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Introduction by Leon Howard

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THE PIONEERS

· *Introduction* ·

James Cooper—the eleventh of his parents' twelve children—was born on September 15, 1789, and died the day before reaching his sixty-second birthday in 1851. Half his life was spent before he became a novelist, but during his last thirty-one years he produced some fifty separate titles of fiction and history, and saw the American novel firmly established on the foundations he had built. By a special act of the New York State Legislature in 1826 he took his mother's family name, Fenimore, as a part of his own and used it for all the books published under his signature. As James Fenimore Cooper he was at the time of his death—and has remained for more than a century since—the most widely read of American novelists. It has taken all the resources of Hollywood, for a generation, to dim the picture of America which he gave to the world.

The first and nonliterary half of his life was a varied and often purposeless one. His father, William Cooper, was one of America's most energetic and successful promoters of new settlements during the eighteenth century; and in 1790 he moved his entire family from their New Jersey home to central New York—according to one story, putting his reluctant wife into a wagon while she sat firmly in her chair holding the infant James in her arms. There the elder Cooper had already established the village of Cooperstown and had built a wooden mansion house on the shore of Lake Otsego for his family's use until the more pretentious brick Otsego Hall was completed a decade later. He was a Quaker by birth, an Episcopalian and a Federalist by later conviction, and a man of firm principles throughout his life. He would not follow the conventional New York version of the Dutch patroon system by settling land with tenants, but sold his holdings outright while maintaining as much paternal interest in the community as was expected of any lord of a manor. He was the village squire, the county judge, and the sometimes district representative in the Federal Congress until he died, in 1809 at the age of fifty-five, of a

blow struck from behind by a political opponent at the end of a public meeting.

Before his death, he planned James's life. He sent his son to Albany at the age of eleven to prepare for Yale College under the direction of an Episcopal clergyman, and two years later he saw the boy entered at Yale under the strict paternalistic guidance of President Timothy Dwight—a Congregationalist and a Yankee, but as staunch a Federalist as New England could boast. When the Dwight discipline and the inherited Cooper spirit clashed in 1806 and James was expelled shortly before he was due to graduate, the boy was sent to sea for a year's experience before the mast which qualified him for the midshipman's commission. He grew a queue and served in the United States Navy—mostly in a wilderness headquarters on the shore of Lake Ontario—from January 1, 1809, until May 9, 1810, when he used his father's recent death as an excuse for requesting a year's furlough, during which he courted and married "a fair damsel of eighteen," before resigning his commission and settling down to enjoy the substantial first share of his inheritance.

At first the young couple settled in the home of the bride, Susan DeLancey, whose Tory family had managed to retain large holdings of land in aristocratic Westchester County. They built their own home at Mamaroneck but soon abandoned it to return to the DeLancey mansion on Heathcote Hill, overlooking Long Island Sound, until 1814 when James constructed his own frame house on Fenimore Farm in Cooperstown to use as a temporary residence until a proper stone manor house could be finished. He abandoned the project, however, before the new house was ready for occupancy, and in the spring of 1817 returned to Westchester where he built still another home, Angevine, on Susan's property in Scarsdale. He became an active member of the County Agricultural Society, a Colonel on the Governor's Staff, and paymaster for the Fourth Division of the state militia, but remained restless. A two-thirds interest in a whaling vessel, the *Union,* enabled him to get the smell of tar in his nostrils once more as he took charge of her fitting and manning; and he spent some time in Sag Harbor, re-equipping her between voyages and marketing the oil. But he

was obviously an unsettled man, subject to some inner rhythm which had compelled him toward a major change of life every third year since he had entered college.

II

None of these changes had directed him in any apparent way toward a literary career, and the ex-naval officer and gentleman farmer has been charged with such indifference to the pen that he could barely be brought to write a letter. But he could and did read, and it was reading, according to the familiar story, which made him a writer. Disgusted with an English novel he was rendering aloud to his family, he swore that he could write a better one himself and was challenged by his wife to do so. The result was *Precaution*—a novel of manners, with an English setting—which he published anonymously in 1820.

It was a poor job, even for apprentice work, but it showed that Cooper had the taste required to select good models from the mass of English popular fiction which surrounded him. For he chose Jane Austen as his example, and when he realized that the characters and manners which so interested the author of *Persuasion* were not suited to his more forthright and masculine disposition he turned to the other outstanding British novelist of his time—Walter Scott, the author of *Waverley,* whose border romances were making history as exciting as Gothic sensationalism.

Cooper's second novel, *The Spy,* was a historical romance of border warfare in the Westchester district of his wife's home; and if his portraits of historical characters were more artificial than Scott's, his freehand representations of common people were almost as natural. Harvey Birch, the yeoman farmer who sacrificed reputation to patriotism in playing the role of the Spy, is a memorable character in fiction, whether or not he is based upon a real character in history. With all his unskilled awkwardness, Cooper could create better than he could copy, and the public recognized the fact by making *The Spy* enough of a literary success to justify its author in taking seriously the profession of authorship.

Cooper's motives in 1822 are not altogether clear. Undoubtedly, in an old journalistic expression, he had got ink on

his fingers while writing his first two novels and could not get it off. His discovery that he could write must have been a profoundly satisfying one, because it was not only a realization of unexpected talent, but also a means of release for the inherent energy which was later to overflow the bounds of literature and which certainly could not have been contained forever within the limits of a Westchester farm. It may have been, too, that he felt the need for a remunerative profession, for he had been disappointed in his later expectations from his father's estate and the financial depression of 1819 doubtless affected him as it did almost everybody else. But we can be sure only that he took serious stock of his resources, began a new book, and decided to move his family to New York City, where the Irvings and Pauldings and other members of "the Knickerbocker group" made the literary atmosphere a stimulating one.

The new author's evaluation of his own resources was probably his most important act because it led indirectly to his most memorable literary achievement. His first interest had been in the novel of manners, but *Precaution* had revealed the inadequacy of his acquaintance with the sort of manners which were refined and elevated and, in short, English enough to interest the conventional reading public. He had been happier and more successful with the familiar scenes and local customs of *The Spy,* but he was not at all sure that his native country provided the materials and associations necessary for an American Scott and the professional practice of historical romance. The book most suited to his own interest and knowledge could be neither an imitation of Jane Austen nor of Walter Scott. It would be, instead, an application of the approach of one to the material of the other. It would be a semihistorical novel of manners on the American border, an examination of American life in its most distinctive and peculiar aspects, a story of the pioneers of a new world.

The following of his "humor"—as he put it—to write such a novel was an act of courage in 1822. No one at the time had advanced the notion that realism, in itself, was a major artistic quality. A novel involved some conformity to the truth of everyday life in order to be distinguishable from a romance, but its literary value was determined by some additional quality—

humor, sentiment, or refinement in manners or morals—either inherent in its substance or superimposed upon it by the author. A mere "slice of life," such as came to be admired a century later, would have puzzled the reading public and infuriated the literary critics.

Furthermore, according to the prevailing esthetic theory of the time, the highest excellence of a literary work was determined by the ideas "associated" with it. If an author dealt with material which stimulated a train of fresh and natural associations in his mind, he was supposed to display a vitality of style he could achieve in no other way; but this vitality could not be recognized and appreciated by his readers unless they shared with him these associations. Such a theory created, for American writers, a problem of which Cooper was acutely aware. The scenes of his own pioneer childhood were rich with associations. They could set in motion the imaginative processes by which he had created the character of Harvey Birch, without placing upon him the historical restrictions which had made his portrait of Washington stiffer than anything on canvas and more rigid than marble. Yet pioneer life was crude, outside the experience of most novel readers even in America, and likely to suggest a train of vulgar associations completely antagonistic to sentiment and refinement. Washington Irving had solved the problem by treating American manners humorously, but Cooper was too serious-minded to take that way out. He was a man of consciously elevated sentiments, who felt the need to prove himself "grave" in his writings and saw only an incidental value in humor.

Fortunately, however, he was convinced that the conquest of the wilderness was in no way incompatible with the highest nobility of sentiment. William Cooper's pride in the 40,000 souls who had been settled under his direction was, in the eyes of his son, thoroughly justified. It was the achievement of a man whose faults and foibles and mistakes in judgment did not disguise his essential greatness of character. Pioneers might be rude and sometime uncouth, but they were not—despite the assertions of President Timothy Dwight of Yale, in his recently published *Travels*—ignoble. A novel of unique American manners might fail to achieve popular or critical success, but from

the author's literary point of view there was no reason why the experiment should not be attempted. He gave it the distinctively American title *The Pioneers, or The Sources of the Susquehanna,* called it "a Descriptive Tale," and drew its material partly from his imagination and partly from his childhood memories of personal experience and family stories about the settlement on Lake Otsego.

Actually Cooper's experiment, although he could hardly have known it in advance, was well timed. For the United States was going through a period of national myth-making and entering into an era of patriotic enthusiasm which was to transform the adjective "American" from an apology into a boast. George Washington had recently been placed upon a cherry stump pedestal by the Reverend Mason Weems; General Israel Putnam had been transformed into a dashing cavalier by the Honorable David Humphreys; and Captain John Paul Jones was being rescued from the aspersions cast upon him by his first biographer. More important, the old Federalist antagonism toward men in leather aprons and breeches was beginning to fade away in an era of good feeling, and the leather-clad common man was already emerging from the forest as a folk hero. Before his death in 1820 Daniel Boone had been celebrated in an epic poem, and the backwoodsman had become such a familiar type that James Kirke Paulding had used him as the subject for a long humorous poem. But Paulding, for all his literary experience, had dealt with him in the wrong manner. The generation of settlers who had been pouring across the mountains into Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Ohio country had learned to appreciate the qualities of men who had scouted the difficult mountain passes and established primitive settlements in a hostile environment. These were not, until they began to describe themselves as "half horse and half alligator" a few self-confident years later, comic characters. On the contrary, they were on the verge of becoming the heroic symbols of a new buckskin democracy.

Cooper was to do more than any other single person to fix this symbol in the popular mind, but when he began *The Pioneers* he could hardly have intended to do more than give a fair picture of life in a new settlement. The sustaining in-

terest in his book would have to be borrowed from romance—a mystery to be solved, an old wrong to be righted, and a young love to blossom despite the temporary blight of misunderstandings. This he could draw from an imagination which was always more ingenious than plausible, and the Temple-Effingham plot was his concession to artificial unity and the demands of popular romance. Otherwise he insisted that his tale was in "keeping" with human nature and advised anyone who picked up the book "with the expectation of meeting gods and goddesses, spooks or witches, or of feeling that strong excitement that is produced by battles and murders, to throw it aside at once, for no such interest will be found in any of its pages."

What a reader could and can still find in its pages is a genuine insight into the social conditions of American expansion during the early years of the republic. Some of them are peculiar to Lake Otsego. Relatively few frontier communities developed under the supervision of a resident squire who had sold the land outright to its settlers and yet tried to keep them under his own benevolent control. Marmaduke Temple is a softened portrait of William Cooper, and his efforts to establish an Episcopal church upon a community of nonconformists are a part of the early history of Cooperstown. His determination to introduce law for its own sake into the wilderness was perhaps more representative of other districts, for the regions opened to settlement by investment, rather than by squatters or—in a later period—by homesteading, were generally planned as law-abiding communities. In any case, Judge Temple was the squire of a district which contained a representation of the various peoples who had earlier given St. John de Crèvecoeur the idea of America as a melting pot and inspired his essay "What is an American?" It included the refugee French storekeeper M. Le Quoi, the German Major Hartmann, the English Ben Pump, the African Agamemnon, and a variety of New England Yankees in addition to the middle colonists who obviously—as Cooper saw it—provided the respectable backbone of the settlement. Some of these have been identified as real people, drawn from the author's memory, and they are all representative. Like the hostess of the tavern, the half-educated and envious lawyer, the ill-trained doctor, the stubborn car-

penter, and the professional wood chopper, they were a part of the social scene which Cooper had in mind when he selected four lines of Paulding's verse for his title page

> Extremes of habits, manners, time and space,
> Brought close together, here stood face to face,
> And gave at once a contrast to the view,
> That other lands and ages never knew.

This was the subject of his "descriptive tale"—a novel of manners which would make him the Maria Edgeworth, if not the Jane Austen, of the American frontier.

III

The greatest contrast Cooper had in view, however, was not that of the extremes of habit and manners brought face to face in the settlement, but the contrast between the settlement and the wilderness. Implicit in his basic conception of the book was a conflict which had bothered many Americans ever since John Winthrop, in 1645, had made a distinction between "natural" and "civil" liberty—the liberty to do as one pleased, and the liberty to do only that which was right, just, and honest. The Declaration of Independence had taken Americans far away from the Puritan attitude of contempt toward natural liberty, but the social and political problems which led to the adoption of the Constitution had tended to revive it. After the French Revolution, Timothy Dwight had given a national application to Winthrop's belief that "civil" liberty was the only liberty proper to New England; and Judge William Cooper, in his political activities, had been a forceful representative of the same point of view. As time was to show, James Cooper's mind was biased in that direction; but in 1822 he was still too restless and unsettled to feel a greater instinctive concern for his "civil" than for his "natural" rights. Furthermore, all his childhood associations with the Otsego country probably included ideas of freedom and antagonism toward restraint.

In any case, he displayed a stronger emotional attachment than he may have realized to the two characters he used as representatives of wilderness manners. One was the lone "Indian John," familiar to almost every settlement usually as an out-

cast both of his own people and of the whites from whom he begged support. The other was the buckskin-clad hunter with his long rifle and solitary disposition, who was known in the settlements only through his occasional appearances for lead and gunpowder and whiskey. Cooper kept them both around throughout his entire story, partly because they were essential to his major design of contrasting manners and partly because they were needed in the romantic Effingham-Temple plot; and perhaps for those reasons, too, he assigned them more dignity than such characters ordinarily possessed in reality. Chingachgook was not a begging outcast but the last survivor of a great tribe who had returned to his native region to die in surroundings through which he had once bounded like a roe and which he could still view with a chastened and subdued pleasure. Natty Bumppo was a hunter who had settled down in a less Wordsworthian spirit for reasons of loyalty which did not become clear until the end of the book.

Chingachgook may have been, in Cooper's mind, as realistic a figure as Judge Temple. For he belongs less to the tradition of the noble savage in European romanticism than he does to that of the American historians who—from Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on Virginia* to Samuel Williams in his *History of Vermont*—had been collecting evidence that Buffon and other European philosophers were wrong in their contention that "the man of America" was a degenerate specimen of humanity. Cooper was very sensitive to "scientific" observations on America, as he was to show clearly by his treatment of Dr. Obed Batt in *The Prairie* and by his explicit comments in later books, and his first portrait of an Indian may have been his first contribution to what was in his day a thriving controversy over the alleged "degenerative effects" of the American climate. John Heckewelder's often-noted influence upon Cooper came later as he developed his distinction between the Delawares and the Iroquois. But the hunter was, from the beginning, half man and half myth—the uncouth Nathaniel Bumppo and the romantic Leatherstocking.

Cooper's original visualization of Bumppo was certainly anything but romantic. As scrawny as Irving's Ichabod Crane, he cut almost as ridiculous a figure with his scraggy neck sur-

mounted by a head of lank sandy hair, shaggy gray brows, and an enormous mouth which opened to expose a single tusk of yellow bone. Even his nicknames were ironic. A foxskin cap, a hairy deerskin coat belted with colored worsted, and a pair of "tarnished" buckskin breeches all belied the implications of "Natty"; and Cooper took pains to point out that he was called "Leatherstocking" despite the fact that his legs were protected beneath his leggings "by thick garments of woolen, duly made of good blue yarn." There was little in his first sullen appearance to indicate that he was going to become the most widely admired romantic hero in American literature.

But he had one characteristic which associated him with romantic rather than comic myth: he was a hunter, not a schoolmaster. As a hunter, he possessed the rugged endurance, the accomplished skill, and the self-reliant shrewdness which were the necessary attributes of his profession; and these were qualities which Cooper himself genuinely admired. His ruggedness was noted and his skill celebrated in his introductory scene. His self-reliance increased and his shrewdness ripened into wisdom as the book progressed, and his character developed as did none of the others. In his protest against the new game laws he was the spokesman for his kind against what they considered civilization's arbitrary restrictions upon natural liberty, and Cooper sympathized with his point of view even if he could not share it. But in his protest against the wanton massacre of passenger pigeons in the name of sport, he was the spokesman for Cooper's own sentiments toward the blind, irrational destructiveness of men who could not subdue nature without destroying it. Far removed though he was from his creator's position and personality, Natty Bumppo took on some of Cooper's own waverings between impulse and reason, became human, and acquired such dignity that the reader forgets his grotesque entrance into the book and follows his exit into the western forest sympathetically and perhaps a little wistfully.

The human qualities of Natty Bumppo may have captured the sympathies of Cooper's contemporary readers, but what they recognized in him was a type. A publishing convention of the time was to advertise a book by releasing a portion of it in advance to the newspapers, and the section chosen for this

purpose from *The Pioneers* was the account of Elizabeth's rescue from the panther. In it appeared the Leatherstocking who caught the public fancy, self-portrayed in a single sentence: "I wonder if I had aimed at the varmint's eye, if I shouldn't have touched the life sooner than in the forehead? but they are hard-lived animals, and it was a good shot, consid'ring that I could see nothing but the head and the peak of its tail." Here was the quick and accurate shooting which made possible America's individualistic advance into the wilderness. Here was Daniel Boone and the conquest of the Dark and Bloody Ground. Here was one of Andy Jackson's hunters of Kentucky whose marksmanship was credited with the recent victory over the British in New Orleans. Here was the distinctive American —a new folk hero, casually cradling his rifle as he slouched toward glory.

The sale of 3,500 copies of *The Pioneers* on the morning of its publication, February 1, 1823, has been attributed to the publication of this extract; and, in any event, the book surely owed its success to Leatherstocking. Reviewers at home and abroad singled him out for praise, whatever they may have thought or said about Cooper's plot or style or the "manners" with which he had been primarily concerned. Natty Bumppo was the first genuinely original character to be recognized in American fiction.

IV

Leatherstocking was also to linger long in the mind of his creator. Cooper's next novel, conceived and composed after his removal to New York in 1822, was *The Pilot*—another historical tale of the American Revolution, designed, it is said, to give readers of Scott some needed lessons in seamanship. In it the major character was not John Paul Jones, whose disguise gave the book its title, but Long Tom Coffin, who was a common sailor with most of the personal qualities of Natty Bumppo but without the mythological attachments which enabled the hunter to catch the public fancy. After Cooper had settled firmly into the profession of authorship and before he went abroad in 1826, he returned to Natty Bumppo and gave him more heroic stature and greater symbolic meaning.

The Last of the Mohicans, the second book in what came to be a series of Leatherstocking Tales, is the best known of

Cooper's works. It supplied a background, suggested in *The Pioneers,* for Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook by presenting them in the full glory of their maturity. The Indian became the noble representative of a disappearing race when his son Uncas, the last potential leader of the tribe, was killed and the father left with memories which made his death scene in *The Pioneers* plausible. Natty, as Hawkeye, became the representative of the triumphant whites who had learned to meet the Indians on their own terms, master their woodcraft, and improve on their marksmanship until the "varmints" among them were destroyed and the good Indians were ready for some happier hunting ground. In *The Last of the Mohicans* Cooper abandoned his interest in the novel of manners and made it frankly a tale of exciting incident, battles and pursuits, escapes from danger, and demonstrations of woodcraft. It was Cooper's closest approach to the popular novel of sensationalism.

In Paris, while completing the third Leatherstocking Tale, Cooper brought Natty's life to an end on the distant western prairies which Lewis and Clark had explored but Cooper himself had never seen. At this distance and without the complicating factors of memory and personal associations, Cooper's perspective was better and his view of the social forces involved in the advancing frontier was clearer than it had been in *The Pioneers.* The plot of *The Prairie* was sillier than anything he had yet invented, but the characters in it were a realistic lot of honest settlers, adventurers, and ruffians of the sort who were actually beginning to pour across the plains. They were a self-selected group, wilder and more violent than the chosen landowners in Cooperstown, and Cooper allowed them the "one or two hangings" which he recognized as being of manifest advantage to new settlements but which he had kept out of *The Pioneers* on the grounds that they "would have been out of 'keeping' with the humane laws of this compassionate country." Among these rougher characters Leatherstocking, now a "trapper," fell for the first time into his own proper perspective as a shadowy figure who was most at home among the Indians. He might be regarded as the advance agent of a race whose progress he made possible, but with whom he had almost nothing in common.

In Europe Cooper was to become preoccupied with his "gleanings" of observation and with his aggressive defense of American democracy; and out of his observation, reading, and argument came three novels—*The Bravo, The Heidenmauer,* and *The Headsman*—which reflected his view of the European social history that Scott had neglected. He had written and was to continue to write throughout his life other historical novels of the American land and sea. But his major achievements were the results of strong bursts of feeling, such as his feeling about the fictional neglect of European social history and his violent reaction to social change in America when he returned home in 1833, and discovered that Jeffersonian democracy had been transformed into the Jacksonian kind and that the Bumppos had grown bumptious in their attitude toward their betters. He became engaged in a long series of personal quarrels, enlarged them to include the whole country in two novels called *Homeward Bound* and *Home as Found,* and carried a chip on his shoulder when he wrote a *History of the Navy*. None of these improved his public reputation, but in them he worked off the violence he had to get rid of before he could manage his many lawsuits with one part of his mind and with the other manage the extraordinary professional achievement of his last decade.

Of the sixteen novels he published between 1840 and the time of his death the most remarkable are those of the "Littlepage" series or the "Rent-War" trilogy—*Satanstoe, The Chainbearer,* and *The Redskins*. Of these, only the last deals directly with the conflict between landlords and tenants which marked the breaking up of the Dutch patroon system and the breaking down of the old political parties in New York State during the turbulent 'forties. The others provide historical background, and *Satanstoe* is the finest of Cooper's attempts to combine social fiction and history. Although its period is the mid-eighteenth century, its tone and richness of detail have the warm suggestion of memory found in *The Pioneers;* and its analytic comments upon the effects of different modes of settlement, its representation of the relationship between English and Dutch, and its frequently amusing reflection of different human points of view reveal a better social perspective than