

As a semi-military body, modelled partly on the Royal Irish Constabulary, the North West Mounted Police followed the army style in administration and dress. The scarlet tunic, worn earlier by the highly respected and popular soldiers of Queen Victoria during their years in the West, was from the first an important part of the NWMP uniform, and was destined to become a badge of friendly authority.

An Early Test

A test for the infant force was not long in coming as thousands of Sioux under Sitting Bull sought refuge north of the United States border following the Indian uprising in 1876. Fear of retaliation drove them to Canada after the battle of Little Big Horn, where a U.S. cavalry regiment under Lieutenant-Colonel George A. Custer was annihilated.

Upon 214 officers and men of the North West Mounted Police weighed the threat of untold bloodshed and strife. Tactful handling of the situation, combined with the loyalty of Crowfoot, chief of the great Blackfoot confederacy, whose friendship had been cultivated with clear foresight, led to the Blackfoot Treaty, perhaps the most important Indian treaty in Canadian history. By 1880, the North West Mounted Police had established Canadian sovereignty over the West, and the transition from buffalo hunting to farming was under way.

Less than a decade had passed, however, when this peaceful period came to an end. Construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway heralded settlement of the Prairies, which in turn created reservations and stirred up Indian and Métis resentment against the intruding Easterners. Demanding redress or compensation for their grievances, the Métis rebelled in the spring of 1885 under the leadership of Louis Riel. Once again, however, the Blackfoot remained loyal and the NWMP were able to bear the strain until militia arrived from the East to quell the uprising.

With the defeat of the rebels and the capture of their leaders, the rebellion came to an end and rapid change and development of the Northwest territories followed. New settlers swarmed onto the high plains, which are ideally suited to wheat farming and cattle ranching. Soon a network of patrols spread out from NWMP detachments linking the settlements.

Gold Rush Days

By 1895, the northern regions of Canada came within the scope of the force, and in particular the Yukon, as thousands of prospectors flocked to the gold-fields. The NWMP moved quickly into the region and established posts at strategic points. Once again, by vigilant and determined law enforcement and a ban on firearms, fewer than 250 members kept murder and serious crime to a minimum. Among their many tasks, the NWMP carried mail to the scattered camps, adding 64,000 miles in one year alone to patrols branching out by boat and dog-sled over the North.