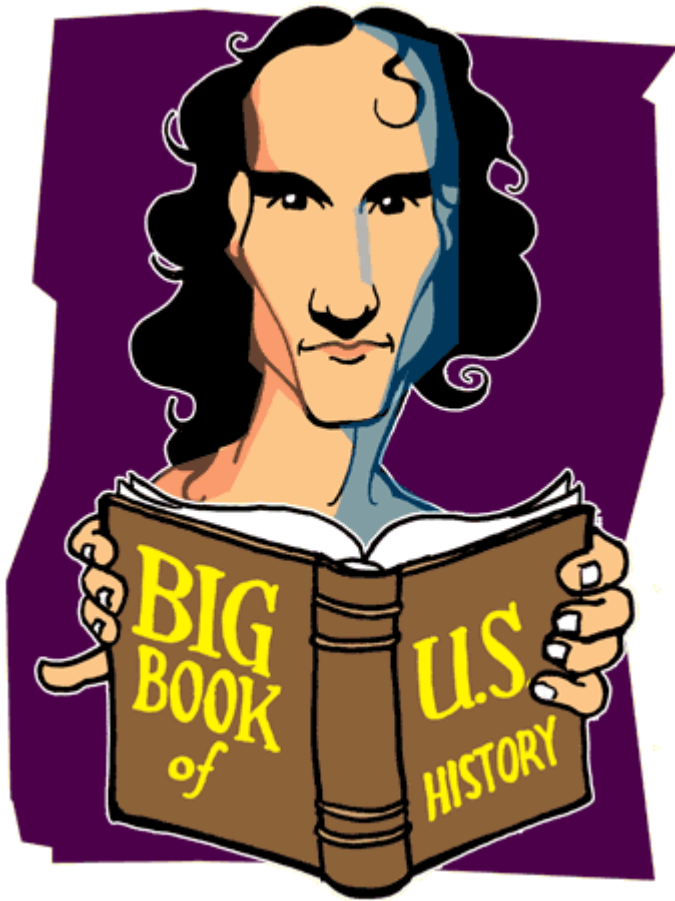


# National Character

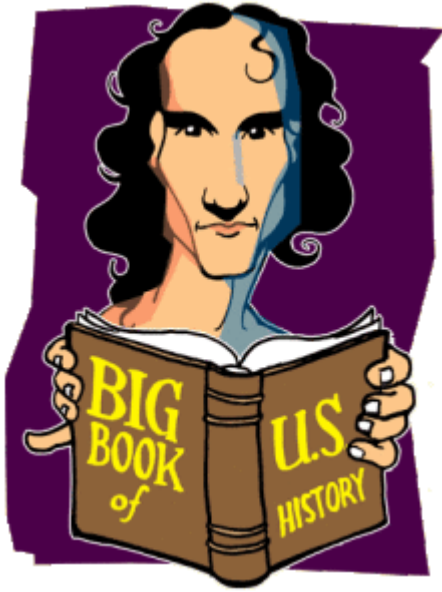


Daniel Day-Lewis, American historian

Anyone trying to construct a U.S. history syllabus—or, for that matter, anyone trying to follow a prescribed U.S. history curriculum—must contend with a number of pedagogical questions: What primary sources are available? What is a reasonable workload and pace for both students and teachers? But there is another question, perhaps the most important for any teacher of history: how does one confront the challenge of boredom, the default setting for most students? Those of us in the profession may savor shared enterprises like producing scholarship, attending conferences, or reading publications like this one. But as far as many of our employers are concerned, the principal justification for our livelihoods lies in making sense of the past for young people who do not necessarily know—or care—about the things we cherish.

So while it's all fine and good to try to encourage students to think like historians, a successful teacher is going to have to be a historian who thinks like an adolescent. And in my experience, an adolescent would much rather watch a movie than read a book. That's one reason why films have become a staple of my survey course ever since I left academe to become a high school teacher a half dozen years ago. (Other reasons include the simple fact that I meet with

my students four times a week for seventeen weeks a semester; gone are the days when I could assign a book in a seminar and convene a week later to talk about it.) At its best, such an approach allows me to achieve a number of objectives at the same time. For example, I can demonstrate what the early film industry was like while illustrating the problems of immigration broached in Charlie Chaplin's perennially entertaining *The Immigrant* (1917).



Daniel Day-Lewis

This kind of film-centered pedagogy is all fine and good for the twentieth century, when films are bona fide primary sources. But what about early American history? Here there are more difficulties, ranging from a dearth of truly good films to a responsibility to point out the seemingly inevitable distortions that accompany even the richest historical recreations. Still, over the course of the past few years, I've settled on a core battery of relatively recent movies that effectively fill that void: *The Crucible* (1996), *Last of the Mohicans* (1992), *Gangs of New York* (2002), and *The Age of Innocence* (1993). If indeed a picture is worth a thousand words, and a few thousand words is more than my lexically challenged students can comfortably handle each night for homework, this strikes me as a relatively efficient, even if imperfect, method for cultivating an informed imagination.

It was only after I had settled on my first-semester slate of films that I realized they all had something in common: Daniel Day-Lewis. (I've now taken to telling my students that I run an annual Daniel Day-Lewis film festival.) The British-born, adoptively Irish actor has been justly celebrated as the finest performer of his generation, in no small measure for the sheer variety of performances he has given over the course of his distinguished career. He first burst into international prominence in 1985 by playing two dazzlingly diverse characters: Johnny, the punk East London homosexual of *My Beautiful Launderette*, and Cecil Vyse, the priggish aristocrat of E. M. Forster's *Room*

with a View. He won an Academy Award for his 1989 portrayal of the Irish poet Christy Brown in *My Left Foot* and also played Irish characters in *In the Name of the Father* (1993) and *The Boxer* (1997). Yet over the course of the last two decades the highly selective Day-Lewis has portrayed a gallery of American characters, beginning with a now obscure role as a contemporary art collector in *Stars and Bars* (1988) and ending most recently with the wildcat oil prospector in *There Will Be Blood* (slated for release later this year). To some extent, this American accent surely reflects the historical realities of the film industry: the U.S. market still dominates to a now-rare degree, and Americans are notorious for their cultural provincialism. So international actors tend to go where the action is.

Taken as a whole, however, Day-Lewis's choices seem to reflect more than just industry realities or access to the juicy roles someone of his stature commands. Actually, his recent body of work shows a remarkably textured, yet consistent, vision of American history. If, as even the most die-hard academics would now concede, history is too important to be left to the professors, Day-Lewis would have to be regarded as one of its most prominent, and even influential, practitioners. That influence may be all the more striking for the way it effectively sneaks under our intellectual radar, viscerally shaping emotions that more often than not are the source of the most powerful, and durable, ideas. But what is he showing us?

We begin our survey with Lewis's portrayal of the doomed John Proctor in Nicholas Hytner's 1996 film version of Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible* (for which the late Miller, who was Day-Lewis's father-in-law, wrote the screenplay). *The Crucible*, of course, is one of the true canonical texts of American literary education, right up there with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It has become exactly what Miller intended: a cautionary tale in which the literal witch trials of the Puritan era foretell the figurative witch trials of the McCarthy era. I must confess, however, that I'm not particularly interested in this angle, not only because I use the film to illustrate life in the colonial period, but also because I regard the deeply ingrained perception of the Puritans as hypocritical prudes—even people who have no idea who H. L. Menckens was have thoroughly imbibed his version of them—as too easy a cheap shot in the age of Paris Hilton and Cam'ron. Instead (and here I know I'm swimming against the tide, which is fine because I don't insist on a particular reading of the story), I hope to convey the richness of the Puritan life: the emotional intensity of a world in which living spirits are taken for granted; in which class and racial conflict jostle with religious obligation; in which a harshly beautiful landscape reflects the jagged longings of the characters.

Those characters are the key. There are any number of objections one can make about *The Crucible*, ranging from the way it creates composites out of the original players in the Salem drama to anachronistic interior sets that are far more

grand than any interiors the Puritans could have or would have made. But looking beyond these failings, the film brings to its characters a depth of feeling rarely acknowledged among the Puritans. Even more than in the play, for example, the film forces us to see the sexual intensity and jealousy of which the Puritans were so capable. These feelings are particularly evident in Winona Ryder's portrayal of Abigail Williams. On a more historically specific note, Joan Allen's Elizabeth Proctor dramatizes the characteristically Puritan struggle with the sin of pride. She says she forgives her husband's transgressions—she may even *want* to forgive her husband's transgressions—but for most of the story her persistent self-righteousness blocks the better angels of her nature. Allen's performance illustrates the human cost for those who struggled to uphold impossibly high standards of piety.

Ultimately, though, this is John Proctor's story and Daniel Day-Lewis's movie. Literally and figuratively, his Proctor is a man on the edge, living on the outskirts of town, maintaining an initial stance of detachment about the accusations of witchcraft, and then refusing to compromise his good name and personal integrity by confessing his alleged "guilt." Yet—and to me this is the key to the movie, the reason why I like to use it—Proctor's fierce moral energy and his ultimate sacrifice of his own life is at once deeply personal and deeply communitarian. His insistent individualism (and that of the motley compatriots who also refuse to confess) is finally what saves Salem. As such, he is as much a reflection of Puritan life as the hysteria that surrounds him. One thing I try to mention in this context is the role of Samuel Sewall, who has a bit part in the movie and whose later apology for his role in the Salem affair is a useful reminder that many of the reasons the Puritans are condemned (such as their naïve moral intransigence) simply do not fit the facts.

This notion of the marginal but righteous communitarian is also important in understanding *Last of the Mohicans*. Much more than *The Crucible*, this is a movie that adapts and updates its source material. Part of a five-part series featuring a variously named character generally known as Natty Bumppo, *Last of the Mohicans*, set during the French and Indian War, was a wildly popular novel at the time of its publication in 1826, but it has been considered almost unreadable since Mark Twain's now-legendary 1895 swipe at "James Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses." The novel's protagonist in particular comes off as a ridiculous country bumpkin, a portrayal that carries over into a number of film adaptations of the book. Director Michael Mann, who also co-revised the screenplay with Christopher Crowe, overhauls the character as Nathaniel Poe, a much more formidable figure. Yet it's Day-Lewis—whose notorious obsession with developing and inhabiting characters even when offscreen has impressed and irritated crews of many productions—who transforms the character into a riveting embodiment of understated competence (a transformation all the more impressive given the nerdy Day-Lewis's conversion into a magnificent specimen of masculine power). He is, in short, a babe magnet.

The babe in the woods he attracts is Cora Munro, daughter of a British army captain, ably played by Madeleine Stowe. This too represents a significant

change from the original novel, as Cooper's protagonist was the ultimate loner, the frontiersman who embodied Frederick Jackson Turner's archetype of the restless wanderer who keeps pushing west to stay ahead of civilization (the final installment of the series is *The Prairie*, with Natty Bumppo out on the Great Plains). In traditional versions of the story, Cora dies, and amid the various romantic permutations between her, her sister Alice, and various Britons and Indians, Nathaniel is not an available partner. In this movie, however, the two form an unshakeable bond and end side-by-side with Nathaniel's adoptive father, Chingachgook, the last Mohican of the title, about to lay the foundation for a distinctively new American society.

That society, we're given to understand, will be multiracial. This of course is a stretch—while the notion of a white person being adopted and raised by Natives was hardly surprising in an eighteenth-century context, the character of Nathaniel in the movie comports nicely with a twenty-first-century social constructionist model of race (pigment be damned, Day-Lewis is extravagantly comfortable negotiating as a fellow Native with a Huron Sachem for the release of the Munro sisters, at one point offering the wampum belt of "my" people as ransom). In those cases where the facts seem to get in the way, the filmmakers have few compunctions about rearranging them. As a number of historians, among them Richard White and Ian K. Steele, have noted, the filmmakers take great liberties with the actual events surrounding the capture of Fort William Henry in 1757. For example, they make the massacre that followed English evacuation of the fort appear to be bloodier than it really was. Moreover, the ethnic composition and orientation of the Indians is seriously jumbled, making the Hurons in particular seem to be much more numerous and decisive French allies than they ever were.

I will confess that many of these inaccuracies escaped me until I began researching this article. (It has made me wonder how much false information I have disseminated over the course of my career through ignorance, unconscious mistakes, or accurately reporting the work of historians who subsequently proved to be incorrect. I shudder at the thought.) But I can't say I regret showing the film. Indeed, I intend to do so again and again. Actually, the very messiness and confusion of the story—of colonists arguing with the British government; colonists arguing among themselves; Indians fighting the colonists and the British and each other; the French fighting them all and yet having more in common with their British opponents than their Huron allies (and French as the lingua franca for Indians and Anglos alike)—is a truth more important than any particular fact and the one students consistently offer unbidden as the message they take from the film. At the center of it all, and yet standing apart, is Day-Lewis's Nathaniel, who embodies the prototypical American in a way that would probably turn James Fenimore Cooper's (and many an Algonquian's) stomach. But as Jefferson told us long ago, the earth belongs to the living. And history is very much an earthly thing.

Of course the living are constantly buried. This is the topic of Chigachgook's final soliloquy in *Last of the Mohicans*—and it's the core subject of the next

film in the Daniel Day-Lewis film festival: *Gangs of New York*, directed by the legendary Martin Scorsese. A bowdlerized version of the bowdlerized 1928 history of New York street culture of the same name by Herbert Asbury, *Gangs* makes *Mohicans* look positively fastidious by comparison. Conflating time periods and gangs, relying on a creaky patricidal plot, and lingering over stylized violence that is brutal yet sentimentalized, the movie was widely criticized by historians and reviewers alike.

There are two things, however, that make *Gangs* unforgettable. The first is its tremendous visual impact—I remember gasping back in 2002 when I first saw the trailer, which showed the downtown docks (actually recreated on a set in Italy). The other is Day-Lewis's performance as the brutally charismatic William Cutting, a.k.a. Bill the Butcher, Bowery B'hoy extraordinaire.

In an important sense, the Butcher, as he is called (only in part because of his profession), is the heir of Nathaniel Poe; Nathaniel is the man the Butcher might have become if, instead of being locked inside an urban jungle and forced to turn his fierce energy inward, he were restlessly moving toward new frontiers. Both consumed and sustained by his hatreds—among them the Irish immigrants who swarm into the Five Points neighborhood he runs with an iron fist and celebrates in a patois of profane poetry (inspired by the angry white hip-hop artist Eminem, to whom Day-Lewis listened as he prepared for the role)—Cutting is a man out of time. The pressure is coming from a variety of directions: from those immigrants, whose numbers will soon render his nativism obsolete; from a new breed of politicians, represented by William (soon to be Boss) Tweed, who sees possibilities for power in the ballot box, even if it has to be bought; and from the gathering force of the federal government—temporarily enmeshed in the Civil War—which will break the power of the clannish local lords, whether on the plantation or in the ghetto. Cutting sees the walls closing in; there's a terrific scene of him wrapped in an American flag, fondly remembering the vanquished Irish foe whose son he has unwittingly adopted as protégé. And it's a virtual death wish that sends him into a final self-destructive spiral of violence against the backdrop of the New York City draft riots.

Superficially, at least, there could not be a man in New York more different from Bill Cutting than his contemporary Newland Archer, protagonist of *The Age of Innocence*, Scorsese's 1993 adaptation of Edith Wharton's novel of the same name. One man is a lawbreaker; the other is a lawyer. One is quintessentially downtown; the other, part of the emerging scene uptown (there's a great shot of a huge estate on a cavernously empty Fifth Avenue). The Civil War looms and finally overtakes Cutting, but for Archer, who comes of age in the 1870s, it barely registers, except marginally, perhaps, in the wobbly fortunes of his buccaneering peers, the Beauforts of South Carolina. Cutting is a thug who revels in his provincialism; Archer, ever the gentleman, is an instinctive cosmopolitan.

Yet beneath these obvious differences are surprising core affinities. Both men

navigate their way through their respective societies with a firm social compass—one pointing west, the other east—but are perfectly willing to buck convention when they consider it necessary. Further, the very personal vision they pursue also engenders self-imposed limits, limits that are mistakenly perceived by their peers as a form of social conformity. Archer's passion for the beautiful Countess Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer) pulls him into open rebellion. That this rebellion is never fully consummated is less a matter of social custom than of honor and a commitment to the deceptively simple-minded May Welland (Winona Ryder, who would team up with Day-Lewis three years later in *The Crucible*). This sense of honor is seen by some as a form of capitulation, though more sophisticated observers (alas, relatively few of my students among them) recognize it as a form of inner strength. And yet even as he maintains a connection to the society in which he came of age, Archer, as his name suggests, quietly insists on going his own way in the books he reads, paintings he views, and travels he (belatedly) takes.

Nevertheless, the role marks a turning point in Day-Lewis's vision of American history. For even as Archer extends the line of restless communitarians in the actor's body of work, he also suggests its descent. One can only go so far in plausibly describing him as a maverick. Compared to John Proctor, Nathaniel Poe, or Bill Cutting, he is a smaller, even diminished figure. (Newland's precocious taste in art marks him as a proto-modernist, but he is finally too thoroughly the Victorian to cross over to that promising symbolist land.) Though one could argue this is simply one role in one movie, his character seems to suggest a larger point: centennial America is just not as big as it used to be, and its protagonists are smaller. This assertion seems to get more emphatic reinforcement when one considers Day-Lewis's performance in the 2005 film *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*, directed by his wife, Rebecca Miller. As Jack Slavin, Day-Lewis portrays an aging hippie who, cut off from his humanitarian past, retreats into incestuous isolation. Proctor, Poe, Cutting, and Archer are impressively tragic figures. Slavin, by contrast, veers uncomfortably close to pathos. His beautiful daughter carries his memory forward—or is it back?—to a Vermont commune, but one has a strong sense of a narrative terminus. Four centuries from the roiling furies of the Puritans, at the end of a hundred years since Newland visited the Old World, a frontier has gone, its archetypal character now trapped on an island off the Down East coast of Maine.

Assigning the title of "American historian" to a Hollywood actor might seem like an implausible act for any number of reasons, among them the simple fact that the creation of history is generally a matter of generating words, and an actor's job is typically a matter of speaking those of someone else, even if, as Day-Lewis surely has, that actor collaborates on his lines. In most of the cases discussed here, those words are effectively twice removed, as they were adapted—make that invented—by a series of screenwriters from a play, a novel, and popular history, each themselves derivative in one way or another.

But like all the arts, history is above all a matter of choices—of subjects, of sources, of shadings of fact and strokes of imagination. When one considers the

body of work of this particular individual, one is left with a surprisingly suggestive interpretive arc. The engine of American history, Daniel Day-Lewis tells us, is a restless individualist who strains against an inherited culture, an individual as likely to look back as to look forward, but an individual who, in that very restlessness, also paves the way for a new generation, one that will ultimately produce a new rebellion for a new age.

Of course, there's nothing uniquely American about this; Day-Lewis himself has portrayed similar Czechs and Irishmen, for instance. But the American settings in which such dramas unfold are distinctive. They're settings in which people are repeatedly told, as a matter of birthright, that dreams are valid and realizable—though not all people realize those dreams, and for those who do (or those in the proximity of those who do) the dreams often turn into nightmares. This friction is what gives so many of Day-Lewis's characters a tragic dimension. It's also what gives them a powerful sense of relevance. There are few places where such questions and issues are more relevant than high schools—settings that, whatever their specific deficiencies, are veritable workshops of dreams.

In its broadest outlines, the Daniel Day-Lewis school of American history is not particularly complex, and it's certainly debatable. That's precisely the point. Day-Lewis may or may not be right that restless individuals are the engine of American history, and if he is, one can argue about whether this is a good thing or not—or whether, for example, those individuals can be women as easily as men. This is the stuff of which good classroom discussions are made.

Further, the Day-Lewis message is not a particularly fashionable one in the academy. In the long, ongoing argument about whether the heroic individual or the impersonal process shapes history, the pendulum has long lingered on the latter. It's a little surprising to realize that in some respects the argument that Day-Lewis is making is not that much unlike the one John Wayne did in his body of work—or by broadening the frame of reference a bit to bring Alan Ladd into the picture, one might dub it the *Shane* school of history, where misfits with good hearts redeem and renew a country. I believe Day-Lewis's interpretation is a bit more textured than that; his characters have a richer and more reciprocal relationship with their communities than these other examples might suggest. But the heritage is there nonetheless.

There is one other aspect of Day-Lewis's vision of American history that distinguishes it from others propagated by popular media. And that is that it is a vision, a sweeping interpretation that takes in the American past as a whole. Not many professional historians (Sean Wilentz comes to mind as an exception) consider it appropriate to even try. In this regard, Day-Lewis harkens back to earlier generations of American historians: Hofstadter, Parrington, and, especially, Turner, and maybe a few modern descendants such as Patricia Limerick. For a variety of structural and ideological reasons, the contemporary professional vision of the past is fractured, slivered into shards that are constantly being recombined into often compelling new arrangements. A



postmodern playhouse. That's fine for graduate students, maybe. But that's not what the kids I see need right now.

They need to grapple with a frontiersman in the woods.

## Further Reading:

Arthur Miller's screenplay version of *The Crucible* (New York, 1997) includes valuable pieces by the playwright and director Nicholas Hytner on the making of the film. Richard White analyzes *Last of the Mohicans* in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York, 1995); Ian K. Steele reviewed the film in *The Journal of American History* 80:3 (December 1993). The major inspiration—as opposed to an important source much beyond the names of the characters—for Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* is Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (1927; New York, 2001). A shooting script of *The Age of Innocence* screenplay by Jack Cocks and Scorsese is available through "The Newmarket Shooting Script Series" (New York, 1991).

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Jim Cullen teaches history at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York, where he serves on the board of trustees. He is the author of *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (Oxford University Press, 2003) and the recently published *Imperfect Presidents: Tales of Misadventure and Triumphs*, recently published by Palgrave Macmillan, among other books.