

## A DISCUSSION OF JAN CREMER'S BOOK ON THE MOUNTIES

ENTITLED:

HET ZWIJGZAME KORPS, REPORTAGE.

Amsterdam: Loeb &amp; van der Velden, 1978, 179 pp.

I am not sure that a Dutchman should be allowed to write about Canada or Canadians. Just think about it. Ever since the end of World War II, when Canadian soldiers liberated Holland, Canadians have not been able to do wrong in Dutchmen's eyes. As well, Canada can be considered in many ways the antithesis to Holland and therefore in his youth, every Dutchman is fed myths about aspects of Canada. He learns about its incredible size, its variegated flora and fauna, its native peoples and, finally, he learns about the Mounties and their heroic deeds. The Dutch who live in one of the smallest and most crowded countries in the world are of course fatally inclined to dream about and to idealize countries which possess wide, open spaces where adventure still seems possible. Concomitantly, most Dutchmen possess an insatiable thirst for exotica and will devour any book about the high seas, the Orient, or the Arctic. They will gladly devour any book about a foreign land as long as it permits them to forget momentarily the noisy, mundane and cramped universe which they must perforce inhabit.

Jan Cremer's book "The Silent Force" attempts to satisfy this desire by adopting the following three-pronged approach. His writing is made up of personal observations about Canada and the Mounties amongst which are interspersed citations from the history of the RCMP and as well descriptive passages treating of the multitude of present-day RCMP activities.

The most memorable parts of Cremer's book are contained in his personal observations. This is not to say that his

remarks about Canada and the Mounties are necessarily profound but at least they are the result of actual experiences and hence they carry the stamp of authenticity. In these passages Cremer adopts a colourful style and he does not shy away from unusual metaphors. This is how he describes Ottawa in the early days of spring:

Het regent en de wagens rijden langzaam door de natte sneeuwmodder. Dóór de monotone cadans van de ruitenwissers die de regendruppels van de ruit scheren, overziet de Mounty vanonder zijn pet waarvan de klep zijn ogen haast bedekt, het grijze en natte straattaferaal. Voetgangers ontwijken met passen van een toreador het opspattende sneeuwslijk als stadsbussen te dicht langs de trottoirband rijden. . . .

Langzaam volgt onze surveillancewagen de brede autoweg naar het westen, die parallel loopt met de nog ondergesneeuwde zuidelijk oever van de Ottawa-rivier die in de diepte schuimend haar weg zoekt. Een brede zwarte scheur in een wit laken dat de regen probeert schoon te wassen.

It is raining and the cars proceed slowly through the slush. A Mountie whose hat nearly covers his eyes surveys the grey and wet street scene through the monotonous cadence of the wipers which shave the raindrops off the windshield. With the deftness of a toreador the pedestrians avoid the splattering slush each time a city bus drives too close to the sidewalk. . . .

Our police car is moving west along the broad highway which runs parallel to the snow-covered south-bank of the Ottawa river which deep down is seeking its foamy path. A broad, black tear in a white sheet which the rain is attempting to wash clean. (My translation) p. 39.

As must be obvious from this quotation, Jan Cremer is somewhat of a *poète manqué* and in his attempts at "new journalism" he reminds me of Dr. Hunter Thompson's exotic imagery. However, it must immediately be noted that in contrast to Hunter Thompson's citified taste for drugs and far-out experiences, Jan Cremer is a plebeian who prefers

beer and buxom maidens. As a matter of fact, it is possible that Cremer's boozing and womanizing have stultified the author's brain to such an extent that he may have lost all critical perspective as well as any desire to go beyond the obviously RCMP-inspired sources for his information. Cremer has not even bothered to read the newspapers. A year's subscription to *The Globe and Mail* might have provided him with a more informed portrait of the RCMP than all the time he spent with the force at its headquarters, its training grounds or on patrol. And, of course, Cremer never heard the RCMP speak of illegal break-ins, the opening of correspondence or of barnburnings.

It is not that Cremer should have stressed only the negative side of the force but the picture he paints gives the rather silly impression that the RCMP is made up exclusively of outstanding redblooded citizens who are constantly on the outlook for evil, eradicating it on the spot. In addition, as Cremer sees them, the females on the force are all rose-cheeked, beautifully proportioned maidens who are both efficient and feminine.

Let us examine some examples of how Cremer views the Mounties so that the listener may judge for himself. States Cremer:

Ook het vertrouwen en de achting die iedere Mounty van zijn meerderen en van het Canadese volk geniet heeft in dit populaire korps tot een ware geest van trots, kameraadschap en saamhorigheid geleid. . . .

Every Mountie enjoys the confidence and respect of his colleagues and of that of the Canadian people and this has had as a result that this popular police force possesses a genuine sense of pride, of camaraderie and of togetherness. . . . (My translation) p. 14.

The next citation provides a description of the training, recruits must undergo:

In het midden van de grote exercitiehhal staand, loeit de ijzervretende bullebak de orders naar de rekruten. Vastberaden en zwijgend marcheren zij door. . . .

D.I. Corporal Hall wordt opgewacht door een jonge vrouw met een klein in wol verpakt kind. Parmantig als een pauw loopt de ijzervretende bullebak met zijn dochterje schuifelend over het trottoir, langzaam en ervoor zorgend dat het niet kan vallen, lief tegen het kind pratend. Een vaderlijke blik vol trots in zijn ogen, de kleine kinderhand in zijn grote knuist geklemd.

In the center of the exercise hall the firespewing drill instructor is giving orders to the recruits. They march silently but are full of determination. . . . (p. 74)

On his way home drill instructor Hall is met by his young wife who carries in her arms a baby wrapped in wool. That firespewing bully now shuffles along the sidewalk as proud as a peacock; he moves slowly and talks in warm tones to the child while making sure that the baby does not fall. The baby's hand is clasped in the big fist and the father's eyes glow with pride. (My translation) P. 76.

Whether or not this description provides an accurate portrayal of that particular sergeant, it leaves the overwhelming impression that Cremer is intent on making us believe that, however rough their exterior may be, Mounties have hearts which overflow with human kindness. It is obvious that Cremer has spent very little time talking to the Indians, to the Doukhobors, or to certain strikers for that matter and that he has preferred to be indoctrinated by the Mounties' propaganda machine. This is the way in which Cremer pays for the warm reception he received, for the rides on the planes and for the hours passed in the cruisers. Another reason for Cremer's overly kind treatment of the Mounties must be sought in the fact that he undertook a task for which he needed their help because it was too big to handle alone and independently.

It is clear as well that Cremer is temperamentally ill-suited for a critical study of the force. Cremer projects a simple and bucolic view of life and it is with genuine pleasure that he expresses his gratefulness to the RCMP for

showing him around. Cremer does not mind the propagandizing because he is not interested in issues. His focus is on the configuration of the landscape and the appearance of the people he encounters. In addition, it is not difficult to let oneself be overwhelmed by Canada or its well-known police force. A country such as Holland provides one with a sense of scale and with a feeling that its problems are within man's grasp. A full description of a typically Canadian phenomenon does not create the feeling that one has it in one's grasp; on the contrary, it is easy to despair at the outsized nature of any of its problems and give up before one has properly started.

Jan Cremer's book is noteworthy in another respect: it signals the weakness of the "new," or what is also called participatory journalism. To mention Hunter Thompson again: his writing may give the impression that it is "hot off the press" and that Thompson was really "in there" but Thompson always knows of what he speaks because he knows the American scene inside out (even if he exaggerates!). Jan Cremer's visit to Canada and his study of the RCMP are done superficially because Cremer is an outsider who performed the absolute minimum of homework. In truth, Cremer cares little about critical perspectives; to him seeing the Mounties in action represented the realization of a childhood dream and Cremer makes sure that they live up to his extravagant expectations. Unfortunately, Cremer's poetic snapshots of Canada and his glowing account of the RCMP's activities do very little to satisfy a Canadian's curiosity about either topic. Ultimately, since Cremer limits himself to what he wanted to see and because the RCMP was not about to give him any information that might have been damaging to them (and who can blame them!!) the reading of this book leaves one with the impression of having been part of a fool's game. Cremer has been fooled by the Mounties and by himself, and in turn

he attempts to fool us into thinking that he has something worthwhile to say about the RCMP. Consequently, the entire exercise strikes me as an imitation on a minor note of Jean Genet's reporting of the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago in *Esquire*. From it I learned that Genet was impressed by the cops' leather jackets, their shiny belts and their bulging behinds but that was also the sum and substance of his message. Jan Cremer's book describes Canada in very poetic terms, it also gives an idyllic portrait of the Mounties and informs us that the author enjoys drinking beer and lusting after healthy young maidens but all that does not take us beyond his boyhood dreams and his adolescent inclinations. When the RCMP invited Jan Cremer to have a look at their operation they knew what they were doing and, of course, as always they also knew that they would get their man.

A. van den Hoven

SOME COMMENTS ON A. VAN DEN HOVEN'S PAPER 'HET

ZWIJGZAME KORPS, REPORTAGE' by Jan Cremer

1. Professor A. van den Hoven reproaches Jan Cremer for not having been critical in his portrayal of the RCMP. He says that Cremer's boozing and womanizing have stultified the author's brain to such an extent that he may have lost all critical perspective, that a year's subscription to *The Globe and Mail* would have provided him with a more informed portrait of the RCMP, that the author seems never to have heard of illegal break-ins, the opening of correspondence or barnburnings, that he preferred to be indoctrinated by the Mounties' propaganda machine, and that Cremer is temperamentally ill-suited for a critical study of the force.