"Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man."

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

In *The Pioneers*, an 1823 novel by James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), Nathaniel "Natty" Bumppo, a white hunter who lives his entire life near the northeast Native American tribal lands of the Iroquois nation, witnesses the wholesale slaughter of passenger pigeons by the residents of Otsego—a fictional town in central New York State modeled on modern Cooperstown. What Cooper's villagers saw to inspire their shooting spree was probably similar to the scene described by the American naturalist and wildlife artist John James Audubon [aw-duh-BON] (1785–1851), author and illustrator of one of the great ornithological books of the nineteenth century, *Birds of America* (1851–1859) (Fig. **14.1**). In 1813, in Kentucky, Audubon calculated that he viewed more than a billion birds pass over him in about three hours. "The air was literally filled with Pigeons," he wrote. "The light of noon-day was obscured as by an eclipse." Natty Bumppo looks on silently at the slaughter, as "the birds lay scattered over the field in such profusion, as to cover the very ground with the fluttering victims," until he is angered into speech by the introduction of a cannon, designed to bring thousands down at a time:

> "This comes from settling a country" he said—"here I have known the pigeons to fly for forty long years, and, till you made your clearings, there was nobody to scare or to hurt them. I loved to see them come into the woods, for they were company to a body; hurting nothing; being, as it was, as harmless as a garter-snake. But now it gives me sore thoughts when I hear the frighty things whizzing through the air, for I know it's only a motion to bring out all the brats in the village at them. Well! the Lord won't see the waste of his creatures for nothing, and right will be done to the pigeons, as well as others, by and by."

Natty clearly relates the fate of the pigeons with the fate of the Native Americans. From Cooper's point of view, the native peoples, so at home in the natural world, must inevitably succumb to the same destructive "civilizing" forces as nature itself. Cooper's story is a premonition of the havoc new technologies would wreak on humanity.

At the dawn of the twentieth century an optimistic spirit of change and innovation permeated Western culture. All this would change. With the eruption of World War I in August 1914, faith in human progress was cast into doubt. The technological fruits of progress seemed to be guns, tanks, poison gas, and, ultimately, the atomic bomb, and the political promise of the nineteenth century's nationalist drive for freedom found its twentieth-century expression in the rise of the new, ultra-nationalist totalitarian state.

The Challenge to Cultural Identity

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, Western nations, revitalized by effective new military, communication, and naval technologies, sought to expand their influence and reap new economic and political power in far-distant lands. As a result of this process of imperial expansion, by the dawn of the twentieth century the tradition and sense of centeredness that had defined indigenous cultures for hundreds, even thousands, of years was either threatened or in the process of being destroyed. Worldwide, non-Western cultures faced fundamental challenges to their cultural identities—not so much a *re*centering of culture but a *de*centering of culture.

The Fate of the Native Americans

The first consistent interactions between Native peoples and Europeans in North America occurred during the seventeenth century and were confined mostly to the eastern part of the continent. In the aftermath of the Revolutionary War and the Louisiana Purchase the movement westward accelerated, first into the Ohio Valley, then the Midwest and South Central regions (Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky), and last, the Great Plains, Rocky Mountain, and Pacific regions. Images such as *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (Fig. **14.2**) by Albert Bierstadt [BEER-shtaht] (1830–1902) reinforced in the national consciousness the wisdom of Jefferson's purchase. First exhibited in New York in April 1864 at a public fair, the painting's display was accompanied by performances by Native Americans, who danced and demonstrated their sporting activities in front of it. However, the scenes depicted by the painting were almost entirely fictional. Although commonly believed at the time to be a representation of

ISBN: 978-0-558-58191-6