

# RESEARCH REPORTS/ NOTES DE RECHERCHE

## September 1931: A Re-interpretation of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Handling of the 1931 Estevan Strike and Riot

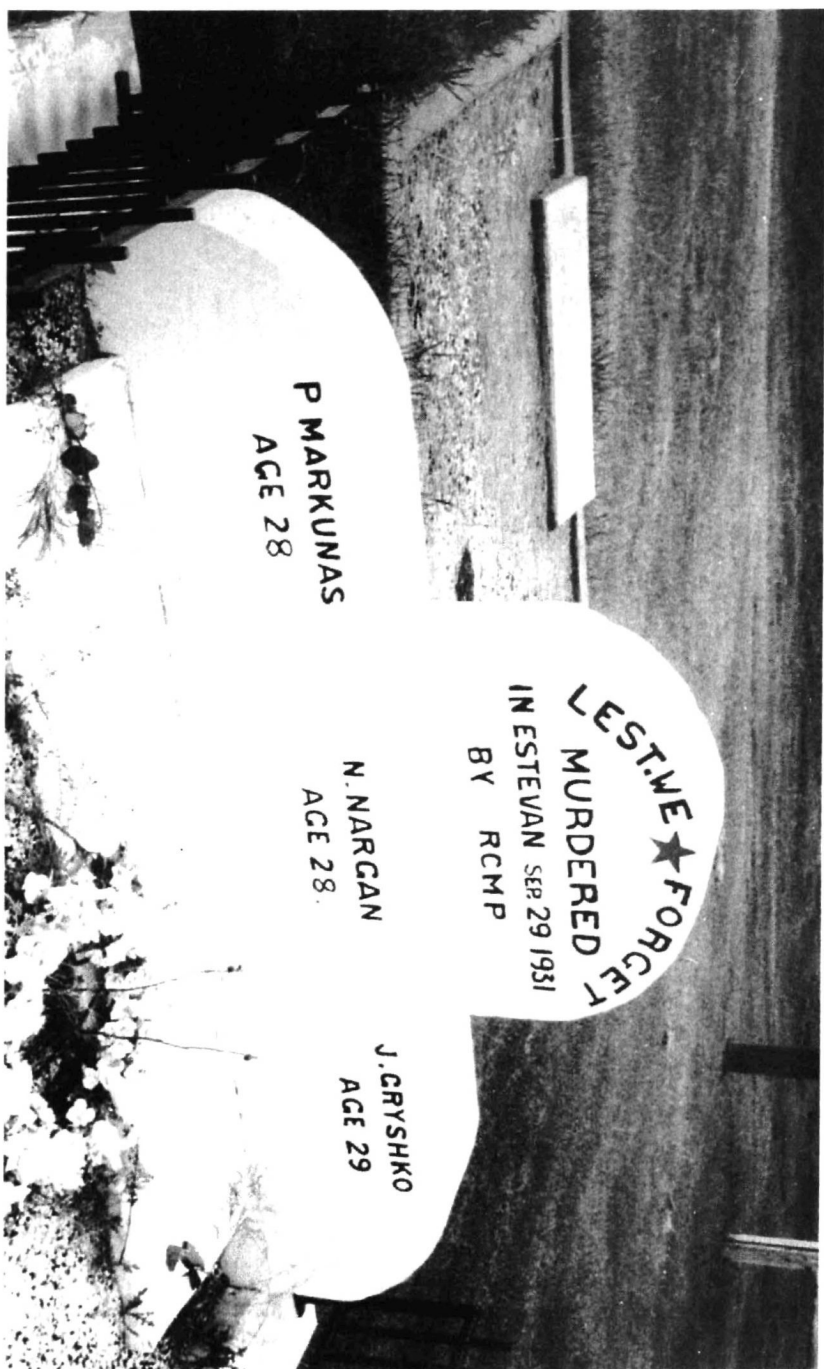
Steve Hewitt

THE ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT has been a major boon to historians doing research on various aspects of Canada's past, in particular those investigating the security actions of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Documents, released under Access by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), allow for a more detailed and subtle portrayal of the activities of both workers and the police.

One example of the possibilities offered by this material are the previously restricted RCMP records on the 1931 Estevan strike and riot and what they have to say about the Mounted Police.<sup>1</sup> The importance of the records is two-fold: the

<sup>1</sup>Two versions of the Estevan material exist. One group of records is held in the National Archives of Canada (NAC), Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) Records, Record Group (RG) 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, parts 1-4. Similar records are available in the CSIS reading room (CSIS, Records released under Access, Accession #88-A-60) although the material deleted under the Access to Information Act varies between the two collections. Greg Kealey noted the potential difficulties these two sets of records might raise for researchers in the introduction to Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part I, 1933-1934* (St. John's 1993), 18.

Steve Hewitt, "September 1931: A Re-interpretation of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Handling of the 1931 Estevan Strike and Riot," *Labour/Le Travail* 39 (Spring 1997), 159-78.



*The miners' grave in the cemetery at Bienfait, 1995. Photo courtesy of Chris Morier.*

material challenges previous historical work on Estevan by disputing the dominant interpretation of some of the most contentious events; and, even more significantly, the records question simplistic notions of the Mounted Police as a monolithic organization.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the latter, many of the officers "on the ground" attempted to be balanced in their assessment of the reasons behind the strike and the course of action to be taken. In fact, some openly sympathized with the striking miners despite their own class and ethnic prejudices. Inevitably, however, in a hierarchical institution like the Mounted Police, they followed the orders of their superiors, a group which strongly espoused the anti-communist rhetoric of the RCMP's political master, the Conservative government of R.B. Bennett.

The Estevan riot occurred on 29 September 1931. It was a particularly violent clash between armed members of the RCMP and striking miners, out of work since 8 September. The miners, wielding clubs and bricks, bore the brunt of the violence. Two of their number lay dead from gunshot wounds in the streets, while a third died later in a nearby hospital. Eight other miners were wounded by police bullets, as were several Estevan citizens. The dead were buried in a cemetery on the outskirts of nearby Bienfait, Saskatchewan. The caption on their common grave reads, "Murdered by R.C.M.P."<sup>3</sup>

Recriminations began almost immediately after the riot. Each side blamed the other for what had happened. The attribution of blame by the Mounted Police, however, carried more weight in the eyes of society, including those in authority, and it was their version of events which held sway at the time. The courts convicted several miners for rioting, while members of the Mounted Police escaped any sort of public reprimand.

Historians in the last quarter century, however, have rendered another judgement. In his 1978 thesis on the Mine Workers' Union of Canada, Allen Seager simply describes the RCMP's policing of the strike as a "terror campaign."<sup>4</sup> S.D. Hanson, on the other hand, contributed a more complex explanation in his thesis entitled, "The Estevan Strike and Riot, 1931," and an article based on it.<sup>5</sup> He accuses some members of the Mounted Police of conspiring with town officials in an attempt to justify their actions the day of the riot:

<sup>2</sup>Two extremes of the nuance-less literature are Lorne and Caroline Brown, *An Unauthorized History of the RCMP* (Toronto 1978) and Nora and William Kelly, *The Royal Canadian Mounted Police: A Century of History, 1873-1973* (Edmonton 1973).

<sup>3</sup>This caption was subsequently ordered removed by the local town council. Since then, however, it has been restored (see photo left).

<sup>4</sup>Allen Seager, "A History of the Mine Workers' Union of Canada," MA thesis, McGill University, 1978, 260.

<sup>5</sup>S.D. Hanson, "The Estevan Strike and Riot, 1931," MA thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1971; S.D. Hanson, "Estevan 1931," in Irving Abella, ed., *On Strike: Six Key Labour Strikes in Canada, 1919-1949* (Toronto 1975).

Viewing the carnage, the authorities, like normal individuals, were doubtless horrified lest they be regarded as having failed to take the necessary steps to head off violence, especially violence in which non-participants had been struck by flying bullets. Under the circumstances, they might well panic and begin asking what they could do to make themselves appear as innocent as possible, thereby placing as much blame as possible on the miners. It would appear that they opted for altering the original minutes to state that [the Estevan town] council, meeting in the regular manner earlier in the day, had specifically advised the police to prevent a violation of its edict. Such a change would be very useful. It would suggest that the town council was an alert body of men, making specific, even if unsuccessful, provisions to safeguard the lives and property of their citizens.<sup>6</sup>

Hanson constructs his theory and then argues its validity because no specific evidence to contradict it exists: "That the original council minutes were altered cannot be disproven ...."<sup>7</sup>

Picking up on Hanson's thesis were Lorne and Caroline Brown who, in their anti-Mounted Police polemic, *An Unauthorized History of the RCMP*, offered a harsh assessment of the Mounties' role at Estevan and their activities in dealing with labour in general:

In the weeks following September 29, the authorities and the police carried on a deceitful campaign to exonerate themselves and discredit the strikers. They spread the story that the strike leaders had been informed that the police intended to break up the parade, but that they purposely kept the miners in the dark about it. They also claimed that when the miners arrived in Estevan they were armed with clubs and even some guns ....

The events surrounding the Bienfait-Estevan strike were not at all atypical .... Governments and police and especially the RCMP automatically sided with the employers. The RCMP were used mainly to protect company property and scabs, but they were also often used to intimidate strikers by means of legal or violent acts.<sup>8</sup>

There is a problem, however, with both Hanson's theory and the Brown's generalization regarding the relationship between the Mounted Police and labour: the RCMP records suggest a more complex picture. The material held by CSIS and the National Archives implies that the Mounties were guilty more of incompetence than dishonesty in their role in the Estevan Riot; the documentation also illustrates that while the overall ideology of the Mounted Police was undoubtedly pro-capital, several Mounties sympathized with the workers or at least attempted to be balanced in their judgement. These same policemen repeatedly reported that the real problem at Estevan lay with the mine owners and managers who through the use of "scab" workers were deliberately attempting to provoke violence. Their reports fell on deaf ears, however, demonstrating a division between the Mounted Police at the top, who completely subscribed to the pro-capitalist/anti-communist philosophy of

<sup>6</sup>Hanson, "Estevan 1931," 53.

<sup>7</sup>Hanson, "Estevan 1931," 53.

<sup>8</sup>Brown and Brown, *An Unauthorized History of the RCMP*, 71-6.

the federal government, and those at Estevan. This divided thinking led to a greater emphasis on the protection of private property and to the ineffective strategy of dividing the Mounted Police contingent on the day of the riot. Such choices contributed to the violence of 29 September 1931.

There has been an array of interpretations regarding the relationship between the Mounted Police and labour. According to historian R.C. Macleod, the Mountie role in the 19th century was one of a neutral arbitrator:

while the police spent much of their time dealing with problems which arose from labour disputes they did not think of it as a special problem apart from the other problems of maintaining peace and order .... It did not occur to any of the parties involved in labour disputes that the police by intervening could be considered to be helping one class exploit another .... The police were effectively neutral in almost all labour disputes. They acted as honest brokers to the general satisfaction of both sides and as often took the part of labour as of management.<sup>9</sup>

In their hagiographic account of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, written to celebrate the centennial of the Force, Nora and William Kelly offered a brief comment on the relationship between the Mounted Police and labour, in the context of the Winnipeg General Strike:

Most of the western press spoke proudly of the Mounted Police, but the western labour press labelled them "strikebreakers." Yet they had only acted on government orders to prevent a forbidden parade and had gathered evidence against certain men, not because they were labour leaders but because they were plotting to overthrow the government, by force if necessary.<sup>10</sup>

The Mounted Police role at Estevan was similar to the one depicted in historian William Baker's excellent study of the Royal North-West Mounted Police's (RNWMP) handling of the 1906 Lethbridge coal strike. That strike began in March 1906 when Local 574 of the United Mine Workers of America District 18 struck for recognition of the union and improvements in pay and working conditions. The strike lasted nine months before the federal government, under the initiative of William Lyon Mackenzie King, intervened to force a settlement. Over the period of the strike a great deal of violence occurred, including two riots, numerous assaults, and thirteen explosions. Throughout that period as well, the Mounted Police found itself arrayed against the striking miners.<sup>11</sup> Baker found an intricate relationship existing between the police and the miners, one fuelled by the stereotypes each held of the other. In general, he noted, members of the Mounted Police

<sup>9</sup>R.C. Macleod, *The NWMP and Law Enforcement, 1873-1905* (Toronto 1976), 157.

<sup>10</sup>Kelly and Kelly, *The Royal Canadian Mounted Police*, 151.

<sup>11</sup>William M. Baker, "The Miners and the Mounties: The Royal North West Mounted Police and the 1906 Lethbridge Strike," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), 65-6.

lacked sympathy for the miners, in part because they believed their own working conditions were worse than the miners:

[local Mountie commander J.O.] Wilson undoubtedly considered the miners an already-advantaged group of workers who were making excessive demands, especially since many were "foreigners." Certainly this would be the inference the Mounties would draw from their discovery that the average daily earnings of seven prominent strikers ranged between \$2.80 and \$5.03 for the six months prior to the strike, some four to eight times the \$.60 per day received by a RNWMP recruit at the time. Other invidious comparisons could have been drawn by the police. If miners complained of harsh treatment by the company, ordinary Mounties might have responded that it was nothing compared to the authoritarian management procedures of the RNWMP whereby fines, jail sentences, and dismissals were quite normal practices. If strikers argued the need to establish better economic conditions for their wives and children, Mounties might have noted that for most constables, marriage itself was unlikely both for financial reasons and because personnel were moved frequently. Clearly, Mounties had little sympathy for strikers.<sup>12</sup>

Baker argued, however, that the Mountie attitude was not beyond reform:

Yet there is little indication of strong police hostility toward the strikers once the initial negative stereotype had been overcome. Indeed, the Mounties did develop an independent judgement of what was required of them as witnessed, for example, by the decision in July, without consultation with company officials, to withdraw the force at the mine encampment.<sup>13</sup>

Like Lethbridge, Estevan, a small town in southeastern Saskatchewan, was blessed with natural wealth in the form of coal, in this case an abundance of lignite. Working without a union, coal miners in Estevan received lower wages than their counterparts in Alberta and British Columbia, experienced seasonal employment and injuries on the job, all the while working for employers who at the slightest complaint could tell a worker "if you don't like it, pack your tools and get out."<sup>14</sup>

Six coal companies represented the employers: Bienfait Mines Limited, Manitoba and Saskatchewan Coal Company, National Mines Limited, Eastern Collieries Limited, Crescent Collieries Limited, and Western Dominion Collieries Limited. A seventh company, Truax-Traer Coal Company, which would be an important site throughout the strike, employed strip mining methods unlike the other deep hole mines.<sup>15</sup> Workers despised the Truax-Truer's mechanized approach because it meant less employment, while rival coal companies felt that the company deliberately undercut the price of lignite in order to drive its competition

<sup>12</sup>Baker, "Miners and the Mounties," 90-1.

<sup>13</sup>Baker, "Miners and the Mounties," 91.

<sup>14</sup>Hanson, "The Estevan Strike and Riot, 1931," 32-49, 80.

<sup>15</sup>Hanson, "The Estevan Strike and Riot, 1931," 11-5.

out of business. This rivalry and a general decline in the price of lignite in the 1930s led companies to cut wages. The poor working conditions and drop in wages, coupled with the lack of work available during the Great Depression to supplement the seasonal employment of mining, made conflict of some sort almost inevitable.<sup>16</sup>

The lack of representation for the miners had long been a source of grievance; the Mine Workers Union of Canada (MWUC) attempted to fill this void. The mine owners, however, refused to recognize the union, ostensibly because of its links with the Communist Party of Canada, but as Hanson points out and as one Mountie would later admit, the mine owners would undoubtedly have refused to recognize any union, whatever its political affiliation.<sup>17</sup> Several hundred miners joined the Communist-affiliated union and on 7 September 1931 they walked off the job.

The local Mounted Police contingent quickly became concerned as tension grew in early September. These were not the Mountie stereotypes generated by some historians. For example, the most important Mountie on the scene at Estevan, Sergeant William Mulhall, in-charge of the local detachment, made no secret of his sympathy for the miners in the reports he filed. On 5 September 1931, the 55-year-old native of Liverpool, England, reflected on the upcoming strike:

*It would appear that a strike in this district would not be so disadvantageous to the mine owners as at first sight and it would seem that they are purposely avoiding a meeting with the miners. The most energetic personality in this is Mr. Moffat [sic], who is interested in the Western Collieries and apparently in favour of forcing a strike. Information from a reliable source is to the effect that this man is using his influence with the rest of the mine operators to prevent them meeting the miners and coming to a mutual agreement to avert a strike ....*

*The number of miners in the Estevan district will be approximately one thousand of mixed nationalities, in favour of a strong foreign element. The majority of these miners are not in favour of communism, though they believe they have had unjust treatment and need a leader to guide them and air their grievances. If these had been adjusted the present situation would have been avoided.*<sup>18</sup>

Even before the miners left the pits the mine owners and managers began to call for an armed presence to deal with any potential strikers. Undoubtedly the owners planned on employing replacement workers and recognized the conflict this might cause. The force they wanted to perform their bidding was the RCMP. On 3 September 1931, eleven-year veteran Constable F.H. Steele met with mine manager E.W. Garner, who requested that at least five men, armed with shotguns, be stationed around Truax-Traer property. Steele could discover nothing to "substantiate [the manager's] fears and it would appear that any outside interference

<sup>16</sup>Hanson, "The Estevan Strike and Riot, 1931," 25-33.

<sup>17</sup>Hanson, "The Estevan Strike and Riot, 1931," 79.

<sup>18</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 1, Report of Sgt. W. Mulhall, 5 September 1931.

would only tend to increase the ill-feeling against this company and thus cause trouble rather than further any amicable agreement."<sup>19</sup>

The local Mounties continued to monitor the situation after the strike began on 7 September 1931. They did not, as the Browns argue, "automatically side ... with the employers." Nor were they simply there "to protect company property and scabs" or be employed as a tool to "intimidate strikers by means of legal or violent action."<sup>20</sup> In fact, when Sergeant Mulhall encountered a group of striking miners on 11 September he attempted to discover their grievances and even tried his hand at mediation:

It appears the bone of contention was the abrupt manner in which a reduction in the scale of wages had been made in the Spring of this year. ... I pointed out that nothing could be gained by them sitting on one side of the fence and the official of the Clay Products Co. on the other making no attempt to come to some arrangement whereby a settlement might be arrived at. I suggested that they appoint a committee to meet Mr. Calvert and arrange for a meeting of the employees of the Clay Products Co. who were on strike and the Directors of the Company and at least talk things over. This they were perfectly willing to do and requested that I advise Mr. Calvert to this effect. Their men appeared to be very reasonable and willing to do anything to bring the present situation to a satisfactory conclusion. After receiving their decision, I advised them to disperse which they did at once.<sup>21</sup>

Mulhall's superiors, however, envisioned a more sinister agenda behind the miners' strike, especially since the new union was linked with the Communist Party of Canada. Mulhall was advised to put the union president and Communist, James Sloan, and another organizer under surveillance.<sup>22</sup> Reinforcements arrived on the morning of 8 September, just in time for the strike, and an additional twelve Mounties under command of Detective Staff-Sergeant William Mortimer were ordered to Estevan that evening. A Mountie Secret Agent, John Eberhardt,<sup>23</sup> received orders to proceed to Estevan and infiltrate the striking miners in order to report on their activities from the inside.<sup>24</sup> Even with these transfers, Superinten-

<sup>19</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1026-9-91093, pt. 1, Report of Cst. F.H. Steele, 3 September 1931.

<sup>20</sup>Brown and Brown, *An Unauthorized History of the RCMP*, 76.

<sup>21</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 1, Report of Mulhall, 11 September 1931.

<sup>22</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 1, D/Sgt. J. Metcalfe to Mulhall, 7 September 1931.

<sup>23</sup>NAC, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Personnel Records of Special Constable J.L. Eberhardt, 94-ATP-1700. Eberhardt, of Czech background, started off as a Secret Agent, became a Special Constable, and then found his employment terminated by the Mounted Police in the mid-1930s.

<sup>24</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG146, vol. 6, File 1025-9-91093, pt. 1, Supt. R.R. Tait to M.A. MacPherson, Attorney General of Saskatchewan, 8 September 1931. Informants were also



dent R.R. Tait, in charge of the Southern Saskatchewan District of the Mounted Police, sought to avoid any action, such as stationing Mounted Policemen at mine sites, that the striking miners might perceive as provocative.<sup>25</sup>

The RCMP displayed two main fears in its strike reports. One was the aforementioned link between the Communist Party of Canada and the MWUC and its leader, James Sloan.<sup>26</sup> The other was the large number of "foreigners," chiefly Eastern Europeans, involved in the strike. The Mounted Police attitudes at the time reflected the ethnic bigotry of a society dominated by British Canadians, bigotry which saw a hierarchy of races and ethnic groups with Anglo Saxons at the top and those of Eastern-European origin somewhere near the bottom.<sup>27</sup> Since the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike the Canadian state perceived radical "foreigners" as the number one threat to the security of the nation. This attitude connecting communism with ethnicity was especially strong in the Conservative government of R.B. Bennett and its appointee as Commissioner of the RCMP, Major-General J.H. MacBrien.<sup>28</sup> MacBrien made an explicit link between radicalism, ethnicity, and disorder in a 1932 speech to an audience in Toronto:

It is notable that 99% of these fellows [Communists] are foreigners and many of them have not been here long. The best thing to do would be to send them back where they came from in every way possible. If we were rid of them there would be no unemployment or unrest in Canada.<sup>29</sup>

---

used as well as other agents, including individuals working at the Taylorton, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan mines. NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 3, Report of Secret Agents at Estevan Detachment, 18 October 1931. The RCMP approached at least one mine manager to get one of their operatives hired on as a miner.

<sup>25</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 3, Tait to MacPherson, 15 September 1931.

<sup>26</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 3, Supt. T.S. Belcher to Pearson, Priv. Sec. of Min of Justice, 9 September 1931. Belcher wrote to the government to note the Communist involvement in the Estevan strike.

<sup>27</sup>For an excellent study of nativism in Western Canada see Howard Palmer, *Patterns of Prejudice: Nativism in Alberta* (Toronto 1978); for a contemporary depiction of ethnic groups, see J.S. Woodsworth's, *Strangers within our gates; or, Coming Canadians* (1909; Toronto 1972), 46-160. For a more detailed discussion of the ethnic attitudes of the Mounted Police see S.R. Hewitt, "Malczewski's List: A Case Study of Royal North-West Mounted Police-Immigrant Relations," *Saskatchewan History*, 46, 1 (Spring 1994), 35-41.

<sup>28</sup>Deportation became a weapon of choice for dealing with the perceived threat. See Barbara Roberts, *Whence They Came: Deportation from Canada, 1900-1935* (Ottawa 1978). In the aftermath of the riot, Assistant Commissioner Spalding ordered that a list of miners involved in the strike and riot be "investigated with a view to their possible deportation and a separate report submitted in each case." NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 3, Spalding to O.C., Weyburn Sub-District, 15 December 1931.

<sup>29</sup>Brown and Brown, *An Unauthorized History of the RCMP*, 63.

## 168 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

As part of one report Mulhall included a list of “foreigners”<sup>30</sup> working at area mines and believed to be “Reds.”<sup>31</sup>

As the strike continued, tension grew. Mulhall believed that a particular mine manager was responsible for the increasingly dangerous situation:

In going over the situation at Taylorton, it seems that Mr. Moffatt [sic] brought in about two dozen men to act as strike breakers, the main object being to provoke the strikers to some overt act of violence thus creating a situation demanding police interference and promoting a crisis. My reason for arriving at this conclusion is that it would be impossible to work the mines at Taylorton with the number of men brought in, particularly as they were inexperienced in the work they were to be employed at. Also as I have already stated no provision was made for boarding these men the cook having refused to cook meals for “scabs”. Mr. Moffatt is an American with extreme ideas, who has had experience in the Pennsylvania U.S.A. strikes, when riots occurred and the miners were literally “mowed down” his attitude is that the present situation should be handled by the police in a similar manner. It has been my endeavour to handle the situation with care and patience and it is to our credit that there has been no violence or destruction of property.<sup>32</sup>

Mulhall’s cool-headed approach angered several prominent Estevan citizens, in particular, J.F. Creighton, who wrote a furious letter to Conservative Senator Gideon Robertson<sup>33</sup> complaining about the Mounted Police role at Estevan:

These men have a perfect right to strike out but equally men who wish to work—and there are many—have a perfect right to work, and our Police here should see that that right is protected. The Sergeant you have here is strong on arresting some one who has mislaid his drivers license, but that is his size. Both sides are calling the Dominion Police [sic], “The Rabbits.” .... If we had Bradley, or Larry Lett — old N.W.M.P. here, either of them alone would have had things so these men who want to work would have been working ... The behaviour of the Dominion Police here is a disgrace.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 1, Tait to M.A. MacPherson, 8 September 1931. Tait had informed the attorney general of Saskatchewan that Eberhardt was “to be on the ground as soon as possible with a view to getting inside information as to the actual conditions which exist and to work among the foreign element with a view to ascertaining to what extent red propaganda is being spread. I am of the opinion that if trouble ensues it will be from this source.”

<sup>31</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 1, Report of Mulhall, 9 September 1931. Mulhall included a list of “foreigners working at the various mines who are believed to be ‘reds’ and who will bear watching ....”

<sup>32</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 1, Report of Mulhall, 17 September 1931.

<sup>33</sup>Robertson had been Minister of Labour during the Winnipeg General Strike and was currently serving in the same position in the government of R.B. Bennett.

<sup>34</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 1, J.F. Creighton to Senator Gideon Robertson, 17 September 1931. This may very well be the same Dr. Creighton who

The Mayor of Estevan, D. Bannatyne, wrote a similar letter on 17 September complaining about Mulhall's lack of action to Assistant Commissioner J.W. Spalding, in-charge of the RCMP in Saskatchewan. Bannatyne finished the letter by calling for the transfer of Mulhall.<sup>35</sup> He also forwarded a copy to Gideon Robertson. The pressure led to the despatching of an officer from Regina to investigate the complaints against Mulhall; he found no validity to them.<sup>36</sup>

Other Mounties besides Mulhall questioned the role of the mine owners and managers at Estevan. Inspector F.W. Schutz, sent to investigate the complaints against Mulhall as well as the general conditions in Estevan, offered his own perspective on events:

As long as the Producers do not attempt to start the mines I am of the opinion that there are sufficient men here to handle the situation but as soon as they attempt to start working the mines there will no doubt be serious trouble and a larger number of men will be required. I am of the opinion that the operators wish the Police to start something. It would appear that the farmers engaged by the Dom. Collieries were not sufficient to start mining operations but that all they did was to stir up the feelings of the strikers.<sup>37</sup>

As the Mounted Police recognized, the flash point to any violence would be the use of strike breakers, something the newly-arrived Detective/Staff-Sergeant Walter Mortimer communicated to headquarters:

12-9-31 The situation appeared to be quite clear at this time and there was only one of three ways the Coal Operators could operate, i.e. close down the mines, operate and recognize the Union, or operate with strike-breakers, it appeared highly probable that there would be acts of violence and disorder if strike-breakers came in, as the majority of the miners are men with families and no other place to go to mete out an existence. [deleted under the *Access to Information Act*] reported to me that the miners were making plans to resist any attempt at strike-breaking ....<sup>38</sup>

A clash nearly occurred on 16 September when strikers surrounded a boarding house that held several strike breakers. The Mounties, under Sergeant C. Richardson, arrived and restored order by informing the men that the police "were neutral

---

in the immediate aftermath of the violence of the riot refused to treat wounded miners unless they could pay a week in advance. This policy may have led to the death of one of the wounded miners. See Brown and Brown, *An Unauthorized History of the RCMP*, 75.

<sup>35</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, D. Bannatyne, Mayor of Estevan, to Col. J.W. Spalding, 17 September 1931.

<sup>36</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Tait to Spalding, 28 September 1931.

<sup>37</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Report of Insp. F.W. Schutz, 20 September 1931.

<sup>38</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Report of D/S-Sgt. W. Mortimer, 19 September 1931.

and were only there to keep the peace ... . It was hard to explain to the striking miners, who were outside in the cold, that the men inside were not getting any more protection than they were themselves."<sup>39</sup> Richardson, however, angered several on the side of management when he told the boarding house cook that it was up to her whether she should feed the strike breakers. She refused and several of the men left.<sup>40</sup> Intimidation of this type on the part of strikers compelled the "big six" to dismiss the remaining replacement workers and shut down operations.<sup>41</sup>

Such examples of Mounted Police intervention did nothing to satisfy the coal mine owners and managers, an attitude which contradicts the Browns' contention that the police had simply done the bidding of the companies by protecting "scabs."<sup>42</sup> Nor does the evidence support the statement in John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager's *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* that the "mine owners ... turned the strike into a struggle against communism, ensuring themselves the support of ... the RCMP in their effort to break the union."<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, the owners openly expressed their discontent and frustration with the Mounted Police to the provincial authorities and in the media:

The police failed utterly on [16] Wednesday when the operators attempted to start work in the mines with other labor. Otherwise the mines would have been working today. Adequate protection was promised the mining industry by the authorities in the event of such steps being taken. This protection was by no means given, and in the case of the Western Dominion Collieries, while the mob was still assembled there, police were completely withdrawn from the vicinity.<sup>44</sup>

Next, they sent a list of grievances related to policing to M.A. MacPherson, the attorney general of Saskatchewan:

our deep seam mines financed entirely by British and Canadian capital continue to lie idle because of the fact that we have not been provided with proper police protection to prevent strikers from entering upon our properties in contravention of the criminal code ... we are compelled and must resume operations immediately and very respectfully and very earnestly request that there be provided at once ample police forces to protect life and property ... it

<sup>39</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Report of Sgt. C. Richardson, 18 September 1931.

<sup>40</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Schutz to Tait, 22 September 1931.

<sup>41</sup>Hanson, "The Estevan Strike and Riot," 114.

<sup>42</sup>Brown and Brown, *An Unauthorized History of the RCMP*, 69.

<sup>43</sup>John Herd Thompson, with Allen Seager, *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto 1985), 225.

<sup>44</sup>*Regina Leader-Post*, 16 September 1931, as cited in Hanson, "The Estevan Strike and Riot," 114.

is our right to demand the necessary police forces to ensure protection to life, property and the peaceful operation of our industries.<sup>45</sup>

Although the Saskatchewan government was concerned that a prolonged labour dispute might disrupt a valuable provincial industry, MacPherson appears not to have issued orders to the Mounted Police; they kept him informed at every step and, in turn, he was content to let them do their job.<sup>46</sup>

Part of that job included following up on the accusations listed in the letters from the mining companies. Inspector Schutz of the Mounted Police personally interviewed one of the mine managers, G.A. Calvert, a man responsible for several complaints against the Mounted Police, including one specifically related to Sergeant Mulhall's handling of a particular occasion when strikers entered the private property of a company:

Mr. Calvert in his conversation to me, stated that if Sgt. Mulhall had taken action other than he did that it might have resulted in bloodshed and also damage to property but also that it might have had a peaceable result and the strike would have now been over.<sup>47</sup>

Schutz proceeded to defend Mulhall's role in this incident and spoke to the causes behind the strike, specifically the discontent of the miners:

I am satisfied that if the officers of the company had tried to put these men off of their premises at the time that they would have resisted. That the police would have then have had to step in and there is no knowing where it would have ended. ... It also seems to be the general opinion that the miners that are striking have a real grievance. I have been told several times that the Officers of the H. & S. mines had a fence built around the property with the purpose of making the miners come through the gate and that on them returning the cars were searched for articles purchased from outside stores and if they were that they were kicked over the prairie. One of the complaints of the miners of this company was that they were compelled to purchase at the company store at prices away [sic] in excess of ordinary prices.<sup>48</sup>

In a 23 September letter to the attorney general of Saskatchewan, R.R. Tait dealt with this event and offered a detailed criticism of the mining companies. The letter also demonstrated the narrow path trod by the Mounted Police in their attempt

<sup>45</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Telegram to M.A. MacPherson from the Coal Companies, 22 September 1931.

<sup>46</sup>In the aftermath of the riot both he and the premier of the province, J.T.M. Anderson, blamed the violence on communist agitators brought in from the outside. Hanson, "Estevan 1931," 63-4.

<sup>47</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Schutz to Tait, 22 September 1931.

<sup>48</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Schutz to Tait, 22 September 1931.

## 172 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

to balance the interests of the miners and the owners:

You will also note the reference made ... as to the attitude of the operators of the Taylorton Mine and Brick Plant, in which they express their opinion that the gathering of strikers at this point would constitute an unlawful assembly. They have been advised that it is their privilege to prefer charges in this respect should they desire to do so. Their attitude, however, is that the police should take action.

While technically speaking the gathering of the miners at the point in question might have been classed as unlawful assemblies their conduct was such as in my opinion did not warrant police intervention as at the time the situation was very critical and any indiscretion on the part of the police would undoubtedly have started a conflagration, the outcome of which would no doubt have resulted in loss of life and damage to property without in any measure relieving the situation.<sup>49</sup>

The complaints of the mining companies, however, were being heard at the highest level of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Commissioner MacBrien offered his own opinion on the correctness of the Mounted Police role at Estevan in commenting on a report sent him by J.W. Spalding. In that report, Spalding defended the Mounted Police against the criticism of the mining companies:

I want to assure you that conditions that governed our conduct in maintaining law and order were at times difficult, but it was early seen that the Operators, or at least some of them, were anxious to make use of the Police to protect strike-breakers and their property when certain under-lying conditions which caused the men to strike, did not warrant us in backing the Operators and Mine-Owners to the limit.<sup>50</sup>

Beside this passage, MacBrien wrote that

this seems peculiar. If the Operators wished to take in strike breakers they & their property should be given every protection unless there are some reasons for contrary action. It is not explained.<sup>51</sup>

Although there is no evidence that the Commissioner ordered a change in RCMP policy, the cumulative pressure from the police critics seemed to make the Mounties more keen to protect property. The Truax-Traer mine, which operated throughout the strike using non-unionized labour, now became a centre of conflict. The union had allowed operations to continue although it warned that it would not

<sup>49</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Tait to MacPherson, 23 September 1931.

<sup>50</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Spalding to Commissioner J.H. MacBrien and MacPherson, 21 September 1931.

<sup>51</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Spalding to Commissioner J.H. MacBrien and MacPherson, 21 September 1931.

tolerate the loading of coal into containers for transportation.<sup>52</sup> Soon the strikers found the operation of this mine unacceptable and in the week before the riot the Mounted Police became increasingly concerned that a destructive attack would occur on the mine. In a 23 September report, Mulhall warned of the possibility of such an attack unless a settlement was achieved.<sup>53</sup> On 24 September a confrontation did occur as a group of miners gathered around machinery at the Truax-Traer location. This incident ended peacefully but the implication, at least to Detective/Staff-Sergeant Mortimer, was that the miners would return.<sup>54</sup> Inspector Schutz also informed his superiors of the need to keep some officers stationed at Truax-Traer for its protection.<sup>55</sup> On 25 September Tait informed the attorney general of Saskatchewan of the threat to Truax-Traer.<sup>56</sup> The following morning, Inspector W.J. Moorhead, newly arrived in Estevan with a heavily-armed contingent of mounted policemen, took a patrol of 26 rank-and-file Mounties out to the Truax-Traer mine at 5:30 a.m. because of "information having been received from a reliable source that a gathering of miners might be anticipated with a view to destruction during the early hours of the morning."<sup>57</sup> Reports from agents and informants only heightened the fear over the safety of the mine. One agent reported a specific threat to attack the mine on either 28 September or 29 September.<sup>58</sup> As late as 28 September, Tait reported to his superiors that outside organizers had been brought in specifically to organize parties of miners to storm the Truax-Traer Mine.<sup>59</sup> These fears are important for two reasons: they demonstrate that the

<sup>52</sup>Hanson, "The Estevan Strike and Riot," 108.

<sup>53</sup>NAC, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Report of Mulhall, 23 September 1931.

<sup>54</sup>NAC, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Report of D/S-Sgt. W. Mortimer, 27 September 1931.

<sup>55</sup>NAC, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Report of Schutz, 26 September 1931.

<sup>56</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Tait to MacPherson, 25 September 1931. Tait specifically noted that "there is considerable agitation amongst the strikers with a view to compelling the Truax-Traer mine to close down."

<sup>57</sup>NAC, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Report of Insp. W.J. Moorhead, 1 October 1931.

<sup>58</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 3, Undercover Report, 14 October 1931. This report, forwarded to Tait and on to the attorney general of Saskatchewan, was a summation by a operative of the intelligence he or she (most likely Eberhardt) received in the Estevan area prior to the 29 September riot. "[deleted under Access] heard from a member of the Miners Committee named [deleted under Access] that an attack was planned on the Truax-Traer Mine on the following Monday or Tuesday (N.B. It will be noted that the attack on Estevan took place on Tuesday September 29th) ...." On 26 September Eberhardt reported that his source had suggested that an attack would take place on the morning of 28 September. NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Part 2, Report of Mortimer, 27 September 1931.

<sup>59</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 3, Tait to MacPherson, 28 September 1931.

Mounties were clearly edgy about the security of this particular mine and they provide context for the allocation of RCMP personnel on the day of the riot.

That day was Tuesday, 29 September 1931. Besides dealing with the threats to the Truax-Traer mine, the Mounties now had to worry about a proposed parade by striking miners. The miners believed that a parade through the streets of Estevan would increase their support among local citizens.<sup>60</sup> To the RCMP the parade might have appeared as a diversion to draw away the police from the miners' real target, the contentious Truax-Traer mine. Since they could not be in two places at once, Inspector W.J. Moorhead, now in command of the entire Mounted Police contingent at Estevan, elected to split his force, with himself, Mulhall, and 27 constables leaving Estevan at 1 p.m. and travelling 15 minutes to the Truax-Traer mine. It was from this vantage point that around

3-p.m. the lookout man reported about seventy five cars and trucks proceeding in the direction of Estevan. On receiving a telephone message from Const. McNeil at our special office re the riot, I immediately left for Estevan with all my men arriving there about 3-35 p.m. and found a state of general disorder.<sup>61</sup>

The actual events of the "disorder" involved an ineffective police response to the arrival of the miners. The town fire department was called out in preparation for the use of its hoses to disperse the gathering crowd. Tension grew as the crowd and police interacted. When a miner jumped on to the fire engine and labelled it "captured," he was killed by a police bullet. Mayhem erupted and a vicious battle spread through the streets of the town. Several miners, citizens, and one Mountie were shot and many on each side suffered injuries. The arrival of Moorhead and his contingent finally restored order. Even then, additional Mounties rushed to Estevan from Regina. Their equipment included several machine guns which were placed at strategic points throughout the town in order to intimidate anyone thinking of attempting to protest again.<sup>62</sup>

Although the Mounted Police admitted no responsibility for the violence which occurred, even to the point of claiming during subsequent investigations that shots had been fired from the miners' side, their guilt seems clear. The events in Estevan followed much the same pattern as those in Winnipeg during the General Strike in 1919 and less than four years later during the Regina Riot. In each case Mounted Police-initiated violence was followed by the blame being placed on those who bore the brunt of the police onslaught.<sup>63</sup> A key factor at Estevan was, as Hanson

<sup>60</sup>Hanson, "Estevan 1931," 48.

<sup>61</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, Report of Moorhead, 1 October 1931.

<sup>62</sup>Hanson, "Estevan 1931," 50-1, 54.

<sup>63</sup>For the Mounted Police perspective on the Winnipeg General Strike, see Vernon A.M. Kemp, *Without Fear Favour or Affection* (Toronto 1958), 66-8; and for a Mountie interpre-



suggests, the large number of inexperienced Mounted Policemen on duty in Estevan that day: 34 out of the 43 constables had under a year of police experience.<sup>64</sup>

Also of interest is the series of events which occurred the morning of the riot and in its immediate aftermath. A particularly contentious issue was whether or not the miners had been warned that city council had prohibited their parade and ordered the police to enforce the ban. Hanson theorizes that the police and local officials falsified records in the aftermath of the riot to show that the police had been ordered to prevent any parade by the miners when in fact they had not. This line of reasoning, he argues, explains the controversial actions which occurred on the 29th:

Only in the light of such an interpretation do certain events make complete sense: the failure of the town clerk, McCutcheon and Mortimer to mention council's instructions to the police, the difference between the telegram and letter received by Moar, the ill-chosen site for the police cordon and their retaining of three-fifths of the police at Truax-Traer rather than in Estevan. Consequently, the town clerk, McCutcheon and Mortimer should not be singled out for criticism. Rather they, together with the town council and Inspector Moorhead, should be charged with being parties to the falsification of official records and circulation of stories with which to shift responsibility for events from themselves to the miners.<sup>65</sup>

There are, however, some problems with Hanson's interpretation of Mounted Police actions. First, based on RCMP records it is clear why they would send some units to the Truax-Traer mine. Mine managers, mine owners, some local citizens, and even the Commissioner of the Force directly or indirectly pressed for this course of action.

Hanson's point about the "ill-chosen site for the police cordon" also seems solvable by an alternative explanation: confusion over the time the parade was to start. The miners scheduled the first step of the parade, the collection of individuals who wished to participate, for 1:30 in the afternoon; the actual parade, however, was not to begin until after 3:00 p.m., something which may have proved confusing to those charged with preventing it. When the miners did not materialize at 1:30, the assumption might have been that they had heeded the warning of the town council and cancelled their parade. Their actual appearance obviously surprised the unprepared police leading to a rushed attempt to control the parade and subsequent violence.

At the core of Hanson's thesis, however, is the charge that Mounted Police officers conspired with town officials to falsify records and make it appear that the

---

tation of events at Regina, see NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 26, file 93-A-00086, Asst. Commissioner S.T. Wood to MacBrien, 4 July 1935.

<sup>64</sup>Hanson, "Estevan 1931," 54.

<sup>65</sup>Hanson, "Estevan 1931," 53.

city had specifically ordered the police to halt any attempt at parading. In this case, there is damning evidence to the contrary. Within the Mounted Police records of that day is the transcript of a telephone call from the Estevan Chief of Police:

It has been contemplated that a Parade of the Mine Workers Union of Canada, will take place today leaving the Coal Fields at Taylorton, at 1.30 P.M. today by trucks and cars, and will parade from there to the Town of Estevan, and then through the streets of Estevan.

At 10:30 A.M. today a resolution was made by the Mayor and Council of the Town of Estevan, that any such parade will be prohibited through the streets ... and that the Chief of the Police, of the Town of Estevan, take what action that he deems requisite to prohibit same

....

In the view of the foregoing I would request that you supply sufficient Officers and men as you deem requisite to assist the Estevan Town Police, to prohibit such parade or meeting in the Town Hall; and the carrying of banners.<sup>66</sup>

Of course, the possibility exists that this record is also falsified. But two pieces of evidence suggest that it is not. First, it may seem strange that a record of a telephone call might exist but not when it is considered that Inspector Moorhead, before he was dispatched to Estevan from Regina, was specifically ordered to get any requests for assistance in writing.<sup>67</sup> There was a fear, quite correct as it would turn out, that there might be problems over responsibility for the RCMP actions at Estevan.<sup>68</sup> The second reason why this document is undoubtedly not falsified is that it places the Mounted Police, and specifically Moorhead, in an unflattering light. The Estevan police chief had approached him for assistance and Moorhead had clearly responded with insufficient manpower for the problem at hand. This particular document suggests that, far from being guilty of illegal activities, Moorhead may simply have been guilty of incompetence over his orders surrounding the parade. Of course, the pressure to protect private property placed on Moorhead by his superiors and the mining companies contributed to that incompetence.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 2, McCutcheon, Chief of Police, to Moorhead (phone), 29 September 1931.

<sup>67</sup>NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 4, Spalding to MacBrien, 1 February 1932. Eventually McCutcheon submitted the request in writing although it is not clear if this letter materialized before or after the riot. NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 3, Report of Mortimer on Estevan Riot, 4 October 1931.

<sup>68</sup>In the aftermath of the riot, battles occurred between the three levels of government over which branch should pay for the costs accrued by the Mounted Police and also the costs accrued by citizens injured by the Mounted Police during the riot. NAC, CSIS Records, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 4, 9 January 1932.

<sup>69</sup>When asked as to why the Mounted Police split its forces, retired superintendent Stirling McNeil, a constable in Estevan on the day of the riot, replied that, "At the time they weren't sure if there was going to be a circus at Truax-Traer or not." McNeil made the phone call to Truax-Traer to inform Moorhead of the riot. Interview with Supt. Stirling McNeil, 24 January 1996.

In the immediate aftermath of the riot, the Mounted Police closed ranks. At the subsequent trials of rioters, an effort was made to place the onus for the violence on the miners. Several police witnesses testified to having drawn their weapons only after being cornered, testimony contradicted by pictures taken during the riot which show their guns out much earlier. An old, broken military rifle was the ludicrous evidence presented to prove that the miners had fired first.<sup>70</sup>

Not all of the Mounted Policemen at Estevan, however, escaped unscathed. Sergeant Mulhall, the Mountie most clearly sympathetic toward the miners and the individual charged with keeping the peace between the miners and the mining companies, seemed labelled, at least in part, as a scapegoat. Moorhead criticized Mulhall's actions on the day of the riot and that report was placed on the latter's service record, damaging opportunities for future promotion.<sup>71</sup>

Still, the occasional Mountie like Detective-Sergeant John Metcalfe continued to question the official line being spun by the mining companies and politicians just as some had in September of 1931:

I have also investigated this Red Movement in this field and find that all Miners who are branded Red by the Mine Owners or Management, are men who are connected with the Union Movement and are on the various Pit Committees, it appears to me that the moment a man submits himself to be appointed on a Committee or some position in a Union, and has nerve enough to approach the Owners on behalf of the workers, he is immediately branded a Red. I have not yet interviewed the Owner or Manager of a mine in regard to the red element that has not given me the names of all of the men on the Pit Committee and the names of some Official of the Union ....<sup>72</sup>

This comment symbolizes the ultimate value of the newly-released security records to researchers interested in the Mounted Police: it introduces shades of grey into the black-and-white portrayal which characterizes much of the historical writing on the RCMP. Yes, there was an inevitability to the Mounted Police's protection of private property and, by extension, the interests of the mining industry. The very day of the riot, Tait confirmed this reality in a message to the attorney general of Saskatchewan:

<sup>70</sup>Brown and Brown, *An Unauthorized History of the RCMP*, 73-4.

<sup>71</sup>RCMP, Personnel Records of William Mulhall, Report by Assistant Commissioner J.W. Spalding, 20 October 1931. Moorhead expressed the opinion that Mulhall "did not rise to the occasion, but there is no evidence that he evaded taking a share in the responsibilities placed on our men, but he evidently was not in the thick of the fight as he did not receive a bruise of any kind, which of course is not proof that he did not play his part, but it is significant that he was unable to identify any one of the rioters who attacked our men whilst several of the recruits who were in the fight gave excellent evidence of their alertness and observation made at the time."

<sup>72</sup>NAC, RG 146, vol. 6, file 1025-9-91093, pt. 3, Report of Metcalfe, 3 December 1931.

## 178 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

There is an indication that about 50% of the strikers might return to work if given the opportunity by the mine owners, in which event all mines starting up would have to be carefully guarded and drastic action taken against anyone who attempted to interfere with the workers or with mine property.<sup>73</sup>

Still the records demonstrate that at least some of the Mounties who policed events in Estevan were not simply the puppets of the mining company; they had a degree of autonomy within a framework determined by the nature of the economic and political system of the time.<sup>74</sup> Compared to the 1906 Lethbridge strike, the labour dispute in Estevan was remarkably free of violence with, of course, the notable exception of the riot of 29 September. This aspect, however, is ignored, in part because of a previous lack of detailed source material on the RCMP role. Such a view has also been neglected for the simple reason that the attempt at maintaining order ended with the Mounted Police-initiated violence of 29 September, exactly what many mine owners had strived for since the strike began. Everything which came before the riot vanished in the hail of Mountie bullets and the crumpled bodies of the miners. Some of the Mounties may have briefly improvised their part in the drama which gripped Estevan during September 1931, but the mining companies had the final say on the ending.

*Special thanks for the helpful comments of Professor W.A. Waiser, Stan Hanson, Chris Morier, Moira Harris, and the reviewers of Labour/Le Travail.*

<sup>73</sup>CSIS, Records released under *Access*, Accession #88-A-60, Tait to MacPherson, 29 September 1931.

<sup>74</sup>In the aftermath of the riot and the echo of Mounted Police gunfire, labour papers labelled the RCMP as "Bennett's stool pigeons," "the bosses' hired thugs," and a "fascist outfit." Hanson, "The Estevan Strike and Riot," 212.