
Crossing Borders Between History and Fiction: Romancing the Revolution in James Fenimore Cooper's *Lionel Lincoln* (1825) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *The Linwoods* (1835)

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Abstract

In 1833, Rufus Choate gives out an address in Salem entitled "The Importance of Illustrating New England History by a Series of Romances like the *Waverley Novels*," in which he asks his contemporaries to put to the fore American matter, and in particular such moments of the national History as the Revolution. With this, he only adds to the general call for an "American Walter Scott" that has been going on for some years. Yet, James Fenimore Cooper had already been thus nicknamed by his fellow-citizens, in particular after *The Spy*; *A Tale of the Neutral Ground* (1821) which narrates the American War of Independence through the story of the Wharton family. He takes up again the device in *Lionel Lincoln*; or *the Leaguer of Boston* (1825), the first – and only published – volume of what should have been *The Legends of the Thirteen Republics* and his only "strictly historical novel." Yet, Rufus Choate's speech in 1833 rings as a reminder that nothing satisfactory to his eyes has been published yet, and *Lionel Lincoln*'s critical failure in its own time comes as a proof of it. *The Linwoods* (1835) can therefore be read as Sedgwick's own attempt at replying to Rufus Choate, only two years after his address, intermingling, as Cooper before her, American History with the romantic plot of fictitious individuals, thereby blurring the frontier between History and fiction in the process. In both cases, the transatlantic journey of Scott's historical romance to the American soil gives way to a paean to America, which counterpoints the acknowledged influence of the "Author of *Waverley*." Yet, if both Cooper and Sedgwick take up the form of the Bildungsroman as the education of the hero through the War of Independence, it seems that Sedgwick furthers the possibilities opened up by Cooper, unfurling his closed ending onto the next generation and the future of the country, which might be an explanation of *The Linwoods*' comparative success in the face of *Lionel Lincoln*'s failure.

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