

detail his participation in the Indian wars, complete with exciting battles, chase scenes, and rescues of young women. In the introduction, he shared his views of Native Americans with the reading public, believing that it was important for US citizens to face the idea that they should simply let the Indians die out. Two years later, he himself would be killed at the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

If the character given to the Indian by [James Fenimore] Cooper and other novelists, as well as by well-meaning but mistaken philanthropists of a later day, were the true one; if the Indian were the innocent, simple-minded being he is represented, more the creature of romance than reality, imbued only with a deep veneration for the works of nature, freed from the passions and vices which must accompany a savage nature; if, in other words, he possessed all the virtues which his admirers and works of fiction ascribe to him, and were free from all the vices which those best qualified to judge assign to him, he would be just the character to complete the picture which is presented by the country embracing the Wichita mountains [in Kansas]. Cooper, to whose writings more than to those of any other author are the people speaking the English language indebted for a false and ill-judged estimate of the Indian character, might well have laid the scenes of his fictitious stories in this beautiful and romantic country.

It is to be regretted that the character of the Indian as described in Cooper's interesting novels is not the true one. But as, in emerging from childhood into the years of a maturer age, we are often compelled to cast aside many of our earlier illusions and replace them by beliefs less inviting but more real, so we, as a people, with opportunities enlarged and facilities for obtaining knowledge increased, have been forced by a multiplicity of causes to study and endeavor to comprehend thoroughly the character of the red man. So intimately has he become associated with the Government as ward of the nation, and so prominent a place among the questions of national policy does the much mooted "Indian question" occupy, that it behooves us no longer to study this problem from works of fiction, but to deal with it as it exists in reality. Stripped of the beautiful romance with which we have been so long willing to envelop him, transferred from the inviting pages of the novelist to the localities where we are compelled to meet with him, in his native village, on the war path, and when raiding upon our frontier settlements and lines of travel, the Indian forfeits his claim to the appellation of the "noble red man." We see him as he is, and, so far as all knowledge goes, as he ever has been, a *savage* in every sense of the word; not worse, perhaps, than his white brother would be similarly born and bred, but one whose cruel and ferocious nature far exceeds that of any wild

4. The Views of George Armstrong Custer

George Armstrong Custer graduated last in his class at West Point in 1861, not long after the opening salvos of the Civil War. Due to the need for officers, he rose quickly through the ranks and, thanks to his charismatic personality, he soon gained a national reputation. After the war, he was named Lieutenant Colonel of the Seventh Cavalry and became a professional Indian fighter in the west. In 1874, he published My Life on the Plains, in which he recounted in

beast of the desert. That this is true no one who has been brought into intimate contact with the wild tribes will deny . . .

To those who advocate the application of the laws of civilization to the Indian, it might be a profitable study to investigate the effect which such application produces upon the strength of the tribe as expressed in numbers. Looking at him as the fearless hunter, the matchless horseman and warrior of the Plains, where Nature placed him, and contrasting him with the reservation Indian, who is supposed to be reveling in the delightful comforts and luxuries of an enlightened condition, but who in reality is groveling in beggary, bereft of many of the qualities which in his wild state tended to render him noble, and heir to a combination of vices partly his own, partly bequeathed to him from the pale-face, one is forced, even against desire, to conclude that there is unending antagonism between the Indian nature and that with which his well-meaning white brother would endow him. Nature intended him for a savage state; every instinct, every impulse of his soul inclines him to it. The white race might fall into a barbarous state, and afterwards, subjected to the influence of civilization, be reclaimed and prosper. Not so the Indian. He cannot be himself and be civilized. He fades away and dies. Cultivation such as the white man would give him deprives him of his identity. Education, strange as it may appear, seems to weaken rather than strengthen his intellect. Where do we find any specimens of educated Indian eloquence comparing with that of such native, untutored orators as Tecumseh, Osceola, Red Jacket, and Logan?

Source: Gen. G. A. Custer, *My Life on the Plains, or, Personal Experiences with Indians* (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1874), pp. 11-19.

Study and further exploration: Dozens of books have been written on Custer, beginning in his own time and continuing through to ours. An interesting project would be to compare the treatment he has received in different time periods or by different segments of society.