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HERCHMER, LAWRENCE WILLIAM, farmer, businessman, office holder, and militia officer; b. 25 April 1840 in Shipton-on-Cherwell, England, son of William Macaulay Herchmer and Frances Turner; m. first 8 Nov. 1866 Mary Helen Sherwood (d. 1899) in Kingston, Upper Canada, and they had at least three sons and one daughter; m. secondly 1905 Jane Ashworth, and they had one daughter; d. 17 Feb. 1915 in Vancouver.

Although born in England, Lawrence William Herchmer was a descendant of United Empire Loyalists. The Herchmers had been among the Hessian troops who came to the American colonies in the 18th century to assist the British in their military contest with the French. They later settled in New York's Mohawk valley. Members of the family fought on both sides

during the American Revolutionary War, and those who remained loyal to the crown eventually received land grants in Kingston Township, Upper Canada.

Through his father's connections and his own marriage, Herchmer acquired close ties to the Conservative party and the élite of Upper Canadian society, and these were to have a significant influence on his later advancement in life. His father, rector of St George's Church in Kingston for many years, was a long-time friend of John A. Macdonald*, the future prime minister of Canada. His first wife was the daughter of the prominent lawyer and politician Henry Sherwood* and the granddaughter of Levius Peters Sherwood*, who had served for 15 years as a judge on the Court of King's Bench.

Along with his brothers, Herchmer received his early education at a preparatory school in Henley-on-Thames, England. Afterwards he attended Trinity College, Toronto, and then returned to England to study at the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich (London). At the age of 17, he acquired a commission as an ensign in the 46th Foot, and he served with it in India and Ireland. On his father's death in 1862, he sold his commission and made his way back to Kingston, where he farmed for a while before accepting a post as supply officer to the boundary commission of 1872, a joint American and British undertaking charged with mapping the international border along the 49th parallel from Ontario to British Columbia [see Samuel Anderson*]. When this task ended in 1874, he operated a brewery in Winnipeg until his appointment in 1876 as the Indian agent at Birtle, Man. In this capacity he had jurisdiction over other Indian agencies in the vicinity, and in 1885 he was promoted to inspector of Indian agencies for the North-West Territories. Following the North-West rebellion, he sat on a commission that had been set up to investigate claims for damages suffered in the course of the conflict.

On 1 April 1886 Sir John A. Macdonald selected Herchmer to succeed Acheson Gosford Irvine as commissioner of the North-West Mounted Police. The change was greeted with general approval in the west; Herchmer's experience as a soldier, businessman, and Indian agent was considered highly suitable for the position. Macdonald himself saw Herchmer as a man well qualified to transform the force into a more professional body. At this time, the force had serious internal problems. Not only were the men poorly trained, but there was a lack of discipline and no uniform system of control or organization. The authority of the commissioner's office had been undermined in matters relating to promotion, discipline, and transfers by the political influence of his subordinate officers. Morale, too, was low following the rebellion of 1885, during which the police had been publicly criticized for their poor performance and Commissioner Irvine singled out for indecisive leadership. The force also faced continuing unpopularity because of its enforcement of the widely detested prohibition laws.

Following the cessation of hostilities, the NWMP's strength had been doubled from 500 to 1,000 men. These had been hastily recruited and included many who were neither physically fit nor of sufficient good character for their duties; indeed, political patronage had played a greater part in their selection than their suitability for police work. One result of these circumstances was a chronic problem of desertion, which tended to keep the force below strength. Another was a serious mutiny that occurred at Fort Saskatchewan (Alta) in February 1886. It was this event that forced Macdonald to make a change in command.

Herchmer brought to the challenges of his new position an unusual degree of energy, determination, and administrative skill. He was to have many critics in the future, but few would accuse him of failing to transform the police into a highly efficient organization. One key to his success was the concentration of more and more power in his own hands. To this end, he introduced new rules and regulations in 1889 which strengthened his administrative grip on the police through a highly bureaucratic reporting system. These regulations also established a more military style of discipline which gave him greater power with respect to the punishment of both officers and enlisted men. In order to deter serious disciplinary infractions, such as intoxication, sentences were made uniform and increased.

Herchmer also improved the selection and training of recruits. More rigorous medical examinations were instituted and a permanent training depot was established at headquarters in Regina. All recruits were required to undergo a course of training by qualified instructors, a course that included lectures on police duties in addition to military drill. Other courses were designed for officers, commissioned and non-commissioned alike. To prevent misfits from getting into the police, Herchmer introduced a probationary period of service. If found unsuitable, a recruit could be released during the first two months of his enlistment.

It was Herchmer's strong belief that efficiency would not improve until good men could be induced to stay in the police by the prospect of a career. At the time, most of them did not re-enlist when their initial five-year period ended. To remedy this state of affairs, Herchmer pressed his superiors for better working conditions. The most important change was the implementation of a pension scheme for non-commissioned officers and constables in 1889. Further inducements were the introduction of good-conduct pay, increased benefits for non-commissioned officers, and the establishment of post canteens at which men could obtain a variety of goods more cheaply than elsewhere. To overcome the monotony of police life, which was the root cause of much of the disciplinary problem and desertion, Herchmer obtained funds for the establishment of libraries, recreation rooms, and improved mess facilities as well as for a variety of sporting activities.

Like his predecessors as commissioner – George Arthur French*, James Farquharson Macleod*, and Irvine – Herchmer ran into difficulties that eventually led to his leaving the force involuntarily. In spite of his organizational skills, he was far from popular with many of his subordinates and some members of the public. Several of his senior officers believed that he had usurped a position for which they were better qualified, and they resented his attempts to eliminate their political influence and gain greater control over them. In addition, Herchmer attracted the personal enmity of Nicholas Flood Davin*, publisher of the *Regina Leader*. The origins of their feud can be traced to August 1883, when an intoxicated Davin had been arrested by William Macauley Herchmer*, an NWMP superintendent and Lawrence's brother, after he had wandered partially undressed through the carriages of an Ottawa-to-Regina train. In 1889 Davin, with the help of Charles Edward Dudley Wood of the *Fort Macleod Gazette* and disgruntled members of the police, launched a scurrilous campaign against Herchmer in his newspaper and in the House of Commons, where Davin was the member for Assiniboia West. Accusing him of a variety of misdeeds, from mistreatment of his men to using government funds for his own benefit, Davin and his allies sought Herchmer's removal from office by way of a judicial inquiry into his command. In 1890 Macdonald authorized an internal departmental investigation, which cleared Herchmer of any wrongdoing. Herchmer's critics were unsatisfied, however, and they continued to petition for a public inquiry under oath. Within a few weeks of Macdonald's death, his successor, Sir John Joseph Caldwell Abbott*, agreed to their demands.

The inquiry into the "Herchmer Scandals," as they were dubbed by the press, began in Regina in January 1892 under the direction of Mr Justice Edward Ludlow Wetmore* of the Supreme Court of the North-West Territories. From the evidence given, it was soon apparent that the whole affair was going to be something of a storm in a teacup. The inquiry looked into 137 charges against Herchmer; only 14 were proved and they were all of a minor character. It was found that he had lost his temper and exceeded his authority in the handling of some disciplinary cases. Nothing was produced that touched upon his honesty, his management

skills, or his command of the police. There was no reason to remove him from office, and Herchmer had no intention of resigning. Within the police, the inquiry helped to clear the air of some of the acrimony that had built up, but it did not remove the feeling of disrespect that certain of Herchmer's subordinates continued to have for him.

In the midst of all this controversy, Herchmer had to contend with other problems. During the 1890s both political parties in Ottawa were committed to reducing the NWMP. As more and more settlers arrived on the prairies, it was argued, they would take responsibility for their own law enforcement, as had happened in the older provinces, and the NWMP would eventually be disbanded. The problem was that the new inhabitants of the territories showed not the slightest interest in establishing their own police forces at their own expense. In fact, they agitated for more and more protection from the NWMP. As a result, Herchmer found himself caught between governments cutting back on expenditure and manpower and a public demanding increased services. To respond to the needs of the growing white population, Herchmer reorganized and expanded the system of horse patrols so as to cover as far as possible all areas of settlement. Besides reducing crime, these patrols brought settlers and police into friendly contact and the close relations that developed between them were to have a positive effect upon the force's work in the future.

The problems posed by diminished resources and increased responsibilities became acute in the late 1890s, when one-third of the NWMP was transferred to the Yukon in order to uphold law and order in the midst of the gold-rush. To maintain services in the territories, Herchmer started a fundamental redeployment of his men, moving many away from Indian reservations to white settlements. Over the course of the decade the Indians had caused some trouble for the police; in 1897, for example, the case of Kitchi-manito-wayá*, or Almighty Voice, caused Herchmer to wonder whether a "general rising" was imminent. Yet, notwithstanding such incidents, the NWMP under Herchmer understood the changed balance of power between natives and non-natives. In the late 1880s and 1890s the force's attitude towards the Indian population shifted from respect to pity, and, while the police still endeavoured to treat the Indians fairly, they were increasingly inclined to rely less on persuasion and more on coercion. By the turn of the century the Indians were no longer considered a serious threat to the peace, and so Herchmer could reallocate scarce manpower from native areas to white ones with little fear of the consequences.

When the Liberal party under Wilfrid LAURIER came to power in 1896, it was widely believed that Herchmer would be forced to resign. He had always been closely associated with Macdonald and was accused by western Liberals of having used his position to compel the members of the police to vote for Conservative candidates during the recent election. Laurier certainly did not trust him, but he left the management of police affairs largely in the hands of Clifford Sifton*, the minister of the interior. Sifton proceeded to humiliate Herchmer and

reduce his authority to the point where a less stubborn man would have resigned. In 1897 Herchmer was replaced at the last moment by one of his subordinate officers as commander of the NWMP squad he had selected and trained to attend Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee. In London the contingent received international praise. That same year he also lost control over the growing number of men sent to the Yukon to police the gold-rush; Sifton made the local commander there, James Morrow Walsh*, directly responsible to his own office. Furthermore, Sifton interfered to an even greater extent than his Conservative predecessors in internal police matters.

Herchmer's tenure as commissioner of the NWMP was interrupted by his decision to volunteer for military service in the South African War. He was appointed to the command of the Canadian Mounted Rifles, two squadrons of which he raised himself from the police and civilian volunteers on the prairies. Herchmer arrived in Cape Town with his regiment in February 1900. On the march north to join British forces, however, he was taken ill and sent back to Cape Town to convalesce. When he rejoined his troops a few weeks later, his superior, Major-General Edward Thomas Henry Hutton*, the former commanding officer of the Canadian militia, refused to return him to active duty. Hutton maintained that he was still not fit enough; Herchmer claimed that he had recovered. The evidence available favours Hutton's assessment. Herchmer saw in it, however, a conspiracy to deprive him of the command of his regiment. He characteristically lost his temper, was insubordinate towards Hutton, and took his case directly to Lord Kitchener, the chief of staff. Not getting any satisfaction there, he then made the mistake of believing that the Laurier government would see that he got justice.

Upon his return to Canada, Herchmer made statements to the press demanding a government inquiry into the loss of his command. This action angered Laurier, who for political reasons had no desire or intention of becoming embroiled in an argument over Britain's conduct of the war in South Africa. The prime minister decided that Herchmer was being unreasonable, had in fact been insubordinate, and was therefore no longer fit to command the NWMP. Consequently, he retired him to pension on 1 Aug. 1900. Herchmer took this decision as a further injustice, and for the rest of his life he was obsessed with establishing the truth of his claims and obtaining better pension benefits. What he refused to acknowledge, however, was that while in South Africa he had been subject to British military authority. If he had been unjustly treated, he should have sought redress in London and not Ottawa.

Herchmer was never a popular commissioner of the NWMP. His uneven and uncompromising temperament got him into frequent conflict with individuals, both inside and outside the police. He could at one moment express compassion for the welfare of those under his command and in the next explode into a fit of anger and punish them severely. The public exposure of his emotional outbursts earned him a reputation as a tyrant. This is

unfortunate since it has tended to obscure his administrative achievements. Herchmer took over a dispirited and poorly organized police force. He raised the standards for enlistment, promoted better training, restored discipline and *esprit de corps*, improved the conditions of service, and created an efficient internal organization. He also started its transition from a frontier military force to an urban law-enforcement body. When Herchmer left the NWMP, it had attained a high reputation both at home and abroad and was beginning to be recognized as a symbol of Canada. His lasting legacies in this respect were the adoption of the wide-brimmed felt hat and the introduction of the first musical rides.

S. W. HORRALL

NA, MG 26, A; MG 27, II, B1; D15; RG 18. Royal Canadian Mounted Police Headquarters (Ottawa), Hist. sect., Service file 0.72. *Calgary Herald*, 1886–1900. *Edmonton Bulletin*, 1886–1900. *Regina Leader*, 1886–1900, esp. 5 Nov. 1889, 18 Feb. 1915. Can., Parl., *Sessional papers*, 1886–1901, reports of the North-West Mounted Police, 1885–1900. “Commissioner L. W. Herchmer, 1886–1900,” *Royal Canadian Mounted Police Quarterly* (Ottawa), 2 (1934–35), no.4: 4–7. *Lord Minto’s Canadian papers: a selection of the public and private papers of the fourth Earl of Minto, 1898–1904*, ed. and intro. Paul Stevens and J. T. Saywell (2v., Toronto, 1981–83). R. C. Macleod, *The NWMP and law enforcement, 1873–1905* (Toronto, 1976). Carman Miller, *Painting the map red: Canada and the South African War, 1899–1902* (Montreal and Kingston, Ont., 1993).

General Bibliography

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