

THE FORTUNES OF COOPER IN ITALY

I

In 1820 in the pages of *The Edinburgh Review* Sydney Smith asked the famous question that rankled in the breasts of thin-skinned Americans for decades: « In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? » Smith's question was ironic in its timing, for Washington Irving already was captivating readers on both sides of the Atlantic. James Fenimore Cooper was about to publish *The Spy* and within a few years would become an internationally known novelist, widely read and translated in Europe. American literature at the moment the question was posed was emerging from its infancy, during which it had been only a minor appendage to English literature. Within two decades belles lettres in the United States would begin the era that Van Wyck Brooks has named, « The Flowering of New England ».

Towards the end of the 1820's one obvious answer to Smith's question might have been « the Italians », who were reading Cooper from Milan to Naples. Italy discovered Cooper in 1828 when simultaneous editions of four of his novels appeared in Livorno and Milan: *The Spy*, *The Pilot*, *The Pioneers*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*. During the next year *The Pilot* was brought out in Naples. Cooper actually had written only two additional novels up to 1827, *Precaution* and *Lionel Lincoln*, both of them failures, and even *Precaution* was translated into Italian in 1835. All but one of the first fourteen novels that Cooper wrote (all those produced through 1835) had been translated into Italian by 1836. Thus Cooper's Italian reputation began early, and not only was he the first American novelist to be translated into Italian, a fact which is not surprising, but he has continued to enjoy popularity ever since.

While I am sure that I have not run to earth every edition of Cooper published in Italy between 1828 and the present, I have found enough editions to document the fact of Cooper's wide acquaintance in Italy. Italian publishers have issued at least 148 editions of his novels over a period of 138 years, and these figures do not include the reprintings, which I have not tried to record systematically. All of the Italian libraries that I consulted are well stocked with Cooper titles. There are no periods in this 138-year record that show no editions, though his popularity declined during the early decades of the present century; but in general the flow of Cooper novels has been steady and uniform. In all, eighteen of his thirty-two novels have been translated into Italian, including some very unlikely titles. Certainly no other 19th Century American author, with the possible exception of Harriet Beecher Stowe, has received as much attention in Italy as Cooper.

As in the United States, Cooper began as an adult author and gradually came to be known as a writer of children's books. But in contrast with the United States, where all of the Leatherstocking Tales and a good selection of Cooper's other better books are in print in adult editions, Cooper in Italy today is almost exclusively a juvenile author. Towards the end of the 19th Century Italian translators began abridging and adapting Cooper's novels for children, and this process has accelerated in the 20th Century. Except for Fernanda Pivano's version of *The Last of the Mohicans* in 1946, there has been only one good recent edition of Cooper, Ruggero Bianchi's scholarly edition of *The Pilot* published in 1964. On the other hand all of the Leatherstocking Tales are available in juvenile editions, plus *The Spy*, *The Red Rover*, and *The Bravo*.

The beginning of Cooper's Italian reputation coincides with his nineteen-month sojourn in Italy from 1828 to 1830. Before that he was known imperfectly, if at all. The popularity of *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans* must have reached Italy ahead of him, however, for in 1827 Rodolfo Vismara, a Milanese publisher, brought out an edition of Catherine Maria Sedgwick's highly moralistic *Redwood* as a « roman-

zo americano del Sig. Cooper». The Italian publisher apparently perpetuated the same error made earlier by a French publisher who had attributed the novel to Cooper. Miss Sedgwick's novel had come out in the United States in 1824 with no author's name on the titlepage; and while it has Lake Champlain for its locale and shows Cooper's influence in the writing, it bears little resemblance to any of the Leatherstocking Tales. Italian readers of *Redwood* who were willing to try another novel by « Sig. Cooper » had a chance the following year to read *L'Ultimo dei Mobicani*. They must have been very much surprised at Cooper's rapid improvement as a novelist.

In 1828 Cooper took his wife and children to Europe for a long stay of seven years.¹ His early novels had been profitable enough to finance the journey, but he hoped to make the trip pay for itself through foreign copyright. By being in England he could secure British copyright, and by being in Europe he could furnish advance copies of his novels to Continental publishers, who might be induced to pay him royalties. But if he had any hopes of obtaining royalties from his Italian translations, his letters do not reveal that fact. Nor do they record any negotiations with Italian publishers. The multiplicity of governments and the absence of copyright protection made it impossible for Cooper to sell his literary property in Italy.²

At any event, Cooper entered Italy from Switzerland in October, 1828, and passed briefly through Milan, where four of his early publishers had their businesses. In November he

1. For much of the biographical data in this essay I am indebted to JAMES GROSSMAN'S *James Fenimore Cooper* (New York, William Sloan Associates, 1949).

2. Cooper's letters reveal that his usual practice while in Europe was to have his books printed privately in a very limited edition. He then sent copies to his English and American publishers and his French and German translators. Cooper assigned the rights to translate into French and German to his secretary, whose salary apparently derived from that source. See JAMES BEARD, ed., *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 1960), Vols. I, II.

began a nine-months' stay in Florence and the next summer sailed from Livorno to Naples, where he passed his second winter in Italy. In both Livorno and Naples publishers had issued translations of his novels before he visited the cities, and during his entire European sojourn ten Italian editions of his works appeared, four of which came out during the year he arrived in Italy. In the three years following his return to America, 1833-1836, another nine were issued, including the six-novel, nineteen-volume edition of *Bonfanti* in Milan.

Cooper combined business and pleasure during his Italian stay. One of his lesser-known novels, which appeared, moreover, in Bonfanti's series, is *The Water-Witch*. Cooper wrote most of it at Sorrento, and the influence of the Bay of Naples, which enchanted him, is apparent in the novel, although the story concerns smuggling in New York harbor in the early 18th Century. But his most important use of Italy resulted in *The Bravo*, written after he had visited Venice in the spring of 1830. This novel became his most popular book in Italy in the 19th Century, going through eighteen editions between 1832 and the end of the century. His early reputation in Italy perhaps owes more to this novel than it does to the *Leatherstocking Tales*. This conclusion is supported by the earliest Italian history of American literature, which ranks the Venetian story as the best of Cooper's works and credits it with doing « more than any other book, ancient or modern, to make world famous that poor old dethroned queen of the Adriatic ».³

Italian publishers in the 20th Century have not found *The Bravo* sufficiently interesting to republish more than three times and only once since 1906. The latest translator, Amilcare Locatelli, who brought out an abridged version in 1948, advised his readers that *The Bravo* is an exciting book that one reads « at a single sitting and which leaves one moved and thoughtful ».⁴ The early readers, however, needed no urging. One

3. GUSTAVO STRAFFORELLO, *Letteratura americana* (Milano, Ulrico Hoepli, 1884), p. 103.

4. See Bibliography, *The Bravo*, item 21.

of Cooper's Milan publishers, G. Truffi and Co., published the book during the year after its first appearance, and another Milanese firm brought out still another edition the year after that. Later two or three editions each decade until the 1890's were required to supply the demand.

If the Italians liked Cooper's novels during the years of his Italian sojourn, Cooper in turn liked Italians. One of his most attractive works of non-fiction is his *Excursions in Italy* (1838). Here his frank enjoyment of Italy and Italians and careful observation of the Italian scene make him the forerunner of a long line of American writers who followed him later in the 19th Century. Cooper prefaced his book by saying that if he had to give a reason why he had written on a country so well known as Italy, « he might be puzzled to give any other answer than that he loved the subject » and was indulging his own recollections « possibly more than will please his readers ». Later when he left Italy after more than a year and a half, he reported that he never had left any country « with one half the regret that I quitted Italy... I felt a reluctance to separate that one is apt to experience on quitting his own house ».⁵

Besides *The Bravo*, which was well known in Italy after 1831, Cooper's early reputation in Italy rested in good measure on his sea stories. As the inventor of this genre, he was properly appreciated by his Italian readers, whose enthusiasm required four editions of *The Pilot* between 1828 and 1839. Cooper's next sea story, *The Red Rover* (1828), also found ready publication in Italy. Truffi brought it out in 1833; but the success of *The Pilot* was not repeated, and the novel was not reprinted for twenty-five years. Nevertheless, *The Red Rover* equals *The Bravo* in the total number of Italian editions (twenty-one), but its success has depended on the transformation of Cooper into a writer for children. Fourteen of the editions of this novel have come out since 1909 and nine of

5. *Excursions in Italy* (Paris, Baudry's European Library, 1838), pp. v., 325; published in the United States as *Gleanings in Europe: Italy*.

them since World War II. Curiously, *The Pilot* has never become a child's book, and the only edition of it since 1868 has been the previously mentioned recent scholarly edition by Bianchi.

The popularity of *The Pilot* during its early years may have owed something to Italian interest in the American Revolution. All of the 19th Century editions carried the subtitle, « Racconto del mare relativo ai tempi della guerra americana », and the same desire for political liberty that made Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* a critical and popular success during the Risorgimento may have given Cooper's use of the American Revolution added interest. This speculation is reenforced by the fortunes of *The Spy* in Italy. As a novel about the Revolution, in which George Washington is exploited as a fictional character for the first time, *The Spy* ranks among Cooper's leading titles in Italy. It was published first in 1828, six more times in the 19th Century, and it continues to enjoy popularity as a children's book.

In 1850 at the end of his career Cooper wrote that « if anything from the pen of the writer... is at all to outlive himself, it is, unquestionably, the series of 'The Leatherstocking Tales' ». ⁶ His estimate was quite correct, if one judges Cooper either by criticism or by publishing statistics. Certainly every Italian schoolchild knows « Calza di Cuoio » at least through one of the many juvenile adaptations. Out of the 148 editions of Cooper published in Italy since 1828, nearly half (seventy-two) have been devoted to the adventures of Natty Bumppo. All of the Leatherstocking Tales have been published in multiple editions, though *The Deerslayer* did not appear until 1901, but *The Last of the Mohicans* has been as popular as any other two titles put together. Several times publishers have brought out composite juvenile editions of all or several of the Leatherstocking Tales in a single volume under such titles as *Natty*

6. *Cooper's Works*, Fireside Edition (Boston, Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1876), p. vi of vol. containing *The Deerslayer* and *The Last of the Mohicans*.

il cacciatore and *Tutte le avventure di Calza di Cuoio*. Cooper's reputation in Italy will probably continue to rest on the Leatherstocking Tales, just as it does in the United States.

Unfortunately for Cooper's Italian publishers in the 19th Century, it was difficult to judge which of his novels most deserved translation. As a result, the investigator of Cooper's fortunes in Italy encounters some surprises. For example, among the eighteen novels which were translated into Italian out of the thirty-two he wrote (in itself a rather impressive percentage), one would not expect to find a version of *Precaution* (1820), Cooper's bad first novel. An imitation of Jane Austen, the book is awkward and amateurish and best left untranslated. One is further astonished to find that *The Monikins* (1835) was translated almost immediately. That unbelievably dull satire on England and America required such close application by the reader that almost no one could finish it. It was a complete failure in the United States, and one wonders what an Italian reader could have made of it. In the United States in the late 1830's «the man who read *The Monikins*» was a newspaper term for a queer character. Another publisher's mistake was *Mercedes of Castille* (1840), one of Cooper's worst novels. Italian readers might well have been spared that book, but nevertheless one intrepid Milanese publisher brought it out in four volumes in 1842.

At the same time, some of the novels selected for translation well deserved to be published abroad. One is not surprised to find translations of *The Heidenmauer* and *The Headsman*, Cooper's idea novels written in Europe and dealing with European subjects. Ideas as well as adventure also appear in *The Bravo*. One is not prepared, however, to discover that *The Headsman* went through three editions and was brought out by two different publishers at the same time. Nor would one expect that *The Two Admirals* (1842), a little known but rather good novel, would be discovered and translated in 1854, a dozen years after the original publication of the novel. The major surprise, however, is reserved for the Italian publication of *The Crater* (1848), another of Cooper's

idea books. This novel, which enjoyed unexpected success in Italy, was Cooper's version of *Robinson Crusoe*. Two Milanese publishers discovered this book and brought out simultaneous editions, abridged for young readers, in 1878 under the title *Il Robinson del Pacifico*. Still another firm reissued it in 1887; but there the publishing history of *The Crater* in Italy ends. It is interesting that this novel is important enough to have appeared recently in a scholar's edition under the imprint of the Belknap Press of Harvard University.

II

Despite the long acquaintance that Italian readers have had with Cooper, only a modest amount of criticism has accompanied the translation of his work. During the first thirty years that his novels were available in Italian his readers knew him only as an American novelist. The novels had to speak for themselves, and the translators apparently felt neither the urge nor the necessity to equip their versions with critical or biographical essays. This fact suggests that there was a ready market for historical fiction and that readers did not need a rationale for doing what came naturally. It also may be true that introductory material seemed superfluous because Cooper usually supplied his own prefaces. Not until 1858 did a Cooper novel appear with a critical and biographical (albeit very brief) preface by publisher or translator, and since that date critical material has appeared only now and again.⁷

The 1858 preface accompanied the second Italian translation of *The Red Rover*, Cooper's novel about an 18th Century American pirate. This is one Cooper novel that particularly needs a defense to explain away the life of piracy of the chief character. Cooper himself exonerates his protagonist, rather

7. I ignore brief prefaces in several early editions of *The Pilot*, which discuss only the difficulties of translating Cooper's nautical terminology but make no value judgments about his work.

unconvincingly, from his criminal career by having him die ultimately serving the American cause in the Revolution. The Italian publisher of this novel in 1858 defended Cooper — as well as other romancers — from the «blue-stockings», to whom novel-reading corrupted the heart and debased the imagination. Cooper, the preface argues, belongs with Scott and Manzoni in the company of ennobling novelists who lift up the spirit, exalt the imagination, lead readers to a true understanding of history and to the love of virtue.

Fortunately, this introduction goes beyond an attack on 19th Century prejudice. The writer gives his readers what probably was the first essay on Cooper to appear in Italy. The points he makes about Cooper would find little disagreement among present-day critics. He praises Cooper for «painting in vivid colors the virgin nature of the new world, the primitive character of the Indians, the maritime life».⁸ Furthermore, Cooper is felicitous in his descriptions, faithful to his material, and he treats «events of his national history so as to make poetry of them». This essay also contains a few biographical details of Cooper's life.

Towards the end of the 19th Century, when Cooper was beginning his metamorphosis into a juvenile author, Carlo Segré wrote an essay on Cooper in a collection called *Saggi critici di letteratura straniera*. This essay begins with the nostalgic questions: who has not loved Cooper since his youth? «Everyone has lived for a time with his heroes and heroines in the sad and active events of war, in the fierce deeds in the virgin forests, in the battles, in the perils, in the victories over the raging waves of the ocean».⁹ This author in a rather artificial juxtaposition goes on to compare Cooper with Pierre Loti, both being romancers of the sea, and finds Cooper, the older romancer, greater and more powerful but Loti, the modern type, more minute and penetrating.

The essay is interesting in its defense of Cooper's right to

8. See Bibliography, *The Red Rover*, items 2 and 3 p. 70.

9. Firenze, Successori Le Monnier, 1894, p. 247.

make his people bigger than life, and it quotes approvingly from Cooper's preface to the 1850 edition of his works. In this preface Cooper argues that « it is the privilege of all writers of fiction... to present the *beau-idéal* of their characters to the reader. This it is which constitutes poetry, and to suppose that the red-man is to be represented only in the squalid misery... that certainly more or less belongs to his condition, is, we apprehend, taking a very narrow view of an author's privileges. Such criticism would have deprived the world of even Homer ».¹⁰ Segré goes on to admit that Cooper's style and characterizations are inferior to Scott's, but he believes that Cooper's principal merit is in invention. He concludes with the hope that people still can take pleasure in the writings of « old Cooper ».

Although Cooper does not seem to be well known among university students, who confine their reading as much as possible to contemporary authors, he has not been neglected by the academic critics in their literary histories. Rolando Anzilotti,¹¹ for example, agrees with Segré that Cooper is a master of invention and first rate as a constructor of plots and an unraveler of complications. He also agrees with Segré and all commentators on Cooper that Cooper's stylistic limitations are serious. But despite the defects of style, the lack of verisimilitude, conventional sentiment, and clumsy dialogue, his hunters, his pioneers, and his Indians are memorable, and Natty Bumppo is unforgettable. These are critical opinions that American academicians also subscribe to.

Salvatore Rosati,¹² to cite another literary historian, is in general agreement with Anzilotti. He notes Cooper's lack of depth in characterization, his repetition of certain expedients, and his suspension of the narrative for interminable conversations; but he also believes that the *Leatherstocking Tales* are

10. *Cooper's Works*, p. ix

11. *Storia della letteratura americana* (Milano, Francesco Vallardi, 1957), pp. 28-29.

12. *Storia della letteratura americana* (Torino, Edizioni Radio Italiana, 1956), pp. 83-87.

Cooper's most important contribution, and he stresses the importance of Cooper as a pioneer in the sea story. He was perhaps the first novelist to see in the organization of the ship's company « an image of society in miniature ». Notwithstanding all his limitations Cooper had the ability to tell a good story, and the sea novel down to Conrad owes a distinct debt to Cooper.

Cooper's importance as a writer of sea stories is one of the chief points made by Ruggero Bianchi in the only scholarly edition of Cooper now in print in Italy. His edition of *Il Pilota* (1964), the first published since 1868, contains a long and thoughtful essay on Cooper. Not only is *The Pilot* important as the first sea novel to describe the movement and maneuvering of ships, but it also treats the topics dear to Cooper's heart: the frontier, the mythologizing of the Revolutionary War, the theme of the good savage. Bianchi goes beyond Rosati's brief treatment of Cooper and finds him a forerunner of Melville as a sea writer and concludes that Cooper « belongs clearly to the same world of Melville, of Thoreau, of Mark Twain, anticipating solutions and directions which these other writers would follow, often in an independent manner but with an insistence and a warmth which places them necessarily within the sphere of the same mentality, of a unique tradition, of a common literary *humus*... Cooper is... typically American ».¹³ And he concludes that despite the attacks Twain would later make on Cooper, as in his essay « Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses », Cooper was actually in the American grain, as was Twain himself. Furthermore, Cooper was traveling down a road he did not know himself he was following — towards realism. In *The Pilot* nothing turns out as the characters wish. The novel is both ridiculous and realistic, but the miscarriage of plans forms a grim humor leading towards realism — an aspect of the novel that the critics have ignored.

13. See Bibliography, *The Pilot*, item 6, p. 67.

While Bianchi may be claiming too much for Cooper, one tends to agree with Fernanda Pivano's essay on « Gli Indiani di Fenimore Cooper », originally published as the introduction to her translation of *The Last of the Mohicans* in 1946. Pavese, Vittorini, and the Italian literati of the Thirties did not discover Cooper at the same time they were discovering Melville and others, but Pivano found him during the war while she was shut up in a hotel room with a type-writer on the bed and the war going on all about her. The world of Cooper « was not the America that Pavese had taught me to read with favor, but it was all the same a marvelous world in which were idealized dignity and courage more than power and villainy ».¹⁴ Pivano does not see Cooper through rose-colored glasses, however, and notes that Cooper's Indians are Sir Walter Scott's knights dressed in buckskin; but what was important for her at the time she translated the novel was the feeling that Cooper belonged to the American tradition. She found that Cooper interested her whereas Scott and Dumas had lost their savor. She found in Cooper the same American temper that runs through much of the literature of the United States. This she defined as a « stubborn but at the same time heroic force to free itself from the influence of Europe ». American writers, she noted, seem to feel this as a personal message. She found it in Whitman, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, even Irving and Poe. It occurs in the most disparate writers, and while in Cooper it is not very strong, it nevertheless is present in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Certainly Pivano and other Italian commentators on Cooper, both past and present, are correct in their general estimates of the man and his work. A reading of Cooper is necessary for a full understanding of the American tradition, and while his novels are often creaky and sometimes exasperating, they cannot be ignored. In their best moments they well repay study, and one hopes that several more Cooper titles

14. *La Balena bianca e altri miti* (Milano: Mondadori, 1961), p. 97.

will follow Bianchi's edition of *Il Pilota* in well-translated editions with adequate critical apparatus. Certainly the Leatherstocking Tales should be rescued from the present exclusive popularity as rewritten and condensed stories for children. A novel such as *Satanstoe*, which never has been translated into Italian, might well be added to the eighteen Cooper titles that already have appeared. Whatever happens to Cooper in Italy, however, one conclusion seems sure: he is not likely to be forgotten. Some 148 editions of his novels over a period of 138 years constitute artifacts too numerous to be ignored by scholars, and his hold on the hearts of children is a permanent hostage to the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PART I

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ITALIAN EDITIONS OF COOPER

The following bibliography lists 148 editions of Cooper published in Italy between 1828 and 1964. I have seen more than 80 per cent of the titles listed. The others I have collected from reliable bibliographical sources: Attilio Pagliaini, comp., *Catalogo generale della libreria italiana dall'anno 1847 a tutto il 1899* (Milano, 1901); *primo supplemento dal 1900 al 1910*; *secondo supplemento dal 1911 al 1920*; *quarto supplemento dal 1931 al 1940*; Laura Gubinelli, «Bibliografia delle prime traduzioni americane in Italia dalla seconda metà del 1700 al 1900» (unpublished thesis at the University of Rome); catalogues of the Biblioteca Braidense in Milano and the Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria in Torino. From these last sources I have included several books listed in the catalogues but which now are missing from the stacks.

*Starred items are those I was unable to see.

Precaution (1820)

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PART II

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