
FRANCIS (FRANK) RITCHIE

One Her Majesty's Secret Service

Written & researched by John Burchill
Winnipeg Police Museum

Like Forrest Gump, police officers are often involved in major historical events, but usually go unnoticed. However, this shared history reflects broader social and cultural trends and can play an important role in telling our communities' stories.¹

I knew nothing about Frank Ritchie, but his name kept popping up as I explored Winnipeg Police history.

Francis (Frank) Ritchie was born on October 17, 1837, in Newry, County Armagh, Ireland. He came to Canada as a youth with his parents/family and settled in Smith Falls, Canada West (now Ontario), south of Ottawa.

Originally a weaver and harness maker, he joined the Ottawa Police in the early 1860s. His start date is unknown, but he resigned in September 1866, much to the disappointment of at least one media outlet. The Ottawa Citizen reported:

We learn that Mr. Francis Ritchie has resigned his position as one of the Ottawa Police Force. He must have been well acquainted with the duties of a policeman, having been a constable for some time before the present force was established ... Mr. Ritchie was a very efficient policeman, and in losing him the police loses a good man, and the city a zealous servant.²

In 1863, Ottawa formed a Board of Commission of Police to oversee and control police activity, and that same year appointed a new Chief of Police, with ten constables under his command; Ritchie likely started sometime before 1863.³

However, Ritchie remained involved in policing. Both the 1867 and 1868 Ottawa City Directories list his occupation as a "policeman" living at the Hamilton Hotel. Additionally, in September 1867, "*Mr. Ritchie, formerly a member of the police force, was dispatched to investigate [a robbery in Arnprior]*" when the local detective, Mr. O'Neil, was unavailable to leave town. "*By a dispatch received from him yesterday, it seems he has made three arrests and has recovered the money*".⁴

¹ Forrest Gump, a 1994 movie based on a 1986 book, centres on the story of a fictional character who witnesses and influences important moments in American history and popular culture, but is unaware of their significance.

² The Ottawa Citizen, September 22, 1866, p. 2.

³ Ottawa's Police History, online: <https://opva.ca/ottawas-police-history/>.

⁴ The Ottawa Citizen, September 13, 1867, p. 4. Did Ritchie work as a detective for another police force?

In late 1864, Premier Sir John A. Macdonald (Canada West) set out to create the Western Frontier Constabulary. It was to be a “*detective and preventive police force, for the purpose of watching and patrolling the whole frontier from Toronto to Sarnia.*”⁵ The Constabulary operated along the borders and rail lines, first reporting on activities related to the American Civil War (“*the Chief duty of the Force is ... is to suppress and prevent all raids being committed upon the country and people of the United States*”⁶), then later the Fenian movement, which aimed to overthrow English rule in Ireland. Its duty was to gather information on “*the existence of any plot, conspiracy or organization whereby peace would be endangered, the Queen’s Majesty insulted or her proclamation of neutrality infringed.*”⁷



Gilbert McMicken, Manitoba Archives, SIS N7982

Stipendiary Magistrate Gilbert McMicken was selected by MacDonald to head the new Western Frontier Constabulary, carrying out covert and secret investigations. According to Creighton, “*this force which was soon in its modest fashion to become a most efficient instrument of counterespionage and prevention*”.⁸ The force was established for one year in 1865 with a budget of \$330,000 and extended for a second year to 1867.⁹

On April 7, 1968, D’Arcy McGee, a father of Confederation and a prominent Irish-Canadian politician and MP for Montreal West, was assassinated in Ottawa. It was believed his assassination was related to the Fenian movement. Following his assassination, the Dominion Police were organized by the federal government to guard the Parliament buildings in Ottawa. The service also provided bodyguards for government leaders and ran an intelligence

⁵ David A. Wilson, *Canadian Spy Story: Irish Revolutionaries and the Secret Police* (2022) McGill-Queen’s University Press, p. 106. Also see Donald G. Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician. The Old Chieftain* (reprint 1998), University of Toronto Press, p. 393. Originally published 1955.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 108.

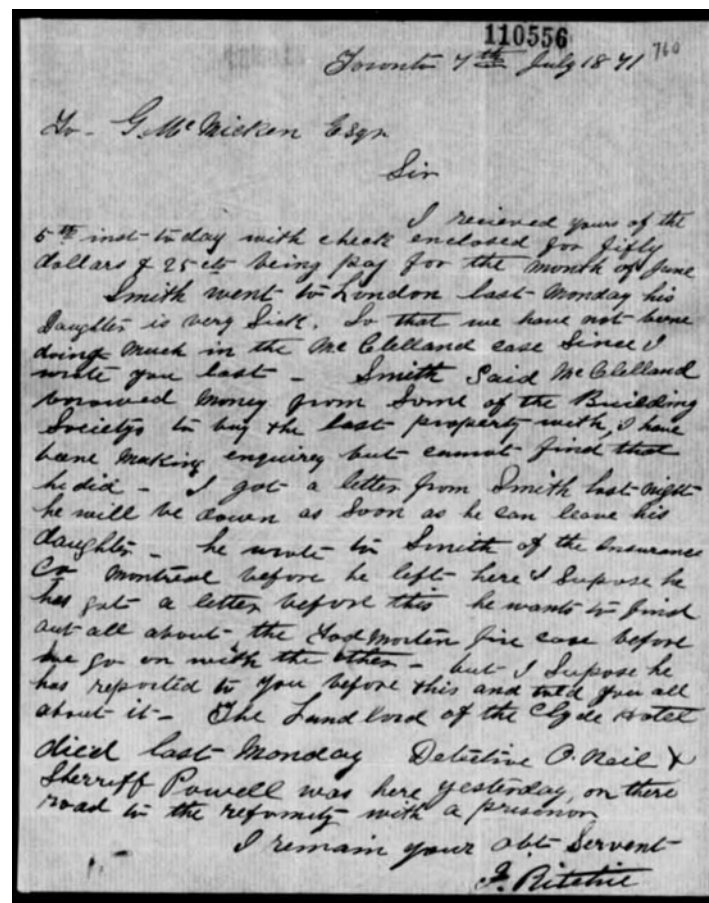
⁷ Andrew Parnaby & Gregory S. Kealey, “The Origins of Political Policing in Canada: Class, Law, and the Burden of Empire,” (2003) 41:2–3 *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 211 at 215.

⁸ *Supra*, note 4 at p. 393.

⁹ See Schedule to Expenses of Civil Government, 28 Victoria, S.C. 1865, c. 3. “*Sums Granted ... For the Frontier Force*”. Also see Schedule to Supplies, 29 Victoria, S.C. 1865-66, c. 2. “*Expenses for Detective Force ... and Frontier Service, East and West*”. For extending the Act for the prevention and repression of outrages in violation of the Peace on the Frontier of this Province, see Acts Continued, 29-30 Victoria, S.C. 1866, c. 14. Assented August 15, 1866.

service whose agents infiltrated the Fenian Brotherhood, taking over the Western Frontier Constabulary's responsibilities.¹⁰

Canadian authorities worried about the Fenian Brotherhood's power, which had already launched several major raids into Canada in 1866 before McGee's death.¹¹ With the creation of the Dominion Police, McMicken became a Dominion Police Commissioner, and he integrated this new supervisory duty with his ongoing undercover network. Although Ritchie was not an original member of the Western Frontier Constabulary, he regularly reported to McMicken on Fenian activities along the border as a Dominion Police officer. Several dozen of Ritchie's reports to McMicken of his activities between 1868 and 1871 are preserved among the Papers of Sir John A. MacDonald at the National Archives of Canada.



110556
Toronto 4th July 1871
Sir G. McMicken Esqr.
Sir
I received yours of the 6th inst. today with check enclosed for fifty dollars & 25 cts being pay for the month of June
Smith went to London last Monday his daughter is very sick. So that we have not been doing much in the McClalland case since I wrote you last - Smith said McClalland borrowed money from some of the Building Society to buy the last property with, I have been making enquiry but cannot find that he did - I got a letter from Smith last night he will be down as soon as he can leave his daughter - he wrote to Smith of the Insurance Co Montreal before he left here I suppose he has got a letter before this he wants to find out all about the Hadjorsten fire case before he goes on with the other - but I suppose he has reported to you before this and told you all about it - The Land Lord of the Clyde Hotel died last Monday Detective O. Neil & Sheriff Powell was here yesterday, on their road in the reforming with a prisoner
I remain your abt. Servant
J. Ritchie

Frank Ritchie, letter to McMicken, July 18, 1871
Sir. John A. MacDonald Papers, National Archives of Canada

¹⁰ The Dominion Police were created on May 22, 1868, by S.C. 1968, c. 73. The Act for the prevention and repression of outrages in violation of the Peace on the Frontier was extended to January 1, 1869, after which it would expire. S.C. 1868, c. 29.

¹¹ See Battle of Ridgeway, June 2, 1866, and where about 800 Fenians crossed the Niagara River at Buffalo into Canada, occupying Fort Erie; and June 7, 1866, where 1000 Fenians crossed the Canadian border and occupied Pigeon Hill in Missisquoi County, Canada East. Fenian Raids, Canadian Encyclopedia, online: <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/collection/fenian-raids>.

In 1870, when the province of Manitoba was created within the Canadian federation, McMicken was vested with the same powers as police magistrates and justices of the peace in the province, and the Dominion Police constables had the same status as those appointed under provincial law.

In September 1871, McMicken was sent by MacDonald to Winnipeg to establish an assortment of federal government offices. While retaining his post as Dominion Police Commissioner, he was to serve as agent of the Dominion Lands Branch and Assistant Receiver General in Manitoba. He was also appointed immigration agent and a member of the Intercolonial Railway Commission. As word had also been received that the Fenian Brotherhood was planning one more raid into Canada through Pembina, Dakota Territory, McMicken was authorized to bring two constables with him at the same rate of pay and expenses they had been receiving in Ontario (\$1.50 a day plus \$4 a week for expenses).

In a letter to the Minister of Justice, McMicken advised that he had brought constables Frank Ritchie and George McMicken. The Minister of Justice indicated that the pay for the two constables would move from the Police Force of Canada, Ontario pay list to the Manitoba pay list, effective October 1, 1871.

Of the “Fenian Raid on Manitoba”, McMicken would later recount his experiences in a paper to the Manitoba Historical Society, published in 1888:¹²

Towards the end of September, 1871, whilst holding a commission under the Great Seal of Canada as Commissioner of Dominion Police, and acting as secretary of the Intercolonial Railway commissioners, I was appointed Agent of Dominion Lands for Manitoba, in connection with other important offices and duties.

[...] hurried by a telegram from the Premier of the Government urging my departure, owing to information he had received relative to the threatened Fenian movement on Manitoba ... To keep tryst in this behalf, and in fullest compliance with the wishes of the Government, I on the following morning took my departure from Windsor en route for Fort Garry [through the United States].

Accompanying me were my astute and courageous son George, and Frank Ritchie equally trustworthy; both most useful and reliable members of my Secret Service Police. Merely stopping over in Chicago between train connections, so as to lose no time, and meeting my agents promptly as expected and arranged, I received the exact information I needed in respect to the condition of Fenian matters and especially as to the projected movement upon Fort Garry.

After discussing their planned travels through the United States to Fort Garry, including the possible use of a canoe by Ritchie and his son George (who were “*adept with the paddle*”), to bypass the Fenians, McMicken continued:

¹² Gilbert McMicken, “Abortive Fenian Raid on Manitoba: Account by One Who Knew Its Secret History,” MHS Transactions, Series 1, No. 32. Read 11 May 1888. Online: <https://mhs.mb.ca/docs/transactions/1/fenianraid.shtml>

Our horses were fresh, and we started out at a rattling pace. Very shortly after reaching the main trail, again we passed the Fenians. Three were ahead of the wagons as an advance guard, and five were behind them. Nothing was said, as I had ordered, and we shot ahead in silence and with such speed as we could. At the next stage house we picked up a driver who knew nothing of the road, having only come in from Pembina over it the previous day. He, we found, was an Irishman Americanized; a full blown Fenian. Ritchie ... pretended to be Americans and in full sympathy with his views. He told them he had been sworn in about two weeks ago, that they would see fun at Garry although he did not know how it would be now, as the leaders had made a big blunder. The raid was planned to take place in November when the route by the lakes could not be passed over, and now the raid was ordered for Wednesday. All were to gather at Pembina then, so as to start on the march for Garry Thursday morning. "It was a d-d mistake," he said, for now the Canucks could send up their soldiers by the lakes and rivers. Still he said, "You'll see fun anyhow."

That morning I sent Ritchie off by the stage to Pembina to watch matters there and report. I endeavored to obtain two saddle horses for myself and son to go to the Hudson's Bay Co's. post near Pembina, but failed, and was obliged to remain at the fort. ...¹³



Troops assembling on Main Street, 1871, to confront possible Fenian invasion. Manitoba Archives, SIS N1252.

When McMicken arrived in Fort Garry, he reported to Lieutenant Governor Archibald, who then issued a Proclamation calling on volunteers to repel the Fenians. The Proclamation was printed on October 3, and immediately various companies of men came forward. Upon hearing the news,

¹³ Ibid. Reference to Ritchie being adept with the paddle comes into play later.

the *Manitoban* reported: “A company of Frenchmen, numbering upwards of forty, formed in the town, left this afternoon.”

The Fenian “raid” into Manitoba occurred on October 5, 1871, at the Hudson’s Bay Company post at North Fort Pembina, near what is now West Lynne/Emerson. It was quickly subdued by Captain Lloyd Wheaton of the 20th United States Infantry stationed at Fort Pembina, Dakota Territory. There was no confrontation and, in fact, the Fenians never actually entered Manitoba, as later border surveys confirmed.

Ritchie is not heard from again until June 14, 1875, when he applied (unsuccessfully) for Winnipeg’s Chief of Police position to replace the [disgraced John Ingram](#). In his application, Ritchie highlighted his 8 years’ experience with the Dominion Police; however, it was apparently not enough.¹⁴

Although it appears Ritchie was no longer working for the federal police, he did remain in Winnipeg, as there are several media references to him in 1875 and 1876 working as a boat captain, and he appears in the membership list of the fraternal organization Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF), Manitoba Lodge No. 1.¹⁵

Although Ritchie’s application was unsuccessful, City Council Minutes show he was hired as a Special Constable for the City of Winnipeg on May 23, 1877, along with J.H. Grady, and promoted to Detective on June 18, 1877, before his services were dispensed with on February 28, 1878. There is little known about his detective work with the Winnipeg Police; however, he and Constable Grady were involved in the arrest of one Gervais for the theft of flour sacks from Andrew McDermott’s store on February 1, 1878:

Detective Ritchie arrested [Gervais], after which I went with Ritchie to Manitoba House, where the prisoner boarded, and searched the room where he stored his grain and found three bags of flour under some sacks of oats; Ritchie marked them “F.R.”¹⁶

By 1883, Ritchie was working as a Customs Officer at the C.P. Rail station in Winnipeg. According to his obituary, Ritchie also worked as a Quarantine Officer at the North West Angle on Lake of the Woods and traded extensively with First Nations communities about 200 miles north of Fort Garry before joining the customs office. His obituary then continues that he went up the Nile as part of the Voyageurs and received a medal from Queen Victoria as well as the *Khedive Star* for his efforts.¹⁷

¹⁴ Considering that the successful applicant, David Murray, had only one year’s experience with the Winnipeg Police, it is surprising that Ritchie did not get the job in light of his 8 years with the Dominion Police and several more with the Ottawa Police before that. Application on file with the City of Winnipeg Archives.

¹⁵ Odd Fellows and Masons are both fraternal organizations that have been in existence for centuries. While they share some similarities in terms of their historical roots and organizational structure, they are distinct groups with their own beliefs, rituals, and purposes.

¹⁶ Testimony of Constable Grady as reported in the *Manitoba Free Press*, March 7, 1878.

¹⁷ The *Khedive’s Star* was a campaign medal established by Khedive Tewfik Pasha to reward those who had participated in the military campaigns in Egypt and the Sudan between 1882 and 1891, including the Nile Expedition.



WANTED IMMEDIATELY

50 MEN

TO ACCOMPANY

GORDON RELIEF EXPEDITION

IN EGYPT

To Take Charge of Small Boats on
the Rapids of the Nile.

MUST BE GOOD BOATMEN.

Men who were in Red River Expedition Preferred

Wages from \$30 to \$40 per month and expenses. Applications will be received by the undersigned until

THURSDAY, the 4th SEPTEMBER

Expedition leaves Quebec for Liverpool on the 13th.

W. N. KENNEDY.

In a 1885 news report, Captain William Kennedy, who had led the recruitment of Voyageurs for the Nile Expedition in Winnipeg, said Frank Ritchie was “*the second man to step to the front*”. While the article doesn’t mention his Dominion Police experience, it does note Ritchie’s previous work with the Ottawa Police Force and Winnipeg Customs.¹⁸

According to Kennedy’s biography, when Major-General Sir Garnet Joseph Wolseley, was seeking Canadian boatmen in 1884 to transport a British military expedition up the Nile River into the Sudan to rescue Major-General Charles George Gordon trapped in Khartoum. Kennedy swiftly raised a large contingent from Manitoba and served as paymaster for the Canadians on the expedition.¹⁹

The Nile Expedition of 1884-1885 was one of the British Empire's more daring and challenging military ventures in the late 19th century. This campaign, aimed at rescuing the besieged Major General Charles Gordon in Khartoum, Sudan, became not only a test of British military reach but also a defining moment for the Canadian Voyageurs, whose participation marked a significant Canadian contribution to British imperial interests. While ultimately ending in tragedy, with Gordon’s death and the fall of Khartoum, the

expedition remains a pivotal event in imperial history, underscoring the complexities of colonialism, the limits of military power, and the connections between Canada and the British Empire.²⁰

Ritchie is listed in the Records of the Nile Voyageurs, 1884-1885, published by the Champlain Society. He is also listed in the Canadian Awards and Honours as receiving two honours.²¹ Several of Ritchie’s letters to a friend (James Hursell) about the voyage to the Nile were also published in the Winnipeg Daily Times newspaper in 1884.

Ritchie returned to Winnipeg in 1885, but later went back to Ottawa, where he died at his home on King Street on November 24, 1896. Although Ritchie was buried without fanfare at Beechwood Cemetery, I often find that studying policing or individual police officers lets us tell our communities’ stories within the broader social and cultural trends of the time.

¹⁸ Winnipeg Daily News, July 4, 1885. Being “adept with the paddle” and a ship’s captain would no doubt be useful skills for traversing the Nile.

¹⁹ Kennedy, William Nassau. Canadian Biography. Online: <https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio.php?Bioid=39746>

²⁰ Nile Expedition, Military History. Online: <https://militaryhistory.ca/nile-expedition/>

²¹ C.P. Stacey, Records of the Nile Voyageurs, 1884-1885: The Canadian Voyageur Contingent in the Gordon Relief Contingent (1955) Toronto: Champlain Society. Also see Library and Archives Canada, Military Medals, Honours and Awards, 1812 to 1969 (search by F. Ritchie).



THE NILE EXPEDITION FOR THE RELIEF OF GENERAL GORDON. THE CANADIAN VOYAGEURS' FIRST TOUCH OF THE NILE
FROM A SKETCH BY MR. F. VILLIERS

"The Canadian Voyageurs First Touch of the Nile". The Graphic, November 22, 1884, p. 536-37