

Gunfighters, Thieves and Lawmen

A Novel

By D. M. McGowan

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The following story is a work of fiction. Any similarity between this story and any historical recording of events is accidental and highly unlikely. Any similarity between the characters depicted and any actual people, either living or dead, is accidental, highly unlikely and very flattering.

Reviews for D.M. McGowan

Cold Coffee Press on “The Great Liquor War”

“Great storytelling, true-to-life cowboy experience with US and Canadian history”

“Nuggets of history told within a great story of human experience”

On Line Book Club on “The Great Liquor War”

“Action-packed and entertaining!”

“My enthusiasm remained high all the way to the end.”

Author Clayton Bye on “Homesteader: Finding Sharon”

“Narrative is conversational and easy to read”

Author Barbra Martin on “Homesteader: Finding Sharon”

“I didn't want to put the book down”

Barbra Casto of Reader's Favorite on “Homesteader: Finding Sharon”

“Absorbed not only in the story, but the history”

Western Fiction Review on “Partners”

“Partners is a well told story that entertains and educates”

Cold Coffee Press on “The Making of Jake McTavish”

“Incredible story telling”

On Line Book Club on “The Making of Jake McTavish”

“A quick and enjoyable read”

“Skillful setting and mood descriptions”

Novels by D.M. McGowan

The Great Liquor War (1998, 2015 & 2023) **

Homesteader: Finding Sharon (2009, 2011 & 2024)

(** Hank James series)

Partners (2008, 2011 & 2024)

The Making of Jake McTavish (2015, & 2023)

Gunfighters, Thieves and Lawmen (2020)

Boundaries (2024)

Short Stories by D.M. McGowan

Marker of Stone

Lucky

Into the Mountains

Stealing Janet's Cattle

A Voice from Beyond

Deacon

Invasion

Blizzard

Sure, I can do that!

What We Need Is a Good Cattle Dog

People of the West: A short story timeline

Forward

I'm always finding small bits of history that I was not aware of or perhaps forgot when that information was forced out of my limited storage capacity by some other surprising/interesting/unbelievable nugget of information from the past. One such tidbit that I've been aware of for several years is that the British Columbia Provincial Police did not have a detective (or inspector if you prefer) among their ranks until the reorganization undertaken in 1924, the same year they adopted uniform dress.

Until their first detective, the BCPP had been one of the Pinkerton Agencies best customers. I've speculated that perhaps that US agency wasn't the only source for an investigator or for "outside" assistance. As a result, an upcoming story entitled "Boundaries" will include a "citizen" investigator with some specific skills.

In the same theme, the BCPP used all manner of personnel in their efforts to expand their numbers and attempt to cover their vast area with, sometimes, less than two dozen officers. That is one of the subjects found here in "Gunfighters, Thieves and Lawmen."

I'm also "recycling" a couple of characters. Those who have read the two "Hank James" stories will recognize them.

. You can access my Author central page through a search engine by entering [amazon.com/author/dmmcgowan](https://www.amazon.com/author/dmmcgowan)

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank those who helped bring "Boundaries" and "Gunfighters, Thieves and Lawmen" to reality. Randy Hadland (Handy Hadlands), Wayne Ezeard (Author of "Where Eagles Soar", radio host on Peace FM) and Samantha Zwicker, co-director of Hoja Nueva of Peru who has created many of my covers. More information about them and their facility in Peru can be found at www.hojanueva.org

GT & L

Most importantly I acknowledge Karen Lynne McGowan who has been by herself as I disappear into a computer screen.

Gunfighters, Thieves and Lawmen

1

When he saw the remains of the small fire he knew his life, or at least the one he had been enjoying in recent years, had come to an end. There were a great many things that upset him about the small pile of charcoal, but the end of that comfortable life was the worst aspect.

“Been a quiet, peaceful run for close to five, six years,” he said to his mount, leaned forward in the saddle and patted the gelding’s neck. He turned away from the cold fire a few yards, swung to the ground and dropped the reins. He moved slowly back to the site examining the ground.

There were tracks of three men and three horses. They had driven at least three animals into the small clearing. Two of those animals were full grown or very close to it.

“A cow, and a yearling and a calf, maybe,” he said to himself. “Or maybe two steers and a calf, hard to tell.”

He could see two different places where animals had been roped both head and heels and dropped on the grass. A third man had handled the fire, heating a cinch ring that had been used as a running iron to change the brand, probably his brand to something else. He could see where the hot ring had been dropped three or four times in the grass leaving a circle of singed grass.

He stood straight and backed away from the branding site and looked around at the clearing. It was in a small cup or depression on a hill side and surrounded by aspen, a few spruce and several bunches of willows. A perfect little spot to drive a few cattle, rope them and drop them and then change their brands.

“Perfect place to hide from the rightful owner, which would be me,” he said. “Don’t know as I’ve ever rode through this clearing before.”

He tried to think of a reason he had come through here today. Had he seen something, a track, crushed grass or a bent twig that had drawn him down the trail that led him here? He shook his head to drive the thought away. Coming through here had been pure chance.

He walked the few steps to his mount, swung into the saddle and reversed his ride, going back toward the buildings.

“I guess we won’t be checking cattle for a few days, Patch,” he said to the sorrel. The name came from a circle of white on the sorrel’s left flank that stuck out from under the saddle skirt.

At the buildings he untied his bed roll, laid his slicker over the saddle and carried the bedding up to the front porch of his house. He dropped it, untied it and rolled it out flat. From the house he brought another shirt and several pairs of socks and added them to the clothes and other items in the bedroll. Rolling it up again he tied it and carried it back to Patch, tying it back in place along with the slicker.

Next, he checked the large saddle bags.

“Enough grub in there for what we need to do, Patch.”

He swung into the saddle and rode east.

The evening of the next day Constable Edward Theason dismounted in a clearing not far from the Yellowhead Trail. He made a circuit every month, but he only came this far north and west every three months. It made the circuit another two weeks longer, thereby cutting in to his regular time off, but he enjoyed the trip. There were never any problems to deal with and he got to enjoy several nice, quiet campsites with protection from the weather and plenty of good water. Except for mid winter

when he often found those same sites isolated, lonely and sometimes dangerous.

He worked his ankles and stretched his legs. He put his hands on his hips and bent his back forward then back as far as he could.

“No law breakers, no Corporals or Sergeants, what could be better?” he said. He thought he was talking to his two horses and the trees.

He turned to his pack horse and started loosening the load when a man stepped out of the bush. It took a moment for Theason to see him for the man made no sound in his approach. He glanced down at the stranger’s feet expecting to see moccasins or mukluks but he wore mule ear adorned riding boots. The tops were every bit as high as Theason’s police issue boots but the heels were much higher and undershot. In addition, the stranger was not wearing spurs, even simple ones such as the military cavalry models Theason wore. The man held a Winchester carbine at port arms.

Moving slowly and carefully, his hand and arm hidden behind his pack horse, Theason reached down to his holster and released the flap.

“Not about to shoot anybody, Constable,” the man said.

“Your rifle seems to be in a very, ah, readily available position,” Theason noted.

The stranger grinned. “You speak mighty well for a ten dollar a month itinerant policeman. And a rifle is just a well-designed ornament if it ain’t loaded and ready t’ hand.”

Theason’s expression remained serious but he took his hand from his holster and returned his attention to the pack. “You don’t appreciate art and ornamentation?” he asked.

“Depends on timing, I guess,” the stranger said. “Right now, I’d appreciate some coffee and I expect you would as well. When you get those two beasts hobbled or

picketed, whatever you're gonna do, follow this trail," he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, "for a bit more than a hundred yards. We're having venison, pork and beans. Oh, an' the coffee o' course."

Theason pulled the tarp off his pack then looked back to the stranger intending to ask his name.

The man had disappeared like a wisp of smoke.

"Makes very little noise for a man wearing boots," he said to the trees and the horses. "To be more accurate, he doesn't make as much noise as I do when I'm not moving."

It took Theason a half hour to hobble his horses and prepare his camp. That accomplished he undid the top two buttons on his tunic, slipped a small revolver out of his pack and inside his tunic. He also picked up a tin cup and plate which he carried with his left hand. Leaving the tunic buttons undone he stepped out on the game trail the stranger had indicated. It only went north for perhaps twenty feet before it turned a circle through the brush and headed back toward the stream.

Theason stopped in the middle of the loop and considered the location of his camp and where he was going. If this stranger wanted to help himself to some new supplies, he could probably follow the stream, visit the camp, and then be back to his own camp before Theason arrived. However, stealing a Mounted Policeman's goods wouldn't be helpful in ensuring a calm life in the Canadian West.

Theason continued on along the trail and stepped out into a well protected clearing next to a deep, calm pool which, despite the cold earlier in the week had surrendered to the heat of the day leaving only a thin fringe of ice at its edges.

The stranger was squatted down by the fire stirring the contents of a pot. He pulled the pot back from the coals, picked up the coffee pot, tapped it twice on one of the rocks surrounding the fire to settle the grounds and poured coffee into a cup.

“You have a cup?” the stranger asked.

Theason set his cup by the fire and the stranger filled it. While he sipped the coffee, he studied the stranger. In addition to the riding boots the man wore wool pants under home made shot gun chaps, from their thickness probably fashioned from moose hide but well made. His pants were held up with wide suspenders but his hips also carried a cartridge belt with a holster hanging on the left side for a right-hand draw. However, unlike Theason’s regulation holster which was mounted the same way, the cowman’s holster was mounted at an angle which put the butt of his revolver in front of his stomach. Under a tweed vest he wore a blue cotton shirt. The outfit included a wide, flat brimmed hat with a flat-topped crown.

“Name’s Sullivan Wheeler,” the stranger said. He picked up a pair of fencing pliers from the dust, tapped them against a stone and then picked up the pot of beans, looking up enquiringly at Theason.

The Mountie set his plate on the ground and Wheeler poured beans out into it while drawing a large knife from a sheath hung on the right side of his cartridge belt. He stopped the flow of beans and scraped the edge of the pot with his knife.

“Help your self to the deer meat,” he said, using his own knife to spear a steak from the coals.

Theason changed the plate to his right hand and reached behind his holstered Colt to draw his own knife. He speared a piece of meat and dropped it on his plate.

There were two large logs on the edge of the camp site. Wheeler had taken one and Theason sat on the other.

“Stopping along the trail and wondering where I was, now that was a good idea,” Wheeler said. “You maybe should have thought of it before you stepped into an unknown trail with so many hiding places for a back shooter.”

“Are you a back shooter, Mr. Wheeler?” Theason asked.

Wheeler smiled. "You feel all right?"

Theason smiled in return. "No, I don't believe I've been shot."

"No, I'm not a back shooter. Matter of fact I hope I never have t' shoot anything again, 'sept maybe my food. However, I'm not the only man with a weapon out here, even though she often appears to be empty country."

"A few women as well," Theason said.

Wheeler nodded. "An' some of 'em damn quick t' shoot. But it's not the men and women you need to worry about."

With a piece of meat in his mouth Theason didn't say anything but lifted his eyebrows in enquiry.

"It's the animals, the two-legged ones you need to worry about."

Theason swallowed, nodded and added, "And those that have completely lost their mind."

"I expect there's some of them."

"We've been looking for one for most of a year now. Over east of here."

Wheeler nodded. "Cree fella over in, what, Athabasca District?"

Theason nodded. "Calls himself Jean Baptiste but it's in the District of Saskatchewan. Place called Duck Lake, near Batoche."

Wheeler smiled. "Maybe the agency calls him Jean whatever, but the other Cree call him Almighty Voice. And he shot one of you boys, what, September last?"

"Sergeant Colebrook at the end of October."

"Well, I've heard about it a couple o' times and even if the man is out of his mind, I doubt he'll be hanging around real close to where he shot a white policeman."

Theason shrugged. "There are a lot of members and volunteers looking for him. It leaves us short handed out here on the ground, but we'll find him."

“Sure you will,” Wheeler agreed. “But you’ll have to admit that with a little more care, you wouldn’t need to find him.”

“You’re talking about him walking out of jail at shift change,” Theason said.

“Well, I didn’t know how he got away from you the first time, but I guess there’s that, too. What I was talking about was this Sergeant riding into his camp.”

“That was his job,” Theason insisted.

Wheeler shook his head, rose and went to the fire and set his plate down. Picking up the coffee pot he took it to Theason, poured, and then filled his own cup.

“He rode into what he knew was a criminal’s camp,” Wheeler said. “A criminal, who’s very, I don’t know, existence I guess, is all about livin’ outside and not in some stone cell.”

Theason nodded. “His father served three years after the rebellion.”

“So, he knew something about jails, plus he spent a day or two in one at this Cold Lake,” Wheeler said. “Despite that this Sergeant rides right into camp, his guide or translator or whatever he is warns him that Almighty Voice is going to shoot and yet he just keeps riding on.”

“As I said, that was his job.” Theason had difficulty not showing his embarrassment. He knew about the shooting and had some difficulty defending the circumstances.

Wheeler sat down on his log again. “Ain’t nobody’s job to commit suicide.” He waved one hand toward Theason. “That damn red coat ain’t bullet proof, just like it don’t hide that special pocket you have inside and over your left breast.”

Theason smiled. “I suppose it would seem I don’t trust you.”

Wheeler chuckled. “You shouldn’t trust me or anybody else you don’t know. That’s the point I’m trying to make. Matter of fact, as a policeman you should give some

serious thought about trusting somebody you do think you know. And you're little hidey gun is a good idea, even if you need a better place to do the hidin'."

Suddenly there was a Colt revolver in Wheeler's hand. It was pointed at the ground and was not cocked, but it was still in his hand and his thumb was on the hammer. "You also need a quicker way to get at it."