



*The Red Man's Rebuke*  
Simon Pokagon (1893)

*Simon Pokagon belonged to a Potawatomi band in Michigan who evaded the Indian Removal of the 1830s. Catholic by upbringing, Pokagon became known among white Americans as a lecturer and writer. The following selection concludes a biting essay he wrote in response to the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, held to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's first landing in the Americas. Addressing "the pale-faced race that has usurped our lands and homes," Pokagon declared at the beginning of his essay that indigenous people felt no desire "to celebrate our own funeral, the discovery of America." (Later, however, Pokagon accepted an invitation from World's Fair organizers to participate in the pageantry as an indigenous representative.) Pokagon's essay was published as a booklet, printed not on paper but on slices of birch bark—in honor, he explained, of Potawatomi tradition.*

Reader, pause here, close your eyes, shut out from your heart all prejudice against our race, and honestly consider the above records, penned by the pale-faced historians [...]; and tell us, in the name of eternal truth and by all that is sacred and dear to mankind, was there ever a people, without the slightest reason of offense, more treacherously imprisoned and scourged than we have been? And tell us, have crime, despotism, violence, and slavery ever been dealt out in a more wicked manner to crush out life and liberty, or was ever a people more mortally offended than our forefathers were? [...]

We never shall be happy here anymore; we gaze into the faces of our little ones, for smiles of infancy to please, and into the faces of our young men and maidens, for joys of youth to cheer advancing age—but alas! instead of smiles of joy, we find but looks of sadness there. Then we fully realize, in the anguish of our souls, that their young and tender hearts, in keenest sympathy with ours, have drunk in the sorrows we have felt, and their sad faces reflect it back to us again. No rainbow of promise spans the dark cloud of our afflictions; no cheering hopes are painted on our midnight sky. We only stand, with folded arms, and watch and wait to see the future deal with us no better than the past. No cheer of sympathy is given us; but in answer to our complaints, we are told the triumphal march of the Eastern race westward is by the unalterable decree of nature, termed by them "the survival of the fittest." And so we stand as upon the seashore, chained hand and foot, while the incoming tide of the great ocean of civilization rises slowly but surely to overwhelm us.

But a few more generations, and the last child of the forest will have passed into the world beyond—into that kingdom where Tche-ban-you-booz, the Great Spirit, dwelleth, who loveth justice and mercy and hateth evil; who has declared the "fittest" in his kingdom shall be those alone that hear and aid his children when they cry and that love him and keep his commandments. In that kingdom, many of our people, in faith, believe [that] he will summon the pale-faced spirits to take position on his left and the red spirits upon his right, and that he will say, "Sons and daughters of the forest, your prayers for deliverance from the iron heel of oppression through centuries past are recorded in this book now open before me, made from the bark of the white birch, a tree under which for generations past you have mourned and wept. On

its pages, silently, has been recorded your sad history. It has touched my heart with pity, and I will have compassion.”

Then, turning to his left, he will say, “Sons and daughters of the East, all hear and give heed unto my words. While on earth, I did great and marvelous things for you—I gave my only Son, who declared unto you my will and, as you had freely received, to so freely give and declare the gospel unto all people. A few of you have kept the faith and, through opposition and great tribulation, have labored hard and honestly for the redemption of mankind, regardless of race or color. To all such, I now give divine power to fly on lightning wings throughout my universe. Now, therefore, listen; and when the great drum beats, let all try their powers to fly. Only those can rise who acted well their part on earth to redeem and save the fallen.”

The drum will be sounded, and that innumerable multitude will appear like some vast sea of wounded birds struggling to rise. We shall behold it, and shall hear their fluttering as the rumbling of an earthquake, and to our surprise shall see but a scattering few in triumph rise, and [shall] hear their songs re-echo through the vault of heaven as they sing, “Glory to the highest, who hath redeemed and saved us.”

Then the Great Spirit will speak with a voice of thunder to the remaining shamefaced multitude: “Hear ye: it is through great mercy that you have been permitted to enter these happy hunting grounds. Therefore I charge you, in presence of these red men, that you are guilty of having tyrannized over them in many and strange ways. I find you guilty of having made wanton, wholesale butchery of their game and fish. I find you guilty of using tobacco, a poisonous weed made only to kill parasites on plants and lice on man and beast. You found it with the red men, who used it only in smoking the pipe of peace, to confirm their contracts in place of a seal. But you multiplied its use, not only in smoking but in chewing [and] snuffing, thus forming unhealthy, filthy habits; and by cigarettes, the abomination of abominations, [you taught] little children to hunger and thirst after the father and mother of palsy and cancers.

“I find you guilty of tagging after the pay agents sent out by the great chief of the United States among the Indians to pay off their birthright claims to home and liberty and native lands; and then sneaking about their agencies by deceit and trickery, cheating and robbing them of their money and goods, thus leaving them poor and naked. I also find you guilty of following the trail of Christian missionaries into the wilderness among the natives; and when they had set up my altars, and the great work of redemption had just begun, and some in faith believed, you then and there most wickedly set up the idol of man-tchi-man in-to (the devil) and there stuck out your sign, SAMPLE ROOMS. You then dealt out to the sons of the forest a most damnable drug, fitly termed on earth by Christian women ‘a beverage of hell,’ which destroyed both body and soul, taking therefore all their money and blankets and scrupling not to take in pawn the Bibles given them by my servants.

“Therefore know ye, this much-abused race shall enjoy the liberties of these happy hunting grounds while I teach them my will, which you were in duty bound to do while on earth. But instead, you blocked up the highway that led to heaven, that the car of salvation might not pass over. Had you done your duty, they as well as you would now be rejoicing in glory with my saints, with whom you, fluttering, tried this day in vain to rise. But now I say unto you: Stand

back! You shall not tread upon the heels of my people nor tyrannize over them anymore. Neither shall you, with gatling-gun or otherwise, disturb or break up their prayer meetings in camp anymore. Neither shall you practice with weapons of lightning and thunder anymore. Neither shall you use tobacco in any shape, way, or manner. Neither shall you touch, taste, handle, make, buy, or sell anything that can intoxicate anymore. And know ye, ye cannot buy out the law or skulk by justice here; and if any attempt is made on your part to break these commandments, I shall forthwith grant these red men of America great power and delegate them to cast you out of Paradise and hurl you headlong through its outer gates into the endless abyss beneath—far beyond, where darkness meets with light, there to dwell—and thus shut you out from my presence, and the presence of angels, and the light of heaven forever and ever.”

**Source:** Chief [Simon] Pokagon, *The Red Man's Rebuke* (Hartford, MI: C.H. Engle, 1893), 1, 9, 12-16, <https://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/redmanquotsrebu00poka>. From a digital scan by the Smithsonian Libraries. Licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Zero 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

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