

## Discord at Pennacook: Whittier and the Problem of American Picturesque

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In this paper, I will explore the ways in which J. G. Whittier attempted to adapt the conventions of British picturesque to the landscape of his native New England: the argument will focus on his poem, 'The Bridal of Pennacook' (1848). The central problem for Whittier is how to map British conventions on to an American landscape that is, he asserts, more beautiful than England but also more deeply imbued with a genocidal past. Like Wordsworth, (whose *Michael* is an important model for this poem), part of his interest is in finding ways to fit unusual-sounding place names (Kearsarge, Winnepiseogee, Uncanoonuc, Pennacook) to the patterns of English meter. Since these are American Indian names, Whittier uses them to evoke the brutal conflicts between indigenous and European cultures that constitute so much of the early history of New England, and which were generated largely, he says, by Yankee greed. Whittier's aim is to preserve a native heritage that has all but disappeared (beyond place names), and to alter the way in which picturesque tourists perceive natural beauty by reminding them of the violence, which made their wealth and leisure possible.

'The Bridal of Pennacook' is a frame narrative, like *Michael*, in which a poet tells picturesque tourists in the New Hampshire Mountains of a Native American legend about the landscape they admire. The tale concerns the arranged marriage and eventual death of Weetamoo, the daughter of a powerful Sachem; it is a story of sexual violence and masculine indifference to the needs of women, set in a variety of meters. Throughout my discussion, I will compare the poem with its Wordsworthian model. Wordsworth sought in *Michael* to revise the picturesque by investing insignificant details of the landscape – insignificant at least to Gilpin – with profound moral significance; his means of doing so was narration rather than description. Similarly, Whittier uses his narrative to transform the way his tourists view picturesque landscape, but his American setting forces him to revise Wordsworth's revisions. This is an interesting process, complicated primarily by Whittier's insistent focus on the character and fate of the indigenous people. I will discuss Whittier's use of the name Pennacook, (the original name for Concord); contrast the moral and social implications of Whittier's story with Wordsworth's tale of a Grasmere shepherd; examine the history of the Whittier family's dealings with local Indian tribes (their homestead was never attacked, even when their neighbours' were), and look at the ways in which Whittier adapts and modifies his historical sources. On this last point Whittier is very interesting: he has, he writes, 'necessarily discarded much of the romance which poets and novelists have thrown around the ill-fated red-man'.

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