

A View from Overseas: The Wild West of Scotland

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Tucked amidst the iconic red and beige sandstone tenements of Glasgow's East End is a bronze statue of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, stoic and braced atop his bucking horse. The piece sits in a private courtyard and, walking north on Whitehill Street, you can see it peeking over the manicured hedgerows bordering two sides of the property.¹ When I moved to Scotland, I did not expect to be reminded of the American settler West on Saturday morning trips to the coffee shop. Asking around about the statue, I invariably received either a vague reference to the West of Scotland's long romance with American country and western culture, or a shrug that said, "The city's full of peculiar stuff—why do I need to explain this?"

Glasgow is littered with monuments to empire. They dot the city's public parks and squares, immobile and constant reminders of how overseas power shaped Britain's "second city of empire." A 144-foot obelisk to Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson, naval hero and vociferous defender of the transatlantic trade in enslaved peoples, towers above visitors on the Glasgow Green. In the city center, a grander equestrian statue of the Duke of Wellington, whose storied career included a long stint in the Raj, sits becaped with an orange and white traffic cone—a now long-standing tradition that fuses Glaswegian humour and the West of Scotland's casual contempt for the pieties of British nationalist mythology.

Traveling west, General Lord Frederick Roberts, famed for his leading role in British colonial wars in Asia and Africa, gazes across Kelvingrove Park upon the University of Glasgow. The university itself is something of a monument to empire, too; it is the beneficiary of gifts and bequests from imperial powerbrokers whose fortunes derived from the slave trade. Back at the Green, the five-tier Doulton Fountain is worthy of its own dedicated study. Built for the 1888 International Exhibition, it features terracotta figures representing Canada, South Africa, Australia, and India—a celebration of the empire's global reach.

Next to these grand tributes, Buffalo Bill in Dennistoun feels quaint: a discreet and anachronistic statue on a quiet residential street, well removed from the city's major public thoroughfares. More unusual yet is its provenance. The statue was not erected during the showman's lifetime (1846–1917) or even shortly thereafter, but in 2006, by a property developer called Regency Homes. A near facsimile of Frederic Remington's iconic 1906 work "The Outlaw," it was unveiled by a member of Scottish Parliament to mark the 115th anniversary of the opening of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in Glasgow, which ran for over three months on nearby Duke Street in a massive purpose-built amphitheatre.²

Scottish links to the American interior predate Cody's visits here by well over a century. Scots migrated to North America in increasingly significant numbers between 1700 and 1900 and played vital roles in shaping settler-indigenous contact zones, first on pre-1776 trading frontiers and later, as Euro-American settler rule hardened, as ranchers, land speculators, and industrialists.³ Metropolitan elites on both

sides of the Atlantic romanticized the peoples and spaces of the Scottish Highlands and the American West, folding them into reductionist frameworks that sentimentalized tribal lifeways, commodified the ecologies of the colonial remote, and alternately celebrated and lamented the arrival of historical "progress" in the hinterlands.

These fantasies found traction among the urban masses in the works of popular artists and authors like George Catlin and James Fenimore Cooper.⁴ The comparative blurring of heterogeneous societies in Scotland and the growing United States obscured tangible material and structural interdependencies between the British North and the American West. "America's borders attracted displaced peoples from the north of Britain," historian Colin Calloway writes, "while resources extracted from American lands fueled developments in Scotland and England."⁵

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, amidst ebbing warfare in the Trans-Mississippi West and Turnerian laments about the "closing" frontier, interest in readily digestible—if not factually or ethically reliable—cultural representations of the settler story grew in the transatlantic public commons. Cody's show, Buffalo Bill's Wild West, capitalized on this demand, crisscrossing the United States and touring Europe eight times between 1887 and 1906. His retinue ultimately performed before millions in cities like London, Rome, Paris, and Antwerp.

This massive moving community and its extensive logistical requirements had only become possible through the rapidly expanding "transportation and communication facilities" of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.⁶ By 1891, it was a finely tuned operation with hundreds of people and animals acting in service of a set of didactic vignettes that purported to tell the "The Drama of Civilization"—or, in other words, the settler conquest of the continental interior.⁷

Cody tapped into an already emergent "European fantasy of the American West" and amplified it by giving audiences more of what they wanted: encounters with the exoticized "wildness" of frontier life. In doing so, *The Drama of Civilization* spoke to metropolitan audiences in Britain, Germany, France, and the Netherlands already primed to understand the domestication of non-European peoples and spaces through the prism of the high imperial civilizing mission.⁸

Buffalo Bill's Wild West would have been among the most lavish spectacles Glaswegians had even seen. Local architects hired by the touring company overhauled the long, narrow buildings of the previous year's East End Industrial Exhibition, bringing them under one massive roof. The result was a seven-thousand-seat amphitheatre that featured a range of modern amenities, including gas lighting, spotlights, ventilation fans, and a raised stage with a shifting set of massive panoramic paintings depicting frontier nature.⁹ Glasgow audiences attending *The Drama of Civilization* were provided a supposedly "authentic" chronological telling of the history of the American West that, in the eyes of designer Steele MacKaye, revealed how intrepid (white) pioneers faced down myriad human

and environmental challenges. The production's six acts jumped across centuries, from an imagined indigenous "pre-history" to an "immigrant train" crossing the plains; from the idyll of the pioneer ranch to the Battle of Little Bighorn. In between the mounted battles and pyrotechnics were segments featuring trick shooting and "cowboy" music.¹⁰

Unlike later tours in Europe, the show's 1891 cast included Lakota prisoners of war, most prominent of whom were the Miniconjou band chief Kicking Horse and Short Bull, a Brulé member of the Ghost Dance religious movement. The movement had, in the final weeks of December 1890, provided a pretext for the U.S. Army to enact a crackdown on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota that culminated in the 7th Cavalry massacring between 150 and 300 Lakota and afterwards dumping their bodies into mass graves.¹¹ Ever the opportunist, Cody coordinated with authorities at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, to offer a deal to their wards: take the ship to Europe as a remunerated cast member in Cody's production or face "indefinite imprisonment."¹²

Many chose the former, and thus found themselves in the strange role of enacting fictional versions of the colonial violence they themselves had experienced. The tragic dimensions of this were largely lost on members of the Glasgow press, who spent their time chasing local anecdotes about the Lakota. As Tom Cunningham relates in his meticulous reconstruction of Cody's visits, stories appeared in newspapers of tipi encampments and Lakota men so smitten with Glasgow that they decided to remain here permanently.¹³

In repackaging the "Old West" as an epic of struggle and heroism, shows like Buffalo Bill's Wild West helped create a set of fables about American history—and the idea of progress—with seemingly endless commercial viability. A second wildly successful tour of Scotland in 1904 included nearly thirty stops and heralded the beginnings of a fascination with "country and western" culture that lingers today. In 1974, Glasgow's own Grand Ole Opry opened its doors in the city's South Side and, over the decades, played host to gunslinger competitions, line-dancing nights, and live country music acts. The largest venue of its kind in the UK, it served cheap drinks to patrons bedecked in jeans and buckskin jackets.¹⁴

Numerous Scottish novelists have mined this phenomenon in their works, including Booker Prize winners James Kelman and Douglas Stuart. Sammy, the blind protagonist in Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late*, waxes poetic on the lyricism of country music singer George Jones, while Stuart's Shuggie Bain describes a night out at the Opry. "Glasgow was the original Wild West, ye know," one character opines.¹⁵ In 1990, the BBC miniseries *Your Cheatin' Heart* chronicled the misadventures of a group of criminally inclined Glaswegian ne'er-do-wells enmeshed in the city's country music scene.

Walking around Glasgow, you can see remnants of country and western fever in old shops selling cowboy boots and Stetson hats. In Europe, only Germany eclipses Glasgow in its fidelity to the western myths of the late nineteenth century. Each year thousands descend upon the town of Bad Segeberg in Schleswig-Holstein to celebrate the works of Karl May, an adventure novelist whose outlandish tales of the American frontier shaped European perceptions of the indigenous-settler encounter during the same era Cody was touring the Continent.¹⁶

The Buffalo Bill statue in Dennistoun has escaped scrutiny in Britain's current memory wars, which center on

the public legacies of the British empire: statues to enslavers; museum collections pilfered from colonized Asian and African states; buildings named for empire builders; universities, including the one I work for, funded through systemized immiseration; and publics wrestling with how empire's long shadow inflects contemporary inequalities.¹⁷

Even in the United States, where protests following the 2020 police murder of George Floyd produced new dialogues on the urgent past, media attention remains primarily tuned to the legacies of racial slavery. The vestiges of the settler empire, which has played a central role in U.S. naming rituals and iconography, have been given less airtime in these debates, despite the work of indigenous activists who point to the ritualized celebration of settler "heroes" and derogatory depictions of Native Americans found everywhere from professional sports team jerseys to the art of the U.S. Capitol.¹⁸ For all their universalism, the 2020 protests primarily operated through national registers,

with each empire state (former or current) grappling with aspects of its own unresolved histories.

The statue, then, presents an interesting example of how other empires are remembered in Scotland. Despite the real connections between Bill Cody and his Lakota performers and frontier violence, by the final decade of the nineteenth century the public image of the American West was being rendered inert by escalating commercialization. Alongside

other touring shows, Buffalo Bill's Wild West helped fashion Western history into a set of reductionist character archetypes and narrative tropes that would be processed and refined in a thousand novels, films, and songs.

Scotland's complex diasporic connections to the settler West proved less resilient than this readily apprehensible version of the past, an "inspired by true events" title card that permitted the foregrounding of entertainment and aesthetics. It anticipated the many ways that the United States' twentieth-century consumer empire obscured itself, exporting goods, services, and ideas that increasingly trumpeted their adaptive localizations rather than their American roots.¹⁹ In this sense, the Buffalo Bill statue became an unusual avatar for a particular sort of local history—a story about a vanished moment from Glasgow's industrial past, when its foundries could rapidly produce the steel girders necessary to build the amphitheatre that housed the Cody spectacle; and about how a consumable American West held lasting appeal for working-class Glaswegians, who laminated its stories of triumph, tragedy, and grit onto their own.

My present office is on the top floor of an old Victorian rowhouse, a former private residence gifted to the university by a shipping magnate in the 1920s and eventually transformed into a research and teaching space. On the walls of its broad stairwells are faded decorations from a previous generation of historians. Most are quaint: a mounted reprint of a newspaper announcing the outbreak of hostilities in 1939; a map of Europe in the era of the First World War with a cartoonish Kaiser Wilhelm II angrily menacing the Continent; board prints for Ken Burns' documentaries from the 1990s. The piece that I found most peculiar when I arrived in 2019, however, was a framed promotional poster for a Wild West show from over a century ago. "What the hell is that doing in Glasgow?" I thought.

Notes:

1. "Buffalo Bill Statue," *Atlas Obscura*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/statue-of-buffalo-bill>.

2. "Statue to the Wild West Showman Cody," *BBC News*, November 17, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/glasgow_and_west/6157590.stm.
3. Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Scots in the North American West, 1790–1917* (Norman, OK, 2000), 21–150.
4. Janne Lahti, *The American West and the World: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives* (New York, 2019), 168–9.
5. Colin G. Calloway, *White People, Indians, and Highlanders: Tribal People and Colonial Encounters in Scotland and America* (Oxford, UK, 2008), 11.
6. Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869–1922* (Chicago, 2012), 4.
7. Tom F. Cunningham, "Your Fathers the Ghosts": *Buffalo Bill's Wild West in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2007), 1–3.
8. Rydell and Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, 111–14.
9. Cunningham, "Your Fathers the Ghosts," 40–44.
10. J.A. Sokalski, *Pictorial Illusionism: The Theatre of Steele MacKaye* (Montreal, 2007), 147–63.
11. David W. Grua, *Surviving Wounded Knee: The Lakotas and the Politics of Memory* (Oxford, UK, 2016), 11–29.
12. Cunningham, "Your Fathers the Ghosts," 14.
13. *Ibid.*, 71–79.
14. Mary Palmer, "Grand Ole Opry Gives You a Darn Good Friday Night," *Glasgow Live*, June 9, 2016, <https://www.glasgowlive.co.uk/whats-on/music-nightlife-news/grand-ole-opry-gives-you-11447891>.
15. Douglas Stuart, *Shuggie Bain* (London, 2020), 20.
16. A. Dana Weber, *Blood Brothers and Peace Pipes: Performing the Wild West in German Festivals* (Madison, WI, 2019), 52.
17. Memory Wars in the UK.
18. Erin L. Thompson, "The U.S. Capitol is Filled with Racist Depictions of Native Americans. It's Time for Them to Go," *Time*, February 8, 2022, <https://time.com/6143574/us-capitol-native-americans-racist-paintings-sculptures/>.
19. Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through 20th Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 1–14.

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