A white man's country: *Yale's Chronicles of America*

Roberta E. Pearson

Writing in 1991, Michael Kammen stated, 'For more than a decade now, the connection between collective memory and national identity has been a matter of intense and widespread interest'.¹ Kammen's examples, ranging from Brazil to several Eastern and Western European countries, make it clear that he sees this interest as a global phenomenon, but the connection between collective memory and national identity has perhaps been most intensely debated in the historian's own country, the US. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, as identity politics gained increasing validity, 'minorities' such as African-Americans and Asian-Americans pressed claims to an 'authentic' self-representation in the country's influential signifying systems (the media, the schools, the museums and so forth). Simultaneously, a flood of immigrants from Asia and the global south sought refuge in the world's remaining super-power. Social and cultural elites (educators, state officials, public institutions and the like) reacted to identity politics and immigration with approbation or alarm: some urged a full embrace of multiculturalism while others worried about the fragmentation ensuing upon the collapse of a common culture. This elite contention echoed that of the previous century, when Southern and Eastern European immigration, African-American migration to large urban centres and the 'threat' of a rapidly expanding industrial working class had led to similar concerns about American culture and identity. These parallel circumstances, vastly different in many respects but alike enough to be instructive, suggest that issues of collective memory and national identity achieve a high profile in periods of rapid change and reconfiguration. This might account for American academics and cultural critics recently taking great interest in the representation of history and memory. Kammen's own magisterial

volume traces the formation and re-formation of American memory from the Revolution to the end of the twentieth century. Other contributions to the debate include the anthologies *Cultural Memory and The Construction of Identity* and *History Wars*, including articles that address topics as diverse as discourses of the past in Israeli pioneering settlement museums and the controversy over the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian.² And there are many more.

My own contribution to the debate and to this volume returns to the turn of the twentieth-century contestation over collective memory attendant upon the decades of social turbulence beginning in 1880 that some historians have labeled a hegemonic crisis, as immigration, industrialisation and urbanisation rapidly altered the country's social landscape. The immediate post-World War One years, hailed hopefully as the 'return to normalcy', saw instead the continuation of the crisis in the form of the upheaval of the Red Scare and widespread labour unrest. In the face of the challenge to national identity precipitated by rapid social and cultural change, white Anglo-Saxon elites attempted to fashion the country's history to make it consonant with their vision of a present and future dominated by themselves or at least their cultural values. As Michael Wallace has suggested, 'The Haymarket affair and the great strikes of the 1880s appear to have been the events that galvanized the bourgeoisie into reconsidering its disregard for tradition . . . Class struggle was transmuted into defense of "American values" against outside agitators.'³ The decades from the 1880s to the 1920s saw a resurgence of interest in the colonial past as evidenced by the activities of historians, historical preservation societies, museum exhibitions, and the emergence of genealogical societies such as the Sons of the American Revolution and their higher-profile female counterparts, the Daughters of the American Revolution. These same years were the age of historical pageants, such as 'The Pilgrim Spirit', staged in Plymouth on the three hundredth anniversary of the colonists' arrival, as well as of the first manifestations of the 'living history' movement, when in 1926 John D. Rockefeller, Jr. gave money for the Williamsburg restoration.

At a time of contested national identity, then, the colonial period was enshrined as *the* originary moment of national identity as public institutions and social elites constructed an official culture and official memory to shore up the hegemonic order. Might these official texts have functioned differently than their popular counterparts?

In their fascinating study of the James Bond phenomenon, Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott theorise that, while official culture/memory may be relatively stable, popular culture texts may act as a barometer of hegemonic reformulation.

Periods of . . . innovation in popular fiction often coincide with those in which the ideological articulations through which hegemony was previously secured are no longer working to produce popular consent. In such moments, popular fictional forms may often prove more mobile and adaptable than more 'organic,' deeply implanted and institutionally solidified political ideologies which, owing to the longer term nature of the work they have to do, are not so conjuncturally pliable.⁴

This essay examines a group of texts that stemmed from a 'deeply implanted and institutionally solidified political' ideology, contrasting them with 'popular fictional forms' that do indeed retrospectively appear 'more mobile and adaptable'. In 1923 the Yale University Press undertook production of a series of educational feature films, the *Chronicles of America*, intended to instruct the nation's populace in their country's glorious history. The Press originally planned to make thirty-three *Chronicles of America* photo-plays, taking the history of the US up to and through the Civil War, but, perhaps because of financial difficulties, ceased production in 1925 after fifteen films, most of which deal with the colonial and Revolutionary War period and several of which prominently feature Native Americans of the woodlands tribes, e.g. the Cherokee, the Shawnee and the Powhatans.⁵ A statement by one of the editors chosen to supervise the project shows that the *Chronicles* producers consciously designed their texts in opposition to the historical spectacles appearing at the local Bijou.

There must be films available that were conceived and carried out in every detail under the guidance of definite educational purposes and ideals. It seems almost obvious that films made primarily to appeal to the largest number, with little or no regard for educational values, must at best be seriously lacking as educational instruments and at worst maybe positively harmful . . . To think of using for educational purposes films designed merely to entertain would be not one whit more absurd than to think of making a set of trashy novels serve as serious textbooks.⁶

The Chronicles of America, based upon the popular fifty-volume American history series of the same title published by Yale University

Press, were sponsored by the Press, Yale's Council's Committee on Publications (the Press's editorial board) appointing three editors to supervise the project: 'Dr. Max Farrand, Professor of American History, Yale University; Dr. Frank E. Spaulding, Sterling Professor of School Administration and Head of the Department of Education at Yale; and Professor Nathaniel Wright Stephenson, formerly of the Department of History at the College of Charleston and later an exchange professor at Yale'.⁷ The Council also formed a subsidiary company, the *Chronicles of America Picture Corporation*, headed by George Parmly Day, Treasurer of Yale and founder and president of the Yale University Press. The Corporation employed experienced Hollywood scriptwriters who wrote the scenarios in conjunction with historians, museum curators and members of various historical societies, and professional directors who oversaw the films' actual production, many of which were shot in the same locations where the historical events occurred, and at the same time of year. Before release, each film was screened and formally approved by the Council's Committee on Publications. The initial titles of each film state: 'Yale University Press presents *The Chronicles of America*. A series of photoplays based upon the fifty volumes published under the same name. The historical accuracy of this presentation of an important event in American History is guaranteed by the painstaking work of a number of distinguished historians. Approved by the Council's Committee on Publications of Yale University.' The Council intended these accurate and approved photoplays primarily for schools, colleges and other educational institutions, although response to the initial films was so positive, the publicists claimed, that the Corporation entered into an arrangement with the Pathé Exchange for a year-long theatrical distribution, apparently in the hope of ploughing profits back into production.

The *New York Times* reported that the series would not have been released to commercial cinemas if not for the desire to Americanise immigrants. 'The original plan of the Yale University Press was to show the pictures at schools and colleges but requests for a general release, to reach the foreign-born, prevailed.'⁸ The producers' rhetoric was quite explicit about the series' ideological agenda. Nathaniel Stephenson, one of the three editors-in-chief of the *Chronicles*, reported that Yale University engaged in 'long deliberation' before granting the go-ahead for the project, persuaded by three arguments the series' proponents advanced: 'the fact that the

general reader was losing interest in American history and might be recaptured by a true statement of it in pictorial form; that the great number of foreigners who read little in English except for recreation might be told the story of our country through the medium of their eyes; and that children were tired of the conventional ways of presenting history.⁹ The Press-issued pamphlet advertising the *Chronicles* series picked up on the second of these reasons, saying that the films constituted a 'powerful instrument for the stimulation of patriotism and good citizenship among native [born] Americans and foreign born citizens alike'.¹⁰

The perceived threat posed by the latter, the thousands of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who had entered the country since the 1880s, shaped the *Chronicles*' ideological project. The panic among the country's white elites over immigration culminated in 1924, with Congressional legislation limiting the annual intake of immigrants from any country to 2 per cent of the number of that country's nationals resident in the US according to the 1890 census, a policy that favoured the British Isles, Germany and Scandinavia and restricted immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe.¹¹ In that same year the magazine *The World's Work*, whose publishers worried about the racial and moral degeneration of the American people and had advocated immigration laws excluding those not of British or Teutonic stock,¹² published an article about the *Chronicles of America* photoplays. Clayton Hamilton began his piece with a description of the 'immigration problem':

For several decades, America has served not merely as a melting-pot but also as a dumping-ground for aliens of many races; and it is not necessary to summon statisticians to support a general assertion that the ethnological complexion of the United States has been drastically changed within the last half-century. This drastic change is immediately noticeable in New York . . . and anybody who now travels at crowded hours in the New York subway must gather, from a gleaning of the faces within sight, an impression that our metropolis has become . . . a foreign city.¹³

Hamilton lauded the schools' effective Americanisation of the younger generation and pointed out the difficulty of reaching their non-English speaking parents. But he believed that the *Chronicles of America* photoplays could instruct even 'those polyglot multitudes in our densely populated cities that have not learned as yet to speak

our common language' about 'our' common history and 'our' common values.¹⁴ The film trade press emphasised the films' patriotic potential in slightly less xenophobic fashion, *Photoplay* asserting that the series' editors believed 'it will do much to promote good and intelligent citizenship' and *The Exhibitor's Herald* proclaiming that the films were 'a way to make better citizens'.¹⁵

The Chronicles' way of making better citizens was to persuade them of the virtues of Englishness and whiteness. On the title page of a draft script for *Gateway to the West* (1925) appears a telling epigram from nineteenth-century historian Francis Parkman. 'If France had preserved half of her American possessions a barrier would have been set to the spread of the English-speaking races . . .'¹⁶ The *Chronicles of America* picture the triumphant spread of the 'English-speaking races' across the continent, all the heroes of Anglo-Saxon stock save the unavoidable Columbus, whose claims to the continent the series delegitimises in the opening title to Jamestown: 'By the 17th Century England claimed almost the whole of the present United States and most of what is now Canada'. All contesting that claim and impeding the Anglo-Saxon 'race's' manifest destiny, be they French, Spaniards or Native Americans, are the enemy, but it is always Indian 'outrages' that justify the warfare necessary to the westward march of the 'English-speaking races'. In *Vincennes* (1923) George Rogers Clark tells Patrick Henry, Governor of Virginia, that the only way to stop the Indian massacres of whites is to conquer the Northwest Territories. The two stand by the window looking out at settlers heading into the wilderness. Says Clark, 'It is always "Westward, ho!" They can't be held back, Gov. Henry, and we must make it safe for them.'

Making it safe for the settlers meant making it safe for white men (and women), as a title from the climatic sequence of *Boonestown* makes clear: 'Their tenacity has won a firm foothold on the new frontier of white colonization'. Or as the titular hero, Daniel Boone, puts it, 'If we turn and run before the Indians it will never be a white man's country.' And here's where the *Chronicles* perform a curious little ideological tap-dance. Since the *Chronicles* was aimed in part at 'the great number of foreigners who read little in English' and dependent in part upon their admissions fees for continued production, slandering potential viewers' ancestors did not make a great deal of ideological or economic sense. Yet the series' editors wanted to turn up the heat under the melting pot, not to celebrate multi-culturalism.

Hence, the *Chronicles* emphasises not simply the triumph of the 'English-speaking races' but the essential unity of all the 'white races'. Native Americans, constituting the smallest fraction of the cinema-going audience and already subject to powerful mechanisms of assimilation, perfectly filled the role of the non-white other whose negative representation conferred whiteness upon the majority of the series' viewers. The remainder of this chapter looks in more detail at the *Chronicles*' representation of Native Americans, briefly delineating the contemporary political situation that may have motivated the negativity and contrasting it with Hollywood's more positive or at the very least ambivalent portrayal.

The Puritans (1924) details the hardships encountered by some of the country's first white inhabitants: 'Privation and sorrow are the common lot during these early days in Massachusetts', declares an intertitle. The first part of the film establishes the sober, pious and self-sacrificing lifestyle of the Puritans in their Charlestown colony, the majority of the action taking place in front of Governor Winthrop's 'Great House', a half-timbered structure with leaded window panes that constantly invokes the spiritual presence of the Mother Country. In Charlestown, the country's original inhabitants are conspicuous by their absence, functioning as an unseen threat lurking in the primeval forest beyond the settlement's stockade. The first Indians appear as an intertitle shifts the setting to Merrymount, where 'flourishes a lawless trading post'. By contrast with the reassuring solidity of Governor Winthrop's residence, this settlement consists of crudely constructed lean-tos. And by contrast with the sober law and order of the Puritan community, the Indians who have come to trade scuffle playfully with their white hosts and drink liquor from large jugs. 'Thomas Morton, Master of Merrymount', has his arm around an Indian woman as she swigs from a flagon. In the next shot, two white men and two Indians bargain over the exchange of rifles for furs. Morton intervenes to expedite the proceedings then staggers off, his arm around the shoulder of one of the Indians. The sequence ends with a long shot of general revelry with Indians again swilling from jugs and staggering drunkenly. The next title tells us that 'At Charlestown, the Puritans decide to abolish the menace of Merrymount', which they do, sending an armed force, which kills many of the Indians and arrests Morton.

The Frontier Woman (1924) tells the story of the women of the Watauga settlement in Tennessee, whose men had gone to fight

the British during the Revolution. 'With every trader bringing fearful tales of Indian uprisings the courageous women "carried on" alone and refused to recall their warriors' who won a significant victory 'that was a prelude to the defeat of Cornwallis'.¹⁷ One of the film's key sequences begins with the intertitle: 'Boys and old men are the chief protection of the little stockade village against the vicious Cherokee', followed by an exterior long shot of the gate of the stockade village, defended by boys armed with long rifles. The following shots show women and little children in the woods, another boy with a rifle standing guard. Margaret Johnson, the film's heroine, warns her children against straying too far, relating the cautionary tale of 'two other little girls and their mother who went into the woods'. The film then shows us her story. A woman and two little girls carrying baskets walk toward the camera from the rear of the frame. Two Indians suddenly appear in the right and left foreground, emerging from behind the boulder and bush where they had been hiding. The women and children turn to run but other Indians leap out in front of them and the Indians in the foreground run toward them. The shot fades out on threatening figures with raised hatchets surrounding the barely visible white characters, leaving the denouement to the childrens' and the viewers' imaginations. Neither the fictional children nor the film's audience should have had any difficulty in completing the narrative, for in this scene *The Frontier Woman* justifies the total war waged to exterminate the Indian foe by drawing upon the recurrent trope in American literature and art of white women and children menaced by 'savages'. White women's fear of death, and worse than death, at the hands of Indians, provided the inspiration for the first American literary genre and the first American best-sellers, the captivity narratives, as well as for much early American art, as in John Vanderlyn's *The Death of Jane McCrea* (1804), John Mix Stanley's *Osage Scalp Dance* (1848) and George Caleb Bingham's *Captured by Indians* (1848).

The Frontier Woman's discrete fadeout spares the audience the gruesome details, but a scene in *Vincennes* (1923) graphically alludes to the consequences of an encounter with the hostile Indians. A small family (mother, father, older and younger sons) sets out from the stockaded settlement of Harrodsburg on their way west. The father explains, 'My brother writes fer us to come, an' we're bound fer the Ohio – Injuns or no Injuns. Somethin' keeps pulling me westward – a man can pick an' choose his acres away off yonder.' Our

hero, George Rogers Clark, says to the younger son, 'Take good care of that yellow scalp, boy'. Later, two white men arrive at Harrodsburg with an Indian captive and the white boy found with him, the older son from the previous scene. The boy reports that his younger brother may still be alive since, when Indians attacked his family, his mother told the little boy to hide. At this point one of the white men pulls a scalp from the Indian's belt. An intertitle follows: 'The scalping devil. It's the little feller's!'

The above are fairly typical examples of the *Chronicles*' representation of Native Americans as faceless, nameless lurkers in the forest, who emerge from the shadows only to kidnap, kill, scalp and, implicitly at least, rape the fair-haired Anglo-Saxons bravely establishing a new nation in the wilderness. Intertitles refer not only to 'scalping devils', a favourite descriptor, but also to 'skulking Cherokees', 'drunken Indians on a spree' and a room that 'reeks of Indian'. The few more prominent Indians, those who have names, fare no better than their unidentified brethren. The 'crafty' chief Blackfish, in *Daniel Boone*, leads his warriors against Boonestown, then retreats, convinced that 'the place is bewitched'. In *Jamestown*, Powhatan, father of Pocohontas (perhaps the only unproblematically 'good Indian' in the *Chronicles*), first sends spies to the colony to ascertain the state of its defences and then refrains from attack only because Gov. Dale has wisely taken his daughter hostage. The *Chronicles* represented its Indian villains as superstitious, credulous and easily intimidated, in short as in all ways inferior to any and all white men. In *Daniel Boone*, the shrewd woodsman time and again easily outwits his Indian foes. In one scene, walking alone through the forest, he instinctively knows that two Indians hide in waiting to pounce upon him. He stops, leans his rifle against a tree, takes out his knife, pantomimes hunger, pretends to swallow his weapon and then resumes his journey. One of the Indians says to the other, 'No kill – that man Boone swallow knife – him great paleface medicine man'. The *Chronicles*' Indians are so dull-witted that they cannot even wage war on their own, but must be lead by Spaniards, Frenchmen, and later Englishmen, who incite them to fight the colonists. As Daniel Boone says when the Indians try to tunnel into his settlement, 'More of the Frenchman's doings – those scalping devils would never think of it themselves!' But in the Revolutionary War period films, British officers leading the Indians against their fellow English-speakers pose an ideological contradiction for the

Anglophiliac *Chronicles* that a scene in *Vincennes* attempts to resolve. Henry Hamilton orders his Indian allies to make war on the colonists, but a British officer warns him, 'If you let loose these devils upon the rebels, the whole country will rise to drive you out!' Hamilton says to the Indian chief, 'Tell your braves there is to be no war against women and children – remember!' French officers issue no such injunctions.

The incidents omitted by the *Chronicles of America* from its 'accurate' and 'authorised' history of the US are perhaps even more revelatory of the producers' ideological stance. *The Frontier Woman* ceases its chronicle well before the forcible removal of those 'vicious' Cherokee from the land that had been theirs for generations. *Columbus* (1923) culminates with the arrival of the titular hero and his men in the 'new world'. The film shows the native peoples only in long shot, their backs to the camera as they cower behind foliage and watch a row boat approach the shore, and, then, rather sensibly, run away when the white men disembark. No natives watch as Columbus proclaims, 'In the name of Holy Church and in the name of their joint Majesties, Isabella, Queen of Castile, and Ferdinand, King of Aragon, I claim dominion over this new empire!' The film ends here, before Columbus and his successors enslave and murder the native populations. Perhaps even more curious than the omission of the white man's mistreatment of the Indian is the omission of the Indian's generous treatment of the white man, often the only factor saving the early colonists from starvation during harsh New England winters. *The Pilgrims* emphasises the threat posed by the Indians but not the aid offered. After the burial of a small child, Miles Standish orders the grave leveled. 'No trace of graves may be left; otherwise the watchful Indians might learn how pestilence is weakening us!' Then he directs that the colony's one cannon be prominently placed to impress the Indians. The film ends not, as one would expect, with the scene known to every American schoolchild of Pilgrims and Indians celebrating the first Thanksgiving, but rather with the Mayflower, the last link to home, departing for England.

The Chronicles' extremely negative representation of Native Americans can be seen as a displacement of fears stemming from the US's contemporary imperialistic responsibilities and from the domestic disturbances that resulted from industrial unrest and the Red Scare. After the closing of the western frontier, officially declared by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, the triumphant march of the white

race across the nation had been extended on a global scale. As Richard Slotkin shows in *Gunfighter Nation*, many involved in advancing and in reporting the country's turn-of-the-century imperialist adventures used the frontier warfare analogy to cast indigenous peoples in the role of the hostile Indians and thus justify savage warfare in the service of white civilisation. For example, Slotkin quotes an article by Marion Wilcox on 'Philippine Ethnology' in which the author argues that 'that some of our present hostiles are blood-relations to the poor foes of the Pilgrims and the Puritans'.¹⁸ This analogy still held in the 1920s, as demonstrated by the fact that a conference on 'Indians and Other Dependent Peoples' was held every fall at Lake Mohonk in New York State.¹⁹ By showing how earlier generations had defeated and assumed administration over the 'primitive' Indians, the *Chronicles of America* could instruct the nation's youth, even those not descended from the 'English-speaking races', in the spirit of imperialism, a particularly important lesson in light of the prominent position among nation-states assumed by the country in the aftermath of the very recent World War One. As Frank E. Spaulding, one of the *Chronicles*' three co-editors, pointed out, '[The schools] must ever be mindful that the content and method of instruction is serving, and should be consciously made to serve, not merely to give adequate understanding of the past, and that as a guide to the future, but to shape the ideals and attitudes and to stimulate the resolutions of pupils who are bound to become large factors in determining the content of the historical stream as it flows on.'²⁰

Just as the *Chronicles*' representation of Native Americans may well have resonated with the culture's discourses about imperialism and other 'dependent' peoples, it may also have resonated with discourses about the mobs and machinations of Reds, or Bolsheviks, or anarchists, or strikers that were said to be menacing the Republic. The perceived threat to national values escalated during the immediate post-World War One years, the years of high profile industrial disputes and the Red Scare, responded to by elites in government and industry with both violence and the violation of civil rights. Labour supported the government's war efforts, but as inflation hit hard after the victory, workers demanded higher wages. Management resisted these demands, causing great industrial unrest. Strikes became prevalent; in 1919 there were 3600 strikes involving more than 4 million workers and affecting key sectors, including the police and the steel and coal industries.²¹ Industry leaders attempted to

equate an anti-labour stance with ‘Americanism’; for example, the president of the National Association of Manufacturers said in 1923, ‘I can’t conceive of any principle that is more purely American, that comes nearer representing the very essence of all those traditions and institutions that are dearest to us than the open shop principle.’ In defense of those dear traditions, industry leaders adopted what they referred to as the American plan, which involved the hiring of strike-breakers and the use of gas and machine guns against strikers, the latter often stockpiled in anticipation of a strike.²²

The conflation of Americanism and anti-unionism entailed forging links between labour and socialism or Bolshevism or anarchy, distinct political positions collectively labeled ‘Reds’ or ‘radicals’. Despite the fact that many labour leaders, such as Samuel Gompers, supported capitalism and opposed collectivist schemes, the press and government officials attempted to fuse labour and radicalism in the public mind, amplifying fears of the possibility of a communist revolution in the US similar to that which occurred in Russia in 1917. In 1919, for example, the influential *Literary Digest* ran articles entitled ‘American Labour and Bolshevism’ and ‘Red Threat of a Revolution’. Senator Miles Poindexter, writing in the leading journal *Outlook* in 1920, claimed:

There is no doubt whatever . . . that the majority of those strikes have been fomented by radical agitators, who are not concerned merely with demands for increase of wages or reduction of hours . . . but whose avowed purpose is to ‘abolish the wage system’. By this, they mean communism. Strikes and sabotage, murder and assassination, are regarded by many [labour] leaders as legitimate means of bringing about [communism].²³

To be fair, the fear of radicals was not entirely unfounded for in June 1919, anarchists mailed bombs to eighteen government officials and industry leaders. But the government responded with the most massive violation of civil rights in US history, the Justice Department rounding up six thousand supposed radicals, Bolsheviks and anarchists and deporting several hundred.

Hollywood produced several films that contributed to this fevered atmosphere of fear and suspicion: *Bolshevism On Trial* (1919), *The Burning Question* (1919), *The Right to Happiness* (1919), *The Undercurrent* (1919) and *Dangerous Hours* (1920). In many of these films, the generic ‘Red’ or ‘radical’ villains fomented worker unrest

that led to strikes and riots. The armed intervention of the heroic US military suppressed the dangerous and violent mobs that threatened the very fabric of the Republic.²⁴ The cycle of explicitly anti-Red films ended as the high tide of the Red Scare receded but these films, together with other propaganda, established the stereotype of the 'Red' 'with wild eyes, bushy and unkempt hair and tattered clothes, holding a smoking bomb in his hands'.²⁵ A picture perfect example of this wild-eyed Red appears in Buster Keaton's *Cops* (1920), hurling a bomb into a police parade.

The *Chronicles of America* photoplays, of course, feature no 'Reds', for the producers never intended to extend their history beyond the Civil War, perhaps precisely because they feared dealing with contemporary and controversial topics such as labour unrest. But they clearly saw their chronicling of the country's early history as having relevance to the present. Writing about the *Chronicles* photoplays for his fellow educators, Frank Spaulding, Dean of Yale's School of Education and co-editor of the series, asserted, 'Recent world events and present conditions are stimulating us as never before to try to get our bearings with respect to the past, that we may proceed into the future more intelligently. Facts . . . of course remain forever unchanged but the interpretation of facts and the understanding of the significance of facts are subject to continuous change'.²⁶ Let us consider *The Puritans* again in the context of immediate post-war history and Spaulding's comments. Might not the mob of drunken and unruly Indians, with their illicitly obtained weapons, have been intended by the *Chronicles*' producers to serve as surrogates for the mobs of strikers and 'Reds' who had so recently rioted in America's cities? By comparison to the well-turned out Puritans they are as unkempt and wild-eyed as any 'Red' or anarchist. They are the threatening other, the dangerous mob, opposing the American values of the sober and hard working Puritans, just as 'Reds' and 'radicals' opposed the 'Americanism' of many government officials and industry leaders. Armed suppression of the transgressive inhabitants of Merrymount and their Indian friends may have recalled the similar violence meted out to strikers and 'Bolsheviks' during the immediate post war years with the same avowed intention of saving the sober and virtuous Republic.

In *The Puritans*, as in all the other *Chronicles* films in which they appear, Native Americans serve as stand-ins for the collective bogey men of the white American psyche: Bolsheviks; labour agitators; the

non-white races and so forth. This displacement permits the broadening of that dominant white psyche to include those viewers who under other circumstances may not have been granted the accolade of whiteness: the Irish, Jews, Southern and Eastern Europeans. But appealing to the whiteness of these viewers necessitated an unremitting portrayal of Native Americans as savages. In this regard, the *Chronicles* were in sympathy with many official histories that predicated the country's foundation upon the subjugation of the Native American, justifying their extinction by portraying them as unredeemably savage. As Jon Sensbach, of the Institute of Early American History and Culture, said in a response to an earlier version of this essay, 'It was crucial to demonstrate that despite the white man's best intentions and efforts, the Indians' inherent barbarism made them unfit for peaceful coexistence, unfit for redemption and assimilation, unfit indeed for anything but conquest and confinement on reservations'.²⁷

Yet the official perspective represented in the *Chronicles* was but one side of the two contrasting representations of Native Americans that dated back several centuries. From the moment of the first encounter, Europeans had oscillated between describing native peoples as 'savage savages', fit only for extermination, or 'noble savages', at one with nature in a manner that eluded Europeans corrupted by 'civilisation'. Both representations served to justify the eradication of native peoples and their cultures but did so in slightly different ways. The 'savage savage' depiction sanctioned the genocidal policies that mandated the forcible removal to the reservations and the military suppression of those who resisted. The 'noble savage' depiction was easily deployed in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century scientific racism: admirable in many ways, Native Americans were still lower on the evolutionary scale than Europeans and the process of natural selection would ensure their ultimate disappearance. By the 1920s this disappearance seemed well under way and the 'noble savage', also known as the 'Vanishing American', appeared throughout the culture, from anthropological studies to major Hollywood features. During the silent film era, 1894–1927, Native Americans featured in countless films.²⁸ Although many of these were run-of-the-mill Westerns in which Indians served only as moving targets, a fair number featured sympathetically drawn Indian protagonists. For the sake of brevity, then, let us look at two of the silent period's historical epics, *The Last of the Mohicans*

(1920) and *The Vanishing American* (1925), films that feature good examples of the 'noble savage' trope so prevalent in the 1920s and so conspicuously absent from *The Chronicles of America*.

The Last of the Mohicans, directed by Maurice Tourneur, features two Indian protagonists: Magua, so savage that he 'does not kill his prisoners. He tortures them', and Uncas, the titular last of his race, so noble that the film permits a romance between him and the white heroine, Cora. The film here follows its literary source, but, unlike the novel, does not establish that Cora herself is of mixed racial heritage, a device Cooper used to justify the attraction between Uncas and Cora to his early nineteenth-century readers. In the film, a key scene between the two shows Cora watching Uncas silhouetted against the mouth of the cave where they hide from the hostile Indians pursuing them. An intertitle guardedly alludes to the racial difference, stressing their disparity rather than their common link of 'non-white' blood. 'The bond of a common danger – drawing together these two, so widely separated by the mystery of birth'. Uncas comes to sit by Cora, points at the rising moon and talks. The next intertitle deliberately distinguishes this prince of the wilderness from your common or garden variety savage. 'Simple words of a savage – yet revealing depths of thought and imagination'. Of course, Uncas is not only noble but doomed and dies fighting the wicked Magua. The film's final scene shows Uncas' father standing beside his son's burial scaffold on a lonely crag at sunset. He proclaims, 'Woe, for the race of red men! In the morning of Life I saw the sons of my forefathers happy and strong – and before nightfall I have seen the passing of the last of the Mohicans.'

Despite its sympathy for its titular character, *The Last of the Mohicans* features an extensive massacre of white men, women and children by the hostile Indians and thus might be said implicitly to support savage warfare against the Maguas if not the Uncases, who will conveniently manage their own disappearance. *The Vanishing American*, based on Zane Grey's 1925 novel of the same name, takes a more 'scientific' view of the Native American, a prologue added for the film mounting a Spencerian argument about the natural succession of stronger races over weaker. The film begins with a quote from Herbert Spencer's 'First Principles': 'We have unmistakable proof that throughout all past time there has been a ceaseless devouring of the weak by the strong . . . a survival of the fittest.' The film then shows a series of 'races' – cavemen, basket makers,

slab-house people, cliff dwellers, ‘the first of the race we now call “Indians”’, the Spanish and finally the white man, in the person of Kit Carson and the US Cavalry, all claiming dominion over the same southwest valley, each ousting the previous residents. Kit Carson promises that the Indians will dwell forever in their valley, but an intertitle tells us,

To those who followed him, the Indians were but encumbrances to the soil, to be cleared away with the sage brush and the cactus. By the opening of the twentieth century, the Indians had been forced backward, into a desert country called by courtesy, a ‘reservation’ – with one narrow strip of fertile fields, barely sufficient to provide corn for the winter. In the shade of great trees, and with flowing water murmuring by, the white man had laid out – for his own use – the town of Mesa, headquarters of the Indian Agent.

The film’s present-day story, set before, during and immediately after World War One, echoes contemporary events that revealed among white Americans of the 1920s a widespread sympathy for the Native American. The exploitation of Southwest tribes, such as the Pimas of Arizona, by whites eager for their land and natural resources had been much in the news, as had the efforts of various progressive reform organisations to aid the Indians. In 1924, in that great bastion of middle-American sentiment, *The Saturday Evening Post*, Herbert Work, the current Secretary of the Interior, condemned those who would defraud his Indian wards as ‘beyond the pale of public respect and impervious to the promptings of humane motives’.²⁹ *The Vanishing American* took much this view of its white villains, the assistant Indian agent and his minions, who throughout the film plot and scheme to steal the Indians’ horses, water and land. While the white characters are savage, the Indian characters are all thoroughly noble, the most noble of all being Nophaie, descendant of the brave warriors who fought the Spanish and the Americans. Upon his departure for the war he tells the white school teacher whom he loves, and who reciprocates his feelings, ‘Since we are Americans, we go fight. Maybe if we fight . . . maybe if we die . . . our country will deal fairly with our people’.³⁰ But like Uncas, his literary and cinematic predecessor, Nophaie too dies by the film’s end, and although his death coincides with the defeat of the evil white men, he becomes yet another in a long line of noble but doomed savages.

Both Uncas and Nophaie belong to the race of 'Vanishing Americans', established as a powerful metaphor early in the nineteenth century by Cooper among others, and a prevalent trope by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, appearing in paintings, sculptures, novels, photographs and scholarly treatises.³¹ But these sympathetic 'vanishing Americans' did not appear in Yale's *Chronicles of America*, which were much more negative and monolithic in their representation of the Native American than much popular culture of the 1920s. Intended to meet fairly clear cut ideological goals, the *Chronicles* exhibits none of the inconsistencies and contradictions that mark films such as *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Vanishing American*. The producers of popular culture, having to appeal to a mass audience, seem to have responded to the society's contradictory discourses about Native Americans with less ideologically coherent, more potentially polysemic texts. In the case of the *Chronicles of America*, at least, 'popular fictional forms' do indeed seem to have been 'more mobile and adaptable than more "organic", deeply implanted and institutionally solidified political ideologies'.

Notes

- 1 Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 3.
- 2 Dan Ben-Amos and Liliane Weissberg (eds), *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999); Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (eds), *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996).
- 3 Michael Wallace, 'Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States', *Radical History Review* 25 (1981), 66.
- 4 Tony Bennett and Janet Wollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 281.
- 5 The fifteen films in production, not historical, order were: *The Frontier Woman* (1923); *Vincennes* (1923); *Daniel Boone* (1923); *Columbus* (1923); *Jamestown* (1923); *The Declaration of Independence* (1924); *Dixie* (1924); *Alexander Hamilton* (1924); *Peter Stuyvesant* (1924); *The Pilgrims* (1924); *The Eve of the Revolution* (1924); *Wolfe and Montcalm* (1924); *Yorktown* (1924); *The Puritans* (1925) and *Gateway to the West* (1925). The Motion Picture Division of the Library of Congress has viewing copies of all fifteen, although some are incomplete, and I understand that Yale University also has a set in its film archives.

While financial difficulties most likely caused the cessation of production, it might also have been the case that the post-Civil War period, dealing with events a mere half-century in the past, might have proved too contentious for filming.

- 6 Frank E. Spaulding, 'America's History Vitalized', *The Journal of the National Education Association* 14 (June 1925), 175.
- 7 'The Chronicles of America Photoplays' (New Haven: Yale University Press, n.d.), p. 10.
- 8 'Yale Shows "Columbus"', *New York Times*, 5 October 1923, p. 2.
- 9 Nathaniel W. Stephenson, 'Yale Historical Films', *National Education Association, Proceedings and Addresses* 62 (1924), 982.
- 10 'The Chronicles of America Photoplays', p. 2.
- 11 Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of The American Worker, 1920–1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), p. 50.
- 12 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), p. 159.
- 13 Clayton Hamilton, 'American History on the Screen', *The World's Work* (August 1924), p. 525.
- 14 Hamilton, 'American History', p. 526.
- 15 'Filming the History of America at Yale', *Photoplay*, December 1923, p. 89 and *The Exhibitor's Herald* quoted in 'The Chronicles of America Photoplays', p. 2.
- 16 Draft script for *Gateway to the West*, Folder VII, Box 1 (Photoplay Scenarios), Nathaniel W. Stephenson Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.
- 17 'The Chronicles of America Photoplays', p. 57.
- 18 Marriion Wilcox, 'Phillipine Ethnology', *Harper's Weekly* (13 May 1899), pp. 485, 487, quoted in Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 110.
- 19 See 'America and Its Dependent Peoples', *The Outlook* (28 October 1914), p. 441.
- 20 Spaulding, 'America's History Vitalized', p. 175.
- 21 Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919–1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), pp. 8–9.
- 22 Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, pp. 89, 147, 151.
- 23 'Labour and the Open Shop', *Outlook* (5 May 1920), p. 324.
- 24 Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 442–55.
- 25 Murray, *Red Scare*, p. 68.
- 26 Spaulding, 'America's History Vitalized', p. 175.
- 27 Jon Sensbach, 'Comment on Roberta E. Pearson, "A White man's country!"' *The Chronicles of America Photoplays*, at the conference 'Possible Pasts: Critical Encounters in Early America', Philadelphia, 1994.

- 28 Since the majority of silent films no longer survive (due to the chemical instability of the film stock), it is impressive that the Library of Congress has issued a forty-eight page filmography of pre-sound films concerning the American Indian in its collection alone. See Karen C. Lund, *American Indians in Silent Film: Motion Pictures in the Library of Congress* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, n.d.).
- 29 Herbert Work, 'Our American Indians', *The Saturday Evening Post* (31 May 1924), p. 27.
- 30 In fact, Indians were granted citizenship in 1924, following arguments that those who were allowed to die for their country should be allowed to vote.
- 31 For information on the social and cultural position of Native Americans during this period see Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1982) and Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian From Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).