

H. A. Cody: Parson and Poet

'The new Cody' headed Saint John's Christmas shopping lists for years

By
Ted Jones



(Ted Jones, a teacher at Fredericton High School, is currently working on a full-length biography of H. A. Cody. The following is the second half of a two-part article. The first was published on Wednesday.)

During the next few years many people in the Yukon were to enjoy the friendship and hospitality of the Codys. After Sunday evening services a number of the Mounties of "11" Division would always call at the rectory, along with prospectors, miners, young ladies of the community, and a young bank clerk, Robert W. Service, who wrote his first book, *Songs of a Sourdough*, while he was in Whitehorse.

Cody's first writing to achieve acclaim was also written here:

"After receiving the twelve essays on Yukon which were submitted by as many different writers on Yukon territory, her history, resources and future possibilities, the three judges appointed by the Yukon council, to the writer employing the nom de plume "Quik Pak" (ancient Russian for Yukon River) awarded the first prize of \$200.

(*The Whitehorse Star*, July 20, 1906)

The identity of "Quik Pak" was soon known to be the person of Rev. H. A. Cody, rector of the Whitehorse Episcopal Church, his 5,000 word essay, "The Yukon Territory," being published in *The Dawson News*.

This success was soon followed by his first book, a biography of Bishop Bompas, entitled *An Apostle of the North*, published by Seely in England, Briggs in Canada, Dutton in the United States, it received many favorable reviews:

"A story of hard work done in establishing the kingdom of righteousness in the wilderness of the Far Northwest has been tenderly told in *An Apostle of the North* by the Rev. H. A. Cody, a Yukon clergyman. These are the memoirs of the Right Rev. William Carpenter Bompas, D. D., in turn first Bishop of Athabasca, of the Mackenzie River, and of Selkirk, Yukon. He died writing a sermon in his study at Carcross, on the Yukon River, at the age of 72. A saintly man, and a sympathetic, clearly drawn portrait of him. It is illustrated with multitude of excellent half tones.

(*The New York Times*, June 20, 1908)



In the spring of 1908, following the birth of their first son Douglas, the Codys visited the East, and at the end of the year 1909 they left the Yukon for the last time, returning home to New Brunswick and the rectorship of St. James' Church in Saint John, The Old Log Church in Whitehorse is now used as a museum of the Church's Yukon history. A photograph of Cody, one of the first rectors, can be seen in the chapel nearby.

In 1910 his first novel, *The Frontiersman*, was published and according to Mary Flett, proprietor of the "Needle and Anchor Bookshop," it was

. . . THE BIG BOOK in the Saint John Bookshop that Christmas; and for nearly a decade Christmas shoppers who were habitual

book buyers, and people who were merely Christmas shoppers, headed their list with "the new Cody."

(*The Canadian Author and Bookman*, July, 1910)

There was a children's version of Bishop Bompas's life amongst the Indians and Eskimos, *On Trail and Rapid by Dog-Sled and Canoe*, also brought out in 1910. All the others, with the exception of a book of poems, *Songs of a Bluenose*, were novels, the majority of them being published by McClelland and Stewart Limited. These were tales of romance and adventure drawn from a familiar environment, the primitive North at first, rural New Brunswick and his boyhood experience in the later books. Finally, the Loyalist era, from which came *The King's Arrow*, perhaps his most popular story.

In 1927 Cody was appointed Archdeacon of Saint John, supervising two deaneries with 30 clergy, a busy ecclesiastical office that left him little time for his writing and reading. This is clearly evident by his annual reports:

"This is the twenty-third anniversary of my rectorship of St. James, and in that time the work has so increased that it is very difficult for me to meet all the demands made upon me. All know this, and are, therefore, considerate when I cannot visit as often as I should like. It is always a great joy for me to meet the members of St. James in their own homes, and although last year I made over eleven hundred calls, they were for the most part upon the sick and those in trouble. I wish to thank God for all His blessings during the past and as He has guided us hitherto, He will still continue to guide, if we are true to Him. The parish registers show. . . a total attendance of 20,052 during the year."

(*The Church Bell*, Jan., 1933)

He continued to rise at four in the morning, and, using only two fingers, peck out his stories on an old Underwood that he had bought back from the Yukon, with Laddie, his collie dog, nearby on the study floor. In the summer he would sometimes write stretched out on the veranda hammock, with his cat, Malta, curled up on his stomach. Summers were spent at Oak Point, Cody having acquired the rectory of his earlier days from a country home:

Come, turn aside, you weary one,
And rest awhile with me,
Beneath the tall tree' leafy shade,
In vine-clad Bide-a-wee.

The road is dusty, hot, and long,
But here the breeze blows free,
So stay and quaff a cooling glass
In vine-clad Bide-a-wee

Then go your way, you rested one,
With this the only fee---
That you will sometimes turn in thought

To vine-clad Bide-a-wee.

(from *Songs of a Bluenose*, 1925)

Four more children were born to the Codys; three boys, Kenneth, Norman, and George; and a girl, Frances. As they grew up and moved away from home Cody took delight in corresponding with them. In one of his letters to George, who was attending the University of New Brunswick, he wrote:

“Are you doing any writing now? I was looking at the poems you wrote which I have in my Journal, and they are very good. I hope you will continue, for you will find much pleasure in doing so, even as a hobby, and a way to express your thoughts. I am sending you a copy of a new poem I have written, “Old Time Joes,” which you might like to have. This is a composite poem, or picture of an old horse Joe we had when I was young, and Tom Thum, and any other horse in general. I think it is quite good. I have written a number of other things, some humorous, which you can see when you come home.”

(March 7, 1939)



During the ten years that remained to Cody after the publication of his last book, he continued to be an active member of the Boy Scout movement and governor of a male orphan home. He still belonged to the Fortnightly Club and the Canadian Club, and was made an Honorary Member of the Canadian Authors' Association, “in consideration of his notable contribution to Canadian historical fiction.”

But in an address given at the Archdeaconry Conference, October 6, 1942, he said:

“On the morning of July 3rd of this year I awoke and found myself 70 year old. It was somewhat startling, although I know it was coming. But it gave me a strange feeling to think that I had reached the three-score years and ten of which the Bible speaks. When one reaches that age he is justified in looking back a little to consider the years that are past, and the changes which have taken place.”

He went on to speak about these changes in his life since the last conference:

“ . . . I have passed through deep waters in my own illness and the

loss of a dear son (Kenneth). When thou passes through the waters I will be with thee, and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee. That was what I found, and to me faith became a personal experience. You cannot teach anyone to love, and what it is like by means of a textbook. One must experience love to know what it really is, and how beautiful it is. You cannot reach religion by a textbook alone – it may help, but there must be the personal experience in the heart to be fully understood.”

In January, 1943 Cody received a letter from Dr. George E. Levy, editor and manager of *The Maritime Baptist* magazine, Wolfville, Nova Scotia. It read, in part:

“A few weeks ago I saw in the daily press the announcement of your retirement from the more active work of the parish. At that time I made up my mind I would do something that I had long thought of doing, and that is write you a note telling you of my own personal appreciation of your work as a novelist. . .

My interest in your writings began when I was but a boy on the farm down here in my native province years ago – or, it seems like years; in fact, it was about thirty years ago that I read *The Long Patrol*, published as a serial in *The Family Herald* and *Weekly Star*. I can easily recall how I looked forward to the coming of the paper each week. The reading of that story transported me from the simple surroundings of that small village with few adventures and little that exciting to a world of adventure, mystery, and charm. . . *The Long Patrol* was my first long story. Needless-to-say, I have read a few since, yet none that gave me more of a 'thrill.' Many of your books have been my stay on more than one occasion.”



H. A. Cody was 75 when he died, February 9, 1948. From the little stone church where he was rector for 33 years, he was taken to Fernhill Cemetery, the harbour of the old grey city of Saint John a short distance away. Perhaps he met Death according to his own description in the last stanza of “The Conqueror”:

We know he smiled, the Great Heart lying here,
As only victors smile at ended strife,
For silent now with light on his cold lips,
He smiled at death, for death to him meant life.