

HISTORY

FADED HERO

*How Canada forgot — then rediscovered —
Sir Sam Steele*

BY CHARLOTTE GRAY



IN 1899, residents of Canada's most northerly town could set their watches by Sam Steele as he made his rounds of Dawson City in the dim winter light. Steele, the North-West Mounted Police superintendent, described his rigid routine in a letter dated February 25 to his wife, Marie, in Montreal: "Up at 7, walk one mile to the town station, enquire if anything had transpired in the night. Sign the book, walk up the long hill and then down the steep one, then breakfast 9 am. Then inspect the cells and prisoners, sign the book... Then office, and busy seeing people on business of all sorts until one o'clock. Then lunch... Then three miles up the Klondike on the ice."

This was the height of the Yukon gold rush, when Dawson City had a worldwide reputation for whisky, women, and wealth. But since his arrival the previous fall, the burly man in scarlet serge had by sheer force of will imposed law and order on this squalid, frantic frontier town. When the young Mounties at the police station near the Front Street saloons saw their walrus-moustached boss stomping toward them in the early-morning darkness, they jumped to attention. When Steele tramped along the frozen Klondike River on crisp, twilit winter afternoons, looking like a dangerous predator in his raccoon coat, cabin dwellers along the riverbank waved politely. On the rare occasions when he stepped into a smoky saloon like the Monte Carlo or the Dominion, a hush spread through the gambling tables as card sharps and hookers melted into the background.

RIGHT Sam Steele's World War I uniform, c. 1914.

quiet lives in Montreal. The younger daughter, Gertrude, remained in England, and Harwood moved back there in the 1960s, taking their father's papers and memorabilia with him. No one in Canada seemed anxious to keep the Steele flame alive. "He was like one of those organisms so perfectly adapted to their environment that a change in external conditions results in extinction," says Macleod. New circumstances and ideals shaped the self-image of twentieth-century Canadians: as the country became more urbanized, it was increasingly defined by progressive social policies and peacekeeping. Informality became the norm, as politicians trawled for votes by unknitting their ties and appealing to "folks." A stocky man in uniform who had respected rank, barked out orders, and bawled out wrongdoers simply didn't fit.



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He was not the only interested head of a Canadian institution: RCMP commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli was keen to have Steele's Mountie uniforms and medals. Soon LAC and the Mounties were working in partnership, and looking for donors. HRH Prince Edward was said to support the acquisition; the names of various oilmen and grocery magnates were mentioned. As Canadian interest accelerated, Steele's descendants commissioned Christie's to handle the sale.

Both LAC and the RCMP had good arguments in favour of the acquisition. LAC calls itself the keeper of our "nation-

al memory," with a mandate to provide the best possible account of Canadian history by obtaining, preserving, and making accessible our documentary heritage—a challenging mission in a country so afflicted with historical amnesia that most citizens cannot name our first prime minister or the date of Confederation. The RCMP, meanwhile, was constructing a shiny new heritage centre, designed by architect Arthur Erickson, on the grounds of its Saskatchewan training academy. The centre, which was to open in 2007, would showcase the RCMP as "an integral part of Canada's historical and cultural landscape"—one that had helped "to form and protect our great nation" and create the Canadian identity. What better way to illustrate the Mounties' historical role than to revive the legend of the Lion of the Yukon and attract visitors and historians to a unique collection of Mountie memorabilia?

But the timing could not have been worse. Thanks to years of polemics from the Conservative Party and the Canadian media, federal politicians had no interest in strengthening Ottawa institutions. Initiatives by Library and Archives Canada to give Canadian history a political presence in the capital were faring badly. Liberal prime minister Paul Martin had cancelled a proposed history centre that year (a decision echoed three years later when his Conservative successor, Stephen Harper, killed a plan for a Canadian portrait gallery). And after a series of disastrous missteps, including its mishandling of the Air India disaster and the forced resignation of Commissioner Zaccardelli, the Mounties had few friends in government.

The same forces that led Steele to be forgotten in the aftermath of his death had further entrenched themselves as well. Superintendent Samuel Benfield Steele was a distinctly nineteenth-century figure—an English-speaking white man who embodied the British traditions of the time, including machismo and respect for military hierarchy and the monarchy. Qualities that made him a hero in his lifetime were by then touching a different set of nerves; his authoritarian style, anti-Americanism, and overt racism had become unacceptable. Politicians and historians had grown sensitive to the disconnect between Canada's nineteenth-century nation builders and the national identity of twenty-first-century Canadians, and their response was to ignore the former. History was increasingly seen as a mere sidebar to citizenship programs in Ottawa, while projects without the word "multicultural" attached received less government attention.

Dr. Merrill Distad, then in charge of the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library at the University of Alberta, watched these events and trends with interest. The Steele collection included the papers of Roger Pocock, an adventurous westerner who had served in the North-West Mounted Police alongside Steele and had remained a lifelong friend. "At first, we were looking only at the Pocock papers, because that's all we thought we could afford," he says. But the Steele family refused to sever the collection.

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It was a demanding schedule, but Steele was in his element. A man of action, he made up for his apparent lack of imagination and humour with the qualities of a military hero: integrity, devotion to duty, attention to detail, and leadership. He was known throughout North America as a tough and fearless campaigner, a reputation forged across three decades spent laying down the law in the West. An admiring profile in Chicago's *Sunday Chronicle* in May 1899 stated, "Colonel S. B. Steele...is a whole army unto himself. He was born to rule in a country where he must become dictator for he is...far away from assistance, from advice and from supplies." Two months later, a feature on Dawson City in New York's *Success* magazine included the line "Under Steele's management and guiding care, the gold district has grown from being a rough camping country to be a built-up, civilized section, where the wife and mother, the peaceful citizen, the timid and the law-abiding are as safe as if living in the centre of a large eastern city."

After his service in the Klondike, Samuel Benfield Steele fought in the Second Boer War in South Africa, and later took command of Canadian troops stationed in England during World War I. He was knighted by George V in 1918. His public career coincided almost exactly with the first forty years of Canada as a self-governing country. "During that time," says Rod Macleod, a history professor at the University of Alberta, "he was seen by most of his fellow countrymen and many outside Canada as standing for what was new and uniquely Canadian."

And yet within a few years of his death in 1919, most Canadians had only the vaguest notion of why Steele had ever been famous—a situation that persists today. He ranked a distant ninety-ninth on CBC's 2004 survey of the greatest Canadians, well after such luminaries as Avril Lavigne, William Shatner, and Patrick Roy. There is no public monument to him, other than an inconspicuous plaque near his birthplace.

In 2006, though, Christie's auction house in London, England, acquired a huge collection of Steele's papers and artifacts. The contents revealed an unexpected side of this Mountie hero: he was a more complex, emotional man than he was prepared to admit, and than his colleagues suspected. The papers also gave hitherto unknown details about Canada's western expansion during the most formative years of nation building. Yet the collection was nearly lost to Canadians. On the market for several months, it might well have been snapped up by a British institution or a private collector of military memorabilia. Only thanks to the University of Alberta's furious efforts to raise the \$1.8-million asking price was this unique piece of Canadian history successfully repatriated for public viewing.

The story of Sam Steele and the race to secure his record raise two difficult questions: How was he forgotten so quickly? And why does Canada do such a poor job of securing its history? Both questions cause Dr. Merrill Distad—the associate university librarian at the University of Alberta who threw his considerable energies into the Steele papers acquisition—to roll his eyes with frustration. "If this were an American hero," he insists, "every schoolchild would have heard of him, and there would already be a television series and several movies about him. He is our Wyatt Earp."



PART OF STEELE'S ATTRACTION for his contemporaries was that he embodied the values of the day: Victorian ideals, imperial zeal, and selfless patriotism. Born in Ontario in 1848 or 1849 (he deliberately obscured his own birthdate), he came from a long line of defenders of the Union Jack. His British-born forebears had fought on the Plains of Abraham in 1759, at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, and at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Steele was still a teenager in 1866 when he joined a militia formed to fight raids onto Canadian soil by Irish American Fenians. The youngster quickly realized that military life in the rough British colony offered adventures impossible to experience on a pioneer farm. In 1870, he volunteered to help suppress the Red River Rebellion in present-day Manitoba, then made his way back to Ontario to become an artillery instructor in Kingston. He was a big, brawny man's man: barrel chested, good looking, and inclined to hit the bottle too hard when bored.

In 1867, the British colony became the Dominion of Canada, and Sir John A. Macdonald committed his government to pushing a railroad over the vast lands that separated Ontario and British Columbia. It would be a monumental effort of engineering, to lay 4,000 kilometres of steel track; of human settlement, to people the prairies; and of law enforcement, to manage relations with First Nations and to beat back American whisky traders. The prime minister knew his young nation could not afford an army to support these ambitious plans. In 1870, Washington spent \$19 million, more than the entire Canadian government budget, on its army—an army notorious out west for massacring Indians. The shrewd Macdonald devised a different kind of militia, a body that would enforce the law with more restraint than the US Army, but more firepower than the constabulary in Britain, which famously did not carry guns. The North-West Mounted Police was to be, in Macdonald's words, "a civil, not a military body, with as little gold lace, fuss and fine feathers as possible; not a crack cavalry regiment, but an efficient police force for the rough and ready—particularly ready—enforcement of law and justice." Its distinctive uniform reflected its purpose: a Mountie wore the red jacket of a traditional British regiment and the breeches and boots of a frontier ranger. In 1873, the third man to be sworn in to this uniquely Canadian force was twenty-four-year-old Samuel Benfield Steele. He began his career as a constable, and started moving up the ranks.

The North-West Mounted Police soon came to symbolize Ottawa's authority west of Ontario. And there wasn't an early Mountie triumph in which Sam Steele didn't star. He marched west in 1877 to negotiate with Sitting Bull, who had fled north after the Battle of the Little Bighorn in Montana. He supervised construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway across present-day Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, keeping peace on the prairies as immigrants swarmed in. After the 1885 North-West Rebellion, he pursued Big Bear until the Cree chief surrendered. A few months later, he was present at Craigellachie when the last spike was driven, completing the CPR's great steel spine from Central Canada to the Pacific. For the next decade, he crisscrossed the Rockies on horseback, becoming a familiar figure to First Nations and settlers in British Columbia and Alberta.

Steele's men respected him for his work ethic, and feared him because he was a bully. "Gruff and bluff, and absolutely fearless of everybody," as a colleague put it. His official diary captures his unbending military demeanour. On January 11, 1888, while stationed at British Columbia's Kootenay Ferry, he jotted this terse note: "Annual flogging administered to whores, adulterers, drunkards and gamblers."

The Samuel Steele of the late nineteenth century was an ambitious and respected man, eager to reach the top job: commissioner of the North-West Mounted Police. In 1890, he made a politically advantageous marriage, to Marie de Lotbinière Harwood, who was the daughter of a Conservative MP and belonged to a well-connected Montreal family. When gold was discovered in the Yukon and the stampede north began in 1897, he took charge of the Chilkoot and White passes, the major routes to the goldfields. He promptly imposed two rules: first, no prospective miner could enter Canadian territory without a year's worth of provisions; and second, every boatload of stampedeers on the Yukon River had to be registered. These rules had no basis in Canadian statute, but they saved countless lives.

A year later, he was appointed superintendent of all the Mounties in the Yukon, assuming command of a third of the entire force, and moved to Dawson City. There, he insisted that all bars, saloons, and gambling parlours close from midnight on Saturday until 2 a.m. on Monday. He cleaned up corruption in the gold commissioner's office. And he saw that major criminals were summarily shipped out of the country, while minor offenders were put to work on the NWMP woodpile, cutting firewood for police headquarters in temperatures as extreme as 40 degrees below zero.

The commissionership of the NWMP continued to beckon, and Steele was determined to project an image as a leader and an upholder of imperial traditions. This was in stark contrast to William Ogilvie, the civilian commissioner of the Yukon Territory, who presided over rowdy dinners in his quarters that were characterized by rivers of whisky, colourful anecdotes, and roars of male laughter. Ogilvie's easy manner, and the way he would talk to "any Tom, Dick and Harry" who dropped into his office, appalled Steele. "Ogilvie is too simple in his habits," he confided to his wife. Steele insisted on plenty of spit and polish in the officers' mess, despite its location in a frontier town with dirt roads, hundreds of hookers, and no

direct communication with the outside world. At NWMP dinners, nobody could smoke until after the toast to the Queen, and the plates were changed between courses. "Thank goodness we hold up our end and act as particularly as if [we were living] in Ottawa or London."

Steele's service during the gold rush was his finest hour, cementing his carefully honed reputation as the "Lion of the Yukon." In the spring of 1899, the *Toronto Globe* declared that "Col. Steele should be given a special vote of thanks by Parliament. No man ever deserved it more. Besides having his men under such a remarkable state of discipline he has done wonders in many other ways...That is the kind of man required in a country like this."

However, not everybody agreed with this assessment. The Liberals were in power in Ottawa by then, and the NWMP fell under the authority of their Minister of the Interior, Sir Clifford Sifton. Sifton also ran prime minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier's patronage machine, however, and Steele's efforts to eliminate corruption in Dawson City had obstructed his practice of bestowing lucrative appointments on the party faithful there. He had, for example, blocked a Sifton pal from receiving a contract to supply meat to the Mounties; challenged several other Grit appointments; and insisted that mining royalties should be collected by Mounties, not Sifton's civilian appointees. He had also bad-mouthed his political master—always a mistake when you're wearing a uniform. A showdown between minister and Mountie was inevitable.

Despite all Steele's efforts and self-promotion, rumours

of his impending transfer out of Dawson rippled through the Yukon during the spring of 1899. The strain began to tell on him. For months, he had boasted to his wife that he had not touched a drop of liquor, but in July he noted at the back of his diary that he had bought two bottles of Scotch.

On September 8, Dawson's first telegraph message came in over a wire newly strung from "Outside." Suddenly, the town's near-total isolation evaporated, and with it the Steele regime. One of the next missives to arrive was from the Minister of the Interior to the chief of the North-West Mounted Police in the Yukon. It tersely informed Superintendent Steele that his Yukon command was terminated.

News of Steele's impending departure triggered an outburst of indignation. Under the headline "Wrong Is Triumphant," the *Klondike Nugget* described him as "the most highly respected



ABOVE Steele with his wife, Marie, in South Africa, c. 1904.

man on the Yukon today," and let rip at "the nefarious schemes of the Sifton gang of political pirates." But Steele's professional mask never slipped. "Busy all day, paid off all my outstanding accts.," he wrote in his official diary on September 21. Five days later, Dawson's citizens presented him with a bag of gold dust. He made a few clipped remarks about duty, then turned his face south as the police paddlewheeler carried him toward Whitehorse. But he confided to his diary his private hurt at being "treated in this very shameful way after working hard and honourably for the people of the Dominion and the honour of the government of our country...Curse the day I ever served such a country." He would never be top Mountie.

The Yukon setback did not stall his career for long. A month after he left Dawson, war broke out in South Africa, and he was offered command of a new regiment, Lord Strathcona's Horse. He was soon on leave from the North-West Mounted Police and back in the saddle, riding roughshod over the veldt as he faced the sharpshooting farmers of the Boer Republics. Then, as the war drew to a close, he accepted a divisional command in the South African constabulary. He spent the next five years in Pretoria.

He returned to Canada in 1907. Over the next few years, he held a succession of senior but not particularly important posts in the Canadian military; worked on his memoirs, *Forty Years in Canada*, published in 1915; and resisted any suggestion that it was time to return to civilian life. The outbreak of war in August 1914 gave him an excuse to stay in uniform (he knocked at least four more years off his already fudged

birthdate, claiming he was still only sixty-two and more than capable of serving in the field.) Although he had officially retired from the NWMP in 1903, he continued to be known within Canada as "Steele of the Mounties," one of the new nation's bona fide heroes. So he was briefly given command of all Canadian troops in England—a confusing role, since the responsibility had already been divided between two other Canadian generals. Once his superiors realized the post made no sense, it was quickly abolished. Steele remained in England, though, and in January 1919, one year after receiving his knighthood, he died in the Spanish influenza epidemic. A group of his friends commissioned a death mask as a first step toward securing a statue of the Lion of the Yukon.

The statue never materialized. Although Samuel Benfield Steele's name lingered in Canadian mythology, knowledge of what he had actually achieved quickly faded. Professor Macleod suggests that "the Great War had so changed Canada and the world that in 1919 Steele's exploits no longer seemed significant." The only public statues erected in the war's wake were sad memorials to a generation massacred on European battlefields. In the 1920s, North Americans, eager to put the trenches behind them, began embracing cocktails, short skirts, and syncopated rhythms; 1921 was the first year that more Canadians lived in towns than on farms. Walrus moustaches and spit and polish were out of fashion; Victorian values and imperial loyalties were passé.

Marie Steele, her elder daughter, Flora, and her son, Harwood, returned to Canada from the UK, choosing to lead

quiet lives in Montreal. The younger daughter, Gertrude, remained in England, and Harwood moved back there in the 1960s, taking their father's papers and memorabilia with him. No one in Canada seemed anxious to keep the Steele flame alive. "He was like one of those organisms so perfectly adapted to their environment that a change in external conditions results in extinction," says Macleod. New circumstances and ideals shaped the self-image of twentieth-century Canadians: as the country became more urbanized, it was increasingly defined by progressive social policies and peacekeeping. Informality became the norm, as politicians trawled for votes by unknitting their ties and appealing to "folks." A stocky man in uniform who had respected rank, barked out orders, and bawled out wrongdoers simply didn't fit.



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It gradually became evident that no national institution was going to make a firm bid, so Distad started to think bigger. He asked Christie's for an inventory, which he says was "tantalizingly sketchy." Finally, he asked if Cameron Treleven, an

antiquarian bookseller in Alberta, could inspect the material. Treleaven, who had spent more than a decade tracking the Steele collection, spent nine hours going through the cardboard boxes, most of which had originally held bananas. Distad still recalls the excitement in Treleaven's voice when he phoned to report. "Cameron told me: sell the farm, mortgage the house, buy it—it's cheap. There is not a single boring letter!"

The asking price was enormous for an institution with an acquisition budget of considerably less than \$1 million. But Distad and his colleagues recognized that there was an appetite in Alberta, if not nationwide, for a scarlet-coated, red-blooded western hero. Pride in the military was beginning to build: young Canadian soldiers were fighting and dying in a distant war, in defence of democracy, and Prime Minister Harper was elevating the Canadian armed forces as a national symbol. In November 2008, General Rick Hillier (then head of the armed forces) declared Canada "a warrior nation"—an idea unthinkable in the late twentieth century.

The University of Alberta worked every public and private connection in its fundraising campaign. Local entrepreneurs ponied up \$400,000, the Alberta government tossed in \$600,000, and \$300,000 came from Calgary's Glenbow Museum. The Calgary oil company Nexen contributed \$250,000 to the cause, and the balance of the asking price came from a federal fund to put archival material on the web.

The deal closed in May 2008. Several members of the University of Alberta library staff, plus Lindsay Blackett, Alberta's Minister of Culture and Community Spirit, travelled to London to watch a theatrical handover of the archive, presided over by Prince Edward. Traffic in central London ground to a halt as a Mountie, astride a horse, clad in scarlet, and flanked by two members of the Household Cavalry, trotted across Trafalgar Square to Canada House, bearing one of the most significant documents in the collection: the letters patent granting Steele his knighthood. Sam Steele's medal-spangled chest would no doubt have swelled at the pomp and ceremony.

Next, the collection was packed into three huge crates and shipped across the Atlantic to its new home. When it arrived in Edmonton, it was celebrated with a black-tie dinner for government ministers, donors, and supporters at the Fairmont Hotel Macdonald. An armoured personnel carrier and riders from Lord Strathcona's Horse and Steele's Scouts, all in vintage uniforms, welcomed guests to the hotel. Mounties, also in heritage costumes, greeted guests in the lobby. It was a fitting return for what Robert Desmarais, rare books librarian at the University of Alberta, called "the Holy Grail of archival collections."



WILL ALBERTA'S ACQUISITION of Steele's papers prompt renewed interest in an old-fashioned hero, and an era of history that barely resonates with today's urban Canadians? The archive has already attracted visitors from across North America and from South Africa. Several books covering different periods in his life are in the pipeline, and Rod Macleod has begun a full-scale, definitive biography of Steele using the new material.

The Glenbow Museum is planning an exhibit of Steele's uniforms, medals, spurs, sword, and military paraphernalia.

The collection certainly lives up to Cameron Treleaven's ecstatic report. It contains an extraordinary amount of original material: 149 diaries; more than 10,000 pages of manuscript and typed memoirs; at least a thousand photographs; and extensive correspondence between family members. Steele wrote long, affectionate letters to Marie almost every day when they were apart. I recently read dozens of these epistles while researching a book on the Klondike gold rush, and was fascinated by the private Sam Steele. His writing is often illegible, and he rarely bothered with punctuation, but his letters resonate with dependence on his wife as the emotional centre of his life. "My darling Marie," he wrote in bold cursive from Bennett Lake, at the headwaters of the Yukon River, in May 1898, "How I long to clasp you in my arms, my own love, how I miss you. You are in my mind day after day." Photos of Marie and their three small children rarely left his breast pocket. In accordance with Victorian inhibitions, Steele rarely spoke to friends about his private life, confirming his image as an inflexible autocrat. But when he received no letters from Marie for three months, while he was in Dawson, he scrawled a desperate note on February 16, 1899: "I am heartbroken." When in July she finally sent him a new set of photos of the children, he wrote to her that, unusually, he had shown them to two of his officers' wives, "and they went into ecstasies over them." Such warmth speaks across the years to a contemporary reader in a way that tales of bully tactics on the frontier can't always manage.

And Steele is finally getting a monument—although in film, not marble. An Ontario company, Knight Magee Productions, has put together \$10 million in funding for a two-hour made-for-television movie. Shooting began in September in Alberta, and co-executive producer Chris Knight hopes for a broadcast by CBC in the fall of 2011. Promotional material for *Sam Steele, Man of Adventure!* (the working title) is filled with lines like "Sam always gets his man!" and "He dodges bullets and arrests con men by the dozen!" A poster showing a dewy-eyed Marie, and Sam Steele carrying a handgun, bears the cutline "Steele Is the Most Eligible Bachelor in the Wild West... He Sweeps Her Off Her Feet with His Moves, On and Off His Horse!" Steele might barely recognize himself, but Knight says, "We are not doing history; this is entertainment. We may be making him less stiff-upper-lip, and more of an action hero, than he really was. But this is for modern viewers, and we are going to give them a ripsnorting ride."

As Merrill Distad points out, few Canadian figures have been mythologized in this way—the way Americans have lionized Wyatt Earp. Canada doesn't do heroes; we are better at recalling their clay feet. Long-serving prime ministers like Pierre Trudeau or Brian Mulroney are too controversial (for different reasons) to be celebrated coast to coast. But despite his flaws, Samuel Benfield Steele has all the makings of a good old-fashioned hero. Perhaps the Steele collection, and the way it is being quarried for popular entertainments that coincide with today's values, will encourage Canadians to engage with our unique and complex past. ~