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## The Mystery of Francis Jeffrey Dickens, N.W.M.P., And Eric Nicol's Dickens of the Mounted

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# THE MYSTERY OF FRANCIS JEFFREY DICKENS, N.W.M.P., AND ERIC NICOL'S DICKENS OF THE MOUNTED

ROBERT THACKER

That he was not more successful is not his fault.

-*Toronto Mail*, May 1885, on the actions of Inspector Francis Jeffrey "Chicken Stalker" Dickens at Fort Pitt during the North West Rebellion<sup>1</sup>

Almost from its inception in 1873, but certainly since its "Great March" west during the summer of 1874 across "the Great Lone Land" of the Plains that had been the Hudson's Bay

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Company's domain only a few years before, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police has been among the world's most famous corporate entities; it is, perhaps, *the* most famous police force.<sup>2</sup> Its reputation is rooted in the very real heroism of its early years and the high standards of excellent service it has had since then; but the mythic quality of that reputation—as a cadre of judicious superheroes—has been created primarily by writers, filmmakers, and journalists viewing the force from the outside. The force itself, however, has maintained and nurtured such positive interpretations, particularly through the production of its well-known "Musical Ride." Revelations of wrongdoing within the force that have come to light in recent years have done little to diminish the myth—such problems have occurred since its early years, as numerous scholars have noted, with scant effect on the force's fame.<sup>3</sup>

What has emerged from the history of the Mounted Police is a complex cultural symbol made up of verifiable history, exaggeration, and hyperbole, the proportions of which have varied according to the particular text at hand and according to the intentions and understandings of the individual author. Thus, whatever "facts" are seen to define the Royal Canadian Mounted

Police, English-speaking peoples recognize this force as an entity that mythically outstrips those facts and, it sometimes appears, does so even mystically. Furthermore, the myth of the Mounties has become inextricably entwined with Canada's ideology of nationhood: just as Canadians have been drawn to the Mounted Police as "their" heroes, so too has the force come to symbolize Canadian conditions, Canadian mores, Canadian values—both to the world and, most urgently (though perhaps embarrassingly) to Canadians themselves. Thus it is as metaphor that the mountie has his greatest power, both as symbol and as caricature. Indeed, after the research involved in the most extended analysis of the force's mythic legacy, Keith Walden argues that "the process by which their image was formulated and dispersed is largely unknowable."<sup>4</sup>

These matters are necessary context for this examination of Eric Nicol's *Dickens of the Mounted: The Astounding Long-Lost Letters of Inspector F. Dickens, N.W.M.P.* (1989).<sup>5</sup> Although essentially a humorous send-up of one of the force's best-known members, Nicol's book centers itself in the myth of the Mounted Police; the result is far more serious, probably, than its author intended and, at the same time, offers an inventive and precise commentary on the nature of the force's appeal as a Canadian symbol. Nicol's *Dickens* is very much a part of—though also different from—the various imaginative renderings of the force and its members that have been a part of the Mounted Police since its founding.

Given the force's past and the excessive claims for its heroism that fostered its reputation, trying to turn from the historical bases of the myth of the Mounted Police to its separate life, as it were, in so-called "imaginative" literature, is not easy. "Truth," however that is defined, seems always to cut at least two ways when it comes to the force. Thus its historiography sometimes reveals writing as much at variance with "the facts" as that found in early popular fictional treatment (though here, his-

torians rightfully distinguish between professional historians and the numerous fans of the force and former members who have written encomia or self-aggrandizing memoirs). In the same way, when one takes up Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) or *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977)—two works generally regarded as "fictional," though based on much historical material—his depiction of the force's actions (in both cases during the 1885 Rebellion) is quite accurate, consistent with the accounts of late twentieth-century historians.<sup>6</sup> Largely because of this slippage between historical fact and imaginative rendering, the mythic character of the Mounted Policeman, resplendent in his red tunic, has proved a supple and variable symbol indeed. His mythic status is far less flexible, however, than that of the American western hero, for in that tunic the fictional mountie is ever a member of an entity that both prescribes behavior and judges action. As such, he is a figure prone to caricature, as opposed to the far more individuated American variant—Dudley Do-Right, if you will, versus Billy the Kid. Eric Nicol is well aware of the nuances and uses them to excellent effect in his *Dickens of the Mounted*.

#### HISTORICAL HEROES AND ANTIHEROES: SAM STEELE VERSUS "CHICKEN STALKER" DICKENS

Although the force's reputation is a corporate myth, individual Mounted Policemen have emerged from the collective identity. From the early years there are George French and James Macleod, the force's first two commissioners; Superintendent James Walsh is another, a man who, while commanding the fort named after him near the Cypress Hills, became known through his actions as "Sitting Bull's Boss"; and there is Sam Steele, who was among the first group of mounties assembled in 1873. He later rose to the rank of superintendent through numerous feats throughout the West and, after leaving the force, rose again to the rank of



FIG. 1. N.W.M.P. Officers, 1874. Seated, Sub-Inspector John French; to his immediate left, Sub-Inspector Francis Dickens; others unknown. R.C.M.P. Archives. Photograph courtesy of Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

major-general in the Canadian army; eventually, he became a knight. Ronald Atkin has described him as “the prototype of Hollywood’s idea of a Mountie” and, indeed, a movie of James Oliver Curwood’s *Steele of the Royal Mounted* (1911) was made in 1925. More recently—and to very different purpose—Sharon Pollock has depicted Superintendent Walsh’s frustrations in dealing with both Sitting Bull and Ottawa in her play *Walsh* (1973).<sup>7</sup> Like Wiebe, she is bent on using “the facts” to tell a different story, one at odds with the prevailing myth of mountie heroism; her Walsh, like Wiebe’s Big Bear and Louis Riel, is not an ad-

venture hero but a psychologically complex, even tragic, character.

And finally there is Nicol’s subject—or victim—Inspector Francis Jeffrey Dickens, N.W.M.P., who became a well-known mountie despite being the antithesis of all the heroic attributes borne out by the full weight of the mounted police myth and its bibliography. Fame was in the family, of course, so despite his lack of ability, Frank “Chicken Stalker” Dickens—as he was called in the Dickens’ household—the third (and most ineffectual) son of Charles, has been for some time a bizarre but well individuated presence in mountie lore.

None of Charles Dickens's sons were successful, but Francis was particularly unable: recently, a popular historian has called him "a spectacular failure." He was deaf, he stuttered, and he drank. Indeed, having returned to England in 1871 after his father's death, he overstayed his leave from the Bengal Mounted Police, lost his commission, and spent "The next three years . . . dissipating his inheritance and quarrelling with his family." Owing to his famous father's reputation and political influence exercised by his sister (who clearly wanted "Chicken Stalker" out of the way in the colonies), Dickens was commissioned a police sub-inspector in late 1874. Just over eleven years later, having served in a variety of posts throughout the Northwest but allowed only two detachment commands, both arguably botched, he resigned as inspector—amid some controversy over his actions at Fort Pitt during the 1885 Rebellion—in the spring of 1886.<sup>8</sup> He died of an apparent heart attack in June of that year, just as he was about to begin a lecture tour ostensibly based on his experiences in the force but more likely owing to the attraction of his name.

That this summary does not invite adulation is confirmed by the concluding paragraph in the entry on Dickens in *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (1982):

Francis Dickens made a definite, if negative, impact on the Canadian west. He was partly responsible for the serious deterioration in relations between the NWMP and the Blackfoot in the 1880s. His misadventures also contributed to the strong prejudice against English officers that existed in the mounted police in the late 19th century.

In 1948 in the *R.C.M.P. Quarterly*, both at a time and in a source in which adulation was allowable, T. Morris Longstreth had offered a similarly gloomy conclusion about Dickens.

The mystery begins when one starts to think about this man, so long in a responsible

position, so little known. His father's biographers barely mention him. His brother officers found him an enigma. A few intimates called him 'Dickie', but his manner is most often described as absorbed, almost morose. He had two confidants, an Irish retriever, and a favourite shotgun.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, as Dick Harrison has noted, Dickens was the first Mounted Policeman to appear in a work of fiction, in Joseph Collins's *The Story of Louis Riel, The Rebel Chief* (1885); having resisted "with his little force, a large band of blood-thirsty Crees," Collins writes, Dickens offers one of the outstanding "acts of bravery recorded during this late Rebellion . . ." As Harrison suggests, too, Collins's depiction is a "woefully inaccurate representation of its subject," Dickens, and, what is more, this portrayal, may be seen as a suitable beginning for the depiction of mounties in fiction, "a mixture of fact and fiction."<sup>10</sup>

But Collins's use of Dickens also suggests the lionization—though in his case, it is probably a "kitty-ization"—of him which began, in effect, when he joined the force through his father's fame and continued to grow—though his abilities militated against it, as official reports on his performance show—throughout his service in the force and, especially, after his death. Since then his light can be seen burning with a small but steady flame, as various commentators have appeared to keep his reputation alive and to defend his name. This process began—however intelligently—with Collins's novel and has continued to this day; indeed, at only a small risk of overstatement, it has been possible to speak of "the legend of Francis Dickens" within the larger legend of the force itself. Clearly, too, Dickens's legend is derived from what might be called—following Longstreth's phrase—"the mystery of Francis Dickens."<sup>11</sup>

In his early history of the force, *The Riders of the Plains* (1910), for example, A. L. Hayden describes Dickens's "defence" of Fort Pitt during the Rebellion as "one of the most heroic in the

annals of the Mounted Police.” Using Dickens’s Fort Pitt “diary”—a document only he had access to at the time—and with a much sharper focus on Dickens himself, Vernon LaChance creates a persona for his historical character as he contextualizes the diary:

He had seen ugly situations arise; occasions when the murderous rage of the red men had been curbed only by the coolness and determination of the police opposing them. The police had been fortunate, he knew. So had the West; much more than it realized. Courage and determination would not always suffice. And there was no set formula for all occasions: the iron of firm adherence to a given course must occasionally yield to the elasticity of compromise. The strain of decision was wearing.

Rhetorically, this is an interesting passage, one that reveals LaChance’s purpose: he is writing an encomia for the force. Although his ostensible subject is Dickens, he broadens his treatment to the Mounted Police more generally; indeed, members of the force warned Ottawa that real trouble was brewing during the years prior to the Rebellion and did their best to diffuse it, but the politicians did not listen.<sup>12</sup>

Dickens was not among such officers; rather, when he was posted with a twelve-man force at Blackfoot Crossing, Alberta, between June 1881 and January 1882, he “was involved in three incidents which nearly resulted in the annihilation of his detachment by Blackfoot Indians. In all three, Dickens, acting on complaints from whites, attempted to arrest Indians accused of crimes without the customary effort to hear their side of the story and secure the cooperation of the tribal leaders.” His actions at Fort Pitt are more defensible than those at Blackfoot Crossing, since he faced a much larger force that clearly had hostile intentions—a police scouting party had been shot up by the Cree under Big Bear, killing one constable, wounding another, and taking a third prisoner. At Fort Pitt

the white civilians he was ostensibly protecting abandoned him to take their chances with Big Bear and, under the cover of darkness, Dickens abandoned the fort and retreated down the North Saskatchewan River to Battleford.<sup>13</sup>

All of this figures in LaChance’s rhetoric, for the Dickens he presents, a character “wearing” under the “strain of decision,” is in no way equivocal. Rather, he is dutiful, efficient, and certainly valiant. John Manning, in a 1959-60 article on Dickens in the *Colorado Quarterly*, one seemingly motivated by a desire to have Dickens’s grave—in Moline, Illinois—restored from its neglect, follows in much the same vein as LaChance. By 1972, when James McCook published a biographical article in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, Dickens’s reputation was in need of restoring along with his grave, and McCook’s argument is aimed directly at the Inspector’s posthumous critics: “Some of the decisions he made as a police officer have been debated in armchair safety by historians, but after a poor start in Canada he became one of the most respected members of the force.”<sup>14</sup>

This attempt at resurrection can be seen as being deflated—at least in Canada—by the publication of Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973). There Dickens plays a bit part in the rebellion, his defense of Fort Pitt is laughable, and Wiebe reproduces (though not verbatim) portions of the “diary,” ending (as does the version published by LaChance) with the notation “Travelled” (p. 271) to describe his force’s flight from the fort. Moreover, from the point of view of Kitty McLean, one of the civilians who left Dickens for Big Bear, the Inspector is described at a “literary evening” at Fort Pitt listening to a reading from *The Old Curiosity Shop*: “the men of the barracks sitting there with some wiping their eyes openly and Corporal Sleigh and Sergeant Martin almost bursting with suppressed laughter while Inspector Dickens stared ahead, small and stiffly purplish among his big men as his famous father’s most famous story crawled sweetly on towards its doom” (p. 273). In a subsequent story, “A



FIG. 2. N.W.M.P. Detachment at Fort Pitt, 1884. Dickens on right; same photograph used on dustjacket of *Dickens of the Mounted*, with Nicol's hero highlighted. Photograph courtesy of Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

Night in Fort Pitt or (if you prefer) *The Only Perfect Communists in the World*," Wiebe takes another swipe at Dickens, calling him "the most infamous officer in the history of the world-famous force."<sup>15</sup> Such is the well-plowed ground for Nicol's book.

#### ERIC NICOL'S DICKENS OF THE MOUNTED

A little over ten years ago, when I first studied the Mounted Policeman in fiction, I argued that "there are indications that the historically realistic mountie may yet figure in Canadian fiction." Today I am not quite ready to say I was wrong—though that's the way I'm leaning—but I am very skeptical; the problem lies in the phrase "historically realistic." Hayden White and other historians have questioned this notion and, in my own field, literature, Linda

Hutcheon has recently confessed in *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988) that "Certainly I no longer read books the way I once did: that eternal universal Truth I was taught to find has turned out to be constructed, not found—and anything but eternal and universal. Truth has been replaced by truths, uncapitalized and in the plural."<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that there is not—in this instance—a body of recoverable facts that, when woven together by someone of careful intelligence, objectively approximates Francis Dickens or the body of verifiable actions on which the legend of the force is based; without question, there is a real Dickens to be found in the historical record, just as there are real Mounted Policemen, though what is meant by "real" must be carefully defined. Even so, and persuaded by such scholarship as White's and Hutcheon's, I find myself believing concepts



like “historically realistic,” as regards the Mounted Police, not particularly useful. The facts, exaggerations, and hyperbole, borne of archives as well as Hollywood ballyhoo, have commingled to such an extent that their separation is difficult, if not impossible, not only by the historian or other outside observer but by many of the historical policemen themselves (especially figures like Steele and Dickens), who lived as much within the context of the developing myth as within any “objective reality.”

The case of Francis Jeffrey Dickens, N.W.M.P., seems an especially acute one: “The mystery begins when one starts to think about this man . . . ,” indeed: in a variety of ways, Eric Nicol’s recent *Dickens of the Mounted* brings matters to a head. If it is fair to say that Dickens’s reputation has burned with a small but steady flame in the years since his death, then with Nicol’s book that reputation may be said to have burst alight and, while not quite yet a prairie fire, it certainly represents a burning revisionism.

One of Canada’s foremost humorous writers, Nicol has since the 1940s lampooned life in his native land and has three times won the Leacock award for humor. In *Dickens of the Mounted*, Nicol is at it once again by assailing one of the shibboleths of Canadian culture, the Mounted Police. And, while I am well aware of the dangers of taking a humorist seriously—especially since, among his other targets, Nicol is after footnote-happy scholars—I want to do exactly that. For any student of mountie material, *Dickens of the Mounted* is a fascinating book, for there is enough history, legend, and fiction in it to make it not only funny: it is often quite poignant.

Nicol’s premise is that he

has discovered Frank Dickens’ letters home to England, which describe his impressions of Canada and his adventures bringing law and order to the rough and ready Canadian West. These witty and informative letters, revealed here for the first time, shed sur-

prising new light not only on the Dickens family, but also on a wide range of characters, from Louis Riel and Sitting Bull all the way to Col. Harry Flashman. (Dust jacket)

What we are being offered, ostensibly, is a scholarly edition of autobiographical letters that we as readers quickly deduce is more a biography but that, upon further consideration and examination, is actually largely a fiction. The book, indeed, is reasonably labelled a “mock-auto-biography,” a form that Timothy Dow Adams defines as “a kind of literature that purposely stands on the border, one foot in the country of fiction and the other in the land of fact.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet Nicol has done his homework sufficiently well to demonstrate a good command of his protagonist’s “real” biography. Using this structure as his skeleton, he embellishes freely but only occasionally wildly, always working off the conventions of the scholarly collection of letters; indeed, Nicol is the “editor” of this collection, even on the title page, and his photo on the dust jacket shows “Editor Nicol enthralled with his discovery in the UBC Library.” In this guise, he begins by quoting—in full—the entry on Dickens from *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, which is based on the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* entry, but that contains this succinct assessment: “His unspectacular career was marked by recklessness, laziness and heavy drinking” (p. 7). In his preface, “editor” Nicol explains the discovery of Dickens’s letters—“The Butts” letters, he calls them—for they are addressed variously to Minerva Butts, then Ezra Butts, Minerva’s husband (Minerva ran off) and, finally, Emily Butts, their daughter (Ezra died). Butts owned the Black Mare Inn, where Dickens drank during his years of dissipation between jobs. Nicol claims that these letters radically change history’s view of Frank, though more through greater depth of understanding than in overall detail.

Nicol makes a great deal of Dickens’s early frictions with Ottawa’s bureaucracy—he was docked the expenses involved in his transport



west because he delayed in Toronto—and argues at one point that “to his credit, Frank Dickens never attempted to assassinate Sir John A. Macdonald [the prime minister], though, as we shall see, he had considerable incentive to do so” (p. 17). He disputes whether the La-Chance publication is a diary, partly on the grounds of stylistic differences between it and the Butts letters, but mainly because it appears more the work of a subordinate (p. 246). Sensibly, too, Nicol omits detailed treatment of Dickens’s time at Fort Pitt during the rebellion.

As to chronology, Nicol is generally accurate, although through what are flashbacks in his letters he obscures exact dates. (In passing, too, one is struck by how Nicol’s treatment of the detail of Dickens’s life is reminiscent of James McCook’s; indeed, Nicol may have used McCook’s article as something akin to an outline.)

In the form of an autobiography, masquerading as a biography, but in fact largely a fiction, *Dickens of the Mounted* has its greatest strength when Nicol invokes the pathetic—but



FIG. 3. Group at Fort Pitt, 1884. Left to right: Thomas Quinn, Indian Agent; Inspector Dickens; James Simpson, Hudson's Bay Company clerk; Frederick Stanley Simpson, his son; Angus McKay, HBC post manager. Dog's name unknown. Photograph courtesy of Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

very real—aspects of Dickens's character. The book is dedicated to "all those other unsung Mounties who did their best" (p. 5), and it is clear that Nicol is consciously inverting the myth of the Mounted Police throughout. (For example, Dickens at one point notes that "almost every officer and NCO, as well as several of the constables . . . are kept busy chronicling the adventures of the Force in hopes of one day being published" [p. 129]; his own memoir, he elsewhere notes, will be entitled *Thirty Years Without Beer*.) Though not "unsung," literally, Dickens should have been; he did his best, Nicol is asserting, but that best was not ultimately of much account. In this characterization Nicol makes what seems a splendid contribution to the Mounted's legend. While not completely debunking it, Nicol undercuts it by humanizing Dickens and so humanizing the force. In this, too, there is a decidedly modern cast throughout: the Dickens in the letters is quite sympathetic to the Indian point of view and is, as well, too prescient as to the political results in Quebec of Prime Minister Macdonald's handling of the French-speaking rebel leader, Louis Riel.

Thus Dickens is cast as a sort of latter-day contemporary commentator (that is possible, given the way Nicol writes), defining his 1885 Canada in terms which seem not only topical, but acute; sizing up the events of the Rebellion, Dickens writes: "Altogether, a quite unsatisfactory war. The Americans do this sort of thing so much better than Canadians do that I doubt that bloodshed and violence will ever catch on in this country" (p. 258). What is more, Nicol creates this persona for his narrator while having Dickens meet "everybody who's anybody" at the time, offering an eye witness account of the opening the Canadian West. Thus he inadvertently meets Gabriel Dumont (p. 71), Sitting Bull (pp. 150-53), Louis Riel (pp. 186-90), and Big Bear (pp. 79-80)—who stares at him so as to make him uncomfortable (this latter relation has some basis in history). If this were not enough, according to Nicol, Dickens is the

source for the "get their man" phrase that makes every mountie cringe (p. 205). Such notoriety, however, appears misplaced in Dickens even as it does to the inspector himself.

But it is by his very inadequacy and by the depth of his inabilities that Dickens both establishes his character and gains our sympathy. Thus, when he is credited with killing a buffalo that collapsed at his feet (and that reminded him of his father, as does Dumont), Dickens represents all of us who have been the beneficiaries of dumb luck. His stuttering and his deafness, his overwhelming, never-to-be-forgotten father, his battle with the bottle (which Nicol has him win, largely), all define an "every person" sort of character, far more common, and far less showy, than the Sam Steeles of the world. (The latter, by the way, appears first as a constable subordinate to Dickens, though in the background of the letters we note him rushing ahead of Frank through promotion [p. 175].) Indeed, the poignancy that builds as the book progresses is evident in several humorous, yet telling, phrases: "Again, my role was to do nothing, as impressively as possible. I think I am getting better at this" (p. 227); he refers to his famous father as "Our Father who art in Absentia" (p. 262); and, most tellingly, writes, "For all my life I have felt as though I was being groomed for obscurity. Now, at last, I have it within my grasp" (p. 269).

This last passage was written in Regina, a few days after Louis Riel's hanging for treason, an action Dickens chose not to witness, given his sympathies. His health had taken a turn for the worse after the Rebellion, and it was clear that his days in the force were numbered. All that remained was for him to haggle with Ottawa one more time—this time over the size of his severance settlement. Returning to the East early in 1886 to visit Ottawa and haggle on the spot, Dickens meets a Dr. Jamieson, of Moline, Illinois, who encourages him to go on the lecture circuit. In Moline, about to deliver his first lecture, Dickens sickens and dies. The prospect of a new life infuses him with uncharacteristic

hope, however, as he indicates in his last letter, written to Emily on the day of his death: "Until now, I have seen myself as one of the few unsuccessful characters that my father created. His life was one huge exclamation mark; mine, one small query" (p. 280). Nicol closes the book with the details of Dickens's death and burial, along with the Dickens family's weak response to the news. Editor Nicol writes: "*Perhaps it was fitting that Frank Dickens, NWMP, did not know when the time is [a reference to the invocation on Dickens's tombstone], as he was able to die at a rare moment of expectancy in his life, among new-found friends, and with some hope of one day not only recovering his father's timepiece [left at Fort Pitt], but also having his own hour in the sun*" (p. 284).

Though not wishing to claim too much for Nicol the humorist—he is essentially sending up the heroic dimensions of the Mounted Police at the same time he is exploiting its continuing appeal—I want to conclude by arguing that *Dickens of the Mounted* offers a version of a life quite compatible with current theories of biography and autobiography. As Peter Nagourney has argued, despite their incompleteness and selection, literary biographies will continue to be written and read, just as "They will continue to make more sense of life than any life as lived. . . ." This is because "The quest for knowing and understanding another human being has always been too strong to discourage writers and readers from the impossible search for life upon the printed page." This is what, it finally seems to me, we are offered by Nicol, who presents his materials through an autobiographical form all the while we sense the biographizing editor behind Dickens's persona. And, as Adams has recently argued, autobiography is a form that ought to be seen as "metaphorically authentic" but not "historically accurate."<sup>18</sup>

At the outset of this essay I asserted the urgency with which Canadians are drawn to the myth of the Mounted Police. They are severely

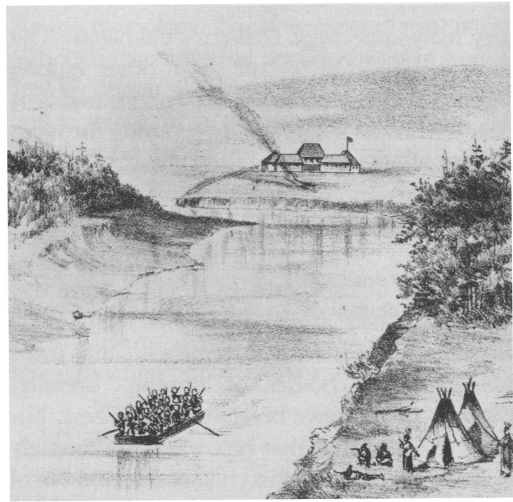


FIG. 4. Fort Pitt being evacuated by Inspector Dickens and N.W.M.P. detachment, *Illustrated War News*, 27 June 1885. Photograph courtesy of Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

jealous of the force's stature as a sacred national symbol while, equally, embarrassed by its hackneyed clichés—Dudley Do-Right indeed. In view of this, the persona of "the little guy who did his best," created by Nicol, is exactly right for a Canadian audience, well aware as it is of the force's myth. By "making sense" of Dickens's life, even if only metaphorically, by giving him voice and so authenticity, Nicol offers a character who speaks—like Wiebe's Big Bear and Louis Riel, like C. P. Stacey's William Lyon MacKenzie King—to the myriad complexities of the Canadian point of view. Haunted by his dead demanding dad, demeaned as a Brit by his Canadian comrades, and stared at by Natives who knew dimly of his lordly connection, striving ever to assert his separate being, Inspector Francis Dickens, N.W.M.P., may well be seen as a perfect metaphor for Canada, whether fictional or not.<sup>19</sup>

# NOTES

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1. *Toronto Mail*, quoted by the *Saskatchewan Herald*, 18 May 1885, itself quoted in William L. Clink, ed., *Battleford Beleaguered: 1885* (Willowdale, Ontario: William L. Clark, 1985), p. 38.

2. The force was initially "a Police Force in the North West Territories"; it was the North West Mounted Police from 1879 through 1904, the Royal North-West Mounted Police (R.N.W.M.P.) 1904-20, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (R.C.M.P.) 1920-present.

3. As anyone who has ever seen the Musical Ride will attest, it works to burnish the force's image. See Mary Ann Smythe, "Our Musical Ride," *Canadian Geographic* 108 (April-May 1988): 20-26. For an overview of the growth of the force's reputation, including a discussion of early internal problems, see Robert Thacker, "Canada's Mounted: The Evolution of a Legend," *Journal of Popular Culture* 14 (Fall 1980): 298-312.

4. When I use the term "Canadians" here, I recognize its limitations. These generalizations apply primarily to English-speaking Canadians, since French-speaking Canadians evince little fascination with "their" police force; equally, the Native view of the force—whatever a person's cultural background—is likely to be at variance with these generalizations. Keith Walden discusses this issue in greater detail in *Visions of Order: The Canadian Mounties in Symbol and Myth* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1982), pp. 4-5; quotation p. vii.

5. Eric Nicol, *Dickens of the Mounted: The Astonishing Long-Lost Letters of Inspector F. Dickens, N.W.M.P.* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989). Subsequent references to this edition appear parenthetically in the text.

6. Rudy Wiebe, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), *The Scorched-Wood People* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977). Subsequent references to this edition of *The Temptations of Big Bear* appear parenthetically in the text.

7. Ronald Atkin, *Maintain the Right: The Early History of the North West Mounted Police, 1873-1900* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 46. Sharon Pollock, *Walsh* (1973; rpt. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1983).

8. Bob Johnston, "Francis Dickens," "The Early Edition," CBC Radio, Vancouver, January 1991; Roderick Charles Macleod, "Dickens, Francis Jeffrey," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 11 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982): 261. The change from sub-inspector to inspector does not amount to a promotion; a reorganization in the late 1870s dropped the sub-inspector rank as too confusing.

9. MacLeod, *DCB* (note 8 above), p. 262; T. Morris Longstreth, "The Force and Literature," *R.C.M.P. Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1948): 41.

10. [Joseph Collins], *The Story of Louis Riel the Rebel Chief* (Toronto: Rose Publishing, 1885), p. 151. Dick Harrison, "The Mounted Police in Fiction," in Hugh A. Dempsey, ed., *Men in Scarlet* (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta/McClelland and Stewart West, 1974), p. 163.

11. This point is confirmed by an examination of the popular press, which shows that, at least since the publication of his Fort Pitt Diary in 1930 (see note 12 below), Dickens and his story have made regular appearances in Canadian newspapers. A recent examination of the files at the Glenbow Institute library, Calgary, yielded some fourteen pieces published in the popular press between 1932 and 1987; likely there are others as well.

12. A. L. Haydon, *The Riders of the Plains: A Record of the Royal North-West Mounted Police of Canada, 1873-1910* (1910; rpt. Rutland, Vermont: Charles Tuttle, 1971), p. 139; Vernon LaChance [ed.], "The Diary of Francis Dickens," *Queen's Quarterly* 37 (1930): 316. This diary, which figures as the source for Dickens's character throughout published materials on him, most particularly Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* and Nicol's *Dickens of the Mounted*, is quite laconic. LaChance published it in at least three places: here, as Bulletin 59, Departments of History and Political and Economic Science, Queen's University (Kingston: The Jackson Press, 1930), and in *The Scarlet and Gold Annual* 13 (1932): 5-7, 9, 11-13.

There is something of a mystery surrounding the diary as well. LaChance, who was a civil servant in charge of R.C.M.P. records in Ottawa during the 1930s, makes no mention of its provenance in his article, nor of how he came to transcribe it. The original, however, was subsequently donated to the Fort Battleford (Saskatchewan) National Historic Park in 1970 by former R.C.M.P. Commissioner F. A. Lindsay and is now held in the R.C.M.P. Centennial Museum, Regina (catalogued as 87.30).

Strictly speaking, the document is not a diary, but rather an official post journal for Fort Pitt for the

year 1885 with daily entries from 1 January through 15 April—the day after Dickens abandoned the fort to the superior Indian force. Presumably such a document would have been kept by the Orderly Room Clerk, a procedure that Nicol asserts as likely in disputing the journal's putative diary status (p. 246). LaChance offers only a portion of the entries—he begins on 4 March—and regularizes spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing; apart from these changes, his transcription is generally accurate.

13. MacLeod, DCB (note 8 above), p. 261. Trying to find sources that illuminate Dickens's actions at Ft. Pitt without being overly interpretive is not easy. Dickens's own report, included in the commissioner's 1885 report, lays out his actions in a direct manner and says the blame for "the surrender of the civilians was entirely owing to the pusillanimity of Mr. Maclean, of the Hudson Bay Company." "Extract from the Annual Report of the Commissioner, North-West Mounted Police for the year 1885," Document no. M539, file 7, Robert H. Hougham Collection, Glenbow Institute Archives, Calgary. For his part, Maclean did not think much of Dickens, either; see "Tragic Events at Frog Lake and Fort Pitt During the North West Rebellion," in Stuart Hughes, ed., *The Frog Lake 'Massacre': Personal Perspectives on Ethnic Conflict* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pp. 244-51.

14. John Manning, "Inspector Frank Dickens of the North West Mounted," *Colorado Quarterly* 8 (1959-60): 63-75; James McCook, "Inspector Dickens, N.W.M.P.," *Blackwood's Magazine* 311 (February 1972): 122.

15. Rudy Wiebe, "A Night in Fort Pitt or (if you prefer) The Only Perfect Communists in the World," *Saturday Night* (August 1989): 42-47; rpt. *Alberta Rebound: Thirty More Stories by Alberta Writers*, edited

by Aritha van Herk (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1990), p. 210.

16. Thacker, "Canada's Mounted" (note 3 above), p. 308; Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in R. H. Canary and H. Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. 41-62; Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. viii-ix.

17. Timothy Dow Adams, "The Contemporary American Mock-Autobiography," *Clio* 8 (1979): 427.

18. Peter Nagourney, "The Basic Assumptions of Literary Biography," *Biography* 1, no. 2 (1978): 102; Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. ix.

19. Big Bear, Riel, and King are all mythic figures, though Prime Minister King—Canada's longest serving leader of a government (1921-25, 26-30, 35-48)—may be the least grand of the three; C. P. Stacey's *A Very Double Life* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976), based on the previously unavailable King diaries, revealed a strange man indeed, dour on the outside, tumultuous and troubled within. As many reviewers of the book noted, King may well be seen as an apt embodiment of Canada. In any case, King belongs in myth, if only because of his longevity in office. Though sales figures can often be deceiving in deciding popular appeal, a former publicist at McClelland and Stewart told me (telephone conversation, February 1991) that Nicol's book did very well in hardback, going into paperback earlier than expected. Its appeal, like that of the Musical Ride, therefore, appears to be quite real to Canadians.