

## Comment by the Editor

### HISTORY ON CANVAS

George Catlin had a splendid idea and acted upon it. Having pulled three years against the current of his inclination in the practice of law, he closed his office one day in 1823 and opened a studio. As a self-trained young artist of promise, his mind was "continually reaching for some branch or enterprise of the art on which to devote a whole lifetime of enthusiasm". In 1829, chancing to see a delegation of Indians "arrayed and equipped in all of their classic beauty," he formed the opinion that among the wild tribes of the West, untouched by the artificiality of civilization, he would find models equal in grace and symmetry to the Grecian youths of ancient Sparta. Then and there he resolved to devote his whole career to the worthy task of "rescuing from oblivion the looks and customs of the vanishing races of native man in America". He would be the pictorial historian of the Indians. From 1829 to the end of his life in 1871 he pursued his ambition with zealous singleness of purpose that never abated through years of danger, toil, and misfortune.

Beginning at the age of thirty-three, with slight pecuniary reward in prospect, Catlin spent eight years among the "wildest and most remarkable



tribes" in North America, living in their villages, paddling his own canoe on the upper reaches of the Mississippi and Missouri, and marching with Leavenworth's dragoons far to the southwest along the trail to Santa Fé. From trading posts and army cantonments he wrote a series of letters which were published in the *New York Commercial Advertiser* and issued in 1841 as *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*. His gallery of more than five hundred paintings and his museum of Indian relics, now in the National Museum at Washington, attracted wide attention and universal praise when exhibited in New York, London, Paris, and Brussels. Upon the suggestion of Alexander von Humboldt, who regarded Catlin's work of great ethnological value, he spent six years from 1852 to 1858 among the Indians in South America and the western part of North America from Alaska to Yucatan, adding many more pictures to his collection.

His various writings, profusely illustrated, were widely read and accepted as the most authentic and vivid portrayal of the character and customs of the aboriginal inhabitants of America. Forty years ago it was estimated that more than one hundred and twenty thousand volumes had been sold. His *North American Indians* has now become a classic. When Indian pictures have been needed for illustrative purposes, Catlin's paintings have been copied; while his experiences and descriptions have furnished the



setting for hundreds of Indian stories. Certainly no other artist or writer has had such a tremendous influence in molding the popular conception of the American Indian.

The explanation of his achievement is his steadfast purpose, his untiring enthusiasm, and his friendship for the vanishing red man. His early admiration and sympathy developed into abiding love for the people who always made him "welcome to the best they had", who "never raised a hand" against him or stole his property, who kept the Commandments "without ever having read them or heard them preached from the pulpit", who never "fought a battle with white men except on their own ground", and who did not "live for the love of money". And because Catlin dealt honestly with the Indians, and his painting fascinated them, they reciprocated his friendship. The only opposition he encountered was due to the magic "medicine" of his brush. A Sioux chief feared that his portrait would live after him to disturb his eternal sleep; another Indian, portrayed in profile, took offense when he thought the artist left out half of his face because it was no good; and an Omaha brave insisted upon being drawn with his eyes straight forward because he was not ashamed to look any one in the eye.

Catlin's abounding sympathy for the children of nature whose every-day life he exalted in his art and perpetuated in his writings colored both his canvas and his notes. He sincerely endeavored to



portray what he saw with absolute accuracy because he was working for posterity. Lest the authenticity of his painting be questioned in the future, he obtained certificates from reputable witnesses as to the truthfulness of his pictures. H. R. Schoolcraft declared that his sketches were trustworthy. Notwithstanding that his portraits were recognizable likenesses, they have been criticized as being neither finished works of art nor distinctive in features. As an English critic remarked, all of Catlin's Indians might have had the same parents. Like C. B. King, he idealized his subjects and lost the characteristics peculiar to Indian physiognomy that distinguish the work of Charles Bodmer.

His writing, much of it hastily scribbled in camp, is off-hand, diffuse, and rambling; yet the narrative has freshness and spontaneity that might have been lost in meticulous revision. A charming raconteur, he wrote as he spoke. With an eye ever alert for the picturesque and romantic, his pen no less than his brush was allowed to depict whatever caught his fancy. No one has described Indian life in its pristine state more graphically than George Catlin — historian in colorful canvas as well as words.

J. E. B.