

The Impact of Sir Walter Scott's *The Pirate* and the Minor Character Dick Fletcher on the Creative Imagination of James Fenimore Cooper

by Norman Barry

There have often been heated discussions as to which works James Fenimore Cooper had read and, more profoundly, the degree of influence the works of previous authors had in fact exerted upon his creative imagination. Although such questions could seldom be answered with any degree of certainty, Sir Walter Scott's *The Pirate* (1821) stands out as a singular exception, for Scott's maritime novel was not only read by Cooper but, by Cooper's own admission, served as a catalyst to launch his own career as a writer of maritime romances. Cooper's daughter Susan Fenimore Cooper, in her volume entitled *Pages and Pictures from The Writings of James Fenimore Cooper with Notes* (1865), provides a graphic description:

"The idea of writing a romance connected with the sea, was accidentally suggested by a conversation at the table with Mr. Charles Wilkes. The author of *Waverley* had recently published "*The Pirate*," and, as usual with every fresh volume from his pen, the book and its characters entered largely into the table-talk of the hour. The admiration of the landsmen of the party was much excited by the nautical passages of the narrative; and some of the guests doubted whether Sir Walter Scott, the legal man, the poet of past centuries, could have drawn marine touches so correctly; the fact was given as a reason for doubting his identity with the author of *Waverley*. No man admired the genius of Sir Walter Scott more than the author of "*The Pioneers*;" but on this occasion he maintained the opinion that "*The Pirate*" was not thoroughly satisfactory to a nautical reader; he added that a man accustomed to ships and the sea, could have accomplished far more with the same materials as those employed in "*The Pirate*." His companions differed from him; they considered the proportion of nautical matter as a proof of the author's skill; they held that similar scenes introduced very freely into a work of fiction must necessarily become tedious from their monotony, that they could not long be made really interesting to the general reader; professional men might take pleasure in them, but for a landsman, occasional passages by way of brief episodes, admitted for the sake of novelty and variety, must always be sufficient. More than this must necessarily become an error of judgment in any work of fiction. Mr. Cooper opposed this view of the subject with his usual spirit and animation. He admitted that as yet very little had been done in the way of nautical fiction; but he maintained that a work of this nature, with the scenes laid on the ocean, whose machinery should be ships and the waves, whose principal characters should be seamen, acting and talking as such, might be written with perfect professional accuracy, and yet possess equal interest with a similar book connected with the land. The general opinion of the company was very strongly against him. And in a conversation with his host, prolonged after they had left table, the same views were very clearly expressed by Mr. Wilkes, for whose general taste and judgment Mr. Cooper had the highest respect. On this occasion, however, the friends differed. Before the conversation had turned to other subjects, Mr. Cooper had already resolved to prove the justness of his own opinion, although no declaration to that effect was made. The same evening, on his way home from the house of Mr. Wilkes, the outline of a nautical romance was vaguely sketched in his own mind."

(Susan's Introduction to *The Pilot*, Ch. IV)

Lest one wonder whether Susan's "reminiscences" might have clouded with the years, Cooper himself, in his revised 1849 Preface of *The Pilot* belatedly explains his motivations. It should be noted that in his 1823 Preface, Cooper discreetly avoids any mention of Sir Walter Scott's *The Pirate*. One wonders if Cooper's daughter Susan would have written her Introduction to the *Pilot* if her father had not, after 26 years and only two years before his death, finally broken his silence.

“The Pilot was published in 1823. This was not long after the appearance of “The Pirate,” a work which it is hardly necessary to remind the reader, has a direct connection with the sea. In a conversation with a friend, a man of polished taste and extensive reading, the authorship of the Scottish novels came under discussion. The claims of Sir Walter were a little distrusted, on account of the peculiar and minute information that the romances were then very generally thought to display. The Pirate was cited as a marked instance of this universal knowledge, and it was wondered where a man of Scott’s habits and associations could have become familiar with the sea. The writer had frequently observed that there was much looseness in this universal knowledge, and that the secret of its success was to be traced to the power of creating *vraisemblance* [=French, from *vrai* true + *semblance*), which is so remarkably exhibited in those world-renowned fictions, rather than to any very accurate information on the part of the author. It would have been hypercritical to object to the Pirate, that it was not strictly nautical, or true in its details; but, when the reverse was urged as a proof of what, considering the character of other portions of the work, would have been most extraordinary attainments, it was a sort of provocation to which the book has certainly very little pretension. The result of this conversation was a sudden determination to produce a work which, if it had no other merit, might present truer pictures of the ocean and ships than any that are to be found in the Pirate. To this unprecedented decision, purely an impulse, is not only the Pilot due, but a tolerably numerous school of nautical romances that have succeeded it.”

James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pilot; A Tale of the Sea*, Preface (1849), (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 5-6.

Cooper had not only read but also *studied The Pirate* and concluded that a nautical romance should provide a more accurate description of the sea and sailing, a fact which led him to become the most important nautical writer of his day and age and an inspiration to later nautical writers (Herman Melville, for instance). From the foregoing, it is clear that a “minor” figure in Scott’s novel would hardly have slipped his mind.

The character under consideration is Dick Fletcher, who in “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” (1845), is resurrected from the dead (poor Dick dies in *The Pirate*). Dick Fletcher receives orders from the unnamed captain of the *Jersey* to check out why smoke is issuing from the steamer’s hold, a command which Dick dutifully performs. Apart from the hero “John Maynard,” “Dick Fletcher,” the obedient sailor, is the only other character in “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” who is provided with a proper name. What could the telltale link between “Dick Fletcher” in “The Helmsman” and James Fenimore Cooper be? Was there anything about his character that might have made a lasting impression on Cooper? Before looking for a concrete answer, let us consider Fletcher’s role as a minor character.

The editions of *The Pirate* now available are reprints of earlier editions. My own edition (Henry Frowde, Oxford University Press) is dated 1912. The profusely illustrated little volume contains 517 pages of text. Dick Fletcher is first named on page 379 (chapter XXXI) and crops up again and again to page 511 (final chapter, XLII). A sailor and a member of a band of pirates, Dick nonetheless represents the “better sort.” He is a confederate with the young captain of the pirates, Clement Cleveland, whom circumstances forced into his ignominious position. Dick does the bidding of Jack Bunce, Cleveland’s friend, who assumes the role of captain while Cleveland, who, madly in love with Minna Troil, attempts to find some way so that the two lovers will one day be united (an enterprise sadly doomed to failure). In other words, Dick Fletcher, becomes synonymous with a dutiful sailor obeying the commands of his superior. Indeed, Fletcher is referred to as the one man “of whose support to second any motion whatever, he [Bunce] accounted himself perfectly sure” [Ch. XXXIX, p. 482]. This is the role, a “trustworthy satellite” [ibid.], which Dick Fletcher naturally assumes in “The Helmsman.” On the other hand, Fletcher was not a flat character in Scott’s novel and had his foibles.

Dick Fletcher’s own role stands out far above that of the other pirates, and even rivals Bunce and Cleveland, each of whom almost strike the reader as only “gentlemen rovers.”

Especially Jack Bunce, who prefers to go by his acting name of “Frederick Altamont,” is hard to place in a den of pirates. A man who loves poetry and acting hardly fits into the role of a rough-hewn sailor.

Clement Cleveland, the alleged leader of the pirates, is only interested in giving up his post (so as to be “worthy” of Minna Troil’s love). Cleveland is bent on leading a life which will expiate his past sins under the Jolly Roger. Perhaps the ultimate disappointment the reader encounters in Captain Cleveland is that he never really serves as captain of a pirates’ ship. This was no doubt what bothered Cooper most about Scott’s novel. The events in the novel unfold either on the Shetlands or on the Orkneys, with precious little occurring on the waves.

Cleveland, from the very beginning, is shipwrecked [1] and stranded on the Shetland Islands, where, somewhat akin to Homer’s *The Odyssey*, he is held captive by his own passions and the lovely Minna, whose Nordic influence on Cleveland might be likened to that of the nymph Calypso on Ulysses. Even after Cleveland finally leaves the Shetlands to reconnoiter with a possibly mutinous crew in Kirkwall, the reader never sees him leading the best of cut-throats into action on the open sea.

Of all the sailors (who are in fact pirates, a point sometimes difficult to remember) it is Dick Fletcher who, with the gritty vernacular and humor of an “old salt,” most clearly represents the common sailor in Scott’s *The Pirate*. In Cooper’s *The Pilot*, it is the “minor” figure Long Tom Coffin who stands out as the quintessence of the common sailor. If the *Pilot* was to demonstrate just how a novel of the sea should be written, then it seems obvious that Long Tom Coffin must owe at least part of his being to his progenitor, Dick Fletcher.

The emphasis placed upon Dick Fletcher becomes clear in the following passage in which Bunce addresses Cleveland and bemoans the fact that their vessel is still in the Bay of Kirkwall (Orkney):

“Yonder she lies,” said Bunce; “I wish to God she was in the bay of Honduras – you, captain, on the quarter-deck, I your lieutenant, and Fletcher quartermaster, and fifty stout fellows under us – I should not wish to see these blasted heaths and rocks for a while” (Ch. XXXI, p. 384)

The question of whether Dick Fletcher was indeed quartermaster becomes obscured when one later reads that a sailor named Derrick held that rank (Ch. XXXIX, p. 482).

That Dick Fletcher was no angel by nature can be seen in the following passage when the pirates capture Magnus Troil’s vessel with both daughters, Minna and Brenda, on board. When Magnus tells the pirates to be civil to the women, Fletcher responds:

“Civil to the women!” said Fletcher, who had also come on board with the gang— “when were we else than civil to them? Aye, and kind to boot? Look here, Jack Bunce! What a trim-going little thing here is! By G—, she shall make a cruise with us, come of old Squaretoes what will!”

He seized upon the terrified Brenda with one hand, and insolently pulled back with the other the hood of the mantle in which she had muffled herself.

“Help, father!—help, Minna!” exclaimed the affrighted girl;; unconscious, at the moment, that they were unable to render her assistance.

Magnus again uplifted the handspike, but Bunce stopped his hand. “Avast, father! He said, “or you will make a bad voyage of it presently—And you, Fletcher, let go the girl!”

“And d—n me! Why should I let her go?” said Fletcher.

“Because I command you, Dick,” said the other, “and because I’ll make a quarrel else.”
(Ch. XXXVI, pp. 440-441)

Whereupon, Dick Fletcher let go. Yet Dick was still a bit feisty when a punch-bowl was offered the pirates as an act of gratitude for Bunce graciously promising Magnus that his daughters would be allowed to go ashore “without either wrong or ransom.” The following passage provides a humorous example of how Dick Fletcher might garner kisses:

“The punch-bowl! said Fletcher;; “I say, the bucket, d—n me! Talk of bowls in the cabin of a paltry merchantman, but not to gentlemen-strollers—rovers, I would say,” correcting himself, as he observed that Bunce looked sour at the mistake.

“And I say these two pretty girls shall stay on deck, and fill my can,” said Bunce;; “I deserve some attendance, at least, for all my generosity.”

“And they shall fill mine, too,” said Fletcher—“they shall fill it to the brim!—and I will have a kiss for every drop they spill—broil me if I won’t!”

“Why, then, I tell you, you shan’t!” said Bunce;; “for I’ll be d—d if any one shall kiss Minna but one, and that’s neither you nor I; and her little bit of a consort shall ‘scape for company;; —there are plenty of willing wenches in Orkney.”

(Ch. XXXVI, p. 442)

Bunce then informs his good friend, the bard Claud Halcro, who is also on board Magnus Troil’s vessel, of the following:

“I have determined to put you and the two girls ashore, with Fletcher for your protection.”

(Ch. XXXVI, pp. 450)

It comes as no surprise that the girls were horrified to hear who was to protect them, yet—and this is the point—Fletcher did in fact do as he was told, despite his baser instincts.

The question of Dick Fletcher obeying (or not) is touched upon in the following passage in which Cleveland attempts to persuade his friend Bunce to take over command of the ship:

“...for I shall leave the command with you, and go ashore at Stromness,” said Cleveland. You shall do no such matter, by Heaven!” answered Bunce. “The command with me, truly! And how the devil am I to get the crew to obey me? Why, even Dick Fletcher rides rusty on me now and then. You know well enough that, without you, we shall be at each other’s throats in half an hour...” (Ch. XXXIX, pp. 479)

In other words, in spite of Jack Bunce’s reassurances of Dick being the ultimate “follower,” this can hardly be taken to mean that Dick had no mind of his own. That Fletcher did not always bend to Bunce’s wishes can be seen in the humorous “singing episode,” in which Dick’s musical talents were found wanting.

“I would sooner be keel-hauled than hear that song over again,” said Bunce;; “and confound your lantern jaws, you can squeeze nothing else out of them!”

“By ——,” said Fletcher, “I will sing my song, whether you like it or no;” and again he sang, with the doleful tone of a north-easter whistling through sheets and shrouds,—

“Captain Glen was our captain’s name;
A very gallant and brisk young man;
As bold a sailor as e’er went to sea,
And we were bound for High Barbary.”

“I tell you again,” said Bunce, “we will have none of your screech-owl music here; and I’ll be d—d if you shall sit here and make that infernal noise!”

“Why, then, I’ll tell you what,” said Fletcher, getting up, “I’ll sing when I walk about, and I hope there is no harm in that, Jack Bunce.” And so, getting up from his seat, he began to walk up and down the sloop, croaking out his long and disastrous ballad.

[Ch. XXXVI, p. 444]

Although Jack Bunce then brags, “You see how I manage them,” it goes without saying that Dick Fletcher hardly surrendered to Bunce’s will in this instance.

Perhaps the ultimate test of Dick Fletcher’s loyalty to Jack Bruce is when talk of mutiny arose in conjunction with Captain Cleveland’s love for Minna Troil. Although Dick’s better judgment counseled him to prevent Cleveland from going ashore, yet he acquiesces to Bunce’s wishes.

“Well, but,” continued Bunce, “Captain Cleveland is in love—Yes—Prince Volsciuss [2] is in love; and, though that’s the cue for laughing on the stage, it is no laughing matter here. He expects to meet the girl to-morrow, for the last time; and that, we all know, leads to another meeting, and another, and so on till the *Halcyon* [=the British warship] is down on us, and then we may look for more kicks than halfpence.”

“By—” said the boatswain, with a sounding oath, “we’ll have a mutiny, and not allow him to go ashore, —eh, Derrick?”

“And the best way, too,” said Derrick.

“What d’ye think of it, Jack Bunce?” said Fletcher, in whose ears this counsel sounded very sagely, but who still bent a wistful look upon his companion.

“Why, look ye, gentlemen, said Bunce, “I will mutiny none, and stap my vitals if any of you shall!”

“Why, then I won’t, for one,” said Fletcher; “but what are we to do, since howsomdever”——
(Ch. XXXIX, pp. 483-484)

A few lines further, Dick adds, “Jack Bunce is always right.” Dick Fletcher’s opinion is immediately exposed as premature for Bunce proposes to take Cleveland and Minna back to their ship by force, a rash plan which ends in a tragic fiasco. Cleveland is taken prisoner along with Bunce while Derrick and several other pirates are killed. Bunce then attempts to convince his fellow-prisoner Cleveland that his intentions were not an act of treachery.

[Cleveland:] “Is it not enough that you have undone me with your treachery, but you must stun me with your silly buffoonery?—I would not have believed *you* would have lifted a finger against me, Jack, of any man or devil in yonder unhappy ship.”

“Who, I?” exclaimed Bunce. “I lift a finger against you!”—and if I did it was in pure love, and to make you the happiest fellow that ever trod a deck, with your mistress beside you, and fifty fine fellows at your command. Here is Dick Fletcher, who can bear witness I did all for the best, if he would but speak, instead of lolloping there like a Dutch dogger laid up to be careened. Get up, Dick, and speak for me, won’t you?”

Dick Fletcher’s death was not forgotten by Cooper. The motif of how the good man should die, “without a groan,” is refined and interwoven into Cooper’s novels [3]. Certainly, the most outstanding example of this motif is to be found in Cooper’s *The Chainbearer*, published in 1845, the very same year as the anonymous “Helmsman of Lake Erie.” In Cooper’s works, the good man is a religious man who, when his earthly existence is waning, is able to accept the fact instead of clinging to this life. In other words, he is willing to *let go* and accept a better life beyond. In the *Chainbearer*, two men, Andries Coejeman, a land surveyor (the “Chainbearer”) and a Christian, on the one hand, and Aaron Thousandacres, a worldly man on the other, are mortally wounded and placed in the same room to die. When Chainbearer dies, “the rugged features [...] remained unaltered by the death-pang” [quoted from *The Pirate*] whereas the following description is presented of Thousandacres:

“His eyes were open; ghastly, wandering, hopeless. As the lips contracted with the convulsive twitchings of death, they gave to his grim visage a species of sardonic grin that rendered it doubly terrific. At this moment a sullen calm came over the countenance, and all was still. I knew that the last breath remained to be drawn, and I waited for it as a charmed bird gazes at the basilisk-eye of the snake. It came, drawing aside the lips so as to show every tooth, and not one was missing from that iron frame; when, finding the sight too frightful for even my nerves, I veiled my eyes. When my hand was removed, I caught one glimpse of that dark

tenement in which the spirit of the murderer and squatter had so long dwelt, Prudence [Thousandacres' wife] being in the act of closing the glary, but still fiery eyes. I never before had looked upon so revolting a corpse; and never wish to see its equal again."

(*The Chainbearer*, Ch. XXVIII, final paragraph)

Cooper was in many ways the most religious American writer of the 19th century. Although Dick Fletcher might well have groaned in a Cooper novel [4], given his lack of religious sentiment, he was, when viewed from a more charitable perspective, a diamond in the rough, a decidedly human and trusting man, who perhaps relied too much on the supposed wisdom of Jack Bunce. Yet Bunce, despite the superficiality of his stage veneer, could actually weep for his friend Fletcher when he died. As an impartial Cleveland rightly pointed out, "...with a better counselor ...[Dick Fletcher] would have been a better man," an observation which Cooper took to heart in his moving portrayals of the mind-set of the dying hero.

The question of what constitutes heroic action is also touched upon in *The Pirate*. Cleveland's love, Minna Troil, tells him on parting:

"Go, Cleveland, detach yourself from those miserable wretches with whom you are associated, and believe me, that if Heaven yet grants you the means of distinguishing your name by one good or glorious action, there are eyes left in these lonely islands that will weep as much for joy, as—as—they may now do for sorrow."

(Ch. XL, pp. 494)

Sir Walter Scott pulls a *deus ex machina* out of the bag in the final pages. Thus, Bunce and Cleveland are not hanged as pirates but pardoned, due to their earlier chivalrous conduct in sparing several prominent Spanish ladies from the hands of marauding pirates. Minna never sees her lover after their final farewell. She spends the rest of her life engaged in helping the needy and doing good works. She is able to take consolation from the following account: Cleveland "had at length fallen, leading the way in a gallant and honorable enterprise, which was successfully accomplished by those companions to whom his determined bravery had opened the road." [Ch. XLII, p.516] [5]. The concept of self-sacrifice for the sake of others (Cooper uses the term "self-devotion") receives ultimate expression in "The Helmsman of Lake Erie."

In conclusion, is Dick Fletcher of Sir Walter Scott's *The Pirate* a minor or secondary figure? The proper answer turns less on the number of pages allotted to the character than on the character himself and, most importantly, what the character can give the reader. For a writer of Cooper's stature and predisposition, there was a lot packed into the character of Dick Fletcher to chew on. This means that Dick Fletcher, his obedience (or should we say the sometimes unwarranted trust he placed in a good friend?), his foibles and rough ways, his life and particularly his death, were not quickly forgotten. Instead, the lessons of *The Pirate* and of Dick Fletcher continued to guide Cooper's pen throughout later literary endeavors.

Notes:

[1] The young man who rescues Cleveland when he is washed up close to the Shetland shore bears the unusual Christian name of Mordaunt. Mordaunt and Minna's lovely sister Brenda marry and "were as happy as our mortal condition permits us to be" [Ch. XLII, p.515]. The first-person narrator of Cooper's *The Chainbearer* (1845) is also named Mordaunt:

"My father was Corny; my mother, Anneke; Katrinke, Kate; and I was Mordy, or Mord; or, when there was no hurry, Mordaunt."

[2] Prince Volscius, is a love-sick character in *The Rehearsal*, a play by George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, staged in 1671. Volscius' amorous attentions are directed towards a barmaid's daughter, who stubbornly refuses to reciprocate his feelings. One cannot help wondering how many learned pirates actually caught Bunce's reference.

"Why, yes, Jack Bunce," answered Fletcher, raising himself with difficulty and speaking feebly, "I will if I can—and I always knew you spoke and did for the best—but howsomdever, d'ye see, it has turned out for the worst for me this time, for I am bleeding to death, I think."

"You cannot be such an ass?" said Jack Bunce, springing to his assistance, as did Cleveland. But human aid came too late—he sank back on his bed, and, turning on his face, expired without a groan.

"I always thought him a d—d fool," said Bunce, as he wiped a tear from his eye, "but never such a consummate idiot as to hop the perch so sillily. I have lost the best follower"—and he again wiped his eye.

Cleveland looked on the dead body, the rugged features of which had remained unaltered by the death-pang. "A bull-dog," he said, "of the true British breed, and, with a better counselor, would have been a better man." (Ch. XL, pp. 498-499)

[3] 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>

[4] In Cooper's two-part novel of 1844, *Afloat and Ashore or, The Adventures of Miles Wallingford*, Pt. 2, (AMS PRESS., New York, 2004), p. 422, the death of the good-natured sailor, old Marble, is described. Marble, "this rude but honest creature," was not decidedly religious, but like Dick Fletcher, did not groan:

"Marble lived until we had passed within the Gulf-Stream, dying easily and *without groan* [my emphasis], with all my family, Neb and the first mate, assembled near his cot. The only thing that marked his end, was a look of singular significance that he cast on my wife, not a minute before he breathed his last. There he lay, the mere vestige of the robust hardy seaman I had once known, a child in physical powers, and about to make the last great change. Material as were the alterations in the man, from what he had known when in his pride, I thought the spiritual, or intellectual part of his being, was less to be recognized than the bodily. Certainly that look was full of resignation and hope, and we had reason to believe that this rude but honest creature was spared long enough to complete the primary object of his existence."

[5] Cleveland's act of heroism and "opening the road" is reminiscent of Arnold von Winkelried, the national hero of Switzerland. 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," <https://johnmaynard.net/Headsman2.pdf>

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