

## Book Review

# The Saga of S.F. Cody, the Flying Cowboy

'Colonel' Cody and the Flying Cathedral: The Adventures of the Cowboy Who Conquered Britain's Skies, by Garry Jenkins, 288 pp, New York: Picador (St. Martin's Press), U.S.A. \$24

By Ben Ruhe

After the plane he was flying came apart in midair and he fell 500 feet to his death on Aug. 7, 1913, Samuel Franklin Cody was accorded a hero's funeral at Aldershot, England. A procession viewed by fifty thousand people delivered his body to the military cemetery there and Cody was interred with Great Britain's heroes, the first civilian and the only American cowboy ever to be accorded such an honor.

This spontaneous outpouring of national grief by the public as well as the British establishment, led by King George V, for a upstart Yankee who had previously been the subject of derision and even contempt was the fitting end to a strange, flamboyant career that British author Garry Jenkins now convincingly sorts out in 'Colonel' Cody and The Flying Cathedral : The Adventures of the Cowboy Who Conquered Britain's Skies. Two earlier volumes on Cody took him pretty much at his own word, a serious mistake, particularly as far as his early life goes, as Jenkins discovered.

Using shrewd guesses and new evidence, some of it made available by the Cody family's sale at auction of historic Cody archives as well as the release of previously classified official documentation in the United Kingdom, Jenkins recreates Cody's life from birth and teenage years in America, to Wild West showman fame in Europe, through pioneering man-lifting kite experiments, which led Cody directly to the first sustained, controllable manned flight in Britain

in 1908. Following this great triumph, Cody—a mix of P.T. Barnum and Orville Wright—did five years of aviation barnstorming which led to a complete turnabout in his reputation. "The British public's chief and best showman of flight" was how a periodical summed him up. Then came his tragic, predictably dramatic death and ascension to a kind of sainthood. Cody would have approved the whole script. Judging from the current interest in early aviation, can a movie be far behind?

As Cody told it, and the versions varied widely in the telling, he was born in Texas in 1861, narrowly escaped an attack on his family by Indians, did bronco-busting, led long distance Texas to Montana cattle drives as a teenager, and dug gold in Alaska.



Cody used a kite to pull this boat across the English channel.

In fact, as Jenkins learned from another avid English researcher, Jean Roberts, Cody was born Franklin Samuel Cowdery in Davenport, Iowa, in 1867, or six years later than he claimed. His family line traced back to

the Pilgrims and the men in the family had a reputation for being adventuresome. Because Davenport, on the Mississippi, was a gateway to the vast prairies of the West, Cody became an expert horseman at an early age and may well have reached Montana as a teenager to do bronco-busting. He may have visited the Yukon too, although there is no documentation of this claim. What is not in doubt is that Cody became an expert at rope tricks, trick shooting and hard riding.

An exhibitionist by nature, the colorful Cody was early drawn to professional showmanship and served a documented apprenticeship with a kind of circus which toured the eastern part of the U.S. Featured were horses, shooting, Indian attacks and stagecoach robberies. The myth of the American West was enshrined as a moneymaker.

Greener pastures were to be found abroad, however, and Cody by 1888 was in England. After shedding a young American wife, Cody

by 1891 linked up with petite Britisher Lela Davis, whose father was an important horse trader with royal palace connections. Fifteen years his senior, Lela brought not only fearlessness and skill as a horsewoman to Cody's troupe but four children as well, including three young sons, all of whom Cody trained in American frontier skills.

Ostentatiously affecting cowboy garb—buckskins, high heeled boots, ten gallon hat, long mustaches, flowing hair—Cody went so far as to bill himself as the son of Buffalo Bill Cody. The great man's lawyers quickly enjoined the young Cody from this preposterous claim.

Lela's loyalty and trust in Cody, which never wavered over 22 years, was so great she acted as a target for him. Encircled by 20 glass balls, she stood stoically as Cody plinked them one by one with rapid gunfire. In case he missed, Lela wore a red body suit so the blood wouldn't show. Although Buffalo Bill Cody in a moment of revelation revealed he fired birdshot, not slugs, at targets, Samuel Cody never went beyond admitting he used "sub-charged" cartridges—cartridges light on powder so the bullets wouldn't ricochet or, if misaimed, be too wounding.



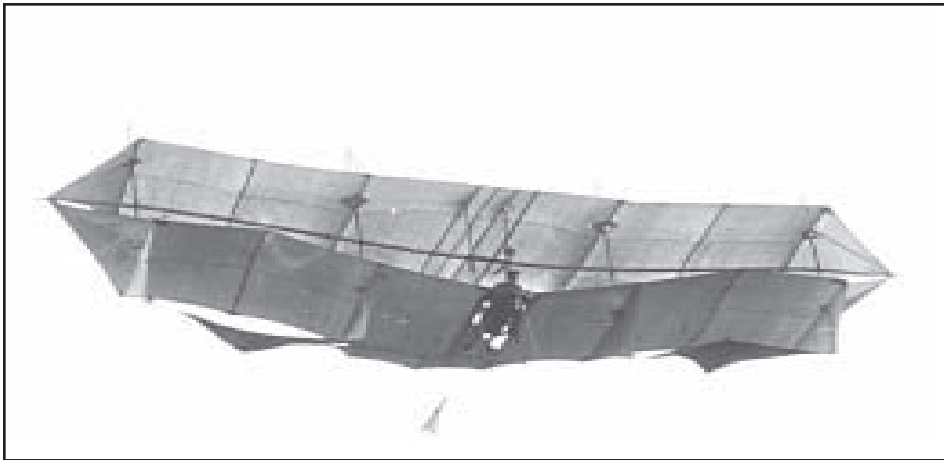
Loyal, daring Lela Cody goes aloft during manlifting experiments. The kite is the famous, beautiful Cody Kite.

Cody and family performed in music hall reviews, then toured on their own. Cody wrote and produced successful melodramas with titles such as *The Klondyke Nugget*. Running year after year, these extravaganzas kept Cody in funds. Having a steady source of income permitted Cody to experiment with a new craze—kites. Early documentation on this important aspect of his career—when, how and why he got started—is exceedingly thin.

Spreading out onto the Continent, Cody supplemented his purse with widely publicized challenges to famous bicycle riders, mainly French, that he, on horseback, could outride them in marathons. Horses against two-wheelers. It was pure outrageous

Cody. More often than not, Cody scooped up the purse, plus bets he made on himself. The races became a good source of income for him.

Almost an illiterate, to judge from the entries in his diaries, purchased by the Drachen Foundation and made available to Jenkins, Cody although clearly unschooled was nevertheless an obvious genius, with an obsessive energy. Picking up on the new Hargrave box kite which had reached Europe from Australia, Cody modified the design by adding wings and the resulting Cody Kite became a classic—efficient and beautiful. Cody patented it in 1901 and the lovely design is still widely



A Cody glider is flown by an unknown pilot.

flown today. Cody's original kites, of which there are a number remaining, are now recognized as marvels of craftsmanship.

Because of the Boer War, Britain realized that signaling and artillery observation needed improvement and brash Cody was quick to try to sell his kites to the military for these purposes. While the various services were in penny-pinching modes, visionary officers saw the need for what Cody offered and he was taken on, at different times, by both the British navy and army to develop man-lifting kites. Although reasonably successful, his work provoked much discord and Cody fought long and hard to be compensated as he felt was fitting. Seeking appropriate pay for his labors and inventions would continue for Cody almost up to his death.

A century ago, the idea of manned flight was in the collective consciousness around the world and Cody at some unknown point caught the fever. He realized his huge kites were the vehicle that might lead to manned flight. With the reported success of the Wright brothers in America in building a workable airplane, European countries fought to catch up in this revolutionary field and Cody was engaged to take his aerodynamic knowledge and ability to the royal military establishment at Farnborough, just west of London. He was attached to the balloon wing at the military base there, commanded during its most important years by Colonel J.E. Capper.

On a visit to the U.S., Capper had seen the Wrights fly at Akron, Ohio, and he gave Cody inside information on their aircraft design, as Jenkins discovered during his research. Capper also apparently envisioned himself as the man who would fly first in England and secretly undermined Cody by giving a second young genius the chance to build an airplane at a

remote estate. This project failed, however.

In response to the Germans and in a detour from their winged aircraft studies, Cody and Capper designed, built and flew England's first dirigible. Their flight around St. Paul's Cathedral in London in 1907 drew enthusiastic public and media attention. Cody in ten gallon hat is clearly visible in photos as pilot of the Nulli Secundus (Second to None) during this epic trip. It was a first step toward Cody's deification by the British, after two decades of his being considered an American cowboy buffoon.

Cody now set about building an oversize airplane, which was to evolve into the Flying Cathedral of the biography's title. It was officially known as British Army Aeroplane No. 1. Powered with a powerful French engine, Cody got the aircraft to achieve a series of very short flights or "jumps," as he called them. He then made Britain's first extended powered flight on Oct. 16, 1908 at Farnborough. It was a jaunt of more than a quarter of a mile and lasted 17 seconds. Cody crashed the plane on landing but this did not matter. The feat made front page headlines across the nation. "The secret of flight is solved," said Cody in an interview. Britain had joined the air age.

As the aviation industry spurted, promotional races from one city to another lured new pilots and new aircraft. Because the 'round-England competitions were open to British citizens only, Cody got himself naturalized so he could compete too. With his intelligence, skill and demonic drive, he won his share of fat purses.

Meanwhile, he kept experimenting with aircraft design and developed first a monoplane, then seaplane.

He was flying the seaplane with a passenger aboard when the aircraft broke up in midair and both men fell to their deaths. The funeral, ordered by the King who had earlier given Cody the honorary title of "colonel," followed and Cody, at age 46, was enshrined as one of the U.K.'s most celebrated and loved characters of the early 20th century.

Garry Jenkins' fine book, 10 years in the research and writing after the author fell in love with the Cody story while researching Welsh aviation pioneers, perhaps falls short in its failure to thoroughly pin down the facts of Cody's early life, although this may be impossible to do now after the lapse of almost a century and a half. Also lacking, and a more serious absence, is a convincing explanation of Cody's driven personality. How could he have persevered for so long in a country that specializes in the acid, unforgiving putdown of colonials? It remains an enigma.

Jenkins does reveal the interesting events that occurred after Cody's demise. That abandoned, never divorced American wife named Maude, from Norristown, Pennsylvania, turned out to be still alive and a suit on her behalf against the estate won her Cody's money. In a typically American twist, the major beneficiary in the end was Maude's lawyer. Faithful Lela and family in England won nothing except the everyday remains of Cody's career—the guns, the kites, the photographs, the press clippings, the trophies. It was a large collection of arcana which the Americans spurned as worthless. Almost a century later Cody's British family was to have a last laugh. When this historic material was sold both at auction and privately, it proved a financial bonanza.

Perhaps publication of this well illustrated, bittersweet Jenkins volume will provoke further interest in Cody and bring to light more of his remarkable story. For now, one can accept that 'Colonel' Cody and the Flying Cathedral proves that the most colorful and extraordinary tales are often those which are true. 🌿

### Drachen's Cody Collection

When his family placed Samuel Cody memorabilia on auction at Sotheby's in London a few years ago, the major buyer of kite material was the Drachen Foundation. Handwritten journals in which Cody described his pioneering kite experiments, many original and later kites, charming drawings and detailed sketches by him, hundreds of glass plate negatives showing work in progress, correspondence, business records, posters, press clippings and letters of condolence upon his death, including a telegram from King George V, were acquired.

Subsequently, the Foundation purchased and was given more material by the family.

Altogether, it is by far the largest collection of Cody kite material anywhere. The accession catalogue runs to 39 single-spaced pages in length. Since it was acquired by a non-profit institution, Cody material—now professionally conserved, as needed—is being made readily available free upon request to the global public. Only fees for copying and postage are imposed. This availability is in line with Drachen's mandate to increase and diffuse knowledge about kites worldwide. The Cody holding has had a particular importance for Drachen itself. Initially focused on American kite doings, a large field in itself, Drachen with its accession of the Cody material set a new, international course that has since had substantial impact on the world kiting community—and can be expected to do so for many years. particularly with the recent opening of a new three-story Drachen headquarters in Seattle.

For information on the Cody holding, contact the Drachen staff or consult the Foundation's on-line site at [www.drachen.org](http://www.drachen.org).

—Ali Fujino