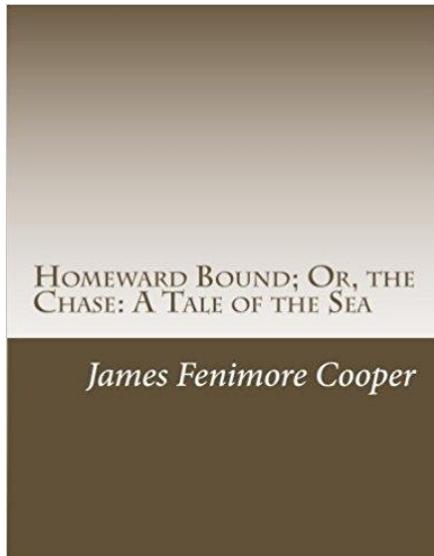




## Homeward Bound. Or, The Chase. A Tale of the Sea

James Fenimore Cooper

New York: AMS Press, Inc., 2015, pp. 654.



Review by Gordon M. Poole\*

The only thing this first-time reader found disappointing about Cooper's long novel, published first in England and later in the same year in the United States, is that it is a cliff-hanger. The main romantic interest, the growing attraction between the beautiful, innocent, cultivated young American, Eve Effingham, and the handsome, brave, young gentleman, initially known as Paul Blunt, does not find its happy resolution in this novel, for that is put off to a follow-up, *Home as Found*, which came out later in the same year. As Cooper admitted in the introduction to the sequel, he was "fully aware of the disadvantage of dividing the interest of a tale in this manner; but in the present instance, the separation has been produced by circumstances over which the writer had very little control." Stephen Carl Arch, the editor of this scholarly volume, explains in his learned introduction, that Cooper had originally intended to write one novel, but it waxed in the making and turned into two.

The book is slow-moving like the *Montauk's* rough, roundabout, adventurous crossing from Portsmouth, England, to New York, with a forced landing on the western coast of Africa, but the incidents strung out on the narrative line are exciting enough for the delay to create pleasurable tension in the reader. In short, *Homeward Bound* is a page-turner.

What slows the tale are Cooper's digressions, which are of two sorts. The first are technical: the novel is somewhat of a handbook in the management of a round-bottomed packet ship, for such was the *Montauk*, and filled with shipboard language. As a youth Cooper sailed before the mast. This aspect gave umbrage to some early reviewers, as editor Arch tells readers. One reviewer, in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, a bit haughtily proclaimed that "Mr. Cooper has disfigured many of the best scenes by the introduction of vulgarisms." He was referring, with gentlemanly insensitiveness, to the rich lexicon of terms by which

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mariners are able to identify and manage the lines, hawsers, booms, spars, sails, instruments, and specific operations (to warp, tack, brace, luff, scud, kedge, brail, reeve ...) necessary to deal with the complexities of sailing a square-rigger. The proliferation of this terminology, both in the orders given by the ship's skipper, an eloquent, able old seadog called Captain Truck, and in Cooper's detailed descriptions of the ship's manoeuvres for dealing with the shifts in wind and wave and the risks of running afoul of shoals and rocks, which require quick, accurate obedience to the captain's orders by teams of sailors attendant to various duties, slows the action but, in compensation, gives whiffs of brine to the tale. Indeed, the fact that Cooper uses the salty jargon without defining it may perhaps be justified by the realism conferred on the reader's experience of being aboard the novel as a land-lubber. Still, the present reader wouldn't have minded having a glossary to consult, so to better understand what was going on.

The second kind of digression regards Cooper's ongoing criticism, from one romance to the other, of his native country, a tendency which, as Arch recounts in the Historical Introduction, irritated several reviewers, such as the one who, in the New York *Knickerbocker*, felt "free to express our regret, that Mr. Cooper has seen fit to make his novel a vehicle for the expression of private opinion, or promulgation of prejudice, against his own country, her institutions, manners, customs, etc." Cooper's response to such America-love-it-or-leave-it strictures comes in the novel itself through the words of Paul Blunt:

"[I]t is duty of the citizen to reform and improve the character of his country. How can that be done, if nothing but eulogies are dealt in? (...) with one's countrymen I see little use and much danger in observing a silence as to faults. The American, of all others, it appears to me, should be the boldest in denouncing the common and national vices, since he is one of those, who, by the institutions themselves, has the power to apply the remedy" (376).

Cooper certainly uses *Homeward Bound* as a sounding board for criticizing the character of the United States. Especially the personage of Steadfast Dodge, a somewhat less than "artful dodger" and a comically depicted anticipation of the "ugly American," but admittedly an unrealistic straw man, serves to caricature traits – duplicity, ignorance, self-interest, chauvinism, bluster – that Cooper considered typical of too many Americans. Be that as it may, Cooper's polemics, however arbitrarily thrust into his tale, are certainly of interest as reflections on the reality of the United States of his time and, rather more interestingly and perhaps surprisingly, as a foreshadowing of situations, concerns, attitudes, and prejudices that bear an uncanny resemblance to questions that concern or ought to concern us today. Cooper's "niggers," West-African Muslims, in their attempt to sack the *Montauk*, are qualified as cruel and treacherous and behave as such.

It should be mentioned that there is plenty of levity and humor in this tale, although some of it might be lost on the reader of today without the editor's timely help. The funniest scenes, almost theatrical, are when Dodge is induced to read from his journals his reflections on the foreign countries he has visited, especially France, Holland, and England. His listeners string him out to their amusement and that of the reader, while Dodge, unaware that he is being made sport of, is puffed with pleasure at the attention he is receiving.

Arch's explanatory notes are all pertinent and useful, but there are only twelve pages of them for a narrative that fills 449 pages. This reader has often turned to his notes for an explanation and found none. Just to give an example, one of the sailors refers to the Arabs as "bloody b—rs," a somewhat surprising impropriety, if we have understood it rightly, and worthy of comment. Arch has been attentive to glossing historical references that today's reader might well not know but has chosen not to clarify a great number of words used in a way that is no longer current or the sailor talk to which we have referred above. Of course, thanks to internet, one can consult maritime glossaries and the 1828 Webster's Dictionary.

This scholarly edition realizes the editor's intent "to attend to the sense of Cooper's words as he first wrote them." This means that if, in Cooper's original manuscript, which Arch has advisedly taken as his copy-text, there are irregularities of spelling (*existance* for *existence*), grammar (superlative between two instead of the comparative), or punctuation, these are mostly respected. Just to give an example of punctuation inconsistency, on p. 416, we find "Capt." (for captain) with a period on lines 3 and 9, "Captain" on line 12, "Capt" (with no period) on line 14, "Capt." on line 15. Many other similarly explained and justified



examples could be given. If such irregularities can initially be off-putting, the final result is to give the readership a text that is possibly as close an approximation of Cooper's intention, purged of egregious errors. Not all editors of critical editions take this stand, but it is a stand that merits respect, and has the advantage of bringing one back in his reading to a bygone age and a recreation of the horizon of expectations of the contemporary readership. Such irregularities, which would be a scandal for the editor of any publishing house today if found in a modern novel may not have raised any hackles for the editors and readers of yesteryear.

As Arch sets out his criteria in his Textual Commentary, his edition "accepts on its own authority corrections of obvious errors in the copy-text that were made by subsequent non-authorial editions" (486). In addition, "Following early-nineteenth-century usage as determined by the Oxford English Dictionary and/or by Webster's 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, the editor accepts the first witness that spelled a word according to the acceptable conventions of the time" (488). There may be a few occasions when such corrections have not been made and should have been. On p. 447 we find: "Unwilling to encourage John Effingham in his disposition to censure, she *conceded* her opinions for a time" (our emphasis) Although this is what Cooper would appear to have written, according to the editor's interpretation of the original manuscript in the author's hand, one of the four amanuenses, his daughters, read her father's crabbed handwriting as *concealed*. Arch prefers *conceded*, but context suggests that *concealed* could not but have been the author's intention. Another case comes at p. 97, where we find "births," an obvious, indeed egregious mistake for "berths," correctly spelled on pp. 130 and 132. In the paragraph beginning "Paul" (p. 309) there is a full stop that most certainly should have been a comma.

Cooper's text is followed by a meticulously curated critical apparatus (pp. 451-654), including Explanatory Notes, Textual Commentary, Note on the Manuscripts, Emendations (substantives and accidentals), Rejected Readings, Textual Notes, and Word Division. In spite of occasional imperfections, this critical edition, with the stamp of approval of the Modern Language Association, is a precious acquisition, restoring for scholarly use and, one should hope, for future popular editions, a most enjoyable novel by an American author who deserves more attention than he receives. Now I'm off to read *Home as Found* and find out how it fared with Eve and Paul.