
SELLING THE “NOBLE SAVAGE” MYTH:

George Catlin and the Iowa Indians in Europe, 1843–1845

by Joseph B. Herring

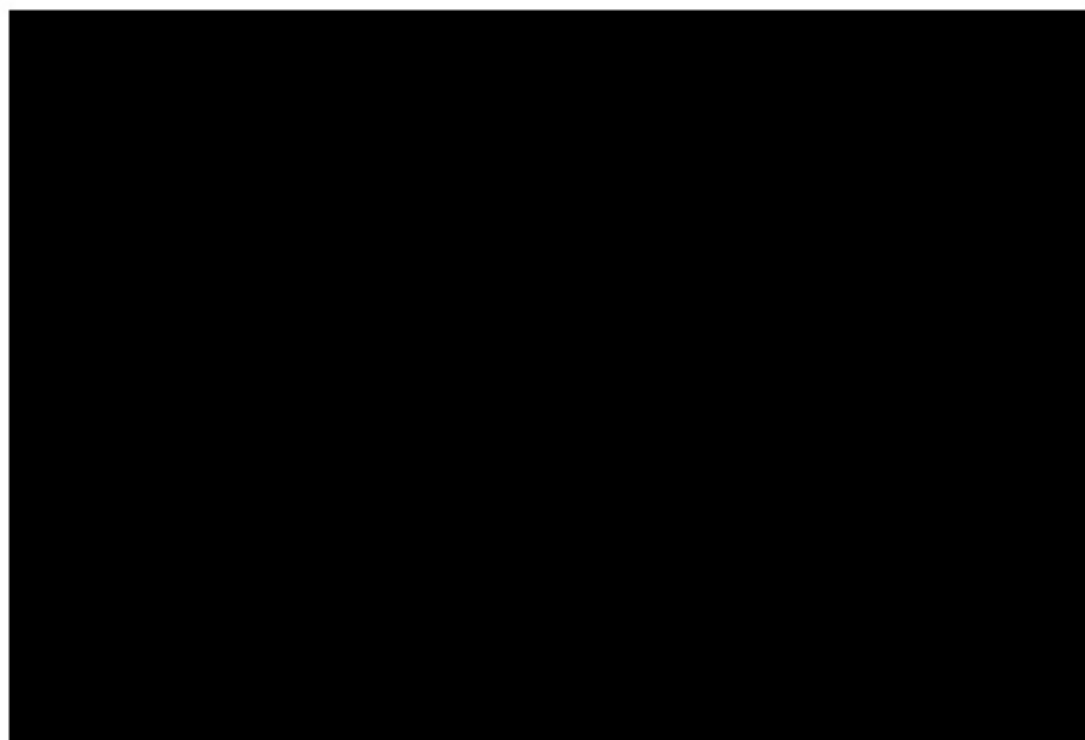
On August 24, 1844, in London, England, White Cloud, Neumonya (Walking Rain), Senontiyah (the Doctor), and several other Iowa, or Ioway, Indians rode horses, shot arrows, played lacrosse, performed tribal dances, and made speeches at Lord’s Cricket Ground on St. John’s Wood Road.¹ The Iowas had traveled over four thousand miles from their village straddling the eastern border of present-day Kansas and Nebraska to England to perform in artist George Catlin’s exhibition and show. Catlin touted these American Indians as living examples of “noble savages” and their war dances and other ceremonies as authentic rites of a vanishing way of life. The Iowa performers did their best to please the crowd, and, not surprisingly, the audience loved the show. The English spectators assumed they had seen the Noble Savage. Looks, however, could be deceiving, as some witnesses to the events that day fully realized.²

This study is partly about the American artist George Catlin and his white contemporaries who promoted a mythical image of Native Americans for profit. Their story is relatively well known to historians and other scholars. The added dimension in this narrative is a group of Indians—the Iowas—the “commodity” that Catlin and others peddled to the public. These Iowas willingly participated in a deception—a commodification of their own culture and traditions—because they saw an opportunity to ensure a place for themselves and their tribe in a rapidly changing, pre-Civil War America. They presented themselves as noble savages, a fictitious image, to advance their own ends, and they silently conspired with George Catlin to confirm what Europeans already believed to be true about Indians. Ironically, the false image they projected in Catlin’s shows provided

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1. Today, members of both the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska and the Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma refer to themselves as Iowas; however, many still call themselves Ioways.

2. For newspaper accounts of the Iowas’ initial shows in London, see *Illustrated London News*, July 27 and September 7, 1844; and *Morning Chronicle* (London), September 7 and 9, 1844.



George Catlin's painting of the Iowa Indians Who Visited London and Paris. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

an implicit critique of contemporary European society and culture. The apparently simple lives of the Iowas served as a counterpoint to an industrial society that was losing touch with nature and the pristine as it embraced the ways of the city, industry, and the search for wealth.

The Iowas who went to England had their own motivations for pretending to be noble Indians. By the late seventeenth century their tribe had been regularly interacting with missionaries and traders and, later, with settlers and sundry government officials. Most were thoroughly familiar with European-American customs and ways. The Iowas had been traders and businessmen, dealing furs, buffalo robes, deer pelts, and other goods to the French and the English well before families of settlers arrived on the scene. Several had intermarried with whites over the years, and in the 1830s some freely sent their children to a distant boarding school. By the early 1840s the Iowa band numbered some five hundred members who lived in a permanent village along the Missouri River near the present-day Kansas-Nebraska border, where they grew abundant quantities

of corn, squashes, pumpkins, potatoes, and other crops. A few families had even begun to stake out and cultivate their own lands, in the style of white farmers, and ten Iowa headmen and their families had moved into cozy, government-built houses, each "well sheeted and shingled," with windows, a brick fireplace, and wood flooring.³ The Iowas were excellent craftspeople, making pottery, utensils, weapons, and religious objects out of local materials. Culturally related to the Otoes, Poncas, Kaws, and Osages, they spoke a Siouan language, and their social and political structures were highly complex. The tribe was divided into two clan divisions, or phratries, each consisting of several clans and subclans. Although leadership positions were hereditary, the Iowas reached important decisions through consensus;

3. These houses, completed in 1842, had been promised to the Iowa headmen in an 1838 land cession treaty. See Charles Kappler, comp., *Treaties with the Indians, 1778-1888* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), 315-319; and Louise Barry, *The Beginning of the West: Annals of the Century to the American West, 1840-1860* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1972), 428-430.

a headman's power was never absolute. Despite their relative sophistication, the Iowas were still largely following their traditional ways of life. Their customs, however, differed markedly from those of the more peripatetic Plains Indians who more aptly fit the stereotype that Catlin was attempting to portray.⁴

By the 1840s the Iowas faced ever-increasing external pressures that threatened the very existence of their band. These pressures included attacks by Pawnees, Sioux, and other enemies; disease, particularly smallpox, and alcoholism; a shortage of game and a loss of timber and resources; and the rapid advance of white settlement, then approaching within a few miles of their village, making removal from their lands in the near future a seemingly foregone conclusion. When offered an opportunity to go to Europe for pay in 1843, several Iowas immediately accepted, for they saw the trip as an opportunity to learn more about white culture, which might help advance them and their tribe.⁵

Catlin, meanwhile, envisioned these Iowas as his ticket to the wealth and fame that had eluded him. He wanted to sell his vast collection of paintings and thought that the Iowas, authentic members of a "doomed" race of people, might facilitate that sale. He was a steadfast champion of the Noble Savage myth, which described American Indians as independent beings of stately bearing, brave but honorable warriors and beautiful princesses, gifted orators, and creatures of innocence and simplicity living from the bounty of nature.⁶ By 1844 he was well known in England

for sounding the alarm that these noble savages and their traditional ways were doomed in civilization's wake. Just three years earlier he had released his two-volume *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, which served notice that Indians would soon vanish as a people along with the bison and other wild creatures of the American West. The work received sympathetic reviews in the British press, partly because English critics opposed America's harsh treatment of Indians and concluded that Catlin was correct—the U.S. government should be doing more to prevent the "inevitable extinction" of America's innocent, noble tribal peoples.⁷

The notion that noble Indians lived in harmony with nature's laws had enthralled the English and other Europeans long before Catlin's time. The myth began soon after Columbus's voyages and was later refined and perpetuated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other eighteenth-century philosophers. The concept of the Noble Savage was eventually incorporated into Romanticism, the nineteenth-century movement that fostered exoticism and the glorification of nature. The Romantics hoped to reform a world made chaotic by industrialization, urbanization, and a headlong quest for profit. Their philosophy was a rejection of the modern, industrial world; for them, primitive societies represented the ultimate in natural perfection.⁸

Novelist Amandine-Aurore-Lucie Dupin, baronne Dudevant, or George Sand, as she was popularly known,

4. For information on Iowa Indian history and culture, see Martha Royce Blaine, *The Ioway Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979); Roy W. Meyer, "The Iowa Indians, 1836-1885," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 28 (Autumn 1962): 273-300; Alanson Skinner, "A Summer Among the Sauk and Iowa Indians," *Yearbook of the Public Museum of the City of Milwaukee* 2 (August 1923): 6-22; Duane Anderson, "Ioway Ethnohistory: A Review," *Annals of Iowa* 41 (Spring 1973): 1228-1241, and 42 (Summer 1973): 41-59; and Joseph B. Herring, *The Enduring Indians of Kansas: A Century and a Half of Acculturation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 70-97.

5. See Herring, *Enduring Indians of Kansas*, 80-84.

6. At least one scholar has noted that Catlin continually struggled with the simultaneous, contradictory impulses of promoting Indian welfare while selling the Noble Savage. See Christopher Mulvey, "Among the Sag-a-noshes: Ojibwa and Iowa Indians with George Catlin in Europe, 1843-1848," in *Indians in Europe: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays*, ed. Christian F. Feest (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 253-275. The Indian as Noble Savage has been the subject of numerous publications. See, for example, Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 72-111; Ray Allen Billington, "The Plains and Deserts Through European Eyes," *Western Historical Quarterly* 10 (October 1979): 467-487; Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.

W. Norton, 1981), 18-25, 105-106, 144; Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 196-236; and James H. Howard, "The Native American Image in Western Europe," *American Indian Quarterly* 4 (February 1978): 33-56. One scholar asserts that the myth of the Noble Savage is itself a myth. Without apparently consulting any primary documentation and ignoring a vast array of critical secondary sources, this author still claims that the actual term was rarely, if ever, used between 1609, the date of its first mention in print, and 1859, when it was "resurrected" by British ethnographer John Crawfurd. See Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), xiii-xxi, 1-8, 178-192.

7. George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians: Written During Eight Years' Travel (1832-1839) Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1973), 1:293. The artist is also quoted in Berkhofer, *White Man's Indian*, 89. For information on Catlin and the release of his two-volume work, see Brian W. Dippie, *Catlin and His Contemporaries: The Politics of Patronage* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 68-72.

8. See Billington, *Land of Savagery*, 18; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950; repr. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 52; Howard Mumford Jones, *O Strange New World* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), 1-34; and Gerald D. Nash, "European Images of America: The West in Historical Perspective," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 42 (Spring 1992): 4-5.



Catlin, self-portrait of the artist at work, ca. 1835.

was one who idealized the way of life of the French peasant. "Look at what is simple, my kind reader," she advised, "look at the sky, the fields, the trees, and what is good and true in the peasants; you will catch a glimpse of them in my book [*The Devil's Pool*] but you will see them much better in nature." The French writer François-René de Chateaubriand expressed these same sentiments when writing about American Indians in his book *Atala, ou les amours de deux sauvages dans le désert*, published at the turn of the nineteenth century. This romantic novel was an immediate success in Europe, going through six editions in its first year of publication.⁹

In America the artistic and literary idealization of primitive peoples occurred only after most Eastern Indians had been driven across the Appalachians and beyond the Mississippi River. The relocation of the tribes to the West tended to make them idealized figures from a largely mythical past for many, especially New Englanders. Even before passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830 began pushing the remaining Indians to the West, readers had been taking pleasure in the fictional adventures of Natty Bumppo, the hero of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* and other Leatherstocking Tales.¹⁰ They also flocked to

stage plays portraying King Philip, or Metacom, and other supposedly heroic but long-dead Indians. These romanticized Indians served as models of integrity and strength for Americans eager to create for themselves a positive national identity—an identity separate from and superior to that of Europe.¹¹

By the mid-1830s Catlin's striking portraits of Indians and colorful scenes of buffalo hunts and other tribal activities were also helping to shape the positive vision that Easterners had of Indians. Although the artist had spent considerable time among the Iowas and numerous other Western tribes, and despite witnessing tribal poverty and cultural disruption, he still maintained a distinctly romantic view of his subjects. In 1832, for example, he wrote, "I have for a long time been of [the opinion] that the wilderness of our country afforded models equal to those from which the Grecian sculptors transferred to the marble such intimate grace and beauty; and I am now more confirmed in this opinion, since I have immersed myself in the midst of thousands and tens of thousands of these knights of the forest; whose whole lives are lives of chivalry, and whose daily feats, with their naked limbs, might vie with those of the Grecian youths in the beautiful rivalry of the Olympian games."¹²

Catlin's paintings became a major influence in creating a fantasized West—a West of the imagination. Inspired by Cooper's novels, Catlin traversed the West during the 1830s, painting numerous scenes of Indian ceremonies and buffalo hunts as well as portraits of Comanches, Kiowas, Ojibwas, Osages, Hidatsas, Mandans, and others. The detailed depictions of the Indians and their ceremonies eventually won him worldwide acclaim, and he began championing Indian causes. He knew that the westward advance of white settlement was inevitable but felt powerless to save the Indians, for he was certain their race was doomed. When the Indians and their old ways disappeared, the artist reasoned, his works would be among the few surviving records, and his paintings would grow in value. Selling the

9. Quotation in George Sand, "Author's Preface" to *The Devil's Pool*, in *French Fiction*, vol. 13, ed. William Allan Neilson (New York: P. F. Collier, 1917), 276. There are several variant spellings of Sand's actual name; for example, it is sometimes written as Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin. Sand was undoubtedly influenced by Chateaubriand's writings. See John Joseph, "Itinerary: The Romantic Travel Journal after Chateaubriand," *South Central Review* 1 (Spring–Summer 1984): 43–48. For a translated version of Chateaubriand's novel, see François-René de Chateaubriand, *Atala, or, The Love and Constancy of Two Savages in the Desert*, trans. Caleb Bingham (Boston: David Carlisle, 1802).

10. For analyses of Cooper's contribution to the Noble Savage myth, see Kay Seymour House, *Cooper's Americans* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1965), 47–71; Leslie A. Fiedler, "The Indian in Literature in English," in *History of Indian-White Relations*, vol. 4 of *Handbook of North American Indians*, ed. Wilcomb E. Washburn (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 575–576; Martin Barker and Roger Sabin, *The Lasting of the Mohicans: History of an American Myth* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), 3–33; John P. McWilliams, "Red Satan: Cooper and the American Indian Epic," in *James Fenimore Cooper: New Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Clark (London: Vision Press, and Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1985), 143–161; Gordon Brotherston, "The Prairie and Cooper's Invention of the West," in Clark, *New Critical Essays*, 162–186; Donald A. Ridge, *James Fenimore Cooper* (Boston: Twayne, 1962), 26–55; Arvid Shulenberg, *Cooper's Theory of Fiction: His Prefaces and Their Relation to His Novels* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 3–10, 75–92; Wayne Franklin, *The New World of James Fenimore Cooper* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Warren S. Walker, ed., *Leatherstocking and the Critics* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1965).

11. Jill Lepore argues that the government's pursuit of Indian removal and the popularity of plays about heroic Indians were part of the same phenomenon. Such plays, Lepore asserts, caused many Americans to believe that Indian removal from the East was "inevitable" and that long-dead Indians could be role models for those in search of a distinctive American identity. See Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 191–226.

12. Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, 1:15.

Noble Savage, he thought, might be his avenue to wealth and fame.¹³

In the late 1830s, however, Catlin's attempts to peddle his extensive collection of paintings to the U.S. government failed. To earn a living, the artist organized "Catlin's Indian Gallery," which appeared in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, and other cities. The gallery featured lectures by the artist and displays of his paintings as well as artifacts collected during his ventures in the West. In the fall of 1837 Catlin arranged for some Sacs, Foxes, Sioux, and Iowas to appear in New York to assist him in answering audience questions about tribal hunting practices.¹⁴ Audiences soon lost interest in Catlin and his gallery, however; the great financial panic that had begun that May undoubtedly contributed to the woeful turnout at the box office. When he failed again two years later to persuade government officials to buy his collection, the artist grew restless. He yearned to find a place where audiences were more enthusiastic and profits could be made.¹⁵

In late November 1839 Catlin sailed to England with an exhibition of 507 paintings. The show opened at London's Egyptian Hall, number 22 on Piccadilly, where the artist delivered lectures on tribal customs and held demonstrations featuring drumbeats, war cries, and traditional dances. These productions initially featured Catlin and other whites performing in Indian costume, and they attracted a host of paying customers and influential guests. The artist then took

13. William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 15–35. For analyses of Catlin's contribution to the romantic image of Indians, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 181–188; and Lee Clark Mitchell, *Witness to a Vanishing America: The Nineteenth-Century Response* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 93–109. See also Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, 2:207; for detailed information on Catlin, see Dippie, *Catlin and His Contemporaries*, 3–46, 97–155; Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 25–31; and Brian W. Dippie, "Green Fields and Red Men," in *George Catlin and His Indian Gallery*, ed. George Gurney and Therese Thau Heyman (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 27–61. See also William H. Goetzmann, "The West as Romantic Horizon," in *The West as Romantic Horizon*, by William H. Goetzmann, Joseph C. Porter, and David C. Hunt (Omaha, Neb.: Joslyn Art Museum, 1981), 15–18; and Philip D. Thomas, "George Catlin: Pictorial Historian of Aboriginal America," *Natural History* 81 (December 1972): 30–43.

14. These Iowas were part of a remnant band living at Council Bluffs. In 1845, after several years at Council Bluffs, these itinerant Iowas rejoined the main band on the Kansas-Nebraska border. See S. M. Irvin to W. P. Richardson, September 30, 1845, U.S. Congress, *House Executive Documents*, 29th Cong., 1st sess., serial 480 (Washington, D.C.: Ritchie, 1845), 605–606; and Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 420, 458–459, 538.

15. Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 18–20; Dippie, *Catlin and His Contemporaries*, 64–68.

the show to Liverpool, Manchester, Edinburgh, Dublin, and other cities and received good reviews. In Sunderland, Scotland, in March 1843, for example, he presented a short lecture followed by a demonstration in which twenty whites in Indian garb performed the "scalp dance" and reenacted battle scenes. "It was a rich treat to all," a local newspaper noted glowingly, "especially to those acquainted—through their reading—with Indian life." It apparently mattered little to the newspaper's editors that no actual Indians were involved in Catlin's program. "The figures of these genuine sons of the forest were striking," the paper noted; "their costumes elegant and appropriate, and their statue-like attitudes; and varied quick, and simultaneous movements, chained, as it were, the attention of the audience, and drew from them loud and repeated acclamation."¹⁶

Even with whites in costume, Catlin brought the Noble Savage to English audiences, reinforcing the myth while distancing the image of Indians further from reality. Later that year the artist attempted to make his show more authentic and arranged with nine Canadian Ojibwas, or Chippewas, and their promoter, Arthur Rankin, to feature "real wild Indians" singing, dancing, and shouting "war-whoops" at his gallery.¹⁷ Catlin thought that he had little choice but to use real Indians because ticket sales to his exhibit barely covered expenses, which included the high rental of the large room at Egyptian Hall. The Ojibwas had come to England ostensibly to petition for annuities from the British government.¹⁸ Another motivation, however, like that of the Iowas who would soon follow them, may simply have been to profit from participation in Catlin's shows.

By adding the Ojibwas to his exhibition, the artist created the first actual Wild West show. His effort to convince British audiences that the Ojibwas were noble and pure, however, did not always succeed. Frederic Madden of the British Museum, for example, abruptly left one disappointing performance just as the Ojibwas were to begin shaking hands with the audience. Madden was no advocate of the Noble Savage; to him, Indians were simply uncultured barbarians. He later confided in his diary that he had "no

16. *Northern Times* (Sunderland, Scotland), March 24, 1843; Therese Thau Heyman, "George Catlin and the Smithsonian," in Gurney and Heyman, *Catlin and His Indian Gallery*, 251–252.

17. Catlin advertised his productions widely. See, for example, *Morning Chronicle* (London), December 25 and 26, 1843; see also Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 276.

18. *Niles' National Register* 15 (September 2, 1843): 16.

White Cloud (Notch-ee-ning-a) the younger, "the son of a very distinguished chief of the same name," wrote Catlin, "was tastefully dressed with a buffalo robe, wrapped around him, with a necklace of grizzly bear's claws on his neck" (North American Indians, 2:25, Fig. 129). In his early thirties White Cloud succeeded his father as headman, but he faced a constant struggle for control of the band. Missionaries and government officials recognized him as a chief, but most of the Iowas favored Neumonya and No Heart.



ambition to grasp the hand of a dirty savage."¹⁹ Neither did Charles Dickens. These Indians, Dickens railed, were no more than "wretched creatures, very low in the scale and very poorly formed." The renowned novelist had read Catlin's "picturesque" two-volume narrative and seen the

19. Quoted in Altick, *Shows of London*, 278; see also Reddin, *Wild West Shows*, xvi, 1–52.

Ojibwas "dancing their miserable jigs," and he concluded that the American artist was entirely naive. At one show an incredulous Dickens listened as the American implored the audience to examine the Ojibwas' "symmetry and grace, their perfect limbs, and the exquisite expression of their pantomime." The novelist was appalled by the audience's willing acceptance of this patent deception. The Indians' dramatic presentation, he insisted, was "no better than the chorus at an Italian Opera in England—and would have

been worse if such a thing were possible." The Noble Savage, Dickens pronounced, was little more than a "conceited, tiresome, bloodthirsty, monotonous humbug."²⁰

Catlin paid little heed to such diatribes, however, and he carried on his quest for increased ticket sales. In late August 1844, after the relationship with the Ojibwas and the promoter had soured, White Cloud, Neumonya, and twelve other Iowa Indians began entertaining audiences outdoors at Lord's Cricket Ground and, a short time later, at Vauxhall Gardens. The Iowas had not been changed by proximity to white civilization, the artist blandly but wrongly insisted. "That the Ioway was one of the remote tribes, yet adhering to all their native customs and native looks ... not only conveyed to the eyes of the people in [England] the most accurate account of primitive modes, but was calculated to excite the deepest interest, and to claim the respect of the community."²¹

Catlin was now a showman, apparently believing his own fabrications as he became captured by the romantic mood of the times. In reality, he had known for years that the Iowas were hardly noble, pure, or even primitive. When the artist had first encountered the same Iowas twelve years earlier in the Little Platte Valley of present-day northwest Missouri, he had noted that they were "the farthest departed from primitive modes" of any tribe in the region. He painted portraits of the tribal leaders White Cloud the elder and No-Heart-of-Fear, or No Heart, and was impressed by the sophistication of both men. Although the Iowas still hunted deer and other game, Catlin fully realized that this band bore little resemblance to Cooper's romantic children of the forest.²²

20. Charles Dickens, "The Noble Savage," in *The Uncommercial Traveler and Reprinted Pieces Etc.* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 467–473. This article was originally published on June 11, 1853, in *Household Words*, a weekly magazine that Dickens edited.

21. George Catlin, *Notes on Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe with His North American Indian Collection. With Anecdotes and Incidents of the Travels and Adventures of Three Different Parties of American Indians Whom He Introduced to the Courts of England, France, and Belgium*, 2 vols. (London: privately printed, 1848), 2:12. The Ojibwas performed with Catlin through the spring of 1844. See Dippie, *Catlin and His Contemporaries*, 101; and William H. Truettner, *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), 41–46. For information on Lord's cricket ground, see "History of Lord's Cricket Field, London, England," http://cricketclub.org/england_history.html. For descriptions of Iowa performances at Vauxhall Gardens, see *Illustrated London News*, September 7, 1844; and *Morning Chronicle* (London), September 7 and 9, 1844.

22. Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, 2:22. For an account of the Iowas' adaptation to white ways in the 1830s, see Blaine, *Ioway Indians*, 225–228. Marjorie Catlin Roehm wrote that Catlin, her great-uncle, had known the Iowas

Several other travelers over the years had also known that to call the Iowas children of the wilderness stretched the limits of the imagination. Some whites even argued that the Iowas were, like most Indians, actually far more worldly-wise than the public appreciated. Most visitors pointed to the seemingly less desirable, ignoble aspects of Iowa tribal life. Shortly after Catlin's first visit to the Iowas in 1832, German naturalist Maximilian, prince of Wied-Neuwied, and his companion, Swiss artist Karl Bodmer, traveled among these same Indians, many of whom "were much marked with the small pox." The ethnocentric Maximilian noted, moreover, that the Iowas "looked very dirty and miserable. The countenances of the women were ugly but not quite so broad and flat" as those of other tribes. A few years later U.S. Indian Agent Andrew Hughes informed his superiors that the Iowas "were kept constantly drunk" by nearby white settlers. Several had recently died of alcohol poisoning, Hughes reported, and the Iowa village "presented each day a scene of drunkenness and riot." The noses, lips, and faces of many, furthermore, had suffered "bites and cuts" from frequent brawls.²³

In late April 1843, two years after the publication of Catlin's *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indian*, the naturalist John James Audubon encountered a group of Iowas on board the steamboat *Omega*. Audubon was unimpressed with these "poor beings," who were returning from St. Louis to their homes some three hundred miles to the west. After dropping off the Iowas, the *Omega* continued up the Missouri River, reaching Fort Clark in present-day North Dakota in early June. The Indians and landscape that Audubon observed on his venture bore little resemblance to those Catlin had described in his writings. Like Dickens, Audubon had reservations about the Noble Savage. He was disappointed that the Mandans, for example, appeared to be "poor, miserable devils," and their earthen lodges scarcely as orderly and "poetical" as Catlin had depicted in his paintings. "We have seen much remarkable handsome scenery," the naturalist allowed, "but nothing at all comparing with Catlin's

well and "several times he had been given hospitality" in their village in northwest Missouri. See Marjorie Catlin Roehm, *The Letters of George Catlin and His Family: A Chronicle of the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 299–300.

23. For Maximilian and Bodmer's visit to the Iowas, see Blaine, *Ioway Indians*, 174–175. For the agent's observations, see Andrew Hughes to Superintendent of Indian Affairs Henry Dodge, May 12, 1837, Letters Received, Great Nemaha Agency, M234, roll 308, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, RG 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C.



According to Catlin, who painted their portraits in the mid-1830s, *Pah-ta-coo-che (the Shooting Cedar), the Iowa on the left, and Was-com-mum (the Busy Man)* “are also distinguished warriors of the tribe.”

descriptions; his book must, after all, be altogether humbug. Poor devil! I pity him from the bottom of my soul.”²⁴

Presbyterian missionaries William Hamilton and Samuel Irvin initially had similar negative impressions of the Iowas, Sacs and other tribes living along the Missouri River and its tributaries. When they first arrived among them in the late 1830s, these missionaries were sure that the Iowas “were a wild, warlike, roving people, and in most wretched condition, depending mainly on the chase for subsistence.” The preachers were never pleased that few Indians showed up to church services, but they were surprised by the inquisitive nature of those who did attend. “Does the devil put the

wood on the big fire in hell?” was one inquiry the missionaries often fielded. Such questions made the Presbyterians wonder if their cause was hopeless. After preaching among the Iowas for several years, however, the two men came to realize that these Indians were far more sophisticated than either had first assumed. Although the ethnocentric preachers frequently denigrated Iowa customs and religion, they grudgingly conceded that tribal customs and ways, rather than simply being naive, served the Iowas well. They were frequent attendees at tribal dances, puberty rites, marriage ceremonies, and funerals, and they observed the Indians’ farming, hunting, and cooking methods. They discovered that Iowa religion, for example, “requires long acquaintance, and close observation, to arrive at anything like just conclusions.” After studying tribal beliefs and discovering a flood myth very similar to that in the Old Testament, the

24. John James Audubon, *Audubon’s America: The Narratives and Experiences of John James Audubon*, ed. Donald Culross Peattie (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), 275–298.



"The Konzas," wrote Catlin in his *North American Indians* (2:26, Fig. 133 and Fig. 134), "reside at the distance of sixty or eighty miles from this place [Fort Leavenworth], on the Konzas River, fifty miles above its union with the Missouri, from the West." He did not make a portrait of their main chief, White Plume, but "fair specimens of these people" are "Sho-me-cos-se (the Wolf ...), a chief of some distinction" (left), and "Meach-o-shin-gaw," or "the little white bear."

missionaries were certain that "many analogies" existed between the religions of the Iowas and the biblical Jews. These people, the white men came to realize, were hardly savage children of the forest. Indeed, they were human beings, with the typical human strengths as well as weaknesses.²⁵

If they had read Catlin's writings, the ministers would very likely have scoffed at the description of Indians as

25. Joseph B. Herring, "Presbyterian Ethnologists Among the Iowa and Sac Indians, 1837-1853," *American Presbyterians: Journal of Presbyterian History* 65 (Fall 1987): 195-203. On September 17, 1836, the Iowas and neighboring Missouri Sacs agreed by treaty to exchange their lands in northwest Missouri for a small reservation along the present-day Kansas-Nebraska border. See Kappler, *Indian Treaties*, 468-470. See also Herring, *Enduring Indians of Kansas*, 70; Blaine, *Ioway Indians*, 163-170.

chivalrous "knights of the forest." Like the traders, fur trappers, federal agents, and settlers who ventured beyond the Appalachians, missionaries were likely to hold a far less positive view than that of Catlin. Historian Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. has described the two fundamental but contradictory conceptions about Indians—the noble and the ignoble savage—that have long prevailed in the minds of white Americans. The ignoble savage, Berkhofer asserts, represented "lechery, passion and vanity," leading "to lives of polygamy and sexual promiscuity among themselves and constant warfare and fiendish revenge against their enemies." The Iowas' violent actions, the Presbyterians well knew, were anything but noble or chivalrous. The frequent personal quarrels and factional bickering within the band

also ran counter to the myth that, at least on the intratribal level, Indians traditionally lived in harmonious innocence and simplicity.²⁶

Hamilton and Irvin regularly commented on the Iowas' apparent propensity for mayhem. In February 1838 Hamilton was horrified when an intoxicated Iowa murdered the government-employed interpreter. The victim was stabbed in the head and chest while trying to protect his parents, who had taken refuge in the lodge of the military leader, Neumonya. The murderer himself was killed a year later, "having been shot with several arrows and finally being tomahawked," but only after he had severely wounded Neumonya and clobbered White Cloud the younger with a brick.²⁷

In February 1840 Hamilton discovered many Iowas inebriated, "frothing at the mouth, and unable to speak distinctly; sore eyes [were] very prevalent, caused in good measure by their intemperance." The "great thirst" for whiskey had not subsided when Samuel Irvin visited the Iowa lodges again a year later. Incidents of alcoholism were "growing worse and worse," Irvin wrote. His concern seemed justified in April 1841 when a war party returned with nine Pawnee scalps. During the victory celebration that followed, the preacher observed intoxicated men and women dancing around the trophies of war—the nine scalps, some severed hands and ears, and a heart "cut and stretched on a stick." In February 1842 Irvin informed Presbyterian authorities that "within the last five months, no less than five individuals (including a French man who was married to a squaw) have been murdered in drunken revels."²⁸

26. See Berkhofer, *White Man's Indian*, 28; and Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., "White Conceptions of Indians," in *History of Indian-White Relations*, 528–539. One historian notes that no Presbyterian missionary ever really subscribed to the Noble Savage myth; see Michael C. Coleman, *Presbyterian Missionary Attitudes Toward American Indians, 1837–1893* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 119.

27. William Hamilton to Presbyterian Mission Secretary Walter Lowrie, February 12, 1838, and Hamilton to Lowrie, May 28, 1839, in *American Indian Correspondence: The Presbyterian Historical Society Collection of Missionary Letters, 1833–1893* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Microform Department, 1981), box 8, vol. 1, letters 4 and 44 (hereafter cited as Presbyterian Mission Records).

28. "Journal of the Rev. William Hamilton," February 28, 1840, Presbyterian Mission Records, letter 57; S. M. Irvin to Lowrie, February 16, 1842, Presbyterian Mission Records, letter 81; "Diary of Samuel Irvin," February 22 and April 21, 1841, Diaries of Samuel M. Irvin, 1841–1848, box 89, microfilm, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka (hereafter cited as Irvin Diaries).

The military leader, Neumonya, held great influence among the Iowas and, along with No Heart, served as a principal spokesman at councils with government officials and talks with other tribes. The missionaries described Neumonya as a dignified man in his midforties with a "shrewd and cunning mind"; he was also a "ready speaker" who got along well with white visitors. White Cloud the younger, then in his early thirties, had succeeded his father as headman; however, he faced a constant struggle for control of the band. Missionaries and government officials recognized him as a chief, but most of the Iowas favored Neumonya and No Heart. The situation did not please White Cloud, who frequently endeavored to embarrass his adversaries to solidify control over the band. Samuel Irvin noted that a "great jealousy" existed between White Cloud and Neumonya, who "do not blush to tell clear lies on each other."²⁹

Fortunately, an opportunity to earn money for themselves and their band appeared in the person of one George Henry Curzon Melody—an agent for showman Phineas T. Barnum—and put a temporary end to their quarrels. Melody, a former jailer from St. Louis, arrived at the Iowa village in the fall of 1843 and proposed to take a group of Indians on a European tour.³⁰ His employer, Barnum, was then in New York entertaining audiences with General Tom Thumb, a six-year-old dancing and singing dwarf. Barnum had recently tried without much success to engage Indians at his popular American Museum in New York City. The celebrated showman complained that his Indian actors, including "the most beautiful Indian maid that ever left her native wild," had been difficult to manage and to control. Because they persistently demanded and got exorbitant presents as remuneration, the Indians were also not as profitable as his sundry jugglers, ventriloquists, gypsies, Fiji mermaids, giants, dwarfs, fossils, and other curiosities. On January 18, 1844, Barnum and a few intimates, includ-

29. See S. M. Irvin and William Hamilton, "Iowa and Sac Tribes," in *Information Respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, ed. Henry R. Schoolcraft (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1853), 3:265; and Irvin Diaries, May 17, 1842. For brief but sympathetic descriptions of White Cloud, Neumonya, No Heart, and other Iowas, see James D. Horan, *The McKenney-Hall Portrait Gallery of American Indians* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1972), 306–314.

30. For information on Melody, see Ray V. Denslow, *Out of the Past: The Story of George Henry Curzon Melody* (St. Louis, Mo.: Royal Arch Masons, 1942), 3, 14–18. For an account of Melody's initial dealings with the Iowas, see Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 519–520.



"At the head of the Grand Pawnees," observed Catlin, was "Shon-ka-ki-he-ga," the "horse chief" (North American Indians, 2:31, Fig. 138). The Pawnees were traditional enemies of the Iowas, but by the late 1840s the Iowas were endeavoring to remain at peace with the Pawnees and other former enemies. When White Cloud led a war party that killed several Pawnees in May 1848, he was dismissed from the tribal council, and thereafter the Iowas remained largely peaceful, for they realized that whites would demand their removal for any serious acts of violence.

ing Charles "Tom Thumb" Stratton, embarked for England in search of bigger profits.³¹

Indian performers had resisted Barnum's efforts to make them perform contrived wedding rituals and other artificial tribal ceremonies to accommodate the tastes of white New Yorkers. Catlin, on the other hand, wisely allowed his Indian actors to decide for themselves, within certain parameters, how to perform their dances and other ceremonies. Barnum had not given up on the idea of using Indians to make money. He therefore hatched a plan that he was confident would succeed—he instructed his agent, Melody, to bring the Iowas to England, where they would be "exhibited by Mr. Catlin on our joint account." Barnum was impressed with Catlin's ability to handle Indian actors. "I find him a very kind, sociable and excellent gentleman," Barnum wrote, "and am most happy to add that he is making a fortune [in London]." The showman would wisely step aside, reaping his share of the profits as Catlin and Melody attended to the assorted details of promoting shows, selling admission tickets, and managing Indians.³²

In the fall of 1843 the Iowas, including the erstwhile adversaries White Cloud and Neu-

31. The so-called Indian maid was Dohumee, a young Sac woman who, reportedly, had just married one of the Iowas in the delegation. The *New York Herald* compared her favorably to Die Vernon, the heroine of Sir Walter Scott's *Rob Roy*. "Dee-Humm-Mee is the most beautiful Indian maid that ever left her native wild," the paper proclaimed. Tragically, Dohumee contracted a virus and died at Barnum's museum a few weeks later. See *New York Herald*, February 6, 1843; and "'Indian Princess'—Do-Hum-Me, 1824–1843," www.greenwood.com/pdf/dohumme54to55.pdf. For information on P. T. Barnum and Tom Thumb, see *The Lost Museum [P. T. Barnum's American Museum]*, www.lostmuseum.cuny.edu. For accounts of Barnum's use of Indians at the American Museum, see Phineas T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs; or, Forty Years' Recollections of P. T. Barnum* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Warren, Johnson, 1873), 151–153; M. R. Werner, *Barnum* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923), 71; and Irving Wallace, *The Fabulous Showman: The Life and Times of P. T. Barnum* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 70–71. Barnum promoted his Sac and Iowa performers as "warriors and squaws direct from their western wilds." See *New York Herald*, February 6, 9, 10, 13, 14, and 20, 1843.

32. Barnum is quoted in Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III, and Peter W. Kunhardt, *P. T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 61–62. See also Phineas T. Barnum, *The Life of P. T. Barnum, Written by Himself* (New York: Redfield, 1855), 345–346; and A. H. Saxon, *P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 135–136.

monya, began their European journey. These Iowas were hardly victims of some white impresario's exploitation, for they ventured east of their own volition and for their own reasons. The following decades would find many Indians emulating the Iowas, abandoning the reservation to accept low wages and poor working conditions to work and perform in Wild West shows and, later, Hollywood films. Their reasons for leaving home—poor living conditions, pressures to assimilate to white society, disease, and poverty—were remarkably similar to those of the Iowas.³³

The Iowas reached Cincinnati in early December and, a short time later, arrived in New York to spend the winter. Persuading them to cooperate in the moneymaking venture had proven easy for Melody, for the Indians surely recognized a good opportunity when they saw one. Living as subsistence farmers along the Missouri, threatened by Pawnee and Sioux enemies and hounded by missionaries and Indian agents to abandon traditional customs and ways, had grown tiresome for these tribal leaders and their families. They also realized that a trip to Europe would enhance their prestige and status at home among other Iowas. The promise of money, medals, medallions, and other gifts that such a trip would bring as well as the opportunity to meet royalty and other famous people influenced their decision. White Cloud had a personal reason for going; he reportedly suffered from a cataract in one eye and hoped that an operation by a European specialist would improve his vision.³⁴

Although he never admitted it, George Catlin certainly knew that Melody was on his way to London with the Iowas, an acculturated and apparently more compliant group than the Ojibwas. The artist

33. For an analysis of how twentieth-century Indian actors struggled to find accommodation in Hollywood, see Nicholas G. Rosenthal, "Representing Indians: Native American Actors on Hollywood's Frontier," *Western Historical Quarterly* 36 (Autumn 2005): 329–352.

34. See Jessie Melody Raber, "An Indian Delegation [sic] Visits Europe," *Colorado Magazine* 26 (April 1949):143–151; Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 519–520; and Hamilton and Irvin to Lowrie, December 22, 1843, Presbyterian Mission Records, letter 99; Niles' *National Register* 65 (December 9, 1843), 226. The *Illustrated London News* later reported that White Cloud suffered "a painful affection of the eye—a cataract; and we may here remark, that the hope of having this removed by a skillful occultist, was one of the inducements for the delegation to visit a foreign shore. The operation is shortly to be attempted, and that it may prove successful is our fervent wish." See *Illustrated London News*, August 10, 1844. White Cloud may not have had a cataract, as one report claimed that he had lost his eye in a drunken brawl. See Alexander R. Fulton, *Red Men of Iowa: Being a History of the Various Aboriginal Tribes* (Des Moines, Iowa: Mills, 1882), 125. Records do not indicate whether White Cloud ever had the operation.

and Melody had become acquainted in America, where Catlin had vouched for the talent agent's character and ability to deal with Indians. It was, therefore, entirely unlikely that Melody had stumbled upon the Iowas by chance; he undoubtedly had gotten word from Catlin that the Iowas would make ideal actors. Both men knew that these Indians were not stupid. "The Ioways," Melody wrote, displayed "more intelligence, more advancement from the aboriginal mind than other tribes." They would be easier to handle than the Ojibwas, and the paying customers of Europe would never know the difference. Unlike Catlin, Melody did not cloak his lust for profit in a veil of romanticism; he hoped to cash in on Catlin's apparent success in exhibiting "authentic" Indians before paying audiences.³⁵

In mid-July 1844 Melody and the Iowas, accompanied by interpreter Jeffrey Deroin, arrived in London. In addition to White Cloud, Neumonya, and the religious leader Senontiyah, the Iowa entourage included Washkamonya (Fast Dancer), Shontayiga (Little Wolf), Nohomunya (Roman Nose), Watonye (Foremost Man), and Watawebukana (Commanding General). The women included White Cloud's wife, Rutonyeweema (Strutting Pigeon); Rutonweeme (Pigeon-on-the-Wing); Koonzayame (Female War-Eagle Sailing); and Shontayiga's wife, Okeweme (Female Bear). The children were a girl named Tapatame and an infant, Corsair, who had been born to Okeweme on the Iowas' journey to England.³⁶

As the Indians settled into their London hotel that first evening, Melody met with George Catlin, and the two men immediately agreed to share all expenses and profits. Presumably, anything left over would go to the Indian actors. The following day Catlin announced that he was prepared to devote himself to helping the Iowas earn their keep, provided they behaved properly and remained "entirely so-

35. Melody quoted in Raber, "An Indian Delegation [sic] Visits Europe," 144. One scholar has suggested that the artist was truthful in insisting that "the three parties of Indians came to Europe on their own accord." See Mulvey, "George Catlin in Europe," in Gurney and Heyman, *Catlin and His Indian Gallery*, 69. Catlin's claim that all three Indian groups that eventually participated in his shows had arrived in Europe without his foreknowledge or assistance, however, is difficult to believe. Catlin had at least some advance notice that the Ojibwas were coming when he received a letter from Arthur Rankin proposing to lease the Indians to the artist; see L. G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883–1933* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 17. Catlin also had advance notice that the Iowas were coming; see Barnum, *Life of P. T. Barnum*, 345–346; and Saxon, *P. T. Barnum*, 135–136. Marjorie Catlin Roehm points out that Catlin had known Melody in America; see Roehm, *Letters of George Catlin*, 299–300.

36. Mulvey, "Catlin in Europe," 70.

ber, and free from the use of spirituous liquor."³⁷ When the Iowas promised to abide by these terms, their European adventure appeared to be off to a promising start. Not surprisingly, they promptly broke their temperance pledge, imbibing champagne and ale, and not long after, with Catlin's reluctant consent, they began frequenting London's gin shops. Senontiyah (the Doctor) especially enjoyed ogling the numerous prostitutes he saw around the city, and he asked Catlin and Melody for permission to visit a brothel. Back at their village in America, meanwhile, Agent William P. Richardson reported that living conditions for the remaining Iowas had improved dramatically, for these Indians consumed only half the whiskey and were far less troublesome now that Neumonya, White Cloud, and the others were away in Europe.³⁸

Managing the Iowas, Catlin soon learned, would prove to be a tall order. But these Indians would behave far better than the Ojibwas, and they were excited and optimistic about their prospects for success in their new roles as noble, romanticized Indians. As Neumonya explained to Londoners, his people were poor and "though the Great Spirit is with us, yet He has not taught us how to weave the beautiful things that you make in this country; we have seen many of those things brought to us, and we are now happy to be where all these fine things are made."³⁹

London's newspapers assisted in promoting the fiction. The Noble Savage was what the British public expected, and the press, eager to sell newspapers, gave readers what they wanted. The *Illustrated London News* reported that the Iowas had arrived from "their hunting grounds in Upper Missouri, near the Rocky Mountains, five hundred miles west of the Mississippi." The fact that the Iowa lands were on the lower Missouri River and well over six hundred miles east of the Rockies was of little apparent concern to the newspaper's geographically challenged editors. "The appearance of the party in their romantic costume, and armed with tomahawks and other warlike weapons," the

37. The specifics of this deal were not publicized; the lion's share of any proceeds, however, surely went to Melody and Catlin. See Catlin, *Notes on Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe*, 2:1-7; Blaine, *Ioway Indians*, 229-232; and Carolyn Thomas Foreman, *Indians Abroad, 1493-1938* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943), 185.

38. See Catlin, *Notes on Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe*, 2:49-50, 53-54, 95-101; Dippie, *Catlin and His Contemporaries*, 105, 460n11; and Richardson to Thomas H. Harvey, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, St. Louis, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1844* (Washington, D.C.: C. Alexander, 1844), 143-146.

39. Catlin, *Notes on Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe*, 2:36.

News reported, "is very picturesque. Their robes are covered with a profusion of brilliant ornaments, and the heads of the males, unlike the Ojibbeways, are shorn, with the exception of a crest of hair, to which is affixed [an eagle feather] ... and a variety of Indian *bijouterie*," or jewelry. The *London Times* opined that the Iowas were "the finest specimens of the Indian tribe that have ever visited Europe," and the *Court Journal* assured readers that they "far surpass the Ojibbeways in interest. They will delight whoever visit them." The Iowa "party consists of the aristocracy of the tribe," the *Morning Chronicle* enthused. The *Sunday Times* added that the dances and songs of the Indian men were "singularly wild and interesting, while the contented air of the women, with their little children, are those of the Indians which we read of in Cooper's novels."⁴⁰

Londoners found the Iowas awe inspiring, fulfilling their expectations of noble savages, and crowds flocked to Catlin's revitalized shows. Many American expatriates even found themselves attracted by the appearances of "these children of the forest."⁴¹ After several exhibitions in London, however, audiences began to lose interest, and Catlin was forced to take the show elsewhere. He and the Iowas traveled on to perform in Birmingham, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Edinburgh, Dundee, Perth, Glasgow, Greenock, Dublin, Liverpool, and Manchester. Curious spectators in these cities came to see the Indian dances and listen to the Iowas' speeches. Neumonya served as principal spokesman on the tour, solemnly explaining, through his interpreter, that the Indian "modes of life are different ... our dances are quite different, and we are glad that we do not give any offence when we dance them." He modestly admitted that their simple garments, "which are made of skins, are not so fine and beautiful ... but they keep us warm, and that we think is a great thing." Although amazed by the wealth and splendor of Europe, Neumonya and the others were saddened by the pervasive poverty they encountered in the major cities. The eloquent Iowa spokesman continued to insist, however, that Europeans were far more civilized than Indians, who were but "poor ignorant children from the wilderness."⁴²

40. These accounts are summarized in *Illustrated London News*, July 27, August 10 and 24, 1844. The Iowas' lands were actually along the Great Nemaha, a tributary of the Missouri River, in present-day Brown County, Kansas, and Richardson County, Nebraska.

41. *Boston Daily Atlas*, September 5, 1844.

42. Catlin, *Notes on Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe*, 2:167, 208.

Early in 1845 Catlin and the Iowas left the British Isles and traveled to Paris, which the Indians found to be the most cheerful city they would visit. At the Tuileries Palace they had an audience with King Louis-Philippe, who declared that it was an honor to introduce them to the queen and the rest of his family; the citizen king then presented gold and silver medals to White Cloud and Neumonya. Apologizing for their simple, "coarse clothes," Neumonya replied that it was a "great day" for his people—"so great a day that our eyes are blinded by the lustre of it."⁴³

The Iowas attracted considerable attention in Paris, and many wealthy and famous personalities attended the "traditional" performances that Catlin directed. George Sand, whose curiosity had been aroused by the arrival of the "aborigines" from America, was among those attending a show at the Salle Valentino on Rue St. Honore in May 1845. This remarkable Frenchwoman cut quite an unconventional figure, for she regularly wore men's clothes, dressing as a woman only for social occasions, and she was noted for her numerous love affairs. Throughout the 1840s her novels and other writings idealized peasants and wage laborers while criticizing the elitism of the French upper classes. She was famous throughout Europe as an advocate for the underprivileged.⁴⁴

Despite her concern for the poor, Sand's interest in the Iowas was motivated by curiosity rather than political or social impulse. She received tickets to Catlin's exhibition from Alexandre Vattemare, who acted as manager for Catlin's troupe during its stay in France. She forwarded one ticket to Eugène Delacroix, then France's most prominent painter and one of her closest friends. In her accompanying letter, Sand encouraged Delacroix to visit the exhibit and also invited him to see a large painting of the Iowas that she had obtained. She attended a performance on May 29 and was profoundly moved by the experience. Two days later she sent an inquiry to Vattemare requesting a personal interview with the Indians. Sand informed the manager that the Iowas had fascinated her; they seemed "gentle and affectionate," yet while dancing they could suddenly appear "energetic and even ferocious." She wanted to question

them privately about their customs, beliefs, and ideas. Her intention, she explained, was not mere curiosity; following her interview she would write magazine articles promoting Catlin's paintings. She also offered to bring gifts to the Indians as compensation for their agreeing to meet with her.⁴⁵

The Iowas consented to an interview that took place on June 3. A few days later, two articles written by Sand appeared in *Le Diable à Paris* under the title "Relation d'un voyage chez les sauvages de Paris." Sand later explained that the Iowas were not mere "sauvages de contrebande" as the public imagined, and that her essays offered a "true" portrait of the Indians. Her articles, however, clearly reflected the Noble Savage tradition as defined by the Romantic writers, in which myth does not meet reality. The novelist's descriptions of the Iowas and their customs contained the two prevailing but contradictory premises of the day: first, the Indians were innocent, honest, and upright children of the wilderness; second, they were wild, inhuman, bloodthirsty savages.⁴⁶

Like Catlin's writings, Sand's articles warned that all American Indians were threatened by the debilitating effects of contact with white society. The novelist rightly pointed out that the Iowas faced the dilemma of preserving their traditional ways while having to accept certain white customs in order to survive. She used the standard literary conventions to build an image of them as pure, simple, and dignified. Rejecting the view that they degraded themselves by performing their sacred religious rites for pay, Sand asserted that the Indians were on a serious mission for their tribe. They were, she insisted, the "new Argonauts," and their leader, White Cloud, despite his infected eye and "melancholy" appearance, was a "modern Jason."⁴⁷

45. See George Sand, *Correspondence*, ed. Georges Lubin, 26 vols. (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1964–c. 1995), 6:870–871, 873–876. According to Catlin, the Iowas were besieged with requests for interviews, and he left it to them to decide whether or not to grant them. See Catlin, *Notes on Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe*, 2:247.

46. Sand, *Correspondence*, 881–882. One scholar writes that although she may have known the true nature of the Iowas, Sand had good reason for "masking Indian realities." The French public expected noble savages, so Sand delivered. See Sharon L. Fairchild, "George Sand and George Catlin—Masking Indian Realities," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 22 (Spring–Summer 1994): 439–449. *Le Diable à Paris* was a multivolume collection of writings by several well-known authors. It was published in a subscription series by Pierre-Jules Hetzel beginning in April 1844.

47. Sand, "Relation d'un voyage chez les sauvages de Paris," in *Oeuvres illustrées*, ed. Hetzel-Blanchard-Marescq (Paris: 1852–1856): 41–48.

43. *Ibid.*, 210–214.

44. Among Sand's works of the period were *Horace* (1842), *Jeanne* (1844), *Le Meunier d'Angibault* (1845), and *Le Pêché de Monsieur Antoine* (1845).



Buffalo Chase, from Catlin's *North American Indian Portfolio: Hunting Scenes and Amusements of the Rocky Mountains and Prairies of American* (1844).

This image of the dignified Indian extended to the other Iowas. Their physical attributes, Sand implied, set them apart as a superior, aristocratic people. Like Catlin's paintings, her articles compared the Indian men to Greek gods or ancient works of art. She likened Neumonya's son, Watwebukana, for example, to "an antique bronze worthy of Phidias," the great sculptor of ancient Greece. She thought Senontiyah possessed a "beauty worthy of Greek statuary." The novelist was most impressed with Shontayiga. "This noble warrior," Sand wrote,

whose Herculean appearance and large, accentuated features at first frightened me, but who, at the side of his sick wife, his heart full of sadness because of the recent death of his child, seemed to me the most gentle and best of men. When he was the first to jump forth in the dance ... my friends compared him to Diomedes. When he resumed his calm and gentle countenance to accept the congratulations of the audience, we called him the Jupiter of the virgin forest; but ... when we heard his story, we saw only a noble and honest figure, characterized by courage and good-

ness, and we named him “the generous one,” a name that would suit him much better than Little Wolf, for nothing in his powerful and sweet constitution expresses ferocity or ruse.⁴⁸

Little Wolf’s infant daughter, Corsair, had died in London, and at the time of the performance that Sand attended, his wife, Okeweme, was gravely ill. Sadly, Okeweme died and was buried in Paris in mid-June 1845.⁴⁹

Besides their resemblance to ancient gods, the reserved nature of the Indians impressed Sand, who was disappointed when White Cloud accepted her gift of red cloth with little show of emotion. She was naive if she truly thought that White Cloud would be satisfied with a simple piece of cloth as payment for the interview. On their journeys the Iowas received hundreds of gifts, including 150 Bibles, thousands of trinkets, and other useless items. The Iowas knew value when they saw it and most likely had little use for pieces of cloth or other such trifles.⁵⁰

Sand’s essays were neither objective nor realistic descriptions of American Indians. As an author of Romantic literature, she wanted readers to experience the thrills, wonders, and dangers of meeting exotic peoples and visiting faraway places. Her colorful descriptions of the Iowas and their ceremonies closely resembled the style of her fiction; her articles on the Indians, therefore, had little bearing on reality. But the Noble Savage was what the reading public expected, and Parisians would have been disappointed with a straightforward account of the American Indian. The following years saw Sand’s literary production grow, and before her death in 1876 her novels had won her worldwide acclaim. Her interest in Indians had proved fleeting, however, for after the encounter with the Iowas she wrote nothing more about them.

Meanwhile, George Catlin found his fortune on the wane. His business partners, Barnum and Melody, had long since abandoned him. The promotion of shows and exhibitions combined with managing a troupe of Indian actors, providing them lodging, food, and other necessities,

was expensive. There simply was no room for error with such a narrow profit margin. After the Iowas returned to the United States in the summer of 1845, the artist remained behind with his gallery. Another group of Ojibwas arrived to perform, but Parisians had lost interest in Indians, and Catlin’s show closed shortly thereafter. With the notable exceptions of Eugène Delacroix; Charles Baudelaire, the poet and art critic; and George Sand, most members of the French elite did not take Catlin’s paintings seriously.⁵¹ The dejected American artist eventually returned to the United States in 1871.

The Iowas arrived back at their village near the present-day Kansas-Nebraska border in the fall of 1845. Like Catlin, they did not come home wealthy. Indeed, it is likely that they returned with little more than a few souvenirs. But they had gained something far more important. Their experiences provided them a greater understanding of the outside world and made them even more determined to build a secure future for themselves. They realized that the Romanticized image of Indians that captured the imaginations of Europeans and East Coast Americans did not impress nearby settlers; most of these whites denigrated Indians as ignoble savages standing in the way of progress and westward advancement. The Iowas endeavored, therefore, to become as inconspicuous as possible and, therefore, less of a threat to their white neighbors. This tactic would enable them to adhere to the fabric of their traditional customs, but most realized that they would have to act quickly to adapt to white ways, at least outwardly, so they placed even greater emphasis on farming and raising livestock. They found the pervasive alcoholism they had encountered among the lower classes of Europe deplorable, and this deeply affected them. By the late 1840s missionaries and federal agents were reporting that the Iowas consumed far less alcohol than before and were now endeavoring to remain at peace with the Pawnees and other former enemies. When White Cloud led a war party that killed several Pawnees in May 1848, Neumonya and No Heart dismissed him from the tribal council. White Cloud died three years

48. *Ibid.*, 45–46.

49. Catlin, *Notes on Eight Years’ Travels and Residence in Europe*, 2:247; Foreman, *Indians Abroad*, 191; and *Niles’ National Register* 68 (2 August 1845): 339.

50. Catlin, *Notes on Eight Years’ Travels and Residence in Europe*, 2:189, 194, 307; and Mulvey, “Among the Sag-a-noshes,” 259–260.

51. See Robert N. Beetem, “George Catlin in France: His Relationship to Delacroix and Baudelaire,” *Art Quarterly* 24 (Summer 1961): 129–145; Mitchell, *Witness to a Vanishing America*, 101–104; Goetzman and Goetzman, *West of the Imagination*, 27; Roehm, *Letters of George Catlin*, 305–307; and William H. Truettner, *A Study of Catlin’s Indian Gallery* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), 44–52.

later. By then the Iowas remained largely peaceful, for they realized that whites would demand their removal for any serious acts of violence.⁵²

The Iowas would be among the very few bands that managed to forestall the forces of Indian removal that threatened the Kansas and Nebraska tribes throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. In his study of the Michigan Ottawas, historian James McClurken points out that the few bands that managed to survive the potent forces of removal did so by creating their own internal programs of compliance with white definitions of civilization. Like the Michigan Ottawas, the Iowas remained true to their Indian identities while acting “white” to mollify a dominant society that would otherwise have demanded their removal.⁵³

The Iowas survived the removal era mostly on their own terms, steadfastly maintaining traditional cultural practices well into the twentieth century. They eventually surrendered most of their lands, and by the turn of the twentieth century the majority had moved to Oklahoma. However, the Iowas still claim a 2,100-acre reservation along the borders of northeastern Kansas and southeastern Nebraska.⁵⁴ Several years ago Pete Fee, an influential member of the Kansas and Nebraska Iowas, explained that although his people may have lost many of the old traditions and their clan relationships are now considerably weaker, they have persevered. The Iowas, Fee noted, “believe that the family unit is the most important aspect of our culture, of our relationships ... and one of the things that keeps us together and makes us strong.” If they only could revive the old traditions and ways, the Iowas would become even stronger as a people. Fee was optimistic about the chances for tribal cultural revitalization. “I believe that everything that the creator gave us in the beginning is still here,” he explained. “Our medicine is still here. Even our clan affiliations and relationships are still here. The way to get them back sometimes isn’t clear.” Fee still strives to

find that clarity, researching tribal history, practicing traditional tribal rituals, and urging others to follow in his path.⁵⁵

Today nearly five thousand descendants of White Cloud, Neumonya, and the other Iowas live in Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and elsewhere and are among the four million Americans claiming to be Indians in the 2000 U.S. census. Catlin and the others were plainly wrong in believing that American Indians would vanish, absorbed somehow into the dominant white society. The artist was also clearly mistaken if he truly believed that Indians were noble savages. Catlin’s noble Indians, like Europe’s romanticized peasants and workers, never really existed; they were stereotypes created by artists, writers, and entrepreneurs.

Whether genuine Romantics or mere opportunists, Catlin and other whites, and sometimes even Indians like the Iowas, helped perpetuate a false image of America’s tribal peoples. As historian Patricia Nelson Limerick has pointed out, “the image—the noble, happy, pristine, uncontaminated Indian—had always been a great deal easier to deal with than the diverse and complicated human beings who had come to be known as Indians.”⁵⁶ Although Limerick was discussing the idealized view of Indians, she may just as well have been referring to Sand’s noble workers and peasants. Human societies, however primitive they might appear, are far more complex than Catlin, Sand, and other nineteenth-century thinkers ever imagined. Efforts to rescue the Noble Savage—whether American Indians or the lower classes of Europe—were therefore fruitless, for it is not possible to save something that never existed.

Today, despite immutable evidence to the contrary, the Noble Savage myth persists. Thom Ross, a Seattle-based artist who uses Western themes in his paintings, recently lamented that audiences still demand the Noble Savage and, indeed, are even angered when they get something different. According to Ross, most of today’s artists, unwilling to risk censure and the resulting loss of a sale, continue to provide the public with “overly done clichés” from a mythical American West, including the stereotypical Indian, the “stoic faced, seemingly unhappy man who is in the act of communing with birds or spirits or something,

52. Herring, *Enduring Indians of Kansas*, 81–85, 95–97.

53. James M. McClurken, “‘We Wish to Be Civilized’: Ottawa-American Political Contests on the Michigan Frontier” (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1988).

54. For information on the present-day Iowa tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, see “Baxoje, the Ioway Nation,” <http://ioway.nativeweb.org/iowayksne.htm>.

55. Interview with Clarence Warren “Pete” Fee, White Cloud, Kansas, July 21, 1992; transcript in possession of author.

56. Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 185.



When the author interviewed Clarence Warren "Pete" Fee at White Cloud, Kansas, in July 1992, this tribal elder was dressed as a nineteenth-century Indian. Fee donned traditional Iowa garb, his head shaved with the exception of a crest of hair to which was affixed feathers, much as George Catlin had portrayed the Iowas in his paintings a century and a half earlier. Photograph by Ken Engquist, Wichita, Kansas.

never smiling, always frowning." Ross asks viewers of his more abstract Western art to disregard the old stereotypes and attempt to understand the past through more critical and interpretative eyes.⁵⁷

Such appeals, however, continue to fall on deaf ears. Like Catlin, today's artists have their eyes focused on the bottom line. They want to sell their work; therefore, they give prospective buyers what they want—an idealized noble Indian. Scholars have offered many possible explanations for the unrelenting belief in and craving for the Noble Savage. Some have surmised that it is the persistence of white racism, which dehumanizes Native Americans and justifies the ongoing dispossession of tribal lands and resources; others have thought that it may be the result of guilt for the past wrongs done to Indians. It could be a longing for a lost Eden that the Noble Savage of the past represents, or it might be that many still see idealized Indian life as an attractive alternative to the unpleasant, complex realities of the real world. Perhaps it is simply the general public's love of history—the more colorful and mythical the better.

Historian Brian Dippie noted that Americans of all ethnicities still dream of the myth of the West as a promised land. Stories and images that depict a "sanitized Old West" and "celebrate frontier expansion as fundamental to the shaping of a distinctive national character," wrote Dippie, have long prevailed. Most people prefer the "visually appealing" mythical images resoundingly over anything that

57. Thom Ross, "Undiscovered History: The Thoughts of Thom Ross," *Western Historical Quarterly* 35 (Summer 2004): 215–224.

might uncover the harsh realities of nineteenth-century westward expansion. Nicholas G. Rosenthal, another historian, has recently noted that cultural perceptions of Indians as noble savages remain "so strong and enduring that contemporary Indians are commonly treated as anachronisms and anomalies, or simply ignored altogether."⁵⁸

The Iowas, meanwhile, continue their efforts at cultural revitalization. This revival, however, is not some attempt to recreate a modern-day Noble Savage to peddle to gullible white tourists. Lance M. Foster, an anthropologist, artist, and enrolled member of the Kansas and Nebraska Iowas, recently noted that such a revival is sought because it would strengthen tribal bonds. Foster has been involved for over two decades in efforts to preserve Iowa language and culture, dedicating himself to bringing the tribe back together "so that we may once again know each other as relatives and help each other maintain our identity as Ioway people." Foster dismissed the Noble Savage concept altogether. "People have just got to realize," he said, "that Indians are human beings with all the good and bad that go with that."⁵⁹

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58. Rosenthal, "Native American Actors on Hollywood's Frontier," 347; Brian Dippie, "Drawn to the West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 35 (Spring 2004): 5–26.

59. Lance M. Foster, member of Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, telephone interview by author, August 1, 2005. See also "Baxoje, the Ioway Nation."