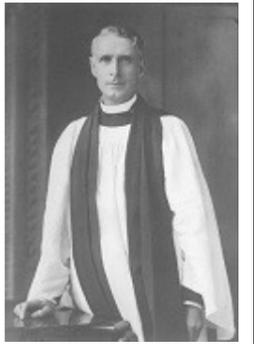


High priest of the frontier

H. A. Cody dreamed of being a bachelor hunter and trapper, but became instead a family man, a priest and the prolific, bestselling writer of popular fiction.



By Dorothy Dearborn

HIRAM Alfred Cody was born in 1872 at Washademoak Lake, New Brunswick – an area which still carries the family name, Cody's (Station). His ambition in life was to be a bachelor hunter and trapper. He was convinced that only a bachelor could embark on a life of adventure such as his young mind envisioned. By the time he died, in 1948, his life proved how wrong a young dreamer can be.

Not only did he marry and become a father and grandfather, but he became an Anglican priest, a calling far from the mind of the young adventure. Yet it was as a priest that he experienced the real-life adventures that formed the basis for his 25 books and numerous short stories published by magazines such as *MacLean's*, *The Canadian Home Journal*, *The Toronto Star Weekly*, *The Canadian Courier* and numerous religious periodicals. *The Family Herald* and many other publications serialized 11 of his novels among them such titles as *An Apostle of the North*, *The Frontiersman*, *On Trail and Rapid by Dog-Sled and Canoe*, *Rod of the Lone Patrol*, *Glen of the High North* adventure stories one and all, many based on life in the Yukon.

In his fascinating, and highly detailed biography of Archdeacon Cody, retired high school teacher Ted Jones quotes liberally from Cody's daily journals. The journals provide insight into his life as a priest in Canada's north and the life of a man who, Cody's son Norman says, was deeply dedicated to his religion.

One such passage written in the Yukon on Thursday, January 25, 1909 reads: "Walked out to Copper King this afternoon & had service in evening – about eight or nine attended. Jack French walked in with me, got home about 8:30 p.m., making in all 8 miles." This from a man who noted on Friday, April 2: "Rheumatism very bad today with sick headache. Worse towards evening. Dr. Harve gave me some medicine. Suffering terribly tonight from hips down."

An indication of how prolific he was is given by his biographer who noted that, during the year 1908, he had "only" written a few draft articles; a novel, *The Frontiersman*; a few published articles and a series, *Heroes of the Canadian Church*, for *The Canadian Church Juvenile*; and a number of articles for a proposed diocesan magazine to be published in England.

In a letter dated December 10 of that year, Archdeacon Cody wrote: "*I have been busy since my return with my pen. This time it is a long story of 27 chapters (The Frontiersman) dealing with early missionary work in the Yukon, at the time the miners came in, and the struggle which ensued in the preservation of mission work. There is of course a romance running through. . .*"

He left the Yukon the following year to become rector of St. James' Church in Saint John. An article on his move published in an Anglican newspaper included the following anecdote that so well depicts the kind of man H. A. Cody was:

“. . . Mr. Cody so suffers from rheumatism in the winters, the effect of exposures on the trails, that he became almost helpless at times. Change of climate may be a decided relief. Last winter he had one of the critical experiences of travelling missionaries. He was stricken so suddenly with rheumatism that he could barely crawl to the dog sleds a few yards ahead. Fortunately the faithful animals went directly with their helpless burden to a mining camp. His departure from the far North and that of his much-liked wife, are sincerely regretted on personal grounds, and also because of pride in his writings of that region in magazines and book, one of which won the prize of \$200, as the best article received upon the Yukon."

His first book, *An Apostle of the North*, was published in 1908, while he was still in the Yukon; *The Frontiersman* was published in 1910. After that, 23 titles flowed from his pen until 1937 after coming to Saint John.

Cody's books were published in both the United States and Canada; McClelland and Stewart counts him among its earliest authors. An advertisement in *Toronto Saturday Night*, Dec. 17, 1921, reproduced in his biography bears the banner "Two Outstanding Canadian Novels" and promotes Ralph Connor's *To Him that Hath*, and Cody's *Jess of the Rebel Trail*, touting it as "Cody at his best – plot, action, movement and plenty of thrills."

ARCHDEACON Cody wrote in his unfinished autobiography: "I have never been able to fully understand why I went to the Yukon. It may have been the spirit of adventure which caused me to make the change. But when I landed in Whitehorse and learned about the work which was. . ." They were the last words he wrote, leaving his own life-story unfinished.

When Ted Jones wrote to the Yukon 20 years later, looking for information dating back to the years 1904 to 1909 for his biography of Cody – for memories of Archdeacon Cody's time there as a travelling clergyman visiting missions and settlements in the 200,000 square mile of frozen diocese – he received a wonderful letter from Ida May Goulter, who was 12 years old when the then-young clergyman visited her family home on the Yukon river.

The incident was vivid in her mind: "*Mr. Cody came with a fine trained dog. Black and white with a little red. This dog was so lively I can recall. When my mother put a white linen table cloth on for the meal, the dog sat up on his haunches as much as if to say 'I am ready.'* The door was open on both sides of the cabin (one room) and a work table was on one side where the door came up hard against

the table leg. Mr. Cody said to the dog 'Go shut the door.' The dog went over to the door, put his nose against the table leg, and of course, door did not move. The dog looked back at Mr. Cody – he said 'shut the door.' So again the dog nosed the table leg. Finally the door moved and the wonderful dog at once [knew] his mistake. He nosed the door away from the table leg and moved the door along and raised up and shut the door tight with his weight. He came back to where Mr. Cody sat beside the dinner table and sat up. My mother wanted to give the dog a tidbit. But no, Mr. Cody said. He had trained the dog not to accept things from others – after the meal Mr. Cody gave the dog some food.”

THIS “very kind and gentle man was a very good father in all ways,” says Cody's now 83 year-old son Norman, an artist living in Fredericton, “Very understanding of what it was to be young.”

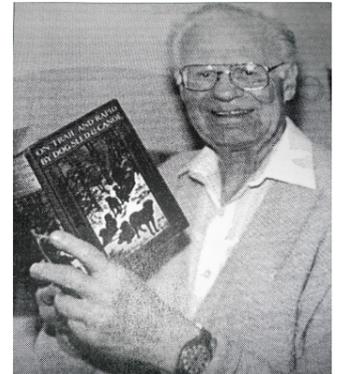
“I remember when a girl friend and I, just teenagers at the time, were studying the poem *The Hound of Heaven*, by Francis Thompson, and he happened to hear us discussing it. He immediately took an interest in what we were doing and went on to say how please he was with what we were doing. I don't ever remember him criticizing. He always supported us, no matter what we wanted to do or how far-fetched it might seem to him.

“When I said I want to be an artist he immediately encouraged me. . . although he didn't know beans about what it entailed!” Norman Cody says his father was the most industrious person he has ever known. “He worked hard at everything he did. He got up early every morning to write, then spent the rest of the day attending to his parishioners. I remember one time, when I was a grown man living in Peterborough, Ontario, there was an article about him in one of the popular magazines. It said, 'He worked by candlelight and save the daylight hours for his parishioners,' and someone asked me did that mean we didn't have electricity 'down there' in New Brunswick?”

Cody also suggested that his father was an excellent athlete with professional capabilities. He was on the football team at college and taught “all the kids” how to play badminton.

Cody wrote about religious themes, but his most popular work targeted the large boys' adventure story market of the time. It was these adventure books that I remember reading as a child. Girls' books of the time were far too tame and goody-goody to suit my tastes, but tracking wolves in the wild and riding dog sleds across the tundra. . . Ah! That was living! Lucky boys!

Yet when my mother pointed out one day that the lean and lanky elderly clergyman of St. James Church who lived on the next block from us on St. James Street in Saint John was none other than the author of these exciting stories, I was no longer interested. By then I was a teenager, enamored of a handsome young man who lived in the other half of the Cody duplex. Years later I came to regret the lost opportunity to talk with one of New Brunswick's best story-tellers.



Norman Cody with a book written by his father, H. A. Cody, the prolific author of adventure stories "with a bit of romance." (Dorothy Dearborn photo)

In his own words

CODY'S gift of creating wonderful imagery went beyond classic descriptive passages. He had both the talent and the heart to ensure that his supporting characters, as well as the heroes of his novels, were three dimensional rather than cardboard bit players. Granted, as a child, I read his books for adventure but now, somewhat less childlike, I appreciate the writer who grants equal respect to the players in his narrative.

The following, from *The Trail of the Golden Horn* (1923), gives some insight into the Royal North West Mounted Police constable Tom Rolfe, a character who quotes poetry throughout the book: “*When Rolfe had meat browned to his satisfaction, the 'sourdough' potatoes fried and the tea made, he called aloud, 'Diner all ready on the dining-car. That's what an Indian guide I once had always used to say,' he explained. 'If you can't have certain things, it is often good to imagine that you have them. That was the way with my Indian.'*”

“*After supper was over, the dogs were fed, and the constable gathered a supply of wood for the night. Then around the bright fire the three sat and talked for some time. It was not of the North they talked, but of bygone days in their old homes. It was a comfort to turn for a time from the cruel trail and the hardships of a desolate, snow-bound region to other scenes, glorified and made beautiful by the sacred fire of memory.*”

-Dorothy Dearborn (1927-2016) was a Hampton author and journalist

Norman Redmond Cody (1914-2000) of Fredericton was part of a vibrant art community