The Last of the Mohicans is the most widely read and internationally acclaimed of James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking tales, and has traditionally been regarded as an exciting and well-made adventure story. In recent years, however, critics have found in this classic tale of colonial warfare deeper levels of meaning. In the introduction to this volume, H. Daniel Peck studies these developments, tracking critical responses to the novel from the time of its publication in 1826 to the present day.

The essays that follow present contemporary reassessments of The Last of the Mohicans from a variety of critical perspectives. Wayne Franklin shows how Cooper’s depiction of Glens Falls – the site of one of the novel’s key scenes – represents the process by which the writer dreams his way into the American past. Terence Martin examines the novel’s great pivotal episode, the massacre at Fort William Henry, revealing how this specifically historical event marginalizes and displaces even the heroic Uncas and Natty Bumppo, thus replicating the very force of history. Nina Baym positions the novel, critically, between the works of two women writers of the 1820s, Lydia Maria Child and Catherine Maria Sedgwick, showing how their women-centered narratives implicitly challenge Cooper’s assumptions about sexual, racial, and social roles. Shirley Samuels, combining feminist and new historicist approaches, considers the theme of cultural miscegenation and demonstrates how the novel’s pervasive confusions of identity dramatize an intense fear of women and of natural reproduction. Finally, Robert Lawson-Peebles shows how the carnage of the massacre of Fort William Henry may be understood as a violation of European theories of warfare, and how this violation reveals Cooper’s attitudes toward the New World environment.
NEW ESSAYS ON THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS
★ The American Novel ★

GENERAL EDITOR
Emory Elliott
University of California, Riverside

Other books in the series:
New Essays on The Scarlet Letter
New Essays on The Great Gatsby
New Essays on Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
New Essays on Moby-Dick
New Essays on Uncle Tom’s Cabin
New Essays on The Red Badge of Courage
New Essays on The Sun Also Rises
New Essays on A Farewell to Arms
New Essays on The American
New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady
New Essays on Light in August
New Essays on The Awakening
New Essays on Invisible Man
New Essays on Native Son
New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God
New Essays on The Grapes of Wrath
New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio
New Essays on Sister Carrie
New Essays on The Rise of Silas Lapham
New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye
New Essays on White Noise
New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49
New Essays on
The Last of the Mohicans

Edited by
H. Daniel Peck
Contents

Series Editor's Preface
page vii

1
Introduction
H. DANIEL PECK
page 1

2
The Wilderness of Words in
The Last of the Mohicans
WAYNE FRANKLIN
page 25

3
From Atrocity to Requiem: History in
The Last of the Mohicans
TERENCE MARTIN
page 47

4
How Men and Women Wrote Indian Stories
NINA BAYM
page 67

v
Contents

5
Generation through Violence: Cooper and the Making of Americans
SHIRLEY SAMUELS
page 87

6
The Lesson of the Massacre at Fort William Henry
ROBERT LAWSON-PEEBLES
page 115

Notes on Contributors
page 139

Selected Bibliography
page 141
Series Editor’s Preface

In literary criticism the last twenty-five years have been particularly fruitful. Since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself – apart from history, biography, and society – there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical. While attention to the text itself, as taught by the New Critics, remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretation has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Before this critical revolution, many American novels had come to be taken for granted by earlier generations of readers as having an established set of recognized interpretations. There was a sense among many students that the canon was established and that the larger thematic and interpretative issues had been decided. The task of the new reader was to examine the ways in which elements such as structure, style, and imagery contributed to each novel’s acknowledged purpose. But recent criticism has brought these old assumptions into question and has thereby generated a wide variety of original, and often quite surprising, interpretations of the classics, as well as of rediscovered novels such as Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, which has only recently entered the canon of works that scholars and critics study and that teachers assign their students.

The aim of The American Novel Series is to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical guides to
Series Editor’s Preface

American novels now widely read and studied. Each volume is devoted to a single novel and begins with an introduction by the volume editor, a distinguished authority on the text. The introduction presents details of the novel’s composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by four or five original essays, specifically commissioned from senior scholars of established reputation and from outstanding younger critics. Each essay presents a distinct point of view, and together they constitute a forum of interpretative methods and of the best contemporary ideas on each text.

It is our hope that these volumes will convey the vitality of current critical work in American literature, generate new insights and excitement for students of the American novel, and inspire new respect for and new perspectives upon these major literary texts.

Emory Elliott
University of California, Riverside