
Wayne Franklin. *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 708p.

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Because family members, literary scholars, and biographers have written extensively about Cooper's life over the years, an obvious question comes to mind when reviewing a work of this scope: why do we need a new biography of his life? Franklin answers that Cooper remains "the last major figure in early American culture lacking a full biography" (xv). He argues that previous works have suffered from either limited availability of sources or from prejudices that have made for unsympathetic biographies, or both. A long history of misinformation, personal attacks, and unfair criticism of his literary contributions has, Franklin compellingly argues, created an incomplete and biased view of our first great American novelist. Franklin is an unapologetic apologist for Cooper, and he makes the traditional (and compelling) case for his role in the formation of the American novel, as well as the less predictable claim that Cooper is the inventor of American novel-writing as a career. The close attention to the business end of Cooper's life and the conditions of the early American publishing industry are particularly interesting, and this aspect of the biography alone is an important contribution to the field of early American literary studies. The biography sympathetically discusses Cooper's literary style without ignoring its critics—most notably Mark Twain—and focuses on the pioneering, innovative aspects of his prose. Franklin is not afraid to make bold, broad claims: for example, that Cooper creates the literary market for American novels and enables the careers of novelists such as Melville and Twain. Furthermore, in taking on Twain's famous criticism of Cooper's "literary offenses," Franklin answers that Natty Bumppo is the literary father of Huck Finn and wryly adds, "No wonder that Mark Twain felt a need to hunt down and kill Natty's own progenitor" (xxii).

Franklin's bare-knuckle defense of Cooper is refreshing, and it is also indicative of the far-reaching claims that he makes in this compendious partial biography. Because Franklin is attempting to reshuffle the current American canon where Cooper has been fading, his work is pertinent to anyone who teaches early or nineteenth-century American literature. He makes a strong case for Cooper's reintroduction into the pantheon of "important" American writers, but his zeal for championing the writer and his works sometimes leads him to a less than rigorous defense against the strongest criticisms of Cooper. For example, in the "Love and War" and "Hawk-Eye" chapters he discusses racial attitudes without fully engaging the broader discussions of racism in Cooper's works by critics such as Francesca Sawaya, Magdalen Mayer, and Barbara Alice Mann. Franklin's work, however, is by no means a hagiography,

though the agenda of returning Cooper to his “proper” place in American literary discussions is clearly expressed and defended. This is an old-fashioned biography in that it is frankly admiring and proprietary, even defensive, in chronicling Cooper’s life, yet it is very contemporary in its close attention to the cultural, artistic, and financial conditions under which the novelist wrote. I find the combination quite compelling. Altogether the biography is an engaging, well written account of an important time, place, and career in American literary history. It surprises, informs, and challenges the reader, and should be on the reading list of any early or nineteenth-century Americanist. Franklin keeps his promise in his introduction: “Cooper’s life richly repays scrutiny a century and a half after his death” (xxxiv). *