

# The Lake George Examiner



## “The Last of the Mohicans” program examines the convergence of history and literature

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“The Last of the Mohicans” is James Fenimore Cooper’s best-known work and the total of what many people know about the French and Indian War. The book is often required reading in schools and several movies have been based on the novel. But, how much of the American classic is history and how much is fiction?

Dr. Nick Junkerman, Associate Professor of English Literature at Skidmore College, addressed this question in a program titled, “James Fenimore Cooper: History & Fiction in ‘The Last of the Mohicans.’” The presentation was held at the Fort William Henry Conference Center in Lake George Thursday evening, August 3.

The event, which was attended by more than 150 people, was presented by the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance and the French and Indian War Society at Lake George as part of a series of programs focused on the Lake George region's early history.

President of the Alliance John DiNuzzo introduced the program saying, "It was precisely 266 years ago today that the siege of Fort William Henry began ... If we were here 266 years ago, we would be hearing gunfire, cannons, all sorts of horror..." DiNuzzo continues, "It's significant to America when we talk about that anniversary, certainly significant, as Nick [Junkerman] will be telling us, to the literary history of the world and of our country."

The bloodshed at Fort William Henry that followed the 1757 siege and surrender gripped the collective psyche of the colonists and clung there as contemporary news reports and, nearly 70 years later, Cooper's novel, set down in ink the gruesome details. DiNuzzo, in his introduction, said he believes it "...motivated the British, the provincials who fought for the British, i.e., the Americans, and even 20 years later when the revolution began, that was still an important part, I think, of the makeup of the Patriot soldiers."

How much of "The Last of the Mohicans" can we take as fact? The title itself is suspect as the Mohicans still exist. In Cooper's preface to the novel, Junkerman explains, Cooper gives insight into the title by writing, "The Mohicans were the possessors of the country first occupied by the Europeans in this portion of the continent. They were, consequently, the first dispossessed." The novel's title certainly suggests an extinction of the Mohicans. "Cooper himself acknowledges at the end here the slightly inconvenient fact that this isn't true, that Uncas, who we meet in this book, was not the last of the Mohicans, in fact, the Mohicans are not gone when he's publishing and are not gone today, but he says there is sufficient truth close enough in the terms of historical fiction."

Junkerman places Cooper's work in context. "This is the moment when the Indian Removal Act and the idea of Indian Removal is being hotly debated and then, by the 1830s, the Act is passed." Cooper compares the removal of Native Americans from the land to a natural process akin to leaves falling in autumn. The Natives disappear "[a]s the verdure of their native forests falls before the nipping frost."

Following the passage of the Indian Removal Act, Andrew Jackson also portrays the removal of Native Americans as a natural and necessary act, the “extinction of one generation to make room for another.”

“You see what he does there,” says Junkerman. “It’s the same thing that Cooper does, a natural process, and it’s not humans doing things to other humans anymore. It’s nature taking its course.” Junkerman adds, “You should hardly need mentioning that you don’t have to pass acts of Congress to make the seasons change.”

### **Cooper’s biography**

Junkerman touches on Cooper’s biography and how it possibly informs the nature of his fictional characters. Cooper’s father, William Cooper, founded Cooperstown, which was, at the time, the frontier. He made a fortune in land development, which James inherited, but it came with debt, and within 10 years, the fortune was gone.

“He is in need of money, so part of the turn to authorship is about trying to make a living, but it’s also colored by this sense of loss, this sense that he has lost the genteel birthright of a frontier aristocrat. We can imagine in this way that both Uncas, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and Natty Bumppo could be fantasy projections of a version of Cooper himself, ways that he might imagine himself.”

### **The Setting**

Cooper first visits the Glens Falls/Lake George region in 1824 when he served as a tour guide for a group of Englishmen, a group that includes Edward Smith-Stanley, the future Prime Minister of England. He met the English gentlemen at Saratoga, and they traveled to Glens Falls and Lake George, where they would have seen the ruins of Fort William Henry.

Edward Smith-Stanley recalls Cooper saying when they are at Glens Falls, “Ah, I must place one of my old Indians here.” Junkerman says this anecdote is “the light bulb moment — ‘ah, I’ll write this book.’ This idea that place inspires this story is important because this book is so in love with its place. It’s so much about this region and, in some ways, so careful about its elaboration of the different places that they go, the descriptions of places like Lake George and what we would call Ballston Spa.”

The hero, Natty Bumppo, and his Mohican allies, as they travel to Fort William Henry, pass Bloody Pond and view the siege of Fort William Henry from a mountaintop that could very well be Prospect Mountain. Cooper gives detailed descriptions of these places that are familiar to those in Lake George today.

### **The Characters**

Comparing the novel to the history, only two characters, Junkerman says, are verifiable historical figures, Colonel Monroe, leader of the British at Fort William Henry, and the Marquis De Montcalm, who led the French. The novel creates two Monroe daughters, Cora and Alice; however, the actual Colonel Monroe did not have any children.

As for the hero of the novel, "I think it's most helpful to think of Natty Bumppo as being someone that Cooper put together out of the materials of his life and his experience but mostly out of his imagination. And I'm reminding you again that the Natty Bumppo that we meet here is not the romantic hero, not the love interest, that we meet in Daniel Lee Lewis in the [1992] film."

Cooper divides his Native American characters into two groups, the Mohicans, part of the larger Lenni Lenape who are represented in the novel by Chingachgook and his son Uncas, the last of the Mohicans. They are brave and noble and friendly to the protagonists. The other group, the novel's antagonists, are treacherous, "dusky" savages. These are the Iroquois. "These antagonists," says Junkerman, "are represented, or sort of crystallized, in the figure of Magua, a Huron adopted by the Mohawks...and by the end of the book, Cooper is comparing him to Satan himself."

This opposition, Junkerman explains, comes from a missionary, Johannes Heckewelder, who worked among the Mohicans and in 1919 published a popular book that cast the Mohicans in this favorable light. "Cooper himself admits that there's some simplification of a complex ethnic and political landscape here."

### **The Siege of Fort William Henry in "The Last of the Mohicans"**

Junkerman gives a brief plot summary that leads up to the characters' arrival in Lake George and a fort under siege, with "Cooper mostly adjusting historical events to allow the central figures of the battle and its own fictional characters to play important roles, to be sort of in the middle of the action, but much of the

general tone of these chapters follows the outlines of the history and especially Monroe's increasingly desperate and fruitless pleas for assistance from Fort Edward and then the delicate negotiations with the besieging French Army."

Junkerman gave an example of how Cooper inserted his characters into historical events:

"There's a famous letter that's sent from Webb at Fort Edward to Monroe at Fort William Henry on August 4<sup>th</sup>. The actual messengers from Edward to Fort William Henry were captured, and the letter carrier was killed, the letters discovered and kept for later use by Montcalm. Cooper keeps some of this idea, but he has Hawkeye [Natty Bumppo], of course, carry the message. Hawkeye comes back, is captured, he's returned, the letter is kept, again, for later use."

### **The Massacre**

Cooper does not spare his readers the gory details of the infamous massacre that followed the surrender of Fort William Henry. Junkerman read a graphic passage from the novel:

*Death was everywhere and in his most terrific and disgusting aspects. Resistance only served to inflame the murderers, who inflicted their furious blows long after their victims were beyond the power of their resentment. The flow of blood might be likened to the outbreaking of a torrent; and as the natives became heated and maddened by the sight, many among them even kneeled to the earth, and drank freely, exaltingly, hellishly, of the Crimson Tide.*

Cooper emphasizes the bloody imagery, says Junkerman, but he doesn't invent the way he describes the massacre. Certainly, the novelist is seeking to entertain, and this imagery does grip the reader, but Cooper "borrows much of it, in fact, from what's perhaps his most important source on Fort William Henry, which is Jonathan Carver's 'Travels through America in the Years 1766, 67, and 68.' Carver was a member of the Massachusetts Colonial forces at the time of The Siege, and he includes an eyewitness account of the aftermath in his book which was published in 1770."

How accurate is Cooper's account of the massacre? The outline of the siege, surrender and its aftermath are accurate, says Junkerman, but Cooper's research

would not meet our standards of historical research, for example, he did not consult French sources, which would have offered a more balanced view. He also fails to mention the killing of the sick and injured at the fort on August 9, making for an incomplete history.

Contemporary accounts of the massacre sensationalize the violence, serving a political purpose, says Junkerman, placing the blame squarely on the French. "We see here that these terrible events, this effort to make them wake strong feelings in the reader and to advance a certain version of history is an immediate feature of this story of the massacre." The repeated use of the word "massacre", says Junkerman, is purposeful. The word is politically and emotionally charged.

"So, this story is sensationalized from the outset, and Cooper follows in that tradition. That's why I think it's hard finally for me to conclusively separate history and fiction, which is the kind of thing that an English Professor would say, but I just don't think it's accurate to think of Cooper as possessing a set of incontrovertible facts that he reaches into and twists around to fit his romantic story if that makes sense."

Junkerman explains that the recorded history available to Cooper couldn't be separated from people's traumas and motivations. Although Cooper wrote about events 70 years after they happened, the memory was still strong. "He was working here not just with a limited set of sources that had their own biases but with a complicated and emotionally charged set of events." He compares the massacre at Fort William Henry to other national traumas such as The Alamo, Pearl Harbor, and, to some extent, 9/11.

"I'm not saying that history and fiction are the same here... I'm just suggesting that some of the ways that Cooper, even though he's writing fiction, maybe he's not so different from some of the other people who have claimed to tell more purely factual versions of this story in the ensuing years," he says.

Summing up the historical fact versus fiction question, Junkerman believes that the novel is "about the complexities that I talked about before but it's also about it drawing its lasting power from this sort of cementing of a national historical imagination."

Junkerman concludes the program by saying Copper is "memorializing and extending a traumatic American memory, and he's also creating this national past, a heroic and natural age to be contrasted with the progressing modernizing but also perhaps more artificial and less noble world of the present day." Cooper is also "consigning the native peoples of America to the Past, freezing them in this kind of farewell, this last of the Mohicans idea...It memorializes our history, but it also decides whose history it is."

The entire presentation may be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qmrbr7go1zM&t=501s>

***Featured image: Dr. Nick Junkerman discusses history and fiction at a presentation held at the Fort William Henry Conference Center in Lake George/Courtesy of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance.***