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*Dan Smoke and Hal Gilpin discuss the film **The Last of the Mohicans** by reading dissenting reviews from Doug George and Russell Means. After, Dan tells listeners about the Iroquois tradition of Nu Yah.*

Host(s): Dan Smoke
Guest(s): Hal Gilpin

HAL GILPIN: Thanks Dan. As you alluded to, this article is titled, ***Last of the Mohicans Attacks Indians' Dignity***.

“When I saw *The Last of the Mohicans*, I saw red. Red, as in a stream of blood in this most violent of films. Red, because I, as a **Mohawk**, was embarrassed by this assault upon the dignity of all Native people, especially our cousins, the **Hurons**. The casual movie patron, knowing little or nothing about Indians, will leave the theater convinced of our historical treachery and our biological savagery. According to the director, **Michael Mann**, Indians were but a primitive people, given to performing acts of extreme cruelty as they satisfied their lust for revenge. Sadly, Mann’s work has been praised by film reviewers, almost all of whom cite his attention to details and commitment to presenting an important part of **colonial history** as truthfully as possible. The critics mention his use of Native actors, language, and customs as indicative to the film’s accuracy. Mann was also given high marks for his ability to capture the violence of the times, not sparing the viewer the sounds of war clubs striking skulls or blood spurting from fresh scalps. Mann had the opportunity to present us with fresh insights into a critical time in our history but he elected to literally rip at the heart. The tragic result is one of the most terrible assaults upon the dignity and image of Indian peoples since the excesses of **John Wayne**. To Mann, who’s movie is based on the novel by **James Fenimore Cooper**, Indians clearly represent that side of the human psyche which is given to rage, in want of acts of cruelty. The hero is **Daniel Day-Lewis**, a white man raised in savagery but saved from barbarianism by the love of a pure woman. As alter ego, there is the **Huron Magua**, depraved and clever, a man only in appearance, for he was without such human emotions as compassion, humour, or fear. Magua is a **colonial serial killer**, infatuated with his **tomahawk**. Utterly simplistic by design, *Last of the Mohicans* borrows freely from the old **Westerns** – there are shootouts and brawls, maidens at risk, a hero triumphant against terrible odds, and of course, the dramatic last fight before the victorious couple stand on the hilltop, bathed in glorious sunset. Why does such a film appeal to so many people? Is it **American** audience have difficulty accepting Native people as complex human beings torn by doubt, moved by joy, and consumed with love? Compared with *Dances with Wolves*, this film is a disturbing step back into another era, one Native people had hoped ended with **John Ford**. This film cannot stand unchallenged. Rather than accept Mann’s version of history, I looked into the facts and found there were very few Hurons in the northeast in 1757. They were called **Wyandots**, with villages in **Ohio-Michigan** area. Some were part of the **French military expedition** against **Fort Edward**, along with 32 other Native groups. The name Magua is not Huron but was a term used by **Dutch settlers** to describe the Mohawks. Digging a little deeper, as Mann should have done, I discovered that many of the atrocities attributed to the Hurons were committed by a **colonial militia unit** called **Rogers’ Rangers**, of whom **Nathanial** would have been part. I learned **Uncas** and **Chingachgook** were

hardly the last of the Mohicans, since the Native nations had a prosperous settlement in **Massachusetts**. These people were later moved west to a place near **Oneida**, then to **Wisconsin**, where they are known as the **Stockbridge Indians**. Other Mohicans now live in **Connecticut**. I found out the **British** surrendered Fort Edward on August 9th, 1757, after days of bombardment by the **French**. **English troops** were murdered by **Indian fighters** but not to the extent shown in the film. **Colonel Monroe** did not have his heart ripped out by Magua, but survived, was promoted, and died the following year. Magua could not have brought his captives to **Abenaki Village** in the **Adirondacks**, since they lived in **Northern Vermont**. The Abenakis would not have conversed in Mohawk, nor would they have permitted a single man to order the execution of a British officer. Reference is made in the film to **Joseph Brandt**, a noted Mohawk military leader during the **American Revolution** – the problem is Brandt was born in 1742 and would've been 15 years old in 1757. There is also a scene involving an Indian burial ground where corpses are placed on scaffolds. The **Iroquois** never used scaffolds, preferring to place their dead in the ground. For all its obvious mistakes, just as disturbing is what the director elected to omit. There is but one mention of the **Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy**, the most formidable Native force in the eastern **North America**, and its effort to prevent the war. **Sir William Johnson** was the most influential white man in the colonies. He played a key role as a British general and superintendent of **Indian Affairs** during this war, yet he's completely ignored. No one should've accepted these compromises, least of all by a director who had a chance to create a film which adheres to the laws of common sense. Can a man running at full sprint fire two 12-pound, 4-foot muskets simultaneously, killing two men moving quickly in opposite directions? Maybe **Arnold Schwarzenegger**, but certainly not an emaciated Day-Lewis. Is it possible for a fragile **birchbark canoe** to go over a waterfall and not be damaged? Boat builders across the **United States** would love to know how Mann managed this little trick. It is embarrassing to see people I know in this film; clearly Native historians and writers were not consulted in the writing of the script because Mann did not want facts to stand in the way of his action thriller. It is disappointing to see **American Indian Movement** activist **Russell Means** and **Dennis Banks** play key roles in *The Last of the Mohicans* with straight faces. It is even more disturbing for Michael Mann to strive for credibility by having **Leon Shenandoah** of the Six Nations Confederacy cited in the film's credits, as if any self-respecting Iroquois would be proud of this atrocity. To my knowledge, no one from the Iroquois has endorsed this film. If you love violence, if you want your worst fears about Indian savages confirmed, if you want to leave the theatre just itching to take care of those pesky **Red Skins**, then see this film. If you want to see the truth, save your money and rent *Dances with Wolves* or *Powwow Highway*.

DAN SMOKE: Miigwetch, nya:weh, Hal. That was **Doug George**; and right now, I'm going to read what Russell Means has to say. Russell was one of the lead actors in *Last of the Mohicans*. He has also been active in the American Indian Movement since prior to the **Occupation Wounded Knee** in **South Dakota**. Unfortunately, he was not portrayed in the *Incident at Oglala* which **Robert Redford** did, and was directed by **Michael Apted**, who liberally borrowed from the book *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* by **Peter Matthiessen**, which details the plight of **Leonard Peltier**. But Leonard Peltier, Russell Means, Dennis Banks, all these people, the **Belcourts**, they were very instrumental in restoring pride to the Native American people. They were very instrumental in restoring a spiritual revival of ceremonies and traditions in the oral tradition and getting direction and guidance from the elders. I am glad to be able to read Russell Means' words:

“Acting against racism in *Mohicans*. What am I doing, working in the movies? I have been asked whether my decision to work in *The Last of the Mohicans* means that I have abandoned my role as an activist. On the contrary – I see the film as an extension of the path I’ve been on for 25 years. Another avenue to eliminating racism. On Saturday afternoons, in **Vallejo, California**, my younger brother Dace and I would go to the **Esquire Movie Theatre** and watch those damn cowboy and Indian flicks of the 40s – the ones where the bugle sounds and the cavalry charges in and starts killing Indians willy-nilly while everyone in the audience cheers. Dace couldn’t watch – he’d bury his head in his hands. When you’re eight or nine years old, as we were, you think that maybe this time, the Indians are going to win, that this movie will be different. Then, afterward, we’d leave the theatre and honest-to-God, we had to fight back-to-back, just the two of us, against **Mexicans, Filipinos, Chinese**, and Black, as well as the whites – all these neighbourhood kids saying “Hey, Indians, we’re going to whip your ass!” So when I first received the script for *Mohicans*, I was pleased that the Indians were more fully developed characters, unlike the cardboard figures in *Dances with Wolves*, also known as *Lawrence of the Plains*. Despite his good intentions, actor/director **Kevin Costner** utilized almost every known stereotype (except the drunken Indian) even though the white man he plays eventually throws his lot in with the Indians because they are so much more spiritual and decent. In *Mohicans*, on the other hand, the Indians are depicted as equals with white. They interact both socially and economically. Few people realize that in the 18th century, on the frontier in the **Atlantic northeast**, Indians and whites actually visited each other’s homes. I also love the politics of the film. At a time where the **French** and **English** are vying for the economic wealth of North America, frontier characters discuss individual liberty as opposed to government control, which fits right in with my own **Libertarian** philosophy. *Mohicans* is also historically and culturally reliable, except for one scene that I objected to, but that Michael Mann insisted was necessary. I call it the African Village Scene, because it resembles those set pieces that appeared in old **Hollywood** movies about **Africa**. The king, or **tribal chief**, would be sitting on his throne, with the masses clamoring for the blood of the white princess, and then the white prince comes and saves her. In *Mohicans*, we have two white princesses; only one of them is saved. Despite my objections, the scene stayed in the movie. You don’t see those scenes in films about Africa anymore – **Africans** have become quasi-independent and more influential in the world, so Hollywood has transferred those stereotypes to the Indians. On the set, the problem I had wasn’t with Mann (who had his hands full) so much as with the assistant directors who unconsciously fell back on racist stereotypes. They’d yell things like, “Indians over here!” I finally said, “don’t refer to us by race. If you do, then say ‘Indians over here, white guys over there, and the Jews behind the camera.’” Difficulties began in the third week, when over 900 Indian extras were brought into **North Carolina** from all over the country. They were quartered at an abandoned **Scout camp**. It was known as **Camp Mohican**, and it resembled a **concentration camp**. The buildings were made of cinderblocks and six-to-eight people stayed in rooms designed for two. Since the camp was isolated 30 miles from town on a dirt road, and the extras had no transportation, they were stuck out there in the summer heat and 90% humidity. Most of the Indian extras’ scenes were at night, so they spent the hottest part of the day in these hellholes, no way of getting out, buy a Coke, or even seeing a doctor. First, the technicians went on strike, demanding better conditions and a union contract. They received both. Then the Indian extras struck, and Daniel Day-Lewis, **Eric Schweig**, and I were the only cast members out on the picket line. I was asked to take a list of their demands to **Hunt Lowry**, the producer, and he agreed to everything. The strike was over in about four hours but the press reported it as if I were the leader. My camaraderie with Daniel extended beyond the picket line. Since he was

playing my adopted son, he felt we should try to establish a father-son relationship. Daniel told me his own father, poet **Cecil Day-Lewis**, was older when he was born and died when he was young. My own father died when he was only 51 years and was also distant. That became a point of bonding between us. Daniel never stepped out of character. He carried his musket everywhere, even at night. It was total immersion, and it carried over into the real feeling for his Indian-reared character. In general, the principals involved in production strived for sensitivity, though there were many problems. I thought the breechcloths were too small. I told Mann that Indians never wore them that small, but he insisted the costumes were accurate because he had seen one on a dummy dressed up like an Iroquois in a **white museum**. I reminded him. He let me wear the size I wanted but he left the others small, probably to delight the women in the audience. Still, I consider these minute compared to Mann's genius and the overall good that will come from the movie. Because the educational system of the dominant culture doesn't let our children know that American Indians existed in the 20th century, there's a real danger in allowing Hollywood to define us. For all my criticism of *Dances with Wolves*, I realize it was a breakthrough. It renewed interest in the American Indian and *Mohicans* is part of turning a corner. And when **Wes Studi**, a **Cherokee** who plays the part of the villainous **Maqua**, wins an **Oscar**, you will know we have made a quantum leap forward from *Dances with Wolves*."

Now when Russell Means was a visitor to **London** back in 1990, he was a guest of **King's College**, the **Oxfam-sponsored Indigenous Peoples' Conference**, he was a guest of the Native peoples here as well. We took him to **sweat lodge** and we had a ceremony in his honour. But he was leaving from here – **Canada** – to go start filming this film, and so this film that he talks about is the result of filming that film.

DS: Earlier, the music that we were listening to was **Kashtin**. I'd just like to tell you that there is a cross country tour, a Kashtin tour, taking place as we speak. They're going to be in Ontario this month. Kashtin. On January the 16th, they'll be in **Wunnumin**. On the 26th, they'll be in **North Bay**. On the 27th, they'll be in **Kapusking**. On the 28th, they're coming down to **Hearst**. On January the 29th, they'll be in **Sudbury**. And on the 30th – mark this date – they'll be in **Toronto**. Hopefully Smoke Signals will be there. We'll try to get an interview with them, and hopefully we'll bring back some footage for our listeners here at Smoke Signals.

Also, at this time, we here at Smoke Signals would like to say to all of our listeners, to everybody, **Nu Yah**. Nu Yah is a tradition that I grew up with on the Six Nations reserve. It is an age-old custom amongst the Iroquois. "It has its roots in respect for the family," says **Cayuga Chief Jake Thomas**. It is a time of the year when the **Haudenosaunee** celebrate their **bloodlines** by visiting their families. It is a time to remember the **clan system** and appreciate who your family is. Women make donut dolls to give to children who come to the door yelling "Nu Yah!" The children go out in the morning and the afternoon is for the elders to visit. And the evening is for singing and a social. Basically, it is celebrated to remember the paternal and maternal side of your family and the whole Iroquois system which is based on the clan system. What better way to start your new year? I remember that because I'd stay with my grandmother on the Fifth Line of the Six Nations reserve and the homes were situated quite a distance apart from each other. So I would have to set out very early in the morning, about 8:00 in the morning, go out her long laneway out to the Fifth Line and then walk a quarter of a mile from house to house. So by the time that I'd finish walking at 11-11:30, I'd have trudged upwards of 5, 6, 7 miles, going up and down the Fifth Line, going from home to home, saying "Nu Yah!" And they

would, of course, give me donuts and candies and goodies, and I remember that in a real nice way. It was timeless because, from what I understand, they're still doing it at Six Nations. The kids are now, instead of walking and trudging that road, they're now being driven by their parents. So, some things haven't changed, some things have. But that's a tradition that is still adhered to today and I'm really glad to be able to say that.

We're going to listen to some music now. We're going to hear from **Buffy Sainte-Marie**. The song is "**The Circle Game**" from her album ***The Best of Buffy Sainte-Marie*** here on Smoke Signals.