

The James Fenimore Cooper Collections at the American Antiquarian Society

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IN the summer of 1978 I first came to the American Antiquarian Society on a Fred Harris Daniels fellowship and literally threw myself on the mercies of the staff. (I should explain that because I had done original research in Latin American fiction as part of my M.A. thesis at Washington University, Virgil Whitaker had deleted the course in bibliography and library use from my Ph.D. program at Stanford. I was grateful at the time, but confronting the awesome holdings of the Antiquarian, I needed help. The staff pretended not to notice my shortcomings and took good care of me.)

At the time, I was editing James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pilot*, and one of the first chores was to establish a stemma—tracking the lineage of all known printings of the text, including piracies. The Antiquarian's collection, supplemented by volumes borrowed for me from other libraries, compressed what could have been a search that took years into a matter of days. We also had here the use of a Hinman Collator—something that had not been available either at Stanford or at the University of California at Berkeley. In short, this library could furnish everything we needed for textual editing.

My biggest challenge was locating the material I had to find in order to write the historical introduction. These introductions, in the Cooper edition, are best thought of as the biography of the

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book. What prompted Cooper to choose this subject? What historical or biographical documents did he rely on? Did anything occur while he was writing to influence his treatment of his subject? Did anything happen later to affect his subsequent revisions of the text? What was the book's reception, both in the United States and abroad? What continued to be its history, in terms of criticism and reprintings and translations, to the time of Cooper's death in 1851?

Again I taxed the holdings of the library and the energies of the staff. Volume after volume of newspapers came out of the stacks to be scanned for references to publication dates and for reviews. (The accepted publication date of *The Pilot*, always given as 1823, proved to be wrong; it was not published until 1824. When it turned out, unexpectedly, to be a success, the first edition was followed within weeks by a heavily revised second edition.)

As for reviews, since we're being sensitive to serendipity and synergy, I should say at this point that the ability to cast so broad a net produced unexpected results in the shape of the small fry, blowfish, groupers, and carp that passed for American literary critics between 1824 and 1850. Many of them turned out to be scavengers. Not only were we stealing British fiction, such as Scott's works, in those days, but newspapers reprinted, often without credit, reviews from English and Scottish papers and journals. Cooper's complaints that Americans had failed to achieve an intellectual independence to match their political independence from Great Britain were well-founded. For my purposes this was a side issue, except that it did give me cause to believe that my author was a reasonable man and that his occasional explosions might be justified.

Having done some preliminary work at the Huntington, I knew that I had a major problem in locating Cooper's source or sources for the book. *The Pilot* has, as its unnamed hero, a figure clearly based on the person and exploits of John Paul Jones. Yet Jones had been virtually forgotten in this country until *The Pilot* became a bestseller both here and in England and France. The reason for

this neglect should interest feminists as well as historians. Following the Revolution, Jones had gone to work for Catherine the Great, who had (like Queen Elizabeth I of England) a very bad press in nineteenth-century America. The consensus about 1820 was that Jones was *not* the lover of freedom that he had pretended to be since he had gone to work for a 'despot' — the only word that was used to describe Catherine in those days. This accusation colors Cooper's own novel, but what Cooper did not know was that Thomas Jefferson had asked Jones to accept Catherine's offer to take command of her navy. The United States could not afford a navy right after our revolution, and only Catherine's ships stood between our own shipping and the Barbary pirates. Unfortunately, only Jefferson and Jones knew about all this, and Jones's papers that had been left in the United States had been lost during the yellow fever epidemics in New York. Only after the publication of Cooper's novel were many of his letters and other papers located and turned over to the Department of the Navy — after having first been brought to Cooper.

Bird-dogging back and forth through everything about Jones that I could find that had been in print between the time of the Revolution and 1823, I failed to find — even in the many chapbooks that were British wartime propaganda — the details about Jones's character and behavior that Cooper must have had available when he was writing. Yet I had the uneasy feeling that I did have the source I needed, but wasn't recognizing it. Like Elizabeth Peabody, when she ran smack into a tree in Margaret Fuller's front yard, 'I *saw* it, but I just didn't *realize* it.' The missing material, which I had seen in a modern version edited at Annapolis, turned out to be a midshipman's narrative published anonymously in 1806 and reissued in 1808 with a title page bearing the name of Nathaniel Fanning. The key scene, like an identifying fingerprint, is a description of Jones's behavior during a storm that almost cost him his ship in real life and that does wreck Cooper's fictional ship, the *Ariel*, in the novel.

With this problem of Cooper's source well on its way to being

solved, I could concentrate on reviews. The Society's famous collection of American newspapers now in microform ends in 1821, just when Cooper started to write, but the Antiquarian's resources beyond that year proved invaluable. A willing staff brought me buried treasures, as they did again when I visited last year. I'm currently writing the historical introduction to *The Bravo*, and an important review of that book is one written by someone signing himself 'Cassio' in the *New-York American* on June 7, 1832. That hostile review, which Cooper and Samuel F. B. Morse mistakenly thought was written by a Frenchman and just reprinted here, began Cooper's long and costly battle with the United States press. I couldn't believe that the boxes of books and papers Jim Beard left at his death didn't contain a copy of this review, but they didn't. Not even Marcus could arrange for us to have every one of the old papers, and the Society lacks the copy for June 7, but again the willingness of the staff to let me see as much of that seven miles of shelved newspapers as I liked paid off. The review turned up in a different volume of the *New-York American*, this one published 'for the country' on Tuesday, June 13, almost a week after the original.

In the meantime, leafing through these old papers had produced another example of synergy. Charles King, who edited the *New-York American* from 1823 to 1845, had long been a friend of Cooper's and a member of the Bread and Cheese Club Cooper organized in New York. At the club's farewell dinner for Cooper, when he was leaving for Europe in 1826, King had, in James Beard's words, 'paid florid tribute to the guest of honor' (*Letters and Journals* 1.139). At that same dinner, on Cooper's motion, Washington Irving and Washington Allston were elected to honorary membership in the club. In short, everything was sweetness and light when Cooper left New York for Europe.

On December 3, 1831, King's paper printed a short but favorable review of *The Bravo*. The hostile 'Cassio' review a year and a half later had been accompanied by an editorial in which King mildly disagreed with the attack on Cooper's book. In August,

Cooper wrote to Samuel F. B. Morse about the Cassio review and said that King had been duped. The following month, Cooper submitted the final report of the American Polish Committee, which he had headed, to King for publication, along with a letter from Lafayette thanking Cooper and the Americans for their aid to the Poles. Printing all this, King then added an editorial recommending that New Yorkers form a committee to aid Polish refugees who managed to get to the United States. As of September 6, 1832, in other words, there was no serious rupture between Cooper and King, so far as Cooper knew. What Cooper did not know until August 1833, almost a year later, was that 'Cassio' was the Paris correspondent for King's *New-York American*. He was Edward Sherman Gould, a young man who had 'achieved' in Cooper's words, 'the most offensively adulatory thing that was ever done to me, and it was, at the same time, one of the most impudent. . . ! The disgust I manifested on that occasion may have been the cause of dread Achilles' wrath' (*Letters and Journals* II. 399-400). (Gould had at one time acted as secretary of the Polish committee in Paris and his offensive behavior may have occurred at one of the meetings of that group.)

This last is conjecture, but by having available the Antiquarian's marvelous store of newspapers, we know for a fact that just five days before he printed the review attacking *The Bravo*, King had devoted 2½ pages, almost half the entire paper, to columns of praise and the text of speeches and toasts given to Washington Irving at a banquet in his honor in New York City. (American newspapers of the time tended to pit Irving against Cooper in a popularity contest neither author had asked for, but awareness of this comes only after one leafs through many old papers.) When Cooper returned to the United States in the fall of 1833, a committee (not including Charles King this time) offered to give *him* a welcoming banquet. He declined, mentioning in his reply that his writing had been 'loudly censured.' At this, King exploded, writing that he must be one of those alluded to and reprinting on December 3, 1833 (some eighteen months after its initial appearance)

the original 'Cassio' review on page 1 of the newspaper and printing as well Gould's translation of the French review that Cooper and Morse had mistakenly thought was the source of the American version. I'm still working on this snarl, but the final word may have to be said by Jim Beard's successor as Cooper's biographer.

Whoever the biographer turns out to be will be blessed by having assembled here at the Antiquarian an incomparable hoard of materials for Cooper scholarship. Marcus McCorison's ability and astuteness, and the record the Society had established under his guidance were responsible for this institution's becoming the chief beneficiary of the late Paul Fenimore Cooper's generosity. I want to stress generosity, since the size of the gift naturally makes it one of the library's most important acquisitions, speaking only of the dollar value. A brief note from Fenimore Cooper to some nonentity, saying that Cooper would not be able to have lunch on a Tuesday, sold recently for \$500, and one page of manuscript may go for two or three thousand dollars. Besides letters and manuscripts written *by* Cooper, the collection contains letters *to* Cooper from other authors, as well as letters from Lafayette, the painter and dramatist William Dunlap, Samuel F. B. Morse, John, Peter, and William Jay, Albert Gallatin, Richard Rush, and a clutch of baronesses, counts, countesses, and his sponsor in Parisian society, the Princess Galitzin.

A complementary collection of Cooper materials is that left by the late James Franklin Beard, Jr. Even though Jim grumbled a lot about what he pictured as Marcus's overprotective attitude toward the holdings of the library, he obviously approved at the same time since he left his entire collection of books and papers to the Antiquarian Society. As you know, after editing the six volumes of the *Letters and Journals* of Cooper, Jim turned to heading the State University of New York Press edition of Cooper's works. The editors working under him were scattered across the continent, and Jim collected criticism, illustrations, and other materials, partly to aid them and partly as preparation for writing the biography of Cooper that the family had authorized him to do. When

he died unexpectedly, some 180 boxes of books and papers at Clark University and files and files of papers in his house were in no particular order. Confronting these, I came to appreciate a remark he made in a letter to me in 1987: 'I think any sane person would give up the idea of a Cooper biography if he or she could see the volume of stuff I've accumulated in the last thirty or so years.'

When I inherited the job of sorting through this 'stuff,' I attempted to suggest categories based on my guess as to *why* Jim had saved each book or paper. In addition to writing the biography and supervising the editing of some thirty-two novels and possibly volumes of Cooper's historical and biographical writings, Jim was working on an annotated bibliography of Cooper criticism for G. K. Hall. He was also teaching and had directed a number of M.A. theses about Cooper; in addition, he had on hand many unsolicited articles, theses, and doctoral dissertations sent to him—some of these in foreign languages, including Russian. My list of what Jim had saved was in no particular order when I first read it to Marcus and suggested what I thought might be done with various categories. Marcus's written report of our conversation was so complete that I accused him of having had a tape recorder hidden somewhere, and he made helpful recommendations about what action should be taken by various people involved. My job of discarding what we didn't need was made much easier when he told me what I think of as McCorison's First Law of Conservatorship: 'Careful selection; ready rejection.' Since that time, some changes have been made in our original plans, the most important being the Antiquarian Society's willingness to house and release to current editors the material they need to edit still more volumes. As a result, everything pertaining to the Cooper Edition is now centered here, and all sorts of research trails crisscross through the collection.

What do I mean by 'everything'? For persons interested in the history of the book, we have multiple editions published in the United States, England, and elsewhere—including translations and piracies. Some of the handsomest volumes are piracies, in fact,

beautifully bound and illustrated. Cooper's works contribute to a history of typography, since his first books were printed in movable type and the later ones were stereotyped. We also have information about the business of printing in the shape of Cooper's contracts with publishers and letters to Cooper from his publishers.

Persons interested in editing practices for the SUNY Press and other Center for Scholarly Editions volumes can find the record of editorial decisions, comparisons of various editions, readings of the manuscript (where it exists), and illustrations collected for each volume. Anyone curious about Cooper's methods of composition and revision has God's plenty of evidence. Not only do we have manuscripts and revisions in his own hand that show meticulous attention to meaning and a marked sensitivity to the sounds of words, but we have proof that Cooper, like Melville, was a 'putter inner' rather than a 'taker outer,' as creative writing teachers divide writers. The only cancellations worth noting are long passages where his pen ran away in pursuit of a line of thought. (One such that I found was a long anecdote about a black man Cooper had hypnotized and his answers to Cooper's questions.) Just as interesting are those books Cooper revised, particularly the ones done for his English publisher. He would have a printed volume taken apart and rebound with blank leaves on which to make revisions inserted between the book's pages. This obviously is a method that allows a writer to do everything except make major structural changes.

The total Cooper collection—by which I mean what Marcus had acquired for the Society plus what came from Paul Fenimore Cooper plus what came from James Beard—is a fertile source of synergy. Because Cooper was interested in so many different subjects, the collection contains the nexus that can be a starting point for many lines of investigation. For instance, his early experience as a seaman, his lifelong support of the navy, his equally long friendship with Commander William B. Shubrick, his invention of the sea novel, and his writings in naval history and biography all intertwine here in the Cooper papers. The last time I talked

with Richard Hofstadter, he said that his next big project would be a reassessment of Cooper as a historian, particularly a naval historian. He said that he had done enough preliminary investigation to be sure that Cooper's work in naval history and biography was unjustly neglected. Unfortunately, Richard died shortly after that and the record remains uncorrected. The damage caused by such neglect, to give an example I'm familiar with, produces such works as Samuel Eliot Morison's biography of John Paul Jones. By ignoring completely Cooper's careful research into Jones's biography (as corrected by Jones's own niece), and by relying entirely on the writing of Alexander Slidell MacKenzie, Morison turned out an unjust portrait of Jones.

Before dropping Cooper's connection with the navy, I want to mention the Antiquarian Society's role in clearing up one of the myths about Fenimore Cooper. It has been said, and repeated and repeated and repeated, that young James was sent to sea by his father as punishment for getting expelled from Yale and for being ungovernable in general. This circumstance, which never happened, has in turn led to whole books based on the thesis that James hated and resented his father. Alan Taylor, who has been working in this collection in order to write a biography of Judge William Cooper, the novelist's father, has been cooperating with the editors of the Cooper edition, and we now know that Cooper went to sea of his own free will and that his father, far from being punitive, was concerned for his safety in those days of impressment when he learned what the boy was doing.

Having deprived the neo-Freudians of their theories about the judge and his youngest son, we can move on to Cooper's relations with actual, rather than fictional, females—beginning with his mother. In his attempt to carry out his mother's wish that he take Fenimore as a surname, and in the family's subsequent tenacious retention of the name of Fenimore to this day, we have an interesting question of Elizabeth Fenimore Cooper's position in the family and her influence on the novelist. That they both were great readers of romance is well documented, but that his relationship

with his mother shaped James's courtly treatment of his wife and daughters, which is mentioned often by the residents of Cooperstown, seems probable. We all know that Cooper was one of those rare American authors who actually liked women. A related subject, which is partly already documented in print, is Cooper's attempt to establish his daughter Susan as a writer and open a career path for her. Also, Susan's letters and those of her mother should interest feminists and cultural historians.

The same two groups will be able to find here documents relating to Fenimore Cooper and the Sedgwick family. At one time, Robert Sedgwick and Cooper had a falling out over some property in Cooperstown that Sedgwick sold for Cooper, disregarding Cooper's instructions and letting it go for less than it was worth. Yet the Sedgwicks remained friends, and since Catherine Maria Sedgwick was a prominent author writing at the same time as Cooper, they shared the same literary circles and were exposed to the same reviewers. I've seen somewhere in this collection Catherine Maria's anxious inquiries to W. C. Bryant about when her latest book might be reviewed in his *Evening Post*. Later, when Bryant was absent in Europe, Theodore Sedgwick edited the *Post* for a time. Working with these papers, in fact, one starts to feel a sort of cultural claustrophobia. Everyone who mattered in New York seems to have known everyone else, as I found out from working on Cooper, Melville, and the personal and historical connections that lie behind *Billy Budd*. Even when they wanted to, Cooper and persons like Alexander Slidell Mackenzie seemed unable to keep out of each other's way.

The facts buried in this collection will let Cooper's biographer cleanse the record of existing errors, just as Alan Taylor's investigation of Judge Cooper's papers and scrutiny of the other records of the time enabled him to disprove the myth of the Judge's having been killed by a blow on the head as he left a political meeting. The Antiquarian Society's conservation of the factual basis for establishing the truth about what happened is particularly important at present. This summer I was reading some manuscripts

submitted to a couple of university presses for possible publication, and I discovered a new breed of literary critic. I came to think of these as bungee-cord critics. They take off in midair and bounce around with steadily decreasing velocity until they finally hang limply and come to a stop—not because they have reached any conclusion, but from fatigue and inertia. At no time do they touch ground in the form of a fact.

In my admittedly reactionary opinion, the best antidote for this sort of nonsense is a library like the Antiquarian's, where one can find facts and arrive at truths. One hopes that at least some of these writers are going to find themselves agreeing with Leatherstocking, who said, when he gave up the idea of marrying Mabel in *The Pathfinder*, 'I have, indeed, been on a false trail. . . .' In the meantime, we can all be grateful for the stewards of our culture and history—from Isaiah Thomas to Marcus McCorison—who have made the American Antiquarian Society the great institution that it is.

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