# "Sympathizing Imperial Eyes": The Politics of the Western Representation in *The Sketch Book*

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**Introduction**

Although Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book* chiefly consists of sketches dealing with European subjects, it also includes several essays handling American themes, two of which are upon Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Earlier studies have considered Washington Irving's representation of the West and American Indians to be humane, compassionate, and sympathetic; for example, Furst judged "Traits of Indian Character" and "Philip of Pokanoket," the two pieces treating of Indians[1] in *The Sketch Book*, as "credible alike to his [Irving's] humanity and to his good judgement" (Furst 405), and Littlefield presumed that the former piece was written to "correct the image of the Indian" (138). In addition, Field recently propounded the view that Irving had the intention of "righting the prejudice of Puritan writers like Increase Mather" (37), while Zimmerman (2014) regarded him as displaying sympathy toward the West, including Indians.

In contrast to these opinions, this article aims to clarify that the sympathy for Indians in the two pieces was indeed in collusion with the then-dominant politics. To substantiate this claim that they operated in connivance with an expansionist and white-supremacist ideology in a peculiar manner that I would call "condescending sympathy," I compare the representations of the West and Indians in the two pieces of *The Sketch Book* with those of other authors who more overtly expressed prejudices about Indians to bolster this ideology.

## I

First, I examine how the West and Indians were represented in quotations from works almost coeval with *The Sketch Book*. The distinctive feature that they share is that they countenanced the effort to settle and colonize the vast West that was pursued throughout the nineteenth century. Concretely speaking, they culturally performed the function of giving the West and Indians an inferior status to the East (=civilization) and whites (=the civilized); in other words, they developed a justification for the dichotomies of civilization/savagery and whites/reds, thereby justifying the conquest itself.

Alongside the two aforementioned pieces in *The Sketch Book* examined in this study, I will inspect Daniel Bryan's *The Mountain Muse* (1813) and James Kirke Paulding's *The Backwoodsman* (1818) as representative contemporaneous works.

Before analyzing these works, an explanation of why they were selected is in order. First, since *The Mountain Muse* and *The Backwoodsman* are contemporaries of *The Sketch Book* categorized as early instances of the literary genre called "western"[2] that chiefly deals with events in the American West, the West and the Indians that the writers portrayed should not differ greatly. In addition, although they share the commonality that both of them assent to Western colonization, each of them looks down upon the West and Indians from a different standpoint; hence I judged them to be suitable materials for comparison so as to bring into relief the distinct character of "Philip of Pokanoket" and "Traits of Indian Character."

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*The Mountain Muse* is an epic of over 250 pages that deals with Daniel Boone (1734–1820), an actual western pioneer who often appeared in literary works. The important characteristic of this work is that it most *directly* reflects the ideology of Western expansion. "Directly" here denotes that its representation of the West and Indians is made from a viewpoint that forthrightly accepts the superiority of the

East and the whites, namely, the dichotomy of civilization/savagery; as a result, the West and Indians are obvious targets for subjugation and exploitation. In other words, it observes them with "disdaining eyes." Here we may observe a typical declaration of white colonialism, which flattered itself as destined to civilize the primitive and having the right to subdue a people or society it deemed primitive for this noble purpose.

Turning to its concrete descriptions, whereas various elements of the West are rendered by such terms as remind the reader of ignorance and savagery, e.g., adjectives like "bloody" and "barbarian" and nouns like "waste," "death," and "blackness," Boone, a white colonizer from civilization, is portrayed as one who "civilizes" and "humanizes" Indians and brings "kindling sparks" and "comfort" to the West. One can discern the aforementioned function quite easily here. For instance, Bryan paints the West in the face of Boone as follows:

> When nought but beasts and bloody Indians
> Dwelt throughout the mighty waste, and Cruelty
> And Death and superstition, triple leagued
> Held there their horrid reign, and imperious sway
> The guardian seraphs of benign Reform
> With keen prophetic glance, the worth beheld
> Of the immense expanse, its future fame
> Its ponderous moment in the golden scales
> Of Freedom, science, and Religious Truth
> When by Refinement's civilizing hard
> Its roughness shall all smoothed away O yes
> Companions in the joys of bliss
> We will refine, exalt and humanize
> The uncivilized Barbarians of the West. (22)

Here the West is represented as "the mighty waste" where "nought

but beasts and bloody Indians" dwells and the triple league of "[c]ruelty," "[d]eath and superstition" hold "their horrid reign, and imperious sway," and it is proclaimed that "[w]e," namely the Whites, "will refine, exalt and humanize" the Indians, who are described as "[t]he uncivilized barbarians of the West."

Clearly, the West is regarded as an inferior land and the Indians who live there as nothing but a barbarous people who should be "civilized." This quotation from the early part of the epic should suffice to demonstrate Bryan's deprecatory view of the West. This discriminating tone is unchanged in the middle section, where Boone deplores his separation from his brother:

> But he [Boone] too well a Hero's duty knew
> To bury in privation-brooded glooms,
> In the dark shadows of domestic woe,
> The kindling sparks of useful Enterprise
> Which promised by gradations to expand,
> Until their bright illuminations spread,
> Through the Barbarian Blackness of the West. (130)

In spite of his grief, "[t]he kindling sparks" of his "useful [e]nterprise" should expand "[u]ntil their bright illuminations spread [t]hrough the [b]arbarian Blackness of the West."

Additionally, in the last part, Boone's triumph, that is, the triumph of the Whites or of civilization, is extolled as follows:

> His labors, Boone beholds
> Unfolding their rich Comforts o'er the West:
> While Amity's restrictive bonds confine
> The nerves of savage Slaughter. Happy now,
> In contemplation of the brightening scene,
> He to Affection's sweet embrace retires

And reaps the Harvest of his useful toils.
Immortal Founder of stupendous States! (227)

Boone beholds his labors "[u]nfolding their rich [c]omforts o'er the West." while Indians' savage nature is abated through "[a]mity's restrictive bonds." Happy Boone is now eulogized as the founding father of "stupendous [s]tates," contemplating "the brighting scene," retiring to "[a]ffection's sweet embrace" and reaping "the [h]arvest of his useful toils."

No viewpoint that sees the West and Indians as equals can be found in these representations. All the rich unfolding comforts, amity's restrictive bonds, and the harvest of useful toils are held by the Whites; the voice of the recipients, or rather victims, is totally suppressed and ignored.

As evinced above, Bryan with his "belittling eyes" thoroughly depicts the West as an inferior waste and Indians as a barbarous people. They are just objects to be grasped, conquered, and exploited by the superior Whites. This mode of representation can be assumed to display the expansionist ideology directly.

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But one also observes representations of the West that do not evidently underscore civilization's supremacy over it. This approach glorifies the objects, instead of belittling them as savage or uncivilized. A marked specimen of such works is *The Backwoodsman of Paulding*, which was published five years after *The Mountain Muse*. This is also an epic that narrates the experiences of a pioneer and his family during their trek to the West. In this work the West is glorified and the values that support the superiority of White civilization are camouflaged. In her *Imperial Eyes* (1992), Marie Louise Pratt stated that even when the Europeans depict a different, namely not a European world, as splendid and attractive, they still regard the world as worth taking because of its splendor and attraction; therefore, they see it

with "imperial eyes." The *Backwoodsman*'s glorification of the West is also proceeds with "imperial eyes." Both belittling the West as barbarous and acclaiming it as great have identical results when the object is viewed through "imperial eyes."

When surveying the actual text, one perceives that although the field is portrayed as "wilds" and Indians as "bloody," nonetheless the West is mainly depicted in favorable terms; it is a place where one seeks a "happier home," modified by "glowing," and likened to a "promised land" and a "lone and spotless virgin." Still, it must be noted that such expressions are given from the standpoint of the protagonist, that is, they are applied to the West as a place to colonize and settle. In other words, they demonstrate its value as a land to be taken.

However, I should first mention that in its depictions of Indians, the work directly reflects the same expansionist ideology as *The Mountain Muse*.

> And bloody Indian, whose infernal yell,
> Of torture, death, and scalping tells full well;
> Who hated blood of white-man never spares,
> Women, nor babes, nor reverend snow white hairs. (22)

Here Indians are the relentless adversaries of the Whites and represented as a people whose only trait is cruelty. In another section the work states:

> There, mid the howling forest dark and drear,
> Rov'd the wild Indian, wilder than the deer,
> King of the woods—who other blessings priz'd,
> And arts and industry alike despis'd. . . . (53)

They seem the embodiment of "wildness." One discovers many a degrading articulation like "wily" (70) and "moody" (80), and reads that

they were a people "who ne'er knew / Themes of philosophy, or false or true, / whose mind was like the forest that he rov'd, / Dark, gloomy, ray less, rugged, unimproved . . ." (95).

Admittedly, *The Backwoodsman* also recognizes Indians as a different people from the Whites, who are not cruel and wild, and as an object to be eliminated and vanquished. Nonetheless, one can detect a rather distinct quality in the descriptions of the West as a land, and here I believe "imperial eyes" can be detected.

At the outset, the protagonist, a young man, is introduced as follows:

> MY humble theme is of a hardy swain,
> The lowliest of the lowly rural train,
> Who left his native fields afar to roam,
> In western wilds, in search of happier home. (7)

Albeit humblest among the country-born people, he, a robust sapling, bids adieu to his home and ventures into the West to discover a "happier home." The work is pervaded by praise of the West. From the expression, "neglected Muse! Of this our western clime" (8), it is clear that the West is regarded as a land of great potential, although it is as yet rugged. What is more interesting is passages with religious connotations, such as "this man's chosen resting place,– / This nestling corner of the human race;– / This new Medina of the glowing West / Where want finds plenty, and the exile rest . . ." (14).

Although it should not be overlooked that "man" and "human race" here blatantly exclude the people who already live there, especially remarkable is the phrase "new Medina." Medina is well-known as the town to which Muhammad led the Hegira in order to protect his faith and his followers from persecution and solidified the foundations of Islam. This analogy is significant, for it appears to reflect the Whites' intention to settle in a new land where plentiful resources are waiting to be exploited, prosper, and develop their society there. No heed for the

settled and the utilized can be discerned here, which one often finds throughout this work, as in the description of the West as "a land [that] there lay, / whose unexhausted energies of soil / nobly repaid the hardy lab'rer's toil" (19).

Another religious analogy evocative of biblical stories is also used to justify the Whites' cause:

> The op'ning eyelids of the blue ey'd day
> Saw our industrious pilgrims on their way;
> For Spring was waning fast, the Summer near,
> And Time would soon evolve the passing year;
> Winter might come ere yet the houseless band
> Had found a refuge in the promised land. (38)

The West that offers refuge to a group of diligent homeless pilgrims is here the "promised land." Refuge for whom? The answer, of course, is for the white settlers. In an age when religious sentiment still held a strong hold on people's minds, this phrase would have summoned up a chain of episodes concerning "the Promised Land" in the Bible. Canaan, the Promised Land, is "a land that floweth with milk and honey," promised to Abraham and his posterity, and Joshua, the leader of the Israelites and the executor of God's justice, masters it by vanquishing its defiled inhabitants. The parallel between this story and the colonization of the West is palpable. The West is rich but inhabited by defiled savages; hence, it is just for the civilized Whites to conquer it as its rightful rulers.

Such a tone continues till the final segment of the work, when the protagonist's trek is almost finished. It states:

> Yes! Lone and spotless virgin of the west,
> No tyrant pillows on thy swelling breast,
> Thou bow'st before no despot's guilty throne,

But bends't the knee to God's, and his alone! (175)

The virgin of the West with swelling breast bends her knee to God's throne alone. Here one readily descries a discourse unmistakably justifying the Whites' exploitation of the land. As demonstrated above, although it employing the indirect method of glorifying the West as an opulent place, *The Backwoodsman* looks down upon the land as a place to be utilized and grasped from a standpoint that adopts "imperial eyes"; therefore, the work also reflects the current ideology of expansionism.

## II

In this section I will examine the representation of the West and Indians in Irving's "Traits of Indian Character" and "Philip of Pokanoket." Among other pieces collected in *The Sketch Book*, which consists principally of European accounts, the two narratives are singular. While I propose that their representations of the West are made from a viewpoint based on "sympathizing imperial eyes," I should explicate this coinage before advancing my main arguments with quotations from them.

In the section above analyzing *The Backwoodsman*, I advanced a theory that one could recognize "imperial eyes" in its manner of glorifying the West. However, there is a strategy that covers its lordly gaze more cunningly than through glorification; that is, sympathy "from above." Sympathy may certainly seem a stance closer to and more understanding of the object than glorification. Surely a sympathy expressed from a viewpoint at the eye level of the object can be deemed so; yet not all sympathy is offered from the same height as its object. It is this that I call "from-above" sympathy. It can be defined as a sympathetic gesture that appears to exhibit comprehension of its object but actually never allows the absolute chasm between them to be bridged. Such a sympathy simply works as an effective device to man-

tle its superior position and shares the same values as depictions that despise an object as savage and uncivilized and that glorify an object as a target to be grasped and exploited. What I term "sympathizing imperial eyes" is a look that internalizes such "from-above" sympathy and contributes to the expansionist ideology.

The reason why this has been overlooked in previous studies might well be that the way Indians are represented in the two pieces is quite shrewd. Certainly it would be difficult to discern a prejudiced thought in these passages.

Concerning the descriptions of the land itself and its inorganic elements, expressions that seem to suspend judgment about their value predominate, although one notices that they often emphasize the scale of an object, such as "its vast lakes, boundless forests, majestic rivers, and trackless plains" (247), "the boundless bosom of the wilderness," and "vast forests" (254).

Meanwhile, with respect to the representations of Indians, one can easily recognize distinctive qualities. They appear to sympathize entirely with the native people:

> It has been the lot of the unfortunate aborigines of America in the early periods of colonization to be doubly wronged by the white men. They have been dispossessed of their hereditary possessions by mercenary and frequently wanton warfare, and their characters have been traduced by bigoted and interested writers. The colonists often treated them like beasts of the forest, and the author has endeavored to justify him in his outrages. . . . the poor wanderers of the forest were persecuted and defamed. . . . (247)

In this beginning section of "Traits of Indian Character," Indians are described as "aborigines of America," which might remind the reader of the current expression "native American," and physical and verbal atrocities of the Whites are mentioned. The tenor of the argument is

repeated in the following passage, which states that "the rights of the savage have seldom been properly appreciated or respected by the white man" (247).

Beside these accounts mentioning Whites' bias, one finds many phrases directly showing sympathetic predilections, e.g., "that proud independence, which formed the main pillar of savage virtue" (248) and the "free and noble qualty [sic] of their natures" (249).

Additionally, in "Philip of Pokanoket," the Indian hero Pometakom, whom the Whites call Philip, possesses a "lofty spirit," "ambitious temper," and "well-known energy and enterprise" (261), evinces "a vigorous mind; a fertility in expedients; a contempt of suffering and hardship; and an unconquerable resolution" (265) in a skirmish with the Whites, and is delineated as a man who never loses his pride even "at this last refuge of desperation and despair" (272). The concluding remark below may be a genuine articulation of admiration by the narrator:

> With heroic qualities and bold achievements that would have graced a civilized warrior, and have rendered him the theme of the poet and the historian, he lived a wanderer and a fugitive in his native land, and went down, like a lonely bark foundering amid darkness and tempest, without a pitying eye to weep his fall or a friendly hand to record his struggle. (273)

Aside from the above, one may detect several statements that would strike readers as bearing no relation to expansionist ideology; yet, when one pays acute heed to the whole structure of these works, he would penetrate the surface to find slyly blanketed "imperial eyes" expressed through a "from-above" sympathy.

Initially, although the observed objects are neither the West itself nor Indians, the viewpoint from which the narrator contemplates the unknown bears insinuating connotations. He remarks:

> I was always fond of visiting new scenes, and observing strange characters and manners. . . . I even journeyed one long summer's day to the summit of the most distant hill, whence I stretched my eye over many a mile of terra incognita, and was astonished to find how vast a globe I inhabited. (11)

It should be noted that the narrator, who likes to visit new scenes and see strange characters and manners, physically "looks down" upon the unknown world before his eyes from "the summit" of a hill.

Second, it is remarkable that the narrator, even when he adopts a sympathetic perspective, consistently portrays the Indians as an uncivilized and barbarous people. As Littlefield cogently points out (138), this is evident from the fact that "savage" is the word that is most frequently used to represent Indians; besides, in "Traits of Indian Character," Indians are persecuted and denigrated "because they are ignorant" (247), and even as their rights have not been properly respected or upheld, "in peace he [an Indian] has too often been the dupe of the artful traffic [sic]" (247). From the standpoint of the narrator's values, they are just "without being benefited by its civilization" (248), and have "their rude code of honor" (252).

On the other hand, various expressions depict the White settlers as an intellectually superior people. These are of course artfully mingled with "from-above" sympathy so that it is not easy to tease them apart. The American government judiciously and humanely endeavors to "inculcate a friendly and forbearing spirit towards them [Indians]" (248), whereas Indians' valor is warped by "the superior knowledge and power of their enlightened neighbors." (248). The narrator additionally states, "[Whites'] chivalrous courage . . . is the offspring of society, and produced by education. It is honorable, because it is in fact the triumph of lofty sentiment over an instinctive repugnance to pain, and over those yearnings after personal ease and security" (253).

What one can grasp from these expressions is that the narrator

must perceive at least an intellectual chasm between Whites and Indians, and that the latter are an inferior people who should be educated and civilized by the former, although he cloaks the idea in sympathetic wording.

What should be heeded next is that the Indians upon whom the narrator remarks sympathetically are not flesh-and-blood Indians; in other words, they are chiefly Indians of the past. Concretely speaking, Indians who are described in the present and the present perfect tenses should strike readers as decadent and mean figures.

The Indians in those days who live at the edge of the frontier are "composed of degenerate beings" whose "proud independence which formed the main pillar of savage virtue has been shaken down, and the whole moral fabric lies in ruins" (248), and "the cruelty of the Indians towards their prisoners has been heightened" (252).

On the other hand, an old account by an historian of New England praises Indians as follows:

> their life is so void of care, and they are so loving also, that they make use of those things they enjoy as common goods, and are therein so compassionate that rather than one should starve through want, they would starve all. (249)

But the narrator says of them, "such were the Indians" (249). In another passage, the past Indians who had "the stern resolution, the unbending pride, the loftiness of spirit that seemed to nerve the hearts of these self-taught heroes and to raise them above the instinctive feelings of human nature" are introduced as "the eastern tribes [who] have long since disappeared" (256). To phrase it differently, the Indians who lived in the West in Irving's day do *not* possess such qualities.

One can recognize from the descriptions above that the Indians with whom the narrator sympathizes and of whom he approves are not his contemporaries, but those of foregone years who roamed in the

wilderness of yore. In the meantime, his present-day Indians are portrayed as corrupt, degenerate, and ignorant beings.

This can be confirmed by analyzing the structure of "Philip of Pokanoket." As stated formerly, Philip, the chieftain who stands against the invading Whites, his father Massasoit, and his brother Alexander are consistently represented as virtuous figures in this piece, and it is admittedly understandable that one may judge the narrator as seeing Indians favorably and sympathetically; however, they also serve to highlight the inferiority of the Indians of Irving's day, who should be subjugated, for the very demise of Philip is triggered by his fellow Indians, whose treachery "seemed to wring his heart and reduce him to despondency" (271). His last moment is told as follows:

> The brother of the victim made his escape, and in revenge betrayed the retreat of his chieftain. A body of white men and Indian were immediately dispatched to the swamp where Philip lay crouched, glaring with fury and despair. [H]e . . . was shot through the heart by a renegade Indian of his own nation. (272)

Following this, the narrator speaks of this treason and his death again: "the treachery and desertion of many of his followers in whose affections he had confided, is said to have desolated his heart, and to have bereaved him of all farther comfort," and "he . . . went down, like a lonely bark, foundering amid darkness and tempest" (273).

Here is the rhetoric; namely, "past Indians are a splendid people. One can discern such exemplars in Massasoit, Alexander, and Philip. *But* they are now gone and the Indians who remain now are descendants of the people who joined forces with the Whites and betrayed them. Why should such a people be worthy of respect?" Therefore, the story is "how they were invaded, *corrupted, despoiled*" (257; emphasis added). This logic corresponds with the descriptions of the Indians coeval with Irving.

In addition, what tells of the gulf and the ideology most eloquently is that although the narrator predicts the extinction of the Indians, nonetheless he observes it as their destined future without proposing measures to halt it. He says:

> [S]uch [disappearance] must, sooner or later, be the fate of those other tribes which skirt the frontiers, and have occasionally been inveigled from their forests to mingle in the wars of white men. In a little while, and they will go the way that their brethren have gone before.(256)

This remark is never made from a genuinely sympathetic standpoint horizontal with its objects. He beholds their disappearance from a lofty position. Who will execute this disappearance? Of course it is Whites.

**Conclusion**

As demonstrated above, the two pieces concerning Indians in *The Sketch Book* have a shrouded aspect of contributing to the expansionist ideology of the day: first, by representing them as savage and ignorant beings who should be civilized by Whites; second, by contrasting the worthy Indians of the past with the degenerate ones of the present, who are inferior to the Whites. What characterizes this may be expressed as "sympathetic imperial eyes," which work as a device to prop up such an ideology.

This paper has clarified a heretofore unnoticed aspect of *The Sketch Book,* namely, that it is partly in collusion with the dominant politics of its age. Then, the naïve opinion that has traditionally regarded the compassionate expressions of Indians as Irving's genuine feelings should be reconsidered. However, it is still a matter for discussion whether all the works of Irving lie within the bounds of the ideology current in his day.

## Notes

1. The reason that I use "Indians" here is not to align myself with prejudices and misconceptions of the time, but simply to underline the historical fact that the phrase was more prevalent than "native American" in the first part of the nineteenth century, when Irving produced his works.
2. As this is indicated by several scholars (Tuska et al., 1984, 240; Jones 1978, 2) and an encyclopedia entry on the subject reflects this ("Westerns" 2013), it would be appropriate to consider it a common understanding.

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