

GEORGE CATLIN, BRIGHAM YOUNG, AND THE PLAINS INDIANS

Larry C. Coates

During his lifetime, Brigham Young received a number of letters from prominent people on such topics as mining, colonizing, religion, polygamy, and Indians. One of his most famous correspondents was George Catlin, the great American artist, naturalist, and author who on 8 May 1870 wrote an impassioned plea to the Mormon prophet asking him to forge the Saints into a fighting force to protect the Plains Indians from extinction by the government. Catlin's letter was motivated by newspaper accounts of the military campaigns waged against the Indians. He was infuriated by reports that Civil War generals George Crook, Philip Sheridan, and George Armstrong Custer were slaughtering the Plains Indians and confining survivors to small reservations to protect telegraph lines, railroads, and wagon routes to mining camps from Indian depredations. Feeling great compassion for his many Indian friends who had modeled for him while he painted them in their native dress, Catlin sent military authorities a circular aimed at convincing them that the government's Indian policies were wrong and inhuman. It was at this time that Catlin wrote to Brigham Young suggesting that he join forces with the Indians to repel federal troops from their tribal domain.

President Young was sympathetic to Catlin's concern for the Indians and agreed that government policies were misguided. In his reply to Catlin, Young predicted that "our country must answer for their bad faith, broken treaties, and great crimes in Indian matters." But the Mormon prophet rejected Catlin's suggestion that the Mormons form military alliances with the Indians. Instead, Young restated a philosophy that had guided his relations with the Indians for some thirty years when he told Catlin:

We have found it cheaper to feed than to fight them at the same time we do not believe in descending to their degraded level to do them good, but to raise them to be industrious, orderly, honest, and peaceful. Thus we shall gain their love, and by keeping our word with them hold their respect.

The letters that follow are verbatim copies of the correspondence exchanged between George Catlin and Brigham Young.¹

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¹Both letters are located in the Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives.

May 8 1870
To Brigham Young,
President, Latter day Saints.
Great Salt Lake City.

Sir,

The long life which I have devoted to visiting the various tribes of North American Indians, with the view to perpetuate their looks and customs, has rendered me cognizant of most of their habits, & also of their misfortunes growing out of the encroachments of civilization with its deceptions—its vices, diseases, bayonets and babies; and through recent events, (& events that are being clearly foreshadowed) I have a clairvoyance that dates from the recent horrible & disgraceful massacres, pointing to the contemplated destiny of your Institutions, and which, as a lover of Liberty in Religion, as in all other human affairs, I feel it my duty to disclose to you.

In General Sheridan's recent letter which you no doubt have seen, and in which he says he has command over more than 5,000 miles of Indian frontiers, he justifies his assassination of the Piegan Indians, and proclaims that the Indians are "*fiends*", and that all the tribes must be removed by *military force*, into the Reservations, which are the *Indian's last ditch*; and that by *the troops* they must be held there to be tangible to civilization."

By this heartless proclamation and the cruelty of the Piegan affair, it is easy to see that his object is to excite the Indians to a general war on the whole Indian frontiers, authorizing him to call for a vast army of Soldiers, and after the complete extermination or expulsion of the Indian tribes, (with his troops in the country on all sides, and practised in butcheries) to concentrate his forces on the peacable and successful Institutions which God has helped you to build up in the wilderness.

I was at the Salt Lake when your Temple was building at Nauvoo, and I was an eye witness to some parts of your shameful persecutions in Missouri. I have admired the perseverance and the industry of your people, and God, who has supported you in your weakness and in your tribulations, will not desert you in your strength and your greatness.

Your people have been the friends of the poor Indians, who have now, no other efficient friends on the earth. You will easily see that their extermination is resolved upon, and I see, (not only in *conjecture*, but *know*, from more reliable sources) that the destiny of your Institutions is resolved on, to follow that of the Indian tribes.

The example which your people have shown to the world, of civilizing the Indians around you, is an honour to your Religion; and amongst the Indian tribes will have its good effects in drawing the Indian tribes around you in a grand fraternity which I am here to Suggest, for their civilization, and your mutual protection against the invading military forces which are entering the great Far West on every side, and which are now marching on you both.

The State that the poor Indians are now in, in all directions

—driven from their hunting grounds and the graves of their parents and children, and being butchered indiscriminately by the monster who wields the army of the Great West, is so alarming & so terrifying to those defenceless people, that the hand of friendship—of brotherhood, extended by the Mormons, would be grasped by them all, and a compact could be formed around you, furnishing some 30, or 40,000, efficient and ready warriors; and taking the field, (and holding it) together, for a common defence, would do more for the civilization and fraternization of those dying races, than all the missionary teaching of the world coul[d] do; and in my opinion that method, and none other, will save your own Institutions and the poor Indians from the exterminating storm, the Electricity for which is gathering around, and preparing to burst upon you.

I have visited nearly every tribe and remnant of tribes now existing in North America, & gathered (not the people, but) their looks and customs, in a compact which sabres and revolvers cannot annihilate, I have made more than 12,000 paintings in oil, containing 600. portraits from the life, & more than 20.000. full length figures in action, in their various games, Religious Ceremonies and other Customs; and if I were a younger man, I would go again to those tribes, as your Emissary, & show them that their deliverance from robbing and death was at hand. I would go to the Cherokees, of 18.000. the Choctaws, of 21.000. the Creeks, of 16.000. already civilized and agricultural, who have been several times removed, and who told me their next move will be into the Rocky Mountains.

I would go to my friends the Apachees, who, when brought together, can muster 8,000. cavalry, and who cannot be removed to the South, as they are on the borders of Mexico. I would go to the Blackfoot—the Crow—the Sioux—the Pawnee, and to all the remnants of tribes partially civilized, and thrown out (and still being kicked out) on the borders of civilization.

The American Indians all have the elements for civilization within them, which require but a confidence in white man's honour and real friendship, with consolidation for their protection, and the requisite time for its accomplishment. They are intelligent, and can easily be made to see the security of fraternization and concentration, and the danger and certain death of dispersion; and they want but such a compact, based on a civilized community with an unity of interest ready to arm and fight by their sides if necessary, rather than against them, like all the civilized people with whom they have previously come in contact.

You have been the first pioneers of the Great West, and you occupy its very centre; you have nobly shown to the world what industry & perseverance, (independant of political strife) are able to accomplish; and by your sympathies for, and kindness to, the poor Indians around you, and your successful efforts to civilize them, you have gained a confidence in the minds of those people (even the nimblest [?] tribes, as I have learned in my conversations with them) as well as conviction in the minds of the people of the old

and the new world; and in the sudden alliance which I have suggested, I can see a chance (and the only chance) for the Salvation and Civilization of the Indian tribes, and the existence and future growth of your own Institutions, in your present position: & in the accomplishment of a work so noble, and a Fortress so strong, I believe you will have the applause of the whole world: and with it, the hand of God, to protect you.

With high Respect, and a profound anxiety for the welfare of yourself and people,

I remain truly yours &c.

Geo. Catlin

8. Rue de Brabant, à Bruxelles

Belgique. 8th May 1870

Salt Lake City, Utah Ter.

27 June 1870

Geo. Catlin Esq.

8 Rue de Brabant

a Bruxelles. Belgique.

Dear Sir:

Your favor of 8th ult has reached me safely and been perused with great interest and pleasure. I sincerely thank you for the good feelings therein expressed to the people of Utah, and the native tribes, and should have answered it at an earlier date had I not been absent from Salt Lake City, visiting our citizens in Northern Utah and Southern Idaho, amongst whom I have passed the last three weeks.

I am well aware of the truth of the declarations made in your letter with regard to the treatment of the poor Indians and ourselves. I am also satisfied that the Red men of the forest are beginning to learn that we are their friends, and are seeking their good. We have proved in our intercourse with them, that there are as fine men amongst the native tribes possessing as noble and generous natures and feelings as amongst any people on the face of the earth, still there are bad men amongst the Indians, as amongst all other people, made so no doubt by contact with worse white men, whose ways and habits they have not been slow to follow, but we make the best we can of them and teach them to be better. We have indeed at times been considerably annoyed by the vagrant habits and degraded course of these sons of the forest and desert, but still we bear with them, and think that they will become better by and bye, and we have not been forward to condemn, nor hasty and vindictive in scourging them in the wantonness of our supposed strength for their real or supposed crimes, as has been too often the case with our neighbors in the surrounding States and Territories.

Notwithstanding the efforts of the Military commanders and their subordinates, who in response to the clamor of the border set-

tlers and political demagogues of the great West, who make the extermination of the Indian one of their watch cries, I have no idea that they will succeed in their bloodthirsty and iniquitous designs. The "great Spirit", has a future for the Red men, and that not in their grave, I as sincerely believe as the Indians do themselves, but how much they may suffer, or how much they may be despoiled and wasted, before the tide of His providence turns fully in their favor is not for me to say. But I do know, and that in sorrow, that our country must answer for their bad faith, broken treaties, and great crimes in Indian matters, that they have perpetrated in the name of Christianity, civilization and progress, which in this case means the inordinate lust of reckless and unprincipled men for riches and power.

Whilst on my late trip, I visited a camp of about eighteen hundred Indians principally Utes, Yampa-utes, Snakes and Bannocks who had assembled in the vicinity of our settlements in Bear Lake Valley to hold council according to their usual annual custom. Most of their big chiefs were there, and they had brought their squaws and papooses with them, and quite a flock of goats and a large band of horses. Whilst I was at their camp the squaws, for the amusement of myself and company went through a characteristic dance and monotonous chant, whilst the braves played on a sort of tamborine. The people living in the neighborhood told me they had had no trouble with them, that they had been peacable and friendly, and had not interfered with the stock or property of the settlers.

The course of the people of Utah have pursued towards the Indians can be recommended not only on the score of humanity, but of economy. We have found it cheaper to feed than to fight them, at the same time we do not believe in descending to their degraded level to do them good, but to raise them up to our standard, and little by little teach them to be industrious, orderly, honest and peacable. Thus we shall gain their love, and by keeping our word with them hold their respect. By this means we hope, with the help of the Lord to accomplish much good for the original owners of the soil of this continent. Again thanking you for the many kind expressions of regard and sympathy which your letter breathes, I remain,

Very Respectfully Yours.
Brigham Young