When Mounties were Modern Kitsch: The Serial Seductions of Renfrew of the Mounted

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In the first half of the twentieth century, and perhaps still today, one of Canada's most recognizable cultural exports was the Mountie, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officer, wearing the signature red coat of his dress uniform and sitting astride his trusty steed. From its founding as the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) in 1873, to its 1920 re-formation as the RCMP, and through to the present, the Canadian federal police force has assumed in literary and popular culture the symbolic weight of national icon and the image has circulated widely, across media and around the world. Starting with the late nineteenth-century colonial press and continuing through the turn-of-the-century fiction market, interwar radio and film, and postwar television and commodity culture, the Mountie has appeared, both earnestly and satirically, at the centre of national mythologies about Canadian liberal democracy. At his most typical, the Mountie is an officer of the law who is part of a rational organization but also a refined gentleman and a unique, special individual. He represents a physically, intellectually, and morally upright and seductive, yet civilized, male hero distinct from the wilder masculinities of American popular culture heroes. Indeed, the fictional Mountie is at the centre of some persistent English-Canadian nationalist mytholo-

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gies, notably that the West was conquered by a central authority whose "decency and paternalism" is also registered in Canada's "careful and fair treatment of Aboriginal peoples, particularly in comparison with the treatment meted out by the law and order forces of the United States" (Dawson 25). Across a range of twentieth-century cultural forms, from novels to radio to film and television, the Mountie therefore functioned at home and abroad as a metonym for the narrativization of Canada as the "Great White North" settler colony: he is at the vanguard of white civility, in the sense of both a pan-British set of "manners and behaviours that must be learned and performed" in the settler territory (Coleman 21) and a trans-imperial masculinity disseminated throughout the empire, much like late nineteenth-century immigration handbooks, "to appeal to the imperial imaginations of men [and boys] in the metropole *and* to guide their gendered performances as the masculine colonizers of the Canadian North West once they arrived" (Henderson 18). This romanticization of invader-settler colonialism and the violent annexation of indigenous territories achieved widespread dissemination in early twentieth-century popular and pulp Northwesterns, adventure stories of a frozen northern territory in which Mounties replace the heroic sheriffs of American Westerns, and exoticized locales such as the Yukon offer the local colour of dogsleds, mad trappers, drunk gamblers, and foolish gold prospectors.

Laurie York Erskine's eight Renfrew of the Mounted novels (1922 to 1941) and their adaptation into eight Renfrew B films (1937 to 1940) are relatively late arrivals in this popular genre that proliferated in the early twentieth century. Northwesterns, of which Mountie fictions are a significant part, often took serial form, whether as novels first serialized in magazines or as a series of novels featuring the same protagonist. As well, by the 1930s Mountie fiction was being adapted into Hollywood films and American network radio serials, a multimedia saturation of Mountie narratives across Canada, the United States, and Britain, lasting for at least three generations, in which Renfrew of the Mounted featured prominently. Erskine, an American who published his Mountie novels simultaneously in the United States, Canada, and Britain, is a good example of an enormously popular writer who has fallen through the cracks of Canadian literary criticism for a variety of predictable reasons: he was neither Canadian nor did he live in Canada; he produced Mountie novels at the tail end of that genre's literary golden age and respectability; and he published first in adventure pulp magazines and then in serial novels marketed as genre fiction for men and boys. Geographically, generically, formally, and commercially, Erskine's Mountie writing falls outside dominant definitions of

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the Canadian writer, expressed aspirations for Canadian literature, and powerful proclamations about Canadian modernism emerging in his productive period and hardening in the postwar period. As a kind of outlier, then, Renfrew can illuminate something about the field of Canadian cultural production, and in particular its dynamics of taste, from his position on its edges. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, Renfrew of the Mounted is "commercial" or "large-scale" writing and thus necessary to reinforce the value of "non-commercial" or "small-scale" writing at the centre of the field of Canadian cultural production, such as poetry (82). This opposition, which Bourdieu theorizes as pivotal to all fields of cultural production, "is the generative principle of most of the judgments which, in the theatre, cinema, painting or literature, claim to establish the frontier between what is and what is not art" (82). Renfrew of the Mounted thus offers a rich case study of frontier writing, in all its senses. Following Bourdieu's logic, it is evident that Erskine's centrality to early and mid-twentieth century North American popular culture and his marginalization within North American literary and cultural history are related phenomena. I believe that the hinge between these two phenomena is the serial form of the Renfrew narratives on both page and screen, that their structures of repetition-with-a-difference is crucial to the nostalgic affects and anti-modern ideologies of these stories that mythologize late imperial Canada from an external position.

My starting point is that Mountie fiction is at once thoroughly Canadian and intrinsically international, or at least late imperial, in its origins and circulation. Fictional Mounties crossed frontiers, both within their narratives as they traversed lawless territories and through the distribution flows of their books. This transnationalism is somewhat ironic, given the Mounties' typical purpose to police territorial boundaries and maintain Canadian sovereignty, yet it is one of many contradictions between content and commodity that characterize Mountie fiction in the modern period, roughly 1890 to 1940. Just as the thematic content often represents the policing of national borders the books themselves sought to cross, so too does the narrative form of the series present a number of contradictions between the books' internal stories and their external contexts. On both its narrative and commercial levels, serial fiction is about creating, and catering to, a demand that can never be satisfied fully, about the compulsion to repeat with a difference. Serial fiction is at once familiar and revelatory, offering its readers both the satisfactions of fulfilled generic expectations and the surprises of variation available within those generic limits. A closer examination of Mountie fiction as a popular genre and

especially Erskine's Renfrew as a kitsch iteration of this genre—a term I will explore shortly—can help us understand the cultural and political anxieties, as well as affective pleasures, in such narrative compulsions in ways that resonate with debates over art, authority, and authenticity today.

In his landmark study of the Mountie in popular culture, Robert Thacker asserts that "the development of a legend surrounding the Mounted Police was no more haphazard than its choice of uniform," the bright red serge tunic reflecting the imperial connection to Britain (300). Thacker cites early examples of the force's control of its public image, including suppression of media accounts of its members' complaints about internal problems and their frequent violations of the prohibition on alcohol (303–04). As much as the force itself constructed its public image, Thacker argues that "by and large the romantic conception of the mountie-as-hero is an American invention" written into North American popular culture as early as the 1870s by newspaper reporters admiring of the NWMP's success at "managing the Indians" (304). The popular fascination with the Mountie may have begun in the purple prose of these press commentaries, but by the 1890s it had taken firm grasp of the popular fiction market when both Canadian and American writers depicted Mounties in their adventure tales of the Canadian northwest. While some former force members did use their personal experiences as the basis for fictional accounts, the majority of late nineteenth-century writers were inspired by the myths, legends, and folklores of frontier life in the Canadian Northwest circulating around the English-speaking world.[1] The Klondike Gold Rush of the late 1890s proved a fertile setting for the emerging genre of Northwesterns, and writers from Jack London to Robert Service used this exciting historical moment for stories featuring Mounties who must overcome the harsh natural environment in addition to unruly foreigners and the temptations of women and alcohol.[2] Many more writers

1 John Mackie's 1895 novel, *Sinners Twain*, is based loosely on his service in the NWMP from 1888 to 1893 and establishes the character traits common to the Mountie protagonist, notably his selflessness, dedication, and refinement exemplified by his musical and dancing skills. Dawson summarizes the ideological work of Mackie's novels when he observes, "this was an endorsement of the ideal of Victorian manliness and its characteristics of sexual self-retraint, chivalry, and gentlemanly behaviour" (37).

2 Jack London's experiences as a gold prospector in the Yukon appear in his popular stories and often feature Mounties among the other typical Klondike characters; in 1899 he sold his first short story, about a Mountie versus an outlaw, "To the Man on Trail," to *Overland Monthly*. London's subsequent novels, *The Son of the Wolf* (1902) and *Call of the Wild* (1903) are often credited as the origins of

capitalized on the popularity of the Northwestern and its sub-genre of Mountie fiction at the turn of the twentieth century; historian Michael Dawson reports that over 150 Mountie novels were published in Toronto, New York, and London between 1890 and 1940 (123). Some of the most popular of these were Ralph Connor's *Corporal Cameron of the Northwest Mounted Police* (1912), James Oliver Curwood's *The Flaming Forest* (1921), and James B. Hendryx's Corporal Cameron Downey series (1925 to 1931; serialized first in *Short Stories*).[3] Having established quite early on that the hero of Mountie fiction is a white man, by the 1930s such variations appeared as Muriel Denison's *Susannah, a Little Girl with the Mounties* (1936), one in a series of Susannah novels in which a young girl is sent to stay with her Mountie uncle (adapted in 1939 as a Hollywood vehicle for Shirley Temple), and Luke Allan's *Blue Pete: Rebel* (1940), about a Métis "halfbreed" man who helps the Mounties catch cattle thieves. The latter is a particularly glaring example of the entrenched racism of much Mountie fiction, which uses the perceived savagery of Aboriginal and Métis peoples as justification for police action as well as character foil to the civility of the Mountie officer.[4] Northwesterns typically draw on similar values to Westerns when it comes to the conquest of indigenous territories and the civilizing mission of white settlers and soldiers in North America. However, as one case study demonstrates, the Canadian and American genres "differ fundamentally in their presentation of these values … [and], indeed, seem to embody divergent perceptions of national identity in the two countries, especially egalitarian and democratic vs. elitist and oligarchic values; the primacy of self-indulgence vs. the necessity of self-restraint; and individualism vs. collective behavior" (Tranquilla 75). These national

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Northwestern fiction by fans of the genre. Robert Service's ballads of the Yukon also depict the typical scenes, characters, and conflicts familiar to readers of the Northwestern novel, but it is his "Clancy of the Mounted," published in 1911, that most obviously depicts the myth of the Mountie who must maintain his civility against the malevolent forces of "the Wild, " including nature itself.

3 Among many writers who profited from Mountie tales and their film adaptations, Curwood had the greatest international success. A Michigan-born novelist and conservationist who traveled extensively in Canada and owned homes on both sides of the border, Curwood's thirty-one novels eventually sold over four million copies and were translated into eleven languages (Roper et al. 302).

4 See Coleman for more on the concept of white civility in early Canadian literature. Emma Laroque notes that, in *Blue Pete*, it is the protagonist's Métis identity, represented as a dual racial heritage (French and Aboriginal) warring within the character's very blood, which produces a narrative conflict at once born from and contributing to powerful racial and cultural mythologies (Laroque 89).

mythologies, rooted in the white civility of British imperialism, form part of the narrative bedrock of Northwesterns, just as the myths of the American frontier are the foundation of Westerns. The popular fictionalization of the Mountie thus had as little to do with the real experiences of RCMP officers as its antimodern representation of northern and Western Canada had to do with a modern Canadian society experiencing the transitions and upheavals of the first three decades of the twentieth century.[5]

Keith Walden argues that the Mountie's popularity has to do with the universality of stories that ultimately come down to good versus evil, but also because the Mountie resolves some of the specific crises of modernity experienced in this period in the North Atlantic triangle of Great Britain, Canada, and the United States, albeit with national and regional variations. As a heroic individual who is part of a larger regime of law and order, the Mountie resolves the very modern problem of the individual in mass society by leading a purposeful existence in which he can "affect the destiny of both [himself] and others" (Walden 63). In the popular imagination, the Mountie is an extension of the pioneering white settler bringing civilization to the wilderness, updated as both "a servant of the government but also of the individual citizen" (81). In an unpredictable and menacing landscape populated with the chaos of whisky running, gambling, and gunslinging, the Mountie stands as an embodiment of law itself but also of a democratic force led by an elite group of men: "The Mounted Policeman was an especially appealing symbol, for he suggested that one could submit to regimentation and directness without sacrificing individuality" (53). As with so many popular and pulp serials of this period, then, Mountie fiction serves complicated ideological purposes in a highly entertaining form.

The distance between these narratives and actual life in Canada may have met a public demand for literary distraction, but it also fertilized critical scorn for the genre when it came time, in the postwar period, for pronouncements on their value to the emerging national literary canon. By the 1960s, professional tastemakers in the field of literary production

5 Lynda Jessup offers a helpful discussion of artistic antimodernism in this period in her study of the Group of Seven Canadian painters, whose 1920s modern landscape paintings have become national icons. Among the features of this artistic antimodernism are a suspicion of so-called progress, a fear that the industrial and economic developments of late nineteenth-century capitalism (routinized work, rationalized bureaucracies) removed the possibility any authentic experience, and a celebration of the Canadian rural landscape as a depopulated and pre-modern wilderness in which the modern man can find physical and spiritual refuge from mass society (132).

sought a more authentic and modern narration of the Canadian experience than the old-fashioned adventure stories from a generation earlier. Writing in 1965, influential Canadian critic Desmond Pacey notes that among the fiction produced in Canada between 1920 and 1940 were "escape novels" set in the Far North: "Here indeed was an opportunity to deal realistically with a way of life unfamiliar to writers of other countries, and something really compelling might have been made out of the strange terrain, the long dark winters and short vivid summers, the small tenacious inhabitants of the North" (659–60). These novels failed to compel, however, as "the opportunity was completely missed" when writers of Northwesterns favoured melodrama rather than authenticity (660). A far cry from the modern realism Pacey and others wanted Canadian literature to produce as a sign of its modernity, Mountie fiction relied on the heightened affective registers of adventure and melodrama, as well as elements of romance, mystery, horror, and the occasional lesson in moral reform to narrate the Canadian north as an antimodern exotic space within the British Empire. In addition to its generic affiliations, the often simultaneous publication of Mountie serial fiction in Canada, America, and Britain blurs the boundaries between domestic and foreign constructions of a national mythology, just as it calls into question the authentic Canadianness of its authors at a time when national identity was a key value in determining membership to the field of Canadian literature.

Even though one of its important pioneers was the quite respectable Ralph Connor (the Reverend Dr Charles William Gordon), the serialization of Mountie fiction in American pulp magazines—many of them read by Canadians in the absence of a pre-World War II homegrown pulp industry—is another factor in their critical devaluation.[6] This was compounded by the production of Mountie fiction by American pulp writers. So, part of the perceived inauthenticity of Mountie fiction among literary critics also has to do with their authorship: not only were most Mountie novels written by civilians, but many of them were written by non-Canadians intent on romanticizing the landscape and trading in stock characters for formulaic fictions.[7] In his introduction to a collection of

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6 See Smith, Strange, and Loo on the influx of American pulps into Canada prior to World War II and the emergence of a domestic pulp industry after World War II.

7 Nick Mount argues that the desire for nativity in Canadian literature has, since the 1880s, been challenged by the frequent migration of writers across the U.S. border to a much larger publishing market that included Canadian writers and readers. This is clearly also the case with popular and pulp writers. As well, a reverse border crossing is evident in the number of American-born writers who

Mountie short stories published in such American pulp magazines as *Argosy*, *Action Stories*, and *Complete Northwest*, Don Hutchison relates the confession of Ryerson Johnson, known in his day as "the Zane Grey of the Canadian Northwest," that he was told to find a pulp fiction niche through which to build his name and chose Mountie fiction because of its popular appeal. Knowing nothing of Mounties, Johnson read library books while "Official Mounted Police Bulletins and a book by Washburn Pike—*The Great Canadian Barren Lands*—supplied the fundamentals. I read for a week and took notes" (xvii). The popular and pulp images of Mounties that circulated widely in the early twentieth century were thus one part of a prolific and varied discursive field in which the Mountie functions as the bridge between peace and violence, order and chaos, past and present, American metropolis and Canadian wilderness, writer and profit.

While a number of cultural historians have studied the gendered, raced, and classed constructions of the Mountie,[8] I am interested in how the serial narrative form of early twentieth-century Mountie fiction can help us understand this antimodern symbol-myth complex that emerged simultaneous to Canada's modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. In this context, the fact that so many fictional Mounties were the heroes of magazine, novel, radio, and cinematic series demands attention to the form of the serial as a particularly apt shape for these northern adventure stories. Following Laurie Langbauer, I use the term "serial" with deliberate looseness to mean "quite simply successive novels or stories that are linked together, usually by recurrent characters or settings" (8). Although each Renfrew novel achieves narrative closure, it leaves open the possibility of another instalment and so, read together, Erskine's series fits Jennifer Hayward's definition of "an ongoing narrative released in successive parts" that intensifies when the novels are adapted into other media (3). Renfrew's sheer endurance over three decades, around the English-speaking world and in multiple media, raises an interesting contradiction between the serial form of the narratives and their late imperial and antimodern content. That is, Erskine's popular stories present the paradox that serial fiction, characterized by a logic of narrative expansion, supplementation, and orientation to the future, proved the ideal form to articulate an antimodernist nostalgia for the residual imperial project of domination, discipline, and control central to the founding of the modern Canadian state.

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traveled to Canada and represented it in their Mountie and other adventure tales.

8 See Dawson, Gittings, Thacker, and Walden.

The majority of Mountie novels were written between 1880 and 1920, so even Renfrew's first appearance is a belated entry into this sub-genre. He first appeared in magazine short stories published in *The American Boy* magazine in 1921, and the stories from these issues were collected as the first novel, *Renfrew of the Royal Mounted*, published in New York by D. Appleton and Company in 1922. The remaining seven novels were all published in the United States between 1927 and 1942, first by Appleton-Century and then republished by Grosset and Dunlap in New York and by Appleton in London. While the initial instalments of the novels first appeared in *The American Boy*, the Renfrew novels were marketed as both boys' and men's fiction, often listed in advertisements alongside Boy Scouts yearbooks and other adventure tales distinct from those advertised as suitable for both boys and girls (Display Ad 141). The *New York Times* reviews of Renfrew novels appear variously in the "Mystery and Adventure" section or "Latest Works of Fiction," and so the novels were positioned as both juvenile and adult fiction in their marketing and reception. In much of the promotional material of the series, both advertisers and reviewers emphasize the quality of Erskine's novels as "altogether tiptop adventure fare" for male readers of all ages ("Mystery and Adventure").[9]

Erskine was born into an acting family in Scotland and immigrated with his family to the United States in 1901, where his family became variously involved in early film, vaudeville, and theatre (his mother appeared in several of Thomas Edison's first films), and he also visited Canada on vacation several times. Perhaps because of his personal connections to Britain, the United States, and Canada, one of the distinguishing features of the Renfrew novels is the north-south movements of their characters and plots. The *New York Times* reviewer of the 1923 novel, *The River Trail*, comments on this extensively:

> Most of the novels that are concerned with the life and people of the wilder regions in the west and northwest of Canada represent the flow of population as being wholly between the east and the west of the Dominion.[…] But Mr. Erskine indicates a considerable movement north and south, not only across the boundary line but far south in the United States.[…] It is a note rarely found in tales of the Canadian West, but Mr. Erskine writes from much personal knowledge and his graphic and always interesting local colour is convincing in itself, aside

9 Erskine also promoted his books in public appearances and reportedly "thrilled" a juvenile audience with a reading of "Renfrew's Long Trail" at the 1933 New York Exhibition of Books of the Year ("Authors Entertain").

> from the fact that it is the result of his own experience and observation. ("Latest Works of Fiction")

Later Canadian critics would scorn the whole genre of Mountie fiction as inauthentic, but in the moment of Erskine's publishing at least one reviewer found the novels to be more authentic than other Northwesterns because they reflect the national boundary crossings that the author, and many other North Americans, actually experienced. The nationalist mythologies at work in Northwesterns and Westerns therefore belie lived experience and mask the transnational publication histories of Mountie fictions. At the same time, this review positions *The River Trail* wholly within a popular genre and concludes that readers who enjoyed the first Renfrew novels "will find in Mr. Erskine's new novel a tale equally good and quite as much to their liking" ("Latest Works of Fiction"). So, readers can begin this novel with the expectation that it will repeat the generic elements and the readerly pleasures of the earlier novel as well as the genre as a whole. However, the Renfrew series is different from its generic predecessors, not least because of its relatively late arrival as a popular serial rather than the more middlebrow hardcover Mountie novels of earlier decades. Arriving at a moment when Canadian, American, and British culture was already saturated with the northern settings and tales of the Redcoats produced by an earlier generation, the Renfrew novels capitalize on this familiarity in a series of embedded tales-within-tales that function as a narrative antidote to the social disembeddedness and disorientations of modernity.

The first volume that lends the series its title, the 1921 *Renfrew of the Royal Mounted*, is an episodic novel based on the logic of embedded narratives and specifically on what Gérard Genette terms "explanatory narrative": an embedded tale that provides an explanation for the circumstances of the frame, so that there is a causal relationship between the diegetic and metadiegetic narrative (232). The metadiegetic narrative is that Renfrew, an American who traveled "North" and became a Mountie, has now returned to the United States and lives in semi-retirement with his saintly grey-haired mother in a suburb named Walney. His police work, however, has been replaced by literary work: Renfrew is capitalizing on his Mountie experiences by writing them up into stories. His present status as a writer for the mass market is at once a sly self-referential move by Erskine and a reminder of his novel's dependence on the repetition of narratives. A curious group of local boys, drawn to the newly built house in their suburb, start to hang out in the woods behind the house telling each other stories and legends (3). Pulled away from the typewriter by these boys, Renfrew

surrenders the potential profits of written serials for the authority and pleasure he derives via oral narration to this junior homosocial collective. Around campfires and on the "trail" with this youthful gang, Renfrew becomes at once scoutmaster and griot, surrogate father and adventurer raconteur. Oral storytelling thus trumps the work of typewriting and is itself occasionally interrupted by the feminine domestic intrusions of Renfrew's mother, offering tea and cake to the boys, who devour the food as eagerly as the stories. Renfrew's stories are all about his exploits in the Mounties, which the boys have heard of already but which their narrator reminds them is a "Force which worked, lonely, against tremendous odds and seldom failed" (7).

The novel proceeds with a series of episodic tales of northern adventure. Moreover, this embedded structure is itself a series of embedded tales, as Renfrew frequently attributes the origin of his stories to other narrators, usually fellow officers, some of whom heard their stories from still others. In the final episode, however, the narrative returns to the metadiegesis as the boys get caught up in an adventure of their own with Renfrew. Throughout this novel, the Canadian Dominion is constructed as a space of narrative circulation. The Mounties only ever take action after hearing a tale of criminal behaviour occurring elsewhere. Their relationships to white settlers, Native Canadians, and foreign n'er-do-wells all begin with the arrival of a storyteller, who has often traveled lengths and endured adversity to deliver his tale to the Mounties and plead for their help. The vastness of the Dominion and the absence of modern communications privilege the embodied narrative of oral communication as central to a Canadian economy of colonial violence and its regulation. Thus, narratives travel in time but also in space in this series: Renfrew's reminiscences look backward with a nostalgia to the freedoms of the northern settler colony and the pride of the Mounted police officer from his present time-space of the modern American suburb. Horses, thieves, "Indians," and drunkards are but a memory for a Renfrew now constrained by home, mother, mortgage, and typewriter. Thus, Renfrew's excursion with the boys is an attempt to recreate the masculine colonial community he describes in the stories themselves.

Not all of Erskine's Renfrew novels deploy such metadiegesis, however. Some dispense entirely with the metadiegetic frame of the present to get straight to the diegetic stuff of historical adventure. The second volume, *Renfrew Rides Again*, begins with a foreword that highlights this series' complex relationship between experience and narrative, sequentiality and sentimentality:

The dogged heroic persistence of masculinity is expressed serially.

> Some one has said that every man's life is, in itself, a story. This is true, and it was true of Renfrew; only Renfrew's life was made up of many stories.[…]
>
> It was adventure which took Renfrew up to Canada. It was the call of adventure which led him to join the Royal Northwest Mounted Police; and when he came back to Walney, that suburb of a great city, it was the distant voice of all adventure which caused him to gather with the boys of Walney and retail to them the stories which those memories contained.
>
> Because of this, two records exist of what befell Renfrew while he rode with the Mounted Police. He rides in crisp, clipped phrases through the official reports of the RNMP blue books, and he rides again, a gallant, scarlet-coated figure, with a brave and well-beloved countenance, through the hearts and minds of Alan MacNeil and all his comrades of those days at camp with Renfrew. (Foreword)

The title of the second volume, *Renfrew Rides Again*, thus serves double duty: it signifies the status of the sequel but it also, as this foreword suggests, signifies the existence of competing official and unofficial narratives of the state police force. Renfrew rides again, Erskine suggests, not just in volume two but when official discourse is supplemented by fictional narratives lodged in the imaginations of young boys. As long as Alan MacNeil and his companions receive Renfrew's campfire tales and, by extension, as long as boy readers continue to buy the series, Renfrew will always ride again—and again and again. The dogged heroic persistence of masculinity is expressed serially. Erskine thus appeals to the sentiment of pride to mask the imperative to buy his narrative commodities when the foreword ends by insisting on the "precious human quality from which is woven the finest fabric of adventure" (Foreword).

As popular fiction, this is also heavy-handed and didactic material and very much in keeping with the moral reform discourse of the era's muscular Christianity, most obviously the Boy Scout movement founded in both Canada and the United States in 1910. Moreover, there is a direct connection between Renfrew and outdoor masculine education: at the same time that Erskine was enjoying widespread success and celebrity as a popular writer, he co-founded the Solebury School, a Pennsylvania independent school for boys still in existence today (it is now co-ed), through which he advocated progressive ideas on how to improve male literacy. In about 1924, Erskine decided to research the current state of American boys' education by traveling around preparatory schools in order "to tell the boys stories of the Canadian North and the Mounted Police" (Erskine quoted

in Vaughan 5–7). He discovered that the majority of boys in traditional schools were bored, depressed, and embittered toward their teachers and the primary method of rote memorization. These boys' confinement to prison-like traditional schools stood in marked contrast for Erskine to the happiness and knowledge he derived from the outdoors life, which is of course also Renfrew's great pleasure, and so he used the substantial proceeds from the sale of movie rights to one of his pre-Renfrew magazine serials, the large sum of $20,000, to finance the Solebury School (Vaughan 7). In an unpublished essay, David Vaughan observes that, once the Solebury School opened in 1925, Erskine turned away from adult fiction to focus almost exclusively on "providing for younger readers the kind of natural education adventure" that he felt was the ideal learning environment for youthful male curiosity (13).

Erskine's pedagogical pursuits fit with the established conventions of Mountie fiction since its anti-modernism produces the message that boys must be prepared to defend an "increasingly threatened [British] empire" on which adults seem to have given up (Dawson 125). Not all the Renfrew novels look backward with nostalgia, however. Some move forward to project Renfrew into the modern world. The 1927 novel *Renfrew Rides the Sky* blends the two popular genres of Northwestern and World War I adventure when the protagonist joins the air force to fight for Britain. Airplanes and Germans replace horses and Indians as Renfrew adapts his skills of military conquest to a more modern cause, some of which is based in Erskine's own experiences with the Royal Flying Corps in World War I ("Laurie Erskine"). The late imperialism of the invader-settler colony has schooled Renfrew well for warfare, and Erskine mobilizes the national trauma of World War I as proving ground for Canadian men and (so the national mythology goes) the nation as a whole. Later novels return to the wilderness setting of the inaugural volume and to retrospective narrations of past adventures so that Renfrew is at once a modern man looking backwards and a man from the past inserted into the present. His seductive stories offer the internal readers—the group of boys he instructs and delights—as well as actual readers of the series the pleasures of adventures in a time and space that seem endless but knowable thanks to the Mountie's mastery of order and control.

In her discussion of Anthony Trollope's serial novels, Langbauer draws a useful parallel between the series and imperialism. Trollope's novels, she argues,

> expose a kind of cultural delusion of omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. His novels display how the desire to account for everything—whether in a theoretical system or a sovereign state—is one of the motive forces underlying the serial replications of imperialism, wherein the dominant group attempts to impose its own sense of the daily on the universe around it. (44)

Whether moving westward into lawless northern territories or flying over the Atlantic to impose the order of Allied democracy, Renfrew's serial adventures are narrative versions of British imperialism's serial expansion; the protagonist's desire to control and contain unruly bodies and undefined borders is a proxy for the serial fiction market's desire to never cease organizing adventure into narratives that accumulate into a world that imagines a totality built on expansion and repetition. This serial expansion over colonial territories is visualized for readers at the beginning of several of the Renfrew novels in frontispiece maps, such as that depicting Renfrew's itinerary from Vancouver to Edmonton and then across the Yukon reproduced in *Renfrew's Long Trail* (1933). This is a factual map of northwestern Canada overlaid with the fictional events of the novel so that readers can chart the plot along actual routes and imagine Renfrew's travels across real territories. If, as Langbauer suggests, serial fiction reproduces imperialism's drive to totalization, then this map is an illustration of that very drive, made comprehensible through the individual forays of one heroic man. Of course, maps themselves are (to paraphrase Langbauer) cultural delusions of omniscience, reproductions on a flat surface of the serial reproductions of power in colonial and settler territories, and so this illustration is another instalment in the serial replications of imperialism reproduced within each Renfrew novel and by the series as a whole.

Like a number of other fictional Mounties, Renfrew's seriality extends into the emerging media of the early twentieth century.[10] In the late 1930s, the American radio networks, many of which beamed from powerful transmitters close to the Canadian border and so enjoyed a large Canadian audience, tapped into "Mountie madness": from 1936 to 1940, CBS ran a fifteen-minute Renfrew adventure three times a week, which later became a thirty minute series on NBC radio (Dunning 574). At least eight Renfrew musical adventures were adapted from Erskine's novels in the late 1930s and made as "quota quickies," films made by American companies set up in Canada in order to avoid British protectionist legislation. The

10 See Berton for an extensive discussion of Mountie films in this period.

Mountie who simply would not die, Renfrew rose again in 1953 when the films, which were only about an hour long, were run as a television serial, with new introductions added and at least thirteen new episodes written for the postwar audience. Erskine's novels and their adaptation to different media seem yet another form of a clichéd national mythology. Erskine's success writing about a place he had only visited a few times demonstrates the degree to which the Mountie, and northern and western Canada more generally, occupied a central place in American and British popular culture of the early twentieth century. For example, Hollywood produced at least 575 films set in Canada between 1907 and 1956 (Gittings 83). Whether imagined as a colonial outpost of adventure and prosperity for white settlers, as in the many turn-of-the-century lavish advertisements produced by Canadian railway companies to encourage immigration, or as an exotic frozen home to indigenous peoples, as in Robert Flaherty's widely screened 1922 film documentary, *Nanook of the North*, films about Canada and its stereotyped inhabitants circulated around the world for popular consumption between the wars.[11] Perhaps at the expense of their own nascent film industry, Canadians eagerly consumed Hollywood's commodified and stereotyped images of themselves or, rather, of Mounties and other stock characters as versions of themselves represented by the powerful other of American mass culture (Nelson 82; Gittings 86–87).

Canadians eagerly consumed Hollywood's commodified and stereotyped images of themselves or, rather, of Mounties and other stock characters as versions of themselves.

The 1930s adaptations of Mountie fiction to cinema exploited the new technologies of screen sound, enhancing the officers' appeal with music and song to create the icon of the Singing Mountie. Renfrew was one of the most popular of the cinema's singing Mounties, even if the series of B film quota quickies in which he appeared have been overshadowed in cinematic history by the more enduring Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald MGM musical, *Rose-Marie* (1936). In its adaptation, the Renfrew series typically loses some of its earnest didacticism and moves more squarely into what one disappointed film critic called "the groove of cops-

11 "Nanookmania" gripped New York in the 1920s and even entered commodity culture through the naming of an ice cream treat the Eskimo Pie. As Shari M. Huhndorf observes, American popular culture in particular was fascinated by the idea of a frozen Canadian north, often projected onto the phantasmic image of the Eskimo hunter as a pre-modern antidote to the tedium of industrial life, who nevertheless embodied American ideals of hard work, honesty, and ingenuity (135). Film historian Joyce Nelson suggests an even deeper ideological project at work in early Hollywood's representation of Canada—to both American and Canadian audiences—when she suggests it was part of the branch plant expansion of American capitalism into Canada and a form of cultural colonialism.

and-robbers melodrama" ("The Screen"). The first film, *Renfrew of the Royal Mounted*, was filmed in California and released by Grand National in 1937. It starred James Newill, an American big band singer who also sang and did vocal work on radio but had not done any prior film work (Anderson). His singing abilities open the film as a group of mounted officers ride through the forest singing the theme song, "We're Mounted Men, " as they make their way to a community cookout at which Renfrew's famous recipe for barbeque sauce will compete against that of the highly caricatured Italian chef from a northern woods resort. This is but one bit of comic business in the film, some of which is amplified for today's audience by the rudimentary special effects (such as when Renfrew's loyal dog, Lightning, jumps over a high cliff to help capture an Aboriginal tracker who has been following them in a canoe), and some of which is cringe-inducing in its racism and xenophobia. The Italian chef and sauce rival turns out to be at the heart of a counterfeit smuggling ring at the resort, and so North American anti-Italian sentiments of the late 1930s make their way into both the initial humour and moral comeuppance that is the triumphant ending of Renfrew's successful mission to bust the smugglers. The Aboriginal tracker who is working for the counterfeiting ring (played by Native American actor Victor Daniels, "Chief Thundercloud," who was the original Tonto), is represented as a strong, silent, and excellent tracker who is easily corrupted and at the mercy of the villains. There is also a romance plot between Renfrew and the head villain's spunky daughter and a subplot involving the death of another Mountie that allows Renfrew to cradle the man's now fatherless son in a domestic scene of sentimental melodrama.

Throughout this film, and its sequels, Renfrew thus performs the established gendered roles of the fictional Mountie: he is at once manly, fearless, and competent with both horses and modern technology (car chases are popular set pieces) and helpful to women and children, even nurturing and fatherly when need be. As the *New York Times* reviewer noted, for adult viewers, "the best that can be said for it is that not once does it mention the boast that 'a mountie always gets his man (or girl).' Perhaps that would be too obvious" ("The Screen"). Perhaps *Renfrew of the Mounted* does not repeat this famous line of the popular genre explicitly because it does not need to: even its initial 1937 audience knew the genre well enough to expect that the Mountie will conquer both evil doers and womankind. What will happen at the end of these films is less their source of pleasure, for both young and adult audiences, than the visual and auditory spectacle of whiteness played out against corrupt and comic foreignness and noble

yet doomed indigeneity. Despite its silly and sentimental moments, the film of *Renfrew of the Mounted* retains from Erskine's novels an ideological earnestness about the civilizing role of the Mountie, even when the plot is at its most formulaic.

As the protagonist of both serial fiction and B films, Renfrew appeared in popular forms usually associated with the repetition of anterior texts and the deployment of conventional and largely unoriginal narratives. Due to both its serial form and its narrative self-consciousness that Mountie fiction circulates in the same world as its protagonist, I believe that Erskine's novels and their film adaptations exemplify what Sam Binkley terms the "repetitive conventionality of kitsch" (134). I want to read *Renfrew of the Mounted* within the aesthetic category of kitsch to allow a consideration of the pleasures as well as the politics of the series and to connect the many dots that lie between serial fiction and national narrations. I also want to be clear that kitsch is the term most appropriate to the modern period of serial Mountie fiction and films, and to Renfrew in particular, rather than the related categories of cliché or camp. It may be possible to read Renfrew retroactively as "pure camp," that which Susan Sontag identifies as the naïve, earnest performance that does not know itself to be camp but which exhibits a "seriousness that fails." Still, camp demands an excessive performance and an irrepressibility that does not obtain in Renfrew's literary or cinematic performances of an entirely controlled sensibility. Likewise, there is no doubt that even by the time of Erskine's writing the Mountie image was a cliché, but this intensified in the second half of the twentieth century. In his discussion of cinematic Mounties, Gittings observes that, "over time, a genre such as the Mountie film exhausts itself and becomes cliché, one possible reason for the virtual disappearance of the Mountie film after 1956" (91). The Mountie film may have waned as a B film genre, but the popular representation of Mounties persists in the form of parodic interventions, from Monty Python's "Lumberjack Song" to the self-conscious Canadian parody of the upright Mountie on *Due South* (1994 to 1999), to the challenges to Mountie stereotypes offered by representing female and Aboriginal officers on the drama *North of Sixty* (1992 to 1998) and even the sitcom *Corner Gas* (2004 to 2009) (Gittings 91–94). Gittings suggests that some of this parodic work is an assertion of self-definition over the typically American-owned image of the Mountie (he concludes with commentary on the Disney Corporation's 1995 five-year contract to handle marketing and licensing for the RCMP) and to subvert longstanding clichés.

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What differentiates Erskine's stories from these more recent self-conscious clichés, as well as the excessive performances of camp, is that Renfrew of the Mounted offers little critical distance between the source of the parody—anterior Mountie fictions—and itself. Renfrew is very much another instalment of the Mountie as muscular Christian, a popular version of a literary and cultural allegory Daniel Coleman describes in terms that resonate with Erskine's didacticism: "The figure of the muscular Christian, with his untiring and virile physical body balanced by his spiritually sensitive heart, made a perfect representation of the ideal Canadian who could carry out the hard physical work of territorial expansion, as well as the equally important social work of building a new civil society" (129). However, Erskine's Mountie is temporally and physically distant from his civilizing mission and he is writing about them in retrospect; this differentiates Renfrew from his generic antecedents and opens up the possibility of reading Erskine's series as kitsch. In *Renfrew Rides North* (1931), the novel repeats the events of earlier novels when it opens with a retired Douglas Renfrew taking a group of boys camping. Their peaceful trip is quickly interrupted, however, when the boys call his attention to something approaching from the distance:

> Renfrew looked up, gazed across the lake, and up through the vista of spruce woods which hedged the meadow. Slowly a smile of satisfaction spread upon his face. The last colorful touch had been placed upon the picture; the final necessary detail had been added to this exquisite scene which was his old hunting ground. It was complete. For down the vivid green meadow was cantering toward the lake a rider clad in scarlet, blue and gold; a rider whose accouterment glistened as only polished leather and brilliant brasses can glitter in the sunlight. (4)

It is, of course, a Mountie riding toward them, and his arrival triggers in Renfrew a feeling the boys cannot understand, "a memory and a regret,—the distant picture of adventures that were past, of a day when he, too, had ridden mountain trails, clad in that bright uniform, intent upon dangerous missions" (4). Within a few pages, Renfrew discovers the body of this picture-perfect Mountie shot dead on the trail and re-enlists in the force to avenge his death. The relay between past and present, experience and storytelling, is evident in the above description of Renfrew's gaze on the natural scene as a painting only made complete by the arrival of the Mountie. His apprehension of the natural scene as a painting parallels Renfrew's fictionalization of his experiences into stories, as both activities

transform experience into aesthetic object. The above passage may seem unoriginal, even over the top, in its loving description of the Mountie's uniform, yet it self-consciously frames this formulaic scene as a painting. The novel shows us what Renfrew sees when he sees a Mountie, and, in so doing, it enters a pre-existing discursive field fully aware of the existence of the field itself.

Descriptions of the Mountie's uniform abound in the fiction, as without his colourful tunic and signature hat the officer is unrecognizable as a Mountie; moreover, in Erskine's works it is a flashpoint for the odd combination of seriousness and sentimentality that offers another way to think about kitsch. There is much that is kitschy within these Mountie novels, if we follow the Frankfurt School's identification of kitsch as an imitative cultural system opposed to the openness and innovations of the modernist avant-garde (see Adorno). Or, following Clement Greenberg's famous 1939 essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," we can locate the Renfrew narratives as precisely the kind of "vicarious experience and faked sensations" that Greenberg laments are the product of modern mass consumption. These 1930s critics, however, did not in that moment recognize that the imitation of high culture can achieve its own aesthetic sensibility. More recently, theorists of the hierarchy of taste have offered a path through both the modernist elitism of the Frankfurt School and the populist celebrations of some recent cultural studies work. Sam Binkley, in "Kitsch as a Repetitive System," defines the kitsch sensibility in terms that resonate with the Renfrew series. Kitsch "employs the thematics of repetition over innovation, a preference for formulae and conventions over originality and experiment, an appeal to sentimental affirmation over existential probing" (133). It endorses "repetition of the familiar and a grounding in an affirmation of the everyday" (134); as a consequence, kitsch depends on what Binkley terms an embeddedness: "a condition of daily life in which uncertainties, existential questions and a sense of the freedom and creativity of human action are bracketed by reassuring traditions and habits of thought [… and] is broadly taken to represent the forms of sociability characteristic of pre-modern societies" (135). I would add that narrative embeddedness, the seemingly endless containment of stories within stories that forms both the first Renfrew novel and its conception of colonial Canada, is a kitschy attempt to bracket the disembeddedness and disorientations of early twentieth-century modernity.

Binkley also hints at the affective qualities of kitsch, the ways in which a Norman Rockwell painting, for instance, transforms its failure to be original into "a charming gesture of sincerity" (140) and its embeddedness into

The boys act out a homosocial melodrama full of sentimental feelings for Renfrew but for something larger than Renfrew as well.

an appeal to something fundamental about human nature. While kitsch paintings in particular strive to evoke recognition of such truths through the affective registers of cute domesticity, the affective register of Erskine's novels hinges on imperial fantasies of adventure and the sentimentality of masculine national pride. The first volume ends with the boys standing over a Renfrew gravely injured by a riotous mob of immigrant strikers intent on the destruction of property. On the final page, two of the boys lean over their leader's body and contemplate his possible death. Quoting Renfrew, Billy says, "'While the heart still beats … there is no end'" (256). Renfrew's eyes flutter and Billy repeats, "'There is no end […] There is no end—ever—anyway'" (256). United in British Christian brotherhood against the immigrant Bolsheviks, the boys act out a homosocial melodrama full of sentimental feelings for Renfrew but for something larger than Renfrew as well: the endlessness of empire that is also the endlessness of storytelling. If kitsch sensibility achieves its full expression when "the banality of the kitsch consumer makes a pretentious appeal to the banality that ultimately lies within us all" (141), then Billy's belief in heroic immortality is an appeal to two much more common banalities presented as human truths: nobody wants a hero to die and nobody wants a good story to end. In this way, Erskine's novels fulfill another definition of kitsch, one that links it to modernity's introduction of spare time into the lives of the consuming middle classes: "Kitsch appears as an easy way of 'killing time,' as a pleasurable escape from the banality of both work and leisure. The fun of kitsch is just the other side of terrible and incomprehensible boredom" (Calinescu 248). Repetitive and even formulaic genre fiction is one bulwark against social change, yet it is also a way to fill the modern burden of spare time with feelings that appeal to nostalgia for an imperial ideal that only ever existed in the fiction itself.

The repetitive conventionality and affective content of Renfrew of the Mounted combine to express a joy in feeling something which others have felt before: the spirit of northern adventure and the pride of the scarlet tunic. In keeping with kitsch conventions, these feelings are tinged with nostalgia and melancholy that can also be read as a late imperial malaise. The pleasures *in* these texts (the Mountie always gets his woman as well as his man) and the pleasures *of* these texts (the popular readership's desire for more of the same with a difference) therefore need to be historically and culturally located at the nexus of anxieties about the connections between narrative form and the modern nation. The critical unease that has plagued these serial fictions, and national symbol, is thus matched by an anxiety expressed in the very compulsive repetitions of the Renfrew

novels themselves, all of which must be understood as a cultural product of invader-settler colonialism's relationship to modernity. The serial form of Erskine's books represents a compulsion to repeat, with minor differences, a narrative of spatial and ideological contraction in a form that seduces readers with the promise of endless imitation as a salve to the upheavals of modern life.

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