



# Whipscars and Tattoos: The Last of the Mohicans, Moby-Dick, and the Maori

*Geoffrey Sanborn*

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## **Whipscars and Tattoos: The Last of the Mohicans, Moby-Dick, and the Maori** Geoffrey Sanborn

In this original study, Geoffrey Sanborn presents a fresh interpretation of the villainous Magua in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and of the dignified harpooner Queequeg in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). Through careful historical research, Sanborn has determined that both authors relied heavily on contemporary accounts of the indigenous natives of New Zealand, the Maori, to develop their iconic characters. Cooper drew heavily on the account of Te Aara in John Liddiard Nicholas's *Narrative of a Voyage to New Zealand* (1817) while Melville studied the personal history of Te Pehi Kupe in George Lillie Craik's *The New Zealanders* (1830) to flesh out his characterization of Queequeg. A close reading of the historical evidence and the source material supports this compelling line of argumentation. At the same time, this isn't a simple source study nor an act of explanatory historical recovery. The conception of the Maori is sophisticated and paradoxical, a portrait of violent but nonetheless idealized masculinity in which dignity depends on the existence of fiercely defiant pride. This lens allows Sanborn to present a radically different view of these fictional characters as well as underscoring the imaginative projection that went into reporting on the Maori themselves. Magua is no longer a stereotypical "bad Indian" or "ignoble savage," but rather a non-white "gentleman," an argument that supports Sanborn's contention that throughout his career Cooper prioritizes status equivalence over racial difference. Queequeg is similarly re-imagined, a move that allows Sanborn to explicate scenes in *Moby-Dick* that are often dodged by other critics because they do not fit with the standard interpretations of the character. The study as a whole provides a vivid example of the fascinating interplay between fiction and non-fiction in the nineteenth century.

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