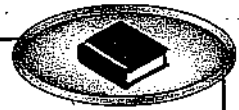


Primary Source Reading 8-2 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Custer on Native Americans**■ About the Selection**

Although he was raised in the city and his family were pacifists, George Armstrong Custer was a legendary cavalry soldier and Indian fighter. His reputation of fearlessness and tirelessness were earned during the Civil War when he was an aide to General McClellan, the commander of the Michigan Cavalry Brigade. After the Civil War, Custer led the Seventh U.S. Cavalry. *My Life on the Plains* is his book about most of those post-Civil War years. The account ends in early 1874, just before Custer's expedition to the Black Hills where he and

Reader's Dictionary**appellation:** name**pacific:** peaceful

his men discovered gold. The subsequent gold rush was one of the main reasons for renewed warfare with the Sioux.

GUIDED READING

As you read, note the traits Custer attributes to Native Americans. Then answer the questions that follow.

Stripped of the beautiful romance with which we have been so long willing to envelop him, transferred from the inviting pages of the novelist [Custer has just mentioned James Fenimore Cooper] to the localities where we are compelled to meet with him, in his native village, on the war path, and when raiding upon our frontier settlements and lines of travel, the Indian forfeits his claim to the appellation of the noble red man. We see him as he is, and, so far as all knowledge goes, as he ever has been, a savage in every sense of the word; not worse, perhaps, than his white brother would be, similarly born and bred, but one whose cruel and ferocious nature far exceeds that of any wild beast of the desert.

... Perhaps there are some who as members of peace commissions or as wandering agents of some benevolent society may have visited these tribes or attended with them at councils held for some pacific purpose, and who, by passing through the villages of the Indian while *at peace*, may imagine their opportunities for judging of the Indian nature all that could be desired. But the Indian, while he can seldom be accused of indulging in a great variety of wardrobe, can be said to have a character capable of adapting itself to almost every occasion. He has one character, perhaps his most serviceable one, which he preserves carefully, and only airs it when making his appeal to the Government or its agents for arms, ammunition, and license to employ them. This character is invariably paraded, and often with telling effect, when the motive is a peaceful one. ... Seeing them under these or similar circumstances only, it is not surprising that by many the Indian is looked upon as a

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Primary Source Reading 8-2 (continued) ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

simple-minded son of nature, desiring nothing beyond the privilege of roaming and hunting over the vast unsettled wilds of the West, inheriting and asserting but few native rights, and never trespassing upon the rights of others.

This view is equally erroneous with that which regards the Indian as a creature possessing the human form but divested of all other attributes of humanity, and whose traits of character, habits, modes of life, disposition, and savage customs disqualify him from the exercise of all rights and privileges, even those pertaining to life itself. Taking him as we find him, at peace or at war, at home or abroad, waiving all prejudices, and laying aside all partiality, we will discover in the Indian a subject for thoughtful study and investigation. In him we will find the representative of a race . . . incapable of being judged by the rules or laws applicable to any other known race of men; one between which and civilization there seems to have existed from time immemorial a determined and unceasing warfare. . . .

Source: *My Life on the Plains*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966.

READER RESPONSE

Directions: Answer the following questions on the lines below.

1. What does Custer paint as the true picture of the Indian?

2. What kind of nature does Custer attribute to Indians?

3. How does Custer believe the Indian gives false impressions to some people?

4. **Critical Thinking** Custer contradicts himself in his judgments about the Indian. What contradictions do you find?
