2003

Joseph A. Altsheler and the Great Ghost Forest of Kentucky

Mervyn Nicholson
University College of the Cariboo, Canada

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review
Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol15/iss2/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kentucky Review by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
Once there was a forest. A great forest of huge trees, vast and magnificent. Only the forests of the Pacific Coast, the forests of the redwoods and the gigantic Douglas firs, could compare with it. An old-growth forest, a forest that had never been logged. It consisted of oak, elm, hickory, walnut, maple, and other hardwoods (as well as conifers), and it stretched from the Atlantic coast over the Appalachian Mountains as far as the Mississippi River and even beyond. But it was in Kentucky where it was at its most magnificent. None of this forest is left now. It is all gone, all cut down. Yes, large parts of this territory are covered with trees today, but it is not the same, and does not consist of the same mix of tree species as it did then, before the Europeans settled the Atlantic seaboard and pressed westward over the mountain barrier. Once it was intact and perfect, except for patches where fires had burned (some set by the indigenous peoples for agriculture or for grazing grounds), where it had been felled by the terrific storms that sweep up the Mississippi basin from the Gulf of Mexico. It is all gone. Only a ghost-forest remains. And a writer who commemorated that forest, and who produced a superb and unforgettable vision of it, the Kentuckian Joseph A. Altsheler.

Altsheler is the poet of the great forest, the ghost-forest, of Kentucky, primeval Kentucky. He was a prolific writer, mainly for what would now be called young adults; his most important work is a sequence of stories about Kentucky at the time of the American Revolution, coinciding closely with the first white settlements. The series begins with *The Young Trailers* and consists of eight novels making up a frontier epic. But throughout this series there is one actor that Altsheler never strayed far from, and lovingly created and re-created at every turn, and that is that gigantic forest of oaks and beeches, elms and hickory trees, with stretches of giant canebrake and small prairies, teeming with deer, buffalo, and other large grazing animals. It is a vision that is awe-inspiring, sublime, magnificent, and it sticks in the mind. At least, it stuck in my mind, reading it as a boy thousands of miles away in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, at the edge of another wilderness, a very different wilderness from the one that Altsheler projected onto my youthful imagination like the most vivid and unforgettable of movies.

What was this wilderness like? A standard reference book,
first published in 1939, by the Federal Writers Program describes it thus:

Before white settlement, three-fourths of the State was covered with forests unsurpassed in eastern North America for the size of individual trees and the density of the cover. Giants six, eight, and ten feet in diameter were not uncommon. The larger varieties were yellow poplar (tulip tree), sycamore, oak, chestnut, and walnut. . . some of the bottom sycamores were so large that families were known to have camped in them until they could build cabins. Today not over one-fourth of the State can be called forested and very little of this is primeval, nearly all having been cut for timber. . . commercial exploitation was practically at an end by the close of the last century. (22)

The forest is gone; "few untouched wild spots are left" (Federal Writers Program, 18). "In its pristine state this vast domain was covered with great forests of oak, hickory, walnut, ash, poplar, beech, cucumber, and maple, among which were mingled stately evergreens" (Rice, 19). Early visitors recorded their amazement; for example, this anonymous 1791 observation quoted in Land of Cane and Clover, a study of Kentucky flora by Julian Campbell:

Among the many accounts that have been given of Kentucky, none of them have done justice to the timber. Oaks and locusts on the flat lands are common at 5 and six feet diameter. Poplars . . . at five and six through . . . The beech grows to the thickness of four and five feet, and both the last mentioned to the height of 120-130 feet. (12)

In his influential 1784 book The Discovery and Settlement of Kentucke, John Filson concludes, "The country in general may be considered as well timbered, producing large trees of many kinds, and to be exceeded by no country in variety" (27). David Trabue, who had other things on his mind, speaks of "the delightful protection of very tall trees" (Young, ed., 64) and describes stopping "for the night at the foot of a great hill, cloathed with large Magnolia, a 2 feet diameter and 100 feet high; perfectly straight, shagbark-hickery, chesnut oak" (Young, ed., 67). The land speculator Richard Henderson conducted a ceremonial purchase of land from the Cherokee under a huge elm near Boonesborough "with a diameter of 100 feet" (Smith, 81; presumably the diameter of the elm's "umbrella"), and the English visitor Harriet Martineau, as late as 1838, describes "belts and clumps of gigantic beech" (qtd. in Betts, 41).

I first cite these glimpses and records of the great forest, the
ghost forest, rather than Altsheler's, because they not only provide evidence for what Altsheler gives us in his novels, but because they are faint and pale compared to the magic of Altsheler's evocation of the woods. Altsheler is a significant writer, even a great writer, partly because of his style. His writing is brilliant and superb. He has a definite, identifiable style: elegant, clear, energized, springing and powerful, and yet light, effortless, and sublime. It has a dignity that is deeply appealing. Dignified and impersonal, but not cold, his writing is clear like a wilderness brook: rapid, smooth, crystalline, reflective of immensity, a vast sky and an ancient forest. One constantly senses the infinite in his writing, because of that vastness of forest, its "total grandeur," in Wallace Stevens' phrase, mysterious, massive, magnificent. And his lead character, Henry Ware, is the perfect male embodiment of the forest and of Altsheler's style. His style has clarity and directness—very good for action scenes—and yet it has a noticeable sublimity that emerges in full splendor periodically and regularly. It is something integral to the narrative, something required or necessary to the story, not something imposed or decorative or merely incidental. The style doesn't draw attention to itself, but has the unconscious force of unerring appropriateness. Altsheler's sublimity is really the basis of his significance as a writer, but before exploring that sublimity, other considerations have to be attended to.

Altsheler has been categorized as a writer "of juvenile fiction," as H. Mark Holsinger puts it. But his appeal is not confined to a particular age. The point is tricky, because the academy shows little respect for children's literature; in literary/cultural studies, children's literature is not a route to respect, still less prestige. The prejudice is foolish, because writing for juveniles can be as serious and significant in its way as writing for adults; furthermore, what young people read is the initial and shaping force in adults' subsequent literary experience, and has, therefore, a primary and determining role in shaping the response to story and illustrating how narrative works. But, in any case, like all significant writing, the appeal of Altsheler goes far beyond simple categorization. It is for anybody and everybody.

Contemporary readers are apt to find another difficulty with Altsheler, besides categorization. Altsheler died in 1919; the Kentucky books were published between 1907 and 1916, a period in which racism was pervasive, and the attitude that whites were superior to all other peoples and destined to rule over them was commonplace and articulated by key figures in society from Theodore Roosevelt to Winston Churchill. Earlier popular culture is full of racist attitudes, often so taken for granted as to be unconscious, if no less offensive. If one looks for racism in Altsheler, one will find it, but surprisingly little. This is especially striking since his stories are about the conquest of the Ohio
Valley by American settlers and the defeat of the indigenous peoples. Altsheler sums up his attitude in *The Eyes of the Woods*: “Henry admired their strength and dexterity. They were splendid canoemen, and he never felt any hatred of the Indians. He knew that they acted according to such guidance as they had, and it was merely circumstances that placed him and his kind in opposition to them and their kind” (82). In short, they “were inferior in intellectual power to nobody” (147). Hence it is not surprising that Altsheler presents the Indians with respect and dignity, and emphasizes the fact that they are fighting to keep what has been theirs for thousands of years against the whites who are determined not merely to defeat the Indians, but to destroy the wilderness itself and the way of life which that wilderness supported. A striking portrait of a First Nations male appears in one of Altsheler’s Western novels, *The Last of the Chiefs*. The “last of the chiefs,” Bright Sun, is depicted as committing a heinous act of betrayal and violence against a settler wagon train and yet Altsheler treats him with surprising sensitivity and respect, and Bright Sun’s point of view is articulated with convincing force. Bright Sun commits crimes, but the motive of resisting white encroachment is both powerful and plainly comprehensible.

Clearly, for a man of his time, and writing with boys and young men in mind, Altsheler was socially progressive to a notable degree. There are virtually no women in *The Young Trailers* series, but nevertheless, Altsheler goes out of his way to emphasize the importance of women. Thus, there is a superb feat of heroism on the part of the women in the besieged village in *The Young Trailers* when they collectively obtain water for the community in the face of the greatest danger. Equally striking is Altsheler’s emphasis on the women in the culture of the Wyandot tribe. The Wyandot men are “the bravest of the brave, the finest ... fighters the North American continent ever produced, the Mohawks not excepted. And the fact remains that they were ruled by women”; “the woman-ruled Wyandots” were, again he uses the phrase, “the bravest of the brave” (*The Border Watch*, 55). There is a complete absence of macho posturing in Altsheler. Not only are women and First Nations people treated with respect, but the attitude toward animals is noteworthy. The killing of animals is always presented as a necessity for food (and sometimes clothing), never as a form of male display or opportunity for bragging or ego-inflation.4 Altsheler created a superb portrait gallery of great First Nations people in his novels, from Black Cloud in *The Young Trailers* through Red Eagle in *The Keepers of the Trail* to the greatest of them all, the Wyandot chief White Lightning—Timmendiquas—who appears in several of the later Kentucky novels. The most eloquent people in Altsheler, apart from the Roman Catholic priest Father Montigny in *The
Free Rangers, are the great chiefs, Timmendiquas above all. Timmendiquas “had the look of a king, a king by nature, not by birth” (The Riflemen of the Ohio, 219). “Standing in the rays of the moon, light from above and firelight from his side falling upon him, the figure of the chief was like that of some legendary Titan who had fought with the gods” (Border Watch, 40). Even as his captive, Henry is impressed by the Wyandot chief, who is “great in stature and with a fierce and lofty countenance, like that of the ancient Roman... a gorgeous red blanket from some Canadian trading post thrown carelessly about his shoulders after the fashion of a toga... Henry felt instinctively that he was in the presence of a great man” (Riflemen, 18). The association with pre-imperial, republican Rome is typical; like Cooper, Altsheler visualized his characters and their cultures in terms of Greek and Roman epics. Near the end of The Riflemen of the Ohio, Timmendiquas makes a powerful speech, in which, among other things, he analyzes the conflicting attitude toward land which differentiates the Indians from the American colonists.

The white man... respects no land but his own. If it does not belong to himself he thinks it belongs to nobody, and that Manitou merely keeps it in waiting for him. He is here now with his women and children in the land that we and our fathers have owned since the beginning of time. (320)

Thayendanegea, chief of the Mohawks in The Scouts of the Valley, is treated with the same respect, and articulates the same analysis as Timmendiquas, only more precisely. Compare historian Stephen Aron: “For the peoples of the Ohio Valley, the American War of Independence effectively ended the possibility of peaceful co-existence... personal independence required ownership of land, ownership, that is, of lands which Indians could no longer occupy” (“Legacy”, 223).

Altsheler is not only respectful of the Indians, he is respectful of their religion, and insists that the God of the First Nations peoples is the same God that Christians—the white settlers from the other side of the Appalachian Mountains—say they worship. “He had been saved miraculously, and he breathed a little prayer of thankfulness to the God of the white man, the Manitou of the red man” (Riflemen, 111). In The Border Watch, “he prayed to the God of the white man and the Manitou of the red man, who are the same” (29). The religious vision in Altsheler’s novels is a Deistic one, and in this respect Altsheler is close to James Fenimore Cooper before him, and Thomas Jefferson: a religion which does not exclude but regards all genuine religions as routes to the same truth and the same God. “Henry, despite his wild, rough life, had much reverence in his nature. The wilderness, too, with its varied manifestations, encouraged the belief in a supreme power, just as it had
given birth among the Indians to a natural religion closely akin to the revealed religion of the white man" (228).

Altsheler shows respect for the indigenous people of North America, as well as for women. He is also surprisingly respectful of the animals whose home the forest is, as I noted. There is no sense of hunting as a macho exercise designed to make a man feel more important. On the contrary, Altsheler and his chief character, Henry Ware, frequently identify with animals and see things from their point of view, like the panther who checks out the island refuge of the protagonist in The Forest Runners. In The Riflemen of the Ohio, when they dispossess a panther from its lair, Henry "felt a sort of amused sorrow for the panther. The rightful owner of this house had been driven out . . . and he was there not far away looking reproachfully at the robbers" (243). In The Eyes of the Woods, Henry escapes capture with a herd of buffalo: "he gave a parting wave to the great animals that had enabled him to make his invisible flight. Never again would he kill a buffalo without reluctance" (170). He frequently feels "his sense of kinship with these animals. He was a thoughtful youth, and it often occurred to him that the world might be made for them as well as for man" (282); he has a kind of conversation with the "king of the beavers" (282-284), and again is warned by them of impending danger. Warning of danger is a traditional function of divinity.

The Eyes of the Woods in particular, where Henry is mostly alone and separated from his companions, is fascinated with animals, and continually emphasizes human kinship with the animal world:

"It was the truth that in these days of hiding and waiting Henry was reverting to some ancient type, not one necessarily ruder or more ferocious, but a primitive golden age in its way, in which man and beast were more nearly friends. There was proof in the fact that birds hopped about within a foot or two of him and showed no alarm, and that a rabbit boldly rested among the leaves not a yard away. (189)"

Shortly after, he is saved by a bear from certain capture. Later, a stag leads him out of the trap he finds himself in: "he felt that he could not question whether it was chance or intent, but must accept with gratitude the great favor that had been granted to him. [In his refuge] he had been a friend for a day or two to the beasts of the forest and one of them had come to his rescue. The feeling of reversion to a primitive golden age was still strong within him" (192-93). Notice that this "reversion" is not an atavistic regression to some more violent or rude phase of human existence, but to a mythic Golden Age in which humans had greater powers and lived in peace with the animal world.

This last point is not fortuitous. Repeatedly, Kentucky is
visualized in Edenic terms and associated with the Golden Age. The emphasis on abundance, fertility, and rich, numerous, and varied animal life is constant. This is not just a forest, it is a magic forest, full of mysteries and powers, and commanding feelings of awe and wonder.

The repeated association with Eden is consistent with the way Kentucky was indeed visualized by the early white explorers and settlers. In many ways, Kentucky was to the eighteenth century what California was to the nineteenth: a land of fabled beauty and abundance, bounded by a great waterway on the west, with the Spanish coming from the south, the British from the north, and reached only after immense hardships and the crossing of deadly mountain ranges. Its mythical reputation was essential to its appeal. As Daniel B. Smith puts it, “what also animated prospective settlers was the pervasive belief—for some it was a conviction—that beyond the mountains lay a land of bounteous promise, a new Eden of fertile soil and the richest flora and fauna. . . Men of more prosaic temperament also envisioned Kentucky as a new Eden of limitless fertility. . . unparalleled fecundity” (78). Traditionally, the key marker of paradise is abundance of food—no need to toil in order to eat—a feature of favored and fabulous lands, such as, for instance, the Land of Cockaigne, and Kentucky was visualized in exactly such terms. In the case of Kentucky, abundance of food was a kind of manifestation or product of something else, that magic forest. In the words of the historians Harrison and Klotter:

According to explorers, the land teemed with game waiting to be killed, the clear streams were filled with delectable fish eager to be caught, and the countless turkeys and other fowls longed to be eaten. Charles Scott (1739-1813), a future governor of the state, returned from his first visit to Kentucky with glowing descriptions of great forests. The trees, he said, were eight to fifteen feet in diameter, and they grew so close together that a man could barely squeeze between them. (Harrison and Klotter, 5)8

Patricia Watlington is even more direct:

The beauty of landscape, the fertility of soil, the ease of life, and above all the emptiness of Kentucky made it a topic of the nation’s conversation. . . To many Americans “Kentucky” did mean something like “heaven,” and it had the advantage of being attainable in this life, even though the gate was narrow, the way was hard, and there were relatively few who found it. (7)

Arthur K. Moore’s study of The Frontier Mind opens with a fascinating discussion of Kentucky’s paradisical reputation. But the only paradises
are lost paradises, and Moore emphasizes how quickly the image disintegrated; not only because early experience of Kentucky was one of unimaginable hardship, but because the magnificent forest that covered the region, along with the abundant wildlife, was destroyed very quickly.

A quarter of a century after the founding of Boonesboro and Harrodsburg, the buffalo and the elk had vanished from the land and the bear and deer had retreated to remote areas; the forests were irreparably damaged. . . . Never had there been a comparable assault on nature and never such a rapid alteration. . . . an almost mystical fervor in the older settlers as they recalled the surpassing beauty of Kentucky in their youth, when they set about destroying the scene which was ever to be their fondest recollection. (42, 43)

Moore points to the paradox of Altsheler's vision. The characters he writes about, especially his hero Henry Ware, are lovers of the wilderness, yet they do everything they can to enable the settlers to destroy the wilderness. That which they love is what they assist in destroying. "Colorful and exciting as it was, the day of the Long Hunter was brief" (Rice, 28-29). This point comes up a number of times within the group of five friends that forms the nucleus of the Young Trailers series. One of them, Paul Cotter, is Henry's age but is very different; a studious nation-builder rather than a free spirit like his friend. Paul is depicted in slightly feminine terms as needing the protection of his more powerful and adept friend in a wilderness where, unlike Henry, he does not quite belong. Paul is preoccupied with what he sees in the future. As he puts it, "all this country will be settled up some day, and how can bears and panthers and buffaloes roam wild on farms?" (The Free Rangers, 106).

While Paul is still very close to Henry as friend, fellow woodsman, and companion—in short, Henry's complement—Henry's father is antithetical. Mr. Ware Sr. represents a dulled perception of the fate of the land, without any of the political grandeur of Paul's vision of a future state: "A worthy man, he had neither imagination nor primitive instincts and he valued the wilderness only as a cheap place in which to make homes" (The Young Trailers, 307). His son is a spirit of the forest that he loves; the father is a farmer for whom work, routine, and security are all-important. Who's ideal ultimately triumphs? In The Border Watch, the close of the series, though not the last to be written, Henry is disturbed and alarmed by the sound of an axe cutting down the great trees; he "flinched as if he himself lay beneath the blade. That ax was eating into his beloved forest, and a hundred more axes were
doing the same” (268). The metaphor of tree and man here—Henry feels the axe blows himself—should be noted. The sound of the ringing axe is the first sign they have that they are approaching their home settlement. Naively, Henry reassures himself with the reflection that the wilderness is too big to be cut down, and cannot ever disappear. In point of fact, the wilderness disappeared very fast. ”The settling of central Kentucky took place in a remarkably short period with the bulk of stations and forts built, occupied, and abandoned between early surveys of 1773, through the Revolutionary War’s conclusion in 1783, to Anthony Wayne’s treaty with the Shawnee in 1795’ (O’Malley, 71). The speed with which the wilderness was transformed is significant:

It took approximately 160 years for Americans to go from the Atlantic Coast to the Cumberland Gap, a distance of a few hundred miles. Within the next seventy years they would go nearly three thousand miles from ocean to ocean. Daniel Boone broke the chain that had confined settlers to a ribbon of shoreline for nearly two centuries. With Boone, Americans took off and created a continental empire. (Remini, 226)

Kentucky was the hinge of this “continental empire.” The first in the series of eight novels, The Young Trailers establishes the key themes and foreshadows the triumph of the Revolution. That revolution is treated in a double form: as a conflict with the old colonial régime, and as the conquest of Kentucky, with the defeat of the Shawnees and other indigenous peoples of the Ohio-Mississippi valley. The two aspects are psychologically identified with each other, as are the two enemies, the British and the Indians. Becoming an independent nation means throwing off the colonial power and transforming the land, cutting down the great trees, the introduction of agriculture. The sense of history and of destiny is constantly present, and is essentially Virgil’s epic theme in The Aeneid: the toil and sacrifice required to create a world-historical political power.

Altsheler was an intensive student of history, and the lesson he drew from it was not a jingoistic one, despite his evident patriotism and celebration of the pioneers. Still, it is an idealized version in which the Kentuckians always win, whereas the historical record is more ambiguous. Some of the battles Altsheler depicts in the series, especially the siege of Wareville (based on the Shawnee siege of Boonesborough in 1778), and the attack on the fort on the river with British cannon in The Riflemen of the Ohio (based on successful British and Shawnee campaigns of 1780, 1782), reflect history. But ”during the Revolutionary War... Indian raids kept the frontier in constant turmoil and almost
depopulated Kentucky” (Remini, 229); indeed, for all practical purposes the British and Indians won the Revolutionary War in the Old Northwest. Although George Rogers Clark invaded the Illinois Country in 1778, lack of logistical support precluded his march on Detroit, and during most of the conflict the British and Indians remained on the offensive. For much of the war the Kentuckians stayed tied to their forts, and the Shawnees and their allies continued to range across the Bluegrass country. (Edmunds, 257)

“Although the Shawnee probably numbered fewer than four thousand individuals when the white settlement of Kentucky began, they fought valiantly against the aggressive settlers. They constituted a formidable threat to the whites in Kentucky until 1795” (Harrison and Klotter, 9). Altsheler’s historical backdrop is based on careful research, and historical figures from “the Great Renegade” Simon Girty to Henry Bird, George Rogers Clark, and Daniel Boone himself, are featured; still it is a history that is poetic and mythically shaded. In this respect, he is somewhat like James Fenimore Cooper, with this great difference: Cooper depicts the wilderness as a place of death and horror, whereas in Altsheler, it is God’s greatest feat of creation and Edenic. Destroying it gives to these stories a tragic and ironic dimension which balances the heroic feats of Henry and his friends. In Virgil, too, the presence of tragedy and suffering—the *lacrimae rerum*—shades the triumph of the new imperium.

Altsheler is one of those once-popular writers who have fallen into almost total neglect. At one time he was widely read, and like many successful popular writers, he was prolific, producing nearly 50 novels, typically at the rate of two a year. Now he is little read; few of his books are in print. I suspect he was popular for the wrong reasons: because he depicted battles, exciting chases and conflicts in the woods between, in effect, cowboys and Indians, because he wrote boys’ adventure stories—the sort of thing that many writers did and still do: guns firing and lots of explosions. He did these things, but he did much more than that. His characters are rich and complex, memorable and interesting; they are not stereotypes. “The weak, stereotypical figures so often seen in other juvenile books of the era never appear” (Holsinger, 392). It is true that he was a superb story-teller and that his adventure sequences are brilliant, but there are other qualities of his vision that are rare and remarkable and that can be appreciated and savored today in a way that was probably impossible during his lifetime.

It is to these other qualities that we may turn now, the real
substance of Atsheler’s writing, the vision which inhabits it, its fundamental characteristic. That vision is one of sublimity. Although he does not often use the word, sublime is probably the best single adjective for the quality of his stories. Primarily, this sublimity relates to the forest itself, but it is not a quality confined to the forest. The vastness of the sky, of the great rivers, especially the Mississippi and the Ohio, and also of the lakes, notably Lake Erie in The Border Watch, exemplifies the awesome sublimity of wilderness experience portrayed in these books. In this respect, Altsheler’s depiction of Lake Erie in The Border Watch is superior to Cooper’s depiction of Lake Ontario in The Pathfinder, wonderful as that is. This quality of sublimity extends also to other vast powers: the terrific storms, the fires, the snowfalls of winter, and also the passions of men in conflict. To take one of innumerable examples, The Riflemen of the Ohio opens with a characteristic scene of sublimity:

The Ohio, at that point, although the tributary, was wider than the Mississippi, and for some distance up its stream was deeper. Its banks, sloping and high, were clothed in dense forest and underbrush to the water’s edge. Nothing broke this expanse of dark green. It was lone and desolate, save for the wild fowl that circled over it before they darted toward the water. The note of everything was size, silence, and majesty. (2-3)

One magnificent river, then another, then the immense, unbroken forest, then the quiet, the mysterious absence of movement, except for birds, a traditional image of freedom, circling in the sky like an emblem of eternity, and finally the underlying point, “size, silence, and majesty.” The sequence is perfect.

The Young Trailers gives a first glimpse of the Mississippi. Notice the skill with which Altsheler unfolds our vision of this scene:

All were eager for a sight of the great river. Its name was full of magic for those who came first into the wilderness of Kentucky. It seemed to them the limits of the habitable world. Beyond stretched vague and shadowy regions, into which hunters and trappers might penetrate, but where no one yet dreamed of building a home. So it was with some awe that they would stand upon the shores of this boundary, this mighty stream that divided the real from the unreal. (181-82)

The river is not merely a river, but a sublime, luminal, almost uncanny experience; a reaching of the boundary of the infinite. And what it inspires is a corresponding feeling within the self, the urge to go beyond and beyond which is practically a manifesting of the divine
within the self: "Henry felt a desire to make that journey, to follow the great stream, month after month, until he traced it to the last fountain and uncovered its secret. The power that grips the explorer, that draws him on through danger, known and unknown, held him as he gazed" (183). Henry is absorbed by the vision and the feeling it inspires within him. He is taken over by something larger than himself, discovering in the process strange correspondences and intuitive connections.

There was something in the spirit of the boy that responded to the call of the winds through the deep woods, a harking back to the man primeval, a love for nature and silence... now the forest beckoned to him, and speaking to him in a hundred voices, bade him stay. When he roamed the woods, their majesty and leafy silence appealed to all his senses. The two vast still rivers threw over him the spell of mystery, and the secret of the greater one, its hidden origin, tantalized him. (185)

Henry's connection with a hidden power in the forest—in the sublime—manifests the super-human in the self. Hence he is often depicted as having a sixth sense which the wilderness calls forth in him and develops. Not only are his eyesight and other senses more acute than others possess, but his senses become another mode of knowing altogether: "the physical sense of Henry Ware, so acute that it bordered upon intuition" (The Free Rangers, 134). His senses are really the manifestation of a super sense, which fuses and transcends ordinary sensory experience: "his intuition, the power that came from an extreme development of the five senses" (The Keepers of the Trail, 111). Elsewhere, "when he opened his eyes again he continued to watch the forest, or rather he watched with his ears now, as he lay close to the earth, and his hearing, at all times, was so acute that it seemed to border upon instinct or divination" (Rangers, 7; notice the synesthesia).

This power is fed by the wilderness itself: "The indefinable sixth sense, developed in him by the wilderness," which is already apparent in The Young Trailers (225), but it develops even further as the epic story proceeds in the later novels:

When he was alone in the woods—and he was alone now—he was in touch with the nymphs and the fauns and the satyrs of whom he had scarcely ever heard. Like the old Greeks, he peopled the forest with the creatures of his imagination, and he personified nearly everything.

Now a clear sweet note came to his half-dreaming ear and soothed him with its melody. He closed his eyes and let its sweetness pierce his brain. It was the
same song among the leaves that he had heard when he was out with the shiftless one, the mysterious wind with its invisible hand playing the persistent and haunting measure on the leaves and twigs. *(Riflemen, 111)*

Heightened sensory power, imagination, and an intuitive sixth sense which is also a "voice" or "song"; one modulates into the other, opening up a perception of higher beings dwelling in the forest, indeed embodied by the forest. "It was obvious that he was protected by the supreme powers. Miracle after miracle had occurred in his behalf. They had sent the wolves just in time, and then they had drawn the fog from the earth, hiding him from the warriors and giving him a covert in which he could lie until his strength was restored" *(The Eyes of the Woods, 258-59)*. Notice the plural: "powers", "supreme powers" have saved him. He is in touch with them, because, in effect, he is called by them, and is one of them. Henry is constantly aware of his calling; the theme of exaltation is always close to him. "There could not be such another wilderness as this on the face of the earth! And he, Henry Ware, was one of the luckiest of human beings!" *(Riflemen, 116)*. Henry Ware: the name suggests both royalty—one thinks of Shakespeare's Henry V—but also wary and more profoundly, aware. Henry is aware in the sense that he perceives more than others do, because he has greater powers than others have, and therefore, in a way, greater responsibilities. This is really the secret of Henry Ware: he is not a human being but a superhuman being. "There was the song among the leaves again, and now it told not merely of hope, but of victory achieved and danger passed. Henry was sure that he heard it. He had an imaginative mind like all forest-dwellers, like the Indians themselves, and he personified everything. The wind was a living, breathing thing" *(Riflemen, 114)*.

Several things follow from Henry's status as a superhuman being, even apart from his expansive vitality. He may be a captive with no possible freedom in sight, yet some vitalizing presence animates him: "The delights of life even as a prisoner now came in a swelling tide upon Henry" *(Border, 150)*. His superhuman identity manifests above all in his determination to rescue and release the captive (and even, at times, as in *The Forest Runners*, to heal); the power to save others has always been associated with divinity. This determination, this courage, unfolds into another determination: to warn and protect those who are in danger. The theme of rescuing is prominent in perhaps the most beautiful of these novels, *The Forest Runners*, which opens with Henry's friend Paul lost in the woods and then captured by the Shawnee.10 Henry rescues Paul, as he had earlier rescued Paul in *The Young Trailers* from wolves and from fire. "The tie of friendship is strong, and as he had come to save Paul and as he had found him too, he did not mean to
be stopped now... At that moment he was at his highest pitch of courage and skill, alone in the darkness and storm, surrounded by the danger of death and worse yet ready to risk everything for the sake of the boy with whom he had played" (The Young Trailers, 297). Henry is one who saves others, as he does repeatedly in these stories. He is, in short, that which saves the weak and vulnerable.

He is different from the others in the close-knit group of companions, whose adventures form the basis of the stories. The others all acknowledge him freely as superior, and his preternatural skill is evident from the beginning. Yet, when The Young Trailers begins, Henry is said to be only fifteen years old. Of course he is older in each of the later books, but it seems odd to think of him as so young, and in much juvenile literature, the protagonist oddly fuses childhood and adulthood, being both at once, metaphorically. But in this case, the reason is somewhat different: his youth has to do with his godlike quality. He is not so much young, as the embodiment of youth, as a divine being would be. In this respect, he embodies the extraordinary intensity of emotional feeling that is so characteristic of adolescence, without having the negative traits of naive immaturity and instability. Adolescence has a curiously bad reputation among adults, no doubt because of the mind-paralyzing difficulties posed by teenagers for their baffled parents. In itself, however, adolescence is associated with more than sexual awakening and intense sexual feelings: it is associated with a huge expansion of emotional life generally; what Wordsworth, in "Tintern Abbey", refers to as "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures." To call such a feeling a contact with the infinite, or even numinous, may sound grandiose, but these expansive sensations are certainly the feelings described and evoked by Altsheler in connection with his hero, Henry Ware. It is not easy to convey such feelings and sensations, and here, again, Altsheler strikes the note of the sublime.

But this brings us to another notable quality of these stories, and that is their extraordinary sensuality. The awesome and sublime vistas that form the backdrop of the action have their counterpart in the delightful pleasure and ease and sensual fascinations of eating, drinking, reclining luxuriously, feeling warm and safe when surrounded by storm and cold, and so on. No book that I know captures more brightly these physical sensations of pleasure. This quality is already apparent in the first in the series, The Young Trailers, and I quote from it to illustrate. A somewhat long passage is needed to give the full flavor of this joyous sensuality—again, a rare and precious quality in literature:

Henry Ware was tasting the fiercest and keenest joy of his life. The great forest seemed to reach out its boughs like kind arms to welcome and embrace. How cool was the shade! How the shafts of sunlight pierc-
ing the leaves fell like golden arrows on the ground! How the little brooks laughed and danced over the pebbles! This was his world... Everything was friendly, the huge tree trunks were like old comrades, the air was fresher and keener than any that he had breathed in a long time, and was full of new life and zest. All his old wilderness love rushed back to him, and now after many months he felt at home.

Strong as he was already new strength flowed into his frame and he threw back his head, and laughed a low happy laugh. Then rifle at the side he ran for miles among the trees from the pure happiness of living, but noting as he passed with wonderfully keen eyes every trail of a wild animal and all the forest signs that he knew so well. He ran many miles and he felt no weariness. Then he threw himself down on Mother Earth, and rejoiced at her embrace. He lay there a long time, staring up through the leaves and the shifting sunlight, and he was so still that a hare hopped through the undergrowth almost at his feet, never taking alarm. To Henry Ware then the world seemed grand and beautiful, and of all things in it God had made the wilderness the finest, lingering over every detail with a loving hand. He watched the setting of the sun and the coming of the twilight. The sun was a great blazing ball and the western sky flowed away from it in circling waves of blue and pink and gold, then long shadows came over the forest, and the distant trees began to melt together into a gigantic dark wall. To the dweller in cities all this vast loneliness and desolation would have been dreary and weird beyond description; he would have shuddered with superstitious awe, starting in fear at the slightest sound, but there was no such quality in it for Henry Ware. He saw only comradeship and the friendly veil of the great creeping shadow. His eye could pierce the thickest night, and fear, either of the darkness or things physical, was not in him. (311-312)

Such sensuality would seem to include, if not to sublimate, the intense sexual feelings of youth. It is interesting that water is regularly associated with this sensuality, and there are many scenes of stripping off clothes and swimming, beginning with *The Young Trailers*:

Once they came to a river, too deep to wade, but all
of them, except the schoolmaster, promptly took off their clothing and swam it... Henry and Paul in their secret hearts did not envy the schoolmaster [who rides a horse across]. . . they enjoyed cleaving the clear current with their bare bodies. What! be deprived of the wilderness pleasures! Not they! (120)

Walt Whitman could have written these lines.

It is possible to find in such scenes a homoerotic dimension. One recalls the absence of women in the series. Nor is there any interest in marriage or courting on the part of the four men grouped around Henry, three of whom are significantly older than he is.11 There is a memorable scene in the last of the novels, *The Border Watch*, when the five men, soaked in the cold rain, find a hot spring, strip, and luxuriate in its warmth and comfort: "An extraordinary sense of peace and ease, even of luxury, stole over them all. The contrast with what they had been suffering put them in a physical heaven" (33), and elsewhere Henry is directly called "a Greek god" as he rises from the water. Later, in *The Border Watch*, Henry escapes from Fort Detroit with a spectacular leap into the river, and, with another swimming companion, returns to his friends: "Little streams of water ran from them as if they were young water gods, but Henry thought only of that most precious of all gifts, his recovered freedom, and, drawing deep breaths of delight, ran at Shif’less Sol’s heels" (170). The emphasis on untiring strength is typical of Henry.

The most memorable of these swimming scenes occurs in a context of intense and high-adrenaline danger, in *The Riflemen of the Ohio*:

They stopped in a little alcove of the rocks, hid their rifles and ammunition among the bushes, took off every particle of clothing, all of which they hid, also, except their belts... slipped through the remaining bushes, six white figures reached the edge of the river, and then all six slid silently into the water, which received them and enveloped them to the chin. (202)

They swim through the river, taking a group of Miami warriors by surprise: "Six white figures rose from the water... Despite their courage [the Miamis] uttered a cry of superstitious horror. Surely these white, unclad figures were ghosts, or gods!" (205). The men then succeed in blowing up their enemies’ cannon on a raft. There is a spectacular explosion. "The boat was a mass of flame, a huge core of light, casting a brilliant reflection far out over the river and upon the bank, where trees, bushes, and warriors alike stood out in the red flare." The men prove their potency:

The boat seemed to quiver, and suddenly it leaped

19 Nicholson
into the air. Then came a tremendous explosion and a gush of overpowering flame... and pieces of burning wood were falling with a hissing splash into the river. (208)

Off they swim in the darkness, with great difficulty managing to regain "the thicket in which they had hidden their clothes." "Queer how much confidence clothes give to a feller!" exclaimed Seth Cole, as he slipped on his buckskins" (211). Perhaps it is "queer," but whether it is or not, the real emphasis is on freedom, sensuality, and the absence of hostility between men—hostility, which so often constitutes male-male relations.

This sensual emphasis, sometimes expressed as delight, as playfulness, as well as intense, heightened sensory experience, complements the emphasis in Altsheler on sublimity and vastness, mystery and majesty. Altsheler's favorite way to formulate this combination is to fuse danger with comfort, threat with ease, physical hardship with sensual pleasure. This recurring, oxymoronic fusion is especially conspicuous in the form of the refuge-in-the-wilderness motif which runs throughout the Young Trailer series. The Young Trailers itself ends with Henry seeking a hidden place where he can live and store his few belongings safe from any intrusion or discovery, "a tiny lodge in the deepest recess of the wilderness" (313). "The marsh was perhaps two acres in extent; right in the heart of it was a piece of firm earth about forty feet square and here Henry meant to build his lodge. He alone knew the path across the marsh over fallen logs lying near enough to each other to be reached by an agile man, and on the tiny island all his possessions would be safe" (314).

This is the first of these wilderness refuges, but there are many of them: caves, islands, mysterious groves in the midst of open ground, firm land in swampland, narrow valleys, hidden clefts beside lakes, and, at least once, on a boat on one of the Great Lakes (coupled with an island). They are places of supreme comfort, and sometimes of recovery from illness or wounds. Enemies come near, but do not find them; or if they find them, they are driven off by unexpected and unusual tactics. Some of these refuges are tiny: "he found a little oasis of dry land [in a marsh] with a mighty oak tree growing in the center. Here he felt absolutely secure... and was soon in a deep and dreamless sleep" (Border, 212). One of the most memorable of these refuges appears in The Keepers of the Trail:

Henry reckoned the length of the valley at two miles and its width at a half mile on the average, with the creek flowing down almost its exact center. At the head it narrowed fast, until it came to the gash between the hills, where grew the largest oaks and elms.
that he had ever seen. It was in truth a magnificent grove. (131)

It is explicitly identified with the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve lived.

This was the Garden of Eden. It must be, and some ancient influence, something that he would probably never know, protected it from invasion. He marked once more the fearless nature of its inhabitants. He could see now three small groups of buffaloes and all of them grazed in perfect peace and content. Nowhere was there a sign of the wolves that usually hung about to cut out the calves or the very old. He saw deer in the grass along the creek, and they were oblivious of danger.

But what impressed him most of all was the profusion of singing birds and their zeal and energy. The chorus of singing and chattering rose and fell now and then, but it never ceased. The valley itself fairly sang with it, and in the opening before him there were incessant flashes of red and blue, as the most gaily dressed of the little birds shot past. (133)

Birds are a traditional emblem of freedom, as noted earlier. But this is only the beginning of the vision:

His eyes turned toward the gap, where the shiftless one had placed the Angel with the Flaming Sword. It was only a few hundred yards away, and he was able to see that it was but a narrow cleft between the hills. While he looked he saw a human figure appear upon the crest of the hill, outlined perfectly against the sun which was a blazing shield of gold behind him.

It was a savage warrior, tall, naked, save for the breech cloth, his face and body thick with war paint, the single scalp lock standing up defiantly. The luminous glow overcoming the effect of distance, enlarged him. He seemed twice his real height... Presently two more figures of warriors appeared, one on either side, and they too were raised by the golden glow to twice their stature. (134)

It is for visions like these that we go to Joseph Altsheler. His writing is full of memorable scenes like this, scenes that embrace and hold the imagination, and stay with one long afterward.

The symbolism of refuge/wilderness opens up a deeper layer in Altsheler's imagination. The basis of this symbolism is power which

21 Nicholson
gives freedom, regardless of circumstances. Henry Ware embodies this power. In the midst of a hurricane, Henry experiences something more than fear. "It was enough to daunt the heart of many a brave man, but Henry Ware was not appalled. His primeval instincts had risen to the surface again. He saw the grandeur of it rather than the weirdness and danger" (Rangers, 329). Danger means grandeur to Henry; it inspires rather than threatens. What he has is not merely confidence; it is something more: it is something like the feeling of complete assurance in the face of difficulty. Because he is not threatened, he does not respond with hostility; he does not need to act from fear or from hate; he is, therefore, free, always free. The feeling cannot be encapsulated as fearlessness because it is actual joy in the face of danger. "Used so long to the life of the wilderness and its countless dangers, the sudden throb of his heart told not of fear, but rather of exultation. It was the spirit rising to meet what lay before it... in the perilous life of the wilderness he had learned how to enjoy the safety and physical comfort of the moment" (Border, 4, 7). Henry is presented to us as young because he embodies vitality, not because of chronological age. He combines the wisdom and skill of maturity with the joy and muscular strength of youth. Properly speaking these are godlike qualities: never to fear; or to fear only in such a way that it is a stimulus.

His power is very far from the sort of will-to-power, of conquering and lording it over others, which weak-minded people think of as power. It is not domination but liberation. Hence Altsheler goes out of his way to emphasize the ethical meaning of this power. Henry is "unwilling to do injury, even in thought merely, to anyone"; he shares with his close friend Shif'less Sol a "genuine aversion to all forms of cruelty" (Border 69, 159). He is a genuine leader; that is, he is one who serves others, in accord with the Gospel principle frequently articulated by Jesus. Henry is a kind of ideal of masculinity: strength without bullying, intelligence without deception, joy without degrading others or himself.

He is also, finally, an embodiment of the wilderness itself, so that when he is asked by the English soldier at Fort Detroit to describe what he has seen, he speaks as if he and what he was describing were one and the same:

He told of the great forests and rivers of the West, of the vast plains beyond, of the huge buffalo herds that were a day in passing, and of the terrible storms that sometimes came thundering out of the endless depths of the plains... "what a glorious thing it is to roam hundreds of miles just as you please, to enter regions that you've never seen before, to find new rivers, and new lakes... I suppose the time will come when such
a life can’t be lived, but it can be lived now and I’m happy that this is my time." (Border, 152)

***

“The Kentucky drama remains eternally fascinating,” observes Arthur Moore, a fact that “ought to occasion no surprise, for the setting is paradisiacal and the action utterly heroic” (Moore, 76), beginning right with Filson’s 1784 account of Daniel Boone. “The collective fancy has reworked the tapestry of the western expansion, creating ideals larger than life, warriors who embody the qualities associated with the heroic age... the legendary Kentuckian... [visualized as] the ideal state of mankind” (Moore, 71).

In Altsheler’s mighty forest and his Henry Ware, the paradise and the ideal state of mankind are realized. He deserves to be remembered, and read.
Notes


2. A 554-acre wood, “Lilly’s Wood,” “has been protected while most Eastern Kentucky timber was falling to loggers. It is reputed to be the largest tract of completely virgin forest in the eastern United States” (“News and Notes”, 82). If this is the only untouched forest in the East, it is less than a mile square.

3. There are fleeting glimpses of a young woman named Lucy Upton in *The Young Trailers,* and one expects a love interest to develop between her and Henry Ware, but nothing comes of it, and Lucy Upton disappears after *The Young Trailers.*

4. For the gender issues here, see my *Male Envy: The Logic of Malice in Literature and Culture.*

5. See Slavick, who traces the epic theme in Altsheler’s *Young Trailer* series. Slavick’s interesting article is the only paper I found which investigates Altsheler as writer, as a literary artist. Milton’s note in *The South Dakota Quarterly* is valuable but as a personal reflection rather than as a discussion of Altsheler the writer. Lucy Slater’s essay is a brief biography of Altsheler.

6. Nor was Kentucky without inhabitants. See A. Gwynn Henderson’s detailed refutation of “The most enduring fallacy about Kentucky . . . that Indians never lived permanently anywhere in Kentucky, but only hunted and fought over it” (Henderson, 1). “By 1750 the Indian population had declined sharply. . . The Shawnee, who struggled with the Kentucky settlers more than any other tribe, probably numbered no more than three or four thousand by 1750” (Harrison and Klotter, 8).

7. Literalism in reading Scripture is also rejected by Altsheler. When
Long declares that "the world is only six thousand years old! The Bible says so!" Paul rebukes him: "In the Biblical sense a year did not mean what a year does now, Jim. It may have been a thousand times as long. Men did live in caves several hundred thousand years ago" (The Keepers of the Trail, 38).

8. The fecundity of the soil was matched by the astonishing abundance of wild animals. "By all testimony, Kentucky was a hunting ground without rival in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. The profusion of game in the territory south of the Ohio River and west of the Cumberland Mountains amazed European explorers, traders, soldiers, surveyors, and settlers" (Aron, How the West Was Lost 6).

9. Henry is instinctively allied with the Indians here. From early on, the standard image of North America by the English settlers was of an unbroken forest in which the Indians somehow lived as fish in the ocean, when of course the Indians had clearings and agriculture. "Moreover, the talk of woods masked a profound difference in cosmology. Indians believed that the woods should last forever" whereas the "transplanted Europeans looked awry at the forest, dreaming of the day when the trees would be gone, the land cleared, the very climate and air forever changed" (Herrell, 27). Whites regarded great trees as markers to indicate where the soil was especially fertile for growing crops. "The trees growing on the land formed a shorthand for determining the land's agricultural worth, the standard of value that meant 'use'. The best land, according to this system, supported oak, among other species"; thus "mention of the trees, and especially the oak, is an indication of the land's [commercial] worth" in Major Robert Rogers's Journals and also his Concise Account of North America (both 1765) (Regis, 30).

10. The Forest Runners has a superb Christmas scene, the chapter entitled "Noel," a passage which deserves inclusion in any anthology of Christmas writing.

11. Tom Ross appears to be at least middle-aged: "thick-set and powerful, the strong face seamed and tanned by the wind, rain and sun of years" (The Free Rangers, 12).

12. This indicates how different Henry Ware is from Cooper's Hawkeye. Hawkeye is not Henry's prototype. Hawkeye is 31 when we meet him in The Last of the Mohicans; we see him at a younger age in The Deerslayer, but unlike Henry, he is given to speech-making, to elaborate
explanations of racial identity especially. Cooper seems to have conceived of Hawkeye from the outset as a homespun sage, as a wise old man rather than as an athletic youth. Hence the figure we meet in the first of the Leatherstocking Tales to be written, *The Pathfinder* (in which Chinachook dies) is an old man, and Hawkeye is even older in *The Prairie*. Altsheler broke off *The Young Trailers* series with Henry still a young man, and the American Revolution not yet over (though we are told that he is present at the Battle of Fallen Timbers [1795]).

**Works Cited**


Federal Writers Project of the Works Project Administration for the State of


Smith, Daniel B. “‘This Idea in Heaven’: Image and Reality on the Kentucky Frontier.” In Friend 76-98.


27 Nicholson