A Patriot Without Illusions

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THE LETTERS AND JOURNALS OF JAMES FENIMORE COOPER. Edited by James F. Beard. 2 Vols. *The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. $20.*

When Cooper died in 1851, Melville said of him that "he was a great, robust-souled man, all of whose merits are not seen. . . . But a grateful posterity will take the best care of Fenimore Cooper." Seldom has a literary prophecy gone further awry.

Our trouble is that when we remember Cooper we do not recall the long and heroic career that stirred the imaginations of his contemporaries. We remember rather an image that was created long after Cooper's death by two brilliant writers who were interested more in asserting their own literary credos than in taking the best care of Fenimore Cooper. "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" is one of Mark Twain's most perfectly executed performances, at once marvelously funny and utterly devastating. Twain was out to destroy romanticism as a literary ideal, and his method of attack was to make its leading American practitioner into a laughingstock. D. H. Lawrence's chapters on Cooper in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* are the most compelling in a memorable book. By way of calling for a literature that would give expression to the "voice of the blood," Lawrence hailed Cooper for the unconscious genius of his mythmaking. What these two very different essays have in common is that they both deny that Cooper had a mind and that he practiced a conscious artistry.

TO SHOW US the grandeur and the complexity of Cooper's mind, to rid us of the brilliant misreadings of Twain and Lawrence, to bring us back into contact with an intellect and an imagination that America once worshiped—and despised—with a truly startling intensity, is the purpose of Mr. Beard's definitive edition of Cooper's letters and journals. Two volumes have just now been published, and we are promised two more; eventually, Mr. Beard will also publish a critical biography of Cooper that will take into account not only the great array of his published work but many unpublished materials as well.

Like Jefferson, Cooper had the far-ranging intellectual tastes of the eighteenth-century mind. Books on politics, religion, agriculture, history, philosophy, and the law engaged him; he was widely read in English literature; his scholarly researches into the history of tariff restrictions, naval history, and Arctic exploration made him a recognized authority in these fields. The legend that Cooper began to write fiction more or less accidentally ignores the fact that he regarded his intellectual gifts as constituting a social obligation. He became a novelist because he believed that "books are, in great measure, the instruments of controlling the opinion of a nation like ours." Like Emerson, he wished to raise the moral and aesthetic quality of a democratic civilization by increasing the knowledge and refining the sensibilities of his audience.

By and large, the early Cooper was pleased with the nature of American society. All that needed to be done was for someone to "rouse the sleeping talents of the nation." The most fascinating thing about these two volumes of the letters—which follow Cooper's career up to the beginning of the second administration of Andrew Jackson—is their revelation of Cooper's gradual disenchantment with his early ideas and his reluctant recognition of the fact that the American dream was somehow turning into a nightmare. American institutions were the best in the world, yet day by day we were losing control of them through our failure to assume the moral responsibility required to maintain them. When Cooper began to speak his mind on the subject, he was greeted with the sort of public vilification that reminds one of the treatment accorded Lincoln during the Civil War.

One of the factors responsible for the wholesale assault upon him was that he sought no allies in his battle. With relentless honesty he attacked

the conduct of both political parties, excoriating in one breath the "fulsome, false and meretricious eulogiums" of the Whigs and in the next the "useless and unmanly complaints" of the Democrats. Another factor was that his critiques were daringly new, as for example when he suggested in a brilliant article written for the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* that the Executive arm of the Federal government should be strengthened (the article was rejected by the magazine's Jacksonian editor), or when he analyzed, with a penetration worthy of Veblen, the ways in which the universal scramble for money was debasing governmental functions, trampling on minority rights, and vulgarizing cultural values.

THROUGH all the years of his disillusionment, Cooper maintained a stout patriotism. His letters from Europe in the late 1820's and early 1830's show a man who was too sophisticated to give way to the "show me" smartiness of Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad,* yet who was too honest, too independent, too intensely American to surrender to European ways and attitudes. Because Cooper was celebrated in Europe as *"le grand écrivain américain,"* he had entree everywhere, so that this tough New World mind encountered the best that the Old World had to offer. Not until Henry James would an American writer register more perceptively the moral nature of European society than Cooper does in his letters of this period. He smelled the blood in the streets, as James would also, and his accounts of the glittering social life of a *grand écrivain* are pervaded by his awareness of the cruel struggle that the European aristocracy was waging to keep itself in power, and of the folly of monarchy, and of its certain doom. That these opinions, when spread before the world in books, earned him the abuse of European journalists is understandable. That they also brought down on his head renewed attacks from his own countrymen, who censured him for his lack of patriotism in concerning himself with European affairs, is the ironic note on which these volumes of Mr. Beard's monumental project close.

The Wild Blue Yonder

GOUVERNEUR PAULDING

MEMOIRS OF WORLD WAR I, by Brigadier-General William Mitchell. *Random House. $4.95.*

In July, 1917, with General Pershing established in Paris and the American First Division ashore at St. Nazaire, the American Air Force, General Mitchell writes, "consisted of one Nieuport airplane which I used myself and that was all." His reports on the morning of November 11, 1918, showed that "we had present on the front, in the hands of American units, 740 airplanes. Of these 528 were of French manufacture, 16 were of British manufacture and 196 of American manufacture. One year and eight months after entering the war, the United States had only been able to put 196 airplanes on the front. We did practically all our fighting with foreign machines, the airplanes manufactured in America being inferior." American air units did not enter into combat until March, 1918; before the end of the war they had shot down 927 enemy airplanes or balloons and had lost 316 airplanes or balloons. They had done very well.

"Billy" Mitchell came into France from Spain the day we entered the war. He observed at once that the French were depressed. He knew why. Since 1914 they had borne the brunt of a war in which tenacious defense alternated with ruinous efforts to break through the enemy front. "This was not an interesting war for the troops on the ground," he was soon to remark. On April 30, 1917, he was watching the fighting: "There were at least four thousand men deployed from each of the seven [French] divisions attacking, and . . . about fourteen thousand were killed or wounded that afternoon while I watched, with the number constantly increasing as the evening wore away. In spite of the tremendous showing the artillery made, the fire had not been sufficient. . . . a piece-meal affair. . . ." Mitchell saw what the French, the British, and the Germans had already seen: the value of aviation. He spoke some French; he liked the French; he admired their endurance and he believed them when they told him that it must finally come to an end. He set to work building up an air force. Washington was busy with plans—the Liberty engine—for a massive and distant future use; for some time Pershing thought that air power might be a nice thing to have but that artillery and foot soldiers were what generals had always had—the more of both the better. In his diary, rewritten in the 1920's and now posthumously published in full, Mitchell gives the impression that he alone wanted planes, that he alone saw that they must be under autonomous command: it was an idea that he was never to abandon, and the

polemic he started then still rages. The fact is that he brilliantly commanded our aviation at the front and that probably there would have been even less of it to command had he not raised such a row.

THERE IS a strange perspective to what he writes; it is hard for us to realize how much the Mexican troubles and the Philippines were still in the Army mind. In his impatience with non-fliers, who seemed to him to be all over the place at Chaumont GHQ, he writes: "It was bad enough having this crowd down in Paris but to bring them up near the line was worse. It reminded me of a story told of old Major Hunter of the Cavalry, when General Otis, in command of the Philippines, had taken him to task for not accomplishing more. Major Hunter replied that he had two hundred men who had never seen a horse, two hundred horses that had never seen a man and twenty-five officers who had never seen either. This was the state of the entourage with which General Foulois had surrounded himself." General Mitchell appears to think that the Germans shared our professional memories; but perhaps what he says of Pershing's arrival indicates malice rather than naïveté: "The news was well broadcast; it was supposed to have a dampening effect on the German morale to know that the hero of our American-Mexican frontier had now arrived in Europe to settle the dispute between the French and Germans." In another passage on Pershing he shows "Black Jack" in an unexpectedly emotional performance. The general and his entourage were visiting Napoleon's tomb: "When we stopped to look at Napoleon's sword, the guardian took it out of its case and held it out to General Pershing, thinking he would take it in his hand; but instead, without touching it, General Pershing bent forward and kissed it. This action made a profound impression on everyone present, on us even more than on the French." And so on—with the inevitable mention of good deeds accomplished by French ladies of the aristocracy together with those of Miss Elsie de Wolfe and Miss Morgan. At the armistice General Mitchell drove, in "my largest automobile," to Paris, where he was acclaimed "from one end of the boulevards to the other."

THAT WAR of General Mitchell's, that most dreadfully protracted agony which held so fallacious a prospect of enduring peace, could not be described in any enduring sense by a man intent, legitimately, on the techniques by which it could be won. It was only when the conquered and the victors could look back upon the war that its disaster became assessable. Barbusse and Louis Guilloux for the French, Remarque for the Germans, Ford Madox Ford for the British, and perhaps greatest of all—after still another war—William Faulkner for us, looked back on man's passion, but in no spirit of tranquillity.

General Mitchell provides today's reader with a moment of irony: "Fighting on the ground and on the water had gone on since the beginning of time, but fighting in the air had just started; and several generations will have to be born and pass away before people can adopt and maintain the same attitude toward this form of warfare as they exhibit toward the old familiar ones."