

# James Fenimore Cooper

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**James Fenimore Cooper**



Portrait by John Wesley Jarvis

**Born:** September 15, 1789  
Burlington, New Jersey

**Died:** September 14, 1851  
Cooperstown, New York

**Occupation:** Novelist

**James Fenimore Cooper** (September 15, 1789 – September 14, 1851) was a prolific and popular American writer of the early 19th century. He is particularly remembered as a novelist, who wrote numerous sea-stories as well as the historical romances known as the *Leatherstocking Tales*, featuring frontiersman Natty Bumppo. Among his most famous works is the Romantic novel *The Last of the Mohicans*, which many people consider his masterpiece.

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## Early life

Cooper was born in Burlington, New Jersey, on the 15th of September 1789, the twelfth of William and Elizabeth Cooper's thirteen children (most of

whom died in childhood). When James was one year old, his family moved to the frontier of Otsego Lake, New York, where his father established a settlement on his yet unsettled estates which became modern-day Cooperstown, New York. His father was a judge and member of Congress. James was sent to school at Albany and at New Haven, and attended Yale College 1803-1805 as its youngest student, but was expelled, apparently for a dangerous prank involving blowing up another student's door as well as stealing food.[1]

Three years afterward he joined the United States Navy; but after making a voyage or two in a merchant vessel to perfect himself in seamanship, and obtaining his lieutenancy, he married Susan Augusta de Lancey (the wedding took place in Mamaroneck, New York, on New Years Day, 1811) and resigned his commission (1811). He had married into one of the best families in the state.

His father William died in 1809, when James was twenty years old, but the legacy he left his son influenced his entire career. Almost one half of Cooper's novels are about populating the wilderness, in *The Pioneers* his father appears directly, as Judge Marmaduke Temple of

Templeton.

## Literary career



**The neutrality of this section is disputed.**

Please see the discussion on the talk page.



Photograph by Mathew  
Brady c.1850

Cooper settled in Scarsdale, Westchester County, New York, the “Neutral Ground” of his earliest American romance, and produced anonymously his first book, *Precaution*(1820), a novel of the fashionable school. This was followed by *The*

*Spy* (1821), which was very successful at the date of issue; *The Pioneers* (1823), the first of the *Leatherstocking* series; and *The Pilot* (1824), a bold and dashing sea-story. The next was *Lionel*

*Lincoln* (1825), succeeded in 1826 by the famous *Last of the Mohicans*, a book that is considered by many to be Cooper's masterpiece. The book was written in a second-story storefront-apartment in Warrensburg, New York, just north of where most of the book's plot takes place. Quitting America for Europe he published in Paris *The Prairie* (1826), the best of his books in nearly all respects, and *The Red Rover*, (1828), by no means his worst.

At this period Cooper's unequal and uncertain talent would seem to have been at its best. These novels were, however, succeeded by one very inferior, *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* (1829); by *The Notions of a Traveling Bachelor* (1828); and by *The Waterwitch* (1830), one of his many sea-stories. In 1830 he entered the lists as a party writer, defending in a series of letters to the *National*, a Parisian journal, the United States against a string of charges brought against them by the *Revue Britannique*; and for the rest of his life he continued skirmishing in print, sometimes for the national interest, sometimes for that of the individual, and not infrequently for both at once.

This opportunity of making a political confession of faith appears not only to have fortified him in his own convictions, but to have inspired him with

the idea of elucidating them for the public through the medium of his art. His next three novels, *The Bravo* (1831), *The Heidenmauer* (1832) and *The Headsman: or the Abbaye of Vigneron* (1833), were expressions of Cooper's republican convictions. *The Bravo* depicted Venice as a place where a ruthless oligarchy lurks behind the mask of the "serene republic." All were widely read on both sides of the Atlantic, though *The Bravo* was a critical failure in the United States.[2]

In 1833 Cooper returned to America and immediately published *A Letter to My Countrymen*, in which he gave his own version of the controversy in which he had been engaged and sharply censured his compatriots for their share in it. This attack he followed up with *The Monikins* (1835) and *The American Democrat* (1835); with several sets of notes on his travels and



James Fenimore Cooper  
statue

experiences in Europe, among which may be remarked his *England* (1837), in three volumes, a burst of vanity and ill temper; and with *Homeward Bound* and *Home as Found* (1838), notable as containing a highly idealized portrait of himself.

All these books tended to increase the ill feeling between author and public; the Whig press was virulent and scandalous in its comments, and Cooper plunged into a series of actions for libel. Victorious in all of them, he returned to his old occupation with something of his original vigor and success. *A History of the Navy of the United States* (1839), supplemented (1846) by a set of *Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers*, was succeeded by *The Pathfinder* (1840), a good “Leatherstocking” novel; by *Mercedes of Castile* (1840); *The Deerslayer* (1841); by *The Two Admirals* and by *Wing and Wing* (1842); by *Wyandotte*, *The History of a Pocket Handkerchief*, and *Ned Myers* (1843); and by *Afloat and Ashore, or the Adventures of Miles Wallingford* (1844).

From pure fiction, however, he turned again to the combination of art and controversy in which he had achieved distinction, and in the two *Littlepage Manuscripts* (1845—1846) he wrote with a great deal of vigour. His next novel was *The Crater, or*

*Vulcan's Peak* (1847), in which he attempted to introduce supernatural machinery; and this was succeeded by *Oak Openings*, *The Two Admirals* and *Jack Tier* (1848), the latter a curious rifacimento of *The Red Rover*; by *The Sea Lions* (1849); and finally by *The Ways of the Hour* (1850), another novel with a purpose, and his last book.

Cooper's work was admired greatly throughout the rest of the world. While on his death bed, the Austrian composer Franz Schubert became an avid reader of Cooper's novels.

### **The Leatherstocking tales**

The five Leatherstocking novels chronicle the life of Nathaniel "Natty" Bumppo, who lives in the frontier (which moves steadily westward with each successive novel) at the intersection of European and Native American culture. Bumppo is a hybrid of these cultures; in each book, he has a different Native American name, and it is by these names that he is known. These books are a lucid and insightful study of the encounter between the two cultures, from the point of view of a man who manages to straddle the divide between them.



## **Last years and legacy**

Cooper spent the last years of his life in Cooperstown, New York (named for his father). He died of dropsy on September 14, 1851 and a statue was later erected in his honor.

Cooper was certainly one of the most popular 19th century American authors. His stories have been translated into nearly all the languages of Europe and into some of those of Asia. Balzac admired him greatly, but with discrimination; Victor Hugo pronounced him greater than the great master of modern romance, and this verdict was echoed by a multitude of inferior readers, who were satisfied with no title for their favourite less than that of "the American Scott." As a satirist and observer he is simply the "Cooper who's written six volumes to prove he's as good as a Lord" of Lowell's clever portrait; his enormous vanity and his irritability find vent in a sort of dull violence, which is exceedingly tiresome. He was most memorably criticised by Mark Twain whose vicious and amusing "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences" is still read widely in academic circles.

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## Cooper's writings

Date	Title: Subtitle	Genre	Topic, Location, Period
1820	<i>Precaution</i> [3]	novel	England, 1814
1821	<i>The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground</i> [4]	novel	Westchester County, New York, 1778
1823	<i>The Pioneers: or The Sources of the Susquehanna</i>	novel	<i>Leatherstocking</i> , Otsego County, New York, 1794,
1823	<i>Tales for Fifteen: or Imagination and Heart</i> [5]	2 short stories	written under pseudonym: "Morgan"
1823	<i>The Pilot: A Tale of the Sea</i> [6]	novel	John Paul Jones, England, 17
1825	<i>Lionel Lincoln: or The Leaguer of Boston</i>	novel	Battle of Bu Hill, Boston 1775-1781
			<i>Leatherstocking</i>

1826	<i>The Last of the Mohicans: A narrative of 1757</i> [7]	novel	French and Indian War, Lake George & Adirondack; 1757
1827	<i>The Prairie</i> [8]	novel	<i>Leatherstocking</i> ; American Midwest, 18
1828	<i>The Red Rover: A Tale</i> [9]	novel	Newport, RI; Island & Atlantic Ocean, pirate; 1759
1828	<i>Notions of the Americans: Picked up by a Travelling Bachelor</i>	non-fiction	America for European re
1829	<i>The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish: A Tale</i> [10]	novel	Western Connecticut Puritans and Indians, 166 1676
1830	<i>The Water-Witch: or the Skimmer of the Seas</i> [11]	novel	New York, smugglers, 1
1830	<i>Letter to General Lafayette</i>	politics	France vs. U cost of government
			Venice, 18th

1831	<i>The Bravo: A Tale</i> [12]	novel	century
1832	<i>The Heidenmauer: or, The Benedictines, A Legend of the Rhine</i>	novel	German Rhineland, 19th century
1832	<i>No Steamboats</i>	short story	
1833	<i>The Headsman: The Abbaye des Vignerons</i> [13]	novel	Geneva, Switzerland Alps, 18th century
1834	<i>A Letter to His Countrymen</i>	politics	Why Coope temporarily stopped writ
1835	<i>The Monikins</i> [14]	novel	Antarctica, aristocratic monkeys. 18th century
1836	<i>The Eclipse</i> [15]	memoir	Solar eclipses Cooperstown New York 1836
1836	<i>Gleanings in Europe: Switzerland (Sketches of Switzerland)</i>	travel	Hiking in Switzerland
1836	<i>Gleanings in Europe: The Rhine (Sketches of Switzerland, Part Second)</i>	travel	Travels From Rhineland & Switzerland
	<i>A Residence in France:</i>		

1836	<i>With an Excursion Up the Rhine, and a Second Visit to Switzerland</i> [16]	travel	
1837	<i>Gleanings in Europe: France</i>	travel	Living, travel in France, 1828
1837	<i>Gleanings in Europe: England</i>	travel	Travels in England, 1828, 1833
1838	<i>Gleanings in Europe: Italy</i>	travel	Living, travel in Italy, 1828, 1830
1838	<i>The American Democrat : or Hints on the Social and Civic Relations of the United States of America</i>	non-fiction	US society & government
1838	<i>The Chronicles of Cooperstown The Chronicles of Cooperstown</i>	history	Local history Cooperstown New York
1838	<i>Homeward Bound: or The Chase: A Tale of the Sea</i> [17]	novel	Atlantic Ocean North Africa coast, 1835
1838	<i>Home as Found: Sequel to Homeward Bound</i>	novel	Eve Effingham New York Otsego County

	[18]		New York,
1839	<i>The History of the Navy of the United States of America</i>	history	US Naval hi to date
1839	<i>Old Ironsides</i> [19]	history	History of th Frigate USS Constitution pub. 1853
1840	<i>The Pathfinder, or the Inland Sea</i> [20]	novel	<i>Leatherstocking</i> Western Ne York, 1759
1840	<i>Mercedes of Castile: or, The Voyage to Cathay</i>	novel	Christopher Columbus in West Indies 1490s
1841	<i>The Deerslayer: or The First Warpath</i>	novel	<i>Leatherstocking</i> Otsego Lake 1740-1745
1842	<i>The Two Admirals</i>	novel	England & English Cha Scottish upr 1745
1842	<i>The Wing-and-Wing: le Le Feu-Follet</i> [21] (Jack o Lantern)	novel	Italian coast Napoleonic 1745
	<i>Autobiography of a Pocket-Handkerchief</i>		

1843	<p>[22], also published as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>Le Mouchoir: An Autobiographical Romance</i></li> <li>■ <i>The French Governess: or The Embroidered Handkerchief</i></li> <li>■ <i>Die französischer Erzieheren: oder das gestickte Taschentuch</i></li> </ul>	novelette	Social satire France & New York, 1830s
1843	<i>Richard Dale</i>		
1843	<i>Wyandotté: or The Huttred Knoll. A Tale</i> [23] [24]	novel	Butternut Valley of Otsego County, New York, 1763-
1843	<i>Ned Myers: or Life before the Mast</i> [25]	biography	of Cooper's shipmate
1844	<i>Afloat and Ashore: or The Adventures of Miles Wallingford. A Sea Tale</i> [26]	novel	Ulster County worldwide, 1805
1844	<i>Miles Wallingford: Sequel to Afloat and Ashore</i> [27]	novel	Ulster County worldwide, 1805

1844	<i>Proceedings of the Naval Court-Martial in the Case of Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, &amp;c.</i>		
1845	<i>Satanstoe; or The Littlepage Manuscripts, a Tale of the Colony</i> [28]	novel	New York C Westchester County, Alb Adirondack: 1758
1845	<i>The Chainbearer; or, The Littlepage Manuscripts</i>	novel	Westchester County, Adirondack: 1780s (next generation)
1846	<i>The Redskins; or, Indian and Injin: Being the Conclusion of the Littlepage Manuscripts</i>	novel	Anti-rent wa Adirondack: 1845
1846	<i>Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers</i>	biography	
1847	<i>The Crater; or, Vulcan's Peak: A Tale of the Pacific</i> [29] ( <i>Mark's Reef</i> )	novel	New Jersey Pacific dese island, early 1800s
1848	<i>Jack Tier: or the Florida Reefs</i> [30] a.k.a. <i>Captain Spike: or</i>	novel	Florida Key Mexican W;



	<i>The Islets of the Gulf</i>		1846
1848	<i>The Oak Openings: or the Bee-Hunter</i> [31]	novel	Kalamazoo Michigan, V 1812
1849	<i>The Sea Lions: The Lost Sealers</i> [32]	novel	Long Island Antarctica, 1820
1850	<i>The Ways of the Hour</i>	novel	"Dukes Cou New York," murder/cour mystery nov legal corrup women's rig 1846
1850	<i>Upside Down: or Philosophy in Petticoats</i>	play	satirization o socialism
1851	<i>The Lake Gun</i> [33]	short story	Seneca Lake New York, political sati based on fol
1851	<i>New York: or The Towns of Manhattan</i> [34]	history	Unfinished, history of N York City, 1 pub. 1864

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- <http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/c>

## Modern editions of Cooper

- The Leatherstocking Tales, vol. 1, Blake Nevius, ed. (New York: The Library of America, 1985) ISBN 978-0-94045020-2. Includes *The Pioneers*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Prairie*.
- The Leatherstocking Tales, vol. 2, Blake Nevius, ed. (New York: The Library of America, 1985) ISBN 978-0-94045021-9. Includes *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer*.
- Sea Tales: The Pilot, The Red Rover, Kay Seymour House & Thomas Philbrick, eds. (New York: The Library of America, 1991) ISBN 0-940450-70-4

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- Find-A-Grave profile for James Fenimore Cooper
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- James Fenimore Cooper Society Website
- Essay on Fenimore Cooper: Works in biographical/historical context
- Thomas R. Lounsbury: *James Fenimore Cooper*. 6th Edition. Boston, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1886 (American Men of Letters). PDF from the Arno Schmidt Reference Library

## External links

- Works by James Fenimore Cooper at Project Gutenberg
- James Fenimore Cooper at the Internet Movie Database

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