



2011

# Nature, Domestic Labor, and Moral Community in Susan Fenimore Cooper's Rural Hours and Elinor Wyllys

Richard M. Magee

Sacred Heart University, [mageer@sacredheart.edu](mailto:mageer@sacredheart.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/eng\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/eng_fac)

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Rural Sociology Commons](#), [Women's Studies Commons](#), and the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Magee, Richard M., "Nature, Domestic Labor, and Moral Community in Susan Fenimore Cooper's Rural Hours and Elinor Wyllys" (2011). *English Faculty Publications*. Paper 16.

[http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/eng\\_fac/16](http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/eng_fac/16)

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact [ferribyp@sacredheart.edu](mailto:ferribyp@sacredheart.edu).

## CHAPTER FIVE

# NATURE, DOMESTIC LABOR, AND MORAL COMMUNITY IN SUSAN FENIMORE COOPER'S *RURAL HOURS* AND *ELINOR WYLLYS*

RICHARD M. MAGEE

Susan Fenimore Cooper, the oldest surviving daughter of the novelist, James Fenimore Cooper, published her most successful book, a nature journal called *Rural Hours*, in 1850.<sup>1</sup> Her book sold well enough that G.P. Putnam put out a fine illustrated edition in 1851, with an updated edition coming out in 1868, another in 1876, and a shortened edition in 1887.<sup>2</sup> Although *Rural Hours* first appeared anonymously, most of her later works, both attributed and anonymous, noted that they were written by "the author of *Rural Hours*," indicating the enduring popularity and name-recognition of the book. After her death in 1894, *Rural Hours*, along with her other works, including her 1846 novel, *Elinor Wyllys; or the Young Folk of Longbridge*,<sup>3</sup> was largely forgotten. New editions of *Rural Hours* were published in 1968 and 1998, though, and her novel was republished in 2003. Scholarly attention to Cooper and her works has grown in recent years; in 2001, Rochelle Johnson and Daniel Patterson edited an anthology of articles about Cooper, and the 1999 Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) conference in Kalamazoo, Michigan, featured two complete panels devoted to Cooper.<sup>4</sup>

Although some scholars have begun to look at Cooper's other works, including both her novel and her shorter essays, most of the critical attention has been focused on *Rural Hours*, and much of that work has been ecocritical. This text, with its close attention to the natural history of the Cooperstown landscape, analysis of bird behavior, and detailed botanical observations, provides ample subject matter for ecocritical scholarship. Cooper's organizational scheme also lends itself to ecocritical approaches, as she follows patterns established by other nature writers such as Gilbert White or John Knapp<sup>5</sup>; she dates her journal entries and

further groups them in four sections corresponding to the seasons. I wish to add to Cooper scholarship by continuing in the path some critics have begun and consider the manner in which ecocritical and domestic readings of Cooper overlap and enhance each other. This is not to say that Cooper scholarship has entirely neglected the domestic aspects of her writing, and, in fact, Vera Norwood adds an important dimension to Cooper criticism in arguing that nature was, for Cooper, "an extension of her domestic sphere."<sup>6</sup> Robert Hardy also argues that Cooper "moved toward transforming the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity . . . into an ethic of care for the environment."<sup>7</sup> Cooper frequently deploys tropes of domestic labor to illustrate the "ethic of care" that permeates the text, and, although Cooper does address both types of domestic labor, she emphasizes communal labor that contributes to the collective good. By generally (though not exclusively) privileging the communal, Cooper emphasizes the themes of interconnection crucial to both domestic literature and environmentally-informed works.

When we take Joanne Dobson's definition of sentimental literature as "that body of mid-nineteenth century American literature, usually but not always by women, that takes as its highest values sympathy, affection, and relation,"<sup>8</sup> it soon becomes clear that Cooper's works, including *Rural Hours*, demonstrate that same attention to these values. Furthermore, if we consider other critical appraisals of sentimental and domestic literature, such as Sandra Zagarell's "Narrative of Community,"<sup>9</sup> we can see that Cooper's journal, though it may at times seem somewhat empty of humans, does, in fact, provide its readers with a clear vision of Cooper's thoughts on the nature of a rural community. Zagarell constructs her idea of community partly around the idea that the narratives in her study are crucially informed by the urge to strengthen the interconnections among all inhabitants of the community. Cooper's construction of community follows a similar pattern, with the important addition of the natural or non-human environment and the non-human inhabitants of that environment as central members. The linguistic intersection that links sentimental and ecocritical scholarship is based on the centrality of these interconnections—human in the case of sentimentalism and biotic in the case of ecocriticism. Sentimental ecology examines the notion that the language used to describe human interconnections and that used to describe ecological interconnections can be used to serve the same ends; sentimental tropes may be used to reinforce ecological imagery, while the language of ecology may be used to underline the physical and emotional links that join humans together.<sup>10</sup>

Cooper uses the natural setting to convey her attitudes toward domestic economy, attitudes which use the language of natural observation and a proto-ecological<sup>11</sup> stance to promote a vision of domestic morality. Cooper opens the door of the kitchen and expands her view of the domestic realm to incorporate the wider rural community as well as the natural environment, creating a broader conception of the domestic that allows the possibility of greater moral action. Her expansive vision of community recenters the home as a place not separate from but within the natural world, a unique placement that falls into neither extreme of romanticized frontier nor inward-looking home life. First I wish to look very briefly at Cooper's first published work, the novel *Elinor Wyllys*, to demonstrate how she begins expanding the domestic out into the community. Then, I will examine Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850)<sup>12</sup> to show a contrasting view of the relationship between nature and domesticity. Finally, I will look closely at two important passages in *Rural Hours* that illustrate Cooper's understanding of the relationship between community, domestic labor, and the natural environment.

By comparing Cooper's depiction of community and the natural world to Warner's, we can see that each is informed by a very different understanding of how nature is to be defined and used, and this influences the way each writes about domestic labor. Warner presents the natural world as an aesthetic frame to enhance the moral lessons she seeks to impart; in a sense, nature in Warner's novel is little more than the setting. In her novel, Cooper constructs a rural community where domestic labor requires cooperation and interdependence to function properly; this becomes more clear when contrasted with the insular, individualistic domestic labor in Warner's novel. By highlighting the manner in which domestic labor is connected to the community, Cooper increases the importance of individual contributions, which Warner, in isolating her concept of labor, pushes it into the background. Cooper's attention to the importance of community ideals and sensitivity to the natural world become even more evident in *Rural Hours*; these community ideals and sensitivities connect *Rural Hours* to her earlier *Elinor Wyllys*.

Cooper turns her presentation of domestic faculty outward: domestic labor is frequently configured as a community event, and this is in keeping with the ecological ethos of her most important work. This outward glance, however, can also be seen in her only published novel, *Elinor Wyllys*, which fits the general pattern of the sentimental novel as outlined by several scholars. Most of the scenes are set in various drawing rooms and houses in the small, semi-rural community of Longbridge, and Cooper frequently emphasizes domestic themes. One scene early in the novel stands

apart as a particularly distinct example of the peculiar approach that Cooper takes in her development of rural domesticity. Pompey Taylor, an arrogant financier and speculator from the city, has recently bought an overlarge and pretentious mansion in town, and his impetuous and spoiled daughter, Adeline, has invited a large group of friends over for a party. Taylor's wife, Hester, panics when she realizes that she must serve and properly entertain "fifty or sixty persons"<sup>13</sup> while at the same moment, most of her household staff has deserted for various reasons. The situation has all of the ingredients of a hilarious farce, with a ridiculous number of coincidences, inopportune illnesses, and sudden appearances of yet more unexpected guests. Cooper, though, maintains a somewhat distanced and lofty tone as she describes the numerous complicated steps that several characters take to avert social disaster.

Hester Taylor's salvation begins when she astutely decides to enlist the aid of Miss Agnes Wyllys, the eponymous heroine's aunt. Although the Wyllyses are not as fashionable or wealthy as the Taylors, they are important members of the community, and, more significantly, they represent solid rural values that act as a foil for the urban and business-driven values exemplified by Pompey Taylor. Miss Agnes immediately and unquestioningly comes to the aid of her acquaintance:

All the men, women, and children in the neighborhood, who might possibly possess some qualifications for the duties of cook, chamber-maid, of footman, were run over in Miss Agnes' mind; and she succeeded at last, by including one superannuated old woman, and another child of ten, in making out a list of some dozen names for her neighbour's benefit.<sup>14</sup>

Once its availability has been secured, Mrs. Taylor begins deploying the neighborhood help around the house. At this point, Cooper's narrator intrudes with a typical editorial comment on the situation:

Even her husband and sons are seldom aware of her toils and vexations. Many people are ignorant of the number of virtues that are included, at such moments, in that of hospitality; could a plain, unvarnished account, be made out, of the difficulties surmounted, at some time or other, by most American matrons, the world would wonder at their fortitude and perseverance.<sup>15</sup>

The tone of this statement, verging on the mock-heroic, does not obscure the point that Cooper is making about domestic faculty in genteel American society. The labor involved in creating the typically American brand of hospitality requires a significant communal effort, with the "mistress of an American family"<sup>16</sup> standing at the head of this effort,

much like the director of a play, a director who is also a lead actress. The comparison to a well-made play is reinforced once the party starts, and Mrs. Taylor and her reduced band of helpers must rush in and out of doorways and halls, always just missing getting caught in the act by the guests. When a footman comes to announce that dinner is ready, Mrs. Taylor assumes a look of "sublime indifference, required by etiquette,"<sup>17</sup> as if she had not just helped set that dinner out.

The light-hearted tone and farcical image of well-dressed ladies dashing madly behind the scenes allows Cooper a chance to slip in her satirical critique of domestic labor. As she points out, the men in the family "are seldom aware" of the tremendous work involved in maintaining any element of the domestic sphere, not to mention the extra labor involved in a large, complicated party. Domestic labor is private, as evidenced by the closed doors that conceal the mad rushing, but it is also public, with the help of many members of the community and the complicity of the hostess who contrives to efface any obvious evidence of the labor. While she does not offer an especially pointed critique of a society that feels it must go to great lengths (and even more labor) to hide labor, she does take the time to illustrate the realities of work.

Cooper's development of sentimental themes and her understanding of domestic faculty stands out when we compare her novel to Susan Warner's roughly contemporary *The Wide, Wide World* (1850). While Cooper often configures domestic labor as part of a community effort, Warner's domestic laborers frequently do so in private; furthermore, Cooper situates her domestic scenes within the context of a rural environment, while Warner establishes the rural as a good classroom, but not as a final destination for proper domesticity. Aunt Fortune Emerson's buttery in Warner's novel comes the closest to representing the union of domestic and rural that seems to interest Cooper so much, and this is the single place in the house where Ellen, Warner's protagonist, feels most at home. It is by far the most appealing spot in the otherwise somewhat severe house, with its spotlessly clean appearance, bright light, fresh paint, and efficient organization. When her aunt falls ill, Ellen is entrusted with the key to the buttery, a signal that she has earned the right to wield the power previously only in the hands of Aunt Emerson: domestic responsibility and private female power is symbolized by the key. Moreover, the iconic key reveals that the world of domestic labor that Ellen is about to enter is isolated and kept securely hidden away from the rest of the community. Female power in *The Wide, Wide World* is configured as emanating from privately held domestic work.<sup>18</sup>

Ellen's experiences in a rural setting are not all connected to domestic labor, but they usually reinforce the notion that nature is a tool to be used for human improvement but not as a permanent home. After one particularly emotional fight with her Aunt, Ellen runs off through a "wild woodway path" that is charming for its "picturesque effect."<sup>19</sup> Here Warner conceives of the natural setting as a place of solitude, far different from the communal festival that Cooper presents in *Rural Hours*. While she is crying bitterly over her longing for her mother and her sense of injustice at her Aunt's hands, she is approached by Alice Humphreys, who commences teaching the girl the lessons in Christian humility and responsibility that permeate the novel. Although Ellen's moral education had already begun with her duties in the buttery, the purpose and direction of the education becomes explicit with this meeting in the woods. Significantly, the rural in Warner's novel is usually pictured as rustic and rude, suggesting that the lessons Ellen learns in the rural setting are meant to be employed for a higher purpose and then taken away from the unsophisticated country. Indeed, in the final chapter of the novel (originally unpublished, but recovered in Jane Tompkins's edition of 1987), Ellen has married John Humphreys, and she is ensconced in a luxurious house in "one of our pleasantest, though not one of our largest cities."<sup>20</sup> The purpose of her rural education was not to teach her to work in any sort of communal effort with other rural women, but was to break down her will and teach her the proper way to be an urban wife. Nature is thus configured as a sort of rough file that removes the burrs and refines the surface, while the friction of rural community life performs the same task.

A pivotal episode in *The Wide, Wide World* demonstrates both the commonalities and the differences between Cooper's and Warner's attitudes towards domestic labor. Aunt Fortune Emerson, worried and exasperated by the amount of work she must complete, decides to throw a "bee," a large domestic party where friends and neighbors work together on a large project that would otherwise be too much for a single family to complete. As in Cooper's novel, the characters gather to work for a common goal—in this case, making sauce out of the fall's apple harvest and sausage from the recently slaughtered pig. Unlike in Cooper's novel, this party has no other purpose; it is created solely for the completion of the tasks, and work is the purpose and end goal. The most significant difference, however, lies in the attitudes expressed by the characters about the work involved. When Aunt Emerson first plans the bee, she is aware that she is stretching tradition by combining two different types of bees (the apple bee and the sausage bee), but her desire to get as much work out

of her neighbors as possible allows her to overcome any obstacles tradition throws at her. Her guests notice her apparent avarice, and one remarks, "ain't that something like what you call killing two—" before he is hushed by Aunt Emerson's appearance in the room.<sup>21</sup> This character's sense that he and his fellow-workers are being exploited for Aunt Emerson's gain seems to speak for all of the characters and reveals Warner's complicated and contradictory attitude towards domestic labor. On the one hand, she extols labor as a virtue, but on the other, she seeks to hide it and finds its more practical and mercenary aspects distasteful.

The differences between Warner's and Cooper's presentations of nature taken simply on the basis of the two novels only tells part of the story, however. On the surface, Cooper's treatment of domestic labor may appear to be, as I pointed out, the mechanism for farce and may not reveal all that much about her domestic philosophy. In *Rural Hours*, however, Cooper has the opportunity to present her domestic philosophy in much more concrete and unambiguous terms, and the contrast between her works and Warner's becomes more striking. In Cooper's presentation, the rural setting is always superior for the domestic arrangements for a number of reasons. First, rural life, she argues, is inherently morally superior. This moral superiority arises because natural commodities become an integral part of the workings of the household, and the type of labor involved naturally requires a more profound connection to the rest of the community. When rural women extend their concern for the well-being of the household outward to the well-being of their immediate community, they nearly always make decisions that are more sensitive to their ethical and moral repercussions.

Cooper's interest in the communal nature of domestic labor grows and her attitudes toward it become more complex when she moves from the small town of Longbridge to a more obviously rural setting in *Rural Hours*, and this allows her to forge more concrete bonds between domestic faculty and the natural environment. One of Cooper's most detailed passages is an entry describing her July 3 visit to a farmhouse, where she finds a perfect opportunity to express her sense of the farm's centrality in her model of rural domestic life. Although Cooper spends some time throughout her journal describing the inhabitants of Cooperstown, she never shows as much appreciative detail as when she visits Farmer B—'s house.

The entry describing the farmhouse follows Cooper's favored pattern of first establishing the larger setting and framework of the discussion to follow and then moving steadily inward, into ever more intimate scenes. She begins with the enthusiastic exclamation "How pleasantly things look

about a farm-house!"<sup>22</sup> Her well-informed interest in the aesthetic and even painterly aspects<sup>23</sup> of the setting continues as she explains that "every better labor, every useful or harmless occupation of man" is interesting to look at, but it only "seems natural to like a farm or garden beyond most workshops."<sup>24</sup> Cooper makes an important qualification to this aesthetic statement, noting that a farm need not be a "great agricultural establishment" for a visitor to enjoy, and, in fact, larger and more complex farms, requiring more extensive knowledge to appreciate, are not as pleasing as the smaller scale of the family farm.

Once she has established the central importance of the family farm as the model setting for her look at rural domesticity, she looks briefly at the farmer and his wife before moving further into the farmhouse. She praises the farmer as "sober and industrious" and his wife as "neat and thrifty."<sup>25</sup> It is clear that Cooper feels more comfortable describing places than people, but her quick, almost clichéd epithets are significant when we consider both where Cooper places her observation, and where she gets her evidence for it. The farmer and his wife have their labels bestowed upon them at the end of a paragraph that is otherwise entirely devoted to a description of the farm's pleasing appearance. The only evidence Cooper gives us to support her claims of sobriety, industry, neatness, and thrift is the farm's appearance. The farm, then, comes to stand as a symbol of the moral stature of its inhabitants, and the farmer's and his wife's descriptions become something more than generic tropes of characterization: they become emblems of the morality of the rural domestic setting. She emphasizes this point later in a similar fashion as she describes the interior of the farmhouse, especially the old family Bible, whose "sacred pages have been well-studied."<sup>26</sup> Although she may well have more evidence that the Bible is "well-studied," she does not provide this to her readers, leaving us to infer that the family's clean, neat farm and corresponding obvious attention to domestic labor is evidence enough of moral stature and familiarity with the Bible.

Once Cooper begins her inward movement to the farm's heart, her attempts to link domestic concerns to rural life and rural values become more apparent. The dairy is run by the farmer's 70-year-old stepmother, who keeps only four cows because "the dairy-work of four cows . . . was as much as she could well attend to."<sup>27</sup> Despite the amount of work she must do to take care of even four cows, she keeps the dairy "thoroughly scoured, beautifully fresh, and neat" and attends to the other domestic chores, such as sewing and cooking. Cooper's admiration for the old woman is clear as, later, she rhetorically asks, "Why is it that cream, milk, and butter always taste better under the roof of a farm-house than

elsewhere?"<sup>28</sup> The superior taste of farm produce demonstrates both the wisdom of the old woman in cutting back on the number of animals she cares for and her domestic virtue; in addition, Cooper employs the richness of the farm dairy to set up a contrast with urban domestic life, which can never be as rewarding and morally sound as rural domesticity.

Cooper's contrast between urban and rural moral values grows more pointed as she continues her inventory and analysis of the farmhouse, reaching an apogee as she sees the spinning wheel as an opportunity for one of her frequent digressions. This household fixture has done its duties for the entire family for years, spinning "all the yarn for stockings, for flannels, for the cloth worn by men, for the colored woolen dresses of the women, and all the thread for their coarse toweling, &c. &c."<sup>29</sup> In many ways, the spinning has woven the family together, leading Cooper to comment that the six step-daughters who learned spinning from the old woman "must have been notable women." Her evidence for their notability is of the same type that she uses to prove the farmer industrious, his wife neat, and the Bible well-studied: the appearance of the farm itself and the labor necessary to maintain that appearance.

Just as important as the sentimental bonding that the spinning wheels provides is the autonomy and self-reliance for the women of the family, who purchase very few dry-goods. Their autonomy and independence from the village life strengthens their connection to the land and to each other, signaling a moral superiority based on their domestic labor and roots in the local environment. Because the women do not need the expensive cloth and fleetingly fashionable merchandise in the town dry-goods store, they are able to remain admirably frugal, spending only "twelve dollars a year, including the cost of raw materials."<sup>30</sup> The village girls, by contrast, "are often wildly extravagant in their dress, and just as restless in following the fashions of the richest lady in the land." Cooper goes on to criticize these girls for "spending all they earn in finery." The frugality and reliance on the family industry and natural resources of the farm are morally superior to the blind consumerism of the towns and villages.

Cooper's discussion of the industrious farm women contrasted with the extravagant village girls offers an important gendered critique of domestic industry and the natural world. Although she does mention Farmer B—frequently in her tour of the farm, perhaps because her audience was largely female, very little of her discussion centers around the masculine industry required to run the farm; instead, she focuses most of her attention on the work that the women perform. It is equally significant that the women's work she praises is all natural industry, such as spinning the wool from their own sheep or churning butter from their own cows. In her

critique of Sherry Ortner's influential article,<sup>31</sup> Ann Romines notes that Ortner "urges that women should become more fully identified with *culture*. . . . She apparently does not consider that domestic life offers full opportunities for such projects."<sup>32</sup> The work that Cooper praises is fully immersed in culture, and it is in rural domesticity that Cooper finds the "cultural continuity"<sup>33</sup> that will help maintain the moral status of America's women.

Throughout *Rural Hours*, Cooper offers small examples of domestic culture that illustrate both the connection to the natural environment and moral function of any properly run rural household; it is worth looking at some of them briefly for the manner in which they further illuminate her observations about the farm. As Cooper describes the plants and animals she observes on her frequent rambles around the Cooperstown area, she rarely lets an opportunity pass to link the natural history of the place with the human history, especially the domestic culture of America. When she observes some thorn bushes, she cites the example of American women during the Revolution using the "long spines of the thorn" for pins, and she follows this up with the example of women brewing various natural concoctions in place of the expensive and imported English tea.<sup>34</sup> The "New Jersey tea" and "Labrador tea" were brewed from native plants that any competent country housewife would have known about, and the sense that local knowledge—a bioregional ethic—can provide both comfort and moral benefit is a favorite theme that Cooper revisits often. That the women were able to endure privations such as the lack of pins or tea and to compensate with their local expertise indicates to Cooper a minimum allocation of suffering, considering that "Washington and his brave army were half clad, half armed, half starved, and never paid."<sup>35</sup> By using the Revolutionary-era example, Cooper seems to be participating in the process of reification of nineteenth-century domestic narratives, which tends to overemphasize the magnitude of domestic power in the young republic; Lora Romero suggests that the "republican motherhood" ideal of the Revolution "is in some sense the precursor of domesticity."<sup>36</sup> Cooper, though, is not making the "exaggerated claims for the influence" of women that Romero critiques, but is instead using the hardships of the war years to illustrate in the most dramatic fashion possible the importance of domestic knowledge and labor that is rooted in the local lore.

The farm wives Cooper admires are resourceful and able to use their knowledge of the local environment in pursuit of a wider moral good. In another extended passage, this time in her "Spring" section, Cooper examines the maple sugar industry around Cooperstown as another, and perhaps more important, example of the moral and ethical benefits that

local domestic industry can promote. It is not surprising that Cooper would have been interested in the fine details of the maple sugar economy, given that her grandfather nearly ruined himself through his speculation in sugar manufacturing, and that her father deals rather critically with the small-scale sugar producers in his novel *The Pioneers* (1823). The three generations of Coopers each dealt with the problem of maple sugar differently, and those differences indicate a complex progression of social, moral, and environmental thought. For William Cooper, the patriarch and founder of Cooperstown, maple sugar served two purposes: personal economic profit and elevated social standing. For James Fenimore Cooper, maple trees stand as conflicted emblems of the richness of the American land as well as elegiac reminders of the vanishing frontier. For Susan Fenimore Cooper, maple trees and their produce provide a pathway toward a morally sound and self-sufficient community that values domestic industry and treats the environment with respect and knowledge.

In order to place Susan Cooper's attitudes towards maple sugar production in context, it is necessary first to briefly outline the Cooper family history and its involvement in the Cooperstown sugar trade. William Cooper, the patriarch, sought after the Revolution to exploit the maples to turn a profit and increase the importance of his newly acquired real estate holdings in former Native lands. By creating a strong center of maple sugar production in his Beech Woods estates, Cooper would be able to entice more settlers to move there, leading to yet more growth and productivity. He would, thereby, be assured of securing a significant niche in American history as the founder of an important economic and industrial center. He kept his eye on his Philadelphia patrons, who were dedicated abolitionists, and who were important members of the exclusive city society he so admired; he felt that his venture into the maple sugar business would elevate his stature among these wealthy and influential men. The Quakers favored the maple sugar plan because it could be both economically profitable as well as morally profitable, since the sugar produced would be free of the taint of slave labor. Cooper's dedication to the abolitionist business plan seemed to be largely dependent upon his reception by the sympathetic Quakers, and, when the maple sugar business proved to be economically unfeasible (poor planning and bad weather conspired against his success), he moved on to other ventures. Eventually, he ordered the maples to be cut down and burned into potash, an economic quick fix with environmentally disastrous results. With the trees literally turned to ashes, there was no turning back to a large maple sugar economy.<sup>37</sup>

Of all of James Fenimore Cooper's novels, *The Pioneers* most directly addresses the economic results of poor environmental stewardship, but his

indictment of his father's policies is problematized by his own contradictory conservation ethic. There are many famous passages from the novel that deal with environmental issues and the wholesale destruction of natural resources, but the treatment of the maples, though more subtle than the slaughter of the pigeons, is perhaps most pointed in its critique since it references William Cooper's real struggles with the early settlement. In *The Pioneers*, Cooper fictionalizes William Cooper as Judge Marmaduke Temple: in spite of his position of leadership, Judge Temple is unable to convince his settlers to practice better stewardship. Early in *The Pioneers*, he arrives home to his settlement of Templeton, itself a fictionalized version of Cooperstown, to discover that his cousin Richard Jones has built a huge fire of maple logs in the mansion's fireplace. The Judge flies into a passion, shouting, "How often have I forbidden the use of sugar maple in my dwelling! The sight of that sap, as it exudes with the heat, is painful to me."<sup>38</sup> Richard laughs off the Judge's concerns, a reaction that points to the myth of superabundance, the belief that the North American continent held unlimited natural resources.<sup>39</sup> Later, the Temple family visits Billy Kirby's sugar bush, and the careless and wasteful arrangement of the sugar making apparatus disturbs the Judge. Temple berates the loutish woodchopper for not taking proper care of the valuable trees, but his concerns are brushed aside. Kirby has never seen a tree that he has not wanted to chop down, including the maples, and in the end of the novel, Natty Bumppo, Cooper's Romantic frontier hero, flees the settlement to escape the sound of the axe destroying the wilderness. Temple's inability to guide the settlers, Cooper seems to be saying, hastens the decline of the Romantic landscape, which is the proper setting for Cooper's hero.

Susan Cooper, in contrast, chooses to engage in a sort of "reinhabitation" of the country that her father's Romantic hero flees. As Lawrence Buell defines it, "reinhabitation" is the process of "refamiliarizing ourselves with the physical environment that our preindustrial forebears perforce had to know experientially."<sup>40</sup> Instead of what we may call "deinhabiting" the country, as Leatherstocking does when he flees the sound of the axe, Susan Cooper argues passionately that the domestic economy must be locally grounded and informed by a sense of the community. Furthermore, since Susan Cooper in some ways creates a domestic counter-myth to her father's frontier myth, she is doing more than reproducing an image that masculine culture could take as a subtle moral corrective.<sup>41</sup> In her view of maple sugar production, women are active participants in a community endeavor that merges domestic ideology with economics and social justice. The frontier women who knew enough about the local environment to incorporate it into their

domestic economy, as in the earlier example of "New Jersey tea," serve as early analogues to the women and families involved in the reinvigorated maple sugar industry that Susan Cooper describes in admiration. By returning to a home grown sugar industry and learning from the failures of the founding generation, the Cooperstown community can reestablish an important connection to the country that combines a sensitivity to the environment, an intimate knowledge of how to incorporate natural resources into domestic industry, and a subtle awareness of how moral communities demand a social conscience.

One element of maple sugar production that makes it economically important, aside from its frugal self-sufficiency, is its creation of an interdependent network of different elements of the local economy. Cooper begins her April 1 entry by saying that fresh maple sugar is "offered for sale today,"<sup>42</sup> immediately marking its place in the local mercantile economy. A short while later, she outlines the process for obtaining maple sap, the first step in the sugaring process. The sap is drawn from the tree through a trough and into a sap bucket, which is a "regular article of manufacture in the country."<sup>43</sup> Not only are the buckets of local manufacture, but they are also cheap, selling, as Cooper tells us, for "twenty cents a piece."

On the other hand, Cooper does not mention the cost of the large iron kettles that are used to boil sap into syrup and then sugar; they are not locally made, having been cast, most likely, in Pennsylvania, and therefore they do not figure as prominently in the local economy. This is a significant omission, as the maple sugaring process is impossible without these kettles. Why, then, does Cooper elide their provenance, especially in light of her other details? The most likely reason is Cooper's insistence on maintaining a local focus. When she praises Farmer B—'s daughters for not buying expensive, imported cloth, she privileges the local. The iron kettles, however, are both crucial to the local economy but impossible to source locally. Furthermore, the locally made buckets are a much less durable product, requiring replacement each year, while the iron kettles are a much longer-lasting commodity, being used for years before needing replacement. Therefore, the impact of the imported kettles on local domestic labor is minimized.

Just as she uses her visit to Farmer B—'s as an opportunity to describe her ideals of domestic labor, she finds the example of the sugar maple an obvious emblem to represent her favorite bioregional themes, linking domesticity with a practical knowledge of the natural environment. Cooper frequently reiterates her concern that the local women do not possess enough knowledge of the region's natural history to be good stewards of

the land; she implicitly connects good housekeeping and botanical understanding. She immediately demonstrates her knowledge of the maples, analyzing the trees and noting that only trees of a certain age should be tapped, as too early tapping can cause harm to the young trees. That the trees can lose so much of their "natural nourishment" when tapped is a marvel to Cooper, and she shows an affectionate concern for their well-being that is based on botanical knowledge but grows more obviously from her aesthetic appreciation for the "beautiful grove" of maples.<sup>44</sup> Because her concerns are domestic as well as environmental, Cooper moves on from her botanical observations to detail the human history of the maple sugar industry in Cooperstown, again explicitly linking the natural and the human. She glosses over the failures of her grandfather to establish a viable maple sugar manufacturing center, saying that "[d]uring the early history of the county" sixty thousand pounds of sugar were received in rent by "the leader of the little colony about this lake." Without mentioning William Cooper by name or the weather problems that stymied his project, she focuses on the "pretty little specimen loaves" of sugar that were sent to Philadelphia.<sup>45</sup>

By focusing on the picturesque qualities of maple sugar ("beautiful groves" and "pretty . . . loaves") and on the practical knowledge needed to exploit the maples successfully, Cooper is signaling the move from industrial sugar production to domestic production. This shift exactly parallels her praise of the farm women weaving all of their own cloth not for sale but for domestic use. To underscore this point, Cooper provides her readers more practical advice. One important and appealing aspect of maple sugar production is that it is much easier to produce than sugar from cane or beets; to this may be added the tremendous benefit that maple trees, as a native species, require virtually no cultivation. The sap only needs to be collected during the early spring, boiled, and then clarified with "the white of two eggs, one quart of milk, and half an ounce of saleratus" for fifty pounds of sugar.<sup>46</sup> Cooper's recipe for maple sugar is unique in *Rural Hours*, and it is, most importantly, quite easy to follow. Since the details of maple sugar manufacture are so simple and clearly explained, nearly any competent farm wife could use the instructions and the simple, "regular article[s]" to produce more than enough sugar for her family. Lest any woman might still be uncertain about the feasibility of such an enterprise, Cooper assures her readers that, for the farmers, maple sugar "is a matter of regular household consumption, many families depending upon it altogether, keeping only a little white sugar for sickness."<sup>47</sup> She clinches her argument with a fact certain to appeal to any

maternal qualms in her readers: some children in the county have never tasted anything but maple sugar.

As I pointed out above, Cooper's development of an ideal domestic faculty usually involves the larger community; her ideal rural household is connected to the rest of the country through myriad ties of labor and interdependence. Her description of the festival atmosphere surrounding the maple sugar harvest reinforces this idea, since a good portion of the rough production of the sugar occurs in the sugar bush itself. The families gather together in the bush, eating and sleeping in a camp, where the children "enjoy vastly this touch of camp life."<sup>48</sup> In the carnival-like atmosphere of this working vacation, the children learn from their parents the skills and values that hold the community together and treat the land with respect. Just as her recipe helps the average rural wife see how easy it is to produce sugar, her description of the sugar bush indicates how simple and wholesome the entire procedure can be. The sugar-making party she describes forms a clear parallel with the big party in *Elinor Wyllys*, with everyone sharing the labor as well as the companionship.

Although Susan Cooper does not mention slavery in her discussion of maple sugar production, by the time she was writing *Rural Hours*, maple trees and maple sugaring had taken on profound and widely held symbolic significance that her readers would have been sure to recognize. In the simplest form, the maples were revered for their generative and regenerative power; as Cooper notes, the sap could be tapped every spring without materially harming the trees.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, sugar in general came to represent the evils of slavery, and maple sugar the possibility of undermining the slave-dependent economies of the West Indies, just as William Cooper's Quaker patrons had hoped. Until the last decade of the eighteenth century, virtually all sugar production in the Americas was centered in West Indian colonies, which were notorious for their ill-treatment of slaves; authors from Jane Austen to George Eliot used West India or sugar as shorthand for the debate over slavery.<sup>50</sup> Maple sugar production also reflected, in some ways, a nationalistic impulse: maple sugar, unlike the cane sugar of the West Indies, was a domestic product.<sup>51</sup>

Susan Cooper's entry into the debate of slavery and the role of sugar in promoting slavery is typically low-key. There are enough oblique references to southern sugar production and slave labor in her discussion to make readers wonder if she is emphasizing the problem of slavery by pointedly not mentioning it; the connection between slavery and sugar becomes, in *Rural Hours*, the proverbial elephant in the room. When she compares maple sugar to beet and cane sugar, she explains that "both the beet and cane require much more expense and labor."<sup>52</sup> Since both cane

and beet sugar come from southern and West Indian sources, her contemporary readers would have had no trouble recognizing that the labor in question was slave labor. As she concludes her discussion of sugar, she lists several other sugar producing regions, mentioning in particular Louisiana, Virginia, and Kentucky, all slave states. Even without any overt mention of slavery, Cooper's point is clear: white sugar is produced on the backs of black slaves, but maple sugar is wholesome, good for the local economy, and free from the taint of associations with slavery. Cooper certainly would not have gone so far as to advocate an outright boycott of southern sugar, but it is entirely consistent with her community-based values for her to advocate a domestic practice that would bring a moral benefit to the local community.

Cooper's argument for a domestic ideal situated within a rural setting reinforces the importance of community connections through a shared sense of morality, as well as understanding of the natural world. Community alone—the human connections—never seems to be enough in Cooper's formulation, but must always exist with an awareness of the world outside the narrow confines of one's own domestic sphere. Concern for one's fellow-beings necessitates a concern for the world in which these beings live, and Cooper understands that when any bonds are broken—such as the bonds that connect us to the natural world—other bonds are threatened. Thus, when we begin to care more for our environment, we awaken within ourselves the possibility of caring for the rest of our human community. This vision of an interconnected domestic economy contrasts with Susan Warner's, where the narrative falls short of imagining a fully-realized community with intimately shared concerns. At a time when environmentalists and other activists for social justice are urging us to think globally and act locally, it is perhaps a good moment to consider how Cooper, in her own subtle way, spoke of the power of the local and domestic to create a more just society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Rural Hours* (1850; Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 96.

<sup>2</sup> David Jones, "Introduction," *Rural Hours*, by Susan Fenimore Cooper (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968), xxiii, xxvii.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Elinor Wyllys; or, The Young Folk of Longbridge* (1846; New York: Fort Schuyler Press, 2003), 116.

<sup>4</sup> The 1999 ASLE Conference in Kalamazoo, MI, featured two panels: "Situating Susan Fenimore Cooper I: Nineteenth-Century Landscape Aesthetic" (Panel 1.3), and "Situating Susan Fenimore Cooper II: Theories of Time, Place, and Community"

(Panel 2.3). In addition, another panel (6.5) had yet another presentation on Cooper, making a total of seven papers. For more specific information, see the ASLE conference program archives at

[http://www.asle.umn.edu/conf/asle\\_conf/1999/program2.txt](http://www.asle.umn.edu/conf/asle_conf/1999/program2.txt).

<sup>5</sup> Cooper edited the American edition of John Leonard Knapp's *Country Rambles in England; or, the Journal of a Naturalist* in 1853. See John Leonard Knapp, *Country Rambles in England; or Journal of a Naturalist*, ed. Susan Fenimore Cooper (Buffalo: Phinney and Company, 1853). On Knapp's title page, the book, published by Phinney and Company of Buffalo, did not credit either Knapp or Cooper directly, but the "notes and additions" were attributed to "the author of 'Rural Hours.'" Cooper and Knapp both looked to Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* (1789) as the foundation text of natural history writing; Cooper notes in her introduction to Knapp's book that he "has told us himself that the book owes its origin" to White.

<sup>6</sup> Vera Norwood, *Made From this Earth: American Women and Nature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 31.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Hardy, "Susan Fenimore Cooper, Catharine Beecher, and the Theology of Homemaking," in *Susan Fenimore Cooper: New Essays on Rural Hours and Other Works*, eds. Rochelle Johnson and Daniel Patterson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 215.

<sup>8</sup> Joanne Dobson, "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," *American Literature* 69, no.2 (June 1997): 283.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra A. Zagarell, "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13, no. 3 (1988): 498-527.

<sup>10</sup> "Sentimental ecology," in the sense that I am using the term here, refers to the rhetorical and thematic intersection of sentimental writing and ecological concerns. Ecological concerns are discussed in terms of the affective language of the sentimental, and, conversely, the sentimental tropes of community interconnections may be described using metaphors of ecological interconnection. Richard M. Magee, "Sentimental Ecology: Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours*," in *Such News of the Land: U.S. Women Nature Writers*, eds. Thomas S. Edwards and Elizabeth A. DeWolfe (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), 27. The term, however, is contested, with environmental scientists using it to denote an unscientific and emotional response to the natural world. Wolfgang Sachs deploys the terms in a critique of the popular photographic image of the earth taken from the moon, an image that has made the earth, according to Sachs, "an object of post-modern popular piety": see Wolfgang Sachs, *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood, 1999), 122. Robert J. Mason and Sarah Michaels describe sentimental ecology as the use of emotional arguments to persuade people to take a particular stance on environmental issues. Problems arise, they argue, when a group such as Defenders of Wildlife discovers that they do not have "science to underpin their sentimental ecology" (79).

<sup>11</sup> Since "ecology" was not coined until well after Cooper wrote her book, she would not have employed the term. However, the idea of ecology was known, and naturalists generally thought of it using Linnaeus's language, "economy of nature."

<sup>12</sup> Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (1850; New York: The Feminist Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Elinor Wyllys*, 116.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>18</sup> Ann Romines calls our attention to the troubling aspects of the symbolic link between "women's work and female power": see Ann Romines, *The Home Plot: Women, Writing, and Domestic Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 5. By making this association "at the most basic level of metaphor," we run the risk of considering female power to be solely rooted in hygiene, or the ability to keep a clean house.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, 147, 148.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 571.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Rural Hours*, 96.

<sup>23</sup> Cooper was quite familiar with the artistic conventions of her time. She writes knowledgeably of landscape conventions, and one important character in *Elinor Wyllys* is a budding landscape artist. In addition, several of the well-known Hudson River painters were friends of her father, and one, Samuel Morse, proposed marriage to her. She turned him down.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?", in *Women, Culture, and Society*, eds. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 67-87.

<sup>32</sup> Ann Romines, *The Home Plot*, 13, original emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Rural Hours*, 74.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 14.

<sup>37</sup> David Maxey describes the Quaker-Cooper link to maple sugar production, explaining that Henry Drinker, a prominent Philadelphia Quaker businessman, decided to hire William Cooper as his agent in the enterprise. Drinker's iron works manufactured the iron kettles used in maple sugar production, and his position as a Quaker and abolitionist led him to consider the moral benefits of investing in sugar that was not produced by slave labor. In a letter to Cooper, Drinker laments that West Indies sugar was "polluted" by its "wicked means," and that he enjoyed the prospects of his kettles being used in a morally sound manufacturing method.

David Maxey, "The Union Farm: Henry Drinker's Experiment in Deriving Profit from Virtue," in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* CVII, no. 4 (October 1983): 612. Alan Taylor also analyzes William Cooper's foray into philanthropic business and details the catastrophic results of his experiment. According to Taylor, Cooper was partly motivated by his desire to become a "father of his settlers, the benefactor of West Indian slaves, the peer of New York's gentry, a favorite of the eminent Philadelphians, and the champion of enlightened Europeans" (126). Perhaps because his altruistic motives were so mixed with self-aggrandizing ones, William Cooper's decision to give up the sugar business is not surprising after three consecutive years of bad weather made the sap uneconomical (132, 133). Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 134 ff.

<sup>38</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (1823; New York: Signet, 1964), 100.

<sup>39</sup> Nelson Van Valen examines James Fenimore Cooper's "conservation schism": see Nelson Van Valen, "James Fenimore Cooper and the Conservation Schism," in *New York History* LXII, no. 3 (July 1981): 289-306. Alan Taylor bases his reading of *The Pioneers* on Van Valen's study, agreeing that James Fenimore Cooper is torn over the choice to exploit or preserve the frontier's natural resources: Taylor, 134 ff..

<sup>40</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 108.

<sup>41</sup> Lora Romero points out that the possible weakness of domestic ideology is that in "posit[ing] a moral difference between men and women, it always threatens to reduce women to little more than vessels for male salvation": Romero, *Home Fronts*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Rural Hours*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Thoreau, according to Richard Lebeaux, referred to himself as a "sugar maple man," using the metaphor to reassure himself that he was "fecund, pregnant with new life, productive, destined for a kind of immortality." Richard Lebeaux, "'Sugar Maple Man': Middle-Aged Thoreau's Generativity Crisis," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1981): 360, original emphasis.

<sup>50</sup> Susan De Sola Rodstein points to George Eliot's largely forgotten short story "Brother Jacob" and its use of the image of sugar to suggest a light-hearted tone that is undermined by the darker moral and economic debates over West Indian slavery: see Susan De Sola Rodstein, "Sweetness and Dark: George Eliot's 'Brother Jacob,'" *Modern Language Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (1991 September): 295-317.

<sup>51</sup> The first successful cane sugar operation on the mainland of the American continent was in southern Louisiana, started in 1795, when Louisiana was still a

French possession: see Joseph Carlyle Sitterson, *Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South 1753-1950* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1953), 3-4. Louisiana sugar was problematic even after the Louisiana Purchase because it was produced by slaves.

<sup>52</sup> Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Rural Hours*, 14.