

## **Whiggery in the Wilderness: The Politics of Indian-hating in Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837)**

**Rowland Hughes, University of the Hertfordshire**

First published in 1837, Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods, or The Jibbenainosay: A Story of Kentucky* is perhaps the prime example of an identifiable sub-genre of frontier fiction: the Indian-hating narrative. Any modern reader of the novel is immediately struck by Bird's constant excoriation of Native Americans as unredeemable savages whose extermination by the Anglo-American community of Kentucky is both justified and apparently inevitable—underpinned, in fact, by what James H. Cox has recently described as “an annihilation imperative—an irresistible drive of biological, cultural, pathological, or divine origins—to kill Indians.”<sup>1</sup> Critics have invariably linked the text's antagonism towards Native Americans to its supposedly expansionist agenda, assuming that Bird set out to justify and celebrate the westward movement of white Americans at the Indians' expense. Cecil B. Williams crystallizes this reading, in the introduction to his 1939 edition, when he states, firstly, that “throughout the book, [...] it is apparent that Dr Bird accepts the ‘Westward March of Empire’ as right and proper”; and secondly, that of all the authors who write about the frontier in this period, “Bird is clearly the least favorable to the Indian.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the undeniable virulence of the Indian-hatred in *Nick* is difficult to reconcile with the rest of Bird's fiction, drama, and correspondence, in which he seems neither a dyed-in-the-wool Indian-hater, nor a tub-thumping believer in America's “Manifest Destiny”. Bird himself had previously created several fictional avatars of the noble Indian chief, of which he is so scornful in the original preface to the novel, while as an amateur painter he had produced a series of sympathetic studies of Native Americans whom he had met on his travels.<sup>3</sup> The question of “the Westward March of Empire” is even more moot; as an easterner and a Whig, Bird was far from committed to the rampant expansionism that marked the age in which he lived, and his letters and short fiction repeatedly interrogate the

values of Jacksonian America. It would be perplexing, then, if his most successful and enduring novel provided an unquestioning endorsement of those values.

In the oft-quoted preface to the original 1837 edition of his novel, Bird states his intention to revise the romanticised vision of Native Americans created and perpetuated by American writers in the preceding two decades, objecting that

the North American savage has never appeared to us the gallant and heroic personage he seems to others. The single fact that he wages war—systematic war—upon beings incapable of resistance or defence,—upon women and children, whom all other races in the world, no matter how barbarous, consent to spare, has hitherto been, and we suppose, to the end of our days will remain, a stumbling-block to our imagination: we look into the woods for the mighty warrior, the ‘feather-tinctured chief’, rushing to meet his foe, and behold him retiring, laden with the scalps of miserable squaws and their babes. — Heroical? *Hoc verbum quid valeat, non vident.*<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, so hostile was the treatment of the Indians in *Nick of the Woods*, that one otherwise complimentary reviewer remarked that Bird was “no friend to the Indian, and has made him act a part accordingly,” adding that “to our taste, there is quite too much of the extra-sanguinary in his pages.”<sup>5</sup> William Harrison Ainsworth, the sympathetic English novelist who edited the British edition of Bird’s novel, commented on Bird’s portrayal of the Indians “not as men possessing the heroic virtues ascribed to them by Heckewelder and others, but as wretches stained by every vice, and having no one redeeming quality.” Ainsworth speculatively attributed Bird’s stance to “a desire to justify the encroachments of his countrymen upon the persecuted natives, rather than by a reasonable estimate of the subject” (editor’s preface, *Nick*, I, v-vi).

The imputation that his negative depiction of the Indians reflected a wish to “justify the encroachments of his countrymen” clearly riled Bird, to a degree that would be unaccountable if the novel were as straightforwardly pro-expansion as hitherto supposed.

When he came to write the preface to a revised edition, sixteen years later, he assured his readers that “the author” had written the novel

with no other object than to amuse himself, and—if that might also be—the public. One does not often compose novels with any grave and sinister design of fomenting discord, of instigating or defending cruelty, or even of provoking the hostilities of readers: at least, that was not the fashion among novelists when “Nick of the Woods” first saw the light.<sup>6</sup>

Bird’s sensitivity on this point is superficially surprising, given the novel’s manifest antagonism towards its Indian characters, and Richard Drinnon has suggested that it can be read as “a flinch of the unconscious away from even stating the profound inhumanity of what he had done: added his mite to hastening the “final solution” of the “Indian problem”.’<sup>7</sup> In actual fact, although most original reviewers noted the handling of his Indian characters, few felt that it was problematic, and many accepted Bird’s claim to greater realism. A reviewer in the *Southern Literary Messenger* applauded “the more sober and truthful painting of Doctor Bird, in which these characters are exhibited with little of the picturesque, and nothing of the grand or beautiful.”<sup>8</sup> Ainsworth’s comments, meanwhile, were almost certainly a well-intentioned attempt to mediate between some of Bird’s more extreme statements and a British audience generally predisposed to look favourably upon the Indians. Bird’s touchiness on the topic, I would argue, reflects his frustration that most contemporary responses to *Nick of the Woods*, like Ainsworth, assumed that the denigration of Native American society, in comparison to Anglo-American society, is the novel’s chief concern. Like all Bird’s work, however, *Nick of the Woods* is underpinned by the political and social concerns of a man who described himself as “a Whig, a very good one”.<sup>9</sup>

With this in mind, this article argues that the novel critiques the radically expansionist ideology of Jacksonian America, suggesting that unregulated extension of the nation’s boundaries to the West will expose American society to the chaotic and degenerative forces

latent in the wilderness, retard the progress of civilization, and prevent the American people from developing a crucial attachment to the land of their birth. Despite this, ever since its original publication, *Nick*'s ideological inconsistency with contemporary works of antebellum historical frontier fiction—by Cooper, Simms, Paulding and others—has been largely unremarked. This article concludes with an explanation of why this should be so.

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What did Bird mean by “a good Whig”? As a formal political party, the Whigs came into existence over the winter of 1833-1834, and hence were still in their political infancy when Bird came to write *Nick of the Woods*—indeed, the first Whig national convention was not held until 1839.<sup>10</sup> The political opposition to the Democrats had been gathering force for a number of years, largely in response to Andrew Jackson's extensions of executive power. The new coalition absorbed former National Republicans, pro-Bank campaigners, nullifiers, advocates of a high protective tariff, supporters of internal improvements, and evangelical campaigners for a variety of social reforms—in short, anyone with an axe to grind against Jackson.<sup>11</sup> Whig policy was strongly influenced by Henry Clay, the party's long-term leader, who had outlined his “American system” when Secretary of State under John Quincy Adams in the 1820s—generally in favour of a national bank and federally sponsored public works, to support the ongoing industrial revolution.

Central to Whig doctrine was a faith in commerce and internal improvements as the basis on which American civilization would be built. Clay and his followers conceived of American society as a harmonious, organic whole, in which the economic progress of different regions, classes and professions was achieved by the exchange of products and services through the market economy. The Whigs, according to Harry L. Watson, “stressed the compatibility of all classes and interests and explained how ‘the producing classes’ included lawyers, bankers and merchants as well as laborers.”<sup>12</sup> Of course, the emphasis on

distinct classes, however compatible they may be with each other, makes Whig beliefs intrinsically hierarchical.

Whig support for the manufacturing and mercantile sectors naturally attracted a majority of the wealthy industrial class to the new party; whereas, generally speaking, the Democrats held sway in rural areas “where the inroads of the Market Revolution were more limited, and more dreaded, than in more commercial areas”.<sup>13</sup> The “common man”, the farmer in whom Jefferson had placed such faith, remained the symbolic lynchpin of Democratic ideology, and this led to vastly inflated territorial ambitions under Jackson. Land was seen by Democrats to be the great leveller of society, offering farmers a second chance, and forcing Eastern industrial employers to keep wages high, in order to retain a work force that otherwise would drain away to the West. Slave-holding southerners also craved new land: without the large-scale expansion needed to support the plantation system, the slave states feared that they would find themselves “outnumbered in Congress and surrounded by hostile societies devoted to free labor”.<sup>14</sup> It was this insatiable land-hunger that had cemented Jackson’s determination to force all Native Americans remaining in the East to remove to new territories west of the Mississippi, formalised in the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

The Whig attitude to expansion was quite different, essentially arguing that the United States should invest its energy and money in improving what it already had rather than avariciously acquiring more land that it did not really need. In short, Whig thinkers argued that the greater the geographical extent of the nation, the longer it would take for America to consolidate its strengths, develop a social and economic structure to rival Europe, and foster the cultural developments—including art and literature—which are the hallmark of a civilized society. As Watson has expressed it:

The Whig preoccupation with “improvement” left the party with little enthusiasm for territorial expansion. Unlike most Democrats, Whigs longed to replace the primitive subsistence economy with refined patterns of moral and technological

development. In their eyes, the acquisition of a new unsettled territory was more likely to dilute or attenuate the forces of order and civilization and to slow down national progress. [...] When Democrats shouted “Manifest Destiny,” Whigs replied with Daniel Webster, “You have a Sparta, embellish it!”<sup>15</sup>

The Democrats, despite their agrarian rhetoric, were not so naïve as to think that improvements were unnecessary—Jackson passed the Deposit Act, for instance, to encourage states to invest in transportation. But Whigs were of the opinion that encouraging expansion *and* improvement simultaneously, as Jackson was doing, created enormous economic instability. It was pointless, Whigs declared, to throw money at distant western lands, when the infrastructure of the settled East was incomplete.<sup>16</sup>

The emerging Whig party of the 1830s, led by the example of Clay, also sought to distinguish itself morally from the Democrats, not least in their general resistance to Democratic Indian Removal policies. Daniel Walker Howe has noted that “The Whigs’ sympathy for the Indians was congruent with their preference for restrictive land policies that would keep the white population relatively concentrated in the East and facilitate industrialization”.<sup>17</sup> Just as importantly for our reading of Bird’s novel, however, Howe also notes that “violence and related forms of disorder constituted a major social problem in Jacksonian America”.<sup>18</sup> William Ellery Channing wrote to Clay to bemoan the fact that “It is believed abroad that property is less secure among us, order less stable, law less revered, social ties more easily broken, religion less enforced, life held less sacred, than in other countries”. Clay, similarly, expressed a fundamental social and ethical tenet of Whig belief when he remarked that “All legislation, all government, all society, is formed upon the principles of mutual concession, politeness, comity, courtesy.” In *Nick of the Woods*, Bird articulates this very anxiety, vividly dramatising the threat to American society posed by what the evangelical Whig Horace Bushnell would term “the bowie-knife style of civilization”.<sup>19</sup>

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Dogged throughout his life by ill health, Bird lacked the energy to devote himself to political pursuits until the 1840s, when his literary career was effectively over, but he was no less determined an opponent to Jackson and the Democrats when writing his novels in the 1830s. His correspondence from this period gives a detailed portrait of his personal life and opinions, and makes clear that, though a fervently patriotic nationalist, Bird was socially conservative. Never a zealous man, he had little to do with the militant Protestant wing of the northern Whigs; but he was opposed to slavery, as made abundantly clear by his immensely popular Roman tragedy, *The Gladiator*, first produced in 1831 as a vehicle for the actor Edwin Forrest.<sup>20</sup>

Despite such points of difference with both northern and southern members of his party, Bird's Whiggery was unwavering.<sup>21</sup> Although he declined the opportunity to stand for Congress in 1842, from 1847 until his death Bird edited the staunchly pro-Whig *North American and United States Gazette*, and wrote the campaign biography for Zachary Taylor during his successful presidential campaign of 1848. His dedication to the Whigs derived principally from two factors—a snobbish aversion to the uneducated working class, and a conviction that continual expansion and emigration would create a shiftless nation with no sense of its own history.

Even at the height of his success as a dramatist, Bird felt an intense dislike of the audience for which he was compelled to write:

Our theaters are in a lamentable condition and not at all fashionable. To write for and be admired by the groundlings! villains that will clap when you are most nonsensical and applaud you most heartily when you are most vulgar; that will call you "A genius, by G—" when you can make the judicious grieve and "a witty devil" when you force a woman to blush.<sup>22</sup>

This contempt for the vulgarity of the audiences and the “unfashionableness” of the venues ultimately enabled Bird to turn his back on the theatre as entirely as he earlier had the medical profession. Mary Mayer Bird tells us that after he split with Forrest in 1837, following a dispute over payment for his plays, he attended only one more play in the remainder of his life, from which he “returned home sickened by the heat and the crowd”.<sup>23</sup>

The further he went from his home in Philadelphia, the more uncomfortable Bird was when dealing with the uneducated majority of the American population. Despite numbering among his close friends two Kentuckians—J. Roberts Black, a medical doctor, and John Grimes, an itinerant artist—and travelling several times to the West and Southwest, Bird could never muster much enthusiasm for the common people he met *en route*. That he was sometimes impressed by the beauty and sublimity of the landscape is beyond doubt—exemplified by his passionate enthusiasm for the Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, and Niagara Falls—but, typically for Bird, his impressions wavered with his health and his mood, and he is just as capable of bemoaning “the savage floods and roaring forests of this howling land.” Nor was he won over by the examples of Western wit and exuberance he encountered, writing in the same letter, “I think Hoogers, Roarers, and, in general, all the geniuses of the river and prairie are mighty dull stupid rascals; and I wish I was back in Philada. [*sic*]”.<sup>24</sup> Bird’s demonstrable contempt for such “geniuses”—a contempt not dissimilar from that he expresses towards Indians—suggests an alternative construction of his remark, in the original preface to *Nick*, that “the true fathers of the State, were . . . ignorant but ardent, unpolished and unpretending, yet brave, sagacious, and energetic, — *the very men, in fact, for the time and the occasion*” (my italics).<sup>25</sup> By implication, the very qualities that fitted them for their “time and occasion”, exclude them from the more civilized, modern society that Bird earnestly wished America to be.

As well as threatening the economic stability of the nation, as Whig theorists averred, and providing a breeding-ground for the “dull stupid rascals” he so abhorred, Bird believed



that westward expansion had yet more serious ramifications. The continuous flow of pioneers towards the West, in his opinion, negated any affection that Americans might feel for their native land. The harsh necessities of frontier existence fostered individualism and intolerance; any communal spirit that might exist was sectional rather than national. Divorced from the everyday reminders of the achievements and sacrifices made by previous generations of Americans, how was it possible to preserve the sense of community and civic responsibility so crucial to virtuous republicanism? The key to creating a republic of which Americans could be rightly proud, Bird believed, lay in consolidating and celebrating the achievements of the nation's founders. This entailed staying at home in the East, and making improvements in arts and culture to rival the achievements of Europe. Moreover, the preservation of local and familial attachments fostered a generosity of spirit that was its own protection against the divisive influence of sectionalism. Bird emphatically expresses these opinions in a letter of 1835:

The affection for the land of our birth is strengthened and perpetuated by the existence of objects and places endeared to our recollection and pride; and it will be a happy day for America, when every spot of holy ground throughout the State, shall be known, revered, and loved. When this shall have happened, when such places are marked with monuments, and distinguished by pilgrimages and festivals, when our beautiful rivers and valleys have been made, as they should be, the theme of our poets and musicians, the subjects of romance and song, we shall have objects at home, whereon to bestow our affections, much more honourable and profitable than any we can seek in our fatherlands. It was the boast of all the polished nations of antiquity, that they were sprung from the soil they occupied; it should be ours, that we return to that which our fathers have made habitable. With this feeling, it becomes us to trace the footsteps of our progenitors, and do honour to the sites made memorable by their labours and sufferings. There is no fear that local attachments

will degenerate into sectional jealousies. They who have most to be proud of at home, are not found to be the most narrow-spirited of our citizens. I would, for my own part, that every state had its Bunker Hill, and its Rock of Pilgrims.<sup>26</sup>

Bird here adapts the characteristically Whig demand for improvements to an artistic as well as an economic frame of reference; he sought improvement in the taste and manners of the people. The appropriate way of “doing honour” to one’s forefathers was not merely to remain on the land inhabited by them, but to commemorate their achievements artistically; and this emphasis on consolidation and celebration as the defining traits of civilization is essential to the scheme of *Nick of the Woods*.

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Bird’s conservative socio-political opinions ultimately forced him to find a new way of writing about the frontier and its inhabitants. As a young man, he was clearly seduced by the Cooperian image of the noble savage.<sup>27</sup> An inveterate planner of literary projects, Bird left behind notes and projections for fifty-five unwritten plays; and one of the most advanced of these was entitled *King Philip, A Tragedy; or The Sagamore*. Bird intended to rework the familiar story of King Philip (sometimes known as Philip of Pokanoket or Metacomet), the Wampanoag chief who had attempted to unite New England tribes against the Puritan settlers in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, and who had been the subject of numerous earlier literary efforts, including one of Washington Irving’s tales in *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819).

Amongst the Bird Papers at the University of Pennsylvania is a complete synopsis of this play, together with some notes and fragments of speeches, probably written around 1828. The action of *King Philip* was to have been conventionally romantic. Philip, long a friend of the white settlers, saves the Governor from a panther attack in the wilderness; but is subsequently betrayed by a jealous tribesman and imprisoned. The governor’s daughter releases Philip, in gratitude for his generosity to her father, but his son Tobias is captured and

sentenced to death. Realising that the execution will create a permanent breach between the Indians and whites, Philip sacrifices his son to the political need to motivate his people against the colonists. In the ensuing war, naturally, Philip and his allies are defeated, and, proudly refusing to surrender, Philip is finally killed at his own request by one of his lieutenants.

The pattern here is familiar from other Indian fictions of the period; the action and characters parallel William Gilmore Simms's *The Yemassee* (1835) quite closely, for example. Just as in Simms's novel, the nobility of the Indian chief offers no protection against his extermination, merely adding pathos to his ultimate death. Indeed, in the scheme of Bird's projected drama, Philip's pride and inflexibility make his own tragic fate, and that of his tribe, a kind of self-destruction: despite the efforts of benevolent whites to intercede, he sacrifices his son and his own life in an ultimately futile struggle. In 1828, of course, Indian removal debates were just coming to the boil, and the characterisation of Philip and his tribe that Bird had intended for this play conforms to the stereotypes of pro-removal agitators. Despite the nobility of Philip, the Indians are shown to be completely incompatible with white society, and incapable of adapting. While he laments their destruction, and even regrets the conduct of white settlers towards them, he never suggests that another alternative was available.

Bird's use of the trope of the "noble savage" in *King Philip* was hardly unusual for the time, and would scarcely be worthy of comment were it not so strikingly different to the fiercely anti-romantic representation of Native Americans he offers in *Nick of the Woods*. Although the depiction of Indian culture in *King Philip* is no more accurate than that of *Nick*, the projected play at least gives the Indian characters a voice, and affords them a few redeeming characteristics, of which they are stripped in the novel (although the end result—Native absence—is the same). Philip is presented as a noble chief forced into confrontation

with the white community by the wrongs done to his people, of which he complains to the white Governor in the following stereotypical terms:

Philip (in conference with the governor &c.): My father [i.e. the whites] asked for a garden—he has filled our vallies [*sic*] with his lodges; my father begged a cup of water—his ships have choked up our rivers; my father asked for food—he has changed our hunting grounds into deserts—my people seek in vain for the deer & and the beaver: the white man has driven them away; my children cry for food in their mother's laps.<sup>28</sup>

By contrast, in *Nick of the Woods*, Bird gives almost no dialogue to his Indian characters, and works hard to undermine the “myth” of Indian eloquence; Wenonga, the villainous Black Vulture and the only named Indian in the novel, is given to declarations such as “Me Wenonga, great Injun-captain, great kill-man-white-man, kill-all-man, man-man, squaw-man, little papoose-man!”

How, then, might we account for this shift? In 1833, Bird made the first of two tours of the South and West with Forrest, and this trip certainly altered his estimate of Indian character. His letters make clear that the romantic preconceptions with which he embarked on this expedition were gradually eroded by his experiences. Instead of the proud warriors of whom he had read and written, he found a demoralised and economically dependent people:

[T]hought I, in the solitudes of the pine-barrens of Georgia, I shall feel very poetical; and among the Muscogee groves, I shall see wandering red men, and verify mine old visions of romance. In those solitudes I saw the green forest kings, and . . . in the Muscogee groves, I saw the proud warriors; but they always came to sell green strawberries, and beg tobacco.<sup>29</sup>

Any sympathy Bird has for their situation can only be felt in the abstract. In one letter he refers to the “steril [*sic*] woodlands, which the hand of oppression is this moment wresting

from the poor Creeks,” an apparently disapproving reference to the Indian removal policy of Jackson’s administration. A few lines later, however, he describes his disrespectful response to an Indian who actually meets his preconception of the noble savage:

Talking of Creeks, I saw one fellow, one day, stalking near some wigwams, who was really as noble in figure and carriage, and as picturesque in costume, as I have ever imagined a wild man to be. [...] I was so tickled with his vainglory that I burst into a laugh. This insult, for which I was instantly sorry—for his pride was the only possession of which my countrymen had not robbed him—stung him. He halted, wheeled half round, falling into an attitude really majestic and Apollo-like, and gave me a look of such fierce and fiery intensity that I began to wish I had my pistols about me.<sup>30</sup>

The confusion of tone in this passage is revealing. Although this Indian, surrounded by the stereotypical vocabulary of the noble savage—“majestic and Apollo-like”—conforms with Bird’s aesthetic preconception—“as picturesque [...] as I have ever imagined a wild man to be”—Bird is surprised by his own response. He finds him more ridiculous than sublime; and even as he acknowledges that “his countrymen” had “robbed” the Indians of everything, he unthinkingly expresses the conventional white fear of latent Indian savagery, in his instinctive wish to have “my pistols about me”, merely because the Indian recognises his insult.

In these letters, there is a tension between Bird’s intellectual recognition of the injustice with which the Indians have been treated, and his evident contempt for them on a personal level. However, his personal dislike for the few Indians he had met cannot fully account for the dramatic disjuncture between the gentle mockery we find in his letters, and the vituperative demonization of Native Americans in *Nick of the Woods*, and it is my contention that the explanation lies in a hitherto unremarked ideological agenda of the novel.

Bird states in the preface to the 1853 reissue of the novel that he “aimed to give, not the appearance of truth, but truth itself” to his representation of Native Americans.<sup>31</sup> In reality, however, he was fully aware that his “truth” was, in fact, a distortion, a fact we can deduce from the selective nature of his preparatory reading. The Bird Papers contain a fascinating fragment, written on a tiny corner of paper, recording which texts the author used when researching *Nick*. The text runs as follows:

Nick of the Woods

Read: *Wilkinson's* Memoirs

— 2. Brackenridge's Do. [ditto]

— 3. Haywood, Filson, Imlay — Butler, Flint, Hall

4. Hoffman's Winter in the West.<sup>32</sup>

The works in this list are notable for the one-sided picture they would have given him of Indian affairs in the 1780s. Kentucky's bloody history of conflict meant that histories by westerners, such as Brackenridge, Haywood, Hall, and Butler, invariably portrayed the Indians as savagery incarnate. Even Flint and Hoffman, a New Englander and a New Yorker respectively, record numerous accounts of Indian massacres as told by westerners they encountered on their travels; Flint's *Indian Wars of the West*, in particular, is a digest of Indian conflict and a celebration of white settlement of the West from the colonial period onwards. Bird's choice of source material may appear broad, embracing personal memoirs, topographical descriptions, histories, and possibly even fiction in the case of Hall and Flint, but it effectively precludes the possibility of presenting a positive picture of the Indians. These texts are virtually unanimous in their anti-Indian rhetoric, and must have been chosen precisely for this reason. Bird excludes any “scientific,” ethnological studies of Indian culture. Even Ainsworth, an Englishman, suggests Heckewelder as a contradictory source, though Bird may have classed him with Chateaubriand and Cooper as a deliberate creator of a “poetical illusion.”<sup>33</sup> There were, however, many other works which, while they

perpetuated many of the contemporary Anglo-American preconceptions about native culture, at least acknowledged that there was more to Indian life than brute savagery. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, for instance, although he had not yet produced his seminal ethnological work *Algic Researches* (1839), had published *A Narrative of an Expedition Through the Upper Mississippi to Itasca Lake* in 1834, containing much detail about the Native American tribes he had encountered. That Bird, always careful and rigorous in his research, was unaware of the work of Heckewelder and Schoolcraft is highly unlikely.<sup>34</sup> Even if he had somehow avoided the foremost authorities on Indian culture of his day, his personal accounts for December 1831 tell us that he purchased a copy of *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner* (1830), a detailed account of Tanner's long captivity with the Shawnee and Ojibway Indians, and Major Stephen Long's *Expedition to the Rocky Mountains*.<sup>35</sup> While hardly groundbreaking works of anthropology, these books would at least have given Bird some sense of the complexity and variety of Native American culture—information which he clearly felt no desire to incorporate into his version of the “truth”.

Bird knew that his decision to dehumanise his Indians was an artistic risk, and worried that it might rob his work of its “poetic” qualities. His preparatory notes for *Nick* reveal that even as he planned the novel, he was still wrestling with his instinctive attachment to the literary trope of the noble savage:

It is the fashion of poetry to lament the change, to weep over the rapacity of the settler and wrong of the red king of the forest. It is right that poetry should do so; for there is something deeply melancholy and humbling in the fate of the Indian.<sup>36</sup>

This acknowledgement of the power of the “poetic” representation of the “red king of the forest” suggests Bird's concern that his decision to excise this familiar figure might make his own novel seem vulgar by comparison. This latent anxiety goes some way to accounting for his disproportionate response to criticism, and for the prominence he gives to justifying both his treatment of the Indians, and his inclusion of so many “ruder” characters, in his original

preface. Ever the snob, Bird sought to pre-empt potential accusations of vulgarity; but his willingness to lay himself open to such accusations in the first place suggests that the violence and racism, though not something he wished to be remembered for, was somehow central to his scheme.

His eagerness to deflect criticism, however, has led to the consistent misinterpretation of his novel.<sup>37</sup> The deliberate eschewal of the “noble savage” stereotype in *Nick* has a political motive. As a trope, it had been thoroughly and repeatedly exploited by advocates of western expansion (including Bird himself, a decade earlier, before his political and social views were fully formed). As a result, the figure of the noble Indian, fading into oblivion before the onset of civilization, held no terror for readers. Bird, seeking to *dissuade* his readers from their migratory habits, needed a far more threatening and monstrous apparition to convey the dangers inherent in encountering the wilderness. The demonization of the Indians, therefore, though deliberate, is not an end in itself in *Nick of the Woods*, but is rather a function of the novel’s insistently *anti-expansionist* agenda.

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The plot of *Nick of the Woods* is a tangle of conspiracies and coincidences, ambushes, battles, and hair’s-breadth escapes, centered on a young, aristocratic Virginian soldier, Roland Forrester, and his younger cousin Edith. Courtesy of an internecine conspiracy hatched by a corrupt lawyer, Richard Braxley, Roland and Edith have been disinherited by their Tory uncle, and have travelled West to start a new life. Unbeknownst to them, Braxley has pursued them, driven by a lecherous desire to possess the beautiful Edith. They encounter a motley cast of characters: Colonel Tom Bruce, the generous leader of the Kentuckian settlement; Telie Doe, the daughter of Abel Doe, a renegade white man who has ‘gone Injun’; the horse-thief Ralph Stackpole, a supposedly comic caricature of a ‘rip-roaring’ Kentuckian; Pardon Dodge, a Yankee pedlar; and the novel’s most memorable character, Nathan Slaughter, or Bloody Nathan, a Quaker who refuses to kill Indians. Faced with this farrago, it



is hardly surprising that commentary on the novel has mostly ignored the complexities of the largely conventional love and conspiracy plot, and concentrated instead on the savagery of much of the violence depicted, the author's hostility towards Indians, and the split personality of the Indian-hating Quaker, Nathan Slaughter—who ultimately turns out to be “the Jibbenainosay”, the devil or ‘Nick’ responsible for the slaughter of countless Indians. This has inevitably led to the dismissal of the importance of Roland and Edith, a stance well characterised by Joan Joffe Hall's remark that “[t]he main plot in *Nick* need not concern us much. [...] the book comes alive only when Nathan is on stage.”<sup>38</sup>

The conflict between Nathan's pathological desire for revenge and his religious conscience has generally been thought to provide the real dramatic tension in the novel; as Richard Slotkin has put it, he is “more complex than any of Cooper's heroes, more intensely divided within himself, and hence more dramatically interesting”.<sup>39</sup> However, I believe that an understanding of Bird's social and political opinions, as already discussed here, imparts meaning to the apparently irrelevant conventionality of *Nick*'s plot, which in turn forces a reappraisal of the central ideological message of the book. The novel that emerges is more complex than the triumphal celebration of Manifest Destiny as which it has sometimes been viewed.

Bird reverts to the familiar conceptualisation of the wilderness as a locus of degeneration, a zone in which the valuable attributes of civilization will be compromised and gradually eroded by the savagery of frontier life. In the aftermath of Independence, when the fledgling United States were seeking to distance themselves from their European past and yet were uncertain what the future they had chosen to embrace held in store for them, race powerfully informed ideas of nationhood. As Jared Gardner puts it:

Concerned, on one hand, with distinguishing themselves from white Europeans, white Americans in the early national period were, on the other hand, anxious lest these distinctions should become too great. The question that resonates throughout

the early national period is: What is an American going to be? Scarcely hidden behind the question is the fear that in this undiscovered country and under this untested political system, white Americans will be either collapsed back into Europeans or else transformed into something as completely ‘different’ as blacks and Indians.<sup>40</sup>

Bird resurrects this early national interrogative for his own era; in particular, *Nick of the Woods* confronts its readers with a spectrum of civility—with Edith and Roland at one end and the Indians at the other—that demonstrates both what Americans *are* and what they are capable of becoming. The borderers are poised between the two extremes, capable of tipping either way. Dana Nelson has suggested that the novel actually sets out to achieve “the ideological relocation of radical democratic possibility in the US onto the pre-political frontier Indian”, and that “the novel’s point is precisely about the federal taming of a radically equalitarian frontier ethos,” which “can spread like infection from the Indians to even apparently ‘good’ frontiersmen.”<sup>41</sup> Nelson’s persuasive reading politicises Bird’s novel, arguing that it—like most frontier novels—contributed to an ongoing federal project that seeks to contain the dangerous “revolutionary energies” of “fraternal democracy” (pre-Constitutional democratic practices) by associating them with Native Americans. Whilst fully endorsing this reading, I would suggest that we can differentiate still further between the political ideologies of different practitioners of the frontier novel, and recognise that Robert Montgomery Bird had come to see the Whigs as the true guardians of the federalist project.

Bird’s Indians are therefore agents in his overarching scheme, in which the frontier must be shown to threaten the representatives of a stable social order. To this end, he presents his Indians as demonic figures; as Michael T. Wilson puts it, as “a literal disease upon the American landscape, and a psychological as well as physical danger for Americans themselves.”<sup>42</sup> Bird inverts the argument of evangelical campaigners against Indian removal, to suggest that, far from resulting in damnation for America if the Indians are not saved, any

further exposure to them will result in moral, spiritual, physical, and—as Nelson argues—political corruption.<sup>43</sup> The Indians are employed by Bird as the living embodiments of the dangers of unchecked expansion.

By setting his scene in 1782, the action of *Nick of the Woods* is placed in a comfortably distant past, and associated with the War of Independence. The “dark and bloody ground” of Kentucky was, by 1837, thoroughly settled, and Bird’s novel, in a sense, can be read as a textual monument to those who conquered the wilderness. But it should not be read as an endorsement of further westward expansion; it functions as a parable of the dangers to civilized man in distancing himself from centralized law and government, and exposing himself to the elemental savagery of the wilderness and its Indian inhabitants. Roland is driven by necessity from his established role in the nation (soldier, landowner) towards a potential, alternative role (pioneer, settler). The action of the novel demonstrates the former to be honourable and suitable for one of Roland’s status, and the latter to be fraught with moral and physical dangers that could lead to a descent into savagery as extreme as Nathan Slaughter’s: “Brutality ever begets brutality” (III, 38), as the narrator observes at one point. At the same time the novel presents an ideal paradigm of regional and social unity in which the hierarchies of class and race are rigidly preserved; Roland, the aristocratic Virginian soldier, combines with the Yankee pedlar Dodge, the slave Emperor, Nathan the Pennsylvanian Quaker, and the Kentucky settlers, to combat the threat to the nation represented by the demonic Indians. The commonplace association of Indians with a treasonous, internal danger is invoked in the figure of Richard Braxley, paying the Indians to assault and imprison the icons of Bird’s ideal American society, much as the British employed them in the Revolution and the War of 1812.

Bird’s narratorial voice repeatedly celebrates the virtues and accomplishments of civilization—it is to this sphere that Edith and Roland belong, and to which they turn their faces at the end of the novel, “towards the East and Virginia,—towards Fell-hallow and

home”. They are no more at home in the Kentuckian settlements than in the wilderness itself. He refers in the Preface to the triumph of the republican spirit shown in the fact that ignorant, uneducated men,

succeeded in their vast enterprise, wrested from the savage the garden-land of his domain, and secured to their conquest all the benefits of civil government and laws. Their success may be considered a phenomenon in history: but the philosophic examiner will perhaps find in it an illustration of the efficacy of the republican principle in enlarging the mind, and awakening the energies, of men whom the influence of another code of political faith would have kept in the darkness and insignificance to which they were born. (I, x)

Bird is insistent in his emphasis on “the benefits of civil government and laws” as the ultimate end of settlement. The process by which they were achieved—the border conflict that the novel describes—is not something to be sought for its own sake. Nor should the fact that previous generations succeeded in settling and ultimately civilizing the wilderness be taken as a mandate for unlimited future expansion—their success was “a phenomenon in history”. This success having been achieved, it should be remembered and celebrated, but not necessarily emulated.

Roland’s first appearance in the novel brings home his acute sense of difference from the other pioneers. He is the *de facto* leader of the group of travellers who appear at Bruce’s station, because of his military experience, his air of command, his aristocratic background. It is made clear that in his proper environment, Roland is a man of judgement and vigour, trusted by others despite his youth. But his own opinion of the Kentucky settlers is anything but positive:

“Yonder people, the outcasts of our borders, the poor, the rude, the savage,—but one degree elevated above the Indians, with whom they contend,—are they the society from whom Edith Forrester should choose her friends?” (I, 16)

Roland is acutely aware of the gulf in class that distinguishes him and Edith from their companions; and though Edith insists that she is not too good for these common people, Bird implicitly suggests that she is.

Almost immediately, the judgement of the borderers is brought into question. Colonel Tom Bruce introduces himself to Roland by establishing a connection with his uncle, under whom he had served, dating back to the French and Indian War—the very uncle by whom Roland has been disinherited. Although the fundamental decency of Bruce and his companions is never questioned, the subtle perversion of their values is. The praise Bruce heaps upon his son for having killed an Indian at the age of fourteen impresses upon us the brutality of the place and the time, and we are meant to recoil slightly at the Colonel's inappropriate suggestion that Edith might consider his precocious offspring as a husband. Bruce, the leader of the settlement, is introduced as an intellectually limited individual, whose prominence in this frontier community is an indication of its backwardness: he is a “plain yeoman, endowed with those gifts of mind only which were necessary to his station, but with the virtues which are alike common to forest and city” (I, 21), a description that makes clear that in the city, back East, his qualities would not be considered remarkable. We are quickly led to doubt the capacity of this frontier commander to control his environment. He fails to protect Roland's horse from the thieving Ralph Stackpole; fails to heed the genuine warning of Nathan; and fails to direct the cousins safely through the forest. Not are we allowed to forget these failings, for at the end of the novel, the death of his son Tom is directly ascribed to “the heroic efforts, so overpowering and destructive in his disabled condition, which he had made to repair his father's fault” (III, 229).

Bruce's attempt to impose order, by sending a lynching party after Stackpole, is represented as barbaric, and the reader is instructed in the correct response by the delicacy of Edith, who insists that he be cut down. Roland—citing the justice of the “Kentucky law” meted out by the “Regulators”—is tempted to let him hang, his civilized values already

beginning to be corrupted by the wilderness around him. This is more than a mere question of gender difference; Edith's objections are legal and moral, not merely the expression of feminine squeamishness or excessive sympathy. She insists that "the law is murderous, its makers and executioners barbarians" (I, 172), an evaluation that guides the reader to reappraise the narrator's account of frontier justice as one laced with irony:

[T]hat all passers-by might take note that the execution had not been done without authority, there was painted upon the smooth white bark of the tree, in large black letters [...] the ominous name—JUDGE LYNCH, the Rhadamanthus of the forest, whose decisions are yet respected in the land, and whose authority sometimes bids fair to supersede that of all erring human tribunals. (I, 169)

Following his release, Stackpole insistently describes Edith as "angelliferous madam," and indeed, in the moral and spiritual maze of their wilderness environment, she cuts a consistently angelic figure; in times of danger, she repeatedly (and apparently successfully) pleads, "Heaven help me!" She exemplifies the delicate virtue of civilized womanhood, which lends her an air of impregnability also linked to her status as the real heir. Braxley's grasp on her uncle's estate is based on the false claim that an earlier child had survived; he therefore wants not just to possess Edith sexually—otherwise he could just rape her—but to marry her, thereby legitimately becoming master of the estate. Edith's class, wealth, and chastity are all closely interlinked; the abandonment of one, Bird implies, will entail the loss of the others.

It is, however, Roland who has the greatest potential to fall from grace, to be tempted by the violence of an environment with which he is unfamiliar to abandon his genteel, civilized virtues. Edith is his good angel; when he is separated from her and held prisoner by the Pianckeshaw Indians, they bind him on a cross, a rather crudely symbolic means of reiterating his alignment with New Testament ideals. But if Edith is Roland's good angel (a

more incorruptible version of Faith in Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown"), whom he must rescue from a kind of descent into hell, then Nathan is, in a sense, his bad one—a guide through the wilderness who appears to be something he is not. The following exchange between them exemplifies this. Nathan asks Roland what he would have done had his family been murdered by Indians:

"Declared eternal war upon them and their accursed race!" cried Roland, greatly excited by the story; "I would have sworn undying vengeance, and I would have sought it,—ay, sought it without ceasing. Day and night, summer and winter, on the frontier and in their own lands and villages, I would have pursued the wretches, and pursued them to the death."

"Thee is right!" cried Nathan, wringing the hand he still held, and speaking with a grin of hideous approval;—"by night and by day, in summer and in winter, in the wood and in the wigwam, thee would seek for their blood, and thee would shed it,—thee would think of thee wife and the little babes, and thee heart would be as stone and fire within thee—thee would kill, friend, thee would kill, thee would kill!" And the monosyllable was breathed over and over again with a ferocity of emphasis that showed how deep and vindictive was the passion in the speaker's mind. (II, 237-238)

Nathan's monomania tempts the young Virginian to abandon the tenets of civilization that define him. In *The Word in Black and White*, Nelson argues that this scene encourages Roland, and by extension the reader, to identify with Nathan, making them complicit in his quest for revenge whilst simultaneously absolving them of any guilt by placing responsibility on the "savage" Indians. The goal, she argues, is to encourage readers to participate in the creation of an American tradition.<sup>44</sup> My own sense, however, is that the response Bird is encouraging in this scene is not identification, but momentary temptation followed by revulsion. Nathan is sometimes heroic and repeatedly saves Roland and Edith—but he is also, clearly, deranged. As the level of his violence escalates in the course of the novel, so he

becomes more Indian-like, until at the climactic battle his transformation is described in the following terms:

His eye beamed with a wild excitement, with exultation, mingled with fury; his step was fierce, active, firm, and elastic, like that of a warrior leaping through the measures of the war dance; and when he spoke, his words were of battle and bloodshed. He flourished the axe of Wenonga, pointed grimly towards the village, and while recounting the number of warriors who lay therein waiting to be knocked on the head, he seemed, judging his thoughts from his gestures, to be employed in imagination in despatching them with his own hands.

This is degeneration in its most complete form, an utter falling away from civility, and from the very values that the Revolution was fought to defend. Surely, the response of Bird's metropolitan readers to this was not meant to be identification? Nathan's double nature encapsulates the persistent duality of the novel; he is neither one thing nor the other, neither peace-loving man of religion nor a true savage. And yet he is the only competent person offered to the reader, the only character able both to predict and respond to the incessant outbursts of violence. For Bird, the fact that the only white man capable of independent survival teeters on the edge of sanity and is driven by a lust for vengeance is an indictment of the society engendered by the frontier. The Kentuckians, one step closer to civilization, are one degree less able frontiersmen—the final victory over the Indians, to which they are led by Nathan, is an eruption of genocidal violence and savagery to which Bird objects, not because it is really wrong to kill Indians, but because civilized men should try to avoid the savagery frontier warfare supposedly makes necessary.

The extent of the transgression of civilized values in this climactic battle is suggested by Dodge, otherwise fully converted into a violent Indian-fighter, who objects to the slaughter of the Shawnee women:



“Everlasting bad work, Cunnel!” cried Dodge; “they’re a killing the squaws! Hark, dunt you hear ‘em squeaking? Now, Cunnel, I can kill your tarnal *man* fellers, for they’ve riz my ebenezzer, and I’ve kinder got my hand in; but, I rather calkilate, I han’t no disposition to kill wimming!” (III, 233)

This striking speech is yet another reminder of the brutalizing effect of frontier life, and an indication of the ease with which a previously pacific man can quickly become habituated to extreme violence (“I’ve kinder got my hand in”). Dodge’s vivid description of “squeaking” women being genocidally culled by rampaging frontiersmen hunting Indian “meat”, is not disputed by the Colonel or any of the other bystanders (a striking contrast to the repeated efforts of the settlers to protect white womanhood from harm); but it is half-heartedly gainsayed several pages later by the narrator, who observes that “many were killed, and more, including all the women and children (who, honest Dodge’s misgivings to the contrary notwithstanding, were in no instance designedly injured) taken prisoners” (III, 243). This peculiar piece of narratorial revisionism does not, I would argue, erase the impression left by the original remark, nor does its equivocal language (not “designedly injured”) fully excuse the Kentuckians for their loss of self-control.

The wilderness in *Nick* is, as James C. Bryant long ago noted, a fallen world, in which all human beings are fallible.<sup>45</sup> We are not being invited to contrast this world with an Edenic paradise, however, but with the ideal social and political stability of the emerging nation. On the frontier, people must choose between violence and religion, savagery and civility, expansionism and consolidation, madness and sanity. Unlike the heroes of earlier frontier novels—such as Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*, who is a failure in society but an instinctively deadly Indian-fighter—Roland continually makes the *wrong* decisions in the woods, and can barely control his violent impulses. Out of place in the wilderness, he cannot achieve his true potential.

Ultimately, the novel emphasises the fragility of human achievements and human virtue, and the ease with which the delicate balance of society can be disrupted, just as an individual can be corrupted. At one point Braxley suggests the fineness of the line between good and evil, when he says to Edith:

“I *am* a villain indeed...all men are so. Good and evil are sown together in our natures, and each has its season and its harvest. In this breast, as in the breast of the worst and the noblest, Nature set, at birth, an angel and a devil...” (III, 123).

Similarly, Bird has set an angel and a devil, Edith and Nathan, at work in his fictional wilderness, working not just for good and evil, but also for virtuous civility and intemperate savagery.

Nathan walks through the novel like an Old Testament prophet, his warnings ignored by the unbelievers; and his advocacy of vengeance and faith simultaneously is also Old Testament in tone, and appropriate to the world he inhabits. Edith’s Christian forgiveness is out of place on the frontier, just as Roland’s skills as a soldier are. But Nathan belongs too completely to the wilderness, and at the novel’s end, he cannot leave it. Exposed as the Jibbenainosay, he retreats into the woods, never to be seen again. His vengeance is not cathartic, and his savagery remains too elemental even for the rude society of the frontier. The two cousins “joyously” return to Virginia, newly restored to wealth and position—“to enjoy a fortune of happiness, to which memory of the few weeks of anguish and gloom passed in the desert, only served to impart additional zest” (III, 260). Bird here lays his cards on the table. Their inheritance had two principal negative associations: anti-republicanism (Roland was disinherited by his loyalist uncle because he chose the colonial side in the Revolution); and sexual capitulation, the option Braxley offers to Edith. By emerging unscathed and fundamentally unchanged from the frontier crucible, they purge their birthright of these connotations. Just as Bird had urged in his letter of 1835, his hero and heroine

“return to that [soil] which our fathers have made habitable,” and to an appropriate future of civility in the East.

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If this is all true, and Bird wrote *Nick of the Woods* in order to discourage the rapid movement of the American people westward, then why, it may be asked, do Bird’s contemporary readers seem to have missed this point? All of the contemporary reviews of the novel recognise that it is different to other examples of the frontier romance, largely because it treats its Indian characters with greater hostility. None of them, however, understand it as an endorsement of consolidation. The responsibility lies with both the author, whose preface sent his readers barking up the wrong tree, and with an audience unprepared to read a frontier romance that questioned the desirability of the nation’s westward progress.

Dana Nelson, following Bakhtin, has suggested that “the novel’s characteristic multi-voicedness may have subverted the possibility for frontier literature to accomplish an undiluted message”.<sup>46</sup> The novel as a form embraces heteroglossia, and as Bakhtin puts it, “[t]he prose writer makes use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others, and compels them to serve his own new intentions, to serve a second master.”<sup>47</sup> This usually refers to a subaltern voice subversively speaking from within a hegemonic discourse; *Nick of the Woods* manages to be both hegemonic in its absolute conviction of the superiority of white American culture, whilst also being subversive in its efforts to make the master-narrative of frontier conquest and westward movement “serve a second master”. He sets out to memorialize the historical exploits of earlier generations on the frontier, while simultaneously recoiling from the prospect of perpetually inhabiting the frontier of the present. The theme of duality that runs throughout the text (embodied most starkly in the figure of Nathan Slaughter, who seems to be one thing and is really another) can be taken as a clue to the nature of the text itself.

Nelson also points out that Bird's novel, and frontier fiction more broadly, "could shape attitudes toward current situations that readers encountered during the continued expansion of imaginative and physical frontiers during the 1820s and 1830s."<sup>48</sup> This is exactly what Bird is trying to achieve, asking his readers to understand their present by considering the past. His point is that Anglo-Americans in the 1830s don't *need* to go chasing off into the woods to kill Indians in order to protect themselves; that work was done by their forebears—at the cost of their civility. It is incumbent on the current generation of Americans, Bird argues, to take advantage of their sacrifice by consolidating, rather than expanding. This scheme requires his readers to 'hear' both voices simultaneously, the celebratory and the admonitory—but for most readers, the former has drowned out the latter. Bird's original preface, on one level, was designed to encourage readers to consider *why* his Indians are so different from those in other novels, to help them to tune in to his embedded counter-narrative; but by focusing attention on a single critical debate—the comparative merits of "romance" and "realism"—it actually deflected attention from the cultural work he hoped his novel might perform in the service of Whig values.

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<sup>1</sup> Cox, *Muting White Noise*, 216.

<sup>2</sup> Bird, *Nick of the Woods*, liv, lviii.. Although I will question these assertions, Williams's essay remains a good short introduction to Bird's work and life.

<sup>3</sup> To view Bird's paintings, see <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/bird/>

<sup>4</sup> Bird, *Nick of the Woods; a Story of Kentucky*, vol. I, xii.. Further references to the text of the novel will be to this edition, and are included in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Anon., *Knickerbocker* (April, 1837) 419-421..

<sup>6</sup> Bird, *Nick of the Woods*, Revised Edn, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Drinnon, *Facing West*, 160.

<sup>8</sup> Anon., *Southern Literary Messenger* (April, 1837) 254-257..

<sup>9</sup> See Foust, *Life and Dramatic Works*, 125.

<sup>10</sup> The publication of *Nick of the Woods* coincided with the so-called Panic of 1837, an “economic tailspin that [...] ensured that the Whig party would endure” (Holt, *American Whig Party*, 61). Defeat in the previous year’s election had threatened to dissolve what was still a fairly loose coalition until the economic crisis gave them a unifying focus. Unfortunately, the Panic also caused the collapse of the book market and effectively spelled the end of Bird’s career as a successful novelist.

<sup>11</sup> For a useful discussion of the constituent elements of the Whig party, see Brown, *Politics and Statesmanship*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 244.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>16</sup> For details of the uncontrolled issuing of currency by state banks in the 1830s, and the consequent increase in wild speculation in frontier land, see Billington, *Westward Expansion*, 320-1.

<sup>17</sup> Howe, *Political Culture*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>20</sup> In 1831, Bird had recorded his opinion that if the play were to be performed in a slave state, ‘the managers, actors, and author as well would probably be rewarded with the penitentiary’ (Foust, 51). Walt Whitman, in reviewing the play, had commented that it was ‘as full of “Abolitionism” as an egg is of meat’, by which he meant very full. See Whitman, “Gladiator”, *Brooklyn Eagle* (December 26, 1846) .

<sup>21</sup> There has been some confusion about whether Bird was Northern or Southern, presumably because he was born in Newcastle, Delaware, but spent most of his life in Philadelphia. Slotkin positions him as a Southerner, committed to slavery and southern aristocracy, but he also erroneously puts the New Yorker James K. Paulding in this category. According to Drinnon, he was a Southern writer only “by a latitudinarian definition of Southern”, but states that “Doctor Bird shared with Paulding and Simms a sympathy for the South and its institutions” (Drinnon, *Facing West*, 151). It is certainly incorrect to claim, as Patricia Roberts-Miller does, that Bird, “[a]lthough not a Southerner by birth [...] is generally considered one of the pre-eminent antebellum Southern men of letters”, a misidentification from which she draws parallels between *Nick* and the rhetorical techniques of antebellum Southern discourse (see Roberts-Miller, “Improbable Cause”, 77.). The fact that he was a Whig does not necessarily mean that he was more ‘Northern’ in sympathy; Brown points out that the Whig party “commanded the support of about one-half of the southern electorate in the Jacksonian era... [which] hardly comports with the traditional portrait of a monolithic South united by hostility to national “consolidationism”” (Brown, *Politics and Statesmanship*, 155). It seems to me that Bird’s “Middle State identification”, to use Drinnon’s term, allowed him to position himself as a ‘national’ writer; and while his letters reveal him to be no abolitionist, nor was he an apologist for slavery in the manner of Simms and Paulding.

<sup>22</sup> Foust, *Life and Dramatic Works*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, fn.

<sup>24</sup> Bird to Mary and Caroline Mayer, “Nashville, June 14<sup>th</sup> 1833”, in Mayer Bird, *Life*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Bird, *Nick of the Woods; a Story of Kentucky*, I, xi.

<sup>26</sup> Cited by Williams, ed., *Nick of the Woods*, xxix-xxx.

<sup>27</sup> The standard biographical sources for Bird are Foust, *Life and Dramatic Works*, and Mayer Bird, *Life*. Also see Dahl, *Robert Montgomery Bird*, for a useful summary.

<sup>28</sup> Bird Papers, Box 6, Folder 183.

<sup>29</sup> Bird to Mrs John Frost, “New Orleans, May 18<sup>th</sup> 1833”. Mayer Bird, *Life*, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Bird to Mary and Caroline Mayer, “New Orleans, May 8<sup>th</sup> 1833”. *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>31</sup> Bird, preface, *Nick of the Woods*, rev. ed. (1853) iv.

<sup>32</sup> Bird Papers, Box 11, Folder 252. ‘Wilkinson’ is probably General James Wilkinson. ‘Brackenridge’ refers to Henry Marie Brackenridge (1786-1871), son of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, and author of *Recollections of Persons and Places in the West* (1834). Judge John Haywood (1753-1826), as well as being a Justice of the Tennessee State Supreme Court (like Andrew Jackson before him), founded the Tennessee Antiquarian Society, and is sometimes know as ‘The Father of Tennessee History’. Alongside many works on Tennessee law, Haywood published the *Civil and Political History of the State of Tennessee from its Earliest Settlement up to the Year 1796* (1823). John Filson (1753-1788) was the author of *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (1784), containing an appendix entitled ‘The Adventures of Daniel Boone’, the earliest published

account of Boone's life. Gilbert Imlay (1754-1828), best known as the unfaithful lover of Mary Wollstonecraft, was also the author of *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (1792), and a companion novel, *The Emigrants*, published the following year. Mann Butler (d. 1835) was a western historian who had recently published *A History of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (1834). Butler had been involved in a minor controversy with Judge James Hall (1793-1868), another historian of Kentucky and the author of several volumes of surprisingly good short stories (including one called 'The Indian-hater') and one novel. Timothy Flint (1780-1840) was variously a missionary, pioneer, editor and novelist. He had published numerous works which Bird might have plundered, including *Recollections of the Last Ten Years in the Mississippi Valley* (1826); *A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or the Mississippi Valley* (1828); *Indian Wars of the West* (1833); and his novel *The Shoshonee Valley* (1830). Charles Fenno Hoffman (1806-1804) had published *A Winter in the Far West* in 1835, a travel narrative, in epistolary form, of the author's experiences in the West over the winter of 1833-1834. Hoffman, a fellow Whig, became a friend and correspondent of Bird's, offering him the Philadelphia editorship of *The American Monthly Magazine* in 1837.

<sup>33</sup> Bird, preface, *Nick of the Woods*, rev. ed. (1853) iv. John Heckewelder was a Moravian missionary who had spent many years with the Delawares, publishing two major works: *Account of the History, Manners and Customs of the Indian Nations who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania* (1819) and *A Narrative of the Mission of the United Brethren Among the Delaware and Mohegan Indians* (1820).

<sup>34</sup> It is possible that Schoolcraft, as the Indian Agent for the Lake Superior region, was too closely associated in Bird's mind with the Jackson administration. He was a close friend of Lewis Cass, the prime mover of Indian Removal as Secretary of War from 1831 to 1836.

<sup>35</sup> See Foust, 52. Presumably the latter refers to Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819 and '20*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Carey, 1823). Long did not publish a separate account himself.

<sup>36</sup> Bird Papers, Box 11, Folder 252.

<sup>37</sup> *Nick of the Woods* was adapted for the stage numerous times, with great success, which may have affected how the story was read. One such version, by George Washington Harley in 1838, survives in the form of a heavily annotated working script in the University of Virginia library. Amongst many instances of compression and alteration to the action of the novel, the ending is materially altered to conform to a more conventional pattern: Edith and Roland do not return to Virginia, nor does Nathan disappear forever into the woods— all parties remain in harmony on the frontier, now safe for white settlement. See George Washington Harley, Manuscript, Accession #7459-a, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903.

<sup>38</sup> Hall, "American Wilderness", 173-4. Several critics, like Hall, presumably confused by Bird's plotting, make the mistake of thinking that Telie Doe really is the missing heir to the Forrester estate, but Bird makes it quite clear that she is not.

<sup>39</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*, 515.

<sup>40</sup> Gardner, *Master Plots*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Nelson, "Frontier Democracy", 215, 225, 227.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, "'Saturnalia of Blood'".

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, Wallace, *Long, Bitter Trail*, for an account of the religious opposition to Indian Removal.

<sup>44</sup> Nelson, *Word in Black and White*, 43-44.

<sup>45</sup> Bryant, "Fallen World", 352-364.

<sup>46</sup> Nelson, *Word in Black and White*, 63

<sup>47</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*,

<sup>48</sup> Nelson, *Word in Black and White*, 60.