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Edited by H. Daniel Peck

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

H. DANIEL PECK

THE Last of the Mohicans is a pivotal work in James Fenimore Cooper's first, remarkable decade of authorship, the 1820s, and in his career as a whole. This was his sixth novel, published in 1826, and its setting and themes are anticipated by several of the works that precede it. Following his first book, an unsuccessful novel of manners called *Precaution* (1820), Cooper found his form, materials, and indeed, his audience, with *The Spy* (1821), a tale of the American Revolution set in the rocky highlands above colonial New York City. Like Washington Irving's work of the same period, this novel demonstrated that American settings and history (George Washington figures in the novel's action) could be made to serve fiction. Although this novel's paradigms of character, plot, and setting derived from Sir Walter Scott ("the American Scott" is an appellation Cooper never liked, and did not outlive), Cooper filled the paradigms with his own distinctive elements.

Most important, he adapted Scott's setting of the "neutral ground," a disputed territory contested by two or more warring parties, to the American landscape. In *The Spy*, this landscape is characterized by a ruggedness that obscures human lines of demarcation and often defeats the attempts of the characters to command its difficult terrain. Out of this setting is born a hero whose uncanny ability to successfully negotiate the landscape defines his heroism. Harvey Birch, a counterspy serving the American forces, is Cooper's first great mythic character. In this figure of daring, skill, and perceptual acuity, Cooper created the model for his Leatherstocking hero.

The Leatherstocking hero, however, as he first emerged in Cooper's fiction, is hardly the equal of Harvey Birch. In *The Pi-*

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oneers, the writer's third novel, published in 1823, Natty Bumppo is an aged woodsman living near Templeton, a frontier settlement drawn from Cooper's childhood memories of Cooperstown. With his Indian companion Chingachgook (known as Indian John in this novel), Natty Bumppo serves primarily to remind the community of its "wasty ways," its mindless destruction of the natural environment; he represents a commitment to the wilderness which, the novel makes clear, is increasingly difficult to honor. Indeed, Natty's departure for the West at the novel's conclusion suggests the inevitability of change and the irrevocable nature of American "progress." The Leatherstocking of *The Pioneers*, essentially powerless before the emerging forces of civilization (his imprisonment in the stocks symbolizes this), is, in several ways, a marginal figure, one of the several frontier "characters" in the novel whose time has come and gone.

When Cooper took up the Leatherstocking figure again in *The Last of the Mohicans* three years later, removing his setting to the French and Indian War of the mid-eighteenth century, he returned him to vigorous middle age and gave him back the powers which had ebbed in *The Pioneers*. Contributing largely to the significance of *The Last of the Mohicans* is the emergence of the Leatherstocking as a fully realized frontier hero – the model for countless imitations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Adding further significance is that, in writing the novel, Cooper began to consider his hero as part of an ongoing series, a saga of frontier life in America.

Before he came to *The Last of the Mohicans*, however, Cooper published two other novels: *The Pilot* (1824), a highly successful tale of the sea, pitting American and British naval forces against one another during the Revolution, and *Lionel Lincoln* (1825), a story of revolutionary Boston whose mixture of gothicism and historical romance worked to ill effect. Despite their different degrees of success and different settings, however, both works pre-*sage The Last of the Mohicans*.

The rugged and fog-shrouded shoreline of *The Pilot*'s English coastline, a further development of the disputed neutral ground, anticipates the dangerous, war-torn landscape of *The Last of the Mohicans*. The selfless courage of the seaman Tom Coffin suggests

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the simple nobility of Natty Bumppo, and the perceptual acuity of the novel's Byronic hero, John Paul Jones, anticipates the Leatherstocking's uncanny ability to successfully negotiate a setting of violence and conflict. In *Lionel Lincoln*, Cooper took the neutral ground to its most extreme limits, depicting a landscape so dangerously obscure that it becomes, in several of its key scenes, a world of nightmare. His rendering of the Battle of Bunker Hill prefigures, in its violence and confusion, the Massacre at Fort William Henry in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

By the time Cooper published *The Last of the Mohicans* in early February of 1826, he was already a celebrity in American literary circles. *The Spy*, *The Pioneers*, and *The Pilot* had been best-sellers and the immediate and extraordinary success of *The Last of the Mohicans* confirmed his reputation as the leading American novelist of his generation. When on June 1, 1826, four months after the book's publication, Cooper departed with his family for an extended European sojourn, he was a national hero. At this point, the next Leatherstocking tale was already under way; *The Prairie* was completed in Europe and published in 1827. Here Cooper took the aged hero of *The Pioneers* to an even more advanced age and to America's far West. In *The Prairie*, Natty Bumppo refers to events and characters from both *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans*; in several ways the novel recapitulates themes and ideas treated in the earlier works. With Natty's death at the conclusion of *The Prairie* came the end of the Leatherstocking saga, or so Cooper thought at the time.

Cooper spent seven years in Europe, returning home in 1833, and during his time away the nation's affection for him waned. His involvement in European political affairs, particularly the so-called Finance Controversy, had made him unpopular at home; and the novels treating the European past that he had written while abroad (*The Bravo* [1831], *The Heidenmauer* [1832], and *The Headsman* [1833]) were not popular, although these works implicitly celebrated American democracy by depicting Europe's dark, feudal past. Misunderstood and, in his opinion, unappreciated, Cooper returned to his homeland in a state of disaffection from which he never recovered.

The 1830s were marked by Cooper's further alienation from his

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native land. The full emergence of Jacksonian democracy brought with it leveling tendencies that threatened the landed gentry on whom America, in Cooper's view, depended for political and cultural leadership. Everywhere he looked, he saw narrow self-interest, greed, and a general breakdown of decorum in social life. Cooper's novel of 1838, *Home as Found*, dramatized this threat. In this work, the descendants of *The Pioneers'* Oliver and Elizabeth Effingham had become a beleaguered minority, struggling to defend their very survival as a class. That the novel dramatizes an actual event from Cooper's life during the 1830s – an attempt to reclaim his family's ownership of a public picnic area near Cooperstown – confirms that his sense of threat to America's gentry was deeply personal. Other work of this period, such as his allegorical novel, *The Monikins* (1835), has a strongly polemical quality, reflecting Cooper's dominant political and social concerns during the 1830s.

Then, in 1840, perhaps out of a need to retreat from the pressing difficulties of his public life (including a series of libel suits he brought against newspapers in this period) and also to recover his flagging reputation as a novelist, Cooper returned to the Leatherstocking series and to the genre that had made him famous, the historical romance. He brought Natty Bumppo back to life in *The Pathfinder*, set on and around Lake Ontario where Cooper himself had served in the U.S. Navy during his young manhood. Roughly the same age as he was in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Natty Bumppo is here characterized in softer terms. No longer the hard-hearted scout committed only to his duty, his "gifts," and his Indian companions, he falls in love. In this novel, Cooper explored the possibility of reconciling an ethos of wilderness adventure with one of domesticity. That the Leatherstocking fails to win the heroine, Mabel Dunham, and returns to the forest with his Indian companion Chingachgook suggests the impossibility in Cooper's mind of such a reconciliation.

The following year Cooper published *The Deerslayer*, taking his hero back to his youthful initiation into wilderness adventure. The setting, Lake Otsego (called the Glimmerglass in this novel), is the same as in the first-written of the Leatherstocking tales, *The Pioneers*, but in a period half a century earlier and predating white

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settlement. The historical remoteness and the wilderness setting, as well as the hero's youth, make *The Deerslayer* the most romantic of the Leatherstocking tales, and suggest the writer's need to repossess imaginatively a simpler world associated with his childhood in Cooperstown. With this novel, the Leatherstocking series was complete; in the hero's beginning was his end.

Cooper's prolific career continued for another decade, during which he published a number of important works, including the Littlepage trilogy (1845–46), a series of novels dramatizing the dispossession of the landed gentry in New York State during the Anti-Rent Wars, and *The Crater* (1847), a novel allegorizing the rise and fall of the United States. At the end of his life, however, Cooper himself knew that the Leatherstocking tales were the works for which he would be best remembered. What he may not have fully understood is the special place within the tales that *The Last of the Mohicans* would forever hold.

The immediate impetus for writing *The Last of the Mohicans* seems to have been a sight-seeing tour of the Hudson River that Cooper made with a group of young British noblemen during the autumn of 1824, encompassing West Point, Albany, Saratoga, and Ballston. Standing in the caverns at the picturesque Glens Falls, one of the British tourists, Edward Stanley, made a remark that Cooper seems to have taken as a challenge: "Here is the very scene for a romance." After the novel was published, Cooper saw to it that Stanley received a copy.¹

If the novel grew, in part, from such a challenge, it would not have been uncharacteristic of Cooper. His imagination is primarily visual, and he responded deeply to the scenic aspects of landscape. For example, Susan Fenimore Cooper said that a sudden glimpse of Lake Otsego through the forest inspired her father to begin writing *The Deerslayer*.²

While the scene of Glens Falls may have served Cooper as the initial impetus for writing *The Last of the Mohicans*, the narrative and symbolic meanings he invested in this site, and in the novel's larger geography as well, came from his own interior landscape. That landscape, in all its rich complexity, has been the subject of much recent critical commentary, which has recognized *The Last of*

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the Mohicans as a key representation of the novelist's deepest personal and historical concerns. As Wayne Franklin points out in the present collection, Cooper's appropriation of Glens Falls, the setting for one of the novel's most riveting scenes, "depended on radical erasures." It involved Cooper's dreaming his way backward from the deteriorated falls and tourist structures he found at the site in 1824 to a true wilderness setting. The erasure and reconfiguration of the landscape, as Franklin shows, are among the deepest sources of Cooper's power as a novelist in *The Last of the Mohicans*, and in his other fiction as well.

In his first preface to *The Last of the Mohicans*, however, Cooper went out of his way to discourage such symbolic interpretations. This book, he said, was simply a "narrative," and he instructed readers not to seek within it "an imaginary and romantic picture of things" (p. 1). In doing this, Cooper was, in part, warning readers of refined taste, especially "young ladies" (p. 4), away from a work in which he had attempted to draw vividly some of the bloodiest scenes in American colonial history. His testimony regarding accurate representation, especially concerning American Indian tribes and their allegiances, is the singular focus of this first preface.³

Cooper's representations of history and Indian life (this was the first novel in which he had undertaken to treat Indians extensively) came under immediate attack in some contemporary reviews. A review in the May 1826 issue of the *London Magazine* referred to *The Last of the Mohicans* as "clearly by much the worst of Mr. Cooper's performances," and drew attention to the "[i]mprobabilities" of its action and characterizations. The American critic W. H. Gardiner was far more sympathetic in his treatment of the novel, but one of his criticisms was that it followed too faithfully the "wild traditions" of the missionary John Heckewelder. These, Gardiner argued, had led Cooper to present "altogether a false and ideal view of the Indian character." "We should be glad to know," he asked, "in what tribe, or in what age of Indian history, such a civilized warrior as Uncas ever flourished?"⁴

A similar attack came from a presumed authority, General Lewis Cass, an Indian fighter and agent, who, in 1828 said that Uncas has "no living prototype in our forests." Attacks such as these

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continued in the years following the publication of *The Last of the Mohicans*, and in 1835 the Philadelphia writer and dramatist William Bird published a novel, *Nick of the Woods*, intended, he said later, to debunk what he regarded as Cooper's idealized characterizations of Indians in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Even Francis Parkman, in his generally admiring survey of Cooper's works written soon after the novelist's death in 1852, said that Cooper's "Indian characters . . . it must be granted, are for the most part either superficially or falsely drawn."⁵

None of this diminished the novel's popularity with the reading public; for an entire century after its publication, it remained the most internationally acclaimed and widely translated of Cooper's works. Professional literary appraisals, however, continued throughout most of the nineteenth century to emphasize the ideality of Cooper's characterizations, and regularly caricatured his treatment of the Indians. Mark Twain's famous essay, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," is merely the most ingenious in a long series of attacks on the credibility of Cooper's representations.

Both Cooper and *The Last of the Mohicans* did have their notable defenders during this period. The American novelist William Gilmore Simms, whose *The Yemassee* (1835) may be considered a counterpart to *The Last of the Mohicans* in its mournful treatment of Indian dispossession in the South, praised Cooper for his "[inimitable] details of Indian art and resource." Honoré de Balzac, in his warm appreciation of Cooper published in 1840, ranked *The Last of the Mohicans* among the seven works of the novelist which he said "are his unique and rightful claim to fame."⁶

The first fully analytical attempts to rescue Cooper, and *The Last of the Mohicans*, from caricature had to await the early twentieth century. W. C. Brownell's perceptive essay on Cooper in his 1909 *American Prose Masters* is the most important of such efforts. In acknowledging that the "verisimilitude of Cooper's Indians has been the main point of attack of his caricaturing critics," Brownell countered, "it is the fact that the so-called 'noble red man,' whom he is popularly supposed to have invented, does not exist in his books at all. Successful or not, his Indians, like his other characters, belong to the realm of attempted portraiture of racial types,

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and are, in intention, at all events, in no wise purely romantic creations." Cooper's Indian characters, Brownell continued, "are as carefully studied and as successfully portrayed as his white ones. . . . They are as much personalities and differ from each other as much." Later in the twentieth century, a European scholar recognized the degree to which Cooper's Indians are related to certain ideal types such as Scott's clan chieftains, Byron's pirates, and Ossian's Celtic heroes – that they are indeed ideal types, but in a recognizably romantic sense that belongs to the age in which they were written.⁷

In our own time, Cooper's representation of Indians has come under a new form of attack, against which Brownell's defense (essentially aesthetic in character) seems hardly adequate. Revisionist literary historians do not accept Brownell's assumption that "fiction is, to some extent, at least, outside [ethnology's] jurisdiction."⁸ They demonstrate the ways in which Cooper's characterizations of Indians, no matter how distinguishable one Indian "type" is from another in his fiction, belong to the larger racial stereotypes that pervaded American thought in the nineteenth century. One such critic, specifically considering *The Last of the Mohicans*, writes: "We may even say that Cooper never loves his Indians so much as when he is watching them disappear, and that for him as for General Sheridan – although with a different emphasis – the only good Indians were dead."⁹ That Cooper's mournful treatment of Indian dispossession is, at heart, a sentimental response covertly justifying that very dispossession is a steadily articulated theme in contemporary criticism.¹⁰

Other scholars in our time have come to Cooper's defense in this matter, by placing his work in historical perspective. James F. Beard, for example, introduces *The Last of the Mohicans* in the following way: "Though Cooper seems never to have prepared a systematic list of readings, the extraordinary assimilation of information displayed in his fiction suggests that his knowledge of Indians was as full and authentic as discriminating study of the printed sources of his time allowed." Beard shows that Cooper went out of his way to meet and interview several of the great Indian chiefs of his day, and that, unlike most Americans of his generation, he was skeptical about the policy of Indian Removal

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that began with the 1823 Supreme Court decision denying that the Indians' "right of discovery" was a sufficient legal basis for land ownership.¹¹

Further, some critics of our time have recognized in *The Last of the Mohicans*, and in others of Cooper's Indian novels, a genuinely felt sense of loss, and even a deep personal identification with Indian dispossession. It is noteworthy that in the years immediately before Cooper wrote *The Last of the Mohicans*, he was dispossessed of vast lands in central New York left to him and his brothers by their land-baron father, William Cooper. The Indians' original ownership of the land is a central point of *The Pioneers*, published three years before *The Last of the Mohicans*. Cooper's sense of threatened class and power, characteristic of him throughout his career, informs all his fiction and repeatedly makes possession the central issue of his novels, whether set in the wilderness, at sea, or in society. The psychic union of Indian dispossession and Cooper's own threatened losses has been posited by several modern commentators, and has been offered as an explanation for the power of Cooper's elegiac vision in *The Last of the Mohicans*.¹²

Certainly it is true that no white American writer of the early and middle nineteenth century (not even Thoreau, as Robert F. Sayre has shown¹³) was free of racial prejudice toward Indians, and, in the end, an exception cannot be made of Cooper. Yet, while rigorously analyzing racial attitudes in his fiction as a means of understanding the racism of our society, we need to be equally rigorous in developing the historical context surrounding Cooper's work. We also need to read the novels more carefully. Close scrutiny of *The Last of the Mohicans* tells us, for example, that Cooper never undercuts the claims of his "bad" Indian Magua, who argues that his deep malevolence proceeds from degradation at the hands of European military forces and from white "gluttony." Furthermore, it is given over to Magua, through his "artful eloquence" (p. 175), to express the novel's most compelling elegiac vision of Indian dispossession:

[The white man's] gluttony makes him sick. God gave him enough, and yet he wants all. Such are the pale faces.

Some the Great Spirit made with skins brighter and redder than yonder sun, . . . and these did he fashion to his own mind. He gave

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them this island as he had made it, covered with trees, and filled with game. The wind made their clearings; the sun and rains ripened their fruits; and the snows came to tell them to be thankful. What need had they of roads to journey by! They saw through the hills. (p. 301)

In several respects, Magua is the most fully and successfully delineated character in *The Last of the Mohicans*, rising above stereotypes of the bad Indian. On the one hand, his motives and feelings are rendered with focused particularity (unlike those of the more abstracted and idealized Uncas). On the other hand, his stature, especially in the second half of the novel, rises to that of legendary malignancy; he becomes “the Prince of Darkness” (p. 284).

If Cooper’s instruction to read *The Last of the Mohicans* as a “narrative” failed to persuade critics intent upon faulting his representation of Indians, in another respect it succeeded better than he could have known. For the word “narrative,” as Cooper uses it in his preface, means not only fidelity to fact but also efficacy of plot. To a large degree, critics and general readers from his own time through at least the middle of the twentieth century have viewed the novel primarily as a “narrative” in just this sense – as a well made, fast-moving, and exciting tale of adventure. An early (unsigned) review, published in the *New York Review and Atheneum* in March of 1826, shortly after the novel’s publication, is an example: “[W]e are carried onward, as through the visions of a long and feverish dream. The excitement cannot be controlled or lulled, by which we are borne through strange and fearful, and even agonizing scenes of doubt, surprise, danger, and sudden deliverance.” W. H. Gardiner, in the review cited earlier, praised the novel for the “intense and breathless interest” of its story.¹⁴

Cooper’s biographer of the late nineteenth century, Thomas R. Lounsbury, said that *The Last of the Mohicans* “is the one [novel in Cooper’s canon] in which the interest not only never halts, but never sinks.” For Lounsbury, the novel’s “improbability of action, insufficiency of motive, and feebleness of outline in many of the leading characters” were but “minor drawbacks” which, set against its driving, powerful narrative, “sink into absolute insignificance.” The continuity of this response deep into the twentieth