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The Wild West in England

William F. Cody

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The Wild West in England

THE PAPERS OF WILLIAM F. "BUFFALO BILL" CODY

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WILLIAM F. CODY

The Wild West in England

Edited and with an introduction by Frank Christianson

*University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln & London*

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The central question facing the McCracken Research Library six years ago when it launched *The Papers of William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody* was basic: why should Cody's papers be edited and published? Cody was not a great statesman; he was not an important philosopher nor a literary genius. Though widely recognized as a show business pioneer, his contribution to cultural consciousness and advancement has too often been, and in large measure continues to be, relegated to the margins of American history. Cody is readily accepted as a pop culture icon of his day but not always seen as a subject of serious scholarly study.

As this present volume illustrates, William Cody deserves the level of attention afforded by this documentary editing project not because of his intellectual, economic, or political contribution but, rather, in part, because he was the most successful cultural export in American history. No other enterprise before or since has so boldly claimed to represent the American experience. Moreover, Cody did not merely represent American culture—he defined it for generations of Europeans. In so doing, he gave it a definition that resonates today. From Cody's prescient perspective, the United States is a pluralist, multicultural, exceptional nation. For European audiences, Buffalo Bill's Wild West stood for the frontier, and the frontier stood for America. The American West was the canvas

on which Cody painted his unique and uniquely American portrait. Like any other worthy work of art it continues to be re-examined and reinterpreted.

This current volume is part of that ongoing reexamination. *The Wild West in England*, edited by Frank Christianson, is the fourth volume of The Papers of William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody and is being published simultaneously with the third volume, *Buffalo Bill from Prairie to Palace* by John M. Burke, edited by Chris Dixon. These two volumes underscore the global nature of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. They document firsthand how, beginning in London in 1887, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West performed the drama of frontier settlement to millions of Europeans. They also point to Cody’s ability to reach ordinary people and yet appeal to the most elite circles. These new editions give us a clearer picture of a man who transcended geographic, social, cultural, and national boundaries.

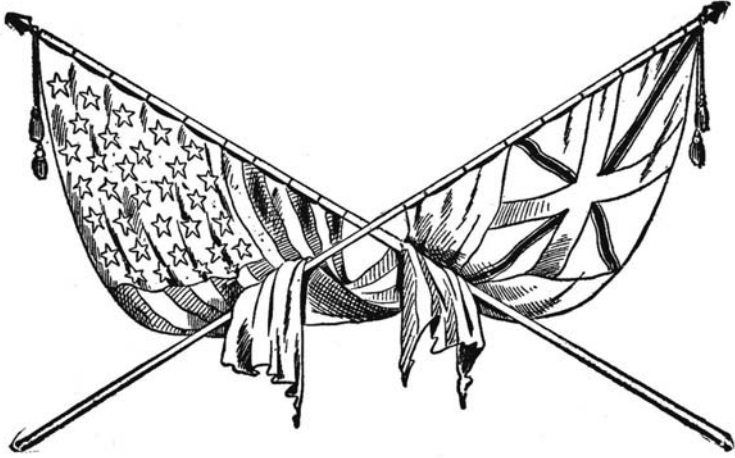
We live in a world that is increasingly “flat,” where our global economy does not need or even allow unique national identities. Cody had the advantage of operating in a world that delighted in differences and celebrated distinctive identities. Within that context, he posited an uncommon American character and found an energetic reception wherever he went.

To contextualize and better understand that character, the Buffalo Bill Historical Center—its staff, board, and generous supporters—have made a substantial investment in recovering and reclaiming the nineteenth-century American West through its most iconic figure. The William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody Papers open a window onto a significant national moment—America’s coming of age—as documents, photographs, newspapers, and memoirs come into view and reveal a distant but dynamic time and place: the world of Buffalo Bill.

Kurt Graham

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

On the final page of his 1879 autobiography, written when he was just thirty-three years old, William F. Cody announces his intention to take his stage play, *The Knights of the Plains*, on a theatrical tour of England the following year. He was concluding this phase of his life story on a high note, reflecting on his considerable success as an actor performing in western melodramas that had toured throughout the United States and identifying the next visible horizon for his ambition. It was eight long years before Cody made it to England, not as a stage actor but on a much grander scale than he could have envisioned as a relatively young man still in transition from plainsman to showman. Cody later acknowledged misgivings that his theatrical production would not be able to distinguish itself enough to generate interest among the English public. In addition, the financing required to make the trip was prohibitive for some years. His early impulse was prescient, however, in identifying England as the arena where he could achieve his greatest success. The 1887–88 season in Britain proved to be a watershed in the history of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, catapulting the show to a new stratum in the world of traveling entertainments and ensuring that it would continue as a cultural force on both sides of the Atlantic for decades to come. *The Wild West in England* recounts the events that led up to the



Wild West's transatlantic venture as well as the cultural encounter between American performers and British audiences as it played out during the months of the English tour. Cody's experiences in England take on significance in a broader context of political, economic, and cultural change and provide a singular view of how Americans understood themselves in an increasingly globalized age.

Cody's original autobiography, *The Life of Hon. William F. Cody*, describes his early years in frontier Kansas, including the traumas brought on by the border war and his time in the Union Army. It also traces the stages of his career, from teamster to buffalo hunter to army scout to hunting guide. Beginning in the early 1870s, Cody translated his frontier experience into an acting career by touring the United States with his own theater company, the Buffalo Bill Combination. Both his stage career and his presence as the fictional hero of widely distributed dime novels made Buffalo Bill Cody a household name by 1880. The autobiography offers the raw

materials of what became the Buffalo Bill phenomenon, but it concludes before the advent of the Wild West exhibition. *The Wild West in England* picks up the tale where the previous volume left off, detailing Cody's transition from stage to showground. While it offers some specifics regarding the development of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, most of the narrative is devoted to the events of the six-month London season. The text assigns a mythic significance to this unique American export by imagining a historically transformative role for Cody's enterprise. The Wild West stepped onto the global stage as part of an unprecedented effort to market American accomplishments to European audiences in the form of the 1887 American Exhibition.

The Wild West as America's National Entertainment

In 1882, after a decade of touring throughout the United States, William Cody's career as a stage actor was on the wane. A fortuitous meeting in New York with fellow actor-producer Nate Salsbury came at just the right time. Together they developed the rough outlines of a Wild West exhibition centering on horsemanship and marksmanship. From its earliest beginnings, Buffalo Bill's Wild West was imagined as an American cultural export.¹ An 1873 letter to his sister Julia, declaring, "I shall probably go to Europe this fall," reveals that Cody had looked abroad from the very outset of his entertainment career. For his part, Salsbury had already enjoyed considerable success with his own touring company in England and Australia. With this shared ambition, the two men planned to build up investment capital and produce a show for international audiences. A tongue-in-cheek note in the *Detroit Free Press* from December of that year invokes the transatlantic context that

gave birth to the Wild West: “Buffalo Bill has at last found a manager willing to take him to England, but what the public will next want to know is whether he is to be left there or not.”

Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, billing itself as “America’s National Entertainment,” was meant to originate on English soil. The following spring, however, Cody, impatient to try the concept, broke from the original plan and joined with W. F. “Doc” Carver, a North Platte, Nebraska, dentist and noted marksman, to put together a “Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition.” Although the show toured to large audiences throughout 1883, it ended the season without a profit and the partnership between Cody and Carver dissolved in bitterness. *The Wild West in England* ignores this initial period of the show’s history, preferring to emphasize the later, more successful, partnership.² Cody reconnected with Salsbury and reinvented his exhibition the following year. Although it evolved over time, the basic components of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West existed from the beginning. A standard program included racing between cowboys, Mexican vaqueros, and Indians and horsemanship demonstrations, such as the roping and riding of bucking horses, and a Virginia reel on horseback. Marksmanship exhibitions eventually made stars of Annie Oakley, Lillian Smith, and Johnnie Baker. “Illustrations” of Indian attacks on both the Deadwood stagecoach and a settler’s cabin, as well as a “genuine buffalo hunt” lent dramatic spectacle to the performance as a whole, as did reenactments of famous battles such as Little Bighorn and Summit Springs. Cody presided over the program, from the opening “Grand Processional” to the final “Salute” and participated in many of the individual events, demonstrating his shooting skills as “America’s Practical All-round Shot,” repulsing Indian attacks, and staging a mock buffalo hunt.

Native Americans played an integral role in the success of the Wild West, validating the show's claims of authenticity and serving invariably as the aggressors in the show's dramatic set pieces. Cody had employed Indians in some of his first western melodramas in the mid-1870s. Although he had frequently used non-Native actors to play Indians in his stage show, Cody's commitment to casting "real" Indians increased with Buffalo Bill's Wild West, which included as many as one hundred Indians in the cast. Despite the profound ambiguity of their position—staging battles in which they themselves had fought less than a decade after the Plains Indians wars—Indian performers were drawn to both the wages and the opportunity the show provided to travel to new regions of the United States and Europe. Of the many prominent Native Americans involved with the show, Sitting Bull was certainly Cody's greatest recruiting success. His participation for four months during the 1885 season was key to the Wild West's ongoing viability. Sitting Bull's actual performance was a mere cameo role, amounting to a brief ride through the arena and other appearances on the showground. The tour also gave Sitting Bull the opportunity to bypass the standard bureaucratic channels and appeal directly to government officials in Washington DC on behalf of his people.³ Indian participants such as Standing Bear and Black Elk later wrote about their experiences in the Wild West and reflected a similar mixture of motives for their participation.⁴

Although show cast lists identified Indians from a number of Plains tribes, including Arapahos, Shoshones, and Cheyennes, the show Indians were almost exclusively Sioux. English, and later continental audiences were especially fascinated with the show Indians and the Wild West showcased them to

the full. The exhibition of American Natives in Europe had been a tradition since the time of Columbus, but the practice had grown over the course of the nineteenth century. Cody and Salsbury employed the Indians as dramatic foils in one context and as ethnological subjects in another. Audiences were invited to tour the encampment to see how Natives lived; the Wild West program included a scene titled “Phases of Indian Life” in which a “nomadic tribe” recreated a prairie camp and performed Indian dances. Both the ethnography of village life and the melodrama of battle scenes displayed the Indians at their most exotic and spoke to the imperialist impulse, with all its contradictions, among British audiences.

The Wild West in England concludes with a letter of endorsement from Gen. William T. Sherman. A deeply nostalgic Sherman testifies of the authenticity of the Wild West exhibition and catalogs the profound changes that have marked the frontier settlement it portrays, including the replacement of millions of buffalo with cattle and the thousands of Indians with white settlers. While acknowledging the terrible cost of westward expansion, Sherman ultimately calls these changes “salutary” signs that the “laws of nature and civilization” had triumphed, allowing the “earth to blossom as a rose.”⁵ Sherman’s coda reiterates the contradictions that riddle Cody’s narrative—in writing and on showground—regarding the status of the Plains Indians. For biographer Louis Warren, Cody’s relationship to Native Americans is the most problematic aspect of his legacy: “The real question thus becomes less how Cody derived his sympathies for Indians than how he fashioned a persona of Buffalo Bill that could denounce Indian conquest at one moment and become its most visible advocate in the next. Of all Cody’s characteristics, it is this profound ambivalence about

American Indians that seems most impenetrable.”⁶ Although their place within the Wild West’s drama conveyed a variety of meanings to the British press and public, the Indians were indispensable evidence of the Wild West’s, and therefore Cody’s, authenticity and ultimately its success.

Manifest destiny served as the governing narrative concept that underscored every piece of Wild West spectacle and turned an otherwise loose array of entertainments (much like a circus) into an exhibition of frontier culture that dramatized and justified Anglophone settlement of the American West. The explicitness of this narrative varied with different iterations of the show but found its most coherent expression in the winter season in Madison Square Garden just prior to the 1887 English tour. This revised version of the Wild West, titled *The Drama of Civilization*, offered a linear history of American settlement beginning with the colonies and continuing through to settlement of the far West. At the same time, the Wild West evoked nostalgia for a way of life that was swiftly passing. A mere four years after the English tour, the U.S. Census declared an official end to the American frontier. Cody’s exhibition had shrewdly capitalized on a romanticized notion of the West that was nearly extinct. In the three years leading up to the English tour the Wild West polished its presentation and honed the management of its massive logistics. Now billed in promotional materials as “America’s National Entertainment,” Cody and Salsbury only needed the right circumstances to realize their original vision.

American Exhibitionism

In 1885, English entrepreneur John Whitley conceived of the idea of an exhibition to be staged in the Earls Court district of

central London. Officially titled “American Exhibition of Arts, Inventions, Manufactures, & Resources of the United States,” the project assembled the best of American achievement in manufacturing, technology, science, and the arts on the model of the world’s fairs that had become regular events since the extraordinary success of London’s 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition. However, Whitley altered the standard format, as a description from an official program suggests: “This exhibition will not be an international one,” the program claims, “but a new departure . . . being national in character and yet held beyond the limits of the national territory.” Whereas most world’s fairs offered limited exhibition space for each country, this exhibition devoted its entire focus to one country: the United States. (Whitley later organized similar programs for Italy, France, and Germany.) Originally planned for the summer of 1886, a series of mishaps and delays put the entire privately funded enterprise in jeopardy until Whitley was inspired to invite William Cody and Nate Salsbury to join in on the venture in return for a percentage of the gate receipts. For their part, Cody and Salsbury had already had some experience with a world’s fair the previous year in New Orleans at the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition. Although the run in New Orleans proved to be a financial failure, the investment, infrastructure, and marketing of the American Exhibition promised to mitigate many of the risks associated with a transatlantic undertaking.

In addition to the financial opportunity, Cody hints at a larger issue involving the development of the Wild West’s brand. In *The Wild West in England* he claims that he had been repeatedly urged by “prominent persons of America” to take the show abroad. At least one prominent person was none other than

Mark Twain, who had written *Cody* three years earlier after attending a performance. Twain lavishes praise on the performance's realism (no small thing coming from one of the founders of American literary realism, who got his start documenting life in the far West), then makes the following claim: "It is often said on the other side of the water that none of the exhibitions which we send to England are purely and distinctively American. If you will take the Wild West show over there, you can remove that reproach." Twain's words reflect a century-long American quest to earn legitimacy in the eyes of the British. Nineteenth-century American cultural history is defined in large part by that effort, and a long list of prominent writers on the subject, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, and Henry James, had devoted many pages to the benefits and burdens of America's British cultural inheritance. Twain suggests that American culture-makers labored under the reproach that their work was somehow derivative, and that America's history was too brief, its culture too thin to produce something truly authentic. As Whitman asked of his own country in 1856, "Where are any mental expressions from you beyond what you have copied or stolen?" Whitman countered his own question with a catalog—a rhetorical exhibition, if you will—of American technological and commercial development. His thesis suggests that progress in the arts depends on an infrastructure of publishers, presses, and booksellers to hold its own. He put his faith in "steam power" to erect that infrastructure and finally realize the dream of American cultural independence. In a very literal sense Twain and *Cody* positioned Buffalo Bill's Wild West as the legatee of earlier nationalist ambitions such as Whitman's.

But what was it about actually going abroad that was so necessary to establishing one's *Americanness*? Twain's own career was marked by both literal and imaginative travel to Europe, paradoxically establishing him as one of the most American-identified and most cosmopolitan men of his generation. In this sense he offered himself as a type to which Cody would also aspire. Both men's careers offer insight into the state of American national identity in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Twain's appeal to Cody suggests that England is the only setting in which a valid statement of American authenticity can be made. Cody's subsequent performances—in the arena and on the page—draw an inevitable link between America's western (provincial) frontier and the world of cosmopolitan London.

The American Exhibition (nicknamed in the London press “The Yankeeries”) opened to the general public on May 9, 1887. According to newspaper estimates, approximately twenty-eight thousand people came to the exhibition on the first day. The main attractions in the American Exhibition included a switch-back railway, an early form of roller coaster that carried twenty people in a car on a steeply graded track, as well as a New England toboggan slide and a diorama of New York City viewed from the harbor and featuring the Statue of Liberty. The actual exhibits were less compelling and garnered little notice in the press. From the exhibition grounds patrons could make their way through a causeway to the Wild West encampment and showground laid out on seven acres east of the main Exhibition Hall. Although initial reviews for the exhibition were unenthusiastic in contrast to the generally ecstatic response to the Wild West, a postmortem in the *Times*, published the day after the closing on November 1, portrayed a symbiotic relationship between the exhibition and Cody's show: “The two things, the

Exhibition and the Wild West Show, have supplemented each other. Those who went to be amused often stayed to be instructed. It must be acknowledged that the Show was the attraction which made the fortune of the Exhibition.” During the Wild West’s six-month London run it routinely played to over twenty thousand visitors (the arena included twenty thousand seats with standing room for ten thousand more) with fourteen performances a week. It was the subject of nonstop coverage in the London press and it welcomed the country’s political and cultural elites. Among the more distinguished visitors hosted by Cody were William Gladstone, the once and future British prime minister; Edward, Prince of Wales; and Queen Victoria herself on the eve of her golden jubilee. The Wild West’s public relations team expertly incorporated this patronage into its marketing efforts by producing press stories and promotional materials touting “distinguished visitors” with portraits of the queen and company surrounding the central figure of Cody himself (see appendix 3). Indeed, *The Wild West in England* can be viewed as a prose version of these mass-marketed images, exploring every aspect of Cody’s success—financial, cultural, even political. From the moment he disembarked, Cody found himself in high demand in London’s cultural salons. Invitations poured in from the likes of Henry Irving, London’s most celebrated actor, and Oscar and Constance Wilde. Wherever Cody went his outsized persona went with him and his movements within London society became fodder for the press. Whether inside or outside of the arena, Cody and his fellow performers were always on display since the encampment was open to the public and the show’s publicity wing made a point of encouraging the headline performers, such as Annie Oakley and Chief Red Shirt, to attend public events where they could garner further media attention.

When the London show came to a close, Cody and Salsbury were able to look back on the most successful season in the four-year history of the Wild West. Approximately two million visitors had paid at least a shilling each to witness the spectacle.⁷ Although this financial achievement would be the primary yardstick of success, Cody and company eventually looked to other aspects of the London tour in shaping the Wild West brand for years to come.

From William Cody to Buffalo Bill

When the London season concluded in October, the Wild West traveled north, attempting to replicate the London success with a brief stay in Birmingham at a much smaller venue followed by a five-month winter/spring season in Manchester held in an indoor arena. Cody cites a press account for the detailed description of the Manchester performance, which shows that the Wild West continued to evolve in response to new settings. The Manchester show was more akin to *The Drama of Civilization* performed in Madison Square Garden the previous winter, with its comparatively sophisticated staging. Although attendance was less consistent outside the social and economic hub of London, the northern tour's mixed results did not curtail the air of triumph, which the show carried into New York harbor in May 1888, as it began preparations for a summer season on Staten Island. Later that year the second edition of Cody's autobiography appeared as part of an effort to capture the meaning of the Wild West's international success for American and British audiences. It was included in a collection with biographies of three other people—Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Kit Carson—who together comprised “the renowned pioneer quartette.” Entitled *Story of the Wild West and*

STORY of the
WILD WEST
AND
CAMP-FIRE CHATS,
BY
BUFFALO BILL,
(HON. W. F. CODY.)

Campfire Chats, the volume listed “Buffalo Bill” as the sole author of all four works. But “Buffalo Bill” had served as Cody’s nom de plume prior to 1888, primarily as the putative author of dime novels—dime novels that had been ghostwritten. On one hand, then, using Buffalo Bill as an author name was already an established way of conveying a brand rather than attributing authorship. On the other, when this work is placed alongside the first edition of the autobiography—which credits William Cody—the name Buffalo Bill signals a shift and suggests how Cody’s celebrity had evolved. The title of the 1888 edition, *The Autobiography of Buffalo Bill* (in contrast to *The Life of Hon. William F. Cody* in 1879), formally marks the transition and reinforces the idea that the persona had succeeded the person, and the representation the original, in the intervening decade.

In this context, what exactly does authorship mean, when material blurs the conventional boundaries between historical personage (William F. Cody) and celebrity persona (Buffalo Bill)? Since the name Buffalo Bill carried its own kind of authority by this point in Cody's career, the text (*Story of the Wild West*) becomes analogous to the show (*Buffalo Bill's Wild West*). Both *productions* are authorized by the figure of Buffalo Bill, whether exclusively authored by him or not. Cody's life is the source material and expanding his mythic persona is the common objective. In a variation on contemporary publishing terminology, *The Wild West in England* might best be described as an *authorized autobiography*. This formula reframes the question of ultimate authorship by recasting it as just one part of a process of mythmaking.

As if anticipating incredulity from both readers and reviewers, the preface to *Story of the Wild West*, signed by Cody, describes the "study, investigation, and care" he has "devoted to this work." (See appendix 1 for complete text.) After acknowledging his "poor literary qualification," he points to other obstacles for the "sincere" biographer in undertaking such a project. Chief among them is the fact that previous biographies of Boone, Crockett, and Carson have each "made quite as much use of fiction as of actual, verified incident in making up their history of these three prominent characters." He complains that the "idle stories thus incorporated in their work being left so long uncontradicted have become an almost inseparable part of frontier history." While written in a straightforward tone, this statement verges on self-parody and reveals the very process on display in Cody's own autobiography and Wild West show: a process by which "idle stories" become history. Cody inserts himself into this tradition of frontier historiography as

arbiter of the facts and offers a counter to the “wild exaggeration . . . of many romancers.” As the primary romancer of his own life, Cody explicitly aligns Buffalo Bill with his forbears, both in their renown as legends and as real historical nation-building figures.

In general outline, *Story of the Wild West* seems to suggest a standard historical narrative that was popularized just a few years later by historian Frederick Jackson Turner. The story line progresses forward in time and further west in space through each successive legendary figure. Turner promoted the American frontier as a unique site of cultural regeneration, a “meeting point between savagery and civilization” that placed settlers in “continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society” and, thereby, furnished the “forces dominating American character.”⁸ His thesis challenged conventional history, which emphasized European influence on the development of North America. For Turner the continuously moving boundary of westward settlement represented the “line of most rapid and effective Americanization.”⁹ This framework employed the frontier as the foundation of a relentlessly exceptionalist historiography: “The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.”¹⁰ Turner successfully institutionalized a historical narrative that described and enacted America’s long-sought-after cultural independence. Although the title page of *Story of the Wild West* gestures to Turner’s brand of frontier boosterism, it also offers itself as evidence to “a wondering world [of] the march of the Anglo-Saxon race towards the attainment of perfect citizenship and liberal, free and stable government.” Cody’s version of American history incorporates an Anglo-Saxon legacy with its emphasis on an essential relationship among English-speaking peoples. He emphasizes

continuity over difference tying American and European histories together by redirecting the grand narrative of American expansion in its final stage as he heads *east* to England. In Turner's historical vision the further west from the Atlantic seaboard you get, the more American you become. In Cody's ironic inversion, American national identity finds its fullest realization in the expatriate experience. In framing the narrative, Cody addresses Twain's premise: he has staged a singularly American drama in the one place it would matter most, in the *only* place it could legitimately function as a symbol of national exceptionalism. Behind the words in his letter to Cody, Twain probably appreciated the contradictions inherent in finding Americanness in London. But the *Wild West in England* does not reflect a similar consciousness. Cody's closing redirection—from west to east—presents itself as another stage of American cultural conquest and receives its final validation from the crowned heads of Europe: the fountainhead of westward expansionism.

Upon his return to the United States in the spring of 1888, Cody found that his star had risen. Even as he and Salsbury launched another successful season in New York, the *Los Angeles Times* observed that "he is now more talked about in the United States than ever before." His European triumphs granted Cody a new authority with which he could successfully stage his own legend-making. In 1888 Cody joined himself to Boone, Crockett, and Carson as part of the story of the West, and this is what *Story of the Wild West and Campfire Chats* sought to formalize. It is an account of how the idea of the frontier was packaged, sold, and centralized within a broader account of American character. The *Wild West in England* literally concludes *Story of the Wild West* and provides a fitting end for this sweeping account of frontier heroism. It transports the performance of American nationalism to an international stage.

The Frontier Goes Global

Much of the *Wild West in England* is a travel narrative that begins with the Wild West's New York departure on March 31, 1887, and concludes with its return on May 20, 1888. The plot highlights a series of cultural encounters, each charged with a broader significance and each affirming Cody's aspiration that the English tour be "an event of first-class international importance."¹¹ An early example takes place as Cody's ship nears London in the section titled "Some anxious reflections," which recounts Cody's crisis of self-doubt motivated by his encounter with London as a global commercial hub. As his eyes take in the scene he is overwhelmed by the "crowded waterway with its myriads of crafts of every description, from the quaint channel fishing-boat to the mammoth East India trader and ocean steamers, topped by the flags of all nations, and hailing from every accessible part of the known world, carrying the productions of every clime and laden with every commodity."¹² As Cody experiences globalization first-hand; he tries to imagine a place for his own venture within this new commercial context: "The freight I had brought with me across the broad Atlantic was such a strange and curious one that I naturally wondered whether, after all the trouble, time and expense it had cost me, this pioneer cargo of Nebraska goods would be marketable."¹³ Cody's so-called anxious moment helps to frame the narrative that follows: a commercial conquest that Cody sums up only a few pages later when he details the British response to what he calls "American methods of doing business."¹⁴ By this he means the Wild West's formidable logistics, which would soon become legendary.¹⁵ The British are reported to exclaim, "By St. George, the Yankees mean business" in reaction to the organization and scale of the Wild West encampment and

arena.¹⁶ The composite Englishman's exclamation is, in essence, the thesis of Cody's story. The Wild West's business success is the rhetorical foundation for all its other achievements, and dramatizing that success becomes the narrative's first priority.

We find a correspondence between commerce and culture in a later episode, wherein Cody uncovers new evidence of an ameliorating spirit between America and Britain: "A walk around the principle streets of London," Cody claims, will show how the Wild West has "'caught on' to the popular imagination. The windows of the London bookseller were full of editions of Fennimore [sic] Cooper's novels." He then lists the titles of Cooper's frontier series "The Leatherstocking Tales," describing them as "those delightful romances which have placed the name of the American novelist on the same level with that of Sir Walter Scott. It was a real revival of trade for the booksellers who sold thousands of volumes of Cooper where 20 years before they had sold them in dozens."¹⁷ Cody uses this evidence to conclude that the Wild West's visit to England has "set the population of the British islands reading, thinking, and talking about their American kinsman to an extent before unprecedented."¹⁸ While 'the sales figures Cody describes may be dubious, his invocation of Cooper is telling. The American novelist would later become the key foil in Mark Twain's attempts to define a new brand of American realism, one shorn of conventions associated with British historical romance. In stark contrast to his praising review of Cody's Wild West, Twain later criticized Cooper's lack of an "observer's protecting gift" that compromised his ability to faithfully represent the American frontier.¹⁹ Cooper's work, then, offers an ambiguous legacy for those who would follow in the tradition of frontier realism. On the one hand he can be seen as a forerunner of Cody (and Twain,

for that matter). In the 1820s and 1830s Cooper was among the first of America's transatlantic celebrities. His works imagined the American frontier for a generation of readers. He also left the United States to pursue his career in Europe. But, unlike Cody, he found his relationship to his native country had only become complicated by his time abroad. Cooper found himself and his political sympathies called into question by the American press and he would struggle throughout his career to be seen as an authentic American literary voice. Cody's claim that he is reviving interest in Cooper implies the restoration of a moribund frontier tradition. In celebrating the revival of Cooper's works, Cody is asserting a form of succession: he succeeds where Cooper has not. Cooper, like Walter Scott, was a writer of historical romances; Scott established the tradition and Cooper followed in his wake. Scott would always provide the frame of reference for Cooper because the American wrote in the period of perceived cultural dependence. Cody, also a promoter of historical romances, uses the episode to claim a specific kind of cultural influence. Cody had effectively exported American frontierism as a nationalist ideology where others had failed to do so. By invoking the Leatherstocking books, he identifies in Cooper a cultural genealogy that he purports to transcend.

Cody bolsters his ascendance to nationalist icon in the narrative's climactic scene: a command performance before Queen Victoria on May 11, just days after the exhibition had opened. Although they were forced into canceling a performance to accommodate Queen Victoria's schedule, Cody and Salsbury rightly saw the marketing bonanza afforded by a royal visit to the showground. The autobiography's depiction of the event extends that marketing effort and reveals the most direct insight into the larger objectives of the *Wild West in England*.

Characterizing the performance as one of “unique and unexampled character,” Cody raises the stakes by multiple orders of magnitude when he focuses on the opening processional and its ritual of national pageantry, including the presentation of the American flag. Calling it a “notable event” that sent “the blood rushing through every American’s veins at Niagara speed,” the text imagines a spontaneous expression of respect on the part of the British: “As the standard-bearer waved the proud emblem above his head, Her Majesty rose from her seat and bowed deeply and impressively towards the banner. The whole court party rose, the ladies bowed, the generals present saluted, and the English noblemen took off their hats. Then—we couldn’t help it—but there arose such a genuine heart-stirring American yell from our company as seemed to shake the sky. It was a great event.”²⁰ This moment of spontaneous nationalist feeling juxtaposes high and low social ranks to dramatize the triumph of egalitarian sentiment. It emphasizes the ritual aspect of the processional demonstrating the innate power of American iconography.

Cody goes on to place the event within a broader historical context by claiming, “For the first time in history, since the Declaration of Independence, a sovereign of Great Britain had saluted the star spangled banner, and that banner was carried by a member of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West! We felt that the hatchet was buried at last and the Wild West had been at the funeral.”²¹ The comparison is a rich one. In political terms, the Declaration of Independence is America’s most dramatic example of exceptionalism. Like *The Wild West in England* it invokes the British monarchy in order to advance a particular version of American identity. But here Cody transforms the Declaration’s oppositional logic by receiving the monarch’s blessing. Cody’s

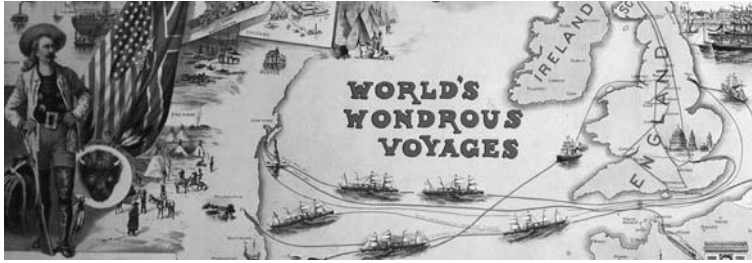
own “declaration” enacts a history-making feat of statesmanship but it does so on his terms. Cody’s text carefully emphasizes the convention-bound nature of the command performance, and he is quick to show how the Wild West transgresses those conventions: “As with Mahomet and the Mountain, the Wild West was altogether too colossal to take to Windsor, and so the queen came to the Wild West.”²² The image of a deferential monarch is the culminating moment in Cody’s “history.”

The British press reported the event quite differently, with a much less demonstrative Victoria simply acknowledging the respectful salute of the performers. And, for her part, the queen’s interest seemed to begin and end with the sheer spectacle: “All the different people,” she would write in her journal that evening, “wild, painted Red Indians from America, on their wild bare backed horses, of different tribes,—cow boys, Mexicans. &c., all came tearing round at full speed, shrieking, and screaming.”²³ Her account of Cody, whom she met personally after the performance, repeats the image projected in the show’s own marketing materials. The queen notes that he is “a splendid man, handsome, & gentlemanlike in manner” and is purported to have killed three thousand buffalo “with “many encounters & hand to hand fights with the Red Indians.”²⁴ But for the logic of Cody’s narrative, a deferential queen completes the story of the *Wild West in England* as the story of the significance of the frontier in American history. Cody would return to the United States armed with his claims of British conquest and confirmation of his (and Twain’s) vision of American cultural independence.

On its surface Cody’s account of the command performance seems to be the ultimate example of an “idle story” that shapes the details to advance a larger ideological narrative. At its most

brazen it evinces the promotional impulse behind all of Cody's work. However, in the months that followed, the press coverage on both sides of the Atlantic tended to reinforce Cody's claims of extra-commercial ambitions for the Wild West. A *Life* article from May 31, 1888, makes the following argument for the success of the Wild West's nationalist program: "The career of Buffalo William in England ought to teach our Anglo-maniacs a useful lesson. The Wild West Show has done more to stimulate Americanism among the republicans who travel abroad, and to inculcate respect for Americans, as Americans, among foreigners, than has ever been accomplished by our ministers at the European courts."²⁵ At the conclusion of the London season on November 1, 1887, the *Times* of London would actually credit the Wild West with taking the initiative to install an international court of arbitration between the United States and Britain: "At first sight it might seem to be a far cry from the Wild West to an International Court. Yet the connexion is not really very remote. Exhibitions of American products and of a few scenes from the wilder phases of American life certainly tend to some degree at least to bring America near to England. They are partly cause and partly effect. They are the effect of increased and increasing intercourse between the two countries."

Affairs of state notwithstanding, one *effect* of this and similar assessments was the enhancement of an increasingly potent Buffalo Bill mythology. In addition to expanding the arena in which these events played out, the narrative positions Cody in the public eye as both agent and object. Cody embodies ideals of entrepreneurship and masculinity as he confronts a series of challenges with a determination to "pull through," as the text repeatedly puts it. These challenges place Cody as the



protagonist in a story of epic “conquest” while heightening its scale with each new test. In addition, the narrative represents Cody’s achievements through a double lens: his own first-person account and the view from the press box. Cody repeatedly invokes (and, at times, cites at length) newspaper reports of his performance. *The Wild West in England* exhibits Cody as a media celebrity; his selective references to the *London Illustrated News*, the *Sporting Life*, and *Punch*, among others validate his own triumphalism. Ultimately, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* could return to the United States as something more than entertainment.

As one of its most widely used and iconic show posters suggests, the mere fact of international travel—the mileage count, the routes taken, the sites visited—would become central to the Wild West’s claim as America’s National Entertainment. Two more extended European tours were still to come, and the show’s self-ordained mission of cultural ambassadorship, anchored in a command performance before the queen, was a primary feature of the Wild West brand for the remainder of Cody’s celebrated career.