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Buffalo Bill and his Wild West

William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody never called his western extravaganza a "Wild West Show." It was simply the Wild West, and if a writer so chooses to add "show," it must be of the lower case variety. Read more about the Great Showman's enterprise from scholars who have studied him for years.

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One of the highest compliments paid to William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody in the American and European press was the designation "Representative Man. He represented the cross-section of qualities that identified the ideal American. He was self-made, well-spoken, ambitious but open-handed, sincere and democratic—he was, as Annie Oakley put it, "as comfortable with cowboys as with kings." On top of it all, as a Medal of Honor winner, a famed guide, and a genuine frontiersman, he was authentic.

—Paul Fees, noted Buffalo Bill historian

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In their nightly attempts to represent the quintessential western lifestyle, Cody and company not only redefined the status of the westerner, but went on to make the cowboy a type who represented America as a whole in both the American and European imaginations...Stimulated by contact with an international community in Europe during the early foreign tours, Nate Salsbury expanded the central focus of the Wild West to include the "Congress of Rough Riders of the World." After the Chicago World's Fair, American and European audiences would be presented with an image of the American cowboy as the central figure in a global pageant that had horsemanship as its core premise.

The poster campaign that Cody's publicists mounted in the eastern United States and in Europe, reveals a clear sense of commitment to presenting the "genuine" realities of "westerling." During the first European tours, their proclaimed intention to transfer an accurate, unromantic depiction of western life "from prairie to palace," from the United States to Europe, resulted in their dominant emphasis on the national significance of the pageant they were presenting...

The Wild West's managers possessed an intuitive sense of changing audience interests, and they were continuously modifying the program to keep it responsive to the immediate moment. [Wild West show principals] Cody, Salsbury, John Burke, and, later, James Bailey of circus fame, could easily have frozen the history of the American West into a static tableau and appealed to nostalgic impulses in the late nineteenth century audience.

—Richard B. Wilson, PhD, professor at Northwest College, Powell, Wyoming

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When William F. Cody took his Wild West show to Europe four times between the years 1887 and 1905, he could not have asked for a more responsive audience, ready to accept his simplified and romanticized version of the settling of the West and eager to have their own preconceived notions of the prairie americaine visually and tangibly confirmed. By all accounts this was an audience who looked to fictionalized versions of American frontier life not only as sources of adventure and romance but as examples of a free, open-ended way of life not possible within the clearly defined boundaries of European society.

The logistical enormity of the undertaking that involved moving a veritable city across the ocean was not lost on the overseas audiences either. In fact, the vast scope of the endeavor and the military precision with which it was carried out influenced the European perception of America as much as the content of the Wild West show...

Like a number of other well-known Americans, Cody cast a far different shadow in America than he did in Europe where his audiences were less critical of the total image he was projecting. In the United States, he is often placed in the same category as showman P.T. Barnum, and, over the years, his detractors have often outnumbered his admirers. In fact, Cody was a consummate capitalist, but only one of many who were vying to capture the minds and dollars of eastern Americans at the end of the nineteenth century.

In Europe, there was little residual ambivalence to this American export. Archives today contain only remnants of the extensive coverage that he received in the European press, coverage that is dominated by a reverent and affectionate tone. These clippings corroborate reports published by Cody and his entourage which depict the Wild West's reception abroad in superlative terms. The French, it seemed, loved it all, right down to the clothes worn by the performers, while in London, a critic labeled the performance a howling success.

—*Harriet Bloom-Wilson, professor, Northwest College, Powell, Wyoming.*

Read more at <http://www.bbhc.org/explore/buffalo-bill/research/>.



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