

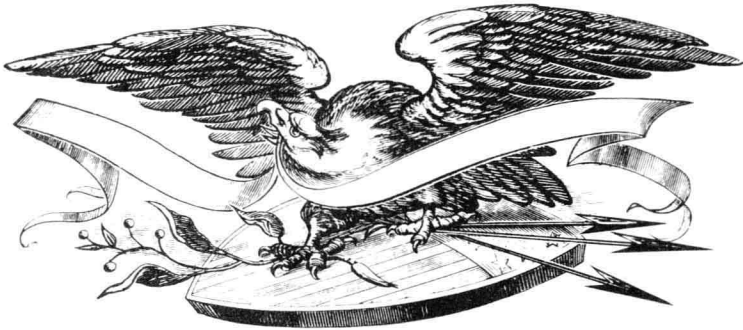
The American Democrat



James Fenimore Cooper

With an Introduction by
H.L. Mencken

★ The American Democrat ★



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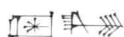
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★ The American Democrat ★



J. Fenimore Cooper



Introduction

In 1838, the year of *The American Democrat*, Cooper was forty-nine, but there was no sign in him of the dying fires which usually come with middle age. Before the year was out he was to publish five separate books, running to seven volumes in all, and by the end of 1841 he was to write and print the eight volumes of four more, including *The Pathfinder*, *The Deerslayer* and his excellent history of the United States Navy. The energy of the man was really almost beyond belief. Since his return from Europe, late in 1835, he had been engaged continuously in brawls of every imaginable sort, whether political, social, monetary or legal, and yet he had somehow found the time to keep up his dogged and furious writing. One lawsuit is usually sufficient to paralyze an artist, as the example of Beethoven so sadly attests, but Cooper, with a dozen on his hands, managed to pour out novel after novel, to project vast and complicated histories, to reduce his observations in Europe to a row of fat volumes, and to belabor his fellow Americans with pamphlets and pronunciamientos, phi-

lippics and pasquinades. His litigations still await an historian of his own industry, learned in both the annals of the law and the dark secrets of the heart. Meanwhile, his prohibition of a biography, though it has been disregarded in the letter, has been observed in the spirit, for Lounsbury's life leaves him vaguer than any other bigwig of his time, and the rest of the writing upon him, forgetting Carl Van Doren's brief but admirable essay, is mainly trash.

Cooper was probably the first American to write about Americans in a really frank spirit. The fact has been pretty well forgotten by the college tutors who now boil sophomores in the *Leatherstocking Tales*, but during his last ten or twelve years on earth it was what his countrymen chiefly remembered when they thought of him. He began, ironically enough, as an apologist for them, and while he was abroad as tourist and consul he wrote a great deal of soothing stuff on the subject, including a formal treatise and three bad novels, now happily expunged from the record. But when he returned home after seven years' absence he was led to reexamine the evidence, and the fruits of that reexamination, being bitter in taste, got him magnificently disliked. What he discovered, searching the national scene, was that the democratic panacea, after all, was a fraud like any other. The young Republic had rid itself of one gang of political streptococci,

only to take on another. There were no more kings and nobles, but the country swarmed with demagogues, and the more Cooper studied them the less he admired them. His conclusions he precipitated into the pamphlets and pronunciamientos afore-said, and of the lot *The American Democrat* was at once the shrewdest and the most offensive. It was not, of course, a complete repudiation of democracy, as the alarmed reviewers of the time alleged. But it went into the defects and dangers of democracy with acrid realism, and so poor Cooper got the name of a sniffish and unpatriotic fellow, and was accused of all sorts of aristocratic pretensions, immensely obnoxious to the free citizens of a free and glorious state.

The fact that one may read it to-day without more than an occasional cough behind the hand is the best of testimonies to its sagacity. How many other treatises on politics have held up for a century? How many of even fifty years ago are worth reading now? Cooper, to be sure, made some bad guesses: for example, he figured that Congress would beat the President, and reduce him to a gaudy nonentity, like the King of England and the President of France. But we may forgive him here for a natural error, for that is the way the stream was running in his time, and he could not foresee the change of course that would come with the Civil

War. In general, his prophecies were as sound as his observations were accurate. He saw clearly how democracy warred upon the free functioning of genuinely superior men—how it kept them out of public life, and so forced them into silence and sterility, and robbed the commonwealth of their sense and decency. And he saw as clearly how the rule of the majority must tend toward a witless and malignant tyranny, anti-social in its motives and evil almost beyond endurance in its effects. These, as we now know, are the chief burdens of the democratic form of government, and under them it is beginning to break down. Cooper discerned them in its springtime, and sought valiantly to throw them off before it was too late.

He failed, but his book remains—a simple, sound and sensible tract, moderate in tone and extraordinarily astute in its conclusions. It is the work of a man who had large confidence in the fundamental democratic scheme of things, despite all his qualms. He knew that democracy, even if it failed, would have some useful by-products—that its dogma of equality, even though false, had certain uses for human dignity. I think the event has justified that assurance. The *Americano*, whatever his faults, is at least a less abject and groveling fellow than the Englishman. He may venerate such fifth-rate men as Harding and Coolidge, but he still falls a good

deal short of venerating such complete vacuums as King George V. So on lower levels. In his view of the secular magnificoes who come and go—Morgan, the Rockefellers, Andy Carnegie, Andy Mellon, Henry Ford, and so on—there is surely none of the base and menial adulation which in England bathes a lord. To him, more often than not, they are largely comic characters, and in his envy of them there is a sufficient admixture of irony to keep it from becoming quite ignoble. Thus he retains a modicum of dignity, imbecile though he may be. I incline to think that that modicum of dignity is the chief and perhaps the only gift of democracy to mankind. At all events, I don't seem to recall any other.

With it, of course, go severe penalties. Dignity slides into vanity. The inferior man, looking upward, concludes that he is as good as his betters, and then, by an easy stage, that he is better. The result is a vast setting up of new values, all of them repugnant to civilization. The virtues of the coward become the official virtues of the nation. Laws are drawn to coerce every citizen into such habits and ways of thought that he will be acceptable to country pastors. The thing becomes a furious game, begun by ignoramuses and carried on by rogues. In the end a candid world contemplates a government whose chief executive fashions his policy to please

Methodist bishops, and whose legislators leap as those bishops crack their whips, and whose highest judicial officers owe office to them, and are not permitted to forget it. And behind roars a system of law which seems to have the chief aim of finding out what civilized men prefer to do, and prohibiting it under barbarous penalties. Here is democracy carried out to the last desperate place of decimals, but it is surely not the democracy that Cooper put his trust in.

His text defines the thing quite differently. Of what use is freedom, he demands, if "every one is not master of his own innocent acts and associations?" And what right has any man to call himself a democrat if he "will submit to be dictated to in those habits over which neither law nor morality [he means, of course, civilized law and rational morality] assumes a right of control?" The true democrat, "recognizing the right of all to participate in power, . . . will proudly maintain his own independence of vulgar domination," and "the same principle and manliness that would induce him to depose a royal despot will induce him to resist a vulgar tyrant." The doctrine could not be put more succinctly, or more eloquently. It was launched into an America that was in the throes of the Jackson *jacquerie*, and so it got no hearing, but of late it has come to life

again, and a great deal will be heard of it hereafter. Or so, at all events, one may hope.

The chief criticism that Cooper had to meet in his day was to the effect that he was a purse-conscious, overbearing and snooty fellow, proud of his fame, proud of his money and proud of his birth—in brief, a sort of backwoods *Junker*, ever eager to elbow lesser folk off the sidewalk. The charge, perhaps had some psychological justification, for modesty is seldom encountered in the literati, and never in those who have made a splash. Nevertheless, Cooper kept his vanity, if he really had as much as was said, in admirable check, and his discussion of “the duties of station” shows that he saw clearly how little genuine aristocracy is a matter of privilege and how much a matter of responsibility. If he urges his “superior” Americans to oppose the encroachments of the mob, it is not because it will work them any private benefit but because it will work a benefit to the nation. The power that is naturally in their hands, democracy or no democracy, must be used to further the freedom of all—and not merely freedom to take a hand in the government, but also and more especially freedom to resist the government. Here Cooper’s doctrine is curiously like that of Jefferson. He sees liberty, not primarily as the right to govern, but as the right to

rebel. "It is a public duty to guard against all excesses of public power, whether inflicted by mere opinion *or under the forms of law.*" The citizen owes no duty of compliance when what is sought to be done to him ought not to be done. It is his duty, as it is his right, to guard against the tyranny of law by remembering the crude and vulgar process by which the laws of a democratic country are made, and the generally sorry character of those who make them.

Cooper, by the standards of his time, was a gentleman, and he was well aware that as such he belonged to a small and far from popular minority. In large part his book is devoted to an argument that the gentleman, after all, has a plausible place in a democratic society, if only as a standing protest against the leveling that everywhere goes on. That leveling, by the democratic theory, is upward, but in actuality it is downward, for the mob suspects and resents superiorities, whereas inferiorities give it a pleasant glow. It would be dangerous for an aspirant to the Presidency to be a man of learning, or to excel at any of the fine arts, or to be of noble lineage. If he professes some science or art, say history, as Woodrow Wilson did, then he must at least profess it badly, like Wilson again. If he is a lawyer, like McKinley, Coolidge or Taft, then he must be an incompetent one. And if, like Roosevelt,

he pretends to gentle birth, then it must be mainly only pretense. Cooper, himself a shining example of what he called the man of "liberal attainments," had a vast disdain for such quacks, and saw in their success only a proof of their quackery. The qualities he esteemed were the sound ones of genuine learning, honest and useful achievement, and unruffled independence of spirit—especially the last. "All greatness of character," he said, "is dependent on individuality." The important man is the odd man, the unfettered man, the man who plows his own furrow. He is the sole repository of honor, national as well as personal. Cooper grieved to see him gradually disappearing from American public life, his place taken by the servile and scurvy fellow who now dominates the whole political scene. "They who do not see and feel the importance of possessing a class of such men in a community, to give it tone, a high and farsighted policy, and lofty views in general, can know little of history, and have not reflected on the inevitable consequences of admitted causes."

Cooper believed passionately in the Bill of Rights, but he was well aware of its limitations. At most, he observed shrewdly, it simply drew a line under the reserved powers of the States, any one of which could nullify the principles it set forth. He saw that a better safeguard to liberty lay in the independ-

ence of the lawmakers, for the more that independence was stressed the easier it would be to get able and self-respecting men into Congress. So he launched himself violently against the theory, first rising in his time, that a Congressman was no more than an office-boy for his constituents, bound to carry out their whims. The event has proved that his reasoning was perfectly sound. To-day we confront a Congress made up of men who play the limber jenkins, not indeed to their constituents, but to the rogues and charlatans who inflame and prey upon their constituents, and everyone knows how little the Bill of Rights stays them. They have driven such tunnels through it that it is now only a shell. Worse, the habit of subservience has extended also to the executive department and the judiciary, and *Marbury vs. Madison* is in as sad a state of debility as the Bill of Rights itself. All the checks and balances, in fact, have ceased to function, and there is no effective obstacle to any imaginable sort of governmental excess. Cooper saw the shadow of that tyranny closing over Congress, but he was too early to envision the bureaucracy that was to come in with the Civil War, or the collapse of the judiciary afterward. When he wrote, John Marshall was but three years dead, and the Anti-Saloon League's pens for fattening candidates for the Federal bench were still undreamed of.

It must be confessed that a certain priggishness shows itself in some of his pages. Not only is there a Johnsonian roll in his prose; there is also a touch of the brittle old lexicographer's pedantry in some of his attitudes. His chapter on the American language, then first differentiating itself from orthodox English, might have been written by a schoolma'am. He even goes to the length of arguing gravely that either ought to be pronounced *eyether* and neither *neyther*—a sheer absurdity, with no support whatever in either etymology or common sense. Here, as in other philological cases, the instinct of the folk has triumphed over the imbecility of pedagogues, and democracy, perhaps, has earned some praise. Cooper's castigation of American hyperbole is equally prudish and preposterous. He had been in Europe so long that it shocked him, precisely as it shocks the English mountebanks who rove the country to-day, exposing themselves condescendingly at tea-parties and snuffling for dollars. It apparently never occurred to him that what set his teeth on edge was the best of all evidences that a new and vigorous national life was in the making in America, and that putting down its natural and inevitable manifestations was as hopeless a task as putting down the tides. Fortunately, his chapter on language is plainly irrelevant and *ultra vires*, and so the reader with humor may conveniently skip it.

He makes up for it by his two brief paragraphs on eating and drinking. They are marred, to be sure, by a dash of what Nietzsche called moralic acid, but there is still proof in them that they were penned by a man who had had his legs, in his day, under many a gorgeous board, and his nose into more than well water. "The Americans," he roared, "are the grossest feeders of any civilized nation known." Is it true to-day? I incline to believe that it is not. The English, with their monotonous roasts, their ghastly boiled fish and their unspeakable vegetables, are now the undisputed champions in that department: to quote Nietzsche again, their cookery is but one remove from cannibalism. Our own cookery is still in a backward state, and the cooking-school ma'ms are trying hard to make it worse, but its materials grow so rich and varied that spoiling them altogether becomes increasingly difficult. We eat, indeed, far better than our fathers, at least if we live in cities. In Cooper's time an American dinner must have been horrible beyond words. Let it be remembered to his credit that he protested indignantly, and even bitterly. Here and there—who knows?—he may have agitated a conscience and translated a frying-pan to the ash-barrel. If so, he served his country well.

The rest of his diatribe seems to have won no customers. Its sole effect was to make him unpopu-