CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

From this survey, the conclusion is that although the *Leatherstocking Tales* acknowledge injustice toward the Indians in the past, especially with regard to their land rights. This acknowledgement is peripheral to the novels' dominant perception of Indian-white relations and would not, therefore, lead to active political concern for the problems of Indians in Cooper's own time. None of the discussion about Indian rights to the land is however completely serious. In *The Pioneers* Indian right to the land is a pseudo-issue which obscures the real issue of Oliver Edwards' claim to the land. The Last of the Mohicans presents Indian land rights in three contexts: a drowsy afternoon dialogue, a rabble-rousing speech by Magua, and a nostalgic speech by Tamenund which sees the entire question as being predestined. In *The Prairie* the incursion of the Sioux into Pawnee territory not only destroys Sioux arguments against white interlopers, it also suggests that the Pawnees did not have effective sovereignty, or even possession, of their lands. Thus the Sioux presence raises questions about the Trapper's defense of Indian land rights. Neither *The Pathfinder* nor *The Deerslayer* give more than cursory attention to Indian ownership of the land.

All five novels of James Fenimore Cooper present other aspects of Indian life and of Indian-white relations which tend to dominate the reader's understanding and also to neutralize any suggestion of white injustice. Thus, *The Pioneers* emphasizes Mohegan's drunkenness and degradation and his very imperfect assimilation into white culture. The novel *The Last of the Mohicans* highlights women and children as
victims of the abuses of civilisation at Fort William Henry, Magua's treacherous and vengeful character, the fear and possibility of miscegenation, the fore-ordained death of the last of the Mohicans by the hand of another Indian, and the pathos of Tamenund. *The Prairie* presents Indian life in terms of inter-tribal warfare, Sioux cupidity, thievery, and treachery, cruel preparations for torture, and Pawnee’s accommodation to the interests of the United States. *The Pathfinder* stresses Indian treachery, blood-lust, and drunkenness, while *The Deerslayer* also presents pictures of Indians torture. The last four of the Leatherstocking novels, of course, also show the good and noble Indian, Chingachgook, Uncas, or Hard-Heart. In no way do they indicate that even these good Indians could find a useful or happy place in white society.

In all of the *Leatherstocking Tales*, Natty Bumppo is presented as a mediator between the two races. George Dekker claims that Natty is "uniquely equipped to bridge" the gap between Indian and white. "He can act as interpreter, he can serve as an example to both races of the good qualities of both. Indeed, he is living proof that the Indians and the white Christians are fundamentally more like than unlike." (LJ, 25) In actuality, Bumppo is a very imperfect bridge which can handle only one-way traffic. He is able to help the white meet the Indians but does not and cannot help the Indians to meet the whites. In addition, the understanding of the Indians which he gives his fellow whites is distorted. He presents a surface account of their actions and words but does not communicate the underlying meaning.

A symbol of Natty's total function in the novel is found in *The Last of the Mohicans* when he escorts his white friends to a hidden cave behind the waterfall at Glenns. Natty has learned of the cave from the Delawares by sharing it with the other whites he opens it to discovery by hostile Indians. Similarly in *The Prairie* he leads Ishmael Bush and his family to an idyllic campin spot—a spot which the Bush family proceeded to violate. Later he reluctantly directs them to the rock formation which
they turn into a fortress. By sharing Indian life, Natty Bumppo is able to discover their secrets, which he later reveals to the whites. In the truest sense of the word he is a pathfinder. He reveals the secrets of the Indians and their land, but he does not help whites to understand the meaning of these secrets.

If Natty helps whites in their encounter with Indians, he cannot help Indians in their encounter with whites. Even where Natty Bumppo accepts white ways, burial customs for example, he does not appear to understand the inner meaning of these. As *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer* show, Natty is unable to relate to white women in any manner except that of knight defender. This failure is both cause and result of his lack of deep relations with white society in general. In *The Deerslayer*, Natty, in his late teens or early twenties, points out that he has been with Chingachgook and the Delawares for some ten years. Why providence places Natty among the Delawares at such an early age is not known. Probably he is either left as an orphan and adopted, or captured in a raid. In either case he is separated from the white society. When he is at a very impressionable age, and, as a result, his relations to other whites, to Indians, to women, and to Christianity have been fixated at a juvenile level. In spite of his good intentions therefore, Natty is unable to provide a bridge between Indian and white people. This means that in the *Leatherstocking Tales* there can be no effective communication between the two races, no possibility of dialogue. Natty, far from being an effective bridge between the two races, belongs to neither and illustrates in his own person, the belief of many people that the two races are incompatible.

The Indians are more alien to white civilization than Heckewelder, one of his major sources, had indicated. He portrays them as more alien to white civilization than they are in actuality. Ignoring any Indian developments in agriculture, they are portrayed as almost entirely dependent upon hunting, a state which one of his
contemporaries described as "the zero of society." Natty Bumppo's understanding of
gifts implies a cultural chasm between the two races which cannot be bridged. Charles
Boewe points out that in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie* gifts are hereditary
in nature. In *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer*, the emphasis shifts to environmental
and cultural factors. Natty's doctrine of gifts presents uncivilized and even inhumane
Indian behaviour as a function of either race or culture. Because "the gifts of the
whites are mostly virtues, those of the Indians mostly vices" (Boewe, p. 29), the
burden of accommodation between the two races is placed entirely on the Indians.
When Hutter and Hurry Harry plan a scalping raid, Natty condemns this in terms of
whites misappropriating Indian gifts, rather than as a function of their own greed.

It is important to note that a great many Indians in the novels are isolated
individuals rather than persons firmly rooted in their tribal traditions. Chingachgook,
Uncas, Magua, Arrowhead, Dew of June, and Hist are all separated from their own
people. Even Hard-Heart is apart from his fellow tribesmen for most of the action in
*The Prairie*. Whites who live and act apart from white society usually represent a
form of rugged individualism, and are, in effect, the vanguard of that society. The
isolated Indian, however usually represents either a tribal remnant, or else an element
of personal degradation and shame.

As a result of this isolation, the Indians as people. Throughout the tales, there
are gets the brief glimpses of Indian society. Three of these, the Huron village in *The
Last of the Mohicans*, the Sioux encampment in *The Prairie*, and the Huron camp in
*The Deerslayer*, show the Indians as they prepare to torture prisoners, blood-thirsty
crones, self-seeking demagogues, and cowardly braggarts dominate. Nostalgic
recollection of past glory and preparation for war dominate, that of Tamenund's
Delaware village in *The Last of the Mohicans*. The Pawnee village in *The Prairie*,
lacks concrete and vivid detail, and that, even here, the suspicions of Captain Middleton arouse a great deal of anxiety in the sympathetic reader.

In addition to showing the Indians as isolated individuals and giving only very distorted glimpses of Indian society, contact with whites have a disintegrating effect upon the Indian people. Mohegan John, Magua, Mahtoree, and Arrowhead have all been corrupted by their contact with whites. In each of these cases, Indian weakness for white man's liquor is shown as a dominant factor. This implies that the Indian is flawed and is unable to withstand the pressures exerted by a changing situation.

Conversely, Cooper does not show any situation where contact with the whites has been of lasting value to the Indian, or where the Indians have been able to grow and develop under the stimulus of white culture. In *The Deerslayer*, Hist remarks that although the Moravians try to teach her to spell, she had resists because it is "'No good for Delaware girl to know too much'" (DS, 176). Chingachgook is half converted by the Moravians but relapses into his old beliefs as he approaches death. Like the Indians characterized by Lewis Cass, the Indians of the *Leather Stocking Tales* can neither learn nor profit from their contact with the whites because of their vulnerability.

Indians, although possess splendid physiques, heroic virtues such as courage, stoic endurance to pain, and loyalty to friends, lack precisely those qualities which are necessary for participation in civilized life. Thrift, prudence, literacy, adherence to Christianity, possession of private property, life in settled communities with an agricultural base, the habit of empirical thinking, and the willingness to do routine physical labour make the Indian and so they have to be in constant warfare with the whites. Thus, in spite of the fact that they can be separated into "good" and "bad"
categories, Indians are all essentially barbaric. Chingachgook, Uncas, and Hard-Heart show no more possibility of adapting to white society than do Magua and Mahtoree.

In each of the *Leatherstocking Tales* some of the Indians indicate that they live better and happier lives before they come into contact with white men and white society. As the novels move backward into history from *The Pioneers* to *The Deerslayer*, the Indians with more virtues and fewer vices are portrayed. Thus, Rivenoak's in *The Deerslayer* is presented quite favourably even though he is an enemy of Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook. Rivenoak is much closer to that of Chingachgook than it is to earlier drawn portraits of later villains, Magua, Weucha, and Mahtoree. By suggesting that the Indians themselves are happier away from white society, the Indian removal is a way of saving the Indians

In addition to presenting a picture of the Indians which see them as alien to white civilization, the *Leatherstocking Tales* also emphasize the inevitability and rightness of American expansion. The rightness of this expansion is brought out by the portrayal of Judge Temple, Paul Hover, Jasper Western, Duncan Heyward, and Captain Middleton. In *The Pioneers*, Leatherstocking himself is referred to as "the foremost in that band of Pioneers, who are opening the way for the march of our nation across the continent" (P, 477). At the same time, emphasis on the rightness of expansion is qualified throughout the *Leatherstocking Tales* by numerous factors. Pictures of waste and spoilage in *The Pioneers* and *The Prairie*; Natty Bumppo's comments about settlers and their "wasty ways" (P, 369); and the portrayal of materialistic and insensitive frontiersmen like Ishmael Bush, Thomas Hutter, and Hurry Harry March. Roy Harvey Pearce gives a helpful perspective on attitude to the frontier:
Throughout his career, even as his specific political alignment changed, James Fenimore Cooper held to a belief that society must progress toward the (perhaps unattainable) goodness of complex (i.e., civilized) forms and usages. . . . Civilization meant a devotion to higher cultural forms, never a turning away from those forms to a rude, down-to-earth egalitarianism. Specifically, the frontier . . . represents one stage in our movement toward the best life. ... The frontier of the *Leatherstocking Tales* is not something to which Cooper would recommend that men retreat. The good life of an agrarian, aristocratically dominated, intellectually developed society was not to be retreated from. It was a goal which Americans, above all, might achieve.

In this perspective, *The Pathfinder* can be seen as a vindication of the frontier and of frontiersmen who, like Natty Bumppo, must engage in bloody practices which would not be acceptable in a more advanced state of society. *The Deerslayer*, contains no such vindication. If the English soldiers, with their steady and disciplined march, represent the coming of order to the wilderness, it is an order which is destructive and anti-life. This last novel does not question the inevitability of American expansion--for that also is symbolized in the measured tramp of the soldiers—but it does question the manner in which that expansion is carried out. It questions not the "American dream" but whether the people are worthy of the dream. *The Deerslayer*, therefore, indicates something of pessimism about America. The frontier is not vindicated but neither are the Indians.

While *the Leatherstocking Tales* recognize the injustice by which the Indian people had been dispossessed of their land, this recognition did not lead to active political concern for Indians who were threatened with removal in Cooper's time. Although Cooper was politically aware and active, this awareness and activity was not directed toward the question of justice for the Indian people. On March 15, 1840,
Cooper wrote to President Martin Van Buren warning of a possible Indian uprising about which he had heard from a Cooperstown Indian: "He then told me that his brother at Green Bay had sent him word that British Agents had been sounding the tribes in that vicinity, to know if they would fight the Americans. The argument was, the Americans keep driving you off your lands, whereas the English will permit you to remain" (LJ, 25). This letter represents Cooper's most direct political involvement with Indian concerns.

On June 17th, 1851, three months before his death, Cooper wrote in answer to a Mr. George Copway (1818-c.-1863) who was planning to publish a weekly concerned with Indians. Although, because of his health, Cooper could not promise any contributions, he did say, "The red man has a high claim to have his cause defended, and I trust you will be able to do much on his behalf" (LJ, 274-5). This expression of interest represents Cooper's concern to see justice done for the Indian people.

Like other Americans of his time, Cooper was committed to the idea of western expansion. Like other Americans of his time he thought of American history in three-dimensional terms, "progressing from past to present, from east to west, from lower to higher" (PSA, 49). Committed as he was to this expansion, his concern for the integrity of his nation found expression not by questioning expansion itself, but only by questioning the way it was taking place.

Thus, although Cooper was aware of America's ethical problem in the dispossession of the Indian, he did not give this awareness a central place in his thinking. He saw the Indian as a foil for white humanity. As Eearce says, the early English writer saw in the American Indian "what he himself would become did he not live according to his highest nature. The Indian became important to the English mind, not for what he was in and of himself, but rather for what he showed civilized
men they were not and must not be” (SA, 5). In the same way, Cooper’s interest was not "in the Indian as Indian, but in the Indian as a vehicle for understanding the white man, in the savage defined in terms of the ideas and needs of civilized life” (SA,202).

Cooper was not greatly interested in Indians except as they served his needs for romantic subject matter. Thus, in reply to a request for some information about the Indians in north-eastern New York, the locale of The Last of the Mohicans, Cooper said, "'My acquaintance with your part of the State is very slight, nor am I very conversant with Indian history. I would recommend Mr. Schoolcraft to you'" (LJ, 401). Acknowledging the moral issue of dispossession—that Cooper "was the greatest advocate the American Indian ever had precisely because he was a great patriot—one whose love for his country embraced the continent as well as the nation, its past as well as its future" (Dekker, p. 66). Statements about the injustice which deprived the Indian people of their ancestral lands express a conscience on the part of the author and appeal to such a conscience in his readers. But acknowledging such injustice does not expiate the sense of guilt which has developed in white society. D. H. Lawrence put the situation most clearly:

Not that the Red Indian will ever possess the broad lands of America. At least I presume not. But his ghost will. . . .

The Red Man is dead, disbelieving in us. He is dead and unappeased. Do not imagine him happy in his Happy Hunting Ground. No. Only those that die in belief die happy. Those that are pushed out of life in chagrin come back unappeased, for revenge. (SICAL, 44)

Within the larger context of American history, however, Cooper knows that questions of Indian conquest, tribal differences, and the validity of Indian law are of ultimate, continuing importance. Without forgetting white injustices and white
slaughter, Cooper recognizes that, for the nation as a whole, the problem posed by the
Indian will not diminish in importance. The larger question of political justice that is
argued in these novels is the kind of justice that the white man can bring to the
wilderness. The Indian per se is not as important as the white man's treatment of him.
(McWilliams, pp. 241-42)

Cooper is able to affirm the westward movement of American civilization even
while he acknowledges the injustice which it has left in its wake. The fictional
travelling gentleman speaks for Cooper himself when he describes Indian removal as
a "great, humane, and ... rational project ... to bring the Indians within the pale of
civilization" (Notions, p. 285).

In the final analysis the Leatherstocking Tales must be seen as a sentimental
retreat from the realities of United States policy towards Indian people. They deal
with the concrete situation of the Indian vis-a-vis white society. They also deal with
the psychological situation of the white American. The novels seek to give the
assurance "that men in becoming civilized had gained much more than they had lost;
and that civilization, the act of civilizing, for all of its destruction of primitive virtues,
put something higher and greater in their place" (PSA, 85). The Leatherstocking Tales
helped people to accept the proposition that Indians had their place in America's past
and also in the present. When all factors in Cooper's depiction of Indians and their
relations with whites were taken into account the average reader in Cooper's time
would conclude that everything was needed to be or could be done about their
contemporary situation.

It is a well known fact that the world is dominated by the whites and the United
States. The American hegemony has sometimes created problem for the American
Indian as well as for all the Indians of the world. The whites as they think they are higher born, suffer from elitism and thus endanger the progress of the Indians.