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# Keeping Humans Out of the Picture: The (Almost) Pristine Wilderness of *The Last of the Mohicans*

MARK NIEMEYER♦

James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans; A Narrative of 1757*, first published in 1826, presents some of the earliest and most striking descriptions of landscape in American literature. Drawing on the traditions of the picturesque and the sublime, Cooper helped establish memorable images of American nature that participated in the effort to create a distinctive national literature for the newly independent United States. Indeed, during the late eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth century, nature and landscape were often focused on by writers interested in proving that the pristine natural beauty of America was a genuine national treasure and in no way less impressive than the well-known and highly praised landscapes of Europe, which had been immortalized in literature and painting. Cooper's nature, in what is probably the most famous of his five *Leatherstocking Tales*,<sup>1</sup> is wild and untamed and is in harmony with the Indians he portrays in the same work.

In fact, and obviously enough, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, much of the American landscape was already being transformed, if not ravaged, by human activity, and there were already examples of observers shocked by the pace of the destruction of the environment. And calls for a more ecologically sustainable development of the country had also already begun, though they most often went unheeded. Among those who were concerned by the rapid disappearance of the American wilderness was Cooper himself. And if he chose, in *The Last of the*

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1 The five *Leatherstocking Tales*, in order of publication, are: *The Pioneers, or the Sources of the Susquehanna; A Descriptive Tale* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans; A Narrative of 1757* (1826), *The Prairie; A Tale* (1827), *The Pathfinder: or, The Inland Sea* (1840) and *The Deerslayer: or, The First War-Path* (1841).

*Mohicans*, to focus on a vision of untamed nature—offering a picture of America, in a sense, as it had been before the beginning of widespread development—there are nonetheless hints, here and there, that the landscape described in the romance was undergoing change due to the influence of man and that it was already, at least to a certain extent, of the past. Like the Noble Savages the author depicts in *The Last of the Mohicans* as, unfortunately, vanishing away, the unspoiled landscape of which they are a part is also, Cooper obliquely reminds his readers, disappearing.

While there have been numerous studies of nature and landscape in Cooper's works, notably the classic monographs by Blake Nevis and H. Daniel Peck,<sup>2</sup> the environmental dimension of his writings has only recently received what is still limited critical attention.<sup>3</sup> And while these relatively new studies have helped recognize the importance of taking Cooper into consideration within the growing field of American ecocriticism, there has as yet been no attempt to offer an in-depth examination of the subtle recognition of environmental concerns in what is arguably the author's masterpiece. This study aims to help fill that gap.

## Nature and Nationalism

Soon after the end of the American Revolution, calls for a distinctively national literature began to appear in magazines and newspapers throughout the United States. Indeed, there was a strong desire for the country to complement its political independence with a literary and, more broadly, cultural independence from Great Britain and Europe. One of the pressing questions was just what, exactly, the authors of the nascent national literature should write about. And one of the frequent answers was the American landscape. As early as 1786, in an anonymous review of *A Poem on the Happiness of America* by David Humphreys, *The Columbia Magazine*, based in Philadelphia, offered general praise for the depiction of American nature in the nation's literary works, which it associated with the patriotic events of the recent past:

Amidst the favourite pursuits of our countrymen, the muses have had their votaries;—nor have those coy maids been unsuccessfully courted. Their genius seems much delighted with our sylvan scenes. The face of nature, throughout the United States, exhibits the *sublime and beautiful*, in the most exalted degree. In almost every part of this country, we are surrounded with objects calculated to inspire the most elevated conceptions of the imagination. Our mountains, vallies [*sic*], plains, and rivers, are formed upon a great scale; the extent of the country itself is great; and the whole is rendered magnificently

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<sup>2</sup> See "References."

<sup>3</sup> Some examples include the studies by Wayne Franklin, John G. Cawelti and John Gatta.

beautiful, by the creating hand of the Almighty Architect! And, if we contemplate the eminently dignified part that has been recently acted on the vast national stage; with the scenes of magnanimity, wisdom, and patriotic virtue, which our gallant countrymen have exhibited thereon; we must allow, that nothing can afford more noble themes for our native bards. (Anonymous, 1786: 67-68)

The reviewer exalts the “sublime and beautiful” in American nature with national pride, emphasizing the pristine aspect of the country’s seemingly boundless landscape that should be celebrated by “native bards.”

In “An Address delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at their anniversary meeting at Cambridge” published in *The North American Review* in November 1815, William Tudor offered a whole series of appropriate subjects for American poets and once again highlighted, among other suggestions, the country’s landscape. After characterizing the earlier historical events that had occurred in North America before the Revolution as “now exclusively the domain of history and poetry” (Tudor, 1815: 14), Tudor notes,

The region in which these occurrences took place, abounds with grand and beautiful scenery, possessing some peculiar features. The numerous waterfalls, the enchanting beauty of Lake George and its pellucid flood, of Lake Champlain, and the lesser lakes, afford many objects of the most picturesque character; while the inland seas from Superior to Ontario, and that astounding cataract, whose roar would hardly be increased by the united murmurs of all the cascades of Europe, are calculated to inspire vast and sublime conceptions. (Tudor, 1815: 15)

The nationalistic dimension of Tudor’s remarks can be seen most obviously in the comparison between the “roar” of Niagara Falls (“that astounding cataract”) and “the united murmurs of all the cascades of Europe,” at the expense, of course, of the European waterfalls. Furthermore, American scenery is here too described as having “the most picturesque character” and is associated with “vast and sublime conceptions.” It should, according to Tudor, be an integral part of the literature of the United States. Furthermore, in the context of this study, it should be noted that the specific region referred to by Tudor (notably Lake George, but more generally the entire region of upstate New York with its many lakes) is exactly the setting that was chosen by Cooper for *The Last of the Mohicans* just a few years later.

And even when Washington Irving, the other major figure of early nineteenth-century American literature alongside of Cooper, left for a long stay in Europe, attracted, in part, by the greater Romantic associations of Old World history

and culture, he seems to have felt obliged to praise the beauties of the American landscape. In “The Author’s Account of Himself,” the introductory essay placed at the beginning of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, first published in book form in 1820, Irving declares:

I visited various parts of my own country, and had I been merely a lover of fine scenery, I should have felt little desire to seek elsewhere its gratification, for on no country have the charms of nature been more prodigally lavished. Her mighty lakes, like oceans of liquid silver; her mountains with their bright aerial tints; her valleys teeming with wild fertility; her tremendous cataracts thundering in their solitudes; her boundless plains waving with spontaneous verdure; her broad deep rivers, rolling in solemn silence to the ocean; her trackless forests, where vegetation puts forth all its magnificence; her skies kindling with the magic of summer clouds and glorious sunshine—no, never need an American look beyond his own country for the sublime and beautiful of natural scenery. (Irving, 1978: 8-9)

The sublime and the beautiful are again evoked, and clearly the American landscape that is focused on is one relatively untouched, certainly unsullied, by humans. And if Irving states that he needn’t have left the United States if he had been “merely a lover of fine scenery,” he nonetheless offers memorable descriptions of American nature, more specifically of the Hudson River Valley, in the two most famous tales included in *The Sketch Book*, “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

It should be briefly mentioned that a similar movement occurred at almost the same time in the world of American painting, which also began to focus on landscape as an appropriate subject for national art around the mid-1820s. Most notably, the painters of the Hudson River School, two of whose early leading figures included Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, celebrated the American landscape in their works, which they began to produce at that time. As Barbara Novak explains, “When Cole, around 1825, arrived on the artistic scene, Americans had just discovered, as it were, their natural aesthetic resources and were fast developing a taste for landscape painting” (Novak, 1979: 63). Cole himself, in the following decade, wrote that American scenery

is a subject that to every American ought to be of surpassing interest; for, whether he beholds the Hudson mingling waters with the Atlantic—explores the central wilds of this vast continent, or stands on the margin of the distant Oregon, he is still in the midst of American scenery—it is his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity—all are his; and how undeserving of such a birthright, if he can turn towards it an unobserving eye, an unaffected heart! (Cole, 1836: 1)

Cole also stresses, with a strong dose of national pride, the wild beauty, the vastness and the sublimity of American nature. And Cooper, for his part, clearly responded to these types of calls to glorify the country's landscape in the writing of his Leatherstocking Tales, notably *The Last of the Mohicans*, thus contributing significantly to the distinctively American character of those works.

## The Pristine, Painterly, Reinvented Wilderness of *The Last of the Mohicans*

Landscape, in fact, plays an important role in *The Last of the Mohicans*, and it is almost exclusively portrayed in the book as wild, picturesque, sublime and pristine. Indeed, Wayne Franklin credits the romance with “introducing the idea of wilderness adventure to readers” (Franklin, 2007: 40), and it is clear that the work's first audience appreciated Cooper's descriptions of the untamed American landscape. Lewis Cass, who was governor of the Michigan Territory at the time, noted in passing in a January 1826 article in *The North American Review* on “Indians of North America” that *The Last of the Mohicans* was “one of those beautiful delineations of American scenery, incidents, and manners, for which we are indebted to the taste and talent of our eminent novelist” (Cass, 1826: 67), though he found Cooper's depiction of Indians unrealistic. And in a lengthy review of the author's works, which appeared in the same magazine just a few months later, William H. Gardiner, focusing on the first two Leatherstocking Tales, wrote:

The descriptions of natural scenery, which abound in some of these productions, are highly picturesque, and full of striking characteristics of the wild American landscapes. They prove that the author has studied for himself in the great school of nature. (Gardiner, 1826: 154)

But while Gardiner's remarks seem—and indeed, from one point of view, are—positive, he's actually not overly impressed with Cooper's descriptions of the American wilderness because it's all, for him, just a bit too wild. Gardiner's remarks continue thus:

But he [Cooper] succeeds best in imitating her [nature's] extravagant and gigantic features. He chooses to paint upon the grand scale, and with a bold outline; and the numberless little beauties, which serve to fill up, and soften, and adorn the real scene, are wholly overlooked. His tendency is always to exaggerate. He aims at something striking and overwhelming; and in the attempt often becomes confused. We find ourselves in the midst of huge rocks, and overhanging woods, and tumbling cataracts, with great mist, and a great noise, and we are

utterly unable to settle the relative positions of these objects, so as to form any distinct picture from them in the mind. (Gardiner, 1826: 154)

The problem for Gardiner—as for Cass in the case of Cooper’s Indians—is a supposed lack of verisimilitude. That lack, however, is relative and is, to some extent, a question of individual taste. But beyond that, since Cooper was writing a romance, and not a realistic novel or scientific treatise, for that matter, these criticisms seem somewhat unjustified, if not totally off the mark. Indeed, since Cooper was writing a romance of the American wilderness, it is more or less to be expected that readers find themselves “in the midst of huge rocks, and overhanging woods, and tumbling cataracts, with great mist, and a great noise.” Landscape itself is, as Malcolm Andrews points out, “a perceived version of the natural world” and “is reconstructed to correspond to human needs, to the changing living circumstances we experience” (Andrews, 1999: 16). Furthermore, and more specifically, as recent ecocriticism has made clear, the idea of wilderness is, to a large extent, invented. Leo Mellor, for example, explains that writers who describe the wilderness

*construct* their wildernesses—and it is not oxymoronic to note it. They build experiences as they choose to see and walk along certain paths, and to ignore—or elide—forms of life that do not fit with the expected components of the wild: a grand scale, the absence of human life, some experiences of solitude and awe. (Mellor, 2014: 105)

Cooper, in fact, more or less consciously I would argue, created exactly such a construct of the wilderness in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

One of the things that contributes to the creation, or invention, of the American wilderness in Cooper’s descriptions is what Michael T. Gilmore refers to as a “painterly quality” that, in the case of scenery, makes the author, again according to Gilmore, a “landscape painter in words” (Gilmore, 1994: 689).<sup>4</sup> For Blake Nevius,

If Cooper is the superior visual artist [compared to Walter Scott], it is partly because of the greater challenge he had to meet and overcome, partly because of his greater ability to utilize what he had learned from the arts of landscape gardening and from theories of the picturesque which, in spite of their waning vogue, his landscapes embody. (Nevius, 1976: 6)

And as H. Daniel Peck observes, Cooper tends to employ “accepted terms of landscape description—‘awe,’ ‘sublimity,’ ‘grandeur’” (Peck, 1977: 27). Finally, as

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<sup>4</sup> Though Gilmore’s specific reference is to *The Pioneers*, his remarks are clearly appropriate for *The Last of the Mohicans* as well.

Ernest H. Redekop asserts, “Cooper consciously described landscapes not only in the language of the picturesque and the sublime but as if they were paintings” (Redekop, 1977: 190). The influence of American landscape painting is, indeed, unmistakable and not really surprising since Cooper knew and admired members of the Hudson River School, including Cole and Durand. And several scenes from Cooper’s second *Leatherstocking Tale* were, in fact, painted by Cole.

Early on in *The Last of the Mohicans*—which is set in New York (in the Hudson River Valley and the region surrounding Lake George) during the French and Indian War—the two daughters of Colonel Munro, Cora and Alice; Heyward Duncan, a young British officer born in the American South; and the song master David Gamut are led by Hawk-eye (often referred to as the scout)<sup>5</sup> and his two Delaware (or Mohican) companions, Chingachgook and his son Uncas, from Fort Edward to Fort William Henry. When the group arrives at Glenn’s Falls,<sup>6</sup> there is a striking description of the wild scenery that incorporates classic expressions of the picturesque and the sublime:

The river was confined between high and cragged rocks, one of which impended above the spot where the canoe rested. As these, again, were surmounted by tall trees, which appeared to totter on the brows of the precipice, it gave the stream the appearance of running through a deep and narrow dell. All beneath the fantastic limbs and ragged tree-tops, which were, here and there, dimly painted against the starry zenith, lay alike in shadowed obscurity. Behind them, the curvature of the banks soon bounded the view, by the same dark and wooded outline; but in front, and apparently at no great distance, the water seemed piled against the heavens, whence it tumbled into caverns, out of which issued those sullen sounds, that had loaded the evening atmosphere. It seemed, in truth, to be a spot devoted to seclusion, and the sisters imbibed a soothing impression of security, as they gazed upon its romantic, though not unappalling beauties. A general movement among their conductors, however, soon recalled them from a contemplation of the wild charms that night had assisted to lend the place, to a painful sense of their real peril. (Cooper, 1985, ch. V: 523-524)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Hawk-eye is the central character of the five *Leatherstocking Tales*, who is referred to by several different names in the series. One of his names is, in fact, Leather-stocking, though this name is not used in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

<sup>6</sup> Cooper uses the spelling “Glenn’s Falls.” The modern spelling is “Glens Falls.”

<sup>7</sup> Page numbers for quotations from *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Pioneers* are from The Library of America edition (see “References”). For convenience, since many different editions of both books exist, chapter numbers (in Roman numerals) are also provided.



While there is not always a sharp distinction between the picturesque and the sublime, elements in this description typical of the picturesque include the “high and cragged rocks,” “the precipice,” the “deep and narrow dell,” “the fantastic limbs and ragged tree-tops” and the “caverns, out of which issued those sullen sounds.” Aspects which correspond perhaps more closely to conceptions of the sublime are the “starry zenith,” the water that “seemed piled against the heavens” and, most notably, the scene’s “romantic, though not unappalling beauties.” Furthermore, Cooper’s vision of the landscape as a painting is evidenced in this passage by “the fantastic limbs and ragged tree-tops” which are described, in fact, as “painted.” And in noting that “the curvature of the banks soon bounded the view, by the same dark and wooded outline,” Cooper creates a framing device like the *repoussoirs*, often in the form of large inward-curving trees on one or both sides of the picture commonly used in landscape painting. All of these aspects contribute to Cooper’s constructed version of the wilderness.

There are, of course, many other examples of descriptions of the wilderness in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Soon after the paragraph just discussed, there are several passages, in chapter VI, describing the cavern in which the group takes refuge, and, in the same chapter, Hawk-eye offers an extended and symbol-laden panegyric on the falls themselves, which suggests, among other things, that the hand of God can be seen in the wilderness. After the dramatic scene in the middle of the book, which serves as the historical focal point of the narrative and describes the so-called massacre of Fort William Henry, the characters plunge into an even more isolated wilderness and the romance takes on an even more mythic dimension. At the beginning of chapter XXI, the narrator explains,

The party had landed on the border of a region that 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. (Cooper 1985, ch. XXI: 716)

It is in this rugged, wild landscape, as Hawk-eye, Chingachgook, Uncas, Duncan Heyward, Colonel Munro and David Gamut try to save Alice and Cora, that the final drama is played out. If Alice is rescued in chapter XXV and taken to a Delaware encampment for safety, Magua, a Huron, whom Cooper portrays as a debased and evil figure, is, at the end of chapter XXX, allowed, out of respect for Indian custom, to leave with Cora as his captive. Her fate remains uncertain until the climactic penultimate chapter of the romance, which offers an account of the final battle, led by Uncas, to save her. It begins with a description of a natural setting suggestive of a primeval forest, if not the Garden of Eden before the advent of man:

During the time Uncas was making this disposition of his forces, the woods were as still, and, with the exception of those who had met in council, apparently, as much untenanted, as when they came fresh from the hands of their Almighty Creator. The eye could range, in every direction, through the long and shadowed vistas of the trees; but nowhere was any object to be seen that did not properly belong to the peaceful and slumbering scenery. Here and there a bird was heard fluttering among the branches of the beeches, and occasionally a squirrel dropped a nut, drawing the startled looks of the party, for a moment, to the place; but the instant the casual interruption ceased, the passing air was heard murmuring above their heads, along that verdant and undulating surface of forest, which spread itself unbroken, unless by stream or lake, over such a vast region of country. Across the tract of wilderness which lay between the Delawares and the village of their enemies, it seemed as if the foot of man had never trodden, so breathing and deep was the silence in which it lay. (Cooper, 1985, ch. XXXII: 849)

There are, in fact, Hurons lurking in this wilderness, but the evocation is of a landscape from a period before time began and, of course, before any human alteration of it.

The final, dramatic episode of this chapter—in which Cora, Uncas and Magua are all killed—takes place in another archetypically picturesque setting. It begins in a “cave,” with a “long and narrow entrance,” and the chase passes “through the natural galleries and subterraneous apartments of the cavern” (Cooper, 1985, ch. XXXII: 860). Magua, still with Cora as his prisoner, then ascends a mountain, where “the way was rugged, broken, and, in spots, nearly impassable” (Cooper, 1985, ch. XXXII: 861). Uncas leads the charge over “rocks, precipices and difficulties,” and the final crisis occurs when Cora stops “on a ledge of rock, that overhung a deep precipice, at no great distance from the summit of the mountain.” It is there that one of Magua’s “assistants” stabs Cora and where Magua kills Uncas. Hawk-eye then arrives on the ledge to find Magua, who tries to make his escape. He leaps across the precipice, but doesn’t quite make it, “though his hands grasped a shrub on the verge of the height.” And as Magua struggles to pull himself up, Hawk-eye takes aim and shoots the Indian incarnation of evil. Magua’s “hold loosened, and his dark person was seen cutting the air with its head downward, for a fleeting instant, until it glided past the fringe of shrubbery which clung to the mountain, in its rapid flight to destruction” (Cooper, 1985, ch. XXXII: 377-381). It is a violent scene of death in the untamed wilderness.

Besides his use of the conventions of the picturesque and the sublime and his tendency to see and describe landscape as painting, Cooper also actively erased all traces of human, or at least white, presence from his descriptions of nature. This

practice, too, helped him to construct a pristine natural setting for his American wilderness romance. The process, as already suggested, is common in depictions of untamed nature. As Leo Mellor explains, “To imagine a landscape as a wilderness has often been, throughout history, a way to render it into a *tabula rasa* for the imagination, thronged with natural forces and ripe possibilities—but scythed clear of human presence” (Mellor, 2014: 111). And this is exactly what Cooper does. For example, as is well known, Cooper visited Glens Falls and Lake George in the summer of 1824 in the company of four young English noblemen, engaging, in fact, in the relatively new activity of tourism.<sup>8</sup> But by 1824, the area had already been significantly altered by human intervention and was certainly not the pristine wilderness described in *The Last of the Mohicans*. As Cooper’s daughter, Susan Fenimore Cooper, later explained,

The hand of man had already been busy here [at Glens Falls], turning the power of the stream to account for industrial purposes, but there was far more of natural beauty still clinging about the spot than at the present hour [in 1861], and the singular character of the dark and silent caverns in the heart of the troubled stream was then very impressive. The travellers were much struck with those dark and sombre rocks, and the flood falling in fantastic wreaths of foam about them. [...] Before leaving the falls, the ground was examined closely, with a view to accurate description at a later hour. The actual natural features of the spot were combined in imagination [in *The Last of the Mohicans*] with those which had been partially defaced by man; the ancient forests were again restored, the first rude and unfinished steps of early civilization disappeared, and the waters fell once more, as they had fallen for thousands of forgotten years, in full, natural torrents, unchecked by any barrier raised by human labor. (Cooper, 1861: 125-126)

As Wayne Franklin asserts, “the landscape Cooper visited in 1824 and chose as the setting for his first ‘wilderness’ novel was not in any real sense a wilderness any longer.” Indeed, as Franklin also explains, “Cooper had never seen the place in its wilder condition, and therefore could draw neither on the falls as he saw them nor on earlier memories” (Franklin, 1992: 32). And one reason that earlier memories would not have helped is that the area had already been disfigured for quite some time. Timothy Dwight, who was president of Yale College when he revisited Glens Falls in 1811, thirteen years before Cooper, was shocked by its transformation:

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<sup>8</sup> It was, in fact, while visiting Glen Falls that Cooper decided to write what became *The Last of the Mohicans*.

To my great mortification I found it encumbered, and defaced, by the erection of several paltry buildings, raised up since my last visit to this place. The rocks, both above and below the bridge, were extremely altered, and greatly for the worse, by the operations of the water, and the weather. The courses of the currents had undergone, in many places, a similar variation. The view, at the same time, was broken by the buildings: two or three of which, designed to be mills, were given up as useless, and were in ruins. Another was a wretched looking cottage; standing upon the island between the bridges. Nothing could be more dissonant from the splendour of the scene; and hardly any thing more disgusting. (Dwight, 1822: 410)

What Cooper had had to do to create his vision of the wilderness in *The Last of the Mohicans* involved, as Franklin puts it, “erasing history from nature” (Franklin, 1992: 33).

## Early Concern about Man’s Destruction of Nature and Cooper as Proto-Environmentalist

By the time Cooper was writing his wilderness romance, American nature was, as has just been made clear, already rapidly being transformed, not to say ravaged, due to human development. And some people had not only noticed the change but had, like Timothy Dwight, clearly expressed their displeasure with what was happening. As Alan Taylor notes, in the early nineteenth century in Otsego County, New York—where Cooper’s father had established the family estate and had founded Cooperstown and where Cooper himself had lived as a boy, as a young husband and during most of the last fifteen years of his life—settlers, as was the case throughout the country, “meant to replace a nature that they called wilderness with another nature called pastoral” (Taylor, 1998: 294). The result, Taylor makes clear, was devastation. As he writes,

Encouraged by their expectations, faith, and stories—and empowered by their swelling numbers and sustained labor—settlers eventually gained the upper hand over the forest and its beasts. They then assailed the wild plant and animal life with a vengeance born, in part, from the memory of recent sufferings. The English traveler Isaac Weld marveled [in the late eighteenth century] that Americans hated trees and “cut away all before them without mercy; not one is spared; all share . . . in the general havoc.” (Taylor, 1998: 302)

“The deforestation was so rapid and so thorough,” Taylor explains, “that by 1800 leading New Yorkers worried about a looming fuel crisis in the Hudson River valley and began to call, in vain, for conservation measures” (Taylor, 1998: 303).

In 1831, just a few years after the publication of *The Last of the Mohicans*, Alexis de Tocqueville, who shared some of Cooper’s concerns about the dangers of democracy and the unchecked power of the common people,<sup>9</sup> lamented the destruction of the American wilderness as he traveled in an even more remote region of the United States, Saginaw Bay and its environs in Michigan:

It is this idea of destruction, this constant reminder in the back of one’s mind of rapid and inevitable change, that gives, one feels, such an original and touching beauty to the solitudes of America. One sees them with a melancholy pleasure; one is in a sort of hurry to admire them. The thought of this wild, natural grandeur that is coming to an end is inseparable from the marvelous images given birth to by the triumphant march of civilization. One feels proud to be a man, and yet one feels at the same time a certain bitter regret at the power God has granted us over nature. (Tocqueville, 1991: 409, my translation)

If Tocqueville is saddened by the loss of the wilderness, what he expresses is more of a resigned regret that the march of civilization seems inevitably to lead to such destruction, an attitude shared by many Americans of the time and which has clear parallels with widespread attitudes towards the disappearance of the Indians, another major theme, of course, in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Painters of the Hudson River School felt a similar regret at the destruction of American nature, which is one reason they felt an urgency to preserve the country’s landscapes on canvas. Thomas Cole, in the conclusion of his “Essay on American Scenery,” already quoted from, laments,

I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away—the ravages of the axe are daily increasing—the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation. The way-side is becoming shadeless, and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement;

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<sup>9</sup> As Thomas Clark—who nonetheless points out significant differences between Cooper and Tocqueville—notes: “While seeing no alternative to democracy and its key principles of equality and popular sovereignty, both men sought to identify its weaknesses and to discover by what means, whether constitutional, institutional, or more broadly social, it could be kept in check in order to prevent its degeneration into a tyranny of the majority” (Clark, 2007: 188).

which, as yet, generally destroys Nature's beauty without substituting that of Art. (Cole, 1836: 12)

Cooper, for his part, held similar feelings about the desecration of the American landscape, which he sometimes expressed quite forcefully in his writings, though not in *The Last of the Mohicans*. They are, however, presented so strongly in the preceding (the first) Leatherstocking Tale, *The Pioneers* (1823), for example, that Leland S. Person characterizes that book as America's "first environmental novel" (Person, 2007: 9).

The expressions of concern for the environment in *The Pioneers* are clearly integrated into the story itself. Comments about the transformation and destruction of nature occur frequently and are expressed directly by the characters. Indeed, early on in the story, as Elizabeth and her father, Judge Marmaduke Temple, who is clearly based, in part, on Cooper's own father, approach the village of Templeton in central New York, their sleigh is forced to slow down, and the narrator notes that "time was given Elizabeth to dwell on a scene which was so rapidly altering under the hands of man, that it only resembled, in its outlines, the picture she had so often studied, with delight, in childhood" (Cooper, 1985, ch. III: 37-38). In chapter IX, Judge Temple exclaims:

How often have I forbidden the use of the sugar-maple, in my dwelling. The sight of that sap, as it exudes with the heat, is painful to me, Richard. Really, it behooves the owner of woods so extensive as mine, to be cautious what example he sets his people, who are already felling the forests, as if no end could be found to their treasures, nor any limits to their extent. If we go on in this way, twenty years hence, we shall want fuel. (Cooper, 1985, ch. IX: 104)

Soon after those remarks, he declares, "The wastefulness of the settlers, with the noble trees of this country, is shocking, Monsieur Le Quoi, as doubtless you have noticed" (Cooper, 1985, ch. IX: 107). Judge Temple's strong concern for the environment—though it could be characterized more accurately as support for a managed use of natural resources—is, in fact, striking in a novel published in 1823. The other strong environmental voice in *The Pioneers* is that of Leatherstocking himself, who in this work is often referred to by his given name, Natty (his full name is Nathaniel Bumppo). At one point the villagers of Templeton organize a pigeon shoot, which is more like a massacre, and which Natty—who seems more focused on wildlife preservation than on protecting the trees and forest—is described as viewing as a "wasteful and unsportsmanlike execution" (Cooper, 1985, ch. XXII: 247). Unable to restrain himself in the face of this needless destruction, he later exclaims, "Well! The Lord won't see the waste of his creators [*sic*] for nothing, and right will be done

to the pigeons, as well as others, by-and-by” (Cooper, 1985, ch. XXII: 248). And it is in this same context that Leatherstocking first uses his homely and memorable expression, “wasty ways” (Cooper, 1985, ch. XXII: 250), to condemn the wanton destruction of nature. John G. Cawelti asserts that because

Never again, in the four Leatherstocking novels he wrote after *The Pioneers* did Cooper deal so explicitly with the negative ecological consequences of pioneering [...] it would be overdoing it to credit Cooper as a precursor of the ecological and wilderness movements in America (Cawelti, 1993: 155).

I would point out, however, that, even if Cawelti is right to a certain extent, there are nonetheless concerns for the environment voiced overtly in other works of the Leatherstocking series (notably *The Prairie*) and indirectly in *The Last of the Mohicans*, as this study hopes to demonstrate.

## **Hints of the Signs of the Influence of Man on Nature in *The Last of the Mohicans***

As has already been made clear, if Cooper was concerned about the threat to America’s natural resources and the beauty of its scenery, in *The Last of the Mohicans* he primarily expresses this concern indirectly through a portrayal of what the country’s picturesque and sublime landscape had been like—or might be imagined to have been like—before human intervention. On the rare occasions when he does call attention to the vanishing wilderness, it is generally in marginalized comments that in one way or another appear outside the main storyline, if not completely outside the body of the text of the romance. Indeed, having created a great landscape painting depicting an at least partially invented pristine American nature in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper placed what little acknowledgment he did make of human transformation outside the frame, and even that recognition was in some cases only added to the work after its first publication in 1826.

There is no talk, for example, of the influence of white civilization on the landscape in the original preface to the work. In the introduction first added for the English edition published by Richard Bentley in 1831,<sup>10</sup> however, Cooper makes the somewhat ambiguous assertion that

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<sup>10</sup> This introduction was also used for the 1850 George P. Putnam “Author’s Revised Edition” of *The Last of the Mohicans*, published in New York, and is normally included in modern editions of the book, such as the one published by The Library of America.

In point of fact, the country which is the scene of the following tale has undergone as little change, since the historical events alluded to had place, as almost any other district of equal extent within the whole limits of the United States. There are fashionable and well-attended watering-places at and near the spring where Hawk-eye halted to drink, and roads traverse the forests where he and his friends were compelled to journey without even a path. Glenn's has a large village; and while William Henry, and even a fortress of later date, are only to be traced as ruins, there is another village on the shores of the Horican. But, beyond this, the enterprise and energy of a people who have done so much in other places have done little here. The whole of that wilderness, in which the latter incidents of the legend occurred is nearly a wilderness still, though the red man has entirely deserted this part of the state. (Cooper, 1985: 476)

Cooper seems to contradict himself in this passage by asserting that there has and has not been development in the region and then tries to dismiss any apparent contradiction by asserting that, even if there have been changes, the (constructed) wilderness of the romance remains "nearly a wilderness still." Part of the ambiguity of these assertions may be due to the fact that they were, at first, addressed to English readers. Cooper, I would argue, wanted both to maintain for his readers the illusion of a pristine American wilderness and, at the same time, remind this audience, in a somewhat muted tone of patriotic bragging, that America, like England, had "fashionable and well-attended watering-places," not to mention a multiplying number of villages, and thus no reason to feel inferior to the mother country.

Another example of a way in which Cooper offers a marginalized reminder of the fact that the wilderness of the romance is of the past is in the epigraph to chapter III, which is an excerpt from the poem "An Indian at the Burying-Place of His Fathers" by William Cullen Bryant, arguably America's first major Romantic poet. The excerpt is the penultimate stanza from this poem published just two years before *The Last of the Mohicans*:

Before these fields were shorn and tilled,  
Full to the brim our rivers flowed;  
The melody of waters filled  
The fresh and boundless wood;  
And torrents dashed, and rivulets played,  
And fountains spouted in the shade. (Cooper, 1985, ch. III: 499)

These lines from the poem, supposedly voicing the regretful thoughts of an Indian who has returned to the burial place of his ancestors, are obviously designed to



reinforce the central theme of the romance, a lament over the vanishing of America's Noble Savages. However, the stanza also quite clearly focuses on the transformation of the nation's landscape from wilderness to pastoral, where instead of a "fresh and boundless wood," "torrents," "rivulets" and "fountains," there are "shorn and tilled" fields, images of the farms that have replaced the endless forests. This reminder of change, however, remains outside of the main narrative, safely cordoned off in the space reserved for epigraphs.

In chapter VI, which includes Hawk-eye's well-known description of Glenn's Falls, Cooper calls attention, in a footnote, to the transformation of the scene and offers a general criticism of Americans' lack of respect for natural beauty:

Glenn's Falls are on the Hudson, some forty or fifty miles above the head of tide, or that place where the river becomes navigable for sloops. The description of this picturesque and remarkable little cataract, as given by the scout, is sufficiently correct, though the application of the water to uses of civilised life has materially injured its beauties. The rocky island and the two caverns are known to every traveler, since the former sustains the pier of a bridge, which is now thrown across the river, immediately above the fall. In explanation of the taste of Hawk-eye, it should be remembered that men always prize that most which is least enjoyed. Thus, in a new country, the woods and other objects, which in an old country would be maintained at great cost, are got rid of, simply with a view of "improving" as it is called. (Cooper, 1985, ch. VI: 532 [footnote])

For Cooper, "civilized life" has "injured" the "beauties" of the falls, and he laments the fact that Americans are destroying "the woods and other objects" in the name of "improving." This violation of the image of the wilderness, already well established by chapter VI, is, however, also kept outside of the romance proper, here by placing it in a footnote.<sup>11</sup>

There are a few rare evocations of the changes to the landscape that appear in the body of the main narrative, but even these, in general, do not really break the illusion of the primeval wilderness that pervades the story. At one point, for example, Hawk-eye and David Gamut become engaged in a theological dispute, which includes Hawk-eye's claiming that Chingachgook, for example, will not be condemned by God despite that fact that he is not a Christian. When he is challenged by David to cite the "chapter and verse" that support his point of view (Cooper, 1985, ch. XII:

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<sup>11</sup> Cooper's footnotes were also first added in the 1831 English edition and then later included in the 1850 George P. Putnam "Author's Revised Edition" of *The Last of the Mohicans*. They too are usually incorporated into modern editions of the book.

604), Hawk-eye responds that his proof comes not from the Bible, but from the book of nature. The scout declares:

I have heard it said, that there are men who read in books, to convince themselves there is a God! I know not but man may so deform his works in the settlements, as to leave that which is so clear in the wilderness, a matter of doubt among traders and priests. If any such there be, and he will follow me from sun to sun, through the windings of the forest, he shall see enough to teach him that he is a fool, and that the greatest of his folly lies in striving to rise to the level of one he can never equal, be it in goodness, or be it in power. (Cooper, 1985, ch. XII: 604-605)

In this argument, Hawk-eye speaks of people who “deform” the works of God, but the place where this deformation has taken place is in the settlements, not in the wilderness home of Hawk-eye and his Delaware companions, and thus it doesn’t actually “spoil” the image of the pristine nature in which the story takes place. It could also be noted that since Hawk-eye sees the presence of God throughout the forest, there is a spiritual and, furthermore, a moral dimension to his defense of the wilderness. Indeed, what Donald A. Ringe remarks in reference to *The Pioneers* is equally true of *The Last of the Mohicans*: “The hunter [Leather-stocking] maintains a moral view of nature, and he regards the bounty around him as provided by a beneficent God for man’s use. A man is justified, he believes, in using whatever part of nature he truly needs; but he is not free to destroy at will” (Ringe, 1988: 17). And as John Gatta notes in a reference to *The Deerslayer*, but which is also clearly applicable to *The Last of the Mohicans*, “the earth he [Leather-stocking] imagines is sacred to the extent that it remains pristine” (Gatta, 2004: 80).

There is only one example in *The Last of the Mohicans* of a reference to the significant transformations of the wilderness that occurs within the body of the narrative, and even in that case Cooper uses another marginalization technique that minimizes the disruption of the scene he has so carefully constructed over the course of the romance. At the beginning of chapter XV, as the story nears its dramatic historical center, there is a discussion of mid-eighteenth-century North American military tactics. It is noted that the fortification of strategically advantageous high ground was often neglected at that time, in part due to the “density of the forests” (Cooper, 1985, ch. XV: 638), reminding the reader once again of the dominance of the wilderness. In order to highlight this point, there is a flashforward to the present of the composition of the work, which describes the transportation facilities that have developed and transformed the landscape into an easily traversed setting that can be admired for its splendor:

The tourist, the valetudinarian, or the amateur of the beauties of nature, who, in the train of his four-in-hand, now rolls through the scenes we have attempted to describe, in quest of information, health, or pleasure, or floats steadily toward his object on those artificial waters, which have sprung up under the administration of a statesman,<sup>12</sup> who has dared to stake his political character on the hazardous issue, is not to suppose that his ancestors traversed those hills, or struggled with the same currents with equal facility. The transportation of a single heavy gun, was often considered equal to a victory gained; if happily the difficulties of the passage had not so far separated it from its necessary concomitants, the ammunition, as to render it no more than a useless tube of unwieldy iron. (Cooper, 1985, ch. XV: 639)

This passage calls attention to the fact that the wilderness of *The Last of the Mohicans* is, in fact, no longer a wilderness, but instead an example of tamed nature, where tourists, those seeking to improve their health or lovers of natural beauty can travel easily from place to place, in contrast to the time of story, when even armies, due to the difficulties of movement caused by the landscape, could not necessarily go where they wanted. However, even this reminder of the disappearance of untamed nature, though it appears in the body of the main narrative, is also marginalized in that it is offered not by a character, but by an intrusive narrator, and is isolated in a single paragraph, which only momentarily interrupts the wilderness setting.

In *The Last of the Mohicans*, James Fenimore Cooper provides an extended vision of a wilderness that helped give a distinctive native quality to the nascent American literature of which it is a part. What he offers the reader is neither the landscapes of the early nineteenth century, when he wrote the romance, nor exactly those of the mid-eighteenth century, when the story takes place, but an archetypal wilderness world that incorporates important aspects of the picturesque and the sublime and that is often described more like a painting than a real landscape. Cooper's literary creation does not suggest, however, that he was unaware of or unconcerned by the transformations of the American landscape that were already proceeding rapidly throughout the country by the 1820s. The author was, in fact, alarmed by the direction in which the United States was headed, which is clear, for example, in the thoughts and words of several of the characters in his earlier work, *The Prairie*. That concern is present in *The Last of the Mohicans* as well, but the references are marginalized and, in one way or another, cordoned off from the main narrative. In

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<sup>12</sup> "Evidently the late De Witt Clinton, who died governor of New York, in 1828" (Cooper's footnote, XV, 639). The "artificial waters" refer to the Erie Canal, completed in 1825, whose construction was strongly supported by Clinton.

this second of the Leatherstocking Tales, Cooper shows his concern for the American landscape by offering an idealized version of the wilderness in a landscape painting of words, where the references to change are kept outside the frame of that painting, preserving a vision of how things were—or might have been.

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