

WILLIAM MACAULEY HERCHMER 1844-1892

William McCauley Herchmer came from a prominent Loyalist family. His great grandfather John Jost Herkimer served in Butler's Rangers and settled in Cataraqui (Kingston) Ontario in 1783. He was born 13 December, 1844 in Shipton-on-Cherwell, England, the son of Rev. William Macauley Herchmer and Frances Turner

Rev. Herchmer, a friend and schoolmate of John A. Macdonald, had received his university education at Oxford and had become an Anglican clergyman. Although his family lived in Kingston, Ontario, he insisted that his children be born in England: his dutiful wife crossed the Atlantic for each of the births of their nine children. William Macauley and his brothers were sent to school at Henley-on-Thames in England.

When his father, Rev. Herchmer, died in 1862, he returned to study law at Osgoode Hall and passed his junior examinations the following year, returning to practise law in Kingston. While articling and practising law in Kingston, he joined the local militia, and by 1869 had risen to the rank of major in the Prince of Wales's Own Regiment. In 1870 he joined the expeditionary force under Colonel Wolseley that was sent to quell the troubles in the Red River Settlement and given command of a company in the First (Ontario) Battalion of Rifles. After returning to Kingston to practise law the following year, he returned to Winnipeg and was admitted to the Manitoba bar.



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William Macauley Herchmer

In 1876, Herchmer was appointed Superintendent of the North West Mounted Police and was for four years in charge of the detachment at Shoal Lake, near the Manitoba/Saskatchewan border. He was then transferred to North Battleford, Saskatchewan because of the rising discontent among the Plains Cree. Three years later he was moved to the new NWMP headquarters at Regina and assigned to be in charge of the detachments guarding the Canadian Pacific Railway property during a strike. Next came a move to Calgary and when the North West Rebellion broke out in 1885, he and some of his men were ordered to Swift Current, Saskatchewan. At the Battle of Cut Knife Creek, the seventy-four men under Herchmer made up almost a quarter of the force sent to relieve Battleford.

On 1 April, 1886, Sir John A. Macdonald selected Lawrence Herchmer, William Herchmer's older brother, as Commissioner of the North West Mounted Police as his experience as soldier, businessman, and Indian agent gave him suitable qualifications. As the

force was rather disorganized with its men poorly trained and lacking in discipline, Lawrence Herchmer introduced training courses, strengthened the training, instituted rigorous medical examinations, and a probationary period. He managed to get a pension plan introduced to keep the men in the force when their initial five-year enlistment was ended. He also improved the living conditions introducing sports, a library and other means of occupying the troops.



Commissioner Lawrence William Herchmer
1844-1915
City of Regina Archives Photograph Collection
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Although never a popular commissioner because of his uneven temperament he did raise the standards of the organization. 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 – with its wide-brimmed felt hats and the introduction of the first musical ride.

Three months after Lawrence became a commissioner, he promoted his younger brother, William Macauley, as Assistant Commissioner of the North West Mounted Police. Perhaps because the appointment had the flavour of nepotism, William McCauley spent the next year in a relentless round of activity. He visited every NWMP post, travelling more than 15,000 miles by water, rail, horse, and snowshoe. This energetic approach to his work characterized the rest of his career. Unlike his older brother, William Macauley Herchmer was popular both within and outside the force.

William Macauley Herchmer was married to Eliza Helen Rose. They had two daughters. In the early hours of New Year's Day 1892, Herchmer suffered a heart attack and died. He had the largest funeral yet seen in Calgary. In his background and attitudes, he was typical of the officers who led the force in its formative years.

Source: R.C. MacLeod, Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Volume XII
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