

## OPEN LETTERS.

## The Centenary of Fenimore Cooper.

MOST appropriate is it that the first literary centenary which we are called upon to commemorate one hundred years after the adoption of the Constitution that knit these States into a nation should be the birthday of the author who has done the most to make us known to the nations of Europe. In the first year of Washington's first term as President, on the fifteenth day of September, 1789, was born James Fenimore Cooper, the first of American novelists and the first American author to carry our flag outside the limits of our language. Franklin was the earliest American who had fame among foreigners; but his wide popularity was due rather to his achievements as a philosopher, as a physicist, as a statesman, than to his labors as an author. Irving was six years older than Cooper, and his reputation was as high in England as at home; yet to this day he is little more than a name to those who do not speak our mother tongue. But after Cooper had published "The Spy," "The Last of the Mohicans," and "The Pilot," his popularity was cosmopolitan; he was almost as widely read in France, in Germany, and in Italy as in Great Britain and the United States. Only one American book has ever since attained the international success of these of Cooper's—"Uncle Tom's Cabin," and only one American author has since gained a name at all commensurate with Cooper's abroad—Poe. Here in these United States, we know what Emerson was to us and what he did for us and what our debt is to him; but the French and the Germans and the Italians do not know Emerson. When Professor Boyesen visited Hugo some ten years ago he found that the great French lyrist had never heard of Emerson. I have a copy of "Evangeline" annotated in French for the use of French children learning English at school; but whatever Longfellow's popularity in England or in Germany, he is really but little known in France or Italy or Spain. With Goethe and Schiller, with Scott and Byron, Cooper was one of the foreign forces which brought about the Romanticist revolt in France, profoundly affecting the literature of all Latin countries. Dumas owed almost as much to Cooper as he did to Scott; and Balzac said that if Cooper had only drawn character as well as he painted "the phenomena of nature, he would have uttered the last word of our art."

In his admirable life of Cooper, one of the best of modern biographies, Professor Lounsbury shows clearly the extraordinary state of affairs with which Cooper had to contend. Foremost among the disadvantages against which he had to labor was the dull, deadening provincialism of American criticism at the time when "The Spy" was written; and as we read Professor Lounsbury's pages we see how bravely Cooper fought for our intellectual emancipation from the shackles of the British criticism of that time, even more ignorant then and more insular than it is now. Abroad Cooper received the attention nearly always

given in literature to those who bring a new thing; and the new thing which Cooper annexed to literature was America. At home he had to struggle against a belief that our soil was barren of romance—as though the author who used his eyes could not find ample material wherever there was humanity. Cooper was the first who proved the fitness of American life and American history for the uses of fiction. "The Spy" is really the first of American novels, and it remains one of the best. Cooper was the prospector of that little army of industrious miners now engaged in working every vein of local color and character, and in sifting out the golden dust from the sands of local history. The authors of "Oldtown Folks," of the "Tales of the Argonauts," of "Old Creole Days," and of "In the Tennessee Mountains" were but following in Cooper's footsteps—though they carried more modern tools. And when the desire of the day is for detail and for finish, it is not without profit to turn again to stories of a bolder sweep. When the tendency of the times is perhaps toward an undue elaboration of miniature portraits, there is gain in going back to the masterpieces of a literary artist who succeeded best in heroic statues. And not a few of us, whatever our code of literary esthetics, may find delight, fleeting though it be, in the free outline drawing of Cooper, after our eyes are tired by the niggling and cross-hatching of many among our contemporary realists. When our pleasant duty is done, when our examination is at an end, and when we seek to sum up our impressions and to set them down plainly, we find that chief among Cooper's characteristics were, first, a sturdy, hearty, robust, outdoor and open-air wholesomeness, devoid of any trace of offense and free from all morbid taint; and, secondly, an intense Americanism—ingrained, abiding, and dominant. Professor Lounsbury quotes from an English magazine of 1831 the statement that to an Englishman Cooper appeared to be prouder of his birth as an American than of his genius as an author—an attitude which may seem to some a little old-fashioned, but which on Cooper's part was both natural and becoming.

"The Spy" was the earliest of Cooper's American novels (and its predecessor, "Precaution," a mere stencil imitation of the minor British novel of that day, need not be held in remembrance against him). "The Spy," published in 1821, was followed in 1823 by "The Pioneers," the first of the "Leatherstocking Tales" to appear and by far the poorest; indeed it is the only one of the five for which any apology need be made. The narrative drags under the burden of overabundant detail; and the story may deserve to be called dull at times. Leatherstocking even is but a faint outline of himself as the author afterward with loving care elaborated the character. "The Last of the Mohicans" came out in 1826, and its success was instantaneous and enduring. In 1827 appeared "The Prairie," the third tale in which Leatherstocking is the chief character. It is rare that an author is ever able to write a successful sequel to a successful story, yet Cooper did more; "The



Prairie" is a sequel to "The Pioneers," and "The Last of the Mohicans" is a prologue to it. Eighteen years after the first of the "Leatherstocking Tales" had been published Cooper issued the last of them, amplifying his single sketch into a drama in five acts by the addition of "The Pathfinder," printed in 1840, and of "The Deerslayer," printed in 1841. In the sequence of events "The Deerslayer," the latest written, is the earliest to be read; then comes "The Last of the Mohicans"; followed by "The Pathfinder" and "The Pioneers"; while in "The Prairie" the series end. Of the incomparable variety of scene in these five related tales, or of the extraordinary fertility of invention which they reveal, it would not be easy to say too much. In their kind they have never been surpassed. The earliest to appear, "The Pioneers," is the least meritorious — as though Cooper had not yet seen the value of his material and had not yet acquired the art of handling it to advantage. "The Pathfinder," dignified as it is and pathetic in its portrayal of Leatherstocking's love-making, lacks the absorbing interest of "The Last of the Mohicans"; it is perhaps inferior in art to "The Deerslayer," which was written the year after, and it has not the noble simplicity of "The Prairie," in which we see the end of the old hunter.

There are, no doubt, irregularities in the "Leatherstocking Tales," and the incongruities and lesser errors inevitable in a mode of composition at once desultory and protracted; but there they stand, a solid monument of American literature, and not the least enduring. "If anything from the pen of the writer of these romances is at all to outlive himself, it is, unquestionably, the series of the 'Leatherstocking Tales,'" — so wrote the author when he sent forth the first collected and revised edition of the narrative of Natty Bumppo's adventures. That Cooper was right seems to-day indisputable. An author may fairly claim to be judged by his best, to be measured by his highest; and the "Leatherstocking Tales" are Cooper's highest and best in more ways than one, but chiefly because of the lofty figure of Leatherstocking. Mr. Lowell, when fabling for critics, said that Cooper had drawn but one new character, explaining afterward that

The men who have given to *one* character life  
And objective existence, are not very rare;  
You may number them all, both prose-writers and singers,  
Without overrunning the bounds of your fingers,  
And Natty won't go to oblivion quicker  
Than Adams the parson or Primrose the vicar.

And Thackeray — perhaps recalling the final scene in "The Prairie," where the dying Leatherstocking drew himself up and said "Here!" and that other scene in "The Newcomes" where the dying Colonel drew himself up and said "Adsum!" — was frequent in praise of Cooper; and in one of the "Roundabout Papers," after expressing his fondness for Scott's modest and honorable heroes, he adds: "Much as I like these most unassuming, manly, unpretentious gentlemen, I have to own that I think the heroes of another writer — viz., Leatherstocking, Uncas, Hardheart, Tom Coffin — are quite the equals of Scott's men; perhaps Leatherstocking is better than any one in 'Scott's lot.' *La Longue Carabine* is one of the great prize-men of fiction. He ranks with your Uncle Toby, Sir Roger de Coverley, Falstaff — heroic figures all, American or British, and the artist has deserved well of his country who devised them."

It is to be noticed that Thackeray singled out for praise two of Cooper's Indians to pair with the hunter and the sailor; and it seems to me that Thackeray is fairer towards him who conceived Uncas and Hardheart than are the authors of "A Fable for Critics" and of "Condensed Novels." "Muck-a-Muck" I should set aside among the parodies which are unfair — so far as the red man is concerned, at least; for I hold as quite fair Mr. Harte's raillery of the wooden maidens and polysyllabic old men who stalk through Cooper's pages. Cooper's Indian has been disputed and he has been laughed at, but he still lives. Cooper's Indian is very like Mr. Parkman's Indian — and who knows the red man better than the author of "The Oregon Trail"? Uncas and Chingachgook and Hardheart are all good men and true, and June, the wife of Arrowhead, the Tuscarora, is a good wife and a true woman. They are Indians, all of them; heroic figures, no doubt, and yet taken from life, with no more idealization than may serve the maker of romance. They remind us that when West first saw the Apollo Belvedere he thought at once of a Mohawk brave. They were the result of knowledge and of much patient investigation under conditions forever passed away. We see Cooper's Indians nowadays through mists of prejudice due to those who have imitated them from the outside. "The Last of the Mohicans" has suffered the degradation of a trail of dime novels, written by those apparently more familiar with the Five Points than with the Five Nations. Cooper begat Mayne Reid, and Mayne Reid begat Ned Buntline and "Buffalo Bill's First Scalp for Custer" and similar abominations. But none the less are Uncas and Hardheart noble figures, worthily drawn, and never to be mentioned without praise.

In 1821 Cooper published "The Spy," the first American historical novel; in 1823 he published "The Pioneers," in which the backwoodsman and the red man were first introduced into literature; and in 1824 he published "The Pilot," and for the first time the scene of a story was laid on the sea rather than on the land, and the interest turned wholly on marine adventure. In four years Cooper had put forth three novels, each in its way road-breaking and epoch-making; only the great men of letters have a record like this. With the recollection before us of some of Smollett's highly colored naval characters we cannot say that Cooper sketched the first real sailor in fiction, but he invented the sea tale just as Poe invented the detective story — and in neither case has any disciple surpassed the master. The supremacy of "The Pilot" and "The Red Rover" is quite as evident as the supremacy of "The Gold Bug" and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." We have been used to the novel of the ocean, and it is hard for us now to understand why Cooper's friends thought his attempt to write one perilous and why they sought to dissuade him. It was believed that readers could not be interested in the contingencies and emergencies of life on the ocean wave. Nowadays it seems to us that if any part of "The Pilot" lags and stumbles it is that which passes ashore: Cooper's landscapes, or at least his views of a ruined abbey, may be affected at times, but his marines are always true and always captivating.

Cooper, like Thackeray, forbade his family to authorize or aid any biographer — although the American



novelist had as little to conceal as the English. No doubt Cooper had his faults, both as a man and as an author. He was thin-skinned and hot-headed. He let himself become involved in a great many foolish quarrels. He had a plentiful lack of tact. But the man was straightforward and high-minded, and so was the author. We can readily pardon his petty pedantries and the little vices of expression he persisted in. We can confess that his "females," as he would term them, are indubitably wooden. We may acknowledge that even among his men there is no wide range of character; Richard Jones (in "The Pioneers") is first cousin to Cap (in "The Pathfinder"), just as Long Tom Coffin is a half-brother of Natty Bumppo. We may not deny that Cooper's lighter characters are not touched with the humor that Scott could command at will; the Naturalist (in "The Prairie"), for example, is not alive and delightful like the Antiquary of Scott.

In the main, indeed, Cooper's humor is not of the purest. When he attempted it of malice prepense it was often laboriously unfunny. But sometimes, as it fell accidentally from the lips of Leatherstocking, it was unforced and delicious (see, for instance, at the end of chapter xxvii. of "The Pathfinder," the account of Natty's sparing the sleeping Mingos and of the fate which thereafter befell them at the hands of Chingachgook). On the other hand Cooper's best work abounds in fine romantic touches — Long Tom pinning the British captain to the mast with the harpoon, the wretched Abiram (in "The Prairie") tied hand and foot and left on a ledge with a rope around his neck so that he can move only to hang himself, the death grip of the brave (in "The Last of the Mohicans") hanging wounded and without hope over the watery abyss — these are pictures fixed in the memory and now unforgettable.

Time is unerring in its selection. Cooper has now been dead nearly two-score years. What survives of his work are the "Sea Tales" and the "Leatherstocking Tales." From these I have found myself forced to cite characters and episodes. These are the stories which hold their own in the libraries. Public and critics are at one here. The wind of the lakes and the prairies has not lost its balsam and the salt of the sea keeps its savor. For the free movement of his figures and for the proper expansion of his story Cooper needed a broad region and a widening vista. He excelled in conveying the suggestion of vastness and limitless space and of depicting the human beings proper to these great reaches of land and water — the two elements he ruled; and he was equally at home on the rolling waves of the prairie and on the green and irregular hillocks of the ocean.

*Brander Matthews.*

"Strange True Stories of Louisiana."

A CIRCUMSTANCE presently to be mentioned requires me to review and extend my inquiry into the character of the old manuscript from which I have translated the story of Alix de Morainville.

In the chapter called "How I got them" (*CENTURY MAGAZINE*, November, 1888), I suggested that the name De Morainville might be a convenient fiction of Alix herself, well understood as such by Françoise and Suzanne. I may still repeat the obvious fact that an assumed name does not vitiate the truth of the story; although discoveries made since, which I am still in-

vestigating, offer probabilities that, after all, the name is genuine.

I also gave some reasons for my belief that the manuscript is old. The total absence of quotation-marks from its many conversational passages either identified it with a time when such things were not universal and imperative as they now are, or else indicated a cunning pretense of age. But there were so many proofs that it had lain for many years filed among old papers that the theory of a cunning pretense had no room. One leaf had been torn first and written on afterward; another had been written on first and part of it torn away and lost or destroyed afterward. The two rents, therefore, must have occurred at different times; for the one which mutilates the text is on the earlier page and surely would not have been left so by the author at the time of writing it, but only by some one careless of it, and at some time between its completion and the manifestly later date, when it was so carefully bestowed in its old-fashioned silken case and its inner wrapper of black paper. So an intention to deceive, were it supposable, would have to be of recent date.

Now let me show that an intention to deceive could not be of recent date, and at the same time we shall see the need of this minuteness of explanation. Notice, then, that the manuscript comes directly from the lady who says she found it in a trunk of her family's private papers. A prominent paper-maker in Boston has examined it and says that, while its age cannot be certified to from its texture, its leaves are of three different kinds of paper, each of which might be a hundred years old. But, bluntly, this lady, though a person of literary tastes and talent, who recognized the literary value of Alix's *history*, esteemed original documents so lightly as to put no value upon Louisa Cheval's thrilling letter to her brother, and to prize this Alix manuscript only because, being a simple, succinct, unadorned narrative, she could use it, as she could not Françoise's long, pretty story, for the foundation of a nearly threefold expanded romance; and this, in fact, she had written, copyrighted, and arranged to publish when our joint experience concerning Françoise's manuscript at length readjusted her sense of values, and she sold me the little Alix manuscript at a price still out of all proportion below her valuation of her own writing, and counting it a mistake that the expanded romance should go unpreferred and unpublished.

But who, then, wrote the smaller manuscript? Madame found it, she says, in the possession of her very aged mother, the daughter and namesake of Françoise. Surely she was not its author; it is she who says she burned almost the whole original draft of Françoise's "Voyage," because it was "in the way and smelt bad." Neither could Françoise have written it. Her awkward handwriting, her sparkling flood of words and details, and her ignorance of the simplest rules of spelling, make it impossible. Nor could Suzanne have done it. She wrote and spelled no better at fifty-nine than Françoise at forty-three. Nor could any one have imposed it on either of the sisters. So, then, we find no intention to deceive, either early or recent. I translated the manuscript, it went to press, and I sat down to eat, drink, and revel, never dreaming that the brazen water-gates of my Babylon were standing wide open.

For all this time two huge, glaring anachronisms were staring me, and half a dozen other persons,