

*Signet Classics*

JAMES FENIMORE COOPER



WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY RICHARD HUTSON

THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

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A NARRATIVE OF 1757

*Mislike me not for my complexion,  
The shadowed livery of the burnished sun.*

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With a New Introduction  
by Richard Hutson



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Published by New American Library, a division of  
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,  
New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto,  
Ontario M4V 3B2, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,  
Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,  
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,  
New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany,  
Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,  
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:  
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Signet Classics, an imprint of New American Library,  
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Signet Classics Printing, December 1962

First Signet Classics Printing (Hutson Introduction), July 2005

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2005042637

Printed in the United States of America

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## INTRODUCTION

FOR FELLOW WRITERS and readers of the first half of the nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper, along with Washington Irving, was the most important American writer of his time. He was popular in the United States, and English and European readers also recognized him as the first American to capture the substance and perspective of the new nation, especially with the publication of his fifth novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*, in 1826. Doris Sommer refers to *The Last of the Mohicans* as the "founding text for America," including both North and South America. But the fact that Cooper was rewriting Walter Scott's *Waverly* (1814), as well as referring to many other writings, has generated a number of questions and perspectives for literary critics and scholars since the novel's publication.

As with Walter Scott, Cooper finds a way to eulogize and elegize what is being lost in the Western world's movement toward "modernity." For Scott, this lost world consists of the feudal remnants of the European and British past. Cooper, having grown up on a frontier in north central New York, sees the lost world as the tribal Native American world. *Waverly* might be one of the most rewritten texts in Western history, since, in effect, Scott invented the historical novel. More important, he invented a narrative structure that plots the confrontation between forces trying to hold on to the ancient ways of a culture and forces representing "the progress of civilization." In this view, the forces of civilization will inevitably win, for the movement toward modernity



and civilization is history itself. But such a plot includes the adventure of characters from civilization moving deeply back into the archaic, primitive world before they can return to civilization and its progress. The figures representing civilization move backward, and they also move forward. The reactionary forces can only be militant about holding on to their archaic world; they cannot progress.

Of course, each rewriting is a revision. Each culture revises to suit its immediate needs at a historical moment. To invoke *Waverly* as the background of *The Last of the Mohicans* is proper, but Cooper also insisted that his writing was original and unique. The historical event that gives his narrative the realist authority he intended is the Fort William Henry massacre in the French and Indian War, which took place in 1757. This was a war of foreign nations to expand their empires, not a war between feudal and modern interests. For Cooper, this war in, and for, the wilderness of the North American continent completely disrupted the Native American tribes who had dwelt on the continent for centuries, confusing their loyalties and tribal affinities. And, in Cooper's view, as well as in the view of many American politicians of the time, the chaos generated by the white intrusion propelled the Natives toward their vanishing. Despite their militancy, there was now no chance for them to maintain control of the land. The Native tribes were, Cooper claims in his introduction, "the first dispossessed; and the seemingly inevitable fate of all these people, who disappear before the advances, or it might be termed the inroads of civilization . . . is represented as having already befallen them" (p. 5). Shortly after the publication of the novel in 1826, President Andrew Jackson and Congress would undertake the removal of Native tribes from east of the Mississippi River to west of the river. As Michael Paul Rogin emphasized, the policy of removal was presented by the politicians of the time as the humane act of preserving the archaic peoples from total extermination and complete vanishing, even as the federal policies contributed importantly toward that van-

ishing. In New York State, Indians were set aside and confined to state reservations.

Whereas *Waverly* depicts the attempt, by war, to force the British nation backward, against the grain of British political and economic modernization, Cooper depicts a battle of competing empires to gain control of the American continent. The French were pushed back into Canada; Great Britain was defeated, ultimately, in the American Revolution and the War of 1812. For Cooper, before there was a United States, there was a colonial competition for the American continent. There is an assumed premise behind this story, namely that the colonial wars of European nations on the American continent resulted in the eventual defeat of these powers, clearing the way for the future nation of the United States. And Cooper is in many ways unique in emphasizing the presence of Native Americans as a critical factor in the creation of the new nation. For not only did the land become free of the English and the French. It would also be cleared of the Indian presence. And the novel suggests a dynamic within the movement of history to account for this phenomenon that would favor the creation of the new nation, a nation generated out of violence, as Richard Slotkin has suggested. But the new nation itself is simply the beneficiary of violence perpetrated by other nations and was never responsible for it, as it also was not responsible for the vanishing of the Native tribes. Cooper's novel supported an important sentiment in the United States, referred to by the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo as "imperialist nostalgia." The mood of mourning and elegy at the funeral ritual of Uncas indicates "strong feelings" toward the people who are vanishing. The paradox here is that the tone of elegy helps the dominant culture to accept the vanishing, in a spirit of innocence. For Rosaldo, the "agents of colonialism long for the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed." This is a "peculiar kind of nostalgia . . . where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed." Imperialist nostalgia uses a "pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture a people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination."

Cooper's sense of the French and Indian war for empire is that it brings Europe and modernity to the American continent. But the civilized nations have to contend, first and foremost, with the Native tribes, the original inhabitants of the land, and the wilderness forest. In order to help his reader understand this confrontation between the military orders of England and France and the primitive culture of the Natives, Cooper, like many of his civilized contemporaries, tends to translate the conflict as a philosophical idea about the nature of humanity.

The real struggle is between passion and the ability to restrain passion. Good people, European or Indian, control their passions; bad people like Magua cannot; their passions control them.

Indians have a strong tendency to act on their passion. The civilized Europeans strive to restrain passion and act with motives of rationality. In theory, a war for empire is motivated by self-interest, not by passion. But Natives appear to fight one another for the sake of fighting. They gain scalps and booty. Europeans fight over long-term economic and political prospects, institutionalized interests. Natives have rituals, especially for passion, such as mourning or triumph in war. Actually, Natives are capable of a stoic restraint, but, for Cooper, a bad Indian like Magua is motivated almost exclusively by a passion for vengeance. As Robert Spiller noted, in one of the earliest studies of Cooper, despite his up-to-date ethnographical knowledge of Native tribes in New York, and despite his sense of the incompatibility between the savage race and the civilized races, Cooper depicted Indians as "transmuted white men," somewhat different expressions of white culture, with primitive exoticism thrown in. Such a view acknowledges that Indians and whites have a common humanity, but irreconcilable differences have developed over the centuries. The kinds of restraints common to people with a European background are not available to Indians. In their wilderness existence, their unrestrained savage impulses have never encountered the necessary and educating limits.

Many scholars have noted that the novel is divided



into two mainly equal parts, with the Fort William Henry massacre squarely in the center, the pivot for the two halves. In the first half of the novel, the first sixteen chapters, characters from the "civilized" world move through a dangerous and profoundly confusing wilderness in order to reach the fort. They live a series of "trials by uncertainty," including a short captivity. Colonel Munro's daughters undertake this journey to join their father at the fort, and their presence makes a dangerous journey especially risky. The second half, the last sixteen chapters, describes the movement into a heart of darkness, into Indian country where no white man has ever tread, in order to rescue the two Munro daughters who have been captured by Magua and the Huron tribe after the sensational violence of the massacre. Now, Cooper claims, the movement is "the father in quest of his children" (p. 221), even though the actual father has become useless and irrelevant in his defeat and betrayal.

Uncas and Hawk-eye are the effective actors in tracking the captors and their captives. The opening movement toward the fort involves multiple moments of suspense in which the characters are faced with terrible risks of death or capture. In the second part of the novel, Cooper invokes, rather than narrates, the traditions of a popular literary tradition in North America: the captivity narrative. And he also brings into his narrative aspects of Native American culture and rituals, using sources such as John Heckewelder's studies of tribal culture. Cooper brings to the reading public a world that is truly extraordinary, coloring his descriptions with hints from another popular literary tradition, the Gothic fiction of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which emphasized sensation, suspense and fright. From beginning to end, Cooper places his characters in harrowing circumstances, and for a reader, it is a wonder that anyone could survive the multiple ordeals.

The set of characters is composed of figures from high civilization, namely the sisters Alice and Cora Munro, along with David Gamut and Duncan Heyward, and the figures who represent the wilderness, Hawk-eye and his two Native companions, Chingachgook and Uncas. The



drama of the new world, for Cooper, is the insistence of European civilizations to impose their will upon the American wilderness. The kind of knowledge that civilized men like Heyward, Munro and Montcalm have will often prove to be useless on this frontier. Since Europe and England want to impose their will upon the land, they resort to war, but even Hawk-eye, an assimilated forester, laments the fact that strategies and rules of war, the "etiquette of war," as performed in the long European tradition, seem no longer relevant or useful. Cooper blames Montcalm for not controlling his Indian allies, a lack of mastery that results in the massacre of unarmed and innocent people as they file out of the surrendered fort. But the novel as a whole emphasizes that the Europeans work with few clues to a winning strategy against the tribes of Native peoples whose presence has to be accommodated. Cooper writes that the story takes place "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" (p. 9). As many critics have noted, *The Last of the Mohicans* is a drama of futility. Cooper has the French commander, Montcalm, muse upon the fact that great foreign powers have set in motion "an engine which it exceeds human power to control" (p. 206).

The disorderliness of this "bloody ground" that is the setting for the narrative may be inscribed within the characters and their actions. David Gamut is an intrusive figure of chaos. His presence, as well as the presence of the two young women, seems incongruous. What are these people doing on the frontier? David, a Protestant psalmodist, is presented by Cooper as a "minstrel of the western continent—of a much later day, certainly, than those gifted bards [in Walter Scott's fiction] who formerly sang the profane renown of baron and prince, but after the spirit of his own age and country" (pp. 140–41). If there is for the American continent a version of a mythic American character, comparable to the Scottish folk character of the bard, it is Hawk-eye, a figure with an English background who has become assimilated to the forest wilderness, to the Natives and their ways.

Where David Gamut is presented as probably the most unfit character imaginable for the wilderness, Hawk-eye is the extreme opposite, a man so assimilated to the forest and the ways of its Native inhabitants that he has to insist that he is a man of unmixed blood, a man "without a cross" (p. 233). And he warns everyone in his party that, for success and survival, it is necessary to imitate the practices of the Natives. "'He who wishes to prosper in Indian warfare . . . must not be too proud to learn from the wit of a native'" (p. 251). In his ability to live and thrive in the wilderness, he demonstrates that he has been capable of learning a lot from the Indians.

Uncas is revealed as the authentic chief of the Delaware tribe. His lineage is traced by Tamenund to the early seventeenth century. Along with Chingachgook, his father, he is a Native with an intact noble genealogy and an intact loyalty to the English presence on the continent. According to Cooper, his archaic purity paradoxically "elevated him far above the intelligence, and advanced him probably centuries before the practices of his nation" (p. 137). As with Uncas, the lineage of Duncan Heyward is also pure and intact, so that Colonel Munro will grant him permission to marry his daughter Alice, also pure of lineage, unlike Cora, her half sister of mixed blood. It is difficult to understand exactly what Cooper has in mind with the drama of genealogical purity on the Delaware tribe side and on the Scottish side, but there is a strong suggestion that purity of blood represents for Cooper a superior form of humanity.

However, to romanticize Uncas and then have him killed, in the end, as the "last of the Mohicans" (p. 35), intensifies Cooper's sense of the inevitable disappearance of the tribal peoples who are the original inhabitants of the continent. Given the way in which Cooper creates Uncas as a character—the loyal, chivalric and superb woodsman, in love with Cora—as if he has already mentally advanced to near the level of a white man, we see that Cooper will not entertain the possibility that Uncas could become a truly assimilated citizen of the forthcoming nation. This is the figure Cooper has disappear, with all the ritual mourning of his tribe's an-

cient practices. Although Hawk-eye claims always that it was the white man's intrusion onto the continent that brought devastation and confusion to the tribes, Cooper asks his reader to believe that both the demonic Magua as well as the noble Uncas will vanish from the continent. For vanishing is the Indians' destiny, and good Indians as well as bad must disappear from the land.

Although the "romance" is designed, from beginning to end, to affect the reader as strange, the strangest and most implausible part of the narrative, in my view, is the second half, the quest by Hawk-eye, Uncas, Chingachgook and Colonel Munro to rescue Alice and Cora from captivity by Magua and the Hurons. The white men and their Indian companions move deeply into a "wilderness where the feet of men seldom go" (p. 230). The success of their quest indicates that Hawk-eye and his friends are masters of the situation. Of course, what Hewelcker understood as the superstitious nature of the Natives aids their success. This is an idea that qualifies the chaos and uncertainty of the earlier part of the novel. The white group succeeds in their intentions of saving the women because they have learned how to trick the Hurons. Is Cooper playing with paradox here? We would think that captivity is an extreme case of the lack of mastery, and the white men have clearly moved into alien territory. Yet Duncan and Hawk-eye, and even David as a participant, indicate their mastery of a wily intelligence and trickery that is effective in wresting Alice and Uncas from captivity. What Cooper suggests is that the cunning mastery of the white men, "owing to their superior dexterity" intellectually (p. 254), is the white man's revenge for the Indian massacre. Their trickery turns "Indian cunning" against the Indians (p. 249). Whereas the Indian will ignore his loyalty to the French and commit the barbaric violence of the massacre, the white rescuer uses his intellectual superiority to reciprocate Indian violence.

Cooper offers a number of observations to try to convince the reader that this rescue by trickery is realistic, but to a modern reader or scholar, rescuing captives with a strategy of multiple disguises—David as a crazy man,



Duncan as a French “juggler” (i.e., a fake medicine man or “doctor”), Hawk-eye as a bear, Chingachgook as a beaver, and then everyone changing disguises and identities again—is what Huck Finn might call a “stretcher.” Cooper is aware of the fact that this scene is both “ridiculous” and “solemn” (p. 311). The performances of the characters in their various disguises are comic, but Cooper insists on another implausibility, that the superstitious Natives are eventually forced to understand that they have been tricked. “The whole deception practiced by both Duncan and Hawk-eye was, of course, laid naked; and no room was found, even for the most superstitious of the tribe, any longer to affix a doubt on the character of the occurrences. It was but too apparent that they had been insultingly, shamefully, disgracefully deceived” (pp. 341–42). Here is the white man’s revenge—to force the Indian to acknowledge the white man’s superiority as an Indian trickster. For the reader, the case is clear that white people are mentally superior, in keeping with Hawk-eye’s sense throughout the narrative that the white man is capable of simulating Indian ways and practices, whereas the Indian cannot rise to an understanding of white culture’s thinking and values, unless he is, like Uncas, of a pure genealogical lineage.

As in the case of evaluating Walter Scott, readers have felt free to consider Cooper in his political/historical/cultural context and promote him as a “literary nation-builder,” despite his own claim that he was practicing the “humble vocation” of a romancer while encroaching on the “sacred precincts” of history (p. 219). But some critics/readers have also seen the novel as nothing more than popular entertainment, without anything serious about it. James Grossman offers an interpretation of the book as “almost but not quite . . . the ‘pure’ adventure story in which in an arbitrarily simplified world everything happens for the sake of the excitement of the action.” In this view, seen as a “‘pure’ adventure story,” the novel “is deliberately superficial.” All incidents and events in the plot are designed to be sensational, seducing the reader with as much suspense as the spectacular events can generate. Ordeals and captivities abound. The

presence of Alice and Cora more or less refers to the presence of the reader, also passive and manipulated by the storyteller's abilities to maintain the series of endangering, suspenseful events of the narrative. For decades, probably until about fifty or sixty years ago, the novel was considered a wild adventure tale for American boys. But it does not seem likely that readers today can avoid the serious cultural implications of a novel with obvious themes of race, empire and miscegenation, the founding of the nation in violence. A scholar/critic might see that Cooper is synthesizing a number of philosophical and literary and historical traditions in his novel—eyewitness accounts, Indian mythology and theories about Native cultures and practices, novelistic and epic traditions of various genres and perspectives, Enlightenment and classical ideas as well as local legends and traditions, not to mention ideas from the Romantic poets and writers with whom he is a contemporary. Cooper does what was expected of nineteenth-century novelists in England and Europe—collect as many different voices from the culture as are available to the novelist so as to present a sense that the writer is merely, to use Balzac's term, a "secretary" of his time.

After the publication of the novel, Cooper moved his family to Europe for twelve years. He continued to write novels as well as travel journals about European countries. His popularity steadily declined after the success of *The Last of the Mohicans*, especially as he became evermore disgruntled about the direction of American society and politics. But his Leatherstocking romances have remained for American and global audiences foundational accounts of a nation building itself from a frontier and the ruins of war toward something like the smoother flow of democracy.

—Richard Hutson

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OF THE  
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## AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

IT IS BELIEVED that the scene of this tale, and most of the information necessary to understand its allusions, are rendered sufficiently obvious to the reader in the text itself, or in the accompanying notes. Still there is so much obscurity in the Indian traditions, and so much confusion in the Indian names, as to render some explanation useful.

Few men exhibit greater diversity, or, if we may so express it, greater antithesis of character, than the native warrior of North America. In war, he is daring, boastful, cunning, ruthless, self-denying, and self-devoted; in peace, just, generous, hospitable, revengeful, superstitious, modest, and commonly chaste. These are qualities, it is true, which do not distinguish all alike; but they are so far the predominating traits of these remarkable people, as to be characteristic.

It is generally believed that the aborigines of the American continent have an Asiatic origin. There are many physical as well as moral facts which corroborate this opinion, and some few that would seem to weigh against it.

The color of the Indian, the writer believes, is peculiar to himself; and while his cheekbones have a very striking indication of a Tartar origin, his eyes have not. Climate may have had great influence on the former, but it is difficult to see how it can have produced the substantial difference which exists in the latter. The imagery of the Indian, both in his poetry and his oratory, is Oriental—chastened, and perhaps improved, by the limited range

of his practical knowledge. He draws his metaphors from the clouds, the seasons, the birds, the beasts, and the vegetable world. In this, perhaps, he does no more than any other energetic and imaginative race would do, being compelled to set bounds to fancy by experience; but the North American Indian clothes his ideas in a dress which is different from that of the African, and is Oriental in itself. His language has the richness and sententious fullness of the Chinese. He will express a phrase in a word, and he will qualify the meaning of an entire sentence by a syllable; he will even convey different significations by the simplest inflections of the voice.

Philologists have said that there are but two or three languages, properly speaking, among all the numerous tribes which formerly occupied the country that now composes the United States. They ascribe the known difficulty one people have in understanding another to corruptions and dialects. The writer remembers to have been present at an interview between two chiefs of the Great Prairies west of the Mississippi, and when an interpreter was in attendance who spoke both their languages. The warriors appeared to be on the most friendly terms, and seemingly conversed much together; yet, according to the account of the interpreter, each was absolutely ignorant of what the other said. They were of hostile tribes, brought together by the influence of the American government; and it is worthy of remark that a common policy led them both to adopt the same subject. They mutually exhorted each other to be of use in the event of the chances of war throwing either of the parties into the hands of his enemies. Whatever may be the truth, as respects the root and the genius of the Indian tongues, it is quite certain they are now so distinct in their words as to possess most of the disadvantages of strange languages; hence much of the embarrassment that has arisen in learning their histories, and most of the uncertainty which exists in their traditions.

Like nations of higher pretensions, the American Indian gives a very different account of his own tribe or race from that which is given by other people. He is much addicted to overestimating his own perfections,