After a brief career as a lawyer, George Catlin decided to pursue his lifelong interest in painting and set up a portrait studio in Philadelphia in the 1820s. After painting the portrait of the explorer William Clark, coleader of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Catlin accompanied Clark (who now served as Superintendent for Indian Affairs) on a trip west to negotiate treaties with several of the Indian nations. Catlin became fascinated with the Indians and their way of life, which he realized would soon be forever changed as a result of Western expansion. In 1832 he embarked on an eight-year-long painting expedition that took him through much of the Indian territories in North America. Catlin visited approximately 146 Indian tribes during his journeys and painted and sketched thousands of portraits and other scenes of Indian life. Upon his return east, Catlin had hoped to sell his collection of paintings to the nation, but when that proposal was defeated in the U.S. Senate, he left for Europe, where he spent the next thirty years with his family. He returned to the United States shortly before his death in 1872.

In addition to his paintings and sketches, Catlin wrote an illustrated book of his journeys, Letters and Notes of the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians, which was published in 1841. In Letters and Notes he described a way of life that he already realized was soon to disappear. In the passage included here, he recounts a remarkable “reverie” in which he foresees the disappearance of both the buffalo and the Indian tribes who depended upon that animal for their sustenance. During his expedition, Catlin also sent a number of dispatches back to newspapers in the east, and in one of those reports he made the earliest known calls for the creation of a system of national parks, a proposal that was reiterated in Letters and Notes.
It is truly a melancholy contemplation for the traveller in this country, to anticipate the period which is not far distant, when the last of these noble animals [the bison], at the hands of white and red men, will fall victims to their cruel and improvident rapacity; leaving these beautiful green fields, a vast and idle waste, unstocked and unpeopled for ages to come, until the bones of the one and the traditions of the other will have vanished, and left scarce an intelligible trace behind.

That the reader should not think me visionary in these contemplations, or romancing in making such assertions, I will hand him the following item of the extravagancies which are practiced in these regions, and rapidly leading to the results which I have just named.

When I first arrived at this place, on my way up the river, which was in the month of May, in 1832, and had taken up my lodgings in the Fur Company’s Fort, Mr. Laidlaw, of whom I have before spoken, and also his chief clerk, Mr. Halsey, and many of their men, as well as the chiefs of the Sioux, told me, that only a few days before I arrived, (when an immense herd of buffaloes had showed themselves on the opposite side of the river, almost blackening the plains for a great distance,) a party of five or six hundred Sioux Indians on horseback, forded the river about mid-day, and spending a few hours amongst them, recrossed the river at sun-down and came into the Fort with fourteen hundred fresh buffalo tongues, which were thrown down in a mass, and for which they required but a few gallons of whiskey, which was soon demolished, indulging them in a little, and harmless carouse.

This profligate waste of the lives of these noble and useful animals, when, from all that I could learn, not a skin or a pound of the meat (except the tongues), was brought in, fully supports me in the seemingly extravagant predictions that I have made as to their extinction, which I am certain is near at hand. In the above extravagant instance, at a season when their skins were without fur and not worth taking off, and their camp was so well stocked with fresh and dried meat, that they had no occasion for using the flesh, there is a fair exhibition of the improvident character of the savage, and also of his recklessness in catering for his appetite, so long as the present inducements are held out to him in his country, for its gratification.