

CONCLUSION

The mythic Canadian West where the Mounties heroically arrive bringing law and order as well as "civilization" to the land has proved hard to dislodge. Mountie images on everything from tea towels to refrigerator magnets for sale in tourist shops across this country serve as a sharp reminder of just how powerful and entrenched a national symbol the mounted policeman remains. Myth makers are still writing history to remind us of lessons that they believe need to be learned from the past, myth in these cases serving the cause of morality. The myths created from the past are deeply encoded with messages about who we are as Canadians and how we should act. The "March West" of 1874 has long stood, and continues to stand, for a new moral and cultural order that the NWMP brought to what was portrayed as an empty land, this in spite of considerable evidence from contemporary prairie dwellers and even missionaries who were astonished at just how cumbersome and incompetent the march onto the prairies in fact was.

Myths and myth makers often serve the ideologies of those who hold power and those who want that power to appear to be naturally and legitimately theirs. Their myths are built around "real people" and "real incidents" but these people and incidents are carefully "constructed" to include the facts that support the mythology and to selectively ignore those facts that might obstruct the clarity of the image.

Both myth makers and historians rely on the "facts" of the past. But historians by their craft are required to be vigilant about the "facts" and must deal with all of the "facts." Historians cannot simply tell a story to preserve a pure image, they must deal with all the information, all the facts, and must often be content to explain the great complexity of history, if necessary. Most importantly, the historian must present the context of historical events along with the multifaceted causality of history. The NWMP, for example, did not simply arrive in the West but were part of larger colonial and imperial enterprises that characterized much of the nineteenth century.

For the myth maker, time and context are unimportant. The Mountie in the tourist gift shop and the historical NWMP are one and the same, the image signified by either of them is what remains important. The Mountie signifies the law and order that Anglo-Canadians envisioned for the West, a law and order they thought the West needed. They were sent out to "maintain the right" for those who held power in central Canada and were about to hold power in the Canadian West. The myth maker, as Roland Barthes points out in the headnote to chapter 7, wants his image to remain above mere history.

At Fort Battleford, myth and history collided because the Mountie of the myth makers excluded the stories of many people, especially the history of the NWMP as they were seen by Métis and Aboriginal people of the prairies. As the complexity of the history at Fort Battleford is revealed through the history that the Cree and Métis tell, the image of the Mounties as harbingers of law and order or as agents of civilization is challenged. There already were laws in the West and there already were significant and varied cultures with a long presence on the

prairies. Aboriginal groups had their own systems of government and of making and enforcing laws.

As the voices of First Nations' peoples are heard, the national narratives that had excluded them have had to adjust to accommodate their version of the past. Meanings and (establishing) the significance of events has changed as the result of the new perspectives. The history of the West has become more complex as more people are heard and as their point of view comes to be tolerated. The history of the West was no longer about the "great" settlement of the West but it was also about what happened to those who were already there. As Patricia Limerick points out in the headnote that begins this book, the inheritance of these original settlers does not only include great men, great events and great development, but it also includes a world on the brink of environmental disaster with pollutants, pesticides, a depleted ozone layer and nuclear waste. All of this does not easily evoke clear images of "progress" nor does the way of life of prairie tribes seem as unreasonable as it was once portrayed.

The myth of the Mounties needs to be balanced off against the historical evidence that shows them to be no more and no less than men of their times who carried the cultural baggage of the Victorian era they were part of. They are not and should not remain above history. They shared many — now discredited — ideas about race, gender and culture. As times change, so do attitudes, and the image of the Mountie should not remain timeless or above time; such myth making only leads to the intolerance inherent in the view that time does not change culture and society, and that new attitudes or ideas need not be entertained. Replacing myth with history is not intended to discredit the Mounties but rather return them to the less valorized context of being human (along with the rest of us), instead of on the pedestal where they have been for too long.