

MAYFLOWER: A STORY OF COURAGE, COMMUNITY, AND WAR¹REVIEWED BY MAJOR DOUG J. CHOI²

The First Thanksgiving is an image of peace, cooperation, and friendship between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans. In *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War*, Nathaniel Philbrick³ takes us beyond this popular image. The relationship between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans did not develop out of friendly curiosity or acts of kindness. Instead, it was motivated by self interest and a desire for power. Philbrick gives us a detailed look at the Pilgrims' history and shows us how diplomacy played into their success.

Mayflower tells the story of the Pilgrims from their escape from England through the end of King Philip's War. It opens with a description of the transatlantic voyage and follows the lives of those who were aboard. *Mayflower*, however, does not end with the events that surround the ship. Instead, it continues to tell the story of the next generation of Pilgrims who seemingly distanced themselves from the purpose for which the Mayflower set sail.

Courage, community, and war are the themes that Philbrick uses to identify the Pilgrims during their first fifty-six years in New England. Philbrick transitions from one theme to the next in chronological order. In the first half of the book, Philbrick provides us with images of the Pilgrims' courage as they struggle to survive over sea and land. The death toll during the first year was catastrophic. The Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth in the fall of 1620 and quickly faced the difficulties of winter.⁴ "By the spring, 52 of the 102 who had originally arrived at Provincetown were dead."⁵

¹ NATHANIEL PHILBRICK, *MAYFLOWER: A STORY OF COURAGE, COMMUNITY, AND WAR* (2006).

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³ Philbrick is a resident of Nantucket Island and an author of maritime literature. Nathaniel Philbrick, *Life at a Glance*, <http://www.nathanielphilbrick.com/about/bio.html> (last visited Jan. 22, 2008).

⁴ PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 34.

⁵ *Id.* at 90.

From this struggle arose a successful permanent settlement. The increase in the English population, however, significantly changed the dynamics of the Pilgrims' relationship with the Native Americans. When they first arrived at Plymouth, the Pilgrims were able to survive because the Native Americans "had come to the Pilgrims' rescue."⁶ However, as the English population began to grow, the Native Americans were seen as an obstacle toward their expansion.⁷ The Native American response was an attempt to regain what was once theirs, and this eventually led to King Philip's War.

As Philbrick takes us through their history, he highlights both the Pilgrims' successes and their failures. Philbrick attributes their successes to the Pilgrims' diplomatic efforts and their willingness to work with others. The Pilgrims were Separatists, and their purpose in sailing to America was to establish a religious community isolated from government interference.⁸ However, they displayed an attitude that was far from isolationist.

The Pilgrims were not alone aboard the Mayflower. Although they may have been a majority, many of those aboard were non-Separatists.⁹ The Pilgrims referred to them as "Strangers,"¹⁰ and their purpose for embarking on that same voyage was very different. For the Strangers, their goal was to establish a settlement that would be financially profitable.¹¹ Despite these differences in their purposes, the Pilgrims and the Strangers understood that their mutual successes depended on their ability to work together.¹² Even before they set foot on land, the men aboard the ship signed the Mayflower Compact which created a single government that unified the Pilgrims and the Strangers.¹³

Philbrick believes that the Mayflower Compact was a response to the mutinous attitude displayed by some of the Strangers when they arrived at Plymouth.¹⁴ They had secured a patent that only authorized a

⁶ *Id.* at 120.

⁷ *See id.* at 206–07.

⁸ *Id.* at 4–5.

⁹ *Id.* at 42.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 22.

¹¹ *Id.* at 40.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *See id.* at 41. "Only nine adult males did not sign the compact—some had been hired as seamen for only a year, while others were probably too sick to put pen to paper." *Id.* at 43.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 39.

settlement in Virginia. Settling at Plymouth might cause a complete financial loss.¹⁵ Philbrick praises the Mayflower Compact as “a remarkable act of coolheaded and pragmatic resolve.”¹⁶ He argues that the Pilgrims could have “looked to their military officer, Miles Standish, and ordered him to subdue the rebels. Instead, they put pen to paper and created a document that ranks with the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution as a seminal American text.”¹⁷ According to Philbrick, diplomacy was the key to the Pilgrims’ success.

Philbrick again highlights this point when the Pilgrims faced the Native American threat. When the Pilgrims first arrived, they had “alienat[ed] and anger[ed] every Native American they happened to come across.”¹⁸ After the first winter, however, the Pilgrims made contact with the Pokanokets and eventually arranged a meeting with Massasoit, their leader.¹⁹ The Pilgrims took this opportunity to secure a treaty with Massasoit, “who, as far as they could tell, ruled [that] portion of New England.”²⁰ Philbrick explains, “Placing their faith in God, the Pilgrims might have insisted on a policy of arrogant isolationism. But by becoming an active part of the diplomatic process in southern New England . . . they had taken charge of their own destiny in the region.”²¹

As it turned out, Massasoit was not as powerful as the Pilgrims were led to believe.²² The Pokanokets were devastated by disease, and they were struggling to survive as an autonomous tribe.²³ Philbrick writes,

There were profound differences between the Pilgrims and the Pokanoket to be sure—especially when it came to technology, culture, and spiritual beliefs—but in these early years, when the mutual challenge of survival dominated all other concerns, the two people had more in common than is generally appreciated today.²⁴

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.* at 42.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* at 119.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 97.

²⁰ *Id.* at 100.

²¹ *Id.* at 119.

²² *Id.* at 111.

²³ *See id.* at 48–49.

²⁴ *Id.* at 119.

As they had done with the Strangers, the Pilgrims had again joined forces with the Pokanokets to achieve success.

Philbrick also suggests that the scale of King Philip's War could have been drastically reduced if the Pilgrims would have again answered with diplomacy. Benjamin Church was a second generation Pilgrim who lived among the Sakonnets, a neighboring tribe to the Pokanokets.²⁵ Church understood that his own future in that region depended on his relationship with the Sakonnets.²⁶ Although a generation had passed, Church had placed himself in a situation similar to that faced by the first Pilgrims.²⁷ His key to survival was also the same. Church developed a strong friendship with the leader of the Sakonnets.²⁸

When Church learned that Philip²⁹ was attempting to draw the Sakonnets into a war against the English colony, Church quickly answered with diplomacy. When the Sakonnets expressed a willingness to side with the English colony, Church told them that he would travel to Plymouth and would return with a treaty.³⁰ By the time Church reached Plymouth, however, King Philip's War had already begun.³¹ If Church had been permitted to pursue diplomacy to its end, the Sakonnets and other Native Americans in that region would have most likely stayed out of the war.³²

Even after the war's outbreak, Church did not give up on his hopes of winning the Sakonnets over to the English side.³³ However, it was not until months later that Church was able to secure the governor's approval for a treaty with the Sakonnets.³⁴ Church was then able to form "his own company of Indians"³⁵ and achieved unparalleled military success by "routinely bringing in more Indians than all of Plymouth's and

²⁵ *Id.* at 233.

²⁶ *Id.* at 235.

²⁷ *Id.* at 233.

²⁸ *Id.* at 235.

²⁹ Philip, who was Massasoit's son, led an alliance of Native American tribes against the English in King Philip's War. *Id.* at xiv–xv.

³⁰ *Id.* at 235.

³¹ *Id.* at 236.

³² *See id.* at 246.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.* at 317.

³⁵ *Id.*

Massachusetts Bay's companies combined."³⁶ Philbrick provides this explanation for Church's success:

Instead of loathing the enemy, try to learn as much as possible from him; instead of killing him, try to bring him around to your way of thinking. First and foremost, treat him like a human being. For Church, success in war was about coercion rather than slaughter, and in this he anticipated the welcoming, transformative beast that eventually became—once the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were in place—the United States.³⁷

Diplomacy again prevailed. This time, however, the choice had not been between diplomacy and isolationism. The choice had been between diplomacy and war.

Philbrick attempts to make the lesson simple. Diplomacy should be pursued as middle ground between isolationism and war. Philbrick writes:

For peace and for survival, others must be accommodated. The moment any of them gave up on the difficult work of living with their neighbors—and all of the compromises, frustration, and delay that inevitably entailed—they risked losing everything. It was a lesson that Bradford³⁸ and Massasoit had learned over the course of more than three long decades. That it could be so quickly forgotten by their children remains a lesson for us today.³⁹

Philbrick draws what appears to be a logical conclusion based on the history of the Pilgrims. However, his lesson is too simple.

Philbrick attempts to be true to history based on his thorough research. He provides us with fifty pages of "notes" to justify his

³⁶ *Id.* at 324.

³⁷ *Id.* at 358.

³⁸ William Bradford was the governor of Plymouth from 1621 to 1656 except for five years within that time period. Dorothy Honiss Kelso, Pilgrim Hall Museum, America's Museum of Pilgrim Possessions, William Bradford (July 14, 1998), <http://www.pilgrimhall.org/bradfordwilliam.htm>.

³⁹ PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 348.

writing.⁴⁰ Philbrick, nonetheless, is forced to rely exclusively upon the written works of the Pilgrims and their descendants.⁴¹ It is from this perspective that Philbrick writes, and it is from this perspective that he draws his conclusions. He views the Pilgrims as the “Americans” and measures success by their achievements. When he draws conclusions about the use of diplomacy, he fails to realize his own bias.

As a result of King Philip’s War, “the Native American population of southern New England had sustained a loss of somewhere between 60 and 80 percent.”⁴² Philbrick is unable to explain the root cause of this war.⁴³ However, it can be argued that Massasoit bears some responsibility. He did exactly what Philbrick praises. Massasoit engaged the Pilgrims in diplomacy. Yet, it was his willingness to support a permanent English settlement that eventually destroyed the Native Americans during King Philip’s War and thereafter.

When Massasoit first learned of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, he had other options. “Massasoit’s first impulse was not to embrace the English but to curse them.”⁴⁴ Massasoit could easily have attacked the Pilgrims as he had done against Thomas Dermer’s English expedition about a year earlier.⁴⁵ The Pilgrims were able to establish a permanent settlement only because of Massasoit’s willingness to support them. “With the exception of Jamestown, all other attempts to establish a permanent English settlement on the North American continent had so far failed. And Jamestown, founded in 1607, could hardly be counted a success.”⁴⁶

From the Native American perspective, diplomacy was a failure. While many view the First Thanksgiving as a symbol of diplomatic success, some Native Americans would disagree. Philbrick even points out that “[i]n 1970, Native activists declared Thanksgiving a National Day of Mourning.”⁴⁷ The First Thanksgiving may mark the

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 363–413.

⁴¹ Philbrick admits that “it is true that we must rely almost wholly on documents written by the English” and that “we will obviously never know as much about the Native point of view as we do the English.” Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: An Interview with Nathaniel Philbrick*, <http://www.nathanielphilbrick.com/mayflower/interview.html> (last visited Jan. 22, 2008).

⁴² PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 332.

⁴³ *See id.* at 215–16.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 95.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 5.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 355–56.

dawn of the English settlement in North America, but it can also be viewed as the eve of an oppressive era for the Native Americans. One Native American captured this sentiment in a poem that reads, “Our many nations once stood tall and ranged from shore to shore but most are gone and few remain and the buffalo roam no more. We shared our food and our land and gave with open hearts. We wanted peace and love and hope, but all were torn apart.”⁴⁸

Philbrick is correct when he says that the Pilgrims succeeded through the use of diplomacy. However, diplomacy does not always achieve success. It certainly did not do so for the Native Americans. The lesson that Philbrick tries to teach in *Mayflower* may be flawed by its simplicity, but *Mayflower* is still a book worth reading. Philbrick begins *Mayflower* by writing, “We all want to know how it was in the beginning,”⁴⁹ and he provides us with exactly that. Philbrick gives us a vivid account of a time period that significantly reshaped America for Native Americans and Pilgrims alike.

⁴⁸ TOMMY FLAMEWALKER MANASCO, WHERE WILL OUR CHILDREN LIVE..., <http://www.nativeamericans.com/> (last visited Jan. 22, 2008).

⁴⁹ PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at xiii.