

The North West Mounted Police was modelled partly on the Royal Irish Constabulary and partly on one of the systems followed in India. Since it operated as a military body, policy dictated that it follow the Army in dress and interior economy. But even then, the Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonald, stressed that he wanted a plain, mobile, fully civil force suited to the rigours of the country "with as little gold lace and fuss and feathers as possible". To gratify the Indians' fondness for the scarlet tunics of Queen Victoria's soldiers, who had been stationed in the West, the police were provided with the time-honoured dress. The red coat became the badge of friendly authority.

After the Indian uprising in 1876, which culminated in the Little Big Horn battle where a United States cavalry regiment under Major-General George A. Custer was wiped out to the last man, Sioux fugitives from American retaliation turned northward for refuge. Upon 214 officers and men of the North West Mounted Police depended the security of life and property along hundreds of miles of restless boundary. Tactful handling of the situation, coupled with the loyalty and prestige of Crowfoot, chief of the preponderant Blackfeet Confederacy, led to the conclusion of the most important treaty in Canadian history, which gave the Ottawa Government complete sovereignty of the west.

The transition from buffalo hunting to farming was carried out under the Mounted Police surveillance. On the plains, the laws of the Dominion were now administered almost entirely by them.

The construction of the railroad, which brought in some 4,000 turbulent labourers, created new difficulties. Once the dominant Blackfeet Confederacy had accepted the white man's way of life, things moved smoothly, but the distasteful restrictions of the settlements and reservations stirred up the Indians and halfbreeds against the intruding Easterners. Soon they were demanding redress of many grievances, and, in the spring of 1885, led by Louis Riel, the Metis rebelled. For several months, the Force bore up under the strain, while militia columns converged from both Eastern and Western Canada to quell the uprising. The Blackfeet remained loyal. With the defeat of the rebels and the capture of their leaders, the insurrection came to an end.

Rapid change and development followed. New settlers swarmed into the High Plains region of the West, which is ideally suited for wheat farming and cattle ranching.

The North, also was to come within the orbit of the Force. By 1895, thousands of prospectors from Canada and the United States were flocking to the Yukon gold fields. It became obvious that some sort of police control was necessary. Amid a conglomeration of all classes of people, a small detachment of 20 selected officers and men struggled to maintain order. In 1898, a judicial district was established with headquarters at Dawson City, and Yukon was constituted a separate territory. The population of Dawson had reached 20,000. The duty of carrying the mails to the scattered gold camps was undertaken by the Force, while patrols using boats and sled dogs branched out over the North.

Following the Boer War, in which the Force was well represented, some 300,000 settlers streamed westward and took up homesteads on the plains. By 1904, detachments were opened in the Arctic, extending the Mounted Police beat from the International Boundary to the Arctic Ocean and from Hudson Bay to the Alaskan border.