A View from Overseas: The Wild West of Scotland

Oli Charbonneau

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. 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 becapped with an orange and white traffic cone—a now longstanding 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 (1846–1917) or even shortly thereafter, but in 2006, by a property developer called Regency Homes. A near facsimile.

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and environmental challenges. The production’s six acts jumped across centuries, from an imagined indigenous “prehistory” 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. 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

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13. Ibid., 71–79.
17. Memory Wars in the UK.

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