

B A N T A M C L A S S I C

# The Last of the Mohicans

JAMES FENIMORE COOPER



With an Introduction by A. B. Guthrie Jr.

# THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

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**JAMES FENIMORE COOPER** was the first great professional American author. He was born on September 15, 1789, in Burlington, New Jersey, and grew up in the frontier village of Cooperstown, New York, in the heart of the wilderness he was to immortalize in his frontier novels. A high-spirited youth, he was expelled from Yale because of a prank and was finally signed into the navy by his strong-willed father. In 1819 a trifling incident reportedly led to the writing of his first book. Reading aloud to his wife from a popular English novel, he exclaimed, "I could write you a better book myself!" The result was *Precaution* (1820), which was followed in 1821 by his first real success, *The Spy*.

Cooper became a prolific writer, creating two unique genres that were to become staples in American literature—the sea romance and the frontier adventure story. The first of the famous Leatherstocking tales, *The Pioneers*, appeared in 1823 and introduced the wilderness scout Natty Bumppo. This detailed portrait of frontier life has been called the first truly American novel. In *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) Natty Bumppo becomes the well-loved Hawkeye befriended by the noble Indian Chingachgook; the novel remains a favorite American classic. Other Leatherstocking tales were *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841). Cooper's sea stories *The Pilot* (1823), *The Red Rover* (1827), and *The Sea Lions* (1849) influenced both Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad and led to the use of the sea novel as a vehicle for spiritual and moral exploration. Cooper also wrote political satire, romance, and the meticulously researched *History of the Navy of the United States of America* (1839). By the time of his death on September 14, 1851, he was considered America's "national novelist."

## INTRODUCTION

A. B. Guthrie, Jr.

**M**Y FATHER read *The Last of the Mohicans* to me when I was a small boy. I already knew how to read but was not yet ready for Cooper's prose. A fidgety youngster, I was bored with it. I wanted action, not perceiving there was enough in the story for two or three books. My father, who was something of a Latin scholar, enjoyed what he was reading, I realize now. Occasionally he would halt, turn to me, and say something like, "What a weapon, that Killdeer, eh, Son? And Hawkeye certainly knows how to use it. He never misses." The comments, I'm sure, were meant to awaken my interest.

I read *The Last of the Mohicans* again as a young man. By this time I knew that James Fenimore Cooper was the first great American novelist, and, if somewhat unwillingly, I recognized and appreciated at least some of his merits. I say "unwillingly" because I read it in the heady iconoclastic days of Sinclair Lewis and *The American Mercury*, when the old formalism of English prose had long since been tossed out the window, and to confess a liking for it was to betray some pitiable weakness.

After reading the story now for the third time, I have an undisguised appreciation for both Cooper and his work. Before, I had not reckoned with his time nor its accepted style of composition. I had not realized how inventive and really how bold the story was, for who else in those early days would have thought or dared to make Indians important and human characters in a book? I salute the author for telling a bang-up tale.

Born in 1789 in New Jersey, Cooper was taken as a one-year-old to New York State, where his father founded the settlement

of Cooperstown, known widely today as the home of baseball's Hall of Fame. His father looms as quite a man. He was a staunch Federalist, a wealthy landowner, a prominent politician, and a Quaker so belligerent that he was expelled from the Society of Friends. History doesn't say, but he must have engaged in a fistfight or some even more violent encounter. He died at the hands of a political opponent in 1809 when James was twenty years old.

At the age of thirteen James Fenimore Cooper enrolled in Yale University: he must have been uncommonly precocious, or the standards for admission were very different from today's. Both factors probably contributed to his early entry. At any rate he was the youngest in his class and excelled in the study of Latin. Two years later he was kicked out of school as the consequence of some boyish prank. Subsequently he sailed as a British seaman and later became a midshipman in the United States Navy.

Then he married in 1811, resigned from the Navy, and settled down in Cooperstown as befitted a country gentleman. But there was an interruption. After he had established himself as a successful novelist, he sailed for Europe in 1826, the very year *The Last of the Mohicans* came out. He stayed there seven years. These were not idle years, however, for he kept busy with the pen. Then he returned to Cooperstown and lived there until the end of his life.

It seems that it was chance that made him a novelist. There was nothing in his life before his success to suggest he would have a career as a professional author. One day he laid aside an English novel he was reading with the idle remark that he could write a better one himself. His wife must have taunted him a bit, for he set to work to prove his boast. One can see him, drawing for inspiration or guidance on the eighteenth-century European novels he knew.

The first proof of his boast—and it was hardly good enough to be called proof—appeared under the title *Precaution*, in 1820. Nothing daunted, Cooper proceeded to write *The Spy* (1821), a better book and a popular one. Cooper was on the way. His future was set. In the thirty-two years of his writing



life, he turned out fifty-two separate works, thirty of them novels, and among them was the Leatherstocking series of five. *The Last of the Mohicans* was the second of the series, possibly the best of the bunch and certainly the best known, both then and today. It is a somewhat melancholy fact that many people use the title as an expression without knowing its origin.

Cooper was not only a man of great energy—major publication followed major publication almost year after year—but also a man of wide interests. He wrote novels of the sea, for which his years as a sailor had given him background. He wrote a history of the United States Navy. He was interested in organized society and wrote on the subject of American democracy; both defending and criticizing it and so became known as a social critic.

He had the experience for frontier tales. As a boy he must have roamed the country roundabout, perhaps far from Coopers-town, on occasion. The countryside from the Hudson River on the east to lakes Champlain and George on the west was densely wooded—explored, to be sure, but still wild, home of bear and deer and moose and smaller animals. Cooper must have learned something of woodcraft and heard tales, still fresh, of the French and Indian War that came to its climax on the Plains of Abraham, where the opposing French and British leaders, Montcalm and Wolfe, met their deaths in 1759.

*The Last of the Mohicans* deals with those savage days before the end of the war. It covers the fall of Fort William Henry to the French. Located on Lake George, in the novel referred to as Horican, its earlier name, Fort William Henry was strategically placed, and its capture was of importance to the French general, Montcalm. The story records the surrender of the fort and subsequent events.

Cooper's protagonist is a frontier scout called Hawkeye, although he is obviously the Natty Bumppo of Cooper's other tales. Traveling with him in the deep and dangerous woods are two Mohicans, Chingachgook and his son, Uncas. They are the last of a tribe related to the Delawares.

At the start of the story Hawkeye and his two traveling companions encounter a party of four. They are a young British

major and two girls, whom the major is trying to deliver safely to their father, Colonel Munro, who is in charge of the fort. To guide them, Major Heyward had employed a scheming Huron, who has deliberately led them astray.

Hawkeye and the Mohicans disclose the Huron's faithlessness. In the process the Huron makes his escape, returning later to plague them to the end. The scout and his friends take over the leadership of the group.

Indians, mostly hostile, are everywhere, for this is the territory of the Five Nations—the Mohawks, Oneidas, Senecas, Cayugas, and Onondagas. To their number had been added the Tuscaroras. Among the local tribes, Hawkeye trusts only the Delawares and the Mohicans. It is incidental but of passing interest that later frontiersmen knew the Delawares as the Ishmaelites of the plains, whom nobody could trust.

It was a mean and personal war the contestants were waging. Today when we speak of Indian troubles our thoughts go to warfare on the prairies and plains, in which one party sees the other and prepares to defend or attack. We think of mounted men, of Red Cloud or Crazy Horse, of generals Crook or Custer. But this was a woodland war, the combatants mostly afoot. Beyond the next tree might hide the enemy. He might be creeping up, unseen, from behind or from the side. And much of the fighting was hand-to-hand, for there was little artillery. Guns were mostly smoothbore muskets and hence unreliable. Hawkeye's firearm, Killdeer, was an exception. Its barrel was rifled. Guns failing, opponents resorted to knives and tomahawks.

It was Indians against Indians, whites against whites, combinations of them against other combinations.

Despite these difficult circumstances, Hawkeye and the Mohicans get the girls to their father. Upon their arrival Fort William Henry is doomed and no outside aid comes to its defense. Montcalm, meeting with Colonel Munro, offers generous terms. The defending soldiers, when they left, could carry their arms, and the French, it was promised, would respect their safety.

Montcalm could assure that much, but he couldn't and



didn't guarantee the good behavior of his Indian allies. The result was a wild bloodletting.

In the turmoil and disorder, the Huron, variously called Magua and Le Renard Subtil, manages to abduct the two girls. A rescue party—composed of Hawkeye, the two Mohicans, Major Heyward, and the aging Colonel Munro—starts out in pursuit. It is a long, various and vigorous quest, by land and by water. There is always the impending threat of an unlucky encounter, and it is the craftiness of both the pursuers and the pursued that colors the tale. Somehow, with spare reference or description, Cooper makes this chase suspenseful and engaging.

The two sides make wary contact.

The Huron is both a chief and an orator; his eloquence has won him allies and almost but not quite brought the Delawares to his side. Reading the carefully wrought words that Cooper puts into his mouth, one finds him shrewdly persuasive.

Open warfare follows, graphically told. The climax leaves the reader breathless. For it is here, in violent conflict, as well as in the account of pursuit, that Cooper is at his best.

I wanted action when my father read the story, and here it is, subtly written and so unperceived by me—dangers, fighting, artful deceits, pursuit, and even a love element, although it is subordinate and treated with much gentlemanly reserve, with such regard for the "weak and tender sex" that one pauses only briefly, for other things have hold of his attention.

Though *The Last of the Mohicans* stands above its fellows in the Leatherstocking series, the four others are good, broad in concept, strong in progression, and marked by Cooper's skill in treating adventure. The others are *The Deerslayer*, also first known to me through my father's reading, *The Pathfinder*, *The Pioneers*, and *The Prairie*.

What can be said of Cooper's style? His language is Latinized, of course, for that was the style of the novels he knew. His works, written as they are, may seem strange and involved to modern ears. But no matter. The reader will discover a true storyteller here, a writer of imagination and talent and steady purpose.

Mark Twain apparently had no time for Cooper's work, no time, that is, except as a target for criticism. Twain wrote his opinions in 1895, almost half a century after Cooper's death, and after he had developed his own style, one that later American writers were to follow. It was direct, rather unadorned, marked by Anglo-Saxon rather than Latin. So his attitude was to be expected.

On the other hand, Balzac liked Cooper; Victor Hugo put him above Sir Walter Scott, whom Cooper came to rival in popularity; Herman Melville admired him; Conrad termed him a "rare artist"; and D. H. Lawrence called him "the American novelist."

Perhaps Cooper's manner of expression owed itself, at least somewhat, to his liking for Latin, at which, as noted, he excelled as a schoolboy. Yet one wonders, what books had he time to read? Where did he find them? It is unlikely that he read many serious English novels during his aborted school days, nor would they have been at hand when he was at sea. Possibly, just possibly, his father had a fine library, though the Coopers-town of the time seems an unlikely place to find one. He was just thirty-two when his first successful book came out. So the wonder remains. Where was the time for study? Where were his sources? His seven years in Europe hardly could have helped him, for he was a successful author before he sailed, his pattern of language already fixed.

One of his stories was compared unfavorably with the work of Jane Austen. Maybe he had read her books. Maybe he hadn't? Was it Scott whose tales he knew? Richardson? Fielding? Smollet? Who then? Who else?

In the rush of his narrative, Cooper could be careless or forgetful. More than once he loses a character whom the reader had reason to think was important. So a bothersome question can arise. Where is he? Where is she? But one doesn't take long in wondering. Too much is afoot for that.

And Cooper makes one believe what is incredible. Two instances occur in *The Last of the Mohicans*. In one Hawkeye, dressed in the hide and likeness of a bear, deceives Indian eyes. In another old Chingachgook, pretending to be a beaver in a



pond with other beavers, is indistinguishable from them until he gets up from the water to leave. Again the reader passes by the implausibilities, so compelled is he to go on with the story.

The reader may question the figurative speech of both Indians and whites. Surely people never talked as these people do. But the discourse is imaginative, pleasing, poetic, and it works.

It had been suggested that the penny dreadfuls and the Ned Buntline exaggerations followed naturally on Cooper's success. These cheap novels, of course, did follow, but whether as a direct result of Cooper is questionable. They certainly do not compare. To put them beside Cooper's works is to couple a comic book with a masterpiece. Cooper's stories were grounded in history, whereas the others are careless or dismissive of it. These successors show no traces of his skill. They were written by the artless for money. Cooper sought "the elevation of romance," by which he meant, I think, worthy purpose, respect for language and background, and regard for decorum. No such aims or scruples characterized the cheap followers, none that is, until the progression reached Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), a landmark if flawed book, and the many lesser tales that borrowed from it.

Students of Cooper's works and life have commented on the difficulties he had with egalitarianism. Nevertheless, here was Natty Bumppo, alias Hawkeye, a gallant if unschooled character, possessor of courage, loyalty, and backwoods skills, and here was his creator, rather an elitist, a believer in the term "gentleman," who couldn't reconcile himself to the crudities of the then president, Andrew Jackson. Where then and in what order did Bumppo come in the scale of social values?

Whether Cooper was really bothered by egalitarianism, I don't know. Nothing of that conflict appears in *The Last of the Mohicans*. It is a straightforward story, told without references to social order and, happily, without digging into psychology.

In his time Cooper was attacked as the creator of "the noble red man," whereas, as all true racists knew, the only good Indian was a dead one. The fact is that Cooper created more ignoble Indians than he did noble ones.



He also came under attack as a nonbeliever in democracy, an aristocrat in conviction. The charges were false. Cooper believed both in democracy and in a gentlemanly social and political order. He sued some of his detractors and won and so helped in the development of the laws of libel.

In sum, what is there to say of Cooper beyond noting again that he was the first American novelist? Why, there are a good many things to say. He had the first requirement of a good fiction writer, the ability to tell a story well. That meant imagination and command of materials. He was an innovator. He took the stuff at hand, the words, the waters, the Indian, and the white backwoodsman, and he made drama of them. He planted his stories in history. To chosen Indians he gave redeeming human qualities that the great majority of white Americans at the time were unwilling to grant. As a forerunner of the many novelists to follow, he gave vitality and sweep and worthiness to his creations.

So finally, let us characterize him by using the title of one of his books, "*the pathfinder*."

**THE LAST OF  
THE MOHICANS**

## CHAPTER I

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*"Mine ear is open, and my heart prepared:  
The worst is worldly loss thou canst unfold:  
Say, is my kingdom lost?"*

SHAKESPEARE

IT WAS a feature peculiar to the colonial wars of North America, that the toils and dangers of the wilderness were to be encountered before the adverse hosts could meet. A wide and apparently an impervious boundary of forests severed the possessions of the hostile provinces of France and England. The hardy colonist, and the trained European who fought at his side, frequently expended months in struggling against the rapids of the streams, or in effecting the rugged passes of the mountains, in quest of an opportunity to exhibit their courage in a more martial conflict. But, emulating the patience and self-denial of the practised native warriors, they learned to overcome every difficulty; and it would seem that, in time, there was no recess of the woods so dark, nor any secret place so lovely, that it might claim exemption from the inroads of those who had pledged their blood to satiate their vengeance, or to uphold the cold and selfish policy of the distant monarchs of Europe.

Perhaps no district throughout the wide extent of the intermediate frontiers can furnish a livelier picture of the cruelty and fierceness of the savage warfare of those periods than the country which lies between the head waters of the Hudson and the adjacent lakes.

The facilities which nature had there offered to the march of the combatants were too obvious to be neglected. The lengthened sheet of the Champlain stretched from the frontiers of Canada, deep within the borders of the neighboring province



of New York, forming a natural passage across half the distance that the French were compelled to master in order to strike their enemies. Near its southern termination, it received the contributions of another lake, whose waters were so limpid as to have been exclusively selected by the Jesuit missionaries to perform the typical purification of baptism, and to obtain for it the title of lake "du Saint Sacrement." The less zealous English thought they conferred a sufficient honor on its unsullied fountains, when they bestowed the name of their reigning prince, the second of the house of Hanover. The two united to rob the untutored possessors of its wooded scenery of their native right to perpetuate its original appellation of "Horican."<sup>1</sup>

Winding its way among countless islands, and imbedded in mountains, the "holy lake" extended a dozen leagues still farther to the south. With the high plain that there interposed itself to the further passage of the water, commenced a portage of as many miles, which conducted the adventurer to the banks of the Hudson, at a point where, with the usual obstructions of the rapids, or rifts, as they were then termed in the language of the country, the river became navigable to the tide.

While, in the pursuit of their daring plans of annoyance, the restless enterprise of the French even attempted the distant and difficult gorges of the Allegheny, it may easily be imagined that their proverbial acuteness would not overlook the natural advantages of the district we have just described. It became, emphatically, the bloody arena, in which most of the battles for the mastery of the colonies were contested. Forts were erected at the different points that commanded the facilities of the route, and were taken and retaken, razed and rebuilt, as victory alighted on the hostile banners. While the husbandman shrank back from the dangerous passes, within the safer boundaries of the more ancient settlements, armies larger than those that had often dis-

<sup>1</sup> As each nation of the Indians had either its language or its dialect, they usually gave different names to the same places, though nearly all of their appellations were descriptive of the object. Thus, a literal translation of the name of this beautiful sheet of water, used by the tribe that dwelt on its banks would be "The Tail of the Lake." Lake George, as it is vulgarly, and now indeed legally called, forms a sort of tail to Lake Champlain, when viewed on the map. Hence the name.

posed of the sceptres of the mother countries, were seen to bury themselves in these forests, whence they rarely returned but in skeleton bands, that were haggard with care, or dejected by defeat. Though the arts of peace were unknown to this fatal region, its forests were alive with men; its shades and glens rang with the sounds of martial music, and the echoes of its mountains threw back the laugh, or repeated the wanton cry, of many a gallant and reckless youth, as he hurried by them, in the noontide of his spirits, to slumber in a long night of forgetfulness.

It was in this scene of strife and bloodshed that the incidents we shall attempt to relate occurred, during the third year of the war which England and France last waged for the possession of a country that neither was destined to retain.

The imbecility of her military leaders abroad, and the fatal want of energy in her councils at home, had lowered the character of Great Britain from the proud elevation on which it had been placed by the talents and enterprise of her former warriors and statesmen. No longer dreaded by her enemies, her servants were fast losing the confidence of self-respect. In this mortifying abasement, the colonists, though innocent of her imbecility, and too humble to be the agents of her blunders, were but the natural participators.

They had recently seen a chosen army from that country, which, reverencing as a mother, they had blindly believed invincible—an army led by a chief who had been selected from a crowd of trained warriors, for his rare military endowments, disgracefully routed by a handful of French and Indians, and only saved from annihilation by the coolness and spirit of a Virginian boy, whose riper fame has since diffused itself, with the steady influence of moral truth, to the uttermost confines of Christendom.<sup>1</sup> A wide

<sup>1</sup> Washington: who, after uselessly admonishing the European general of the danger into which he was heedlessly running, saved the remnants of the British army, on this occasion, by his decision and courage. The reputation earned by Washington in this battle was the principal cause of his being selected to command the American armies at a later day. It is a circumstance worthy of observation, that, while all America rang with his well-merited reputation, his name does not occur in any European account of the battle; at least, the author has searched for it without success. In this manner does the mother country absorb even the fame, under that system of rule.



frontier had been laid naked by this unexpected disaster, and more substantial evils were preceded by a thousand fanciful and imaginary dangers. The alarmed colonists believed that the yells of the savages mingled with every fitful gust of wind that issued from the interminable forests of the west. The terrific character of their merciless enemies increased immeasurably the natural horrors of warfare. Numberless recent massacres were still vivid in their recollections; nor was there any ear in the provinces so deaf as not to have drunk in with avidity the narrative of some fearful tale of midnight murder, in which the natives of the forest were the principal and barbarous actors. As the credulous and excited traveller related the hazardous chances of the wilderness, the blood of the timid curdled with terror, and mothers cast anxious glances even at those children which slumbered within the security of the largest towns. In short, the magnifying influence of fear began to set at naught the calculations of reason, and to render those who should have remembered their manhood, the slaves of the basest of passions. Even the most confident and the stoutest hearts began to think the issue of the contest was becoming doubtful; and the abject class was hourly increasing in numbers, who thought they foresaw all the possessions of the English crown in America subdued by their Christian foes, or laid waste by the inroads of their relentless allies.

When, therefore, intelligence was received at the fort, which covered the southern termination of the portage between the Hudson and the lakes, that Montcalm had been seen moving up the Champlain, with an army "numerous as the leaves on the trees," its truth was admitted with more of the craven reluctance of fear than with the stern joy that a warrior should feel, in finding an enemy within reach of his blow. The news had been brought, towards the decline of a day in midsummer, by an Indian runner, who also bore an urgent request from Munro, the commander of a work on the shore of the "holy lake," for a speedy and powerful reinforcement. It has already been mentioned that the distance between these two posts was less than five leagues. The rude path, which originally formed their line of communication, had been widened for the passage of wagons; so that the distance which had been travelled by the son of