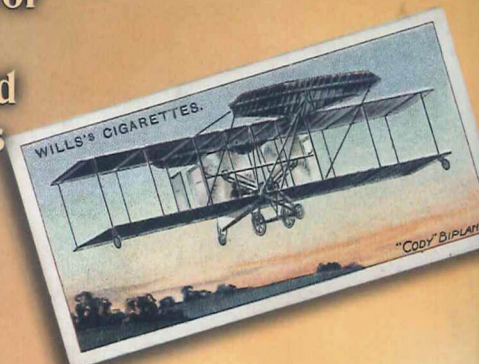
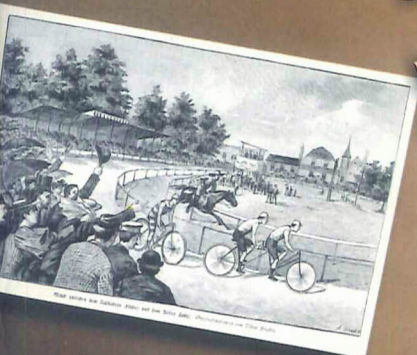


'COLONEL' CODY

and the
Flying Cathedral

The Adventures of
The Cowboy
Who Conquered
Britain's Skies



GARRY JENKINS

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PROLOGUE

ON 11 AUGUST 1913, the British Army's headquarters at Aldershot witnessed a scene unprecedented even in its long and valorous history.

The first mourners had arrived in the English countryside, twenty miles or so outside London, with the dawn and the first trains from Waterloo Station. The flow of people – starched and steam-pressed in Bible-black – had continued unabated for the rest of the morning.

By early afternoon, according to most reliable reckonings, 100,000 people had positioned themselves along the aspen-lined lanes, from the village of Ash Vale in Surrey to the Military Cemetery at Thorn Hill, three miles away, across the Hampshire border. At the most popular vantage point, on a knoll overlooking the spot where a new grave had been excavated that morning, the crush was so dense a team of Army nurses had been requisitioned to treat the growing numbers of women overcome by the broiling heat.

The garrison's history was rich in pomp and pageantry. 'Never have so many people gathered together in Aldershot,' said one wonder-eyed witness nevertheless.

The ritual they had come to participate in began at 2 p.m. precisely, as a heavy oak casket emerged through the picket-fence gates of a large house on the edge of Ash Vale. The coffin was draped in a Union Jack and decorated with a single wreath of blue

'... but a tithe of those who
wanted to come...'
Samuel Cody's funeral procession
on 11 August 1913.

and white flowers in the shape of
a broken steering wheel. The
inscription on the card had been
written in a quavering hand. It
read simply, 'In Memory of
My Dear Frank.'

The pallbearers placed
the coffin on a gun carriage
of the Royal Engineers, then
fell back into the cortège
assembled behind them. The
procession, too, was comfortably
the largest the home of the
British military establishment
had seen. Every member of the
newly formed Royal Flying
Corps had volunteered to take
part. Every battalion of every
regiment stationed at Alder-
shot was represented, even
though their numbers reflected
'but a tithe of those who want-

ed to come'. As a team of six
coal-black horses eased the gun carriage into its journey, the
line of a thousand men stretched back a mile along the neatly
manicured roads. The band and pipers of the famous Black
Watch Regiment, and the relentless dirge of Chopin's Funeral
March, maintained them in their slow, purposeful stride.

With the crowds standing two, three or more deep in places,

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the procession's progress was slow. Only at the burial site itself, cut on a plateau in a tranquil corner of the cemetery, were the chief mourners left to grieve in some semblance of privacy. When, finally, the coffin was lowered into the grave, a solo piper played the traditional soldier's farewell, 'The Flowers o' the Forest'. As the final strains of the lament drifted into the late

afternoon, and the mourners made their way home, only a blanket of floral tributes remained. 'He has won his wings,' read one. 'After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well,' read another.

By the time the trains arrived back in London that evening, the papers had already published their epilogues to the day's events. The *Evening Standard* caught the mood best. Its report began, 'On the top of a hill clothed with purple heather, looking out across the ground that was the scene of his struggles, his disappointments and his triumphs, they have buried Cody with all the honour they could render – the honour of a soldier's grave.'

'COLONEL' CODY
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FOR MOST OF HIS FORTY-SIX YEARS, 'COLONEL' SAMUEL Franklin Cody's name had been synonymous with the epic and the melodramatic, the stirring and the unforeseen. Cattle-trail cowboy and bronco-buster, burlesque actor and sharpshooting King of the Wild West cowboys, dramatist, man-carrying kite maker and founding father of English aviation, even in an age of flamboyant pioneers, he had been the frontiersman supreme. Yet his life contained no more spectacular – nor improbable – a scene than the extraordinary funeral which followed four days after its sudden ending.

In October 1908 Cody had been the first man to fly in Britain. In the five, adventure-filled years that had followed he had become what *Vanity Fair* magazine called 'the British public's chief and best showman of flight'. His death, in an air accident at Cove Common near Aldershot on 7 August, had provoked an outpouring of spontaneous grief. 'Millions who had never seen him felt they had suffered a loss, almost as if they had lost a friend,' wrote one who had known him. 'Not since King Edward's death has our country felt so deeply any one man's death,' ventured another, one of the hundreds moved to send letters of condolence to his widow, Lela, in the following days.

Edward VII's son and heir, King George V, had been among those to express their grief. Cody's friendship with the monarch

extended back to his days as Prince of Wales. (It had been the King who had first referred to him as Colonel, a rank he had technically never earned. Cody had taken the compliment as some form of blessing and used the title freely ever since.) 'I have received with profound regret the news of the death of Mr Cody. I saw him on several occasions at Aldershot and always appreciated his dogged determination and dauntless courage,' the monarch wrote in a handwritten telegram, dispatched to Mrs Cody via the head of the Army at Aldershot, General Haig, from the Royal Yacht *Britannia* at Cowes. 'His loss will be much felt at Aldershot where he did much for military aviation. Will you convey to Mrs Cody and her sons my sincere sympathy with them in their sorrow. George RI.'

The King's message captured the public mood, and added new momentum to the campaign for Cody to be buried with full military honours. In the immediate aftermath of his death, his family had begun arrangements for a small, private funeral and an interment at a local church. Within forty-eight hours, General Haig and the War Office had offered Cody a plot within Thorn Hill, a site ordinarily reserved for officers and holders of the highest military honours. As far as anyone could ascertain, he was the first civilian to be granted such an honour. He was certainly the first Wild West cowboy to be laid alongside the heroes of Britain's glorious military past.

For most of his time in England, there could have been few less likely candidates for the tribute that he finally achieved. Only five years before his death, as his attempts to become Britain's first successful flyer floundered, Cody had been the butt of unprecedented vitriol. Large sections of the public regarded him as a laughing stock, a national joke made all the more amusing by the fact that he was an American. The final act of his life represented perhaps the ultimate triumph of his 'dogged determination'.

Yet if he went to his grave a hero, Cody also left the world an enigma. In life he had perpetuated the mystery surrounding his

PROLOGUE



origins and his emergence as not just the most prominent flyer, but the most beloved adventurer of his day. In dying prematurely he had left the puzzle unsolved, and sealed his legend in the process.

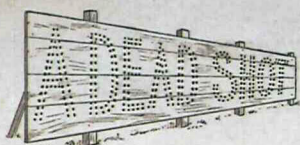
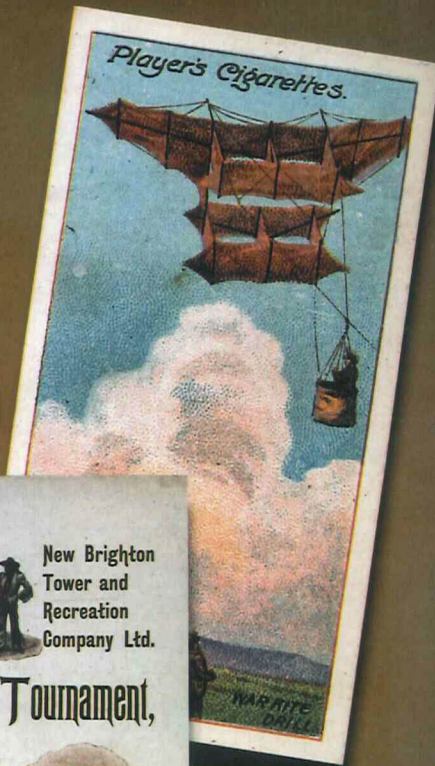
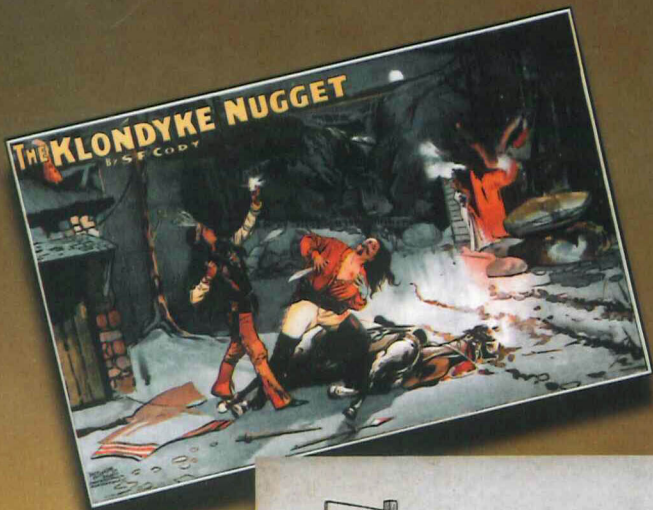
'How was it that this boisterous son of a Western ranch, trick shot in music halls, and small lead in cheap theatres became one of the most daring and ingenious of English aviators . . . easily the most popular and picturesque of our flying men?' one editorial wondered at the time of his death. In 1913, the confusion of fact and fiction that surrounded Cody's life rendered the question all but unanswerable. The details of his work for the British Army remained protected by the Official Secrets Acts. Few, if any, knew the complex truth of his private life.

In the century that has followed, as his name and achievements have faded, so much of the material suppressed during his life has seeped into the public domain. Now, for the first time, his story can be seen in clear relief.

Cody's life turns out to have been a saga of invention – and frequent reinvention! – fortitude and occasional farce. Above all it emerges as a case study in the indomitability of the human spirit, an unlikely yet uplifting story set at the end of the pioneer age in which that disposition was allowed its freest expression.

'COLONEL' CODY
AND
THE FLYING
CATHEDRAL





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At 2:30 p.m.

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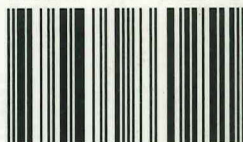
S. F. CODY

(Roi des Cowboys), with his
Champion Cycle, Horse and . . .
. . . Variety Tournament.



PROGRAMME - - ONE PENNY.

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