

Primary Source:

*Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians (1859)**



PRIMARY SOURCE

INTRODUCTION

LETTERS AND NOTES

Introduction

George Catlin (1796-1872) was an American artist, famous for his travels to the American west and his portraits of Native American peoples. Though best known for his paintings, Catlin also documented his travels in text and wrote numerous letters to his peers. The book *Letters and Notes on the Customs and Manners of the North American Indians* was compiled in the early 1840s and includes two volumes of his writings, produced between the years 1832-1839. Documenting a variety of Native customs, the book gives the reader a glimpse into the lives of the Native Americans Catlin observed, though presented from his own views of the western plains and the people and animals who inhabited them.

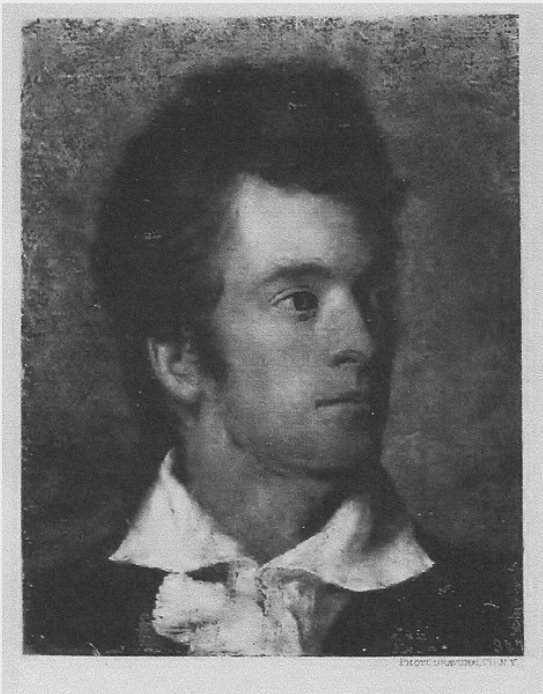
In the excerpt below, Catlin discusses the impacts of westward expansion on Native American and buffalo populations. As you are reading, consider the following questions:

- How does Catlin portray the American “wilderness”?
- How does he portray the people and animals that inhabit the west, and what does he think their future will be?
- What is his proposal for addressing the impacts of colonial westward expansion on Native Americans and the animals and landscape of the plains?

*George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of North American Indians Written During Eight Years' Travel Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians of North America*, 1895, pages 395-401.



***Letters and Notes on the
Manners, Customs, and
Condition of the North
American Indians (1859)***



**George Catlin, self-portrait at the
age of 28, 1885**

"Many are the rudenesses and wilds in Nature's works which are destined to fall before the deadly axe and desolating hands of cultivating man; and so amongst her ranks of *living*, of beasts and human, we often find noble stamps, or beautiful colors, to which our admiration clings; and even in the overwhelming march of civilized improvements and refinements do we love to cherish their existence, and lend our efforts to preserve them in their primitive rudeness. Such of Nature's works are always worthy of our preservation and protection; and the further we become separated (and the face of the country) from that pristine wildness and beauty, the more pleasure does the mind of enlightened man feel in recurring to those scenes, where he can have them preserved for his eyes and his mind to dwell upon.

Of such "rudenesses and wilds," Nature has no where presented more beautiful and lovely scenes, than those of the vast prairies of the West; and of *man* and *beast*, no nobler specimens than those who inhabit them—the *Indian* and the *buffalo*—joint and original tenants of the soil, and fugitives together from the approach of civilized man; they have fled to the great plains of the West, and there, under an equal doom, they have taken up their *last abode*, where their race will expire, and their bones will bleach together.

It may be that *power* is *right* and *voracity* a *virtue*; and that these people, and these noble animals, are *righteously* doomed to an issue that *will* not be averted. It can be easily proved—we have a civilized science that can easily do it, or anything else that may be required to cover the iniquities of civilized man in catering for his unholy appetites. It can be proved that the weak and ignorant have no *rights*—that there can be no virtue in darkness—that God's gifts have no meaning or merit until they are appropriated by civilized man—by him brought into the light, and converted to his use and luxury. We have a mode of reasoning (I forget what it is called) by which all this can be proved, and even more. The *word* and the *system* are entirely of *civilized* origin; and latitude is admirably given to them in proportion to the increase of civilized wants, which often require a *judge* to overrule the laws of nature. I say that we can prove such things; but an *Indian* cannot. It is a mode of reasoning unknown to him in his nature's simplicity, but admirably adapted to subserve the interests of the enlightened world, who are always their own judges when dealing with the savage; and who, in the present refined age, have many appetites that can only be lawfully indulged, by proving God's laws defective.

Catlin's travels in North America, 1830-1855

It is not enough in this polished and extravagant age, that we get from the Indian his lands, and the very clothes from his back, but the food from their mouths must be stopped, to add a new and useless article to the fashionable world's luxuries. The ranks must be thinned, and the race exterminated, of this noble animal, and the Indians of the great plains left without the means of supporting life, that white men may figure a few years longer, enveloped in buffalo robes—that they may spread them, for their pleasure and elegance, over the backs of their sleighs, and trail them ostentatiously amidst the busy throng, as things of beauty and elegance that had been made for them!



Reader! listen to the following calculations, and forget them not. The buffaloes (the quadrupeds from whose backs your beautiful robes were taken, and whose myriads were once spread over the whole country, from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic Ocean) have recently fled before the appalling appearance of civilized man, and taken up their abode and pasturage amid the almost boundless prairies of the West. An instinctive dread of their deadly foes, who made an easy prey of them whilst grazing in the forest, has lead them to seek the midst of the vast and treeless plains of grass, as the spot where they would be least exposed to the assaults of their enemies; and it is exclusively in those desolate fields of silence (yet of beauty) that they are to be found—and over these vast steppes, or prairies, have they fled like the Indian, towards the "setting sun;" until their bands have been crowded together, and their limits confined to a narrow strip of country on this side of the Rocky Mountains.

This strip of country, which extends from the province of Mexico to Lake Winnepeg on the North is almost one entire plain of grass, which is, and ever must be, useless to cultivating man. It is here, and here chiefly, that the buffaloes dwell; and with, and hovering about them, live and flourish the tribes of Indians, whom God made for the enjoyment of that fair land and its luxuries.

George Catlin, "Buffalo Bull Grazing," 1845





George Catlin, "Sioux Indians on Snowshoes Lancing Buffalo," 1846-1848

It is a melancholy contemplation for one who has travelled, as I have, through these realms, and seen this noble animal in all its pride and glory, to contemplate it so rapidly wasting from the world, drawing the irresistible conclusion, too, which one must do, that its species is soon to be extinguished, and with it the peace and happiness (if not the actual existence) of the tribes of Indians who are joint tenants with them, in the occupancy of these vast and idle plains.

And what a splendid contemplation too, when one (who has travelled these realms, and can duly appreciate them) imagines them as they *might* in future be seen, (by some great protecting policy of government) preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness, in a *magnificent park*, where the world could see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse with sinewy bow, and shield and lance, amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes. What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! A *nation's Park*, containing man and best, and in all the wildness and freshness of their nature's beauty!

I would ask no other monument to my memory, nor any other enrolment of my name amongst the famous dead, than the reputation of having been the founder of such an institution.

Such scenes might easily have been preserved, and still could be cherished on the great plains of the West, without detriment to the country or its borders; for the tracts of country on which the buffaloes have assembled, are uniformly sterile, and of no available use to cultivating man.

It is on these plains, which are stocked with buffaloes, that the finest specimens of the Indian race are to be seen. It is here, that the savage is decorated in the richest costume. It is here, and here only, that his wants are all satisfied, and even the *luxuries* of life are afforded him in abundance. And here also is he the proud and honorable man (before he had teachers or laws, about the important wants, which beget meanness and vice); stimulated by ideas of honor and virtue, in which the God of Nature has certainly not curtailed him.



George Catlin, "Picturesque Bluffs above Prairie du Chien," 1835-1836

There are, by a fair calculation, more than three hundred thousand Indians, who are now subsisted on the flesh of the buffaloes, and by those animals supplied with all the luxuries of life which they desire, as they know of none others. The great variety of uses to which they convert the body and other parts of that animal, are almost incredible to the person who has not actually dwelt amongst these people, and closely studied their modes and customs. Every part of their flesh is converted into food, in one shape or another, and on it they entirely subsist. The robes of the animals are worn by Indians instead of blankets—their skins when tanned, are used as coverings for their lodges and for their beds; undressed, they are used for constructing canoes—for saddles, for bridles—l'arrêts, lasos, and thongs. The horns are shaped into ladles and spoons—the brains are used for dressing the skins—their bones are used for saddle trees—for war clubs, and scrapers for graining the robes—and others are broken up for the marrow-fat which is contained in them. Their sinews are used for strings and backs to their bows—for thread to string their beads and sew their dresses. The feet of the animals are boiled, with their hoofs, for the glue they contain, for fastening their arrow points, and many other uses. The hair from the head and shoulders, which is long, is twisted and braided into halters, and the tail is used for a fly brush. In this wise do these people convert and use the various parts of this useful animal, and with all these luxuries of life about them, and their numerous games, they are happy (God bless them) in the ignorance of the disastrous fate that awaits them.

Yet this interesting community, with its sports, its wildnesses, its languages, and all its manners and customs, could be perpetuated, and also the buffaloes, whose numbers would increase and supply them with food for ages and centuries to come, if a system of non-intercourse could be established and preserved. But such is not to be the case—the buffalo's doom is sealed, and with their extinction must assuredly sink into real despair and starvation, the inhabitants of these vast plains, which afford for the Indians, no other possible means of subsistence; and they must at last fall prey to wolves and buzzards, who will have no other bones to pick.



George Catlin, "Comanche Village, Women Dressing Robes and Drying Meat," 1834-1835

It seems hard and cruel, (does it not?) that we civilized people with all the luxuries and comforts of the world about us, should be drawing from the backs of these useful animals the skins for our luxury, leaving their carcasses to be devoured by the wolves—that we should draw from that country, some one hundred and fifty or two hundred thousand robes annually, the greater part of which are taken from animals that are killed expressly for the robe, at a season when meat is not cured and preserved, and for each of which skins the Indian has received but a pint of whisky.

Such is the fact, and that number or near it are annually destroyed, in addition to the number that is necessarily killed for the subsistence of three hundred thousand Indians, who live entirely upon them. It may be said, perhaps, that the Fur Trade of these great western realms, which is now limited chiefly to purchase of buffalo robes, is of great and national importance, and should and must be encouraged. To such a suggestion I would reply, by merely enquiring (independently of the poor Indians' disasters,) how much more advantageously would such a capital be employed, both for the weal of the country and for the owners, if it were invested in machines for the manufacture of *woolen robes*, of equal or superior value and beauty; and thereby encouraging the growers of wool, and the industrious manufacturer, rather than cultivating a taste for the use of buffalo skins; which is just to be acquired, and then, from necessity, to be dispensed with, when a few years shall have destroyed the last of these animals producing them.

It may be answered, perhaps, that the necessities of life are given in exchange for these robes; but what, I would ask, are the necessities in Indian life, where they have buffaloes in abundance to live on? The Indian's necessities are entirely artificial—all are created; and when the buffaloes shall have disappeared in his country, which will be within *eight* or *ten* years, I would ask, who is to supply him with the necessities of life then? and I would ask, further, (and leave the question to be answered ten years hence), when the skins shall have been stripped from the back of the last animal, who is to resist the ravages of three hundred thousand starving savages; and in their trains, one million five hundred thousand wolves, whom direst necessity will have driven from their desolate and gameless plains, to seek for the means of subsistence along our exposed frontier? God has everywhere supplied man in a state of Nature, with the necessities of life, and before we destroy the game of his country, or teach him new desires, he has no wants that are not satisfied.

Amongst the tribes who have been impoverished and repeatedly removed, the necessities of life are extended with a better grace from the hands of civilized man; ninety thousand of such have already been removed, and they from Government some five or six hundred thousand dollars annually in cash; *which money passes immediately into the hands of white men*, and for it the necessities of life *may be* abundantly furnished. But who, I would ask, are to furnish the Indians who have been instructed in this unnatural mode—living upon *such* necessities, and even luxuries of life, extended to them by the hands of white men, when those annuities are at an end, and the skin stripped from the last of the animals which God gave them for their subsistence?

Reader, I will stop here, lest you might forget to answer these important queries—these are questions which I know will puzzle the world—and, perhaps it is not right that I should ask them.

Geo. Catlin.

George Catlin, "Prairie
Meadows Burning," 1832
and signature



Image Citations:

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