

1927. A more balanced view is emerging, with an improved representation of Native American women

Columbus Finds a Strange People in America

The people Columbus found in America were very different from the Europeans with whom he was familiar. As we have said, he called them Indians, and they have always been known by that name. Since they were to play a considerable part in the history of our country, it is desirable we should know what kind of people they were.

THEIR DIVISION OF WORK

Although the Indian was a true child of nature, with a wild love of freedom, his life was not, as some have supposed, an idle one. Hunting and fishing were his chief occupations, these being the necessary means by which he obtained his food. But the Indian brave was first of all a warrior. He had to defend his hunting-grounds and ward off attacks of hostile tribes; and sometimes he took the war-path for his own gain. When not following the war-path or the chase, he had to make his weapons. They were mainly the bow and arrow, the war-club, and the tomahawk. He also required canoes and snowshoes for covering distances, and these, with other necessary conveniences or tools, he made with his own hands.

The squaw, too, led a busy life. Digging with shells and pointed sticks, she cultivated the soil and gathered the crops. These were more varied in the South than in regions farther north, for the climate was warmer and more attention was paid to a rude kind of agriculture. Indian corn was the chief crop, but tomatoes, beans, pumpkins, squashes, and tobacco were also raised. Besides cultivating the soil, the squaw dried the meat brought home from the chase and dressed the skins, making from them moccasins and other wearing apparel, for the hunt supplied clothing as well as food. She also rudely fashioned the simple household utensils, gathered wood, made fires, cooked the food, and set up the wigwam when on the trail, for the brave was supposed to be busy providing game or guarding against the enemy.

THEIR CHARACTERISTICS WERE PRIMITIVE

The instincts of the Indian were untrained, but he could be kind and generous. In the midst of famine he would cheerfully share his last morsel with a fellow sufferer, and in the hour of danger would lay down his life for a friend. He was also capable of lofty ideas of right and duty, and frequently gave proof of them in making and keeping treaties and in the beautiful and poetic expression of his thoughts.

THEIR BELIEF IN THE AFTER-LIFE

The Indian had faith in good and bad spirits, but had no clear idea of one God over all. He believed that Indians, good and bad, would after this

life go to the happy hunting-grounds. This was his name for heaven, where life, he believed, would continue with the same occupations as in this world. It is thought that the practice of scalping enemies killed in battle was associated with the belief that the loss of the scalp prevented the spirit from entering the happy hunting-grounds. The Indian would, therefore, take almost any risk to save the dead body of his chief or his friend from being scalped by the enemy. It was common practice to bury arms with the "brave," so that he might have them in the happy hunting-grounds. That he might lack no means of comfort other articles of common use also were buried with him.⁹