-fired day and night school. . . .'[3]

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* The term "literature" is used here in its wider sense of printed matter generally, rather than simply fiction.

1. Richard L. Neuberger, *Royal Canadian Mounted Police* (New York, 1953), p. 82. Also, Irvin Block, *The Real Book About the Mounties* (Garden City, 1952), p. 78.
2. Jeremiah Lynch, *Three Years in the Klondike* (Chicago, 1967; originally published, 1904), p. 32. See also Nora Kelly and William Kelly, *The Royal Canadian Mounted Police: A Century of History, 1873-1973* (Edmonton, 1973), pp. 90, 99, 101-2; Henry J. Woodside, "Dawson As It Is", *Canadian Magazine*, XVII (September 1901), p. 408; Muriel Denison, *Susannah of the Yukon* (New York, 1937), p. 29.
3. A.L. Haydon, *The Riders of the Plains: A Record of the Royal North-West Mounted Police of Canada, 1873-1910* (Toronto, 1912; reprint ed., Edmonton, 1973), p. 227. Also R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Canadian Mounted Police* (New York, 1938), p. 132.

The Canadian North, as a result, was "as close to being crimeless as any place on earth."[4]

This tale of the triumph of order in the Arctic and sub-Arctic reaches, however, was only a continuation of the lesson taught by the force's encounter with its first area of operations, the prairie West. Its initial achievements had apparently been repeated in the regions of its later endeavors. Because the force had been successful in the first instance, it seemed reasonable to assume that it had duplicated its accomplishments later on. The starting point for this theme of order, therefore, lay in the description of what the men in scarlet had achieved on the plains. In the histories of the police, great emphasis was placed on the way in which their arrival transformed the West. The emphasis was doubly understandable since this chronicle was also the story of the beginnings of the force itself.

The histories of the force made it clear that to understand the significance of the police accomplishment in the West, it was first necessary to understand the character of that area before their arrival. The Northwest was not merely the prairie, the uninhabited empire of the settled parts of Canada. It was wilderness. It was a vast tract of empty, threatening, unknown land. In the often quoted words of Captain William Butler, it was "the great lone land". Butler insisted that his use of the phrase was not unduly romantic or sensational. "There is no other portion of the globe in which travel is possible," he claimed, "where loneliness can be said to dwell so thoroughly. One may wander 500 miles in a direct line without seeing a human being, or an animal larger than a wolf."[5] Butler's view seemed authoritative because he had been there, and his judgement of the area, formed even before the force came into existence, was echoed long afterwards by police historians. In 1950, for example, John Peter Turner described the West just before the arrival of the scarlet troopers:

> For more than 600 miles across this vast domain of primitive man, there stretched a huge glacial moraine. . . . Reaching far up into Canada, awesome, treeless and windswept, its interminable undulations stood as a warning rampart to a land given over to buffalo and restless nomads — a world as it were beyond the world. It was a conspicuous setting for an unprecedented and inevitable transition.[6]

At worst the plains were "a howling wilderness"; at best they were "something of a mystery."[7]

If the great lone land was seen as being formidable, it was nonetheless appropriately splendid for the deeds of the mounted police. It was a stage magnificently set on which an equally magnificent and dashing troop could play out its glorious

4. Douglas Spettigue, *The Friendly Force* (Toronto, New York, London, n.d.), p. 89. See also T.C. Bridges and H.H. Tiltman, *More Heroes of Modern Adventure* (London, 1931), pp. 215-6; Fetherstonhaugh, p. 94.
5. Captain W.F. Butler, *The Great Lone Land* (London, 1873), p. v.
6. John Peter Turner, *The North-West Mounted Police, 1873-1893*, two volumes, (Ottawa, 1950), I, p. 127.
7. Roger Pocock, *Tales of Western Life* (Ottawa, 1888), p. 77; Haydon, p. 5.

role. The setting added dignity, grandeur, and exoticness to the task of the young force. The size, the isolation, the harshness of the land, all suggested that the police had undertaken an incredible assignment. Moreover, the lone land, completely vacant and unsettled, provided a scale by which to measure the achievements of the newcomers. If there was nothing there before they arrived, their impact would be very easy to chart.

The challenge of the plains, however, lay not simply in their breadth and exacting environment. The great land, it seemed, was not so lone after all. Some people did inhabit the West and they were felt to be creating a great deal of trouble. The Indians, in the minds of the historians of the force, clearly represented one element of disorder. "Thousands of the most war-like of Western Indians" inhabited the prairies, observed R.G. MacBeth. They had been required, suggested Peter Turner, to acknowledge "no guidance other than their own violent passions and ways of life."[8] A second source of anxiety lay in the presence of increasing numbers of "outlaws and killers and whiskey traders"[9] who descended on Canadian territory from the United States. These "reckless men" had "ruined the Indians and brought on quarrels with them for the sake of gain."[10] Drunken brawls which led to murder and rape were supposedly standard amusements.[11] A most graphic illustration of what was happening was provided, according to many historians, by the Cypress Hills massacre of 1873 in which some thirty Canadian Assiniboines were shot by white wolf-hunters.[12] If this kind of depredation continued, the entire West could have erupted into Indian war.[13]

Before the arrival of the police, then, according to most observers of the force, the West was clearly "characterized by a spirit of lawlessness."[14] Disorder prevailed.

> Along the wide Border was no law or order,
> The redman debased by the bootlegger's sway.
> Unprincipled trader and 'Fort Whoop-up raider,'
> The Montana 'Long-knives' were lords of the day.
> 'Mid orgies and mysteries, there were wailings and miseries;
> Bloodlust and hatred were thereby revived.
> But, at this crucial moment, with chaos in foment,
> Commissioner French and his Mounted arrived.[15]

8. R.G. MacBeth, *Policing the Plains* (London, n.d.), p. 57; Turner, I, p. 382. See also Samuel B. Steele, *Forty Years in Canada* (Toronto, 1915), p. 53.
9. Block, p. 35.
10. Steele, p. 53.
11. Alan Phillips, *The Living Legend: The Story of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police* (Boston and Toronto, 1957), p. 282. See also Turner, I, p. 237; Haydon, p. 13; MacBeth, p. 59.
12. Spettigue, p. 4; Kelly and Kelly, p. 17; T.M. Longstreth, *The Scarlet Force: The Making of the Mounted Police* (Toronto, 1953), p. 3; MacBeth, p. 33.
13. Phillips, p. 282.
14. Haydon, p. 34.
15. George E. White, "A Ballad of the West", *Royal Canadian Mounted Police Quarterly*, VIII (1940), p. 121.

It did not take long for these new arrivals to change the situation completely.

The difference was astounding! "The change that had come over the district", claimed A.L. Haydon, "was certainly remarkable." People who before had locked their doors firmly and feared to let any possession out of their sight now left their doors unlocked at night without any concern.[16] John Peter Turner felt that Canada owed perpetual tribute to those "who established law where no law existed, spoke order into existence wherever order was threatened", while T. Morris Longstreth was so overwhelmed by what the police had done that he could only explain it in terms of magic. The force, he said, "had virtually laid a spell on an immense territory which had reached the verge of anarchy."[17]

The mounted police, according to the popular view, had imposed civilization on the West. They were the "vanguard of ordered sovereignty and occupation."[18] But what generated particular admiration was the way in which they were perceived to have accomplished this feat. Those who retold the story of the scarlet troopers had no difficulty explaining how the police had been able to subdue the forces of chaos and transform the region so dramatically in such a short space of time. A few observers stressed the fact that the older inhabitants of the West were made aware of the raw power of the newcomers. T.M. Longstreth, for example, described how the police introduced field guns to the Indians: ". . .a tree across the river was pointed out to them. It disappeared. The chiefs professed it remarkable medicine. . . . The conquest of the West can be said to date from this occasion."[19] Of course, the power demonstrated was not only negative and violent. The Indians also succumbed to the magic of free food and gifts of tobacco, things which the police seemed to have in inexhaustible supply.[20] For most commentators, however, the success of the force was not simply to be attributed to armed might and a well-stocked larder. The success of the force, to a great extent, was also seen to be the result of the rigorousness with which it upheld the law.

Right from the start, the police cracked down on wrong-doers. Immediately upon reaching their destination, it was stressed, the whiskey trade had been suppressed:

> As soon as they arrived, Assistant Commissioner Macleod and his men dug into the work of ridding the country of the treacherous whiskey traders who were spreading drunkeness and crime among the Indians. War on whiskey was declared and the Mounties proved to be expert sleuths, tracking down the most cleverly hidden caches of 'fire-water.'[21]

16. Haydon, pp. 37-8.
17. Turner, II, p. 576; Longstreth, *The Scarlet Force*, p. 67. See also *The Globe* (Toronto), 10 May 1876; *The Mail* (Toronto), 8 October 1881; E.E. Hariman, "The R.N.W.M.P. As An American Sees It", *Scarlet and Gold* (1919), p. 10.
18. John Peter Turner, "When the Mounted Police Went West — Part II", *Canadian Geographical Journal*, X (March 1935), p. 144.
19. Longstreth, *The Silent Force* (New York, 1927), p. 53. See also Kelly and Kelly, p. 46.
20. Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 61.
21. Block, p. 30.

"Prospects suddenly had become gloomy for the whiskey runners", declared R.L. Neuberger. "They never knew when a scarlet-coated trooper on horseback would confront them along the trail."[22] As well, the police were credited with putting a quick end to the intertribal warfare which, until their advent supposedly had been the outstanding feature of western existence. The force put an end "to the frequent and bloody wars that had prevailed previously between the various tribes", said Ralph Connor.[23] "Between hitherto warring tribes there was peace", agreed John Peter Turner, "attributable to the tact, firmness and fair dealing of the North-West Mounted Police." "The savage", he wrote, "had been made to bow to a calm, dignified and irresistible mandate."[24]

Turner was typical in suggesting that the key to the success of the police in subduing the disorderly elements of the West lay not in exercises of raw power, but rather in demonstrations of their fairness and consistency. These in turn were derived from their adherence to the concept of law. If the idea of law was to operate successfully, it had to be properly explained. According to the popular accounts, this is exactly what the police undertook to do. They made it clear that all inhabitants of the West "had to observe the laws of the land."[25] R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, for example, described how Colonel Macleod explained to the Blackfoot Indians "the simple laws his unit would enforce, emphasized how these laws would apply to white men and Indians alike, and assured the gratified chiefs that . . . no Indians need fear punishment for the breach of laws he did not understand nor for actions he did not know to be wrong."[26] This process was not necessarily as simple as it sounded, for often the law had to be explained just when it was about to be broken by individuals who derived great enjoyment from doing exactly that. To prevent this, the force conducted what T.M. Longstreth described as "such a campaign of patient gentleness . . . as would be given explosions of notoriety in this day."

> Each of the officers in turn . . . and many of the men played in the same piece: a report of insubordination, ten men listed for special duty, a swift ride, a surprise, a show of firmness, the shine of teeth, a refusal to be initimidated, an explanation of justice, a pound of tobacco, and the point was gained. The excellence, the hardihood of the acting can only be realized by counting up the miles, the hundreds of miles, of dangerous distance lying between these scenes and reinforcements.[27]

Explaining the law, it was made clear, was often done at great risk.

After describing how the police made sure that the Indians had grasped the law, historians recounted how they enforced the law fairly and justly:

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22. Neuberger, p. 49. See also Kelly and Kelly, p. 43.
23. Charles William Gordon [Ralph Connor], *Corporal Cameron of the North-West Mounted Police* (New York, 1912), p. 355.
24. Turner, I, pp. 346, 382, also, p. 379; Kelly and Kelly, p. 46; and Haydon, p. 69.
25. MacBeth, p. 62.
26. Fetherstonhaugh, p. 26. Also Haydon, p. 38.
27. Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, pp. 77-8.

"Offenders, regardless of who they were, were clapped into jail, fined and sternly warned that the law had come to Western Canada and was there to stay."[28] Histories of the force were full of anecdotes which demonstrated that the police would not back away from this commitment regardless of the dangers to themselves.

For many historians then, the clarity of the law and the uniformity of its application went a long way to explain how the force had transformed the West so dramatically. But this process was also accomplished quickly, in their view, because the Indians had intuitively discerned that the mounted police were a force for good. This widespread belief was perhaps most obvious in the accounts of the meeting between Crowfoot and Colonel Macleod. R.C. Fetherstonhaugh drew an imaginative picture of the Blackfoot chief's response to the then Assistant-Commissioner's speech explaining why the police had come to the West and what they intended to do:

> Listening intently . . . it was borne in upon the minds of Crowfoot and his chiefs that in this stalwart figure wearing the uniform of the Queen there was no guile . . . . they were impressed by the transparent honesty of the man himself and by his soldierly and gentlemanly bearing. Well pleased, as a result, they left the fort and spread the news that in this Redcoat who served the Queen they had found a white man who knew no fear, whose favor no money could buy, yet one who, unless an astounding error had been made, was indeed the Indian's friend.[29]

T.M. Longstreth's reconstruction of the scene was very similar:

> Crowfoot, missing nothing with those trained eyes of his, spoke at last with his gaze fixed on Macleod of the bison-like beard. . . . 'The law of the White Mother is good when she has a son like you. I shall obey that law. I and my people.'[30]

In the popular mind, Crowfoot's judgement represented the feelings of the vast majority of Indians. The force, as R.G. MacBeth observed, "became from the first in the eyes of the Indians the embodiment of genuine friendship and British fair play."[31]

Obviously, commentators on the force were at no loss to explain how the police had been able to impose such beneficial order on the western plains in such a short space of time. Because they came from a superior and more powerful culture and because they were so obviously fair and consistent in all their dealings, the Mounties had worked a veritable miracle. Within the logic of these assumptions, this explanation of the transformation of the Canadian West made a great deal of sense. In view of the fact that until very recently (and, arguably, even now) most whites sincerely believed their cultures were morally and materially superior to those of non-white peoples, there was very little inclination

28. Block, p. 30; see also Neuberger, p. 51.
29. Fetherstonhaugh, p. 26.
30. Longstreth, *The Scarlet Force*, p. 52. See also Block, p. 31; Kelly and Kelly, p. 45.
31. MacBeth, p. 66.

to challenge this interpretation. Of course the primitive and backward Indians accepted the fruits of an advanced society! And when the agents of that society were as transparently benevolent as the mounted police, it was no wonder that the change was so sudden. The Indians, having nothing to fear, readily embraced the new order. What could be more natural?

Within this framework of assumptions, the conclusions drawn about the initial impact of the force on the West seemed very reasonable and sound. Obviously, however, these assumptions — like all assumptions — had a heavy cultural bias. Several of them, on closer inspection, are perhaps somewhat naive. What people, no matter how badly off, so willingly accept the intrusion of outsiders into their affairs or the disruption of their traditional customs? What human beings could really have been as altruistic, as humane, as consistent as the Mounties were made out to be? Or again, does it seem plausible that such a small group of men could master so quickly and so completely such a large territory and one, moreover, which was completely new to all of them? These things do not make sense. Any immigrant experience involves a long, subtle process of adaptation to a new environment and of interaction with the existing inhabitants of the new region. Such subtlety was completely missing from the traditional accounts of police history. What was presented instead was a simplistic epic of how the forces of goodness and truth quickly dispelled the powers of darkness. Moreover, the characters in this colourful drama were almost invariably sketched in hues of pure white or pure black. The conventional explanations of how the police brought order to the West just do not ring true, either to real human psychology or genuine frontier experience. They do ring true to myth.

The story of how the police brought order to the West occupied a large place in the annals of the North-West Mounted Police. Historians of the force realized, however, that before the public could believe that the men in scarlet had imposed order on the external world, it was necessary to prove that they had imposed order on themselves. Integral to this western success story was the description of the primal event in the formation of the famous corps. The great march to the West in 1874 from Dufferin, Manitoba, to Fort Whoop-Up in the shadow of the Rockies was, in the minds of these who wrote the history of the force, clearly central to an understanding of its inner spirit and achievements. By comprehending the deeper significance of the great march in their minds, it may be easier to understand why the distorted image of this early period was so largely unquestioned.

II

As S.W. Horrall has pointed out, the great march to the West has always had a special place in the traditions of the force: "Over the years, the March West has occupied the thoughts of the members of the Force more than any other event in its history."[32] This is interesting in view of the fact that the march was by no means a glorious triumph. It has suffered, wrote Ronald Atkin,

32. S.W. Horrall, "The March West", in H.A. Dempsey, ed., *Men in Scarlet* (Calgary, n.d.), p. 14.

> . . .embarrassing exaggerations and has invariably been hailed as an epic. It was certainly an epic of endurance and determination; but it was also epic in its lack of organization, in the poor way in which it was conducted and in its incredibly close brush with disaster. . . . long before the end survival had overtaken success as the main aim of the expedition.[33]

That survival, it might also be pointed out, was to a large extent dependent on the very whiskey traders the force had been sent to control in the first place.[34]

A few writers disregarded the problems of the march and blandly assumed that it was a complete and unqualified success. Norma Sluman, for example, described the police at the end of the trek as being in high spirits and "dressed splendidly".[35] A little research would have indicated that, in fact, many of the men were sick and exhausted, and that their uniforms were in tatters. Most writers, however, even though they were not as critical as they might have been, did not try to hide the difficulties of the march. Indeed, it was the hardships and trials, succcessfully endured, which in their view, gave its participants a claim to fame.

If the mounted police had been the first to venture into the unknown West, this interpretation might make some sense. However, in light of the fact that similar, largely unheralded journeys had been made previously and been made much more competently — most notably perhaps by the boundary survey group — it seems odd that the great march of the mounted police should have earned so much attention and glory. Though observers of the force claimed that the actual march was significant, it is obvious that its historical importance, in their view, was to be derived from an appreciation of the force itself, an appreciation which made more sense in light of its later accomplishments. It was natural that those who admired the force would look back to its earliest days and expect to find there some explanation for what they felt to be its magnificent record. Not surprisingly, they found what they were looking for. In their minds, the great march was the mechanism which transformed a group of ordinary young men into a remarkable frontier corps. In their hands, the great march became an account of the creation of heroes.

Anthropologists, literary critics, psychologists, and many others have long been interested in the general phenomenon of hero myths. From their labours to record and understand the stories told by all human societies, it has become clear that almost all legends of heroes share a strikingly similar pattern. Some people, pointing to such things as dreams and rites-of-passage rituals, have even suggested that this is a universal structure fundamental to human perceptions of the meaning of life. Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* charted

33. Ronald Atkin, *Maintain the Right: The Early History of the North-West Mounted Police, 1873-1900* (London, Toronto, 1973), p. 60.
34. Roderick Charles Macleod, *The North-West Mounted Police and Law Enforcement, 1873-1905* (Toronto, Buffalo, 1976), p. 23.
35. Norma Sluman, *Blackfoot Crossing* (Toronto, 1959), p. 228. See also *New York Times*, 6 August 1933.

what he called the "monomyth" of the hero and his analysis of this seemingly archetypal structure confirmed and clarified the conclusions drawn by other scholars.[36] Campbell distinguished three basic stages in the hero myth and within each stage identified various recurring motifs. In the first stage, "the call to adventure", the hero or the collective hero is summoned from ordinary life to "the threshold of adventure", the point at which he must leave the normal world and his commonplace previous existence to take up an unusual but vital task. The hero may be lured away or forced away from his former state, or he may leave voluntarily, but either way he moves towards a state of existence clearly differentiated from the usual. In this stage, he may be given aid or advice or charms by some cosmic helper who understands, even if the hero does not, the essential purpose and importance of his mission. When the hero arrives at the "threshold of adventure" and crosses into the supranormal realm, the event is marked by a happening of obvious import. Whether he is crucified, attacked by a dragon, or placed in a boat to drift on the oceans, he is subjected to an experience which clearly indicates that he has crossed a boundary into another world. Once he breaks across this threshold, "the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces", some of which threaten him, some of which give him aid. If he successfully deals with these powers, if he triumphs over the supreme ordeal which he must face in the nether world, he gains a reward. This may be symbolized by a sexual union, by the acquisition of some valuable device or elixir, or by a transformation in himself. Whatever it is, it is something remote and highly esteemed by humankind. Once this point has been reached, the hero is ready to return to the ordinary world. Again, at the threshold between the two realms there is a struggle as the forces of darkness make one last attempt to keep the hero in thrall. When he does finally win re-entry into the normal sphere, he is equipped to bestow on it advantages which have accrued to him from the successful completion of his ordeal. This is the essential pattern of the hero myth and, as Campbell has so aptly demonstrated, it can be found in every hero tale from the legends of the Buddha to the stories of Horatio Alger and beyond. More surprisingly, perhaps, it can as well be found in the supposedly factual history of the great march of the mounted police.

The typical myth of the hero begins with the call to adventure, which in this case, clearly, was the announcement that the government intended to open the West. In some myths, the hero has to be coerced or seduced into undertaking his mission. This was not so with the mounted police. As the historians made clear, they were not reluctant voyagers. Irvin Block, for example, described the reaction of the men to Colonel French's address to them on the eve of the march:

36. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, 1972); [Fitzroy Richard Somerset] Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (London, 1949), pp. 177-99; Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and Other Writings* (New York, 1964), pp. 3-96. Also interesting are A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London, 1960); and Wendell C. Beane and William G. Doty, eds., *Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader*, two volumes, (New York and Toronto, 1976), I, pp. 164-7. It should be emphasized that there are disagreements about the meaning of this pattern, but its existence is not questioned.

> Trumpeter Bagley's voice rang out clearly, 'Ready, sir — ready to follow you anywhere!' Bagley looked about and blushed. He had called out without thinking — he had not been able to control himself.
>
> But his blush of embarrassment turned to a radiant glow as the ranks of grinning men took up his shout. Three hundred Mounties stood in their stirrups, lifted their snow-white helmets and heaved them into the air so that it seemed the sky above them was thronged with swooping white gulls.
>
> 'Ready!' was the word that was shouted by three hundred throats. 'Ready!' filled the valley. 'Ready! Ready! Ready to go!'[37]

T.M. Longstreth was equally insistent about the enthusiasm of the men. The policemen

> . . .were now facing the unknown with an elation that can come to a man hardly oftener than once a lifetime. As they headed into that unpeopled vacancy of golden summer, the light-drenched distances before them formed a fit setting for their unbounded spirits.[38]

Of course, there were some problems. Not all recruits looked forward to the arduous nature of the task, and it had to be admitted that a substantial number had deserted across the American border. Colonel French, according to the story, conscious that a large portion of his force might drift away even before its work had begun, countered this threat by calling a full-dress parade. With the whole corps assembled, he proceeded to outline the dangers and discomforts which could be expected on the journey and then suggested that those not willing to face these trials might leave the force immediately without penalty. Accounts vary as to whether any men took up his offer,[39] but there was complete agreement that this marked a significant point in the history of the police.

> Though it is seldom possible to name with assurance the moment when the traditions of a military force are born, it would seem that on the day of Lieutenant-Colonel French's appeal the North-West Mounted Police came into its own.[40]

At this point, it was felt, the misfits had been weeded out. "The weak had already been separated from the strong, the timid from the brave."[41] The work of the force required men of heroic stature and not all men were heroes. Those who were not, understandably refused the call to adventure. Their desertions were to be expected. The remainder took up the call willingly and prepared to "meet the unknown out there where grass merged with sky."[42] They willingly chose to become, as Longstreth so appropriately put it, "the confidant of mystery".[43]

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37. Block, p. 24. See also Phillips, p. 284.
38. Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 27.
39. Spettigue, Longstreth, and Block, for example, claimed that no men accepted French's offer; Phillips and Nora and William Kelly suggested that a few did leave.
40. Fetherstonhaugh, pp. 12-3.
41. Spettigue, p. 6. See also Block, p. 25; Kelly and Kelly, p. 28; Haydon, p. 22.
42. Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 20.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Those who genuinely belonged in the mounted police, the true heroes, accepted the call to adventure without hesitation. Their confidence was well founded for they, like most heroes, had a helper of such stature and potency that their mission could hardly fail. That helper was none other than Sir John Alexander Macdonald. The first prime minister, it was emphasized, was the founder of the force, the man who had dreamed it into being. The police "were one of Macdonald's inspirations",[44] and he moulded them to the vision he had in his mind's eye.[45] Nor did he abandon them after the creation: they were his "pet scheme"[46] and he made sure that they "always remained under his eye".[47]

> . . .in all his administrations the Premier kept the control of the Force in his own hands; it was, in a sense, his own pet scheme, and he saw to it that both in its military and civil capacities the corps maintained its efficiency and smartness in the highest degree. Thanks to his guidance the North-West Mounted Police passed through their early stormy years to a place in the country's regard which few were found to cavil at.[48]

One writer even went so far as to claim that Macdonald "initiated the idea of a special police force for the Yukon and the allied Territories."[49] If he did, it must have been from beyond the grave.

It is obvious why so many writers wanted to see such a close association between Macdonald and the mounted police. By linking the two, it was natural to think that the vision which brought the force into being was part and parcel of the vision which had inspired Canada itself. Macdonald's interest seemed to imply that the formation of this dedicated corps was part of the act of national creation. The force, therefore, was an instrument of national growth and not a repressive, negating element in Canadian life. It was central to the Canadian experience and an essential element in the ongoing success of the nation.

Like any good mythological helper, Macdonald not only pushed his heroes gently on their way; he was also credited with giving them a number of devices and aids to help them in their quest. For one thing, he decided that the new body would be called a police force rather than a military corps. In the realm of myth, names are important and this one was designed to soften the image of the new body and so reduce the chance of hostility towards it by both the Americans and the Indians. It was a device that offered protection from two powerful enemies.[50] As well, Macdonald decided that the uniform of the force would be as simple as possible. There would be no "frills and feathers", no unnecessary encumbrances which would detract from the completion of the task. The wise, old sage knew that the renown of the true hero came from what was inside, not from what was

44. J.G.A. Creighton, "The Northwest Mounted Police of Canada", *Scribner's Magazine*, XIV (October 1893), p. 399.
45. Haydon, p. 18. See also Kelly and Kelly, p. 14; Longstreth, *The Scarlet Force*, p. 4.
46. Agnes Deans Cameron, "The Riders of the Plains", *Cornhill Magazine*, n.s., XXXIV (January 1913), pp. 90-1.
47. Creighton, p. 399. Also, Fetherstonhaugh, p. 64.
48. Haydon, p. 170.
49. J.B. Kennedy, "Scarlet of the Mounted", *The Mentor*, XXVI (March 1928), p. 4.

tacked on to the exterior. The uniform of the troopers would be as simple as their motives were pure. Finally, Macdonald decided that the uniforms of the force would be red in colour. Knowing that red was identified by the Indians with the fairness and friendship of Queen Victoria and the British Empire, he wrapped his initiates in clothing with magical powers to protect them from the hostile forces they would encounter. These were all powerful aids. They did not guarantee the success of the mission — in myth, of course, that depends on the inner resources of the heroes themselves — but they were a tremendous help nonetheless.

Having accepted the call to adventure and having been prepared for the ordeal by their cosmic helper, the police, like all heroes, were ready to begin their task. The date of 19 June 1874 was one of great significance in the history of the force. On that day the three newest divisions of the North-West Mounted Police arrived at Fort Dufferin from Toronto and were united there with the three older divisions. This was the first time the force as a whole had been together. That evening a storm erupted in the night. It was, said A.L. Haydon, "one of the most dreadful thunderstorms ever witnessed in the country".[51] Longstreth's account of it and its effects provides the essential details:

> The thunderstorm which fell on the Force the night after the arrival, secured for itself a permanent place in history. It nearly wrecked the expedition. An enclosure had been made for the horses by means of stakes and a long cable; outside these horse-lines the wagons were arranged in a ring, a single passage having been left at the corner. The first gusts of wind ripped open the canvas wagon-covers, whose flappings kept up a fusillade of cracking and roaring. Lightning filled the sky and glittered from the hail, coming closer and closer, finally striking, by the camp. The terrific thunder, the rush and impact of the rain, and the destructive wind crazed the horses. Panic was multiplied by numbers. Senseless, climbing one another's backs, leaping through overturned wagons to the noise of broken wood and shouting men, some of who were being trampled, they burst the barrier and streamed southward on the only way they knew. Thus were the new-comers initiated into their wild and hoped-for West.[52]

Longstreth's description emphasizes well the two important mythic motifs at work here. One is the thunder. As a symbol, the thunderbolt often represents the action of the higher world on the lower. It is a sign of supreme creative power. The lightning concomitant with thunder is usually related to dawn and illumination: it is "symbolic of the spring principle and of the initial stage of every

50. Captain Ernest J. Chambers, *The Royal Northwest Mounted Police* (Montreal, 1906; facsimile ed., 1972), p. 18; Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 8; Neuberger, p. 36; Phillips, p. 282.
51. Haydon, p. 23.
52. Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 24. See also Longstreth, *The Scarlet Force*, pp. 14, 18-9; Kelly and Kelly, p. 26; Spettigue, p. 6; Fetherstonhaugh, p. 11; Turner, I, p. 119; Steele, pp. 63-4. Interesting as well is the illustration by H. Julien originally published in the *Canadian Illustrated News* in 1874 and reprinted in Dempsey, p. 29.

cycle".[53] The other element is the corral. A corral is generally a circle, a circumference, and a circumference, besides being a sign of perfection and oneness, is a symbol of "the manifest world, of the precise and the regular".[54] The symbol of the corral, then, represents the ability of man to establish successfully some protective order and unity in the face of a natural world that is essentially chaotic, the ability to sustain over time in some systematic way a control over potentially disruptive cosmic forces which continually threaten society from within and without. The corral represents the power of known civilization.

Having left Fort Dufferin, the last outpost of civilization, the Mounties attempted to recreate the traditional structures which provided shelter. There was no reason to doubt the effectiveness of the wagons and wire in confining the horses. Obviously, though, they were not enough. What the famous thunderstorm of the great march indicated, was that in the realm about to be entered by the mounted police the protection offered by the known order was not enough. They were entering a sphere clearly differentiated from the normal world. They were beginning to trespass in an environment where the full creative powers of the cosmos held sway and those powers, though they held out the promise of eventual illumination, would not lightly admit any intruders. The thunderstorm marked a transition from one world to another. It indicated that ordinary existence had been left behind. Though shaken by the experience as heroes usually are, the mounted police had been fully initiated into the trials that lay in store for them. The threshold of adventure had been crossed.

Beyond the threshold, according to the archetypal pattern of the hero myth, lies a mysterious world full of strange yet familiar forces. It is a confusing, threatening, sinister environment capable of terrifying the irresolute with the unkown or seducing the unwary into peril through a false aura of normalcy. It is a place palpable with danger. In the histories of the mounted police, the plains over which the force marched in 1874 were described in very much these terms. Irvin Block pictured the prairie as a "treeless brown ocean that rolled across hundreds of miles of barren continent." Its earth was "dry and cracked", locusts had descended on it "like a black storm cloud and had devoured every blade of grass so that the land looked naked", and buffalo "lurched over the parched mounds until they staggered to their knees in a dried out wallow and died." The area was, he concluded, "a terrible, silent, death-haunted place".[55] For Alan Phillips as well, death and uncertainty were everywhere: "Heat lightning flickered in the awesome expanse of sky and thunder echoed ominously. Everywhere they saw bleached bones of buffalo."[56] Longstreth's description was fuller, but its essential features were the same:

53. J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London and Henley, 1976), p. 342.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
55. Block, p. 26, also, p. 18.
56. Phillips, p. 284.

> Mirage tantalized the men, but not one actual bush relieved the eye. The sky was brazen, the earth brown, and the sight dwelt on vacancy. Hope was parched into a semblance of fatalism. The emptiness of the land weighed on them like a mechanical power.[57]

This was not a world made for ordinary men.

Not only was the land itself portrayed in these narratives of the great march as the usual desolate, eerie, nether world of myth, it was also peopled with the destructive and hostile forces usually found there. The whiskey dealers, by the very nature of their trade, were violent, malicious, and mercurial. The Indians, with an equal potential for violence, were just as unpredictable and all-pervasive. Even the Métis guides hired by the police to pilot them to the West were sometimes accused of deceitfully leading the force astray.[58] In the stories of the great march, it was emphasized that nothing about the land or its indigenous inhabitants could be taken for granted. According to William and Nora Kelly, even the buffalo were a dangerous menace.[59]

Not only were the police portrayed as being surrounded by hostile and shadowy elements, it was also made clear that they were subjected to the hero's usual "road of trials".[60] "Dufferin has barely disappeared behind the horizon," wrote R.L. Neuberger, "before the difficulties of the trek begin to be evident."

> Water holes are few and far between. The horses gasp and choke in the midsummer prairie heat of 100 degrees. Troopers are miserably uncomfortable in their uniforms which fit like glue. When a creek is reached, the horses must drink first. The water is a muddy gumbo by the time the men can quench their thirst.
>
> Dysentery breaks out. The Constables retch in their saddles and sway weakly, trying to hold on to the reins of the horses. Grasshoppers settle on the carts and wagons in a dark cloud, devouring quantities of the precious food supplies. Prairie cholera attacks some of the men who drank too greedily of alkali water. They lose weight rapidly. All food sickens them.[61]

Neuberger might also have mentioned dust, hail, wind storms, autumn cold, a lack of wood for cooking, a scarcity of grass to feed the horses, lice, mosquitoes, prairie fires, broken carts, and worn-out boots. Other writers did.[62] The catalogue of suffering was long, but it was entirely within the keeping of the normal

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57. Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 35. Also Fetherstonhaugh, pp. 18-9; Donalda Dickie, *The Canadian West* (Toronto, 1927), p. 238.
58. Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 35; Phillips, p. 285; Kelly and Kelly, p. 38. See also Haydon, (p. 29) who described how the Métis exaggerated the threat posed by the whiskey traders, and Block, (p. 29) who emphasized the general threat of Métis violence.
59. Kelly and Kelly, pp. 37-8.
60. Campbell, p. 97.
61. Neuberger, p. 42.
62. See Kelly and Kelly, pp. 36-8; Spettigue, p. 7; Phillips, p. 284; Block, p. 28.

hero's journey. Through it all, boasted the storytellers, these adventurers did what heroes have to do: "with dogged determination, they carried through the service required of them."[63]

Many of the descriptions of the way in which the mounted police proceeded into the West emphasized a motif that has interesting symbolic connotations. The precise order of the march was frequently commented on. Spettigue, in a typical example, observed:

> The great march began with the lead troop on dark-bay horses, followed by a line of wagons hauling supplies. The next troop rode past on dark brown horses, and the next on light-chestnut mounts, leading two field guns. The remaining sections were mounted on grey, black and light-bay horses according to their troops. Last of all came a long string of Red River carts. . . .[64]

The strong linear image of the march implicit in these sorts of descriptions was reinforced by drawings of the event showing long orderly files of men spread across the prairie[65] and by the occasional more explicit reference. Block, for example, spoke of "a long, thin line of men, carts, horses and oxen" which moved across the plains.[66] Obviously, the descriptions of the march had a strong phallic aspect. In symbolic terms, perhaps this was meant to suggest, consciously or unconsciously, that the mounted police were agents of fertilization, and that as a result of their penetration into this unknown and seemingly waste land, it would bear fruit. It is also interesting to note that, in many myths, the successful completion of the hero's task depends on strict adherence to a rigidly prescribed order of activities. His discipline stands in contrast to the chaos around him. In the case of the police as well, the emphasis on the deliberate arrangement of the troopers does suggest that this was a protective device to shield them from the disorderly forces which surrounded them.

While the hero moves along his road of trials in the nether world, he may confront friendly spirits as well as hostile ones. These can also be somewhat mysterious and volatile, but their benign intercession is often crucial to the conclusion of the mission. In the myth of the great march, such a figure is readily perceived in the person of Jerry Potts. Potts was seen by historians of the force as the very embodiment of the prairie. Block, for example, called him "the spirit of the plains itself . . . as enduring as the very earth."[67] In these descriptions, Potts did indeed resemble a fabulous and slightly grotesque creature of myth:

63. Haydon, p. 33. (He was quoting Colonel French.)
64. Spettigue, p. 7. See also, for example, Haydon, p. 25; Fetherstonhaugh, p. 15; Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 27.
65. See for example Neuberger, p. 39; Longstreth, *The Scarlet Force* p. 21; Dempsey, pp. 36-7.
66. Block, p. 26.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

> Short, bow-legged, with ill-set black eyes and a long straight nose, he was given at times to much strong drink; but drunk or sober and despite a chronic cough he was capable of amazing physical effort and, as a guide, perhaps no man on the plains was his equal.[68]

He was, said another author, "picturesque and fascinating, a man of mingled emotions, one who harboured a strange complex of the white man's understanding and the Indians' elemental instinct."[69] Potts was portrayed as containing within himself all the chaos, contradiction, power and mystery of the land he was said to personify. Although he served the force as an interpreter and guide for many years after, he first became associated with it on the great march. He was hired by Colonel French in Fort Benton, Montana, when the Commissioner went there to contact Ottawa about supplies. The force by this time was lost. It had reached the junction of the Bow and Belly Rivers where Fort Whoop-Up was reputed to stand, but it found no sign of human habitation. In the mythical underworld, of course, where substance turns quickly to shadow, such an occurrence is by no means surprising. But the police did need help to find their way. Like many heroes, they required aid from some friendly indigenous power to lead them to their goal. Jerry Potts, half-Indian, half-Scot, a creature with "an uncanny sense of direction even in country he scarcely knew",[70] came to their rescue and led them to the gates of Fort Whoop-Up.[71]

It is clear that, in the accounts of the great march, the conditions and powers confronted by the police conformed to the typical environment faced by the hero in his journey through the underworld. Though nearly overwhelmed by the trials and tribulations hurled at them, the stories of the trek tell how the stalwart adventurers pressed on, sustained mainly by their own courage and endurance but also by protective charms and the aid of a friendly spirit. They marched, say the histories, from Manitoba to the foothills of the Rockies. They marched across the whole of the great western plains. But it was an enchanted landscape they traversed, and as they moved through it, emphasized the historians, they were not only transported geographically; they were also transformed physically and psychologically as well.

According to most commentators, the march was responsible for adapting the men to the conditions of the West. It transformed them into beings capable of surviving and operating successfully in the new environment which they would occupy. The achievement of the great march, said Paul Sharp, was not "in blazing a trail across the plains." The real accomplishment, he felt, was the transformation of inexperienced recruits into a hardened command, capable of

68. Fetherstonhaugh, p. 22, See also Block, p. 40.
69. Turner, I, p. 157.
70. Kelly and Kelly, p. 40.
71. Longstreth, *The Scarlet Force*, p. 39; Fetherstonhaugh, p. 22; Spettigue, p. 8; Phillips, p. 287; Neuberger, p. 50.

meeting hardship and discomfort without flinching.[72] The great march, it was believed, had turned the young troopers into rugged westerners. John Peter Turner believed that "readiness to make the best of every situation had become an essential part of duty: and the western frontier within the limits of a single month, had marked for its own many a daring and resourceful recruit."[73] T. Morris Longstreth concurred. "That sight, that sense of space and glory, that smell of living air caught them up, marked them for life, branded them as sons of those plains from which they would wish never to return."[74] They had begun the trek as inexperienced novices from the East; they ended it as "lean, tanned, hard young soldiers",[75] at home in the West.

The march was credited by some people, however, with doing much more than transforming the men into hardy plainsmen. It was also seen to be the mechanism by which the isolated individuals who comprised the force were fused into a single, effective unit. It was the furnace in which the soul of the force was fired. Those who were "weak and recreant",[76] those who lacked heroic character, were described, as has been seen, as dropping out even before the journey began. With the sluggards gone, "the force took on new life".[77] As they began their journey along the road of trials, as the powers of darkness hurled their worst against the vulnerable wanderers, the chronicles of the march record how the men responded with what was best in themselves. "As signs of settlement disappeared," wrote Turner, "love of daring and adventure stirred the resolute."[78] In the face of danger and suffering, the young policemen were described as telling stories, singing, dancing, and laughing.[79] The tests of the march, it was said, brought the men together and gave them a new sense of who they were:

> . . .in the autumn darkness and chill, surrounded by dangers known and unknown, and 700 miles from help, the men of the Northwest Mounted Police became conscious of themselves as a new unity. It was the first coming

72. Paul F. Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country: The Canadian-American West, 1865-1885* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1973), pp. 90-1. See also Neuberger, p. 43; R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, "March of the Mounties", *Beaver* (June 1940), p. 25.
73. John Peter Turner, "When the Mounted Police Went West — Part I", *Canadian Geographical Journal*, X (February 1935), p. 61.
74. Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 40.
75. *Ibid.* See also Spettigue, p. 8.
76. Turner, "When the Mounted Police Went West — Part I", p. 55; Also Norman Fergus Black, *History of Saskatchewan and the Old North-West* (Regina, 1913), p. 575.
77. Kelly and Kelly, p. 28.
78. Turner, "When the Mounted Police Went West — Part I", p. 55.
79. Harwood Steele, *Spirit of Iron: An Authentic Novel of the North-West Mounted Police* (Toronto, 1923), p. 26; Block, p. 27; Turner, "When the Mounted Police Went West — Part I", p. 61; Illustration for *Canadian Illustrated News* of 1874 by H. Julien, reproduced in Dempsey, p. 32.

> to life of a pride in their outfit. The months of training in obedience held all hands together now in a spirit of co-operation. They respected their leaders, trusted each other and themselves.[80]

Indeed, to some commentators, the march created an almost magical bond of union among the men. One novelist, describing its finish, suggested that

> These last few days had done something to the force that everyone felt — a strange welding of spirit which brought every man in the train to a common bond. . . . The force was becoming as one man now, and pride was high.[81]

The march had truly effected, in the eyes of many admirers of the police, a profound transformation.

It is difficult to say whether this famous journey was as successful in uniting the force as it was made out to be. There is some evidence to suggest the claims have been distorted. One account of the march written by a rank-and-file participant casts doubt on the assertions that men had complete confidence in their officers and that harmony prevailed. Commissioner French, according to this witness, "showed great want of ability as Commander-in-Chief", and, he reported, among the officers serious conflict existed.[82] Moreover, the phenomenal desertion rate which plagued the force during its early years in the West invites speculation as to how strong the bonds actually were among those who had allegedly been welded into one unit. Similarly, in the same period, the force seems to have had major problems with illness, which again leads to some questioning about how successful the Mounties were in adapting quickly to the western environment.[83]

However, if the popular accounts of the march do not precisely conform to what actually happened, they do conform to the typical hero myth. As Campbell pointed out, when a hero enters into the realm of adventure,

> . . .he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again — if the powers have remained unfriendly to him — his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and herewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom).[84]

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80. Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 38. See also Longstreth, *The Scarlet Force*, p. 39; Phillips, p. 288.
81. John F. Hayes, *Bugles in the Hills* (Toronto, 1955), p. 228. Also Turner, "When the Mounted Police Went West — Part II", p. 114.
82. Jean D'Artigue, *Six Years in the Canadian Northwest* (Toronto, 1882; facsimile ed., Belleville, 1972), pp. 35, 44. Also Atkin, p. 62.
83. See E.C. Morgan, "The North-West Mounted Police: Internal Problems and Public Criticism, 1874-1883", *Saskatchewan History*, XXVI (1973), pp. 41-62; and also Atkin, p. 62.
84. Campbell, p. 246.

To learn, then, that in successfully undergoing the rigours of the great march, the police had been transformed so completely is not surprising. As is usually the case, their reward involved an expansion of their powers and of their consciousness of who they were. No hero could expect less.

Once transformation has been achieved, according to the mythic framework, the adventurer is ready to leave the underworld and return to the normal realm. He is ready to bring to mankind the benefits of the struggle which he has undergone. But, in order to return, he must meet one last challenge: he must recross the threshold of adventure between the nether world and the ordinary world. The powers he has confronted will not easily relinquish him from their grasp. In light of this pattern, the accounts of the conclusion of the long march take on a new significance.

The destination of the Mounties in the West was the notorious haunt of the whiskey traders, Fort Whoop-Up. With Jerry Potts guiding them, the story goes, the police found the disreputable post and drew up in front of it. It was an ominous scene, as the description of T.M. Longstreth suggested: "The dark palisade of the fortress hid the main stronghold behind. The American flag presumptuously flapped in the wind. Whoop-Up was silent, too!"[85] Many historians emphasized the rumours which indicated that Whoop-Up was well armed with cannon, had extensive underground tunnels for defence, and was determined to fight any intruders.[86] As the police approached, however, there was no sign of life. Macleod, after positioning his field gun and placing his troops around the fort, approached its entrance with only Jerry Potts at his side. He rapped on the heavy gate. Minutes passed. "Finally, it swung open. A tall angular man with sharp eyes, a long nose and a brown pointed goatee drawled, 'Walk in, General. Walk in, General, make yourself at home.'"[87] As in hundreds of myths and folktales, a lone hero had approached a dangerous and guarded gate, only to be met at the threshold by a decrepit-looking old man. Whoop-Up offered no resistance.

Some observers lamented the fact that the fort was captured so easily. Observed Longstreth: "It was not to their liking that without a shot, without a flurry, the stronghold of the desperadoes had fallen."[88] Nevertheless, in terms of myth, the outcome was not unusual. As the noted historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, has pointed out, in many stories which recount initiatory activities, expected danger disappears when the ordeal itself is successfully undergone.[89] By confronting danger, it is banished. When the final threat to the successful completion of the great march evaporated at the entrance to the lonely fort, therefore, it was a sign that the underworld adventures of the police were about to end.

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85. Longstreth, *The Scarlet Force*, p. 40.
86. Haydon, p. 29; Neuberger, p. 52; Turner, I, p. 165.
87. Phillips, p. 287. Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 48; Kelly and Kelly, p. 41; Neuberger, p. 52; Turner, I, p. 165.
88. Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 48.
89. Beane and Doty, II, p. 411.

If the moment of separation from the normal realm came with the destruction of the corral during the thunderstorm outside Dufferin, the moment of return came when the police occupied Whoop-Up. In crossing its threshold, they were recrossing the threshold of adventure. The transformation they had undergone was symbolized by the fact that they could now maintain the kind of civilizing structure which in their uninitiated state was easily destroyed by the cosmic powers. Not only could they master the pre-existing structures of that hostile environment, they could now successfully erect their own. The first major action of the men after their capture of Whoop-Up, according to most histories, was the construction of Fort Macleod, the western headquarters of the force.[90] If additional proof were needed to show that the force had been changed, it could be found in the return march of Colonel French and some of the troopers back across the prairie to Manitoba where they were to establish their main headquarters. This time, as the same men crossed the same territory, they experienced few problems. "Nothing eventful occurred during the march", wrote Haydon.[91] With the capture of Fort Whoop-Up, the prairies, it seems, no longer constituted a kingdom of dread. They had been redeemed for normal human habitation.[92]

In myth, when the hero returns from the transcendental darkness, "the boon that he brings restores the world."[93] The fruits that he has won from his ordeal are generously spread for the rest of humankind. As the histories of the police make clear, their actions after the capture of the whiskey post, were the actions of typical heroes. One of the first things they did was to take active steps to suppress the liquor trade. Many histories recounted the story of how the police, literally within hours of arriving at the site of what was to become Fort Macleod, captured a party of whiskey traders, confiscated their pelts, and poured their vile liquor into the ground.[94] With this kind of efficiency, the suggestion that the men in scarlet had quickly eliminated the whiskey trade from their territory was not to be

90. See for example, Haydon, p. 34; Turner, I, pp. 190-1; Fetherstonhaugh, *Royal Canadian Mounted Police*, p. 23; Dickie, p. 239.

91. Haydon, p. 32. Also Longstreth, *The Silent Force*, p. 43. Even those writers who suggested that the returning troops encountered continuous difficulties did not elaborate, leaving the impression that these difficulties were easily dealt with. See Kelly and Kelly, p. 41; Fetherstonhaugh, *Royal Canadian Mounted Police*, p. 21. In light of the strong linear character of the descriptions of the actual march, the breakup of the force at its end, and indeed the earlier separation of "A" Division which left the main column at La Roche Percee and went to Edmonton, it is interesting to note Eliade's observation that "in innumerable mythologies, the world came from the cutting up of a primeval monster, often serpentine in form." See Beane and Doty, I, p. 24.

92. The point made by Campbell should be kept in mind. "The hero adventures out of the land we know into darkness; there he accomplishes his adventure, or again is simply lost to us, imprisoned, or in danger; and his return is described as a coming back out of that yonder zone. Nevertheless — and here is a great key to the understanding of myth and symbol — the two kindgoms are actually one. The realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the world we know." See p. 217.

93. Campbell, p. 246.

94. See MacBeth, *Policing the Plains*, pp. 59-60; Block, p. 30; Haydon, pp. 36-7; Neuberger, pp. 45-9; Kelly and Kelly, pp. 44-5.

wondered at. As well, said most observers, the police took immediate steps to pacify the warlike Indians. This involved explaining the law and the intentions of the force to the tribes and indicating what was and was not acceptable behaviour. As has been seen, these were the very things which were felt to be necessary to bring order to the West. The elimination of illegal activities and evil men, the subjugation of chaotic forces, the establishment of order — these were the changes wrought by the mounted police. However, such beneficial results did not accrue simply because the men journeyed to the far West. It was not simply their presence which brought the possibility of civilization to this new frontier. Rather, this was a gift bestowed on humanity by a group of heroes who, having braved the terrors of the kingdom of darkness, had the special powers necessary to effect such a change. No ordinary beings could have accomplished such deeds.

Like all heroes and successful initiates, the mounted police deserved explicit public recognition for their accomplishments. Historians of the force made sure they got it. In their hands, the meeting between Macleod and Crowfoot became not only a symbolic ceremony to confirm the passing of the old ways and to acknowledge the superiority of the new, but also a formal rite to honour the mounted police for their noble deeds. Some indication of the imaginative significance of the meeting can be gained from a painting by R. Lindmere, reproduced in R.C. Fetherstonhaugh's history of the force.[95] Lindmere placed the encounter outside Fort Macleod. In the foreground of the panel, about to shake hands, stand the two great protagonists. Macleod is pictured in his full dress uniform. Crowfoot is clothed in what appears to be a frock coat, modestly decorated with native designs. It is an Indian version of statesmen's garb. Although the policeman wears a high-plumed helmet which makes him appear taller, both men are about the same height. Clearly, in stature and presence, the two are equal. Crowfoot, the leader of the western tribes, a true "redskin statesman"[96] widely known for his bravery and wisdom, represents the natural man, the noble savage who can see beneath surface glitter to the true state of things beneath:

> The Queen meant nothing to him; but this man, her representative, did, and he had to assess him correctly. That he was a good man and passionately sincere, Crowfoot could not doubt. The stamp of him was plainly upon him.[97]

In the painting, Crowfoot offered his hand to a man of obvious honesty and goodness and strength — to a man with the qualities of a hero.

If the Blackfoot chief represented natural man and his instinctive knowledge, he was also a symbol of the spirits of place. He encompassed the strength and wisdom of all the forces that inhabited the plains. It was he who was best able to evaluate the accomplishment of the dashing troopers:

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95. See Fetherstonhaugh, *Royal Canadian Mounted Police*, p. 24.
96. Longstreth, *The Scarlet Force*, pp. 52-3.
97. Sluman, p. 238.

> He, more than anyone, knew what this handful of young men in the gay scarlet had dared when they penetrated to the heart of his realm uninvited. His own young men, even when incited by the war drums to prove their valour by the number of scalps taken could have shown no more courage than this.[98]

When Macleod grasped the hand of Crowfoot, he did so to accept his investiture into the ranks of the heroes. The powers that be had acknowledged his greatness and his right to impose virtue and order on the rest of the population. It was truly a cosmic moment, "one of the great hours in the history of Canada."[99] It was as if "civilization stood still for one brief instant."[100] Only those close to the gods can make such things happen.

It is not surprising that the great march was given such a central place in the history of the force. It was an epic which told of the coming of order to a frontier wilderness and its subsequent transformation into a garden of man. Canadians, interested in the way in which their country developed; Anglo-Saxons, fascinated with the expansion of the British race or with the "westward course of empire"; indeed, all groups which professed to believe in the concept of progress, were bound to feel that the march was an event of some significance. It had brought order to an important part of the globe. Order was the foundation, the first principle of civilization. Those who furthered civilization were enlarging the possibilities of all humankind. The world stood in their debt and the record of their activities naturally became the focus of much interest. To a society deeply involved in a questioning of the ultimate possibility of order, such heroes and such an event had a special attractiveness and appeal.

However, it was not simply the importance of the changes it purportedly accomplished which explains the popularity of the story of the great march. This also rested on the fact that the trek of 1874 was told as a chronicle of the heroes. All the elements of the typical hero adventure were present: the call to adventure, the cosmic helpers, the journey through the underworld and the trials at its thresholds, the ordeals and tests of the kindgom of darkness, the return to the normal world. The story of the great march was appealing because it was structured on an age-old and universal pattern of romance. Although obviously some people were more interested in the specific cultural context, almost anyone, anywhere, could respond to a framework of archetypal significance. The essentials of the tale were so basic that they were readily accepted and digested by those who read. Here, there were no complicated and confusing principles of causation to deal with, no subtle and complex analyses of hows, whats, and whys. Instead the reader or listener discovered a success story so well known in its outline that he or she might tingle in pleasurable anticipation of the familiar.

The structure of the story, however, dictated many of the conclusions that were drawn about the mounted police character and the accomplishments of the force. In accepting that structure, most people also accepted the validity of those

98. Longstreth, *The Scarlet Force*, p. 51.
99. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-3.
100. Turner, I, p. 193.

conclusions. Even if on the surface what was said about the force seemed fantastic or extravagant, the way in which the story was cast made it seem reasonable and correct. Because they had successfully undergone the ordeal of heroes, it was logical to assume that the policemen did indeed have the characters of heroes as well. Similarly, according to the archetypal mythic structure at work here, the noble adventurer, by virtue of his triumphs in the underworld, conveyed benefits of inestimable value to the general population on his return. Therefore, by putting the march in this context, it seemed entirely believable that the police could have subdued the West so quickly and completely, and that they were the only agents in its transformation. It was not necessary to take into account the impact of the Hudson's Bay Company or the presence of the Métis, the options and alternatives of the Indian tribes (conditioned as they were by a knowledge of events on the American frontier), or anything else. The existence of order in the Canadian West was a boon conferred by the police, whose heroic apotheosis had transformed them into superior beings capable of performing such deeds. Having done it once, it was obviously an easy matter for them to do it again in the Yukon and again in the Arctic.

Because the story of the initiation of the force was cast in these terms, its popularity is understandable. However, this conclusion only invites a more difficult question. Why did the chronicle of the great march have this structure? Why did historians of the force describe the event as a typical hero myth? Such a pattern might be expected in a purely imaginative work, but the great march, surely, was not invented out of thin air. Historians of the trek did not invent such things as the thunderstorm outside Dufferin or the capture of Fort Whoop-Up to ensure that their story conformed to the archetypal pattern. These things happened and the historians believed they were describing them accurately and honestly. Even where licence was taken to imagine conversations or reactions, the authors involved did not feel they were distorting the essential truth of what went on. Certainly they did not conjure up the basic events of the march.

While the pattern was not a fabrication, neither was it simply a factual accounting of a sequence of events. The optimism of Lord Acton that "ultimate history" could be written has vanished and in its place has come a realization that fact and interpretation do not exist independently of each other. Whether a particular fact or event is seen to have significance is determined by preconceived cultural assumptions. Probably there was more than one thunderstorm endured by the police during the march, yet the others were not deemed worthy of consideration. Why have the historians emphasized those events which make the story a typical hero myth?[101] There is no clear answer to this.

101. It could be argued that the historians were merely restating what the actual participants in the march said and wrote at the time. The historians, therefore, did not make any assumptions. But this contention only carries the problem back to an earlier stage. How did the policemen at the time decide which events had more significance than others and why?

Inevitably a discussion of the relation of myth and history raises many questions for which there are no clear answers. Perhaps there never can be. Does all written history rest ultimately on such universal mythic frameworks? Are all our perceptions of what is important determined by archetypal structures in our minds? Are events which seem to conform to these patterns deemed to have a significance which other events do not? Is this how we determine what is important historically? Or do historians arrange basically shapeless material into preconceived configurations? To what extent do these structures dictate assumptions and conclusions about the characters and actions of historical participants?

Again, it is probably impossible to provide authoritative answers to these kinds of questions. However, from this study of the great march of the mounted police it would seem that the distinctive frameworks of myth are just as attractive to many historians as they are to more imaginative writers. And, if the popularity of this specific story is any indication, it may suggest that what many people want from history itself is not an understanding of the Truth — of what actually happened — but, rather, contact with familiar patterns which provide some sort of fundamental reassurance about man's fate, the meaning of life, and the nature of things, patterns which, in themselves, are sometimes felt to constitute Truth.