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The Deerslayer

JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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THE DEERSLAYER

INTRODUCTION

A reader coming to *The Deerslayer* in the 1990s must simply grit the teeth, count to ten, and implore historical relativism for mercy. So much of what has proved lethal in American life is encapsulated in this hero, Natty Bumppo. Scarcely a chapter goes by in which he doesn't parade both racial and sexual superiority in some egregious manner and, of course, with the best intentions. After all, white men have their 'gifts', as Natty calls them. Which is not to say he does not acknowledge the 'gifts' that belong to 'red-skins' or 'females'. It is just that Natty's 'gifts' are the ones which always prevail.

No reader should be misled by thinking that James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) had direct knowledge of either the American frontier or native American people. Born in New Jersey, he was taken to Cooperstown (a small settlement 150 miles north of New York City) as a baby. His father, William Cooper, was a wealthy member of the gentry who had acquired large parcels of land in New York following the American Revolution. James grew up with wealth and privilege. He began writing fiction in 1820 as a means of regaining the inheritance he had squandered. Between 1826 and 1833 he lived in both Paris and London and toured the continent where he received a great deal of attention since his books had been widely translated. Returning to Cooperstown a wealthy and famous man of letters, he continued to write prolifically and to become ever more élitist in his views.

The five novels which make up the 'Leather-Stocking Tales' were published between 1826 and 1841. *The Deerslayer*, though the last written, occupies the fictional beginning of the series. The story takes place during five days in the early 1740s when Natty (*aka* Straight-Tongue, The Pigeon, Lap-Ear, Deerslayer and Hawkeye – Cooper was fond of a 'sobriquet'), his loutish companion Hurry Harry and his noble-savage friend Chingachgook defend themselves and the lives of two white women (Hetty and Judith Hutter) and Chingachgook's

'betrothed' (called alternately Wah-ta!-Wah and Hist) against the viciousness of marauding 'Hurons' or 'Iroquois' or 'Mingos', i.e. 'savages'. The scene of the action is an Edenic lake called 'Glimmerglass' (usually identified as Lake Champlain) where Tom Hutter, the girls' father, has built a domestic fortification dubbed 'Muskrat Castle' on a shoal in response to several burn-downs of his dwellings on shore.

Many readers have found Natty both heroic and memorable. The narrator of the romance describes him as one possessing 'guileless truth, sustained by an earnestness of purpose, and a sincerity of feeling, which rendered it [and him] remarkable'. But what are we to make, finally, of someone who says in all sincerity to Judith Hutter: 'This sounds well, and is according to woman's gifts . . . Woman was created for the feelin's, and is pretty much ruled by feelin'.' Or the Natty of the following dialogue:

> 'And where, then, is *your* sweetheart, Deerslayer?'
>
> 'She's in the forest, Judith – hanging from the boughs of the trees in a soft rain – in the dew on the open grass – the clouds that float about in the blue heavens – the birds that sing in the woods – the sweet springs where I slake my thirst – and in all the other glorious gifts that come from God's Providence!'
>
> 'You mean that, as yet, you've never loved one of my sex, but love best your haunts, and your own manner of life.'
>
> 'That's it – that's just it. I am white – have a white heart, and can't in reason love a red-skinned maiden, who must have a red-skin heart and feelin's.'

For always under Deerslayer's idealism, his innocence, his natural love for the natural world, lies the bedrock of racism. It is one of his 'gifts' about which he seems entirely unconscious. In fact, his apparently benign racism, often expressed as sincere admiration for the 'red-skin's gifts', is deliberately contrasted with Hurry Harry's more obvious bigotry which leads him not only to shoot an innocent Indian woman but also to take scalps from 'a heartless longing for profit'. Put alongside this all-too-familiar stereotype, Deerslayer's values and attitudes gain the appearance of rational, progressive thought.

Of course the fault is Cooper's, and so the same defects which mar Hawkeye show up in other characters and in other ways. For instance, here is a description of the Indian couple, Chingachgook ('an Apollo of the wilderness') and his 'betrothed', meeting after long absence.

> No tender wife, reared in the refinements of the highest civilisation, ever met a husband on his return from the field, with more of sensibility in her countenance, than Hist discovered, as she saw the Great Serpent of the Delawares step, unharmed, into the ark.

Comforting to know that 'they' weren't all savages howling like dogs around hideous bonfires. But Cooper's patronising sentimentality only confirms the depth of his ethnocentrism. These are noble savages, indeed; but in the end all a good, white frontiersman can do, even if he is a Christian, is hit his adversary between the eyes with a tomahawk. That, at least, earns some respect.

There is not much use going on in an ungenerous way about the ghastly undertones of this novel without acknowledging that the Leather-Stocking Tales are a major point of origin for an American myth, the Western, which has continued into our era. The themes and values of the novel, far from being an unwholesome aberration lost to the ravages of time, continue to plague American life with ever-increasing ferocity. In passage after passage of *The Deerslayer* we find sown the seeds of that violence. For what sort of hero carries his first victim lovingly in his arms while preaching a short sermon about 'the happy hunting ground' and man's common mortality? And what sort of novelist has the victim answer: ' "Good!" ejaculated the Indian, whose voice retained its depth even as life ebbed away; "young head – old wisdom!" ' Will the vicious history of colonisation and genocide be so easily covered over by a romance modelled on Homer's war at Troy?

Cooper's popularity only confirms our worst suspicions. He told Europeans and Americans only recently liberated from European rule what they wanted to hear about America and Americans. It had and has nothing to do with 'truth' in the usual sense of the word; on the contrary, it is far from the truth. That is what makes it popular. And the reader's ignorance is required, as in a recent movie based on the Leather-Stocking Tales which was made in North Carolina. In that version we find Natty, played by the handsome Daniel Day Lewis, running through rhododendron bushes while pretending to be in upstate New York. Who cares? 'It's only a movie.' And so with the characters and action of *The Deerslayer*. In the climax of the novel our hero is tied to a young tree, threatened with tomahawks, knives and musket balls, all of which are intended to make him flinch; he does not flinch. Judith tries in vain to intervene. A fire is made, but the feeble-minded Hetty scatters the sticks. Again the fiends attempt to burn their

victim, but again they are foiled. Then, out of the woods, a regiment of redcoats arrives in the nick of time! Later they will be called cavalry. Later still, 'green berets'. The forces of civilisation arrive, thank God, well armed and in superior numbers.

We must take 'the Western' as it was made, but we must not be deceived by it. In it we can find both the myth which gives Americans identity and the myth that dooms them. As the poet Robert Bly has written recently: 'The time of manifest destiny is over, the time of grief has come.'

HILLARY SOAMES

FURTHER READING

Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, Cambridge 1981

D. H. Lawrence, 'Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Novels' in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, London 1923

Allan Nevins (ed.), *The Leatherstocking Saga*, New York 1966

Geoffrey Rans, *Cooper's Leather-Stocking Novels*, Chapel Hill 1991

Stephen Railton, *Fenimore Cooper: A Study of His Life and Imagination*, Princeton 1978

Mark Twain, *The Literary Offences of James Fenimore Cooper*, 1895

PREFACE

THIS BOOK has not been written without many misgivings as to its probable reception. To carry one and the same character through five several works would seem to be a wilful overdrawing on the good nature of the public, and many persons may very reasonably suppose it an act, of itself, that ought to invite a rebuke. To this natural objection, the author can only say that, if he has committed a grave fault on this occasion, his readers are in some measure answerable for it. The favourable manner in which the more advanced career, and the death of Leather-Stocking were received, has created, in the mind of the author, at least, a sort of necessity for giving some account of his younger days. In short, the pictures of his life, such as they are, were already so complete as to excite some little desire to see the 'study', from which they have all been drawn.

The 'Leather-Stocking Tales' now form something like a drama in five acts; complete as to material and design, though probably very incomplete as to execution. Such as they are, the reading world has them before it. The author hopes, should it decide that this particular act, the last in execution, though the first in the order of perusal, is not the best of the series, it will also come to the conclusion that it is not absolutely the worst. More than once, he has been tempted to burn his manuscript, and to turn to some other subject, though he has met with an encouragement, in the course of his labours, of a character so singular, as to be worth mentioning. An anonymous letter from England has reached him, written, as he thinks, by a lady, in which he is urged to do almost the very thing he had already more than half executed; a request that he has been willing enough to construe into a sign that his attempt will be partially forgiven, if not altogether commended.

Little need be said concerning the characters and scenery of this tale. The former are fictitious, as a matter of course; but the latter is as true to nature as an intimate knowledge of the present appearance of the

region described, and such probable conjectures concerning its ancient state as could be furnished by the imagination, enabled the writer to render it. The lake, mountains, valley, and forests, are all believed to be sufficiently exact; while the river, rock, and shoal are faithful transcripts from nature. Even the points exist, a little altered by civilisation, but so nearly answering to the descriptions, as to be easily recognised by all who are familiar with the scenery of the particular region in question.

CHAPTER I

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep sea and music in its roar.

CHILDE HAROLD

ON THE HUMAN IMAGINATION events produce the effects of time. Thus he who has travelled far and seen much is apt to fancy that he has lived long; and the history that most abounds in important incidents soonest assumes the aspect of antiquity. In no other way can we account for the venerable air that is already gathering around American annals. When the mind reverts to the earliest days of colonial history, the period seems remote and obscure, the thousand changes that thicken along the links of recollections throwing back the origin of the nation to a day so distant as seemingly to reach the mists of time; and yet four lives of ordinary duration would suffice to transmit, from mouth to mouth, in the form of tradition, all that civilised man has achieved within the limits of the American republic.

It is matter of history that the settlements on the eastern shores of the Hudson, such as Claverack, Kinderhook, and even Poughkeepsie, were not regarded as safe from Indian incursions a century since; and there is still standing on the banks of the same river, and within musket-shot of the wharfs of Albany, a residence of a younger branch of the Van Rensselaers, that has loopholes constructed for defence against the same crafty enemy, although it dates from a period scarcely so distant. Other similar memorials of the infancy of the country are to be found, scattered through what is now deemed the very centre of American civilisation, affording the plainest proofs that all we possess of security from invasion and hostile violence is the growth of but little more than the time that is frequently filled by a single human life.

The incidents of this tale occurred between the years 1740 and 1745, when the settled portions of the colony of New York were confined to the four Atlantic counties, a narrow belt of country on each side of the Hudson, extending from its mouth to the falls near its head, and to a

few advanced 'neighbourhoods ' on the Mohawk and the Schoharie. Broad belts of the virgin wilderness not only reached the shores of the first river, but they even crossed it, stretching away into New England, and affording forest covers to the noiseless moccasin of the native warrior, as he trod the secret and bloody war-path. A bird's-eye view of the whole region east of the Mississippi must then have offered one vast expanse of woods, relieved by a comparatively narrow fringe of cultivation along the sea, dotted by the glittering surfaces of lakes, and intersected by the waving lines of rivers. In such a vast picture of solemn solitude the district of country we design to paint sinks into insignificance, though we feel encouraged to proceed by the conviction that, with slight and immaterial distinctions, he who succeeds in giving an accurate idea of any portion of this wild region must necessarily convey a tolerably correct notion of the whole.

Whatever may be the changes produced by man, the eternal round of the seasons is unbroken. Summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, return in their stated order, with a sublime precision, affording to man one of the noblest of all the occasions he enjoys of proving the high powers of his far-reaching mind, in compassing the laws that control their exact uniformity, and in calculating their never-ending revolutions.

In the depths of a forest, of which the leafy surface lay bathed in the brilliant light of a cloudless day in June, while the trunks of the trees rose in gloomy grandeur in the shades beneath, voices were heard calling to each other. The calls were in different tones, evidently proceeding from two men who had lost their way, and were searching in different directions for their path. At length a shout proclaimed success, and presently a man broke out of the tangled labyrinth of a small swamp, emerging into an opening which appeared to have been formed partly by the ravages of the wind, and partly by those of fire. This little area, which afforded a good view of the sky, although pretty well filled with dead trees, lay on the side of one of the high hills, or low mountains, into which nearly the whole surface of the adjacent country was broken.

'Here is room to breathe in!' exclaimed the liberated forester, shaking his huge frame like a mastiff that has just escaped from a snow-bank; 'Hurrah, Deerslayer! here is daylight at last, and yonder is the lake.'

These words were scarcely uttered when the second forester dashed aside the bushes of the swamp, and appeared in the area. After making a hurried adjustment of his arms and disordered dress, he joined his companion, who had already begun his dispositions for a halt. 'Do you

know this spot?' demanded the one called Deerslayer, 'or do you shout at the sight of the sun?'

'Both, lad, both; I know the spot, and am not sorry to see so useful a friend as the sun. Now we have got the p'ints of the compass in our minds once more, and 'twill be our own faults if we let anything turn them topsyturvy ag'in, as has just happened. My name is not Hurry Harry, if this be not the very spot where the land-hunters 'camped last summer, and passed a week. See, yonder are the dead bushes of their bower, and here is the spring. Much as I like the sun, boy, I've no occasion for it to tell me it is noon; this stomach of mine is as good a time-piece as is to be found in the Colony, and it already p'ints to half-past twelve. So open the wallet, and let us wind up for another six hours' run.'

At this suggestion, both set themselves about making the preparations necessary for their usual frugal, but hearty, meal. We will profit by this pause in the discourse to give the reader some idea of the appearance of the men, both of whom are destined to enact no insignificant parts in our legend. It would not have been easy to find a more noble specimen of vigorous manhood, than was offered in the person of him who called himself Hurry Harry. His real name was Henry March; but the frontier-men having caught the practice of giving sobriquets from the Indians, the appellation of Hurry was oftener applied to him than his proper designation, and not unfrequently he was termed Hurry Skurry, a nickname he had obtained from a dashing, reckless, off-hand manner, and a physical recklessness which kept him so constantly on the move, as to cause him to be known along the whole line of scattered habitations that lay between the province and the Canadas. The stature of Hurry Harry exceeded six feet four, and being unusually well proportioned, his strength fully realised the idea created by his gigantic frame. The face did no discredit to the rest of the man, for it was both good-humoured and handsome. His air was free; and though his manner necessarily partook of the rudeness of a border life, the grandeur which pervaded so noble a physique prevented it from becoming altogether vulgar.

Deerslayer, as Hurry called his companion, was a very different person in appearance, as well as in character. In stature, he stood about six feet in his moccasins, but his frame was comparatively light and slender, showing muscles, however, which promised unusual agility, if not unusual strength. His face would have had little to recommend it except youth, were it not for an expression that seldom failed to win upon those who had leisure to examine it, and to yield to the feeling of

confidence it created. This expression was simply that of guileless truth, sustained by an earnestness of purpose, and a sincerity of feeling, which rendered it remarkable. At times this air of integrity seemed to be so simple as to awaken the suspicion of a want of the usual means to discriminate between artifice and truth; but few came in serious contact with the man, without losing this distrust in respect for his opinions and motives.

Both these frontier-men were still young, Hurry having reached the age of six or eight and twenty, while Deerslayer was several years his junior. Their attire needs no particular description, though it may be well to add that it was composed in no small degree of dressed deer-skins, and had the usual signs of belonging to those who passed their time between the skirts of civilised society and the boundless forests. There was, notwithstanding, some attention to smartness and the picturesque in the arrangement of Deerslayer's dress, more particularly as regarded his arms and accoutrements. His rifle was in perfect condition, the handle of his hunting-knife neatly carved, his powder-horn ornamented with suitable devices, lightly cut into the material, and his shot-pouch decorated with wampum. On the other hand, Hurry Harry, either from constitutional recklessness, or from a secret consciousness how little his appearance required artificial aids, wore everything in a careless manner, as if he felt a noble scorn for the trifling accessories of dress and ornaments. Perhaps the peculiar effect of his fine form was increased, rather than lessened, by this unstudied and disdainful air of indifference.

'Come, Deerslayer, fall to, and prove that you have a Delaware stomach, as you say you have had a Delaware edication,' cried Hurry, setting the example by opening his mouth to receive a slice of cold venison steak, that would have made an entire meal for a European peasant; 'fall to, lad, and prove your manhood on this poor devil of a doe, with your teeth, as you've already done with your rifle.'

'Nay, nay, Hurry, there's little manhood in killing a doe, and that, too, out of season; though there might be some in bringing down a painter, or a catamount,' returned the other, disposing himself to comply. 'The Delawares have given me my name, not so much on account of a bold heart, as on account of a quick eye, and an actyve foot.'

'The Delawares, themselves, are no heroes, or they would never have allowed them loping vagabonds, the Mingos, to make them women.'

'That matter is not rightly understood – has never been rightly explained,' said Deerslayer earnestly, for he was as zealous a friend, as

his companion was dangerous as an enemy; 'the Mengwe fill the woods with their lies, and misconceive words and treaties. I have now lived ten years with the Delawares, and know them to be as manful as any other nation, when the proper time to strike comes.'

'Harkee, Master Deerslayer, since we are on the subject, we may as well open our minds to each other in a man-to-man way. Answer me one question; you have had so much luck among the game as to have gotten a title, it would seem, but did you ever hit anything human or intelligible: did you ever pull trigger on an inimy that was capable of pulling one upon you?'

This question produced a singular collision between mortification and correct feeling, in the bosom of the youth, easily to be traced in the workings of his ingenuous countenance. The struggle was short, however; uprightness of heart soon getting the better of false pride and frontier boastfulness.

'To own the truth, I never did,' answered Deerslayer; 'seeing that a fitting occasion never offered. The Delawares have been peaceable since my sojourn with 'em, and I hold it to be onlawful to take the life of man, except in open and ginerous warfare.'

'What! did you never find a fellow thieving among your traps and skins, and do the law on him with your own hands, by way of saving the magistrates trouble, in the settlements, and the rogue himself the costs of the suit?'

'I am no trapper, Hurry,' returned the young man proudly: 'I live by the rifle, a we'pon at which I will not turn my back on any man of my years, atween the Hudson and the St Lawrence. I never offer a skin that has not a hole in its head beside them which natur' made to see with, or to breathe through.'

'Ay, ay, this is all very well in the animal way, though it makes but a poor figure alongsides of scalps and and-bushes. Shooting an Indian from an and-bush is acting up to his own principles; and now we have what you call a lawful war on our hands, the sooner you wipe that disgrace off your conscience, the sounder will be your sleep; if it only come from knowing there is one inimy the less prowling in the woods. I shall not frequent your society long, friend Natty, unless you look higher than four-footed beasts to practyse your rifle on.'

'Our journey is nearly ended, you say, Master March, and we can part tonight, if you see occasion. I have a fri'nd waiting for me, who will think it no disgrace to consort with a fellow-creatur' that has never yet slain his kind.'

'I wish I knew what has brought that skulking Delaware into this part

of the country so early in the season,' muttered Hurry to himself, in a way to show equally distrust and a recklessness of its betrayal. 'Where did you say the young chief was to give you the meeting?'

'At a small round rock, near the foot of the lake, where, they tell me, the tribes resort to make their treaties, and to bury their hatchets. This rock I have often heard the Delawares mention, though lake and rock are equally strangers to me. The country is claimed by both Mingos and Mohicans, and is a sort of common territory to fish and hunt through, in time of peace, though what it may become in war-time, the Lord only knows!'

'Common territory!' exclaimed Hurry, laughing aloud. 'I should like to know what Floating Tom Hutter would say to that? He claims the lake as his own property, in vartue of fifteen years' possession, and will not be likely to give it up either to Mingo or Delaware, without a battle for it.'

'And what will the Colony say to such a quarrel? All this country must have some owner, the gentry pushing their cravings into the wilderness, even where they never dare to ventur', in their own persons, to look at 'em.'

'That may do in other quarters of the Colony, Deerslayer, but it will not do here. Not a human being, the Lord excepted, owns a foot of s'il in this part of the country. Pen was never put to paper consarning either hill or valley hereaway, as I've heard old Tom say, time and ag'in, and so he claims the best right to it of any man breathing; and what Tom claims, he'll be very likely to maintain.'

'By what I've heard you say, Hurry, this Floating Tom must be an oncommon mortal; neither Mingo, Delaware, nor Pale-Face. His possession, too, has been long, by your tell, and altogether beyond frontier endurance. What's the man's history and natur'?'

'Why, as to old Tom's human natur', it is not much like that of other men, but more like a musk-rat's, seeing that he takes more to the ways of that animal, than to those of any other fellow-creatur'. Some think he was a free liver on the salt-water in his youth, and a companion of a sartain Kidd, who was hanged for piracy, long afore you and I were born, and that he came up into these regions, thinking that the king's cruisers could never cross the mountains, and that he might enjoy the plunder peaceably in the woods.'

'Then he was wrong, Hurry; very wrong. A man can enjoy plunder *peaceably* nowhere.'

'That's much as his turn of mind may happen to be. I've known them that never could enjoy it at all, unless it was in the midst of a

jollification, and them ag'in that enjoyed it best in a corner. Some men have no peace if they don't find plunder, and some if they do. Human natur' is crooked in these matters. Old Tom seems to belong to neither set, as he enjoys his, if plunder he has really got, with his darters, in a very quiet and comfortable way, and wishes for no more.'

'Ay, he has darters, too; I've heard the Delawares, who've hunted this-a-way, tell their histories of these young women. Is there no mother, Hurry?'

'There was *once*, as in reason; but she has now been dead and sunk these two good years.'

'Anan?' said Deerslayer, looking up at his companion in a little surprise.

'Dead and sunk, I say, and I hope that's good English. The old fellow lowered his wife into the lake, by way of seeing the last of her, as I can testify, being an eye-witness of the ceremony; but whether Tom did it to save digging, which is no easy job among roots, or out of a consait that water washes away sin sooner than 'arth, is more than I can say.'

'Was the poor woman oncommon wicked, that her husband should take so much pains with her body?'

'Not onreasonable; though she had her faults. I consider Judith Hutter to have been as graceful, and about as likely to make a good ind, as any woman who had lived so long beyond the sound of church bells; and I conclude old Tom sunk her as much by way of *saving* pains, as by way of *taking it*. There was a little steel in her temper, it's true, and as old Hutter is pretty much flint, they struck out sparks once-and-awhile, but, on the whole, they might be said to live amicable like. When they did kindle, the listeners got some such insights into their past lives, as one gets into the darker parts of the woods when a stray gleam of sunshine finds its way down to the roots of the trees. But Judith I shall always esteem, as it's recommend enough to one woman to be the mother of such a creatur' as her darter, Judith Hutter!'

'Ay, Judith was the name the Delawares mentioned, though it was pronounced after a fashion of their own. From their discourse, I do not think the girl would much please my fancy.'

'Thy fancy!' exclaimed March, taking fire equally at the indifference and at the presumption of his companion, 'what the devil have you to do with a fancy, and that, too, consarning one like Judith? You are but a boy – a sapling, that has scarce got root. Judith has had *men* among her suitors, ever since she was fifteen, which is now near five years; and will not be apt even to cast a look upon a half-grown creatur' like you!'