

# Historical Introduction

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## Composition and Publishing Arrangements (LS)

### Composition

“The Littlepage Manuscripts,” of which *The Chainbearer* is the second of three volumes, constitutes Cooper’s most carefully constructed multivolume achievement in fiction. Before this Anti-Rent trilogy of 1845–46, Cooper had experimented several times with recurrent characters and settings. Most famously, Natty Bumppo appeared in the *Leather-Stocking Tales* published between 1823 and 1841, but for Bumppo’s five fictional roles Cooper devised significantly different plots, settings, and themes—and even names. In *The Pioneers* (1823), the first of the *Leather-Stocking Tales*, the owners of principal inn at Templeton (the fictional Cooperstown) bring forward poignant memories of the slain Revolutionary War heroic dragoon Captain Lawton of *The Spy* (1821), by naming their inn the “Bold Dragoon.” Later, the town of Templeton recurs in the two *Home* novels of 1838—rather awkwardly for Cooper and his publishers since the author originally intended a single volume to cover the Effingham sea voyage home and their first impressions of Templeton. But Cooper’s penchant for maritime exploits filled *Homeward Bound* with sea chases, piracy, and false identities, necessitating a sequel, *Home as Found*, for the domestic satire.

Immediately before “The Littlepage Manuscripts,” *Afloat and Ashore* (1844), which adumbrates some of the themes of the trilogy, also grew beyond the intended single volume, to Cooper’s surprise and perhaps chagrin. Thus, in writing to Richard Bentley on 22 January 1845 about his latest project, Cooper had to argue at length that the proposed trilogy was intentional and would contain exciting incidents

and political reflections likely to please a British audience.<sup>1</sup> Cooper required all his powers of persuasion to engage Bentley in yet another large publishing project; cheaply produced literature was coming to dominate publishing following the economic troubles of the late 1830s and many new authors like Dickens were competing with established figures. Furthermore, in 1838 Bentley had protested strongly against the *Home* novels morphing into two volumes, since “[m]y experience has always proved that sequels do not sell to the same extent as the earlier portion” (*L&J*, 3:307, n. 2).

Thus Cooper tried his best to present “the Littlepage Manuscripts” as independent yet related novels:

“The Family of Littlepage” will form three complete Tales, each perfectly distinct from the other as regards leading characters, love story &c, but, in this wise connected. I divide the subjects into the “Colony,” “Revolution” and “Republic,” carrying the same family, the same localities, and the same *things* generally through the three different books, but exhibiting the changes produced by time &c. In the Colony [*Satanstoe*], for instance, the Littlepage of that day, first visits an estate of wild land, during the operations of the year 1758, the year that succeeded the scenes of the Mohicans, and it is there that the most stirring events of the book occur. In the “Revolution” [*The Chainbearer*] this land is first settled, and the principles are developed, on which this settlement takes place, showing a book, in some respects resembling the *Pioneers*, though varied by localities and incidents— In the “Republic” [*The Redskins*] we shall have the present aspect of things, with an exhibition of the Anti-Rent commotion that now exists among us, and which certainly threatens the destruction of our system— You know I write what I think, in these matters, and I shall not spare “The Republic” in all in which it is faulty and weak, as faulty and weak it has been to a grievous extent in these matters. . . . These books will be perfectly distinct as Tales, and each will make an ordinary sized novel, though I hope the interest of one will be reflected on the others (*L&J*, 5:7).

Cooper further assured readers (and publishers) in his Preface to *Satanstoe*, published in early July 1845, that, as “Editor,” he

had been led to lay these manuscripts before the world . . . partly on account of the manner in which the two works we have named

“Satanstoe” and the “Chainbearer” relate directly to the great New York question of the day, ANTI-RENTISM, which question will be found to be pretty fully laid bare, in the third and last book of the series [*The Redskins*]. These three works, which contain all the Littlepage manuscripts, do not form sequels to each other, in the sense of personal histories, or as narratives [as in Cooper’s other multivolume series]; while they do in that of principles. The reader will see that the early career, the attachment, the marriage, &c. of Mr. Cornelius Littlepage are completely related in the present book . . . while those of his son, Mr. Mordaunt Littlepage, will be just as fully given in the “Chainbearer,” its successor. It is hoped that the connection, which certainly does exist between these three works, will have more tendency to increase the value of each, than to produce the ordinary effect of what are properly called sequels, which are known to lessen the interest a narrative might otherwise have with a reader. Each of these three books has its own hero, its own heroine, and its own picture of manners complete; though the latter may be, and is, more or less thrown into relief, by its *pendants*.<sup>2</sup>

Cooper’s 22 January 1845 letter to Bentley states that the governing theme of *The Chainbearer* is revolution: “In the ‘Revolution’ this land is first settled, and the principles are developed, on which this settlement takes place, showing a book, in some respects resembling the *Pioneers*, though varied by localities and incidents” (*LeJ*, 5:7). Because the action of the novel occurs in 1784, Cooper’s associating the novel with the “Revolution” cannot refer to the time of the actual Revolutionary War, concluded with the peace treaty of 1783. True, the novel’s hero, the then college-age Mordaunt Littlepage—son of Corny Littlepage and Anneke Mordaunt who marry at the end of *Satanstoe*—fights in several important battles early in the war and observes the fall of Yorktown. But all this action is presented as part of the first-person narrative in chapter 2 to establish the linkages with the preceding novel—not as a significant description of the Revolutionary War for its own sake. While chapter 2 is interesting for disclosing Cooper’s nuanced analysis of the causes which motivated both Whig rebels and Tory loyalists, on balance the narrative tone never challenges the decision of the Littlepages to side with the rebels.<sup>3</sup>

Cooper’s aligning the second novel in his overall schematic for the trilogy with the “Revolution” is not a glance back to the issues and events of 1775–1783, but instead a manifestation of his fears that Anti-

Rentism will soon cause a new and dire revolution in the United States. Cooper's 22 January letter announcing the trilogy to Bentley described the aim of the third novel—and by implication all three interrelated tales—as “an exhibition of the Anti-Rent commotion that now exists among us, and which certainly threatens the destruction of our system.” Although Cooper's Preface to *The Chainbearer* maintains the mask that the author is merely the Editor of “the Littlepage Manuscripts” and thus not responsible for all the opinions the Littlepages express, the heated rhetoric the Editor supplies in his notes about Anti-Rentism being the apocalypse of the Republic accords with opinions Cooper expressed in his correspondence.<sup>4</sup> The *Chainbearer* Preface begins with:

The plot has thickened, in the few short months that have intervened since the appearance of the first portion of our Manuscripts, and bloodshed has come to deepen the stain left on the country, by the widespread and bold assertion of false principles. This must long since have been foreseen, and it is perhaps, a subject of just felicitation, that the violence which has occurred, was limited to the loss of a single life, when the chances were, and still are, that it will extend to civil war (1.2–9).

Cooper—like modern historians—regularly characterized the Revolution itself as a civil war.<sup>5</sup> The modality of the remainder of this long Preface clearly establishes the author's fear that human greed trumpeted by demagoguery (although here Cooper does not use this term) will lead to the violent destruction of his ideal republic based on principles and laws, especially those protecting the minority against the majority.

What Cooper does show in *The Chainbearer* are the seeds of the Anti-Rent revolution being planted by the flood of New England emigrants who sought the comparatively more fertile soil of upper New York state and were free to move after the war's end.<sup>6</sup> Mordaunt first learns of squatters on his Ravensnest estate in chapter 7 from the cagey landlady Mrs. Tinkum, a recent squatter whose dialect betrays her New England origin. Mrs. Tinkum justifies her “title” through bartering for the “betterments” (improvements) of the previous squatter who ran the very modest local tavern, and censures the Chainbearer for refusing to survey “their” land when he learns they hold no legitimate title (82.27–33).

Chapter 9 firmly establishes the revolutionary threat to New York landholders from New Englanders by introducing the Connecticut emigrant, Jason Newcome.<sup>7</sup> Now installed as the agent (a corrupt one, we eventually discover) of the Littlepages on the family lands Mordaunt has come to survey, Newcome, by exploiting the people's misplaced faith in the "Majority," manipulates the vote for the denomination of the "meetin'-us" the locals are about to raise, to favor the "old Connecticut Standing order" (105.32), or Congregationalists. Mordaunt marvels that thanks to Newcome's sly practices as town Moderator, "[s]uch were the facts attending the establishment of the Congregational Church, in the settlement of Ravensnest, on purely republican principles; the question having been carried unanimously in favour of that denomination, although fifty two votes, out of seventy eight were pretty evidently opposed to it!" (110.13–17). Demagoguery is already manipulating the vote, preparing us for Jason's nascent Anti-Rentism.

For *Satanstoe*, as Kay Seymour House has established, Cooper could draw upon rich personal memories of Albany, at the very beginning of the nineteenth century when the author was a student there of Thomas Ellison, and before the town had expanded much beyond its Dutch origins. Supplementing Cooper's own memories were his borrowings from authors like Ann MacVicar Grant and William Dunlap, whose accounts of New York customs, manners, and events House shows found their way into *Satanstoe*.<sup>8</sup>

We know of no such readings that inform *The Chainbearer*. Cooper's correspondence assuring Bentley, his reluctant British publisher, that the second two novels of the trilogy would not be mere sequels, sheds light, albeit indirectly, on his sources. He wrote Bentley that in *The Chainbearer* "this land is first settled, and the principles are developed, on which this settlement takes place, showing a book, in some respects resembling the *Pioneers*, though varied by localities and incidents" (*L&J*, 5:7). Perhaps by referring to *The Pioneers* Cooper hoped to remind his publisher of a great success in his early career—but the similarities between the two books are far smaller than their striking differences. In *The Pioneers*, the land is already settled with a significantly differentiated social order, Judge Temple, dispensing law, at the top. Wayne Franklin has argued that the society Cooper represents in *The Pioneers* is not really the "frontier." Despite the title, the word "pioneers" appears only twice in the novel itself, though quite famously in the concluding line enshrining the Leather-Stocking,

willy-nilly, as “the foremost in that band of Pioneers, who are opening the way for the march of civilization across the continent.”<sup>9</sup>

In *The Chainbearer*, Mordaunt Littlepage may be a “pioneer” in Cooper’s new sense, opening the wilderness for settlement, but the lawless squatters of the Thousandacres family physically dominate the book. (Their family name is Timberman, but they are known as Thousandacres for their success in appropriating as much of other people’s lands as they can use.) The Thousandacres are the archetypical “back country” people Crèvecoeur, Brackenridge, Brockden Brown, Timothy Dwight, and others depicted as morally degenerate. So did Cooper; in chapter 16, when first introducing Aaron Thousandacres and his squatter clan, he never missed an opportunity to describe them as wild animals.<sup>10</sup> Cooper details the incursions of Vermont squatters into the lands owned but not controlled by New Yorkers:

It is a principle of moral, as well as of physical, nature, that like should produce like. The right ever vindicates itself, in the process of events, and the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, even to the third and fourth generations, in their melancholy consequences. It was impossible that an example of such a wrong, could be successfully exhibited on a large scale, without producing its deluded imitators, on another that was better suited to the rapacity of individual longings. It is probable Vermont has sent out, among us, two squatters, and otherwise lawless intruders on our vacant lands, to one of any other of the adjoining states, counting all in proportion to their whole numbers (195.30–40).

Both House and Franklin document the close similarities between the DeLancey and Littlepage families, with the Westchester “Satanstoe” estate and its origins drawing heavily on the DeLanceys.<sup>11</sup> But after the opening chapters, in *The Chainbearer* the second generation Littlepage protagonist leaves the world of the settled Westchester gentry for a real frontier, literally uncharted as his purpose is to oversee accurate surveys to begin the process of selling or leasing lands. In Cooper’s experience, his father William of course had been exactly such a “pioneer” as Mordaunt Littlepage is, venturing with a similar mission into the Otsego Lake region in 1784. To some degree, then, Cooper is drawing upon family traditions about his father opening up vast tracts of land far less settled than the Templeton/Cooperstown of *The Pioneers*; imaginatively, he is in part creating a fictional “history” of

his father's process of settling the frontier.<sup>12</sup> Franklin, Taylor, and John P. McWilliams's introduction to this volume on the Anti-Rent controversies all document the complexities of William Cooper's building his real estate empire only to have his heirs lose most of its value after his death in 1809. James Fenimore Cooper probably did not know as much of the details of his father's aggressive acquisitions, poor financing, and sloppy record-keeping as modern scholarship has recovered. But he did know, firsthand, that New Englanders were largely responsible for the last of Judge Cooper's sons—the author himself—losing his patrimony in Cooperstown.

Franklin's chapter on "Legal Troubles" unravels the complexities of the collapse of Judge Cooper's estate, which—as the only of five sons who survived to the early 1820s—James Fenimore Cooper had to deal with. Cooper's headaches were compounded by his sister Ann and her husband, George Pomeroy, successfully suing to protect her share of the troubled estate. Alan Taylor stresses that as creditors of Judge Cooper's estate seized its assets, the Cooperstown businessman William Holt Averell, son of a 1787 Massachusetts emigrant, bought them up very cheaply. According to Taylor:

Averell managed his newly acquired Cooper properties without the paternalism practiced by the judge and his heirs. Not giving a damn for popularity or gratitude, he preferred to maximize his profits. Averell never aimed to be a Father of the People. In foreclosing on Cooper properties in Broome County, he directed the sheriff to auction everything, including a lot that the Coopers had set aside for a local church. In St. Lawrence County, Averell refused to exempt settler-occupied lots from his auction purchase, and he demanded that the settlers pay off their debts within four years or face eviction.

Cooper doubtless was thinking of Averell in the final paragraph of *The Chainbearer* Preface, in retelling the fable of King Log and King Stork.<sup>13</sup>

#### Publishing Arrangements

For "the Littlepage Manuscripts," Cooper was employing a publishing strategy he had initiated with *Afloat and Ashore* after his suspicions about their business practices led him to abandon his long association with the Philadelphia publishers Lea and Carey and their successors.<sup>14</sup> As with *Afloat and Ashore*, for "the Littlepage Manuscripts," Cooper

undertook the considerable managerial duties of paying for all the costs (paper, printing, binding, shipping and the like) of producing copies for sale of his new trilogy. Cooper had come to regard highly the Philadelphian John Fagan for his accuracy and good business practices. To Fagan he entrusted setting the type which Cooper proofread before Fagan prepared the stereotype plates, which Cooper then owned and controlled. Cooper himself then had copies of *Chainbearer* printed, and arranged distribution through a new start-up company in New York City, Burgess, Stringer and Co.

Cooper's extant correspondence with Richard Bentley provides a scanty record of the *Chainbearer's* composition.<sup>15</sup> On 24 April 1845, Cooper responded to Bentley's disappointment with the sales of "the second part of *Miles Wallingford* [*Afloat and Ashore*]," for which Bentley had paid him £350 per volume. Cooper, having considered alternative arrangements for British publishing, now affirmed his intention of continuing to do business with the British firm he had worked with since *The Prairie* (1827), and doubtless grudgingly accepted a lower rate of £250 for the three "Littlepage" books (*L&J*, 5:19). On 23 September 1845, Cooper agreed to Bentley's terms for the new series based on the April letter—and tried again to assuage his publisher's fear that sequels would not sell. In the second sentence below, Cooper further conceded to Bentley a £50 credit for the first two books of the trilogy, as compensation for the poor sales of the second part of *Afloat and Ashore*.

I have determined that you shall have the three Books connected with the Littlepage Manuscripts for the £250 each, with the other conditions you name. Satanstoe you shall have with a credit of £50, [also?] towards *Chainbearer*, which is the next work, now nearly stereotyped. This book is not a sequel, but a work in which the same scenes are used, and *some* of the old characters of Satanstoe are introduced, with new hero, heroine and love-story. The next book [*Redskins*] will be on the same plan, connecting one or two characters with the three books as *Leatherstocking* appears in different tales. My sole object in consenting to your terms, is to avoid the appearance of a misunderstanding by separating the Littlepage Manuscripts (*L&J*, 5:55–56).

Cooper's statement here that *Chainbearer* was "now nearly stereotyped" suggests he had begun the work several months earlier, probably before



*Satanstoe* had been released in early July. He further assured Bentley, who needed to publish a new title first anywhere in the world to secure British copyright, that “I shall send you half the book, or one American volume, by the middle of October, and the remainder about ten days later. I wish you to go to press at once, and to publish before Dec. 1st if possible” (*L&J*, 5:56).

To meet his publishing deadline with Bentley, Cooper thus needed to produce all the printed sheets to ship to London by the end of October. His letters in September and early October disclose his presence in Philadelphia to perfect the text for both American and British publication. As one of two representatives of Christ Church, Cooperstown, the author attended the annual diocesan conference in New York in late September 1845, to deal with the scandalous accusations made against Bishop Benjamin Tredwell Onderdonk. He was also troubled by evidence that his local rector, Frederick Trenck Tiffany, was guilty of various deceits; much of his extant correspondence to friends and family from New York and Philadelphia in September and October deal with the debates over what to do with the disgraced prelate and the problems with the spiritual leader of Christ Church, Cooperstown (*L&J*: 5:59–85).

After his “eight days detention in New York” (*L&J*, 5:68), he wrote a chatty letter to his nephew Richard on 2 October from his favorite Philadelphia hotel, Head’s. His letters from 2 to 11 October from Head’s to nephew Richard, to his close friend William Branford Shubrick, and to his wife and son are filled with gossip; his brief references to publishing are more concerned with managing daughter Susan’s novel *Elinor Wyllys* than his own work. However, his reference on 3 October to Mrs. Cooper that “[w]e are hard at work on vol. II, vol I being done” (*L&J*, 5:72) must apply to the current title in production; the letter goes on to state “Chainbearer is a good book I think,” perhaps because his rereading during revisions recalled its merits. And on 11 October he wrote Mrs. Cooper that “[m]y book will be finished this afternoon, and I shall go to New York to-morrow night” (*L&J*, 5:79). Since his sales tactic for the novel was to own and control the plates Fagan would make, we may reasonably assume these references during his Philadelphia sojourn are to perfecting Fagan’s typesetting before allowing Fagan to make the stereotyped plates. Thus on 13 October he wrote Bentley that “[b]y the Cambria (16th instant) you will recieve [*sic*] the sheets of Chainbearer, complete” (*L&J*, 5:81).

Cooper returned to New York after his nine days in Philadelphia and before finally going home to Cooperstown. Corresponding with John Fagan from New York on 17 October, Cooper lamented that “[a]fter all I came off without the Title pages of Chainbearer and Elinor. As I have given an order to Burgess and Stringer to recieve [sic] the plates of the first, it may be out of your power to send them to me” (*L&J*, 5:87). Such “an order” establishes that while in New York, he was arranging for printing and distribution of *The Chainbearer* with the new firm of Burgess, Stringer and Co. For his part, Fagan wrote to Cooper on 27 October that “I sent the plates of ‘Chainbearer’ some days ago, to Burgess & Stringer, they having forwarded your order therefor [sic].”<sup>16</sup> One brief letter from Burgess, Stringer, to Cooper confirms his conducting business in the second half of October with his new distributors. Writing on 29 October from New York, the company, which must have had Fagan’s plates for two weeks or so, forwarded “two Title pages of the Chainbearer which we send as you requested us to do *when here*, by mail.”<sup>17</sup>

According to Steven Harthorn’s excellent study of Cooper’s publishing in the 1840s, Burgess, Stringer and Co. (which soon became Stringer and Townsend) was formed on 9 December 1843 by Wesley F. Burgess, James Stringer, and William A. Townsend.<sup>18</sup> The new company first specialized in cheap literature but soon sought to boost their stature by engaging established writers like Simms and Cooper. Cooper had selected them as one of his distributors for *Afloat and Ashore*, and apparently pleased by their efforts, contracted with them to handle printing and distribution of the new trilogy. The new company was poorly capitalized, and what few letters to Cooper exist, according to Harthorn, are mainly requests for the author to extend the terms of their payment notes to him. Cooper wrote his wife on 18 November that “Chainbearer will be published early next week, and not before,” and again on 21 November that “Chainbearer will appear to-morrow” (*L&J*, 5:96, 97). *Chainbearer* appeared before 1 December 1845, bearing the imprint “Burgess, Stringer and Co.”<sup>19</sup>

Correspondence in 1846 between James Kirke Paulding and Cooper sheds valuable light both on Cooper’s dour assessment of the literary market and his diminished stature in it, and on his dealings with Burgess and Stringer. In a letter to Cooper of 4 May 1846, Paulding shared his frustrations with publishers:

Hitherto I have been a prey to the Bookselling Craft, and have made a good many bad Bargains. My desire is to avail myself a little of Your experience and Sagacity in future, and I have troubled You with this letter, for the purpose of requesting of You—provided You are at liberty to communicate them, and will do me the favour—to state the precise terms of Your agreement with Burgess & Paine for the publication of Your work. I shall only use it for my own special direction. They tell me they will give me the Same terms, but decline stating what they are—which is very satisfactory.<sup>20</sup>

Paulding's lament that "I have been a prey to the Bookselling Craft, and have made a good many bad Bargains" unleashed an even stronger rant from Cooper in his response of 9 May 1846:

I am very sorry to say that my pecuniary benefits, in this country, amount to nothing worth naming. I own so much literary property, and so many plates, that in the whole they amount to something, though far less than you would suppose. The cheap literature has destroyed the value of nearly all literary property, and after five and twenty years of hard work, I find myself comparatively a poor man. Had I employed the same time in trade, or travelling as an agent for a manufacturer of pins, I do not doubt I should have been better off, and my children independent. The fact is, this country is not sufficiently advanced for any thing intellectual, and the man who expects to rise by any such agency makes a capital mistake, unless he sell himself, soul and body, to a faction.

After disburdening himself of this lament for a career he had come to regard increasingly as unappreciated, Cooper supplied Paulding with the details of his publishing arrangements with Burgess and Stringer:

My last bargain with B &S. was a complicated one, including the use of plates of no less than three old books, besides the new one [*Redskins*, published by Burgess and Stringer in July 1846]. The price paid was \$1500. The two preceding books, however, sold each an edition of 3500 for \$1050, the plates at my cost. I do not think the last three books ["the Littlepage Manuscripts"] will nett [*sic*] me much more than \$500 a book. B &S. say they have not sold the first editions of *Satanstoe* and *Chainbearer*.<sup>21</sup>

Cooper continued by venting his spleen that “the press is a solid phalanx against me, and I am unpopular with the country, generally—Indeed, were it not for the convenience of correcting proof sheets, I would not publish in this country at all. . . . If they will not pay, they ought not to read.” Cooper had of course done better with Bentley’s price of £250 per book (roughly \$1,250). Thus he concluded with the recurrent but never realized threat to “go abroad, and never return,” sharing his opinion with Paulding that “[y]ou and I have committed the same error; have been American—whereas our cue was to be European, which would have given us success at home” (*L&J*, 5:131–32).

Cooper’s letters home to his wife in November and December 1845 express his frustration with the sales and reviews of *Chainbearer*. His first reference, on 26 November, is mixed news: “Burgess has sold about 2500 of *Chainbearer*. But the sale of all such books, if copy right, is heavy” (*L&J*, 5:99). Writing on 30 November, he is less sanguine: “I can hear nothing of *Chainbearer*. The papers are mum, as usual, but I know it sells pretty well. They cannot put me down entirely, though they do me infinite harm. A precious set of dishonest knaves are they!” (*L&J*, 5:101). On 3 December: “*Chainbearer* I can tell you nothing of” (*L&J*, 5:105). On 5 December, much the same: “Of *Chainbearer*, I can tell you nothing, though Griswold does not think it as interesting as *Satanstoe*. It has a fault which he pointed out, but it is a more interesting book than *Satanstoe*. Dus Malbone he likes” (*L&J*, 5:106–7). On 9 December, almost the same words: “I can tell you nothing of *Chainbearer*, as I have not yet been to the publishers” (*L&J*, 5:107). His last known extant reference is in his letter of 9 May 1846 to James Kirk Paulding: “B & S say they have not sold the first editions of *Satanstoe* and *Chainbearer*” (*L&J*, 5:131).

Cooper’s letter of 9 May 1846 to Paulding states his distributors Burgess, Stringer paid him \$1,050 for 3500 copies; how many they sold is not known.<sup>22</sup> Bentley paid Cooper £250 (or \$1,250) for *Chainbearer*, but no records are extant of how many copies the British publisher printed or sold. Given Cooper’s comparatively poor sales in England after his return to the United States in 1834, and Gettmann’s reporting Bentley sold only 400 of 750 copies of *Sea Lions* and thus printed only 500 copies of *Ways of the Hour*,<sup>23</sup> *Chainbearer*—one of Cooper’s best novels of the 1840s—initially may have sold under 4,000 copies, which brought Cooper \$2,300. From this sum he had to pay all the costs of producing the American edition,<sup>24</sup> and thus he had lamented to Paulding “that I do not think the last three books will nett [*sic*] me

much more than \$500 a book.” In comparison, the American editions alone of his most popular earlier works brought him at best ten times that amount. “For *The Prairie* (1827), *The Red Rover* (1828), and *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, Carey paid Cooper \$5,000 per title and printed at least 5,000 copies for the first run.” And for the two final titles in the “Leather-Stocking Tales,” Lea and Blanchard “paid him \$3,600 for an initial sale of 5,000 copies [of *The Pathfinder* (1840)] of which 4,000 quickly sold. . . . For *The Deerslayer* Cooper received only \$2,500 for 5,000 copies, with an agreement for additional payments after the initial printing sold.”<sup>25</sup> Cooper’s bitter remark to Paulding that he and his family would have done better financially had he devoted his career to “travelling as an agent for a manufacturer of pins” thus is grounded on his accurate accounting of what his readers in the later 1840s were willing to pay for.

#### Reception (WTM)

The scattered reviews of *The Chainbearer* ranged from hostile to lukewarm to enthusiastic, the response to Cooper’s craft often related to attitudes toward his politics. Especially in New York, Cooper’s elitist sympathies and increasingly litigious spirit colored the critical reception of his later fiction. The *Albany Evening Journal* did not even notice the publication of *The Chainbearer* but derided Cooper’s letter in the *Protestant Churchman* in which he complained that his views at a recent church convention were reported incorrectly, and that, quoting Cooper’s own words, “the building in which the Convention assembled was so ill-adapted to debating, that, for one, I did not hear a fourth of that which gentlemen who sat higher up the Church said.” The *Journal* mockingly concluded:

Every body abuses Mr. J. Fennimore [sic] Cooper, in or out of the Church! He cannot even get reported correctly, “*either in public or in private.*”—What a shame it is that such a “handsome” man, and one so “amiable,” withal, should be so ill-used? When *will* obstinate, self-willed people learn that the world was made for one man? At any rate, we hope that “Trinity” will immediately “erect a hall” in which Mr. J. Fennimore Cooper can hear and be heard.<sup>26</sup>

The *New-York Tribune* review, which appeared before the book’s official publication date, faulted both Cooper’s social views and the

novel: “The author takes the extreme ground in sustaining the justice and wisdom of manorial tenures, and has no sympathy or charity for the complaining Tenants. The story of the Chainbearer is defective and uninteresting—indeed, it is altogether subordinate to the design of denouncing the movement of the Anti-Renters.” Others have made the case for the proprietors “more effectively,” the review concluded, “but in zeal and determination, Mr. Cooper has not been surpassed. In this work, as in all others by the same author, his reverence for ‘old families,’ and what he calls the higher classes of society, is ludicrously manifested.”<sup>27</sup>

*The Harbinger*, the organ of Associationism published at Brook Farm in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, might have been expected to be even more predisposed to condemn Cooper’s social views. But the paper took aesthetic matters seriously and Charles Anderson Dana began his lengthy review by considering, at least, *Chainbearer’s* artistic merits, and offered faint praise: “though not destined to a very long immortality, it is much better than [*Satanstoe*]. Considered simply as a work of fiction, to be tried by the standards of art, it has no very substantial claim upon our imagination. . . . Still the book displays a degree of power, and to give it full praise, is beyond the average of Mr. Cooper’s later performances.” Yet Cooper invited extraliterary assessment because he asserted that *Chainbearer* was more than “a mere romance”; indeed, the *Harbinger* noted, “It is nothing less than an essay upon the rights of property, administered to the public in the vehicle of a love story, as medicine is disguised in molasses, a stratagem which is not always successful.” Cooper’s “opinions upon various points in political philosophy, which are often not without merit,” nevertheless “are not wholly true.” Nor will he, by this means, reach “the popular mind.”

Dana then takes aim at Cooper’s social and political views: “Upon the Anti-rent difficulties, Mr. Cooper writes in the spirit of a conservative, who has no doubt of his right to the highest rank among the ‘upper class,’ and whose sympathies do not extend much beyond that class, except in the way of patronage and condescension.” In *Chainbearer* “[h]e defends the ‘rights of property’” but ignores “the rights of man.” As a writer and as a political thinker, he is not up to the task: “A man who now-a-days undertakes to instruct the world, must enter upon the office with a heart and mind of more generous expansion than his.” Echoing Brook Farm’s stated mission to restore the dignity of “labor, whether corporal or mental,” Dana declares

Cooper blind to the reality that “present labor is left a victim to free competition, mercantile frauds and all the degradation and disgrace which ages of slavery have entailed upon it.”<sup>28</sup>

The *New York Evening Post* later praised *The Harbinger*—despite that paper’s “peculiar doctrines”—for its coverage of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Great Men lectures (6 February 1846, 2). But the *Post*’s own treatment of *The Chainbearer* epitomizes the fact that the novel was more widely advertised than reviewed. The *Post* covered Anti-Rent unrest in great detail and praised Governor Silas Wright’s commutation of the death sentences of Steenburgh and O’Connor (“The Case of the Anti Renters,” 26 November 1845, 2). But though the *Post* ran ads for *The Chainbearer* on 1 and 2 December (with the erroneous subtitle “Or, The Title Page Manuscripts”), the paper did not review the novel or comment on its relevance to the debate over Anti-Rent legislation.

More genially but, in the end, equally neglecting the novel, *The Knickerbocker*, in its “Editor’s Table” feature, greeted *The Chainbearer* as “one of the very best of our distinguished novelist’s recent works, if we may judge from a cursory examination of its pages. We shall have more to say of it hereafter” (26 [December 1845], 590); but two careful scannings through May 1846 suggest that the promised review never appeared.

A note in the monthly Hunt’s *Merchants’ Magazine, and Commercial Review*, however, found *The Chainbearer* a worthy successor to *Satanstoe* in plot, theme, and characterization: “The plot is well carried on, and the story rendered characteristic of Cooper, by the introduction of the Indian and negro. The design of the series is to touch the question of *anti rentism*; the application, probably, of the characters of ‘Satanstoe’ and the ‘Chainbearer’ to the circumstances and principles of that exciting subject, being intended for the last. The contrast between those descended from Puritan and Dutch forefathers, is also well kept up.”<sup>29</sup>

The English press regarded a Cooper novel as a social and political event, whatever its literary merits. Despite strong cultural ties between the United States and Great Britain, tensions lingered in the 1840s over border disputes in North America and Britain’s assertion of the right to search vessels; and many American intellectuals, bristling after decades of being mocked as provincial Jonathans, were returning the favor, attacking Britain as a quagmire of crime and abject poverty presided over by an unholy alliance of a reactionary national church, a clueless aristocracy, and a corrupt Parliament. Though Cooper had often taken

Great Britain to task over such issues, the growing domestic criticism of his blatant conservative social views doubtless would intrigue many English readers. Thus a new novel by a High Church, outspoken American concerned with the threats of the leveling forces of his own society promised to appeal to English readers—as the author had predicted to his London publisher.

The reviewer in the London *Literary Gazette and Journal of the Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.*, which had been running ads for *The Chainbearer* for more than a month, found that the novel delivered what it promised—a continuation of the Littlepage series—though its main value seemed to be as a cultural document, as a window on “American society”:

Publications to all outward and visible appearance Novels do now-o'-days so often turn out to be something else, that we open them doubtingly whether we shall fall in with a polemical tract, a political treatise, a moral essay, or a free-trade or poor-law diatribe. In the present case of the *Chainbearer*, the Littlepage MSS. (the first part of which was reviewed in our No. 1483, page 392), are carried out; and the changes in New York and various portions of the United States are elucidated at length. About one volume constitutes the Tale, or Novel; the rest presents us with views of American society, and the author's opinions upon many subjects connected therewith, and the existing condition of the country. Were we to indulge in extracts, they must be so much in the same spirit as those quoted in our former notice, that our readers would hardly thank us for them. We have, therefore, only to repeat, that much interesting information relative to the United States will be found in these volumes, and that there are many things in them, at this critical time, especially worthy of English attention.<sup>30</sup>

The London *Spectator* too found *The Chainbearer* a significant social document but also offered as lengthy and nuanced a literary analysis as that of *The Harbinger*.

The literary character of *The Chainbearer* is very similar to that of its immediate predecessor [*Satanstoe*], and to the average of Cooper's land novels. There is the same absence of what the ignorant call 'highly worked up' situations; but the same sustained, quiet interest, produced by an even, natural story, and characters that admit of force and contrast from the peculiar state of society in which they are placed.



In brief, Cooper had written “truthful dialogue, and well-written but somewhat slow narrative.” The reviewer criticized the appearance of Cooper’s “personal weakness”—“a wish to display the accomplishments of Europe and America”—which, “coupled” with the especially “conspicuous” “fault” of “stopping the narrative for a wise remark,” produces “too much the air of ‘absolute wisdom.’”

A major fault of *The Chainbearer*, according to *The Spectator*, is its lack of “novelty” as “a structure or a story.” The novel’s greatest virtue is vitiated by its greatest defect: “Its freshness arises from its delineation of character; which is masterly both in conception and execution”—but “[t]he philosophy is not quite so good. Mr. Cooper has pushed his abstractions and legal rights rather too far to carry the entire sympathy of his readers with him.” This tension between strongly delineated characters and intrusive social commentary leads to an unintended result: The reader *sympathizes* with Cooper’s “triumph,” his putative villain, “old Thousand-acres.” (Though the reviewer does not make the analogy, his point recalls the Romantics’ opinion that Milton undercut his theological purpose by unwittingly creating a powerfully seductive hero in Satan.) Indeed, “the hero himself [does not] act altogether in a way becoming the representative of individual right,” which is a defect of the author as well: “[W]hile Mr. Cooper is thus strict on the hard principle of a vicious title *ab initio* forfeiting all additional value imparted, he is as lax in the larger justice of politics as the worst squatter or Anti-Renter of the State of New York.”

The reviewer concludes by wondering if, ironically, Cooper’s own principles of justice and the rule of law apply equally to America and to Britain’s own colonial affairs. The ongoing dispute over Oregon may well bear out Cooper’s belief that European “interference” is the greatest stimulus to “annexation” by the United States. But Cooper, the reviewer notes, cannot have the principle both ways:

[W]e should like to know whether Great Britain has not as good a right to interfere respecting Canada . . . as Mr. Cooper or any other landlord has to interfere with his tenants. The rights of landlords are not the only rights in this world; and if Mr. Littlepage had a right to his trees after they were made planks, surely England has a right to Canada and to the parts of Oregon she has occupied, and holds by tenure and prescription or both.

With still richer irony, the reviewer concludes that Mordaunt Littlepage's insight that "a subserviency of interests . . . clearly could last only so long as the party governed was too weak to take care of itself" must finally apply not only to the American Revolution but also to Cooper's own land politics; indeed, that insight also might be occasion for Britain to "ponder over in relation to our other colonies at present."<sup>31</sup>

### The Anti-Rent Controversy (JPM)

No state shall . . . pass any Bill of Attainder, ex post facto Law, or Law impairing the Obligation of Contracts.

U.S. Constitution, section 10 (1787)

The question Whether one generation of men has a right to bind another . . . is a question of such consequences as not only to merit decision, but place also among the fundamental principles of every government. . . . I set out on this ground, which I suppose to be self-evident, "*that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living*": that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it.

Thomas Jefferson, letter to James Madison, 6 September 1789<sup>32</sup>

Here are two great principles, one of American law, the other of American values, which are in purpose and in application opposed to each other. Nowhere more so than in the Anti-Rent war of 1839–45 which served as Cooper's impetus for writing the trilogy titled "the Littlepage Manuscripts." Can and/or should a landlord have the right to hold lands in perpetuity as rental property, while reserving part of the "usufruct" for himself? Can and/or should a third or fourth generation tenant have the right to convert a leasehold contract into a freehold contract in face of the Constitutional stricture to uphold the "Obligation of Contracts"? Can and/or should past debts contractually due to a landlord be canceled because they are claimed to be both "feudal" and unpayable by the present renter? Must a land rent contract be upheld if the landlord's title is questionable, or if the signing of the leasehold contract preceded the ratification of the Constitution?

From Thomas Jefferson to Frederick Jackson Turner, from Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* to Cather's *My Ántonia*, from New York State's "Homestead Exemption" clause to the 1862 Homestead Act itself, Americans have praised, even revered, the small family farm as a bedrock of democratic moral value, individual self-sufficiency, and national prosperity. Renting money (once called

“usury,” now called a loan) and renting housing (apartment or single dwelling) continue to be perfectly acceptable, but renting land is seen as a form of servitude, from which it is as difficult to escape as from plantation slavery or from sharecropping. Criticisms of today’s agribusiness appeal to all the virtues that have presumably been lost as the family farm has declined. The usufruct of the soil, many an agrarian and environmentalist believes, should be reclaimed as part of our corporate community, but not as the property of a corporation.

Cooper was well aware of how resentment against large landowners, together with faith in the virtue of fee simple ownership of the family farm, underlay the generally favorable treatment the Anti-Rent movement had been receiving in the New York press since 1839, when Stephen Van Rensselaer the Third’s two sons had demanded payment of present and back rents on Rensselaerswyck in accord with their father’s will. The charge that any form of land rent is necessarily feudal and un-American was fed by the very size of the patents long held by the Rensselaer, Livingston, Verplanck, Phillipses, and other families. The primary target of Anti-Rent rhetoric, until at least 1844, was Rensselaerswyck, an immense estate of some 290 square miles and 750,000 acres, entirely surrounding the city of Albany. Such estates were commonly branded as “manors” and their owners as “patroons” even though those terms had, in most instances, long since fallen into disuse.

From Cooper’s perspective, the historical facts of Hudson Valley settlement were becoming distorted beyond recognition because they were now seen through the lens of today’s agricultural conditions, today’s Anti-Rent politics, and today’s newspapers. What was needed was an extended family chronicle that could not only describe the ways of eighteenth-century New York, but could engage the reader’s historical imagination. First-person narrative would enable the reader to understand, if not to share, the landlord’s point of view. Instead of following popular prejudice in condemning patroons, manors, and landlords as anti-republican aristocrats, “the Littlepage Manuscripts” would enable the reader to discover why the distinction between leasehold and freehold had to develop, and how it had changed. As the trilogy progressed toward the present, the author’s problem would be to keep the rhetoric of contemporary Anti-Rent political issues from overwhelming the novelist’s care for narrative and characterization. In this regard, *The Redskins* would conspicuously fail. Appreciation of

the merits of *The Chainbearer* as historical fiction, however, requires knowledge of the novel's historical contexts.<sup>33</sup>

### The Origin of Anti-Rent

The persistent stereotype of the Anti-Rent movement pictures an idle landlord of aristocratic tastes who has inherited from his Anglo-Dutch forebears the vast farmlands whose rental is his only income. The landlord, living on his vast manorial estate, refuses to alter the terms of a virtually unbreakable lease, even though his tenants, having improved the lands with “betterments,” have long sought relief from seemingly interminable rent. “Feudal” stipulations for payment of rent in day’s works or in crops (produce, bushels of wheat) rather than in cash served as a particularly visible and effective target of Anti-Rent protest. Issues almost as inflammatory, and far more damaging in economic effect, were the landlords’ reservations of mill sites, the tenants’ payment of land taxes, and the landlords’ contractual rights to enforce both Distress (seizure of tenant lands for unpaid rent) and the Quarter Sale (enforced payment to the landlord of 25 percent of the price when the tenant sold his lease). Landlords had to pay Quitrent to the state (a stipulated fee per acre when deciding to sell lands under leasehold), further impeding property transfer of the land (or, legally, “alienation”). The combined effect of these forces was a legal and economic impasse so severe that by 1845 it resulted in tarring, feathering, beatings, widespread resistance of arrest, and a governor-declared “State of Insurrection” in New York that would promptly be described as a “war”—as it still is in scholarly monographs and history textbooks.

Although this stereotype has considerable validity for the situation in the 1840s, the origins of the Hudson River landhold and land-settlement practices had been, as Cooper well knew, created and maintained to meet a far different but equally challenging set of economic and political circumstances. When the British took full control of New Amsterdam in the late 1670s, trading connections between Fort Orange (Dutch Albany) and Manhattan (increasingly British New York) needed to be strengthened. More importantly, Governor Thomas Dongan needed to secure loyalty within the new Provincial government by granting large tracts of undeveloped or underdeveloped land to men who could then serve, loyally, in the Province’s Assembly. The surveying of lands for purposes of making