The Life and Death of Sitting Bull

Tatanka-Iyotanka, or Sitting Bull, is best known to non-Indians as the Hunkpapa Sioux chief who masterminded Custer’s defeat at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. In fact, as befitted a man in his mid-forties, whose arms were still swollen from the sacrifices made in the sun dance, Sitting Bull directed most of his energies that day to protecting the women and children. His major influence on the battle was exerted before the conflict began, in his vision of the soldiers falling into camp.

Sitting Bull’s fame among his own people rested on his spirituality as much as his military reputation. He was both a war chief and Wichasha Wakan (“holy man”). Born in the early 1830s, he counted his first coup at age fourteen; he had accumulated more than sixty coups by 1870, and he fought against both Indian and American enemies. He displayed the virtues his people admired most — courage, fortitude, generosity, and wisdom — and attained the unprecedented position of supreme chief. Wooden Leg, whose Northern Cheyenne people joined Sitting Bull prior to the Little Big Horn, explained the sources of the Hunkpapa’s influence. Sitting Bull was “the most consistent advocate of the idea of living out of all touch with white people,” he said:

He had come into admiration by all Indians as a man whose medicine was good — that is, as a man having a kind heart and good judgment as to the best course of conduct. He was considered as being altogether brave, but peaceable. He was strong in religion — the Indian religion. He made medicine many times. He prayed and fasted and whipped his flesh into submission to the will of the Great Medicine.²

As American pressure on Sioux lands and culture intensified, Sitting Bull came to personify his people’s struggle for freedom. After the Little Big Horn, he led his followers to Canada rather than submit to life on the reservation. Driven by hunger to return to the United States,
he surrendered at Fort Buford, Dakota Territory, in 1881, expressing his wish that he be remembered as "the last man of my tribe to surrender my rifle."

Almost two years as a prisoner of war did nothing to alter Sitting Bull's devotion to the way of life he had fought to defend:

White men like to dig in the ground for their food. My people prefer to hunt buffalo as their fathers did. White men like to stay in one place. My people want to move their tepees here and there to different hunting grounds. The life of white men is slavery. They are prisoners in towns or farms. The life my people want is a life of freedom. I have seen nothing that a white man has, houses or railways or clothing or food, that is as good as the right to move in open country, and live in our own fashion."

At the Standing Rock agency, Sitting Bull continued to resist assimilation. A stint of touring eastern cities with Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show in 1884–85 seems only to have confirmed his conviction that he "would rather die an Indian than live a white man." He argued forcefully against allotment. The agent at Standing Rock, James McLaughlin, portrayed him as an obstinate troublemaker and worked to undermine his authority among his people. But when the Ghost Dance religion took hold among the Sioux in 1890, it was natural that the people should look to Sitting Bull as their spiritual leader, whether or not he himself embraced the new religion. It was equally natural that the authorities should identify him as a ringleader who had to be removed.

The selections in this chapter illustrate Sitting Bull's record as a warrior, his continuing defense of Sioux interests even after his defeat, and his death at the hands of men who had once fought beside him.

SCENES FROM A WARRIOR'S LIFE

Sitting Bull drew many pictographic representations of the coups he had counted, following the traditional conventions of pictographic composition even though he used paper and pencils rather than paint on hide. The drawings reprinted here (Figure 25) are taken from a series done by Sitting Bull in 1870. He gave them to his adopted brother, Jumping Bull, who added some of his own. Another Lakota artist, Four Horns, copied the drawings, and they were eventually purchased by Assistant Surgeon James Kimball at Fort Buford. From there they were