

1857, because of rumours of half-breed restlessness and a threatened uprising of the Sioux in Minnesota, U.S.A., a company of the green-clad Royal Canadian Rifles was sent to Fort Garry and remained there four years. The Winnipeg 90th infantry rifles also effected that colour in a shade so dark that the unit was dubbed "Little Black Devils" in The North-West Rebellion. Many of Wolseley's troops who arrived at Fort Garry in 1870 had uniforms of bottle green and so, to some extent, were linked in the minds of the Indians with the pensioners of 1848.

About the time of the transfer to Canada on July 15, 1870, of Rupert's Land and the North-western Territory from the Hudson's Bay Company, the government at Ottawa was receiving vigorous complaints that the Indians of the plains were being debauched and robbed by whisky traders. The lawless conditions in the West coupled with the need for maintaining more rigid sovereignty there, led to the formation in 1873 of the North West Mounted Police. The previous year the government had sent out Col. P. Robertson-Ross, adjutant-general of the Canadian Militia, to make a general reconnaissance of this untamed realm with a view to ascertaining what constitutional lines the proposed force should take. Accompanied only by his 16-year-old son, one guide and an Indian lad the colonel left Fort Garry on Aug. 10, 1872, for the Rocky Mountains.

Before he had gone 60 miles, he met three large camps of Sioux Indians—part of the band which but ten short years before had sought refuge in Canadian territory after participating in the bloody Minnesota Massacre—and on another occasion when far out on the prairie his small party was ridden down by ten mounted Sioux who "became quite friendly in manner, shaking hands with us heartily" upon learning that the colonel was a British officer. Not once during the whole 8,000-mile trip were Robertson-Ross and his three companions molested, a fact which is attributable to the Indians' respect for a soldier of the Queen.

In the light of today's tradition, the colonel's most interesting observations were based on his own experiences during that trip, and they concern the uniform to be worn by the new Force.

"During my inspection of the North West" he reported, "I ascertained that some prejudice existed amongst the Indians against the colour of the uniform worn by men of the provisional battalion (militia in Manitoba), for many of the Indians said, 'Who are these soldiers at Red River wearing dark clothes? Our old brothers who formerly lived there (meaning H.M.'s 6th Regiment of Foot) wore red coats. We know that the soldiers of our great mother wear red coats and are our friends'."

So, on grounds that it would gain the confidence and respect of the Indians as nothing else could, the militia commander suggested that the proposed mounted police should be provided with the time-honoured scarlet coat. He doubtless had in mind the tradition already established by the troops in 1846 and the natural fondness of the Indian for bright colours; but he was also well aware from personal knowledge of the power the red coat held over the unrestrained Indian of whom there were at that time some 25,000 on the prairie.

On May 23, 1873, the North West Mounted Police came into existence and in police matters were modelled partly on the Royal Irish Constabulary and partly on a system followed in India; however, the similarity of the conditions under which they and the army would operate dictated that they take after the latter in dress and interior economy. But even here the Prime Minister stressed that he wanted a plain, mobile, purely civil force suited to the rigours of the country with "as little gold lace and fuss and feathers as possible". Above all, he insisted, there was to be no ostentatious display.

Thus was the traditional red coat of the British soldier introduced to the plains of Western Canada. Shortly before and also with a view to reassuring the Indian mind the red coat for militia on duty in Manitoba had become a permanent policy.

In the Force's initial annual report Commr. G. A. French explains that upon his return to Ottawa in February, 1874, he arranged for "uniforms to be designed and supplied". From this it appears that the regulation uniform had not as yet been decided