

ARTS & LETTERS

Rediscovering The Noble Savage

"The Lure of the Primitive" by George Woodcock, in *The American Scholar* (Summer 1976), 1811 Q St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Although many scholars have studied vanishing primitive cultures, few have asked why civilized man is so fascinated nowadays by what Europeans used to call "savage cultures." Woodcock, editor of *Canadian Literature*, writes that Portuguese voyages to Africa and the discovery of America first brought Europeans into contact with primitive peoples. They were regarded as inferior pagan beings, "as unspoiled children to be converted into imitation Christian gentlemen," or simply exploited for commercial purposes (the ivory trade and slavery). Paralleling these derogatory attitudes, there emerged among rationalist thinkers in the late seventeenth century the romantic cult of the Noble Savage. Real knowledge percolated slowly into Europe from the reports of travelers, missionaries, and traders. Then came Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871) and the slow development of anthropology.

Not until early in the twentieth century was primitive man seen "as the representative of a complex, valid way of life contemporaneous with our own, neither intrinsically inferior nor necessarily improvable." Woodcock says such recognition came about largely through shifts in perception among Western artists and intellectuals: Picasso, who discovered African art and in 1907 painted the pioneer work of cubism, *Les Femmes d'Alger*—like primitive art, a projection of inner visions; Sir James Frazer, whose 12-volume *The Golden Bough* (1907) revealed a worldwide network of common mental constructions—including the mythologizing habit we share with primitives; and the pioneering field studies by Anglo-Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands of the western Pacific. The lure of the primitive, says Woodcock, lies both in a desire to find what is common to all societies and "in a pointless nostalgia for peoples and ways of existence that our greed for land and resources has destroyed."

Rewriting Uncle Tom

"Uncle Tom Reconstructed: A Neglected Chapter in the History of a Book" by Thomas P. Riggio, in *American Quarterly* (Spring 1976), Box 1, Logan Hall, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa. 19174.

No American novel has generated more controversy than Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Much of the recent debate centers on the role of "Uncle Tom" as a symbolic figure in black American history. A major critical effort to rescue Mrs. Stowe's novel and its chief character from opprobrium has been underway, says Riggio, professor of English at the University of Connecticut, but scholars have