
Steve Friesen, with François Chladiuk, *Lakota Performers in Europe: Their Culture and the Artefacts They Left Behind*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. 304 pp. ISBN 9780806156965.

<http://www.oupres.com/ECommerce/Book/Detail/2199/lakota%20performers%20in%20europe>

Buffalo Bill, his name and his legend, live on until the present day. He keeps re-appearing across a wide range of media in the United States as well as in Europe, in history books, in film (notably Robert Altman's *Buffalo Bill and the Indians: Or Sitting Bull's History Lesson*), in novels (like French novelist Eric Vuillard's *Tristesse de la Terre: Une histoire de Buffalo Bill Cody*). In the manner of so many stars of the international stage, he seems unable to take leave from the adulation of audiences who flocked to see his show in their millions in its heyday, roughly from the 1880s to the 1910s. Not even the trifling detail of his death prevented him from entering a long and successful afterlife. During his life as a showman he had set the parameters for the translation of the history of the American West into myth, turning recent history into the quintessential American narrative of "how the West was won," and how the Americans found their national destiny. Through the re-enactment of heroic high points in this narrative the message of "manifest destiny" and of the Indians as a vanishing race, where Anglo-Saxon whites kept winning and Indians kept losing battles, was hammered home to audiences that themselves were caught in the process of becoming Americans.

Not only that: Buffalo Bill's Wild West went on tour internationally, to England first, in 1887 on the occasion of the golden jubilee of Queen Victoria's rule, to other European countries in following decades. Rival shows, such as Pawnee Bill's Great Wild West, were cut of the same cloth and vied for the same audiences. They all combined to disseminate the story of the American West as spectacle and entertainment. Nor were they the only carriers of this information. Countries like Germany and France had a long infatuation with the romance of the American West and the American Indian. In France we can trace this back to the popularity of what is arguably the first "Western" in literature, Chateaubriand's *Atala*, or to later French fiction by Gustave Aimard. In Germany a similar long-standing sentimental involvement with the American Indian spurred initially by translations of James Fennimore Cooper's frontier tales, was being fed by Karl May's stories of white-Indian male bonding in the pristine open spaces of the American West. In addition, local entrepreneurs blended the appeal of the untamed "wild", whether animals or human beings, in what became known as "human zoos." People from the far reaches of the world, explored in the frantic competition for colonial expansion, were put on display in European countries and the U.S. for local publics to gaze at in a blend of anthropological and prurient interests. They could hail from the Pacific, from Africa, but American Indians were a prominent presence.

Thus, in these varied ways, European publics were exposed to forms of mass entertainment as these had recently been shaped, particularly in the United States. At the same time, they may have taken in the many implied readings of contemporary civilization. The rank order of human cultures as projected through these pageants and spectacles was from primitive and un-civilized to high, with white civilization at its pinnacle. It was a view that confirmed white audiences, on both sides of the Atlantic, in their sense of global mission, what the French called their *mission civilisatrice*. This particular blend of entertainment and indoctrination led

American author Mark Twain, centrally involved in the production of an American cultural vernacular, to re-assure Buffalo Bill, on the eve of his first European tour, that he would be offering Europeans a sample of something truly and authentically American, not – as had been the case all too often before – something at best derivative of European culture. The role the Indians were given to play in the Wild West show formed part of the larger message of American pre-eminence in the world order of civilizations. Most of them were Lakota and kept performing in the Wild West show even after images of the massacre at Wounded Knee, in particular of Lakota chief Spotted Elk’s frozen body left out in the open following the carnage, had reached a larger public.

One is left wondering how a man like Mark Twain, a powerful voice in the international protest against Belgian King Leopold’s reign of terror in his Congo colony, could at the same time ignore domestic atrocity visited upon native American Indians. Clearly a matter of selective observation and indignation. Yet there they were, Lakota performers in traveling Wild West shows. Why did they get themselves involved? This is the central question that the book under review tries to answer.

Toward the end of the 19th century American Indians had a limited number of options: a miserable life on reservations, forced Americanization imposed on Indian children at Indian Schools, or the chance to earn money and keep their own culture alive through its continuing re-enactment before eager publics. This may have made sense for those involved, although only limited numbers could avail themselves of this option.

Much of the story that the book under review tells has been told before. There is no original research for this book to report. In fact, although published by a university press, this is not an academic, or scholarly, book. It is a coffee table book, gorgeously produced. It is a fan’s product in two ways. It lovingly orders and reproduces in beautiful color a collection of cultural artefacts that go back to what Lakota performers had left behind or had sold to a Belgian “collectionneur” after their last stay in Brussels. That, we might say, was the first fan’s critical intervention. Subsequently, re-discovering this cultural hoard, cataloguing it and making it accessible to a larger public is important cultural work in its own right, and we have to thank the instigators for it. Local fans have found a way of sharing their enthusiasm with the wider world. It is a triumphal act of resistance against the forces of entropy and oblivion.