

Fenimore Cooper and the Exploration of the Great West

by Richard C. Poulsen

"But he was truly an artist."

D. H. Lawrence

Some years ago Wallace Stegner, in a book aptly subtitled *A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier*, poignantly reminisced about his boyhood days in the town he called Whitemud, Saskatchewan, Canada. When Stegner and family crossed the Montana border to the great plains of Southwestern Canada, Sitting Bull was twenty-four years dead, Geronimo had only recently died, and Black Elk had not yet spoken.

But on the plains of Canada in 1914, the Indian—his presence, his image—was still very much alive. About him Steger wrote:

Indians were a part of our boyhood fantasy, but our image of them was as mixed as our image of most things. Our Indians certainly did not come from life, and we were a little early to get them from the movies. We got them from books, and we did not discriminate among the books from which we got them.

One of our principal sources was Fenimore Cooper, and no Mark Twain had as yet broken in upon us with raucous horse laughs to destroy our faith in Cooper's delicate arts of the forest. We were masters of the lore of the broken twig; we trod the willow bottoms silently, single file, pigeon-toed, like Tuscaroras or Mohicans. Much of our Indian play demonstrated the stubborn persistence of inherited notions, for the Indians we played came mainly out of novels written eighty years before and two thousand miles away, out of the French and Indian wars, out of the darkness of the deep deciduous forests, out of the Noble Savage sentimentalities of Chateaubriand and Thomas Campbell. They came more or less from where our poetry and geography came from—where even our prejudices came from, including the prejudices against real Indians that lay so uncomfortably upon our literary and sentimental attitudes.

Real Indians we saw perhaps once a year, when a family or two in a rickety democrat wagon came down from somewhere and camped for a few days in the river brush. Probably they were Cree: . . .

Our inherited, irrelevant, ineradicable Indian lore was not modified in the slightest, any more than our humanity was aroused, by these contacts with the real demoralized Cree.

By his own word, Stegner's boyhood conception of the Indian had been gleaned largely from the Leatherstocking novels, the literary sensibilities of James Fenimore Cooper; so that when little Wallace and his playmates saw "the real demoralized Cree," they saw not the red-and-white guts of a slaughtered Indian beef drying in the sun, or the stench of Indian dogs, or the shapeless dark women, but Mohicans eighty years and two thousand miles removed from what some historians might call reality.

Cooper's influence was obviously great then on the sensibilities of these young American-Canadians. We might simply dismiss such wild imaginations by attributing them to boyhood fantasy were it not for the fact that other, earlier observers also saw the "real West" through the literary imaginations of Fenimore Cooper.

These men were not children; one, John K. Townsend, was a respected scientist, another, Philip St. George Cooke, an officer in the United States Army.

In 1834 Nathaniel J. Wyeth undertook a journey from St. Louis to Oregon to establish posts for the Columbia River Fishing and Trading Company. With Wyeth traveled a number of prominent Western figures, such as Milton Sublette and Thomas McKay, as well as a botanist, Thomas Nuttall, and John K. Townsend, ornithologist.

Near the end of April, 1834, Wyeth and party crossed the Platte, and soon after encountered the first herd of buffalo they had seen on the journey. Soon the men were feasting regularly on fat prairie beef, living very well. About these circumstances John Townsend wrote:

The buffalo still continue immensely numerous in every direction around, and our men kill great numbers, so that we are in truth living upon the fat of the land, and better feeding need no man wish. The savory buffalo hump has suffered no depreciation since the "man without a cross" vaunted of its good qualities to "the stranger;" and in this, as in many other particulars, we have realized the truth and fidelity of Cooper's admirable descriptions.²

Townsend, of course, alluded to the brief scene in *The Prairie* where Paul and the Old Hunter feast on "savory bison's hump." But in the novel the two gorge themselves in silence. Near the end of their meal, the old man says: "cot more into the center of the piece; there you will find the genuine riches of natur", and that without need from spices or any of your biting mustard to give it a foreign relish."³ Since Leatherstocking says very little here about the qualities of the meat itself, one wonders what Townsend remembered or thought he remembered when he claimed the old man "vaunted of the good quali-

ties" of the hump. The main intent of the old trapper's short speech seems primarily to instruct the greenhorn in proper carving methods.

Near present-day Ketchum, Idaho, on one of the tributaries of the Malade River, Townsend commented on the abundance of beaver in the stream. About the river and the animals he noted:

It contains a great abundance of beaver, their recent dams being seen in great numbers, and in the night, when all was quiet, we could hear the playful animals at their gambols, diving from the shore into the water, and striking the surface with their broad tails. The sound, altogether, was not unlike that of children at play, and the animated description of a somewhat similar scene, in the "Mohicans," recurred to my recollection, where the single-minded Gamut is contemplating with feelings of strong reprobation, the wayward freaks of what he supposes to be a bevy of young savages.⁴

Here Townsend alluded again to Cooper, this time to *The Last of the Mohicans*.

But in the book Duncan, not Gamut, is involved in the beaver scene. Cooper wrote:

In the next moment he was concealed by the leaves. Duncan waited several minutes in feverish impatience, before he caught another glimpse of the scout. Then he reappeared, creeping along the earth, from which his dress was hardly distinguishable, directly in the rear of his intended captive. Having reached within a few yards of the latter, he arose to his feet, silently and slowly. At that instant, several loud blows were struck on the water, and Duncan turned his eyes just in time to perceive that a hundred dark forms were plunging, in a body, into the troubled little sheet. Grasping his rifle, his looks were again bent on the Indian near him. Instead of taking the alarm, the unconscious savage stretched forward his neck, as if he also watched the movements about the gloomy lake, with a sort of silly curiosity. In the mean time, the uplifted hand of Hawkeye was above him. But, without apparent reason, it was withdrawn, and its owner indulged in another long, though still silent, fit of merriment. When the peculiar and hearty laughter of Hawkeye was ended, instead of grasping his victim by the throat, he tapped him lightly on the shoulder, and exclaimed aloud,

"How now, friend! have you a mind to teach the beavers to sing?"

Cooper's "animated description" of beavers at play here amounts to the clause: "At that instant, several loud blows were struck on the water." We can scarcely be sure that the loud blows were caused by the animals; never do we have a description of the beavers or of the sounds they make. What we do have is a description of the actions of Duncan and Hawkeye, and even these actions are obtusely portrayed.

After Wyeth and party reached the Columbia, Townsend again alluded to Cooper. One Maniquon, a local Indian chief, according to Townsend, was quite a talker. "Like most old people," he wrote, "he

is garrulous, and, like all Indians, fond of boasting of his warlike deeds. I can sit for hours and hear old Maniquon relate the particulars of his numerous campaigns, his ambushes, and his 'scrimmages,' as old Hawk-eye would say."

As mentioned, early in his travels, Townsend, when discussing the "culinary merits" of buffalo hump, attributed to Cooper's "admirable descriptions" of prairie life, "truth and fidelity." But in his own personal recollections of Cooper's descriptions we have not a single instance of a truthful or felicitous description. On the contrary, Cooper's descriptions as remembered by Townsend are vague and imprecise.

Phillip St. George Cooke, who saw the American prairies shortly after *The Prairie* was published in 1827, also attributed to Cooper an accuracy of description. On the upper Mississippi in 1828, Cooke witnessed the burning of a "prairie bottom," which evidently clearly and forcibly marked his memory, for he mentioned it in 1857, when *Scenes and Adventures in the Army* was published. Cooke wrote:

While staying here, I witnessed (and was exposed to some danger from) the burning of a "prairie bottom," the grass of which was very tall and luxuriant. I have read a description (I believe in "The Prairie") which is very accurate, of its wonderful rapidity—the flame *leaping* forward with almost the wind's velocity, the stems of great weeds exploding like pistol shots.

Well into *The Prairie*, Cooper did indeed "describe" a prairie fire. The blaze was started by a group of Tetons determined to drive the Old Man and his white companions into the open. Said Cooper:

The subtle element seized with avidity upon its new fuel, and in a moment forked flames were gliding among the grass as the tongues of ruminating animals are seen rolling among their food, apparently in quest of its sweetest portions.

The experience of the trapper was in the right. As the fire gained strength and heat, it began to spread on three sides, dying of itself on the fourth for want of alment. As it increased and the sullen roaring announced its power, it cleared everything before it, leaving the black and smoking soil far more naked than if the scythe had swept the place. The situation of the fugitives would have still been hazardous had not the area enlarged as the flame encircled them. But by advancing to the spot where the trapper had kindled the grass, they avoided the heat, and in a very few moments the flames began to recede in every quarter, leaving them enveloped in a cloud of smoke, but perfectly safe from the torrent of fire that was still furiously rolling onwards.

Although Cooper described the flames as "forked tongues," and the fire's sound as "a sullen roaring," we have little description of the blaze itself that might be called accurate. Cooke's own description of the fire he saw on the Mississippi seems more accurate, more

sensory, than Cooper's. In saying that the flame leaped forward with almost the wind's velocity, the stems of great weeds exploding like pistol shots, Cooke gives the fire a kind of immediacy not found in Cooper.

In 1829, near the Arkansas River, Cooke observed another natural phenomenon which reminded him of Cooper. Cooke noted:

Next day we passed (we had seen it from afar) an isolated, abrupt, and rocky hill or mound, perhaps 100 feet high; an extraordinary feature in this region of country; one that might suggest the idea of Bush's elevated camp in the "Prairie," a novel, as remarkable for its absurd plot, as for the fidelity of its descriptions of scenery and scenes, which the author had never visited or witnessed.

One wishes Cooke had gone on to describe what it was, specifically, that reminded him of Bush's camp in *The Prairie*. However, it is possible Cooke remembered few particulars, since they are difficult to isolate in Cooper's description of the camp. About Bush's citadel, Cooper wrote:

Seen from beneath, there were visible a breastwork of logs and stones intermingled in such a manner as to save all unnecessary labor, a few low roofs made of bark and boughs of trees, and occasional barrier constructed like the defenses on the summit and placed on such points of the acclivity as were easier of approach than the general face of the eminence; and a little dwelling of cloth, perched on the apex of a small pyramid that shot up on one angle of the rock, the white covering of which glimmered from a distance like a spot of snow, or, to make the simile more suitable to the rest of the subject, like a spotless and carefully guarded standard which was to be protected by the dearest blood of those who defended the citadel beneath. It is hardly necessary to add that this rude and characteristic fortress was the place where Ishmael Bush had taken refuge after the robbery of his flocks and herds.

Although details are plentiful in Cooper's narrative, few are actually descriptive. For example, what *exactly* is a "visible breastwork of logs and stones intermingled in such a manner as to save all unnecessary labor"? Or, what did Cooper mean by "points of acclivity as were easier of approach than the general face of the eminence"? All we really know from Cooper's description is that Bush's fortress was elevated above the rest of the prairie.

Cooke noted yet another instance in his army adventures which reminded him of Cooper. In 1832 he fought in the Battle of Bad Axe, which was waged between the army and Indians near the Wisconsin River. About a slaughter of Indians he wrote:

Instantly without orders, the volunteers commenced firing, and a hundred guns were discharged at them; I saw them drop from limb to limb, clinging poor fellows like squirrels; or like the Indian in the "Last of the Mohicans."

The bit of narrative Cooke alluded to here is, I think, one of the memorable scenes in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Leatherstocking and company are trapped on a river island under Mingo fire. One sharp-shooting Huron has climbed a tree and gained a sniper's advantage over the party. His rifleshot keeps the group helplessly pinned in hiding, until

At length, emboldened by the long and patient watchfulness of his enemies, the Huron attempted a better and more fatal aim. The quick eyes of the Mohicans caught the dark line of his lower limbs incautiously exposed through the thin foliage, a few inches from the trunk of the tree. Their rifles made a common report, when, sinking on his wounded limb, part of the body of the savage came into view. Swift as thought, Hawkeye seized the advantage, and discharged his fatal weapon into the top of the oak. The leaves were unusually agitated; the dangerous rifle fell from its commanding elevation, and after a few moments of vain struggling, the form of the savage was seen swinging in the wind, while he still grasped a ragged and naked branch of the tree, with hands clenched in desperation.

"Give him—in pity give him the contents of another rifle!" cried Duncan, turning away his eyes in horror from the spectacle of a fellow-creature in such awful jeopardy.

"Not a karnel!" exclaimed the obdurate Hawkeye; "his death is certain, and we have no powder to spare, for Indian fights sometimes last for days; 'tis their scalps or ours!—and God, who made us, has put into our natures the craving to keep the skin on the head!"

Against this stern and unyielding morality, supported as it was by such visible policy, there was no appeal. From that moment the yells in the forest once more ceased, the fire was suffered to decline, and all eyes, those of friends as well as enemies, became fixed on the hopeless condition of the wretch who was dangling between heaven and earth. The body yielded to the currents of air, and though no murmur or groan escaped the victim, there were instants when he grimly faced his foes, and the anguish of cold despair might be traced, through the intervening distance, in possession of his swarthy lineaments. Three several times the scout raised his piece in mercy, and as often prudence getting the better of his intention, it was again silently lowered. At length one hand of the Huron lost its hold and dropped exhausted to his side. A desperate and fruitless struggle to recover the branch succeeded, and then the savage was seen for a fleeting instant, grasping wildly at the empty air. The lightning is not quicker than was the flame from the rifle of Hawkeye; the limbs of the victims trembled and contracted, the head fell to the bosom, and the body parted the foaming water like lead, when the element closed above it, in its ceaseless velocity, and every vestige of the unhappy Huron was lost forever.¹²

Although Cooper's descriptive passage here is compelling, it is, I think, not because of precise, visual or even poetic description, but because of the tragic suspense inherent in the instance itself. That is, as long as the wounded Mingo hangs above the river our interest never wanes.

Mark Twain, of course, was the most important critic to first notice the shortcomings of Cooper as literary artist. In his hilarious

"Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," he pointedly mocked "Cooper's high talent for inaccurate observation."¹³ As Twain also noted at length, Cooper's language was at times so poorly chosen and imprecise that it defied translation. After destroying Cooper at literary technician, Twain claimed there was little or nothing left to appreciate in the artless prose of the novelist; but beyond his raucous dismembering of Cooper's works, Twain left us little solid criticism of Cooper as literary artist.

It is probable Twain would have been puzzled, even perplexed, by Townsend's and Cooke's observations. Why should two men, two professionals in their own right, two explorers of the American West, observers of frontier life, allude to Cooper with some regularity in their writings? I find it interesting, even perplexing, that with so much new landscape at hand, so many new experiences encountered every day, that two such men would even think of Cooper, let alone mention him in print. Was it only that Cooper, by 1834, was one of the few writers that had written of eating buffalo hump that prompted John Townsend to remember him when eating hump himself? Or was it that Cooper, through five Leatherstocking novels, had affected both Cooke's and Townsend's and possibly others' whole vision of the West, of the American frontier? If so, the importance of Cooper as writer cannot be seen in the single passage, the single work, or the single idea, for his novels had become *history* in a very real sense; so that Cooke and Townsend, in part at least, perceived the American frontier through the literary sensibilities of Fenimore Cooper.

Possibly the only critics to date to capture the essence, the import of the Leatherstocking novels are D. H. Lawrence and Henry Nash Smith.¹⁴ In Cooper Lawrence saw a parable, a portent and a prophecy of American life. He said: "But probably, one day America will be as beautiful in actuality as it is in Cooper."¹⁵ What he meant by beautiful, I think (even though he went on to say the beauty would not come until the factories had fallen down), was the beauty of the country's spirit, of what it once was, a primitive wilderness, of what it could become: a wilderness of the spirit, a sustenance for the soul of thinking man, an abundance of life. About *The Pioneers* Lawrence wrote:

Perhaps my taste is childish, but these scenes in *Pioneers* seem to me marvellously beautiful. The raw village street, with woodfires blinking through the unglazed window-chinks, on a winter's night. The inn, with the rough woodsmen and the drunken Indian John; the church, with the snowy congregation crowding to the fire. Then the lavish abundance of Christmas cheer, and turkey-shooting in the snow. Spring comes, forests all green, maple-sugar taken from the trees; and clouds of pigeons flying from the south, myriads of pigeons, shot in heaps; and night-fishing on the teeming, virgin lake; and deer-hunting.¹⁶

Perhaps Lawrence's taste was childish, but it is precisely that taste which caused men like Stegner, Cooke, and Townsend to see the West through the eyes of Cooper. It was the Romantic Vision: the hope that the America which once was would continue to be, the primitive impulse to merge with wilderness, to be unfettered by humanity.

The vision was imprinted in the landscape before the men moved West. So that John K. Townsend did *not* hear beavers in *The Last of the Mohicans*: they weren't there. It was only the hint of animal life, of the romantic vision Cooper had of his country that appeared on the pages, almost ironically above the faulty diction, the obtuse detail. That is why the entire West, indeed the whole of pristine America, could sound and look as Cooper made it sound and look, because he only hinted—his mythic, his impossible vision of a country innocent, of the fight of moral forces being pre-eminent, rose above the dark details.

Imagine the power of synthesis inherent in the ability to create an actual West (actual in the minds of early observers, at least) without having been there, merely by suggesting rather than describing. Cooper turned history back on itself.

About *The Pioneers* Lawrence went on to say: "Alas, without the cruel iron of reality. It is all real enough."¹⁰ Perhaps without realizing he was getting closer to the real Cooper all the time, Lawrence said that ". . . when one comes to America, one finds that there is always a certain slightly devilish resistance in the American landscape, and a certain slightly bitter resistance in the white man's heart. Hawthorne gives this. But Cooper glosses over it."¹¹

Cooper of course was no Hawthorne in language or in vision. But how could John Townsend have traveled west expecting to see the forests of Hawthorne even if he could have read of them in 1834? It seems unlikely any traveler would have gone West expecting to see what Goodman Brown saw. So Townsend took Cooper's hints and imagined a West which never really was and which never really will be. The sound of beavers triggered in his mind not the actual descriptions by Cooper, for there were none, but the innocent, the wild, the essentially moral, paradoxical nature of a new land of promise.

It was this same vision Lawrence saw when he spoke of Cooper, saying: "*The Last of the Mohicans* is divided between real historical narrative and true 'romance.' For myself, I prefer the romance. It has a myth-meaning, whereas the narrative is chiefly record."¹²

It was the myth-meaning both Townsend and Cooke saw in the landscape and life of the American West. A myth going beyond

narrative, beyond description, and ultimately beyond the landscape itself.

Returning to Stegner we see *that* experience partially, at least, synthesized by an expert and sensitive writer. The Indians of Stegner's boyhood came not from the plains of Saskatchewan, but from the novels of Cooper. Like Lawrence, Stegner had a "childish" vision of the West, one influenced largely by the writings of Cooper. There was myth-meaning in Stegner's perception, idealized though it may have been, of the Indian and his land—a meaning we are perhaps beginning to re-live today as we study the Indian (largely of the past, and largely idealized) and his ways.

In *Wolf Willow* the history, the story and the memory form and fuse to mythic proportions, to a statement, ultimately, of power and of primitivism—to the kind of vision early readers saw in the novels of Cooper, to a statement of what the land had been and what it would become. For what it is can only be dealt with by past and future. Perhaps early explorers turned to Cooper's romantic vision of the West when they discovered, as Stegner later did that

You don't escape sky and sun, but wear them in your eyeballs and on your back. You become acutely aware of yourself. The world is very large, the sky even larger, and you are very small. But also the world is flat, empty, nearly abstract, and in its flatness you are a challenging upright thing, as sudden as an exclamation mark, as enigmatic as a question mark.¹¹

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NOTES

1. Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), pp. 49-50.

2. John K. Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains* (Boston: Perkins and Marvin, 1939). Quoted here from vol. 21 of *Early Western Travels*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland, Ohio: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1905), p. 166.

3. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie* (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 101.

4. Townsend, p. 244.

5. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), p. 237.

6. Townsend, p. 337.

7. Philip St. George Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures in the Army or Romance of Military Life* (New York: Arno Press, 1973), p. 31. Originally published in Philadelphia by Lindsay and Blakiston, 1857.

8. *The Prairie*, p. 258.

9. Cooke, p. 44.

10. *The Prairie*, p. 89.

11. Cooke, p. 187.
12. *Mohicans*, pp. 82-83.
13. Mark Twain, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," in *Literary Essays*, vol. 22 (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1897), p. 88.
14. According to Smith, "Despite Cooper's failures, the character of Leatherstocking is by far the most important symbol of the national experience of adventure across the continent." See *Virgin Land* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), p. 66.
15. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923), p. 74.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
20. *Wolf Willow*, p. 8.