

## JAMES FENIMORE COOPER'S *LAST OF THE MOHICANS* AS AN ADIRONDACK NOVEL

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In 1824, James Fenimore Cooper travelled to the town of Saratoga to meet with two English fans of his early novels, especially *The Pioneers*, which was published in 1823 and had richly described the development of Cooperstown itself. His aim was to show his guests some of the wilder and more sublime scenery of the northern lake and mountain region of the state, which he had not yet seen for himself. From Saratoga, the small group headed north to Glens Falls and Lake George, where they visited the ruins of Fort William Henry.<sup>1</sup> Here, at what would become the southeast corner of the Adirondack Park some sixty years later, Cooper and his companions would have had exactly the view of the lake that he describes at the beginning of his sixth and most successful novel, *Last of the Mohicans*, setting the scene for the novel's complex historical plot. Published in 1827, *Last of the Mohicans* was a best-seller for its time in both the U.S. and England, and remains well-known today, though probably more so through its popular representations (like the Michael Mann movie of 1992) than the novel itself. A significant part of the novel's historic appeal is that it is set in a seemingly boundless mountainous wilderness<sup>2</sup> of northern New York, which when Cooper was visiting the region had not yet been named. Cooper's goals for the novel were multiple, but amongst them was setting the narrative in an American landscape that could be both symbolic rich, and geographically specific.<sup>3</sup> The novel's geographic and historic specificity are rooted in its representation of

1 Wayne Franklin, *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 433-38

2 The geologist and surveyor Ebenezer Emmons gave the region the name "Adirondacks" in his geological survey in 1838.

3 His model for the novel was Walter Scott's *Waverley*, one of the most popular and influential British novels of the first half of the nineteenth century, which features a similar combination of romantic and exotic landscape (the Scottish Highlands), and a history of specific battles, as a way of exploring and establishing a myth about national identity.

the skirmishes and battles of the French and Indian Wars that occurred in 1757 along Lake George. These events give the novel, and the region they are set in, a sense of historical significance, an origin for ideas about the nation that the novel situates in the Adirondack region of northern New York.

Several of the battles of the French and Indian War, and of the Revolutionary War two decades later, occurred along the major waterways that surround the Adirondack Mountains. This reflects an aspect of the reality of the region—that there were no colonial settlements in the mountains of New York in the 18th century, and that traversing mountains was too difficult to make military maneuvers in the region's interior feasible. This void in settler history is marked by the blankness on maps of northern New York State well into the 19th century, and suggests too the possibility of both the mystery of the region, and the freedom this allowed for Cooper's imagination to project events, landscapes, and meaning, onto it. For Cooper, the Adirondacks provided a blank canvas with some fairly well-defined borders—the Champlain and Lake George valleys on the east, the Mohawk River to the south, Lake Ontario to the west, and the St. Lawrence River to the north. However, a part of the region's appeal for Cooper must also have been its actual proximity to eastern cities and cultural centers, and indeed to his own home, just forty or so miles south of the lower edge of Adirondack Mountain region. The events the novel describes did not occur at a distant frontier, marking the expansion of the American idea to the west; rather, they happened somewhere near the heart of what early America would quickly become, and in the novel this space becomes a kind of birthing ground for a new American culture and people.

The mix of actual and symbolic landscape in the novel is matched by its mix of actual and fictional characters and events. Cooper read several accounts of the battles of the French and Indian War, in addition to visiting the spot of some of these battles himself. The first of the novel's two major battles is an account of the French siege and eventual victory at Fort William Henry, a battle the British lost in a war they would win just two years later in the famous Battle of the Plains of Abraham, in Quebec. The military leaders involved in the earlier battle—Lieutenant Colonel George Monro (spelled Munro in the novel), General Daniel Webb, and General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm, appear in the novel as directing the battles that drive the novel's main characters further into the Adirondack wilderness. The massacre that Cooper describes when the surrendered British forces leave the fort is also central to the novel's plot and tone. It marks the brutality of both one group of indigenous people (those the novel depicts as allied with the French), and more broadly that of the European forces who are ultimately trying to control the land, and which the novel's colonial characters (including most obviously Hawkeye) see themselves increasingly as antagonistic towards. As with Walter Scott's *Waverley*, on which *Last of the Mohicans* is clearly modeled, the historical realism of the novel lends it an air of gravity and sophistication, marking it not as an escapist romance or gothic novel, as is true of most of the popular British and American novels before Scott and Cooper, but one which tackles important and realistic themes, including in Cooper's case a semi-allegorical account of how a new people and nation arise out of the internecine squabbles of their European ancestors. The plot of the novel also reprises that of early American captivity narratives<sup>4</sup>: Munro's daughters are twice captured by Magua and his band of Hurons, and taken deeper into the Adirondack wilderness. And they are twice rescued by a motley group of characters who follow them into the Adirondack wilderness. These characters—Hawkeye, Cora and Alice Munro, David Gamut, and Duncan Heyward—are versions of American settlers who varyingly adapt aspects of British culture to the new American environment.

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4 For instance, Mary Rowlandson's *True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, first published in 1682.

To my knowledge, literary critics before now have not thought about the novel's setting as reflecting anything relevant about the history of the Adirondack region beyond its depiction of the specific battle at Fort William Henry. Rather, they see the novel as set in a "vast and for the most part undifferentiated landscape of the primitive American wilderness."<sup>5</sup> I think this is overstated—the fact that the novel was inspired by Cooper's trip to the region points to his interest in representing something about the actual Adirondack wilderness. As in his novel *The Pioneers*, Cooper presents himself in *Last of the Mohicans* as a local writer with specific knowledge and insight into the landscape the novel describes. He knew too that colonial settlement of the kind that had established his own home town was occurring around the Adirondack region, but not in it. That is, like many others at the time, he understood that the northern mountains of New York were an unusual and mysterious place. Indeed, midway through the novel, as his central characters head northwest from Lake George into the wilderness in pursuit of the kidnapped Alice and Cora, the novel's narrator says that the region is,

*even to this day, less known to the inhabitants of the states, than the deserts of Arabia, or the steppes of Tartary. It was the sterile and rugged district, which separates the tributaries of Champlain from those of the Hudson, the Mohawk, and of the St. Lawrence. Since the period of our tale the active spirit of the country has surrounded it with a belt of rich and thriving settlements, though none but the hunter or the savage is ever known, even now, to penetrate its wild recesses. [241]*

An under-valued aspect of the novel's significance, then, is its prescient accounts of the symbolic meanings of the region both in terms of its specific distinctness, and of his nationalistic understandings of the importance of a wild landscape more generally. This is much like what later writers about the Adirondacks (like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Joel T. Headley, and Verplanck Colvin) would do, but Cooper did it first, and in a novel explicitly aimed at a national and even global audience. This significant novel, then, ought also to be regarded as the first literary work that attempts to represent something distinctive about the Adirondack region of northern New York.

Like the novels of Walter Scott, and like Cooper's earlier novel *The Pioneers*, *Last of the Mohicans* has long passages that are more or less purely descriptive—attempting to situate the novel's plot in the reality of places that Cooper had seen, and that could be found by readers on maps or on touristic journeys. A particularly detailed description of the southeast corner of the Adirondacks occurs just as Hawkeye's group approaches the besieged Fort William Henry. The description serves the plot in that Hawkeye has scaled a small mountain in order to determine how safest to get access to the fort, where he has promised to take Munro's daughters, but it also gives the reader a sweeping and particularly painterly view of where most the action of the novel has taken place. It is worth quoting at length:

*The mountain on which they stood, elevated perhaps a thousand feet in the air, was a high cone, that rose a little in advance of that range which stretches for miles along the western shores of the lake, until meeting its sister piles, beyond the water, it ran off toward the Canadas, in confused and broken masses of rock, thinly sprinkled with evergreens. Immediately at the feet of the party, the southern shore of the Horican*

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5 Blake Nevius, *Cooper's Landscapes: An Essay on the Picturesque Vision*, (Berkeley: U of C Press, 1976) 6.

*swept in a broad semicircle from mountain to mountain, marking a wide strand, that soon rose into an uneven and somewhat elevated plain. To the north stretched the limpid, and, as it appeared from that dizzy height, the narrow sheet of the "holy lake," indented with numberless bays, embellished by fantastic headlands, and dotted with countless islands. At the distance of a few leagues, the bed of the water became lost among mountains, or was wrapped in the masses of vapor that came slowly rolling along their bosom, before a light morning air. But a narrow opening between the crests of the hills pointed out the passage by which they found their way still further north, to spread their pure and ample sheets again, before pouring out their tribute into the distant Champlain. To the south stretched the defile, or rather broken plain, so often mentioned. For several miles in this direction, the mountains appeared reluctant to yield their dominion, but within reach of the eye they diverged, and finally melted into the level and sandy lands, across which we have accompanied our adventurers in their double journey. Along both ranges of hills, which bounded the opposite sides of the lake and valley, clouds of light vapor were rising in spiral wreaths from the uninhabited woods, looking like the smoke of hidden cottages; or rolled lazily down the declivities, to mingle with the fogs of the lower land. [159]*

This strikingly precise description is of a view from what is now appropriately called Prospect Mountain, just east of the town of Lake George, which rises about 1500 feet above the southern end of the lake. Cooper's account gives a clear sense of how the mountains and forests of the region dominate the landscape, with the lakes providing a deeply pleasing visual contrast. The narrator looks both north and south, making clear how the two lakes and the lowlands to their south have become a major route for the French and English military forces between Quebec to the north, and Albany, the Hudson, and New York City to the south. The mountains are accurately described as a barrier to navigation, and are unnamed and unexplored, which is true both when Cooper visited the region, and thus also of the period 70 years before when novel is set. Indeed, the description from the top of Prospect Mountain (which now has a road to its summit) remains accurate today.

Cooper's lengthy account emphasizes a distinctly romantic sense of the beauty of the region—its mix of lakes, forests, mountains, and mists that Thomas Cole and other painters of the region would try capture a decade or two later, and that William Wordsworth celebrated about England's Lake District in much of his poetry. Indeed, the last sentence of the passage in particular seems to echo Wordsworth's description of the Wye Valley in "Tintern Abbey," his most famous poem, which also notes ambiguous "wreaths of smoke" rising to the sky from a hill-top view.<sup>6</sup> Cooper's description of the water vapor that allows for the illusion of "smoke of hidden cottages" suggests that the passage reflects his own prospect of the region in 1825, which would have included the effects of actual houses in the village at the south end of the

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6 Cooper may well have met Wordsworth during his trip to England in 1828, just two years after publishing *Last of the Mohicans*. See Wayne Franklin, *James Fenimore Cooper: The Later Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017) 36. For a careful analysis of the meaning of the smoke in Wordsworth's poem, see Tobias Menely, *Climate and the Making of Worlds: Towards a Geohistorical Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021) 192-96.

lake. The description of the landscape in the novel thus ambiguously points to the possibility of the future development of the region—that mist might be replaced with smoke, as it was in Wordsworth's Wye Valley, or that his probable view of smoke in 1825 could be converted back to mist in his historical recasting of the scene. Fascinatingly, in both Wordsworth's poem and Cooper's novel, the ambiguity of mist and smoke is connected to development of iron mines in the wilderness—where forests would be converted to charcoal for the smelting of iron ore. This had already occurred when Wordsworth walked to Tintern Abbey in 1798;<sup>7</sup> for Cooper, the smoke/mist of both 1757 and 1825 portend a future of development in the wilderness that would in fact include iron mining. Indeed, it's worth remembering that iron mining was one of the main drivers of exploration and development in the Adirondacks in the first half of the 19th century, which included the clear cutting and burning of large tracts of woodland for iron smelting operations—including mines at Tahawus, about 50 miles northwest of Lake George, as well as along the shores of Lake Champlain, both of which were active in the 1820s.<sup>8</sup> Sixty years after the novel was published, protecting the Adirondack forests and waterways from the effects of this clear cutting, and the fires related to them, would become one of the central factors in the creation of the Park and Forest Preserve. It is thus not an exaggeration to say that much of the history of the region is figured in Cooper's brilliant description from the top of Prospect Mountain, which is centrally about the tension between valuing wilderness as an aesthetic resource, and as the site of actual material resources that could fuel the development of the region and the nation, that is to say, between preservation and exploitation or development.

Cooper also points to this ambiguity of the Adirondack landscape earlier in the novel through Hawkeye's detailed description of the Hudson River at Glen's Falls, which Cooper also visited in 1825. Hawkeye dwells on the details of the wildness of the river—falls and rapids being throughout the 19th century one of the most obvious and appealing scenes of Burkean sublimity, much sought out by tourists to the Adirondacks, including Cooper himself.

*Ay! there are the falls on two sides of us, and the river above and below. If you had daylight, it would be worth the trouble to step up on the height of this rock, and look at the perversity of the water. It falls by no rule at all; sometimes it leaps, sometimes it tumbles; there it skips; here it shoots; in one place 'tis white as snow, and in another 'tis green as grass; hereabouts, it pitches into deep hollows, that rumble and crush the 'arth; and thereaways, it ripples and sings like a brook, fashioning whirlpools and gullies in the old stone, as if 'twas no harder than trodden clay. The whole design of the river seems disconcerted. First it runs smoothly, as if meaning to go down the descent as things were ordered; then it angles about and faces the shores; nor are there places wanting where it looks backward, as if unwilling to leave the wilderness, to mingle with the salt. [64]*

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7 Whether or not Wordsworth actually saw the effects of mining works on his trip has been the subject of much debate, as Menely carefully notes. What is at stake is the harmony or beneficence of the relationship between human presence and the natural world. For Menely, one of the latent meanings of the smoke is the beginning of industrialization, which has brought about the massive release of carbon into our atmosphere, and the fundamental altering of climate and our relationship to it.

8 Jerry Jenkins notes that iron mining along the shores of Lake Champlain likely began during the Revolutionary War. *The Adirondack Atlas* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 14.

The sublime wildness of the river as Hawkeye describes it is a fitting symbol for Adirondack wilderness more generally. Because of the region's unique geography, its relatively wet climate, and hundreds of rivers, it does indeed have many large and spectacular falls and rapids, which would draw the attention of painters and later adventure writers in particular. Moreover, preserving the region's water resources was a key motivation for those seeking to great the Forest Preserve and Park in the 1880s, so it is especially fitting that Cooper's most detailed descriptions of the region focusing on the beauty of its rivers and lakes. However, as Wayne Franklin notes in his biography of Cooper, Glen's Falls had already been substantially altered by the construction of a dam and several mills by the time Cooper saw them.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Cooper added a footnote to this description in the 1831 edition of the novel, in which he states that while Hawkeye's account is "sufficiently correct. . . , the application of the water to the uses of civilised life has materially injured its beauties" (65). He goes on to complain that "in a new country, the woods and other objects, which in an old country would be maintained at great cost, are gotten rid of simply with a view of 'improving' as it is called."

This note points again to a profound tension in Cooper's representation of Glens Falls in particular, and the wilderness of northern New York more generally. In the examples I've given, Cooper highlights and even celebrates the wildness of landscape as an aesthetic resource even as he also highlights and celebrates the fact that colonial settlement of the region, and the nation, is an unstoppable and necessary force. The footnote suggests something akin to a preservationist sentiment, bemoaning the unsightly industrial development that was occurring around the southeastern edges of the Adirondack forest in the early decades of the 19th century. In two other passages, he similarly suggests that the landscape his characters are traversing is valuable not for its material resources (farmland, logging, and mining), but its aesthetic and touristic ones. In chapter 12, for instance, Hawkeye's group stops at a "silent spring" to drink, where, the narrator informs us, "within fifty years, the wealth, beauty, and talents, of a hemisphere, were to assemble in throngs, in pursuit of health and pleasure" (140). Cooper's footnote to this passage helpfully identifies the spot as "where the village of Ballston now stands." Now a suburb of Saratoga Springs, at the time of the novel's publication, the town was an early example of tourism based in the notion of escaping the city and finding a form of health and well-being in a more natural venue. In another of Cooper's footnotes, jarringly connected to what is probably the first (and only?) canoe chase in literature, as Hawkeye's crew tries to escape from Huron chasers by paddling around islands in Lake George, Cooper comments that "The beauties of Lake George are well known to every American tourist. In the height of the mountains which surround it, and in artificial accessories, it is inferior to the finest of the Swiss and Italian lakes, while in outline and purity of water it is fully their equal; and in the number and disposition of its isles and islets much superior to them all together" (231). Cooper is here anticipating writers like Verplanck Colvin who some 50 years later would also be making a preservationist case for the value of the Adirondacks—as one whose primary purpose should be for recreation, tourism, and its water resources, rather than for farming and resource extraction. Cooper provides the first example too of the cosmopolitan need to compare the scenic beauty of the Adirondacks to that of the European Alps, something nearly every 19th-century writer about the Adirondacks also does.

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9 What Cooper to some degree anticipates here is that by the 1860s Glens Falls would become the site of the largest log boom and pulp industry in the United States, driven by the ever-expanding logging industry in the Adirondack Forest. See Franklin, *The Early Years*, 434-36.

Another aspect of *Last of the Mohicans* of deep significance to its setting in the Adirondack region is its complicated and contradictory representation of Native Americans. Much has been written about Cooper's representation of Native Americans in the novel, and of course the novel's title announces both the centrality of indigenous people to its plot and themes, and its allegiance to the racist myth of manifest destiny—that Native Americans were doomed to disappear (one way or another) from the land, and that European Americans were divinely or naturally the inevitable inheritors of it. Wayne Franklin argues that Cooper intended for the novel to be primarily about Native Americans, rather than Hawkeye, and that while he was “hopelessly wrong” about many aspects of First Nations history, “he strove to know as much as he could and, more importantly, to use it sensitively” (*Early Years*, 471-472). Cooper grew up near several Haudenosaunee settlements, and read several (white) histories of Native American people and cultures. John McWilliams, in his excellent essay on the “Historical Contexts of *Last of the Mohicans*,” in his edition of the Oxford publication of the novel, specifies several of the ways in which Cooper was indeed hopelessly (and possibly deliberately) wrong about the Native American nations he represents in the novel. The key fact is that while the novel presents the Mohawks (members of the Haudenosaunee Five Nations) as enemies of the British American forces during the French and Indian Wars, and the Delawares as their allies, “at the siege of Fort William Henry in 1757, most of the Iroquois were officially neutral, though mostly pro-British, while the Delaware were officially neutral, though mostly pro-French” (404). McWilliams argues that the reasons for Cooper's reversal of these allegiances is that most of the Haudenosaunee peoples sided with the British in the Revolutionary War, and so Cooper “projects a Revolutionary War enemy back on to an earlier war, thus obtaining... a clear historical alignment of winners versus losers” (405-06). That Cooperstown and much of Cooper's family's land was formerly Haudenosaunee land probably also contributed to the novel's historical distortion of allegiances.

McWilliams shows that Cooper's representation of Native Americans in his novel is, like his use of the Adirondacks, grounded both in Cooper's knowledge and experience, and his own symbolic purposes. We see the latter most explicitly in the outlines of the novel's romance plot, which is also a mythic plot of the racial and cultural origins of the nascent American nation.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the novel, the two whitest characters—Duncan Heyward, the colonial officer tasked with bringing the Munro daughters to their father, and the comparatively passive and fair Alice Munro—are set to marry and reproduce, having been tested and strengthened by the trials of abduction and combat. All of the other major characters in the novel are either killed off or explicitly left on the margins, and in no position to marry and carry forward in the novel's implicit projection of American history. The novel's most interesting couple are Uncas and Cora, who begin exchanging meaningful glances from the beginning of the tale, and who, after they are both killed, are mourned by the remaining Delawares as being able to live together in heaven, where the “wise one of the earth' had transplanted” (387) them both. They are, in short, Cooper's acknowledgement of the possibility of inter-racial love and harmony (Cora herself being partly Black), which is allowed to develop in the freedom of the wilderness—the wilderness also allowing them to reveal their kindred intelligence and courage. The novel's other odd couple are Hawkeye and his adoptive father Chingachgook, who are similarly powerful and adept in the Adirondack wilderness, but also clearly doomed to remain uselessly on the fringes of American culture as it develops. Chingachgook acknowledges that he will die childless and

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10 Probably the most incisive account of this theme in the novel is Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse's “Recalling Cora: Family Resemblances in *Last of the Mohicans*,” in *American Literary History* Vol 28:2 (Summer 2016) 223-245.

landless, and both, as we know from *The Pioneers*, will end their days as old men, living together on the outskirts of Cooperstown. Interestingly, Hawkeye, Uncas, and Chingachgook become useful symbols for the development of the identity of guides in the Adirondacks several decades later.<sup>11</sup>

And yet the novel's representation of Native Americans in relation to the Adirondack region remains prescient and, in some ways, even accidentally correct. Early 20th-century accounts of the Adirondacks, when debates about the ownership and purpose of the Adirondacks became especially keen, downplayed the presence of Native Americans in the Adirondack wilderness, imagining it as a more or less empty space, a wilderness that had always been free of any human habitation. The early Adirondack historian Alfred Donaldson, for instance, argued that "the consensus of authoritative opinion seems to be that Indians never made any part of what is now the Adirondack Park their permanent home."<sup>12</sup> In this way, the region could become a symbol for a kind of fantasy of American wilderness—not one that was fought over, involving the killing or removing native inhabitants, but one that was "empty and free to exploit and appropriate," as the indigenous historian Melissa Otis puts it.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Cooper presents the region as complicatedly occupied by hundreds of individuals from several indigenous nations. All of them, including Magua, Uncas, and Chingachgook, seem deeply familiar with the geography of the region, and how to survive in it, implying that they frequently traveled there, and occupied the land in the way that Otis argues that First Nations peoples actually did. The action of the final third of the novel, where Hawkeye's group finds the captured daughters, occurs in neighboring villages of Hurons and Delawares, living in an uneasy peace somewhere in the center of the Adirondacks, who finally battle each other because of the presence of the white visitors. Contemporary archaeology is still trying to determine the exact nature of Native American presence in the region, but Cooper is broadly correct in describing the Adirondacks as filled with a complex native presence. There were no indigenous villages or settlements when the region was finally explored and mapped in the early 19th century, but there has long been evidence of various kinds of Native American presence in the region, including possibly long-term settlement along the eastern shore of Lake Champlain, and probably more temporary or summer settlements in their interiors. These peoples would not have been Hurons or Delawares, of course, but rather people of the Haudenosaunee nations from the south, and Algonquins and Abenaki from the north. Otis argues that the region may have been seen as a "dish with one spoon" (12), a shared hunting and summer ground for many different nations, prior to the arrival of European settlers. She also argues that the Adirondacks were, as Cooper describes, a "shatter zone" in which displaced indigenous peoples found new homelands (22). These are the Native Americans encountered by many of the early travel writers, and several served as their guides.

11 See Hopsicker, Peter M. "The Adirondack Guide: The Wilderness Representative of Invasion and Invitation Into an Imagined Community." *New York History*, vol. 87, no. 3, New York State Historical Association, 2006, pp. 344–63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23183495>. Paul Jamieson in a brief introductory essay to a section on writing about guides in his book *The Adirondack Reader*, argues that "Natty Bumppo... was promptly adopted as the spiritual father of Adirondack guides," and provides a number of examples of writers who saw the fictional Hawkeye as embodying the character (and racial ambiguities) of the early Adirondack guide. (New York: MacMillan, 1964, p. 370). Several of the early and famous guides, including Mitchell Sabbatis, were Native Americans or, as in the case of Orson Phelps, appeared as Natives, as of course Hawkeye does too.

12 *A History of the Adirondacks* (New York: The Century Co, 1921) 2 Vols, Vol. 1, 21.

13 "Location of Exchange: Algonquin and Iroquoian occupation in the Adirondacks before and after contact." *Environment, Space, Place* 5:2 (Dec. 2013), 8.

If Cooper is loosely correct in describing the region as shared by people of many of the First Nations, his account is also unfortunately a relatively accurate reflection of the pervasive racism of the 19th-century America as a whole, and of northern New York more specifically. Uncas, the last Mohican of the title, is a paradigmatic “noble savage”, while Magua and his band of Hurons are presented with almost every imaginable racist trope. On the novel’s final page, with the Hurons defeated in the novel’s climactic battle, Tamenund, the chief of the Delawares, tells those who remain of his people to disperse before the oncoming tide of white men. The novel appears finally to empty the region of remaining native presence, so that Alice and Duncan and the other European Americans may claim this space (and the rest of the nation) as their own. Most tellingly, Hawkeye, the novel’s most famous character, is also its most conspicuous racist. He repeatedly argues that the races are as distinct as animal species—that they shouldn’t and can’t mingle, and that while he has learned a lot from his Mohican family, he insists several dozen times that “he is a man without a cross” (that is, without any mixed blood, despite his sunburnt appearance). In an early battle, while shooting at a Huron, he says that it’s necessary to aim low, since “the life lies low in a Mingo and humanity teaches us to make a quick end of the serpents” (84). The novel also describes a beaver village (an entirely fictitious phenomenon) as looking neater and better organized than the Huron village. And of course the novel has at its center a massacre of English soldiers and settlers at the hands of Montcalm’s Indian warriors, in scenes of explicit brutality. While there are certainly many instances or complexity and even sympathy for Native Americans in the novel, there can be no doubt that in the end it remains a clear example of how essentially racist ideologies are inscribed in America’s literary history, and also onto cultural understandings of the Adirondack region. In imagining the region as a wilderness that is in part made both savage and interesting by the presence of indigenous peoples, and by also imagining them as more or less magically disappearing from that region, Cooper creates a powerful and enduring mythical origin of American Wilderness,<sup>14</sup> which manages simultaneously to acknowledge Native American history, and to erase it. This is a racist myth that reappears in much of the later writing about the Adirondacks.

While the novel’s racism is central to its depiction of the significance of its setting, the novel is prescient about other aspects of the meaning of the Adirondacks as well. By the end of the 19th century, the region was being celebrated as a “sportsman’s paradise,” which is to say, that it was a place where men from nearby cities could venture for a wilderness vacation, marked especially by hunting and fishing, and in doing so, recover both lost health and masculinity. The almost comical trope for this vision of the positive effects of wilderness on the feminized and enfeebled male is of the consumptive who enters the woods a near corpse, and comes out several weeks later “as bronzed as an Indian, and as hearty,” as W.H.H. Murray would put it about 50 years later in his notorious book that helped launch middle-class tourism into the Adirondacks.<sup>15</sup> In Murray’s text, the restorative factors of the wilderness vacation are a combination of the balsamic air, rest, and lengthy but mild exercise of traveling through the region by boat piloted by a guide. In Cooper, it is the labor of trekking through wilderness and the demands of survival and warfare (which of course the trials of hunting mimic). *Last of the Mohicans* presents what is perhaps first instance of this trope in American literature through the character of the unmanly David Gamut, a preacher/singer who is accidentally caught up with the Munro sisters and Hawkeye’s band. Like Ichabod Crane, of Washington

14 See William Cronin, “The Trouble with Wilderness” *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995) 79-80.

15 *Adventures in the Wilderness*, Ed, William K. Verner (Syracuse University Press, 1989) 14.

Irving's story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," he is tall and ungainly, dressed in motley, and carrying only a small flute (instead of a weapon), and a book of psalms. He is marked, that is, as already feminized through his relation to cultural work, and that he is from a coastal city (New Haven, where Cooper himself attended Yale University for 3 years), and as such is a figure of the young American as city bumpkin. Hawkeye repeatedly disparages Gamut, insisting that his presence (and singing) endangers the troop, blaming his proclivities on having "fallen into the hands of some silly woman, when he should have been gathering his education under a blue sky, and among the beauties of the forest" (254).<sup>16</sup> By the end of the novel, however, Gamut has been transformed into an odd kind of warrior; his singing weirdly protects him from being killed (the Hurons think he is either gifted or crazy), he becomes an able communicator with the natives he briefly lives among, and he joins the last battle armed with a sling shot, with which he kills one of the Hurons (380).

The weeks spent in the woods have a similar transformative effect on Duncan Heyward. Though a trained colonial soldier and officer, he proves singularly inept in the woods, as his pistols fail to work, and he is outmuscled in hand-to-hand combat on several occasions, saved from certain death by Hawkeye himself. Indeed, Hawkeye more or less serves as Duncan's guide, teaching him how to shoot, hunt, track and survive in the woods, so that by the end of the novel, the Delaware chief Tamenund is unable to tell Hawkeye and Duncan apart, and they must engage in a shooting competition to establish who really is the feared white scout (which Hawkeye naturally wins, though Duncan performs better than expected). A deep part of the romance of the novel, then, is the romance of a long and adventure-filled sojourn in the American wilderness, including encounters with Indians (or their simulacra, Hawkeye as guide), rugged scenic beauty, and wild animals. It anticipates both Thoreau's celebration of the restorative powers of the natural world in *Walden* (published three decades later), and the broader fear of the feminization of American men that many of the later writers about the Adirondacks understand as self-evidently true—that life in cities and offices have made many men weak and unfit. These two threads are conspicuously connected through the novel's fetishization of Hawkeye's prowess with his "long rifle," for which one doesn't need Freud to see the symbolic implications. The connections between firearms, hunting, warfare, and masculinity (and race) are almost laughably over-determined in the novel, beginning with Hawkeye (the name denoting his accuracy with his rifle<sup>17</sup>) insisting that rifles are the proper weapon for whites, and not Indians, in his first appearance in the novel.<sup>18</sup> As though to prove his point, two pages later, Uncas appears, and almost

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16 Earlier in the novel, Hawkeye wonders what help Gamut can be to Alice and Cora, asking: "Can he slay a buck for their dinner; journey by the moss on the beeches, or cut the throat of a Huron? If not the first cat-bird he meets is the cleverest fellow of the two" (212). He later refers to Gamut as "that miserable devil" (229).

17 Hawkeye's other names in the novel are "La Longue Carabine" and "Deerslayer". In *The Pioneers* he is referred to more often by his Christian name—Natty Bumppo—which is presumably insufficiently masculine and fearsome for a novel set in the Adirondacks.

18 See Karen R. Jones. *Epiphany in the Wilderness: Hunting, Nature, and Performance in the Nineteenth-Century American West* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015). Jones makes the case that hunting in the 19th century changed from a subsistence activity to a performative one, connected to ideas of recreation, masculinity, national power, and a new relationship to wilderness. She notes too that "the popularity of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* suggested developing interest in the national project of wilderness taming, its cultural grounding, and the allure of its principal

immediately takes up his bow to shoot an arrow at a deer, which he must finish off picturesquely: “Avoiding the horns of the infuriated animal, Uncas darted to his side, and passed his knife across the throat, when bounding to the edge of the river, it fell, dying the waters with its blood” (41). Hawkeye comments that this “’twas a pretty sight to behold,” and then, imagining that he hears more deer in the woods, exclaims “if they come within range of a bullet, I will drop one, though the whole Six Nations should be lurking within sound” (42). Killing deer in the woods is depicted here as a virtually spontaneous reaction to seeing them—that the purpose of deer is to be killed as tests of instinctive or native martial ability. That the Hurons whom Hawkeye frequently shoots in the novel are also often described as moving “like deer” also points to how the novel fuses hunting skills with those of war, and its depiction of animals as deeply involved with its racism.<sup>19</sup>

What this overdetermination points to is the fact that a part of the meaning and value of the Adirondack wilderness for Cooper, and even more obviously for many of the travel writers and touristic painters later in the century, was as a reservoir for deer, which white men could hunt not for food or provision, but for what was generally referred to as ‘sport’.<sup>20</sup> Already by the time Cooper was writing the novel in the mid 1820s, deer had already virtually extirpated from southern New York. Cooper’s *The Pioneers* (set in a fictional version of Cooperstown, in south-central New York) opens with a dispute about who actually fired the shot that kills a deer that appears and is quickly killed, with Natty going on to complain about how few deer are left in the region thanks to “clearings and betterments.”<sup>21</sup> Intensive logging of the Adirondack forests, which began in the middle of the century, actually created better habitat for deer, and the extirpation of wolves and cougars throughout the northeast, and the relatively sparse human population, meant that the Adirondack region did have a much higher deer population than the rest of the state for much of the century. My point here is that Cooper’s fetishizing linking of wilderness, deer, guns, and war anticipates or reveals a central meaning/value of the Adirondacks as a place where white men could recover instincts and associated skills that would make these men more masculine and potentially better soldiers, the qualities of which are epitomized by Hawkeye, who was himself likely modeled on Robert Roger—of Roger’s Rangers, a hugely successful soldier of the Revolutionary War. This convergence of meaning is nowhere made clearer than in Verplanck Colvin’s report to the NY legislature of his survey of the Adirondack region in 1873, famous for first proposing the creation of a park in order to protect the Adirondack forests from continued extensive logging. Among the many justifications for the creation of a park, he includes preserving habitat for deer, preserving a place where men can hunt:

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protagonist: the hunter” (38).

- 19 For a more detailed discussion of the novel’s representation of animals as linked to its racist ideologies, see Onno Oerlemans, “Cooper’s Animal Offences: The Confusion of Species in *Last of the Mohicans*,” in: McHugh S., McKay R., Miller J. (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020) 307-17.
- 20 The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists one of the original meanings of the word as “Success, pleasure, or recreation derived from or afforded by an activity, originally and esp. hunting, shooting, or fishing.”
- 21 *The Pioneers*, (Penguin Books, 1988), 22. For an excellent history of deer populations and hunting in the Adirondack forest, see Charles D. Canham, *Forests Adrift: Currents Shaping the Future of Northeastern Trees* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020) 75-90.

*The field sports of the wilderness are remarkably exhilarating, and strengthen and revive the human frame. The boating, tramping, hunting, and fishing expeditions afford that physical training which modern Americans—of the Eastern States—stand sorely in need of, and which we must hope will, with the fashionable young men of the period, yet replace the vicious, enervating, debasing pleasures of the cities. It is to their eager pursuit of field sports that metropolitan Englishmen owe their superiority in physical power, with that skillful use of firearms, independence, fearlessness, cool presence of mind, and ability which they possess to bear the fatigues of war and exigencies of military service.*<sup>22</sup>

This is a version of the romantic belief, epitomized in Thoreau's *Walden*, that a sojourn in the wilderness could restore one to physical and spiritual health, but here it is focused specifically on countering the de-masculinization of urban men as a social pathology. But what we see in Colvin's account of Adirondack wilderness in 1873, and foregrounded in Cooper's yoking of war and hunting, is something quite different from Thoreau and Wordsworth's idealistic imaginings of the natural world. Thoreau, after all, asserts near the end of his meditation on hunting in *Walden* that "No humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure that he does."<sup>23</sup> Rather, Cooper's novel depicts the Adirondack wilderness, just on the edge of the established heart of early 19th century American culture, as a place where certain forms of violence—those deeply connected to full masculinity and to a state's ability to engage in warfare—are welcomed, encouraged, and even nurtured, particularly when they are directed at 'others'.

The association of wilderness with hunting in particular, and violence more generally, is of course not specific to the Adirondack wilderness. Violence is at the heart of the idea of the American frontier, a space where indigenous people and animals must be eliminated before white settlers can move in. What is distinctive about the Adirondack wilderness is that it was already a bounded eastern frontier when Cooper represented it, an almost atavistic space that in *Last of the Mohicans* too can be accessed relatively quickly and easily from the nation's major urban centers. Lawrence Reynolds argues that support for 'righteous violence' amongst many of the 19th-century's greatest American writers reveals itself most clearly in expressions of support for John Brown, the abolitionist warrior,<sup>24</sup> who of course made a home near Lake Placid in the 1850s, which the Adirondack region's most important contemporary novelist, Russell Banks, made central to his depiction of the Adirondacks in his wonderful novel *Cloudsplitter*. A more direct genealogical connection between Cooper and later powerful representations of the Adirondacks can be found in Thomas Cole's several paintings of "*Scenes from Last of the Mohicans*," which similarly draw attention to the wildness of the scenery, and the violence at its heart, particularly in his painting "The Death of Cora." Cole of course painted a number of more direct (though still deeply symbolic) paintings of the Adirondacks, and helped to initiate both the Hudson River School, and the touristic impulse to explore

<sup>22</sup> "First Annual Report," in *Adirondack Explorations: The Nature Writings of Verplanck Colvin*, ed. Paul Schaefer (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 114.

<sup>23</sup> *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, ed. Bill McKibben (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 199.

<sup>24</sup> *Righteous Violence: Revolution, Slavery, and the American Renaissance*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011) 29.

the sublime wilderness that was also the origin of the Hudson River. My point is that on this theme too, Cooper's novel is prescient and representative of later writing about the Adirondacks. Literary texts more broadly have been important for the Adirondack region in a number of ways—not simply helping define the region's meaning to its inhabitants and those who value it as a distinctive American wilderness, but more specifically in defining the region as worth preserving as a legally protected landscape. I've pointed to several of those texts in my discussion above. My central point is that Cooper's landmark novel, celebrated and critiqued for nearly two hundred years, needs also to be recognized as a novel of significance for the Adirondacks, and for the literary tradition that the novel can be seen to initiate. Indeed, it's not an exaggeration to say that especially with *The Pioneers*, but also with *Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper begins the American literary mode of regional writing, of representing America's distinctive places to the nation more broadly.