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Benjamin Rush and the Pennsylvania German Farmer as Noble Savage

The title of this article implies no disrespect for the Pennsylvania Germans. Scholars of the Noble Savage concept in history and literature have long recognized that the idea reveals more about the observers than the observed. In this article, the Pennsylvania Germans are considered as the observed. The observer and true subject of this study is Benjamin Rush and, particularly, his 1789 essay, "An Account of the Manners of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania."¹ Though Rush's essay included brief sections on skilled craftsmen and businessmen in the German community, he devoted the bulk of his essay to the Pennsylvania German farmers. My purpose here is to suggest that this portion of his essay belongs, quite logically and correctly, on the same shelf with those works that have become synonymous with the Noble Savage idea in Europe by such authors as: Columbus, Las Casas, Drake, Raleigh, Montaigne, Swift, Defoe, Rousseau, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey.² This task will require some backtracking through the roughly two-thousand-year-old convention. It is widely accepted that the explorers of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were themselves predisposed to regard Caribbean, South and North American, and Polynesian natives as Noble Savages, and that the idea found expression in their travel and promotional literature before it became a standard motif for literature and social criticisms of an over-cultivated European lifestyle.³ Less clear are the reasons for this predisposition. Explanations point to a gradual convergence of motifs and sentiments that arose from the Biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the classical and medieval view of simplicity and innocence in the Golden Age, and the Wild Man folklore of Northern Europe.⁴ Etchings, woodcuts, carvings and paintings of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries document the transition of the Wild Man from a menacing savage to a thoroughly domesticated family beast

modeled after paintings of the Holy Family. So dramatic was this transition that Wild Man transcended mere acceptability to attain virtual heroism in the popular imagination, living as he did a simple, hardy life in harmony with nature, protected from the hardships, dangers, and temptations of civilization.⁵ Socially critical intellectual tracts dating from the first century that contrasted the strong, morally pure savage with his weak, decadent, civilized counterpart lent further credibility to these pictorial representations. All of this, it is argued, established a precedent in the European mind for revering an uncultivated lifestyle in a wild, natural setting, a lifestyle that had maintained a handful of powerful descriptors since the time of Tacitus: simple, virile, virtuous, brave, hardy, unpretentious, democratic, hospitable, chaste, and monogamous—all of this before the discovery of the New World.⁶

The association of the Caribbean Islands with an earthly paradise fairly invited the explorers (and those entrepreneurs who rewrote the explorer's reports for the reading public) to superimpose these descriptors onto the natives, and to elevate them as models for European society.⁷ In the next century, Europeans read Noble Savage literature by Columbus, Drake, Raleigh, Amadas, Barlow, and others who made constant reference to the Golden Age and the Garden of Eden, and generated a new host of labels.⁸ Their savages were: open-hearted, loving, neighborly, generous, gentle, guileless, intelligent, honest, faithful, cheerful, obedient, humble, patient, forgiving, trusting, and physically beautiful. The impact of these reports on European letters, particularly reflections on the nature of primitive man, is well documented. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Noble Savage concept received a thorough going-over and gained further legitimacy in the hands of such influential thinkers as Montaigne, Rabelais, Voltaire, Locke, Swift, and Defoe.⁹ Hobbes's legendary portrayal of the life of primitive man as "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" was simply overtrumped.¹⁰ Significantly, as Fairchild makes clear, the Noble Savage idea was rock-solid in European folk and intellectual history long before it became erroneously but inextricably linked to Rousseau by nineteenth-century poets, so much so that by the eighteenth century the concept invited variations for new purposes and parodies of itself.¹¹ Rousseau's contribution, and that of other eighteenth-century philosophers, was to transfer the idea of the Noble Savage from the Indians of the Americas and the Pacific Islands to any person or group whose lifestyle was simple, removed from cities or other sophisticated enclaves, and close to nature so that the concept came to include: children, peasants, mountaineers, and farmers.¹²

The same transition occurred, roughly simultaneously, in the colonies of North America fueled by the influence of European thought, the overwhelmingly (though not solely) negative portrayals of Indians in Indian War Tracts and Captivity Narratives, which McGregor claims had

"an unmatched capacity to become metaphorical," and the influence of Vattel's *Law of Nations*, which justified the seizure of land by those willing and able to cultivate it for the betterment of mankind, and which rendered the beatification of the farmer a political necessity.¹³ Even the ideal landscape was shifting from the wilderness to cultivated field and garden.¹⁴ The transition of the Noble Savage from the Indian to the farmer in America was also facilitated by common discussion of their plights. Crèvecoeur, for example, who contributed so much to the reception of the Indian as Noble Savage, commented in the same breath on the Pennsylvania German farmers, reasoning that their labor compensated for their coarse manners.¹⁵ For Crèvecoeur, as well as for Rush after him, the farmer distinguished himself from the Indian by the energy that he channeled into agriculture. By the second half of the eighteenth century this stereotypical image of the simple, unsophisticated, peaceful American farmer, like the European peasant-farmer, had in some ways eclipsed the Indian and become so conventional as to serve a variety of literary and political purposes as the notion of agrarian democracy gained momentum. This is evident in the works of Rush's contemporaries and correspondents: Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and the Virginia historian, Robert Beverly.¹⁶

If the highly educated Benjamin Rush had not been influenced by these strong trends in European and American thought, he might have generated a Noble Savage portrait of the Pennsylvania German farmers independently because a set of circumstantial prerequisites common to the Noble Savage encounter through the ages just happened to be in place. Rush considered farmers to occupy the bottom rung of his rigid social hierarchy, he admired the lushness of their natural surroundings, and as a Philadelphian he lived a comfortable distance from both. He regarded the farmers as nonthreatening, felt a missionary zeal to help them (in his case through medicine and education), and stood to gain politically and economically from diplomatic relations with them.¹⁷ Against this backdrop, Rush might have been observing the Pennsylvania German farmers from the deck of a Spanish galleon.

But in addition to these bare circumstances, of course, Rush was very much a product of the enlightened, preromantic thinking of eighteenth-century Europe, a textbook example of the best education educated Americans could buy.¹⁸ Though born into a somewhat humble family, his widowed mother procured a private education for him from which he went on to New Jersey College, shortly afterwards known as Princeton University, and medical study at the Philadelphia Medical College, the University of Edinburgh, and two London hospitals. He also enjoyed a brief European junket with an extended stay in Paris. Not unimportantly, Rush's professional and social introduction to Europe was launched and partially financed by Benjamin Franklin, thanks to whom he conversed

with the elite physicians, artists, and thinkers of his day: Benjamin West, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Samuel Johnson, Albrecht Haller, David Hume, and the famous Whig historian, Catherine Macauley, to name a few. Back in America, he married into an influential Princeton family that surrounded him with prominent intellectuals and politicians.

The impact of this milieu on him is evident in virtually every line of his voluminous prose legacy, but his few remaining love letters to fiancé Julia Stockton alone would suffice as proof.¹⁹ Rush repeatedly stresses a reverence for learning and the cultivation of virtue in their future married life, as well as his respect for Julia as a rational companion. Referring to himself as a philosopher, he wrestles with the same problems of happiness and value in human life that preoccupy the European thinkers, and quotes them liberally: Swift, Goldsmith, Waller, Sterne, and Pope. His definition of taste, "what is proper—beautiful— & sublime in nature or art," was surely given shape by Immanuel Kant; and the personal library of religious, historical, moralistic, and poetic texts that he promises to Julia, includes, along with Shakespeare and Milton, a number of contemporary romantic poets.²⁰

Obviously smitten, Rush infuses the loftier enlightened sentiments of his letters with pure romantic naturalism. His imagery encompasses fruits of love sprung from seeds watered by Julia's virtues, and so on.²¹ Significantly, in this context, he admires Goldsmith's humble Swiss villagers, and describes for Julia his own encounters with simple, country people.²² He is "charmed with the simplicity of their sentiments," with their affection and gratitude.²³ Should the Revolutionary War make life in Philadelphia impossible, Rush adds, he is prepared to live among these people working the land himself, to return each night to Julia who will make their cottage "vocal with her hymns and songs."²⁴ But even in this fantasy, he is quick to distinguish himself from his peasant neighbors with his educational pastimes:

Sometimes we will pass a rainy day, or a winter's evening in reading alternately to each other select passages from the most useful or entertaining books, for my library shall accompany us wherever we go. Thus, while we revive the simplicity of patriarchal times, we will be happy. . . .²⁵

This *mélange* of enlightened and romantic thinking enabled Rush to perceive the Pennsylvania German farmers as Noble Savages.

Like most Noble Savage literatures, Rush's essay lacks the derision that would qualify his subjects as savage. Social inferiority is generally taken for granted in the genre. But one need not look far in his letters and essays to find evidence of disdain. Like most of his contemporaries, Rush was an elitist, and his writings leave no doubt as to his criteria for

social stratification: not wealth or worldly sophistication, but education separated the social classes, deliverance from the unexamined life. Added to this was Rush's very fuzzy notion of the lower echelons of society, into which he lumped creatures he refers to as brutes together with Indians and farmers. The distinction between the three is confused and complicated by the fact that the term *brute* appears to refer to humans as well as animals. The difference between humans and brutes, he explains to Julia, is religion, brutes being "animal machines who are governed in all their actions by instinct only" (here brutes appear to be animals); but then he goes on, "they are governed by the vulgar maxims and fashions of the world" (now the brutes do appear to be human).²⁶ Except that when Rush charts the "eight degrees of happiness in marriage," his "Matrimonial Thermometer," he writes to Julia:

The first or lowest degree of conjugal happiness consists in a sympathy in animal love. The Indians of this country enjoy no other happiness in matrimony than what is derived from this source. It is but a small degree above the happiness of brutes.²⁷

Now, it seems, brutes *are* animals unless Rush envisions human brutes lower on his scale than Indians, which is possible. In describing his frustrated efforts to converse with a farmer, Rush comments: "Perhaps tho't I the social and rational being is wholly lost in this man in the mere animal."²⁸ From these early letters to Julia, then, we can document the hazy convergence of animal, Indian, and farmer viewed from Rush's rather extreme and insular elitism.

Years later, this position resurfaces in Rush's correspondence with supporters, donors, and trustees of Dickinson and Franklin colleges.²⁹ To win financial support for the colleges from wealthy and prestigious Germans, Rush had to convince them that the rural Germans needed and deserved education. His portrayal of their need is consistent with his social hierarchy: frontier society, he claims, progresses "from the savage to the civilized."³⁰ In a letter to John Dickinson dated 5 April 1787, Rush expressed the hope that the two colleges would "humanize the half-civilized inhabitants of the . . . counties of Pennsylvania."³¹ And in arguing for education in the German language, he noted:

the extreme ignorance which they discover in their numerous suits in law, in their attachment to quacks in physic, and in their violent and mistaken zeal in government. The influence of our college, if properly directed, might reform them and show them that men should live for other purposes than simply to cultivate the earth and to accumulate the specie.³²

This last reference to cultivating the earth and multiplying the species recalls Crèvecoeur's defense of the Pennsylvania German farmers as tillers of the soil, while at the same time highlighting Rush's notion that farmers exist and procreate without a higher purpose in their lives. Both of these views are echoed in Rush's correspondence to and from his peers in higher education and government.³³

How was it possible for Rush to offer privately so pejorative a view of people he will praise publicly in his essay? Rush, his biographers concur, had a very high tolerance for ambiguity on many political and social issues. It should not surprise us, then, that ambiguity with regard to the Pennsylvania German farmers was all in a day's work for him. Financial support for the colleges required him to demonstrate not only the need but also the worthiness of the Pennsylvania Germans. Their need he described in private letters; their worth he praised in his public essay, and argued in two ways. First, he pointed out, as did his contemporary Rousseau, that the primitive lifestyle of the farmer nurtured many, though not all, of the virtues aspired to by formal education: humility, piety, and industry. Second, he argued that an educated German population would make an indispensable economic contribution to the young republic. The result of his discourse, his "Account of the Manners and Habits of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania," reflects not only Rush's long-held, positive inclination to the Germans, and perhaps as Bonar claims, "a sophisticated analysis of the balance between assimilation and non-assimilation in an immigrant group,"³³ but also a long tradition of Noble Savage literature in Europe and in the colonies, a tradition that has always accommodated ambiguity.

Rush's Pennsylvania Germans reflect the qualities of Noble Savages described before and after them. They lead frugal, sober lives, free of debt, in Christian piety, in the comfort of their simple, neat homes, and in the plenty produced by their hard work and attention to crops and livestock—just like the European peasants and farmers described in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is not surprising, when we recall that they were first- and second-generation immigrants from those groups. But their closeness to the land, heightened sensitivity to nature, conservation of natural resources, close-knit families, love of children, hospitality, generosity, thoughtfulness, intelligence, and trustworthiness also recall sixteenth-century descriptions of the indigenous peoples of the New World, and the earlier scenes of Wild Man and his family so carefully modeled after paintings of the Holy Family in an Eden-like setting. It stretches the author's imagination to glimpse the Golden Age in the innocence, superstition, and patriarchal nature of Pennsylvania German culture that Rush describes, but thoroughness fairly demands mention of the fact that both Rush and Tacitus commented on the well

built fences of the Germans, a fact from which the author declines to draw a conclusion.

Regardless of how one might assign and match these various qualities, the feature of Rush's essay that ties it most clearly to the tradition of Noble Savage literature is his didactic intent, his use of his subjects as models for the rest of society. He appeals to citizens and legislatures to:

learn from the account that has been given of the German inhabitants of Pennsylvania, to prize knowledge and industry in agriculture and manufactures, as the basis of domestic happiness and national prosperity.³⁴

He reminds these constituents that the Germans are the "only pillars" of revolutionary American society who could support the newly written constitution.³⁵

Was there any validity to Rush's estimation of the Pennsylvania Germans? A number of his contemporaries corroborated much of what he said—both the positive and the negative.³⁶ But recent research on rural America, particularly, women in rural America do not support Rush's idyllic portrait of Pennsylvania German farm life in the essay,³⁷ and we cannot forget that his essay was a promotional piece for a college fundraising campaign. Despite his questionable historical accuracy and ulterior motives, however, his glowing, idealistic view seems to have generated that same power of myth that other Noble Savage literatures possess. It was the first essay of its kind, and seems to have garnered credibility, so much so that Rush was cited as a primary source on the habits of the Pennsylvania Germans in *Pennsylvania Folklife* as recently as 1992.³⁸

If there is any significance in this link between Rush's essay and the Noble Savage tradition, perhaps it lies in linking a seminal document in the construction of a regional, ethnic identity to the larger strains of European and American thought. Or, perhaps it lies in uncovering an irony in the history of American culture. Today, Pennsylvania Germans along with other German-Americans are thoroughly integrated into and identified with the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, middle-class majority against which contemporary ethnic minorities must struggle for recognition. It is surely ironic that the Pennsylvania Germans, from their earliest arrival in the American colonies well into the twentieth century, suffered discrimination on the basis of their language, accent, and humble origins just as visible ethnic minorities do today. But to discover that the

Pennsylvania Germans were once regarded as Noble Savages like the ancestors of many of today's minorities only adds to the irony, and suggests that our majority might have more reason to identify with minority groups than it remembers.

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Notes

¹ Benjamin Rush, *An Account of the Manners of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania*, Schmauk and Rupp, eds. (Lancaster: The Pennsylvania German Society, 1910). Hereafter cited as *Account*.

² Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York, 1961); Gaile McGregor, *The Noble Savage in the New World Garden: Notes Toward a Syntactics of Place* (Toronto, 1988); a great deal of research on the development of the Noble Savage concept has drawn on the reports of voyages transcribed by Hakluyt in the sixteenth century, to which the reader is referred, Richard Hakluyt, *Voyages*, 8 vols. (London, 1907).

³ Fairchild; McGregor.

⁴ Fairchild; McGregor; for the development of the Wild Man myth see Lynn Frier Kaufmann, *The Noble Savage: Satyrs and Satyr Families in Renaissance Art* (Ann Arbor, 1979).

⁵ Kaufmann, 35-41.

⁶ Fairchild, 2-4; McGregor, 12-16; Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*, trans. and introd. H. Mattingly (Baltimore, 1948), 101ff.

⁷ Fairchild, 8ff; McGregor, 12ff.

⁸ Hakluyt, 4-8.

⁹ Benjamin Bissell, *The American Indian in English Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, 1925), 41, 54; Fairchild, 15-21, 25-26, 45-50, 52-56, 127-28, 470-71; McGregor 15-25; Gilbert Chinard, *L'Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVII^e et au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1913), 366-99.

¹⁰ W. G. Smith, ed., *Hobbes's Leviathan* (Oxford, 1909), 97.

¹¹ Fairchild, 122-39.

¹² Bissell, 38-54; Chinard, 401-30; Fairchild 121-271; McGregor, 24-29.

¹³ McGregor, 41; Emmerich de Vattel, *The Law of Nations: Or, Principles of the Law of Nature; Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns* (New York: S & E Butler, 1805), book 1, chapt. 8, 160-61.

¹⁴ Fairchild, 121-271; McGregor, 24-29; Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization* (Berkeley, 1988), 69-73.

¹⁵ Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, *Voyage dans la Haute Pennsylvanie* (Paris, 1801), 25-41.

¹⁶ McGregor, 46ff.

¹⁷ These "prerequisites" to the view of a person or people as Noble Savages are rarely discussed but will be expanded in a larger work in progress. Particularly significant to the continuity of the concept within the Pennsylvania German community is the vacillating popularity of Amish and Old Order Mennonite communities, which has always diminished in times of war in Europe and in America because of their refusal to bear arms. Peace seems to be an absolute prerequisite to regarding a person or people as Noble Savages. For more on this phenomenon in the Amish and Old Order Mennonite community see Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Baltimore, 1989), 5, 26, 210, 217-18.

¹⁸ For a review of Rush's upbringing and education the reader is referred to his numerous biographies and autobiography: James Arthur Bonar, *Benjamin Rush and the Theory and Practice of Republican Education in Pennsylvania* (Ann Arbor, 1965); Carl Binger, *Revolutionary Doctor: Benjamin Rush, 1746-1813* (New York, 1966); John Donald D'Elia, *Benjamin Rush: an Intellectual Biography* (Ann Arbor, 1965); Harry G. Good, *Benjamin Rush and His Services to American Education* (Berne, 1918); Nathan G. Goodman, *Benjamin Rush: Physician and Citizen, 1746-1813* (Philadelphia, 1934); David Freeman Hauke, *Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly* (New York, 1971); Winthrop and Frances Nielson, *Verdict for the Doctor* (New York, 1958); George W. Corner, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush* (Princeton, 1948).

¹⁹ Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., and L. H. Butterfield, eds., *My Dearest Julia: The Love Letters of Dr. Benjamin Rush to Julia Stockton* (New York, 1979).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17, 43, passim.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15, passim.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 7, passim.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15, passim.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16, passim.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁹ L. H. Butterfield, *The Letters of Benjamin Rush*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1951). Hereafter cited as *Letters*.

³⁰ Bonar, 55.

³¹ Bonar, 59.

³² *Letters*, I, 353.

³³ Bonar, 55.

³⁴ *Account*, 110.

³⁵ *Account*, 111, passim.

³⁶ Crèvecoeur; Jonas Heinrich Gudehus, "Journey to America," *Publications of the Pennsylvania German Society* 14 (1980): 185-329; Gottlieb Mittelberger, *Reise nach Pennsylvanien*, trans. Carl Theo Eben (Philadelphia, 1898).

³⁷ Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women: 1750-1850* (New Haven, 1986); Jean R. Soderlund, "Women in Eighteenth Century Pennsylvania: Toward a Model of Diversity," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 115 (1991): 163-83; Lisa Wilson Waciega, "A 'Man of Business': The Widow of Means in Southeastern Pennsylvania, 1750-1850," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (1987): 40-64; G. S. Rowe, "The Role of Courthouses in the Lives of Eighteenth Century Pennsylvania Women," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 68 (1985): 5-23; Sharon V. Salinger, "'Send No More Women': Female Servants in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 107 (1983): 29-48.

³⁸ Amos W. Long, Jr., "The Rural Pennsylvania-German Home and Family," *Pennsylvania Folklife* 42 (1992): 16.

