THE BATTLE OF THE HEROES:

THE CREATION OF A NEW HERO OF LAKE ERIE IN THE BACKDROP OF THE YEAR 1845:

THE JACKSON – ELLIOTT – COOPER CONNECTION

BY NORMAN BARRY

INTRODUCTION

The year 1845 was one of James Fenimore Cooper's most productive years. Although the year was crowned with two Hudson River novels, ***Satanstoe*** and ***The Chainbearer,*** it was fraught with mental turmoil due to Cooper's rôle as America's paramount historian of the U.S. Navy.

In the festering dispute over Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott's conduct during the Battle of Lake Erie, Cooper had come to the defense of Elliot to the dismay of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry's supporters. The troubling history of the Battle of Lake Erie was always in the back of Cooper's mind. Perry, the Hero of Lake Erie, and Andrew Jackson, the Hero of New Orleans, whose life was slowly but surely being snuffed out, were key figures in Cooper's world of 1845. As will be seen, it was Elliott, who provided the historical link between Lake Erie and Jackson.

Cooper was not generally given to writing short sketches. The only short story officially accredited to Cooper is "***The Lake Gun***" **[1]**, which is, in effect, a political allegory. This article will analyze allegorical intent **[2]** in the backdrop of the impending death of Andrew Jackson, America's "Old Hero." The substantiation of the allegorical nature of "***The Helmsman***" in the backdrop of the year 1845 allows yet a second solution to the riddle of the four-year gap between the loss of the ***Erie*** and the first publication of "***The Helmsman***." Apart from the established role of the ***Swallow*** tragedy on the Hudson River, the widely publicized deterioration of General Andrew Jackson's health and consequent approaching death add a significant allegorical constituent.

I.

THE DEATH OF THE "THE OLD HERO" ON JUNE 8TH, 1845

Augustus Fuller, mistakenly reported in 1841 as Luther Fuller, the young "helmsman" of the ***Erie***, may indeed have been heroic. Yet a legend did not grow up around his person. Even the editor of the Buffalo ***Commercial Advertiser*** in 1845 confused Fuller with Jerome McBride, the wheelsman who was off duty at the time of the conflagration and who had died of his severe burns. The fact that there was not one eyewitness who could attest to Fuller's heroism no doubt prevented the growth of a "Fuller legend." Only four years had passed, but Fuller's name had been forgotten....

What could breathe new life into a tragedy, and then turn the worst tragedy on Lake Erie up to 1845 into a soul-stirring event of salvation through the self-sacrifice of the "Old Hero"?

A perusal of newspapers in the year 1845 immediately reveals a marked event which moved the hearts and minds of the American nation. It was the death of the greatest American of that day and age, the man who had become a legend long before his death: General Andrew Jackson, the "Old Hero," "Old Hickory," the "Hero of New Orleans." On June 8,1845, the life of the greatest democrat America had ever known expired. His mortal remains were placed beside those of his prematurely deceased wife in the garden at his home at the Hermitage in Tennessee. The orations delivered in New York City and the nation's capital honoring Jackson's life and accomplishments were in many instances not in print until mid-July and later. Poems eulogizing Jackson were published throughout the summer and into September. The temporal proximity of Jackson's death and the advent of "***The Helmsman of Lake Erie***" **in** ***The Church of England Magazine*** (London, England) on June 7, 1845, provides justification for a closer look at the two events, although it is clear that "***The Helmsman***" was composed at least six weeks *prior to* Jackson's death**.** Due to the time frame, only press coverage of *the imminent demise* of Andrew Jackson, rather than coverage following and eulogizing his death, could spark "***The Helmsman.***"

The "Old Hero's" death did not come as a surprise. Already in December of the previous year, Jackson had declined an invitation to visit New Orleans on January 8, 1845 (the 30th anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans). As Jackson, in his letter of December 28, 1844, stated:

> "...for so great is my debility, and so inclement is the season, that it will be impossible for me to embrace and enjoy them *(=the almost irresistible inducements).* ... Nor would it be prudent for me, in this precarious state of health, to designate any other day of the future. ...and with feelings of the most perfect resignation, I can adopt the invocation of Simeon of old – 'LET NOW THY SERVANT DEPART IN PEACE:" – for I have lived to see the salvation of my country, and the perpetuity of our glorious Union secured."

President-elect James Knox Polk, in his letter of Dec. 31, 1844, wrote:

> "His *(=Jackson's)* feeble state of health precludes the possibility of such a visit on his part."
>
> "***Letters from Gen. Jackson and President Polk***," ***Albany Argus***, Friday, Jan. 31, 1845, p. 4.

What does the anonymous sketch tell us about Maynard? He enjoyed widespread esteem in spite of his advanced age, sun-burned appearance and somewhat gruff manner. His proverbial honesty was buttressed by his faith in God.

> "Old John Maynard was at the wheel; a bluff, weather-beaten sailor, tanned by many a summer day, and by many a winter tempest. [lines 45-49] . . . . He was known from one end of the Lake Erie to the other, by the name of honest John Maynard; and the secret of his honesty to his neighbors, was his love of God." [lines 57-61]

Due to his youth **[3]**, Fuller was obviously neither "weather-beaten" nor well-known from "one end of Lake Erie to the other." Nowhere do we find mention of Fuller's "honesty to his neighbors" or his "love of God." As a result of partial deletions in a later version of the 1845 "***Helmsman***" sketch, the helmsman's age is not relevant in John Bartholomew Gough's, Horatio Alger, Jr.'s, the anonymous Josephine's, Ada Linden's or Theodor Fontane's renderings **[4]**. Only Benjamin French's 1845 ballad, composed only a few days after the anonymous sketch appeared in the ***Baltimore Sun*** and also entitled "***The Helmsman of Lake Erie,***" speaks of "*the brave old pilot*." **[5]** In the summer and early fall of 1845, "Old John Maynard" was closely akin to America's "Old Hero," who was, after Washington, looked upon

as the "father of his Nation." It dovetails neatly with the "Old Hero" and "Old Hickory," i.e., a man capable of withstanding extreme pain.

Of equal interest, is the fact that Jackson had not *become* "old," but had been regarded as such even when he became President just before turning 60:

> "...and on February 11 [1829] the President-to-be finally arrived. People noted him as a tall, gaunt man, his face wrinkled with pain and age, his thick gray hair turning snow-white. His eyes were sad and heart empty from the recent death of his wife, and his right hand ached from the hard grips of admirers along the way."
>
> – **Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr**., ***The Age of Jackson*** (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945), p. 6

II.

GANSEVOORT MELVILLE'S DESCRIPTION OF ANDREW JACKSON

As Jackson's health had been deteriorating for some time, the question of when the "Hero of New Orleans" would expire had occupied the minds of Americans for over a year prior to his death. One of the greatest political orators of the North was Gansevoort Melville, Herman Melville's elder brother, who tragically died in London in 1846 at the age of 32. This talented young man whose death represented a great loss to the country, had paid the Old Hero a visit at the Hermitage in Tennessee. His description of Jackson, delivered at a political rally of the democracy for Polk's candidacy in Newark, New Jersey in November of 1844, suggests that Jackson's days were numbered:

> "With the snows of seventy-seven winters on his brow, and the thoughts and struggles of a thousand ordinary lives having left their traces on his form, daily awaiting his summons to the grave, his memory, not only of events long since transpired, but of those of the most recent date, is as tenacious and ready—his judgment as clear—his will as strong—his affections as warm—his patriotism as ardent as they ever were. When Andrew Jackson dies, he will not drivel his path to the grave like a slobbering dotard, as the whig press falsely call him; but when HE dies—when the great soul within shall have utterly consumed its outer tenement of clay—why, then, a MAN will die!"
>
> – ***The New York Herald***, Nov. 5, 1844, p.2, c. 3

III.

"HELMSMAN" METAPHOR

"**THE HELMSMAN OF LAKE ERIE**" is a title open to interpretation. "Steersman," "wheel- or wheelsman," and "pilot" are the terms used in the August 1841 papers when referring to young Luther Fuller of the *Erie*. "Helmsman" is not used. The word "*helmsman*," on the other hand, can be a metaphor with a decidedly political connotation. Recall the activities of the passengers in the second paragraph of "***The Helmsman***": conversation, calculation of business gains, reading a good book or "composing themselves to sleep." If engaged in conversation, the topic was "politics". The following excerpt is from 1828:

> "Resolved, That we will, in an honorable and fearless manner, exert every nerve to place the farmer of Tennessee, ***Andrew Jackson, at the helm of our national vessel,*** having the utmost confidence in his ability to bring the gallant ship off the rocks and quick sands on which she has been laboring for the past four years, under the management of ***that unskillful helmsman, John Quincy Adams, and his mad-brained pilot, Henry Clay***, who prayed for war, for pestilence, for famine, or any scourge, rather than the power should fall into the hands of a Military Chieftain."
>
> - **Ira K. Morris,** ***The Morris's History of Staten Island, New York***, Vol. II, (West New Brighton, Staten Island, published by the Author, 1900), p. 244.

In the year 1836, Andrew Jackson is referred to by Martin Van Buren as

> "...***the helmsman of the ship***, without whose quick eye and strong arm, she must have yielded to the tempest."
>
> –***The Republican Compiler***, Gettysburg, Pa., March 29, 1836, Vol. I, No. 27 (New Series), p. 4, c.5.

Finally, even after Jackson's death, in the eloquent and soul-stirring oration provided by George Bancroft, the metaphor was yet again applied to the "Old Hero:"

> "Fortunately for the country, and fortunately for mankind, ***Andrew Jackson was at the helm of State,*** the representative of the principles that were to allay excitement, and to restore the hopes of peace and freedom."
>
> ***The JACKSON FUNERAL OBSEQUIES at Washington. Mr. George Bancroft's Oration, Pronounced from the Eastern Portico of the Capitol***, June 27, 1845

IV.

IN SEARCH OF THE ALLEGORY'S ANCHOR

On September 10, 1813, America's naval history on Lake Erie was crowned with a glorious victory against the British fleet during the War of 1812 (a misnomer as the war was not over until the Peace of 1815 was signed). The Battle of Lake Erie was decisively won by Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry (1785-1819), often entitled "THE HERO OF LAKE ERIE." Yet Perry was not the only legendary figure instrumental in achieving victory over the British fleet. Perry's second in command, Jesse Duncan Elliott (1782-1845), played an essential role in achieving victory. Unfortunately, the question *which* of the two heroes had been *most instrumental* in winning the battle coupled with subsequent suspicions that the victory had not been portrayed in the proper light, led to acrimony and accusations that were never completely resolved during the lifetime of either man. The contest for the title of "THE HERO OF LAKE ERIE" was still being waged *even after* Perry's premature death due to yellow fever on August 23,1819. When Elliott died on December 10, 1845, after a severe illness of over five months, there were still some federalist and whig critics who would posthumously and most unfairly label him a coward. And even in the not very distant past, there have been scholars who have seriously questioned Elliott's "state of mind" and actually suspected he "had a screw loose!" **[6]**

The naval history of the Battle of Lake Erie had been ruthlessly fought and refought for thirty-two years at the time the "***Helmsman***" appeared. The notion of a "new history" of Lake Erie, one rewritten with a "new hero," a different hero, the greatest hero America could offer, in the person of her dying General and ex-President, the Savior of his Nation and his country's Constitution, in order to transcend the rancor of decades, would constitute a remarkable literary achievement with a firm historical foundation. This was not a subject for an Englishman. It would require a steadfast Jacksonian democrat with a keen sense of naval history, who was bent on driving away the storms of the past that had raged over Lake Erie's history with a mighty crucifix symbolic of Old Hickory's endurance, humanity, Christian charity and sacrifice.

It would appear that Perry was not content to share the laurels of victory with Elliott. The title "HERO OF LAKE ERIE" was Perry's just as Jackson was the "HERO OF NEW ORLEANS" in the same war with Britain. Elliott's sympathies were strongly Jacksonian for which he received staunch support from both Jackson and Martin Van Buren (Secretary of State and later Vice President under Jackson before becoming President in his own right).

The remission of Elliott's sentence in 1840, for example, and his reinstatement in the Navy was President Van Buren's decision. (One can picture Jackson discreetly conferring his paternal blessing in the background.) The "sentence" had been based on three rather amazing charges: 1) use of the lash as punishment [7], 2) rendering the venerable ***Old Ironsides*** unfit for action by turning her into a stable for breeding jackasses, in which Elliott was speculating, and 3) coercing his men to contribute towards a "service of plate to adorn his sideboard." Needless to say, Van Buren regarded the charges as spurious.

The degree to which Elliott idolized Jackson can be appreciated by his decision in 1834, when in command of the famed ***USS Constitution***, that icon of American history, otherwise known as "***Old Ironsides***," to place a carved wooden head of Jackson on the brow of the ship (which Elliott paid for out of his own pocket without coercing his crew), to symbolize *allegorically* the man who had saved the Constitution of his country. Elliott's symbolic act created a storm of controversy. That the head was afterwards in the dark of a rainy night sawed off by whig pranksters did not reflect well upon Jackson's political opponents.

V.

A MAVERICK WITH HIS HEAD HELD HIGH

The vilification of Elliott by the whig press and by charges designed to dismantle his reputation assumed a political hue and went far beyond an appraisal of Elliott's heroism or alleged cowardice during the Battle of Lake Erie. In spite of the never-ending charges brought against him, Elliott was singularly successful in maintaining his stature and composure throughout his life. He received military mourning at the order of none other than George Bancroft upon his death on December 10, 1845: "The flags of the navy-yard and vessels in commission will be hoisted at half-mast, and thirteen minute guns fired at noon on the day after the receipt of this order. Officers of the navy and marine corps will wear crape on the left arm for thirty days."

That Elliott moved in august circles can be seen in the "pickpocket" article of 1845. On March 4, 1845, while attending the inauguration ceremony of James K. Polk as the 11th President and third Democrat (after Jackson and Van Buren) to hold this office, his pocket was picked. Among

the purloined articles was a lock of Jackson's hair, given him as a memento. "Another was a letter from Mrs. Madison enclosing a lock of Mr. Madison's hair." (James Madison had been President during the War of 1812.) Elliott begged the thief to return the relics so dear to his heart and stated that the thief was welcome to the money.

In February 1845, the United States Senate approved Elliott "relief" for outlays of money to entertain various high-ranking individuals (including the King and Queen of Greece) while he was Commander of the Mediterranean Squadron sailing ***Old Ironsides*** "from the year 1835 to 1839."

That in the year 1845 the Perry-Elliott controversy was still raging can be seen in the case of the medallion Elliot caused to be struck in honor of Cooper. The two newspaper clippings from the autumn of 1845 are diametrically opposed in their argumentation. It will be noticed that even two years afterwards it was necessary for Cooper to point out his position with regard to the medallion.

Letter from Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott / Navy Yard, Phila., Jany. 13, 1845:

Dear Sir
Every day's experience satisfies me of the propriety of having the medal struck of you. Cooper, *answer* me *right* to the *point*, I am urged to take a position at Washington, how would you like to *fill* the *Navy* office? I have a letter of Congratulation from Genl. Jackson saying no Man on earth rejoices more than he that I am in full possession of my honors and long may live to carry the stars and stripes successfully through every clime and sea, that Mr. Polk is my warmest friend, and the old man [Jackson] sends me a lock of his hair to be divided in my family and as I want you to allow me to adopt yours I send a portion for them and for your good Sister Mrs. Pomeroy.

From Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott, Navy Yard, Phila, Jany. 13, 1845
(***Correspondence of James Fenimore-Cooper***, vol. 2, p. 531.)

The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper, Vol. V, p. 249.
COOPER'S REACTION TO THE MEDAL ELLIOTT HAD STRUCK IN HIS HONOR

917. *To George Palmer Putnam?* Hall, Cooperstown, Dec. 10th 1847

Sir,

The late Commodore Elliott caused a medal of me to be struck at the mint, shortly after the decision in my favour by the arbitrators who decided the points referred to them in connection with the controversy about the Battle of Lake Erie. This medal was made not only without my concurrence, but contrary to my wishes, as it seemed likely to bring me into a species of ridicule, as having a medal struck in honour of so trifling an affair. I did remonstrate with Commodore Elliott on the subject, though my opposition was not as earnest as it might otherwise have been, as the feeling of gratitude it manifested in Commodore Elliott was respectable in him. I had no agency whatever in causing this medal to be struck or presented to any one.

COMMODORE PERRY, COMMODORE ELLIOTT AND Mr. COOPER.—The world has been informed that Commodore Elliott, in gratitude for the zealous efforts to exalt his fame, put forth in Mr. Cooper's History of the War, caused a medal to be struck in honor of that gentleman. At the request of Commodore Elliott ex-President Adams forwarded one of the medals to the Historical Society of Rhode Island. But that body had no particular reverence for the gift or sense of obligation to the giver, and at a meeting held on the 10th instant unanimously resolved that the medal be returned—because, as the preamble says, "in the published writings of J. Fenimore Cooper, Esq.," relative to the battle of Lake Erie, "he has labored to establish opinions which we can neither adopt nor sanction: And whereas, justice requires that this society shall not do or participate in any act which may imply its acquiescence in the efforts which have been made in behalf of Commodore Elliott, to establish for him a reputation derogatory to the just fame of his deceased commander."

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NEW-YORK SPECTATOR.

NEW-YORK, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 1845.

WEEKLY OHIO STATESMAN.

COLUMBUS, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29, 1845.

COMMODORE ELLIOTT AND THE RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY.—Some two years since, Mr. COOPER, the novelist, wrote a very interesting volume on 'The Battle of Lake Erie,' in which he reviewed the various accounts of that gallant action given by Burges, Duer, and Mackenzie, and effectually vindicated the fair fame of Com. Elliott. Out of gratitude for so important a service, the Commodore caused medals to be struck in honor of Mr. Cooper, one of which was recently presented by Mr. Cooper himself, through John Quincy Adams, to the Rhode Island Historical Society. That learned body flatly refused to accept the medal, on the ground that Mr. Cooper's book was unjust to Commodore PERRY, of whose honorable fame, as Rhode Islanders, they are justly proud, and are ever ready to uphold. We believe they were wrong. Mr. Cooper did not assail Perry, but simply vindicated Elliott, and to do the one, it is by no means necessary that the other should be performed. We do not believe that any public officer in this country has been more unjustly, more wantonly assailed, than the commander of the Niagara. Mr. Cooper has clearly proved, that the various charges which have been made against him, tending to impeach his character for courage, have never had even the slightest foundation. His conduct in the battle of Lake Erie has been placed in its true light, and it is evident that if he was guilty of any error in the course of that action, it consisted in rigidly obeying the orders of Com. Perry. We believe that Com. Elliott was wrong in not taking the responsibility into his own hands at an earlier period of the action, but this is an opinion formed after the event; and it should be borne in mind, that though a subordinate officer of high character—Lord Nelson, for instance—may disregard orders and signals, and be justified by the event, yet such conduct would not answer for a young officer who has his character to make, and who would be shot by the order of a court martial were his disobedience of orders to produce disastrous results. As it was, Com. Elliott was taking his vessel into close action when Com. Perry came on board, and the result would have been the same had the latter officer remained in the Lawrence. There is one fact connected with the action worthy of particular notice, as, when correctly given, it shows how little reliance is to be placed on popular accounts of remarkable deeds. Mr. Cooper says that Com.

Perry, when he went from the Lawrence to the Niagara, had on a round about, and that he incurred less danger from being thus plainly dressed. Now there is a very common engraving, which can be found in any print shop in the country, representing that time of the battle in which Perry shifted his flag from the Lawrence to the Niagara. He is represented as standing up boldly in the boat, dressed in full uniform, and pointing with his sword to the Niagara, while a sailor is endeavoring to pull him from his exposed situation, as any sensible sailor would have done. The engraving is curious, as giving the popular idea of a hero, and is very unjust to Com. Perry, who was as sensible as he was brave. He was not so foolish as to set himself up as a target for the enemy to try their skill upon. The commander who exposes himself needlessly, is always regarded as an extremely silly personage by those who serve under him. He must always be ready to expose himself when there is any necessity for so doing, and dare all for the purpose of winning all. The conduct of Lord Nelson at Trafalgar, in decorating himself, is pretty generally regarded as having been more remarkable for its folly than any thing else. It was undoubtedly

the cause of his death, and thus deprived England of the services of her greatest naval commander. Com. Perry did not needlessly expose himself at the battle of Lake Erie. He did all that a brave and sagacious man was required to do, and won for himself immortality. Those who seek to make him the chief actor in a sort of bravado scene, show that they have no just idea of military worth.

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The American Antiquarian Society

VI.

THE SPARK THAT STARTED IT ALL

Elliott attracted national attention and the praise of Congress as a young naval officer in his daring exploit in October 1812, when, in a surprise attack against the British, with 102 men under his command, he took two former American ships on Lake Erie, the brig ***Adams*** and the schooner the ***Caledonia***.

> "Lieutenant Elliott captured 58 men in the raid, including three commissioned officers, and also released twenty-seven Americans found on board [the ***Caledonia***]. Elliott lost one man killed and four wounded."

In other words, even before the untried Perry, three years younger than Elliott, was placed in command of the Lake Erie fleet (which at that time did not exist), Elliott had already seen combat with singular success. Also, it was Elliott who had first conceived of the notion of an American fleet on Lake Erie. As might be expected, the constellation Perry – Elliott was destined to be a powder keg.

Before a simplified sketch of the Battle of Lake Erie is provided, some word should be prefaced regarding the status of "honor" and "reputation" in the early 19th century. It will be recalled that dueling was an effective and quick method of settling differences. Jackson, for instance, had to put up with a bullet lodged close to his heart for the last 39 years of his life. The bullet was the result of a duel. Fear of having one's character impugned was rampant in the days of the Early Republic. It will be noticed that even the dying Jackson, less than one month before his death, was careful to place his papers in safe hands that they could be used should an attempt be made to assail the integrity of his character after his death. No doubt Jackson's decision was not overlooked by Cooper in his rejection of an authorized biography of his own life. There is no official record of what was discussed during Cooper's personal meeting with Jackson in the White House on December 11, 1833. According to Wayne Franklin (***Later Years***, p. 154), "he (=Cooper), like the president, also was at pains not to record what the two discussed." Discretion offered no fuel to the press. Elliott's concern for his reputation was well-founded and hardly exceptional in the years of the Early Republic. Perry turned down Elliott's challenge to a duel in 1818, a little more than one year before Perry's untimely death due to yellow fever during a mission to Venezuela.

Although, immediately following the victory over the British fleet in the Battle of Lake Erie, Perry had written a positive assessment of Elliott, Elliott quickly sensed that Perry was hedging in his praise. Nonetheless, both Perry and Elliott, were *equally* rewarded by Congress with a golden medallion bearing their respective effigies, and the very same prize money ($7,140 each). Only as an afterthought did Congress then award Perry an additional $5000. That the second in command should have received such honors was exceptional and no doubt a blow to the Commanding Officer's pride.

So, what went wrong? It will be recalled that Perry, in command of the ***Lawrence***, had engaged in combat with the British ***Detroit***, but was soon assaulted by the ***Queen Charlotte*** as well. Elliott, who was the commander of the ***Niagara***, was supposed to have engaged the ***Queen Charlotte*** in "close action," but had also received instructions to "hold the line." The ***Queen Charlotte*** and the ***Hunter*** joined the ***Detroit*** in giving the ***Lawrence*** a proper pounding and rendering her useless while the ***Niagara*** seemed to be disinterestedly looking on from a safe distance together with the smaller vessels of the American fleet. The implicit accusation of cowardice to engage the enemy and to come to the immediate relief of the ***Lawrence***, was the crux of the accusation Perry later leveled against Elliott, while claiming that he had falsely presented Elliott in a positive light (i.e., that Perry had "screened" Elliott) so as not to spoil the splendid victory that had so nearly slipped through their fingers). An added rub in Perry being forced to leave the ***Lawrence*** and paddle to the ***Niagara***, was the famous saying attached to the ***Lawrence***: "*Don't give up the ship*!" When Perry was brought on board the ***Niagara***, rumor has it that he made some statement to the effect that all was lost, but that Elliott cheerfully responded that the day could yet be saved (no doubt through Elliott's intervention). The ***Niagara*** was then placed under Perry's command and Elliott rallied the smaller vessels placing them in close

action against the British fleet. The activity (this time coordinated) soon shattered the English fleet and led to an unprecedented American victory.

The seeds of discord had been planted on a day marking America's greatest naval victory up to that time. The accusations arising from the Perry faction were that Elliott had failed to join the fray when it was incumbent upon him. Also, there seemed to be backbiting intrigues against Perry on the part of Elliott to undermine his commanding officer's reputation. Whether these intrigues were real or imagined is beside the point. Here, again, there was a question of honor – this time, Perry's honor seemed at stake.

But what about Perry himself? If Elliott had truly failed to do his duty, why not press charges? Why the reluctance, on the one hand, to condemn where condemnation was due, and the temerity, on the other, to allow the undeserving to share in the honors of the day? Was this only "good old navy tradition" on days crowned with the laurels of victory?

The question of whether Perry had irresponsibly advanced too far ahead of his own squadron and exposed his vessel to an unnecessary three-pronged attack should only be expressed in a muted whisper. The question of whether Perry had failed to provide proper lines of communication for a concerted attack can be considered more readily. If help was needed, why the hesitancy to send a signal? With regard to these awkward issues, Elliott received a strong ally from an unexpected quarter: none other than the famous American author of the frontier and the sea, a gifted writer of fiction who became America's paramount naval expert, James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851). Cooper's definitive ***Naval History*** with its controversial chapter on the Battle of Lake Erie created an uproar in the 1840's **[8]**.

VII.

THE WAR OF THE HISTORIANS AS WAGED FROM 1839 TO 1845

In 1997, Hugh Egan of Ithaca College published an essay entitled "***Enabling and Disabling the Lake Erie Discussion: James Fenimore Cooper and Alexander Slidell Mackenzie Respond to the Perry/Elliott Controversy***." **[9]** In the appendix following his essay, a chronology is added providing dates of exchanges between Cooper and Mackenzie on the Battle of Lake Erie. Those exchanges, beginning in May 1839 with the publication of Cooper's ***Naval History*** and extending to 1844, lead up to the death of the "Old Hero" (Jackson). Egan's chronology is a clear statement of the intensity of the debate, which was actually gaining in momentum in spite of an event in the year 1813.

As late as November 1845, Cooper was even planning to lecture on the subject of the allegorical "figure head" of Jackson on ***The USS Constitution***. And where of all places? In the lion's den of Boston, home of the whig press and Elliott's worst enemies! In his letter to Cooper on November 19, Richard Henry Dana (1787–1879) of Boston, American poet and essayist, wisely urged Cooper not to press the issue of the "figure head" so as not to arouse added animosity. **[10]**

Thus, the stormy history of Lake Erie had reached a culmination of ferocity by the year 1845.

VIII.

A PROPER RESTING PLACE, OR "HOW TO CALM THE STORM"

Finally, there was the episode with the sarcophagus. Elliott had discovered an ancient marble sarcophagus for a Roman king or emperor while in Syria. He took it back with him and gave it to the National Institute in Washington, D.C., under the condition that it be used as the final resting place for Andrew Jackson. Naturally, the issue became acute immediately before Jackson's death. In April 1845, the Old Hero balked and rejected the affectionate and well-meaning offer of his old friend, pointing out that his republican sympathies would in no way condone such an "imperial" interment. Jackson specified that he wished his mortal remains to be laid to rest, without "pomp or parade", beside his beloved wife at his farm at the Hermitage in Tennessee. The issue of the sarcophagus was a subject of daily debate both prior to and throughout the summer following Jackson's death. It was even pointed out in Butler's Eulogy during the State Funeral and in poetry that the whole question of *where* Jackson's mortal remains were to be deposited was irrelevant because his "shrine" lived in the hearts of all Americans. Perhaps needless to say, Elliott and Cooper were in close contact throughout this final year of Elliott's dramatic life. On the other hand, Cooper's letters and journals do not breathe a word regarding Elliott's grand gesture of a "sarcophagus" or the deteriorating health of Jackson.

It is truly exceptional that a living ex-President (or anyone else, for that matter) should have the question of *where* his mortal remains shall be deposited thrust upon him from an outside source months before his impending death. That such was the case and that the sarcophagus was a "hot potato" in the press can be readily appreciated. The issue of the sarcophagus gave rise to the

question of *location*, concomitant with the debate regarding its immediate importance versus ultimate irrelevance.

Latent in this journalistic controversy was the real literary possibility of displacing Jackson from his beloved Hermitage and catapulting his persona into a fictional Lake Erie setting. (After all, Jackson's "shrine" was neither of wood nor stone but lodged in the heart of a grateful nation). The literary license of placing the "Old Hero" (alias John Maynard) on Lake Erie, stems from Elliott's well-intended yet sadly tactless gesture of the sarcophagus. The ***Erie*** of 1841 was thus used as a simplified foil, upon which much greater issues than the death (or possible death) of a young wheelsman were brought into play. The four-year hiatus between the ***Erie*** and John Maynard is thus no accident. Apart from the obvious fusion of the ***Swallow*** and ***Erie*** tragedies through Captain Squires **[11]**, "***The Helmsman***" required the proper Hero and found him in the person of America's greatest hero of that day and age. The unholy history of Lake Erie was to be placed on a Christian pedestal with the Spirit of "the Democracy" and Old Hickory setting things right. "***The Helmsman of Lake Erie***" was thus THE ALLEGORY OF LAKE ERIE, a sophisticated literary achievement, in no way a mere recapitulation of ***Erie*** incidents turned upside down for a Hollywood ending, but an attempt to "lay to rest" one of the blackest chapters in American naval history **[12]** that had tarnished the honor of what an "American Hero" was meant to convey. The notion of *rewriting* that history so as to blot out the controversy of the *two contending heroes* of Lake Erie by *superimposing* the yet greater legend of Andrew Jackson, the Old Helmsman, whose secret, his love of God, would save his passengers and put things right on Lake Erie, was an ambitious yet controversial literary undertaking. The link between Elliott and Jackson established the link to Lake Erie. The allegory had already begun when Elliott placed the carved head of Jackson on the ***USS Constitution***. It continued with Jackson's rejection of Elliott's gift of a sarcophagus and the general reception of the press and poetry that *neither a shrine nor a particular location* for Jackson's mortal remains was necessary as he would live on in the hearts of all Americans, and his spirit would continue to watch over and protect his country. "***The Helmsman***" was thus a literary-journalistic experiment, the awesome attempt to rewrite Lake Erie history with a hero every American and indeed every human being could identify with.

IX.

Talent, Knowledge, Opportunity, Contacts, Political Leanings, Religiosity *and* a Clue *or* Two:
James Fenimore Cooper

The question, ***Who was the anonymous author of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie***?,**"** can only be answered if approached from a number of angles. Criteria such as talent, knowledge, motive, circle of friends, political leanings, historical context, and religiosity limit the field of potential writers considerably. In this paper it has to this writer's mind become ever more evident that only one candidate stands out for serious consideration: James Fenimore Cooper, America's first professional writer.

Looking for a "clue," we should first cast a glance at the name of the ship. The ***Jersey*** is a strange name for a Lake Erie steamer that never sailed on Lake Erie. Could the name of the ship be seen as a sort of "signature" or "hallmark," used either consciously or unconsciously by the anonymous writer?

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) was born in Burlington, New Jersey. **[13]** Although he admittedly grew up in Cooperstown, New York, a frontier community established by his father, his sense of allegiance to and identification with New Jersey, his place of birth and the home of his ancestors, can be seen in the following quote from a letter written by Cooper from Paris, May 25, 1831 to Richard (Dick) Cooper, Cooperstown (From ***Correspondence of James Fenimore-Cooper***, vol. I, p. 229):

> "It is odd enough that I had a visit, when in Tuscany, from an officer of one of our frigates who told me he was born in Cooperstown. This is probably the first male native who ever found his way into Italy, for you will remember that I am a Jersey-man born, and both William and Paul are New Yorkers."

The fact that Cooper had not grown up in New Jersey, did in no way diminish his emotional attachment— a disposition which this writer, who was also born in a different state from that in which he grew up, can readily attest to. Robert W. Neeser, in his essay entitled "***Cooper's Sea Tales***" made the following point:

> Personally, I have always liked the "***Water Witch*" *or the "Skimmer of the Seas***" [*published in 1830*] the best for the opening scenes are laid on a part of the coast of New Jersey with which I am familiar, and Cooper appears to have been unusually well informed of the continual changes wrought in this tongue of sand "by the unremitting and opposing actions of the waves on one side, and of the currents of the different rivers, that empty their waters into the bay, on the other," this referring, of course, to Sandy Hook. **[14]**

That Cooper was hardly ignorant of some of the more salient features of New Jersey, the State in which he was born, becomes clear in Neeser's passage.

During the Jacksonian Age, a sense of political kinship with the Old Hero was the rule rather than the exception among writers. John Maynard was a strong man. So was Andrew Jackson. Allen M. Axelrad stated the following about Cooper's attraction to Jackson:

> "Cooper thought the legislature was the center of their [*demagogues'*] political power, so he was anxious about legislative infringement on executive rights. To counter the threat of aristocracy he advocated a powerful executive: a strong president such as Andrew Jackson. The office and the man, he hoped, would have the strength to withstand the intrigues of aristocratic demagogues." **[15]**

In the election campaign of 1844 between Henry Clay and James Polk, Cooper took a lively interest:

> "In the campaign of 1844, he [*Cooper*] attended his first political meeting in twenty-five years, 'and if anything could bring me on the stump,' he declared vigorously, 'it would be to help put down the bold and factious party that is now striving to place Mr. Clay in the chair of state.' He denounced the Whig party as 'much the falsest and most dangerous association of the sort that has appeared in the country in my day.'"
>
> **- Cooper to C.A. Secor, *et al*., September 8, 1844, *The Campaign***, September 21, 1844.

"***The Helmsman of Lake Erie***" is exceptional for its strong reliance on faith as the mainstay of its protagonist. This would presuppose a writer of equal religious bent. **[16]** Donald A. Ringe offers a fascinating statement on this account:

> "We have long been aware that Cooper's religious position was unusual among American writers. As long ago as 1952 Howard Mumford Jones observed that Cooper 'was the only American novelist of international stature to take Christianity seriously both as personal motive and as social force.' Six years later, Charles A. Brady went even further to say that Cooper was 'the only major nineteenth-century creative writer– short of the great Russians–to work within a specifically religious dimension.' Jones and Brady are right."

A few lines further, Ringe adds:

> "Yet another aspect of Cooper's religion can be found in the doctrine of Providence: the belief that the hand of God actively guides both the individual person and the entire nation. This concept had also had a long history in America by the time Cooper began to write."

Here the notion of the "helmsman," as both *head of state* and *pilot*, wedded allegorically in the 1845 sketch, matches Cooper's religious views. And finally, Ringe makes the following statement about Cooper's "much neglected maritime novels":

> "If we take a ship at sea to represent society in miniature, we quickly perceive that, as early as ***The Pilot*** (1824), Cooper showed in the character of John Paul Jones the need for competent authority to direct a ship, especially in times of crisis, and by implication, society as well." **[17]**

No other American writer was in a better position to understand the tug of war of the past on Lake Erie, one of the darkest chapters in America's naval history. Coupled with this, he was obviously qualified as a gifted narrative writer with a quick mind, a man capable of reworking history with a questioning "But what if?" Finally, he was well-acquainted with the players in his drama and knew many of them personally. That Cooper had every reason to remain anonymous, given the vituperative onslaught he had endured since publication of his ***Naval History***, is clear. Finally, it is indisputable that no writer of Cooper's caliber was so emotionally involved in the history of Lake Erie as was James Fenimore Cooper.

The fact that Cooper was still intent on lecturing on the Jackson figure head in November of 1845, demonstrates that the imagery of Jackson, guiding the "ship of state," elevated from a mere "figure head" to the allegorical "Helmsman," was still of central importance in Cooper's mind.

Cooper not only was familiar with George Bancroft's eulogy, but was also his friend. In his correspondence, the following letter establishes this:

> Mr. Bancroft is here with his family. I believe one of his children is unwell. I have been asked by Ingersoll to meet him at dinner but could not on account of clearing off my work. He is to pass an hour with me to-morrow morning.
>
> **Letter dated Oct. 11, 1845 to Mrs. Cooper, Cooperstown. (*Correspondence of James Fenimore-Cooper*,** vol. 2, p. 553.)

And then, of course, there was Commodore Elliott. Two letters from Elliott, dated January 9, 1845, and January 13, 1845, establish just how grateful Elliott was for Cooper's intercession. In the first letter, Elliott has succeeded in having a commemorative medal struck by Congress in honor of Cooper's "Disinterested Vindication of His Brother Sailor, Jesse D. Elliott" (***cf.***

***illustration, p. 8*).** In the second letter, Elliott – who was apparently *not joking* – offers Cooper "the *Navy* office." **[18].** His references to General Jackson and President Polk point out that Elliott was held in high esteem and wielded no little influence. Also, Elliott's less-than-serious remark about "adopting" Cooper's *whole family* can only be viewed as marking a deep friendship between the two men:

Following Jackson's death, Elliott's health began to deteriorate. Whether the cause was the painful loss of Elliott's "Defender of the ***USS Constitution***," must remain conjecture. Needless to say, on August 19, in his letter to William Branford Shubrick, Cooper mentions both Bancroft and Elliott. Of Elliott, whose health was failing and who would die on December 10, Cooper says the following:

> "You send me news of Elliott. I had supposed him convalescent. Old officers, however, are some times killed off in service before the breath has left their bodies."
>
> ***The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper***: vol. v, p. 52.

And on November 30th:

> "Elliott is here, and in an advanced dropsy, not only of the body and limbs, but of the heart and chest. He cannot survive, I should think, though he seems to think he may. I have seen his wife and thanked her for the 'few little matters.' Elliott, himself, believes he is getting better."
>
> ***Ibid***., vol. v, p. 100

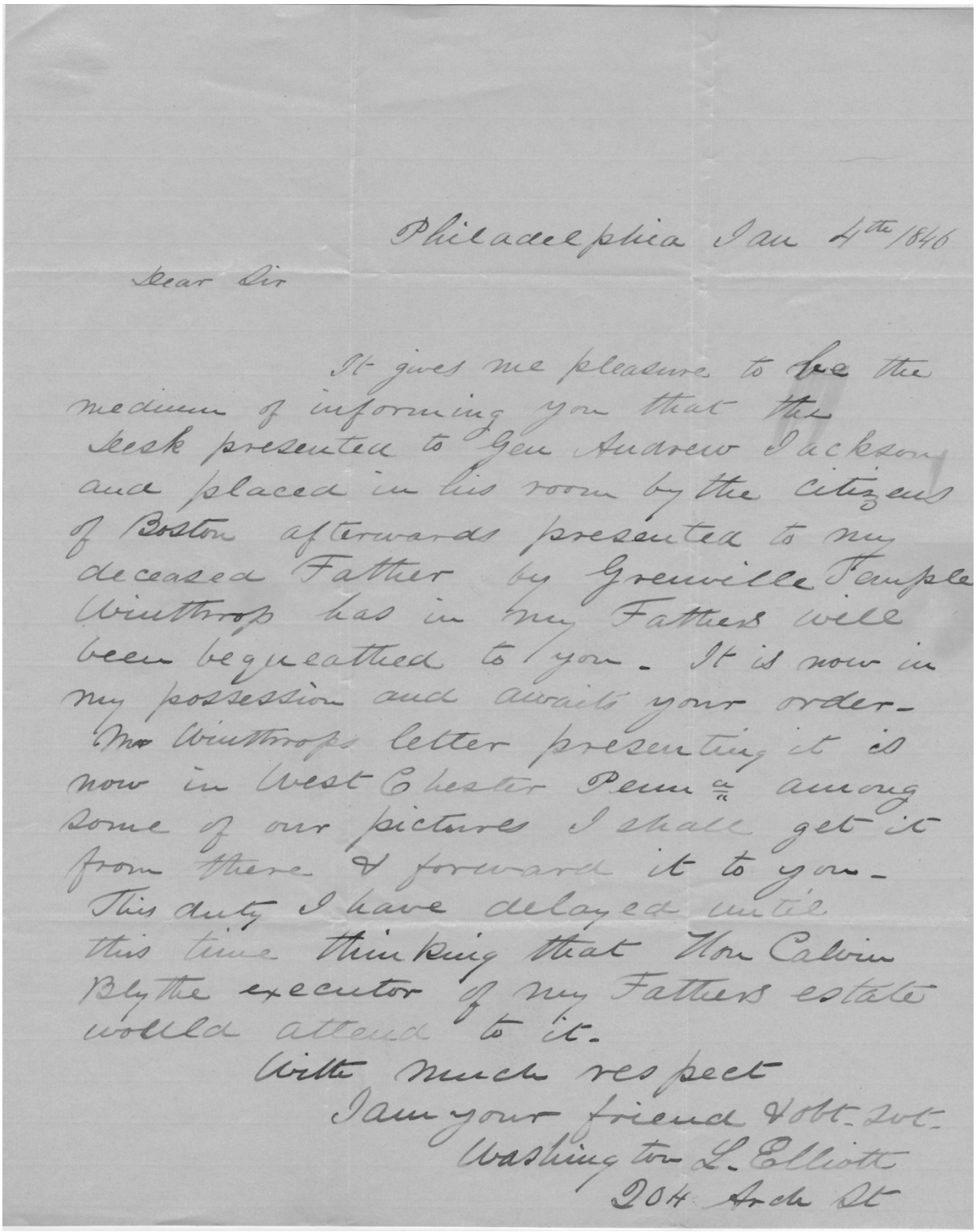
The final visit was on December 5, 1845, five days before Elliott's death:

> "Poor Elliott cannot last long. I went to see him to-day and found him sensibly weaker. It was plain that his family consider his case desperate. He made some allusions again to his end, and I believe he thinks he has no chance in this world. He looks like an emaciated, white-headed, old man of seventy."
>
> ***Ibid***., vol. v, p. 106

Elliott's undying gratitude that Cooper had restored his honor can best be appreciated by Cooper's short statement in a letter to his son:

> "I am writing on Gen. Jackson's desk."
>
> ***The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper***: vol. v, p. 145, "To Paul Fenimore Cooper, Heads, 26th May, 1846."

Elliott had received the alleged "Andrew Jackson" desk in 1835 as a gift from Grenville Temple Winthrop (1807-1852), who held Elliott in high esteem. According to Winthrop, the desk had been placed in Andrew Jackson's hotel room in the Tremont during his 1833 presidential visit to Boston.**[19]** When the desk was afterwards placed on auction. Winthrop was the successful bidder. Elliott, in his will, bequeathed it to the man who, more than any other, had had the courage and stamina to delve into the facts behind the Battle of Lake Erie in 1813, and to defend his findings, no matter how unpopular they may have been. We may assume that the Bostonian desk used by Old Hickory during his short stay in Boston and later by Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott was put to good use during the five remaining years of Cooper's relatively short life.



Philadelphia Jan 4th 1846

Dear Sir

It gives me pleasure to be the medium of informing you that the desk presented to Gen Andrew Jackson and placed in his room by the citizens of Boston afterwards presented to my deceased Father by Grenville Temple Winthrop has in my Fathers will been bequeathed to you. It is now in my possession and awaits your order. Mr Winthrops letter presenting it is now in West Chester Penn^a among some of our pictures I shall get it from there & forward it to you. This duty I have delayed until this time thinking that Hon Calvin Blythe executor of my Fathers estate would attend to it.

With much respect
I am your friend & Obt. Svt.
Washington L. Elliott
204 Arch St

A copy of the letter informing Cooper of Commodore Elliott's bequest has been provided by courtesy of the Beineke Library at Yale University.

Certainly, Cooper had personally *lived* the drama of Lake Erie. Who else could better tackle its story?

X.

DEADLY SILENCE VS. SCATHING CRITICISM

It may be thought strange, or nothing less than amazing, that the most prominent American writer of his day and age should possibly have found himself in a position in which he would find it preferable to refrain from the use of his own household name and humbly seek to dash off an *anonymous* anecdote for vulgar newspaper consumption.

In Cooper's case, it should, however, be pointed out that during the last ten years of his relatively short life (he expired on the eve of his 62nd birthday), even reviews of his works had been, to an astonishing degree, banned from the American press (and not merely the Whig press) because Cooper had won so many lawsuits against individual newspapers that had been critical of him. Of the two works that are of greatest interest to a Maynard researcher, due to their publication in 1845, we read:

> "Neither ***Satanstoe*** nor ***The Chainbearer***, two of Cooper's finest works, seems to have been accorded even one literary notice."
>
> **George Dekker and John P. McWilliams**, Editors, ***Fenimore Cooper. The Critical Heritage*** (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan, 1973, p. 22).

Cooper's own comments on May 9,1846, exemplify his deep dissatisfaction not only with the American Press but also with America:

> "B & S [=Burgess & Stringer] say they have not sold the first editions of ***Satanstoe*** and ***Chainbearer***.
>
> "I make no doubt you can do much better, as 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. I have a work in contemplation, that will be secured here, to cut off the profits of pirates, but which I do not mean to publish in America, at all, any farther than may be necessary to secure the copy right. If they will not pay, they ought not to read.
>
> "If I were fifteen years younger, I would certainly go abroad, and never return. I can say with Woolsey [Cf. Cardinal Thomas Wolsey in Shakespeare's ***King Henry the Eighth***, III, ii], "if I had served my god with half the zeal I've served my country" it would have been better for me. You 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. The time was, when these things pained me, but every interest seems so much upside down, here, that another feeling has taken the place of even regret."
>
> ***Letters and Journals***, Vol. V, pp. 131-132, Letter # 859 To James Kirke Paulding, from Hall, Cooperstown, May 9th 1846.

In other words, had Cooper attached his name to a literary sketch for general newspaper distribution, it could either have been rejected on the spot, or, if printed, subsequently have been torn to ribbons. Also, given the inversion of heroes of Lake Erie, his reputation as an objective historian of America's naval history would have come under fire.

A second point worthy of consideration is that Cooper was always willing to experiment with new approaches to literature. And shorter pieces, though hardly characteristic of Cooper, were embarked upon in the final years of his life. Even a remnant of an 1850 three-act play in the form of a comedy, entitled ***Upside Down; or, Philosophy in Petticoats*** has been recovered.

Upside Down was poorly attended. Cooper's own assessment of the reason for its failure is illuminating:

> "I am not surprised at the thinness of the house. ***I was afraid that the use of my name would produce this effect*** [my emphasis], it having been for years a part of a *concerted plan* [Cooper's emphasis] among the newspaper men and the leaders of the Whigs, with here and there an exception, to put me down by apparent neglect. I have been distinctly notified of the existence of such a plan and have had proof of its being carried out in several instances."
>
> (***The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper***, ibid., vol. VI, p. 198, Letter to James Henry Hackett, Sunday, June 30th 1850).

Yet the estrangement of the American Press from Cooper was long-term and had already begun in the early 1830's. Perhaps the whole controversy boils down to misconceptions on the part of American reviewers as to ***what constitutes good literature***:

> "...one concludes that American reviewers became critical of Cooper's novels because they felt that treating serious political questions in a romance was an artistic sin. Nearly every journal-review of Cooper's novels from 1830 to 1841 condemns Cooper, not because he is a republican, but because he is obtruding political matters upon the apolitical purity of the historical romance."
>
> ***Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage***, "***Introduction***," edited by **George Dekker and John P. McWilliams**, p. 15.

XI.

"POINT DE BATEAUX À VAPEUR – UNE VISION

One short satire by Cooper, written in French, which is sometimes overlooked in Cooper bibliographies, is, in translation, "***No Steamboats – A Vision***." **[20]** The piece, written in late 1832, and published in Paris, represented a creative foray by Cooper into the French language and was originally entitled "***Point de Bateaux à Vapeur – Une Vision***." Cooper's own pride in his creation can be appreciated in the following:

> "Bring back my Cent-et-un with you, for I prize my exploits in the French language more than all the rest together."
>
> ***Letters and Journals***, Vol. VI, p. 323, Letter 333a. To Colonel Thomas Aspinwall, [1832-1833].

Translated into English by an unidentified translator two years later, it was published in Boston in ***The American Ladies' Magazine***. Although the satire is devoid of the slightest hint of suspense and might, at first sight, be regarded as a clever intellectual exercise staged by an amateur high school debating club (instead of by Cooper himself), it is, in the main, a manifesto

in defense of America against the prejudices of grossly misinformed Europeans. The following major accusations are countered: 1) Americans' alleged selfishness, 2) Americans creating social chaos through a "classless" society, and 3) religion losing its value through racial mixing (a theme Cooper had already discreetly touched upon in ***The Last of the Mohicans*** in the posthumous marriage of Cora and Uncas).

Interestingly, "***The Helmsman of Lake Erie***" also represents a rebuttal of the very same accusations leveled against America in "***Point de Bateaux á Vapeur – Une Vision***": The *selfless act* of the Helmsman in the 1845 Maynard text is an answer to the first objection. The fact that a *mere wheelsman* – not a king or noble – would sacrifice himself for his fellow man *and* himself attain the elevated status of an exemplary hero (or "martyr") must also be seen as a defense of a healthy and far-from-chaotic society lacking the trappings of a hierarchical and stratified social structure paying only lip service to democracy. That the Helmsman was *enabled* to perform the ultimate sacrifice can only be viewed in terms of his "love of God," thus rejecting the supposition that religion in America no longer exercised a firm hold on the hearts and minds of Americans. The notion of racial intermixing, of course, presaged the creation of a multicultural society whose strength lay in its diversity. Cooper was bent upon refuting the objections brought forward by the "Three Ideas" by unveiling their inherent absurdity:

> "The history of my morceau [i.e., the sketch in question] is this – The Doctrinaires – who are gentry that believe in the possibility of having Monarchy, Aristocracy and Democracy all at once, - in their jealousy of us, have let loose the curse of abuse upon us for the last twelvemonth. I have personified their theory under the name of the three Ideas and have made them the organs of proclaiming their own nonsense as respects us, by giving their facts and arguments a little coloured, and by George, not much coloured either."
>
> ***Letters and Journals***, Vol. II, p. 366, Letter 308. To John Allen Collier, Paris. Dec. 14th 1832.

The singular portrayal of the arrival of the three "abstractions" riding the helm of an "enormous wheel," kept in motion by "a multitude of people on foot," i.e., the "teeming masses yearning to breathe free," immediately identifies the threesome as an oppressive trio, who are "carried" through life not by their own efforts but by the wanton exploitation of the masses. The three "ideas" together are the "helmsman," who guide their strange "ship of state" at the expense of others. What makes their accusations against America all the more ridiculous is the kind of society they themselves, as parasites, embody.

A Monsieur Blouse is the group's spokesman. He is an easy talker, a "*parliamentarian*" in the worst sense of the word, with a gift for glibly distorting facts to his own advantage. America, according to Blouse, needs three ideas, not merely one [i.e., a working democracy]. He then points out that important documents on the sorry state of affairs in America have just arrived by "the last steamboat." The year being 1832, Cooper politely points out to the three gentlemen, "As there is no steamboat which navigates the ocean between Europe and America, it is possible that you are deceived with regard to facts more important to my country." Whereupon Blouse counters with the following absurdity:

> "No steamboats!" cried M. Blouse, casting upon me a look of pity mingled with grief. "M. Cooper, your patriotic spirit is too easily alarmed. I had not the slightest intention of making any unpleasant allusion, although steamboat enterprises are eminently republican. By a moment's reflection you will see the impossibility of disproving a fact recognized by all Europe from the Mediterranean to the White Sea."

The next *bon mot* deals with the name of the country. Unable to convince the three "Ideas," Cooper pulls a copy of the American Constitution" out of his pocket and reads aloud the first clause:

> "The title of this confederation shall be the United States of America."

Monsieur Blouse:

> "That is inconceivable – very strange! Oh, the Constitution is wrong! Many honorable Americans have assured us that there are innumerable mistakes in the Constitution."

In Cooper's 1832 satire, a false "Helmsman" in the form of the "Three Ideas" would usurp power. The American Constitution, containing the principles of government and protected allegorically by Jackson as the figure head" on the ***USS Constitution***, is ridiculed as riddled with errors – including the name of the country!

And what of General Jackson? —

> "You obstinately refuse, against all reason, to make the amiable General Jackson your Emperor, he who has served you so well. . . ."

Cooper's dry response:

> "Our originality is the cause."

Is there a great difference between "No Steamboats" crossing the Atlantic in the year 1832 versus "No Steamboats" named the ***Jersey*** bound for Detroit in 1845? Is "A Vision" of what America is not really different from "A Vision" of what the *true Hero* of Lake Erie should be?

XII.

PERSONAL LINKS BETWEEN COOPER AND THE ERIE DISASTER

Although it is obvious that Cooper, as the nation's greatest naval historian in the 1840's, would have been well informed about the tragedy of the ***Erie*** (which was given lengthy newspaper coverage in the month of August 1841), there are also two trails that lead directly from Buffalo to Cooperstown: Levi Beebe, the courageous and skilful military academy cadet at Cooperstown *and* Cooper's lifelong friend and fellow Cooperstown resident, Judge Samuel Nelson. Nelson personally accompanied young Levi from Cooperstown to Buffalo before seeing him off on the ***Erie***. Exhibiting unusual stamina and skill, the young cadet survived the tragedy and was celebrated as a hero with national coverage. Given this *personal side* to the incident, it would be hard to imagine Nelson and Cooper *not* discussing the ***Erie*** disaster in detail **[21]**.

That Cooper's relationship with the American Press was, to say the least, ***strained*** is undeniable. That he might readily have considered floating an anonymous sketch as a "trial run" can hardly be ruled out. To "*blow off steam*", both due to the neglect of his works by the American Press *and* due to the hammering he was receiving by defending Elliott's role during the Battle of Lake Erie **[22]**, why not conjure up – once again – a tale of a *steamboat*? The writer's object: to blot

out an acrimonious past and, at the same time, point to the elevated kind of humanity which the "Old Hero," Old Hickory, so nobly typified. Besides, for Cooper, the person of Andrew Jackson was really nothing new: he was, after all, of the same moral fiber as a Natty Bumppo, an Andries Coejemans, a Long Tom Coffin. And even if an allegorical link to Jackson was recognized, it would be drowned in the flood of mourning the death of the Nation's greatest hero since George Washington. Such an ambitious literary-journalistic enterprise could be embarked upon with impunity. He would never be caught!

XIII.

LITERARY PRODUCTS OF EMOTIONAL TURMOIL: *THE OAKS OPENINGS* (1848) AND "THE HELMSMAN OF LAKE ERIE" (1845) COMPARED

Whig attacks on Cooper's political affiliation, which spared neither his literary nor historical works upon which he was dependent for his livelihood, together with the libelous attacks upon his character to the effect that Cooper, the naval historian, had been biased towards Elliott to the detriment of Perry and only interested in warping America's naval history, represent Cooper's ordeal from 1839 to 1845. The young Hero of Lake Erie, Oliver Hazard Perry, is dethroned in "***The Helmsman***" by an old civilian. Old John Maynard, buttressed by his love of God, displays completely selfless courage. The wreath of glory won through a naval battle is replaced by the saintliness of a role model, a "Christian martyr." The prose sketch ***"The Helmsman of Lake Erie"*** is devoid of vituperation, backbiting complaints, or mud-throwing innuendo. Instead, old John Maynard summarily directs the frightened ladies on board to prayer, to turn inward rather than outward for their own and the ship's salvation. The sketch, with Jacobean precision, describes the incredible degree of suffering a devout man can endure for his fellow man.

Although Cooper was not as overtly religious an Episcopalian as his wife in the sense that he found many tenets of the church outmoded and leading in some instances to intolerance, his religion was a Christian's duty towards his fellow man, regardless of religious affiliation, or lack thereof. Whether Native American or African American, Cooper held all in deep respect. In many ways, he was before his time. The reworking of the "Hero of Lake Erie" (Oliver Hazard Perry) into the "***Helmsman of Lake Erie***" (John Maynard), given Cooper's strained circumstances in 1845, is not what one might expect. The decided emphasis on "Love of God" as the premise for Maynard's selfless sacrifice for all the passengers and crew of the ***Jersey*** deserves close attention.

In a similar vein, Cooper's 1848 novel ***Oak Openings***, the literary product of his tribulations with luckless land speculation in May 1835, in Michigan Territory, does not lodge a complaint against unscrupulous land speculators, but instead paints a landscape reminiscent of a Garden of Eden, even though Cooper was required to journey from Cooperstown to Buffalo and then by steamboat on to Detroit to attempt to fight for his rights in court. Cooper's inspection of his holdings in Kalamazoo acquainted him with the bewitching landscape of the area. **[23]**

Given the emotional turmoil over an investment that Cooper, even on his deathbed, was never able to recover completely, the metamorphosis of an investment gone sour into a Christian

portrayal of redemption suggests a close affinity with "***The Helmsman of Lake Erie***." As Wayne Franklin puts it:

> "*The* ***Oak Openings*** thus contains 'the most consistently drawn edenic landscape in all of Cooper's fiction.'[50] Given the forces that brought Cooper to Michigan, that is ironic indeed."
>
> - Wayne Franklin, ***James Fenimore Cooper*: *The Later Years***, p. 441. Ftn. 50: H. Daniel Peck, ***A World by Itself: The Pastoral Moment in Cooper's Fiction*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 50.

The War of 1812 infuses the entire plot of ***Oak Openings***. The sensitive American failures at Fort Mackinac, Fort Dearborn, and Detroit lead to the flight by canoe of the crafty bee hunter and his party of Americans from hostile Indians allied with the British. Journeying north up Lake Michigan, then east to Lake Huron, and finally south to Lake Erie, the intrepid band of fugitives, aided by Scalping Peter, find a safe haven in (of all places!) Erie, Pennsylvania (the site from which Perry set out to defend the lake against the British). Cooper refrains from embittered self-pity while creating a hymn to the beauty of northern Michigan. Scalping Peter, who is converted to Christianity due to the ability of a dying Pastor Amen to forgive the very Indians who were killing him, provides the religious focus of the novel. Franklin characterizes the novel as "an allegory about the redemptive power of Christian love." **[24]**. It is singular that in the final paragraph of ***The Oak Openings***, which transpires three decades after the incidents recorded in the plot, the white-haired old man of at least eighty, who was once an honored chief and leader not of one tribe but of many, has long since turned his back on his military past and can now exhort the reader, "Stranger, love God." ***The Oak Openings*** was Cooper's final frontier novel.

XIV .

"LIKE TITANS SPURNING TIME AND FATE:" [25], THE BIRTH OF A NEW LEGEND

The close links of friendship between Jackson and Elliott, Elliott's allegorical "figure head" of Jackson on the ***USS Constitution***, Eliott's proposed gift of a sarcophagus and the resulting controversy over *where* the Old Hero should be laid to rest, all of these factors point to a political allegory of the first rank. James Fenimore Cooper's objective ***Naval History*** of 1839 lent added support to Elliott's cause and was tenaciously defended by Cooper in the years leading up to Jackson's death (a pamphlet, "***The Battle of Lake Erie***," to stave off attack, was published by Cooper in July 1843 **[26]**, and ***Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers*** published in 1846, contained a reprint of Cooper's 1843 biography of Perry in ***Graham's Magazine***, again not retracting a word Cooper had already written in defense of Elliott).

The conjunction of historical currents in the persons of both Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott and General Andrew Jackson point to the creation of "***The Helmsman***" embodying the Spirit of Jackson, which was then superimposed upon the image of the *dual* "HEROES OF LAKE ERIE." The "Spirit of Jackson," given flesh and blood in Maynard's act of self-sacrifice, meshes neatly with the "Spirit of Natty Bumppo," the quintessential legend of America's Pioneer Hero.

The motives?

A defense of American values and the value of a True American. An allegory of national redemption, a baptism with fire, a cleansing of what it meant to be an "American Hero" – the

notion that a good man could indeed "bring forth good works in an infinite series" (cf. Nathaniel Hawthorne). Historical, religious, allegorical – and reflecting the heart and soul of what America's national character should stand for.

The purpose behind the sketch was to blot out the legacy of hubris and acrimony deriving from the naval heroes of the past on Lake Erie while creating a new caliber of Lake Erie hero, one whose only desire was the well-being and salvation of his "passengers and crew" (symbolic of the American nation), one who regarded fame on this earth as frivolous compared with the blessings of immortality his Redeemer had promised him.

What we find in "The Helmsman" is realistic description of the tumult of the Buffalo harbor scene, the activity of the passengers, the injection of dramatic irony in the misleadingly "pleasant May morning" that leaves passengers and crew unsuspecting but alerts the reader to the horrors to come, a matter-of-fact Maynard parrying questions put by frightened womenfolk with his exhortation to pray, the professional measures taken in a nautical setting to meet the emergency of a ship on fire, the sparse narrative with the all-important question – "Could you hold on five minutes longer?" with the pregnant response "I'll try, sir"– followed up with the moving description of a dying hero determined to do just that – essential ingredients that could fire Cooper's poetic imagination and lead to a masterpiece.

The "sleigh ride on the Hudson" in ***Satanstoe*** is often regarded as Cooper's finest single episode **[27]** in the form of a thrilling tale. Both it and "***The Helmsman***" exhibit a kinship in time frame of composition, buildup, tone and elements. For an in-depth comparison of shared elements in the two tales, the reader is encouraged to consult Section IX ("***A Thrilling Tale of a Floating Bridge***") in *"**The Author's Signature: The Good Ship Jersey in 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie,' and the Significance of the Geography of New Jersey in the Works of James Fenimore Cooper**."* [Cf. Annotation 13]**.**

Cooper is all-too-often said to avail himself of a "long-winded" and "antiquated" style. Yet given an episode fraught with danger, his poetic imagination could excel in creating a lively tale of suspense. The allegorical element in "***The Helmsman of Lake Erie,***" which serves to reconcile the heated maritime history of Lake Erie also delimits the time frame of the sketch's creation. **[28]** Given Cooper's unique position as a maritime expert, novelist, essayist and defender of American values and society, and – whether he wanted to be or not – an outspoken partisan of Elliott's (for he was convinced by his own research that Elliott had been maligned), Cooper's handwriting and signature cannot be misconstrued. As Cooper himself put it, "A History ought to be a matter of fact, though, like most men, it is seldom what it ought to be" [cf. Annotation 6]. In "***The Helmsman of Lake Erie***," history was made to be as it *ought to be*.

NORMAN BARRY, JULY 2008, REVISED AND UPDATED January 2021

ANNOTATIONS:

For the sake of brevity, the anonymous sketch entitled "***The Helmsman of Lake Erie***" will often be referred to as "***The Helmsman***."

So as to facilitate access to original source material, the author has compiled three folders or files. Cf. "Norman's Cooper Corner" in www.johnmaynard.net.

E: The Jesse Duncan Elliott File
J : The Death of General Andrew Jackson
M : The Gansevoort Melville Folder

1) The short story **"*The Lake Gun*"** (1850) is a singular tale of the "Wandering Jew" in the form of a North American Indian, punished for his evil doings by being imprisoned in a tree stump that is doomed to navigate Lake Seneca for "a thousand winters." The trapped spirit of the transformed Indian becomes a "helmsman:" "What does the old chap do but shift his helm and make for the west shore." Here again, the "helmsman," who had been a chieftain who had deceived his people, is condemned to navigate a log instead of his nation. The short story is clearly allegorical (the imprisoned chief "See-wise" referring to William Henry Seward) and points an accusing finger at the potential of demagogues using the American people as marionettes. The metaphors of "ship of state" and "helmsman of a nation" are implicit. Of particular interest is the name of the traveller who is seeking the "Jew:" a man named "Fuller," the name of the wheelsman of the ***Erie***!

The short story was published not quite a year before Cooper's death. Cooper's comment: "I am finishing off the '***Lake Gun***,' which earns the $100, that lies untouched in my trunk. I should like to work at this rate, the year round. I believe this miscellan[e?]ous writing pays the best, just now." (***The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper***, ed. James Franklin Beard (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), vol. vi, p. 239. # 1107, Nov. 25, 1850).

2) Novels such as ***The Monikins*** (1835), ***The Oak Openings*** (1848), and even ***The Bravo*** (1831), for example, all have allegorical content. For ***The Bravo***, cf. Wayne Franklin's ***James Fenimore Cooper: The Later Years*** (Yale Unicersity Press, New Haven & London, 2017), pp. 108-113, "Sourcing a Political Fable."

3) Cf. **Frederick J. Shepard**, "***Myths of the Great Lakes," The Buffalo Express***, Sept. 1, 1912 :http://johnmaynard.net/myth.html According to this doubtful account, Fuller did not die until 1900 at the age of 87. This would mean that, in 1841, Fuller was 28 years of age. A curiosity perhaps worthy of mention is the fact that Oliver Hazard Perry, at the time of his victory over the British fleet, on September 10, 1813, was also only 28.

Cf. Norman Barry,"***New Material on Calculating the Erie's Lost and Saved***," p. 41 & pp. 65-72: http://johnmaynard.net/Figures.pdf

4) Cf. Norman Barry, "***The Triangle: Three German Lake Erie Ballads. Is Emil Rittershaus the Catalyst behind Ada Linden's and Theodor Fontane's 'John Maynard' Ballads?***" http://johnmaynard.net/TriangleEng.pdf

5) **Benjamin B. French**, ***Baltimore Sun***, September 5, 1845, p. 1, c. 3. http://johnmaynard.net/FrenchBalt.pdf. Reprinted in ***The Albany Argus*** (day in early September 1845 unknown), ***The Jeffersonian Republican*** (New Orleans) on Sept. 16, 1845, p. 2, c. 4, and ***The Barre Gazette*** (Barre, Worchester County, Massachusetts) Oct. 10, 1845, p.1, c.1.

6) Cf. **Lawrence J. Friedman and David Curtis Skaggs**, "***Jesse Duncan Elliott and the Battle of Lake Erie: The Issue of Mental Stability***," ***Journal of the Early Republic***, 10 (Winter 1990), p. 494 (quoting Samuel Eliot Morison). Although the article establishes that Commodore Elliott's mental makeup was no different than that of other American naval officers of his day and age, it becomes quite clear that up to the end of the twentieth century Commodore Elliott was still a highly controversial figure among naval historians.

Cf. **David Curtiss Skaggs**, "***Aiming at the Truth: James Fenimore Cooper and the Battle of Lake Erie***," ***The Journal of Military History***, 59 (April 1995), pp. 237-256. A fascinating and rewarding portrayal of both Cooper and the Battle of Lake Erie. The introductory quote on p. 237 deserves requoting:

> "A History ought to be a matter of fact, though, like most men, it is seldom what it ought to be. I aimed at truth in mine, and I believe I am nearer to it, than most historians, though I fear some mistakes must exist. At all events, I knew too much to swallow all the stuff that has been in circulation, and have purified the accounts of battles, from a vast deal of exaggerated nonsense."
>
> – ***J. F. Cooper to Daniel Dewey, 22 May 1839***, in **James Franklin Beard, ed.,** ***The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper***, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964-1968, vol. 3, p. 378.

7) Cf. **James D. Wallace** (Boston College), "***Cooper on Corporal Punishment***," Presented at the Cooper Panel of the 1997 Conference of the American Literature Association in Baltimore: Cf. James Fenimore Cooper website. To find out what Cooper, a navy expert, thought of corporal punishment, the following excerpt from Wallace's essay is helpful:

> "The suspicion that Myers' view regarding flogging was closer to Cooper's own than that of Richard Henry Dana, Jr. is confirmed by the new preface that Cooper wrote in 1849 for ***The Pilot***. There he alludes to the reform movement (by then on the brink of success) as misguided at best:
>
> > 'It is not easy to make the public comprehend all the necessities of a service afloat. With several hundred rude beings confined within the narrow limits of a vessel, men of all nations and of the lowest habits, it would be to the last degree indiscreet, to commence their reformation by relaxing the bonds of discipline, under the mistaken impulses of a false philanthropy. It has a lofty sound, to be sure, to talk about American citizens being too good to be brought under the lash, upon the high seas; but he must have a very mistaken notion who does not see that tens of thousands of these pretending persons on shore, even, would be greatly benefited by a little judicious flogging.'"
> >
> > - ***The Writings of James Fenimore Cooper***, ***The Pilot***, Preface (1849), pp. 7-8

8) Cf. **Robert D. Madison** (United States Naval Academy), "***Cooper and the Sea: A Bibliographic Note*,**" The American Neptune, Vol. 57, No. 4, Fall 1997, pp. 371-372:

> "In 1839 Cooper published the first of several editions of ***The History of the Navy of the United States of America***, a life-long work which had been in Cooper's mind since his review of Thomas Clark's ***Naval History*** in the ***Literary and Scientific Repository*** in 1821. Cooper's own naval history opened a decade of intense naval writing that was to include "***The Edinburgh Review*** **on James's** ***Naval Occurrences*** **and Cooper's**

Naval History" (1842), ***The Battle of Lake Erie*** (1843), ***Ned Myers*** (1843), "***An Elaborate Review***" in ***Proceedings of the Naval Court Martial in the Case of Alexander Slidell Mackenzie*** (1844), and ***Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers*** (published 1846, from sketches written 1842-1846). Two other pieces apparently begun during this period were published posthumously: "***Old Ironsides***" (1853) and "***The Battle of Plattsburg Bay***"(1869)." Cf. James Fenimore Cooper website.

9) **Hugh Egan** (Ithaca College), "***Enabling and Disabling the Lake Erie Discussion: James Fenimore Cooper and Alexander Slidell Mackenzie Respond to the Perry/Elliott Controversy***." Originally published in ***The American Neptune*** (Vol. 57, No. 4, Fall 1997) (pp. 343-350): "Mackenzie was related by marriage to the Perry clan and was, like Cooper himself, something of a sailor-author. Cooper had served three years in the Navy (1808-1811), stationed on Lake Ontario."

With regard to Cooper and Lake Ontario, the following article is a "must": Robert D. Madison (Northwestern University) with Mary K. Madison (Northeastern University), "***Guides in the Wilderness: An Extract, Glossary, and Chart of Cooper's Fictional and Factual Boat Journeys on Lake Ontario***." Presented at the 4th Cooper Seminar, ***James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art*** at the State University of New York College at Oneonta, July 1982: Cf. James Fenimore Cooper website.

10) **James Fenimore Cooper**, C***orrespondence of James Fenimore-Cooper***, edited by his grandson **James Fenimore Cooper**, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1922), pp. 556-557.

A lengthy excerpt from Dana's letter to Cooper follows. The letter clearly reflects the charged atmosphere of the year 1845.

> J. F. Cooper, Esq.
> FROM RICHARD HENRY DANA
> Boston, November 10, 1845
>
> My dear Sir—
>
> I will speak as "frankly" as you ask me to do. I can only give you my general impressions, being too little in the world to have any distinct knowledge of particulars as respects feelings, opinions, or rather notions, afloat here or elsewhere. You must consider that Perry being a New Englander and from a State [Rhode Island] bordering close to us, and one with which we were in intimate relation, it almost necessarily followed that our people should take a peculiar pride in his success — something beyond that merely of being a fellow-countryman;—they felt and claimed the honor of near relationship. After the peace he visited Boston, and through all the attentions paid to him bore himself modestly. He was a young man also, and, as I remember him, with a mild expression of countenance, which you know is particularly pleasing in military men in civil life.
>
> In consequence of this and of the stories then current, a contrary feeling towards Elliott may of course have been stronger here than elsewhere. When some few years back E. came here he came among a people more or less prejudiced against him; and the first

act done under him (and, as understood, *by* him) at *our* navy-yard, was to put the figure head of Jackson (a man then generally most heartedly hated here) upon ***Old Ironsides***, *our* ***Old Ironsides***, *born* among us and one of us: it was felt as if it were a personal insult to us. Looking at both instances, you see how naturally the state of feeling prevailing here was produced, seeming to grow up unconsciously out of the run of circumstances.

I have very little belief that people have been saying—we won't read Cooper—our "minds are made up." And I much doubt whether they have read more of Mackenzie and your opponents than they have of what you have written. I suppose their reading to have been principally confined to the newspapers, and what may have appeared in our Monthly Rev[s] etc., among other articles. I have gotten this impression—for it is nothing more—I scarcely know how; and I have another still stronger, that as concerns you personally, if there is any ill feeling, it is very slight and confined to the most ignorant, and entirely unworthy of your notice.

Now, as to your lecturing on the subject. I do not see how one situated as you are could come here and lecture upon the matter without *appearing* to take advantage of your place as lecturer to turn what should be a mere public affair at such a time into something personal to yourself. It seems to me that on all such occasions the true course is for a man to avoid all that may even *appear* to bear upon himself. Allow me to ask would it not be calling out towards you a deeper feeling of respect to make no allusion to this subject, than you could possibly excite even by a defense of your ground that should be *conclusive to the minds of your audience*?

Besides, were you to take a contrary course, some would say, let us hear the other side; and your antagonists might claim a right to be heard, and the lecture- room would be turned into a battle-ground.

11) Cf. Norman Barry, "***A Reevaluation of the Impact of the Swallow on the Creation of 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie'***": http://johnmaynard.net/Squires.pdf

12) **James Fenimore Cooper**, ***Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers*** (Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, ***1846***), vol. 2, p. 204. ["Entered according to Act of Congress, ***in the year 1845***, by Carey & Hart, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania."]:

"Though victory crowned the efforts of the Americans, the commanding vessel, the *Lawrence*, struck her flag to the enemy, while the *Niagara*, a vessel every way her equal in force, did not get her full share of the combat until near its close. Nothing is more certain than that both peculiarities might have occurred without blame being properly attached to any one; but nothing was more natural than that such circumstances should lead to accusations, recriminations, and quarrels. Most of the officers were exceedingly young men, and, while some of the *Niagara* were indiscreet in accusing those who surrendered the *Lawrence* of having tarnished the luster of the day, those of the *Lawrence* retorted by accusing the Niagara of not having properly supported them. When this business of recrimination commenced, or which party was the aggressor, it would now most probably be in vain to ask; but the result has been ***one of the most protracted and bitter controversies that has ever darkened the pages of the history of the American marine; and a controversy to which political malignancy has endeavored to add its sting*** [my emphasis]."

With regard to Cooper's ***Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers***, although published in 1846, it was copyrighted in 1845. Consequently, it is probable that the work was completed by 1845 unless copyrighted before completion.

13) For an in-depth consideration of the impact of New Jersey upon Cooper and his writing, cf. **Norman Barry**, "***The Author's Signature: The Good Ship Jersey in 'The Helmsman of Lake Erie,' and the Significance of the Geography of New Jersey in the Works of James Fenimore Cooper***:" http://johnmaynard.net/Jersey.pdf

14) ***Robert W. Neeser*** *(Secretary of the Naval Society, New York City), "***Cooper's Sea Tales.***" Published in the Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association,* Vol. XVI, pp. 63-68, 1917. Cf. James Fenimore Cooper Society, articles.

15) **Allen M. Axelrad** (California State University at Fullerton), "'***Aristocracy forsooth!...the Blackguard is the Aristocrat': James Fenimore Cooper on Congress and Capitalism,***" Presented at the 10th Cooper Seminar, James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art at the State University of New York College at Oneonta, July 1995.

16) For a look at the religious character of Cooper's heroes, cf. **Norman Barry**, **"'*The Helmsman of Lake Erie' in Light of the Role Played by Religion in the Fictional Writing of James Fenimore Cooper or, The Secret Why the Good Man, When Dying, Does Not Groan:"*** http:/johnmaynard.net/MARTYRSDEATH.pdf

17)**Donald A. Ringe** (University of Kentucky), "***Cooper Today: A Partisan View***", Presented at the 7th Cooper Seminar, James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art at the State University of New York College at Oneonta, July 1989.

18) Elliott's notion of handing Cooper the Navy Office had been entertained before. Whether, in 1836, Elliott was also "pulling strings" is, however, not clear:

436. To Mrs. Cooper ***Astor House – July 1st 1836***

> "A foolish paragraph is going the rounds that I want to be Secretary of the Navy. I have caused it to be contradicted, though I fear some of the officers are making a little influence to that effect, else it is not easy to see whence the report should have come [Ftn. 1]"
>
> [Ftn. 1] "Mr. Cooper called upon us this morning, in consequence of a rumor pointing him out as an applicant for the office of Secretary of the Navy. He requests us, in his name, to pronounce the report entirely destitute of foundation. Mr. C. stated expressly that he had neither applied for, nor was desirous of obtaining, any office of a political character. This explicit disclaimer of the intention imputed to him, of course, sets the matter at rest."
>
> (The ***New York Journal of Commerce***, 30 June 1836) ***The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper***, Vol. III, p. 223 & p. 225 (ftn.)

19) The question whether the "citizens of Boston" actually *gave* Jackson the desk he used in the Tremont or whether the desk was simply a "courtesy" provided by the hotel remains unanswered. It is clear, however, that the desk was never in the White House or in the Hermitage. Elliott did, however have the desk in his cabin on board the ***U.S.S. Frigate Constitution*** ("***Old Ironsides***"). Apart from the open question whether the desk had actually

belonged to Jackson, it is safe to say that both Elliott and afterwards Cooper truly *believed* they had Jackson's desk.

*. *. *. *

A revealing commentary on the "mystery desk" is to be found in the appendix of Jesse Duncan Elliott's ***Speech of Com. Jesse Duncan Elliott, U.S.N., Delivered in Hagerstown, Md. On 14th November, 1843****; Published by the Committee of Arrangement of Washington County* (Philadelphia: G. B. Zieber & Co, 1844), Appendix pp. 26-27:

Appendix, Page 26:

> In connection with these remarks, touching the *spirit* of the people of Boston, I will relate an incident, which may go to exhibit their claims to denizenship in a land of steady habits and "fixed principles." An elegant and costly writing desk, made of rosewood, beautifully mounted and adorned, had been constructed with a special purpose of presenting it to Gen. Jackson, when he should visit the city, on express invitation from the authorities. At that time the General was extremely popular with the good folks of Boston; and this manifestation of their regard was but one of thousand, that were arranged to prove it. Accordingly, on his arrival, the desk was placed in the room, prepared for him. It was well stored with the usual conveniences and comforts; such as a shaving apparatus, penknives, mirror, tooth-brushes, pincushion, a beautiful seal with the General's initials, surrounded by an olive branch and a serpent; and even *one or two pots of corn salve*! Everything needful was there, and of a costly kind; it was quite a cabinet of *notions*.
>
> The General enjoyed the use of the desk, during his sojourn in Boston; but whilst he was en route for the North, it was ascertained that he had penned his instructions for the removal of the Treasury Deposits from the United States Bank, upon this very article, which had been intended for a *souvenir* of patriotic affection! The tone of feeling among the people was instantaneously changed! The President was as unceremoniously vilified as he had before been caressed; and when he returned to the city, he not only found that all their warmth and attentions had subsided, but that *the desk was gone*! The donors, on account of the deposits, had *removed* it, and exposed it to sale to the highest bidder! It was purchased by an esteemed friend, Grenville Temple Winthrop, Esq., who did me the honor of presenting it to me, with the accompanying letter:
>
> Boston, 1st March, 1835.
>
> My dear sir, —I send the desk, which I mentioned this afternoon, and beg you to receive it as a slight token of the high esteem, with which I have the honor to be,
> Your friend and faithful servant,
> GRENVILLE TEMPLE WINTHROP.
>
> To Commodore ELLIOTT, U.S. Frigate Constitution.
>
> P.S. It is precisely as it was when in the General's room, at the Tremont House. I thought that there might be *some ch*arm in the desk, and accordingly had my defense written on it, and signed with the *same pen* that the President had used in

Appendix, Page 27:

> preparing his instructions; but ———all wouldn't do! —as the sequel of the proceedings of the Court Martial unfortunately proved! —I, however, took occasion to send the Hero of Orleans, the seal and toothbrush; stating to him that I deemed the seal properly his; —as for the *brush*, I did not desire any interest in it!
>
> On my arrival at New York with the Constitution, the ship was visited by great numbers of persons; and among them was one, who manifested as I thought, an exclusive curiosity to see everything about the frigate. He was gratified in his apparent desire, and at length was introduced into the cabin. After inspecting the arrangements, &c., he came to me, and observed that *he was the inventor of an article, which was very beneficial to the human family*! I bowed my wish for him to explain; when he pulled out *two small pots of corn salve*, similar to those placed in the desk for the use of the General! With much difficulty, I commanded myself sufficiently to tell him that the people of Boston had anticipated his wish *to relieve the human family*, &c. I showed him the salve in the desk, which he recognized as his, and, consequently, the *pure article*. But he appeared very much disappointed in not effecting a *trade* with me; so much so, that putting up his salve, which was so *beneficial to mankind*, and angry with me, perhaps, that all my toes were not covered with corns, like an ALLIGATOR'S back, he went ashore, without one more look at the ship, or anything belonging to her!"
>
> *. *. *. *

Several problems crop up in the above narrative. First, Jackson was in Boston only once, and that was during his Presidential Campaign Tour in New England in 1833. Winthrop claims he had successfully bid on the desk to prepare his defense *during* his court-martial proceedings in 1832, which is an obvious embellishment. (Cf. ***Trial by a Court Martial of Lieut. Col. Grenville Temple Winthrop, on Charges Prepared against Him by Adjutant Gen. William H. Sumner, in Pursuance of Orders from His Excellency Levi Lincoln, Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts***. *Printed for the Respondent* (Boston: Carter, Hendee & Co., 1832).

I had the good fortune of receiving considerable help and advice from Marsha Mullin. I agree completely with Jon Meacham in his acknowledgments to his Pulizer Prize winning book, ***Andrew Jackson, American Lion***, when he wrote: "The curator of the Hermitage, Marsha Mullin, was kind and helpful, always willing to field the oddest of questions with sure and steady grace" (p. 366). Surely, my question regarding the desk would fit into one of the oddest that could be placed. Marsha Mullin confirmed that Elliott's reference to the decision to remove deposits from the Second U.S. Bank occurred while Jackson was in Boston. Taking this one step further, the actual order to remove deposits from the Second Bank of the United States and to redistribute them to state-chartered banks could very well have been penned on the desk, as Elliott claimed. Elliott's account that Jackson returned to Boston to collect the desk is historically inaccurate. Due to ailing health, Jackson abruptly cancelled his tour of the Northeast when in New Hampshire, and returned directly to Washington, D.C., without a stopover in Boston. As Mullin put it in our correspondence: "So, the angry removal of the desk and placing it for auction did not happen exactly as Elliott recounts." She added, "I would agree though with the general outline of the story and that Jackson likely did not take full possession of the desk."

It is also most unlikely that within only a little over a week, the citizens of Boston would have changed their minds about Jackson and the donation of a Bostonian desk due to a sudden change in the political climate. It should be borne in mind that Jackson's stance on the U.S. Bank had

already been made crystal clear the previous year in July when he vetoed the re-charter of the Second Bank of the U.S. For many Bostonians and alumni of Harvard, granting Jackson, "an illiterate westerner," an honorary Doctor of Law during his stay hardly increased his popularity. John Quincy Adams, a Harvard Alumnus, did not attend. His excuse: "I would not be present to witness her disgrace in conferring the highest literary honors upon a barbarian who could not write a sentence of grammar and hardly could spell his own name." (Jon Meacham, ***American Lion*****,** p. 18). Two further examples of Boston as "enemy territory" are provided by Meacham (***American Lion***, p. 260):

> "Josiah Quincy, the son of the president of Harvard University and a cousin of John Quincy Adams, recalled that parents of the Northeast sometimes invoked the name of Andrew Jackson to frighten misbehaving children. According to Harriet Martineau, a New England Sunday school teacher once asked a child who killed Cain. The answer: 'General Jackson.'"

During his tour, Jackson did, in fact, receive, gifts. For example, in Boston, Jackson received "a beautiful suit of black clothes" from Mr. W. H. Milton:

> Sir – Allow me to present for your acceptance, the suit of clothes accompanying this note, made from American cloth manufactured by the Northampton Manufacturing co. as a specimen of N. England skill and industry.

Jackson's response as communicated by A. J. Donelson:

> The President desires me to return you his thanks, and to assure you that he is highly gratified by the possession of New England manufacture."
>
> ***Saratoga Sentinel*** (Saratoga Springs, Massachusetts), Tuesday, July 23, 1833. p. 2.

The fame of Boston's cabinetmakers was widespread. The notion of a gift representative of a branch of Massachusetts handicraft, whether in the form of a suit or even a desk, is not so far-fetched. In that day and age, Presidents were not encumbered by the possible embarrassments of the impropriety of accepting gifts.

20) Cooper's description of this visit to Buffalo and Niagara Falls is in Chapter 30 of ***Oak Openings*** (published in August 1848, pp. 565-567/582), with a reference to a former visit to Niagara, which Cooper states was "thirty-eight" years earlier:

> "Quitting our own quiet and secluded abode in the mountains, in the pleasant month of June, and in this current year of 1848, we descended into the valley of the Mohawk, got into cars, and went flying by rails toward the setting sun. Well could we remember the time when an entire day was required to pass between that point on the Mohawk where we got on the rails, and the little village of Utica. On the present occasion, we flew over the space in less than three hours and dined in a town of some fifteen thousand souls.
>
> "We reached Buffalo, at the foot of Lake Erie, in about twenty hours after we had entered the cars. This journey would have been the labor of more than a week, at the time in which the scene of this tale occurred. Now, the whole of the beautiful region, teeming with its towns and villages, and rich with the fruits of a bountiful season, was almost brought into a single landscape by the rapidity of our passage.

"At Buffalo, we turned aside to visit the cataract. Thither, too, we went on rails. ***Thirty-eight years had passed since we had laid eyes on this wonderful fall of water.*** [My emphasis] In the intervening time we had traveled much and had visited many of the renowned falls of the old world, to say nothing of the great number which are to be found in other parts of our own land. Did this visit, then, produce disappointment? Did time, and advancing years, and feelings that had been deadened by experience, contribute to render the view less striking, less grand, in any way less pleasing than we had hoped to find it? So far from this, all our expectations were much more than realized. In one particular, touching which we do not remember ever to have seen anything said, we were actually astonished at the surpassing glory of Niagara. It was the character of sweetness, if we can so express it, that glowed over the entire aspect of the scene. We were less struck with the grandeur of this cataract, than with its sublime softness and gentleness. To water in agitation, use had so long accustomed us, perhaps, as in some slight degree to lessen the feeling of awe that is apt to come over the novice in such scenes; but we at once felt ourselves attracted by the surpassing loveliness of Niagara. The gulf below was more imposing than we had expected to see it, but it was Italian in hue and softness, amid its wildness and grandeur. Not a drop of the water that fell down that precipice inspired terror; for everything appeared to us to be filled with attraction and love. Like Italy itself, notwithstanding so much that is grand and imposing, the character of softness, and the witchery of the gentler properties, is the power we should ascribe to Niagara, in preference to that of its majesty. We think this feeling, too, is more general than is commonly supposed, for we find those who dwell near the cataract playing around it, even to the very verge of its greatest fall, with a species of affection, as if they had the fullest confidence in its rolling waters. Thus it is that we see the little steamer, the ***Maid of the Mist***, paddling up quite near to the green sheet of the Horse-Shoe itself, and gliding down in the current of the vortex, as it is compelled to quite the eddies, and come more in a line with the main course of the stream. Wires, too, are suspended across the gulf below, and men pass it in baskets. It is said that one of these inventions is to carry human beings over the main fall, so that the adventurer may hang suspended in the air, directly above the vortex. In this way do men, and even women, prove their love for the place, all of which we impute to its pervading character of sweetness and attraction.

"At Buffalo we embarked in a boat under the English flag, which is called the ***Canada***. This shortened our passage to Detroit by avoiding all the stops at lateral ports, and we had every reason to be satisfied with our selection. Boat, commander, and the attendance were such as would have done credit to any portion of the civilized world. There were many passengers, a motley collection, as usual, from all parts of the country."

21) That there were indeed persons linking the 1841 tragedy of the ***Erie*** and Cooperstown, where James Fenimore Cooper resided, makes it all the more probable that Cooper, America's leading maritime historian, would take a lively interest in the tragedy. Cf. Norman Barry, "***An Investigation of American Source Material Used by the GEWERBE-BLATT FÜR SACHSEN in Leipzig, Germany on October 8 , 1841,*** under the Heading ***'Loss of the Steamboat Erie'*** " (January 24, 2009). http://johnmaynard.net/SCAEssay.pdf : Cf. Levi Beebe and Judge Samuel Nelson, pp. 12-18.

22) An additional reason for "going Cooper-bashing" could well be his poetic portrayal of the North American Indian – who, in Cooper's works, is every bit as worthy and human as a "pale face." A hostile reception on the part of a bigoted Press and a bigoted society is argued in a

provocative article *by* ***Barbara Alice Mann*** entitled *"**Race Traitor**"* in ***A Historical Guide to James Fenimore Cooper,*** edited by **Leland S. Person** (Oxford & New York, etc.: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 155-186. Professor Mann also argues that Natty Bumppo may well have been of mixed race, an assertion this writer finds difficult to reconcile with the question of "honesty to oneself," which to Cooper boiled down to "honesty to God."

23) ***Op. cit.***, Wayne Franklin, ***James Fenimore Cooper: The Later Years***, p. 429: "To be sure, Cooper did make some modest gains from the Comstock entanglement. Even at the time of his death, when a substantial portion of the debt remained unpaid, Cooper owned more than a dozen lots in Kalamazoo that Sabina and Horace Comstock transferred to him in 1841 to cover some of what they still owed him then. And he managed to pick up considerable knowledge of the new state of Michigan, and indeed the Midwest as a region, during a series of trips he made there beginning in June 1847."

24) ***Ibid.***, p. 446.

25) ***"LIKE TITANS, SPURNING TIME AND FATE..."*** *The poem "Andrew Jackson," by C. D. Stuart, was placed above the text of "**The Helmsman of Lake Erie**" in the Sept. 2, 1845 issue of* ***The Wisconsin Argus.***
http://johnmaynard.net/WisconsinArgus.jpg

The Wisconsin Argus

(Madison, Wisconsin Territory)

September 2, 1845

Vol. 2, No. 3 (Whole No. 55) p. 1, c. 1

POETRY.

From the ***Albany Argus****.*

ANDREW JACKSON. BY C. D. STUART.

He sleeps at length! whose victor will,
Nor court nor camp could ever bend;
Who rose, 'mid storm, more proudly still,
His life one conquest to the end!

His gleaming helm, and battle blade,
Are now the sport of time and rust;
And low that iron heart is laid
Untrophied in the common dust.

But all is left that made him great—
The life and soul outliving breath,
Like Titans, spurning time and fate;
Would neither bow nor yield to death!

'Mid danger nurst, in battle tried,
His stormy course the warrior run;
And stood by freedom's wounded side,
Until her starry goal was won!

Nor crumbling stone, nor written line,
Nor pageant pomp can swell his fame—
A nation's heart, his fitting shrine,
Is sculptured with the HERO'S name!

BOSTON, JULY 13, 1845.

26) For a reader's reaction to the pamphlet of July 1843, the following letter to Cooper is quoted in its entirety. Given the negative public opinion Elliott endured through the years, it must be said that Mr. Sutherland was right as to "the final judgement of the Country on the matter." That "final judgment," of course, was both hypothetical and subjective (e.g., "if his heart had been in the right place"). The prematurely deceased Perry achieved immortal fame in the eyes of his countrymen while enjoying immunity to solid criticism.

From ***Correspondence of James Fenimore-Cooper***, edited by his grandson James Fenimore Cooper, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1922), pp. 507-508:

J. Fenimore Cooper, Esq., Cooperstown

FROM J. SUTHERLAND
Geneva, August 30, 1843

My Dear Cooper,

I have read your ***Pamphlet on the Battle of Lake Erie***. You certainly place your Adversaries in a very awkward predicament, and fully establish, as it appears to me, the accuracy of your historical account of that Battle. You have shown your usual moral courage in undertaking the Vindication of Elliott, in opposition to the universal Sentiment or feeling of the country. I have no doubt great injustice has been done him. There is no ground for imputing to him any want of courage in that affair. But still I have a *sort of feeling,* that a man of generous courage, a courage not merely above personal fear, but animated by generous impulses, would, notwithstanding the order of Battle, have gone to Perry's relief sooner than he did.

Your answer to this is that he did not know the crippled condition of the Flag Ship. If Perry required his more immediate support, he should have ordered it by signal. There is great force in this. It is undoubtedly a perfect *legal* defense. But still I cannot but feel that he must have known, from observing the superior force which was concentrated upon Perry's Ship, that he required support, and that if his Heart had been exactly in the right place, he would have afforded it much sooner than he did, and I rather think this will be the final judgement of the Country on the matter.

I am very sincerely and Truly
Yours
J. Sutherland

The question was not so much whether Elliott's "heart had been in the right place" but quite simply whether it was true that Elliott had not been "*enabled*" to engage the enemy for over one hour (possibly two) due to "*a want of wind*." Cooper argues that this was indeed the case and points to Perry's own statement on Elliott's conduct issued immediately after victory:

> "The fact that the gun-boats had been kept astern by the lightness of the wind, is mentioned by Perry, himself, in his official account of the battle. He also says, "at half past two, ***the wind springing up***, Capt. Elliott was enabled to bring his vessel, the ***Niagara***, gallantly into close action," leaving the unavoidable inference that ***a want of wind*** prevailed at an earlier period of the engagement."
>
> - ***Lives,*** "***Oliver Hazard Perry***," vol. 2, p. 180.

27) It may seem strange that the first truly positive statement regarding ***Satanstoe*** and the "sleigh ride on the Hudson" should come not from America but from France! Yet it only confirms the severe neglect Cooper was subjected to on "home ground."

The French reviewer **George Sand**, the pseudonym of **Madame Amandine Dupin**, [1804-1876] "pronounced ***Satanstoe*** one of his best novels and singled out for particular attention the sleigh ride on the river and the description of the sudden thaw as being 'all the more thrilling because, thanks to the confidence and clarity of observations, it is among the most intelligible. These descriptions, in the form of straightforward and matter-of-fact report, are among Cooper's finest qualities. One senses there is an observer who, from his own experience, has tried to give an account of everything, the effects and the causes, the details and the picture as a whole. Thus, one's interest is held by the force of truth. The narrator has the calm objectivity of a mirror which reflects the great crises of nature, without adding any frills out of his own head, and, I repeat, this course flexibly taken, constitutes at times an important property we perhaps underestimate a little."

> Quoted by **Kay Seymour House** in her "***Historical Introduction***" to ***Satanstoe*** (Cooper Edition), pp. xxxiii – xxxiv. From: George Sand, "***Fenimore Cooper***" in ***Autour de la Table*** (Paris, 1856), 261-72 and 281-2, translated by D.B. Wood and printed in **George Dekker and John P. McWilliams**, ***Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage*** (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 265.

George Dekker, in his work entitled ***James Fenimore Cooper, the Novelist*** (London: Routledge & Kegal Paul, 1967), p. 226, also emphasizes the exceptional literary quality of "the sleigh ride:"

> "I hope that this discussion of the design of ***Satanstoe*** does not make it seem dry, schematic, relentlessly didactic; for nothing could be farther from the truth. Not only is the narrative embedded in a rich and fascinating circumstantial reality, but it contains ***what is beyond dispute one of Cooper's greatest action scenes – the sleigh- ride on the Hudson River ice***" [my emphasis].

28) For a consideration of a further allegorical link to the Swiss national hero, Arnold von Winkelried, on the basis of Cooper's European novel, ***The Headsman***, cf. Norman Barry, "**James Fenimore Cooper's *The Headsman, or, the Abbaye des Vignerons* and the Legend of Arnold von Winkelried: John Maynard's European Roots"**: http://johnmaynard.net/Headsman2.pdf