

Chief of the Mounties

William Leonard Higgitt

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OTTAWA, May 16—When William Leonard Higgitt was appointed commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police 18 months ago, very few Canadians outside the civil police force he had served for 32 years knew the name.

Most Canadians, who would know J. Edgar Hoover on sight, do not know, even now, what the commissioner of the R.C.M.P. looks like. Mounties may perform many crime-busting, counterespionage exploits similar to those of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and they may be equally celebrated—as a force. But tradition and the retirement law prevent Mounties, individually—even their boss, the Commissioner—from becoming the national institution Mr. Hoover has become.

Nevertheless, Mr. Higgitt and Mr. Hoover have things in common. They are relentless Civil police officers. And they have reputations for being hard to get to know.

For Mr. Higgitt, it may be said that it is in the tradition of Mounties to shun exposure to the limelight, and Mr. Higgitt is acknowledged by those who know him to be a Mountie through and through. Also, the 53-year-old Commissioner's few ventures into the field of public relations have not been happy, largely because a Mountie holding a news conference is still a Mountie, not a politician or a diplomat.

On being appointed Commissioner by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau in October, 1969, Mr. Higgitt met reporters whose preoccupation at the time was Canada's effort to open diplomatic relations with China.

An Early Question

One of the first questions asked the new Commissioner was whether he thought a Chinese Communist Embassy in Ottawa would pose a new security problem for the federal police. Mr. Higgitt quickly answered that a Chinese Communist presence in Canada would, of course, pose a new problem of police vigilance.

The answer made big news and Prime Minister Trudeau, who had pressed hard for the Canada-China negotiations, was not pleased.

Mr. Higgitt's blunt response has haunted him since, but has not necessarily changed his mind. A few weeks ago, after Canada and China had agreed to exchange ambassadors, Mr. Higgitt was asked, while testifying before the Commons Judicial Committee, if he maintained his 1969 position on China.

He explained that at a news conference he had been asked whether a Communist Chinese Embassy would result in more police agents in Canada. "The obvious answer had to be yes," he stated.

The man chosen to make the 8,500-man Royal Canadian Mounted Police effective in modern times rose through the ranks with speed. He attained the Commissionership by promotion over several officers who were his senior. The reason most often heard for this is that Mr. Higgitt "understands the R.C.M.P. better than anyone else." He is also an acknowledged specialist in the urban and other problems that are increasingly causing concern.

Mr. Higgitt was born on Nov. 10, 1917, in the Saskatchewan farm community of Anerly. After completing high school he joined the Mounties at Regina, the provincial capital, in 1937. Regina had been the national headquarters of the force since the days it was called the Northwest Mounted Police. The head offices are now in Ottawa, but the main training school remains on the prairie outskirts of Regina.

Security Expert

At the outbreak of World War II, Mr. Higgitt was transferred to Ottawa, where he quickly became identified with security and intelligence work. During part of the war period he was the Government adviser to the Commons Judicial Committee on Internment Operations. These operations led to the removal of many hundreds of persons of German and Japanese descent in Canada to detention camps in the hinterlands.

In April, 1954, Mr. Higgitt has appointed as the officer commanding all federal police activity in the Western half of Quebec, except for Montreal.

In July, 1957, he became the officer in charge of coun-

terespionage branch of the directorate of security and intelligence in Ottawa. In the early nineteen-sixties he was the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's liaison officer in Europe and was a Canadian delegate to the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) conferences in 1961 and 1962.

He was then in succession appointed Superintendent, Chief Superintendent and Assistant Commissioner, Director of Force, Deputy Commissioner and finally Commissioner.

The Commissioner and his Nova Scotia-born wife lead a quiet social life, usually within the circles of the police force. A friend said he was a man without a hobby, "unless it's the police force itself." The Higgitts have no children.



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Considered a Mountie through and through.