

18 CRITICS DISCUSS

James Fenimore Cooper

(1789-1851)

"Cooper is, in this age, the only author worthy of being compared with Walter Scott; he will never be his equal, but he has a share of that same genius, owing the high place which he holds in modern literature to his two talents, that of portraying the sea and seamen, and that of idealizing the magnificent landscapes of America."

Honore de Balzac
Revue Parisienne (25 July 1840)

"In these details of Indian art and resource, Mr. Cooper was inimitable. In his pursuits, flights, captures,--in his encounters,--cunning opposed to cunning,--man to man--the trapper and the hunter, against the red man whose life he envies and emulates,--Mr. Cooper has no superior as he has had no master. His conception of the frontier white man, if less true than picturesque, is also not less happy as an artistical conception of great originality and effect... With self-reliance which is only found in true genius, he goes forward into the wilderness."

William Gilmore Simms
"The Writings of James Fenimore Cooper"
Views and Reviews in American Literature, History and Fiction I
(Wiley & Putnam 1846) 210-238

"Leatherlegs and Tom Coxwain did not accompany Tatua when he went to the Parisian metropolis on a visit to the father of the French palefaces. Neither the legs nor the Sailor cared for the gayety and the crowd of cities... The stern and simple trapper loved the sound of the waters better than the jargon of the French... 'I can follow the talk of a Pawnee,' he said, 'or wag my jaw, if so be necessity bids me to speak, by a Sioux's council-fire... But from the tongue of a Frenchwoman, with white flour on her head, and war-paint on her face, the Lord deliver poor Natty Pumpo'."

William Makepeace Thackeray
Punch (9 October 1847)

"Here's Cooper, who's written six volumes to show
He's as good as a lord: well, let's grant that he's so...
But he need take no pains to convince us he's not
(As his enemies say) the American Scott...
He has drawn you one character, though, that is new,
One wildflower he's plucked that is wet with the dew
Of this fresh Western world, and, the thing not to mince,
He has done naught but copy it ill ever since;
His Indians, with proper respect be it said,
Are just Natty Bumppo, daubed over with red...
And his very Long Toms are the same useful Nat,
Rigged up in duck pants and a sou'wester hat...
And the women he draws from one model don't vary,
All sappy as maples and flat as a prairie.
When a character's wanted, he goes to the task
As a cooper would do in composing a cask;
He picks out the staves, of their qualities heedful,
Just hoops them together as tight as is needful,
And, if the best fortune should crown the attempt, he
Has made at the most something wooden and empty."

James Russell Lowell

from "A Fable for Critics" (1848)

"Of all American writers, Cooper is the most original, the most thoroughly national. His genius drew alimnt from the soil where God planted it.... His volumes are a faithful mirror of that rude transatlantic nature, which to European eyes appears so strange and new.... Men as true, generous, and kindly as Leatherstocking may still be found among the perilous solitudes of the West. The quiet, unostentatious courage of Cooper's hero had its counterpart in the character of Daniel Boone; and the latter had the same unaffected love of Nature which forms so pleasing a feature in the mind of Leatherstocking.... His life conveys in some sort an epitome of American history."

Francis Parkman
"The Works of James Fenimore Cooper"
North American Review LXXIV
(January 1852) 147-161

"It was several years after its first appearance that I read *The Pioneers*, and I read it with a delighted astonishment. Here, said I to myself, is the poet of rural life in this country--our Hesiod, our Theocritus, except that he...is a greater poet than they.... Leatherstocking has higher qualities; in him there is a genial blending of the gentlest virtues of the civilized man with the better nature of the aboriginal tribes; all that in them is noble, generous, and ideal, is adopted into his own kindly character, and all that is evil is rejected... Leatherstocking is acknowledged, on all hands, to be one of the noblest, as well as most striking and original creations of fiction."

William Cullen Bryant
Memorial of James Fenimore Cooper (1852)

"European readers, satiated with the worn-out romance of Italian amours, German mysticism, and French intrigue, turned with avidity to the grand natural panorama, the novel Indian warfare, the simple colonial life, the magnificent scenery and heroic endurance in the wild and on the billow, unfolded in the pages of Cooper."

H. T. Tuckerman
"James Fenimore Cooper"
North American Review LXXXIX
(October 1859) 298-316

"[We] can find improbability of action, insufficiency of motive, and feebleness of outline in many of the leading characters. But these are minor drawbacks. They sink into absolute insignificance when compared with the wealth of power displayed."

Thomas R. Lounsbury
James Fenimore Cooper
(Houghton 1882)

"Fenimore Cooper has probably done more than any writer to present the Red Man to the white man. But Cooper's presentiment is indeed a wish-fulfillment. That is why Fenimore is such a success still. Modern critics begrudge Cooper his success. I think I resent it a little myself. This popular wish-fulfillment stuff makes it so hard for the real thing to come through, later.... Yet the Leatherstocking books are lovely. Lovely half-lies. They form a sort of American Odyssey, with Natty Bumppo for Odysseus... Natty is a saint with a gun, and the Indians are gentlemen through and through, through they may take an occasional scalp. There are five Leatherstocking novels: a decrescendo of reality, and a crescendo of beauty.

1. *Pioneers*: A raw frontier-village on Lake Champlain, at the end of the eighteenth century. Must be a picture of Cooper's home, as he knew it when a boy. A very lovely book. Natty Bumppo an old man, an old hunter half civilized.

2. *The Last of the Mohicans*: A historical fight between the British and the French, with Indians on both sides, at a Fort by Lake Champlain. Romantic flight of the British general's two daughters, conducted by the scout Natty, who is in the prime of life; romantic death of the last of the Delawares.

3. *The Prairie*: A wagon of some huge, sinister Kentuckians trekking west into the unbroken prairies. Prairie Indians, and Natty, as an old, old man; he dies seated on a chair on the Rocky Mountains, looking east [false: he dies on the prairie looking west] .

4. *The Pathfinder*: The Great Lakes. Natty, a man of thirty-five, makes an abortive proposal to a bouncing damsel, daughter of the Sergeant at the Fort.

5. *Deerslayer*: Natty and Hurry Harry, both quite young, are hunting in the virgin wild. They meet two white women. Lake Champlain again....

Now let me put aside my impatience at the unreality of this vision, and accept it as a wish-fulfillment vision, a kind of yearning myth... But probably, one day America will be as beautiful in actuality as it is in Cooper. Not yet, however. When the factories have fallen down again.... To open out a new wide area of consciousness means to slough the old consciousness. The old consciousness has become a tight-fitting prison to us... Now the essential history of the United States seems to me just this: At the Renaissance the old consciousness was becoming a little tight. Europe sloughed her last skin, and started a new, final phase. But some Europeans recoiled from the last final phase. They wouldn't enter the cul de sac of post-Renaissance, 'liberal' Europe. They came to America. They came to America for two reasons:

1. To slough the old European consciousness completely.
2. To grow a new skin underneath, a new form .

The two processes go on, of course, simultaneously. The slow forming of the new skin underneath is the sloughing of the old skin.... Now Fenimore stayed very safe inside the old skin: a gentleman, almost a European, as proper as proper can be. And, safe inside the old skin, he imagined the gorgeous American pattern of a new skin.... The Leatherstocking novels create the myth of this new relation. And they go backwards, from old age to golden youth. That is the true myth of America. She starts old, old, wrinkled and writhing in an old skin. And there is a gradual sloughing of the old skin, towards a new youth. It is the myth of America."

D. H. Lawrence
Studies in Classic American Literature
(Viking 1923-1968) 37, 50, 52-54

"Cooper is associated with the frontier Leatherstocking as Hawthorne is associated with the frontier Puritan.... So far from emphasizing the weakness and timidity of his women, Cooper loves to dwell upon their strength and courage...which he expressly attributes to the frontier environment.... Leatherstocking is the happy product of the Romantic movement in literature and the westward movement in history. He incarnates the best qualities of both parents. He has the sentiment of the Romantic hero without his mawkishness; he has the heroism of the frontiersman without his vulgarity. He is an idealized frontiersman, not in the sense that any of his qualities are idealized, but in that the combination of these qualities in one individual is possible only to the conscious selection of art... Cooper has placed beside him undesirable frontier types such as the greedy and unscrupulous Hutter, the boisterous Hurry Harry...Ishmael Bush."

Lucy Lockwood Hazard
The Frontier in American Literature
(Crowell 1927)

"Cooper believed in democratic government; and, as an aggressively patriotic American, he was capable, among the enemies of democratic theory, of going to considerable length in its defense; but he distrusted the common and uneducated man--that is, he feared irrational mob action; he feared that the idea of democracy might easily be degraded into the dogma that whatever a majority decides is right. Such a degradation would result naturally in the immediate subversion of law and civilization..."

The Littlepage novels--*Satanstoe*, *The Chainbearer*, and *The Redskins*--were written to illustrate a thesis: the justice of the property-rights of the landed proprietors. But underlying this is a more general thesis: the social function of an aristocracy, a concept based on the old but dying social organization of New York.... Like most novelists of class-struggle, he separated his characters pretty sharply into the more or less Calvinistical categories of the socially saved and the socially damned. The only American novel of

class-struggle of any importance, and so far as my reading extends, to surpass this formula, is *The Octopus*, by Frank Norris...

Since Cooper is dealing primarily with manners and not with morals--that is, with society as such, and not with the salvation of the soul--his figures must of necessity be offered as representative social types and not as moral abstractions like the figures in Hawthorne.... The vigor with which Cooper realizes at least a few characters and patterns of action, and the sense with which he leaves us when the books have long been read and laid away, of a rich and varied way of life, are sufficient evidence of the reality of his genius...

If Natty is his greatest single achievement--and great he is, a great national myth, with a life over and above the life of the books in which he appears, a reality surpassing that even of an historical figure such as Daniel Boone--yet only two of these novels, *The Pioneers* and conceivably *The Prairie*, could rank among Cooper's half dozen best individual novels. Furthermore, the best single passage of prose in Cooper is probably the seventh chapter of *The Deerslayer*, a book which displays few other serious merits... The best single plot of adventure in Cooper is beyond a doubt that of *The Last of the Mohicans*, but the style in this work is so consistently florid and redundant that in spite of the action, in spite of the magnificent timing of many scenes, in spite of a certain amount of fairly respectable characterization, the book nowhere rises to a level of seriousness.

The skill of this backwoodsman, and the skill as well as other characteristics attributed by Cooper to the Indians, are frequently derided, but probably with small justice. In any environment certain particular skills will be generally developed, which are foreign to other environments, and the skills required in the wilderness are now far away from us and of their nature we can have but very small understanding.... The boxer of genius, or even the billiard player of genius, may perform feats which if recounted in detail would seem far less plausible than the most extraordinary feats of Leatherstocking....

Cooper errs not in the plausibility of his facts, but in relying so heavily for the maintenance of interest on so limited a range of facts, and frequently in the sentimental and inflated redundancy with which the facts are rendered.... Cooper appears as one of the last representatives of the great tradition of formal historical narrative, of which Hume, Gibbon, and Macaulay are the masters."

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-43) 176-96

"Natty Bumppo, a composite...but in his main outlines undoubtedly suggested by Daniel Boone...is nobler than Indian John [in *The Pioneers* (1823)] because he has not yielded but carries into the deeper forest his virtues, which even in Cooper's boyhood were becoming archaic along the New York frontier, and now in 1823 had become a legend. Natty stands as a protest, on behalf of simplicity and perfect freedom, against encroaching law and order....

Natty, called Hawkeye in *The Last of the Mohicans* [1826], no longer has the hardness which marred his disgruntled age in *The Pioneers*. He appears instead as erect, swift, shrewd, contented, and wise. With all his virtues of hand and head he combines a nobility of spirit which the woods have fostered in a mind never spoiled by contact with human meanness and injustice.... Hawkeye and Chingachgook...one must be the canny reasoner, the other saddened with the passing years. The purest romance of the tale lies in Uncas, the forest's youngest son, gallant, skillful, courteous, a lover for whom there is no hope, the last of the proud race of the Mohicans....

Since 1826, when he went with his family to Europe for a residence of seven years, Cooper had been growing steadily more critical and less Romantic. His universe was enlarging. He found his books well known in Europe and people disposed to make much of him. In Paris he fraternized with Scott, who enjoyed and approved his American rival....

Nature in America is no longer so solitary, and no longer so ennobling, but much of this older simplicity, downrightness, courage, competence, unsophistication, and virgin prejudice still marks the national type. Generation after generation of American boys has read these romances as they have read no

others. Boys of other nations and races have admired in Leather-Stocking qualities generously transcending merely national ones....

There was thus produced the panorama of the American frontier which at once became and had remained the classic record of an heroic age.... His mighty landscapes lie still unshaken in a secure district of the human imagination. Over such mountains through such dim and terrifying forests to such glorious lakes the mind still marches... His Indians, whatever their authenticity, are securely established in the world's romantic memory as a picture of those belated and unfortunate men of the stone age who were fated to oppose the ruthless advance of a more complex civilization. It is poetic justice that those red savages, unjustly as they were dealt with while alive, should be a little honored with a chivalrous reputation when dead or conquered enemies... In this manner all peoples remember their ancient defeated enemies...

After all else that can be said, one returns to Cooper's invention, which is almost supreme among Romancers, and which lifts him solidly above all his faults of clumsiness, prolixity, conventional characterizations, and ill-temper."

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 26-42

"In novels like *The Pioneers*, *The Pilot*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie*, landscape is central to the book. Now the characteristic formula for landscapes by the founders of the Hudson River School is this: a dark foreground, usually with one or two trees, commonly dead, and tiny figures looking into the picture; theatrical perspective, so that one views as from a height a vast expanse; winding water in the middle distance extending to the plain of the horizon; the highlight on the central scene and on the distant sky; and silvery cloud or vapor, shedding sentiment and vagueness over interminable leagues of earth beyond. This combination of the picaresque and the sublime can be seen in most of Thomas Cole's landscapes, in works like Doughty's *Raft* and in Asher B. Durand's *Kindred Spirits*, wherein Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant are portrayed admiring a mountain waterfall...

Cooper's landscape is composed precisely as landscape paintings by his friends are composed; and he found the effect so efficient that he never abandoned it... Certain it is that painter and poet influenced each other, and that there is a working relation between the landscape painting of the Hudson River men and the descriptive technique of New York writers like Irving, Cooper and William Cullen Bryant....

Two fundamental ideas interest the earlier members of the Hudson River School: the theme of the grandeur of God working in the universe, and the theme of the decay of empire, or the assumption that nations, like men, have their childhood, youth, maturity, old age and death."

Howard Mumford Jones
"James Fenimore Cooper and the Hudson River School"
Magazine of Art XLV (October 1952) 243-251

"With Fenimore Cooper the American novel became the novel of the world. Like Scott and Byron, Cooper was as widely read and as influential abroad as he ever was in his own country. He was translated into many languages; Europeans often learned all they knew of America from him.... Dumas and Balzac were importantly indebted to Cooper, and Thackeray placed Leatherstocking ahead of all Scott's creations. There is even a story by Chekhov in which two Russian boys address each other as 'Montezuma Hawkeye' and 'my Paleface Brother.'

The world has placed the novels of which Natty Bumppo (Deerslayer, Hawkeye, Leatherstocking, Long Rifle) is the hero at the head of Cooper's achievement; it was through them that he conquered the world.... *The Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer* have, of course, always been the great favorites, and two books set against similar backgrounds could hardly be more unlike. *The Mohicans* is the great action book, Cooper's prime example of the drama of escape and pursuit which he made his own. *The Deerslayer*, too, has plenty of action, but the freshness of Natty's and Chingachgook's youth outshines everything else: The book smells of the woods and the promise of a virgin land....

The most thrilling sequence in *The Pathfinder* is the siege of the blockhouse, which involves Cooper's best Indian heroine, Dew-of-June.... There are thrilling scenes again in *The Prairie*, notably the buffalo stampede and the prairie fire... The nobility of Natty's spirit makes *The Prairie* the most exalted of Cooper's books; but when the squatter Ishmael Bush enters with his family--types of pioneers which other writers were not to discover for many years--it also becomes the most realistic. *The Prairie* is, indeed, a strange combination of disparate elements; for one thing, Cooper has now taken his hero westward toward an undefined region which he himself had not seen, and imaginative rather than authentic is the word for his portrayal of it....

Important as Cooper is, his work demands less analysis than that of many of his successors. This does not mean that it is simple. It is not simple. The pigeon-holers always have great difficulty, for example, in deciding whether he was a Realist or a Romancer... Robert Spiller has said of Cooper that 'His personal love of action alone made him interested in the Romance of adventure; at heart he was a Realist.' Yet Spiller also says that 'His taste obviously ran to fiction of the Romantic type'... But Romance interested him primarily because he was an idealist; the main interests of his life were practical and hard-headed...

Creative though Cooper was in opening up vast new territories for fiction, he was the reverse of creative in technique; he dutifully imitated the novels then in vogue. And his most trying aspects for modern readers are generally the result of these imitations.... Take all the tedious mysteries of birth and parentage. Such things often require as close attention as the meaning of the White Whale. And many contemporary readers do not think they are worth it....

It is true that Cooper had no first-hand knowledge of Indians, but he did consult the more reliable sources; in glorifying the Delawares against the Iroquois, he was following the lead of the Moravian missionary John Heckewelder (1743-1825), whose Christian charity and gentleness of judgment made a powerful appeal to him. It is often carelessly assumed that all Cooper's Indians are as noble as Uncas and Chingachgook. They are not...

Cooper is always free of the pseudo Nature-mysticism which is so often the modern surrogate for religion. There are touches of Byronism in Cooper, but there is no Rousseau. If Cooper was anything he was a Christian; I know of no novelist not avowedly a devotional writer who makes a larger use of Christian doctrine. Confronting the Indian, Cooper was inclined to make much the same distinctions that Melville was later to make in the South Seas. Because these men were God's children, God had given them their own 'gifts.' But theirs were not the white man's 'gifts.' The Indian's 'gifts' please God--in an Indian--but he will not accept them in a white man. For the future belongs to the white man, with all his sins--to civilization, to Christianity. The Indian is doomed. And the Romantic glamour with which Cooper has invested him is the by-product of his doom, for the Indian is not responsible for his tragic fate....

All his sympathies were agrarian, and he feared the effects upon manners and freedom alike of a new domination based upon money alone.... Generations of academicians--aided and abetted by two men of genius, Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain--have fallen foul of Cooper's style; most of their strictures, though sound enough, are a little pedantic. 'He wrote as well as any novelist of his time,' said the fastidious Joseph Conrad, and whose praise could any writer desire more? But it is possible that Conrad read him in Polish. The lack of distinction in Cooper's style contributed to his vogue. Unlike writers of marked individuality and distinction, he had nothing to lose in translation; sometimes he even gained.... In any case, none of his faults importantly alter the fact that the themes he discovered have kept his descendants occupied clear down to the present hour."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 14-29

"Few storytellers in all history have enjoyed so wide a popularity as Fenimore Cooper. He is easily translatable, and his best work was soon rendered into nearly all the important languages of the globe. The historian Parkman, visiting Italy, found his Leatherstocking Tales well thumbed in a remote mountain village of Sicily, and his *L'Ultimo de Mohecani* [*The Last of the Mohicans*] a favorite book from Milan to Naples. He and Irving were the first Americans who established a high and permanent literary reputation

in Britain; Cooper's feat being the more remarkable because he was a cantankerous, prickly man, and his kindly reception owed little to his personality.

Thackeray, reading voraciously during his voyage to Cairo, thought that *The Prairie* was better than any of Scott's novels he had on shipboard; and he enshrined Cooper in his burlesque series of 'Novels by Eminent Hands.' Balzac and Victor Hugo admired the American... When the United States entered the World War in 1917, a French leader could think of no better characterization of the nation's fervent determination than to say, 'The spirit of Leatherstocking is awake.'

In the field of the novel, the influence of Cooper can be traced in many a title of Erastus Beadle's dime thrillers, and in many a piece of wild Western fiction. In the domain of poetry, more than one touch in Walt Whitman (a professed admirer) and Joaquin Miller bears Cooper's coloring. In that of history, his influence upon Francis Parkman is plainly evident... [Parkman] learned lessons of vigor, vividness, and narrative power; lessons so important that Parkman's best biographer credits part of his special technique to the Leatherstocking Tales.

A subtle emanation of Cooper's spirit is doubtless diffused through nearly all modern writing on the North American forest, the frontiersman, and the Indian. He impressed on the national mind so memorable an image of the noble savage in Chingachgook and Uncas, of Indian deviltry in Magua and Mahtoree, of the best type of pioneer in Leatherstocking and the more disreputable type in Hurrey Harry and Ishmael Bush; he painted so strongly the wild majesty of untouched forests, mountains, and lakes; and he described so skillfully the conditions of frontier garrison life and settlement, that no subsequent author can shake off the subconscious authority of his books....

In his own day he was read by adults for a mature instruction and enjoyment. Scott and Thackeray, Balzac and Hugo, so read him. William Cullen Bryant has recorded with what delighted astonishment, in the late 1820s, he scanned *The Pioneers*. Here, he said to himself, 'is the poet of rural life in America, our Hesiod, our Theocritus, unfettered by the restraints of verse, and even more poetical than they.' No wonder it enchanted Bryant; and no wonder that he was enchanted also by *The Prairie*. That book the poet read 'with a certain awe, an undefined sense of sublimity' justly appertaining to the vast unpeopled plains of the West. And Bryant was equally impressed by the lawless frontier family of Ishmael Bush...

Cooper's dialogue could be as artificial as some of Dickens's; he could bore us with local minutiae almost as much as Balzac. All this is true--but in the large view it matters little. The proper course in reading Cooper (as with Scott, Hugo, and many another) is to cast aside all his inferior works; to fasten on the best books; to practice judicious skipping; and to dwell judiciously on elements of strength. When this is done, Cooper stands forth as a great writer. Some of his heroines are women as staunch, true, and fearless as any American life ever produced. His descriptions...sometimes rank with our best word paintings; for they are filled, as Bryant noted, with a true poetry....

Most of the dialogue is simplicity and naturalness itself. And the cumulative effect of the Leatherstocking Tales, like that of Scott's stories of his native land, is tremendous. Those who take the pains to read the five novels attentively, taking them in proper succession from Deerslayer's awkward youth to the trapper's mellow old age, will find that they have read nothing less than the nearest approach yet made to an American epic. What counts in Cooper, in short, is the general impression, to which all the main elements of his work--headlong plot, wild Nature, the frontiersman, the Indians, and pioneer society advancing on the wilderness--contribute. We cannot disentangle these elements from each other. Cooper has mingled them to create an undying record of our rude heroic age, our Homeric period of national life....

Each novel draws much that is fresh and original from its special setting: *The Deerslayer* from wild Lake Otsego, *The Pathfinder* from Ontario, *The Last of the Mohicans* from the Lake George country, *The Pioneers* from infant Cooperstown, and *The Prairie* from the trans-Mississippi plains. The swiftest of the books are the first three, as is proper for Romances of Leatherstocking's dynamic youth; the richest in human interest is the fourth; the most wildly sublime is the fifth. No reader has any sense of repetition. It is evidence of the highly individual character of each book that good critics have differed widely in their choice of a favorite. Henley termed *The Prairie* clearly the best. Bryant evidently gave his preference to

The Pioneers. Cooper himself, like Parkman, regarded *The Deerslayer* as his finest performance... The general favorite, by the test of international currency and use in schools, is *The Last of the Mohicans*....

The personages of the Leatherstocking Tales fall into two distinct groups: On the one hand Leatherstocking, Chingachgook, and Uncas, prime favorites of the author, and recipients of his best pains; on the other the minor characters--soldiers, random hunters, young women to furnish objects or rescue, young men to furnish suitors for the girls, and figures of comic relief--who obviously sometimes get Cooper's second best efforts.... It is possible that when the itinerant psalm-singer of *The Last of the Mohicans*, David Gamut, was first presented, he seemed funny. Today he is as tiresome as he is unconvincing. In part he seems a weak copy of the lank, awkward, courting schoolmaster in 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,' in part an invention to enable Cooper to display the historic prejudice of Yorkers against Yankees; altogether he is about as real and amusing as a clotheshorse....

The charge that Cooper's heroines tend toward the insipid, made by Lowell and others, can be sustained if we confine our gaze to Cora and Alice in *The Last of the Mohicans*, and to the fair Inez of Spanish blood in *The Prairie*; but it has no validity whatever as respects various other women of the Leatherstocking series. 'You will find Mabel,' said Sergeant Dunham of his daughter to Leatherstocking, 'like her mother, no screamer or a fainthearted girl to trouble a man in his need, but one who would encourage her mate, and help to keep his heart up when sorest pressed by danger.' [Compare the wife of Ishmael Bush in *The Prairie* and Mary in Irving's "The Wife."...]... The variety of Cooper's feminine figures is unusual, and the complexity of several would do credit to the best latter-day novelists. Even Cora Munro, stronger than her half-sister Alice, is given unusual interest by her infusion of Negro blood, and her unrequited love for Heyward. As for Judith and Hetty Hutter in *The Deerslayer*, both are masterly creations....

Leatherstocking, like many a frontiersman in real life, expresses a strong love of Nature. It is this, in part, which makes him an ardent conservationist, lamenting the spoilation of the wilderness. In *The Pioneers* he repeatedly expresses his horror at the devastation of natural wealth and beauty; in *The Prairie* he bitterly declares that when the Yankee choppers have cut their path from the Atlantic to the Pacific, they will 'turn on their tracks like a fox that doubles, and then the rank smell of their own footsteps will show them the madness of their waste.' In mastery of wilderness lore...Cooper very properly makes Chingachgook and Uncas superior to the scout....

Viewing the five Romances as a whole, we are struck by their breadth and grandeur. Their faults, which are many, are faults of detail; their virtues are large and enduring virtues. It was Cooper's felicity to unroll a canvas whose panoramic width matched the shaggy continent; to paint on it the pageant of the primeval Atlantic forests, the Great Lakes, the smaller canoe-threaded waterways, and the rolling prairies; and to fill the foreground with the clangorous action of the era when Indian, Briton, Frenchman, and Spaniard disputed the destiny of the continent. We can go with him in youth for entertainment, and come back to him in maturity for our fullest presentation of the color and magnitude of the American scene in its primitive epoch."

Allan Nevins

Introduction

The Leatherstocking Saga, condensed edition
(Modern Library 1954,1966) 2-19

"In the Leatherstocking series Fenimore Cooper hoped to create the Great American Epic. Like Cotton Mather and Joel Barlow in earlier generations, he was convinced that American history offered a theme equal, if not superior, to the themes of Homer and Virgil. For Cooper, as for many of his countrymen, there was no subject with greater drama and significance than the destiny of Christian morality in the American wilderness.

More explicitly, he was concerned with the relation between Christian morality and the skills necessary in America for survival and exploitation, the skills esteemed and cultivated by the self-sufficient and individualistic woodsman hero. An attempt to combine Homeric heroism and Christian sainthood in the figure of the American pioneer was doomed to certain failure, but it was a magnificent failure, and, in a larger sense, America's failure. In spite of his serious faults as a convincing character, Leatherstocking

stands as not only the greatest, but as the prototype, of American fictional heroes. With all his shortcomings as an artist Cooper must be taken as one of the few writers whose imagination gave form to American ideals, and whose plots, however juvenile, dealt directly with problems basic to the American experience.”

David Brian Davis
“The Deerslayer, a Democratic Knight of the Wilderness: Cooper 1841”
Original Essays on Great American Novels, ed. Charles Shapiro
(Wayne State 1958) 1-22

“The notion of the sacredness of womanhood and the sanctity of every member of the sex, the supreme creed of the female sentimentalists, he accepted as literal truth, ritually portraying all upper-class, white, Anglo-Saxon women as without sin... Only the Indian in him, which is to say the unconscious, is allowed to blaspheme against the pale-face virgin...in all [his] magic woods (sometimes more like those of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* than any native forest), no mosquito bites, no ant crawls; the charmed underbrush itself relents and will not tear the clothes nor mar the looks of the two girls who without soap or comb or brush must maintain their symbolic beauty, light and dark, unblemished. Were one of the actors to sweat or belch or retire to the bushes to relieve himself, the spell would be broken; we would know that all of them were merely flesh.”

Leslie Fieldler
Love and Death in the American Novel
(Dell 1960,66) 185, 201

“Although there had been earlier novelists in this country--Rowson, Foster, Brackenridge, and Charles Brown among the best--Cooper was the first whose writing was genuinely American. He had dared, as no one before him, to create a novel in which character, scene, and ideas were all unmistakably American... A number of recent scholars have explored what may be called the mythopoeic function of Cooper’s novels. In what ways did his art crystallize into permanent images, the attitudes, and the moods of life along the American frontier?... What unarticulated psychic need of the American people--perhaps of readers everywhere--did, and do, Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* satisfy?...

That there will be a continuing commentary on the *Leatherstocking Tales* is a foregone conclusion based upon the remarkable resurgence in their popularity. With sales of the series rising, a number of reprint publishers have entered the market until, at this writing, there are available more than twenty paperback editions of one or more of the *Tales*. With such a burgeoning readership, one cannot believe that the saga of Natty Bumppo will want for fresh insights and new interpretations.”

Warren S. Walker, ed., Introduction
Leatherstocking and His Critics
(Scott, Foresman 1965)

Michael Hollister (2014)