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# Belles lettres and bell ringers

*Sitting Bull*, Champion of the Sioux. By Stanley Vestal. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company. 1932. \$3.50.

N EARLY ninety years ago an Indian boy ran away from camp to join his father and some other Sioux warriors who were looking for scalps and glory. They found the enemy and lay in ambush for them; but before the moment for the charge came, the boy's impatience overcame him, he shot forward on his fleet pony, bore down on a man who stood with arrow drawn to the head, and struck him with a coup stick, a light peeled rod with a feather tied to the end. The arrow went wild, and an instant later the thundering Sioux rode the enemy warrior down, killed and scalped him. The boy was unarmed, and he was only fourteen years old. He had no name at that time, but his proud father immediately dubbed him Sitting Bull, a name which he believed had been divinely and miraculously bestowed on himself, and was therefore his to use or give away. Our popular accounts would have us believe that this boy grew up to be a coward. Before his death he was to count sixty-three of these coups, honors won by striking the enemy with the hand or something held in the hand, and to bear in his body the scars of two bullets and an arrow—all in front.

He was born near the present town of Bullhead, South Dakota, into the Hunkpapa tribe of the Teton or prairie Sioux. He came of a fighting race and a fighting family, a race jealous of courage, strength, and prestige. And he was, in time, to be elected head chief of the greater part of this nation. For the first fifty years of his life he had little or no contact with the whites and practically nothing is known of this period beyond what Mr Vestal has gathered from old Indians, comrades of Sitting Bull, and preserved in the present volume. In this account he appears as a reckless, ruthless, and cunning warrior, master of such strategy as existed in the glorified sport of Indian warfare; as a social leader, a poet, and a singer, a favorite with the women, a fierce, intense patriot. And yet he was admired by the Indians almost as much for his kindness as for his courage; on

many occasions he is known to have saved the lives of enemies, and one of these, an Assiniboin, became his adopted brother and a famous warrior. He died with Sitting Bull.

As his power increased among his own people his economic sagacity developed. The existence of his nation depended on the integrity of their hunting grounds. He launched war party after war party against Crows, Rees, Hohe, and Flatheads, and he saved the great buffalo herds for his people until the ever increasing pressure of the whites brought him into contact with the soldiers. From 1864 until his surrender, clashes with troops alternated with battles against other Indians, and Sitting Bull rarely came off second best.

In 1875, on recommendation of the Indian Bureau, the Washington authorities determined to put the hunting Sioux on reservation; this was the beginning of the campaign which reached its tragic climax in the battle of the Little Big Horn. Sitting Bull did not seek that fight; Custer sought it. Custer was ambitious. Mr Vestal thinks he had his eye on the presidency. Eight years before, he had come upon the encamped Southern Cheyenne, Arapahoe and Kiowa in the valley of the Washita in Oklahoma, and achieved a great victory; it has been called a massacre. If he could do the same thing to the Sioux he would be the greatest Indian fighter of all time. But there were too many Sioux, and the three divisions of troops failed to synchronize their attacks. Reno attacked and the Sioux, Sitting Bull in the lead as usual, drove him back across the river. Custer attacked and Sitting Bull stayed with the women and children west of the camp; he knew he was not needed against Custer. His young men would take care of that little force, and besides something told him that there must be another body of troops coming up. He was right; if Benteen had not been hopelessly entangled in the badlands there might have been another tale to tell. And because Sitting Bull was a strategist, because he tried to hold his women and children from panic, he has been branded as a coward. And because the Indians, who knew next to nothing about this strange white breed, who fought them as if they had been some new kind of animal, robbed the dead and mutilat-

## OKLAHOMA CITY O. U. BOOSTERS

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ed some of them, he has been branded as a monster of cruelty. And yet the old Indians (who were eye-witnesses) say that on the night of the battle Sitting Bull gave a command which deserves to be recorded among the memorable utterances of mankind: "Tonight we shall mourn for our dead, and for those brave white men laying up yonder on the hillside."

Finally seven months after the battle, Sitting Bull, tired of dodging the soldiers, led his band into Canada. The Red Coats knew how to handle Indians, and Sitting Bull made his young men behave. He was happy. But the buffalo were getting scarce, the Canadian government refused him a reservation, and the traders could not feed him. And so, after four years of this "Indian summer" the old chief, in desperation, came in. Outwardly his surrender was complete; he settled down on Grand river, took up farming, and behaved. Inwardly he was still going the Indian road! He was still chief of the Sioux, he still clung to his old religion, he still refused to sell the Sioux empire for a song. His exploitation by Buffalo Bill increased his influence. Because of his prestige, the Indian agent, Major McLaughlin, felt that he must be removed. The Ghost dance and the Messiah craze offered a good excuse; but it was only an excuse. Sitting Bull never believed in the Messiah, and had little to do with the ghost dancers. The military ordered his arrest. The Indian police tried to arrest him. Fourteen Indian policemen and Sitting Bull Indians lay dead around his cabin when the affair was over. But Sitting Bull was a "good Indian;" and the Indian Bureau reigned supreme over the tamed and leaderless Sioux.

The entire book is a process of exploding myths. Most of these myths originated in ignorant, prejudiced or deliberately falsified reports, memoirs, and fiction. But there is another source of information available; it is the oral testimony of old Sioux, Cheyenne, Nes Percé, Crow, Cree, Blood, Blackfeet, Assiniboin, some of them friends and relatives, some of them enemies, all of them eye-witnesses. It would seem that their testimony is reliable; in the first place an Indian has a wonderful memory and does not commonly lie to his friends; in the second place their testimony checks, even though taken at different times and places; in the third place, not all the incidents offered redound to the honor and dignity of Sitting Bull; and finally, their evidence checks with some of the records kept by whites which are known to be unprejudiced. It would seem that Mr Vestal has sifted and preserved most of the evidence which is yet available. While he is a vigorous partisan of his hero, he is

also a historian with a historian's objective devotion to truth. It is sufficient to say that his style is adequate to his theme. His picture of Sitting Bull and his Sioux is probably as nearly correct as will ever be obtained.

Out of it the old chief emerges as the finest representative of a heroic civilization, heroic in the sense in which the civilization of Mycenae and Troy was heroic; a civilization built, in respect of economics on the buffalo, in respect of social amenities on war. And this civilization, in which personal qualities were supreme, came into disastrous conflict with the mass culture of the Americans, built on the machine, in which personal qualities counted (and still count) for very little. The world lost something which it could ill afford to lose when the culture of the Plains Indians was destroyed.—KENNETH KAUFMAN, '16as, '19M.A.