

## ARTS &amp; 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 Frazier, 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

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yet to explain adequately "how a book whose avowed and successful purpose was to champion an oppressed people came to stand as a major symbol of that oppression." One neglected clue in the "eccentric popular history" of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* lies in its role in Southern Reconstruction fiction, notably in the best-selling work of Thomas Dixon, of North Carolina.

Dixon's novel *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) sold over a million copies. It was intended as a white Southern response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but rather than reënforce the theme of black-white reconciliation that permeates the "Uncle Remus" stories of Joel Chandler Harris and other "New South" writers, Dixon created an archetypal black man who was "a genetically inferior, oversexed animal whose minute intelligence directs itself toward one goal—the wives and daughters of the white man."

Dixon carried Mrs. Stowe's story forward to 1900. He transformed the cruel, white overseer, Simon Legree, into a Reconstruction politician and finally sent him home to New England to become a capitalist who exploits the white working class. He created a new character, Tom Camp, a one-legged Confederate veteran and Bible-quoting Christian who experienced a crisis of faith when liberated blacks raped and killed one of his daughters. Dixon, according to Riggio, portrayed "a white Uncle Tom, a poor white crucified both psychologically and economically by the black man under the tutelage of an industrialized Simon Legree. It is an image to which many, North and South, responded—and still do."

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**SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY**

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*Making Sensible  
Ocean Boundaries*

"Ocean Boundaries and Petroleum Resources" by Hollis D. Hedberg, in *Science* (Mar. 1976), 1515 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

Proposals to set international boundaries at 200 nautical miles from a nation's coast have the advantage of simplicity but little else to recommend them, says Hedberg, Princeton professor emeritus of geology. There is no logical or natural basis for the currently proposed 200-mile limit; as applied to petroleum and other mineral resources, such a boundary would be unacceptable to many countries. The United States, Russia, and China, for example, would lose large, potentially valuable areas of their continental slopes, whereas others, like Chile, Peru, and Portugal, would receive huge tracts of ultra-deep ocean bed more appropriately assigned to an international regime.

Hedberg proposes a "geomorphic" boundary formula based on the continental margin—"the base of that slope that marks the outer