

Historical Introduction

I

What prompted James Fenimore Cooper in the summer of 1829, three years into his seven-year sojourn in Europe, to determine on writing a nautical romance set in New York harbor and its adjacent waters in the early eighteenth century is not obvious. In the spring of 1829, when the project apparently first occurred to him, he, his wife Susan, their five children, and his nineteen-year-old nephew William Yeardley Cooper were comfortably settled in Florence in a ten-room suite in the massive Palazzo Ricasoli. The Coopers had already resided in France for two years, visited England and Holland, and made an extensive tour of Switzerland. Now, at the height of his reputation in the United States as the standard bearer of American literary genius and in Europe as a leading light of the international romantic movement, the writer turned his thoughts to Sandy Hook, Raritan Bay, Staten Island, the Manhattan waterfront, Hell Gate, and Long Island Sound, far removed from Florence and its river Arno.

Since his arrival in Europe, Cooper had conceived, written, and published two novels: *The Red Rover*, a sea tale set in colonial Rhode Island and the western waters of the Atlantic, and *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish*, a narrative of seventeenth-century Connecticut. Viewed in relation to its two predecessors, the book that was to become *The Water-Witch* seems less an anomaly than the continuation of a pattern. All three works invite their readers to inhabit the pre-Revolutionary American past and to consider both its differences from the familiar bustling present and its anticipation of the values and tendencies of that present. All three, moreover, focus on the distinctive landscapes, cultures, and histories of the colonies in which they are set, thereby highlighting the diversity of the communities that were to form the Union. In this respect, they seem to be vestiges of an ambitious scheme that Cooper had announced in 1825 on the half-title page of *Lionel Lincoln*, where he

identified that novel as the first of a series called "Legends of the Thirteen Republics." Presumably, each member of the series was to depict the experience of a different American state in the Revolutionary War and thus contribute to a grand panoramic treatment of the birth of the nation. While the lackluster reception of *Lionel Lincoln* (and surely the rigidity of the scheme itself) discouraged Cooper from pursuing his plan, *The Water-Witch* and its two immediate predecessors suggest that it still lingered in his mind. There is a hint of the abandoned scheme in the southwestward movement from Rhode Island to Connecticut to New York. And although the detailed historicity and Revolutionary setting of *Lionel Lincoln* are dropped, something of its interfusion of local color and suggestions of the supernatural, its combination of the realistic and the legendary, persists.

Whatever the stimulus of the new undertaking may have been, Cooper's choice of the setting of *The Water-Witch* was ideally suited to the situation of an author separated by thousands of miles from the locales it was to depict. In preparing to write *Lionel Lincoln*, his ignorance of the novel's terrain required him to make a trip to Boston to acquaint himself with the city and its environs. But the New York harbor setting of the new work was ingrained in his memory with all the particularity that its plot demanded. He first encountered the East River and the long passage from there through the Narrows out to the open sea in 1806 when, at the age of seventeen, he began his voyage before the mast in the merchantman *Stirling*. Two years later he revisited the scene as a newly appointed midshipman stationed at the Brooklyn Navy Yard at Wallabout Bay. Except for a year's tour of duty on Lake Ontario, most of his naval service was limited to New York harbor. In late 1809 he was assigned to the sloop-of-war *Wasp*, a ship of the same general class as Ludlow's *Coquette*, which, like the fictional *Coquette*, spent much of her time lying at anchor. The *Wasp* did, however, contribute to one of the most compelling episodes of *The Water-Witch*, the passage of the *Coquette* through Hell Gate without a pilot. As Cooper wrote in reference to the episode in a letter to his old naval friend William Branford Shubrick in 1831, "I remember the passage of *Wasp* through Hell Gate very well. I had left the

ship at Whitestone, and was dining at Gibbs' place when she came down. I had also the benefit of poor [Neale's?] description which beats mine greatly."¹

In the years after he left the navy in 1810, Cooper expanded his knowledge of the places in which the action of *The Water-Witch* would be set. During the two years following his marriage to Susan Augusta DeLancey in 1811, he lived in Westchester County, close to his wife's family in Mamaroneck and in easy reach of Manhattan, his friends in the navy, and the doings of the port. The regular conveyance between Mamaroneck and Manhattan was a sloop that had to negotiate the rocks, shoals, and currents of Hell Gate in order to reach its destination; according to Cooper's daughter Susan, on occasion her father took the helm himself through the dangerous passage.² After a four-year residence in upstate Cooperstown, his own family's seat, he returned with his wife and children to Westchester in 1817, from where in 1819 he sought to increase his faltering income by investing in the whaleship *Union*. Cooper oversaw the repair and fitting-out of the ship at New York and made repeated visits to her home port, Sag Harbor at the eastern tip of Long Island, a region that was later to figure as the boyhood home of the central figure of the new novel, the master of the brigantine *Water-Witch*.

In 1822, by which time he had turned to writing as a means of support, he and his growing family moved to Manhattan. Seeking to escape the outbreaks of yellow fever that threatened the densely populated lower district of the island in the hot months, they spent their summers at a series of then rural retreats, all of which overlooked the route that the *Coquette* would follow in pursuit of the brigantine in chapter 28: Turtle Bay on the East River at the site of the present United Nations Park; Bayside, on the other side of the East River at Little Neck Bay in Flushing; and again in Queens, at Sunswick, now Astoria.³ His daughter Susan recalled that at this last summer place, in 1825, "many were the hours he passed sitting on the narrow belt of grass before the cottage door, watching the varied fleet of sloop, schooner, brig, and steamer passing to and fro. The perils of Hell Gate lay just above, adding to the interest with which the movements of the different craft were watched." Here, too, Cooper acquired the *Van Tromp*, a

twenty-ton sloop in which he commuted to New York, explored its harbor, and refreshed the memories that he would take with him to Europe the next year.⁴

If it is clear that the novelist drew upon his experience to develop the physical setting of *The Water-Witch*, the apparent sources of its other elements (other than those that derive from the author's powerful imagination) are varied and obscure. For the basis of his portrait of the novel's only historical character, the corrupt royal governor of New York Lord Cornbury, Cooper could have relied upon William Smith's *History of the Province of New York*, the standard treatment of its subject for decades after its publication in 1757. The Dutch materials of the novel may owe something to Washington Irving's burlesque *History of New York* (1809) and even more to Cooper's conversations with his friend William Dunlap, whose several studies of the New York past were to include a *History of the New Netherlands, Province of New York, and State of New York* (1839-40). Indeed, such conversations with friends and the traditions of his wife's family could well account for nearly all the slight historical detail of *The Water-Witch*.

The characters of the novel are overwhelmingly the creatures of the writer's imagination, though Alida de Barberie owes a good deal to his wife for her Norman Huguenot descent and, like many of Cooper's heroines, for her physical appearance and personality, while the commercial obsessions of Alderman Van Beverout may have something to do with Walter Scott's Baillie Nicol Jarvie in *Rob Roy* (1818). But Cooper's chief literary indebtedness was a more general one, his obligation to the ancient tradition of romance, which came down to him chiefly from his beloved Shakespeare, from the "novels and amusing tales" to which he was addicted in boyhood,⁵ and from Byron and Scott, his most influential contemporaries. This tradition—with its maidens in masculine disguise, its reunions of long separated family members, its prophetic witches, ambiguous heroes, shipwrecks, and the rest—contributes elements to much of Cooper's fiction of the first decade of his career, but to none more than *The Water-Witch*, the most fanciful of his novels. It may be that the Gothicism of some of Scott's tales, particularly those in the recent first series of *Chronicles of the Canongate* (1827), encouraged the American

writer to intensify the atmosphere of mystery and marvel in his new novel.

To this mix must be added Cooper's long-standing interest in politics and economics, an interest intensified by his public involvement in the controversies engaging Europe at the time of his residence. In *The Water-Witch*, that interest was to find expression in the characters' repeated debates over the competing claims of individual freedom and governmental authority. Here, too, the novel was to reiterate an important emphasis of its two immediate predecessors, *The Red Rover* and *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish*, in its representation of the emergence of attitudes and concerns that were to lead to the formation of a distinctively American identity.

Beyond these sources and possible influences, a wholly new body of personal experiences found its way into *The Water-Witch* after its composition was well under way. The first four chapters that Cooper wrote in Florence make only one reference to Italy, and that one—in Tiller's allusion in chapter 4 to the ease with which one may enter the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar and the difficulty of making the outward passage—derives from the novelist's recollection of his long-ago voyage in the *Stirling*.⁶ But in late July of 1829 the Coopers left Florence, made their way to Leghorn by carriage, and there chartered the *Bella Genovese*, a thirty-ton felucca manned by a crew of ten, to take them south to Naples. The party—servants, carriage, and all—set out along a coast that Cooper found, as he wrote in his Italian travel book of 1838, to be irresistibly seductive, "one scene of magnificent nature, relieved by a bewitching softness, such as perhaps no other portion of the globe can equal. I can best liken it to an extremely fine woman, whose stateliness and beauty are relieved by the eloquent and speaking expression of feminine sentiment."⁷

Coasting along this entrancing shore, the *Bella Genovese* encountered wonder after wonder, none more impressive than the night sky as seen off the malaria-ridden delta of the Tiber:

I was singularly struck by the existence of this subtle and secret danger in the midst of a scene otherwise so lovely. The night was as bright a starlight as I remember to have seen. Nothing could surpass the diamond-like lustre of the placid and thoughtful stars; and the blue

waters through which we were gliding, betrayed our passage by a track of molten silver. While we were gazing at this beautiful spectacle, a meteor crossed the heavens, illuminating everything to the brightness of a clear moonlight. It was much the finest meteor I ever saw, and its course included more than half of the arch above us. The movement, apparently, was not swifter than that of a rocket, nor was the size of the meteor much less than one of the ordinary dimensions. Its light, however, was much more vivid and purer, having something intense, and much beyond the reach of art, in it.⁸

The next day the felucca reached the Neapolitan coast and its dramatic volcanic islands and peaks, made all the more magnificent by the onset of a thunderstorm, and the day after, the sixth and last of the sea-voyage, she entered the Bay of Naples: as "we advanced farther into this glorious bay, we could not help exclaiming, 'What dunce first thought of instituting a comparison between the bay of New York and this?'"⁹

After a brief stay in Naples, with visits to Pompeii and Herculaneum, the Coopers determined to spend the remainder of the season in the vicinity of that city and rented the Palazzo detta del Tasso, a villa perched on the cliffs of Sorrento where they lived from 20 August until cold weather forced them back to Naples three months later. From Sorrento they made excursions to all the notable sites of the region, even hiring the twenty-oared *Divina Provvidenza* for their longer expeditions by water. And at Sorrento, Cooper, now under the spell of coastal Italy, resumed his work on the new book.

From the window of the study where that work took place and the terrace just outside, the whole panorama of the Neapolitan coast lay in view.¹⁰ This spectacle, together with the sights seen in the course of the passage in the *Bella Genovese* and the boating on the Bay of Naples, intruded upon the composition of *The Water-Witch* to a degree that significantly modified the tone and color of Cooper's original conception. The first four chapters written in Florence are defined by the little new world of colonial New York, with its quaint mixture of English, Dutch, and African cultures. But beginning in chapter 5,

allusions to coastal Italy, both in the narration and the dialogue, gradually accumulate, reaching a climax in chapter 23, where its chief matter, Seadrift's lengthy description of the view from the abode of her youth on the cliffs of Sorrento, reproduces the view from Cooper's rented palazzo in much the same language and detail that he was later to employ in his Italian travel book, even to the concluding comment on the absurdity of comparing the bays of New York and Naples in beauty. Although the androgynous Seadrift is the chief vehicle of this Italian imagery, she is not the only character whose recollections return to the coasts of the Mediterranean. Thus in chapter 6, the sturdy Tom Tiller relates the strange spectacle he witnessed off the mouth of the Tiber, not the meteor that his creator had seen but an illuminated cross high in the night sky. Even Trysail, the veteran master of the *Coquette*, has his Italian moments, as in chapter 20, where he recalls a passage to Genoa in which the position of the ship was determined by taking the bearings of a peak of the Maritime Alps and a peak of the mountains of Corsica, a near echo of Cooper's account in his travel book of a passage he made in an English brig from Marseilles to Leghorn in March of 1829.¹¹

Cooper's weaving of his immediate Italian experience into the texture of the novel did nothing to slow its composition. Writing to his friend the sculptor Horatio Greenough on 15 September, he reported that "I work every day and am on the *middle* chapter of the 'Water-Witch.' This is doing well for a month you will say."¹² By 5 November he could tell Greenough that the "book is nearly done, and, although I have not yet read it in course, I am much inclined to think it the most comely of the family. There remain six chapters to write, and if they come out well, I think we shall do."¹² When those last chapters were written, Cooper turned the manuscript over to his nephew William, who, serving as his uncle's secretary and amanuensis, made a fair copy of the crowded and crabbed script of the holograph. By the end of November, the author had completed his extensive revisions on the margins and between the lines of the copy, and the new novel was ready for the press.

II

If the composition of *The Water-Witch* went swiftly and smoothly, its printing turned into something of a nightmare. Cooper intended to follow the procedure he had used with the other novels he had written in Europe: he would contract with a local printer who would set the text in type and furnish him with proof sheets. When the corrections had been set, the printer would supply him with a sufficient quantity of corrected sheets, or revises, to serve as copy for the printers of his American and British publishers and for the translators employed by any European publishers who had contracted with him. He would then, if necessary, make a few additional corrections in the sheets, bundle them up, and send them off.

For *The Water-Witch*, Cooper intended to use a printer in Rome, the next stop on his leisurely tour of Italy. He and his family arrived in that city, then under the government of the papacy, in mid-December. As required, he submitted the amanuensis copy of the novel to the official censors, only to have it returned at the end of the month with a flat refusal of permission to publish.¹⁴ Something of the writer's reaction to this rejection may be gleaned from his letter of 6 January 1830 to his New York friend and banker, Charles Wilkes:

My next tale, Water Witch is ready, but the Roman Government wont let me print, on account of this expression, which unfortunately occurs in the first Chapter. "And Rome, itself, is only to be traced by mutilated arches and fallen columns." Here are thin-skinned gentry for you! The rogues wish to make their people think Rome is still Rome.¹⁵

Frustrated in this first attempt to print the new work, Cooper next thought of the Florentine printer Joseph Molini, who had printed the first edition of *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* the previous spring. In the letter of 30 December 1829 he sought assistance from Greenough, then residing in Florence, in speeding things along:

Will you go and see Mollini [*sic*] the printer—ask him what is the greatest number of sheets he can put in type at once, whether he will undertake to print another tale,

what is the shortest time he can do it in, sending the sheets once to Rome—whether he cannot divide the work in *two* offices and the terms?¹⁶

But Molini, Greenough reported, could print only two sheets a week, a rate far too slow to suit Cooper's apparent wish to have the book appear in England and the United States by the summer or even before; "two sheets a week," he wrote Greenough on 28 January, "will not answer my purpose at all. I shall send the Manuscript to Paris, and get rid of the whole affair."¹⁷ Most likely he intended Hector Bossange, the Parisian publisher who had handled the initial printing of *The Prairie* and *The Red Rover*, to deal with the new novel as well.

For some reason, the plan to print in Paris came to naught, and, after an inexplicably long interval, Cooper announced in a letter of 9 April to Wilkes that he would have the book printed in Dresden, the next major stop on the family tour, and now hoped that it would be published in September. He already had in mind, he wrote Wilkes, another book; it was to be, he told the publisher who had contracted for the rights to a French translation of *The Water-Witch*, one more sea novel.¹⁸ Cooper and his entourage set out from Rome in mid-April, and after spending the month of May in Venice, arrived in Dresden on 21 May, taking rooms at the Hôtel de Pologne, "clean, but neither very good nor cheap," he noted in his guidebook.¹⁹ After four days at the hotel, the Coopers rented a pleasant apartment overlooking the Altmarkt, where they were to stay for the next three months.²⁰

On 26 May the novelist signed an agreement with the long-established Dresden publishing house of Walthersche Hofbuchhandlung for the printing of *The Water-Witch*. By the terms of the agreement, Walther was to print the book entirely at its own expense, its only compensation being the right to sell the English version on the European continent. The firm was to have the book printed as rapidly as possible, furnish the author with proof sheets, and incorporate any authorial corrections of the proof in the printed text. It was required to furnish Cooper with eight copies of the corrected sheets for distribution to the other publishers who had contracted for the novel and two copies of the finished book for his own use. Walther was to publish on a day set by the novelist, a date that would be as

early as the publication date of any other bookseller.²¹ Walther's printers, C. C. Meinhold & Söhne, immediately went to work, supplying the author with proof before the end of May and finishing the job by 26 July.²² Riddled with typographical errors though the Walther edition is, Cooper was satisfied; as he wrote on a note pasted in the first volume of the copy of the edition in the Dresden Sächsische Landesbibliothek, despite some blunders in the spelling and grammar of the French dialogue, "considering the difficulty of printing in a foreign language it is believed that, in other respects, the work will be found correct."²³

With the several copies of the revises in hand, Cooper now set about distributing them to his publishers in other cities. Although the author had set 15 October as the publication date of *The Water-Witch*, Walther jumped the gun and issued its small edition a full month earlier, an action that infuriated Duncker und Humblot, the Berlin booksellers who had contracted for the German translation of the novel and who, fearing that a rival would come out with a pirated translation before their own was in print, published the first two of the three volumes of the novel on 1 October.²⁴ Cooper's London publishers, Colburn and Bentley, published as scheduled on 15 October,²⁵ and it is likely that Charles Gosselin in Paris, the publisher of the French translation, followed soon after.

The last to appear was the edition that meant most to Cooper, that of his American publishers, Carey & Lea of Philadelphia. The writer sent off the revises to Carey by the packet that sailed on 1 September.²⁶ The Philadelphia bi-weekly *Ariel* announced in its issue of 27 November that the Dresden sheets had arrived at the publishing house "several weeks ago, since which the proprietors, Messrs. Carey and Lea, have caused [the novel] to be stereotyped, and it will be issued in a very few days." In the issue of 11 December, however, the *Ariel* reported that there had been "an unaccountable delay" in the publication of *The Water-Witch* and fretted that a forthcoming dramatic version of the novel at the Chestnut Street theater would give away the plot. At last, on 25 December, the *Ariel* had good news:

The *rush* for the *Water Witch* on Saturday last [18 December 1830] was tremendous. The whole city

thronged to the bookstores as if actuated by a common feeling of irrepressible anxiety to obtain a copy of a work so long announced and so much applauded beforehand, by the few who read it in advance of the public. A single bookseller in Fourth Street [had a sale] of near 500!—and the publishers themselves no doubt sold three times that number in the same space of time.

Long though the delay had been, Carey & Lea evidently expected a still longer one, for all known copies of the first American edition are dated 1831.²⁷

Appearing at the height of Cooper's international popularity, *The Water-Witch* earned its author the kind of return that enabled him to maintain the gentlemanly style of his residence in Europe. Although no record of Carey & Lea's payment for the American copyright appears in the firm's cost book, it was certainly no less than the \$5,000 that they paid for *The Red Rover* in 1827 and again in 1831 for *The Bravo*.²⁸ From Henry Colburn in London Cooper received his by then customary payment of £600 for the British rights,²⁹ while Duncker und Humblot gave 600 francs for the sheets of *The Water-Witch* and Charles Gosselin paid 2,000 francs.³⁰ The total represents more than \$220,000 in today's currency. In later years Cooper received nothing from the nearly annual reprintings of Carey & Lea's first American edition of the novel nor, of course, from the numerous British and Continental pirated editions, but two revised editions yielded modest sums: £50 for the appearance of *The Water-Witch* in Bentley's Standard Novels series on 1 February 1834 and \$500 for its inclusion in George Putnam's never completed edition of *The Works of J. Fenimore Cooper* in May 1851.³¹

III

Gratifying though his income from *The Water-Witch* must have been, Cooper was apparently still more pleased by the fiction itself. Indeed, it may be that the sea novel that he planned as his next novel was to be a kind of sequel to *The Water-Witch*. It has recently been discovered that an apparent remnant of that abandoned scheme intruded upon the first draft of *The Bravo*,

where, in chapters 18-20, the writer embarks on an episode involving a magically swift and graceful American-built schooner named the *Eudora* that is commanded by a youth who is clearly an eighteen-year-old version of Zephyr, the child ward of Seadrift/*Eudora* and the Skimmer in *The Water-Witch*. Confirming the identification are the facts that the young sailor has earlier served on a brigantine and that he is now engaged in the trade of smuggling. Readers of *The Water-Witch* may even speculate that the consort that is said to accompany the *Eudora* is commanded by the Skimmer of the Seas himself. Recognizing that this cheerful episode violated the somber tone and grim narrative thrust of the new book, Cooper expunged it.³²

Although the *Eudora* episode was inappropriate to *The Bravo*, in the months following the publication of *The Water-Witch*, Cooper repeatedly expressed his satisfaction with that novel itself. He thought it was a better book, he wrote Shubrick, than *The Red Rover*; its nautical passages were a particular matter of pride:

The best thing in *Water Witch* (and it is the truest and best nautical bit I have ever done) is the running into the Cove and anchoring. Now, to my fancy, Master Billy that is a bit of ship. One can feel the surges of the cable, and hear the grumblings of the bitts.³³

To his friend Mrs. Peter A. Jay, who thought some of the incidents of *The Water-Witch* improbable, he insisted that there is "nothing improbable in the story," and that only a landlubber would think so. And yet he was aware that the critics did not always share his opinion of the book. "[T]hey tell me," he wrote Mrs. Jay, "all the writers and reviewers at home, are in a league to pull me down."³⁴ Even in France, the "'Journal des Débats' was snappish with '*Water-Witch*.'"³⁵

If the unkind treatment of European publications like the conservative *Journal des Débats* was easily attributable to political opposition to Cooper's alliance with Lafayette in defense of republicanism and democracy, the lukewarm response to *The Water-Witch* by reviewers in the United States would seem to have been an early warning of a deeper and more painful problem, the gradual alienation between the novelist and his American audience that his years of residence in Europe were fostering. Apart from the widely distributed and reprinted

pre-publication puffs, notices of the new novel in American newspapers were significantly fewer than they had been for its predecessors. The Philadelphia *Ariel*, which had followed so closely the slow progress of the book through the press, gave it a generally favorable review in its issue of 5 February 1831, observing that the plot "is neither intricate nor ingenious, but a pervading charm has been imparted to the pages by the spirit of daring, originality, and beauty with which the portraits of Seadrift and Tiller, the hero and heroine, are imbued." The *New-York Mirror* of 18 December 1830, on the other hand, disapproved of the characters of the novel but thought its action adequate. Writing in the Hartford *New England Weekly Review* of 27 December 1830, John Greenleaf Whittier largely agreed with his New York colleague. The sentiments and style of *The Water-Witch*, like those of Cooper's work as a whole, are tame and unoriginal, and still worse is his characterization of "the lovely ones of earth." In sum, Cooper "is at home—perfectly so—in his delineations of natural scenery—in the turmoil and excitement of manly daring and professional hardihood—but he has little skill in metaphysical matters."³⁶

American magazines paid *The Water-Witch* still less attention, and when they did deign to review the book, it was with much the same banality that the newspapers had brought to the task. Thus the *Ladies' Magazine* found in the novel "no sentiment, no heart"; indeed, it "may be read without a sigh or a smile." The reader can take comfort only in the fact that the author still manifests a love of his native land: "we feel assured that foreign luxuries, and the flatteries of strange tongues have not corrupted his imagination, or turned aside his heart from the worship of simple nature, and the appreciation of the proud and blessed distinction our free and equal institutions afford every American who will be true to his country."³⁷ The one extended review of *The Water-Witch* upon its publication in the United States, O. W. B. Peabody's article in the *North American Review*, turns out to be a general essay on Cooper's fiction, with only the concluding paragraph of its fifteen pages devoted to the new book. After acknowledging the novelist's international popularity, Peabody's critique follows a well-worn path: Cooper's genius lies in his descriptions of nature and his narration of action; his characters lack sentiment and

stature; his dialogue is stilted. Much as he may delight and excite the reader, he falls short of "a dominion over the heart"; worse, he "fails to instruct or elevate us."³⁸ A brief notice of the publication of the Putnam edition of *The Water-Witch* in the *Southern Quarterly Review* may be taken as the final word of the American press on the novel in Cooper's lifetime:

[The book] is one of his most ambitious, but not one of his most successful romances. . . . We think he mistakes machinery for imagination. Until we confound the melo-dramatic and the pyrotechnic with the imaginative, the leading characteristics of this tale can scarcely deserve the latter appellation.³⁹

Some of the British journals gave *The Water-Witch* more favorable treatment than did their American counterparts, although the kind remarks of the writer for the *Gentleman's Magazine* are somewhat vitiated by the paucity of evidence that he had read the book.⁴⁰ The *Athenaeum* had high praise for the nautical episodes of the novel but found the land scenes, including "the insipid jargon of negroes," a bore. The conclusion of the article reaches new heights of restraint: "We have said the best we could of this work, and fear it will not realize our readers' expectations."⁴¹ The most thoughtful of the contemporary reviews of *The Water-Witch* is that of the *Edinburgh Literary Journal*, which, running counter to its rivals' opinions, singled out Van Beverout, Trysail, François, and the Skimmer himself as "splendid and masterly portraits." The plot of the novel is arbitrary, and its tone lacks "pervading depth of feeling," and yet these deficiencies are vastly outweighed by Cooper's achievement:

The great charm of this novel—as in others of the author's best—unquestionably derives itself from his unequalled conversance with the power and presence of the great waters—from the magical sway he exercises over the spirits of the sea. This is a department of literature which he has struck out for himself, and in which he knows no equal.⁴²

This last note is one that nearly every American and British reviewer of *The Water-Witch*, whether laudatory or derogatory, sounds. With the publication of this third of his eventual

eleven sea novels came a general agreement that Cooper had established a new and significant genre of fiction and that these books, rather than his tales of the forest and prairie, constitute the larger accomplishment.⁴³

IV

Although Cooper repeatedly declared his indifference to criticism, it seems apparent that by the end of his life the reviewers had persuaded him that *The Water-Witch* had "proved a comparative failure" with the public.⁴⁴ In forming this judgment, he neglected or was unaware of a mountain of evidence that testified to the persistent popularity of the book over the two decades following its first publication. If Carey had told him that the book had done only "pretty well,"⁴⁵ the Philadelphia publisher and his successors were not reluctant to follow up the initial printing of 5,000 copies with at least twelve printings over the years before the author's death in 1851, while by that date Bentley in London had issued at least three additional printings of his Standard Novels edition of the book after its first appearance in 1834.

Indications of the impact of *The Water-Witch* on the culture of its time are widespread. Over the next half century innumerable British and American yachts, warships, and merchant vessels took their names from Cooper's title; even town fire companies found the name irresistible. Visitors to the Highlands region of New Jersey were shown the reputed remains of Van Beverout's villa and the cove where the brigantine anchored,⁴⁶ and by the end of the century they might have arrived at the Water Witch train station, walked along Water Witch Avenue, and, if very fortunate, been guests of the exclusive Water Witch Club.⁴⁷ The Skimmer's song in chapter 15, one of Cooper's rare efforts in verse, supplied the lyrics of the popular parlor piece "My Brigantine!" (1831), with music by the English composer George Herbert Rodwell.⁴⁸ In the decade following its first appearance, *The Water-Witch* was adapted for the stage by five different playwrights and performed repeatedly in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, St. Louis, New Orleans, and London.⁴⁹

What might have pleased Cooper most of all are the references to his book in sailors' narratives and journals, for Shubrick was not his only sea-going reader. The New England merchant and shipmaster Richard J. Cleveland recalled in his autobiography, itself an apparent source for the novelist's own *Afloat and Ashore*, "a passage in a vessel, which might have served Mr. Cooper for his description of the *Water Witch*; for she was like that portrait in every point."⁵⁰ Cooper could have had no knowledge of the journals kept by William Reynolds, a young passed midshipman, on his circumnavigation of the globe as a member of the United States Exploring Expedition in 1838-42, but he would have been delighted to encounter there Reynolds' lengthy quotation of passages from chapters 20 and 26 of *The Water-Witch* on the qualities of mind and spirit demanded by the seaman's profession. "Mr. Cooper's ideas are correct," Reynolds wrote on pages that were to become salt-stained and mouse-nibbled before his long voyage reached its end, "and I like him, because he has an admiration for the sea life, and does justice to the habits and characters of those who follow it."⁵¹

In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the acceleration of the westward movement, the ordeal of the Civil War, and the spectacular growth of cities and industries, the American imagination turned inland, away from the romantic vision of the sea that is embodied in Eudora's triumphant choice at the end of *The Water-Witch* of "a ship for a dwelling—the tempestuous ocean for a world" (p. 417). Cooper's pioneering nautical fiction gradually faded from the memory of all but a few specialists, leaving only the *Leatherstocking Tales* to survive in popular editions on the bookstore shelves and to be re-created on movie and television screens. But if Cooper's discovery of the sea, the ship, and the sailor as meaningful literary subjects was to be forgotten by most readers, its consequences are still present and vital in the work of such writers as Herman Melville, Victor Hugo, and Joseph Conrad, his great heirs.

NOTES

1. *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, ed. James Franklin Beard, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1960-68), II, 79-80; hereafter cited as *Letters and Journals*. The brackets enclosing "Neale" are Beard's. Cooper refers to Benedict Neale, one of the Wasp's two lieutenants, who, along with Shubrick's brother John, was lost at sea in 1815; see Wayne Franklin, *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 135 (hereafter cited as Franklin), and J. Fenimore Cooper, *Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1846), I, 167.
2. Susan Fenimore Cooper, Introduction, *The Last of the Mohicans* by J. Fenimore Cooper (Houghton, Mifflin and Company: Boston and New York, 1876 [Household Edition]), p. xiv; hereafter cited as SFC, *Mohicans*.
3. See Franklin, pp. 389, 430, and 467.
4. SFC, *Mohicans*, xii-xiii.
5. See *Letters and Journals*, I, 5, and Franklin, p. 66.
6. See *Ned Myers; or, a Life before the Mast*, ed. Karen Lentz Madison and R. D. Madison with a Historical Introduction by William S. Dudley and Hugh Egan (New York: AMS Press, 2009), p. 25.
7. James Fenimore Cooper, *Gleanings in Europe: Italy*, ed. Constance Ayers Denne and John Conron (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 84; hereafter cited as *Italy*.
8. *Italy*, pp. 91-92.
9. *Italy*, p. 93.
10. See *Italy*, pp. 119-20.
11. See *Italy*, p. 64.
12. *Letters and Journals*, I, 389.
13. *Letters and Journals*, I, 396.

14. See Cooper to Greenough, 30 December 1829 (*Letters and Journals*, I, 399).
15. *Letters and Journals*, I, 400-401; the wording of the passage from chapter 1 differs slightly from that in the author's manuscript and the first edition.
16. *Letters and Journals*, I, 399.
17. *Letters and Journals*, I, 400, n. 2, and 402.
18. *Letters and Journals*, I, 409, and Cooper to Charles Gosselin, 30 April 1830 (*Letters and Journals*, VI, 304).
19. *Letters and Journals*, I, 414, n. 3.
20. See Susan Fenimore Cooper, Introduction, *The Water-Witch* by J. Fenimore Cooper (Houghton, Mifflin and Company: Boston and New York, 1884 [Household Edition]), p. xxii.
21. *Letters and Journals*, I, 416.
22. See Cooper's note to Walther, 2[6?] May 1830 and his letter to Mrs. Peter Augustus Jay, 26 July 1830 (*Letters and Journals*, I, 416 and 425).
23. The note is quoted in Max I. Baym and Percy Matenko, "The Odyssey of *The Water-Witch* and a Susan Fenimore Cooper Letter," *New York History*, LI (1970), 41, n. 14.
24. See Duncker und Humblot's letter to William Cooper of 18 September 1830, published in Robert E. Spiller and Philip C. Blackburn, *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Writings of James Fenimore Cooper* (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1934), p. 234 (hereafter cited as Spiller and Blackburn).
25. Colburn and Bentley's advertisement in the London *Times* for 14 October 1830 announces the next day as the publication date of the new novel.
26. See Cooper's letter to Charles Wilkes, 24 August 1830 (*Letters and Journals*, II, 8).
27. The cause of the delay may have been the need to correct an excessive number of errors in the stereotype plates. The *Ariel* of 25 December 1830 comments on "the many "typographical errors" in the book, an apparent reference to the early proof sheets that Carey & Lea distributed to newspapers for

promotional purposes; the published text is no more error-ridden than the Carey & Lea editions of other Cooper novels that were initially printed abroad.

28. See *The Cost Book of Carey & Lea, 1825-1838*, ed. David Kaser (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), pp. 52 and 107.

29. See Cooper's letter of 1 February 1831 to Henry Colburn, in which the novelist offers to sell Colburn, "as usual," the sheets of *The Bravo* for £600 (*Letters and Journals*, II, 52).

30. See Spiller and Blackburn, p. 234, and *Letters and Journals*, II, 37, n. 1.

31. See Jacob Blanck, *Bibliography of American Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), II, 285 (hereafter cited as Blanck), and *Letters and Journals*, II, 65, n. 3, and VI, 5. The proceeds from the Putnam edition were particularly meager, for the author was required to furnish the stereotype plates, which cost him nearly as much as Putnam's payment; see *Letters and Journals*, VI, 130, n. 1.

32. For a thorough and thoughtful analysis of this episode and a transcription of the relevant manuscript draft, see Lance Schachterle, "A Long False Start: The Rejected Chapters of Cooper's 'The Bravo' (1831)," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, CXVI, Part 1 (2006), 81-126.

33. Cooper to Shubrick, 1 May 1831 (*Letters and Journals*, II, 79-80).

34. Cooper to Mrs. Jay, 16 June 1831 (*Letters and Journals*, II, 109-10).

35. Cooper to Samuel F. B. Morse, 19 August 1832 (*Letters and Journals*, II, 310).

36. Reprinted in *Whittier on Writers and Writing: The Uncollected Critical Writings of John Greenleaf Whittier*, ed. Edwin Harrison Cady and Harry Haydn Clark (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1950), p. 69.

37. "Literary Notices," *Ladies' Magazine*, IV (1831), 44-47.

38. [O. W. B. Peabody,] "The Water-Witch," *North American Review*, XXXII (1831), 508-23.

39. "Critical Notice," *Southern Quarterly Review*, IV n.s. (1851), 270.

40. *Gentleman's Magazine*, CI (1831), 132;. the review consists of blather about the nobility of British sailors. only relieved by the passing observation that *The Water-Witch* frequently attains "all the grandeur of an epic poem."

41 *Athenaeum*, 29 October 1830, pp. 658-59.

42. *Edinburgh Literary Journal*, 6 November 1830, pp. 290-92; much of this opinion was echoed by the writer of "American Life and Manners," *New Monthly Magazine*, XXXI (1831), 47-48.

43. Most of the reviewers, and presumably readers, on the European continent did not share this preference for Cooper's tales of the wilderness of the sea over those that dealt with the wilderness of the land. For much of the Continental audience, landlocked and reading the novels in translation, his nautical incidents and language were positively off-putting by comparison with his representations of the exotic landscapes and inhabitants of the New World. For discussions of the critical response to Cooper's fiction in Germany, see Harvey W. Hewett-Thayer. *American Literature as Viewed in Germany, 1818-1861*, University of North Carolina Studies in Comparative Literature, 22 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), pp. 24-35, and Morton Nirnberg, *The Reception of American Literature in German Periodicals, 1820-1850* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1970), pp. 54-74.

44. Preface to the Putnam edition, p. 7 of the present volume.

45. See Cooper to Shubrick, 1 May 1831 (*Letters and Journals*, II, 79).

46. See F. E. Fryatt, "The Navesink Highlands," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, LIX (1879), 548.

47 See "Highlands History TIME LINE" at <<http://www.highlandsnj.com/news/html/NewsDocs/HighlandsTimeline>>.

48. See Blanck, p. 308, and Edward Harris, "Cooper on Stage," diskette, James Fenimore Cooper Society Miscellaneous Papers, Electronic Series No.1, p. 4 (hereafter cited as Harris); also