

# THE PIONEERS

*or*  
THE SOURCES OF THE  
SUSQUEHANNA

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*A Descriptive Tale*

*James Fenimore Cooper*

With a New Introduction by  
Max Cavitch



SIGNET CLASSICS

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## INTRODUCTION

James Fenimore Cooper claimed that he wrote his first novel on a dare, his second to please a fickle reading public, and his third, *The Pioneers*, exclusively to please himself. In writing *The Pioneers*, Cooper drew extensively on memories of his childhood in upstate New York, where his father William had bought a large parcel of land—land that had previously been seized from Indian tribes—and, in 1786, founded a settlement there, which he named after himself. Cooperstown was a frontier town, part of the vast network of settlements that was everywhere pushing inland from older coastal and riverine settlements up and down the Atlantic Seaboard. Land speculation and development made William Cooper rich, and he later became a county judge. The character of Judge Marmaduke Temple in *The Pioneers* is based on him. Other characters in the novel, including the French refugee Monsieur Le Quoi and the town doctor Elnathan Todd resemble people Cooper's family actually knew. Though none of the characters or events in *The Pioneers* is strictly factual, they are all suffused with the author's childhood memories. This element of autobiographical reminiscence is what made the novel such a deep pleasure for Cooper to write.

But *The Pioneers* did more than just please its author; it helped make him an international success. It was an instant hit, selling thousands of copies on the first day of publication alone. *The Pioneers* has been pleasing readers ever since, both on its own and as the first in a series of five novels—the so-called Leatherstocking Tales—concerning the life and adventures of Natty

Bumppo, nicknamed Leatherstocking because of the deerskin leggings he wears. Cooper didn't write the novels according to the chronological sequence of Natty Bumppo's life. In *The Pioneers* (1823), Leatherstocking is a gray-haired man, still robust but well advanced in years. The next novel Cooper wrote featuring Bumppo, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), takes place almost forty years earlier. Then Cooper wrote *The Prairie* (1827), in which the very aged Leatherstocking comes to the end of his life. But in *The Pathfinder* (1840) Natty is a young man again. And in *The Deerslayer* (1841) he is younger still.

Leatherstocking makes a relatively modest first appearance in *The Pioneers*, but his character is clearly established there along the lines Cooper would follow in the four ensuing novels. Wallace Stegner has described him to a T:

Far from handsome (looks went with the effete and civilized), he is nevertheless fearless, self-reliant, omniscient, a keen tracker and a dead shot, a mortal enemy and the most loyal of friends. He is also the soul of chivalry, protecting and saving Cooper's females when they go implausibly astray in the wild woods. An orphan, untutored, Natty has kept the innocence of the natural man. From his brief contact with the Moravians, or from the woods themselves, he has imbibed a noble magnanimity, a sensitivity to beauty and a deep if unorthodox piety. Homeless in the civilized sense, he has made the wilderness his home, and no witches, devils or fears assail him there: he feels the presence of God in every leaf.

Stegner is describing no mere literary character, but rather a mythic hero, a "demigod in buckskin." The fact that a contemporary author could paint such a vivid and idealizing portrait of Leatherstocking nearly two centuries after Cooper invented him is just one sign of the hold he still has on the modern imagination. He is one of those made-up people, like Don Quixote and Robinson

Crusoe, who live far beyond the pages of the books in which they are born. They become national icons.

*The Pioneers* is a book about a young nation undergoing swift and comprehensive changes. The story begins in 1793, just ten years after the end of the American Revolution and a mere two years after the ratification of the Constitution. The citizens and subjects of the new nation were engaged—some of them freely and some, like Judge Temple's slave Agamemnon, under compulsion—in the wholesale transformation of the North American landscape and its peoples. The novel's setting, the environs of New York's Otsego Lake, about sixty miles west of Albany, is a scene of change so rapid that one of the characters imagines she can see it mutating under her very eyes. Here, as in so many other states and territories of the new nation, the influx of settlers, the development of natural resources, the clearing of land, the proliferation of farms, the erection of schools, churches, and municipal buildings, and the refinement of civil society seemed to many to be signs of inevitable progress and limitless potential.

Yet even amidst the bounty of Judge Temple's "Patent" (the vast land holdings he had cheaply acquired after their confiscation from Loyalists during the Revolution), there are already signs of ultimate limits and costs. Leatherstocking, a longtime resident hunter in the region, complains to Temple that game is getting harder and harder to find as a result of the Judge's "clearings and betterments." And even Temple is alarmed at the number of trees falling to the ax and being consumed in roaring hearth fires like his own. But whereas the principled Leatherstocking always refuses to participate in the settlers' wanton destruction of flora and fauna (he kills what he needs, nothing more), Temple periodically gets caught up in the excitement, despite his proto-conservationist views. He laments the spectacular waste generated by the overkill of pigeon shoots and net fishing, yet, in the midst of such depredations, he is as excited as any other settler by the easy pickings. It is this ambivalence, as much as the novel's gorgeous descriptions of pristine landscapes and its moralistic warnings against their impending destruction,

that makes *The Pioneers* one of the first important American literary works of ecological consciousness.

Judge Temple believes that, ultimately, the law will succeed in controlling rampant deforestation and promiscuous hunting. He consoles himself with this belief, even as he watches the land, water, and air being plundered without check all around him. For example, with the approach of spring, sugar maples are carelessly gouged with deadly wounds to collect the running sap when small incisions would have done just as well, and would have minimized the risk to the irreplaceable "growth of centuries." Later in the spring, the settlers shoot down vast flocks of migrating passenger pigeons (a species of pigeon now extinct; the last one died in a zoo in 1914) in their flight over Templeton, and the ground is strewn with thousands of dead and half-dead birds. Characteristically, Temple gets caught up in the bloodlust and later regrets his actions as he contemplates the sea of wounded birds: "I see nothing but eyes, in every direction, as the innocent sufferers turn their heads in terror. . . . I think it is time to end the sport; if sport it be." Yet in the very next chapter, Temple participates eagerly in the netting of thousands of fish from the lake. Then, contemplating a haul that vastly exceeds the needs of the settlers, he once again succumbs to remorse, calling it "a fearful expenditure of the choicest gifts of Providence." He offers Leatherstocking a portion of the catch, but the hunter refuses: "I eat of no man's wasty ways." Whereas Temple believes that regulation, in the form of laws, will ultimately curb these "wasty ways," Leatherstocking holds to a morality that precedes and, in his view, transcends legal restraint.

Judge Temple's faith in the law runs deep, and not only because he sees in it the hope of environmental protection. The law also backs his ownership of the land and of the resources it contains, despite the fact that others have strong moral claims to assert. Leatherstocking, for instance, had been a resident of the Otsego Lake region for decades before Temple arrived to assert his claim. Temple freely acknowledges Leatherstocking's precedence and the freedom he has hitherto enjoyed to hunt when and where he likes. But the judge insists such

claims of "natural" rights must yield to the advance of settlement and to the development of a system of restraints adequate to the protection of a more complex society. When Leatherstocking kills a deer "out of season," he is dismayed to discover that the law—and Judge Temple himself—will indeed move against him.

Leatherstocking's great friend and companion, the Delaware chief Chingachgook (also known as Indian John and John Mohegan), represents another kind of claim—that of displaced Indian tribes, the hunting cultures of which required an abundance of game. The clearing of the forests for farming has thinned or eliminated animal populations (such as beaver and deer) upon which aboriginal societies depended. Chingachgook is treated as the solitary ghost of a civilization and way of life that the white settlers, including those most sympathetic to the Indian, agree cannot be restored. Even Oliver Edwards, the mysterious and cultivated young man who temporarily shares the modest wigwam of Leatherstocking and Chingachgook, concurs with Elizabeth Temple when she says that, even if they wanted to, they could not "convert these clearings and farms, again, into hunting-grounds, as the Leatherstocking would wish to see them." Similar forms of resigned nostalgia helped convince white settlers—and readers of Cooper's novel in the 1820s and beyond—that their displacement of Indian tribes was, if lamentable, nevertheless inevitable and irreversible, a belief that was to some extent self-fulfilling.

Oliver Edwards, as it turns out, represents yet another kind of claim on Temple's Patent. His uncertain origins and motives—sources of great curiosity and dramatic tension throughout most of the novel—turn out to be linked closely to the pre-Revolutionary property and estates of the Royalist family of Temple's friend Edward Effingham. Temple was able to gain legal title to the Patent because it was one of many such estates confiscated during the Revolution. In the violent seizure by rebel Colonials of Royalists' property, there was, as Cooper's novel makes plain, a deeply ironic echo of the violence previously used by the British to dispossess American Indians of their lands in the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries. Like Chingachgook, Oliver Edwards (who many in the novel believe to be a blood relative of Chingachgook) stands for preexisting property claims that new American laws have vitiated. The justice of these dispossessions is centrally at issue in *The Pioneers*.

The law of property was centrally at issue in Cooper's own life as well. His father, William, like Judge Temple in *The Pioneers*, was a Quaker from the middle colonies who moved his family to Otsego Lake after acquiring a large tract of land formerly owned by a British Loyalist. After William's death in 1809, his estate, valued at roughly \$750,000 (tens of millions in 2006 dollars) was divided among his six surviving children, mostly in the form of widely scattered and heavily encumbered land holdings. Bad investments, burdensome debts, and the economic depression following the War of 1812 steadily sapped the family fortune. When James Cooper (he added the "Fenimore" in 1826) began writing *The Pioneers* in 1821, he was still able to live the life of a wealthy gentleman farmer. But by the time of the novel's publication, less than a year and a half later, he was virtually propertyless. Many readers believe that, during this period of financial calamity, Cooper wrote *The Pioneers* in order to imaginatively reclaim the patrimony that was slipping through his fingers.

The collapse of the Cooper family fortune played out against a backdrop of national and local debates over the laws of property. In 1821, as Cooper was writing his novel, New York State was rewriting its constitution, lowering property-holding requirements for voters, and thereby opting for a less paternalistic, more democratic form of government. But paternalistic conservatism remained a strong value for Cooper, and the central characters of *The Pioneers* reflect this. "The poor are always prodigal," says Judge Temple, who believes, therefore, that the poor must be "protected" from their own extravagance and lack of foresight by lords of the soil like himself. Even the highly individualistic Natty Bumppo—who would become, thanks to *The Pioneers* and to the four ensuing Leatherstocking novels, one of the great mythic heroes of American democratic romance—spends

much of his time and energy helping to restore the property of the family of the dispossessed British officer he dutifully served as a frontier scout before the Revolution. In his role in preserving hereditary rights and pre-Revolutionary interests, Leatherstocking turns out to have a great deal in common with Cooper in his own real-life struggle to preserve his father's estate and to defend the claims of landholding elites. Leatherstocking's idiosyncratic nature (he's a town-shunning illiterate woodsman who snaps his fingers in the face of property rights while nevertheless championing the cause of a dispossessed aristocrat!) owes much to the complexity of Cooper's own shifting, uneasy relation to what often seemed like contradictory democratic and republican values. Did American individualism require less government, or more? Was universal suffrage good or bad for agrarianism? What about the commercialization of agriculture? Did the leveling of society promote civic virtue, or moral degeneration? Should concentrations of family wealth be discouraged by law and by custom, or should hereditary inheritance be zealously protected?

Despite the Cooper family's money troubles of the early nineteenth century, the success of James Cooper as a novelist soon made him a wealthy man again, and with his earnings as a writer he continued throughout his life to pursue the reacquisition of old family property—pursuits that resulted in various public disputes and lawsuits, as well as a series of novels, published in the 1840s, that championed the interests of landed proprietors and opposed tenant rights. Cooper's intensive study of political history and time spent living in Europe strengthened his allegiance to republican principles, which he praised at length in *Notions of the Americans* (1828), a Jeffersonian paean to the "natural" aristocracy of the independent farmer, the justice of the popular will, and the sovereignty of the law. But his return to the U.S. after seven years abroad (he and his family lived chiefly in Paris from 1826 to 1833) was profoundly disillusioning. What had looked from afar like the bastion of freedom had, from Cooper's perspective, become a country where unchecked, coercive egalitarianism threatened the liberty of the individual.

Two novels published in 1838, *Homeward Bound* and *Home as Found*, extended Cooper's deeply ambivalent quarrel with democracy and the Jacksonian transformation of American society (D. H. Lawrence wrote that Cooper "felt the democratic American tomahawk wheeling over his uncomfortable scalp all the time") by extending the story of the Effingham family begun in *The Pioneers*. These two novels are, indeed, sequels to *The Pioneers*—much more truly than most of the other Leatherstocking novels, which are prequels rather than sequels (the one exception is *The Prairie*, in which Natty Bumppo dies). *Homeward Bound* and *Home as Found* are extensions, not of Leatherstocking's story, but of the Effingham family's—the story of the descendants of the British Major Effingham, whose confiscated estate becomes Templeton in *The Pioneers*. They are stories of the disappointments of homecoming, disappointments Cooper himself experienced upon his return from Europe. He found home—Cooperstown in particular—to have changed into something recognizable only in its declension from its former state, which, for Cooper, was largely a state of mind: an expression of deep-rooted longings under the pressure of present anxieties.

One thematic hallmark of *The Pioneers* is its obsession with change, with mutability. The seasonal transformations of the landscape, the more abrupt changes wrought by storm and fire, the bloom and decay of human life, the slapdash construction of a booming frontier town, the unceasing alterations to ways of living that new people, new laws, new tastes, and new threats required—Cooper describes all of this with wonderful detail and deep pathos. The opening scene of the novel, in which Judge Temple and his daughter Elizabeth, on Christmas Eve day, return home to Templeton through a world of white in a horse-drawn sleigh is a tour de force of American pastoralism. The fact that the very first character we encounter is neither Elizabeth nor her father, but rather their slave Agamemnon driving the sleigh, is no insignificant index of the violence that so often lies at the heart of such visions.

—Max Cavitch

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