

## CHOOSING BOOKS FOR BOYS—"THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS"

By R. J. GILLINGS

MAY BECKER, in her "Choosing Books for Children", writes: "Action, adventure, danger, and a happy ending, and you have a book for a boy in his early teens." Under the heading of "Adventure and Romance", she lists 36 recommended books, of which "The Last of the Mohicans" is placed thirty-sixth. This is its correct place. In fact, I doubt whether it should be in the list at all. In Terman and Lima's book, "Children's Reading: A Guide for Parents and Teachers", all of Cooper's novels are listed as suitable for children's reading. One of the best of all guides would be for parents and teachers (including Terman and Lima) themselves to read some of the books they suggest.

"The Last of the Mohicans" has been regarded as a popular boys' book for over a century, for the last half of which it has been foisted on the unsuspecting schoolboy by teachers who know it by repute only. The title, of course, attracts them. It may be Professor Lounsbury who is responsible for its continued popularity. He said of Cooper: "At his best, he has had no superiors and very few equals in the description of scenes and the narration of events." Or it may have been Honoré de Balzac, who wrote: "I know of no one in the world, save Walter Scott, who has risen to his grandeur and serenity of colours." This is praise indeed! One can imagine the parent and the teacher attitude. "Why plough through 'The Last of the Mohicans' when Professor Lounsbury and Balzac assure us of its quality?" Their praise is so fulsome for so poor a novel that I very much doubt whether they read it themselves with any great care, or with an eye to criticism.

Of course, James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) wrote the book a century ago; but any defence of the book which claims that submarines, aeroplanes, wireless and radar were not then known, and that these are the very things in which modern boys are interested, cannot be sustained. Whatever the subject, the story is the thing, and a book written two, three, four, or even more centuries ago would be suitable for school libraries if it could go close to satisfying the following three requirements:

- (a) the story should have "action, adventure, danger and a happy (or reasonably happy) ending";

- (b) it should be written in good English;
- (c) the incidents should be presented with reasonable probability and likelihood.

"The Last of the Mohicans" satisfies none of these requirements! Of course, this is no sudden discovery. Years ago Mark Twain took "Deerslayer" and "Pathfinder" pretty thoroughly to pieces, in his own inimitable manner, but few teachers seem to have been impressed by his criticism. So let us apply these three criteria to "The Last of the Mohicans".

(a) The action is vague and ill-defined, and the adventure doubtful. But there is an abundance of danger! Oh, plenty of danger!! The annoying part, however, is that most of it is easily avoidable by the most elementary boy-scout principles. The reader is amazed at the utter ineptness of the characters who repeatedly fall into the simplest of traps, and who leave themselves wide open to peril and massacre by their wanton disregard of simple prudence and caution.

And there could so easily have been a happy ending. Any schoolboy could foresee the natural ending if he could rely upon Cooper's sense of a story. But Cooper's characters, for one amazing and unbelievable minute, forgot all their cunning, all the craft of the woodsman, all the delicate art of the forest, every commonplace rudiment of Indian warfare, and allowed Cora and Uncas to be stabbed to death before their eyes. Cora and Uncas, mind you, the only characters in the book really worth saving! What do you suppose Hawk-eye was doing at the very moment? You will hardly believe it! He was looking on! And in his hands he held "La Longue Carabine", "Kill-Deer", at whose very name the Iroquois trembled with fear! Did he use it? He did not!

Come! Come!! Hawk-eye, wake up!! Look! Le Cerf-agile, Uncas, is unarmed and wounded! The Last of the Mohicans! He is about to be murdered by Le Renard Subtil! Do something! This is what happened, and what he did. I quote:

Uncas, with a stern and steady look, turned to Le Subtil and indicated by the expression of his eye all that he would do had not the power deserted him. The latter seized the nerveless arm of the unresisting Delaware and passed his knife into his bosom three several times before his victim, still keeping his gaze riveted on his enemy with a look of inextinguishable scorn, fell dead at his feet.

"Mercy! Mercy! Huron," cried Heyward from above, in tones nearly choked by horror.

Since Cora had already suffered the same fate as Uncas some time before, the plea for mercy on the part of Major Heyward,



of the Royal American Army, was not only stupidly belated, but totally childish as well.

Ah! but now Hawk-eye wakes up! Surely he has been in a brown study! I quote again:

It was now, when *the body of his enemy was most collected together* that the *agitated weapon* of the scout was drawn to his shoulder. The surrounding rocks themselves were not steadier than the piece became for the single instant that it poured out its contents.

And another redskin bit the dust! But my dear sir, you were too late, much too late! We are reduced to taking consolation from the expression in Uncas's eye when he was being murdered.

(b) "The Last of the Mohicans" is not written in good English. Of course, we must not be too meticulous, too pedagogic. Even Homer nodded. But on every page Cooper becomes prolix to the point of obscurity, and frequently succeeds in writing what he does not mean as a consequence. He has not the "mot juste". Mark Twain said that "Cooper's word sense was singularly dull", and he gave thirty examples of the wrong use of words from a mere half dozen pages of "Deerslayer". From the Mohicans I take the following passages:

His charmed eyes were still riveted on the fierce and disappointed countenance of his foe, who fell sullenly and disappointed down the irrecoverable precipice.

"Let us find leisure with our dying breath, to ask him for penitence and pardon."

Bounding from his footsteps, he appeared for an instant darting through the air, and descending in a ball, he fell on the chest of his enemy, driving him many yards from the spot, headlong and prostrate. (Only Uncas could dart through the air.)

The instant their mistake was rectified, the whole party retraced the error with the utmost diligence.

He rather affected the cold and inartificial manner which characterizes all classes of Anglo-Americans when unexcited.

"But he who thinks that even a Mingo would ill-treat a woman, unless it be to tomahawk her, knows nothing of Indian nature or the laws of the woods."

David pursued the direction of his gaze, and in some measure recalled the recollection of Heyward by speaking.

His eyes opened as if he doubted their truth; and his voice became instantly mute in excess of wonder.

"What art thou?" demanded David, utterly disqualified to pursue his original intention, and nearly gasping for breath.

He was content to become a silent spectator of the fruits of a contest that he had arrived too late to anticipate.

Though rendered less connected by many and general interruptions and outbursts, a translation of their language would have contained a regular descant, which in substance might have proved to possess a train of consecutive ideas.

Imagine a schoolboy trying to make sense of the last passage! These are not isolated examples of Cooper's "literary sharpening and flattening", to use Mark Twain's phrase. They occur on every one of the 400 pages of the Mohicans, and if an adult is puzzled to make sense of them, how will a schoolboy fare? If anything as brilliant as an idea ever hit Cooper, it is not in evidence in this book, much less a "train of consecutive ideas".

(c) The important incidents are unconvincing, artificial, and in parts so improbable as to be ludicrous. We read, for example,

In the hurry of the moment he had lost direction. In vain the scout turned either cheek towards the light air; they felt equally cool. In this dilemma . . .

On the extraordinary supposition that one cheek *might* have felt cooler than the other when turned towards the light air, it would be interesting to know what conclusion Hawk-eye could have drawn from that phenomenon. It would be something unique in the art of trailing. Take the description of the massacre of Fort William Henry:

More than two thousand raging savages broke from the forest at the signal and threw themselves across the fatal plain with instinctive alacrity. The trained bodies of the troops threw themselves quickly into solid masses, endeavouring to *awe their assailants by the imposing appearance of a military front*. The experiment in some measure succeeded, though far too many suffered their loaded muskets to be torn from their hands in the vain hope of appeasing the savages.

Vain, indeed! What boy, however credulous, would believe that of trained bodies of troops? The behaviour of the Scottish commander, Munro, during this massacre, as described by Cooper, is ludicrous. It is scarcely in the tradition of famous Scottish fighting regiments.

Here is a piece of trailing that should go close to a world record. Having noted the tracks of Le Renard Subtil and the kidnapped Cora, Hawk-eye and his companions note the general direction of the trail entering a wood, then *take a birch canoe in another direction altogether*, and some time later (note this!) land on the

. . . border of a region even less known than the deserts of Arabia or the steppes of Tartary. A circuitous distance of *more than forty miles* had been passed . . .

But Uncas with Cooperian sagacity stood exultingly over a spot of fresh earth that looked as if it had been recently upturned.

"'Tis the trail!" exclaimed the scout advancing to the spot. "The lad is quick of sight and keen of wit for his years."

This was certainly good! This was trailing indeed! Bony, the half-caste Australian aboriginal detective, the



doyen of black trackers, never attained these heights. And listen to this! Note how this Huron met his death! (Either a Huron, or a Mingo, or an Oneida, or a Mohawk, the names are all one to Cooper.)

The conflict was soon decided: the tomahawk of Heyward and the rifle of Hawk-eye descended on the skull of the Huron at the same moment that the knife of Uncas reached his heart.

Well, he should be dead! Using the cliché of the journalist, death must have been instantaneous. This passage comes from Chapter XII, and there could be no more fruitful ground than this chapter for an examiner in English to wield his blue pencil. I suppose every major fault from tautology to hendiadys could be found in these fourteen pages with an abundance which is completely bewildering. The spelling, nevertheless, is good.

Boy scouts innocently reading "The Last of the Mohicans" may note the following important points in trailing which do not occur in their handbook. They are quoted verbatim.

- (1) Rapid oblique glances at the moss on trees.
- (2) Occasional upward glances at the setting sun.
- (3) Passing looks at the directions of watercourses.
- (4) Examining the barks of trees.
- (5) Walking fifty miles without stopping to take breath.
- (6) Turning your cheeks to the air.
- (7) Considering the colour, velocity and quantity of the water in the streams.
- (8) Running with a low nose to the ground.
- (9) Keeping your eyes on the dried leaves.

No, they would scarcely be found in the handbook. Bill Cody would disclaim every one of them. So would Wild Bill Hickok.

Hawk-eye's remarkable performance at the shooting match between himself and Major Heyward is worthy of inclusion in Ripley's "Believe It or Not" series.

The gourd was one of the usual little vessels used by the Indians, and it was suspended from a dead bough of a small pine by a thong of deer-skin at the full distance of a hundred yards.

Heyward fired first. Naturally enough. Any time there is a shooting match on depend upon it, Hawk-eye will have the last shot. It is part of his technique. Heyward missed the gourd, but hit the tree "a very little on one side of the proper target". Now it is Hawk-eye's turn.

The scout shook his priming and cocked his piece; and, as he ended he threw back a foot and slowly raised the muzzle from the earth: the motion was steady, uniform, and in one direction.

This amazing sentence lets the reader know the calibre of the man he has to deal with. He can't miss! Cooper proceeds:

When on a perfect level it remained for a single moment without tremor or variation. During that stationary instant it poured forth its contents in a bright glancing sheet of flame.

There! That should do it! The "stationary instant" is no doubt the secret of Hawk-eye's success as a marksman. But when the Indians examined the gourd, no traces of the bullet were to be seen! Not a mark on the gourd! Not a mark on the tree! Does this worry the reader? Not a bit of it! He has been caught that way before. He knows that Hawk-eye has put his bullet through the orifice already there in the centre of the gourd to let the water out. He was on to that all right; in fact, he was expecting it! But he was not prepared for this amazing addition!

The Indian youths, tearing the gourd from the tree, held it high with an exulting shout, displaying a *hole in its bottom*, which had been cut by the bullet *after passing through the usual orifice in the centre of its upper side*.

"This unexpected exhibition", Cooper goes on, "effectually established Hawk-eye in the possession of his dangerous reputation." And rightly so, too!! The twentieth century, with all its new inventions and atomic weapons, has yet to invent the weapon which can fire round corners.

Having ploughed through chapter after chapter of this tiresome book, one comes upon, here and there (1900 edition, Macmillan, London) a ray of sunshine, an illustration by H. M. Brock. There are twenty-five of these (dated 1897) and in my mature consideration it was these pictures which enabled those few hardy lads who got through "The Last of the Mohicans" to do so without coming to regard Cooper as in the same class as they regarded Shakespeare.

At the head of each of the thirty-three chapters Cooper quotes a piece of verse, the purpose of which is not generally clear. One only will suffice to show the inaptness of his quotations. Chapter XVII, dealing with the surrender of Fort William Henry, has this from Gray at its head:

"Weave we the woof. The thread is spun.

The web is wove. The work is done."

It could have been placed at the head of any of the other thirty-two chapters with equal suitability.

When anyone suggests to me that a suitable book for a school library or for a boy's reading is "The Last of the Mohicans", "Deerslayer" or "Pathfinder", or any other of Cooper's novels, or, in fact, novels by Marryatt, Ballantyne and Edward S. Ellis, I will immediately ask "Why?" Unless the answer is: "Because I have just read it and I think a boy would enjoy it", then I will pay no heed to the suggestion.