

Mayflower : A Story of Courage, Community and War

by Nathaniel Philbrick

Viking

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

Nathaniel Philbrick breathes new life into the Mayflower Pilgrims' odyssey and their cultivation of a life among the Indian Sachem Massasoit and the Pokanokets. Told in the best tradition of a narrative history, *Mayflower* reintroduces us to the Pilgrims: their 12-year attempt at independence in Leiden, Holland; their politics and Calvinistic religion, their struggle to gain passage to New England and their voyage across a wintry sea.

In Part 1, Philbrick carefully chronicles the Pilgrims' movements based on the writings of three men, William Bradford, Edward Winthrop and Benjamin Church. He spends fully one third of the book on the Pilgrims' first year – their landing in 1620 and settlement in Plymouth on Cole's Hill, an Indian village abandoned after a massive influx of infectious diseases during 1616-1620.

Through the diaries of Bradford and Winthrop, the reader experiences firsthand the Pilgrims' three exploring expeditions – one on foot and two by "shallop" -- and follows them, at last, into Cape Cod Bay and toward Long Island and their ultimate landing in Plymouth Harbor, a course they charted while in retreat from an encounter with Nauset Indians whose corn they had taken without permission a previous day.

We follow the progress of better relations as well. Through the interpreter Squanto, Massasoit, William Bradford, and their communities meet, share and trade goods, and sign a pact to support and protect each other. The native groups had been devastated by illnesses and there was competition among the various tribes to gain control over lands that were left deserted. Massasoit's motives were likely influenced by these events. The Pilgrims needed food and to learn farming. Thus they found common ground.

In Parts two and three, Philbrick examines the lives of the settlers from 1623-1675: their evolving relationship with Massasoit and the Pokanokets; their interactions with other Indian sachems; their attempts to help starving settlers from Wessagussett (Weymouth) find food; their own successes in farming; their struggles to settle accounts with investors and the growing problem of land – the burning issue which erupted into King Philip's War.

By 1630, seventeen ships had arrived with over 1000 settlers. The second generation of settlers and Indians distanced themselves from the earlier days of cautious compromise and major

problems ensued. In Part four the reader witnesses an intricate, absorbing and terrifying war story told through the eyes of Benjamin Church and others. Church advocated establishing relationships with the natives and employed many as his own soldiers – a very different set of tactics than those used by Governor Josiah Winslow.

Nathaniel Philbrick teases forth a dramatic story that reveals something far more vital than the vague accounts we may have of this time period. We come to know the complex calculations of Governor William Bradford, of his Indian interpreter Squanto, and of the surly Myles Standish, who wears a shortened sword to match his small girth; and who, in the opinion of many, seeks out violence too often. We come to understand Massasoit, who at once wishes to drive the European intruders away and to negotiate with them for mutual advantage. We witness Edward Winthrop's 40-mile walk to Sowams, and his nursing of Massasoit, suffering from what was likely typhus, back from the brink of death.

Then there is Wamsutta, Massasoit's eldest son and future sachem who challenges Josiah Winslow and the pilgrim government by selling off lands outside of the court system and sabotaging his own people; and Benjamin Church, who lives happily in Sakonnet among the Indians and incorporates all that he has learned to somehow eke out relationships with the natives in King Philips' War. Perhaps one of the most heroic of the settlers is Mary Rowlandson from Lancaster – who was shot with her 6-year old daughter in her arms (the bullet piercing her child's abdomen) and taken as prisoner to live with the Indians. She lived to write an account of her life with them.

In the end, what is intriguing and especially fun to read about are the special places in Massachusetts and Rhode Island where the Native Indians and Pilgrims lived and toward which they traveled. We can follow the settlers along the coast of Cape Cod, visit "First Encounter Beach", imagine Acushnet, now New Bedford and Pope's Beach, follow the Pokanokets along paths by the Taunton River, and imagine Massasoit's Sowams near Warren, RI. We know Rehoboth and Swansea, MA, and Tiverton, Little Compton and Mount Hope Bay, RI. Finally, we can visit Plimoth Plantation and Pilgrim Hall, having gained a far deeper understanding of our American history.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the word "accommodation" as it relates to the Pilgrims and the Native Americans in the 1620's? How did their accommodation of each other change over the years?
2. The author tells this story mostly through the writings of William Bradford, Edward Winslow and Benjamin Church, as found in "Of Plymouth Plantation" and "Mourt's Relation," among many other documents. Which of these men do you feel you have come to know best?
3. There are many details describing the efforts that the Puritans made to book passage on a ship to the New World. Some members of the group gave up and decided to stay in Leiden, Holland. Others came later. What are some of the issues that made this passage so complicated?

4. Was there anything about the Pilgrims passage to New England that surprised you? For example, November was probably the worst time a group could land in the Northeast with limited food stock and little knowledge of fishing. Why do you think they made the ultimate decision to embark? Was there anything else about the circumstances of the Pilgrim's arrival that is surprising or curious to you?
5. Who are the people among those Philbrick portrays that you would most like to meet? Why?
6. It is fascinating to learn in detail what some of the Puritans felt about each other. There is Myles Standish, who defended the settlers well but who was overly aggressive; William Bradford, who lived in the temporal world of governance but who was extremely pious. Which relationships among the new settlers intrigues you most and why?
7. It is a certainty that Puritan and Indian women played a crucial role in Pilgrim life in their display of courage, community involvement and leadership. Yet their stories are less obvious in many early historical narratives. In this book, Mary Rowlandson stands out as a unique individual. Which other women in this story intrigue you? Which women had you been unaware of? Which would you like to know more about?
8. What is a "memory hole"? What kind of importance did the Indians attach to such landmarks? What parallels do you think exist in 21st century geography?
9. Often what is most fascinating about history are the twists and turns a person's life takes. How do you think that this concept might apply to the life of Benjamin Church? To which other individuals in this story might this apply?
10. Which local area of Massachusetts and/or R.I. discussed in the book would you like to become more familiar with? Which areas, if any, still convey a sense of history to you?
11. What do you think of Massasoit as a leader? How does his style compare with King Philip?
12. How has this story enlightened your understanding of the relationship W. Bradford and his immigrant community had with each other? With Massasoit and his tribe?
13. As we have seen, succeeding generations of Pilgrims and Native Americans behaved differently than their parents. For example, King Philip as compared with his father, Massasoit. Which other differences evolved over time to change the delicate balance between the settlers and the natives?
14. What parallels are there, if any, that could be said to be similar in 20th century American history?
15. Which scenes stand out as being the saddest, most touching or poignant to you?

16. What are the themes that the author is trying to convey in his narrative? Do you agree or disagree?

SUGGESTED WEBSITES

- www.americanjourneys.org
- www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/williambradford.html
- <http://etext.virginia.edu/users/deetz/Plymouth/plymaps.html>
- www.historyplace.com/specials/kingphilip.htm
- www.historyplace.com/specials/tougias.htm
- www.historyswomen.com
- www.mayflowerfamilies.com
- www.mayflowerhistory.org
- <http://members.aol.com/calebj/language.html>
- www.native-languages.org
- <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/divam.htm>
- www.pilgrimhall.org
- www.pilgrims.net
- www.plimoth.org (links to Wampanoag home site as well)
- www.plymouthpubliclibrary.org
- www.pokanoket.org
- <http://teacher.scholastic.com/researchtools/researchstarters/plymouth/>
- www.sail1620.org
- www.uswars.net
- www.swanseamass.org/local_history.html

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

<http://www.nathanielphilbrick.com/about/bio.html>



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