

John Trusler's Conversation with the Wappinger Chiefs on Civilization
c. 1810
England
MsD: The Lewis Walpole Library; Draft, Bath Central Library

NB: in the text, the label "Cherokee" appears – this was an error, the Indians involved were Stockbridge Indians, not Cherokees.

The [notes] are mine, and I did some other light editing.

I acknowledge with profound thanks my source for this document, as well as much more information about the Stockbridge Indians and other historical items; my brother Rick [Richard Bidwell Wilcox], who has taken a keen interest in these things for many years now. He told me this is the best description he has seen about the values of the Native people of our area.

MFW May 14, 2020

Chapter 18, Trusler's Memoirs,¹

[opening section deleted]

Perhaps some few traits of their [the Indians'] way of thinking may not be unacceptable to my readers, desirous of knowing from what they had seen and experienced in England. Whether they would prefer living in such society as ours in preference to their own, I made the inquiry; the reply was "No." The elder of the three said that happiness consisted merely in the gratification of a man's wants, that these were readily gratified in their own country, their wants being few.

But here continued he, such a variety is offered to the eye and to the palate, as to create incessant wants and if not gratified, must be the source of endless quarrels, for the strongest arm would snatch from the weakest and men would be little better than wild beasts.

¹ While this document is from the collections of The Lewis Walpole Library, a draft exists at the Bath Central Library, Bath England.

Hence, said he, must arise innumerable contests, war and bloodshed. I do not give these expressions as the exact language of this untaught Indian but as the purport of it. I represented to him that such evils as he alluded to were checked by good laws and regulations. Even the laws themselves, said he, would become evils which we never experience: restraints upon conduct which free men are unaccustomed to. We have no statute to impose any service as a duty, no compulsory laws to oblige us to perform it: all our resolutions are voluntary and flow from the impulse of our own minds we have but one law, which is to punish murder. The man who deprives another of life is put to death.

But, said I, do theft and adultery never occur among you? Certainly, returned he. They do, but are not these sufficiently punished by detection? Why then a multiplicity of laws? What possesses thee to expose thy person to dangerous voyages and be oppressed about futurity? Avarice is thy bane and thou art no less tormented in preserving what thou hast, than in acquiring more. Fear of robbery and shipwreck makes thee wretched. Thus those growest old in thy youth. Thou hast become grey,² thy forehead is wrinkled, and a thousand ailments afflict thy body; a thousand distresses surround thy heart, and there movest with painful hurry to the grave; nursed in the lap of ease and in the midst of plenty sickness in a variety of complicated forms assails thy constitution from which in youth we are entirely exempt.

Savage man knows not the name of madness. Mental derangement arises from chagrin, and you owe this to your society. Why art thou not content with what thy own country produces? Why not condemn superfluities as we do? In a state of nature like ours we enjoy what our labour procures, but in a state of society like yours those who labour most enjoy the least, and thou who labour not at all have the greatest number of enjoyments.

But after all, I like my own state best. We are unrestrained. We have no master to serve; no patron to please. We can lie down and rise up, go out and come in, are lords of the creation, above ceremony, above control and are strangers to restless nights. Health and liberty is everything with us. If we have these, we want no more. The necessaries of life are all within our reach: we can command game and

² The word "old" is deleted.

fish all the year round; a skin supplies us with clothing, and a cabin or a cave shelters us from the weather.

But in a state of civilization like yours if a provision were not made against the casualties of life, thousands must starve. Such a fine garb as we now wear would be ridiculed in our country, and such a profusion of dressed food and strong liquors would, if in general use, destroy that health which to us is our greatest blessing. Every one is contented with what he has.

Notwithstanding this, said I, you are not without your wars. War, returned he, is with us matter of choice, not of necessity. **We had much fewer wars before we became acquainted with the English.** [emphasis added] They have drawn us into a state of warfare and have a great deal to answer for, for we fight not so much for ourselves as for you. It will happen at times that one tribe will make inroads upon another, but this is an evil soon remedied. Our wars are only the war of a month; yours are almost endless. Danger, like labour is to us a condition of our nature, and the fear of it never troubles us. Our wars are merely to prevent encroachment. In want of agriculture we are obliged to roam from place to place; when we have exhausted one place, we search for another. Other tribes do the same; but as interference with each other is an injury to both, we are obligated to prevent encroachments. A Cherokee, whenever he travels, is always at home. He carries his little property about him and builds him a cabin as you would erect a tent, sits down and is quiet, but your state of society is an endless source³ of wretchedness. Eager to accumulate, you lie, deceive, over-reach, plunder and destroy. Not so, the Cherokee.

He tell no lie. *Ee maffo fonio abada* says even the Mandingo Negro, mourning over his murdered son,⁴ he never told a lie.⁵ No, never. Indian lives and lets live and helps man to live. What better man you than Cherokee? If there be scarce food in the North, we remove to the South; if in the South, to the North. All places are alike to us. You, civilized man, are confined in prisons, bound in chains, shut up in garrisons, and there left to starve or be slaughtered. The enjoyment of

³ The word "state" is crossed out and "source" inserted.

⁴ The word "master" is deleted and "son" substituted.

⁵ The source for this quote is Mungo Park's account of a herdsman wounded by the Moors, whose mother cries out, *Ee maffo fonia abada*, which, according to Park, means "he never told a lie; no, never." Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa: Performed under the Direction and Patronage of the African Association, in the Years, 1795, 1796, and 1797* (London, 1799), 102.

property is lost in the anxious care of it. "Cherokee know no taxes; no arbitrary mandates, no servitude, no mortifications from the great, and if we have no palaces, we have no hospitals. "What savage feel no want of, he no covet." He is subject only to natural evils, and these his hardiness is best able to cope with. He experiences neither ingratitude nor jealousy; and why, because he expects no return for favors nor any connubial fidelity and as our interests do not clash, we do not necessarily kill each other. Children do not secretly wish the death of a father, nor one man rejoice at the downfall of another. "Cherokee is the friend of all." If a quarrel arise, a few blows set it to rights, and the weaker submits to the stronger.

In short, such were the sentiments I collected from these men, and it often led me to reflect on the evils of society which doubtless are many and which the savage is exempt from.

The Citizen is a drudge to the last moment of his life, perpetually toiling & racking his brains for what? To find out occupation still more laborious.

The Citizen sacrifices truth and decency to his own interest and transforms the man into the sycophant and buffoon.

The Citizen cringes to those whom he hates and fawns upon a rich man whom he secretly despises.

The Citizen takes pleasure often in the misfortunes of his neighbour and rejoices at his undoing.

The Citizen prays for the death of that parent who gave him life that he may enjoy his property and his honors.

The Citizen looks forward eagerly to calamities, to public distresses, to commotion, to wars, hoping to profit by the event, regardless of the massacre of slaughtered thousands.

The Citizen will with the same breath caress and curse, enemies to each other by duty, knaves by interest.

But *savage* man when he has *dined* is the friend of all his fellows, and is at peace with all the world.

Many authors have been of opinion that civilization is an evil and has tended more to human infelicity than any one thing in existence. What has occasioned wars, all that strife among men, that slaughter which has deluged the earth but contest for property, the effect of Civilization? A single question will determine this. Ask the civilized man if he be happy and ask the savage the same, and their answer will decide it. The first will tell you *no*; the other will answer *Yes*. The difference of the two states of men cannot be determined by those who have not experienced both.

Did not Selkirk the Scotchman who was cast away on the Island of Fernandez live there alone for four years, and did he not declare that after he had lost all reflection of the past and all the anxiety for the future he felt himself eased of the burden of social life and was as happy as he supposed man was capable of being in this sublunary world.

[snip]

In drawing the line, however, between a savage and a civilized state, we must say there are advantages in both unknown to the other, that in order to be happy, what we approve in a savage state we should endeavor to imitate, and what we disapprove in a state of civilization we should endeavor to avoid.⁶

But may it not be said that in civilizing of mankind, the Christian civilizer has much to answer for. He invades an island inhabited, say, by savages only, in order to conquer them and hold possession of a territory belonging to others – On what principle? The manifest intent is extent of territory dominion and power to the invader not the extension of Christianity among a race of infidels which appears to me to be the only good arising from the change. For this seeming good they are executing evil. They are invading a peaceful country. Robbing the natives of their property murdering all that oppose them as lords of the domain, calling every native that contends for his property a rebel and putting him to death in a Christian manner, by a Christian executioner – How stands this Christian in the eyes of his Creator, who thus presumes to dictate to him? What ought to have been *done* and which they as Christians would not in conscience have *undone*!

⁶ The text following this paragraph is added to the manuscript with the words “See Addition. But &c.” It is written on different paper and sewn into the original folios between pages 25 and 26.