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Introduction

"Similar Organizations in Other Parts"

In April 1919 a novice instructor at the University of Texas named Walter Prescott Webb wrote to a government official in Ottawa inquiring about the history of the Royal North-West Mounted Police (RNWMP).[1] Webb was looking for information on the Mounties that might add depth to the master's thesis he was writing at Austin, a study of another famed North American rural constabulary, the Texas Rangers. Webb had been inspired to undertake the project by the controversy roiling the force that spring, when the Texas state legislature had launched an investigation into alleged Ranger atrocities committed against Mexicans after a failed uprising in South Texas.[2] For his part, the Canadian official promised Webb his assistance and—attempting perhaps to allay the young historian's concerns about the spread of Ranger notoriety—added amiably that the Texas constabulary still enjoyed "considerable reputation in [Canada] and it would be too bad should they be allowed to fall into disrepute."[3]

Whatever Webb made of the dusty, fire-damaged annual reports sent to him that fall from the RNWMP's headquarters in Regina, Saskatchewan, he did not say; the Mounties do not receive even a passing mention in his sprawling 1935 study of the Texas state police. Maybe the prospect of extensive archival research in Canada (in the dead of winter) did not appeal to him; or perhaps Webb was simply conserving academic energy for his massive study of the Great Plains, which appeared in 1931. To be sure, in the years since the publication of Webb's book on the Rangers, scholars of each constabulary have often noted the parallels between what Webb's Canadian correspondent termed "similar organizations in other parts." But such comparisons have usually been fleeting and superficial, merely reminding readers that the Rangers and Mounties are likely the two best-known police forces in the world.[4]

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The absence of a sustained analytical comparison of the Rangers and Mounties is surprising, both because such a project seems so obvious and also because insights can be gleaned by juxtaposing the two forces. On the most fundamental level, measuring the constabularies against each other challenges the notions of historical exceptionalism that animate most histories of the Rangers and Mounties and also of the regions they policed. The forces were created at almost the same moment in the early 1870s, for a strikingly similar reason: to extend the power of the state to outlying regions. More broadly, looking through the institutions themselves to the areas they patrolled undermines the tendency among scholars to describe nineteenth-century Texas and the Canadian prairies in singular terms. The myth of the sui generis North American frontier runs especially deep in both places, but collapses when one realizes, for instance, that the Lone Star State's cattle kingdom had a robust counterpart in southern Alberta, or that the "last, best West" so heavily promoted by Ottawa in the 1890s looked just as bleak to Canadian Indians as the West lying to the south of the 49th parallel appeared to their American counterparts.

Beyond this challenge to exceptionalism, a comparison of the Rangers and Mounties offers fresh perspectives on the Great Plains. Writers and scholars have long confined their studies to either one side of the 49th parallel or the other, imposing intellectual parameters seemingly no less arbitrary than the international border itself.[5] The very existence of these rural constabularies at opposite ends of the region, however, as well as the remarkable overlap between their missions emphasizes the transnational reach of the Great Plains. That the two forces policed nearly identical populations—including Indians, peoples of mixed ancestry, homesteaders, and industrial workers—reinforces the notion that Texas and the Canadian North-West were bound by conditions of ecology, economy, and demography that transcended North American political boundaries. Moreover, because the enforcement of international borders was so central to the work of each force, comparing such efforts by the Rangers and Mounties establishes that the Great Plains belong in any academic discussion of the "borderlands," which for many decades has served as a sort of shorthand referring exclusively to the American Southwest.[6]

Most importantly, linking the histories of the Rangers and Mounties brings into sharp relief the common process by which states incorporated their frontiers during the late nineteenth century. The first step involved the

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confinement or removal of indigenous peoples in order to prepare the hinterlands for occupation by white farmers and entrepreneurs. In Texas, the Rangers—who were driven by decades of brutal native-white conflict within the region—secured the state's borders by forcing Kiowas and Comanches north across the Red River into Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) and by pushing Apaches westward into New Mexico, where the Indians then became the responsibility of the federal government. Though employing far less violence, the Mounties were no less effective in the North-West, since they confined Blackfoot and Crees to reserves, where (it was hoped) the First Nations could then be assimilated into broader Canadian society.

Next came the dispossession of peoples of mixed ancestry, whose communal resource use threatened the privatization of valuable natural resources. For the NWMP, this meant breaking the grasp of the Métis on the river valleys of Saskatchewan, which were coveted by Eurocanadian farmers moving west from Ontario. The Mounties imposed Ottawa's decree that lands throughout the North-West would be divided into square tracts (and not the oblong lots with narrow river frontage favored by the Métis), and then the police worked to quell resistance to federal surveys and land sales. The Rangers, on the other hand, used terrorism and lethal force to protect the cattle of Anglo ranchers from Mexicans (who for their part insisted that many of the animals had been taken from them by whites in the years following the Mexican-American War). The Rangers also suppressed Mexican resistance to the privatization of communal salt deposits in far West Texas, which for decades local residents had used for their livestock or to generate extra income in times of want.

The police then defended cattlemen and ranching syndicates from the protests of the rural poor. With the spread of barbed wire throughout Texas during the 1870s, farmers and smaller ranchers found their access to the free water and grass of the public domain under siege by the wealthy, who enclosed their lands (legally and otherwise) in order to feed their animals and provide for selective breeding. When an intense drought hit the state in 1883, angry nesters retaliated against their more powerful neighbors by destroying fences and stealing livestock. The state government responded by sending out the Rangers, whose primary mission in the mid-1880s involved the eradication of fence cutting. At the other end of the Plains, the Mounties faced the inverse problem: keeping the poor from erecting enclosures (usually along river bottoms) on public lands that had been leased by Ot-

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tawa to Alberta's biggest stock growers. The NWMP thus drove off squatters whose shacks and fences impeded the access of fine-blooded animals to water and forage.

Lastly, the police defeated the threat to nascent industrial development by intervening in strikes at the largest collieries in Texas and the North-West. Mountie involvement at the Alberta Railway and Coal Company helped that corporation through more than a decade of labor disturbances, and saw the police evolve from relatively honest brokers between the two sides to—what many strikers considered—little more than company muscle. The Rangers enjoyed a nearly identical relationship with Colonel Robert D. Hunter's Texas and Pacific Coal Company, with some members of the force even serving in Hunter's private security detail in order to gain more leverage over the dissidents. Over the course of their fifteen years in Thurber, however, the Rangers became less enthusiastic (and consequently less effective) in defending management from the strident efforts of labor activists to unionize the T&PCC workforce.

The convergence of the constabularies' work frames the political objectives and economic imperatives shared by authorities in Austin and Ottawa at this moment, while illuminating police strategies for facilitating the absorption of the hinterlands. While the methods of the police may have diverged sharply—contrast the Rangers' enthusiastic dispensation of violence with the relative restraint of the Mounties—the goals and the net results of their efforts were virtually indistinguishable. Beyond merely linking together the Rangers and the Mounties or the geographical extremes of the Great Plains, such a discovery serves to integrate the frontiers of North America into a global story of economic transformation in the industrial age.

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1 Instruments of Incorporation

In September 1878 the *Saskatchewan Herald* published a poem by an author identified only by the initials W. S. titled "The Riders of the Plains," the piece celebrated the valor of the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP), who had arrived on the prairies four years earlier to establish Canadian authority in the region. After describing the myriad challenges met and overcome by the constabulary during its famed march to the West in 1874, the poem reaches its crescendo in the final stanza:

Our mission is to plant the right
Of British freedom here—
Restrain the lawless savages,
And protect the pioneer.
And 'tis a proud and daring trust
To hold these vast domains
With but three hundred mounted men—
The Riders of the Plains.

The poem soon became the best-known verse about the Mounties, and inspired later writers to add their own stanzas to the original.[1]

Although W. S. no doubt believed the Mounties were peerless, just six years later a Texas woman named Mary Saunders Curry drafted a paean to the Texas Rangers that echoed the tributes heaped by the Canadian poet upon the Mounted Police. Of the typical Ranger, Curry wrote in 1884:

He stands our faithful bulwark
Against the savage foe;
Through lonely woodland places

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Our children come and go.
Our flocks and herds untended
O'er hill and valley roam;
The ranger in the saddle
Means peace for us at home.[2]

While Curry's poem seems to have been intended only for the amusement of Captain L. P. "Lam" Sieker and the men of Ranger Company D, it, too, enjoyed broad circulation, suggested by its reprinting in a state periodical some eight years later.[3]

The parallels between the verses are striking. For instance, both writers evoke the forbidding landscapes of their respective Great Plains frontiers, and each identifies the chief responsibility of the police as protecting (white) settlers from "savage" Indians. And yet even a passing glance at the poems uncovers some revealing differences. W. S. emphasizes the Old World traditions undergirding the NWMP, as well as the aim of the force to "plant the right of British freedom" in the West—in other words, to bring justice to areas then beyond Ottawa's control. There is no mention of such high-minded duties anywhere in Curry's poem; rather, she stresses throughout the importance of Ranger vigilance in keeping Anglo-Texans safe from the terrors of murder and theft.

Though of dubious literary quality, the poems are useful in opening a window onto the Rangers, Mounties, and the transnational Great Plains frontier they policed during the late nineteenth century. For one thing, the verses attest to the powerful resemblances linking the two constabularies, which were formed at virtually the same moment, for nearly identical reasons, and to patrol similar environments. Moreover, the authors' unabashed celebrations of the police underscore the intensive process of mythmaking that has surrounded the constabularies from the moments of their inception right up to the present. But no less than such similarities, the poems also call attention to the significant differences between the conditions faced and the means employed by the Rangers and the Mounties as they incorporated the hinterlands of Texas and the North-West. If in the end their efforts produced overlapping results at the far edges of the Plains, Ranger violence contrasted with Mountie restraint reveals much about the forces themselves and the societies that deployed them.

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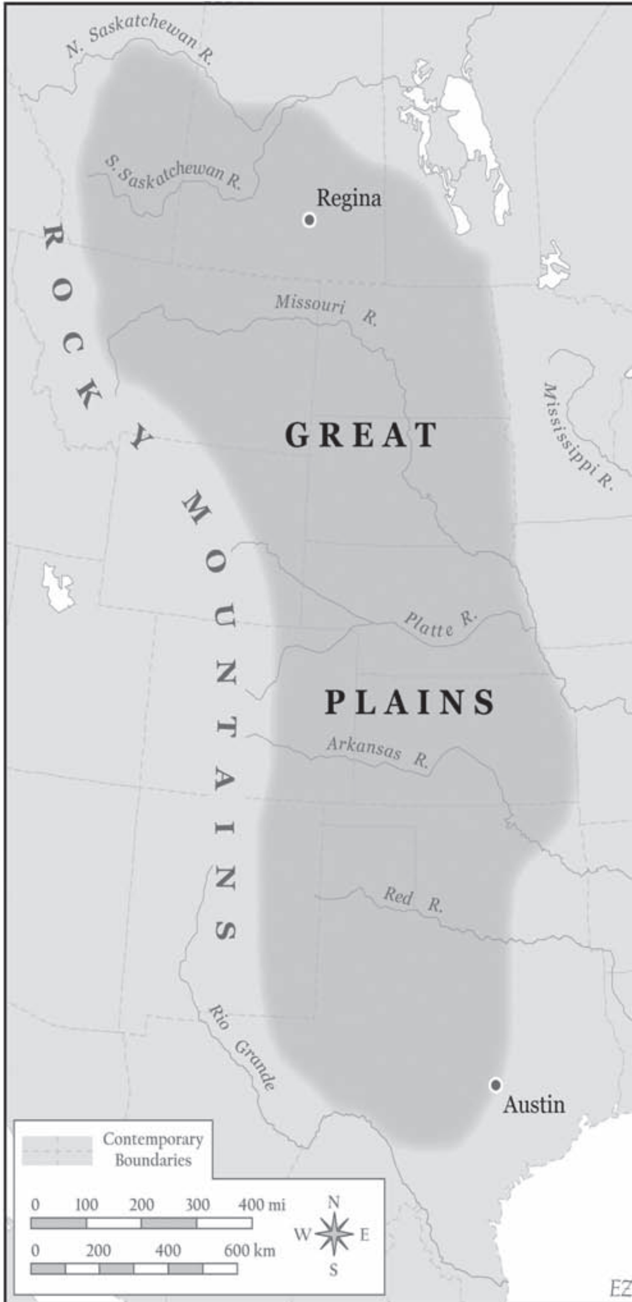

1. The Great Plains

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2. Texas

The Plains

Though separated by more than 2,000 miles (plus an international boundary), Texas and the North-West Territories of Canada had much in common during the last third of the nineteenth century. For one thing, as the southern and northern extremes of the Great Plains, they were linked by the environmental conditions of the vast North American grasslands, characterized by a semiarid climate, a flat or slightly rolling landscape, and a wide variety of plant and animal species of which the bison was the most famous.[4] For another, they resembled each other in size: at 261,000 square miles, Texas is roughly equal in area to the lower halves of Alberta and Saskatchewan, which made up the heart of the North-West Territories.[5] Moreover, the composition of their human populations was analogous, consisting of natives, peoples of mixed ancestry, Anglo settlers, and European industrial workers.

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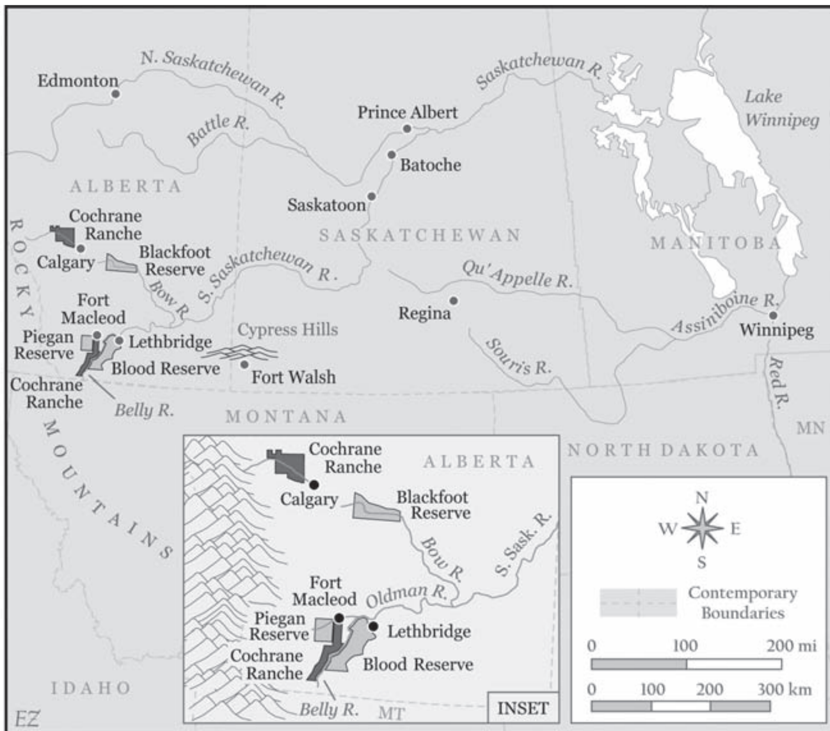

3. Western Canada

Texas and the North-West Territories were related in this period in more complex ways as well. Both were borderlands regions of larger state entities actively engaged in the process of state building, and as such, officials in Austin and Ottawa placed the highest priority on bringing these hinterlands under their political and economic control. The North-West, for instance, lay beyond the grasp of the federal government at the time of Canadian Confederation in 1867. For the previous two centuries, the area (known as Prince Rupert's Land) had existed under the jurisdiction of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), established in 1670 by King Charles II of England to exploit the abundance of fur-bearing game in the region north and west of the Great Lakes. After Confederation, however, Ottawa moved quickly to acquire the territory from the HBC in order to extend the reach of the new nation but also to deny the United States the opportunity to annex it, a legitimate concern given America's territorial pretensions of the nineteenth century. Thus it was that Ottawa purchased Rupert's Land in 1869 from the British for £300,000.

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Likewise, Texas in the late 1860s and early 1870s was in political and geographic transition. As part of the United States, the Lone Star State was mired in the throes of national reconstruction following a bitter civil war, and Texas experienced its own rebirth in this period, as control of the state shifted back to the Democrats after nine years of postwar Republican rule.[6] Moreover, as in Ottawa, officials in Austin sensed a keen need to shore up the borders surrounding their outlying regions, and so set about strengthening the human and physical boundaries between Mexico to the south and Indian Territory to the north. While of course neither Mexicans nor Indians sought the annexation of Texas, their continued presence within the confines of the state imperiled Austin's plans for the absorption of the region, in much the same way that prospective American interlopers threatened the fragile dream of a transcontinental Dominion of Canada.

Even more broadly, Texas and the North-West were both located on the peripheries of an expanding system of international capitalism, one marked in late nineteenth-century North America (as elsewhere) by the rapid movement of people and investment capital to the frontier and the ensuing development of natural resources for commercial exchange.[7] While the Great Plains was among the last parts of the continent integrated into the global market economy, industrialization swept across it with transformative power between 1870 and 1900. For instance, this period witnessed the massive extension of rail networks in Texas and the Canadian West, as the Lone Star State added nearly 9,000 miles of track and Ottawa oversaw the hurried construction of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway. These infrastructural improvements facilitated the migration of white settlers—many of whom harbored entrepreneurial ambitions—to resource-rich but previously inaccessible places such as the Texas Panhandle and the Bow River Valley of present-day Alberta. Their new ventures in ranching and mining attracted great sums from domestic and overseas investors and served to bind the hinterlands to more developed urban areas in Texas and Canada.

Despite these powerful resemblances, several features nevertheless distinguished Texas and the North-West from one another. Most fundamental was the issue of political status. Though Texas had existed briefly as an independent republic from 1836 to 1845 (and thus entered the United States in possession of most of its territory), in 1870 it was merely a state within a larger nation, one that had formally separated from England nearly a