

RICHARDSON'S INDIANS

Leslie Monkman

NO WRITER OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY CANADA more fully explored the literary potential of the Indian than Major John Richardson. In novels such as *Wacousta* (1832) and *The Canadian Brothers* (1840), Richardson's interest is in the conflict between red man and white man on the Canadian-American frontier. In later formula novels such as *Hardscrabble* (1851) and *Wau-Nan-Gee* (1852), he more directly appeals to the American reading public by shifting his focus to the events preceding the founding of Chicago. Yet Richardson's interest in the Indian was not limited to an exploration of his potential in frontier fiction; *Tecumseh* (1828), a narrative poem paying tribute to the Indian warrior whom he met as a young man, was Richardson's first published volume, and references to the Indian and Indian cultures appear repeatedly in his volumes of history and autobiography. Throughout his work, Richardson affirms his admiration for the red man, and in later works such as "The North American Indian," he writes movingly of his concern for the extinction of the Indian race. Yet he consistently separates red and white cultures into distinct orders and, despite his stated esteem for the Indian, ultimately presents the red man only within the context of savagism.

Richardson's interest in the Indian may have stemmed in part from his own family history; the question of whether or not his maternal grandmother was an Ottawa Indian has not yet been conclusively answered.¹ No such genealogical connection need be assumed, however, in order to explain his interest in the red man; in *Eight Years in Canada* (1847) and "A Trip to Walpole Island and Port Sarnia" (1849), he documents his own first-hand contacts with the Indian, and one of his most treasured memories was of fighting by the side of Tecumseh in the War of 1812. Combined with these personal experiences was his reading of works such as Alexander Henry's *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories* (1809) and his fascination with the novels of James Fenimore Cooper.

In an abridged edition of *Wacousta* published in the New Canadian Library series, Carl Klinck reprints what we are told is Richardson's introduction to the 1851 edition of the novel. However, the first two paragraphs of this introduction in which Richardson explicitly acknowledges Cooper's influence are not included:

This Chapter, written eighteen years subsequent to the original publication of *Wacousta* in London, will be found unavoidably replete with egotism. By none will it be more readily pronounced such than by those who are most open to the charge themselves. Without its exercise, however, the object of this introduction would not be gained.

As the reader may be curious to know on what basis, and in what manner this story (of which I have certainly robbed that first of vigorous American novelists — the “Last of the Mohicans” Cooper — which tale, albeit I have never read a novel by another author twice, I have absolutely devoured three times,) was suggested to me, and on what particular portions of History the story is founded, I am not aware that this introductory Chapter, which I have promised my Publishers, can be better devoted than to the explanation.²

At the time of the publication of *Wacousta*, three of James Fenimore Cooper's “Leatherstocking Novels” had been published: *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and *The Prairie* (1827). But Richardson's interest in the American novelist also encompassed the later novels in the series, *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841), as revealed in the enthusiasm expressed in *Eight Years in Canada* (1847) in a description of his thoughts while travelling through upper New York state:

Never were the characters in Cooper's “Leather Stocking” and the “Pathfinder” more vividly brought before my recollection. This was the sort of scene in which he loved to introduce them, and, I know not how it was, but with what dreamy state of half consciousness which a solitary traveller awakened early from his slumbers, feels in a situation of this kind, when the fancy is fully at work, I looked, at each moment expecting to see a deer or a wild turkey arrested by the crack of a rifle and a hunter, equipped as the charming Indian novelist has painted him, issuing in the pursuit of game.³

Despite Richardson's acknowledged familiarity with Cooper's work and his confession to having “robbed” the story of *Wacousta* from the American master, his work rarely indicates the kind of explicit debt declared by Richardson. Yet if he does not owe details of plot structure and character to Cooper, he does share perspectives on Indian culture which have been identified by twentieth-century critics in the American novelist's work.

Paul Wallace, one of several critics who have debated Cooper's role as “Indian novelist,” argues that Cooper's principal source, John Heckewelder's *Account of the History, Manners and Customs of the Indian Nations, Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighbouring States* (1819), provided the novelist with a basic distinction that pervades his work.⁴ Wallace contends that the Indian in Cooper's novels is either part of a band of demonic fiends (as embodied in Cooper's “Mingoes”) or a member of a tribe of noble savages (Delawares such as Uncas or Chingachgook). This kind of tribal distinction emerges most prominently in a story published in 1850, “The Sunflower. A True Tale of the North-

West," and in Richardson's later novels *Wau-Nan-Gee* and *Hardscrabble*. Thus, in *Wau-Nan-Gee*, the narrator comments on the red villain of the novel, Pee-to-tum:

It has already been remarked that Pee-to-tum was not a genuine Pottowatomie, but one of that race whose very name is a synonym with treachery and falsehood — a Chippewa. With low, heavy features; a dark scowling brow; coarse, long, dark hair, shading the restless, ever-moving eye that, like that of the serpent, seemed to fascinate where most the cold and slimy animal sought to sting; the broad, coarse nose; the skin partaking more in the Chippewa, of that offensive, rank odor peculiar to the Indian, than any others of the race.⁵

The same Pee-to-tum becomes the rapist of the novel's heroine, and in the face of such grotesque villainy, his heroic counterpart, the Pottowatomie, Wau-Nan-Gee, is almost overwhelmed. Wau-Nan-Gee, a literary descendent of Uncas of *The Last of the Mohicans*, quietly accepts that his love for the white heroine must remain platonic and functions as a diligent and constant agent of virtue throughout the book. His only reward, however, is to be damned as an Indian by the heroine who refuses to make tribal distinctions after her rape by Pee-to-tum.

Although Richardson clearly intends the reader to acknowledge the injustice in the heroine's condemnation of the entire Indian race, her attitude is closely related to the perspective that recurs most frequently in his work. In his discussion of James Fenimore Cooper's treatment of the Indian, Roy Harvey Pearce argues that in the United States, by 1825, the idea of savagism had overwhelmed other perspectives on the Indian, and he identifies this perspective in Cooper's work. Within this context, the Indian's life

could not be said to be one totally superior or inferior to that of a civilized man. It did not make sense to view his state as one either to be aspired to or to be dismissed with unfeeling contempt; rather it was to be seen as the state of one almost entirely out of contact, for good and for bad, with the life of civilized men.⁶

Within this perspective, one can freely praise a "good Indian," but implicit in this praise is the idea that the Indian is being weighed by a different scale of values than would be used to assess a "good white man." Richardson's shared acceptance of the ideology that Pearce identifies in Cooper's work can be demonstrated through an examination of his two best-known novels and of his poetic tribute to Tecumseh.

In *Wacousta*, the opposition between savage and civilized worlds is initially established in terms of setting through a continuing contrast between North America and Europe. Sir Everard Valletort asserts that he would prefer the life of a barber's apprentice in London to his role as lieutenant in the midst of Canadian "savage scenes." For Valletort, the civilized world of Europe and its extensions in the forts of North America are always preferable to a surrounding wilderness

identified with Indians. Richardson's narrator, however, adopts a more neutral stance in contrasting the Indian furnishings of Madeline De Haldimar's apartment at Fort Michilimackinac with European decor and simply notes that "nothing could be more unlike the embellishments of a modern European boudoir."⁷ Within the context of savagism and civilization, positive and negative values need not be assigned; instead, the emphasis falls on the existence of two distinct orders.

THE SEPARATION OF THESE ORDERS in Richardson's perspective provides a key for understanding the transition of "civilized" Sir Reginald Morton into "savage" Wacousta. In the Scottish highlands, Morton meets and falls in love with Clara Beverley in a setting described in the language of conventional pastoral. On a bank, "formed of turf, covered with moss, and interspersed with roses and honey-suckles," Clara sits as "the divinity of the oasis." To Morton, she is a true "child of nature" in what he calls "the Eden of my love." Inevitably, when the innocent Clara is removed from this Edenic setting and exposed to the fallen world of the Scottish army camp, she falls prey (according to Wacousta) to the perfidy of De Haldimar and the world which he inhabits. When the conflict between Morton and De Haldimar resumes in North America, De Haldimar is still resident in an extension of the garrison he inhabited in Scotland. Morton, however, has become Wacousta, an "altered being" who resides in the camp of Pontiac, a setting which Richardson juxtaposes with the European retreat of Clara Beverley's father.

The difficulty of access to both settings is heavily emphasized. Wacousta describes at length his difficulty and athletic feats in crossing the crags and fissures that separated him from Clara's home. Similar difficulties are encountered by Frederick De Haldimar as he is led to Pontiac's camp: "At length they stood on the verge of a dark and precipitous ravine, the abrupt sides of which were studded with underwood so completely interwoven that all passage appeared impracticable." Both settings are frequently identified as oases, a word that does not occur in the novel out of this context: Pontiac's camp is "a sort of oasis of the forest, girt around with a rude belt of underwood," and Clara Beverley's home is "this garden — this paradise — this oasis of the rocks."

Clara Beverley's father creates a retreat from civilization which Richardson presents in the trappings of traditional pastoral. Pontiac's camp, also opposed to the civilized world of army and fort, is not idealized into pastoral but rather emerges within the context of savagism. In this camp, we find not pastoral "children of nature" but female inhabitants

supporting in their laps the heavy heads of their unconscious helpmates, while they occupied themselves by the firelight in parting the long black matted hair and

maintaining a destructive warfare against the pigmy inhabitants of that dark region.

Richardson clearly does not idealize Pontiac's camp into pastoral as he does Clara Beverley's oasis, but neither does he present the savage oasis as an inherently demonic world in simple contrast to that of the Scottish "goddess."

The figure who transforms the savages into a "legion of devils" and "fiend-like bands" is Wacousta. This man, so consumed by his desire for revenge that he crosses the barriers separating civilized and savage orders, becomes a larger than life Satanic figure, exploiting the worst instincts of the savage Indians. During the abortive battle following Pontiac's ruse of the lacrosse game as a means of entering the fort, Wacousta's face is

painted black as death and as he stood under the arch of the gateway, with his white turbaned head towering far above those of his companions, this formidable and mysterious enemy might have been likened to the spirit of darkness presiding over his terrible legions.

In his maniacal hatred of the husband and family of the woman he loved, Reginald Morton rejects the world of civilization and becomes not just "a savage both in garb and character" but the chief of demonic savagism.

Pontiac, the historical chief of the Indians, assumes only a secondary role in *Wacousta*. Even the order in which Richardson presents the events of the Detroit attack weakens the dramatic impact of the Ottawa leader's role. The introduction to the novel tells us of the lacrosse ruse; we see its execution and failure; only then does Richardson provide a flashback to the Indian encampment where we hear Pontiac outlining the plan to his warriors. Such a sequence of events does little to focus our attention on Pontiac since his words present "old news." Even in this scene, Wacousta's response is the most significant element; reacting to Pontiac's plan,

the warrior's swarthy countenance kindled into fierce and rapidly varying expressions. A thousand dark and complicated passions evidently struggled at his heart, and as he dwelt leisurely and emphatically on the sacrifice of human life that must inevitably attend the adoption of the proposed measure his eye grew larger, his chest expanded, nay, his very nostrils appeared to dilate with unfathomably guileful exultation. Captain De Haldimar thought he had never gazed on anything wearing the human shape half so atrociously savage.

Significantly, as soon as Wacousta is killed, Pontiac arranges for peace with the garrison. The malevolent savagism of Wacousta gives way to the benevolent savagism of the young Indian who slays him.

Even Richardson's "good savages" remain decisively separated from the civilized order. The young Amazon, Oucanasta, is saved from drowning by Captain Frederick De Haldimar, and although she falls in love with him, "she knew she

was very foolish and that an Indian girl could never be the wife of a handsome chief of the Saganaw." Any possible marriage between Oucanasta and Frederick is unthinkable in the context which the novel establishes; such a union would join two disparate orders, the savage and the civilized.⁸

Richardson's narrator does not simply ascribe negative values to the savage world and positive qualities to the representatives of civilization. Repeatedly he focuses on the duplicity, injustice and treachery of both European civilization and its new world extensions. What he does insist on is the separation of the two worlds into separate orders and the measure of Wacousta's uniqueness and of his fall lies in his having transcended the barriers separating these orders.

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING treatments of this separation between savages and civilized societies in Richardson's work occurs in the sixth chapter of *The Canadian Brothers*.⁹ Richardson places in conversation, General Brock, Commodore Barclay and Colonel D'Egville of the British forces in the War of 1812 and an American captive, Major Montgomerie. The chapter begins with dinner host D'Egville apologizing to the American commander for the inclusion of Techumsch and three other chiefs at the table. To his relief the American ascribes his apparent distraction to other factors. Richardson's narrator maintains an objective stance in regard to this slighting of his Indian hero. After the departure of the Indians at the conclusion of dinner, conversation turns to two major questions: the British use of Indian forces against the Americans and the historical record of the British and the Americans in their treatment of the Indians.

The most surprising element in the treatment of these questions is the cold objectivity of Richardson's narrator. He presents both sides of the conversation, but in fashion uncharacteristic of Richardson's work, the narrator in no way directs the reader's response. Thus, Major Montgomerie argues the following positions either to the assent or polite qualification of his listeners:

if instances have occurred wherein the sacredness of treaty has been violated, it has only been where the Indians have refused to part with their lands for the proffered consideration and when those lands have been absolutely indispensable to our agricultural purposes.

The factual errors in Montgomerie's argument are simply glossed over and he proceeds to further analysis:

The uneducated negro is, from infancy and long custom, doomed to slavery, wherefore should the copper coloured Indian be more free? But my argument points not at their subjection. I would merely show that, incapable of benefitting by the advantages of the soil they inherit, they should learn to yield it with a good grace to

those who can. Their wants are few, and interminable woods yet remain to them, in which their hunting pursuits may be indulged without a fear of interruption.

The inevitable submission of the individual perceived as savage to civilized man could not be presented more clearly. General Brock points out the swift disappearance of congenial landscapes for the Indian, but finally all concur in the quiet conclusion that the Indians of North America will disappear, "gone, extirpated, until scarce a vestige of their existence remains."

Discussion of the treatment of the Indian by the United States and Britain leads to the conclusion that both nations have been guilty of treachery and duplicity. None of the participants, however, seems particularly concerned about these reflections on his nation's policy. When Commodore Barclay tries to state Tecumseh's case by cataloguing the injustices suffered by his people, Major Montgomerie grants his points and asserts that they in no way affect his own position which is simply to defend American policy in terms of "civilized" necessity and precedent set by British, French or Spanish governments. Even when General Brock attempts to defend Indian scalplings, the reader's involvement in his arguments is minimized by the awareness that all of this discussion is in some sense pseudo-argument, since each of the participants bears the same assumptions regarding the irreconcilability of civilization and savagism and the inevitable dominance of the former over the latter.

If any Indian could have altered Richardson's sharp distinctions between civilization and savagism, it would have been Tecumseh. Richardson's respect and admiration for the Shawnee chief is reiterated throughout much of his work. In *Eight Years in Canada*, he recalls fighting by the side of Tecumseh in the Battle of Moraviantown and remarks on the imposing physical appearance of the chief-tain on that occasion:

Not an hour before he fell, he had passed along our line in the elegant deer-skin frock, fringed, and ornamented with the stained quills of the porcupine, which he usually wore, and which, on this occasion, surmounted a shirt of snowy whiteness. In addition to this, he wore a plume of white ostrich feathers.¹⁰

In *The Canadian Brothers*, Richardson returns to his treasured memories of Tecumseh shaking him by the hand before the start of this battle, and in his *War of 1812* he reproduces the speech delivered by Tecumseh in which he opposed General Proctor's decision to retreat from Amherstburg and Detroit.

Tecumseh is consistently described in almost adulatory tones. The only successor to Pontiac as a leader capable of uniting a number of diverse Indian tribes, he is also presented by Richardson as Pontiac's superior. In *The Canadian Brothers*, Tecumseh is "one of those daring spirits that appear like meteors, few and far between, in the horizon of glory and intelligence, . . . possessed of a genius as splendid in conception, as it was bold in execution." The qualities in Tecumseh's

character that are most frequently acknowledged are the pervasiveness of his influence and the authority which he commands among the united tribes. Just as the eye of Pontiac controls the actions of his warriors in *Wacousta*, Tecumseh in *The Canadian Brothers* supervises the movements of his followers.

Yet in spite of Richardson's obvious admiration for the Ottawa warrior, Tecumseh never emerges as anything other than the best of savages. Thus, he is assigned "a power of analyzing motives which has never been surpassed in savage life";¹¹ his death is seen as "the destruction of all that was noble and generous in savage life,"¹² and if he possesses some "civilized" virtues, immediate associations link him with the "savage qualities" of Tamburlaine or Genghis Khan.¹³

Even in *Tecumseh or The Warrior of the West*, a narrative poem written "to rescue the name of a hero from oblivion,"¹⁴ Tecumseh ultimately emerges as a savage rather than simply as a man. In the opening canto, after a description of the victory of the Americans over the British in a naval battle at Amherstburg during the War of 1812, Richardson introduces Tecumseh with all the epithets of the heroic leader: "towering warrior," "godlike form," "monument of strength." Yet as Richardson sets the scene for the land battle at Amherstburg in the final canto, Tecumseh's Indians paint themselves "half white, half black," looking "like wild fiends, raging to devour," and Tecumseh emerges as the embodiment of satanic savagism:

Amid that scene, like some dark towering fiend,
With death-black eyes, and hand all spotted o'er,
The fierce Tecumseh on his tall lance lean'd,
Fir'd with much spoil, and drunk with human gore.

Despite Richardson's view that Tecumseh represented the hope of his people to sustain some kind of independent sovereignty and that his death marked the end of any hope of aboriginal survival in North America, his admiration for the Indian leader was consistently qualified by a perspective separating savage and civilized orders.

In the first paragraph of Richardson's *War of 1812*, he asserts that "much has been said and written in respect to the Red-men of the forest; but I do not recollect having ever met with a detail sufficiently accurate to convey a just idea of the character of these people."¹⁵ The crucial obstacle to Richardson's answering of this problem lies not in the absence of sufficient detail but rather in basic assumptions regarding savagism and civilization. In "A Trip to Walpole Island and Port Sarnia," Richardson praises the "native dignity and simplicity"¹⁶ of the Indians of this area in contrast to "the loathsome hypocrisy of civilized life." He even asserts:

if I could always see them as then presented to my observation, I could willingly pass the remainder of my days among them — a son of nature and subject only to nature's laws.

Emphasis must fall on the first word of this comment, for Richardson could dream of a return to primitive bliss, but his way of seeing the red man was insistently dichotomous in its separation of civilized and savage worlds.

NOTES

- ¹ The issue was first raised by Derek Crawley in "Did Major John Richardson Have Indian Blood?" *Canadian Notes and Queries*, 9 (June 1972), 4-5. Further circumstantial evidence was presented by Donald Smith and David R. Beasley in *Canadian Notes and Queries*, 12 (November 1973), 6. In *The Canadian Don Quixote* (1977), Beasley assumes Richardson's Indian ancestry but presents no further evidence to support this view.
- ² John Richardson, *Wacousta* (New York, 1851), p. iii. In his bibliographical study of Richardson's works, William F. E. Morley notes the first instance of this omission in the 1906 edition of *Wacousta* published by the Toronto Historical Publishing Company.
- ³ John Richardson, *Eight Years In Canada* (Montreal, 1847), p. 161.
- ⁴ Paul Wallace, "Cooper's Indians," *New York History*, 25 (October 1954), 423-46.
- ⁵ John Richardson, *Wau-Nan-Gee or The Massacre At Chicago* (New York, 1852), p. 80.
- ⁶ Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization* (Baltimore, 1965), p. 199.
- ⁷ John Richardson, *Wacousta* (New York, 1851), p. 125. All subsequent references are to this revised edition.
- ⁸ Twenty years after the publication of *Wacousta*, the same pattern recurs in Richardson's treatment of the relationship between Ampata and Major Mordaunt in "Ampata! A Tale of Lake George."
- ⁹ It is presumably this chapter that Richardson sent to the King of England, requesting permission to dedicate the novel to his Majesty. Normally the king did not accept the dedication of novels but Richardson was proud to report that his book, "from its historical character, was deemed of sufficient importance not to be confounded with mere works of fiction." John Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers* (Montreal, 1840), p. x. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- ¹⁰ Richardson, *Eight Years In Canada*, p. 130.
- ¹¹ Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers*, p. 62.
- ¹² John Richardson, *War of 1812* (Brockville, Ont., 1842), p. 125.
- ¹³ Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers*, p. 173.
- ¹⁴ John Richardson, *Tecumseh or The Warrior of the West* (London, 1828), p.v.
- ¹⁵ Richardson, *War of 1812*, p. 1.
- ¹⁶ John Richardson, "A Trip to Walpole Island and Port Sarnia," *The Literary Garland*, 7, n.s. (January 1849), p. 21.