

“I Could Tell a VERY Plain Tale in Connection with This Matter,
That Would Forever Dispose of It.” - Cooper

A Statement of Intent

By Norman Barry

Although the supporting evidence is overwhelming that James Fenimore Cooper was the only possible candidate for authorship of the anonymous 1845 sketch entitled “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” not one single letter or journal entry has been unearthed to provide definitive proof.

The Cooper family, following Cooper’s death in 1851, was quite efficient in destroying any incriminating letters or journal entries that might cast a shadow on an author, who while devoting his life in support of American democratic principles in both novels and essays while adding a note of caution with regard to provincialism and placing too much faith in a manipulative press, was, in return, subjected to vicious American press coverage during the latter part of the 1830’s, the first half of the 1840’s, and, in his final six years, muffling coverage by pretending Cooper did not exist. As such, even the slightest traces of authorship of the “Helmsman of Lake Erie”, which would only be seen by the Perry faction and a hostile press as subjective bias in favor of Elliott, and a direct attempt to diminish Oliver Hazard Perry’s standing as the true “Hero of Lake Erie,” were carefully expunged.(1)

In 2013, Professor Steven Harthorn undertook the meticulous task of deciphering Cooper’s unpublished handwritten manuscript, his “Reply to Alexander Slidell Mackenzie,” to which Harthorn added an historical introduction. (2) Begun roughly in October 1844 and completed no later than January 1845 (3), Cooper wrote a 62-page manuscript (4) as a response to Mackenzie’s continued attack on his depiction of the Battle of Lake Erie in his 1839 definitive *History of the Navy of the United States of America*.

The literary war between Elliott and Perry faction was still raging at the beginning of January 1845. A very frustrated and vexed Cooper had just completed his 2-part *Afloat and Ashore; or, The Adventures of Miles Wallingford* and was looking ahead to tackle questions of property rights in his *Littlepage Trilogy*.

As if Cooper did not have enough on his plate, there were the ever more personal attacks due his defense of Jesse Duncan Elliott, Oliver Hazard Perry’s second-in-command during the Battle of Lake Erie in 1813 in his 1839 *History of Navy of the United States of America*.

Cooper’s unpublished reply to the attacks of Alexander Slidell Mackenzie targeting Cooper’s depiction of the Battle of Lake Erie in his *Naval History* was aimed at setting the ledger straight regarding the American fleet under Perry: American fire power, size of ships, their position in the course of the battle, whether there was documentation of a lack of wind, the number of dead and wounded, the significance and timing of Perry’s signal as well as the broader question of possible negligence of Perry’s second-in-command, Jesse Duncan Elliott. Cooper’s 62-page response to Mackenzie’s twisted charges exonerated Elliott while showing the lack of historical acumen of a prejudiced

Mackenzie, who felt that Perry was not receiving sufficient praise from Cooper. On the negative side of the ledger, Cooper had become much too emotionally involved. As a result, he was planning to impugn Mackenzie's character, exposing him as both a "dunce" and "knave." This intention is, of course, not compatible with either the objectivity of an historian nor the concept of what constitutes a gentleman. It may be ascribed to Cooper's credit that the unpublished "Reply" served as a conduit for letting off steam while deliberating how best to handle a situation in which a factual presentation, simply because it was Cooper's, would be ignored and vilified as was the case with his 1843 pamphlet covering much the same material. (5)

"I am now answering M'Kenzie's answer to my pamphlet. I shall not leave him much character. His *frauds* exceed those of Duer. He will regret ever making his attack, for I prove him not only a dunce, but something very near a knave."

—Harthorn, p. 13 of "Introduction" and fn. 16, p. 92: *Letters and Journals*, vol. 4, Letter 776, To William Brandford Shubrick, Hall, Cooperstown, Oct. 27th, 1844, p. 481

Cooper had also published a series of sketches providing biographical information on the lives of America's famous naval officers in the very popular *Graham's Magazine*. The sketch on Perry was in the May and June 1843 issues. This material was published in revised form in 1846 in the 2-vol. *Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers*.

Cooper had other bones to pick with Mackenzie, the brother-in-law of Perry's younger brother Matthew, who belonged by marriage to the "Perry Faction." There had even been rivalry regarding both men's European travelogues. Who had the best press coverage? Who had sold the most copies?

Then there was the court-martial and acquittal of Mackenzie following Mackenzie's decision to hang 18-year-old Philip Spencer, son of the Secretary of the War, together with other so-called co-conspirators, for alleged mutiny without a trial. Cooper felt that Mackenzie's acquittal following his court-martial was a miscarriage of justice. As a result, Cooper wrote an "Elaborate Review" of the case, much to the detriment of Mackenzie. (6)

In other words, the attack by Mackenzie went, on several levels, far beyond an impartial assessment of Cooper's position by a navy officer.

As mentioned in the first paragraph of this article, Cooper's *Letters and Journals* have thus far produced a blank. That the lengthy unpublished manuscript of Cooper's Reply to Mackenzie, which would be not only difficult to read but in many cases difficult to follow without diagrams, was somehow overlooked and escaped the watchful eye and censorship of the Cooper family is understandable. Toward the end of the "Reply" (Harthorn, p. 89), Cooper writes:

"I am out of pocket by my legal warfare, though I had a verdict in every suit brought to trial, besides being the loser of thousands, *tens* of thousands, I think I might justly say, by the malignant and base hostility of the press. Were it millions, however, I would struggle on, if I know myself, for some of the *substance* of that liberty, of which this nation enjoys, so much of the *mockery*. I could tell a very plain tale in connection with this matter, that would forever dispose of it, (-my emphasis) but a danger so much greater than that of even the licentiousness of the press, is at this moment impending over me, as to render

the time unreasonable. We are about to try the issue of the existence or non-existence of legal liberty among us.”

What was to be disposed of? What was meant by “a *very plain tale*?” Had Cooper realized that his own response to Mackenzie was – on a moral level – no better than Mackenzie’s own attack? Cooper prided himself as a Christian gentleman. Had he finally realized that any true response to Mackenzie and the Perry faction should be on the moral level, for his critics were immune to facts. A “*very plain tale*”, set on Lake Erie, not with Perry, not with Elliott, but with an old John Maynard - what better way to combat prejudice and allow an unknowing press to judge the sketch on its own merits, impartially in as much as the author remained anonymous.

In other words, Cooper was already toying with the notion of some sort of “*very plain tale*” several months before the *Swallow* tragedy on the Hudson struck. On page 90, confirmation of Cooper’s reliance on his “friend and neighbor” Samuel Nelson, who was deeply involved in both the *Erie* and *Swallow* tragedies is alluded to.(7) The question why the lengthy reply to Mackenzie’s attack was never published should be viewed in light of the watershed year 1845. After 1845, Cooper no longer exhausted himself in libel trials and lengthy rebuttals to his critics. The press, still licking its wounds from Cooper’s litigation success, simply went “mum.” (8) Instead of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” Cooper, without “turning a cheek,” was able to sublimate his vexation and create new literary works. Particularly, *The Chainbearer* (1845), the second novel of the *Littlepage Trilogy*, analyzed the question of just how much pain a dying man of faith could endure. *Oak Openings* (1848), was also an example of how Cooper was able to transform his misguided land speculation in Michigan into a very religious novel ending in the exhortation to love God.(9)

Cooper’s novels abound, for example, in allusions to the primaeval American forest representing the temple of God. In the Leatherstocking novels, churches of varying denominations in towns are often viewed with suspicion as corrupted by non-Christian dogmatic sophistry. Raised in a Quaker family and married to an Episcopalian, Cooper strongly resisted membership until shortly before his death while attempting to live a Christian life and even to lend support to the Episcopal church. His brother-in-law was the Episcopal bishop of Western New York. The importance of proper conduct, i.e., the *Christian conduct of an American gentleman*, has often been downplayed or simply ignored by critics.

The planning of “a *very plain tale*” was, on the one hand, a statement of intention. On the other, it led to the realization that his reply to Mackenzie, which he had just completed, should indeed remain unpublished so as not to stir up yet another Perry hornet’s nest and, not to be overlooked, to besmudge Cooper’s own character. Through his ordeal with the press and with libel litigation, Cooper had finally grasped that another path was open providing him with *the inner fortitude* of not overstepping the bounds of a Christian gentleman (10) while remaining true to his own convictions.

Notes:

- 1) James Franklin Beard, Editor, *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, 6 volumes (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge Massachusetts, 1960-1964). This monumental work is essential for any attempt to understand the life of Cooper. I have argued, based on the distribution of letters and in consideration of just

how prolific a writer Cooper was, that if the archive were indeed complete, there would be at least 24 volumes.

The suppression and partial destruction of the Cooper archive are referred to on p. xii of Wayne Franklin's, *James Fenimore Cooper, The Early Years* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2007), p. xii of Introduction. Significantly, on p. xv. Franklin states: "As a result, Cooper remains, more than two hundred years after his birth, the last major figure in early American culture lacking a full biography."

- 2) Steven Harthorn, "An Unfired Shot in the Literary Battle of Lake Erie: Cooper's Unpublished Reply to Alexander Slidell Mackenzie," (*Literature in the Early American Republic*, Annual Studies on Cooper and his Contemporaries, Vol 5, April 2013). (Hereafter, Harthorn).
- 3) A second reference to the unpublished reply is pointed out by Professor Harthorn on p. 13 of "Introduction," written roughly one year after the letter to Shubrick: fn. 20, p. 93: JFC to Richard Henry Dana, 30 October 1845, in *Letters and Journals*, vol. 5, p. 92.

The 62-page manuscript was completed before Cooper had embarked on his Littlepage Trilogy. See Cooper's reference on page 89 of "Reply:" "We are about to try the issue of the existence or non-existence of legal liberty among us," to which Professor Harthorn attached the following footnote:

Ftn 46, p. 99: "Here Cooper may be alluding to New York's Anti-Rent War." See *L&J* 4:477-78. The question of property rights of the owners of large estates was a central issue of dispute. Cooper identified in this cause with his deceased father, who had built up a fortune by renting out plots of land on large tracts. Cooperstown, founded by his father, for instance, was a case in point.

Accepting Professor Harthorn's assumption that the Unpublished Reply was completed before the Littlepage Trilogy was tackled, one can say that by January 1845 at the very latest, the Reply had been completed:

"In any event, he clearly had the entire trilogy laid out by 22 January, 1845, when he wrote Bentley about his 'forth coming work, which I call 'The Family of Littlepage.'"

Satanstoe, Cooper Edition, "Historical Introduction," by Kay Seymour House, p. xxvi.

- 4) The hand-written manuscript is located in the Yale Collection of American Literature, ZA, Cooper (folder 17), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. See Harthorn, fn. 21, p. 93. It goes without saying that the very act of deciphering Cooper's penmanship, often bordering on an illegible scribble, required unimaginable patience.
- 5) With regard to his 1843 pamphlet, Cooper's letter #747 to William Gilmore Simms, *Letters and Journals*, Vol. 4, pp. 437-438, Jan. 5, 184(3)4, makes the following observation:

“As for the Lake Erie affair, it was an easy task to show the rascality employed against me: but cui bono? Few persons read my pamphlet, and I am still vituperated as the falsifier of history. The coarsest calumny that has been published against me, in connection with this affair has appeared since the explanations have been made. Unable to answer any thing, it runs into abuse and accuses me of *being hired by Elliott!* The edition of the pamphlet is mostly on hand, and will probably never sell.”

Cooper concludes the letter with the following observation (p. 439):

“If I were ten years younger, I would go to Europe instantly. There a literary man has at least the same rights as another, and, if known, he enjoys immense advantages. This country is not yet sufficiently civilized for this.”

- 6) Cooper, *Proceedings of the Naval Court Martial of Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, A Commander in the Navy of the United States, &c. Including the Charges and Specifications of Charges, Preferred against Him by the Secretary of the Navy. To Which Is Annexed, An Elaborate Review*. New York: Henry G. Langley, 1844.

Also, see Wayne Franklin’s *James Fenimore Cooper, The Later Years* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2017), pp.329 – 351.

- 7) See Norman Barry, *James Fenimore Cooper’s Personal Links to the 1841 Erie and 1845 Swallow Tragedies. I. Two of the Erie’s Lost and Saved & II. Judge Samuel Nelson’s Swallow Case, Defendant: William Burnett, Pilot of the Swallow*: <https://johnmaynard.net/Personallinks.pdf>

- 8) “I can hear nothing of Chainbearer. The papers are mum, as usual, but I know it sells very well. They cannot put me down entirely, though they do me infinite harm, A precious set of knaves are they!” – *Letters and Journals*, Vol. V, p. 101, Letter 844 To Mrs. Cooper, Head’s Sunday, November 30th, 1845.

- 9) See 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*: <https://johnmaynard.net/MARTYRSDEATH.pdf>

- 10) Although the “gentleman ideal” may not carry much weight nowadays, to Cooper it was the hallmark of an American of the highest social status and purest character.

In Cooper’s much derided 1838 novel *Home as Found* (4th page of Ch. XIII), we read Eve Effingham’s (perhaps rather inflated) views of what an American gentleman entails:

“Eve actually fancied that the position of an American gentleman might readily become, nay, that it ought to be, the highest of all human stations, short of that of sovereigns. Such a man had no social superior, with the exception of those who ruled, in her eyes; and this fact, she conceived, rendered him more than noble, as nobility is usually graduated. She had been accustomed to see her father and John Effingham moving in the best circles of Europe, respected for their information and independence, distinguished by their manners, admired for their personal appearance, manly, courteous, and of noble bearing and principles, if not set apart from the rest of mankind by an arbitrary rule connected with rank. Rich, and possessing all the habits that mark refinement, of gentle extraction, of liberal attainments, walking abroad in the dignity of manhood, and with none between them and the Deity.”

In *Letters and Journals*, Vol. 4, pp. 80-84, Cooper comments on Eve’s position in *Home as Found* pointing out that aristocratic rank is “purely a social dignity” (p. 82), Letter # 594, to William M. Swain, for the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, [27 September – 10 October 1840?].

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