

The Three Roots of

“Manifest destiny” is one of the broad labels describing United States history. High school students learn it as the statement that the U.S. was “destined” to stretch “from sea to shining sea.” But this ideology was one of the main justifications for U.S. expansion at the expense of its Native peoples. It not only helped justify the removal of Indians from their lands, it pervaded American foreign policy throughout the 19th century.

BY DOUG HERMAN

Manifest Destiny



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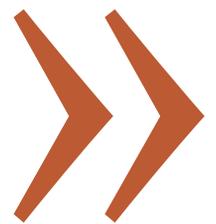
The term manifest destiny was most likely coined by John L. O’Sullivan in an 1845 article promoting the annexation of Texas. He wrote of “our manifest destiny to over-spread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”

It was more famously repeated in an 1846 speech by Rep. Robert C. Winthrop of Massachusetts, opposing the termination of the joint occupation of Oregon. Winthrop argued that “...this, after all, is our best and strongest title – one so clear, so pre-eminent, and so indisputable, that if Great Britain had all our other titles in addition to her own, they would weigh nothing against it. The right of our manifest destiny! There is a right for a new chapter in the law of nations: or rather, in the special laws of our own country; for I suppose

the right of a manifest destiny to spread will not be admitted to exist in any nation except the universal Yankee nation!”

In both cases, the argument has its roots in an intertwining of three ideas regarding the new republic. The first and oldest idea is a sense of an inherently Christian *mission*. This idea was rooted in Puritan conceptions of America as a New Canaan, a potential Holy Commonwealth. The idea became secularized as the colonists’ economic interests overtook their religious concerns. By the time of the Revolution, it merged with the concept of natural law to produce the anti-monarchy argument that “all men are created equal.” But the belief that Divine Providence was guiding the nation to become a beacon of freedom to the world took on still greater power after the Revolution.

The White Man’s Burden (Apologies to Kipling) Victor Gillam, Judge 1899. Like many cartoons at the time of the Spanish-American War, this one shows the newly-acquired insular territories (Cuba, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Philippines) as savage negroid children whom Uncle Sam, wearing a red cross and following his British counterpart with his own colonial burden, is carrying up the mountain of barbarism, oppression, superstition, ignorance, brutality and vice towards the shining beacon of civilization.





John Gast's 1872 painting *Manifest Destiny*, variously titled *Westward Ho* and *American Progress*. The painting depicts the figure of Liberty floating West through the sky while unrolling telegraph wire. Beneath, Indians, bear and bison move away as white civilization (represented by farmers, stagecoaches, trains and ships) moves in.

This belief fostered the second major idea behind what we call manifest destiny, the conviction that the new nation would expand *naturally* as others realized that the new *freedom* on which American institutions were based constituted a higher standard of civilization. Moreover, held this doctrine, the expansion of this new, shining civilization would be good for the world. The Founding Fathers had high hopes for the extent of its expansion. John Adams thought that the U.S. was “destined to spread over the northern part of

that whole quarter of the globe,” and Thomas Jefferson considered it not impossible that it would ultimately cover “the whole Northern, if not the Southern continent.” But initially this doctrine was not aggressive in nature but passive: other nations would naturally want to be a part of the United States.

Yet the peoples immediately at hand – American Indians – were generally not interested in joining this new Republic or taking up its version of civilization. This reluctance had been an issue since Puritan efforts to



“American Indians were generally not interested in joining this new Republic or taking up its version of civilization. This reluctance had been an issue since Puritan efforts to Christianize the Indians achieved less than desired results.”

dom-loving” Anglo-Saxons in England dated back to the mid-16th century and arrived in America with the British colonists. Jefferson was among many to become intrigued by these ideas, which would develop over the century and not be put to rest until World War II. Anglo-Saxonism included the notion that this freedom-loving branch of the Caucasian race had migrated west from the steppes of Central Asia into Europe and ultimately Great Britain. Then some had migrated further west to America. Westward movement, in this doctrine, was the natural course of civilization. It was a spurious argument to justify economic motives. But it entered the national mythology.

Race theory developed rapidly to justify American expansion. Some proponents vigorously argued, in direct affront to the Bible, that all humanity did not descend from a single original couple, but that different races had been independently created. A range of “scientists” outlined the natures of these different races and promulgated their theories in texts that unabashedly glorified a superior white race. By the mid-19th century the argument was widespread in the U.S. that other races not suited to civilization would have to give way to the spread of Anglo-Saxons. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution only furthered these ideas, feeding Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinism, the slogan “survival of the fittest” and the birth of eugenics. (See “Eugenics and Erasure,” Fall 2009.)

From these three interwoven sets of ideas – mission, expansionism and race – emerged manifest destiny, clamoring for forcible American expansion based on Divine right and racial superiority. The doctrine does not refer to the gradual Westward removal of Indians from their lands, but specifically to two major military events: the 1848 war against

Mexico, and the 1898 Spanish-American War. In the former, military success led to calls for the conquest of all of Mexico and its incorporation into the union. Ultimately, the racial arguments for Anglo-Saxon superiority worked against this campaign: Mexico was full of Indians and Spaniards who would have to become citizens. But the argument for conquest was not itself effectively retracted.

In 1898, a new set of expansionists looked across the Pacific Ocean and invoked the same arguments. American expansion towards Asia was the demand of Divine Providence, the spread of civilization and the “White Man’s burden” of ruling supposedly inferior peoples. The exemplar of this group is Sen. Albert J. Beveridge, who in his maiden speech in the United States Senate after the war argued for retaining control of the Philippines: “We will not renounce our part in the mission of the race, trustee, under God, of the civilization of the world... He has made us adepts in government that we may administer government among savages and senile peoples... And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world.” Yet some of the territories thus acquired – Guam and Puerto Rico remain to this day – have never been given the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution.

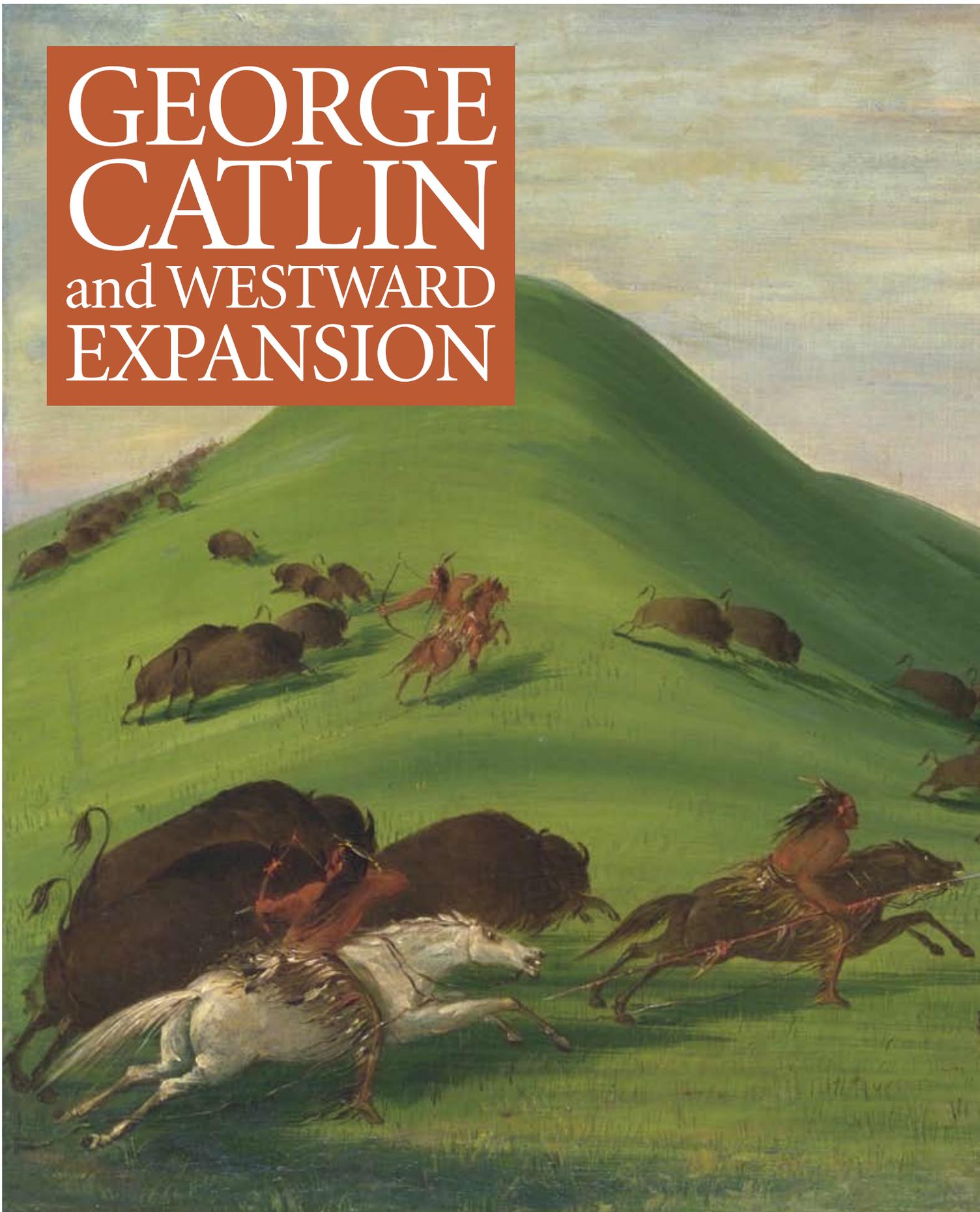
Manifest destiny is not, then, a simple expansionist rhetoric justifying the growth of the United States, but a rhetoric invoking specific ideas of a Divine mission and a national superiority employed for the purposes of military action. Even though it proclaims “freedom” as its *raison d’être*, in fact the doctrine serves to deny those freedoms. Its echoes have not vanished from American rhetoric. ✿

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Christianize the Indians achieved less than desired results. Slavery in the South posed another problem for the universality of freedom. Thus it came to be presumed that not all peoples were ready for the new civilization. Further speculation suggested that perhaps it was the provenance of a particular people only: the Anglo-Saxons.

This third idea, that a particular race carried the burden of fostering free government, became the newest and most insidious strand of manifest destiny. Myths of the “free-

GEORGE CATLIN and WESTWARD EXPANSION



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BY JOHN HAWORTH

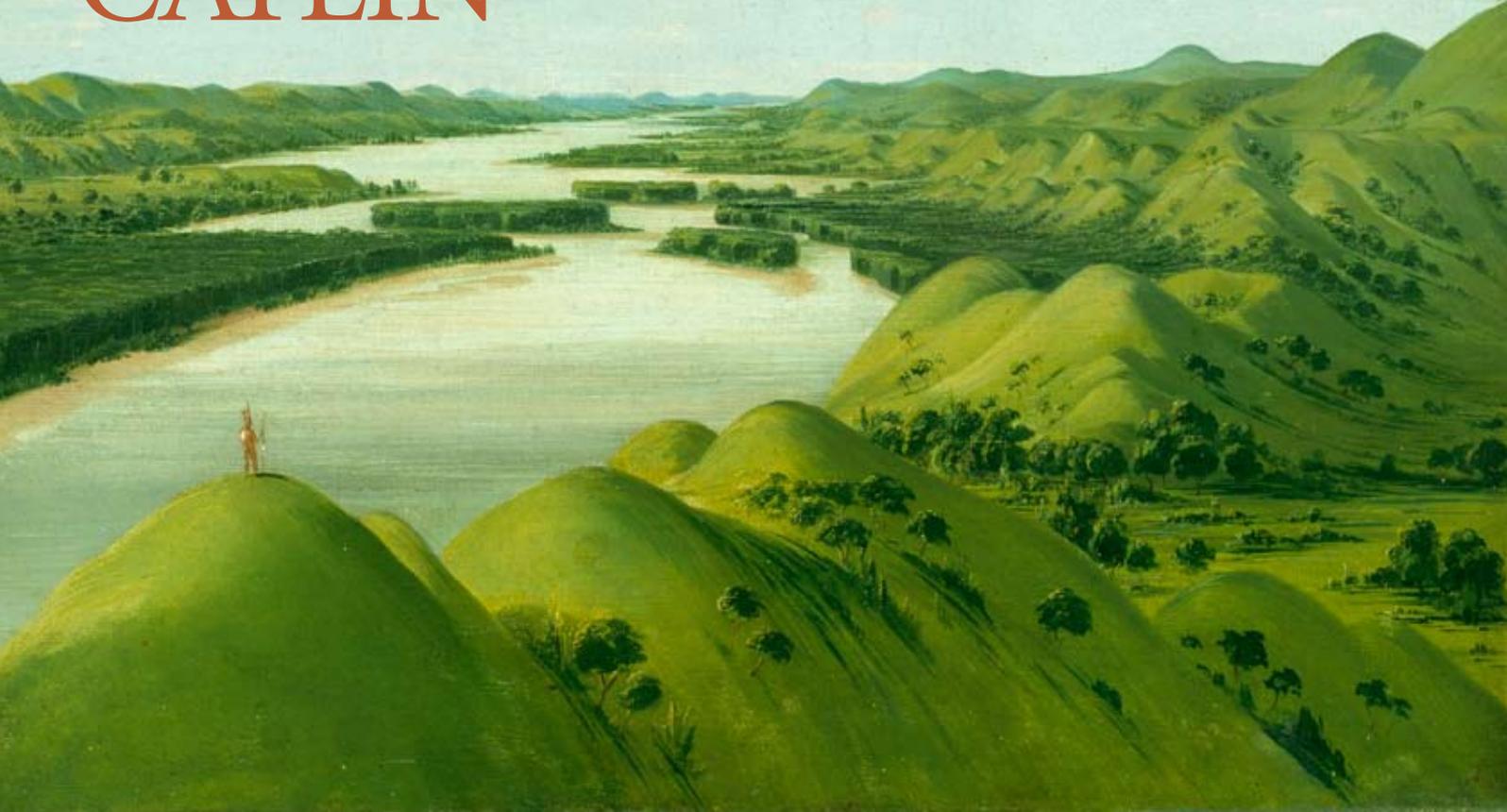
While the period of Manifest Destiny was a time of exploration, artistic accomplishment, scientific discovery and settlement in the United States, from the Native perspective, it was a harsh and difficult period of unending war, starvation, disease, epidemic and almost complete destruction of many indigenous cultures. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, some artists and writers felt compelled to document American Indian culture, driven by their sense of urgency that Indian cultures would disappear.

George Catlin will now hang in the White House, with President Obama's selection of 12 of the painter's "cartoons," done from memory, on loan from the National Gallery of Art. The paintings here, done while Catlin was still in the field, are in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

LEFT: *Buffalo Chase over Prairie Bluffs*, 24" x 29", 1832-33.

ABOVE: *Stu-mick-o-sucks, Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe*, 1832.24" x 29".

GEORGE CATLIN



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *River Bluffs, 1320 Miles Above St. Louis*, 11.25" x 14.375", 1832. *Kee-o-kuk, The Watchful Fox, Chief of the Tribe*, 24" x 29", 1835. *Mah-to-toh-pa, Four Bears, Second Chief, in Full Dress*, 24" x 29", 1832. *Wi-jun-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going To and Returning From Washington*, 24" x 29", 1837-1839. *Ud-je-jock, Pelican, a Boy*, 24" x 29", 1845.

George Catlin (1796-1872), known as the premier painter of American Natives, played a key role in providing visual evidence about Native people in this complex era. Catlin documented the cultures and lives of Plains Indians both in magnificent portraits and landscapes and in extensive writings and diaries. His work is a lens for the enormity and complexity of westward expansion in the 19th Century.

The political policy that emerged during Thomas Jefferson's presidency culminated in President Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830. President Jackson sought to eliminate what was called "the Indian Problem" by getting rid of the Indians, forcibly removing them to the West.

These circumstances gave Catlin the impetus to paint the Indians, recording not only

their faces and dress, but their ceremonies, daily lives and physical surroundings. From 1831 to 1836, coinciding with Jackson's presidency, Catlin followed the trail of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. He travelled thousands of miles and visited 50 tribes living west of the Mississippi River. His portraits are carefully observed with remarkably vivid details and imagery about Indian material culture, including the extraordinarily beautiful and well-made garments they wore. His output affirmed the highly-developed aesthetic of the indigenous people of this land and gave evidence of the rich cultural expressions in Indian country.

Catlin's lifetime was also one of global expansion and imperialism for the major European powers and the sweeping American





CATLIN'S AMBITIONS

were driven by the passion to capture on canvas what Indian people looked like and where they lived before it was all lost forever. His highly representational paintings help us understand deeper truths about who these people were, what they valued and how they lived their very full and rich lives. His work shows much respect for the people about whom he painted and wrote.

narrative about westward movement. The national agenda of expansionism – Manifest Destiny – included the annexation of massive amounts of territory, the building of railroads and the attempt to eradicate powerful Indian cultures, including their ways of life and even their animals.

During the 40-year period between 1820–1860, over 240 treaties were made between sovereign Indian nations and the U.S. government, most of which required Indians to forfeit or sell off their land for significantly less than its value, thus giving up their ancestral homelands. In this same period, smallpox pandemic carried by outside traders killed tens of thousands of Indians.

Catlin's paintings reflect these deeper complexities of the period. Though Catlin brought an informed outsider's perspective to the table, and he clearly worked hard to express it with a high degree of integrity, it was far from perfect. Some contemporary historians have interpreted Catlin as an exploiter of other people's cultures. This ambiguity permeates the recorded commentary that accompanies the exhibit of Catlin's paintings in the NMAI on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

"Certainly, some of these efforts were well intentioned. It's true that without them, much that is preserved would have disappeared. But there's another truth: the subjects here – us, have been portrayed from the outside, our stories told by others to explain or justify their own agendas."

Keeping this polarity in mind as we look closely at his paintings, we learn more about this period of our history.

Catlin's ambitions were driven by the passion to capture on canvas what Indian people looked like and where they lived before it was all lost forever. His highly representational paintings help us understand deeper truths about who these people were, what they val-

ued and how they lived their very full and rich lives. His work shows much respect for the people about whom he painted and wrote.

During the last half of the 19th century, American paintings expressed deeper spiritual and moral values, including the sublime in nature. Painting sweeping panoramic views of this Indian landscape, Catlin created a precursor of the glorious American landscapes painted after the Civil War. The artist-as-traveler was a key 19th century idea, and Catlin was one of the first. Catlin's journals describe in great detail the enormity of the Western landscape with its vast sky and distance to the horizon. He was dazzled by the distinctive look of the prairie and its geology and wrote at length about the variety of the living world of plants and animals he encountered.

As 21st century people, it is impossible for us to transport ourselves to this different time and place, but in taking a closer look at Catlin's artistic output, we have a good starting point for a deeper understanding of one of the most brutal periods of American history. We can also comprehend more fully the reality of the lands which changed hands, how the physical environment and vistas changed and even the extent of the wildlife that was lost. But even though the worlds that Indians knew back then were forever changed during this period, and the losses have been overwhelming and tremendous, Indian cultures are very much alive today. Catlin's impulse to capture the images of Indian people for the ages was based on his view that Indian people could not survive, but vibrant Native life is not only persisting but thriving. ✨

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Author's note: Portions of this essay first appeared as the forward to Susanna Reich's *Painting the Wild Frontier: The Art and Adventures of George Catlin* (Clarion Books, a Houghton Mifflin Company imprint: 2008).