
JOHN CONLEY (J.C.) MCRAE

Chief of Police (1887-1911)

*Written & researched by John Burchill
May 29, 2022. Winnipeg Police Museum*



My second installment in a series of articles looking for the most significant police officers to come out of Winnipeg – individuals who made sustained and substantial contributions to policing in Winnipeg and to their community – is John Conley (J.C.) McRae.

McRae was born on March 4, 1859, in Carleton County, Upper Canada (now Ottawa, Ontario). In his early 20's he left Ontario to look for available homestead land near what would become Minnedosa. However, he remained only a few months before moving to Winnipeg. He joined the Winnipeg Police Force on August 1, 1881, and quickly rose through the ranks to become a Sergeant in 1885 and the City's 3rd Chief of Police in 1887. He served as Chief of police for 24 years until his retirement in late 1911.

Under McRae's leadership the force saw significant improvements including an increase in officers from a low of 13 to 108 members when he retired, hiring of detectives in 1902 who could speak a multitude of different languages, the opening of a new Police Headquarters in 1909 and 2 sub-stations, hiring of the first woman 'matron' in 1899 to supervise female prisoners, creation of an Identification Section that was one of the first in North America to adopt the use of fingerprinting, implementation of a Police Signal System made-up of 158 call boxes being a first in North America, obtaining motorized vehicles in 1906, motorcycles in 1910, and a police ambulance in 1911.

McRae was one of the charter members of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACP) in 1905. He was held in such high esteem that he was one of the first police officers in Canada to be awarded the King's Police Medal in 1913 for his long and distinguished service to the citizens of Canada. However, that wasn't the end of his career as he was later appointed as Commissioner for the Manitoba Provincial Police during the investigation into the Legislative Building scandal from 1915-1917.

McRae's rapid rise and his fame as a police officer were due in large measure to his apprehension of a number of high-profile criminals. In September 1885 he had pursued Edward "Bulldog" Kelly all the way into the United States for an alleged murder committed in British Columbia. While he successfully aided in Kelly's arrest, after several extradition hearings the U.S. government intervened and refused to deport Kelly who was released from custody in April 1886.

Two years later, in May 1887, while attempting to detain Joseph Fant for stealing and slaughtering cattle (an offence for which he had just been released from prison), McRae was shot in the groin. Unable to remove the bullet for fear of rupturing an artery, the bullet remained lodged in McRae's body until his death in 1921. Fant fled to the United States, was extradited and tried for attempting to kill McRae. However, due to a defect in the laying of the charge, Fant was acquitted in November 1887.

In 1889 McRae gained even further recognition when he single-handedly captured Martin Burke, one of the men responsible for the murder Doctor Patrick Henry Cronin in Chicago.

Dr. Cronin was a prominent Chicago physician and a member of Clan-na-Gael an American political organization formed to replace the Fenian movement to promote Irish independence from British rule. Clan-na-Gael was very effective at raising large sums of money for the cause. However, Dr. Cronin believed the Executive Board led by Chicago lawyer Alexander Sullivan was embezzling from the fund. When Dr. Cronin criticized the board, he became a marked man. He subsequently disappeared on May 4, 1889, and three weeks later his body was found wedged in a catch basin of a Chicago sewer. He had been stabbed five times with a sharp, narrow weapon, likely an ice pick.

At the time, the murder of Dr. Cronin drew national attention with thousands of newspaper stories and editorials documenting and speculating about the case. Even today it is the subject of a recent book by Gillian O'Brien.¹ Seven men were indicted for Cronin's murder, and four – Patrick O'Sullivan, Dan Coughlin (a Chicago Police Detective), Martin Burke, and John Kunzel – were found guilty and sentenced to prison time. Of these, two were granted new trials and two (Burke and O'Sullivan) died in prison.

Martin Burke, who fled Chicago after the murder, was found travelling under the alias of W.J. Cooper in Winnipeg by Chief McRae. Burke had just bought a ticket at the Canadian Pacific ticket office for travel to Liverpool and was recognized by his description. Burke was held in custody and fought extradition to the U.S. However, his deportation order was eventually upheld by the Manitoba Court of Appeal on July 30, 1889.²



¹ Gilliam O'Brien. "Blood Runs Green: The Murder That Transfixed Gilded Age Chicago". University of Chicago Press; Reprint edition (April 25 2016).

² [Regina v. Burke \(1889\) 6 Man. R. 121 \(C.A.\)](#)

At the turn of the last century, Winnipeg was referred to as the “Chicago of the North”. With the official connection of the railway to the U.S. on December 3, 1878, Winnipeg was on its way to being a transportation hub like Chicago and one of the fastest growing cities in North America. One of the immediate effects of the railway’s arrival in Winnipeg was a land boom that began a quickening of local economic activity in 1880 and continued with a building frenzy in 1881-82.

The railway was a cost-effective way to import both settlers and manufactured goods to the west, and to export grain and other marketable goods to the east. As a result Winnipeg’s population would more than double during this time, increasing to 20,000 persons with 700 new buildings being constructed during 1881 alone.

Although a world-wide recession was just around the corner, by 1885 the real estate boom of 1881-82 had allowed Winnipeg to complete most of the structural works necessary for the development of industry including street construction, a sewer system, water distribution, telegraph lines and feeder railroads, which allowed the establishment of new factories, banks, and the Winnipeg Commodity Exchange which opened in 1887.



Winnipeg Police Force, 1892. Chief McRae is front centre.
Winnipeg Police Museum #1612-53275

While the pace of growth fell off, Winnipeg’s population had increased to 25,600 by 1891 and to 42,340 by 1901, which led to a second development boom driven by European immigrants and migrants from eastern Canada. The population of Winnipeg increased by 221 per cent from 42,340 in 1901 to 136,035 in 1911. The increase in population and industrialization also led to an increase in crime, workers rights and the growing needs of the Winnipeg Police Force – which

had also increased in size from a low of 13 men in the mid-1890's³ to over 108 men when McRae retired.

The increase in manpower caused overcrowding in the police station and McRae started to campaign for a new station. City Council approved the construction of a new station on Rupert Avenue, which was opened in 1909. Although Council eventually agreed to construct sub-stations it was not until May 1911 that two were opened – one for the south on Jessie Avenue (“B” Division) and another for the north on Magnus Avenue (“E” Division”). Although additional lots were purchased in Elmwood to the east and on Arlington Street to the west, no further sub-stations were built.

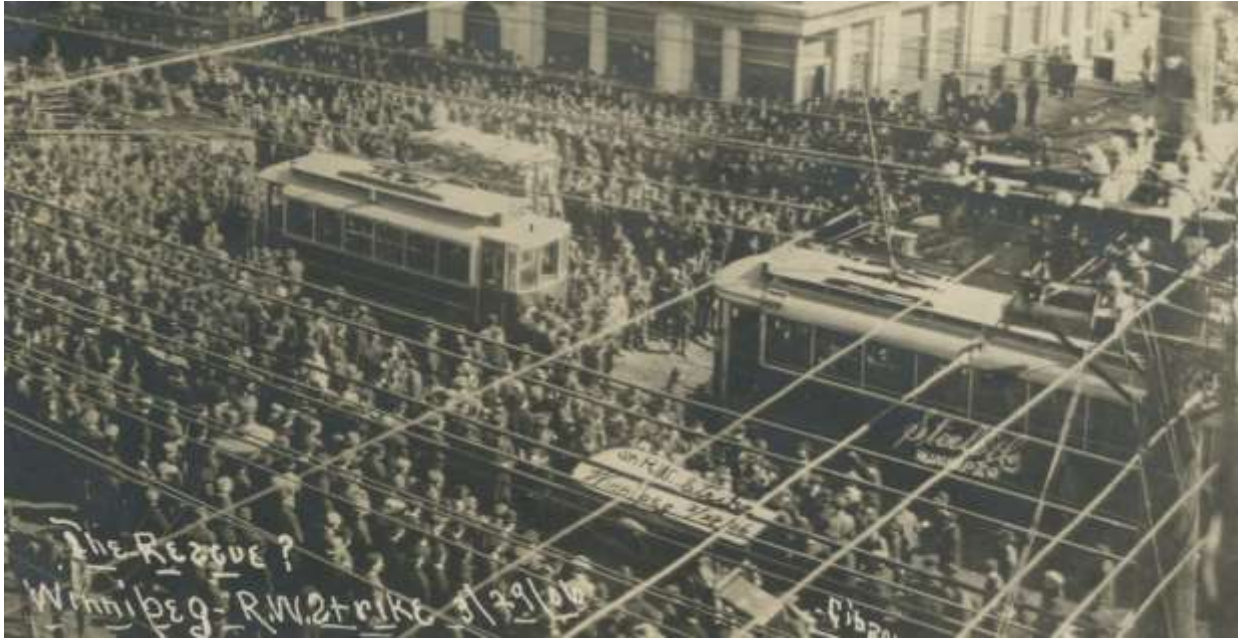
With Winnipeg's population rate increasing at 1000 people a month (mostly unattached young men), it was hard enough for the police to deal with crime let alone suppress or stamp out morality offences such as prostitution. As such houses of ill-fame (brothels) were allowed to operate in a separate, segregated, part of the city under the close regulation of McRae and his officers where it was fairly easy to keep track of them.

By late 1910 the brothels were teeming with so much business that they began to attract the attention of the local moral reformers who levied accusations of white slavery, police corruption and accessory to immoral criminal conduct. Statements made in the Toronto newspapers described Winnipeg as “*a moral cesspool, the stench of which is making itself felt throughout the Dominion*”. [Read more here.](#)

At the time Winnipeg was in the middle of a civic election campaign and the pressure resulted in City Council unanimously asking the Manitoba Government to appoint a Royal Commission to investigate the allegations of municipal corruption. Justice H.A. Robson was to head the inquiry. In January 1911 Robson made public his report in which he found that the police did tolerate prostitution within a certain area and further that prostitution was a menace to the morals and the peace and good order of the area. However, with the incumbent mayor returned, little attention was paid to the report and the City opted for continued tolerated prostitution and related vices in the segregated area.

In 1905 McRae became a charter member of the Chief Constables Association of Canada (later the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police) when about 50 police officials met in Toronto on September 7 at the Canadian National Exhibition. The announced goals of the association were closer ties among police departments (including the challenges of new technology, police-community relations, political accountability, interdepartmental communications, recruiting and training), the encouragement of uniform police administration, the improvement of conditions of service, and the promotion of such legislation as would tend to suppress crime and preserve law and order. McRae had previously gone to the International Association of Chiefs of Police conferences in New York (1901), New Orleans (1903) and Chicago (1905) where he had seen the benefits of a national police lobby group, a common criminal-records bureau, and progressive reform surrounding the professionalization of policing.

³ Although the force had as many as 40 men in 1885, the 1881/82 building boom had burst and the force was reduced to 25 and then 13 men a few years after McRae took office.



Winnipeg Street Railway Strike, March 29, 1906.
PastForward, Winnipeg Public Library, Martin Berman Postcard Collection

With technological advances in automation, large-scale factories and time management of workers, companies reshaped manufacturing, consumption, work and the urban landscape – which also increased labour unrest. The first major labour disruption faced by the Winnipeg Police was the Winnipeg Street Railway Strike that lasted 10 days from March 29 to April 7, 1906. The public supported employees as they sought fair work hours and wages from the Winnipeg Electric Railway Company.⁴

There were incidents of vandalism and violence, and special police and the military were brought in to control the crowds. On the first day of the strike, two streetcars were destroyed, twelve were damaged, and two-dozen demonstrators were arrested. The crowd, which surrounded two streetcars on Main at Broadway, grew to 2,000 people. According to the Winnipeg Telegram the trolley cables were cut and *“the windows of the car totally smashed and one of the members of the crew badly pounded by [members of] the crowd.”*

Chief McRae retired in November 1911 and was honoured in 1913 with the award of the King’s Police Medal for his long and distinguished service. However, his career did not end there. When the Province of Manitoba was looking for an experienced officer to handle the investigation and prosecutions associated with the scandal over the construction of the Manitoba legislative buildings in 1915, they turned to McRae.

⁴ McRae and his men were sworn in as provincial constables to assist the provincial government at the “Battle of Fort Whyte” in 1888 when violence was feared between the Canadian Pacific Railway and the crossing of its line by the provincial Red River Valley Railway at what is now Fort Whyte. Attorney General Joseph Martin called for volunteer police to protect construction crews in their work of putting in a crossing of the C.P.R. southwest of Winnipeg. A miniature civil war threatened in which “hundreds would have flocked to the assistance of the Government even if it had meant the support of their measures at the point of a bayonet” according to R.B. Hill as quoted in James A. Jackson’s article in MHS Transactions, Series 3, 1945-46. However, this was not a labour dispute, rather a political one.



Winnipeg Police Force, 1909. Chief McRae is front just left of centre.
Winnipeg Police Museum #1612-53277

The history of the scandal goes back to 1911 when a competition was opened to architects to design the new Manitoba legislative building. The contract to construct the building was awarded in 1913 to Winnipeg's Thomas Kelly & Sons for \$2,859,750 million, one of the largest individual construction contracts at the time. The only other bid was submitted by Peter Lyall & Sons Construction of Montreal the day before was \$3250 more than Kelly's. According to a later Royal Commission, Kelly was given information on Lyall's bid and reduced his original bid down from more than \$3 million to secure the contract.

On review by the Public Accounts Committee there was evidence the Conservative government under Sir Rodmond Roblin, then Premier of Manitoba, was in collusion with Kelly to divert money away from the construction project to the party's accounts and for Kelly's personal benefit. A majority of the Committee, finding "*gross and culpable negligence in the part of the government and officials thereof*" asked for a Royal Commission into the construction project.

The "Mathers Commission" was subsequently established under Chief Justice Thomas Mathers, along with Justice Donald Alexander Macdonald and Police Magistrate Hugh John Macdonald in April 1915. When the Mathers Commission filed its report on August 24, 1915, they found a "*fraudulent scheme or conspiracy formed before the contract [for the new foundation] was entered into to obtain from the extras an election fund ... For this purpose Dr. R. M. Simpson, V. W. Horwood, the provincial architect, and at least some members of Thomas Kelly & Sons became parties to and active participants in carrying it out ...*" [Read more here.](#)

On August 31, 1915, proceedings were initiated in Winnipeg Police Court against four ex-Cabinet ministers Roblin, Montague, Howden, and Coldwell. A Preliminary Hearing commenced shortly thereafter. However, Dr. Montague, who had already been ill, died a few months later on November 13, 1915. An arrest warrant was also sought for Thomas Kelly for perjury, conspiracy to defraud and obtaining money under false pretenses.

McRae was subsequently sworn in as a provincial constable and as Commissioner of Police in and for the Province of Manitoba on September 25, 1915, to assist in the investigation and prosecutions associated with the case including the arrest of Kelly who had fled to the U.S.

With the assistance of the Chicago Police, Kelly was arrested on October 1, 1915. McRae travelled to Chicago and extradition proceedings were started. Kelly fought extradition all the way to the United States Supreme Court which upheld his extradition on April 17, 1916.

On May 6, 1916 McRae took custody of Kelly and left Chicago for Winnipeg. After an 11-day trial, Kelly was found guilty on June 29, 1916, of defrauding the provincial government of more than \$1.2 million. On August 18, 1916 the Manitoba Court of Appeal upheld Kelly's conviction and the stated questions by Justice Prendergast. A further appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada was upheld on November 7, 1916. Kelly was subsequently sentenced to 2½ years in Stony Mountain Penitentiary.⁵

While the trial was proceeding, McRae was further investigating the possibility of other political improprieties and possible jury tampering during the "Galt Inquiry". Another hearing headed by Justice Alexander Galt into other monies paid to Thomas Kelly and possible collusion with the Conservative government during the construction of the new Agricultural College (University of Manitoba) buildings.

While Justice Galt found there to be a conspiracy regarding the building of the Agricultural College between Kelly and Robert Rogers, the provincial Minister of Public Works, upon further review by a Royal Commission headed by Ezekiel McLeod, Chief Justice of the Province of New Brunswick (Rogers was now the Federal Minister of Public Works), it was felt that Galt had erred and that Rogers was not involved in the conspiracy when they released their findings in August 1917.

As for McRae, his term as Commissioner of Police in and for the Province of Manitoba expired on May 1, 1917, shortly after Justice Galt released his final report.

After a protracted illness McRae died four years later on July 19, 1921, at the age of 62. He was buried at Elmwood Cemetery.

NOTE: Anyone wishing to recognize a police member they feel made sustained and substantial contributions to policing in Winnipeg and its surrounding municipalities during the past 150 years is asked to send me their name and (if known) a brief description of their accomplishments.

⁵ [Rex. v. Kelly \(1916\) 27 Man. R. 94](#), aff'd [\(1916\) 27 Man. R. 105](#), aff'd [\(1916\) 34 D.L.R. 311](#)