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### *A very American fable: the making of a Mohicans adaptation*

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*Published in:*  
Nineteenth-Century American Fiction on Screen

*Publication date:*  
2006

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Barker, M. (2006). A very American fable: the making of a Mohicans adaptation. In R. B. Palmer (Ed.), *Nineteenth-Century American Fiction on Screen* (pp. 9-28). Cambridge University Press.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2160/1989>

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# 1 A very American fable: the making of a *Mohicans* adaptation

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*Martin Barker and Roger Sabin*

In 1936 the second major screen version of James Fenimore Cooper's (1789–1851) *The Last of the Mohicans* was released by a small outfit, Reliance Pictures, through United Artists. The film did very well at the box offices, and made a star of its lead male, Randolph Scott. Curiously absent from histories of 1930s Hollywood cinema,<sup>1</sup> it has been fondly remembered by many viewers, and still plays on television quite regularly. It also provided the basis for Michael Mann's 1992 remake; Mann credits the screenplay by Philip Dunne as a prime source for his own ideas. In 1997 we published a book about the long and extensive history of adaptations of *Mohicans*, across the media of film, television, animation, and comic books.<sup>2</sup> We tried to set the 1936 film in its production and cultural contexts. And in one important respect we got it wrong. This essay recounts what we discovered when an opportunity came subsequently to do further research in the archives.<sup>3</sup> A very telling story emerges, which has implications far beyond this particular film.

Cooper's novel was originally published in 1826. More than any other, it made his name as an "American author." Not the first, it was undoubtedly the best-known of his "Leatherstocking" tales which tell the life of Nathaniel Bumppo, or Hawkeye, the frontiersman who fictionally patrolled the forests of the North East – and who encountered the real circumstances of the French and English wars for control of America. *The Last of the Mohicans* is the story most directly concerned with that encounter, tying Hawkeye into the real historical circumstances of the siege, surrender, and massacre at Fort William Henry in 1757. The core of the narrative is the friendship between Hawkeye and his two Mohican friends Chingachgook and his son Uncas – the last two of this people whom Cooper writes as the *ur*-tribe of the Delawares – and their efforts to save the two daughters of the English Colonel Munro from the villainous intentions of the Huron Magua. In the novel the younger girl, Alice, dies with Uncas, who has fallen in love with her, leaving Cora to depart America with Major Duncan Heyward, the stiff British officer

who has been changed by his encounters with the wilderness. Hawkeye returns to the wilderness, with the grieving Chingachgook.

One of the central themes of our book was that this story, so well known for its evocative title (but much less well known in detail), had the peculiar virtue of being almost infinitely adaptable. Its themes of wilderness, the origins of “America,” the interrelations of race and sexes, could therefore be made to resonate with the particular concerns and tensions of each successive moment when it was reworked. In the case of the 1936 adaptation, we could point to a large number of changes. Much of the violence of the original story was toned down. Little of the original dialogue survived; instead, characters talked as though they were straight out of a family adventure movie. The characters of Alice and Cora were for some reason reversed, and the surviving Alice ends up with Hawkeye. But it was hard to say which counted as major, or minor, alterations. Some did look significant. For example, we pointed to the visual diminution of the “wilderness” into parkland. This connected with inserted dialogue in which Hawkeye becomes the mythic voice of a new conception of the frontier: as a land waiting to be developed into towns, cities. As an expression of the will during the Depression to industrialize the countryside in order to save the collapsing rural economies, this made and still makes sense.

We were particularly struck by one major narrative alteration. In the released version the narrative is topped and tailed by episodes not found in the novel. The story opens in Europe with a grandiloquent scene in St. James’s Palace where George II is listening to his ministers debating the worth of trying to save America, and is persuaded by the prime minister to see it as the “raw materials of an Empire,” to be tamed and exploited for England’s purposes. But having embroidered this theme of a conflict between the interests of the English and the colonials, in which Hawkeye must take the side of the latter and face rough “English justice,” the film solves this with an ending in which Hawkeye is forgiven, becomes a scout for the English, and of course gets the girl. Trying to make sense of this, we borrowed a claim from Dan Georgakas, that at this point Hollywood may have been responding to a quiet request by Franklin D. Roosevelt to make films which would challenge America’s dominant isolationism.<sup>4</sup> Films showing that Europe and America share common interests could have been valuable – especially in the light of the increasing saber-rattling in Germany, Italy, and Spain.

On reflection, we came to doubt this account, for a number of reasons. Above all, it depends on the possibility that Roosevelt foresaw the coming European war. The temptation to see him in this way may be part of an attractive mythologization on which David Culbert has

recently commented. Culbert lists a series of fallacies, including the idea that “Roosevelt is superhuman. He saw World War II coming, did everything in his power to stop it, but was thwarted by an isolationist Congress at home. Documents published in the last decade indicate that Roosevelt gave comparatively little attention to foreign affairs before 1939 . . . and had himself urged passage of the first Neutrality Act in 1935.”<sup>5</sup>

This Neutrality Act required that America not align itself with either side in any European conflicts, and it was renewed and extended by further Acts in 1936 and 1937 – which again, Roosevelt signed without overt protest. These Acts suited American armaments manufacturers, who could now sell to whoever could pay. They also suited those within American politics who saw potential in totalitarian regimes such as that of Mussolini, who in 1935 had mounted an all-out invasion of Abyssinia, or those opposed on principle to the Republicans fighting Franco in Spain.

Roosevelt’s personal position is debatable. Faced with a threat of filibustering over his New Deal legislation, he put his name to the Neutrality Act – and kept his own counsel as to the real needs of American politics and economy. Edgar Robinson, another historian, argues that “It is true that in the closing hours of the Presidential campaign of 1936, Franklin Roosevelt had warned the American people that in a world of war and rumors of war, the United States might not be able to maintain neutrality, non-involvement and at the same time a proper defense of American interests.”<sup>6</sup> But even Robinson, a sympathetic historian, can only point to such small gestures.

Less sympathetic judgments saw Roosevelt as at best drifting, at worst displaying cowardice in the face of emergent fascism.<sup>7</sup> The already weak League of Nations was further weakened, and the message to Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco among others was pretty unequivocal – the American political leadership saw no role for itself in Europe. In fact, the Neutrality Act was weak – it forbade only arms and munitions; it said nothing about raw materials. Despite supposed neutrality, American exports to Italy of raw materials, including oil, steel, and copper, mounted across 1935–37.

In this situation the evidence to support the claim that Roosevelt sought Hollywood’s help to combat isolationism would have to be strong. In fact, it is desperately weak. If there is a problem with relying on an image of a forward-looking Roosevelt urging ideological warfare on his isolationist opponents, there are even bigger problems with the supposed source of the story of his request to the studios: Jack Warner. It is hard to track down the exact source of the claim (it is not

evident in his autobiography), but regardless of this, Warner is known as a self-aggrandizer, and an unreliable source.<sup>8</sup>

Several books have told the story of Warner Brothers' famous anti-fascist films.<sup>9</sup> These histories show that the great period of antifascist filmmaking, culminating in *Mission to Moscow* (1943), in fact began later than 1936. Michael Birdwell in particular makes clear that Warner was by no means the major impulse in their making – it was his brother Harry, who was no friend to Roosevelt. It was Jack who appears to have invented the story of the Warners agent supposedly murdered in Germany – who may in fact never have existed.

If there is no sure evidence of a company the size of Warner Brothers being enticed by the President, what of Reliance Pictures, source of *The Last of the Mohicans*? Tino Balio's business history of United Artists tells the story of the creation of Reliance. Joseph Schenk had joined United Artists in 1924, and it was his business acumen that rescued the company from an early demise. Reliance was one of Schenk's attempts to increase the output of films. In 1931 he attempted to persuade United Artists' Board to invest in independent producers, in order to increase the flow of product, but received mixed responses. Faced with embarrassment after this, he put his personal money in with Harry Goetz and Edward B. Small, only withdrawing when, in 1933, an alternative source – the banker William Phillips – came in.<sup>10</sup> It is just very unlikely that a company as small, incidental, even accidental as Reliance should be courted by the President. And that is before we consider the political views of Edward B. Small, as we shall see later.

Realizing the problems with our too-easy original explanation, our only recourse was to go back to the film's production history. What might be revealed by surviving archival materials? Friends and colleagues helped us to obtain some valuable sources. But crucially, we found large amounts of useful materials in three archives: at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, in the United Artists archive in Madison, Wisconsin, and most importantly in the library of the University of Southern California.<sup>11</sup> In the last we found – among other vital materials – eleven different, dated versions of the film, as variously pitch, script outline, or screenplay. Through analyzing and interpreting these, alongside their relations to other materials that we found, we offer here a picture of the *most probable* version of what prompted and guided the making of this version of *Mohicans*. What we did *not* find was any document even hinting at any underpinning political motives or interests in the making of the film.

The questions that in the end we found most profitable, when examining the scripts, were these. What alterations in the narrative sequence

are made, between versions? What is the resultant scope and generic placement of the narrative? What traits and tendencies do characters embody? And what kinds of motivation are ascribed to different characters? Three names – John Balderston, Philip Dunne, and Ralph Block – are directly associated with the versions. However, we know (from a good deal of evidence) that the film’s producer, Small – the one among the three founders of Reliance who took responsibility for production – read every version, and commented on them, probably from a number of angles (among these, their financial implications, and their audience potential). Balderston’s name appears not only alone on the opening four versions and with Dunne’s on the fifth (to which the evidence says he did contribute), it also appears on the tenth and eleventh – and on the credits to the film itself. However, we are reasonably sure that Balderston left the production long before these late versions, and that Dunne may have put Balderston’s name on these because he was trying to reintroduce some elements from those early versions. Here, then, is an account of the phases in these script versions.

*Phase One – John Balderston’s “epic” proposal*<sup>12</sup>

More than a year before the film would appear, Small <sup>12</sup>took a preliminary decision that the next big film that Reliance would produce after *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1934) would be a revisiting after fifteen years of Cooper’s *Mohicans*. At this time, Balderston was on the writing staff at Reliance and he was asked to write a first pitch for the film. Balderston had begun his working life as a journalist. During World War I, he had been a war correspondent for the McClure newspaper group, and he then attained some success as a playwright, novelist, and scriptwriter (best known for his fantasy and adventure writing). He was known to his colleagues as a man of wide interests, and “liberal” views (we must be cautious of this term since it has a changing meaning). It should not surprise us, therefore, that Balderston’s pitch for the film, embodied in a quite remarkable document, proposes to make it a geopolitical epic film, opening in the two opposed courts of France and England, and extending Cooper’s narrative to take in the conquest of Quebec (“[I]f at first glance it seems far-fetched, you will find after we work out a treatment that what Hawkeye does is plausible, in character, and you and the audience will wonder why Cooper didn’t think of it himself” [1:5]).

Balderston’s pitch (March 7, 1935) begins with an explanation of his use of the term “epic” as “something more than a story about people fighting, loving, hating” (1:1). To be epic, a picture has to deal with

“vaster themes . . . of general and permanent historical significance” (1:1). Balderston lists a number of films which he feels achieve this: alongside *Birth of a Nation* (1915; mentioned without any qualms about its racial attitudes), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) and *Cavalcade* (1933) are the English-centered *Lives of the Bengal Lancer* (1934) and *Clive of India* (1934). All are stories in which human conflicts, often involving wildly unbalanced forces, are fought out bravely, and can be seen as changing the world. *Mohicans* is in this class, potentially. “Great armies battle in Europe, but our war is a side-show to London and Paris” (1:4). Balderston then retells the main thrust of the narrative, in terms that accentuate the conflict of mighty forces – but he covers his odds, by explaining how this can be filmed without impossible expense. What is interesting is that despite the title of the book, this approach makes the question of the Mohicans an “Indian sub-plot” (1:7), good for the film because it offers a “dramatic and tragic element” (1:9). He goes on: “Great pictures on this theme will be made, for it is a great theme, the conquest of one race by another” (1:11).

Balderston followed this with a nineteen-page outline (March 14, 1935), plotting the film’s proposed scenes. This, as promised, opens in the French and English courts, with the French king under the thumb of a selfish, prima donna-ish La Pompadour, while the English king – albeit unwillingly – is persuaded to send extra troops to secure America. The most striking element about this outline is the strong contrasting of modes of behaving established for the English and the colonials, captured in a scene where Munro’s army, moving to Fort William Henry, is ambushed. The film, Balderston declared, “should show enough of this fight to show the difference between British and American methods of fighting” (2:7). Munro is outraged when he sees the colonials adopting Indian tactics and getting behind trees – he orders his men to stand and fight properly (a version of this survives to Balderston’s fourth script attempt, where he has Munro declare: “This American mode of fighting will destroy the reputation of his Majesty’s army! I’d rather lose a battle, than win it so!” [3:31]). What Balderston wanted was a demonstration of a *conflict between ways of seeing the world*. And what Hawkeye embodied for him was, very much, innocence. He describes him early on in this fashion:

Hawkeye, in his early thirties, nurtured and bred in the forests, trapper and hunter in peace-time, scout and Indian hunter in war, is ill-at-ease in the settlements which he visits as seldom as possible. In his face is the innocence and purity of a man never into contact with civilization; there is about him, when we get to know him, a beauty of spirit and charming simplicity, that is strangely matched with his efficiency as an Indian fighter. (2:6)

That character is at odds with the mannered civilities of Europe. So, when he and Cora find themselves attracted to each other, “it is so hard for the sophisticated Cora to understand this simple, wilderness mind; we observe, too, Hawkeye’s fascination and wonder at this beautiful, vital creature, he who has never seen women other than squaws and slatterns around the trading posts” (2:8). Hawkeye even sees himself as “illiterate,” therefore an impossible figure for Cora, a “great London lady” (2:15), to be attracted to. Balderston plays on this “innocence” in Hawkeye throughout; it allows him not even to be offended by an attempt by Heyward to bribe him to stay away from Cora – Hawkeye simply does not understand the appeal of money. And Balderston’s Hawkeye displays an unvarnished willingness to give his life at the stake to save the women, because that is clearly what a “man” does – because once having given his word, “No Indian would take a white man’s word, in war or peace, were it known that the Long Rifle had broken his faith. You’d have me shame my color, or my friends?” (2:132, retained in several subsequent versions).

Narratively, much of the action of the story follows Cooper’s books quite closely, up to the point where Hawkeye shoots Magua after the deaths of Alice and Uncas, and Tamenund and Chingachgook mourn their loss. But a coda takes us to Quebec, where Munro is reunited with Cora, whom he had thought dead. Here Hawkeye uses his woodcraft skills to aid the assault on the Heights of Abraham, after which “we play the historical scene of the deaths of Wolfe and Montcalm.” The film closes with Cora having realized that their worlds are incompatible and, reconciled with Heyward, preparing to return to Europe, while Hawkeye and Chingachgook “turn away back to the wilderness where they belong.”

The third (151-page) version, again from Balderston, is largely a script enactment of this outline, with some small but important changes: for example, when Hawkeye, provoked by Cora asking if he does not find the Indian girls “lithe like gazelles, warm and passionate,” replies sternly, “I’ll not deny that some of our color comport themselves so. But I have never let myself forget that I am a man without a cross of blood” (3:69). This racial politics is a taken-for-granted in this, and the next version, where it becomes even more delineated and indeed twentieth century, when Balderston substitutes this sentence: “Never have I let myself forget, with the women, that I’m a man of pure white blood” (4:56).

Balderston’s fourth revised screenplay (April 23, 1935) makes small but significant changes, whose origin and motivation we can only surmise. Both his third and fourth versions share a changed ending. Cora and Hawkeye acknowledge their love for each other, but recognize that



their lives, their cultures are just too different. In heightened words they declare the impossibility of it all – most strongly in the fourth version. Cora knows that if she took Hawkeye back to try to live in London he would die.

HAWKEYE: “Aye, you’d not do that to me, because you love me. How then could I do the same to you? No, Cora, ’tis a star-crossed love, with a gulf between us as broad and deep as that tween that boy who never spoke his love, but who kissed the ground where your sister’s feet trod, and who died for her.”

CORA: “It’s wrong, Leatherstocking. It’s life, we can’t fight it, but it’s wrong.”

HAWKEYE: “Your face will be with me, wakin’ or sleepin’, while life lasts, and the sweet thoughts of that night I thought to have been my last on earth.”

CORA: (repeats his words with a pledge of her own): “While life lasts.” FADE OUT. (4:131)

This version of the ending seals the sense throughout Balderston’s versions of the script that this is to be a film about people living through events larger than themselves, caught up in epic battles which sweep them along – to the creation of “America.” It is notable that this fourth version includes the death of not just Uncas, but also Chingachgook – who is made to die at the siege of Quebec. Thus is Hawkeye left to inherit the American earth, without even a vestige of the nonwhite races to concern him.

#### *Phase Two – Philip Dunne’s heroic individuals*

Philip Dunne is by far the best known of those writers who worked on the script. It is Dunne’s account in his autobiography *Take Two: A Life in Movies and Politics* (1980) that has come nearest to being the “official” account of what happened on the film. He has left behind a reputation as a “liberal.” We will show reasons to qualify this – or at least to press the meaning of “liberalism” into an uncomfortable context. Younger than Balderston, Dunne had only recently come to work for Small, who had taken him on partly out of admiration for his father, the well-known humorist Finley P. Dunne. Small would later say of Dunne that he had a wonderful eye for a dramatic scene, but not yet a sense of overall narrative shape and thrust. His contribution initially comes in the form of a new main storyline (April 30, 1935) and then a full 151-page screenplay (June 14, 1935). There are some clear continuities with Balderston’s work and approach. For instance, describing the initial scene in his storyline, Dunne writes of Munro: “Munro is confident enough to have his daughters with him. This confidence, and a stubborn adherence to the rules of

war as fought on the open battlefields of Europe, are characteristic of the brave, bull-headed British officers” (5:1).

But it is not just these individual characteristics that are changing in Dunne’s hands, it is now a sense precisely that these *are* “individuals” in a special way. Perhaps because he came to this as a writer of fiction (as against Balderston’s journalistic background), Dunne tells his story *through individuals and what drives them*. The storyline is remarkable for just how strongly *motivated* every action by every individual is. In just one example, notice how situations and reasoning and emotional responses all combine to make a move inevitable:

Now the deaths of the unfortunate Alice and the last of the Mohicans serve a purpose. They bring Hawkeye and Cora close together. United by a common sorrow, they face the almost impossible task of working their way to civilisation. To go south is impossible – with a woman. The revengeful Mingoes are there. Their only chance is to go north – through hostile country, but where they will not be expected – and so win through to Quebec, and attempt to join Wolfe’s besieging force. (5:8–9)

When Dunne spelt out his storyline as a full 151-page screenplay, the shift in the sense and direction of the “epicness” becomes more apparent. The narrative is to be prefigured by a rolling caption:

“1757: Europe shakes as great armies of all nations clash in the world encircling Seven Years’ War. The war leaps the ocean. French and English fight in the trackless forests of North America. Blood-thirsty savages aid the French, with the English red-coats stand rude Colonists who defend their homes against fire and scalping knife. The United States, as a nation, is still hidden in the future. If the great French general Montcalm can break through down the Hudson from Canada, America will be forever French.” (6:1)

This teleological picture of a nation seeking to be born in the face of “savages” permeates all that follows – but the nation must be fought for. The opening speeches at George II’s court are used to set up the wrong ways of seeing America; it puts into the mouth of Lord Newcastle the “wrong” view that England has an automatic right to own America: “’tis the very nature of history that England should possess Massachusetts.” Through the views of those who will lose runs a dismissive view of the “Americans.”

Hawkeye now becomes a “super-ordinary American,” one who can, with the wisdom of his position, apologize to his fellow colonials for the arrogance of the English, equating them with the equally barbarous “savages”: “The red man’s scalpin’ knife is no more barbarous than the white man’s arrogance” (6:20). And when Hawkeye is alone with Alice (the reversal of the names of Cora and Alice begins here, for no

apparent reason), his debate with her, as she comes to appreciate his value, is all about that American future:

- ALICE: (after a pause – muses): “You’ve known no other life – than here in the wilderness?”
- HAWKEYE: (simply): “*This* is settled country (speaking with great emotion). Beyond those mountains beyond the Ohio, lies the *real* wilderness. In peace the Mohicans and I pioneer, blaze trails, open up new country, for civilization to follow – (pauses – turns to her) I wonder if you can understand the thrill of being *first!*”
- ALICE: (enthralled): “As you tell it, I think I can.” (6:56)

This is a moment when Alice discovers herself, and apologizes to Hawkeye. He praises her courage. But notice the wording – “As you tell it, I think I can.” Hawkeye embodies understanding, from whose words therefore can come a special realization. It is interesting that this phrasing *nearly* survives into the released film, but there Alice says only: “I think I can.” On its own, this would be a minor indicator, but, in concert with all the other ways in which Dunne’s version of Hawkeye as a *living proof* of “America” effectively vanished, it matters indeed.

Hear how it resonates again after the death and burial of Cora and Uncas. Now the mourning is conducted by Alice and Hawkeye:

- HAWKEYE: “It was a right royal rite and for the last of the royal race of Mohicans (looks around the woods – and sighs). The time will come soon when the red man no longer hunts in these woods. The race is dyin’ (looks off towards Chingachgook, nods). The Sagamore knows it.”
- ALICE: “And yet there’s little death in the woods. They seem new and young – whispering that life is beginning – joyous and carefree.” (6:117)

Even the wilderness is turning against the “vanishing Americans,” who know they are finished.

These two versions keep much from Balderston’s, but make significant changes. The *overt* racism of the first scripts shifts now into the *irrelevance* of the Indians. When a new nation is waiting to be born, what hope for *anyone* who stands in its way?

### *Phase Three – Ralph Block’s dreadful “western”*

We know that at this point in the film’s development, Dunne and Balderston left the project. Delays in the casting meant that they were not needed, so they moved on to other work. In August 1935, and still well before the preparation of the version that would go for vetting by the Production Code Administration (PCA), work moved to Ralph Block.

Block was a very different kind of writer, with a background first at Pathé, then at Fox writing westerns, then latterly at Warner Bros. He would soon largely abandon scriptwriting for a leading role in the emergent Screen Writers Guild, where he made his name as a campaigning liberal.<sup>13</sup> Three screenplay versions exist in the archive, all carrying his name (along with Dunne's, but that is surely a residual acknowledgment), through which it is possible to trace an evolution toward a whole different kind of film narrative. How far this narrative was motivated by a desire of the producers to generate an "audience pleaser" we shall see in a moment.

Across two versions – one labeled "Final" (August 26, 1935) and one bearing only handwritten dates ("8 October 1935, revised 14 October"), it is possible to trace several concurrent processes. First, a decline in all senses of the "mythic." Here Hawkeye is given a backstory, which presents him less as an all-powerful hero, more as a lucky survivor.<sup>14</sup> In this version speech passes out of the register of cultural representation to become caricatural. Upon our arrival in America, we meet General Braddock in debate with Hawkeye. Infuriated by Hawkeye's refusal to accept the wisdom of his commands, he replies: "Oddfish – infernal insolence" (7:15). Curiously, into this version comes the "real" figure of George Washington, to add a dash of authenticity. We are seeing a mix of real referents with generic fictionality.

But the big changes begin in earnest in the next version. By October, characters are becoming ever more stereotyped. The two women take on a melodramatic air (Alice becomes a huffy, arrogant missy, demanding that Hawkeye take her to her father). The reasons for actions are declining. Where, previously, we had seen the British motivated by the "raw materials of an Empire" to take America, now it becomes personal ambition. Pitt says to George II, simply, "Sire, I gave you India! Now I'll give you America" (8:4). Who needs a reason? But another influence is perhaps also showing: Small as producer is exerting a different, budgetary control. The massacre at Fort William Henry is reduced to a third-person report, eliminating all need for the big scene.

But the narrative is moving more generally in a new direction. Across Balderston and Dunne, characters were motivated by the *kind of people* they were, the *kinds of culture* they represented and embodied. Now, once past the increasingly dull, functional dialogue (HAWKEYE: "The fightin's stopped – what's happened?" SENTRY: "We've surrendered. But nonetheless you'll hang" [8:68]), characters relate primarily through accidents, coincidences, misunderstandings, mistakes, bluffs, and tricks. For example, at a crucial moment during the massacre, Hawkeye escapes

from imprisonment in the English fort by tricking Heyward into coming too close and then “jumping” him to take his pistols.

Here the Indians are becoming trading post natives – stealing white folks’ goods and drinking perfume for alcohol – or just plain nasty. In this version, strangely, Hawkeye knows Magua, but not as an old enemy – he approves Magua going as the women’s guide. They only become enemies after Magua has tricked Uncas into a fight, for which he will be publicly flogged (Alice and Hawkeye have to rescue him). A great deal is made here of attempts, always failing, to get messages through. Tricks and countertricks prevail, with chases in between. Alice and Hawkeye quarrel like figures in a romantic comedy. (Peculiarly, although it might be argued that the original book is just vanishing, small parts that never appeared before now enter – a scene from Cooper’s novel, for instance, with bears in a cave provides a “motive” for Alice to fall into Hawkeye’s arms.) Now elements that will appear in the released film begin to enter – crucially, Hawkeye taking Alice’s place at the stake. But in general Dunne’s later claim that a bizarre, shapeless, directionless interference with the text had taken place seems borne out.

*Phase Four – emergency action*

At this point, Dunne was rehired – not, as he would later claim, so late that the film was effectively in production, but at the turn of 1935/6 (with actual filming five months off). Even so, it must have been clear to him that this was a time for desperate measures. On January 10, 1936, Dunne turned in a revised screenplay. The striking thing about this version is Dunne’s attempts to reintroduce elements from his and Balderston’s earliest versions. But only slimmed and diminished versions of Dunne’s ability to make characters “speak their cultures” would survive into the final version. The question has to be: why?

This version, too, ends with Alice staying with Hawkeye. Quebec is gone – our best guess is that the accountant in Small had finally decided this, on cost grounds. Heyward, having (as in the to-be-released version) finally exonerated Hawkeye of treason at a postvictory trial, is ordered back to London, and leaves Alice in Hawkeye’s “keeping”:

ALICE: “Do you mind?”  
CHINGACHGOOK: (gently but with strength): “Hawkeye is my brother, but his skin is pale. The white man will increase like grass in the spring – and Hawkeye will lead them. The day of the red men is past.” FADE OUT. (10:117)

In this version Hawkeye has evolved – under Dunne’s tutelage – into more than a scout, into a modern statesman, a leader, a man of the future not the past; and the Indians mourn but accept their own vanishing. If this is “liberalism,” it is of a strange kind.

Indeed, this version is remarkable for Dunne having reinserted some of the crudest elements of racial ideology, which had gradually been expunged. At the scene of Magua’s capture of the two women, Alice mocks him for his failures: “Aren’t there enough women in your own tribe to be wives to such a great Chief?” Magua draws himself up proudly:

MAGUA: “Magua French – take white woman to squaw.”

ALICE: “Oh, a half-breed. Is it possible that the pure-blooded women of your own people will have nothing to do with you?” (10: 92)

It is evident that even these toned-down reintroductions were not acceptable. By the final versions, they are almost all gone. The April 10, 1936 version, we sense, is the version sent to the PCA – but not yet the version actually filmed. The ending would receive one more change. In the archives are four dated revisions to the April 10 script. The first two still have the residual figure of Gamut, a wandering preacher who travels with the two women and plays a small role in their rescue, but by the third he is excised. The first three keep George II as a caricatured German with a bad accent. By the fourth, surely at the behest of the PCA (which, as Ruth Vasey has shown well, concerned itself greatly with the “exportability” of films), this is changed.<sup>15</sup> The first three also return to the ending in which Alice returns to Europe with Heyward; only in the finally released (and approved) film does she get to stay – this has to have been a change on set. On April 13 the PCA received a script and wrote a long summary of it. With the exception of the ending, it is recognizable as the film that would be released. Joseph Breen, for the PCA, wrote to Small outlining its response. There were no overall problems, but there were many individual concerns about “too much gruesomeness throughout, with scalplings, violent death of all kinds, etc.”<sup>16</sup> Script changes, or else great care in filming, were called for to cater for the criticisms. The completed and edited film was submitted to the PCA in July, and was passed with few problems. But we should note that the PCA recorded without comment that the ending had changed, to the “resolving” version.

How to explain this messy potpourri of changes? For the film as a whole: from epic, through world-historical individuals, to impoverished and discombobulated western, to a scrambled egg of a final film, not with some rhetorical challenge to isolationism, but with the relics of the

original epic purpose. For the Native American characters: from a wider thematic in which they were irrelevant, to social Darwinian obsolescence, through western stooges, back to redundant fodder for the advance of “civilization.”<sup>17</sup> For Hawkeye: from majestic figure, through incompetent, irascible chump, to a nice ordinary guy. Whatever the explanation, the one thing there is not is a purposeful politics. But that does not mean there is no politics at all.

The best clues to why this all happened in this way are contained in Small’s (n.d) as-told-to autobiography. This three-volume compilation is a self-glorifying account, complete with a childhood tale of standing before a statue of an Indian chief, Tomo-Chi-Chi, in Savannah, Georgia, and dreaming of the past and his future: “When I thought of the Chief, I could picture the way our city was in days past, a beautiful panorama of forests and wild animals, of noble, brave warriors and tepees and tomahawks” (1:7). And thus, Small exclaims, his life-goals were set.<sup>18</sup>

But in among the self-aggrandizement there is some useful information. In 1932, when Small came together with Schenk and Goetz to form Reliance, Small took charge of actual productions – something he had long wanted to do. And he was, as Dunne later accused, a really interfering producer, for good or ill. Overall, Reliance did well. It had an early hit with *I Cover The Waterfront* (1933). Then Small conceived the idea of doing *The Count of Monte Cristo*. His account of the reasons bears consideration. He recalled arguments among the three of them. When he proposed that they do *Cristo*, Schenk and Goetz argued fiercely against him – they believed that apart from Cecil B. DeMille’s, costume dramas were dead: “‘People were worried about bread,’ Goetz added, ‘and you want to give them costumes.’ I had learned my lesson as a kid. ‘People want to escape,’ I said stubbornly. ‘The Depression’s been around a long time. They’re sick of worrying about bread’” (II:269). The precise conversations aside, this is a believable account – Small had come to pride himself on his ability to smell what the small folks will enjoy – or what he called “audience-pleasers.”<sup>19</sup>

*Cristo* cost \$435,000 to make, considerably over budget – but it made \$5m. Small became angry because somehow Reliance seemed to see very little of the profit: “I became aware that something indeed was rotten – but not in Denmark and the rest of the foreign countries. It was in the United States. A look at the profits showed that only thirty per cent came from America, the other seventy per cent from the rest of the world. It made no sense – on a logical base” (II:276). The answer was corrupt practices at home – cinema owners misrepresenting the money they’d taken. “I concluded that the best way to fight their tactics was to

make only films with subject matter slanted to do well in international theatres. Let the American exhibitors try to get their hot little hands on those box office receipts!" (II:277). Small would henceforth make films which best ensured overseas distribution.

If we follow this line of reasoning, the decisions that led to the *Mohicans* outcome was almost certainly an acute business judgment. This is the positive side. On the negative side, there is every reason to suppose that it was *not* ideological. Small recalls doing a biography of Rudolph Valentino. During its making, he had a battle with a "communist" writer, who tried to "insert propaganda" into one of his films – about a black man who could not afford false teeth. Sacking the writer, Small decided to get his own back, with a film called *Red Salute* (1935) vilifying communist propaganda. The film was attacked on its release and was boycotted, with stink bombs let off at its opening night in New York: "The attacks were successful. *Red Salute* failed. That was in 1935" (II:285). In the same year that he began to plan *Mohicans*, Small had his fingers burnt twice – by "communists." He half-regarded Roosevelt as a communist. No way would he have responded to a call for help from that source.

But as we have said, although there is not a scrap of evidence to sustain our original proposal of a direct political link to Roosevelt, that does not mean that there is no politics in this film. In fact, we would argue that its politics lie much more in the *kind of pleasure* it afforded audiences – a pleasure which is well captured in the repeated description of the film in many reviews we have read as an "old-fashioned blood." Frequent comparisons are made to silent-era westerns. Here is a film that decidedly refuses any of this "modern" nonsense about Indians. In the name of industrializing the countryside, it is possible to cheer and mourn simultaneously the "passing" of these lesser beings – even if we do admit, as they go, that "our side" may also have faults. Their irrelevance to the essential plot is nowhere better caught for us than in the fact we stumbled on, while doing our original research. The magazine *Picture Show* carried a pictorial synopsis of the 1936 *Mohicans* in its March 13, 1937 edition. Clearly prepared before the film's release, it declares that in saving Cora, "both Chingachgook and Uncas die." No such narrative importance survived the final edit. In the released version Chingachgook simply disappears after the death of his son – a true case of a "vanishing American."

The wider implication of this tale is, for us, the warning that it delivers about the dangers of textual interpretation unchecked against the routines and individual circumstances of a film's production regime. Political and ideological "readings" of films have become an academic



Table 1

	Hawkeye	Cora/Alice	Heyward	Chingachgook
Balderston: March 22, 1935	Returns to wilderness	Returns to London alone	Returns to London alone	Disappears after death of Uncas
Balderston: April 23, 1935	Returns to wilderness with Chingachgook	Returns to London alone	Returns to London alone	Returns to wilderness with Hawkeye
Dunne: June 14, 1935	Returns to wilderness with Chingachgook	Is reconciled with Heyward	Is reconciled with Cora	Returns to wilderness with Hawkeye
Block: August 26, 1935	Returns to wilderness with Alice and Chingachgook	Persuades Hawkeye to accept that she has changed	Dies, sacrificing himself to save Hawkeye	Returns to wilderness with Hawkeye and Alice
Block: October 8, 1935	Wounded; will be looked after by Alice	Commits herself to Hawkeye	Returns to London alone	Returns to wilderness alone
Dunne: January 10, 1936	Stays with Alice	Stays with Hawkeye	Disappears from narrative	Returns to wilderness alone
Dunne: April 10, 1936	Declines Alice	Returns to London with Heyward	Returns to London with Heyward	Disappears from narrative
Dunne: June 1, 1936	Accepts Alice; becomes scout	Will marry Hawkeye after the war	Returns to London alone	Disappears from narrative

game, which our error has forced us once again to recognize. Take the very ending of the film. In our erroneous reading of this adaptation, the end, and the ultimate fate of the characters, mattered greatly. The fact that Hawkeye becomes a scout for the English, and will marry Alice, signalled the film's anti-isolationist message. Now consider Table 1, which summarizes the changing fates of key characters across the main script versions that we have been able to examine in detail. This is ending as afterthought, and the decisions look decidedly *ad hoc*.<sup>20</sup>

As a coda, we would like to point to one remaining puzzle. Namely, the role of *Mohicans* director George B. Seitz. The Seitz who made a six-chapter serial version of the *Leatherstocking Tales* in 1924, and made the extant, Social Darwinian *The Vanishing American* in 1926. The Seitz who then worked for many years at M-G-M, gained a long-term contract, and carved a successful career making, among other things, the film *Andy Hardy's Dilemma* (1938) about small-town American life. Why



Figure 1 This montage photograph was one of a number offered to cinemas as posters for the 1936 adaptation of “the immortal classic” *The Last of the Mohicans*. The central focus is evidently on the romance between “the daring frontier scout hero Hawkeye and the lovely Alice Munro”.

was Seitz asked to direct this version of *Mohicans*? When was he taken on board and what input did he have, if any, to the writing of the script? Our sense, from hints and clues, is that he was marginal to the whole operation, as indeed was often the case in classical Hollywood production systems.<sup>21</sup> We have not managed to locate any substantial archive on Seitz. But if someone else can complete our story on this point, even if it challenges us on other points, we will be delighted.

#### NOTES

1. The film is rarely discussed in academic histories of the period. There is a short and interesting reference to it in an essay by Jeffrey Walker, who in less than a paragraph summarizes it as an adaptation blighted by fears of miscegenation (Walker, "Deconstructing an American Myth: *The Last of the Mohicans*," in Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, eds., *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* [Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998], p. 173), with a suggestion that this may have been the outcome of using George B. Seitz as director. This hurried conclusion, we will try to show, misses much that is important.
2. For any readers interested in the more general history of these adaptations, we would point to our book *The Lasting of the Mohicans: History of an American Myth* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995).
3. This archival research was made possible by a grant from the British Academy, one of the UK's research funding bodies, to which we want to record our gratitude.
4. "Swelled by refugees from Nazi persecution and moved by the valor of loyalist Spain, Hollywood was ardently anti-fascist. Hollywood was also at this time informed by Washington that the President would welcome motion pictures that extolled democratic values and presented England in as positive a light as possible" (Dan Georgakas, "Robin Hood: From Roosevelt to Reagan," in Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. MacDougal, eds., *Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) p. 71).
5. David Culbert, "Our Awkward Ally: *Mission to Moscow* (1943)," in John E. O'Connor, ed., *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image* (New York: Continuum 1989), p. 128.
6. Edgar Eugene Robinson, *The Roosevelt Leadership, 1933-1945* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1955), p. 233.
7. See James McGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956), p. 255.
8. See, for example, Jack Warner, *My First Hundred Years in Hollywood* (New York: Random House, 1964).
9. See in particular Nick Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment: Warner Brothers in the 1930s* (London: BFI, 1983); David Culbert, ed., *Mission to Moscow* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press/Warner Brothers Screenplays, 1980); and Michael E. Birdwell, *Celluloid Soldiers: Warner Bros.'s Campaign Against Nazism* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

10. See Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 117–118.
11. If space allowed, we would have much to say about these extraordinary archives. First, our thanks for the kindness, courtesy, and helpfulness of staff at each archive – you do a wonderful job. Second, great praise not only to those who run the archives, but to those who have taken care to hoard and safeguard such a wealth of materials. Without access to this depth of historical record, we would be left only with highly speculative accounts, and no ways to test even our own outlandish “textual” claims. Third, we record our own excitement at finding such amazing materials. In some ways, that they were incomplete made what was there even more exciting – the task of tracing patterns, finding connections, testing probabilities remains, simply, glorious.
12. All references and quotations in the following sections are, unless otherwise stated, taken from the production files for *The Last of the Mohicans* (1936), University of Southern California Cinema-Television Library.
13. Block would win an honorary Oscar in 1939 for “services to the industry through outstanding charitable endeavors.”
14. The odd thing about this backstory is how closely it resonates with the opening given to the 1977 Schick Sunn version of *Mohicans*: (1936) Indians creep up on a lonely loghouse in an attack on a family, in which all die bar one boy – who grows up to be Hawkeye: (1977) Indians creep up on a lonely loghouse in an attack on a family, but this time Hawkeye appears at the last moment to drive off the Indians and rescue the family with the small boy – who then asks who is this person “La Longue Carabine” and thus launches the film.
15. Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood: 1919–37* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997).
16. Production summary and report, April 14, 1936. Letter from Joseph I. Breen to Reliance Pictures (April 16, 1936). Production Files, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1936), AMPAS Archive.
17. A wider set of issues is raised by the representation of Native Americans in this film. In a remarkable study, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U. S. Policy* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1982), Brian Dippie has traced the career of a persistent two-century-long ideology which preached, through every medium imaginable, that Native Americans were doomed, indeed were already dying out. However, by the early 1930s official policies were changing, not least as a result of the appointment of a new Head of the Bureau of Indian Administration, John Collier. Collier introduced substantial changes, many deriving from a principle of recognizing the authenticity and cultural worth of Native American cultures. Collier went on later in life to write a remarkable history of the American Indian peoples (Collier, *Indians of the Americas* [New York: New American Library, 1947]). None of this shows in the 1936 *Mohicans*. The publicity files in particular are replete with snide comments about Native Americans who appeared on set. There is casual talk of “braves,” “squaws,” and “bucks,” and astonishment when they can ride bicycles. Mock references to films as “pictures that

talk like a man” present them as at best gauche, at worst rather stupid and backward. In the meantime, John Barrat, who played Chingachgook, is quoted in a press release declaring his interest in these cultures: “I was delighted to discover such interesting reading as are the old histories of the various of redskin tribes,” Barrat declared. “I was amazed, too, to learn how speedily the North American Indian is vanishing, especially in the Eastern section of the country” (Publicity Files, *The Last of the Mohicans* [1936], USC Archive).

18. Edward Small, *You Don't Have To Be Crazy To Be In Show Business, But It Helps: An Autobiography* (as told to Robert E Kent), 3 vols. AMPAS Library, n.d., I:7. Further quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text.
19. Small's judgment on this was sustained by Joseph Breen, who wrote of *The Last of the Mohicans*, in the PCA's monthly report (July 31, 1936) as “an excellent audience picture based on the classic novel.”
20. There remains a question. If the production of the film was not visibly influenced by the conflicts emerging in Europe, was its reception? By the time the film reached the cinemas, war was looking ever more inevitable. In November 1936 Mussolini announced the “Rome-Berlin Axis.” The level of threat rose steadily thereafter. Could the film have been taken up in ways which turned its “history” into a contemporary moral lesson, about the need to unite against a common foe? We plan to explore this question in a separate essay. But from the surviving materials we have so far managed to examine, we can find no trace of such a “reading.” In fact, there seems a determined wish to regard the film as a “return to an older style of film-making,” or an “old-fashioned blood,” as several reviews term it – denying it any contemporary reference points.
21. An example: in 1936 the magazine *Cinema Arts* ran an article on *The Last of the Mohicans*. We are not certain of the nature of the magazine, but it reads like something close to a publicity magazine, perhaps directed at exhibitors. The article is entirely positive. In recounting the story of the making of *Mohicans*, it devotes one sentence to Seitz, one paragraph to Dunne and his co-writers, and four long paragraphs to Edward Lambert, the film's researcher (“*The Last of the Mohicans: James Fenimore Cooper's Undying Story of the Courage and Sacrifice of America's Pioneers*,” *Cinema Arts* 1 [1936], p. 24). The title alone warrants a pause for reflection if, as we suspect, this is effectively a piece of outreach publicity for the film. Not the *Mohicans*, not even *Leatherstocking*, but the “courage and sacrifice of the pioneers.”