

# Scalping the Whites

Native Americans in Thackeray's *The Virginians*

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It is not wrong to say that Native Americans are described as 'savages' in William Makepeace Thackeray's (1811-63) *The Virginians* (1857-59), the sequel to *Henry Esmond* (1852). Considering the context of the time, there is nothing surprising about that. There were many shows of 'savages' in Britain in those days. Charles Dickens (1812-70), for instance, wrote about the Native Americans whom he saw in George Catlin's show, which was popular in the 1840s, in an essay entitled 'The Noble Savage' (1853):

Whereas, as mere animals, they were wretched creatures, very low in the scale and very poorly formed; and as men and women possessing any power of truthful dramatic expression by means of action, they were no better than the chorus at an Italian Opera in England — and would have been worse if such a thing were possible.<sup>1)</sup>

As Richard D. Altick points out, 'The prejudice Dickens expressed... was a conspicuous symptom of the general climate of opinion relative

to race which had developed by the forties.<sup>72)</sup>

Considering this background and Thackeray's lifelong tendency to break down the conventions of the novel, it is natural that the 'savages' we can find in *The Virginians* are not 'noble savages'. However, we must not judge hastily that Thackeray described Native Americans as mere horrible 'savages'.

We should note, in the first place, the existence of 'a half-breed woman'<sup>73)</sup>. she takes care of George Esmond Warrington, the elder of the twin heroes of the story, during his captivity in a French camp after the failure of an expedition in the French and Indian War (1756-63), and helps him to run away. When she herself runs away from the French fort and visits Castlewood in Virginia, George's mother (i.e. Madame Esmond) and the women in her household get angry and treat her coldly, imagining a romance between George and her (vol. II, ch. VI, pp. 44-45). However, in fact, she is a heavy drinker, as one of the stereotypical images of Native Americans was in Thackeray's time: that is, she is the very opposite of a romantic figure. We may say that this suspicion and ill-treatment reveals the meanness of the white women.

Those who reveal their meanness by their behaviour to Native Americans are, however, not only white women but also white men. Thackeray has George tell the cause of the failure of the expedition like this:

"We despised the Indians on our own side, and our commander made light of them and their service. Our officers disgusted the chiefs who were with us by outrageous behavior to their women. There were not above seven or eight who remained with our force. Had we had a couple of hundred in our front on that fatal 9th of July, the event of the day must have been very different. . . ." (vol. II, ch. III, p. 20)

Moreover, the allusions to the story of Pocahontas (1595?-1617) are significant. First, let us look at the significance of a historical tragedy

by George entitled *Pocahontas*. That tragedy meets with miserable failure because of the British audience's ignorance: George having made the performers wear realistic costumes, the British audience laugh at them, especially at Pocahontas (vol. II, ch. XXXII, pp. 274-281). We can find here Thackeray's realistic attitude to the truth and his consciousness of the British people's conceited ignorance.

Another significant allusion to Pocahontas is the nickname of Madame Esmond. It implies an interesting relationship between the Native Americans and the whites, that is, the identification of the white colonists in America with the Native Americans by some people in Great Britain. In this novel, someone from America is often called by a name relative to the Native American people. When young Rachel (i.e. Madame Esmond in her maidenhood) was sent to Britain to receive an education becoming her status, she was nicknamed 'Pocahontas' by her schoolmates. Harry and George are often called 'Iroquois', 'Cherokee' etc by fashionable people in Britain.

It seems ironical that the white colonists are identified with the Native Americans, but what is more ironical is the white people's behaviour. We can find a mention of the Boston Tea Party (1773), in which some white colonists in Native American disguise, as Thackeray wrote, attacked a British ship and threw all the tea that was loaded on the ship into the sea. White colonists in America made use of the image of Native Americans in order to establish their identity and independence, though at the same time they never wished to consider and treat Native Americans (or African Americans) as their equals. However, the white colonists' authority in America was supported by that of Britain, so that to deny the suzerainty of Britain was to deny their own authority, and to insist on freedom and equality meant that they should admit those to a 'negro' or an 'Indian' as well as to a white.

Thackeray, who was a 19th-century man and travelled around America twice before writing *The Virginians*, where the question of the emancipation of slaves was burning in those days, knew well the fate of

the non-whites after the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the unreliability of the ideal that the white colonists in America had insisted on. His awareness of the whites' selfishness is found indeed in the earlier part of the novel. He argues that

To be sure, there existed other people besides French and British, who thought they had a title to the territory about which the children of their White Fathers were battling, namely, the native Indians and proprietors of the soil. But the logicians of St. James's and Versailles wisely chose to consider the matter in dispute as a European and not a Red-man's question, eliminating him from the argument, but employing his tomahawk as it might serve the turn of either litigant. (vol. I, ch.VI, p. 50)

Here we notice that Thackeray was aware of the whites' selfishness in the conflict of France and Britain over possession of America, and also aware that the position of the Native Americans was different from that of the European people.

Bearing in mind what we have seen so far, we shall now look closely into how Thackeray made use of the subject of 'scalping'. Scalping was the most notorious of the Native American customs in Thackeray's time, and indeed Thackeray refers to it repeatedly in *The Virginians*. From the beginning of the story, George is thought to have been killed and scalped in battle. However, George appears alive before Harry, the younger of the twins, and us, the readers, at the very ending of the first volume.

It is important whether George was killed and scalped or not, because that question is connected with the question of the legitimacy of Harry's claim to inheritance. Here we should notice that George is thought not only to have been killed but also to have been scalped. In fact, we can see earlier in *Henry Esmond*, that 'appearance' is profoundly and complicatedly connected with the problem of 'legitimacy' or 'claim': Henry Esmond 'appears' to be a bastard, because Henry's 'appearance'

quite resembles the 3rd Viscount Castlewood's; but later it turns out that he is the only 'legitimate' successor and that the 4th and 5th Viscounts' 'claims' are mere 'apparent' ones. Bearing this in mind, we will be able to understand that this connexion is significantly repeated in *The Virginians*: George, the 'legitimate' successor, 'appears' to have lost his 'claim' by his death, and his 'appearance' by scalping; and Harry, whose 'appearance' looks almost the same as George's except for the colour of their hair, 'appears' to have become the 'legitimate' successor, but it turns out later that his 'claim' is a mere 'apparent' one.

Now let us turn our attentions to the way George was saved. To sum up the explanation by George himself, this was the case: when George was on the verge of being killed and scalped by a Native American soldier on the French side, who was robbing and scalping anyone without regarding on which side the officer or soldier was, he luckily happened to find an old friend in the French army; the French officer, recognising George, ordered the Native American soldier in vain to stop killing him; at last the French officer shot the Native American dead, and George was safely carried into the French camp (vol. II, ch. III, pp. 20-23).

That scene must have seemed to be more realistic and fearful to Victorian people than to us. However, if we remember what we have seen, we will understand that it takes on a different aspect: the British and the French were the same to Native Americans, so that the Native American soldier robbed and scalped not only British but also French men; he was ordered to stop killing an enemy officer and in the end shot by an officer of the allied army, because of the friendship between the two whites about which he knew nothing. We may say scalping the whites here implies not only robbing George of his appearance and legitimate claim to inheritance, but also tearing off the appearance of a legitimate claim to the possession of America from the whites.

Moreover, the next quotation raises an interesting question.

Harry strikes his fist upon the table, and cries, "The bloody, murderous, red-skin villains! There will never be peace for us until they are all hunted down!"

"They were offering a hundred and thirty dollars apiece for Indian scalps in Pennsylvania when I left home," says George, demurely, "and fifty for women."

"Fifty for women, my love! Do you hear that, Mrs. Lambert?" cries the Colonel (i.e. Colonel Lambert), lifting up his wife's hair. (vol. II, ch. III, pp. 23-24)

Historically, it is a fact that white colonies paid money for 'Indian scalps', and it is said that that system of prize money increased scalping, which had been the custom of only a few tribes, to all the tribes of the Native Americans<sup>4)</sup>. Then, who are the savages, the Native Americans or the whites? Here we can find again Thackeray's sceptic awareness of the issue.

From what has been said above, it can be concluded as follows: Thackeray did not describe Native Americans either as 'noble savages' or as mere fearful 'savages'; he did not think that whites are either nobler than or superior to them. Instead he made use of Native Americans to reveal the true figure of the white people in various and complicated ways. We may say that the existence and behaviour of the Native Americans in *The Virginians* have an affinity, in this respect, with those of the blacks in William Hogarth's (1697-1764) pictures<sup>5)</sup>, which Thackeray liked very much. To put it metaphorically, Thackeray tried to scalp the whites with the existence and behaviour of the Native Americans.

### Notes

- 1) This quotation is drawn from the Penguin Classics Edition of Charles Dickens' *Selected Journalism 1850-1870* edited by David Pascoe (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 561.

- 2) Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1978), p. 279.
- 3) *The Virginians*, vol. II, ch. III, p. 24 in *Thackeray's Complete Works* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1883). Subsequent references are to this edition, and the volume, chapter and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.
- 4) On this matter, see Torao Tomita, *America(n) Indian(s) no Rekishi* (Tokyo: Yuzankaku Shuppan, 1982, 3rd ed. 1997), pp. 82-86.
- 5) David Dabydeen points out in *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) as follows:

The black then is a detail pregnant with meaning, although a peripheral figure in Hogarth's work. . . . In these works (i.e. *Rake's Progress*, *Scenes of Cruelty* etc) Hogarth consciously employs current myths and stereotypes about blacks, relating to their sexuality, paganism, primitivism and simian ancestry, so as to comment on the morality of the English aristocratic class. (p. 130)

## 要 旨

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63) の *The Virginians* (1857-59) におけるアメリカ先住民の描写は、基本的には「野蛮人」としてのものである。それは、当時のイギリス人たちの人種観を考えれば自然なことだが、だからといってサッカーがアメリカ先住民をただ単に恐ろしい「野蛮人」として描いたなどと簡単に決めつけてはいけない。

The French and Indian War (1756-63) のある遠征の失敗の後フランス軍の虜となっていた George の逃亡を手伝った白人と先住民の混血の女性の存在は、彼女の野蛮さよりも、彼女に冷たくする白人の女性たちの卑しさを露にする。同様に、戦争中のイギリス軍兵士の先住民たちへの態度や、後にジョージの書いた *Pocahontas* という劇の上演でその先住民役の衣装に大笑いするイギリス人観衆の行為なども、彼ら自身の卑しさと無知を露呈する。

さらに、皮肉にもアメリカの白人と先住民とがイギリス人によって同一視されるという問題があるが、一層皮肉なことに、アメリカの白人たちは、独立を求めて戦う際にむしろ積極的に先住民たちのイメージを利用する。だが、19世紀の人間であ

り『ヴァージニアンたち』執筆の前に奴隷問題に揺れるアメリカを旅行したサッカーは、そうしたアメリカ独立の後の非白人の運命とその独立の理想のうさん臭さをよくわかっていた。

それらを念頭においてこの作品における「頭皮剥ぎ」の扱われ方を見てみると、それが単に先住民たちの野蛮さを描いているのではなく、ジョージと Harry という双子の財産相続の正当性の問題や、ひいてはフランスとイギリスの白人たちのアメリカの所有権の正当性の問題と絡んでいることが見えてくる。ジョージ救出の場面には先住民たちを無視しながら都合よく利用する白人たちの勝手さに対するサッカーの意識を見てとれるし、さらにその「頭皮剥ぎ」が白人の出す懸賞金によって行われていることへの言及も見られる。

以上のことから、次のように言えるだろう。サッカーは決してアメリカ先住民が白人よりも高貴であるとか劣っているとかいうふうには描いたのではなく、むしろその先住民たちの存在や行為によって、白人たちが決して先住民たちよりも高貴なわけではないことを描き出したのだ。比喩的に言えば、サッカーは、先住民たちの存在や行為によって白人たちの「頭皮剥ぎ」をしたのである。

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