

The Last of the Mohicans

J.Fenimore Cooper

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'The Last of the Mohicans' is the ultimate Indian-book. Or so I believed as a child. I had a Swedish translation of it but never got around to reading it for some reason. Later on I bought a cheap pocket edition of it (A Signet classic) but still I never got around to reading it. I may have tried but must have gotten quickly bogged down in the introductory paragraph. Finally I decided to make a concerted effort, hoping to become engaged in an engrossing tale and experience once again the magic of reading you enjoyed as a child. The novel was supposedly one of the most read by the American public, and even if the excitement supplied by suspense no longer would trap me as it would have done in more innocent days, the evocation of pristine American wilderness might be something I still could savor.

The book was written in 1826 and formed part of a series of successful books (the so called Leather-Stocking tales) written in the 1820's and 1830's. Although the 'Drang nach Westen' had already begun opening up the prairies for cultivation, there was still a lot of wilderness in the East, especially in Upstate New York and the upper parts of New England. While the typical Indian in the public imagination is a prairie Indian, the time when Indians also roamed the forests of the East, so called forest Indians, was not too distant, yet already a subject of nostalgia. Cooper sets his tale in the mid 18th century when the colonial wars between the English and the French were ravaging the lands and different Indian tribes were engaged on both sides of hostilities although to their ultimate disadvantage. In fact this proved to be the swan song of the eastern shore Indians, hence the sad title of the novel.

You expect suspense and evocation of unsullied nature of huge forests sprinkled with quiet lakes, cut through by meandering rivers and fresh brooks and teeming with wildlife, moose, smaller deer, bears, beavers and smaller fray, all conveyed through rich and solid old-fashioned prose. In short a depiction of Romantic North America, when there were no freeways, shopping malls, suburban spread. Still much of the States is blessed with the kind of nature that you never find on the European continent, but somehow this nature is tamed and hamstrung and has lost its soul once the original inhabitants and their culture have been eradicated never to be revived. But do you actually get it in the novel?

The problem is the prose style. Cooper writes a contorted and over-elaborated prose treating the passing, inconsequential detail, as extensively as the important passages. The effect is soporific and exhausting, literally not seeing the forest because of all the trees. Mark Twain in his notorious but highly amusing lambasting of Coopers work, focuses on his style, and in a memorable metaphor likens the style to an army, the author to a general, and the book to a campaign, and complains that Cooper avails himself of as much artillery when attacking a cow as he would be forced to do against a battalion. The verbiage that goes into the novel could easily be cut in half and convey as much information and with much more clarity to boot, as to be found in the original. One may counter that that

elaborate style was fashionable at the time, and that contemporary readers seem to have savored his works, and why change a winning concept? This might be true, and in the hands of abler writers it can produce passages of striking beauty, one only needs to be reminded of Hawthorne and Melville which are set up as models of American 19th century prose. (And to be honest, if you look hard enough you may come up with some striking passages in Cooper as well, this being inevitable by statistical coincidence if not through other reasons of deliberation.) But the art of novel writing was still rather primitive at the time, all of them suffering from over elaboration, as if verbosity was an asset. Thus the presence of some remarkable exceptions such as the novels of Jane Austen are so much more remarkable. In addition to that Cooper was an amateur who only by accident had discovered his ability to put words on paper and spin a yarn. A discovery that went to his head and made him think, unrestrained by the example of contemporary prose, that the more words the better. With that came a proclivity for using sophisticated words, when actually simple ones would do as well, not to say much better. But the public starving for reading matter, besides the Bible, had no choice than to put up with it. Maybe he also got paid by the number of words? It is always much easier to expand on a passage, keeping all your darlings and their hangers-on, than actually trim and dispose of words and expressions already framed with a sustained effort you do not want to see wasted. Thus the general malaise of the times is exacerbated by the author's plain incompetence, partly caused by his lack of education. Twain in his analysis points out that a passage such as 'while those hands which she had raised' gives the reader to believe that the young woman have several sets of hands. He also points out that a 'flush of beauty' cannot be said to 'be seated on her cheeks', as it is not a matter of cosmetic powder applied to the skin, but an effusion that originates from within. Thus, one surmises, that something such as 'oozing out of her cheeks' might be more appropriate, although the verb 'ooze' might not be the most felicitous, verbs such as 'escaping', 'burning' or 'glowing' would be preferable. It goes to show the importance of style in presenting a story, in fact with a good style, the story takes second place. It also points out the many pitfalls inherent in writing, and the more verbose and elaborated, the greater the risk for blunders.

Now what can you get out of the book? First and foremost it is the depiction of the wild woods. This he does capably if not inspiredly. More interesting is his description of the Indians. They are seen as cruel savages no better than wild animals, although the real heroes of the novel are two Indians (of the Delaware people, the Mohicans) and the scout who has gone Native (Hawk-eye by name). This bespeaks of an ambivalence, not unusual at the time. The notion of the noble savage was still vivid in the minds of people, fueled by the fascination with a strange and primitive life-style combined with an unparalleled sophistication in surviving the harsh environment, meaning in particular of being able to trace animals and make themselves almost untraceable. Skills that have been lost by civilized people, softened by domestication. The Christian Jew David Gamut of the story, with his ungainly frame and general physical ineptness which renders him useless in the bush, will stand for the most extreme case of effeminated manhood. Thus the hatred of the Indians is tempered by a fascination ranging from the reluctant (this applies in the novel to the arch-villain Magua) to the admiring (the Indian heroes). Twain faults Cooper with a failure of observation, and this might well be true, the novels are written on the

desktop of a study, no doubt with a view of distant forests through the windows, but not instructed by hands on explorations. This is a pity, otherwise the mores of the Indians communities might have been rendered with higher accuracy and more significant details, as would the tracking through the forests giving the author an opportunity of being a pioneer in forensic fiction later to be developed into the crime story. But the ambition of the author was to spin a romantic tale, to bring him money, and not to produce an embellished anthropological study. And of course it is the romance that have attracted readers, including as we will see below, D.H. Lawrence.

The French are represented with respect, especially the French commander Montcalm (1712-59) a historical person. There is also a fair amount of French in the conversation without any translations, suggesting that readers should be competent enough. However, the young women - Alice and Cora - daughters of the English commander Colonel Munro (Monro (1700-57) in real life another historical person), are depicted using the most hackneyed cliches. As a result they do not come to life and as reader one does not really care for them and their fate, thus depriving the reader of much of the intended suspense. An interesting aside though, is that Cora is hinted as having Negro blood, and the stigma associated with that is very much regretted. This may be an indication on how the Black slaves of the south were thought of by the Northerners at the time. This fact D.H.Lawrence pounces on in his comments on the Leather-Stocking novels, and he sees Cora as the center of sexual attraction in the novel. First most explicitly by the villain Magua, who abducted her and sent the whole plot rolling by the act, secretly by the young Indian Uncas, and unconsciously by the young officer Heyward, but who would be too timid for such a union, and instead prefers, to the consternation of his potential father-in-law, the insipidity of the half-sister Alice.

As to the actual plot, the less said the better. It is based on real events as noted, in particular the massacre of a few hundred stragglers after abandoning the besieged fort under the generous conditions offered by Malcolm, did take place in real life. Otherwise it is done according to a formula with remarkable coincidences, cliff-hangers, and unbelievable stratagems. There is much killing and shooting, as in a modern thriller, and the reader is manipulated to side with what in normal life would be considered a bunch of psychopaths, who are given authority by the fictional setting to kill with impunity. This is typical for much fiction and reminds us that the books by Cooper were not written for a sophisticated literary audience but for a mass public, whose taste has not significantly improved (or deteriorated) in history.

The book ends by the murder of Cora and her secret lover - Uncas - the young Indian who serves as one of the novel's heroes. Her abductor is killed as well, providing a climax to the plot. This gives to the novel a touch of tragedy, incidentally justifying the title, and maybe, in the hope of the author, elevating the book to a higher literary level. It also provides an excuse for an extending burial ceremony and the opportunity for an Indian patriarch (in excess of a century old) to bemoan the passing of the Indian ways, a regret many a reader can share.