

Cowboy Dreams

The Congress of Rough Riders.

By John Boyne.

Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 328pp, £12.99 in UK

William Frederick Cody (1846-1917), better known as Buffalo Bill, is literally and metaphorically a novelist's dream. An Iowan by birth, Cody was from a young age a notable adventurer. At fourteen he became one of the first Pony Express riders and went on to make his name as a stalwart of the Sioux Wars and Union Army scout during the Civil War. Myth began to overtake the man in the early 1870s when he appeared as Buffalo Bill in the popular cowboy dime novels of the period. Seeing the capital value of his heroic soubriquet, Cody set about propagating it via his Wild West Show which, with the defeated Sioux chief Sitting Bull as star attraction, toured America and Europe from the 1880s into the early 1900s.

The title of John Boyne's second novel refers to the Military College and International Academy of Rough Riders that Cody set up in semi-retirement on his Wyoming ranch in 1901. Though Boyne acknowledges neither historical nor fictional sources, he holds closely here to the received knowledge on Cody. Not one to simplify history, Boyne's first novel, *The Thief of Time* (2000), was a daring attempt at creating a character that lives from the eighteenth into the late twentieth centuries, and he plays similarly with time in *The Congress*.

Cody's life is framed by a story set in the present where a Londoner called William Cody, laden with his father's stories about his ancestral namesake, eventually packs away his cowboy posters and plastic Indians and strikes out at nineteen for an independent life abroad freed from imposed memories. Through twelve sprawling chapters, the Buffalo Bill story alternates with William's narration of his travels to Japan, France and America, of his development as a journalist and progress in love, of the eventual birth of his son and death of his wife.

There is a sense of two novels here, one flat-toned and monotonously structured (boy develops in counterpoint to father, becomes experienced young man), the other identically styled but rescued by richly mythopoeic historical material. Though there is no effort made at idiom, Buffalo Bill's story is well developed, and there are in particular some colourful battle and bull-whacking scenes while America's nineteenth-century expansion is nicely enacted in the background.

By virtue of its awkward melding of sub-novels, with no consistent reflection on the axis of past historical fact and present mythic commemoration, *The Congress* only intermittently entertains. Nevertheless, hard work is evident: Boyne is currently the most historically and geographically venturesome of young Irish novelists and is worth keeping an eye on.

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