THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS (1992)

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851), born in Burlington, New Jersey, was raised in Cooperstown, New York, then a wild countryside. Expelled from Yale in 1806, he entered the Navy in 1808. Resigned from Navy in 1811, and married in New York. First of 33 novels of extremely unequal quality published in 1819. The best novels were about the sea and the wild frontier. Cooper spent much of the 1820s as a diplomat in Europe. In his later years, he was involved in many legal combats.

His most famous works are five novels, known as the “Leatherstocking Tales.” They follow the adventures of Natty Bumppo, fearless frontiersman from his young manhood to his old age. The order in which they portray Bumppo’s life is not the same as the order of their publication: “The Deerslayer” (1841), “The Last of the Mohicans,” (1826), “The Pathfinder,” (1840), “The Pioneers,” (1823), and “The Prairie,” (1827). The tales cover Bumppo’s life from 1740 to 1806. Bumppo was also known as “Hawkeye,” “La Longue Carabine,” “Pathfinder,” and “Leatherstocking.” He was the child of white parents, but grew up among Delaware Indians. His religious training was from the Moravian Church. He is closely associated with his foster brother, “Chingachgook,” and his nephew “Uncas.”

Among screen versions of TLOTM, there was a silent version in 1920, a 1932 9-episode serial version, a 1936 version, a 1971 BBC TV serial, a 1977 movie, and the 1992 version, starring Daniel Day-Lewis.

Who were the Mohicans? They were an eastern branch of the Algonquian Tribes. Their name means “people of the waters that are never still,” meaning the tidal reaches of the Hudson River. Around 1800, the Mohicans migrated westward to Oneida Tribal lands in western New York. Those who identify with that tribe now live in Shawano Co, Wisconsin. Their religion is listed as Moravian Church.

The action of TLOTM takes place in 1757. The French and Indian Wars lasted from 1754 to 1763, and they largely decided that the fate of North America would be mainly English rather than French. The American war was an offshoot of the Seven Years War (1756-1763) between Prussia and England, against a coalition of France, Russia, and Austria.

TLOTM tales place around the Siege of Fort William Henry, August 3-9, 1757. The English forces were led by Colonel Munro, whose daughters, Alice and Cora are the heroines of the novel. The French and Indians forces were led by General Louis Joseph, Marquis de Montcalm, who won battles against the English at Oswego (1756) and Ticonderoga (1758), but is most famous for losing the battle at Quebec in 1759 to General Wolfe. Both generals were killed in that battle.

Fort William Henry was at the southern tip of Lake George, which, with Lake Champlain to the North, made up a major waterway between English-held territory and French Canada.

The Cast:

Daniel Day-Lewis as Nathaniel “Hawkeye” Poe (name changed from “Natty Bumppo”)

Madeline Stowe as Cora Munro

Russell Means as Chingachgook

Eric Schweig as Uncas

Jodhi May as Alice Munro

Steve Waddington as Major Duncan Heyward

Wes Studi as Magua

Maurice Roëves as Colonel Edmund Munro

Patrice Chéreau as General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm

Directed by Michael Mann; Screenplay by Michael Mann and Christopher Crowe, and Philip Dunne (1936); produced by Michael Mann and Hunt Lowry; Camera by Dante Spinotti; edited by Dov Hoenig and Arthur Schmidt; Music by Trevor Jones and Randy Edelman; production company: 20th Century Fox. Running time: 112 minutes; languages: English, French, Mohawk, Cherokee, and Delaware. Budget: $40 million; Box Office: $143 million.

In the Cooper novel, Bumppo is about 40, and he is not a romantic hero.

The 1992 version gives a writing credit to Philip Dunne, the adapter for the 1936 version, which initiated a sub plot in which Hawkeye foments a rebellion at Fort William Henry among American farmers, who want to go home and defend their farms from marauding Indians. These pre-Revolutionary War feelings are not in the Cooper novel.

The 1936 version begins in the “civilized” world of Albany and ends there as well. The 1992 version begins and ends in wilderness (actually, North Carolina).

In Cooper’s novel, Cora comes from Munro’s first marriage, in the West Indies, to a woman who had an enslaved ancestor. It is claimed that she is the first mulatto character in American fiction. In the 1920 and 1936 versions, the romance between Uncas and Cora is more pronounced than in 1992. None of the versions I looked at alludes to Cora’s African background.

In the novel, Major Heyward is a Virginian-born officer in the British army.

In Europe, the “Leatherstocking Tales” were greatly popular. There is a statue of Natty Bumppo in a small German town, and in the 1980s, Russia issued a series of postage stamps illustrating episodes from the Tales.

In earlier film versions, Bumppo is never without his coonskin hat. In the 1992 version, Day-Lewis is hatless, and never misses.

One character from Cooper’s original who is missing from the 1936 and 1993 versions is David Mamut. He is a “psalm singer,” who in all situations is given to singing psalms or hymns. He is Cooper’s attempt to introduce some humor into a serious story. He is especially useful in that the Indians think him crazy, and such people are treated in Indian tribal society with kindness, even with reverence.

About Cooper’s novels, Francis Parkman said, that despite some reservations about the loquacity of the characters, the bloodthirstiness of some of the scenes, and the improbabilities of plot, he found the descriptions “instinct with life, with the very spirit of the wilderness; they breathe the somber poetry of solitude and danger.”

In the 1992 version, Montcalm was played by Patrice Chéreau, who was one of the most famous opera directors of the second half of the 20th century.